
From 'Romantic Friendships' to Boston Marriages: Victorian Women in Same-Sex Unions

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Abstract:

This article analyses the experience and identity of Victorian women in same-sex unions, using nineteenth century Britain and America as a case study. By exploring literature written by women romantically interested in other women, this article comments on the repressed nature of women's sexuality, paying particular attention to those in same-sex relationships. It will evaluate the ways in which Victorian society responded to lesbian women, including their conceptualisation of 'romantic friendships', Boston marriage and gender inversion. Furthermore, this article uses theoretical concepts such as gender performativity, patriarchal equilibrium and patriarchal bargaining in order to compare the experience of women in same-sex unions to those within normative marriage. As well as arguing that women in same-sex relationships used normative marriage as a context upon which to measure and legitimise their own relationships, it will also consider the changes women in same-sex unions attempted to enforce upon women's civil liberties within Victorian society.

The lesbian identity has historically proven to be difficult to locate, with sexuality being conceptualised as a 'modern invention'.¹ Following the publication of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, the debate surrounding the history of homosexuality has accelerated in attempt to delineate 'the historical specificity of lesbian and gay identities'.² The discourse surrounding sexuality has transformed significantly since the nineteenth century, thus changing the ways in which historians approached the study of same-sex relationships. Defining same-sex couples of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the same way as modern homosexual identities is both inaccurate and problematic. Moreover, investigation into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has revealed that despite the pre-Foucauldian notion of 'sexual repression', there seemed to be the opposite of a censorship of sex but almost a compulsive obsession with sexual activity, with far-reaching evidence of same-sex couples within societal discourse.³ Therefore, the study of modern same-sex couples proves to be an imperative focus of research for historians of sexuality.

This article will specifically investigate women in same-sex unions of nineteenth century Britain and America, examining the experiences of Anne Lister and Charlotte Cushman, in attempt to

¹ H.G. Cocks, and M. Houlbrook, *The Modern History of Sexuality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), p.6.

² M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, volume 1 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p.26.

³ A. Clark, *Desire: A History of European Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p.2.

determine the nature of same-sex relationships before the notion of lesbianism. By drawing on theoretical work by Butler, and Bennett among others, it will investigate how the framework of gender roles, patriarchy and gender inversion affected women in same-sex relationships.

Furthermore, by examining the ways in which same-sex unions between women contrasted with heterosexual marriage, in addition to the perception of same-sex unions within the patriarchal order, this article will comment on the non-normative female sexual experience of nineteenth century society, and whether same-sex unions undermined or strengthened Victorian marriage.

Historians have faced considerable difficulty in their research on female relationships due to limited evidence acknowledging the existence of same-sex activity between women.⁴ Whilst sodomy was an illegal and punishable crime, sex between women was not prohibited. Although there are a limited number of known cases where women were reprimanded for sleeping with someone of the same sex, such cases often impacted the lower classes, whereas relationships between middle and upper class women, drawing upon the de-sexualised notion of 'romantic friendships', were symbolised as fashionable and quite an attractive prospect⁵. As a result, historians lack public records to examine in this regard, severely limiting the evidence available to those researching women in same-sex relationships.⁶

Notwithstanding, historians have found means to explore the history of women's same-sex unions, drawing on fiction written for and by women in same sex-relationships.⁷ Additionally, the use of contemporary diaries and letters have proved imperative to relative studies. A wealth of material written by women such as Anne Lister, a Yorkshire gentlewoman who expressed sexual and romantic interest in the same sex, evidences the ways in which these women explored their identities before the conception of lesbianism.⁸ Conversely, such resources can prove difficult to analyse. In the case of Anne Lister, despite openly negating the notion of marrying a man, she still wrote her diary entries and letters in a specific code that disguised the explicit nature of her thoughts.⁹ One commonly used instance found within her diary entries is the use of an 'x' in the margin when she experienced an orgasm.¹⁰ It could be argued that this represents

⁴ A. Clark, *Desire: A History of European Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p.137.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.137.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ M. Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p.80.

⁸ J. Liddington, *Female Fortune. Land, Gender and Authority: The Anne Lister Diaries and Other Writings, 1833-36* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1998), p.15.

⁹ L. Moore, "'Something More Tender Still Than Friendship': Romantic Friendship in Early Nineteenth-Century England", *Feminist Studies*, 18:3 (1992), p.511.

¹⁰ A. Clark, 'Anne Lister's Construction of Lesbian Identity', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 7:1 (1996), p.23.

the repressed nature of same-sex relationships in Victorian society, or more accurately, the reticence practiced by many women is a direct reflection of the passivity enforced on women's sexuality in nineteenth century Britain and America. Women within middle-class marriages involving men were also required to confine their sexuality and preserve their dignity.¹¹ Sexual energy was decidedly a masculine characteristic enforced within Victorian marriage, with women expected to remain overtly non-sexual.

