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The tie that binds: The idealization of sisterhood in Victorian literature

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The Ohio State University, 1994
THE TIE THAT BINDS: THE IDEALIZATION OF SISTERHOOD IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of the Ohio State University

By

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To Sharon Torrison, Debbie Dahlgren, Allen Greenbaum, Linda Greenbaum, and Bob Flagler
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all the people who have supported and encouraged me in this project. I particularly appreciate the guidance, support, and wisdom of my advisory committee, David Riede, Clare Simmons, and Phoebe Spinrad. David Riede not only read innumerable drafts and offered pertinent advice, but he also calmed my anxieties and redirected my energies toward more productive endeavors. Clare Simmons's meticulous reading of my drafts proved invaluable. Her vital criticism and suggestions for revision helped me clarify my objectives and fine-tune my language. Through coursework and beyond, Phoebe Spinrad has helped me remember why I returned to school and encouraged me to keep working.

I would also like to thank everyone who passed on sister narratives to me. With their assistance I accumulated a long list of texts that goes beyond the scope of this project and that will keep me reading about sisters for a long time. And I extend a special thank you to the Interlibrary Loan Department of the Ohio State Library. They found every text I requested, and their endeavors greatly enhanced the breadth of my research and the contents of this paper. My office mates deserve recognition for cheering me on and listening to my whining, particularly in the last few months when I wondered if I would meet my deadlines.

To my husband Don Parsisson I offer my love and thanks for all that he has done. When recently asked what "Mr. Chambers" contributed to this
dissertation, he replied, “the cooking, cleaning, and laundry.” But his support went far beyond the practical. He provided me with an emotional environment which helped us weather the stresses of dissertation writing. It speaks to the strength of our relationship that this paper is finished when it is.

Finally, Sharon Torrison, Debbie Dahlgren, Allen and Linda Greenbaum, and Bob Flagler, my Supportive Services Program family, provided me with a community that allowed me to grow professionally and personally. Without their love and support, I would never have believed enough in myself to return to school. To them, this thesis is dedicated.
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FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: English

Studies in Nineteenth-Century British Literature, Women’s Literature, John Donne
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INTRODUCTION

My interest in the relationships of biological sisters in literature began with a reading of D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*. I was struck by the power of Ursula and Gudrun's sororal bond and the depth of Birkin's fear of that bond. At the same time, I was reading Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook*, written almost 100 years earlier, and since I had the Brangwen sisters on my mind, I thought the novel was as much about the two sisters Margaret and Hester Ibbotson as about the male protagonist Hope, but the criticism of the novel focused mainly on him. I also noticed that Hope, unlike Birkin, was not afraid of the bond between the sisters even when it influenced his relationship with both women; instead he sought ways to protect it. Puzzled and curious, I paid attention to sisters in the various works I read over the next two years, and I eventually focused on sisters in the literature of the Victorian period.

Feminist use of the metaphor of sisterhood has been criticized in recent years for its idealization of the relationships between and among women, especially arguing that it tends to gloss over differences. For example, Helena Michie identifies the metaphor as "a distressingly utopian term" because it minimalizes conflict and contains and obscures differences among women, including differences of race, class, and sexual preference (8).¹ In examining

¹ See also Bonnie Thornton Dill's "Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood" and Iris Marion Young's "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference."
the source of the metaphor—biological sisters—during the Victorian period, I discovered the idealization is neither new nor limited to women's perceptions. Biological sisterhood was a culturally sanctioned institution whose value was seen by both men and women, yet at the same time that it was privileged and idealized, it also was feared and strictly controlled. Indeed, idealizing sisterhood was one way to control and limit its power. Within the writing of the period, both male and female writers of fiction, poetry, and non-fiction attempted both to construct and critique an ideal relationship between biological sisters, and as a result, the sororal bond that is portrayed both resists and reaffirms the domestic ideology of the Victorian middle class.

During the Victorian period, several factors contributed to a growing interest in the relationships of sisters. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the bourgeois ideology that had developed and continued to develop located men and women in two distinct, yet interrelated, spheres, the public and the private. A woman belonged in the domestic sphere because by nature that was her place. In her domestic role, a woman was wife and mother, nurturing, caring, virtuous, and providing the moral center for home and hearth. The woman had her husband and her children, and discussion and debate focused primarily on the nature of these relationships. If a woman did not fit the role, then she was seen as aberrant or a problem. Issues about the Woman Question usually referred back to what was perceived as the primary role. However, at the same time, the 1851 census report indicated that there were an excess number of single women in the country, women who would
never have the opportunity to live up to their natural role. The redundant women, as they were sometimes called, not only heightened interest in an examination of women's roles and women's nature, but they increased the awareness that these women needed to have someplace to live and something to do with their lives.

For many women that place was the married sister's home. Throughout the nineteenth century, it was common for an unmarried sister to live with a married sister, helping her to care for the children and maintain the home. If the married sister died, the single one frequently stayed to help the widower manage his household. Or, if she had not been living with them before, she arrived after her sister's death to take over her sister's duties. But by mid-century, this, too, was called into question through the debate that came to be known as the Deceased Wife's Sister Controversy. Stories about sisters that appeared in pamphlets, parliamentary debates, magazine essays, religious tracts, and several novels were used to argue whether or not a man should be allowed to marry his deceased wife's sister. While a sister was expected to live in her sister's home, her presence was also perceived as a possible source of tension and conflict—even when her sister was still living. Writers on both sides of the argument revealed a special intimate bond between sisters that transcended any other earthly relationship, and they sought to control and protect the relationship and issues of sexuality through legislation. Idealizing the sororal bond provided a means to relieve the uneasiness.

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²The 1851 census in Great Britain reported a total population of 10,223,558 males and 10,735,919 females on March 31, 1851. It also reported that of people of marriageable age, there were 3,110,243 bachelors and 3,469,571 spinsters. (12 was the legal age for marriage for females, 14 for males.) (Nestor 3)
caused by having an unmarried woman living in a man’s house and to reduce anxiety about sexuality. 

With women’s activities located primarily in the home, women had many opportunities to spend large amounts of time with other women through pregnancies and childbirth, sickness, family care, and social visiting. Recent studies of women’s relationships with other women in the nineteenth-century in both England and America indicate a network of close, passionate, loving friendships with women, including sisters, that lasted through a woman’s adult life, even when marriage separated the women. In fact, in their study of English middle class life from 1780 to 1850, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall describe the relationship of sisters as the one that may have been the closest of all relationships of that period. Additionally, they report that “sisters were instrumental in keeping [family] members together and sisterhood became the prototype of female relationships” (362). Biographies about sisters in the nineteenth-century reinforce the idea that sisters form close, lasting bonds with one another, even when there were conflicts and tensions.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s landmark study of women in nineteenth-century America has been widely accepted as also applying to women in England. Through her examination of women’s diaries and letters from the 1760s to the 1880s, she discovered that despite radical changes in society, there was little change in the nature of women’s close relationships. Furthermore, the bonds between sisters, cousins, aunts, and nieces provided the foundation upon which the various networks of women organized. She writes:

The female friendship must not be seen in isolation; it must be analyzed as one aspect of women’s overall relations with one another. The ties between mothers and daughters, sisters,
female cousins and friends, at all stages of the female life cycle constitute the most suggestive framework for the historian to begin an analysis of intimacy and affection between women . . . it would shift the focus of the study from a concern with deviance to that of defining configurations of legitimate behavioral norms and options. (3)

Eve Sedgwick supports Smith-Rosenberg's idea of the interrelatedness of women's relationships with women when she discusses the existence of a "continuum between 'women loving women' and 'women promoting the interests of women,' extending over the erotic, social, familial, economic, and political realms" (3). Her continuum includes the sister-sister bond as well as mother-daughter bonds, women friends, "networking," and the struggles of feminism. Jeffrey Weeks, in his study of sexuality since 1800, also reinforces the idea that women formed life-long emotional ties with other women and that their relationships were on a continuum ranging "from a close supportive love of sisters, through adolescent enthusiasm, to mature avowals of eternal affection" (116). Equally significantly, he also reports that there was no concept of female sexuality apart from men's, and both the role of mother and the belief that woman's sexuality was tied to man's established effective barriers to even conceptualizing lesbianism.

Within the network of women's relationships, the term sister took on significant meaning. What Carol Lasser found most noteworthy in her study of friendships among nineteenth-century American middle class women "is the regularity with which many friends called each other sister" and the language of sisterhood that permeates their writings (162). As I read women's public writing from the same period in England, I found a similar use of the term. For example, in the conduct book *The Mothers of England*, Sarah Stickney Ellis
apologizes for what her women readers may perceive as an "unsisterly" admonishment of their behavior (4). In The Women of England, she refers to the reader as "my sister" (12, 216). In one of Mrs. Eliza Lynn Linton's essays in The Saturday Review, she labels vocal women's rights activists as "the shrieking sisterhood" (341). Still other women refer to friends as being like sisters: Elizabeth Gaskell calls Charlotte Brontë's friend Ellen Nussey "this friend, who was all but a sister" (Life 342). Additionally, Victorians in mid-nineteenth-century England witnessed the organization of sisterhoods, communities of single women who served the distressed and poor in various capacities.³ The Quaker Elizabeth Fry, for example, founded the Institution for Nursing Sisters in 1840. John Henry Newman and E. B. Pusey first recommended and then revived Anglican sisterhoods in the 1840s. In an 1855 lecture entitled "Sisters of Charity," the feminist Anna Jameson called for the organization of religious orders to train women to become teachers, social workers, and nurses. Eventually, the head nurses on wards, both secular and religious, became known as sisters. The metaphor of sisterhood applied to these institutionalized communities of women as well as to other relationships with women suggests an understanding of a paradigm by which women were to view their relationships with one another.

Since relationships between women were generally considered asexual, it would be easy for Victorians, who sometimes exhibited much anxiety about sexuality, to perceive women's bonds, especially the bonds between sisters, as innocent and pure, something to be admired, privileged, and celebrated—even envied by men. And, as we shall see in later chapters,

much was done in writing to celebrate women's bonds, particularly those with sisters. But at the same time, many Victorians (men and women), not unlike other European cultures, were afraid of women's communities (Nestor 4; Vicinus 31). One fear was that women would so enjoy the company of other women and their independence that they would decide not to marry (Vicinus 18). But there was also a fear that women were a bad influence on one another, and some conduct book writers warned women about spending too much time together. Eliza Lynn Linton's popular collection of essays Girl of the Period was a scathing diatribe about women's inabilities to form friendships and communities. Dinah Mulock Craik is more ambivalent. Her conduct book for single women A Woman's Thoughts About Women warned of the problems inherent in women's friendships but also addressed the joys; she suggested that a woman was better off living a solitary life, depending on herself instead of other women. While there was no united opinion on what to believe about women's relationships, as Pauline Nestor rightly notes, there were certain preoccupations and perspectives [that] remained constant, regardless of the writer's sympathies. These included the conception of women's friendships within a conventional framework of heterosexual roles, the related notion of female friends compensating for the lack of a male, and the recognition of a need for male authority. Underlying all was a continuing definition of women and women's friendships in relation to men. (5)

What I discovered as I studied the writing about sisters is that these conventions also generally applied to the sororal bond. What made the concept of sisterhood easier to idealize and privilege was its connection to and placement within the middle class domestic ideology.
Calling women sisters raises important questions about women’s relationships and about sisters. If women are to treat one another as sisters, how do sisters act? If a code of conduct relates to how sisters should (or do) treat one another, what is the sisterly code that was in place? In Communities of Women, Nina Auerbach notes that while male communities “tend to live by a code in its most explicit, formulated, and inspirational sense . . . in female communities, the code seems a whispered and fleeting thing, more a buried language than a rallying cry . . . whose invocations have more than a touch of the impalpable and the devious” (9). If the source of the metaphor of sisterhood and thus its code lies with biological sisters, then to understand more completely the relationships of women to women, we must look at the relationships of sisters. Since women’s place in the nineteenth-century middle class ideology is firmly located in the domestic sphere and since that is where sisters also are located, I suggest that the nineteenth-century domestic ideal goes beyond the woman’s role in relation to either her husband or her children. Until recently what has not been examined is the role of the domestic ideology in governing a woman’s relationship to her sisters and the role of the sororal bond in shaping the domestic ideal. In examining this particular familial bond, we can discover the extent to which the image of the sister is important to the representation of women in the nineteenth century.

Examining the writing of any period offers insights into the culture, and with the continued popularity of poetry, the rise of the novel, the proliferation of magazines and journals not to mention conduct books for women, as well as an increasing reading population in the Victorian period, I found a particularly fertile ground for examining how the concept of biological sisterhood
developed across genres. When I first began, however, I was warned by several people that there would not be much about sisters—and I suspected the same. Instead, what I discovered is that it is easy to ignore sisters when primary emphasis and vision is placed on the marital relationship and on the role of the mother. As long as a woman's role is narrowly defined, other connections literally cannot be seen. But as in my initial awareness in reading Deerbrook, keeping sisters on my mind (and on the minds of all the other people who knew of my project) brought many, many biological sisters in literature to my attention, many of them in non-canonical texts. Too many. My initial intention was to begin with Jane Austen, whose novels are almost as much about sisters as about marriage, and work through the nineteenth century to end with E. M. Forster's Howards End. I clearly saw the importance of examining the writing of both men and women since almost all the study of biological sisters had been done with women writers only. As those of us who suspected few sisters were proven wrong, and as I examined some of the socio-cultural issues which came together in mid-century, I narrowed my focus to a shorter, though still somewhat lengthy, portion of the century—from the publication of Martineau's Deerbrook in 1839 until Tennyson's 1880 "The Sisters," with the exception of a lengthy discussion of Sir Walter Scott's The Heart of Midlothian, its significant explanatory introduction added in 1830, and brief discussions of George Gissing's The Odd Women and the end of Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles. Thus, Jane Austen's novels from

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*The fertile ground for examining sisters also extends to plays of the period. Many of the novels and some poems were translated into plays, similar to what happens with books and films today. The differences are sometimes enormous and suggest an area for further study which is beyond the scope of my project. For example, in Willig and Rae's theatrical version of Jane Eyre, Blanche Ingram and Jane Eyre are sisters (see Michie 15-17).
earlier in the century as well as many new woman novels from the end of the century must wait until the study is expanded and connections can be made to other time periods. Additionally, I decided to focus specifically on biological sisters (not step-sisters) whose relationship is central to the text being discussed. This eliminated, for example, Molly and Cynthia in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters* and the Reed and Rivers sisters in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. What I gained was an opportunity to study some works which are not well-known now but which were popular during the Victorian period.

Until recently, most of the research on nineteenth-century sisters has focused primarily on Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* and Jane Austen’s novels (although, interestingly, H. R. Dhatwalia’s *Familial Relationships in Jane Austen’s Novels* all but ignores the relationships of the sisters). There seemed to be a vast silence concerning sisters, again until I started looking beyond the usual. Most examinations of sister relationships take place within a discussion of individual works—such as *Goblin Market*. And sometimes a discussion of sisters is embedded in books on women’s friendships, the most peculiar being Tess Cosslett’s discussion of *Goblin Market* where she barely acknowledges Lizzie and Laura as sisters and consistently refers to them as friends. In fact, the books on women’s friendships were helpful in my initial forays into understanding biological sisterhood, for they opened up the discussion on women’s relationships and helped me to think about the metaphor of sisterhood.

Most of the research on sisters and on women’s friendships has been done by women. In their writing they also tend to address the importance of
sisters and/or women's relationships in their own lives. For example, Toni McNaron writes, "I began this book because I believed it would shed light on my checkered relationship with my own sister" (3). And Christine Downing describes, "[i]n dream after dream she appeared, this figure who is both my literal sister and someone else, a more intimate presence in my contemporary life" (7). Helena Michie ends her book with an "inter-chapter" in which she describes her first encounter as a rape crisis counselor with a rape victim. For these women, their own connections with other women stimulated their research. While my own sisters did not inspire me to this project, reading the writing of these other women critics forced me to realize that my research and my critical perspective is highly influenced by my experiences with numerous groups of women, including a strong network within my family, that have provided support and encouragement to me and other women but that have also been filled with tensions and ambivalences. The research by others, including a 1963 essay on Cranford by Martin Dodsworth which today appears extremely sexist, served as a fitting reminder to me that as much as sisterhood concerns gender issues in the nineteenth century, my discussion of sisterhood is influenced by gender issues in the late twentieth century.

In Women's Friendships in Literature, Janet Todd analyzes both eighteenth-century novels and her own experiences of female friendships and provides an overview of the discussion of female friendships in medical manuals, pornography, and female utopias. She first announces that Virginia Woolf was mistaken: eighteenth-century fiction contains many examples of female friendships by both male and female writers. (In A Room of One's Own, Woolf complains, "I tried to remember any case in the course of my
reading where two women are represented as friends" [86]. While Todd's discussion focuses primarily on types of non-biological friendships, she provides us with two important ideas. First, in sister relationships, she sees rivalry present in novels by both men and women, "but the cruel blood-sister is most often created by men" (411). For example, Todd points out that in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, Arabella despises her sister Clarissa and inflicts enormous cruelty on her, while Fanny Burney and Jane Austen seem to privilege the sister relationship in their stories.6 Secondly, she notes that when women's friendships become the focus in novels where the heterosexual relationship (the romance) forms the main plot, "the critical focus" shifts and "concentrates on a relationship and ideology often opposing the main romantic ones" (6). Thus, she acknowledges the potentially subversive nature of women's friendships because they call into question the dominant (male) ideologies. Her findings suggest to me, then, that in the nineteenth century the move to privilege the sororal bond also meant finding a way either to cover up its potential subversion and/or contain and control the bond in order to eliminate potential subversion.

While Todd focuses on the eighteenth-century, Nina Auerbach examines communities of women in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and American novels, communities that include both biological and non-biological sisters. Moving quickly from an overview of Greek mythological sisters (the Graie, Amazons, muses, and three fates) to the metaphor of

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6 The nature of the sororal bond as well as women's friendships in Austen's work is a source of disagreement in Austen criticism. See, for example, Glenda A. Hudson's "'Precious Remains of the Earliest Attachment': Sibling Love in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*" and the discussion of that novel in Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women*. 
sisterhood in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Auerbach also
recognizes a potential power in women's relationships and asserts:

As a recurrent literary image, a community of women is a rebuke
to the conventional ideal of a solitary woman living for and
through men, attaining citizenship in the community of adulthood
through masculine approval alone. The communities of women
which have haunted our literary imagination from the beginning
are emblems of female self-sufficiency which create their own
corporate reality, evoking both wishes and fears.

As a literary idea, a community of women feeds dreams of a
world beyond the normal . . . reminding us that female self-
sufficiency is not a postulate of this or that generation of
feminists, but an inherent and powerful component of our shared
cultural vision. (3-4)

Auerbach discusses at length in her introduction the metaphor of sisterhood in
the writing of Mary Wollstonecraft, Sarah Stickney Ellis, Eliza Lynn Linton,
Dinah Mulock Craik and other nineteenth-century writers on woman's conduct.
She also places women's communities in a relationship to the heterosexual
relationships, especially when she describes some women's communities as
places where women wait for marriage. Yet, for Auerbach, women's
communities create their own authorities and evade traditional definitions of
community.

Rather than studying women's relationships as communities, Tess
Cosslett is primarily interested in how female friendships relate to the
conventional heterosexual romantic plot of Victorian literature. She finds that
"[a]gain and again, female friendship figures crucially at important turning-
points of the narrative in the works of women writers such as Charlotte Brontë,
George Eliot, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning" (3). Friendships are crucial to
resolving the stories, but "they nearly always operate to assimilate one or both
women into marriage" (3). Yet, she sees women writers using the convention
of the angel in the house as a means for "build[ing] a position of power for their female characters" (4). Furthermore, the various types of women (e.g. angel, monster, virgin, whore) and the friendships formed give the women writers a location where they "can negotiate with and between the dominant images of female identity" (4). In other words, heroines of their novels use the ideology of the domestic sphere "to create positions of power for themselves" (4), reinforcing what Davidoff and Hall and Martha Vincinus found in their social history studies. Like Auerbach, Cosslett sees female friendships as examples of the development of strong female communities. Interestingly, she does little to distinguish between friends and sisters—all female relationships are friendships, yet certainly differences must exist between friendships by choice and those that are based on family connections.

Taking a different approach from the previous women, Louise Bernikow writes about various relationships among women by sliding back and forth between "what actually happens in women's lives, in my life and the diminished reflection of that in literature" (4). Significantly, she notes that in literature, sisters represent "companionship, physical intimacy, all varieties of warmth, and a sense of a circle of female protection" (74-75). Also important, is her assertion that sister relationships in literature "provide one place where it is all right to love another woman" (76). However, she claims that much literature written by men contains little female intimacy partly because the masculine narrator cannot be part of the feminine conversation, something

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6 The "angel in the house" comes from Coventry Patmore's poem by the same name and has been adopted by many critics as a shortcut to explain what many in the nineteenth century considered the ideal woman. Interestingly, the man in the poem who marries his "angel" must first decide which of three sisters he finds the fairest: Mary, Mildred, or Honoria. (Honoria wins.)
which certainly has not been examined much and suggests an area for further study. In men’s writing she observed that conflict between sisters is primarily over men (as in the biblical stories of Rachel and Leah and Mary and Martha, the fairy tale Cinderella, Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, and Shakespeare’s *King Lear*), but with women writers, she claims a “myth of devotion” among women appears (76). While I agree with her discovery about what sisters represent in literature, what I found in the nineteenth century is writing by both men and women that develops conflict between sisters over men and writing by both men and women which develops a “myth of devotion.”

Since I began my study, two books about sisters in literature have been published which include lengthy discussions of nineteenth-century sisters. Both focus on revealing the underlying tensions and rivalries between sisters, both biological and metaphorical. One is Amy Karen Levin’s *The Suppressed Sister: A Relationship in Novels by Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Women*. Her thesis is not that sisters are suppressed in the novels but that discussion of biological sisters is suppressed in the criticism which instead focuses on “systematically tracing every imaginable relationship involving women” except sisters (14). When biological sisters are discussed, critics tend to move smoothly and quickly into a discussion of the metaphor of sisterhood. The displacement of biological sisters by non-biological reveals a desire on the part of criticism (primarily feminist) to focus on the ideal in sisterhood which Levin identifies as a holdover from the angel in the house myth. Furthermore, she claims that women writers’ sister fictions are based on what she, like Bernikow, calls men’s stories of sisters: Cinderella, Psyche, Snow White and Rose Red, Antigone, Beauty and the Beast, and King Lear.
Although she appears to be attacking feminist criticism for ignoring what she now exposes, her discoveries do not seem different from what others have already discovered and acknowledged—some of which I cite above and below. She does acknowledge the significance of Erich Neumann's assertion that Psyche's "sisters represent an aspect of the female consciousness that determines Psyche's whole subsequent development" (Neumann qtd. in Levin 22). However, where others find strength in the sister bond, Levin's project is to reveal the ruptures in biological sisterhood in the novels she studies. Levin creates a sister plot based on difference and competition, where intimacy between sisters is a means for one sister to control another. Sister relationships become a power struggle, and the relationship as a battleground becomes a means to move plot. Harmony is only a gloss on the underlying tensions that she seeks to expose. Overall, Levin's discussion of sister stories deals primarily with issues of rivalry and redundancy and how over two centuries women writers from Jane Austen to Emma Tennant gradually reveal more and more of the antagonism between sisters and by the time of Tennant's writing, explode the myth of sisterhood. Levin and I differ in our interpretation of harmony in sisterhood. As we shall see, where she reveals harmony as a cover-up for rivalry and fear of being redundant, I see a desire for unity and strength in bonding. Furthermore, while she sees the idealization of sisterhood as a holdover from the angel in the house, she fails to examine how that domestic ideology is reinforced (or not) in the novels she studies. The second book to appear since I began my study, Helena Michie's provocative and insightful _Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture_ is one of several books which examines how a
woman's identity is influenced by a sister, both in literature and in culture. Michie questions the feminist use of the concept of family (sister, mother, patriarchal authority) in critiques and revisions of culture and literature, ultimately confronting the metaphor of sisterhood. In attempting to expose the problems of the family metaphor in not allowing a place for differences in women, Michie instead uses the term "sororophobia" to "describe the negotiation of sameness and difference, identity and separation, between women of the same generation, and is meant to encompass both the desire for and the recoil from identification with other women" (9). Throughout Michie's work, sisterhood is seen as a series of oppositions and contradictions that clearly demonstrate how problematic idealizing the bond becomes. When, for example, likeness is both empowering and dangerous, sisters, both biological and metaphorical, have difficulty negotiating what constitutes family membership. How much alike must one be to be included in the family?

Michie's study encompasses a variety of historical and cultural contexts and texts, including sister relationships in Victorian England. For Michie, Victorian sisterhood, both literary and historical, is a safe place where women can negotiate issues of difference which also become issues of identity.¹

¹ She is not the first to point out difference as a characteristic of nineteenth-century sisters. In his playful essay "A Petition to the Novel-Writers," Wilkie Collins notes the long-established rule:

I know that it is a rule that, when two sisters are presented in a novel, one must be tall and dark, and the other short and light. I know that five feet eight of female flesh and blood, when accompanied by an olive complexion, black eyes, and raven hair, is synonymous with strong passions and an unfortunate destiny. I know that five feet nothing, golden ringlets, soft blue eyes, and a lily brow, can not possibly be associated . . . with any thing but ringing laughter, arch innocence, and final matrimonial happiness. (65)
Indeed, she rightly identifies difference as sisterhood's major characteristic, and she argues that sisterhood becomes a structure for containing and representing sexual differences among women. However, while I see Victorian sisterhood as an attempt to construct an idealized relationship among women that becomes an appealing paradigm for the twentieth-century version of metaphorical sisterhood, she views it as undermining the metaphor because so many of the Victorian sisters behave "unsisterly," i.e. with "stereotypically unfeminine feelings and behaviors" (21). Nevertheless, Michie's work constitutes a significant contribution to my understanding of the problems with identity which Victorian sisters in literature had.

Also dealing with the issue of identity and sisterhood is *The Sister Bond*, edited by Toni McNaron, a collection of essays examining sister relationships in well-known women such as Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra, and Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell. In her introduction to the collection, McNaron echoes a familiar theme in discussions of women's relationships when she writes that "[t]he relationship between sisters . . . comes to us shrouded in silence and ignorance" and "may well constitute a threat within patriarchy" (5). McNaron classifies the sister relationships in the book in two groups: "those who used each other as a repository for troublesome or painful aspects of self; those who saw in their relationship with each other a chance to comprehend an expanded self" (8). Both of McNaron's classifications reflect issues of identity which both surround and lie at the heart of the sister relationships. Furthermore, she explains some of the problem in figuring out how to connect with a sister: the sister bond contains "the desire to be one, juxtaposed against the necessity to be two" (7).
One of the most thoughtful books on sisters is Christine Downing’s *Psyche’s Sisters: Reimagining the Meaning of Sisterhood*. She traces sisterhood in mythology (including fairy tales and Greek drama), the Bible, and psychology (primarily the work of Freud, Jung, and Adler as well as feminist interpretations and extensions). One of her conclusions is that “[t]elling a story about sisters well discloses how the sisters co-create each other” (168), and she sees sisterhood as an interdependent relationship. Downing identifies an archetypal Sister but does not concern herself much with the relationship of the archetype to the sister-sister relationship except on a relatively mystical level. Her work provides needed background in the drama of sisterhood and a beginning for understanding the ideology, but she does not look within specific historical contexts.

Other research in psychology, sociology, and feminist studies that has focused on sisters also includes a mention of the absence of work done on biological sisterhood. Leading sibling researchers Stephen Bank and Michael Kahn note that current theories of human development are “strangely silent” about any sibling relationships (5). Psychoanalysis tends to focus on rivalry for the love of a parent during early childhood, and generally psychotherapists and psychologists are taught that sibling influence is minor,
with parents determining a child's identity (Bank and Kahn 5; Lamb 4). In the last twenty years, developmental psychologists and psychotherapists have begun more intense research on sibling relationships. One of the most comprehensive books, *The Sibling Bond* by Bank and Kahn, resulted from an eight year study of siblings in the United States. Because of changes that have taken place in families in the last half of this century (what they perceive as movement towards more freedom and separateness that leaves how to be a sibling a matter of choice rather than a matter of following an old ideology or set of norms), they caution that the results of their work should not be considered valid for all time. Nevertheless, their discussion has provided me with ways to ask questions and think about sisters, and perhaps more importantly, has substantiated some of my suspicions about what I was noting in the literature I read. In their research, they did not intentionally study gender influences but did note gender-specific discoveries when they occurred. (For example, they discovered that the same sex in siblings seems to promote loyalty. Additionally, one-way loyalty, as in a sister for her brother or another

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*Helene Deutsch, an early follower of Freud and someone who wrote about the psychology of women, addresses the importance of the sister relationship, but she does so within the context of female friendships and focuses more on the effects of non-sibling friendships on separation from the mother (Downing 155). Another Freudian, Karen Horney, in a concern about a young girl's sexual development, emphasizes the damage that close childhood sister relationships may cause later in adulthood (Downing 156). Both Horney and Deutsch emphasize the heterosexual relationships as central to woman's development. Melanie Klein focuses on siblings in general as an aid to helping children separate from the parents, but she does not examine distinctive differences that may exist because of a sibling's sex (Downing 158). More recently, Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow have worked with mothers and daughters, and Carol Gilligan has tried to construct a feminine ethic of care which focuses on the centrality of relationships to women's lives. French feminists (Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva) have also explored a daughter's connection with the mother.*
sister, appears to develop mostly among girls who assume some primary
caretaking responsibilities as children which often extends into adulthood. In
other words, it is less common for a brother to develop a loyalty which is not
reciprocated.) Bank and Kahn define the sibling bond as “a connection
between the selves; it is a ‘fitting’ together of two peoples’ identities” that can
be both positive and negative (15). Often it is “experienced without conscious
understanding and sensed that it is a vital key to one’s own knowledge of
oneself” (60). In the quest for identity and selfhood, a child compares
herself/himself to a sibling close in age. Issues of sameness and difference
can bring siblings together or alienate them. Interestingly, one of the
conditions Bank and Kahn identify under which intense sibling bonds can
occur is the absence or failure of the parents, something which I had noted in
a long list of nineteenth-century sister stories. When parents cannot be relied
on, brothers and sisters will turn to one another in their search for identity and
for a reliable relationship.

Over and over again, in the research I read, the significance of
connection was emphasized. The term “sister,” like the other terms used to
place women in the nineteenth-century, is relational. A woman’s subjectivity is
tied to another, her sister, but also there may be no closer Other than that
same-sex sibling. Since sisters are usually close in age, their relationship
often lasts longer than any other and ends only with the death of one of them
(although some will argue that the relationship may extend beyond the grave).
Sisters share the same parents and family and are exposed to the same
values and social environment, yet issues of birth order, age, and genetic
makeup can create enormous differences in perception of the world,
personality, appearance, and treatment within the family unit. Sisters are not identical—even when twins. Issues of similarity and difference, intimacy and distance, and togetherness and opposition create a means for self-definition and present paradoxes and tensions that lie at the core of the relationship (Downing 11). In literature, sisters have the potential to play out a wide array of the struggles and tensions in their relationships, as well as develop an intense bond.

In the writing of the nineteenth-century, I saw a code, patterns of expected behaviors, which were to guide a woman's understanding of her relationship with her sister, and thus, her understanding of her self. Furthermore, as it was represented in the writing, the code seemed to indicate that both readers and writers shared an understanding of the expectations of biological sisterhood which was deeply rooted in the middle class domestic ideology of the period. Whether there were jealousies and tensions, love and affection, love and hatred, opposites in personalities, marked differences in attitudes and behaviors, or "good" and "bad" sisters, a definition of an ideal sisterhood and an ideal sister was at the heart of any relationship. This ideal mediated the behavior of sisters, not only assisting in creating the relationship but affecting the self-identity of each sister and any relationship that existed with others—particularly lovers and husbands but also with parents.

The sister ideal creates a tie that binds. On the one hand, the tie binds the sisters in a life-long connection that unifies and/or strengthens them. Rather than emphasizing autonomy and independence, sisterhood emphasizes community and interdependence, strength in numbers, in bonding, in unity. Differences may be pointed out, even reinforced, but unity is
to be preserved. The ideal sister relationship strengthens each sister and assists her in her quest for identity. However, because of the emphasis on the "shoulds" of the bond, the tie could bind or constrict a sister and keep her from defining herself or taking action. It could also place unrealistic demands and expectations on her as she strives to live up to the ideal. For the sister bond to work, it must create a delicate tension in order to find a balance that allows for both selfhood and interdependence, unity and individual identity.

