

Romantic Friendships in *Shirley* and *Wives and Daughters*

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It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

— Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

The opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* is an often quoted phrase when speaking of Jane Austen. And, while Miss Austen asserts that all men are in want of a wife, she does not say that the desire is reciprocal. Even more ironically, the bulk of that same novel is not, in fact, devoted to the exploration of heterosexual marriage — as her introduction would lead the reader to assume — but instead devotes itself to studying relationships between women. The penultimate marriage between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy is an event that the reader is not even present for, and is summed up in the last chapter as the day that “Mrs. Bennet got rid of her two most deserving daughters” (372). This attention, documentation and exploration of female friendship — and the varying forms that that may take — is far more prominent and important to the Victorian novel than the (usually) eventual heterosexual marriage plot. This attention to the female experience is seen in the relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and her friend Charlotte in *Pride and Prejudice*, the sisterly devotion between Elinor and Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, the matriarchal society of *Cranford*, the friendship between Helen and Jane in *Jane Eyre* and Dora and Agnes in *David Copperfield*, as well as the nearly life-long friendship between Mrs. Weston and Emma in *Emma*. The exploration and documentation of these women’s experiences dominates Victorian texts. It filled their letters, diaries, novels and their lives. It is only fair that the texts then be analyzed accordingly. I will argue that the eventual heterosexual marriage plots within the Victorian novel are irrelevant to the main relationships explored in the text — those between women. Female friendship is more than a precursor to

marriage — it is more important for these character's development than heterosexual marriage. This reading of these texts removes some of the conclusiveness and security that comes with the marriage plot. It forces the reader into murky territory in which love, affection and desire are not so easily distinguished, and in which the pairing of women is not always easily defined or understood. That uncertainty is encouraged.

By giving more critical attention to these relationships than to those between women and men, the actual lived experience of the Victorian woman — fictional and factual — can be better understood. The women in these novels, who dominate and propel the narrative, deserve the equivalent amount of attention. In these novels, women spend a good amount of time interacting with, living with and talking to their female friends and relations, and a comparatively short amount of time interacting with any male suitors. The intimacies formed between these female friends take up a large amount of narrative space. They propel the emotional development of the female protagonists, serve as the mechanism through which these characters are able to vocalize their internal experience to the reader, and generally complete their existence in their respective communities. These friendships fill any void that might have been created from a lack of occupation, lack of familial attention, or even lack of male attention. Some critics discount the importance of these relationships by framing them as stepping stones to their eventual heterosexual courtships and marriages. In her book *Charlotte Brontë and Female Desire*, Jin-Ok Kim argues that “women's homosocial-erotic bond in Brontë's works is the basis upon which heterosexual relationships are constructed” (xii). This statement incorrectly links the relationships between women to those that they had with men — placing them within the constraints of heteronormativity.

These relationships between women should not be placed within a binary. To do so is to severely limit the many interpretations and variations of affection that were produced in these pairings. Even to consider these relationships on a “continuum” of lesbianism, as Adrienne Rich suggests, is limiting. Instead, I propose that these relationships should be considered outside of the binary system of either heterosexuality or homosexuality. The obsession with labeling sexual and romantic experiences is not one that seemed to have been shared by the characters in many Victorian novels. The women in them also struggled to find an acceptable way to frame their feelings for one another, always framing their affection as ‘more than’ what they could describe: they were more than sisters, more than friends, more than and entirely different from their heterosexual courtships, and certainly different from a heterosexual married couple. Thus, in my consideration of these relationships I do not strive to label them, I only explore the ways in which these relationships between women were different from, and not as limiting as, their heterosexual counterparts. Admittedly, to even compare them to the relationships that they formed between men is engaging with the binary system that I argue must be set aside to fully understand these pairings. However, I believe in order to begin to understand the many ways that these relationships between women were ‘more than’ their heterosexual counterparts, it is necessary to have some understanding of how heterosexual love was discussed and participated in by women. Ultimately, it is my hope that they can be considered outside the realm of heterosexuality or lesbianism, or somewhere in between, and instead as the primary form of social connection through which the smaller range of interactions within heterosexual courtship exist. These relationships did not exist in reaction to masculinity, nor did they exist only in contrast and opposition to men. Rather than reading them as mere reactions, they should instead be given the same amount of time and attention as heterosexual courtships. The expressions of

love, affection and companionship between women is in fact more diverse, varied and meaningful than the emotional intimacy found in heterosexual relationships. Instead of focusing on their often eventual heterosexual marriages as expressions of love, affection and narrative completion, I suggest that the pairing of and relationships between women are the most important interactions within these novels.

Introduction: Contextualizing Female Friendship in Victorian England

In her book *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England*, Sharon Marcus discusses how to better understand and categorize relationships between women. She comments, “I now grasped that our contemporary opposition between hetero- and homosexuality did not exist for Victorians, and that Victorians were thus able to see relationships between women as central to lives also organized around men” (19). Marcus points out that in the haste to categorize and make sense of relationships between women, scholars have placed their own contemporary understanding of hetero and homosexuality on Victorians. She argues that the use of queer theory to understand relationships between women allowed her to “abandon the preconception of strict divisions between men and women, homosexuality and heterosexuality, same-sex bonds and those of family and marriage” (13). Her book makes a “historical point about the particular indifference of Victorians to a homo/hetero divide for women” (13) and asserts that in “Victorian England, female marriage, gender mobility, and women’s erotic fantasies about women were at the heart of normative institutions and discourses” (13). Ultimately, she argues that the “mistake” in previous evaluations of female friendships has been “to assume that those structural forces” of heteronormativity and the patriarchy “precluded the strong, complex, and socially acknowledged bonds between women” (22). This method of inspecting relationships between women is one that I hope to evoke in my own argument. I will

examine the relationships between these women as being primary to their development as characters, as well as central to the development of the narrative. My analysis will focus on the language with which the narrators and characters discuss marriage, how they physically interact with one another, as well as the moments in which their gender expression changes — further drawing attention to when the characters interact as women.

While being grounded in critical works discussing the novels of many Victorian authors, I will focus my textual analysis primarily on *Shirley* by Charlotte Brontë and *Wives and Daughters* by Elizabeth Gaskell. Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) was the eldest of the three Brontë sisters and wrote four novels, as well poetry, during her lifetime (Cody). Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) was referred to after her death by *The Athenaeum* as being “...if not the most popular, with small question, the most powerful and finished female novelist of an epoch singularly rich in female novelists” (*An Encyclopedia of British Women Writers*). She wrote a myriad of short stories and novels throughout her life, including *Cranford* and *Cousin Phillis*. The two women maintained a friendship in the latter part of Brontë’s life, and Gaskell would go on to write *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, a biographical recounting of her life, the life of Brontë’s family, and their friendship. Published over fifteen years apart — *Shirley* in 1849 and *Wives and Daughters* from 1864-1866 — the two novels both feature a central relationship between women. Marcus argues that the female friend should not be considered an auxiliary, but instead, “She is a mate, an ally, and a critic, the repository of confidences, a bestower of wisdom, a conspirator, nurse or patient, teacher or pupil, a source of physical contact and pleasure, an object of admiration, a link to the past and bridge to the future. Often as securely in place at a novel’s end as at its beginning, female friendship has narrative longevity.” (79) This is exemplified in the relationships between Caroline and Shirley and Cynthia and Molly. Throughout each of the novels, the women serve as

their respective allies in a world dominated by men. They often share comforting moments of physical contact, and frequently express their reliance on one another. And, their relationships persevere throughout two novels where a majority of the first established relationships are at an end by the close of the novel.

In order to understand my analysis of Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, it is necessary to first establish an understanding of the unconventional nature of female friendships during this time period, and the fact that for many women — even the most romantic of friends — the label of “lesbian” might not have been known or accessible to them at the time. Although the word “lesbian” is widely used and understood in modern vocabulary, the word was only first recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1890 — preceded only twenty years earlier by “lesbianism.” Lillian Faderman explores and gives context to romantic friendships between women in her book *Surpassing the Love of Men*. I am particularly interested in her discussion of the 19th century woman and her “kindred spirits.” She sums up the dilemma surrounding labels nicely, writing,

“But they also did not suspect — any more than the women themselves did — that such an emotional and even physical closeness was ‘lesbian,’ at least in a twentieth century definition. They did not treat it as an abnormality because it was common enough to be a norm.” (157)

Thus, in order to understand the relationships presented in these novels — particularly as a twenty-first century reader — it is necessary to set aside our assumptions about what “lesbian love” looks like. Faderman suggests that “Lesbian describes a relationship in which two women’s strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other” (18). While this definition begins to embrace the indefinable nature of many of these relationships, I would like

to instead shift the focus away from trying to label these relationships at all — lesbian or otherwise — and instead examine these relationships as the preeminent relationships formed by women within these texts.