The discourse of women in same-sex relationships was initially demonstrated in work by Smith-Rosenberg as ranging from 'the supportive love of sisters, through the enthusiasm of adolescent girls to sensual avowals of love by mature women'.¹² Faderman emphasises the concept of 'romantic friendships' between women, which she notes were idealised within eighteenth and nineteenth century culture.¹³ It was expressed as a world in which 'men made but a shadowy appearance', yet was overwhelmingly characterised by rigid gender roles enforced by patriarchal society and the need for 'performativity' within such gender roles.¹⁴ Particularly prevalent within middle and upper class culture, as argued by Faderman and Smith-Rosenberg, romantic friendships were established as a result of gendered spheres remaining distinctly segregated.¹⁵ By 'performing' their gendered roles in society women were able to find 'their own space' to develop private emotions as associated with womanhood, creating deeply devoted and intimate friendships.¹⁶ This emotional intimacy seemed to develop for some into physically intimate relationships, where women were known to publicly show affection in the form of embracing and kissing each other. In some cases, women such as Charlotte Cushman - an American actress of the nineteenth century known for her romantic involvement with numerous women - evidenced sexual intimacy through personal testimony and letters sent to her female lovers.¹⁷

In the case of both exemplary women of this essay - Anne Lister and Charlotte Cushman - it is argued that they used the framework of heteronormative marriage as a means to characterise and

¹¹ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends* (2004), xxix.

¹² C. Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America', *Signs*, 1:1 (1975), p.2.

¹³ L. Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to Present* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1981), p.75.

¹⁴ See Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual' (1975), p.2, for further discussion on men's involvement in romantic friendships, and J. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), p.198-199, on an in-depth analysis of gender performativity.

¹⁵ Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, (1981), p.75

¹⁶ T.N. Swain, 'Unveiling Relations: Women and Women – On Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's Research', *Journal of Women's History*, 12:3 (2000), p.31.

¹⁷ S. Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Marriage and Desire in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p.200.

reinforce their own relationships. Marcus notes that it was not uncommon for some women in romantic relationships to seek some of the rights afforded by the state to normative Victorian marriages.¹⁸ Through their own legally binding agreements and often the exchange of rings, women in same-sex relationships could avow commitment to their monogamous relationship, while sharing property and financial assets.¹⁹ It is important to note that although such agreements appear to be influenced by Victorian marriage, a necessary distinction to make is the sharing of possessions. Rather than one of the partners assuming the role of 'husband' and thus both acquiring ownership of their joint possessions, the women were able to share their possessions together. Charlotte Cushman subscribed to this notion by, in her own words, 'marrying' one of her long-term partners, Emma Stebbins, creating a 'spousal bond and kinship network'.²⁰ Marcus notes that Cushman referred to Emma's father as her 'father-in-law', evidencing the fact that she considered their legal agreement a real and binding marriage.²¹ Ostensibly, there were instances of female same-sex unions modelling their relationships upon normative partnerships, which is unsurprising given that the institution of marriage was deemed to be the pinnacle of Victorian relationships.

Drawing on available sources, historians have highlighted the significance of analysing expressions and language as means of exploring female same-sex unions. Their particular use of language, as suggested by Marcus, often reflects the paradigm of heterosexual Victorian marriage.²² Women in same-sex unions often referred to themselves or their partners as 'hubbie', 'better half', 'spouse', or 'wedded wife', hinting at their reverence to the sanctimony of marriage.²³ This notion could be used to suggest same-sex unions between women supported and reinforced the institution of Victorian marriage. Yet, it could also be interpreted as an attempt to fit in with societal norms, using these norms to emphasise the women's commitment to their partner. Conceivably, due to the fact that marriage between women was not legally attainable in the nineteenth century, it is possible to suggest these women strived for the opportunity to officially and legally bind themselves as couples, affirming their status as monogamous partners. Their language is not necessarily reflective of their support for the institution for legal marriage but is just part of a societal context against which they could

¹⁸ S. Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Marriage and Desire in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p.194.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.200

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.196-197.

²² *Ibid.*, p.201.

²³ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends* (2004), p.80.

measure their own relationships. Thus, this notion limits the extent to which same-sex unions strengthened Victorian marriage. Women in same-sex unions used marriage as a framework to improve upon for their own relationships.