I also discovered that the tie proved problematic for the writers. In privileging and idealizing the bond, there was a tendency to create improbable situations and stories as well as sisters too good to be true that taxed the credulity of readers and critics. As in the case with Charles Dickens's *The Battle of Life*, for example, the sentimentality overwhelms the story, and the situation in which he placed the Jeddler sisters is unbelievable. It also caught writers in another kind of a bind. Since the marriage bond and the sororal bond were both privileged relationships, there had to be a careful negotiation of the contradictions and oppositions in order to work out the conflicting and competing ideologies. What would happen when a woman desired a bond with her sister and a bond with a man? How could the desire for a sister fit with the desire for marriage?

To examine the ideals of sisterhood in Victorian England and its effects on sisters and their relationships with others, I needed a framework that would explore how the ideal sisterhood mediated relationships and how a sister negotiated her own desires when those desires may pull her in different directions. What I ended up doing was challenging and revising René Girard's theory of triangular or mimetic desire as first explained in his book
Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure. As a general theory to explain his notions of great works of literature and later to explain all human behavior, I find Girard problematic because he works primarily with relationships between two men and a woman and reduces all conflict to mimetic desire. Interestingly, he writes of “mediation of father to son, brother to brother, husband to wife, or mother to son” (43), but he never mentions mother-daughter or sister-sister. Indeed, with the exception of Emma Bovary (discussed below), he does not consider women as subjects, yet he declares his theory to be universal.

For Girard, objects are desirable to a subject because they are also desirable to Another. In other words, someone imitates a model he has chosen by desiring the same object(s) of that model, which he calls a mediator. A character desires “any object as long as he is convinced that it is already desired by another person whom he admires” (7). Thus, the mediator also becomes a rival and provides a roadblock in the character’s quest for the

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Girard continued to expand on this theory of triangular desire. While in Deceit, Desire, and the Novel he focused exclusively on triangular desire and the novel (especially in connection with those novelists he considers great: Cervantes, Proust, Stendhal, and Dostoevsky), he expanded his theory to include anthropology and religion. See, for example, Violence and the Sacred (1977) and “To double business bound”: Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology (1979).

In a review of Cesar Bandera’s Mimesis Conflictiva: Ficción Literaria Y Violencia En Cervantes Y Calderón, Ciriaco Morón-Arroyo also criticizes Girard’s inattention to women:

Why should the stories of Cardenio and the curious impertinent be approached from the couples Cardenio-Fernando, and Anselmo-Lotario only? This approach casts the women merely as objects of the conflicting desires; from this angle the theory is illuminating. But is it not legitimate to look at the story from the side of the women, as subjects who are the tragic victims? Whom do the women imitate and desire? (83)
object of desire. Girard uses triangular desire to account for snobbery, jealousy, resentment, envy, and hatred. His rhetoric is negative and violent, with desire becoming "a corrosive disease that gradually infects the most intimate parts of being" (43). The rivalry between subject and mediator becomes more important than the subject's desire for the object. The desired object receives little attention from Girard; more significant is the intense competition between rivals and the violent contest they act out between one another. The actors in Girard's drama are male; women are relegated to observer/object status, and a woman is only desired (by a man) because she is desired by another man; she has no status in her own right. In the end, only "the character who triumphs over metaphysical desire in a tragic conclusion" can be a hero, and the hero becomes one with the author (also male) as they discover the truth about mimetic desire (296).

Girard also describes two kinds of mediation: external and internal. With external mediation, the distance between mediator and subject is large enough for their "two spheres of possibilities" not to overlap (10). In external mediation, the subject announces the nature of his desire and openly acknowledges his model. An example Girard cites is Don Quixote as the

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Girard's placement of women is not so different from the idea of women as objects of exchange between men as discussed by Lévi-Strauss and Gayle Rubin. Sedgwick reviews traffic in women in Between Men:

Based on readings and critiques of Lévi-Strauss and Engels, in addition to Freud and Lacan, Gayle Rubin has argued in an influential essay that patriarchal heterosexuality can best be discussed in terms of one or another form of the traffic in women: it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men. For example, Lévi-Strauss writes, "The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners." (25-26)
subject and the knight Amadis as the model of the perfect knight. Amadis is dead; there is no chance of their two worlds colliding or intersecting. Amadis can openly be held up as Quixote’s model, and anything Quixote desires stems from his need to imitate Amadis.

In internal mediation, the distance between subject and mediator is close enough to allow their two spheres to intersect to varying degrees. The subject conceals his attempts at imitation and indeed denies the relationship. The denial and the rivalry involved in internal mediation can lead to bitterness, jealousy, and hatred because the subject realizes the tension between admiring, even worshiping, the mediator and hating him for being his rival. A subject may exhibit toward the mediator/rival “adoring hatred” or “admiration that insults and even kills” (42). In his discussion of Pavel Pavlovitch in Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*, Girard notes that sometimes “the desiring subject wants to become his mediator; he wants to steal from the mediator his very being of ‘perfect knight’ or ‘irresistible seducer’” (54).

Because internal mediation is hidden, it can give the illusion of autonomy, but Girard sees that the role of novelists is to “reveal the imitative nature of desire” (14). The Other (the mediator) has tremendous power over the Self: “... at the very source of the subjectivity, one always finds a victorious Other. It is true that the source of the ‘transfiguration’ is within us, but the spring gushes forth only when the mediator strikes the rock with his magic wand” (33). His triangle changes in size and shape as the distance (metaphysical not physical) between the subject and mediator changes; the closer the subject and mediator, the greater and more intense the rivalry. Since he sees that distance as smallest in familial relationships, rivalries between family members become
particularly severe and alienating, but again, he only considers the men as mediators and subjects. The women do not figure in the family drama.

The only discussion Girard provides of woman as subject is of Emma Bovary, who is used as another example of external mediation. She imitates the romantic heroines and desires what they desire in appearance and behavior, yet they will never be rivals because her world and theirs will never intersect (except for a ball when Emma can only gaze at her idols). Girard never takes woman as subject into the deeper, intense relationships he later describes as internal mediation. He leaves woman, as exemplified by Emma Bovary, as only desiring a fashionable, superficial life. However, this explanation too handily dismisses Emma Bovary's needs and desires. Her unhappiness with her life is intensely passionate and painful, and her tragic death cannot be easily attributed to a desire only to imitate the romantic heroines.

Recently, feminists Toril Moi and Eve Sedgwick have questioned the validity of Girard's claims as they apply to feminine desire. Moi claims that Girard's theory cannot account for feminine desire because he never takes into account the role of the mother nor does he consider the female as a subject (21). Comparing Girard's theory to Freud's Oedipal complex (as Girard himself does, only his intent is to prove his theory's superiority), Moi refutes Girard's claim to the universality of triangular desire. She argues that his theory cannot account for feminine desire because he excludes the mother from his reading of the Oedipal triangle. The problem is twofold. First, for Girard, sexual difference is a sign of crisis in society. As Moi explains,

\[\ldots\text{Girard rejects the suggestion that the child should desire the mother. But it is precisely in this } \text{escamotage} \text{ of the mother that the flaw in his own theory can be detected. For he has}\]
apparently not discovered that the Oedipus [sic] is the situation, for Freud, in which sexual differentiation begins. The Oedipus complex enables Freud to account for sexual difference. Since Girard cannot account for it at all, he has consequently to deny its existence. To be concerned with sexual difference, he believes, is reactionary. (27; Moi's italics)

Secondly, Girard never applies his theory to the preoedipal stage. If he did, "one is obliged to posit the woman's desire as original, the mother's desire becomes paradigmatic of all desire" (28). Since masculine desire is Girard's norm, this position is untenable. As a result of imitating the mother's desire for the father, all males would be homosexual, yet for Girard, heterosexuality is instinctual and inborn. Since Girard frequently discusses the flaws in Freud's theories and the superiority of his own (Freud as Girard's rival), Moi sees his failure to address the preoedipal stage as the rupture in his theory.

In rejecting a child's desire for the mother, Girard is also rejecting a girl's identification processes which usually are mediated by her relationships with her mother. As Nancy Chodorow explains, while males tend to break with the mother and identify with the masculine gender roles of a culture, females tend to identify with their mothers, using their mothers and other women as models (175-176). For a female, the process by which she learns gender role identification tends to be on a continuum, just as researchers also identify her relationships as being on a continuum. Because of this, connection to others becomes a significant part of her development—more so than with the male (Chodorow 177). The sororal bond, too, is based on connection, and maintaining the connection becomes a vital part of sisterhood. Yet, Girard's theory is based on conflict and separation, not connection. Thus, his predicted
outcomes of triangular desire should change when the sororal bond is considered.

In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Sedgwick uses Girard's model to examine male homosocial desire and its effects on women in English novels from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. She shows various ways in which men bond with other men through the female as an object of desire. Additionally, she details ways in which male homosocial desire perpetuates and transmits patriarchal power. She explains that "both Girard and Freud . . . treat the erotic triangle as symmetrical—in the sense that its structure would be relatively unaffected by the power difference that would be introduced by a change in gender of one of the participants" (23). However, Sedgwick hypothesizes that the differences between the male and female homosocial continuum might modify the structure of the triangles in ways that relied on gender. She also claims that

Lacan, Chodorow and Dinnerstein, Rubin, Irigaray, and others, making critiques from within their multiple traditions, offer analytical tools for treating the erotic triangle not as an ahistorical, Platonic form, a deadly symmetry from which the historical accidents of gender, language, class, and power detract, but as a sensitive register precisely for delineating relationships of power and meaning, and for making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment. (27)

Using Girard's model with sisters will help discover to what extent Sedgwick's hypothesis is correct and in what ways the structure changes. In fact, in dealing with sisterhood in Victorian writing, the "historical accidents" that are found in the domestic ideology become significant factors in the relationship between triangular desire and sisters.
By referring to Girard's theory, I am suggesting that the desire to be a sister and a desire for the sister is mimetic. If so, who or what is being imitated? When sisters (usually presented in pairs in literature) relate to one another, the ideal of sisterhood mediates their relationship. This triangle creates a tension controlling the sisters' behavior toward one another and influencing their individual identities as well as creating and reinforcing the ideals. Sisters act or do not act as sisters "should," and their behaviors in turn reinforce the message of how sisters should act. This eventually translates into a larger issue of how women should act toward and with one another (what it means to be sisterly).

As subject, a sister can desire to be an ideal sister, thus imitating the ideal, but she can also desire her sister, the object. In Girard's terms, the mediation is external because the ideal is not living and her world cannot be in the sister's world. In external mediation, the subject openly announces the imitation and the source, yet this becomes problematic in sisterhood because the sisterly code is an inherent part of the culture. As such, it exists both within and outside of the text, usually implied and seldom openly defined. If sisterhood is a rarely challenged "truth," then it becomes both difficult and needless for a woman to acknowledge openly her imitation because the imitation is expected. Indeed, many of the problems between sisters occur when a sister does not follow the expected imitation.

Another problem arises when considering Girard's theory. As I mentioned earlier, I believe the ideal sister bond privileges unity over rivalry. Thus, triangular desire for sisters is, for the most part, different from Girard's assumptions concerning rivalry and its destructive nature. The importance of
succeeding as sisters outweighs and transcends the rivalries. The goals of unity and strength through unity seek to disarm the tensions. Indeed, I argue that the sister bond mediates other relationships and tensions, even other triangles—such as when two sisters are rivals for the same man. When Girard focuses on rivalry between the mediator and subject, he loses the subject-object relationship, yet I maintain that when sisters are involved and the genders of mediator, subject, and object are changed, attention must be given to the entire triangle. In fact, the triangle becomes an inappropriate geometric metaphor. When sisterhood is involved in mimetic desire, there is a striving for the triangle to become a circle, the symbol of unity. The points and the angles of the triangle which suggest isolation and a desire for autonomy reconfigure into the smoother object of the circle.

In studying the mimetic desire of sisters and the sororal bond, I found it important to uncover a definition of the ideal sister and the ideal bond that seems to be understood but seldom articulated. To determine the meaning, I examined various kinds of writing from the period from essays to biography and from poems to short stories and novels, specifically looking for the ways sisters and their relationships were discussed. Simultaneously, I examined the ways in which the definition mediated the experiences of literary sisters. For the most part, the sisters represented in the literature are of the middle class, and the issues and concerns about sisterly conduct are related primarily to the middle class and its concern for the womanly ideal and the domestic sphere.

The ideal sister that I found in the writing of the period set aside her own self-interest for the sake of a sister. The phrase "for my sister's sake" and
its variations was used over and over by writers across various genres. The middle class code of womanly conduct that dictated self-sacrifice, self-abnegation, and self-denial also applied to the ideal sister. Typically in the literature, an older sister, who often assumed the mother's role after the mother died, was expected to sacrifice for her younger sister, a sacrifice which frequently included remaining single. And yet, the sacrifice was made to seem no sacrifice at all because it was for the sister. By giving up oneself for a sister, a woman in turn found her self. When a woman was portrayed as an ideal sister, her conduct was turned into conduct book, and she became a paradigm for other women.

The relationship between sisters was to strengthen the domestic, female world by providing an acceptable place for women to nurture one another. The interdependence that developed would provide encouragement and strength. Sisters were to stand by each other in difficult times, providing both support and assistance when needed. Sisterhood not only gave women strength to act, but it also provided an environment in which women were permitted to act ("for my sister's sake"). Sisters frequently turned to one another because one or both of the parents failed or died, and the sisters had only each other, thus further giving permission for action. The relationship was to be one of unity, mutuality, reciprocity, and acceptance of differences. The ideal sisterhood was seen as a pure and innocent relationship, a place free from the problems of sexuality. Thus, men, and the accompanying issue of sexuality, had the potential to be a rupture in the bond. If men disrupted sisterhood, the ideal bond would find ways to overcome the disturbance in order for marriage and sisterhood to be compatible. One of the tensions in the
ideology occurred in attempting to balance the ideals of marriage and the ideals of sisterhood, especially when assertions were made that both relationships were the most significant in a woman's life. Sisterhood, however, tended to outlast marriage and claims were made that it even transcended the grave.

The ideals of sisterhood also revealed a desire by both men and women for an ideal community, a community that worked. Locating that community in the feminine removed it from a masculine world perceived as fragmented and chaotic, a world where autonomy was more important than connection. Thus, sisterhood also frequently became a hope for better relationships between and among people. It reminded those frustrated with the fragmentation of the world that unity was possible, that differences could be overcome. In addition, sisterhood was frequently used as a paradigm for Christian love and community. References to sisterhood often used spiritual and religious terminology and metaphors, and the relationships between sisters provided paradigms for how Christians were to interact with another. Indeed, when I first contemplated "The Tie That Binds" as a title, I was not aware of how appropriate the reference to John Fawcett's hymn was to become. But as I examined more and more references to sisters, Fawcett's four verses became similar to the idealization of sister love as seen by so many writers in the nineteenth century:

Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.

Before our Father's throne
We pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one,
Our comforts and our cares.

We share our mutual woes,
Our mutual burdens bear,
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.

When we asunder part
It gives us inward pain;
But we shall still be joined in heart,
And hope to meet again.

To begin my examination of sisters and the nature of their bond, the first chapter is devoted to the Deceased Wife's Sister Controversy and its related writing, conduct books, and biographies about women of the period. The struggle to privilege and also control the sororal bond can best be seen in the writing surrounding the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill, a bill periodically introduced in Parliament which would allow a man to marry his deceased wife's sister. Sisterhood was appropriated by the political domain in order to discuss marriage, the sanctity of family life, and threats to the domestic ideology, the authority of the Church, and England itself. Both proponents and opponents told stories about sisters and their relationships that enhance our understanding of Victorian perceptions of sisterhood.

The ideals of sisterhood are also located in conduct books. Although the books contained more information on how a sister was to relate to her brother, writers Sarah Stickney Ellis and Charlotte Yonge did address a desired relationship between sisters. The bond became a means for the "weaker sex" to bear the burdens of her life. The ideal sister set aside rivalries and jealousies, sought complementarity in differences, and consoled, supported, and strengthened the other sister. Both sisters strove for the ideal
in order to create a bond of mutuality and reciprocity.

Biographies written about sisters of the nineteenth-century reinforce historians' observations that sister relationships were possibly the most significant and long-lasting relationship a woman had. E. M. Forster's biography of his great aunt Mariannne Thornton reveals her reliance on family, especially her sisters, and their reliance on her, and the depth of the sororal bond can also be seen in Ina Taylor's biography of the Macdonald sisters. Finally, in bringing Charlotte Brontë's life to public attention in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Elizabeth Gaskell carefully delineates a tie that bound three sisters in an interdependent relationship from which they drew strength. The virtuous woman who emerges in the biography becomes a "real life" example of the ideal sister.

The ideals of sisterhood present the possibility of a heroic sister, an idea which is examined in the second chapter through Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and *No Name*, and Sir Walter Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian*, considered because of the popularity of his writing among Victorians generally and the Rossettis specifically. In each of these works a woman sets out to save a sister in need. The heroic sister portrayed in these narratives recognizes the necessity of connections to sisters and acknowledges that a bond must be maintained, which then gives her a reason for action. The narratives explore the extent to which a woman will go in order to save her sister and the nature of sisterly self-sacrifice. "For my sister's sake" becomes the rallying cry by which a sister takes action and also by which she is given permission for action. She moves out of the domestic sphere into the public world and embarks on a journey where she
not only seeks the lost sister, but she also finds her self. She calls into question both the nature of femininity and the nature of heroism. However, while Scott and Rossetti privilege the heroic sister and make her conduct an example for others to emulate, Collins resists, limits her power, and provides a man to complete the task the sister began.

The third chapter examines the strength of the sororal bond when a lover or husband enters the picture. He disrupts the intimacy of the bond, yet many sisters still attempt to find a way to maintain their relationship with one another. A woman's desire for a man and her desire for her sister reveal the potential for conflict, as does a man's desire for two sisters. The ideology governing both sisterhood and marriage problematizes the resolutions as the willingness to sacrifice oneself again becomes an issue. Because of the rules of sisterhood, an attempt is made to turn triangular desire into a circle of love and goodwill. I examine a variety of writers who attempt to deal with the vexing problem of sisterhood and rivalry in a variety of ways. Their solutions themselves are often vexing. In rewriting Rachel and Leah's story in his poem "Jacob's Wives" Arthur Hugh Clough examines how sisters see themselves as desirable and how they use their differences to entice Jacob. In her only novel Deerbrook, Harriet Martineau turns a potential triangle into a family circle of love that becomes a model for others to emulate. Anthony Trollope sidesteps the issue of rivalry by making the man a cad in The Small House at Allington. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 1880 "The Sisters" reveals the narrator's love for two sisters, the love for one of them developing only after she dies from not being able to bear the sacrifice of her love for her sister's sake. Charles Dickens's problematic and saccharine The Battle of Life reveals not only an idealized
sisterhood but the difficulties that develop in plot and character when the sororal bond is overly sentimentalized. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Bertha in the Lane" explores one woman's anger toward her sister when her lover switches his affections from her to her younger sibling. The chapter concludes with a series of Christina Rossetti poems about sororal betrayal that nevertheless reveal the expectations of sisterhood.

The final chapter focuses on Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*, a series of sketches published as a novel in mid-century, when concern about the number of single woman and what to do with them was increasing. Gaskell's humorous narrative allows us to examine the relationship between biological and metaphorical sisterhood. The community of women that is Cranford becomes a paradigm of secular sisterhood that is based on the tenets of biological sisterhood, and yet it is not idealized. Through the concerns of the Cranford women, Gaskell questions the highly gendered domestic ideology that provides few options for widows and spinsters at the same time that she provides a relatively comfortable and safe place for these women to be. The chapter and the dissertation concludes with a brief examination of biological and metaphorical sisterhood in George Gissing's *The Odd Women*, an updated version of *Cranford* in which the single women have moved out of the small town into the big city. Gissing demonstrates why idealizing women and biological sisterhood is problematic but also why women following realistic paradigms of sisterhood can provide a helpful environment for "odd" women.
CHAPTER I
"THAT CHARMED CIRCLE OF THE SISTERHOOD": PUBLIC DISCOURSE ABOUT SISTERS

Two or three sisters might establish a very comfortable home, answering in all respects to any reasonable definition of it. If any one generalization can be made on the subject, it will probably be said that a woman is of the essence of family life; but whether that woman be mother, daughter, or wife, or any other relation or person, it is not necessary to decide, so that it be one of the female sex. ("Common Sense" 159)

So wrote an anonymous writer in an 1883 essay in *Westminster Review* in an attempt to stretch the definition of a home and implicitly of a family. While supporting the domestic ideology of Victorian England which identified the woman as “the essence” of home and hearth, the writer suggests that a home can exist without the traditional mother-father-children configuration. What is significant is that the alternative home offered as example consists of “two or three sisters.”

Given the thousands of pages written about the family and the nature of woman, the Victorians published relatively little about sororal relationships. Rather, conduct book writers such as Sarah Stickney Ellis or Dinah Mulock Craik wrote more about the metaphorical sisterhood (women’s friendships) or about the woman as an individual and her responsibilities toward men and children. Even when examining the advice to mothers on how to raise daughters, there is little about the daughters together. Rather, the
relationships discussed are usually about mother-daughter, father-daughter, or brother-sister. Or there might be instructions on how to be like a mother to siblings if an elder sister had to assume some of the caretaking responsibilities, either to help out the mother or because the mother was absent (usually dead). And yet, the sister-sister relationship is occasionally discussed. If an ideal sister and an ideal sisterhood existed in Victorian middle class ideology and mediated sister relationships in the literature of the period, then we must look at what little was written about sisters to find tentative definitions, to place sisterhood in a context, and to give the ideal sister an identity. It is my intention in this chapter to examine what was written about sisters and how they were placed within the public discourse about the private sphere by focusing on the Deceased Wife’s Sister Controversy, conduct books of the period, and biographies about sisters, most notably Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

Not only do we find few references to sisters in the expository writing of the period, but the work of twentieth-century social historians also makes little reference to the relationships between sisters during this time.¹ While historians seek to critique the myths of the Victorian family, their primary focus is still on the stereotypical portrait of the middle class family: a dominant

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¹ My primary sources for background in the family, primarily that of 19th Century England, are *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English middle Class, 1780-1850* by Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall (1987); *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* by Mary Poovey (1988); *A Prison of Expectations: The Family in Victorian Culture* by Steven Mintz (1983); *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800, 2nd Edition*, by Jeffrey Weeks (1991); and *Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* by Lawrence Stone (1977). My discussion represents a synthesis of my reading in their work and others, including several biographies, some of which will be discussed later.
father, a submissive wife, numerous well-behaved children. The image has become a metaphor and symbol for the domestic sphere of middle class Victorian England because it represents a formidable part of the ideology of the period. Although recent studies of Victorian family life have shown that this image is only part of the picture and that numerous variations and exceptions existed, including a fairly flexible definition of who made up the family, sisters are still seen primarily as wives and daughters, or they are part of a generic examination of siblings. Women as sisters are seldom researched, and as a result, sisters are placed on the margins of domestic and social discussions. However, if we shift the focus from the dominant image to the marginalized sisters, we shall see that sister relationships were used to promote and sustain domestic ideology. Additionally and more significantly, just as the home was to provide men with a refuge from the turmoil and anxiety of the public sphere, a close sororal bond was used to offer women a viable refuge from the anxiety and turmoil in their lives.

What I found in the discussion of sisters is an ambiguity about sisterhood. Certainly, for some women there was no ideal sister relationship, with a sister or any woman. Edith Macdonald, for example, found herself outside the circle of a strong sister bond and later wrote about her family from what she saw as the position of an outsider (Taylor 181). Other women saw the inferiority of woman as a barrier to any ideal relationship with another woman; women could never be as loyal and true to each other as men were to men. Furthermore, it was emphasized that a woman was to focus on and develop her relationship with the men in her life. While sisters were important, they should never be as significant as the men, and a serious break in
relationships with sisters often occurred because of men whose presence created rivalries and jealousies. Some of the rhetoric in conduct books persisted in maintaining a hierarchical relationship among sisters, making a sister submissive to her older or married sister.

The ambiguity also seems to grow out of a reluctance to admit publicly that a relationship with a sister might be preferred over that with a brother, father, or husband, or even with a mother. To do so would deny the primacy of "normal" Victorian family relationships and subvert the social (and ultimately economic) power structure. It is difficult to promote marriage as the ultimate goal for a young woman and the male-female relationship as the ultimate relationship if the desired connection is with another woman—embodied in the sister.

When I examined what was written about sisters and how they were to relate to one another, I found a desire for and belief in an ideal sororal bond that transcended any other earthly relationship. No one else—not parents, children, or husband—could provide the same kind of support, comfort, and love. The ideal bond, based on mutuality and concern for one another, could overcome jealousies, rivalries, and differences. Love for a sister was the most perfect love that could be achieved on earth—a love that echoed Paul's description of Christian love: it "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (I Corinthians 13:7). Sisters together provided one another with the strength to live in a difficult world.

When I juxtaposed the ideal with what was written about real sister relationships that worked, I also found that the ideal and real were not far apart—the descriptions mirrored the ideal. Sisters helped one another bear
the burdens of life and provided strength in unity. Sisters united to accomplish goals that one woman could not achieve on her own, often as a way to enter and work within the male-dominated public sphere. They shared their sorrows and their joys, their hopes and their fears. Although different, they strove for a harmonious relationship. Typically, one sister tended to take on responsibility for others, yet there was still a sense of equality. She gained as much from the relationship as the others who depended on her because in her own way she depended on them. In large families, sisters tended to form pairs; all sisters were close, but the two were closer. Men provided ruptures in the sisterhood and therefore were a threat. Marriages interfered with the intensity of the relationship, often providing an arena for rivalry, yet after marriages became disappointments, and/or in old age, sisters returned to one another when nostalgia for what once was created a desire to reconnect. Sisters also recognized the unbearable loneliness that would occur when other sisters died, and there was enormous, painful disappointment if the relationship fell short of the ideal. No matter what the domestic ideology of the nineteenth century proclaimed about the stability and continuity represented by the family in general, to many women there was no more significant, stable, or continuous relationship than that with a sister.

Women were not alone in seeing the potential power of the bond between sisters. Not surprisingly, when we consider the domestic ideology of the nineteenth century, most Victorian discussion of sister-sister relationships took place within a heterosexual context. For 73 years, sisters were used to
make the domestic sphere part of the public, political world. The sororal bond was appropriated by the political domain in order to discuss marriage, the sanctity of family life, and threats to the domestic ideology, the authority of the Church, and England itself. A focus for the issues was the Marriage with a Deceased Wife's Sister Bill, a bill which would legalize marriage with a man's deceased wife's sister. The debate that began with a bill introduced by Lord Lyndhurst in 1835 did not end until another bill was passed in 1907. During that time, personal relationships between sisters were made part of the public debate. Mostly, the argument took place between men, and although concern was expressed about the nature and quality of the sororal bond, the controversy was about the regulation of the family and sex and the effects of sexual desire on the purity of the English family. Debaters used the bill to argue about the ability of government to legislate morality and control individual behavior. Since the battle was fierce and prolonged, it does become ideologically significant to the Victorian period and more than what Gilbert and Sullivan eventually were to ridicule briefly as "that annual blister" (264), and it provides an opportunity for insight into the Victorian expectations for sister relationships. Additionally, the discussion about the controversy supplies an avenue for examining how the ideals of sisterhood mediated sexual desires.

While appropriating the personal experiences of families, the debaters created characters facing moral dilemmas. They placed a husband, his wife, and her single sister in a triangular relationship of passion and desire. At the same time, they also showed the desire of sisters to bond with one another in an intimate, caring relationship. Then they tested the strength of each
relationship by juxtaposing the two and by setting them in direct opposition to one another. Opponents told stories of the horrors which would occur if a deceased wife’s sister bill passed; proponents told of tragedies involving decent men and women (and, of course, the children) who were trapped by the law and either forced to live in sin or marry illegally.

The way the public world discussed relationships between sisters indicates that men recognized the significance and depth of the sororal bond. Both proponents and opponents of the bill sought to protect the bond, primarily because they thought the love between sisters had the potential to maintain the sacredness of the family. They frequently identified sororal love as a love second only to that between husband and wife and addressed the affection, confidence, trust, and intimacy between sisters, often envying the relationship. However, in acknowledging the potential desire a man might have for his deceased wife’s sister, men also implied that it was easy for a man to substitute one sister for another, to transfer love from one woman to another. A sister became a twin who could slip into the missing woman’s place in the nuclear family. In addition, in envying the relationship, men implied that something was missing from their relationships. Furthermore, examination of their stories about a man and two sisters reveals a fascination with the rivalry between sisters, with men’s roles in that rivalry, and with the rupture that men could cause in the sororal bond.

Although evidence suggests that many Victorians were ambivalent about the bill and others married not knowing it was against the law, the issue did seriously affect some families and became more than an ideological argument. For example, in E. M. Forster’s biography of his great aunt
Marianne Thornton, he attributes the break-up of the family home to his great uncle Henry Thornton’s marriage to his deceased wife’s sister Emily Dealtry. The family survived illnesses, deaths (including both parents), and a bank failure, but the marriage was “a fantastic mishap . . . a contretemps which they could only regard as tragic, and it was consequently a tragedy” (Forster 189). Marianne could not understand how her brother could marry Emily because to her “my own brothers- and sisters-in-law have always appeared to me so exactly like real brothers and sisters that any other connection seems an impossibility” (Forster 193; italics mine). Her opinion echoes that of a number of Victorians as does Forster’s conclusion about the “tragedy”: “to a moralist, so much discomfort [to Henry Thornton and his family] will seem appropriate. To the amoralist it will offer yet another example of the cruelty and stupidity of the English law in matters of sex” (210). Henry Thornton himself made his private life a political issue. As one of the leading members of the Marriage Law Reform Association, he became a financial backer and lobbied heavily for passage of the bill.

The Thornton’s story became one of many stories made public during the controversy. As Margaret Morganroth Gullette rightly argues, the Deceased Wife’s Sister Controversy became “a different form of fiction making” (142). To address the arguments and garner support, both

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2Gullette’s purpose in studying the Marriage with a Deceased Wife’s Sister Controversy was to explore its contributions to the invention of the concept of middle age. She argues convincingly “how a particular section of the life course was being engineered, described and self-described, derided and defended—in short, invented” (146). I am most grateful to Gullette for discovering Craik’s Hannah. Nancy Anderson discusses the controversy as incest anxiety and concern for family purity and offers a summary of the various scientific and ecclesiastical arguments offered on both sides. Cynthia Behrman examines the issue by focusing on the tensions in the relationship between the state and the Church of England.
proponents and opponents told stories in pamphlets, parliamentary debates, magazine essays, religious tracts, and at least two propaganda novels. In addition, the issue provided a topic for sensation and horror stories, and even the problematic ending of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* can be understood from the perspective of the dispute.

The controversy about a man marrying his deceased wife's sister became an issue when Lord Lyndhurst attempted to correct an ambiguity in an old law. Marriages in England and elsewhere had always been controlled by both church and state, according to various degrees of consanguinity and affinity. When Lord Lyndhurst introduced his bill in 1835, he sought to correct a secular law and declare the legitimacy (and thus protect the inheritance) of children who could be declared illegitimate by the ecclesiastical court. He proposed to limit to two years the time within which a marriage could be voided. (His motives were not totally altruistic—he sought to protect the future of the son of the Duke of Beaufort; the Duke had married his deceased wife's half-sister.) Parliament agreed that the ambiguity had to be corrected but passed a modified form of the bill (what officially became section 2, act of the 5th and 6th William IV, chapter 54). First, all marriages within the prohibited degrees of affinity existing prior to August 31, 1835 were declared legal and valid. Secondly, marriages within the prohibited degrees of consanguinity and affinity after that date were illegal. During the debate, some men argued that some prohibited degrees of affinity should be reconsidered, principally the one between a man and his deceased wife's sister. In Nancy Anderson's study of the debate, she concludes that the Deceased Wife's Sister supporters agreed to endorse the modified bill because they believed that was the only
form in which it would pass, but they also believed a new bill allowing marriage with a deceased wife's sister would pass soon after (67). However, they underestimated the strength of the objections and the volatility of the issue. The Deceased Wife's Sister Bill was not introduced until 1842 and was repeatedly defeated, almost annually, until it finally passed on August 29, 1907. For 65 years, every time the bill was reintroduced, pamphlets, speeches, and articles were written to review the issue and argue each side's case. The uproar dwindled in the 1890s, but even after the bill was passed, a clergyman wrote a book in 1912 reviewing the issues as if there had been no resolution to the controversy (Gullette 146).

