DiGeSt

Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

What are you reading?

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

Review by Lauren Ottaviani
PhD Candidate at KU Leuven
lauren.ottaviani@kuleuven.be

DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, Volume 13, Issue 1
https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.101165
Print ISSN: 2593-0273. Online ISSN: 2593-0281
Content is licensed under a Creative Commons BY
DiGeSt is hosted by Ghent University Website: *https://www.digest.ugent.be/*

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

Sharon Marcus's *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* combines Marcus's own background in literary studies with an analysis of women's life writing to offer a compelling redefinition of Victorian relationships between women. Rejecting previous models of understanding women's relationships which often posited female friendship and lesbianism on a spectrum fundamentally opposed to heterosexual marriage, Marcus instead offers an analysis that is highly attuned to the ways in which women wrote about their relationships in the period, drawing her conclusions from over 100 different samples of women's life writing between 1830 and 1880 that include diaries, memoirs, and letters. Making regular reference to these works, she builds her central hypothesis that 'Victorian society, in which marriage between men and women was a supreme value, did not suppress bonds between women but actively promoted them.'

Marcus arranges her book according to three different categories of female relationships: female friendship, female desire, and female marriage. Each section first uses women's life writing to establish Marcus's hypothesis, then applies that hypothesis to a number of literary texts. In 'female friendship,' Marcus demonstrates that romantic language as well as displays of physical affection were behavioral norms for middle-class Victorian friendships between women, holding that female friendship functioned as an autonomous space in which women could express a wider range of emotions and agency than in their relationships with men without altering the fundamental structure of Victorian femininity. Through extensive analysis of life writing, Marcus shows that friendships remained a significant part of women's lives well after marriage; she uses this conclusion to challenge critical assumptions about novels ending in marriage as being 'hostile to female friendship (p. 76).' Section two, 'Female desire,' works primarily with periodicals and argues that women's pleasure in looking at fashion plates was dependent not on an imagined and interpolating male gaze, but on a desire for femininity that was itself constitutive of Victorian womanhood: to Marcus, 'Desire for women was the crucible in which femininity was formed (p. 166).' The book's last section, 'female marriage,' maintains that because the idea of the 'degenerate lesbian' did not yet exist in Victorian England, life partnerships between women were met largely without social stigma. Marcus argues that these partnerships often bore close resemblances to the concept of 'marriage by contract', central to campaigns for marriage reform throughout the middle part of the century, and shows how women's partnerships are used to demonstrate the plasticity of marriage within period novels.

Working at the crossroads of literature and history, Marcus's monograph displays the fruitful possibilities of interdisciplinary study as she shows how life writing offers significant insight into the study of fiction, and likewise that fiction bears out period understandings of gender. *Between Women* considers a much more limited time period than Kosofky Sedgwick's *Between Men*, to which Marcus's title pays homage. While this makes it less influential to the field of gender studies at large, it only increases the work's value to scholars of the Victorian era, as the work's limited focus allows plenty of space for Marcus to demonstrate her theories on canonical texts using a method she refers to as 'just reading', or close reading a text to draw attention to often-overlooked features of plot and character development. Overall, the text offers a comprehensive guide to Victorian women's relationships that, over fifteen years after its publication, remains a useful guide for scholars to distinguish between platonic and sexual relationships in period texts. Furthermore, it allows for an understanding of women's homoerotic desire as a force not opposed to, but actually constructive of Victorian conceptions of femininity.

My current research focuses on depictions of suffrage in middlebrow women's magazines at the turn of the twentieth century. Marcus's theory that women's desire for femininity functioned as a constitutive element of Victorian womanhood itself has especially interesting ramifications for women's anti-suffrage writing, which often positions suffrage

as incompatible with Victorian conceptions of the feminine. More broadly, *Between Women* will inform my understanding of how the women's magazines in my corpus depict women's relationships. Because the magazines focus to such a degree on both constructing and representing female identity, both fiction and non-fiction features regularly depict female friendships and women's interactions with one another as confidants, rivals, and even life companions. *Between Women* will provide me with a thoughtful, critical vocabulary for analysing these relationships, allowing me in the process to highlight the formative and often vastly varied friendships both constructed and reflected in the period's middlebrow magazines.

Lauren Ottaviani

This research has been supported by the Research Foundation — Flanders (FWO) grant 1184925N.

Lauren Ottaviani is an FWO-funded PhD student in English literature at KU Leuven, Belgium, where her research focuses on domestic ideals and the women's suffrage movement in the English periodical the *Woman at Home* and the Irish periodical the *Lady of the House*. Her work has appeared in the *Irish Studies Review*, the *Edinburgh Companion to Irish Literature and Periodical Culture, and* the *Women's History Review* (forthcoming). She is the associate editor of the *Victorian Periodicals Review* and sits as a PhD representative for EFACIS.