Moreover, it is useful for the purpose of this essay to consider the ways in which society perceived women in committed relationships, often illuminating the discourse of same-sex unions compared to normative marriage. According to Bennett, throughout history a patriarchal equilibrium has placed not only men, but also powerful women, as the dominant force in society.²⁴ This can be demonstrated in nineteenth century Britain and America by analysing the framework of matrimony applied to romantic and sexual relationships. Faderman observes the use of the term 'Boston marriage', which originated from nineteenth century New England, to describe long-term relationships between two otherwise unmarried women.²⁵ She notes that often Boston marriages included women who were financially independent, thus indicating no need to marry a man to maintain their comfortable lifestyles.²⁶ This conviction is substantiated in the lifestyles of both Anne Lister and Charlotte Cushman. Anne Lister, after inheriting Shibden Estate, was recognised by society as a landed gentlewoman, thus granting her a noteworthy amount of personal and financial autonomy.²⁷ Cushman, successfully building her career worldwide as an actress, was also afforded significant financial and social independence.²⁸ Women in Boston marriages could likewise be associated with the likes of spinsters or 'Old Maids', mature women who were recognised as introverted and lacking in the sexual appeal necessary to secure a male companion.²⁹ Following the rationality of Victorian societal norms, these women did not require support from a masculine authority, and proved to be an exception to the gendered dynamic of marriage in patriarchal society. Consequently, this notion suggests women in same-sex unions or Boston marriages significantly undermined the institution of Victorian marriage, deeming it unnecessary for middle and upper class women to build a successful livelihood.

While same-sex unions undermined the traditional gendered sphere of power exhibited by nineteenth century heterosexual marriage, it is necessary to consider the ways in which Victorian

²⁴ For further discussion on patriarchal equilibrium, see J.M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), pp.56-59.

²⁵ Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981), p.190.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.191.

²⁷ C. Roulston, 'The Revolting Anne Lister: The U.K's First Modern Lesbian', *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 17:3 (2013), p.269.

²⁸ Marcus, *Between Women* (2007), p.197.

²⁹ Donoghue, *Passions Between Women* (1993), p.127.

society perceived such unions. Romantic friendships were frequently considered as a precursor to ‘real’ marriage.³⁰ This was often the case, with evidence supporting the fact that many women who were in intimate and loving relationships with other women had to invest in a ‘marriage of convenience’ for their own financial security.³¹ In explaining the difference between societal tolerance and acceptance of same-sex unions, Clark denotes the metaphorical concept of ‘twilight moments’ in attempt to ascertain the genuine experience of women who loved women.³² Clark argues that far from accepting same-sex relationships and unions, nineteenth century patriarchal society, in an attempt to reinforce the power and legitimacy of legal normative marriage, ultimately understood female relationships as a phase.³³ This notion confirms the extent to which marriage as a patriarchal paradigm shaped the experience of women in same-sex unions. Women, regardless of their sexual preference, were often confined by the institution of marriage, with their opportunities for careers, interests and control over their own bodies limited by their need to follow societal norms and marry a man. Yet, Adrienne Rich stresses the fact that it should not be assumed that women leaving same-sex unions for heterosexual marriage were choosing ‘heterosexuality’ over ‘homosexuality’ - albeit homosexuality or lesbianism as an identity did not yet exist.³⁴ Rather, she notes, these women ‘submitted with faith or ambivalence, to the demands of the institution...but their feelings – nor their sensuality – were neither domesticated nor limited by it’.³⁵ By following Rich’s assertion that women were in more control of their fate than initially perceived, it could be argued that women were using Victorian marriage as a form of patriarchal bargaining, in attempt to secure themselves future opportunities within the construct of marriage.³⁶ To a certain extent this suggests a challenge to Victorian marriage by undermining the traditional institution.

As previously discussed, there is evidence to suggest that the heterosexual population struggled to fathom the notion of two women sexually involved with one another due to women’s imposed virtue and purity.³⁷ Thus, it was necessary for society to transpose female sexual relationships within the patriarchal model of society and its rigid gender roles. Subsequently, the

³⁰ Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981), p.196-197.

³¹ Donoghue, *Passions Between Women* (1993), p.130.

³² A. Clark, ‘Twilight Moments’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14:2 (2005), p.142.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.141.

³⁴ Swain, ‘Unveiling Relations’, p. 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.31.

³⁶ For the theory of patriarchal bargaining and its application to women outside of western discourse see D. Kandiyoti, ‘Bargaining with Patriarchy’, *Gender and Society*, 2 (1988), p.285.

³⁷ G. Freidman, ‘School for Scandal: Sexuality, Race and National Vice and Virtue in *Miss Marianne Woods and Miss Jane Pirie Against Lady Helen Cumming Gordon*’, *Nineteenth Century Contexts*, 27:1 (2005), p.53.

late-nineteenth century witnessed the sexological conception of gender inversion.³⁸ Psychologist of sex Havelock Ellis wrote of ‘sexo-aesthetic inversion’, defined as a change in a person’s sexual impulses towards those of the same sex. Ellis develops this further, defining the invert as a person whose ‘tastes and impulses are so altered that, if a man, he emphasises and even exaggerates the feminine characteristics of his own person...and finds peculiar satisfaction in dressing himself as a woman and adopting a woman’s ways’.³⁹ Felski observes the recurrent attempt to apply masculine characteristics to women in same-sex unions, often as an attempt for society to employ heterosexual attributes to relationships that do not fit the hegemony of ‘normal’ relationships between men and women.⁴⁰ Vicinus similarly maintains that the easiest way for a woman to explain her same-sex desire would be to present herself as man.⁴¹