It makes sense that a questioning of marriage within the prohibited degrees of affinity should occur over sister relationships. Partly owing to the large numbers of single women in England during the nineteenth century, it was common for a single sister to move in with her married sister and help with household management, particularly with raising the children. And, since many women died during or as a result of childbirth, it was also common for a single sister of the deceased woman to become the primary caretaker, even if she had not been living in the home prior to the sister's death. (A notable example is Charlotte Brontë's Aunt Branwell, her mother's sister, who moved in with the family to help raise the children after Mrs. Brontë's death.) Some of the writers of conduct books specifically referred to the beloved aunt and the dear sister, and fiction writers wrote many stories that included women caring for their sister's children. For example, Aunt Fanny moves in with her brother-

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3 Marriage with a deceased brother's wife was not made legal until 1921. In 1931 it became legal to marry nieces and nephews by marriage. And, while a man may marry his deceased wife's sister, according to the Marriage Act of 1949, he cannot marry his divorced wife's sister. (Anderson 85)
in-law and two children when her younger sister dies in Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Half-Brothers." Within the Deceased Wife's Sister Controversy, we have Dinah Mulock Craik's *Hannah*. The single sister who willingly and lovingly accepted her role as her married sister's assistant and confidante or her dead sister's replacement was praised for the self-sacrifice at the same time that it was made to seem no sacrifice at all.

However convenient and ideal the relationship was for the two sisters, some Victorians saw the possible dangers inherent in adding a man to the picture. Although caring for a sister's children provided an acceptable and useful occupation for the single woman, the Deceased Wife's Sister Controversy called attention to the situation and forced Victorians to raise questions about the propriety of an unmarried woman living in the same household with either a married or widowed man and led them to discuss, attempt to define, and ultimately try to regulate the nature of relationships within a family. Could the presence of a man disrupt the relationship between sisters? How might he be attracted to and tempted by the other woman in the house? How could a widower live in the house with his single sister-in-law without causing a scandal? The last question points out the contradictions in the discussion: a man and woman were prohibited from marrying because they were considered brother and sister, but they also could not live together as brother and sister because they were not really brother and sister and other people would question the living arrangement. Furthermore, Victorians needed to decide why a sexual relationship that was not tolerated when a woman was living should be permissible when she died. When another question was raised as to whether the relationship between brother- and
sister-in-law is one of affinity or consanguinity, the discussions led to the question of definitions of incest. In fact, the idea of a sexual relationship between brother- and sister-in-law being incestuous was still an issue late in the century: according to Ford Maddox Ford, Joseph Conrad contemplated writing a story about incest, and his abandoned attempt, “The Sisters” (1896), was to be about one man and two sisters, one of whom the man marries and one by whom he has a child (17-18).

In the beginning, the major arguments in the Deceased Wife’s Sister Controversy were primarily ecclesiastical and social, but by the turn of the century they also contained scientific support. For both opponents and proponents of a Deceased Wife’s Sister Bill, the theological argument focused on three passages from the Bible: Leviticus 18, which establishes prohibited degrees; and Mark 10:8 and Matthew 19:6, where Christ declares that husband and wife become one flesh. As Percy Greg aptly stated in his argument against the bill, “[t]here are varieties of reading and construction, but only one that seems of any importance” (525). The problem was that both sides saw “only one that seems of any importance,” and it was not the same one. The opponents clearly saw it as a violation of God’s law; the proponents were concerned about how God’s law was interpreted. In addition, both sides of the argument spent pages reviewing the marriage codes throughout history.

The Leviticus argument concerned whether or not Jewish law is binding to Christians and how that particular chapter should be interpreted, particularly verses 16 (“You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother’s wife; she is your brother’s nakedness”) and verse 18 (“You shall not take a woman as a rival wife to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is yet alive”). Although Christ is using Genesis 2:24, the deceased wife’s sister opponents made a point of using Christ as a reference point in order to bolster the Christian aspects of the theological argument. Thus, they could point to both the Old and New Testaments for support.
trying to explain how they got to the present state.

Two becoming one flesh became an argument of the literal versus the metaphorical, and here the argument about incest took shape. If two did indeed become one flesh, then a wife’s sister also became sister to the husband and marrying her was the same as marrying one’s sister. Even on a metaphorical level, the idea of marrying someone who was thought of like a sister was repugnant to many Victorians—Marianne Thornton is an example. In one essay, Mrs. Chapman described the relationship between brothers- and sisters-in-law as “one of the purest and most delightful of relationships . . . one of the flowers in this vale of tears,” but sexual desire would add “a feeling abhorrent” to the relationship (986). When science was finally dragged into the argument, the discussion resembled a scientific “one flesh.” The writer of an essay in the April 8, 1905 issue of Saturday Review was convinced that physiological changes taking place in a woman and possibly taking place in a man after their marriage produced “more or less of a blood relationship between them” (“Science” 444). Thus, any subsequent marriage between sisters- and brothers-in-law should be avoided because the union between close blood relationships had the potential to cause “degeneration resulting

5 The Pandora’s box opened by the Deceased Wife’s Sister Bill also extended into a discussion of consanguinity and why some marriages are a violation of laws of nature. Science became part of the discussion through analogy to Charles Darwin’s study of the fertilization of orchids. Arguing against consanguineous marriages, Darwin writes “. . . it is apparently a universal law of nature that organic beings require an occasional cross with another individual.” After discussing orchids in particular, he infers, “in accordance with the belief of the vast majority of the breeders of our domestic productions, that marriage between near relations is likewise in some way injurious—that some unknown great good is derived from the union of individuals which have been kept distinct for many generations.” (qtd. in Adams Part I, 723) Darwin’s argument is refuted in “Marriages of Consanguinity,” July 1863, Westminster Review.
from inter-breeding" (444).

For those who believed that both family purity and sexual desire could be controlled by the law, the issue could not be resolved easily because the concern over marrying a deceased wife's sister also became a concern about overthrowing the entire marriage code. If one rule was relaxed, what rule would be challenged next? As one law after another fell, family purity would become threatened. (And certainly, there was something impure about a man having sexual feelings for his sister-in-law.) Even the proponents of the law admitted that the prohibited degrees were designed to keep harmony in a family. Opponents to change, such as Beresford-Hope, raised a question about which relationships were "sacred from the promptings of sexual passion" (759). Pleased that once again the bill had been defeated, an essayist in the June 30, 1883 issue of *Saturday Review* rejoiced that the House of Lords "has declared that the foundations of society are things not to be tampered with" ("Church Quarterly" 816). Mrs. Chapman also spoke for the opponents when she wrote "it is not and cannot be denied that true family life . . . is the best product of human evolution yet reached," and the very existence of this "true family life" "depends upon its being a space marked off, where the flame of passion shall be under rule and order" (984-85). Changing the laws to allow marriages within certain degrees of affinity would break down the fences and allow a serpent to enter "our earthly Paradise" (986). Apparently, Paradise was devoid of sex, and a consequence of humanity's fall was sexuality with all its accompanying temptations. Even Matthew Arnold argued strongly against the bill, seeing it as fulfilling "the double craving so characteristic of our Philistine . . . the craving for forbidden fruit and the craving
for legality" (181). As G. W. E. Russell explains about Arnold's repugnance to the bill, Arnold believed "that the sacredness of marriage, and the customs that regulate it, were triumphs of culture which had been won, painfully and with effort, from the unbridled promiscuity of primitive life. To impair that sacredness, to dislocate those customs, was to take a step backwards into darkness and anarchy" (203). For the opponents of the bill, changes in marriage laws attacked the very foundation of British society—the family—and challenged national life itself.

When the proponents raised the issue of how much either the Church of England or Christians as a whole had a right to impose their beliefs on others, the argument moved further into the social realm. Greg (and other opponents) argued that the social code demanded that "You shall not do what the great majority of your countrymen consider immoral" (527). It then became necessary to discover who was the majority and what it considered immoral. To create a majority, both sides started telling stories that focused on the relationships between sisters and on a perceived husband-wife-sister-in-law triangle. The stories are usually impassioned, emotional appeals, dripping with pathos and tragedy. The characters are either victims or villains, noble people forced into a compromising position or sex maniacs out to destroy the family because they let sexual passion override concern for the family. In addition to telling the stories, the writers often reviewed pamphlets and parliamentary debates and frequently responded to one another, thus creating

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Behrman argues that it is a shift in what the majority considered immoral that finally permitted passage of the bill, and Anderson cites societal changes in the understanding of the nature of the family and the role of women. Gullette sees passage as an acceptance of the respectable middle age couple giving validity to second marriages.
an on-going discourse about the controversy. Through the stories we get glimpses of how the Victorians viewed relationships between sisters and how they connected the sororal bond to women's relationships with men.

Although published anonymously, "Marriage with a Deceased Wife's Sister," which appeared in the April 1853 edition of *Edinburgh Review*, is attributed to the Christian apologist Henry Rogers, who married his deceased wife's sister in 1834 and thus was protected by the 1835 act (Anderson 76). Rogers writes to praise a list of pamphlets and essays that had appeared in support of the bill and to further argue for passage of such a bill. In order to refute opponents who claim that marriage between a man and his sister-in-law is naturally repugnant, he tells the story that he claims many writers of this subject tell, a story of mothers

in their last hours, recommending their husbands to give a sister a mother's rights over their children. Far from being conscious of the imputed natural repugnance, they feel assured that they thus best secure the happiness of their children. They can die with a calmer mind when they know that those they love so well will not pass into the hands of mere stepmothers and strangers; that the continuity of association and affection, the 'sacred' charm of one family, will not be rudely broken. (327)

He describes the dying woman as leaving this world knowing that those she loves so dearly will be protected because of "the tried affection of a sister's love"; furthermore, the loved ones will still be connected to the dead woman "by familiar ties" (327). The nature of the living sister's love guarantees that the children (and husband) will be cared for and loved. Rather than demonstrating that family purity is in danger and will somehow be tainted by marriage between a man and his sister-in-law, this ideal sister love shows the opposite—it is a kind of love that maintains the sacredness of the family.
Furthermore, sister love is powerful enough to provide a connection between the dead sister and her living family, demonstrating a love that transcends the grave.

By writing anonymously and neglecting to explain his own interest in the controversy, Rogers leaves the reader to believe that his purpose is pure and noble and that he has the best interests of the family in mind. However, by using the sororal bond instead of his own story, Rogers covers up male desire and the husband-wife-sister-in-law triangle—suggesting that he is well-aware of his argument’s precarious position if his identity were known. Furthermore, Rogers’ story also reveals how easy it is for men to replace one sister with another, but again it is disguised by the sororal bond, with the dying sister suggesting that the replacement is for the good of the family. Self-effacing women also become self-replacing as sisters become identical twins.

Thomas Hardy’s problematic ending to *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* also engages with the Deceased Wife’s Sister Controversy and covers up male desire in a similar way to Rogers. Tess gives Liza-Lu to Angel Clare, first declaring that men around Marlott marry sisters-in-law all the time and then justifying the union by claiming a spiritual connection between her and her sister that would allow her to remain connected to Angel: “. . . if she were to become yours, it would almost seem as if death had not divided us . . .” (415). Furthermore, Tess reveals that she would have no trouble sharing Angel with her sister when they are all dead, thus creating a ménage à trois in heaven. Equally noteworthy is the perceived twinship of Tess and Liza-Lu. Tess declares that her sister is her better self, someone who has “all the best of me without the bad of me” (415), but Tess is not alone as the narrator also
identifies Liza Lu as "a spiritualized image of Tess" (418). As Angel and Liza-Lu walk off hand and hand at the end of the novel, Hardy, through Tess and the sororal bond, has given Angel a better woman. Angel, who earlier protested that he will lose everything if he loses Tess, has easily accepted her. In the argument presented in Tess, by gaining Liza-Lu, he does not lose Tess.

Dinah Mulock Craik's intention in writing her novel Hannah was to argue for passage of the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill, and indeed, she argues more persuasively than most of the essay writers. Yet, like Rogers, her story reveals the contradictions and ironies in the argument when the sororal bond is juxtaposed with the marriage bond. Hannah's sister is already dead when the story begins, and Hannah has never lived in her sister's household. Craik portrays Bernard and Hannah as innocents who understand the law and see no reason for scandal. Hannah cannot conceive of falling in love with Bernard for three reasons: she is still mourning her dead lover; she cannot conceive of taking her sister's place by marrying her sister's husband; and she is only going to live with Bernard out of her desire for a child. On Bernard's side, he is a cleric who has already refused to marry one couple because they are brother- and sister-in-law, and furthermore, he wants Hannah to "be like her lost mother to my poor little girl; and as for me, my wife's sister shall be to me exactly as my own" (17). While Craik diffuses the problem of family ties by portraying Bernard and Hannah as two strangers, the family ties are still there through the child, and that is what permits Hannah to live in Bernard's household. As Bernard and Hannah live together with the baby as chaperon, they quietly slip into love. What they finally realize and what becomes the

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7 All quotations and page references are from Dinah Mulock Craik's Hannah. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1872.
point of Craik's story is that the law cannot control feelings or dictate whom one loves, and trouble will occur when it tries. Hannah must recognize that sisters-in-law are not real sisters. Bernard, as a member of the clergy, must come to terms with both secular and ecclesiastical law as well as the feelings of his family, whose reactions are reminiscent of the Thornton family’s. Craik's readers are to come to the same conclusions as Hannah and Bernard. At the same time, we notice that the rumor-mongers are right: Bernard and Hannah should not have been living together, no matter that the baby was held up between them and that they remained chaste until their marriage on the Continent.

In her story, Craik presents three different sister relationships in order to argue her case and send several moral messages about the family, love, and trust. Hannah and her dead sister Rosa are the ideal. Rosa’s death eventually merges the sororal bond with the husband-wife-sister-in-law triangle. Bernard and Hannah call the dead woman “our Rosa,” and she becomes a connecting point even in their love for each other. They both surmise that Rosa may be looking down on them from heaven, not in condemnation but in approval because the two whom she loved best will now be happy together. At the time they acknowledge their love for one another, Rosa’s lovely face is smiling down at them from a portrait on the mantel. Later, on a journey to France, Hannah dreams that she sees her sister’s face in the moon, still smiling down on the new family. The baby, whose name also is Rosa, serves as a constant reminder of who brought them together (baby and mother) and a constant source of blessing on the union.
The second sister relationship involves the woman whom Hannah has hired to care for Rosa. Hannah learns that Grace Dixon is the woman who has scandalized the neighborhood by marrying her deceased sister's husband; the Dixons are the same couple whom Bernard refused to marry. When Grace tells her story to Bernard and Hannah, she explains that in her fondness for her dying sister, she responded to her sister's pleas and cared for her dying sister's children. After her sister's death, the man acknowledged that he could not get along without her, and since the children adored her, she agreed to marry him. But it appears to have been a marriage of convenience; he got someone to raise his children and someone for sex. Grace acted out of love for her sister and did not know the marriage would be illegal; when the husband James wanted to end the relationship, he used the law and ended up disgracing her, with no one being able to hold him accountable for his actions because they were not legally married. Craik's message is that the law hurts a genuinely good woman and tarnishes the loving relationship between two sisters.

The third relationship also shows how the law can come between sisters. Adeline, who is jealous of her sister Bertha's flirtation with her husband, tells Hannah that the law ought to make clear that sisters-in-law are not real sisters so "a man wouldn't go philandering with them in his wife's lifetime" (185). She believes the law gives permission for flirtation, and as a result, the wife has no power to object. Because of her silly belief in the power of the law, she dies a jealous and bitter woman, her relationships with her sister and her husband frayed. Men and men's law provide a rupture in this sororal bond, but the good Hannah uses the situation to think about jealousy
and trust and to suggest to Adeline (and the readers) that love for husband and sister should be able to transcend the law. Thus, if Adeline could emulate the ideal sororal bond, the husband/sister-in-law flirtation could have been regulated.

In Craik's world, the ideal sister relationship does not need the law to protect it or the family. In the ideal sororal bond, sisters recognize that "a degradation" between brothers- and sisters-in-law in the wife's lifetime can become a blessing after her death. The dead sister becomes the ideal sister who will smile down from "the celestial sphere" and bless the union of the people she loves most. The family will be preserved as will the love the dead woman had for both her sister and her husband. Craik wants the reader to believe that it is right that the two be joined—creating a union of the three most important relationships for women (sister, wife, mother).

Opponents of the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill did not see the harm that could be caused by adhering to rigid laws nor the spiritual potential of a brother- and sister-in-law marrying and had their own versions of the sister story which recognized the evils of desire and stressed the ability of the law to

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For two different discussions of *Hannah*, see Judy Mimkin, who explores the story from the brother-/sister-in-law angle, and Gullette, who examines it as a story of middle age and second marriages. M. E. Braddon also used the controversy for the subject of her sensation novel *The Fatal Three*. The plot centers on whether or not the deceased wife's sister law should have any merit at all, especially when the relationship of the two wives was totally unknown to anyone (and in the end it turns out the women were not half-sisters). The story also examines the privileging of principle over love, especially when that principle threatens a loving, caring relationship. Braddon clearly sides with the proponents of change and indicts both secular and ecclesiastical law. Other novels based on the Deceased Wife's Sister Controversy include Agnes Hubback's *The Wife's Sister; or, The Forbidden Marriage* (1851) and Harriet Frewin's *The Inheritance of Evil; or, The Consequence of Marrying a Deceased Wife's Sister* (1849). See Mimkin, whose discussion focuses on brothers- and sisters-in-law in literature.
control desire. Any advantages to permitting the marriages were far outweighed by "the mischief and disturbance" caused, Beresford-Hope going so far as to call it an "evil omen" (760). In his story, he sees these marriages as a privilege for a selfish few:

One man may desire to marry his sister-in-law; he runs to Parliament for leave; or, perhaps, he only wants to make her an "honest woman"; and absolutely for the sake of this pair a hundred sisters-in-law are to be put to the most cruel torture, or be whipped out of the home of their widowed brothers, and be by statute forbidden to act a mother's part to their orphaned nephews and nieces. (760)

While Beresford-Hope does not explain how this torture will come about, he is positive that "home life, with its innocent pleasures and quiet charities" will be disrupted and become confused and potentially dangerous (760). Also, he differs from Rogers in that he does not consider marriage a necessity in order for the sister "to act a mother's part," thus separating motherhood and sexuality and reducing the widower's desire to one of passion and lust.

Beresford-Hope received support in an 1883 essay in Saturday Review. The writer calls the supporters of the bill "a wealthy and unscrupulous clique of malcontents" ("Church Quarterly" 108). Part of a letter from an American clergyman to Lord Hatherley is reprinted to demonstrate what would happen in England if a deceased wife's sister bill was passed. Instead of a wholesome family environment where a woman could consider her brother-in-law as a brother and she could live in the household after her sister's death "without a whisper of slander," passage of a similar bill in America now had created "a perceptible and painful constraint" in families as the husband-wife relationship is transformed into a husband-wife-sister-in-law triangle where desire and rivalry may erupt at any moment:
the children learning to look with apprehension on their mother's sisters, and the wives becoming jealous of their influence with their husbands, while familiarities which formerly were thought to be, and really were, innocent, have come to possess a consciousness of evil tendency which itself is of the nature of sin. (110)

Furthermore, the American clergyman cites a specific example he personally witnessed in which a sick wife became increasingly tortured in her dying days as she saw her husband pay more and more attention to her "young and attractive sister" until "it became the one engrossing feeling of her soul for the last few weeks of her life, exciting in her an undisguised dread of what she foresaw would, as it did, take place, and so absorbed her as to shut out all thought of religion and make her miserable to her very death" (110). Mrs. Chapman also uses a story about a young, attractive sister who has been invited to help her sick sister. The married sister becomes aware that "the fraternal relation' is waning" as "a feeling abhorrent to it" develops between the brother- and sister-in-law that causes a "degradation of family life" as the married sister realizes she has been betrayed by "the two persons she has loved and trusted most" (986). Both sister love and husband-wife love fail the woman.

Instead of a pure sister love sustaining the family after the mother's death, the sisters in the opponents' stories become rivals, and the husband's apparently uncontrolled desire for a young, attractive sister causes him to abandon his sick or dying wife, thereby demonstrating a lack of decency and moral character. The young sister is either a temptress who would have no hesitation about also deserting her sick sister or an innocent who would be seduced by the husband (the stories are ambiguous about the sister's
contribution to the villainy). Meanwhile, the poor married woman goes to the grave after witnessing the betrayal of the two most important people in her life. A change in the law had the potential to turn innocent, decent people into immoral, corrupt, indecent villains. The ideal sister relationship has no power to control or eliminate triangular desire between a man and two women.

Percy Greg tells similar stories in order to bolster arguments against the law. He, too, argues that a change in the law will radically alter the relationship between the man and his sister-in-law because “the permission of marriage is the prohibition of sisterhood” (529). In one of Greg’s stories, the sister of a man’s beloved wife cannot function as an ordinary visitor to the husband because of the two women’s relationship to one another: “She is far too intimately associated with those recollections of his wife’s girlhood and childhood in which he is deeply and fondly interested” (529). Indeed, she may be closer to him than his own sisters since she is so frequently in the household and since he hears so much of her through his wife. Greg also does not want the sisters’ relationship tainted by any possibility of a different relationship between brother- and sister-in-law. Within this context, he describes the relationship between a woman and her sister: “... her intimate companion for eighteen or twenty years, still the object of the closest affection, the most confidential trust she bestows outside of her own household, her favourite guest, her nurse in sickness...” (529). For Greg, the sororal bond is second only to that of her family and certainly one too significant to be threatened by a change in the law.

J. F. Oxon also sees value in the sister relationship, but instead of dwelling on the potential destruction of the relationship between the sisters, he
sees the loss for the man. While the sisters are allowed to welcome each other “with tenderest affection” and he sees both his wife and children welcoming the sister as a “best-beloved kinswoman,” the sister can be only an acquaintance to the man. He envies the sororal bond, but because of the law, he cannot be a part of it. Instead, he must guard himself against any impropriety, and to do that, he keeps a distance, both physical and emotional, between himself and his sister-in-law, who would be “no more . . . than any other female friend” (674).

Greg presents a second sister scenario, but now the sisters are 10-15 years apart in age with the young sister “almost as a daughter” who “has been watched, taught, caressed, loved as a child is only loved by a mother or an elder sister . . .”; she lives in her sister’s house “the petted darling alike of husband and wife . . .” (529). Instead of mentioning incest, Greg raises the question of what the relationship between the brother- and sister-in-law is to be when she matures. The reader is to make his/her inferences about a man’s desires for a woman he once considered a daughter. Again, a change in the law seems to ensure a change in the man’s desire for the sister. If it were against the law to marry her, he would never desire her, something which the proponents call into question by arguing that a law cannot control the feelings two people may have for one another (as Craik argues in Hannah).

At a time when marriage between brother- and sister-in-law was legal in almost all states in the United States, Henry James wrote “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes,” a short ghost story which described the horrors of a marriage between a brother- and sister-in-law after the wife’s death. James understands the conventions of the deceased wife’s sister stories, but he splits
the desire between the husband Arnold Lloyd who sees "a devilish fine woman" (20) in his sister-in-law and the sister who covets her sister's wardrobe and appears to orchestrate the second marriage. At the beginning of the story, two sisters see themselves as rivals for one man; the younger sister Perdita wins. However, after the wedding, she discovers her sister Rosalind dressed in her wedding dress and jewelry, and she carries the image with her until her death following childbirth. Fearful of "her sister's rapacity" (18) and shocked and jealous when she learns that her husband had been riding with Rosalind when Perdita went into labor, she makes him promise to save her clothes for their newborn daughter. Lloyd later marries Rosalind, who has carefully used her position as aunt to move into his house. Lloyd's financial setbacks prevent Rosalind from obtaining as fine a wardrobe as her sister had, and when she becomes aware of the clothes "languishing in thankless gloom in the dusty attic" (22), she badgers her husband until he gives her the key. However, she dies after opening the chest of clothes, on her face "the terror of something more than death" where also "there glowed the marks of ten hideous wounds from two vengeful ghostly hands" (25). Obviously, this is not the same kind of sororal bond that Henry Rogers described as transcending the grave.

In the proponents' versions of the deceased wife's sister fiction, sister love transcended law and life itself and kept the sacred family circle unbroken. Proponents also recognized that the law could not control sexual desire, but the sororal bond could. In the ideal sister relationship, the husband-wife-sister-in-law triangle was not an issue while the wife was alive. Both sisters' quest to be connected to one another eliminated and/or controlled potential
male desire for the unmarried sister. The ideal married sister was also the loving wife; the man need not be tempted. The single sister privileged unity with her sister and could not conceive of herself in her sister's place. At the married sister's death, she gave permission for her sister to replace her, a replacement that would allow a continuation of the sacred family circle and would ensure that no outsider joined it.

However, for the opponents to the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill, a change in the law had the power to change the nature of relationships. Neither sister love nor spousal love had the power to withstand the law, which paradoxically both corrupted love and was needed to preserve pure love in the family since the individuals could not be trusted to regulate passion on their own. As Percy Greg wrote, "to all wholesome natures, the impossibility of marriage is the exclusion of passion . . . .wherever it [the line] is drawn by the law of this or that nation, . . . there the sacred protection of natural feeling and domestic love follows it" (530). Because of sexual desire, men could break or fray the charmed connection between the sisters. Furthermore, a man could share in the benefits of the sororal bond only if he were a brother. For both opponents and proponents, the relationship between sisters was a special, intimate bond that even the men envied and wanted to be part of, and by working within the law, they suggested ways to keep the relationship strong and deal with their own sexuality. Significantly, the debates over the bill clearly suggest that the love between sisters is non-sexual, a pure love different from sexual love. Thus, because of its innocence and purity and its spiritual connections, sisterhood in Victorian England could be used to attempt to control sexual desire.
II

The political arena was not the only public forum for a discussion of the nature of sister relationships. Where men sought to control and protect the relationship through the law, the women conduct book writers sought to regulate it by offering advice on appropriate behavior. While writers about the Deceased Wife's Sister Controversy connected the sororal bond to male desire and made sisters objects of that desire, the conduct book writers made sisters the objects of desire for each other and an ideal sororal bond a goal to be sought. In books that functioned primarily as guides to how women were to serve men, discussions of sisterhood pushed men to the margins. Men connected to the sororal bond only as part of the difficult world in which women lived; they were not dwelt on in connection to rivalries and jealousies. The bond became a means for the "weaker sex" to bear the burdens of her life. Through advice on how to be a sister, we get yet another glimpse of the characteristics of the ideal sister, and we gain an understanding of why women should seek a strong, positive relationship with a sister.

Writers addressed sister relationships only occasionally, writing more on how to be a sister to a brother (which was more to the purpose of the conduct books). Two conduct book writers who did address sister relationships are Sarah Stickney Ellis and Charlotte Yonge. For both women, the sororal bond had the potential to last a lifetime and provide strength and support to both sisters. While they recognized the realities of jealousies and rivalries and addressed problems in sisterhood, they also saw the enormous potential benefit if women could learn to overcome the hostilities. However,
both women had difficulty placing the relationship within the domestic ideology because it seemed to contradict what was said and believed about relationships between men and women. Although Yonge more carefully controlled her enthusiasm about the bond than Ellis, the two women strove to find a way to write about sisters’ desire for a bond with each other without offending the belief system in which they wrote. If many women felt this strongly about the potential of sisterhood, it is no wonder it became a metaphor (both positive and negative) for connections between women, and it is not at all surprising that the bond between biological sisters was not frequently addressed: sisterhood was empowering, and thus, unless carefully contained within the domestic ideology, it could be viewed as subversive.

For Ellis, as described in The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits, sisters who go through life meeting few obstacles and having no hardships have a greater potential to be insensitive to one another and to develop jealousies and rivalries. Sisters whose lives follow an easy road deliberately try to hurt each other, "to intercept the sunshine that would otherwise fall upon each other's path . . . [and] sportively drive each other upon the rocks and the quicksands . . ." (224-25). These sisters, who know each other's weaknesses, torment and tease instead of support and uplift one another. In other words, Ellis blames jealousies, rivalries, and petty ridicule of one another on life being too good and easy. (In all of Ellis's writing, she

*All quotations and references to Ellis's work in this section are from Sarah Stickney Ellis's The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits. London: Fisher, Son, & Co., 1839. Ellis wrote a series of books addressed to daughters, women, and mothers (but not sisters) of England. They were all variations on her basic theme of delivering “practical minutiae of practical duties” to women (A2). Her discussion of sisters appears only in The Women of England and not in The Daughters of England, written in 1843 and clearly addressed to a teenage audience.
reinforces her belief that life is hard, but she also claims that a difficult life builds and strengthens character.)

Sister relationships are more loving, intimate, and stronger when developed where adversity exists. She recognizes that a woman’s relationship with a man places her in an inferior position, “her part . . . to make sacrifices, in order that his enjoyment may be enhanced” (223). In addition, because of woman’s weak nature, her duties to men may be more than she can bear on her own, and as a result, she needs the sympathy and support of someone who can understand her feelings. Since the superior male cannot possible understand “the foolish fears” of a weak woman, the perfect choice is someone else who suffers—a sister. Because of their mutual understanding of the oppressiveness of the woman’s role, “there is sometimes a bond existing between sisters, the most endearing, the most pure and disinterested, of any description of affection which this world affords” (224). It is important that the rivalries and jealousies of childhood and youth be overcome, because sisters’ lives together have the potential “to be the bower of repose” (228). When adults, sisters who get together “to enjoy a few brief days of heart-communing” after a few years of separation will find that their reawakened memories will allow them to return to the world, “strong in the confidence of that unshaken love which formed the sunshine of their childhood, and is now the solace of their riper years” (229-30). Returning to the world implies an otherworldliness

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10 That the woman’s role becomes oppressive is, of course, the woman’s fault because of her “unsanctified spirit.” Although she performs her duties willingly, “from error of judgment, or from want of consideration, she does it so often without producing any adequate result, and so often without grateful acknowledgment, that her spirit sometimes sinks within her, and she shrinks back from the cares and anxieties of every day, with a feeling that the burden of life is too heavy to be borne” (223-24). Ellis makes it clear that in no way is a man to be blamed for a woman’s oppression.
when sisters get together—a contrast between the male-dominated world in which they must live and a female world in which they find strength.

Over and over again, Ellis reinforces the need for a sister's love and affection. (She even admits that she has difficulty putting her pen down when she writes on this theme.) Although sisters may form friendships with other women, "where a sister is a sister's friend, there can be none so tender, and none so true" (230), a sentiment echoed by Christina Rossetti at the end of *Goblin Market*. When she earlier notes that the brother-sister relationship may be "one of the most faithful and disinterested," she then does not wax as eloquently or as passionately (or as long) about that friendship as she does about "the most pure and disinterested" bond between sisters. Sisters provide consolation, instruction, comfort, and support to one another. Nothing can destroy the love. No one else can provide strength in adversity. No one else will sacrifice as much for a woman as her sister will. When called upon, a sister

will hasten upon difficult and dangerous journeys, without feeling the perils they undergo . . . the self is annihilated by the overwhelming power of their affection. Obstacles cannot hinder, nor persuasion retard their purpose: a sister suffers, and they esteem it their highest privilege to assert, in defiance of all opposition, the indisputable claims of a sister's love. They have an inalienable right to share in her calamity, whatever it may be; and this right they will not resign to another. (233-34)\(^\text{11}\)

One wonders what the opposition might be, but given the context, we could assume the domestic ideology itself might provide an inherent barrier to the sororal bond. As much as Ellis embraces the standards and expectations of

\(^{11}\) As we shall see in the next chapter, this becomes the theme for the heroic sister in Sir Walter Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian* and Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* and with some modification in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and *No Name.*
male-female relationships, it is clear that the relationship between sisters is at least as important, if not more important, than any other earthly relationship. So strong are her feelings on the subject, she admits that even language fails to find a way to express the depth of the relationship. She encourages women to overcome any disagreements and distance between sisters, cherish the sister bond, and recognize the "refreshing power of this well-spring of human happiness" (234). It is not surprising that the metaphor of sisterhood becomes a strong motif in her writing. She ties sisterhood (both biological and metaphorical) to the domestic ideology by acknowledging the ability of sisters to help each other bear the enormous burden of maintaining the "nation's moral wealth" (13).