Lillian Faderman and Sharon Marcus both discuss the interaction and often oppositional framing of men and women's roles in Victorian society. This oppositional framing is also present in *Shirley* and *Wives and Daughters*. By understanding how men and women interacted with one another in Victorian society, it becomes easier to understand and see the correlation to how men and women interact within a narrative. The roles inhabited by men and women reinforced the foundational friendships already in existence between women. Marcus point out that female friendship served as a fundamental component and expression of femininity — especially middle class women (39), and that these friendships often presented as oppositions to masculinity. In their separate social spheres, women were trained in their relationships with other women to not encourage competition, unlike men, and learned “selflessness and empathy as counterweights to the male virtues of competitiveness and self-determination” (Marcus 39). Faderman echoes this characterization, commenting “Men tried to claim exclusively for themselves the capacity of action and thought, and relegated women to the realm of sensibility alone” (157). These oppositional spheres allowed women to be “entirely trusting and unrestrained” with one another — sharing “sentiment, her heart — all emotions that manly males had to repress in favor of ‘rationality’ — with another female” (Faderman PP). In the presence of another woman, “the shield of passionlessness” that women were trained “to raise before a man could be lowered with another woman without fear of losing her chastity and reputation and health.” (Faderman). The emotional hiding and shielding that women were expected to do when around men only reinforced and furthered their emotional, and physical closeness around women. Ultimately, as

Marcus suggests, marriage was only one form of friendship, while friendship was the basis of true love. As I suggest, the romantic friendships between women preclude and are more important and more impactful than their relationships with men.

Adrienne Rich proposed that compulsory heterosexuality effectively erases the experiences of women over time in her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” and argues for the reexamination of the relationships between women throughout history. She contextualizes marriage and draws attention to the ways in which the female experience has been edited out of history. This contextualization of the economic motivations often imbued within marriage is important to remember when considering the 19th century novel. Sharon Marcus points to this piece of scholarship in her book as furthering the understanding of the female friendship, and suggests that to fully understand these relationships it is necessary to add to the foundation that Rich provided. Rich uses two terms to discuss ‘lesbianism’: lesbian existence and lesbian continuum. She uses the term ‘lesbian continuum’ to “include a range — through each woman’s life and throughout history — of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman” (648). She argues that this ‘range’ should be expanded to include “the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (648-649). As the word lesbian has been restricted to “clinical associations in its patriarchal definition, female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, thus limiting the erotic itself” (650). According to Rich, the “lesbian existence has been written out of history” (648) — particularly because of the persistence of the enforcement of ‘compulsory heterosexuality.’ Sometimes this is accomplished through the “destruction of memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence... what has been kept from

our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community” (649). Heterosexuality has been enforced “as a means of assuring male right of physical, economical, and emotional access” (647) to women. Rich points out that marriage does not guarantee heterosexuality, but rather, that

“Women have married because it was necessary, in order to survive economically, in order to have children who would not suffer economic deprivation or social ostracism, in order to remain respectable, in order to do what was expected of women...because heterosexual romance has been represented as the great female adventure, duty, and fulfillment.” (654)

Marriage for economic necessity is a reality that is mentioned throughout 19th century novels. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth’s best friend Charlotte marries the clergyman Mr. Collins, who could inherit Mr. Bennet’s property, almost entirely because of economic necessity. It is also the main motivator behind Mrs. Kirkpatrick re-marrying Mr. Gibson in *Wives and Daughters*, and why Cynthia nearly marries her suitor Mr. Preston — despite the fact that she loathes him. Ultimately, Rich sees this “lie of compulsory heterosexuality” (657) as affecting “not just feminist scholarship, but every profession, every reference work, every curriculum, every organizing attempt, every relationship or conversation over which it hovers” (657). Compulsory heterosexuality is evident in the societal obsession with the marriage plot in Victorian novels. It reinforces the structure of marriage, and re-directs the attention of the reader to marital relationships and heterosexual courtships that are largely added as asides to the central relationships between women.

The examination of heterosexuality that Rich conducts, and its effects on marriage, scholarship and the individual relationships of women is evident when examining and

considering the construction of female-female relationships in the 19th century. The relationships formed by fictional women, and oftentimes even the authors themselves, are often restricted to a plot of heterosexuality in their exploration and understanding by the modern reader. The merit of these female-female relationships as being romantic, or really anything more than just ‘friendships,’ is discounted, primarily because Victorian novels often end in marriage plots. However, as Rich points out, the fact that women marry is not remarkable. Marriage is often just one pressure contributing to the enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality, with which women participate in out of economic necessity. Rich quotes a letter she received that expounds upon this theory, “I have had very bad relationships with men — I am now in the midst of a very painful separation. I am trying to find my strength through women — without my friends, I could not survive” (646). Rich comments, “How many times a day do women speak words like these, or think them, or write them, and how often does the synapse reassert itself?” (646). She urges that the reader go beyond the eventual heterosexual coupling, and instead examine the relationships between women.

Thus, the fact that *Shirley* and *Wives and Daughters* end with the four main women marrying men is a matter of insignificance, even irrelevance. While the word “lesbian” was not a characterization that these women would have necessarily used to describe their relationships, I find that Adrienne Rich’s explication of the “lesbian continuum” can be applied to these texts. If all women exist on a “lesbian continuum,” then “we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not. It allows us to connect aspects of women-identification” (651). Furthermore, if all women exist on a lesbian continuum, then whether or not women enter into a heterosexual marriage is immaterial to their female-female relationships. The two do not exist in collusion with one another. Instead, female-female

relationships are the assumed minimum relationship for women. These relationships between women, fictional or otherwise, are foundational necessities. Thus, it should not be surprising that these relationships are complex, oftentimes romantic, and even erotic, relationships. It is only through the “political institution” (637) of heterosexuality that the relationships have been assimilated to appear as simple friendships. Therefore, the works of *Shirley* and *Wives and Daughters*, as well as many of Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell’s contemporaries should not be considered romance stories or love stories that conclude with a happily ever after. Rather, they illustrate the creative and narrative potential that is possible with attention to the female experience amongst each other. It is the ‘friendships’ between Caroline and Shirley and Molly and Cynthia that propel the plot of their respective novels, and allow for a more fluid understanding and exploration of romantic relationships/friendships between women. The novels may end in marriage, but there is very little that indicates to the reader that their marriages will be happy, content and fulfilling. At the very least, there is no suggestion that these relationships are necessary to their happiness in the way that their female friends are. Rather, what the reader does know, is that their relationships continue to develop despite their new marital status. As I previously suggested, Rich’s exploration of the lesbian continuum and the effect of compulsory heterosexuality on women’s lives is foundational — and yet still places the relationships between women on a binary system within a modern definition of lesbianism. I believe that rather than attempting to define the nature of these friendships, it is instead more important to examine them for what they were: extraordinary examples of female connection, love, affection and strength.