There are numerous examples of ‘gender inversion’ throughout nineteenth century Britain and America; Anne Lister referred to herself as ‘a naturally masculine woman’, whilst Charlotte Cushman often cast herself in male roles - most famously playing Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* - stating that she ‘was born a tomboy’.⁴² Evidently, these women struggled to define themselves as having a sexual desire for the same sex whilst still maintaining their femininity. Accordingly, Butler’s concept of performativity could be applied, but in the sense that they were performing to typically male gendered characteristics in an attempt to fit within the heterosexual model of marriage and relationships.

When examining whether same-sex unions strengthened or undermined Victorian marriage, it is crucial to consider the working relationship which developed between women in same-sex unions and those who contributed to early feminist movements. Whilst embracing the framework of legal marriage as a model for their sexual relationships with women, they often sought to reform the institution of marriage in attempt to improve women’s status in Victorian society.⁴³ By legal definition, Victorian marriage up until 1857 was shaped by its resilience and indissolubility.⁴⁴ Yet, many historians associate marriage in the nineteenth century as vital to the patriarchal model of the British and American state, with Marcus stating that it ‘mandated the

³⁸ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (1978), p.43.

³⁹ A.I. Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p.35.

⁴⁰ R. Felski, ‘Introduction’ in L. Bland and L. Doan, *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998), p.6.

⁴¹ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends* (2004), p.80.

⁴² Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981), pp.220-225.

⁴³ Marcus. *Between Women* (2007), p.2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.204.

formal inequality of husbands and wives, since coverture dictated that they were legally one person, the husband'.⁴⁵ By transferring women's property, finance and personal belongings to their husbands upon marriage, women essentially became the property of the man, forfeiting the majority of their rights as individuals.⁴⁶

With the growing feminist movement, however, women began to strive for reform in a variety of different spheres, and women in same-sex unions often used this platform in their attempts to amend marriage laws to include men and women of the same-sex. Hence, as Marcus states, there grew an affinity with same-sex relationships and marriage reform.⁴⁷ Moreover, as of 1856 a petition was submitted to the British government detailing the prerequisite of equality within marriage, and although this was initially only partially successful, it did start progress of a Civil Divorce Law which would be published the following year.⁴⁸ Women in same-sex relationships were significantly valuable in the petition, with the requisite for impartiality of those signing in support. Married women were unable to contribute due to the 'conflict in interest', thus women in romantic friendships or same-sex unions proved to be important participants to the activism of marriage reform. Evidently, women in same-sex unions proved to be invaluable in the reform of marriage, and furthermore, the protection of women's civil rights and liberties in married life. This overwhelmingly suggests that same-sex unions weakened the institution of same-sex marriage. Women in romantic relationships, whilst striving for marriage equality of those of the same sex, recognised that the matrimonial institution was flawed, thus merely employed it as a provisional framework for their own relationships.

Female romantic friendship is a concept that may initially prove difficult for the modern historian to interpret when compared to the contemporary lesbian identity. Yet, it is a subject of vast significance when analysing historical sexual discourse. Arguably having developed from a segregation of rigid gender roles, the nineteenth century women often established close and intimate relationships with their female counterparts. Habitually, normative Victorian marriage was used as a framework on which to base female same-sex unions, primarily to show women's commitment to life-long partners. Gender inversion was utilised by greater society, in addition to women within same-sex unions, to define relationships within the hegemonic model, somewhat

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981), p.181.

⁴⁷ Marcus, *Between Women* (2007), p.204.

⁴⁸ For further discussion on the 1856 petition submitted to the British government, see Marcus, *Between Women* (2007), p.204.

undermining romantic friendships and strengthening the institution of Victorian marriage. However, an important distinction to make between Victorian marriage and same-sex unions was the notion of equality, which considerably weakens the notion of marriage. Within same-sex unions, women benefitted from an equality not experienced by their equivalents in normative Victorian marriages. Albeit, it could be argued that some women in Victorian marriages were 'bargaining with patriarchy', however for most women it was an experience of subordination.⁴⁹ Most importantly, same-sex unions played a significant role in the reform of marriage. Although same-sex unions strengthened Victorian marriage to a certain extent by modelling their relationship on patriarchal norms imposed by the institution, it is evident that they, in part, undermined normative matrimony by striving for women's equal rights within marriage.

⁴⁹ D. Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining With Patriarchy', *Gender and Society*, 2:3, (1988) pp. 274-284.

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