Thirty-seven years later, Charlotte Yonge, in her book *Womankind*, expresses more ambivalence about sister relationships. Yonge herself had no sisters and only one brother who was seven years her junior. She suffered from loneliness during her childhood and eagerly anticipated summer visits to her cousins whose family life embodied her ideal and became a model for the families in her novels (Dennis 25). While close to her cousins, she still had to observe sister relationships from a distance. Although echoing much of what Ellis writes, she is more impersonal, far less passionate, and more rule bound than Ellis. Desiring a bond with a sister, she is less sure of how to accomplish

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12 For one discussion of how metaphorical sisterhood and communities of women are written about in the conduct books of Victorian England, see Nina Auerbach’s introduction to *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978.

13 All quotations and page references are from Charlotte Yonge's *Womankind*. London: Mozley and Smith, 1876. Her work first appeared in the *Monthly Packet* during the early 1870s.
it. While recognizing the rewards of a close intimacy between sisters, she also recognizes the jealousies and hostilities that may develop instead since the family is a place where “true selves are shown” (142). The relationships are hierarchical to some extent, mostly because of roles. Rivalries and jealousies pose the greatest threat to love between sisters, so “rules of sisterly charity and peace” should be set up and followed by the sisters, and then they must “treat their transgression as serious sins to be repeated and confessed” (142). Clearly, sisters’ sinful natures interfere with the potential of the harmonious sister bond and the ability to become an ideal sister. She suggests that sisters “who may have to live together through life must learn to give up to one another” (143). Even those sisters who go their separate ways in adulthood will have fonder memories of their youth if they follow her advice. Yonge’s suggestions show the major difference between sister-brother and sister-sister relationships. Sisters “give up to one another,” but sisters only give up to the brother with no equal sacrifice on the brother’s part.

When children, the sister relationship is hierarchical because the elder one is responsible for the younger one(s). She can help the mother, or if the family is motherless, fulfill the mother’s role. As the substitute mother, the elder sister is given authority over the little ones. When they are out of childhood, the relationship switches to one of equality, but interestingly, “the eldest sister at home must always remain the head, and be deferred to” (144). Yonge also

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Both Yonge and Ellis discuss the brother-sister relationship. The sister’s role is like that of the brother’s future wife. She performs numerous services for her brother, and in return, she will be rewarded with a wonderful, blessed love. Although couched in appropriately ideological terms that portray a magnificent love, a brother’s love for his sister is certainly conditional, extremely hierarchical, and easily withdrawn. The sister’s love is sacrificial, selfless, enduring, and respectful. Because it is impossible, there is never any mention of the potential equality they find in relationships between sisters.
recognizes that in childhood, when pairs of sisters bond "in that intimate manner," the affection they develop for one another is one of the most pure and perfect that exists (144). However, Yonge needs to find a way to explain the desire for the sororal bond when the sisters reach adulthood and the husband-wife relationship naturally is to become the most important. She succeeds by connecting a single and a married sister.

In her concern for finding work for the many redundant women in England, she turns to the sister relationship. A single sister "can be the devoted handmaid of the married one, with great benefit to both, and without exciting any jealousies, unless she is more than ordinarily foolish or exacting" (141). Yonge goes on to recognize and admit the value and also the complementarity of the sororal bond for adult sisters. Earlier in her book she said women's "affection is really more valuable to a spinster," but by marrying off one sister and having the single one live with her, Yonge places sisters in an ideologically appropriate position that allows both of them to continue the intimacy of childhood and to "remain the first with each other through life, lean on one another, suffer and rejoice together . . . . One remains leader and originator, housekeeper and manager; the other is her complement for life, and the tie is never loosened" (142; underlining mine).15

While clearly recognizing that jealousies and rivalries prohibit sisters from forming ideal bonds with one another, Yonge's and Ellis's discussions of sisters create an identity for the ideal sister. She is someone who sets aside

15 Yonge posits an alternative for single women in her novel The Heir of Redclyffe (1853). Two sisters, Jane and Elizabeth Wellwood, seek to establish a school and hospital as a sisterhood to help the poor in their community, thus extending the idea of sisterhood as a relationship and a place for single biological sisters to other single women as well.
rivalries and jealousies; seeks complementarity in differences; and consoles, instructs, supports, and strengthens the other sister. More importantly, she privileges her relationship with a sister and will overcome obstacles in order to establish and maintain the bond. For them, the ideal sister is not an autonomous individual; she exists through connection to a sister. They clearly indicate that in the sororal bond, both sisters must strive for the ideal in order to create a bond of mutuality and reciprocity. "The tie that is never loosened" only works when it balances. Both sisters desire not only each other, but they desire to be a better sister by focusing on the ideal.

In privileging sisterhood the way Yonge and Ellis do, they also implicitly address some of the contradictions in the domestic ideology they sought to reinforce. No matter how much the ideal woman and the ideal family might have been desired, there was generally an incongruence between the ideal and the real and a conflict between the defined roles and the realities. In addition, in an ideology fraught with contradictions about their behavior, women would have a difficult time understanding how to balance the dichotomies. For example, how does a woman learn to be both strong and weak or active and passive? It is difficult for a "real" woman to live up to any idealized image, and she could feel an enormous psychological burden when she failed. In reinforcing the strength of sisterhood, these two conduct book writers tried to demonstrate that striving for this particular ideal would not be burdensome. Instead, the sororal bond would provide women with an outlet for expressing their needs and finding a network of support. Sisters who developed an intimate, trusting relationship while children certainly would provide a ready-made, close-knit community within the family that would
continue into adulthood, thus maintaining the ideology by not revealing its burdens to outsiders while providing support for a seemingly impossible role. Furthermore, women conduct book writers cover up female desire for the sororal bond by placing it within the confines of the domestic ideology, thus creating a tension between subverting the ideology and reinforcing it.

III

While Ellis and Yonge were trying to describe a desired sororal bond and place it within the domestic ideology, actual sisters were relating to one another in a way that closely paralleled the descriptions of the conduct book writers and demonstrated a desire for sisters to connect with one another into adulthood and marriages. Studies of family relationships within the nineteenth century indicate that sister relationships may have been the closest of any relationship during the Victorian period and may have become “the prototype of female relationships” (Davidoff and Hall 351-352). Martha Westwater argues that the support system created by the sororal bond “constitutes a cultural cushion that . . . the wider family of Victorian femininity were loathe to relinquish” (3). The emotional bonding among sisters helped create the female world, provided a stable environment in which women could live and function, and reinforced, sustained, and promoted the domestic ideology. In the little that is written about sisters, social historians reveal that the relationships were supportive and intimate, at times passionate in their intensity. The close bond between sisters also often extended to sisters-in-law, who, in some cases, were close family friends.
Occasionally, sisters also connected for economic purposes, thus providing a way for women to enter the male-controlled public world. In their study of family businesses, Davidoff and Hall found one example of three sisters, left in a bad financial situation by the death of their father, who joined together to write popular history books in order to maintain themselves (286). This is not too different from the Brontë sisters who sought ways to relieve their father of the financial burden of three single daughters. Berkeley the Banker, a story by Harriet Martineau in her Illustrations of Political Economy, tells the story of two sisters who go to work in order to help restore financial solvency to a family facing economic ruin.

Some biographies of nineteenth-century women also reveal the significance of close sororal ties. For example, in E. M. Forster’s biography of his great aunt Marianne Thornton, he describes Marianne’s relationship with her five sisters as “the charmed circle of the sisterhood” (84). Marianne showed an aptitude for the business world, but following the death of her father, who had encouraged her talents, she was expected by others (including her ultra-conservative guardian Sir Robert Inglis) to confine herself to the domestic sphere. Her energy and talents were then transferred to maintaining the family ties. Having been excluded from the public world, it is clear that Marianne instead privileged the sororal bond. When she wrote about the feelings associated with a sister marrying, she expressed her

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See also Martha Westwater’s The Wilson Sisters: A biographical Study of Upper Middle-Class Victorian Life. For a discussion of relationships between pairs of sisters, see the collection of essays in The Sister Bond: A Feminist View of a Timeless Connection, edited by Toni A. H. McNaron. The essay by Diane D’Amico attempts to refute negative biographical criticism about the relationship between Christina and Maria Rossetti.

All quotations and page references are from E. M. Forster’s Marianne Thornton: A Domestic Biography, 1797-1887.
bewilderment about a sister who would choose a relationship with a man over one with a sister, claiming that “. . . all women are so much better than men—then it seems so impossible that the girl should like him well enough for that” (158; italics Thornton’s). Marianne herself never married, and although Forster never offers an explanation, it becomes clear that Marianne found the company of women, especially her sisters, more satisfying. Indeed, in her recollections of the family friend Hannah More, she described the More household of five sisters as “the Paradise of my childhood” (39). It appears to me that Marianne’s perceptions of the More sororal bond paralleled her own desired relationships with her sisters, and the More bond became the model for Marianne’s ideal relationship with sisters. She writes:

Surely there never was such a house, so full of intellect and piety and active benevolence. They lived in such uninterrupted harmony with each other, were so full of their separate pursuits, enjoyed with such interest and vivacity all the pleasures of their beautiful home, or wholly laid aside all the forms of society that were irksome, that young or old one felt oneself in a brighter and happier world . . . . (39)

For Marianne Thornton, the relationships with sisters provided a more harmonious, happier world than anything a male-dominated world could offer her. As a result, in her desire for a close relationship, she took her sisterly duties seriously and never seemed to resent any of the responsibilities that fell to an older, unmarried sister—including raising her dead sister’s children. Despite rivalries and disagreements among the sisters, she worked to maintain relationships with all of them throughout her life and to emulate the More ideal.

Marianne Thornton was not alone in wanting to sustain a relationship with sisters. Ina Taylor relates a similar desire in Victorian Sisters, the
Although coming from an obscure family background, the four women either married notable men or had famous sons. Alice was the mother of Rudyard Kipling; Georgie married the artist Edward Burne-Jones; Agnes married the artist Edward Poynter; Louisa was the mother of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin. What Taylor discovered in her research and reveals in the book was a strong unity among these sisters that began when they were children, “loosened in early marriage, but strengthened again toward the end of their lives, providing great comfort and support in their final years” (xix). In telling the individual sister stories, she returns again and again to the sister bond and reveals the ambivalence caused when sisters try to maintain a relationship with one another.

More than in the Thornton biography, *Victorian Sisters* exposes situations that caused ruptures and fraying in the sisters’ relationships with one another. Although a fifth sister, Edith, lived with Louisa and helped raise her children, she never became part of the sisterhood. Alice had difficulty bearing the pressure to take on the responsibility for the care of her aging parents and eagerly moved to India because the family unity seemed a burden. While children, the Macdonald sisters had “the usual sisterly battles for superiority” (103), but as the women became young adults, the rivalries and hostilities were clearly caused by men (a problem alluded to by Forster in Marianne’s story). Agnes and Louisa, for example, became intensely competitive in adulthood, primarily as rivals to outdo one another in their marriages. Yet, despite their hostilities, the sisters still felt a pull towards one

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another and acknowledged the desire to stay together “at all costs” (86). It frequently proved to be a desire more to be dreamed of than fulfilled and often created a longing for something they once had.

Georgie refused to participate in the childhood squabbles because she saw them as pointless and potentially harmful to the sororal bond. She carried this attitude into her adult life and as a result became the sister of choice when physical or emotional support was needed. Like Marianne Thornton, Georgie became the caretaker sister and the one who worked the hardest to maintain the connections, but unlike Marianne, she had some problems with the sororal bond during early adulthood. Although her sisters felt comfortable turning to her when troubled, she could not reciprocate and found solace in friends. In addition, a reunion with Alice, who had been in India for two years, proved disastrous. Both sisters were forced to recognize how different their lives were and how difficult it was to bridge a gap that more than miles had placed between them. The experience devastated Georgie because it seemed to her that if the sororal bond weakened, then no relationship could be relied on to remain stable.

For both Georgie and Alice, the tie that binds bound too tightly for several years, and both sisters temporarily pulled away from the others. Contrary to the ideal, the distancing played a positive role in their personal development. With the help of Rosalind Howard, George Eliot, and William Morris, Georgie developed into a dynamic individual and devoted herself to various causes, including socialism, education, and feminism. Alice transferred the sororal loyalty to her husband and children and worked to establish a reputation for her husband John and a position for the family in
India. Only in later years, secure in their identities, were they able to return to their sisters.

In middle age, Georgie and Georgie’s home became the focal point for family connections as the sisters sought to retie old bonds and heal old wounds. As marriages proved disappointing, the sisters sought comfort in one another and were able to overcome hostilities and regain the former enjoyment they found in one another’s company as well as the unity and loyalty, and the revived family connection was strong enough to carry into the next generation. What the Macdonald sisters learned over the years is best expressed by Georgie who wrote of her feelings for Louisa, feelings which could be applied to all four sisters: “She and I have always been deeply attached to each other, but we have developed along different lines and much that gives me help does not feed her and vice versa—but it is wonderful what chasms love will span” (154).

In both the Macdonald and Thornton biographies, the sisters did not strive to be ideal sisters, yet they all seemed to desire a strong bond with their sisters. In order to accomplish the bonding, one sister had to take on the role of caretaker and monitor of the relationship. A set of expectations developed for this sister, and other sisters turned to her in their needs. For her to work successfully in her role, she had to be willing to accept the responsibilities. For the bond to work for her, she had to find something equally desirable in the relationship. The Macdonald story particularly reveals the difficulty in maintaining balance and finding a relationship that worked for everyone. Effort, negotiation, compromise, and acceptance of differences were needed, and the sisters had to be comfortable with whatever developed. For them, the
ideal sororal bond seemed to rest in a recognition that "it is wonderful what chasms love will span."

True-life stories, the domestic ideology, and the ideals of sisterhood all converged in one nineteenth-century biography. Following Charlotte Brontë's death in 1855, her father asked Elizabeth Gaskell to write a biography of his daughter. While it is considered an impressive example of nineteenth-century English biography, I view Gaskell's endeavors to tell Brontë's life equally impressive as an insight into the ideals of sisterhood. In bringing Brontë's private life to public attention, Gaskell carefully delineates a tie that bound three sisters in an interdependent relationship from which they drew strength. The resulting bond reinforces Sarah Stickney Ellis's belief that sisterhood would help women endure the hardships of life. Through Gaskell's portrayal of the Brontë sisters' relationship, we are meant to see how Charlotte valiantly faced each trial with strength and courage and how sisterhood helped her survive her difficult life. Indeed, in her interpretation of the power of the sororal bond, she suggests that it transcended the deaths of Anne and Emily and remained a source of strength for Charlotte. That their affection was "stronger than either death or life" (178) is revealed not only in Gaskell's discussion of Brontë's life, but in the words of Charlotte which she chose to share with the reading public. More significantly, the virtuous woman who emerges in The

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"For discussion of the development of Gaskell's biography of Charlotte Brontë and nineteenth-century biography in general, see Alan Shelston's introduction to Gaskell's The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Penguin edition, 1975. All quotations and page references from The Life of Charlotte Brontë are taken from the Penguin edition which is a reprint of Gaskell's first edition, published in 1857. Following complaints and threatened legal action against Gaskell for her descriptions of the Clergy Daughter's School and Branwell's relationship with Lydia Robinson, she made extensive revisions for the third edition. However, I agree with the editor Shelston that the first edition is how Gaskell wanted to represent Brontë and her family."
Life of Charlotte Brontë becomes a “real life” example of the ideal sister, and as her conduct becomes conduct book, she becomes a model for other sisters. In a letter to Brontë’s friend Ellen Nussey, Gaskell explains the Charlotte Brontë that she intended to present to the public: “I am sure the more fully she—Charlotte Brontë—the friend, the daughter, the sister, the wife, is known, and known where need be in her own words, the more highly will she be appreciated” (qtd. in Shelston 25). Gaskell wanted to reveal the impeccable moral character of her friend, not by focusing on the author Brontë, but by describing the relationships Charlotte had within the domestic sphere. Both her heroines and her novels were criticized for their impropriety and coarseness and their obvious lack of feminine decorum, and Gaskell’s decision to focus on Brontë’s womanliness in part responds to those concerns (Spencer 68; Bick 34). By showing the conventional Victorian woman in Brontë, Gaskell separates Brontë from her writing and absolves her of the unconventional and improper behavior of her characters. That means, of course, choosing to emphasize some aspects of Brontë’s life, such as her non-sexual love for her sisters, while ignoring or minimizing other aspects, such as her sexual love for M. Héger. By defining Charlotte’s womanliness within the roles of friend, daughter, wife, and sister, she also reinforces the significance and relevance of the sister in definitions of the Victorian woman.

In establishing Charlotte Brontë as the ideal sister, Gaskell first positions her in the expected older sister role. As Gaskell relates the situation, when her older sisters Elizabeth and Maria died, Charlotte, although only nine years old, was well-aware of the responsibilities and duties falling to her. In her “loving assumption of duties beyond her years,” Charlotte became like a
mother to Anne and Emily (111). Although the three sisters shared planning and decision-making in adulthood, Charlotte's mother-sister role was to continue throughout her life. Gaskell credits much of Charlotte's desire to find a means of establishing a school that the sisters could run together to her need to be near her sisters in order to care for them in a way which no one but a sister could. She could not bear to see her younger sisters physically or psychologically suffer "what Charlotte could have borne patiently for herself" (166). But if Gaskell was intending to use Charlotte as a model of feminine decorum, she falters when she portrays Charlotte's love for the sisters as intense, passionate, and fierce. When Anne was looking ill, Gaskell writes that "Charlotte watched over her younger sisters with the jealous vigilance of some wild creature . . . with the longing, fond anxiety, which is so full of sudden pangs of fear" (181). Even in discussing the relationship of the fictional Lowood School in *Jane Eyre* to the Cowan's Bridge School that some of the Brontë sisters attended, Gaskell describes the author Brontë as "an unconsciously avenging sister of the sufferer [sister Maria]" (104).

It would seem that the burden of the mother-sister role should disrupt the balance of the sororal bond, yet in the portrait that Gaskell draws, Charlotte's role strengthened rather than weakened the bond. Ultimately, Charlotte received as much from her relationship with her sisters as she gave, and the unity was maintained. In her teenage years, Brontë derived her pleasure and relaxation from her walks with her sisters. Later in life, the sisters were caretakers together as they attended to the needs of their father and brother, the house, and the parish. The three sisters became "all in all to each other," and Gaskell hypothesizes whether "there ever were a family more
tenderly bound to each other" (93). It was at home where "their natures expanded" (178). Furthermore, despite the presence of Aunt Branwell and their father, the sisters developed a sense of direction from one another. They came to rely on each other rather than the adults, and together they planned for their futures and that of their brother Branwell's and for the financial and emotional survival of the family.

Certainly the relationship among the sisters was different from that with their brother Branwell. Given the hierarchical relationship between men and women which placed women under men, both the power and privilege of brothers and sisters were unequal. Yet, however privileged and powerful Branwell was supposed to be, Gaskell suggests that he suffered in his life because he was excluded from the sororal circle—thus echoing a sentiment of the debaters in the Deceased Wife's Sister Controversy. While the sisters remained "all in all" to each other, Branwell, because he was the male who was "expected to act a part in life; to do" (197), had to venture forth into a world which ultimately destroyed him. (In portraying the world as a potentially bad place for the Brontës, Gaskell even describes "that mysterious London" as "Babylon the great" [155-156].) There is no doubt that the sisters dearly loved Branwell, but he was a brother, not a sister, and their relationship to him was a different kind of devotion.

By 1835, when it was time for the family to decide what Branwell, who was eighteen, was to become, the sisters strove to find a way to finance his attendance at the Royal Academy (a plan that later fell through). It is in the sisters' relationship with Branwell that Gaskell most severely critiques the expectations of the domestic ideology. Although she admires sisterly
self-sacrifice when it was for a sister, she does not exhibit the same attitude
when it is directed toward the brother. She acknowledges that at this point in
the siblings’ lives, Branwell may have indeed been “the greatest genius in this
rare family,” but she regrets that the sisters recognized his genius but not each
others’ (153). Until Branwell’s ultimate disgrace was discovered, he remained
the sisters’ “hope and their darling” (197), and even as his faults and vices
were exposed, they still expected him eventually to become the pride of the
family. Privileging the male is irritating to Gaskell, perhaps because she is
looking at the Brontë lives in retrospect, but nevertheless, she disrupts the
domestic ideology by admonishing any sisters who “have laid their lives as a
sacrifice before their brother’s idolized wish” and “[w]ould to God [the Brontë
sisters] might be the last who meet with such a miserable return!” (156).
Ironically, as Branwell failed in his role, it was left up to the reclusive sisters to
take action normally reserved for the man.

How they manage is a product of the sororal bond. Over and over
again Gaskell describes the habit of the sisters to meet in the dining room at
nine o’clock in the evening to talk over their problems and to plan for the
future. According to Gaskell’s portrait of the sisters, it was from this tightly knit
group that major family decisions were made. Although at many times in their
lives they found themselves living apart, either attending school or trying to
earn enough money to relieve their father of the financial burden of three
daughters, whenever together they plotted and planned—who should go out
to work, what were the prospects for writing careers, how could they get a
school started so they could all be together permanently. It was also at their
meetings where the sisters decide to publish some of their poetry (significantly
not Branwell's) and eventually to write and seek publication of their novels as well as to listen to and critique one another's ideas for stories. The exclusion of Branwell and his writing is a bold step for the sisters since usually during this period, male poetry is privileged over the perceived weaker female poetry. Here in the sisters' world, the privileging is reversed as efforts are intensified to bring their work into the public sphere. Their passionate desire to be together permanently is what finally propels the reclusive sisters out into the world to find a means to fund their desire for togetherness. Throughout all this activity, Gaskell portrays Charlotte as the leader, the one who organizes, directs, and implements the plans.

In Gaskell's desire to create an ideal sister through Charlotte and to reinforce her own belief in the significance of sisterhood, she also emphasizes Charlotte's belief in its significance by carefully selecting passages from her letters. In one letter Brontë wrote: "there is nothing like [sisters' affection to each other] in this world, I believe, when they are nearly equal in age, and similar in education, tastes, and sentiments" (289). For Brontë, the differences among the sisters were not an issue; they produced neither rivalry, jealousy, nor anger, only occasional irritation. When she recognized a difference between Emily and herself in their approaches toward finances, she realized that she "must remember that perfection is not the lot of humanity; and as long as we can regard those we love, and to whom we are closely allied, with profound and never-shaken esteem, it is a small thing they should vex us occasionally by what appears to us unreasonable and headstrong notions" (289). The significance of the sororal bond to Charlotte Brontë remained evident after the deaths of Emily and Anne. Gaskell shows Brontë by herself
in the same room where she and her sisters used to sit and plan and listen to the progress of each other's writing. "Solitude, Remembrance, and Longing" became her sole companions as she continued her work on *Shirley*: "... the pen, laid down when there were three sisters living and loving, was taken up when one alone remained" (379-80). The loss of what was "nearest and dearest ... in this world" was felt keenly because for Brontë "the two human beings who understood me, and whom I understood, are gone" (383). She recognized that "it is so bad for the mind to be quite alone, and to have none with whom to talk over little crosses and disappointments, and to laugh them away" (399). Repeating the word "alone" on page after page, Gaskell emphasizes her sense of Charlotte's acutely painful solitude.

Since Gaskell wants the reader to see that the ideal sister relationship transcends death, she uses the intensity of Charlotte's "Remembrance and Longing" for her sisters to demonstrate again the passion and depth of this sororal bond. Gaskell describes Charlotte as having "an intense longing once more to stand face to face with the souls of her sisters" where "[i]t seemed as if the very strength of her yearning should have compelled them to appear" (401). As Gaskell conjures up the spirits of the dead, she declares that on windy nights, "the cries, and sobs, and wailings" could have been the beloved sisters trying to get to Charlotte, and Gaskell claims that she once heard Brontë reply to someone who objected to *Jane Eyre* hearing the voice of Rochester, "But it is a true thing; it really happened" (401). Gaskell relates that Brontë's walks on the moors reminded Charlotte of the times her sisters were with her. Gaskell provides a letter in which Brontë reveals that all of nature around her reminds her of Emily, while Anne is "in the blue tints, the
pale mists, the waves and shadows of the horizon" (409). Brontë also wrote that "[i]n the hill-country silence, their poetry comes by lines and stanzas into my mind . . . and [I] am driven often to wish I could taste one draught of oblivion," yet it is in the “Great Hope" of their eternal life that Brontë found some solace (409). Clearly, she planned to see them again, but until she did, her memories, her work, and her relationships to other people kept alive her connection to her sisters.  

In The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Gaskell also makes clear that a story of sisterhood does not end with the biological sisters but can extend into other relationships with women. The primary example of sisterhood Gaskell provides is in the friendship between Brontë and her close friend Ellen Nussey who is described as “this friend, who was all but a sister” (342). Anne Brontë also recognized the importance of Nussey’s friendship as well as the importance of her own relationship with Charlotte and tried to find a way to connect the two as she approached her own death and realized that her sister would be left alone. In a letter to Ellen Nussey, Anne wrote that her own death would be much easier to face if she knew that Nussey “would give as much of your company as you possibly could to Charlotte, and be a sister to her in my stead” (367). Anne’s request not only extends the bonds of sisterhood to

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20 Additional connection with Emily was kept alive through the character of Shirley, who strongly resembles the beloved sister, and Gaskell claims that Brontë never tired of talking to her about Emily. Brontë also saw in G. H. Lewes a resemblance to Emily which “almost moves me to tears” and which convinced her that she could never be angry with him (411). Gaskell writes that in editing new editions of her sisters’ works, Charlotte found it “a sacred duty” that at first was extremely painful, but when responding to a letter of admiration to the author of Wuthering Heights, Brontë told the writer that “it revived me for many a day to find that, dead as she was, the work of her genius had at last met with worthy appreciation” (435).
women outside the family, but it also provides another example of a dying woman asking a “sister” to take her place in an attempt to keep the sororal connection intact.

After her sisters' deaths, Charlotte Brontë did continue the friendship with Ellen Nussey, and she also developed others—including ones with Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Gaskell. Although Brontë did not explicitly connect sisterhood to friendship, her description of friendship is remarkably similar to her description of sisters in that one must “take faults along with excellences” and “be content, and even happy to give more affection than we receive” because friends are loved and regarded “for their sakes rather than for our own . . .” (454). While Gaskell identifies the sororal bond as a means of connecting women friends, for Charlotte it was never quite the same. Her selfless love for her friends earned her their affection for life, yet they only somewhat made up for the loss of her beloved sisters.

In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell clearly presents Charlotte Brontë as a paradigm of the sisterly ideal and the Brontë sisters' relationship as a model for other women to emulate. It is within her description of Charlotte Brontë's funeral that Gaskell summarizes her sense of the sororal bond. She writes about “a village girl . . . who had found a holy sister in Charlotte” (525). The troubled girl grieved over Charlotte's death because she faced the loss of someone who helped her when others abandoned her. The description which Gaskell provides of Brontë's concern for the girl gives us an idea of how Gaskell defines the support of a sister: Charlotte “had sheltered her with her help, her counsel, her strengthening words; had ministered to her needs in her time of trial” (525). No biological sister could have done more.
Elizabeth Gaskell carefully constructed Charlotte Brontë as a paradigm of sisterly virtue in order to enhance Brontë's womanliness and help promote her as an exemplary figure. But other writers discussed in this chapter also constructed paradigms of sisters and sisterhood whether in biography or conduct book or as part of the Deceased Wife's Sister Controversy. While sisters and their relationships were squarely located within the domestic ideology and used to promote it, they also challenged traditional notions about women's relationships. By emphasizing the significance of sisterhood, writers undermined the primacy of the marriage bond. The contradictions proved to be a vexing problem throughout the writing of the Victorian period. The paradigms and problems will be revisited and revised in the literature discussed in the following chapters as the sororal bond became another means by which the nature of woman (the Woman Question) was explored.
CHAPTER II
FOR MY SISTER'S SAKE: SISTERLY HEROISM AND SELF-SACRIFICE

In her conduct book *The Women of England*, Sarah Stickney Ellis claims that no one will sacrifice as much for a woman as her sister will. A woman will embark upon any kind of dangerous journey to help her sister in need. No obstacles can stand in her way; no person can discourage her from her undertaking. This chapter examines four works written in the nineteenth century in which this ideal becomes the theme of the heroic sister. These sister narratives deal with a woman in trouble and her sister who desires to save her, and each one explores the possibilities and the problems connected with the heroic sister and idealizations of her. These narratives also reveal the problematic nature of the sororal bond and its placement within nineteenth-century domestic ideology.

The most discussed sister relationship in Victorian literature is found in Christina Rossetti's heroic sister poem *Goblin Market*, published in 1862, but variations on Laura and Lizzie's tale can be seen in other nineteenth-century narratives as diverse as Sir Walter Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian*, still popular in mid-Victorian England although published 44 years earlier than Rossetti's poem, and Wilkie Collins's sensation novels *The Woman in White* and *No Name*, written about the same time as *Goblin Market*. In each of these works is a common understanding of the ideal sister and of heroic sister
conventions, but they demonstrate a difference in the interpretation of those conventions. Saving a sister and maintaining a connection to her is the heroic sister’s goal. “For my sister’s sake” becomes a kind of battle cry that sets in motion the action and guides the heroic sister on her journey. The ruptures in the sororal bond are caused by men, but the means by which the rupture occurs and how and to what extent the sisters are reunited vary from work to work. Scott and Rossetti idealize the heroic sister and allow her to save her sister. But Collins does not idealize her; he does permit a sister to begin her task, but she is not allowed to complete it.

The sister who becomes a heroine seemingly calls into question both the nature of femininity and the nature of heroism. In a highly gendered culture where men were given power, authority, and the ability to take action and women were to be passive dependents, there emerge in literature independent women who defy conventions in order to rescue another human being. However, the heroic sisters in these stories must be contained because the admired and idealized sisterhood is also subversive and threatens the traditional patriarchal power structure. Heroic sisterhood resists rules and authority and is usually most active when the father has failed. By attempting to become a hero(ine), the heroic sister herself transgresses as she oversteps the boundaries between domestic and public spheres and between masculine and feminine conduct.

Thus, a tension exists between the ideals of sisterhood and the rules of patriarchy that the writers must struggle to control. They find ways to make the heroic sister palatable to their audience, and their writing reveals the various methods used to manage her activities and behaviors. Although heroic sisters
take action, they are given permission to do so only if they follow rigid rules of conduct. While some twentieth-century readers would prefer sister heroines who overthrow the domestic ideology (and the patriarchy) of the nineteenth-century, these women, while subversive, are not radicals, and any subversiveness ultimately must be contained. Heroic sisters, however, do reveal the ruptures in the ideology and challenge the assumptions about what women are capable of accomplishing, and they posit alternatives to the behavioral norms.

What Lee Edwards notes about women heroes in general also applies to heroic sisters: "the woman hero can make use of feminine traits in order to challenge the belief that society as an idea must rest on war and conquest" (9). The heroic sister's actions call into question the nature of power and the need for violence. Her power works through self-sacrifice and connection to others, not by hierarchical authority or a show of force. The ideal relationship between sisters ultimately suggests a paradigm for all human behavior—a model that reinforces the importance of unconditional love and ties with other human beings. The moral imperative of sisterly connection suggests that saving oneself is linked to saving another. Yet when their tasks are accomplished, they return to the domestic world from which they came, and a sense of equilibrium is restored.

While heroic sisters are given masculine characteristics in order to perform heroic deeds, these women must retain their femininity. The heroines

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1 Edwards' book *Psyche as Hero* does not include a discussion of heroic sisters. However, she does examine what she identifies as heroic patterns in British and American novels with women protagonists and asserts that the woman hero provides a contrast and "alternative to the more limited archetypes of angel, witch, hag, and madwoman" (14).
take action that demonstrates their moral strength, their purity, and their selflessness. In addition, they are often placed in situations where they must ask for and accept the help of others (usually men) who have ways of functioning in the world that are not available to them. The women are also permitted to take action because the traditionally protective male figure, notably a father, has failed in his role or is absent (frequently dead). When the male protector is removed from the picture, the female can move into an active role, but only for her sister's sake. In effect, she replaces the father and acts his part, a problematic issue for the domestic ideology but one that Wilkie Collins resolves by introducing a hero to finish the task started by the sister.