Going Beyond the Marriage Plot: Engagement and Marriage as Folly

Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë openly critique the institution of marriage through the narratives of Molly and Cynthia and Caroline and Shirley — despite the fact that the four women

do marry male suitors by the end of the novel. This critique only reinforces the centrality of the female friendships, and further demotes the relationships between women and men. *Wives and Daughters* features the friendship of Molly Gibson and Cynthia Kirkpatrick, who are brought together as step-sisters after Mr. Gibson re-marries Mrs. Kirkpatrick. The two young women navigate marriage proposals, hidden engagements and untimely deaths throughout the novel. This critique of marriage takes place quite openly between Caroline and Shirley. The two women discuss several times at length throughout the novel the limitations of marriage and their own fraught relationships with men. This conversation is more veiled in *Wives and Daughters*. Rather than witnessing Cynthia and Molly discuss their feelings on marriage, the reader is instead presented with situational critiques, including: short and unsuccessful engagements, concealed marriages, scandalous courtships and unhappy widows. Miss Browning, a loveable spinster and friend to the Gibson family, offers up one of the most astute and candid observations about marriage, saying, "...I am rather inclined to look upon matrimony as a weakness to which some very worthy people are prone; but if they must be married, let them make the best of it, and go through the affair with dignity and propriety: or if there are misdoings and clandestine meetings, and such things, at any rate, never let me hear about them!" (497) To her, and many others, marriage is something to be endured in silence and without disturbance to the other spheres of that individual's life. It is not something to make a fuss over — just something to get on with, if you are one of those "worthy people" that must engage in the "weakness" of marriage. In these instances, the reader is asked to draw their own connections between these examples. All of these discussions about marriage reinforce the importance of the relationships between female friends — particularly romantic friendships. Faderman defines romantic friendships as women who wanted to "share their lives, confide in and trust and depend upon each other, to be there

always for each other” (142) and as being “love relationships in every sense except perhaps the genital” (16). By illustrating the contentious and unfulfilling nature of many male-female courtships and marriages, the narrator/author is actually drawing more attention to the relationships that do work — those between women.

One of the first instances presented to the reader to consider in *Wives and Daughters* is the re-marriage of Mr. Gibson to Mrs. Kirkpatrick. The grief that Molly expresses upon learning of her father’s remarriage is of the same nature as if someone had died. This comparison between death and marriage only weakens the Molly’s impression of the institution, and makes it more likely that she would recognize that emotional sustenance must come from someplace other than marriage. Which, Mr. Gibson’s remarriage does in fact force Molly to look for emotional support from someone other than himself — a role that Cynthia happily fills — her new sister who is ironically joined to her only because of Mr. Gibson’s remarriage. Molly’s mother died when she was very young, and the thought of her father remarrying did not cross her mind until the day that he did just that. Since he raised her by himself, Molly and Mr. Gibson have a particularly close relationship, and the narrator comments that “The child grew to understand her father well, and the two had the most delightful intercourse together—half banter, half seriousness, but altogether confidential friendship” (33). Molly is fearful that this closeness she shares with her father will be jeopardized if, and when, he does remarry. The grief that she expresses only furthers the message that marriage is not always a unifying force — that it can sometimes tear apart the relationships that were once supportive and uplifting. When Mr. Gibson’s remarriage to Mrs. Kirkpatrick is confirmed Molly mourns the news as though she were mourning the death of a loved one. She “...broke out with suppressed passion of grief...her father was going to be married again—her father was angry with her; she had done very wrong—he had gone away

displeased; she had lost his love; he was going to be married—away from her—away from his child—his little daughter—forgetting her own dear, dear mother” (115). This description of Molly’s grief mirrors the emotion she feels — it is written in a choppy and disjointed manner, evoking the same sobbing sensation that Molly herself is experiencing.

In contrast, Mrs. Kirkpatrick is incredibly satisfied with her impending marriage to Mr. Gibson. However, the reader soon understands that this happiness stems from her own need to be financially and socially secure, rather than emotionally fulfilled. This financial security would have been more necessary for women than for men, which also explains Molly’s reaction to her father’s remarriage — it wasn’t actually financially necessary for him to do so. The marriage between Mr. Gibson and Mrs. Kirkpatrick (both widowers) exemplifies the ways in which marriage is emotionally dissatisfying for both parties, but economically necessary for women. Before their marriage, Mrs. Kirkpatrick laments the days when she could sit “in the drawing-room like a lady” while her husband did all of the “dirty work” and “toiling and moiling for money” (99). To her, “marriage is the natural thing (99),” and her constant work to monetarily support herself, and Cynthia, she feels to be much more difficult than being a wife. Over time, Mr. Gibson comes to recognize the ways in which his remarriage is far less emotionally fulfilling than his relationship with his young daughter had been. This is particularly evident when his daughter does at last marry Roger, and moves away from home, leaving the house to himself and Mrs. Gibson. In the concluding remarks to the novel, the editor of the *Cornhill* comments that “If any one suffers for it, it is Mr. Gibson. But he takes a partner, so as to get a chance of running up to London to stay with Molly for a few days now and then, and ‘to get a little rest from Mrs. Gibson’” (646). As time goes on, Mr. Gibson becomes more aggravated by his wife, who monitors his household in a very different manner than Molly had — changing meal times to

appear more proper and outlawing cheese as a form of dinner for the busy doctor. By the conclusion of the novel, and the editor's comment about his London visits, it is doubtful that there is any emotional intimacy left in the marriage between the two. Molly observes this, and comments, "...she could not help perceiving that her father was not satisfied with the wife he had chosen" (407). Instead, Mr. Gibson returns his attention more fully to his work, and Mrs. Gibson returns to monitoring the household and planning for any visits by Molly and Roger or Cynthia and her husband Walter Henderson.

By framing marriage as an economic necessity it becomes easier to understand Cynthia's many engagements throughout the novel. If women participated in the institution of marriage primarily out of economic necessity, as Rich argues, then her haste to draw out engagements and her eventual rush into marriage begins to make sense. Cynthia, always noted for her beauty, is never lacking for male suitors. She is often the first to be noticed at a party, and when the Gibsons attend the charity ball, Cynthia's entrance is immediately commented on by the new doctor in the community, who asks to be introduced to her by community gossip Miss Hornblower. Over the course of the novel, the reader observes four different men who court Cynthia, three of whom she is at one point engaged to. Her first engagement was to Mr. Preston at age 16, when her mother was particularly neglectful and she was in need of a friend and money. Mr. Preston, struck by her beauty, became her friend and eventually her suitor. Their engagement began when he gave Cynthia a small amount of money to buy some new clothing for a weekend away with a friend's family, under the condition that they become engaged. Cynthia, who was naïve and young, agreed to the engagement, not knowing how seriously Mr. Preston took her word. For years he blackmails her with her love letters that she sent to him, as well as the money that he spent on her. The reader only learns of this engagement towards the

end of the novel, after Cynthia has already become engaged to Roger Hamley. Her engagement to Roger begins out of a necessity to distance herself from Mr. Preston and his threats of exposure and matrimony. Molly is of course horrified at this justification, to which Cynthia explains, "I was free—I am free; it seemed a way of assuring myself that I was quite free; and I did like Roger—it was such a comfort to be brought into contact with people who could be relied upon; and I was not a stock or a stone that I could fail to be touched with his tender, unselfish love, so different to Mr. Preston's" (470). Thus, she becomes engaged to Roger also out of economic necessity to free herself from the man who is blackmailing her. However, similarly to her engagement to Mr. Preston, she asks that her engagement to Roger be kept a secret. Roger is embarking upon a scientific voyage to Africa, and so the two part as a couple with the intent to be married, but also knowing that it will be several years before that is a possibility. It is during this time that Roger is away, and before her engagement to Mr. Preston is made known to Molly, that Cynthia receives a third proposal by Mr. Coxe — Mr. Gibson's previous medical assistant. Mr. Coxe visits the Gibsons with the aim of proposing to Molly, and instead is wooed by Cynthia, to whom he proposes at the end of his short stay with the family. Mr. Gibson is outraged by her behavior, and her willingness to be flirtatious with a susceptible man despite being engaged (to two men nonetheless) already, and reprimands her in front of the household. Embarrassed, Mr. Coxe leaves their household as single as he came. After the scandal of Cynthia's engagement to Mr. Preston becomes known to the Gibson household, and gossip has slandered Molly as the guilty and engaged party, Cynthia decides to end her engagement to Roger. She confesses that she does "not love him well enough to go through the shame of having to excuse myself, —to plead that he will reinstate me in his good opinion...I would rather never see him again, for these two reasons. And the truth is, I do not love him. I like him, I respect him;

but I will not marry him.” (troubles never come alone). Finally, after her letters to Mr. Preston are retrieved by Molly, and her engagement to Roger is ended, Cynthia agrees to marry Mr. Henderson — who proposes for a second time towards the end of the novel — the first proposal the reader is only privy to via a narrative recounting. The second proposal Cynthia receives via mail — “a declaration of love, a proposal of marriage as clear as words could make it” from Mr. Henderson, to which she accepts. They are married only a few weeks later. In all of these engagements, Cynthia never strives to be loved or love in the way that she loves Molly. Instead, she moves from one man to the next all in the hopes of remaining economically secure — much like her mother.

In contrast to Cynthia’s failed engagements and Molly’s lack of suitors, the two women’s love for one another is cemented early on in their meeting — which reinforces the superfluous nature of their eventual marriages. They both receive an abundance of love from one another. By examining the declarations of the love between Molly and Cynthia, and comparing them to the eventual heterosexual marriage proposals that they both receive, it is evident to see how much more intimate and romantic these relationships between women were than their eventual love towards their husbands. In tearing down the marriage proposal as less than satisfactory, it is easy to see how the small “I love you” and subtle compliments the women pay each other throughout the novels exemplify a deeper understanding of love than their heterosexual relationships. Their love is based on their deep emotional understanding of one another — something that is cemented by the amount of time they spend together as step-sisters. Molly and Cynthia’s love for one another is made evident to the reader essentially upon their first meeting. Molly is presented with Cynthia’s figure — seeing her outlined in the doorway — and the narrator comments that “Molly fell in love with her, so to speak, on the instant” (215). By adding as an aside “so to

speak,” the narrator is also illustrating just how difficult it is to categorize and label the emotional experience shared between two women. By comparing their felt experience to love, “so to speak” implies that love is the most similar emotion to what they experience, but not quite a tangible or appropriate classification. The narrator struggles with the classification of these relationships just as critics have. Molly’s visible blindness to Cynthia’s facial features, since her body is cast in shadow when they first meet, only emphasizes the irrational element of her love for Cynthia. Just as Molly is physically blind to Cynthia’s body, she is also emotionally blind to her faults. She bestows upon Cynthia unconditional love — when she believes that her and Roger will marry, when the engagement is called off, and even when she finds out about Cynthia and Mr. Preston. This love is not dependent on the details of Cynthia’s being or character, or even on the intricacies of Molly’s character. There is a level of love, obsession, lust and fascination that inhabit their initial interactions, particularly Molly’s private musings on Cynthia. The narrator describes this emotion as something that can “neither be described nor reasoned upon,” which seems to depict a description of love. Just ten days after they meet, Cynthia’s love for Molly is also expressed. She says, “I do believe I love you, little Molly, whom I have only known for ten days, better than anyone.” This odd qualification of love is seen again with “I do believe.” It adds a level of uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity when trying to determine what exactly Cynthia does believe she feels for Molly. She goes on to comment that she wishes that she could love people in the way that Molly does, to which Molly replies in surprise, “Don’t you?” Cynthia then confesses, “No. A good number of people love me, I believe, or at least they think they do but I never seem to care much for any one” (219). Going even further, Cynthia comments, to Molly’s shock, that she loves her even more than she loves her mother. Later in the

novel, when they are discussing Roger Hamley, Cynthia again reinforces that her love for Molly remains stronger than her love for anyone else. She says,

“But you know I've often told you I've not the gift of loving; I said pretty much the same thing to him. I can respect, and I fancy I can admire, and I can like, but I never feel carried off my feet by love for any one, not even for you, little Molly, and I am sure I love you more than...” “No, don't!” said Molly, putting her hand before Cynthia's mouth, in almost a passion of impatience. “Don't, don't---I won't hear you---I ought not to have asked you---it makes you tell lies!” (375)

This conversation reads as if it were confessional — Molly is distraught at Cynthia telling her that she will never love her as she can love anyone else, and responds as if Cynthia had told her something highly illicit.

While Elizabeth Gaskell critiques marriage through narrative examples of failed engagements and marriages, Charlotte Brontë critiques marriage through the dialogue of Caroline and Shirley. *Shirley* documents the friendship between Caroline Helstone, the niece of the local parson, and heiress Shirley Keeldar. The novel outlines their place as women within the sphere of a small town dominated by the mill that Caroline's cousin operates. In *Shirley*, the reader understands the experiences of Molly and Cynthia through their own words, rather than through the narrator's eyes. The reader is present for their conversations and dialogue, whereas the narrator in *Wives and Daughters* will, at times, summarize and contextualize an interaction or conversation that the reader might not have actually been present for. In this way, there is an element of reliability that is present with dialogue that is not as certain with narration. Their relationship with one another is often discussed and framed by themselves as a starkly different relationship than that which they experience with men. The relationship between Shirley and

Caroline is an exploration of the “deep bond between two women” and how that “might be the solution to the problem of how to survive emotionally as an unmarried woman in Victorian society” (Hunt 55). As Linda Hunt illustrates, Charlotte Brontë is even exploring “the possibility that female friendship could be a preferable alternative to romantic attachments to men” (55). In the chapter “Shirley Seeks to be Saved by Works,” just several chapters after they meet, Shirley and Caroline consciously reflect on their own friendship within the context, and overshadowing influence of Robert Moore’s presence in the two women’s lives. Shirley laments that he keeps “intruding” between them, and that without him, they would “be good friends.” It is his presence that creates a “perpetually-recurring eclipse of our friendship.” Shirley confesses that if they [Caroline and Shirley] were left “unmolested,” she could “bear you [Caroline] in my presence for ever, and not for the fraction of a second do I ever wish to be rid of you.” Caroline responds with a brief but emphatic reassurance, saying “Shirley, I can say anything you wish. Shirley, I like you.” Expounding upon this statement, she says, “I am every day growing more accustomed to—fonder of you. You know I am too English to get up a vehement friendship all at once; but you are so much better than common—you are so different to every-day young ladies—I esteem you, I value you; you are never a burden to me—never” (197).

This conversation highlights the dissonance that is created by men. It is the male presence that serves as the disruptor of their relationship, without which they might be able to live in harmony. However, it is also the presence of Robert Moore that brings about their mutual realization and confessional expression of their feelings for one another. Without his intrusion, they might not have realized the sheer joy and contentment and satisfaction that their friendship provides for one another. Their commitment to each other is not to be minimized. They express their appreciation for each other in the sentiment that the reader might see a marriage proposal

expressed. Shirley believes that she could be with Caroline “for ever” — and not just theoretically, but continuously in her literal presence “for ever.” Caroline’s response is simple — “I like you” — but effective. The statement is uttered in agreement to Shirley’s confessional “for ever.” Caroline does not need to rationally or emotionally convince herself or Shirley of the power of her affection. Simply, “I like you,” expresses all she needs to convey. Her feelings grow every day — she is “accustomed to” and “fond” of Shirley — even “esteeming” her and “valuing” her — noting that Shirley is “different to every-day young ladies.” This quiet expression of affection framed by Caroline’s self-confessed “English” temperament, reiterates the exceptional nature of their friendship. Her soft esteem and fondness and Shirley’s “for ever” cast this passage as one that might be compared to a proposal. The two characters recognize and state their affection for each other, comparing their relationship to the society that they are surrounded by, and coming to the conclusion that they are different and more exceptional than Robert Moore or any other “young lady.” This verbal declaration contributes to the categorization of their friendship as a romantic one, and makes their feelings for one another clear to themselves and the reader.

Caroline continues to expound upon her feelings for Shirley, comparing their relationship to that of sisters — possibly the only example of a permanent intimate relationship between women that Caroline (or Charlotte) felt was accessible. Sisterhood, as Caroline recognizes, is forever. In many ways, the novel’s ending tries to sustain this “forever” in the only way it knows how — they become sister in-laws.