The curious blending of masculine and feminine becomes acceptable primarily because the heroism is placed initially within a domestic context—the family—and involves sisters, a relationship already sanctioned as ideal by the culture. The heroic sister is an extension of an expectation that sisters will help each other, but the nature of heroism temporarily removes her from the confines of the home and thrusts her on a journey into a seemingly hostile, public world. The task before her tests both the power and strength of sisterhood and the sense of self. Sisterhood and selfhood become entwined, and sisterly heroism suggests that both independence and connection are possible. Sisters, heroic and redeemed (and a sister can be both), usually receive a proper nineteenth-century reward—marriage and a family, thus extending the connection of self and other to self and others. Sisterly heroism explains and reinforces the power of women's moral strength to save a corrupt world. However, while these sister narratives celebrate sisterhood, they also succeed in limiting the power and controlling its influence.
Out of the four sister stories presented here, Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* best exemplifies an attempt to define the ideal heroic sister. At the end of the poem, we learn that both Laura and Lizzie go on to lead conventional Victorian lives—they marry and have children. We also learn that Laura does not forget her experience. On more than one occasion, she gathers the children around her and tells the story of her transgression and the subsequent redemption by her sister Lizzie. Following the tale, she joins all their hands together, asks them to cling to one another, and then recites the often-quoted final lines of the poem: “For there is no friend like a sister...” (562). For Laura, her story has become a moral lesson to be passed on and repeated to the children. The message is clear: there is no other earthly love like a sister's love. In telling and retelling her story to the children, Laura ultimately transforms Lizzie's conduct into conduct book, much as Elizabeth Gaskell transformed Charlotte Brontë's conduct in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. (At the same time, the errant Jeanie, mentioned in the poem, becomes an example of what not to do, and perhaps more importantly, it appears that Jeanie had no one to save her.) By the end of the poem both children and readers are to understand that this is a poem about the ideal sister relationship. The act of joining the children's hands and bidding them “cling together” reinforces the point; Laura desires that the children not only understand the message but apply it and resist separation from one another.

The sister love revealed in *Goblin Market* goes beyond the seemingly simple, sing-song six lines at the end of the poem. While not condoning
wrong-doing, it is an unconditional love, a love that transgression does not cancel, and a love that can redeem. Indeed, Laura's transgression itself seems to strengthen sister love as it demands commitment and sacrificial action from Lizzie who then receives deep, devoted sister love from Laura. Furthermore, Rossetti suggests that this sister love is applicable to both males and females. The children to whom Laura speaks are not identified as specifically female (nor are they identified as specifically her children), and the use of "one" implies a broader application of the message that includes both sexes.  

_Goblin Market_ critics frequently have addressed the nature of sisterhood in Christina Rossetti's poem. For example, Dorothy Mermin writes of the "heroic sisterhood" (107); Janet Galligani Casey discusses "the potential of sisterhood" (63); Jeanie Watson addresses "the dilemma of sisterly self-sacrifice" (50); and Jerome McGann claims that the poem presents "a convincing positive symbol for an alternative, uncorrupted mode of social relations—the love of sisters" (224). Mermin and Casey also connect the poem to Rossetti's interest in the nineteenth-century sisterhoods, primarily those dedicated to nursing. Additionally, most critics are quick to point out the connection to Christian teachings, often referring to the poem as a Christian allegory and placing the sister story squarely within the temptation-fall-redemption genre. Most recently, Mary Arseneau argues that "the interpretive acts of Laura and Lizzie do reveal a spiritual consciousness, and thus, the

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2 Dorothy Mermin believes otherwise: "The children are apparently all girls and are exhorted to keep the female circle closed and complete. This is a world in which men serve only the purpose of impregnation . . ." (114). However, Janet Galligani Casey argues that sisterhood in _Goblin Market_ is not exclusionary and "potentially includes the experience of both sexes" (63).
process of moral reading takes place within the poem itself as one of its organizing features," and as a result, the poem need not be read "at the relatively remote level" of allegory (79). Connecting Christian themes and symbols with a story of sisterhood reinforces the nineteenth-century belief in the power and significance of the sororal bond and helps to mythologize it. If sister love represents Christian love, Rossetti’s poem reminds readers that Christian love is based on connection and supreme self-sacrifice. A fall represents separation—in this case from a sister, the closest other. Through the self-sacrificing heroism of a sister comes redemption which leads to reconnection.

The language of *Goblin Market* resonates with a language of moral "shoulds" and a language of separation and connection, and it is this language which reminds us of the significance of sisterhood. The sisters’ initial physical closeness suggests a psychological and emotional connection: they crouch together, clasp arms, and remind each other that they are not to look at the goblin men. Both Laura and Lizzie are aware of the “musts” and “should nots” of being feminine, and these rules also transfer to sisterhood. Although Laura knows the rules, she is still tempted to peek and urges her sister to look also. Lizzie refuses and reminds her sister that “Their offers should not charm us, / Their evil gifts would harm us” (65-66). The moral principles which Lizzie has learned guide her actions, and she flees the potential danger, leaving her sister behind. Yet those same moral principles also fail her; in doubting the ability of the sisters together to ward off the evils of the goblin men, she leaves Laura vulnerable. While Laura’s curiosity causes her to stay and her longing leads her to sell herself for a taste of the fruit, the
failure of the sisters to cling to one another is the beginning of the fall and of the sisters' separation.³

After Laura's fall, although physically close once again, the sisters are emotionally and psychologically, even psychically, separated. Lizzie is first "Full of wise upbraidings" (142), and unaware that her sister has fallen, she continues to lecture her on appropriate moral behavior, using the fallen (and dead) Jeanie as an example of what not to be.⁴ Once she realizes that she is too late, her anguish is that she can only watch and not share in Laura's pain. (The desire to share Laura's pain is reminiscent of Sarah Stickney Ellis's belief in the idea of sisterhood as shared pain.) Lizzie's desire to reconnect with Laura motivates her to consider action as she "Longed to buy fruit to comfort [Laura]" (310). However, Lizzie's fear of the consequences of an encounter with the goblin men prohibits action. Laura's separation from her sister is evidenced by her silence. Once she learns that Lizzie can hear the goblin men but she cannot, she turns "cold as stone"(253) and maintains a silent vigil that is not shared with Lizzie.

Only Laura's impending death, the final separation, finally spurs Lizzie to action as she "weighed no more / Better and worse" (322-23). Concern for her sister's life prompts her "for the first time in her life / ... to listen and look" (327-28). In a world where women are to be passive rather than active agents of change, Lizzie responds to her sister's life-threatening crisis not by finding

³ Casey claims that Laura's fall is a fortunate one in that it sets in motion the events which will force Lizzie to gain courage (69).

⁴ The usual assumption in discussions of the poem is that Jeanie is a friend and not another sister. Positing Jeanie as sister would suggest that Lizzie has already failed once at upholding sisterhood, yet that does not seem the purpose of using Jeanie as a lesson. Rather, Jeanie's fate is meant to be a lesson to Laura. (Winston Weathers calls Jeanie "the third sister" [84].)
someone else (a man) to save Lizzie nor by giving up because no one else is around to help, but by going out herself. Instead of covering her eyes and sticking her fingers in her ears as she did in the beginning, she looks and listens for the goblin men. What is significant in Lizzie's action is that she hopes she can make a difference, and thus, she is willing to risk her life. Although she knows what happened to Jeanie, she now has made a decision not to give up on her sister.

Rossetti's description of Lizzie's confrontation with the goblin men reveals the heroic sister's blending of masculine and feminine characteristics. She stands "like a lily" yet also "like a rock," like an "orange-tree / White with blossoms honey-sweet" and "like a royal virgin town" but also "like a beacon" (409-418). The combination provides her with strength and courage to resist the goblin men's violence. However, her resistance is not a masculine violence (she does not, for example, slay the goblin men) but a feminine passivity and silence that is strong and resilient rather than weak, meek, and ineffectual. Thus, Lizzie's heroic efforts partially belie the traditional belief about the nature of femininity: although it remains passive and silent, femininity here does not equal weakness.

Hope for reconnection with her sister also helps Lizzie resist the goblin men. When they invite her to "Be welcome guest with us" (380), she declines because "one waits / At home alone for me" (382-83; my underlining). Her first words upon returning are "Laura . . . / Did you miss me?" (464-65). In the Eucharistic scene, Lizzie becomes a Christ-like figure, demonstrating that it is possible for a woman to act a savior's part, and offers herself to Laura as the antidote for Laura's sin: "eat me, drink me, love me" (471). Lizzie claims that it
is for Laura’s sake that she braved the goblin men, but the reconnection is also for her own sake; confronting the goblin men forces her to confront her own fears—of them, of risk-taking, and of losing her sister. Her triumphant return to Laura contains a boast: “Laura, make much of me; / For your sake I have braved the glen” (472-473). To save herself, she needed to save her sister. Her self-worth and moral integrity are tied to her love for Laura and to being a sister. Demonstrating the love found in sisterhood requires the self-sacrificing action of risking her life by leaving her world, the domestic sphere, and facing the goblin men in the marketplace, but in return, the heroic sister learns who she is and what she can accomplish.

As a result of Lizzie’s self-sacrifice, Laura does reconnect with her sister. Just as she later asks the children to cling to one another, she clings to her sister and expresses fear and concern for Lizzie’s life. In kissing her sister, she again tastes the forbidden fruit, whose taste is now bitter. Significantly, retasting the fruit does not begin her regeneration; rather it is her recognition that her sister risked her own life for her. That recognition initiates Laura’s movement toward reconnection and redemption because she is finally able to look beyond herself and her desire for the goblin men’s fruits. In clinging to and kissing her sister, Laura’s own tears already begin to revive her:

Mermin (112-113) and Casey (69) also address Lizzie as antidote and Lizzie’s heroic boasting. Mermin notes Rossetti’s use of masculine and feminine characteristics to describe Lizzie, but she does not associate them with notions of sisterly heroism (112).

Watson sees Lizzie’s self-sacrifice as a journey from innocence to experience without being lost. Experience represents self-knowledge, and Lizzie’s selfhood is tied to the strength of her love for Laura (52). McGann argues that “Lizzie’s function in the poem . . . is to repeat Laura’s history, only at so self-conscious a level that she becomes the master of that history rather than its victim” (225).
As Mermin rightly points out, "moral and emotional salvation comes from a loving response to selfless love" (112).

It is the redeemed Laura who recognizes both the heroism of her sister and heroic action as part of the expectations of the ideal, and it is Laura who presents the sister story to the children—the future generation. Laura, in recognizing the importance of sisterhood, tells the story to other siblings, transforms her sister into an ideal, and then makes that ideal an object of desire, not only for herself but for others coming after her. Whether *Goblin Market* is referred to as allegory, fairy tale, or fantasy, the idea persists that there is something special about the relationship between Laura and Lizzie that makes it stand out from other sister connections, and indeed, from other relationships among humans. And yet in recognizing and admiring the unconditional self-sacrifice of Lizzie and the bond between sisters, we must also recognize the bizarre nature of Lizzie's sacrifice. The earlier description of the goblin men's assault resembles a rape that Lizzie passively endures until they become tired of her, and in offering herself to Laura, she allows herself to be devoured. The ending rhyme itself conceals the horror of what Lizzie allows to happen to her. Instead, in translating Lizzie's conduct into conduct book, Laura simplifies and sanitizes the nature of Lizzie's heroism:

"For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands." (562-67)
Goblin Market differs from other Rossetti sister poems such as "The Lowest Room," "Noble Sisters," and "Sister Maude," which are filled with sororal rivalries, jealousies, and disappointments, but even within those poems, it becomes clear that an understanding of a sisterly ideal guides the reactions and responses of one or both of the sisters. That is, according to Christina Rossetti, sisters understand how sisters should behave toward one another. In writing Goblin Market, Rossetti solidifies her doctrine of sisterhood and reveals her own desire for an ideal sororal bond. In doing so, she joins the likes of Elizabeth Gaskell and Sarah Stickney Ellis in attempting to identify the ideal, self-sacrificing sister whose sacrifice is to seem no sacrifice at all. In the poem, the ideal becomes a model against which others can measure their behaviors. For Rossetti, demonstration of moral strength lies in a redefinition of nineteenth-century feminine passivity; moral strength is manifested by an odd passive action during crisis, by a willingness to risk oneself for the sake of another, and by literally giving oneself to another. If by the end heroic sisterhood also becomes what McGann identifies as a declaration of "the need of an alternative social order" (230), embodied not in the the goblin men or the marketplace but in the sisterhood of the domestic sphere, then it is an alternative that promotes self-sacrifice for the sake of another.

Almost 50 years before Goblin Market, Sir Walter Scott told a similar story in The Heart of Midlothian: a passionate sister falls, and the virtuous sister takes a heroic journey in order to save her life. While I realize the oddity of discussing a work published in 1818 in a chapter which examines three
other narratives published in the 1860s, I have two reasons for discussing the novel. First, it remained enormously popular throughout the nineteenth century, possibly because a book with characters like Jeanie Deans and her father gave the novel a seriousness and moral lesson that would have appealed to Victorian readers (Lauber 74). The central character is Jeanie Deans, a woman who faces a moral dilemma about helping her fallen sister, and thus, the lessons of sisterhood become a significant part of the lesson *Midlothian* teaches. Secondly, Scott's novels were enthusiastically read by Christina Rossetti and her siblings (Battiscombe 21, 42). Marya Zaturenska reports in her portrait of Christina Rossetti that the library of the grandfather Polidori contained Romantic literature including Scott's novels which “the children eagerly devoured” (35). In 1840 when she was nine, Christina wrote the beginning of a story about the Crusades which reflected her excitement about Scott's novels (Battiscombe 21). *The Heart of Midlothian* would have given her a heroine and a sister relationship as a model for another heroic sister story, a model that more closely resembles Lizzie and Laura's sisterhood than does the sentimental and mostly forgettable relationship of Brenda and Minna Udaller in Scott's *The Pirate*.

In his 1830 introduction and postscript, Scott clearly reveals that his novel is based on a true story. "The prototype of the fictitious Jeanie Deans" was Helen Walker, a woman whose story had been told to him in a letter from Mrs. Goldie, whom he quotes extensively in the introduction (5). In describing her character and briefly relating the story of the two sisters, Scott

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ennobles Helen Walker and transforms her into a virtuous ideal against whom he can test Jeanie and Effie's relationship and their characters.

After the two sisters were orphaned, Helen raised the younger Isabella. When Helen discovered that her sister was to be tried for child-murder, she also learned that she would be the chief witness against her sister if she did not testify that Isabella told her in some way about the pregnancy. However, Helen refused to "swear to a falsehood" no matter what the consequences, and her sister was condemned to die (4). The same day Isabella was found guilty, Helen set out for London to speak to the Duke of Argyle, who then obtained a pardon from the court. Helen returned to Scotland "just in time to save her sister" (5). Isabella later married her seducer "and lived happily for [sic] great part of a century uniformly acknowledging the extraordinary affection to which she owed her preservation" (7) and apparently holding no grudge against her sister for initially refusing to lie in court. Few other details are known about the story since neighbors would not ask Helen about her endeavors because "the natural dignity of her character, and a high sense of family respectability, made her so indissolubly connect her sister's disgrace with her own exertions" (6).

Throughout Scott's explanation, his language demonstrates his admiration for Helen. She acts "solely from high principle" and provides "a pleasing view of the moral dignity of virtue" (6-7). In his postscript, he even interprets what he learns from "Sketches from Nature, by John M'Diarmid"; when Helen Walker was described by peers as "pensy, that is, proud and conceited," Scott decides that their views only demonstrate that Helen had "a strength of character superior to those around her" (7). To him, the affection
between the sisters is also exemplary, and to some extent he uses Isabella’s apparent affection for her sister as additional proof of Helen’s fine character. Scott was so impressed with the Walker story that he wrote an inscription and provided the funding for a memorial to Helen Walker erected in 1831 in a churchyard near Dumfries (Lamont 541). While he idealized Helen and clearly patterned the Deans story after the Walker story, Jeanie and Effie Deans are not Helen and Isabella Walker, as Scott is well-aware. Near the end of his introduction, he asks readers to keep the prototype in mind and then judge whether or not he “has improved upon, or fallen short of” the sisterly heroism of Helen Walker (5).

In *Goblin Market*, we are meant to see that similarities and differences in Lizzie and Laura balance and indicate that either sister had the potential to fall and that Laura is not to be condemned for her actions. However, in rewriting the Walker story, it seems important to Scott to delineate the differences in character between the two sisters in order to ennoble Jeanie and reward her for both actions and principles and to explain Effie’s fall and subsequently unhappy life. Moral strength and virtue keep Jeanie pure and serene while passion, “a little fund of self-conceit and obstinacy, and some warmth and irritability of temper” lead to Effie’s downfall (98). Furthermore, while Jeanie adheres to her father’s teachings and moral principles (albeit with modification), Effie rebels and both literally and metaphorically strays from the home. Who they are and what they do determine the kind of life they are allowed to lead after Jeanie saves her sister.

Differences between the sisters also lead to friction, yet at the same time they are pulled toward one another. The tension creates an ambivalence
in their relationship which allows Scott to explore the nature of sisterhood. From early in the story until their final separation, the two sisters connect and separate—understanding the principles of sisterhood, desiring connection with one another, yet being unable to overcome the consequences of the differences between them. Jeanie, whom Jana Davis calls “the nearly ideal moral yardstick” (61), attempts to serve as a moral monitor for Effie, but Effie rejects her words. In one of their earliest interactions in the novel, Jeanie admonishes Effie about staying out late, but her sister responds with teasing about the Laird of Dumbiedikes calling on Jeanie. Seeing her success in “carrying the war into the enemy’s country,” Effie continues with her taunts until she realizes that she has hurt her sister (99). Her response then is to fling her arms around Jeanie and kiss away the tears, and Jeanie “return[s] the sisterly kiss, in token of perfect reconciliation,” understanding that Effie’s “good and evil seemed to flow rather from impulse than from reflection” (99). However, the interplay does not end until Jeanie once again attempts moral admonishment, and Effie responds with apologies and promises to resist the dancing—responses that are as impulsive as her misbehavior. Of course, Effie breaks her promises, and the cycle to some extent repeats itself for the rest of their lives. When Effie goes to work for the Saddletrees and the sisters become physically separated, Jeanie feels “the full force of sisterly sorrow” (103), yet because she both fears Effie’s potential imprudence and hopes that her sister will behave herself, she cannot resist one final lecture in an attempt to get Effie to reflect and think before acting.

Effie’s resistance to Jeanie’s principles includes rebellion to her father’s ways. Indeed, as long as Effie views Jeanie’s principles as the equivalent of
her father's and Jeanie as her father's spokesperson, she is unable to confide in Jeanie the way she, Jeanie, and others expect sisters to confide. A scolding about the evils of dancing from her father "created a division of feelings in Effie's bosom, and deterred her from her intended confidence in her sister. 'She wad haud me nae better than the dirt below her feets...” (101). Even later in jail, when Jeanie asks Effie why she did not reveal the pregnancy, Effie declares her shame: "Isna my crown, my honour removed? And what am I but a poor wasted, wan-thriven tree, dug up by the roots, and flung out to waste in the highway, that man and beast may tread it underfoot?" (204). Her reluctance is later confirmed by George Staunton, Effie's lover, who tells Jeanie why Effie did not confide in her sister: "I knew her dread of you and of her father. She would die a thousand deaths ere you should know her shame" (327).

However, Effie mistakes Jeanie. It is precisely because her moral principles are not exactly her father's, but rather a modification of them, that she is able to become the heroine and save Effie. Jeanie's guiding principles may have originally come from her father's teaching, but by adulthood and her problems with Effie, when she finds herself "separated from all earthly counsel," she turns directly to God through her devotions, from which she is "fortified to endure affliction, and encouraged to face difficulties" (144). She

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*David Craig argues that the novel is controlled by "the moral and religious ethos produced by Presbyterianism" (224), and his claims generally have been accepted and extended; Winifred Lynskey, for example, discusses the presence of the elect and the reprobate. On the other hand, Jana Davis examines the influence of Scottish moral philosophers and Scottish common-sense morality. She suggests that Effie's fall is "a failure to subdue passion with principle" rather than "demonstrating that she has been predestined to evil or good" (58).*
frequently mediates between sister and father, deciding what it is safe to tell David Deans and what is in the best interest of Effie to conceal. After Effie's arrest, she questions whether or not she should have told her father more but decides that she "acted for the best" (145). On more than one occasion, Jeanie hesitates to talk to her father about decisions she must make because she fears he might not give her the answer she needs—most thoroughly expressed in rationalizing why she cannot tell him about her journey to London until after she has gone:

Without departing from filial reverence, Jeanie had an inward conviction that the feelings of her father, however just, and upright, and honourable, were too little in unison with the spirit of the time to admit of his being a good judge of the measures to be adopted in this crisis. Herself more flexible in manner, though no less upright in principle, she felt that to ask his consent to her pilgrimage would be to encounter the risk of drawing down his positive prohibition, and under that she believed her journey could not be blessed in its progress and event. (249)

In portraying Jeanie's apparent divided loyalties the way he does, Scott depicts a sister love which resists the authority of the father. The rupture in the domestic ideology is apparent: it is impossible to adhere to both the father's law and the ideals of sisterhood at the same time, and instead of choosing the patriarchal authority, Jeanie selects the affections and compassion of sisterhood. To mend the rupture in the ideology, Scott must find a way to make Jeanie's behavior acceptable. Thus, we find Scott provides numerous opportunities for his characters to recognize, justify, and idealize sisterhood.

Before the trial, David Deans condemns Effie for her sins, announcing that he will never see her again, and while acknowledging that biologically he may have two daughters, Effie, now "a child of Belial, and a company-keeper,
and a trader in guilt and iniquity" has "ceased to be a bairn of mine" (191).
Furthermore, he would never ask one daughter to risk her conscience to save the life of the other. However, David Deans also decides that maybe a sister can do something an ultra-conservative father cannot. In a conversation before Effie's trial, Deans tells his daughter,

'Jeanie, if ye can, wi' God and gude conscience, speak in favour of this puir unhappy . . . She is your sister in the flesh—worthless and cast-away as she is . . . but if ye arena free in conscience to speak for her in the court of judicature, follow your conscience, Jeanie, and let God's will be done.' (199)

Deans cannot help Effie, but Jeanie must—if she follows the sisterly ideal. Sisterhood remains despite Effie's transgressions, and as a result of sisterly love, Jeanie refuses to abandon her sister, even when her father gives her up as lost.

Jeanie and her father are not alone in understanding the responsibilities and nature of sisterhood. Prior to the trial, Jeanie will be asked by various members of society to uphold sisterhood and to save Effie (the two being connected). In so doing, Jeanie must also find a way to preserve her conscience and maintain her integrity. In other words, her sisterly heroism will work only if she can save Effie by not compromising herself. In addition, she will demonstrate the "strength of character superior to those around her" that Scott said he found in Helen Walker (7).

George Staunton (Robertson, Effie's lover) attempts to take advantage of Jeanie's sisterly emotions and sense of duty. In his letter requesting that Jeanie meet him secretly, he passionately enlists her assistance "if she desired the life and honour of her sister to be saved from the bloody fangs of an unjust law . . . " (143). Furthermore, Jeanie will guarantee the "destruction
of her sister" if she tried to bring someone else with her (144). When they meet, he continues to invoke a sisterly ideal, first by demanding that she promise to save Effie by doing what he says and then by declaring that she is the only one who can save Effie. Because of what Staunton believes a sister relationship to be, he also believes that Effie must have told Jeanie about her pregnancy: "Nothing is so natural as that Effie should have mentioned her condition to you—think—reflect—I am positive that she did" (155). Finally, he asks Jeanie to lie, again invoking sisterhood and further explaining that even if anyone should suspect she is lying, they would forgive her and admire her for her sisterly affection.

In meeting Staunton, Jeanie makes her first journey from home on what she perceives as "so wild an expedition" (147), one she views as improper and perilous (and with Jeanie it is often difficult to tell which is worse—impropriety or danger). In many ways, her journey to the crags is a small test run before her London journey. Like Lizzie in *Goblin Market*, she must confront her own goblin men and remain pure. Jeanie is fearful about going to the crags, noted as a haven for criminals and purported to be a meetingplace for witches, demons, and Satan—all of which also lead her to question who Staunton is. Over and over, Scott reminds readers that Jeanie’s ability to overcome fear and persevere in her efforts is due to her determination to find a way to rescue her sister.

However, rescuing Effie does not involve compromising Jeanie’s integrity—although her inability to lie for her sister when the law is clearly wrong calls into question her (and Scott’s) definition of integrity. What Scott does not adequately clarify is why Jeanie’s high principles permit keeping
information from her rigid father when that will help Effie, but public lying about what she knows when a law is too rigid is “unlawful to a Christian” (153). If both father and the law are representatives of patriarchal authority, but both instances of lying (public and private) are not wrong, then a strange dissonance in Scott’s argument results. In his efforts to demonstrate Jeanie’s superiority to others, her resistance to lying in public portrays her in a different light than Scott intended. Although we are supposed to see that Jeanie is right, her virtuous behavior seems misplaced, and we, like society at large, also begin to question her behavior and her definition of moral principle.

Jeanie first resists Staunton’s persuasive efforts, including his redefinition of lying: “. . . there is no falsehood, except in so far as it was not told to you . . . in saying what I have said, you will only speak the simple truth” (155). Instead, she counters by asking him to save her sister, something the criminal lover also cannot do. But who is more guilty of failing to help Effie? His final words to her are a reminder of her responsibility. As the trial approaches, Jeanie continues to be confronted with the expectations of others, including her sister. The turnkey Ratcliffe, who admits he has “smacked calf-skin [kissed the book] fifty times in England for a keg of brandy,” cannot understand Jeanie’s scruples and hopes she will reconsider (207). Effie’s lawyer builds his entire case on Jeanie, who he believes will help her sister by testifying on her behalf—whether the testimony is a lie or not.

At their first meeting while Effie is imprisoned, the two sisters once again move from harmony to acrimony. Their love for each other is expressed with an embrace that Jeanie shares “with an earnestness that partook almost of rapture,” and when their joy turns to sorrow as they recollect the
circumstances, they are also able to weep together (203). However, as soon as Effie learns that Jeanie has talked with Staunton, they begin quarreling—first about Staunton and then about Jeanie's unwillingness to perjure herself, which Effie first construes as a sign that Jeanie thinks she is guilty. Effie, ever mindful that "[a]t my best, I was never half sae gude as ye were" (208), attacks her sister's virtue by declaring that "it's whiles the faut [sometimes the fault] of very good folk like you, Jeanie, that they think a' the rest of the warld are as bad as the warst temptations can make them" (207). Although remembering that her sister's tragic circumstances may account for her harsh words, Jeanie is still wounded and tries to explain that she would give her life if that would save her sister, but Effie is unmoved. Since she believes that Staunton was willing to risk his life for her by invading the prison to free her, she cannot understand why Jeanie will not say only a word in her favor. In court she pleads, "O Jeanie, Jeanie, save me, save me!" and impulsively grabs her sister's hand and covers it with kisses and tears (228).

By this point in the story, Scott has made clear that only a sister, only Jeanie, can save a sister. The father will not, the lover cannot, and the law shows no mercy. Furthermore, he has also made clear that society as a whole loves a sympathetic sister story. Those in power bow to pressure from someone like Mrs. Saddletree "who declared it was heathen cruelty to keep the twa broken-hearted creatures separate" (201) and allow Jeanie to visit Effie in prison. The turnkey Ratcliffe, "who had spent his life in scenes calculated to stifle both conscience and feeling" (203), is touched by Effie's plea to see her sister and by the affection he then witnesses between the sisters. The spectators in the courtroom "shed tears," and the judge himself
had difficulty "subdu[ing] his emotion" at the sight of the two sisters embracing (228). Thus, when Jeanie refuses to lie and declares that Effie told her nothing about the pregnancy, "a deep groan passed through the Court" (231). Even David Deans, who held out some small hope, faints and must be carried from the courtroom. Ironically, because of the sympathies towards and expectations of sister relationships (and by extension the relationships with metaphorical sisters), the judge is more convinced than ever of Effie's crime:

When you concealed your situation from your mistress, your sister, and other worthy and compassionate persons of your own sex, in whose favour your former conduct had given you a fair place, you seem to me to have had in your contemplation, at least, the death of the helpless creature, for whose life you neglected to provide. (237)

Jeanie, who understands society's idea of sisterhood, will now use it to obtain Effie's pardon. She tells her sister, "I will go to London, and beg her pardon from the king and queen . . . if a sister asks a sister's life on her bended knees, they will pardon her—they shall pardon her—and they will win a thousand hearts by it" (245). Furthermore, she receives assistance from many people who offer their services. Mrs. Saddletree tells her about the ability to obtain a pardon. Ratcliffe, who respects Jeanie's efforts, suggests going to the Duke of Argyle as a way to gain access to the court and writes her a note that he thinks will help her should she encounter any unsavory characters while on her journey. Dumbiedikes loans her money when she asks. Butler provides Jeanie with a document from his grandfather's era which might help her meet with the Duke, and he obtains copies of Effie's testimony concerning her innocence which Saddletree then sends to London. Even Staunton, when she meets him again, offers himself as a sacrifice if it would help Jeanie
persuade Argyle. (Staunton's father also offers a letter to the landlady at the coachstop in London, although he does not know the reason for her journey.) Jeanie insists on taking the journey by herself, but she is not alone as she takes with her the emotional, financial, and practical support of the people around her.

When Jeanie sets off on her second journey, she has similar fears as with the first, and the hope of saving her sister once again helps her overcome them. She braves all the goblin men (and women) whom she encounters and arrives safely in London. Her character continues to earn respect. The Duke of Argyle, finding Jeanie "a singular young woman" who appears to place everyone else's interests before her own, agrees to help her (350). When he introduces Jeanie to Queen Caroline, he pleads her case by explaining "the affectionate exertions which Jeanie had made in behalf of a sister, for whose sake she was willing to sacrifice all but truth and conscience," and knowing Jeanie's power to persuade asks the queen to listen to Jeanie herself (366). Jeanie uses her belief in the significance of connections to others to ask for Effie's pardon:

\[\ldots\ O, \text{madam, if ever ye kend what it was to sorrow for and with a sinning and a suffering creature, whose mind is sae tossed that she can be neither ca'd fit to live or die, have some compassion on our misery! \ldots \text{when the hour of death comes} \ldots O, \text{my Leddy, then it isna what we hae dune for oursells, but what we hae dune for others, that we think on maist pleasantly} \ldots (370)\]

The queen agrees to intercede on Effie's behalf, and Effie is pardoned but banished from Scotland for fourteen years.

As in *Goblin Market*, Scott does not let *The Heart of Midlothian* end with redemption. Rather, the last third of the novel deals with the consequences of
Effie's fall and redemption and the heroic efforts of Jeanie. It is here where Scott departs most from the Helen Walker story. Apparently, Helen's remaining life as a single, hard-working peasant woman did not seem like a sufficient reward, but neither did Isabella's happy marriage to her lover seem an appropriate punishment. Scott, then, attempts to provide a lesson for the readers by rewriting the end to the Walker story. Just as in Laura's retelling of her story in *Goblin Market*, Scott's ending turns the sisters' conduct into conduct book.®

Throughout her ordeal, Jeanie is sorrowed by the consequences of Effie's fall on her own personal life. She clearly sees Effie's transgression as impinging on her own worth, and "while she shed tears for her sister's distress and danger, there mingled with them bitter drops of grief for her own degradation" (115). She tells Butler that because she is tainted by Effie's sin, she cannot with good conscience marry him. However, Jeanie's efforts on her sister's behalf apparently cleanses her of her sister's transgression, and her efforts are rewarded by marriage to Butler who has obtained a comfortable living from the Duke of Argyle (another reward for Jeanie). "All the domestic good qualities of which she had given proof during her maiden life" are transferred to her married state, and thus, her virtue can continue to be used for the good of her new family (448).