"Shirley, I never had a sister—you never had a sister; but it flashes on me at this moment how sisters feel towards each other—affection twined with their life, which no shocks of feeling can uproot, which little quarrels only trample an instant, that it may spring more

freshly when the pressure is removed; affection that no passion can ultimately outrival, with which even love itself cannot do more than compete in force and truth. Love hurts us so, Shirley. It is so tormenting, so racking, and it burns away our strength with its flame. In affection is no pain and no fire, only sustenance and balm. I am supported and soothed when you—that is, *you only*—are near, Shirley. Do you believe me now?” (197)

In this analogy between sisterhood and their own uncategorized relationship, the element of permanence is sustained. This version of sisterhood is more accurately an evaluation of marriage. However, Caroline seems to even be going beyond marriage in this description. In her mind, her relationship with Shirley is one where “affection” is deeper than “passion” — deeper even than “love.” If love is to be associated with traditional heterosexual courtship and marriage, then affection is to be associated with female relationships that are un-categorical in nature. If love is “tormenting” and “burns” away strength — inflicting pain in the process — then affection is constant, sustaining, sympathetic and supportive. Love and heterosexual marriage may offer a version of passion, but is ultimately unsustainable and far more detrimental than supportive. In this moment, Caroline is accurately assessing the depth of her emotion for Shirley, and the real nature of their relationship. Sisterhood offers the same permanence as marriage, but is a far more radical expression of emotion — one that does not feel the need to inflict pain or exist in a dichotomy of pain and pleasure. Instead, affection is consistent, stable and “sustenance.” Caroline recognizes that the emotion she feels when it is only Shirley by her side is incomparable to any other relationship in her life. This comparison to marriage is evident and remarkable. If love was often “viewed as the coming together of two halves of a previously severed whole,” then “when the two heroines of *Shirley* recognize that the male and female ‘spheres’ are so far apart that they have little actual knowledge of what men are like, it is a serious matter indeed”

(Hunt 57). In this conversation, that recognition of their compatibility is evident. In this scene, “Brontë is raising the possibility that a woman’s search for a counterpart may be fruitfully conducted among members of her own sex” (Hunt 58). However, framing the search for a romantic partner through the lens of finding a “counterpart” still reinforces the dichotomy of a heterosexual relationship, and suggests that a romantic partner must in fact be oppositional to oneself. This analysis still operates within the binary system of examining relationships.

The nature of the “sustenance and balm” present in their relationship is something that Linda Hunt explores in her essay “Sustenance and Balm: The Question of Female Friendship in *Shirley* and *Villette*.” Hunt examines the ways in which Brontë pushes the limit of the conception of female friendship, and the way in which her plot is ultimately constrained by her personal prescription to the “old-fashioned” and “traditional world of women.” (66). The extremes of heterosexual relationships, and their oppositional nature is a theme that Hunt sees Brontë pushing up against, but ultimately being constrained by and succumbing to. If Caroline and Shirley’s relationship offers sympathy, sustenance and harmony, then heterosexual relationships exist within a paradox of emotions. Hunt argues that she “...wants the continual clash of opposing impulses: imagination and reason, passion and self-control, excitement and repose. Both sides of the dialectic are essential, and Brontë sees male and female as essential contradictions” (59-60). It is in this belief that the development of the relationships and marriage between Robert and Caroline and Shirley and Louis begin to make sense. While Brontë was willing to explore the development of an affectionate relationship between women, she ultimately “...cannot envision women offering one another ‘elation’ and it is not a feeling she is willing to allow her heroines to forego” (60). Thus, *Shirley* ends with the marriages of the two heroines to their opposing hero figures. This analysis lends some explanation to the hasty marriages by the two women, and the

ironic self-awareness that Brontë demonstrates in what she terms “The Winding Up.” Hunt draws attention to the ways in which Brontë would have been pushing up against the social constraints surrounding the depiction of a romantic female relationship.

Linda Hunt offers an analysis of *Shirley* that recognizes the significance and depth of relationship between Shirley and Caroline, while also emphasizing that Charlotte Brontë did not believe in the possibility of this dynamic being fully realized in ‘real life.’ She assumes that Brontë consciously chose to devalue the reality of this friendship, recognizing Brontë’s adherence to more traditional evocations of women’s roles. However, what she fails to consider is the fierce belief in the value of these relationships that actually allowed her to explore their power, despite undercutting their actualization in the end. Brontë depicted a pairing of two women whose love and affection was itself radical. Hunt fails to consider the ways in which Brontë herself might also have been constrained by society as a woman author operating in a profession largely dominated by men. In her telling of Shirley and Caroline, and their ultimate marriage to men, she is exemplifying the affect that a patriarchal society has upon the work of a woman who is probing a fictitious matriarchal world. Brontë does not couple Shirley and Caroline in the end — but this does not mean that she was not pushing the envelope of traditional relationship depictions. Instead, in not coupling these women together, Brontë is illustrating how deeply affective internalized patriarchal values can be. She is willing to explore the elements of female romance and coupling, and even gender fluidity, but in her world, this actualization might have been fully inaccessible for her to create — even in fiction.

Physical Touch and Subverting the Male Gaze

The physical exploration of the female body calls attention to the physical intimacy, not just emotional intimacy, that these women share with one another. Cynthia and Molly’s subtle but

continuous touching throughout the novel draws more attention to their emotional intimacy. These interactions that they have with one another continue to emphasize the importance of these relationships between women. Cynthia herself is also an interesting physical representation of the feminine form. She is depicted as being very beautiful, and well aware of her own beauty. Thus, it is significant that when Molly and Cynthia first meet, her body is in shadow and Molly and the reader only see an outline of Cynthia's figure. This blindness to the physical details of Cynthia highlight Molly's blindness to her emotional flaws. In *Shirley*, Shirley and Caroline explore the female body through their gaze, instead of through the traditional gaze of a man. Shirley conjures up the image of a mermaid in Caroline's likeness, but discuss the mermaid as if she physically represented all women — referring to the mermaid as a “Temptress-terror! monstrous likeness of ourselves!” Here, the physical vagueness of the mermaid allows for her to represent the often repressed emotional landscape of women as seen through the eyes of men. The two women see the mermaid's anger and crazed posture, ultimately reflecting the same anger that Shirley holds towards the society that remains dissatisfied by her single status, despite being economically stable without a husband. Ultimately, the two women watching this depiction of ‘woman as mermaid’ illustrates the way that their own bodies are watched and policed by society — particularly their emotional selves, as the mermaid represents. It is with this understanding that their ability to be emotionally vulnerable with one another is highlighted.

This development and awareness of emotional intimacy is evident in *Wives and Daughters*. Molly and Cynthia are first introduced to one another as half-sisters — Mr. Gibson and Mrs. Kirkpatrick have just married, and Cynthia is traveling back to England to live with her new stepfather and stepsister. Despite meeting each other within the context of becoming half-sisters, the narrator makes it clear that their relationship is one that cannot be defined by

“sisterhood” or even “friendship,” but is instead something intangible and undefinable. Molly seems to be the only person in her household that expresses enthusiasm over Cynthia’s imminent arrival — Mrs. Gibson resents her daughter for the youth and beauty that she herself is losing in her aging. However, any amount of excitement that Molly feels towards the arrival of “a companion, a girl, a sister” does not explain the physical intimacy that Molly and Cynthia share upon first meeting. Throughout much of the novel, it is Cynthia’s beauty that will differentiate between Molly and Cynthia. It affects how Molly sees herself, how the community sees them both, and how suitors perceive the two young women — as well as how Cynthia sees herself.

The reader’s attention is immediately drawn to the physical form of Cynthia — as if her physical presence is just as noteworthy, if not more so, than her actual persona. Cynthia’s entrance is such that the reader sees her silhouette before her physical features, as does Molly. This entrance immediately calls attention to the physical form of the human body as being just as important as Cynthia’s physical and facial features. Molly’s visual blindness upon Cynthia’s entrance foreshadows her emotional blindness towards her faults later in the novel. She enters the room and Molly is described as seeing “a beautiful, tall, swaying figure, against the light of the open door, but could not see any of the features that were, for the moment, in shadow.” Not only is this scene noteworthy because of the focus/emphasis that it places on the physical presence of Cynthia, but it also foregrounds Molly and Cynthia’s relationship as being one that is irregular. Molly’s initial reaction to meeting Cynthia is a shyness that is seen amongst lovers, not friends — and certainly not step sisters. Molly is described as being overcome with “a sudden gush of shyness” that “quenched the embrace she would have given a moment before” (214). Unhindered by Molly’s initial restraint, Cynthia closes the physical and emotional gap between herself and Molly and instead “took her in her arms, and kissed her on both cheeks.” The

narrator is drawing the reader's attention to the beginning of what will continue to develop as a relationship outside the parameters of the roles that Molly and Cynthia interact in with one another. The conscious veiling of her features "in shadow" also necessitates a conscious unveiling of Cynthia's beauty. Once Cynthia emerges from the shadows, Molly is described as being "absorbed in the contemplation of Cynthia's beauty" (215). Very little attention is given to Cynthia's actual figure in her physical description, and instead, most of Molly's rapture is focused on her facial features — observing,

"Perhaps her features were not regular; but the changes in her expressive countenance gave one no time to think of that. Her smile was perfect; her pouting charming; the play of the face was in the mouth. Her eyes were beautifully shaped, but their expression hardly seems to vary. In colouring she was not unlike her mother; only she had not so much of the red-haired tints in her complexion; and her long-shaped, serious grey eyes were fringed with dark lashes, instead of her mother's insipid flaxen ones" (215).

The narrator seems to be addressing a third party, with the aside "one," suggesting that there is a watching and commenting on watching that is similar to Shirley and Caroline's watching of the mermaid. This scene then offers some attention to the physical form of Cynthia, and a conscious watcher of her form. The attention that the narrator draws to the physical similarities and differences between Cynthia and Mrs. Gibson reflects the tenuous relationship that they have with one another — and that Molly has with both of them. The space given to the description of Cynthia's body is in line with how Cynthia sees herself — beautiful and worthy of the devotion of both men and women. In this moment, the reader is viewing her through Molly's eyes, as well as through her own. Molly seems to only serve as a mirror for her own infatuation with herself.

In addition to introducing the physical power that Cynthia has over Molly, the narrator also alludes to the emotional influence that grows with their relationship. After only seeing Cynthia appear in the doorway, and without even interacting with her further, “Molly fell in love with her, so to speak, on the instant” (215). This emotional connection that Molly experiences is echoed by Cynthia when they first meet as well. Cynthia takes both of Molly’s hands when they are first alone and “looking steadily into her face” declares “I think I shall like you. I am so glad! I was afraid I should not” (215). The development of their physical attachment is paired with the development of their emotional attachment — drawing the connection and creating a natural progression between watching and feeling. After their initial meeting, the narrator interjects to point out the “unconscious power of fascination” that Cynthia enacts over Molly. This power seems to be derived from their emotional and physical connection, and yet, there is something improbable and inexpressible about where exactly this “fascination” originates. Cynthia, according to the narrator, is the equivalent of the girl

“...found in every school who attracts and influences all the others, not by her virtues, nor her beauty, nor her sweetness, nor her cleverness, but by something that can neither be described nor reasoned upon....A woman will have this charm, not only over men but over her own sex; it cannot be defined, or rather it is so delicate a mixture of many gifts and qualities that it is impossible to decide on the proportions of each” (216)

In this description of power and admission of Cynthia’s great influence over Molly, the narrator again alludes to the indefinable nature of the relationship that Molly and Cynthia are entering into. The power and affect is tangible, but the definition and label for the relationship is elusive.

The emphasis on the feminine physical body is furthered when Shirley subverts the male gaze and instead gazes upon her conjuration of a mermaid as if she were viewing all women. The

scene is remarkable enough simply by the act that Shirley bequests the reader and Caroline indulge upon with her. She verbally creating an image of a fictional being, and asking Caroline (and the reader) to gaze upon something that is a figment of her imagination. Shirley summons up the image of a mermaid — in the likeness of Caroline but as a representation of all women — and the two women are described as gazing upon her, as if they were gazing upon themselves. Shirley and Caroline are taking power for themselves in this act of watching, and the universality of the mermaid's appearance allows them to personalize her experience with their own. The blankness of the landscape of the mermaid physically places more emphasis on her emotional landscape. In this scene, Shirley and Caroline are watching themselves, and in turn being watched by the representation of themselves that is the mermaid. It is a contemplation and recognition of how they view themselves and how they are viewed by others (men). The mermaid is first defined and observed based on the physical form that the creature takes, and its physical attributes. She does not talk to Shirley and Caroline, nor do they speak with her. Shirley comments that her face is “a face in the style of yours [Caroline]” but that her eyes are not those of Caroline's. The mermaid beckons to the two women, and Shirley comments that “Were we men, we should spring at the sign—the cold billow would be dared for the sake of the colder enchantress; being women, we stand safe, though not dreadless” (184). While the mermaid's physical description is somewhat vague — despite being described as having a face in the “style” of Caroline's, the creature is otherwise loosely described as having long straight hair, “alabaster” skin, and a lifted arm beckoning the two women.

Shirley's description of the mermaid's emotion landscape as embodied by her physical form allows her own feelings to be expressed. It is the mermaid's body that serves as the emotional conduit for Shirley's own experience, and by extension, the experience of all women.

The specificity comes when Shirley describes the emotional landscape of the mermaid. Shirley describes that she “comprehends our unmoved gaze” and feeling “powerless; anger crosses her front; she cannot charm, but she will appall us; she rises high, and glides all revealed on the dark wave-ridge. Temptress-terror! monstrous likeness of ourselves!” It is in this emotional description that the reader is presented with a reflection of Shirley’s own internal emotional landscape. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar comment that Shirley is able to see through the “coercive myths of her culture” since she “consciously experiences herself as monstrous, deviant, excluded, powerless, and angry” (387) — further reinforcing Shirley’s own identification with the mermaid. In this instance, Shirley is not only commenting on the “stereotypical male images of women as unnatural (but seductive) monsters,” but is also “describing the effect such images have on women themselves.” (387). Interestingly, this characterization of the mermaid as monster varies from Hans Christian Anderson’s *The Little Mermaid*, published in 1837, in which the mermaid is presented as a creature to be pitied. The mermaid is the embodiment of the desire that the two women have to enact some form of revenge on the “men who have enslaved” them (387). This scene ultimately allows her to express her own dissatisfaction with her life — a sense that is only remedied by the woman who is standing next to her. Caroline comments, “But, Shirley, she is not like us. We are neither temptresses, nor terrors, nor monsters,” to which Shirley ominously responds, “Some of our kind, it is said, are all three. There are men who ascribe to 'woman,' in general, such attributes.” Their discussion of themselves, women in general, and how men view women as being akin to monstrous mermaids, all while they themselves are watching this projection of a mermaid is highly unsettling. In this scene, there is some level of recognition that women, including themselves, are often misrepresented by society. However, it would not be as accessible for them

to have this conversation if they were explicitly viewing their own bodies, so the mermaid is called up as a stand in — removing the conversation one level from the two women. It is only possible to have this conversation about their own physical embodiment, and the way society gazes upon them, if they are somewhat removed from the conversation's implication. Ultimately, this conversation is a recognition of the ways in which their emotional and physical expressions as women are monitored by men — but that among women, and particularly among each other, they are able to be their authentic selves.

Gender Queer: Donning Heterosexuality to Emphasize Female Attraction and Subvert Binary Expression

Further reinforcing that the relationships between women are central to the Victorian novel, Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell experiment with the use of gender with the characterization of both Molly and Shirley. Brontë characterizes Shirley as having a fluid approach to gender. At various points throughout the novel, Shirley refers to herself as a “gentleman” or “Captain” or with “he/him” pronouns. In addition, Shirley is an independent and wealthy heiress, complete with the mansion that would often accompany the characterization of a gentleman. This gendering as masculine creates an opposition between Shirley and Caroline, and suggests “that there is a desire possible between females through Shirley’s masculine behavior. Brontë’s development of Shirley’s masculine side represents Brontë’s subtle depiction of same-sex desire” (Kim 69). Though this discussion and alteration of gender identity, Brontë is challenging the reader to question the interactions that Shirley and Caroline share as women. In *Wives and Daughters*, Molly takes on the role of masculine hero when she sets out to rescue Cynthia’s reputation from the clutches of Mr. Preston and retrieve her old love letters. In the chapter “Molly Gibson to the Rescue,” Molly is clearly presented as being the hero to Cynthia’s

damsel in distress. Both of these instances draw attention to the intimate relationships between these women, and serve to suggest to the reader what the alternate ending to the novel might have been if Shirley and Molly had been men, not women. By framing their relationships as being heterosexual, even fleetingly, it reinforces the romantic and intimate nature of their friendships. In both instances, it becomes easier to imagine their love for one another when placed in the context of heterosexuality.