Effie, however, is not as fortunate, but that is because Effie is not completely redeemed by her sister's efforts. Unlike Laura in *Goblin Market*,

* Many others have offered explanations of the "bad press" which the fourth volume of *The Heart of Midlothian* has received. James Kerr, for example, explains that the fourth volume moves "the geopolitical center of Scotland away from the corrupt and conflict-ridden world of Edinburgh to a rural agrarian community" (814) and thus makes Knocktarlitie "a social symbol of resolution" (813). See also David Brown and Harry Shaw.
she does not learn all the lessons well enough. While she can recognize the
deal in Jeanie, she is unable to attain and retain that ideal for herself. Effie
can never emulate Jeanie—can never be “the bauldest and best sister that
ever lived” (443); she can only continue to admire and envy her from afar, ask
for more help, or offer impassioned embraces and kisses when in her
presence. She violates the precepts of sisterhood by running off with
Staunton, the man who initially caused the rupture in the bond. As Effie once
again privileges sexual desire and passion over sisterhood, Jeanie herself
wonders “O Effie, Effie, wha could hae thought it, after sic a deliverance as you
had been gifted wi’!” (408), probably echoing Scott’s sentiments as much as
her own. Her father suspects that she did it “because she was not of us . . . .
She is a withered branch will never bear fruit of grace . . . ” (sic) (408), and
indeed, she never does have any more children, and her lost, lawless,
illegitimate son unknowingly murders his own father. Her marriage is not the
happy marriage of Jeanie’s.

Many years later, Jeanie receives a letter from her sister which explains
Effie’s understanding of their lives and their actions:

When I look backward myself, I have always a ray of comfort; it is
in the generous conduct of a sister, who forsook me not when I
was forsaken by every one. You have had your reward. You live
happy in the esteem and love of all who know you, and I drag on
the life of a miserable impostor, indebted for the marks of regard I
receive to a tissue of deceit and lies, which the slightest accident
may unravel . . . .

Yourself, alas! you have nothing to betray—nothing to fear;
you, the pure, the virtuous, the heroine of unstained faith,
unblemished purity . . . . (453-455)

Although she has the position, the money, and the language of a better class,
Effie sees the advantages of her sister’s life and the desirability of a character
she cannot attain. Effie enlists her sister’s assistance once again when she asks Jeanie to keep her identity a secret since she is now the wife of George Staunton, a respected man whom no one knows as the criminal Robertson. The connection and separation between the sisters, both metaphorical and physical, continues. Jeanie is momentarily piqued by Effie's egotism and wealth, yet she is able to continue both protection and correspondence. Effie's behavior continually tests Jeanie’s conscience: the money Effie sends, she hides and even at one point thinks of as hush money; she does not tell Butler about Effie's life; she keeps the knowledge of Effie’s son’s existence to herself. When the sisters meet, the reunion is never permanent; they function best as sisters from a distance. Even after Staunton dies, the sisters cannot stay long together, and Effie retires to a convent, spending the rest of her life in a different kind of sisterhood, one which she also does not completely join.

The lesson to learn from the last section of the novel is not only about the reward and punishment of individuals. For sisterhood to work for Jeanie and Effie, and for any sisters, there must be reciprocal action as well as feeling. Jeanie's heroic efforts work to a point, but part of Effie's redemption must come from herself. It is not good enough for Effie to love her sister and then take from Jeanie whatever Jeanie can provide; she must reciprocate in action as well, and in her inability to respond in kind, the sisterhood can only be appreciated from a distance.

Scott takes great pains to emphasize the sisterly heroism and ideal moral character of Jeanie Deans, sometimes at the expense of Effie. In fact, by situating the sister story within the political and social world of Scotland and England, Scott extends the ideals of sisterly heroism and sisterhood beyond
the family and into the world at large. James Kerr sees her journey to save Effie as "a mission of reconciliation, aimed at revitalizing both the Deans family and the greater family of Britain" (810). But, as we have seen above, if the sister story is indeed an allegory, the reconciliation is only partially fulfilled. The heroism can only accomplish so much without reciprocity from the other side.

In contrast, George Lukács focuses on Jeanie's heroism as an example of the potential and power of an ordinary individual to confront a crisis. For him, Jeanie's story of "inner battles and of the struggle to save her sister shows the rich humanity and simple heroism of a really great human being" (52). Susan Morgan expands on his assertion and contemplates the effects of making a hero a heroine, one who "encompasses and supersedes traditional masculine codes of honor and courage" (580). Jeanie's heroism reaffirms the importance of hope, compassion, mercy, duty, and connection to others—virtues that are usually associated with the female. As a result, Scott presents an alternative view of the nature of society, and he does it through an examination of a sisterly ideal and the power of sisterhood. Jeanie's actions reaffirm the ability of an individual to control and direct her life. Against enormous odds, she perseveres and triumphs. But significantly, it is her belief that she can make a difference and that connection to another human being, no matter how fallen, is all-important that gives her the courage

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10 Morgan also examines Jeanie in contrast to other Scott heroes and addresses the character flaws in George Staunton that explain why he cannot be a hero. Similarly, Kerr also explains the failure of Staunton and further discusses the differences between the two couples—Butler and Jeanie and Staunton and Effie. The Stauntons become an example "of what will become of those who ignore the beneficent constraints of familial and public order and give themselves over to desire" (812).
to face adversity. In the end, by presenting the readers with heroic sisters and literally embodying heroism in the feminine, both *Goblin Market* and *The Heart of Midlothian* suggest that the brotherhood of man would work more effectively if it included the ideals of sisterhood.

III

As we have seen in Rossetti's poem and Scott's novel, a heroic sister's conduct can become conduct book, providing a lesson and a model for virtuous behavior. Wilkie Collins takes the possibilities and problems of the heroic sister and turns them into fodder for the sensation novel. Subverting rules and challenging the ideology provide part of the thrill and intrigue of any sensation novel as characters test boundaries and readers discover how far someone can go before he or she gets caught or repents and before the moral code and social order are reaffirmed. Sensation novels also deal with secrets, perception, and appearances. When Collins ties these elements of sensation to sisterly heroism, we can examine how he manipulates the conventions of sisterhood and its relationship to heroism. In Collins's narratives, the heroic sister pushes too many limits and herself transgresses, thus prohibiting her from accomplishing the task of saving her sister. Instead, Collins brings in a man to finish what the sister starts, and a tamed heroic sister is returned to the domestic sphere.

Written about the same time as *Goblin Market* and published two years earlier, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* also deals with heroic sisterhood, but in this novel the heroic sister Marian Halcombe oversteps the boundaries and is not allowed to save her half-sister Laura Fairlie. Like
Scott's *Midlothian* and many other sister stories, this one is reported to have its beginning in a true story, although in this case it is sketchy and based on second hand reports of an encounter Collins, his brother, and the Pre-Raphaelite Millais had with a woman in white (Symons 11). Supposedly, the woman was Caroline Graves who was kept a prisoner in a villa for several months, possibly by her husband, and the three men encountered her as she escaped. In creating a story about a mysterious woman's escape, Collins makes her into two women who are half-sisters (Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie) and connects one of them to another half-sister (Laura to Marian Halcombe), someone who, no matter what any one person or any institution would say, would believe her sister and would seek a way to protect her. Then he also makes that half-sister sensational.

In *The Woman in White*, Marian and Laura's parents are dead, a convention of many sister stories, and the male protector/guardian proves a failure. Indeed, in contrast to the strong Marian, who resembles her mother, the entire Fairlie family appears weak. The sins of the father, in this case Laura's father, are passed on to Laura and also to his illegitimate daughter Anne. Mr. Fairlie sanctions a marriage with Sir Percival Glyde, never seeing the evil in the man, and Laura, ever dutiful to her father, marries a man she does not love and who, she quickly learns, has no love for her—only for her fortune. Her guardian uncle, Frederick Fairlie, is also a failed parent, a man who uses the authority of his position as guardian but wants none of the responsibility. He encourages an early marriage, and to make matters worse, he makes a marriage settlement which will only hurt Laura. Later, he refuses to acknowledge her as alive and, as a result, forces her into poverty and
namelessness.

The two sisters have only each other, and as Marian tells Walter Hartright when he first meets them, she will not live without Laura, and Laura cannot live without Marian. In fact, we rarely see Laura without Marian (Sucksmith xx). The sisters are portrayed as different from one another, but the difference directly concerns issues of masculinity and femininity. Marian herself tells Hartright that she and her sister

are in every respect as unlike each other as possible. My father was a poor man, and Miss Fairlie's father was a rich man. I have got nothing, and she has a fortune. I am dark and ugly, and she is fair and pretty. Everybody thinks me crabbed and odd . . . everybody thinks her sweet-tempered and charming . . . In short, she is an angel; and I am— . . . (60)"

But before filling in Marian's "I am" (which she herself does not do in this passage), we must begin with Laura, the consummate good girl. She is a portrait of femininity including and emphasizing her weakness, often portrayed through headaches ("that essentially feminine malady" [59]) and near-fainting. She has supreme devotion to her father's memory, never tells a lie, and has never broken a promise. She has wealth, beauty, and a charming personality—no man could want more in a perfect angel. Ironically and problematically for Victorian domestic ideology, Laura's transgression in marrying Sir Percival stems from her trust in and love for her father (and her sister who reminds Laura of her commitment), but her father, we later discover, was "constitutionally lax in his principles, and notoriously thoughtless of moral obligations where women were concerned" (574). Much of her persecution at Glyde's hands stems from her belief in telling the truth and thus confessing to

him that she does not love him. The good angel gets in trouble and needs
rescuing because she is a good angel. By placing Laura in the position he
does, Collins suggests that marrying for love should be privileged over
devotion and duty to one's parent. To a lesser extent, he also suggests that
Laura may have been better off in not being honest with Glyde. Indeed, much
later, Marian, in stark contrast to Scott's Jeanie Deans, questions women
following principle when she writes, "... where is the woman ... who can
regulate her actions by the abstract principles of honour, when those
principles point one way, and when her affections, and the interests which
grow out of them, point the other?" (248)

Laura also has undying devotion to her sister and gains any strength
and courage that she has from the relationship. For example, when she wants
to speak with Glyde about their engagement, she asks Marian to be with her
and tells Sir Percival, "My sister is here because her presence helps me and
gives me confidence" (190). She needs Marian so much that she asks Mr.
Gilmore to make sure that she and Marian are not separated when she
marries and wants to leave her property to Marian, whom she considers
"mother and sister both to me" (166). When it is clear to her that her marriage
will be a failure, she pleads with Marian: "... promise you will never marry
and leave me. It is selfish to say so, but you are so much better off as a single
woman—unless—unless you are so very fond of your husband—but you won't
be very fond of anybody but me, will you?" (235) Beneath her child-like
request and her mature awareness of her unfulfilling marriage lies Laura's
message of her need for Marian's undivided attention and self-abnegation for
Laura's sake. "For Laura's sake" becomes Marian's rallying cry as she
searches for people to help her save Laura from Glyde's clutches just as "for
Marian's sake" becomes Laura's weaker echo. The sisters are tied to one
another for reasons that run deeper than biology, and their survival as
individuals depends on the preservation of their sisterhood. Collins
repeatedly reminds us of their emotional and psychological connection: "You
must please both of us . . . or please neither of us" (61); "The change in Miss
Fairlie was reflected in her half-sister" (91); "Help my sister, and you will help
me" (143). When Hartright marries Laura, he gets Marian, too, and when he
comments near the end "I think we had hardly known how close the tie was
which bound us three together . . . " (564), we know that while he may not have
known, the sisters are well-aware of the tie that binds at least the two of them.

Laura's need for her sister gives Marian tremendous power over Laura,
and if the power was not tempered with love and devotion, Marian could have
appeared as wicked as either Sir Percival Glyde or Fosco. While Marian
presents herself as someone who "will go anywhere and do anything to serve
Laura's interests" (131), she also recognizes the influence she has over
Laura. Unfortunately, her investigation into Glyde fails to reveal anything
dangerous, and her power over Laura forces Hartright to leave and Laura to
move quickly to marry, thus involving Marian in Laura's fall. Her quest to save
her sister rises partially from her guilt. After Laura finally confesses to her the
torments of her marriage to Glyde, Marian blames herself and feels painful
remorse for coming between Laura and Walter Hartright. In wonderfully
melodramatic language, Marian writes in her journal:

The white despair of Walter's face . . . rose before me in mute,
unendurable reproach. My hand had pointed the way which led
the man my sister loved, step by step, far from his country and his
friends. Between those two young hearts I had stood, to sunder
them for ever, the one from the other, and his life and her life lay wasted before me alike in witness of the deed. I have done this, and done it for Sir Percival Glyde. (284)

Searching in her journals for clues to her culpability, she is relieved to discover that she acted as best she could given the circumstances. She also resolves to stay at Blackwater Park and endure Glyde's "mortifications, insults, and threats, for Laura's service and for Laura's sake" (289), much as Lizzie endured the assault by the goblin men for her sister Laura's sake.

However, neither Marian's desire to be a heroic sister and save Laura from Sir Percival nor her complicity in promoting the marriage is her major transgression. She realizes that being a woman limits and prohibits her actions, and she is quick to seek help from others, especially recognizing her need for Walter Hartright's advice and ultimately his action. She might desire to be a heroic sister, and she pays a price when she thinks she is one, but Marian's chief transgression is her desire to be a man. Although Laura sees Marian as both mother and sister, Marian desires to fulfill another role as father and brother. That Laura also desires a father can be seen when Laura, seeking comfort, wraps her arms around Marian, rests her head on Marian's breast, and gazes at her father's portrait (186). However temporary, Marian, who resembles their mother, becomes mother-sister-father.

Marian's struggle with her gender identity is first represented by her appearance. Neither man nor woman, she is first described by Hartright as somewhat of a freak—giving double meaning to Fosco's later description of her as a "sublime creature" (358).¹² With her back to Hartright, he first sees a

¹² Gavin Lambert also addresses Marian as a freak when he writes that Wilkie Collins "infers that the only chance for a woman to become independent in Victorian society is to be like Marian, strong, but freakish" (14).
vision of loveliness, a woman who embodies all the feminine ideals of grace and beauty. He permits himself an admiring gaze before he makes his presence known, but poor Walter is then horrified to discover his vision is marred by a masculine face and head. Besides "almost a moustache," an "almost swarthy" complexion, and a "large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw," Marian's masculine features which detract from her perfect figure are "prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes" and a "bright, frank, and intelligent" expression that "appeared . . . to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete" (58-59). Walter, who completely believes the Victorian definition of the perfect woman, at first becomes repulsed by the blending of masculine and feminine. Walter can relax (and eventually learn to admire and respect Marian) only when she speaks to him and reveals "the easy, unaffected self-reliance of a highly-bred woman" (59). He likens the sensation he has to the feeling "when we recognize yet cannot reconcile the anomalies and contradictions of a dream" (59). Yet for Marian, the dream is more of a nightmare as she longs to escape her feminine side—and her female body. She is trapped and literally embodied by the feminine.

Marian openly acknowledges her dislike of her own sex ("We are such fools" [60]). However, it is not women as individuals whom she despises but rather it is women's weaknesses. Her disparaging remarks are directed toward the limitations with which they must live and function in a male-dominated world. While she acknowledges the reality of the differences between men and women, she rails against it. In order for Marian's self-
redemption, she must be reconciled to and embrace her feminine side to the point where she herself becomes Walter's and Laura's "good angel" (646). In doing so, she must also recognize that she cannot be father or brother to her sister.13

While attempting to protect and save Laura, Marian works through four stages in her struggle for gender identity and her desire to be a man before she submits to the fifth stage of accepting that she is indeed a woman and has a woman's place in the world. First Marian reveals her awareness of both the power and privileges that men have and the opposite side—the inferiority of women. She saw her sister gaze at her father's portrait while embracing her. She also knows that her uncle passed on the responsibility for the family to her while giving her no authority, and that makes her powerless to stop Glyde's and Frederick Fairlie's plan. Shortly before Laura marries, she attacks men: "They are the enemies of our innocence and our peace—they drag us away from our parents' love and our sisters' friendship—they take us body and soul to themselves, and fasten our helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog to his kennel" (203). (In a world of men like Percival Glyde and Frederick Fairlie, she has a point.) Marian's attack also explains her dislike for women, who are worse than second class citizens—as her metaphor aptly proves. In Marian's world men have the power to determine and disrupt women's lives,

13 For a different reading on The Woman in White see Peter Thom's's The Windings of the Labyrinth in which he examines the quest for selfhood for Marian, Laura, and Walter. The end of the novel is to be seen as a triumph of selfhood for all three with the third epoch revealing the "making of new life involving what is true and right" (58) as Marian and Hartright particularly learn "to act for themselves and be guided by a personal morality" which demonstrates "a quest for the condition of selfhood which exists outside the plans of others, when one is no longer a victimized character but an author" (56).
yet since women are powerless and she must have power to save Laura and preserve sisterhood, she desires to be like them.

To Marian, men cause a rupture in the sororal bond, and saving Laura means mending the rupture and preserving the bond by contending with her rival Glyde. Although Laura thinks the only alternative for keeping the sisters together is for Marian to live with her and Glyde, the Glyde-Laura-Marian family triangle is as unacceptable to Marian as it is to Glyde. Indeed, before the marriage, she reveals in her diary a desire not to share Laura: “Before another month is over our heads, she will be his Laura instead of mine!” (207). When Laura wants Marian to join them on the honeymoon, Marian “was obliged to tell her that no man tolerates a rival—not even a woman rival—in his wife’s affections, when he first marries . . . my chance of living with her permanently . . . depended entirely on my not arousing Sir Percival’s jealousy and distrust by standing between them . . .” (207). Women become men’s possessions, yet she also wants ownership of Laura. She imagines Glyde will see her as a rival, yet she sees the same in him. Marian’s frustration builds until she declares herself a “helpless, useless woman” at the same time that her diary entry ends with a threat: “if ever he injures a hair of her head!—” (216). The threat can only remain unfinished because she has no power to carry it through.

The next stage in Marian’s acknowledgment of her desires is reflected in a small incident following Laura’s marriage when Laura and Glyde are due at Blackwater Park. Waiting in eager anticipation of seeing her sister again, Marian longs to ride out to meet them, yet that small action is prohibited because she is “nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and
petticoats for life . . ." (221). What she desires at this point is only "the privileges of a man" (220), the opportunity to act when she wants to act.

However, a few days later when she needs to speak out against Sir Percival once again for Laura's sake and as a result is insulted by him, she moves from desiring the privileges of a man to desiring to be a man: "If I had been a man, I would have knocked him down . . . But I was only a woman" (268). While Laura tells Marian that her mother could have done no more to assist her, Marian knows that a woman-mother-sister's help is not enough.

Since there still is no father or brother to protect and save Laura from Glyde and Fosco, Marian must do what she can, primarily by working through men such as the lawyer Kyrle and her incompetent uncle, which is yet another frustration for her. Marian is trapped by the rules which would permit the men, who are far away from Blackwater Park, to assist Laura while she, who sees what is going on around her, is hampered by "patience, propriety, and petticoats." Her desire to be the actor and her acknowledgment that she is the only one around leads her to take action, and it is not only the action but her triumph in the accomplishment that leads to her downfall.

When Marian overhears Sir Percival and Fosco arrange a meeting, she realizes that she must find an opportunity to listen for "Laura's honour, Laura's happiness—Laura's life itself" (340). She devises an unladylike plan to crawl out on the roof and creep to a place above the window. To accomplish her task, she changes from an encumbering feminine silk dress to less cumbersome, action-oriented attire, thus shedding "patience, propriety, and petticoats." She exchanges a dress that would take up "the room of three men at least" to an ensemble that "when it was held close . . . no man could have
passed through the narrowest space more easily" (342). In becoming like a man and acknowledging that no man could have accomplished more, she seals her fate, crosses the boundary between the masculine and feminine worlds, and usurps the privileged male position. Because she takes action and triumphs in it, she must be brought down. After trespassing into male territory, she returns from the roof wet, chilled, and cramped—"a useless, helpless, panic-stricken creature" (356). Marian becomes ill, and as a result, the evidence she has gathered and recorded in her diary cannot save Laura. Effectively silenced by a fever and then typhus, she is not allowed to be the heroic sister in the way she intended.14

Weakened by her illness, she cannot, as was her previous nature, effectively and resolutely pursue her investigation into Laura’s death (resolute being one of the words which most of the other characters have previously used to describe her). However, her woman’s perseverance eventually succeeds in discovering her sister and planning Laura’s escape. Ironically, Marian as a woman helps save Laura from the asylum. As Fosco readily admits, his “fatal admiration for Marian” prohibited him from exposing the sisters when Marian rescued her sister from the asylum (631). He has earlier described her as a “sublime creature” and an “unparalleled woman” (358), and it is clear that her “foresight and resolution of a man” (346) only enhances his admiration of her as a woman—albeit a creature. Since Fosco is also one of the villains (however engaging), his admiration and recognition

14 Thoms sees Marian’s fever as part of the “patterns of rebirth—of moving out of one plot or life toward another” (58). That new life she moves toward is one based on a “personal morality” which leads her toward her “true narrative and [her] freedom” (58). However, Alison Milbank argues that Marian’s fever is the means by which Collins can “deprive his heroine of initiative, lest she become too great a threat to male supremacy” (74).
of a strong woman undercuts any attempt to redefine an acceptable nature for women. Marian herself, although fascinated by Fosco, is horrified by his attention.

Collins permits Marian only to rescue her sister from the asylum. Restoring Laura's identity is a man's job, and Collins and his character Marian Halcombe give the task to Walter Hartright (whose heart, of course, is right). Although Walter disappears for a major portion of the novel (busy building his manhood in Central America), he is a presence in Marian's mind. As she struggles through her stages in desiring to be a man, she is also aware that she cannot be one. Genuinely fond of Hartright and finally aware of her sister's love for him, Marian develops a trust in him that allows her to recognize that he could be the male friend/protector/savior that the sisters need, a man who is different from the men she fights against. At various times in her frustration, she longs for Walter's advice and counsel until she finally dreams his life in Central America.

Indeed, from the beginning, Marian helps make Walter the man she desires to be. When he is devastated and heart-broken to find Laura is engaged, it is Marian who reminds him of the manly thing to do: "Crush [the love]! . . . Here, where you first saw her, crush it!! Don't shrink under it like a woman. Tear it out; trample it under foot like a man" (96). Her belief in his manliness, Walter admits, recalls him to self-control. Marian's connections enable Walter to find a job, and his work in Central America completes his growth into manhood.15 As much as the women need him in England, his

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15 On this point Thoms and I agree. He writes, "The journey to Central America thus figures as a crucial period in his growing, providing him with the strength to act from his convictions and preparing him for his creative rewriting of 'narrative' in the third epoch" (65).
experiences overseas harden him for the work he will need to do to save Laura. By the time Walter meets the sisters once again, Marian is ready to turn over the heroism to him, and he becomes the desired father-brother to the sisters. Marian can also accept his marriage to Laura and does not see in him the rival that she saw in Glyde because he is the right kind of man and because he also accepts the other sister.  

In many ways, Walter Hartright returns resembling the person Marian already was before her illness, the kind of man she wants to be. In his narrative, he describes the "changed man" he became:

In the waters of a new life I had tempered my nature afresh. In the stern school of extremity and danger my will had learnt to be strong, my heart to be resolute, my mind to rely on itself. I had gone out to fly from my own future. I came back to face it, as a man should. (427)

Walter, the kind of man Marian can accept but cannot be, now can finish the task Marian herself cannot complete.

When Walter resumes telling the story in the third epoch, he announces early on that “Marian Halcombe is nothing now but my eldest sister” (434). Collins has removed her to the margins of the story and to the domestic world where she cares for Laura as she did at the beginning while Walter goes out into the public world to rout out evil and restore Laura’s rightful name, and it is through Laura and Walter’s male child that the family fortune is restored. The “unquenchable spirit” (453) which Walter maintains he can still see in Marian is now used for housework. The mannish hands that sat idle while other

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16 My purpose here is not to discuss the odd sexuality present in Walter Hartright as both brother and husband to Laura, echoing concerns found in the Deceased Wife’s Sister Controversy. The issue will be addressed later but only as it relates to Marian’s sexuality.
women did needlework perform duties that Marian now perceives as "what a woman's hands are fit for" (453).

Marian does make one last attempt to hold on to her desire to do something when she tells Walter that not only can she be trusted with her fair share of the work, she can also be trusted with her "share in the risk and the danger too" (454). However, Walter now controls the situation, even to the point of narrating the story. The sisters' experiences are rewritten by Walter "in the words of the brief, plain, studiously simple abstract" because their words are, according to him, "often interrupted, often inevitably confused" (435). Nevertheless, a speech made by Walter to Kyrle in which he nobly explains his intentions and motives in saving Laura could easily have been made by Marian in the first half of the novel (with, of course, the additional phrase, "if I were a man"):

> There shall be no money motive . . . no idea of personal advantage in the service I mean to render to Lady Glyde. She has been cast out as a stranger from the house in which she was born . . . That house shall open again to receive her in the presence of every soul who followed the false funeral to the grave—that lie shall be publicly erased from the tombstone by the authority of the head of the family, and those two men shall answer for their crime to ME, though the justice that sits in tribunals is powerless to pursue them. I have given my life to that purpose, and alone as I stand, if God spares me, I will accomplish it. (465-466)

For Marian to preserve the sisterhood, she must recognize that it must be contained within the traditional domestic sphere; indeed Marian finally declares to Walter that "[m]y heart and my happiness are with Laura and you. Wait a little till there are children's voices at your fireside. I will teach them to speak for me in their language . . ." (641, italics Collins's). She becomes the
beloved aunt and devoted sister described in the conduct books and moves from Fosco’s label of “sublime creature” (which she rejects) to Hartright’s avowal of her as “the good angel”—the declaration which ends the book. Marian learns to live through Walter and eventually through Walter and Laura’s children. Her life in general becomes what Barbara Fass Leavy aptly describes as a “seemingly enforced spinsterhood and vicarious existence” (127).

In discussing Marian Halcombe’s problem with gender identity, her desire to be a heroic sister, and her “enforced spinsterhood,” the issue of Marian’s sexuality must also be addressed. How to read Marian’s sexuality has proved a problematic issue. Sue Lonoff suggests that “Collins uses Marian’s masculine face, her lack of sensuality, and even her intelligence, a ‘manly’ virtue, as defenses against her voluptuous body and her female allure” (147). Yet Leavy refers to her as sensuous, arguing that Marian’s “sexuality and intellect” free Laura to be the feminine ideal (128). However, Gavin Lambert claims Marian demonstrates “a strongly latent lesbian attraction to her half-sister . . . ” (13) while Julian Symons doubts that such thoughts were intended by Collins (15). Henry Peter Sucksmith argues that her mismatched body and face reveal the contradictory Victorian attitudes toward women’s sexuality which is reinforced by Walter’s feelings for both Laura and Marian (xviii). He also argues that Collins has difficulty concealing Marian’s love for Walter “behind the screen of platonic affection” (xvii). More than one critic refers to the relationship between the two sisters and Hartright as a ménage à trois (Lambert 27; Hennelly 463). Mark Hennelly, Jr. puzzles over why Collins never allowed Marian and Hartright to marry and concludes that the failure of
Walter “to detect the final mysteries of his own heart, or of Marian’s either” makes “his sympathetic story . . . all the more mysterious and insoluble, and hers all the more self-sacrificial and educating” (464). Collins himself admitted that many readers revealed to him their desire to marry the real prototype for Marian (Hennelly 464).

Although Fosco, Collins’s male Victorian readers, and assorted literary critics see Marian’s sensuous and sexual side, Marian, while struggling with her masculinity and femininity, demonstrates little interest in her sexuality—as if the combination of masculine and feminine makes her asexual. In fact, Collins seems to create situations and reactions which would ensure that readers see her sexuality (and also Laura’s and Walter’s) as benign and proper. Men interest Marian because of their power and privilege. In fact, she is embarrassed by and resists Fosco’s admiration, and while we could dismiss her reaction from the perspective that she recognizes Fosco as a disreputable character, she also displays discomfort with his reactions to her as a woman. Hennelly claims that Marian’s negative reaction to “Fosco’s passion” is because it “is too egocentric and domineering and thus untrustworthy” (463), but that is also Marian’s reaction to men in general.

Marian shows disdain for women, too—except for her sister Laura. And while twentieth-century minds might perceive her desire for Laura as unnatural, it would not have been so to Victorian readers who understood the intensity of the love between sisters (and half-sisters were considered equally with full biological sisters) and the idealization of sisterhood in specific. Marian’s reaction to Glyde’s possession of Laura (“ . . . she will be his Laura instead of mine” [207]) arises out of her growing suspicion of Glyde’s nature
and her recognition of men rupturing the sororal bond. In contrast, she has no difficulty sharing Laura with Walter Hartright, who has demonstrated his love for Laura (who in turn loves him) and who has accepted Marian as a sister. If there are brief tears when Walter expresses his desire to marry Laura, they are ones that are more tears of regret that all three of them cannot remain just siblings. While Walter admires and respects Marian and relies on her assistance with taking care of Laura, his connection with her is through Laura and because of Laura. They share a common cause. As a result, "the very fact that they are comrades mitigates against their being latent lovers" because their interest resides in her and not in each other (Lonoff 146). By the end of the novel, the magnificent character that is Marian Halcombe at the beginning is reduced to a shadow of her former self to the point where the issue of her sexuality no longer matters. She is not a threat (sexual or otherwise) to anyone, unless we suspect that she has subversive plans for what she will teach the Hartright children. Collins portrays Marian as readily and easily accepting her role as maiden aunt (and good angel)—a role which seems to demand asexuality.

The discussion of the heroic sister in *The Woman in White* cannot be complete without some small attention paid to Anne Catherick. Although she does not know she is half-sister to Laura Fairlie, she becomes a ghostly shadow of a heroic sister. She desires to save Laura from Glyde and so writes her a mysterious letter at Limmeridge and tries to talk with her at Blackwater Park. Anne's warning letter to Laura raises concerns and sets in motion the initial investigation. Her presence continues to remind Marian that something is wrong. And, according to Mrs. Clements, Anne developed symptoms of
heart disease soon after she learned of Laura’s marriage to Glyde. There is not a conscious recognition of sisterhood (although there is a desire on Anne’s part to have Mrs. Fairlie as her mother), yet apparently the biological connection still tugs at Anne’s heart. Of course, she fails—she is a weaker woman than Laura. Yet she does contribute to the heroic sisterhood, and her death saves Laura’s life, a bizarre instance of one sister literally and unknowingly giving her life for the other. Once again, however, it is up to Walter to save Laura’s selfhood and identity.

Anne dies, but Laura is also subdued and reduced in the novel, becoming a shadow of her former self and a twin to her weak half-sister.17 Because she is thought to be too fragile to handle the truth, Walter and Marian protect her. Everything is done for Laura’s sake as she becomes a helpless, passive recipient of their activities. Her resemblance to Anne Catherick becomes more than physical. Her body and mind are locked up in the asylum as Anne’s were. Even after she is freed, she is still kept isolated in the lodgings shared with her sister and Walter—a new kind of asylum designed to protect her fragile being and, again similar to Anne, to hide her from Glyde. Walter and Marian treat her like a child to the point of playing children’s games with her at night. Even as she heals and becomes more aware of what is happening around her, they still humor her—the most pathetic and patronizing example being when Walter pretends to sell her “poor, faint, valueless sketches,” something which Walter considers an “innocent deception” (500). While Laura’s redemption allows her to marry for love, she has been further

17 Leavy, Hennelly, Thoms, and Jenny Bourne Taylor all discuss the doubling of Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick. Milbank insists that “Laura’s and Anne’s physical echoing of each other removes the presence from each until Anne is safely buried under her own name” (78).
enfeebled and is carefully enclosed within the domestic sphere.

The novel ultimately supports highly gendered, traditional roles for the men and women. Although a woman has a role in assisting in her sister's salvation, the heroics of the sisters in either *Goblin Market* or *The Heart of the Midlothian* are too threatening for Collins to support. For Collins, sisterhood does not suggest an alternative world order, and it can only work when it is subsumed by the patriarchal world. The moral code and social order must be restored, but that can be accomplished only within a traditional context. By the end, both Laura and Marian are safely in masculine control and enclosed within the domestic sphere (Milbank 76), as is sisterhood itself. The women are weakened and subdued, yet at the same time, Collins wants readers to see their new selves as the embodiment of the domestic ideal. For Collins, there may be no friend like a sister, but if she is strong, she is problematic.