Charlotte Brontë experiments with the use of gender in her characterization of Shirley — specifically in the way that Shirley manages to alternate throughout the novel between being referred to as a “gentleman” and “captain” and a “lady” and “heiress.” This alternating is most noticeable when Shirley takes on the role of “gentleman” in the presence of Caroline. In these instances, Brontë is subtly suggesting and exploring what the relationship between Shirley and Caroline might look like if Shirley were actually a man — something that even her name suggests, since Shirley was a generally a man’s name in the 19th century. As Gilbert and Gubar point out in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, “...Shirley is not a dependent inmate or a passive suppliant, not a housekeeper or housewife. She is a wealthy heiress who owns her own house, the ancestral mansion usually allotted to the hero...” (381). The rendering of Shirley as the gentleman to Caroline’s lady forces the reader to consider how the ending of the novel might have been different if Shirley were indeed a man — certainly there cannot be any doubt that the two would have been married — but Brontë is pushing the reader further than just considering the marriage that could have been. In this characterization she is suggesting that Shirley might actually be better suited to marry Caroline than any of the other ‘heroes.’ It is the closest that she gets to imagining an alternate ending, one in which the two main characters do marry each other as the friends and lovers that they are. Shirley’s performance of “the captain to Caroline’s

modest maiden” infuses their “coy banter” with “a fine, subtle sexuality that is markedly absent from their manipulative heterosexual relationships.” (Gilbert and Gubar 381)

Shirley takes on this persona of the “gentleman” quite frequently when discussing business affairs with other men, but she also occasionally takes on the persona when she is speaking with Caroline. The context within which Shirley’s gender alters is significant. When viewed in the context of her conversations with other men, her shift in gender is one that serves to reinforce her capabilities as a landowner, business owner and heiress. On the other hand, her assumption of the role of the “gentleman” around Caroline is more romantically suggestive. In these instances, she often assumes responsibility for Caroline’s well-being, and interacts with her in the manner of a potential suitor, or even husband. When shown side by side with Caroline’s sweet exemplification of domesticity, it is difficult to not see Shirley as Caroline’s character double — an idea that Gilbert and Gubar explore. In addition, the scenes in which Shirley assumes a masculine persona serve to also call into question and draw attention to the scenes where Caroline and Shirley interact on level footing as women. In these characterizations of alternations between gender identity, Brontë is forcing the reader to question the interactions that Shirley and Caroline share as women. If the two can interact as if they were in a romantic relationship when Shirley uses masculine pronouns, what, if anything, changes when they interact alone as women? Initially, it is tempting to place more emphasis on the occasions in which the two interact as though they were in a heterosexual relationship, but in actuality, their greater shared intimacies are developed when they are alone as women. This characterization forces the reader to take the relationship between Shirley and Caroline seriously — as just that — a relationship between women.

When Shirley takes on the persona of a gentleman around Caroline, it is often with the aim of spending time alone together. One notable instance of Shirley taking on the persona of a man occurs when she is attempting to persuade Caroline away from her expressed desire to be a governess. Shirley initially attempts to appeal to Caroline's emotional attachment towards herself, saying, "Why, it is my daily pleasure now to look out for the little cottage bonnet and the silk scarf glancing through the trees in the lane, and to know that my quiet, shrewd, thoughtful companion and monitress is coming back to me; that I shall have her sitting in the room to look at, to talk to or to let alone, as she and I please" (181). In this confessional, Shirley reaffirms the relationship that her and Caroline have — placing ownership on Caroline by using "my" to describe her, acknowledging that she likes to "look at" and "talk to" Caroline. It is only once Shirley has reminded Caroline, and the reader, of their established and regularly shared intimacy that she switches into describing herself as "Captain Keeldar." As a counter to Caroline's plan to be a governess in an effort to improve her outlook on life, Shirley offers to take Caroline on a two-month excursion to the Highlands. Shirley proposes this idea to Caroline, saying "However, when Captain Keeldar is made comfortable, accommodated with all he wants, including a sensible, genial comrade, it gives him a thorough pleasure to devote his spare efforts to making that comrade happy. And should we not be happy, Caroline, in the Highlands?" (182). In this instance, Caroline is again Shirley's for the taking — a comrade that "Captain Keeldar" desires to make happy. And, notably, this happiness would come from Caroline accompanying Shirley on a two-month trip with only each other and Mrs. Pryor. This outing would be perfectly acceptable for two young women to take together with a governess. But, that is not the context within which Shirley makes the offer. Instead, Shirley is inhabiting her masculine persona when she makes the request of Caroline, to which Caroline responds, "You are very good, Shirley,"

and Shirley says, “I would be very good if you would let me.” The acceptance of this trip (which actually never takes place) is granted when Shirley is acting as “Captain Keeldar.” It would have been wildly inappropriate for Caroline and Shirley to take this trip had Shirley actually been her male suitor. But, as two women, the reader is made to understand that this would have been a normalized and appropriate outing for two women. However, the rendering of Shirley as a man in this scene forces the reader to think twice about the context of the invitation — if Shirley is the suitor when she takes on the role of “Captain Keeldar,” is she not still the romantic suitor as herself? This exchange illustrates their mutual dependence on one another. Shirley desires to make Caroline happy and Caroline affirms Shirley’s desire. The two exist in a dance to please one another — each step a move that perfectly aligns with the desires of their partner.

This desire to be alone together, potentially as more than just female friends, is reinforced when Shirley is asked by Caroline’s uncle to stay with her for the night while he sets out to help Robert Moore avenge the destruction of his mill. In this scene, Shirley recognizes that Mr. Helstone actually wants her to take on the protective guise of guardian and protector of Caroline — something reserved for men, particularly husbands. Mr. Helstone is transferring the power that he has over Caroline as her guardian to Shirley, the unceremonious equivalent to matrimony. When Mr. Helstone makes this request, Shirley clarifies what his actual intention for her role is, saying, “...you want me as a gentleman — the first gentleman in Briarfield, in short — to supply your place, be master of the rectory and guardian of your niece and maids while you are away?” Mr. Helstone replies, “Exactly, captain. I thought the post would suit you. Will you favor Caroline so far as to be her guest for one night? Will you stay here instead of going back to Fieldhead?” (249) Thus, the narrator makes it clear that Shirley and Caroline will spend the night together — with Shirley taking on her role, at least initially, as the gentleman protector. Even

though there no apparent sexual intent in Mr. Helstone's proposal that Shirley spend the night, nor does anything sexual occur between the two women, it is still significant that they do spend the night together. This act is something that would have been reserved for only close relations or a spouse — illustrating the fact that in Caroline and Shirley are, in many ways, both sisters and wives to each other.

In *Wives and Daughters*, Molly Gibson is framed as the knight in shining armor to Cynthia's damsel in distress, placing their friendship within the context of a heterosexual relationship, and drawing further attention to the spaces in the novel where they interact simply as women. Molly intervenes in Cynthia's troubles with Mr. Preston — clearly cast as the hero next to Mr. Preston's villainous tactics — rescuing Cynthia from a romantic mess of her own creation. Mr. Preston used Cynthia's old letters to him as a means of blackmail — trying to force her into marriage with the proof of her consent to their engagement when she was 16. Molly's heroism sets her apart from Cynthia and the many of the men that pursue Cynthia. Her moral fortitude is developed throughout *Wives and Daughters*, making her 'rescue' of Cynthia seem entirely plausible. In the chapter "Molly Gibson to the Rescue," Molly is framed as Cynthia's hero — the knight in shining armor — made all the more apparent since Molly is 'saving' Cynthia from an unhappy engagement and certain misery if she were to marry Mr. Preston. In framing Molly as Cynthia's 'rescuer,' the connection between 'savior' and 'suitor' narrows. The reader is presented with one of Cynthia's actual male suitors, whose feasibility as a marriage prospect is minimal at best, who is contrasted by Molly's very goodness, morality, and willingness to sacrifice her own dignity for that of the woman that she loves. By framing Molly as the hero, and Cynthia as the damsel in distress, the two women are placed into a heterosexual relationship mold that, had Molly actually been a man, would have certainly resulted in

courtship, if not marriage. In this context, the narrator is making their romantic love for one another difficult to ignore — the heterosexual model of Molly as the ‘rescuer’ makes their love acceptable and legitimate, not just the passing fancy of friends.