In 1862 Collins published yet another sensation novel that focuses on the nature of the sororal bond and the problem of sisterly heroism. In *No Name* Wilkie Collins presents Magdalen Vanstone, a sister who desires to be a sister heroine but who fails to understand the rigid rules attached to the role. In Magdalen's desire to be a heroine, she challenges society and law to save her sister and herself, but because good and evil battle for control of her and evil often appears to be winning, she goes about her heroism in the "wrong" way. Both her motives and her method become questionable. Initially, Magdalen desires to recover the family fortune both for her own sake in order to marry Frank Clare and for her sister's sake. However, she erroneously believes that saving herself and her sister means reclaiming the family name and fortune. Believing the nineteenth-century ideology that connects a
woman’s identity with name and fortune, she confuses her sense of self with that material identity. Furthermore, she resorts to deceit, which includes appropriating other identities in order to achieve her goal, and to accepting the assistance of a disreputable relative, Captain Wragge. Magdalen transgresses partly because she does not understand the difference between self and outward identity, and as a result, she must herself be redeemed. Her older sister Norah, a model of goodness and patience, remains in the background for most of the story, yet she influences Magdalen’s goodness, provides both the reader and Magdalen with a model for appropriate behavior, and also finds herself a heroine of sorts as she reclaims the family name and fortune by remaining true to her sense of self and to her principles.

Norah and Magdalen Vanstone are left without fortune, family, and home following the deaths of both parents. The sins of the father are apparently being visited upon the children once again. He pretended to be married to their mother after having paid off a woman he married in Canada. For years, he and his family led a respectable and financially comfortable life without the least hint of scandal. At the beginning of the novel, Mr. Vanstone receives word that his wife has died, which frees him to marry Norah and Magdalen’s mother. Unfortunately, English law declares that when they married, his previous will became invalid. When he dies in a train accident before the will can be changed, and the mother, in her grief, follows soon after, the illegitimate daughters cannot inherit the fortune which instead goes to the estranged uncle, a greedy, bitter man who refuses to help his nieces. In fact, he enjoys their plight and considers it just retribution for the past. He offers them a mere £100 each, which they consider an insult and refuse, and turns
them out of their home. In their lawyer's words, Norah and Magdalen Vanstone become "Nobody's Children" (98) who according to the law have "No Name" (128). Except for the kindness of their old governess Miss Garth and the family lawyer Mr. Pendril, the sisters are alone and must find a way to survive without their previous privileges. Both of the sisters desire to protect and save the other, but the nature of the protection and the salvation is as different as the characters of the two women.

Before we learn of the family secret and witness the tragedy, we learn about the two sisters, both in terms of their personalities and in their relationship with one another. In his preface, Collins articulates his intention to use Magdalen Vanstone to demonstrate "the struggle of a human creature, under those opposing influences of Good and Evil" (xxxvi). Because Collins uses opposition and contrast in characters to help delineate characteristics of good and evil (Lonoff 106), it would be easy to assume that we are to see Norah solely as the good sister and only as a contrast to the bad sister Magdalen. However, throughout the novel, Collins complicates their relationship and our feelings towards both of them. Although he focuses on Magdalen's story, Norah is ever-present in the shadows, both a touchpoint for and a counterpoint to Magdalen. Ironically, in his portrayal of the two sisters, the good Norah is less interesting, even boring. Peter Thoms describes her as "almost anti-narrative" (102). Magdalen may be wrong in the means of pursuing her quest and does indeed misunderstand the quest itself, but her passion and her sense of justice invoke more response than Norah's passive

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acceptance of her situation.

As part of his game-playing with the conventions of sisterhood, in the opening chapters Collins intentionally misleads the reader because he wants us to believe that something might be wrong with Norah, the older of the two. Miss Garth, in thinking about Norah's reaction to Frank Clare, summarizes her reaction to the two sisters: "You're [Norah] one of the impenetrable sort. Give me Magdalen, with all her perversities; I can see daylight through her. You're as dark as night" (33). While Norah is described as a mirror image of her mother, she is something less, her facial features "scarcely so delicate, their proportion was scarcely so true . . . there was less interest, less refinement, and depth of feeling in her expression . . . clouded by a certain quiet reserve" (4). Collins also lets his narrator raise a question about moral integrity and intelligence which might "wear out mysteriously in the course of transmission to children" (4), and while a general musing, we are meant to see it specifically pointed at Norah. Her quietness and reserve, her "old-fashioned formality" (5), are to be viewed as a liability; we also can suspect her because she appears secretive.

In contrast, Magdalen is the family favorite. Passionate and pleasure-loving, she is the indulged child. She resembles neither parent, which could be construed as an asset since they harbor a secret. She is described as "bloom[ing] naturally and irresistibly, in right of her matchless health and strength" (6). Because her emotions are so apparent, others feel more comfortable with her than with Norah; exuberance becomes a sign of openness and honesty. Although her whole being is seen as a mass of contradictions (for example, she is both child-like and sexual), the
inconsistencies are enjoyed and appreciated, certainly tolerated. While she may not adhere to the Victorian code of conduct for young women, we are meant to like her—another contradiction. And yet, as Melynda Huskey notes, Collins intends for us (and the characters in the novel) to see the contradictions in her character and appearance as a measurement of both her character and her future life (7).

While Mrs. Vanstone and Miss Garth would like Mr. Vanstone to control Magdalen’s impulsiveness and passion more than he does, it is Norah, rather than the elders, who is seen as placing a damper on her sister’s exuberance, Norah who, like Scott’s Jeanie Deans and Rossetti’s Lizzie, tries to be the moral monitor for her sister. She is the one who rightly sees the problems of a liaison between Frank Clare and Magdalen and encourages her father to curtail their time together, especially in connection with the acting planned at the Marrables. During and after the play, we finally begin to see Norah and Magdalen in a different light. Our sympathy shifts to the older sister when Norah witnesses Magdalen’s “cool appropriation of Norah’s identity” to create Julia’s character in The Rivals (42). Norah is hurt by her sister’s behavior and tells Magdalen that she never would have “mimicked my sister to an audience of strangers” (45), but Magdalen, unaware of her cruelty toward the sister she loves dearly, views Norah as a poor sport who cannot take a joke. When Norah tries to admonish and warn her sister about Frank, Magdalen petulantly tells Norah, “You always were hard on me, and you always will be” (46). In a rare passionate outburst, Norah grabs Magdalen’s hand, and when Magdalen accuses her of inflicting pain, Norah vehemently declares, “I shall never hurt your heart” (47). Norah’s sense of the rules of sisterhood runs deeper than we
were led to believe, and even when Magdalen attempts a reconciliation, Norah, unlike Jeanie Deans, refuses her sister's kisses. Their reconciliation is only "silently implied" (51), and while Norah retains "silent misgivings" (55) about her sister, she never says anything more. Once Magdalen is engaged to Frank Clare, Norah tries to apologize, but it does not quite work because she cannot overcome her mistrust of Frank.

By the time the parents die, Collins has laid groundwork for our perceptions of the sisters. We sense both the tensions in the sisters' relationship and the differences in their personalities. Norah has been wounded, and both her pride and natural reserve keep her silent. Magdalen, caught up in her love for Frank and her belief that Norah is wrong about him, turns her attentions to their relationship, a man yet again providing a rupture in the sororal bond. However, in their loss, the sisters do turn toward one another. In their grieving and preparation for the future, they reveal more of their personalities and the nature of their sisterhood. While watching the sisters react to the tragedy, Miss Garth realizes that the daylight through which she could see Magdalen turns out to be darkness, and the darkness of Norah changes to light:

It might be, that under the surface so formed—a surface which there had been nothing, hitherto, in the happy, prosperous, uneventful lives of the sisters to disturb—forces of inborn and inbred disposition had remained concealed, which the shock of the first serious calamity in their lives had now thrown up into view... Was the promise of the future shining with prophetic light through the surface shadow of Norah's reserve; and darkening with prophetic gloom, under the surface-glitter of Magdalen's bright spirits? (104)
Yet we should not be surprised. Collins is good at playing games with his plots, his characters, and his readers (Lonoff 117), and part of the intrigue of *No Name* involves the readers discovering which sister should earn their allegiance.¹⁹ In *No Name* light and dark and their connection to perception become important metaphors as Collins plays with our perceptions and misperceptions. People are not always as they outwardly appear, and the sisters are no exception. (For example, near the end of the novel, old Mazey describes Magdalen: "Take the outside of her, and she's straight as a poplar; take the inside of her, and she's as crooked as Sin" [498].) Anyone who has read his 1856 light-hearted essay "A Petition to the Novel-Writers" should suspect that Collins might try some variation in the traditional expectations concerning sisters. He acknowledges that the rules for two sisters in novels dictate one be dark and passionate with "an unfortunate destiny" and one be light, innocent, and blessed with "final matrimonial happiness" (65), but Collins also recommends a revolution that would change in some way the traditional treatment of two sisters. *No Name* demonstrates Collins's attempt with the

¹⁹ For a discussion of reader response to Magdalen and Norah and its position within the quest motif see Peter Thom's *The Windings of the Labyrinth: Quest and Structure in the Major Novels of Wilkie Collins*. He particularly sees Magdalen's quest as our own:

We enter the work cheering Magdalen's quest, but perhaps we leave it more quietly and thoughtfully, perceiving our own folly as we come to understand Magdalen's. For Magdalen's journey essentially becomes our own, and it is in our identification with her—as she first represents energetic scheming and then the loss of that energy—that our rite of passage through the narrative and psychological space of the novel occurs. (102)

While twentieth-century readers may cheer Magdalen's quest, many nineteenth-century reviewers of *No Name* were outraged at her behavior and dismayed to see she was rewarded with marriage at the end. See Norman Page's *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*.
revolution as the light, seemingly transparent, and innocent Magdalen reveals a depth no one, not even her sister, knew existed, and the secret which Norah harbors is goodness, patience, and devotion to Magdalen, who she continues to believe can be redeemed, despite the evidence presented to her. At the same time as Collins experiments with the representation of sisters, for his project to succeed he must continue the standard trope of difference and present the sisters in opposition to one another.\(^\text{20}\)

Everyone is unprepared for and frightened by Magdalen's reaction to her parents' deaths and to revelations about the family secret, the inheritance, and the uncle's response. Her hardness, resolve, fortitude, and courage suggest danger as the exuberant, innocent energy of youth now appears charged with a purpose. In the early parts of the novel, Magdalen's quest to recover their name and fortune and her desire for retribution continue to be contrasted to her sister's behavior. For example, Miss Garth witnesses a difference in the two sisters after their father's death. She is grateful to find Norah kneeling in prayer which "told her that God's help had found the fatherless daughter in her affliction" while she finds Magdalen "pacing to and fro in the secrecy of her own chamber . . . with a cruel, mechanical regularity, that chilled the warmest sympathy and daunted the best hope" (76). Miss Garth is relieved later to find that Norah has been able to comfort her sister and that "Norah's patient sympathy had set the prisoned grief free . . . The healing tears had not come gently; they had burst from her with a torturing, passionate vehemence—but Norah had never left her till the struggle was

\(^{20}\) Those who also acknowledge the difference in sisters as significant to the novel's development and Collins' project include Peter Thoms, Helena Michie, and Susan Lanoff.
over, and the calm had come" (77). The behavior of the two sisters in this example becomes a pattern as the story develops. Norah patiently accepts what the law, society, and family send her way and seeks appropriate Victorian solutions to resolve the various crises; as Norah says, "We are alone, now—we have our hard way through the world to walk on as patiently as we can" (105). Magdalen, strong and restless in her resolve, takes action to seek justice and right what she perceives as an intolerable wrong. Determined never to forget her uncle's cruelty and the law's injustice, she carries a written reminder of her father's wishes in a small bag around her neck, and she tells Norah that if her sister ever forgets "all that we owe to Michael Vanstone—come to me, and I will remind you" (112). Recognizing her sister's ability to calm her passions and desiring to keep her passions aroused in order to pursue her goal, Magdalen learns to stay away from Norah and to draw nourishment from the bond from a safe distance.

Similar to Scott in *The Heart of Midlothian*, Collins uses members of society to function as moral monitors who guide and influence readers' perceptions of the two sisters as they comment on Norah's and Magdalen's behaviors. But unlike Scott's representatives of society who encourage Jeanie in maintaining sisterhood, characters such as Miss Garth and Mr. Pendril warn Norah about her sister (as do the elder Mr. Clare, Admiral Bartram, and Mrs. Lecount), and they also want to save Norah from Magdalen. Throughout the novel, they express to Norah and each other what Pendril explains as his "strong disapproval of your allowing yourself on any pretence whatever, to be mixed up for the future with your sister's proceedings" (389). He suggests that Norah enlist Miss Garth's assistance because she could
provide "an old friend's protection against your own generous impulses" (389). Miss Garth herself promises Pendril "to stand between these two sisters, and to defend Norah's peace, character, and future prosperity at any price" (392). Miss Garth is outraged when Norah refuses to marry George Bartram and writes him that "Norah was wrong to place . . . a hopeless belief in her sister . . . above the higher claims of an attachment which might have secured the happiness and the prosperity of her future life" (506). Both Miss Garth and Pendril perceive sisterhood as a dangerous business for Norah, and they do not perceive Magdalen's endeavors as heroic attempts to save the family.

Norah also does not understand her sister's actions; at times Magdalen is "an unfathomable mystery" (113). Nevertheless, she refuses to abandon her sister, and on the margins of the story she remains ready to help in any way that she can, even when the attempts to help are resisted and rebuked by Magdalen. She desires to do what is right to save Magdalen from herself and worries when her actions might harm her sister. Early in the story, she asks Miss Garth to help Magdalen—"help her against herself" (105). In addition, Norah defends Magdalen, sometimes misinterpreting her sister's actions but always acknowledging what she believes to be her sister's fundamentally "noble nature" (122). Norah trusts that Magdalen's goodness ultimately will triumph over her badness. Indeed, it is in Magdalen's relationship with Norah and with Mrs. Wragge that "her better self" (105) is revealed.

But just as Norah resists the messages they send her way, so, too, do readers because Collins also presents "devices which save Magdalen's character from corruption" (Milbank 32). Collins has established the family as respectable and the sisters as not deserving the treatment they receive from
their unforgiving uncle. He calls into question the sins of the father being passed on to the daughters who have basically good natures. Magdalen's obsession with recovering the family fortune is based on a learned belief about money and position that society has taught her. Her stage career, although inappropriate for a lady, is a logical outcome of the law's removal of her identity. In addition, she is much more spirited than her sister and puts up a fight against an unjust law. It is when she marries her cousin that she pushes the limits; her actions are reprehensible as she marries a man she abhors in order to get revenge and steal the fortune back.

The major portion of the novel focuses on Magdalen's endeavors to recover the family name and fortune. During what she herself calls her "blindfolded journey" (151), her connection to Norah remains a source of concern and strength. Magdalen recognizes the power of the sororal bond, and both resists it and uses it as a justification for her actions. When she asks for Wragge's assistance in pursuit of her goal, he asks her if she could maintain her courage if Norah found her. She recognizes that she "could trust [herself] with others. Not with Norah" (145). Indeed, in fleeing Miss Garth's to pursue her quest, she leaves a note for Norah, rather than seeing her sister again, deliberately avoiding the calming influence. In her note, she recognizes her own inappropriate behavior and her fear of revealing her intentions to Norah—knowing Norah would disapprove and attempt to persuade her to stay. Loving her sister yet unable to be Norah and live Norah's life, Magdalen must leave:

Our quiet life here, maddens me; I can bear it no longer, I must go. If you knew what my thoughts are; if you knew how hard I have fought against them, and how horribly they have gone on haunting me in the lonely quiet of this house, you would pity and
forgive me . . .

I go away miserable at leaving you; but I must go. If I had loved you less dearly, I might have had the courage to say this in your presence—but how could I trust myself to resist your persuasions, and to bear the sight of your distress? (130)

Although initially Magdalen selfishly desired the fortune as much for herself as for her sister, when Frank Clare fails her, she shifts her desire to Norah solely. In one melodramatic scene Collins portrays the various aspects of the sororal bond and the problematic issues of heroic sisterhood in No Name. Magdalen has maintained her connection to Norah through a packet of letters which she rereads when she needs the nourishment that sisterhood provides her. Inspired by the contents of the most recent letters revealing Norah's work as a governess, Magdalen decides to see Norah again—but in one of her disguises. The rhetoric of Collins' description of Magdalen's decision as well as his description of her encounter with Norah reveals an uneasy connection between the ideals of sisterhood and Magdalen's questionable behavior; the good and evil at war and yet mixed with one another can only create an unholy alliance. Collins writes of Magdalen's decision: "A sudden impulse to test the miserable completeness of her disguise, mixed with the higher and purer feeling at her heart; and strengthened her natural longing to see her sister's face again, though she dare not discover herself and speak" (197). The actual encounter also reveals ambivalence. Magdalen is horrified to discover that her disguise works so well that not even her sister recognizes her and for a short time "yearning to burst [the costume's] trammels and hide her shameful painted face on Norah's bosom, took possession of her, body and soul" (198). But she is also horrified to see her sister abused by the people who employ her, and the encounter
only strengthens her resolve to complete her task:

Arming itself treacherously with the strength of her love for her sister, with the vehemence of the indignation that she felt for her sister's sake, the terrible temptations of her life fastened its hold on her more firmly than ever . . . . The thought of her sister . . . was now the thought which sanctioned that means, or any means, to compass her end . . . . (199)

Later, she writes Norah and explains that it is in the hope of helping her sister that she continues to hope at all. In thinking of Norah's difficult life, Magdalen feels emotion again, although painfully, and that alone allows her to "almost think I have come back again to my former self" (232). She writes Miss Garth that "all my better thoughts have left me—except my thoughts of Norah" (232). Magdalen uses Norah to defend and justify her actions and to hold on to any remnants of her better self, but Magdalen's narrative repeatedly reminds us that neither her good intentions nor using Norah as a symbol of goodness can be used as a defense for bad actions. Before Magdalen can be redeemed, she must recognize that Norah's goodness cannot substitute for her own.

As Magdalen pursues her quest, she continues to be horrified by her actions and gradually abandons her self. Her marriage to Noel Vanstone signals to her the ultimate degradation to her sense of self. Before the marriage, she carefully examines "her position" and sees two sides: "the revolting ordeal of the marriage" and "the abandonment of her purpose" (357). In questioning whether she could still choose between sacrificing her purpose and sacrificing herself, she acknowledges that "[t]ime . . . had made her purpose a part of herself" (357). There was no longer anything strong enough within her to resist her purpose, and seeing her self lost, she contemplates suicide as her only other option. Yet Magdalen is so lost that she cannot
choose, and she lets fate, in the form of passing ships, decide for her.

In living, "Nobody's Child" becomes "Somebody's Wife" (436), but in doing so, Magdalen Vanstone loses herself, and she must symbolically die before she can be reborn. Magdalen has rightly described her journey as "blindfolded." She cannot see where she is going nor the consequences of her actions. When she declares to Miss Garth that she will not see Norah again until "the day when I put Norah's fortune into Norah's hand" (437), she cannot see that that is not what Norah needs or wants. (Norah only wants her sister back.) Just as she could not see the hurt caused to Norah when she publicly mimicked her sister during the play, she also does not see the consequences of her actions to Norah. While Jeanie Deans worried that her sister's tainted life would transfer to her but society continued to admire her character, Magdalen's tainted life does transfer to Norah. She loses one position as a governess when her employers find out about Magdalen, and when Admiral Bartram learns who Norah's sister is, he tries to talk George out of marriage. When he fails, he exerts pressure on Norah and suggests that anyone who would marry her would "first make it a condition that she and her sister were to be absolute strangers to each other" (505). Because of her allegiance to Magdalen, she refuses to marry George Bartram.

Besides her loss of self, the consequences of Magdalen's actions also affect her in other ways. When she marries Noel Vanstone, she does not see that ecclesiastical law can negate her actions and that Vanstone's will can be altered against her. Mrs. Lecount's revenge involves using Norah against Magdalen, and when Magdalen discovers what she perceives as Norah's complicity, however well-meaning, her heart is "poisoned . . . with its first
distrust of her sister," and she cannot "seek pardon and consolation in her sister's love" as she desires to do (444). When she becomes "Somebody's Wife," she cannot see that she has truly become Nobody. As a result of her misperceptions, Magdalen not only cannot be the heroic sister she desires to be, but she loses everything, including her identity. Her "penalty" for marrying Noel Vanstone is "paid in unavailing remorse, in hopeless isolation, in irremediable defeat" (443). She deliberately severs contact with everyone, including Norah. After Vanstone dies, she, like Marian in *The Woman in White*, becomes ill, and in her debilitating fever, her namelessness is complete as no one knows who she is or where she belongs.

Once again, Collins does not privilege sisterhood in the same way that Rossetti and Scott do, and Magdalen is not allowed to save her sister. Instead, the nearly dead Magdalen is brought back to life, physically and emotionally, by Kirke, the son of the man who saved her father and who happens to captain a ship appropriately named *Deliverance*. The family name and fortune are restored by Norah, whose goodness and patience prevail. She marries her cousin George Bartram, the man who finally inherits the Vanstone fortune and who looks like her father. Thus, not only does Collins re-establish the Vanstone family through Norah and Bartram, but he also recreates it in a better form: Norah and Bartram physically resemble her parents but morally they are purer. Ironically, in her quest to save the family, Magdalen is responsible for bringing Bartram and Norah together since they were searching for the missing Noel and Magdalen Vanstone at the time they met.

Norah also discovers the Secret Trust for which Magdalen plotted and frantically searched, and she tells her sister that now Magdalen finally can
obtain the fortune due her. But in Magdalen's final struggle with Good and Evil over her connection to the trust, she learns her lesson and is redeemed. She comes to terms with the difference between her and her sister and the consequences of that difference:

Norah, whose courage under undeserved calamity, had been the courage of resignation—Norah, who had patiently accepted her hard lot; who, from first to last, had meditated no vengeance, and stooped to no deceit—Norah had reached the end which all her sister's ingenuity, all her sister's resolution, and all her sister's daring, had failed to achieve. Openly and honourably, with love on one side and love on the other, Norah had married the man who possessed the Combe-Raven money . . . and Good and Evil struggled once more which should win [Magdalen]—But . . . with the nobler sense that had grown with the growth of her gratitude to the man who had saved her, fighting on the better side . . . she had victoriously trampled down all little jealousies and all mean regrets; she could say in her heart of hearts, "Norah has deserved it!" (537)

Magdalen's "blindfolded journey" can end only when she takes the blindfold off and recognizes that her sister did not need saving and that the goal of her quest was not fortune and name but a better self. As a final acknowledgment of her redemption, she tears up the Secret Trust that would grant her the fortune for which she schemed, symbolically destroying her past life, and she resolves to accept only what Bartram and Norah choose to give her. She once again trusts Norah, which signals her acceptance of Norah's unconditional love and her reintegration with family through the sororal bond. Magdalen is restored physically, mentally, and emotionally and rewarded with both sisterhood and marriage. They come together for Norah also as she writes Magdalen, "Don't suppose I married him . . . until I had taught him to think of you as I think—to wish with my wishes, and to hope with my hopes" (536). Norah has proved the Miss Garths, Admiral Bartrams, and Mr. Pendrils wrong.
Collins uses the sisters to reinforce the significance of community and bonds with another. When Magdalen first rejects the intimacy of sisterhood and then rejects all others as she pursues her quest, she descends further into degradation. In Magdalen's plight, we see the dangers of the individual in isolation. It is only when she places herself in a loving connection to others (not in the deceptive and false connection to Noel Vanstone) that she can overcome Evil and allow Good to control her actions. At the same time, the sororal bond and Collins' ideas of sisterly heroism reinforce the traditional roles and characteristics for nineteenth-century women. Magdalen must become like her virtuous, traditional sister Norah in order to regain her better self. Like Marian Halcombe before her, she must be tamed, subdued, and controlled, and her actions become inactions.

The differences between the Scott and Rossetti sister narratives and the Collins narratives exemplify the tension surrounding the understanding of sisters during the Victorian period. On the one hand, there was a belief in the potential of the sororal bond to provide a moral paradigm for both individuals and the community, for men as well as women. There was no greater love than the love between sisters, and "for my sister's sake" became a reason for action that could move a sister out of the domestic sphere and into the public world. Both Christina Rossetti and Walter Scott connected sisterhood to Christian principles of love and community. On the other hand, there was a belief that the bond between sisters could offer love and support within the domestic sphere, but there it was to stay. Moving into the public sphere and/or demonstrating unwomanly behavior for the sister's sake made them sensational. Sisters were still to be models of virtuous behavior and women
who fitted the domestic ideal, but their power and ability to act was limited by the boundaries set by the domestic ideology.
CHAPTER III

"THAT MYSTIC BOND...PREVAIL'D": THE PROBLEM OF TWO SISTERS
AND ONE MAN

Nowhere does the problem of privileging and idealizing the sororal bond in Victorian ideology become more apparent than when it is juxtaposed with marriage. The potential for intense rivalry between sisters exists in the very nature of woman's place in society. In a culture where marriage is the most (and often only) socially acceptable option for a woman and becomes symbolic of her place in that society, a woman needs to find a husband. When the woman has sisters close in age and when she lives in a country with an excess number of single women (one-half million according to the 1851 census), those sisters can be in competition for the same man. The domestic ideology of the period portrayed marriage not only as a desired goal but as a loving and continuous bond between a man and woman that was the most significant relationship a woman would have. At the same time, the

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1 It is not my intention to sort out the economic necessity of marriage versus the romantic love ideal attached to the relationship between a man and a woman. Certainly they sometimes operated independently and other times in connection with one another. For discussions of the marriage bond in England see Peter Gay's *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*, 2 volumes; Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*; Jeffrey Weeks's *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*, second edition; and Lawrence Stone's *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*. 153
relationship a woman had with her sister was also the most significant, intimate relationship she would have, and it was long-lasting, usually outlasting marriage. The sororal bond was where a woman was to draw her strength, and it was to be nurtured, respected, and preserved at all costs. If both marriage and sisterhood were the most significant relationship a woman could have, which one had primacy when they were in conflict with one another? Under what conditions could and would the sororal bond not only survive but prevail? In exploring answers to these questions in Victorian literature, I found that frequently the sister story and the marriage plot became intertwined, with the marriage plot mediated by sisterhood. That is, the relationship between sisters affected the marriage plot. A woman’s relationship with a man had the potential to destabilize the sister’s bond, but also a woman’s relationship with her sister usually would guide her decisions about her relationship with a potential husband.

While there are exceptions, the paradigm of an ideal sisterhood usually works with two sisters (in contrast to three or more) in a face to face, one on one, intimate relationship. When the sisters connect emotionally and psychologically, the bond they form demonstrates unity and solidarity. However, when a male third person intrudes, the relationship shifts as attention shifts to him. A sister’s devotion and loyalties become divided, and the time and attention previously given to the sister splits or shifts altogether to the man. The remaining sister can feel abandoned, betrayed, and/or envious of the other sister’s new life. Or, the two sisters can become attracted to the same man (and/or he to the two sisters). The potential for conflicts and juicy

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According to Bank and Kahn’s research on sibling pairings, “real life” siblings “appear to organize themselves into emotionally significant pairs” that can be either positive or negative (50).
sister stories of jealousies, rivalries, hate, and passion seems obvious, and indeed, particularly in the poetry of the period there are situations which reveal the tensions created when a man enters the picture. However, what is curious about the writing of the nineteenth century is the number of writers dealing with the issue of sex and the sororal bond who attempt to find methods for sisters to maintain and privilege sisterhood and thus try to suppress the negative feelings sisters could have toward one another. Ways are sought to deny or disguise jealousy and rivalry or even to make them disappear.

Men’s disruption of the sororal bond becomes a common theme in the writing of the nineteenth century. Biographers, conduct book writers, and the debaters in Deceased Wife’s Sister Controversy as well as poets and novelists recognized that men and the accompanying issue of sexuality posed a threat to women’s community and intimacy. When Mrs. Chapman argued against marriage with a deceased wife’s sister, she wrote about the “earthly Paradise” that changes in the law would destroy, implying that Paradise is devoid of sexuality (986). But her words also echo a basic tenet of sisterhood. If sisterhood as community is an example of earthly Paradise, men are the serpents in the Garden of Eden, tempting women with sex. Sexuality tends to divide sisters and disrupt sisterhood.

The presence of men in sisters’ lives may separate them emotionally and psychologically. In the previous chapter we have several examples of a man in one sister’s life causing a separation between two sisters. None of these sisters are in competition for the same man, yet a man’s presence for varying reasons disrupts their intimacy. Jeanie and Effie Deans in The Heart of Midlothian are divided by Effie’s love for Staunton. The goblin men isolate
Laura from Lizzie as Laura withdraws emotionally and psychologically after her encounter with them in *Goblin Market*. Norah and Magdalen Vanstone argue about Norah's love for Frank Clare in *No Name*. In the most sinister move, Sir Percival Glyde in *The Woman in White* separates Marian and Laura, first geographically through Glyde's and Laura's honeymoon trip, but then through a series of attempts and successes in keeping the two sisters apart in order to destabilize Laura who derives strength from her sister. In many ways, Glyde and Marian become rivals for Laura as much as Hartwright and Glyde are rivals.

The potential for rivalry between sisters over a perspective husband is apparent in numerous discussions about the ease with which a man could replace one sister with another. As noted in chapter one, the issue surfaces in the Deceased Wife's Sister Controversy as both opponents and proponents of the bill argued about the effects of allowing a man to marry his deceased wife's sister. While they recognized the ability of the sororal bond to maintain the sacredness of the family and identify sisterly love as a love second only to that between husband and wife, in acknowledging the potential desire a man might have for his wife's sister, they also implied that it was easy to a man to substitute one sister for another and to transfer love from one woman to another. Certainly, marked differences between sisters could help a man transfer affection from one sister to another as he came to see something more desirable in the other sister. But paradoxically, at the same time that we see rivalries based on difference, the controversy suggests that sometimes the differences between and among women, as exemplified by sisters, are so small that it is easy for a man to replace one woman with another. However,
as Helena Michie notes, "competition is in some sense a mark of sameness . . . it suggests at least a minimal degree of equality between competitors . . . [and] arises as much from a perception of sameness as from difference, or more properly, . . . it takes place on a complex grid of sameness and difference . . . " (7). Thus, the mutuality, equality, and sameness on which sisterhood is based and which is supposed to overcome jealousies, rivalries, and differences can also become a threat. Additionally, there is an implied warning in some of these sister stories: keep the unseen sister away from the suitor because she is more beautiful, pleasing, and desirable. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar go so far as to claim that "[f]emale bonding is extraordinarily difficult in patriarchy: women almost inevitably turn against women because the voice of the looking glass sets them against each other" (38); yet as we shall see in many of these Victorian sister stories, writers strain to find ways to keep sisters together.

In René Girard's paradigm for triangular desire, the rivalry between subject and mediator, who desire the same object, becomes acute to the point of ignoring the object (usually a woman) in favor of the rivalry. He also claims that the closer the subject and mediator are to one another, the greater the rivalry. Since family relationships are particularly close, rivalries between family members become particularly intense. However, the nature of triangular desire shifts uneasily and sometimes wildly when it is contextualized within the nineteenth-century idealization of the sororal bond. Since sisterhood privileges community over autonomy, there is an attempt to change the triangle. The image of a triangle itself suggests individuals isolated and potentially at odds with one another, but sisterhood strives to
make the triangle into a circle, the symbol of unity and connectedness, which blurs the points, softens the angles, and gives the perception of continuity and stability. Indeed, subject, object, and mediator shift and blur—partly because sisterhood is based on two subjects desiring one another and partly because sisterhood frequently functions as mediator. Even when the man becomes the desiring subject, Girard’s paradigm disintegrates. The male, too, becomes involved in negotiating the sororal bond. In nineteenth-century literature, there is no easy answer, no monolithic paradigm for the problem of sororal rivalry when the ideals of sisterhood mediate the desire for a lover.