After Cynthia confesses to Molly her tumultuous past with Mr. Preston, and his threat to release her old letters (in which she critiques and insults her mother) if she does not consent to their marriage, Molly nearly immediately offers to retrieve the letters for Cynthia. Cynthia, somewhat shocked by her offer, remains doubtful that Molly will follow through on her promise. But, true to form, Molly sets off to meet Mr. Preston alone, not particularly aware of or concerned about how their clandestine meeting might be construed if someone were to see them. Molly matches Mr. Preston’s “impertinence” (476) with determination — unwilling to accept defeat and return to Cynthia empty handed. For every snide comment that Preston makes about Cynthia’s honesty or worth, Molly matches him with an unwavering and honest response. At one point, she even chides him, saying “You should not speak so of the person you profess to wish to have for your wife” (476). Molly appeals to him on the point that Cynthia will not nor cannot marry him, but Preston reminds her of her ignorance, saying, “I suppose you don’t know that there is any other feeling that can be gratified, excepting love. Have you never heard of revenge?” (478) In this instance, her own blindness towards love is highlighted — she neglects to consider that Preston might try to retaliate against Cynthia, and that if he cannot have her love, he can at least enact revenge. However, this argument only further reinforces the moral differences between himself and Molly — her purity of character is bolstered by Preston’s moral depravity. This contrast also seems to suggest that there at least some inherent level of moral depravity in all men, a flaw Molly is exempt from, even when taking on the role of the hero. It further positions men and women as being intellectual and ethical opposites of one another.

The turning point of the argument between Molly and Mr. Preston that leads to her eventual victory only occurs after she adopts his argument tactics. Finally understanding his pain at the acceptance of the loss of Cynthia, as well as the lengths to which he would go to enact revenge, Molly levels the playing field with a threat of her own. If Preston does not return the letters, she threatens to "...tell it all, from beginning to end, to Lady Harriet, and ask her to speak to her father. I feel sure she will do it; and I don't think you will dare refuse Lord Cumnor." (479)

Unknowingly, Molly hits upon the exact intimidation tactic that would result in Preston conceding. He values his reputation as that of a gentleman, as well as his relationship with Lord Cumnor, and knows that his behavior is "what no gentleman, no honourable man, no manly man, could put up with in any one about him" (479). It is not until Molly engages in the "rational values" (Faderman 158) of men that she bests Mr. Preston — continuing to push her into the realm of the 'hero' and the performance of masculinity, in contrast with Cynthia's very feminine plea for help. Preston wonders how "...the girl standing before him had been clever enough to find it out" and he "forgot himself for an instant in admiration of her" (479). Molly's mastering of the "capacity of action and thought" (Faderman 157) even captures Preston's attention. Molly "...stood frightened, yet brave, not letting go her hold on what she meant to do, even when things seemed most against her" (479) for the defense of "...Cynthia first, and for Roger as well" (478), showing her internal loyalty to two of the people she cares most for. Molly leaves the encounter (not knowing that Preston recognizes his loss and intends to return the letters) and arrives home to Cynthia empty handed. Her time as the hero is over, at least for the moment, but the scene still ends with an internal declaration of love. She admits to the reader that despite "...this long forty-eight hours, Molly had loved Cynthia dearly; and had been more weighed down by the position the latter was in than Cynthia herself" (481). Her actions all stemmed from

her love for Cynthia, and her desire to right the very wrong situation that she had found herself in — showcasing once more the moral fortitude of Molly as compared to Preston, or even Cynthia herself — and the lengths she was willing to go to for her “love.”

Conclusion: Female Friendship as Narrative Glue and its Historical Importance

The endings of *Shirley* and *Wives and Daughters* contribute to the framing of the relationships that the reader sees progress through each novel. The four women all marry men in marriages that take place towards the very end of each novel — some of which the reader is not even present for. The manner in which these marriages are dealt with narratively — largely last minute and as an almost inevitable aside — is in line with my own evaluation of the importance of the marriage plot within the context and examination of female friendships. The endings reinforce that the most noteworthy, important and consequential relationships of these novels are those formed between the female protagonists. Notably, Elizabeth Gaskell died just before finishing the final installment of *Wives and Daughters* in the *Cornhill*. Thus, the novel ends with “Concluding Remarks” from the *Cornhill* editor. It is made clear to the readers that the marriage between Roger and Molly would have most certainly taken place. However, the relationship between Molly and Cynthia is to continue as well — Molly receives several letters from Cynthia after she moves to London with her husband, and on the close of the novel, the Gibsons are preparing for Cynthia and Walter to visit them in Hollingford. Perhaps the ending between those two women is not as satisfactory since the novel was not quite completed, but their affection and communication is still quite clear. While Elizabeth Gaskell seems content to have ended the novel with the marriages of her two main characters, Charlotte Brontë is far less satisfied — and makes that known to her reader. The final chapter is self-consciously titled “The Winding Up,” concluding with the two marriages of Shirley and Louis and Caroline and Robert. The narrator

then moves forward into the future, and recollects through the voice of a housekeeper Martha the fate of these two women. She recollects, “But Mrs. Louis was the grandest; she always wore such handsome dresses. Mrs. Robert was quieter like. Mrs. Louis smiled when she talked. She had a real, happy, glad, good-natured look; but she had been that pierced a body through. There is no such ladies nowadays” (482). The two women are revealed to still be good friends — with Shirley always smiling at Caroline’s remarks.

Brontë ends the chapter self-consciously and with the knowledge that in titling the chapter “The Winding Up,” she subverted the reader’s expectations, for the ending that we do receive is not nearly so nicely tied up as the title suggests. The final sentence mocks the reader, with the narrator commenting, “The story is told. I think I now see the judicious reader putting on his spectacles to look for the moral. It would be an insult to his sagacity to offer directions. I only say, God speed him in the quest!” (482). This last statement is a recognition of all of the ways that the reader is actually left hunting for the moral of the story — and Brontë knows that that is what she has done. As Gilbert and Gubar comment, “It looks as if Brontë began *Shirley* with the intention of subverting not only the sexual images of literature but the courtship roles and myths from which they derive” (395). In her attempt to write a story of female strength and perseverance, the reader is actually given some insight into Brontë’s own social constraints. Just as it would be nearly impossible for women not to eventually marry, it is nearly impossible for her to imagine an ending where there is no concluding marriage. Gilbert and Gubar continue, “She herself explained to the reader in the course of the novel why the only ‘happy ending’ for women in her society is marriage. She gives us that ending, but like Jane Austen, she never allows us to forget that marriage is a suspect institution based on female subordination, and that women who are not novel heroines probably do not fare even as well as Caroline and Shirley”

(395). In some ways, the book concludes with a nod to fairytales — with the housekeeper Martha remembering the Hollow fifty years ago, when her mother lived there. She remarks, “I can tell, one summer evening...my mother coming running in just at the edge of dark, almost fleyed out of her wits, saying she had seen a fairish [fairy] in Fieldhead Hollow; and that was the last fairish that ever was seen on this countryside (though they've been heard within these forty years). A lonesome spot it was, and a bonny spot, full of oak trees and nut trees. It is altered now” (482). What seems like a random interjection and outlandish comment is actually quite appropriate when considered with the novel’s ending. By mentioning “fairies,” Brontë calling to mind the storytelling mechanism of a fairy-tale — and seems to be suggesting that the relationships between women should be re-framed as the real happily-ever-after.

Despite the somewhat inconclusive endings, the characterization of the women in these novels is quite clear. Their relationships with one another were more sustaining and more vital to their well-being than their marriages. It is in the examination of the critique of marriage, the inclusion of physical intimacy and gazing, and the masculine gendering of Molly and Shirley that these relationships between women come to the forefront of my examination. It is limiting to only view the relationships between Caroline and Shirley and Cynthia and Molly as ‘friendships’ — they are romantic relationships that satisfy the women more deeply than any heterosexual relationship ever does. And, by affirming their importance, it is unfair to place the examination of these relationships within the context of either heterosexuality or homosexuality. This binary categorization is still limiting in the expression and actualization of the relationships. Instead, it is necessary to consider them as existing on an entirely different spectrum, still within the same context and social constructions as heterosexuality. They cannot be examined outside of the heteronormative society within which they operate, but it is possible, and important, to examine

them on a different plane. The relationships do not exist outside the sphere of men, but also do not deserve to be considered only in comparison to either their male counterparts or lesbians. In considering their endings, it is also important to recognize the social constraints that their authors were placed under. Each novel ends with the four women marrying their respective husbands, but this participation in the ‘marriage plot’ is not a failure on the novelists nor should it be read as a lessening of the very real and important value of these relationships between women. The women in these novels, and the authors who imagined them, illustrate the potential and certain fulfillment that women can find with one another. They exemplify an imagining of what is possible when there is a surrendering to the fluidity of gender expression and sexuality.

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