Before examining how Victorian writers rewrite Girard’s paradigm for desire, it is first helpful to note one instance where sisterhood does not become the means by which problems are smoothed and/or erased. In Judeo-Christian tradition, the rivalry and jealousy between sisters over a man dates back to the Genesis story of Rachel and Leah, a story which Arthur Hugh Clough retells in his poem “Jacob’s Wives.” Unlike Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, and Joseph and his brothers, this sister story contains no violence, murder, treachery, or swindling (Mink and Ward 2). Instead, the Genesis story suggests that the sisters play out their rivalry over bearing sons. Rachel has Jacob’s love, but she envies her sister’s ability to give him sons. She sends her servant Bilhah to act as a surrogate, and after Bilhah bears two sons, Rachel declares herself triumphant. Leah, who is temporarily barren, responds in kind—another servant, another two sons, and while she knows she does not have Jacob’s love, she expects his honor in return for her prolific child-bearing. God eventually allows Rachel to bear two sons (Joseph and Benjamin), but she also dies following Benjamin’s birth. The final tally: Leah
—six sons, her servant two; Rachel—two sons, her servant two. A nation is born, and when Jacob plans to leave their father and return home, the two sisters provide a united front of support.⁹

In retelling Rachel and Leah's story, Clough explores the nature of rivalry between two sisters when there are apparent differences between them, and he defies Victorian convention by ignoring the problematic intrusion of the sororal bond. In doing so, his story of desire best exemplifies Girard's paradigm. The object of desire, Jacob, remains silent and eventually fades to the margin as the two sisters argue over which sister offers better benefits—also making it obvious why men may shift and slide from one sister to another. However, Clough somewhat deflects the rivalry. Instead of allowing the sisters to confront each other directly, he positions Jacob between them: each woman attempts to convince Jacob to sleep with her, but really they are talking to each other through Jacob and arguing over who is the more desirable wife. Paradoxically, the differences between the sisters threaten each sister's relationship with Jacob while at the same time those differences are used to maintain a relationship with him; additionally, their rivalry is used to get Jacob's attention.

Clough patterns his poem after the style and form of the biblical story. He imitates the language and tone of Genesis: "These are the words of Jacob's wives; the words / Which Leah spake and Rachel to his ears" (80). And he also imitates the biblical story's movement back and forth from Rachel to Leah, again using comparable language: "And Rachel said . . . "; "And Leah

⁹ For the story of Jacob and his sojourn in the land of his father-in-law Laban and the return to his homeland, see Genesis 28-35. Even the rivalry and hostilities between Jacob and his father-in-law provide a marked and treacherous contrast to the story of the two sisters.
said . . . ." Rachel offers Jacob love and passion; Leah offers sons and the establishment of a nation. They resort to name-calling: Rachel calls Leah "an alien unsought third" (45) while Leah refers to Rachel as a "fretful, vain, unprofitable wife" (49). Rachel reminds Jacob (and Leah) of their passionate past and accuses Leah of being no more than one of the servants by whom Jacob has also had children. But Leah questions which is more important: love for Rachel or the establishment of the kingdom of Israel, thus also invoking God's command to be fruitful and multiply. Rachel counters with the promise that a God who can close her womb can also open it again, and besides, wasn't Joseph, the "Child of love" (109) worth the wait? But Leah has the last word, blaming Rachel for keeping Jacob's love from her, pointing out Jacob's "maturer mind" which will no longer succumb "to light dalliance as of boy and girl" (116-118), and also accusing Rachel of wanting to "set their father's soul against [her] sons" (112). There are no drawn swords in this rivalry, only sharp tongues. What Clough's poem demonstrates is that if there was any bond between the two sisters, the marriage to Jacob has effectively disrupted the sisterhood and severed the tie.

However, the predominant message in the sister stories of the mid-Victorian period is that the tie should not be severed. The code of conduct governing sisterhood dictates that the connection be preserved, and the major means of doing so once again involve sisterly self-sacrifice. With the early 1860s as a midpoint, the sister stories discussed in this chapter cover a 40-year period that coincides with a growing awareness of the excess number of single women in the country. Sisters provided an alternative to marriage; an already significant connection conveniently gave women another relationship
on which they could focus and another place to be. Thus, sisters could find
themselves in competition for a man at the same time they needed each other
for support—one more reason why conduct book writer Sarah Stickney Ellis
saw sisterhood as a way to share the pain of life. Charlotte Yonge, in her
conduct book *Womankind*, told sisters “to give up to one another” (143), and
although not specifically addressed to marriage matters, giving up appears to
include their relationships with men. The message in many of the sister
stories is that a woman is to sacrifice her love for a man for the sake of her
sister. And frequently, but not always, it is the elder sister who sacrifices for the
younger.

One of the few writers who codified the nature of the sacrifice is Anthony
Trollope. In *The Three Clerks*, he delineates what he considers appropriate
sisterly behavior when two sisters desire the same man. After Linda
Woodward learns that her sister Gertrude is to marry the man she loves, Linda
pours out her heart to her mother. Although Mrs. Woodward comforts her
daughter, she also knows she must teach her how to conduct herself during
the ensuing preparations for the marriage:

She had to bear with her sister’s success, to listen to her sister’s
joy, to enter into all her future plans, to assist at her toilet, to
prepare her wedding garments, to hear the congratulations of
friends, and take a sister’s share in a sister’s triumph, and to do
this without once giving vent to a reproach. And she had worse
than this to do; she had to encounter Alaric, and to wish him joy
of his bride; she had to live in the house with Alaric as though he
were her brother, and as though she had never thought to live
with him in any nearer tie. She would have to stand at the altar
as her sister’s bridesmaid, and see them married, and she would

*While my discussion here focuses on biological sisterhood, certainly the
rise of religious and secular sisterhoods during this period also provided
women with another option. Sisterhood, both metaphorical and biological,
also becomes a place to be in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (see chapter 4).*
have to smile and be cheerful as she did so. (*Three Clerks* 160-161)

This passage reads like a list of rules from a conduct book, and the horror is that it is the mother who places this extraordinary burden of self-abnegation on her daughter. The rules given to Linda are, as we shall see in other works, rules inherent in Victorian sisterhood. Linda succeeds because "she had that within her to overcome herself, and put her own heart, and hopes, and happiness . . . into the background, when the hopes and happiness of another required it" (161).

All the Victorian messages about sisters get tangled with the messages about marriage, and when that ideological entanglement impinges on the literature, the result is a diverse and odd collection of approaches to resolving conflict—to forcing triangular desire into a smooth circle of connection. Frequently, instead of dealing with the conflict between sisters, writers find ways to obviate the problem of sororal rivalry. In Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook* and Anthony Trollope's *The Small House at Allington* sisters are in potentially rivalrous situations, yet in both of them, the rivalry is nonexistent, and any problems shift away from the sisters and onto the man. In Charles Dickens's *The Battle of Life* and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 1880 "The Sisters," the potential rivalry shifts to an ennobling self-sacrifice as one woman gives up her love for a man for the sake of her sister. In each situation sister love becomes a moral message. Finally, there is resistance, significantly from two women: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti understand the tensions, frustrations, and anger associated with the sisterly code of conduct and use their poetry to explore the feelings sisters have when they feel betrayed by a sister and by the code of conduct.
It is not surprising that in Harriet Martineau's 1839 novel *Deerbrook* she strives to keep both sisterhood and marriage intact. Nor is it surprising that she chooses the two sisters-one man plot as a focus for her novel. Although she never married, Martineau was committed to the domestic ideal (Sanders 79), and she also reports in her autobiography that she was devoted to her relationship with her younger sister Ellen. The bickering that took place among Martineau's other siblings when she was a child proved to be unbearable to her. As a result, when a child she resolved that she would find happiness in her new sister and that in return Ellen "should never want for the tenderness" which Harriet herself never found in the other siblings (Autobiography I, 39). The "passionate fondness" which she felt for Ellen was not like anything else she felt in her life, and their friendship lasted throughout their lives (Autobiography I, 39). Martineau also relates that in searching for a plot for her novel, she decided she wanted a story from "real life," and it quickly becomes clear that the real life story would involve the two sisters-one man plot (Autobiography I, 411-413). Martineau says she first considered Catherine Sedgwick's "Old Maids," a story about two sisters, ten years apart, in which the younger loves and marries the betrothed of the elder. Then she considered a story by Mrs. S. Carter Hall about two Irish girls and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Bertha in the Lane." It seems important to Martineau to make a point about her novel fitting in with a particular type and number of sister stories because she stretches time somewhat in using "Bertha" as an example: Browning's poem appeared in her 1844 collection of poems, but
Deerbrook was first published in 1839. Martineau does not explain the discrepancy, but, then, in her autobiography in general she seems more concerned with making a point than in the veracity of her life story. She claims that she finally settled on using an incident from a family she knew (which she later learns, to her relief, was not true): a man "had been cruelly driven, by a matchmaking lady, to propose to the sister of the woman he loved,—on private information that the elder had lost her heart to him, and that he had shown her attention enough to warrant it. The marriage was not a happy one, good as were the persons concerned ..." (Autobiography I, 413). But while this story forms the beginning of her novel, Martineau cannot let it end unhappily. She is in the business of teaching lessons, and Deerbrook is no exception. By intertwining both a marriage plot and a sister plot, Martineau is able to show the significance of both relationships to the men and women involved. For her, both sisterhood and marriage are part of the domestic ideal, and the better self for which her characters search is found in their relationships with others.

In Deerbrook, neither Margaret nor Hester Ibbotson knows that Hester's husband Edward Hope loved the one he did not marry. Since the unmarried sister lives with the Hopes, the novel is ripe for the same kind of melodramatic tale used years later to argue against the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill. However, Martineau deflects the problem of sororal rivalry by making the problem the lover/husband Hope's, and the story becomes one about finding one's better self and the importance of duty in attaining that self. Deerbrook was written a few years after the 1835 law which prohibited marriage between a man and his deceased wife's sister, and her choice of plot may have reflected her sentiments on the issue. In writing about the Deceased Wife's
Sister Controversy 23 years after the publication of her novel, Martineau argued that the law cannot control adultery. Instead, individuals must rely on their own self-discipline as well as believe in the sanctity of the marriage bond:

. . . this state of things, painful and perplexing as it is, arises out of the very virtues and good qualities of the parties concerned: the reliance of the wife upon the sister, the sister’s faithful discharge of the trust reposed in her, the husband’s grateful recognition of a life devoted to him and to his . . . . The remedy clearly lies in that simple prudence which should mount guard over all the mutual relations entered into by fallible mortals;—that prudence which, in the conjugal case, should keep all friendships subordinate to the supreme bond . . . . (“Wives and Sisters” 321)

This belief also informs her main characters’ actions in Deerbrook.

Once married, Hope is tempted because his wife Hester disrupts their marriage with her passionate temper and her bouts with depression and jealousy when she is not the center of attention. In contrast, Margaret is an appealing model of forbearance and serenity. However, Hope does not fall. Indeed, it is his belief in and respect for the inviolability of the family that preserves him, his marriage, and the sisterhood. He does struggle, “but it is secretive, constricted, spluttered out in melodramatic soliloquies. Above all, he dreads the disruption of his home life, already troubled by Hester’s outbursts and his own despair” (Sanders 78). Significantly, until Hope is able to pull himself together, it is Margaret who holds the household together and manages to monitor and mediate the various disruptions. She never loses her faith in either her sister or her brother-in-law and patiently perseveres when the other two waver. She is the model of the better self which Hope must aspire to attain.
Only once does Hope publicly reveal his feelings when Margaret falls through the ice while skating. When gossip spreads because of those who overhear him, his successful attempts to suppress the rumors and keep them from the sisters provide an opportunity for him to test his character (Sanders 78). Throughout the novel, the two sisters never know they are rivals for the same man. Instead, it is Hester’s volatile personality that tests their relationship and Margaret’s patience.

Through his trials, Hope comes to love Hester, and his previous love for Margaret is transformed into a “transient fancy” *(Deerbrook III, 274)*. Martineau credits Hope with having “permanently established Hester in her highest moods of mind, strengthened her to conquer the one unhappy tendency from which she had suffered through the whole of her life, and dispersed all storms . . .” *(Deerbrook III, 299)*. In addition, in rising to the occasion he, too, triumphs and moves “from self-reproach and mere compassion, to patience, to hope, to interest, to admiration, to love . . .” *(Deerbrook III, 299)*. In the end, Hope and the sisters are rewarded with tranquil households (for Margaret marries the man she loves) and the respect of their neighbors. Sisterhood and marriage are united and provide an ideal of life in the domestic sphere. Indeed, the neighbors, too, learn their lessons from this model family.

Although Anthony Trollope wrote several novels which included sister relationships as part of the plot, he obviously does not have the same personal interest in sister relationships as does Martineau, nor is he as interested in teaching a lesson about the domestic ideal. Instead, he seems to have a fascination for the ideals of sisterhood and their effects on sisters.⁵ The

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⁵ See *The Three Clerks*, *Ayala’s Angel*, and *Rachel Ray*. He seems particularly interested in using sisters to show differences in courtships and marriages.
code of sisterhood certainly influences the potential triangle in *The Small House At Allington*. Trollope presents another pair of sisters, Bell and Lily Dale, and a man, Adolphus Crosbie, in another potentially rivalrous relationship. But once again, a rivalry fails to develop, and in this story there is more reason for it to exist: both sisters like Crosbie, and Crosbie is fickle. Bell and Lily both attract the attention of Crosbie, their cousin Bernard’s house guest. Early in the novel readers are informed that although Crosbie likes Lily, “he thought he liked Bell the best . . . for Bell was the beauty of the family” (20-21). He makes movements towards Bell, and by the end of the second chapter readers are led to believe that his preference for Bell will be developed and that Lily is too lively for Crosbie. Throughout the third chapter there is also confusion over which sister is interested in Crosbie. In one exchange between the sisters, Lily accuses Bell of being jealous because Lily has been teasing Crosbie. Yet when Bell appears irritated, Lily retreats and denies she is interested in Crosbie, and Bell then also declares she has no interest in him. The conversation sounds like two sisters ready for a fight. However, at this point the reader can only guess how the sisters’ words match their feelings. Does Lily consider Crosbie somewhat of a joke when she calls him an Apollo? Why is Lily mentioning Dr. Crofts as someone she likes but sees as a suitor for Bell? And while we are pondering the possibility of either sister ending up with Crosbie, Crosbie becomes engaged to Lily. Only after the engagement is announced does Trollope attempt to sort out the relationships and provide an explanation.

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Trollope demonstrates the Victorian unease with the rivalry he could develop between the two sisters and only hints at Bell’s disappointment, and to solve his problem, he has Bell gracefully step aside. Indeed, Trollope’s narrator admires Bell’s perception and grace: “It was beautiful to see how Bell changed in her mood towards Crosbie and towards her sister as soon as she perceived how the affair was going” (56). Bell’s sacrifice is made to seem no sacrifice at all; she is represented as slightly better than Lily and a good woman with excellent foresight. Throughout the story, only the narrator and Trollope’s readers know that Bell suffers pangs of regret and a sense of loss over Crosbie, for Bell suffers in silence. However, we should not be surprised that Bell must suffer silently, given the rules of sisterhood.

In addition to hinting at noble self-abnegation on Bell’s part, Trollope relies on some familiar characterizations to provide a hasty and easy solution to the problem he initiated. After the engagement, we learn that the sisters were “very like each other” with their differences considered “trifling” (53), thus making it easy for Crosbie to move from one sister to the other. Trollope gives the transfer little attention or explanation:

> It is almost sad to say that such a man might have had the love of either of such girls, but I fear that I must acknowledge that it was so. Apollo, in the plenitude of his power, soon changed his mind; and before the end of his first visit, had transferred the distant homage which he was then paying from the elder to the younger sister. (56)

Crosbie continues his woman replacing as he discards Lily for another woman who he perceives will give him better social benefits. We see that Bell is better off without the man, and she is rewarded for her goodness with Dr. Crofts. The sisters remain loyal and devoted to one another, even after Lily acknowledges
that she stole Crosbie from her sister, and Bell's concern for Lily overrides any envy and jealousy. In this Trollope novel, sisterhood does not permit rivalry.

In trying to lessen the chances for rivalry, Trollope portrays the male lover in an unfavorable light. But in nineteenth-century writing, including the writing about the deceased wife's sister, there appear to be many "Apollos" who change their minds about women. At the very least, men do not know what or who they want and appear inconstant, unreliable, and easily persuaded to switch their intentions. While perhaps not a serpent in the Garden of Eden, Crosbie is at least a self-centered snake who does not know himself well enough and ends up using women for his own selfish purposes. It is no wonder the sororal bond is privileged. If there must be a choice between sororal love and marital love, the sister love in these stories does appear more reliable, stable, and long-lasting. Men do not seem worth the disruption. Additionally, there appears reason for sisters to find ways to maintain both relationships: if the relationship with the man fails, the sister will still be there.

II

The writers we have seen thus far found ways to deflect or deny rivalry between sisters, but there are instances where love for the same man provides sisters an opportunity to test their love for one another. One variation on the theme of two sisters loving one man is Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 1880 "The Sisters." Tennyson's son Hallam claims it is partly based on a story his father knew "of a girl who consented to be bridesmaid to her sister, although she secretly loved the bridegroom. The night after the wedding the poor
bridesmaid ran away from home . . . at last she was found, knocking at the church door . . . her wits gone . . . ” (381-382). The story is told from the man's perspective, and by the end we learn of the effects of sisterhood on him and his marriage. Indeed, his roles as lover, husband, and father are all affected by sisterhood as sisterhood mediates all the relationships in the narrative.

The narrator is the father of Edith and Evelyn, named after two twin sisters, one of whom he married. He is addressing the suitor of one of the sisters, probably Edith, but since the differences between the two young women are both marked and blurred, the father fears that the young man "may be flickering, fluttering in a doubt / Between the two"—which he warns must not happen lest it "Be death to one" (106). The father fears for his two daughters when a man now enters their lives. He regrets that the sisterhood cannot be preserved as it is, but the man's world of law and inheritance insists that the suitor disrupt their world, just as one man's passion disrupted a previous generation of sisters:

... and yet one
Should marry, or all the broad lands in your view
From this bay window—which our house has held
Three hundred years—will pass collateral. (107)

In discussing the present, the father hints of the past until, after wishing the young man "a happier marriage than my own" (108), he tells the suitor of his courtship and marriage, and both suitor and reader understand how the past is inextricably linked with the present—and provides a warning for the future.

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The blurring of sisters and the resulting problem of mistaken identity forms the basis of the father's story, but it is also concerned with love and honor, self-sacrifice, and the learning of valuable lessons about our relationships to others—all elements of the idealized sisterhood. His story is also the sisters' story, and if it was initially one of triangular desire, by the end, he sees the power of sisterhood and no longer knows which of the two sisters he loves best as "The sisters glide about me hand in hand" (116). The painful lesson he learns, he wants to pass on. As he says during his narrative,

My God, I would not live
Save that I think this gross hard-seeming world
Is our misshaping vision of the Powers
Behind the world, that make our griefs our gains. (114)

The story is also told against the backdrop of the young sisters' song. Evelyn and Edith sing of the desire for "diviner light" and "diviner air" to bring relief to "this weary world of ours" (104-105), a weary world exemplified in the story their father tells. In contrast to his daughters' song, his tale is told in a calm and subdued voice, too calm and too controlled perhaps for what the tragedy seems to warrant.

When a young man, he relates, he saw a carriage containing "the loveliest face on earth" and "The face of one there sitting opposite," whom he did not see (108). He declares he fell in love with just this glance, but long after when he met the woman "as it seem'd" and courted her, he was not quite content. Believing that the ideal and real do not quite match, he overcame his doubts, made Edith love him, and declared his love for her. Just after his declaration, Edith's twin sister Evelyn entered the house after a two year absence in Italy, and the narrator knew "There was the face, and altogether she" (111). He felt honor-bound to marry Edith, yet he wrestled with his doubts
and anxieties and his sexual desires. How could he marry one sister while loving the other? He also asked the by now familiar Victorian question, with the most agitation he shows in his narration: after marriage,

... that mock-sister there—
Brother-in-law—the fiery nearness of it—
Unlawful and disloyal brotherhood—
What end but darkness could ensue from this
For all the three? So Love and Honour jarr'd . . . . (112)

Edith, perceiving the problem, seemingly saved him from his dilemma by writing a letter asking him to visit her mother and sister while she was away. His desire for Evelyn was strong, so when he perceived Edith's letter as "Cold, but as welcome as free airs of heaven / After a dungeon's closeness," he declared himself free from all commitment to her, and saw his "path was clear / To win the sister" (113).

The night of his marriage to Evelyn, Edith "her brain broke / With over-acting" fled to the church where she was found "beating the hard Protestant doors" (115). She died and was buried before the newlyweds knew anything was wrong. However, in his version of the story to this point, the narrator does hint to the young suitor that everything was indeed very wrong. His monologue is filled with hesitations and hints, even before he begins the narrative. Additionally, he misconstrues Edith's coldness both before and during the wedding. When he and Evelyn left on their honeymoon, Edith clung to her sister "In utter silence for so long, I thought / 'What, will she never set her sister free?'' (114), but the clinging he describes is much like the embrace in which the sisters engage when Evelyn first returned—and thus becomes a sign of Edith's sisterly self-sacrifice. Pounding on the hard church
doors also suggests Edith's anguish and despair at having been bridesmaid when she should have been the bride and at fulfilling her sisterly role instead of her wifely role. The narrator hints throughout the story that he will cause Edith much pain: before she is even identified, he describes her as the one "On whom I brought a strange unhappiness" (109), and his successful wooing of her is "The worse for her, for me!" (110).

His previous fear was accurate. His marriage to Evelyn was indeed the "darkness" he perceived "could ensue . . . / For all the three" (112). Evelyn's smile, which "had sunn'd /The morning of our marriage" left her; the house seemed haunted by Edith's ghost, and finally, the mother, unable to keep silent, needed to explain her dead daughter's "heroism":

The mother broke her promise to the dead,
And told the living daughter with what love
Edith had welcomed my brief wooing of her,
And all her sweet self-sacrifice and death. (115)

The mother in this story, rather than invoking the code of silence, broke the code which Edith had set in place because she wanted her daughter praised for what she had done.

Finding out the truth caused a rift between Evelyn and her husband who considers the sisters' relationship "a mystic bond" that prevailed "So far that no caress could win my wife / Back to that passionate answer of full heart / I had from her at first" (115). Her love for him had not lessened, he believes; instead he sees "that dead bridesmaid, meant to be my bride, / Put forth cold hands between us" (116). As a desiring subject, the narrator discovers his rival and mediator is sisterhood—and sisterhood wins. The sororal bond is stronger than the marriage bond, so strong that after two daughters are born, also named Edith and Evelyn, Evelyn dies and joins "In and beyond the grave,
that one she loved" (116).

But the one that Evelyn loved also becomes the one the narrator loves, and after years of reliving the story and understanding Edith’s sacrifice, he sees

The sisters glide about me hand in hand
Both beautiful alike, nor can I tell
One from the other, no, nor care to tell
One from the other, only know they come,
They smile upon me, till, remembering all
The love they both have borne me, and the love
I bore them both . . .
I know not which of these I love the best. (116)

Like other sister stories, the love between Evelyn and Edith lasts beyond the grave, and it becomes a love which now includes the man in the circle. The lesson he learns from Edith and Evelyn concerns the constancy and unconditional nature of love, a love strong enough to cause a sister to sacrifice for another, even when that sacrifice means death. At the end, when he perceives that the young man loves his daughter Edith more, he, too, declares “I think I likewise love your Edith more” (117), but his declaration for that Edith, so like her aunt Edith, is also a suggestion that he does know which sister he loves the best.

Throughout Tennyson’s poem, a disturbing ideal admires the sacrificial death of a sister (that even pairs sacrifice and death in the same phrase) and sees it as an act of heroism. There is also the disturbing presence of yet another story where the man places his feelings above and beyond the needs of others, to see what he wants to see, to reach the ends he wants to reach while a sister puts the desires of others above her own. The woman the narrator admires become admirable in death, a death brought on by her
inability to bear the sacrifice. The sacrifice for a sister is a costly one; the good woman is a dead woman. Furthermore, the sisters' attempt to preserve sisterhood ended in the death of both sisters and the disruption of a marriage, suggesting that placing sisterhood over marriage can only lead to death in a world where marriage is supposed to be the desired relationship.

What makes the father's story even more tragic is that it is told within the framework of another sister story that has the potential to end in tragedy (Watson 59). Another Edith and Evelyn face another suitor who will decide between the two. The father sees the resemblance in the sororal bonds: "No sisters ever prized each other more. / Not so: their mother and her sister loved / More passionately still" (107). While the father was not concerned about the effects of his suit on sisterhood and learns too late the effects of sisterhood on him, this time he clearly is worried, and his story serves as a warning to the young man. While we may temporarily wonder why he does not warn his daughters, it becomes clear that this is a man's world. Even when young Edith once asked her grandfather why she and her sister must marry, he answered by telling them of his wars and his wound earned at Waterloo—the implication being that dutiful men go to war (and get wounded); dutiful women get married (and get wounded). The sororal bond is powerful, but the father-narrator seems to think control over sisterhood can be handled by the men if they only understand both the code and the story.

While the Tennyson poem questions whether or not sisterly self-sacrifice is noble and redemptive, Charles Dickens answers in the affirmative in his Christmas book *The Battle of Life*. At the most, Edith and Evelyn's bittersweet story is only ambiguously redeeming and certainly not the "diviner"
air and light needed for man's weary world. However, Dickens's story of sisterly self-sacrifice does offer redemption for that same weary world of law, inheritance, and war. Furthermore, the self-sacrificing, and thus heroic, sister need not die and can herself be rewarded.

In the first part of the story, Alfred, the object of Grace and Marion Jeddlers' love, addresses Dickens's concern in our human battle of life:

I believe, Mr. Snitchey... there are quiet victories and struggles, great sacrifices of self, and noble acts of heroism, in [life]—even in many of its apparent lightnesses and contradictions—not the less difficult to achieve, because they have no earthly chronicle or audience—done every day in nooks and corners, and in little households, and in men's and women's hearts—any one of which might reconcile the sternest man to such a world, and fill him with belief and hope in it, though two-fourths of its people were at war, and another fourth at law; and that's a bold word. (111)*

The next line reads “Both sisters listened keenly” (111), significant because it is the two sisters who prove Alfred's (and Dickens's) belief. This sister story in which marriage and sisterhood intertwine demonstrates what Dickens saw as the purpose of his Christmas stories: “to awaken some loving and forbearing thoughts, never out of season in a Christian land” (xiv).

Like other sister stories involving two sisters and one man, The Battle of Life contains familiar conventions. The sisters' love for one another is intimate and intense, and they are often seen “twined together” (102). Their physical closeness becomes emblematic of their emotional connection. They embrace, they hold hands, they gaze at one another with an intensity that makes it seem physical. When Alfred leaves, he gives Marion over to Grace's embrace; when Marion disappears, Grace keeps her farewell letter next to her

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heart; when Marion returns, they cling to one another. Dickens’s description of
their reunion so blends the two in their actions, that it becomes difficult to tell
the actions of one from the other:

Clipping to her sister, who had dropped upon a seat and bent
down over her—and smiling through her tears—and kneeling,
close before her, with both arms twining round her, and never
turning for an instant from her face—and with the glory of the
setting sun upon her brow, and with the soft tranquility of evening
gathering around them . . . . (171)

By the time we sort out the pronouns, we realize it does not matter which sister
does what. They are reunited, physically and emotionally.

At the beginning they are different: Grace, older by four years, has
taken on the mother’s role, and as a result, her “home-adorning, self-denying
qualities” and “quiet household figure” present a contrast to the younger, more
beautiful and lively Marion (103). And yet, as time passes, their identities blur:
“Something of the difference between them had been softened down in three
years’ time” as the “same earnest nature” that was found in Grace earlier now
appeared in Marion; and six years later “[t]he spirit of the lost girl [Marion]
looked out” of Grace’s eyes (168).

The story also involves the transfer of a man’s affection from one sister
to another, but in this story, there is a twist (or two). It has the blessing of the
engaged sister (the beautiful Marion), who orchestrates the change. Her
absence and the couple’s remembrance of her become the means of uniting
them. While the two sisters love the same man, the competition is over who
will sacrifice herself for the other sister—who will out-sister the other.
Additionally, the religious themes and vocabulary connect the sisters’ story to
traditional Christian teaching and Christ-like behavior. As a result, the sisters’
sacrifices for one another become examples of their maid Clemancy's nutmeg grater-golden rule philosophy: “do as you wold [sic] be done by” (115).

The story briefly: when Alfred Heathfield, who has been Dr. Jeddler's ward, leaves the Jeddler family for three years study abroad, it is with the understanding that he will marry Marion when he returns. He entrusts Marion to Grace's protection, and yet Marion seems uneasy with the whole arrangement. When Alfred is due to return, Marion flees, leaving everyone to think she has eloped with Michael Warden, a young man who has been seen lurking around the Jeddler property. Six years later, we find Alfred married to Grace and explaining to her that the truth about Marion finally will be revealed to her. To Grace's delight, Marion returns and explains all. Marion, who could tell that Grace loved Alfred, decided that leaving Alfred was the least she could do considering all her sister had done for her.

In Dickens's story, it is important that the message of sisterly self-sacrifice be heard so the redemptive power of sacrifice can be seen by the extended Jeddler family, the neighborhood, and even the reading public in order that redemption be extended beyond sisterhood to a larger world. Marion's actions redeem both Dr. Jeddler, who had seen the world as a joke, and Michael Warden, who had been a wastrel. Apparently the reviewer for The Athenæum, in one of the few positive reviews of the book, understood the message when he wrote that in this Christmas book we learn "[i]t is not by

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* For a discussion of the relationship of the book to traditional Christian teachings, see Katherine Carolan's "The Battle of Life, a Love Story." Dickensian 69 (1973), 105-110. She connects the story to Dickens's work on The Life of Our Lord, which is a version of the New Testament Dickens wrote for his children. She also sees a similarity between the Jeddler sisters and the two sisters in Oliver Goldsmith's The Vicar of Wakefield. A contemporary reviewer of The Battle of Life saw a similarity between the Jeddler sisters and Scott's Minna and Brenda in The Pirate ("Battle," London Journal 278-79).
what Love demands, but by what it surrenders, that we compute its wealth. If from its power over others we learn that it is royal,—it is its power over Self that shows us it is divine . . . . To few living writers are we more indebted than to Mr. Dickens for lessons in the Philosophy of the Heart" (Marston 1319).

Yet Dickens's message comes with a price to his storytelling. What is missing from my recounting of the story is the heavy-handed pathos and sentimentality with which he overwhelms his plot. Dickens is so involved in the relationship of the two sisters, what they are willing to sacrifice for one another, and the moral he wants to extend to the world that the story wallows in sentimental dialogue and good feelings. However, his problem with the book may be a problem with Dickens's own personal desires. Modern critics have noted that The Battle of Life appears to be a fictional account of Dickens and his relationship with Georgina and Mary Hogarth, both of whom lived with Dickens and his wife (Slater 96-99; Marcus 288-292; Guerard 73-74; Hibbert 195-197). According to Michael Slater, although the ages of the two sisters are reversed, Dickens's characterization of Grace and Marion so closely resembles that of Georgina and Mary that the connection cannot be accidental (97). Steven Marcus suggests Alfred fulfills Dickens's subconscious desire to possess the two sisters and sees him as "merely manipulating certain symbols" from his life and "day-dreaming" (292). Slater concurs and suggests that whether the fantasy was conscious or subconscious, Dickens lost control of both his day-dream and his plot (99). The result is a story that reads as a fairy tale from its literal "once upon a time" beginning to the happily-ever-after ending.
Although both contemporary and modern critics have been hard on the story (and Dickens), I believe it is precisely the pathos, sentimentality, and fairy tale aspects of the sisters' story that attracted the reading public. 23,000 copies of the Christmas book were sold on the first day of publication; in contrast, Thackeray's Christmas book published the same year, *Mrs. Perkins's Ball*, sold only 1500 copies (Page 260). Thackeray himself, writing as Michael Angelo Titmarsh, noted that he believed Dickens's aim was "not to produce . . . a close imitation of life, but a prose poem, designed to awaken emotions tender, mirthful, pastoral, wonderful" (125). Even many of the critics who disliked the book had difficulty reconciling a criticism of the improbability of the plot with the moral of the story. The reviewer in *Howitt's Journal*, for example, found the goal of the book "noble," but Marion's sacrifice was "foolish and ill-judged" ("Battle" 28), while the *Globe* reviewer decided the improbable plot could be forgiven because it might "bring out what is true in character" ("Battle"). *The Athenæum* reviewer, who liked the book, still had problems with the plot: "In working out a beautiful example of the battles that may be fought and won in the human heart, the author has done so by incidents about as improbable as he could well have contrived . . . " (Marston 1320).

While Dickens may have been attempting to work out his desire for two sisters, he may also be reflecting the desires of a larger public to locate an ideal love triangle in the two sisters-one man plot. Much of Dickens's story reflects the arguments put forth about sisterhood in the protagonists' supports of the Deceased Wife's Sister Controversy: the sisters love one another deeply; the man is like a brother to the other sister; the "dead" sister becomes the connecting point by which the remaining couple is united. Conversely,
much of the critics' rejection of the improbable plot has to do with Marion's
unbelievable self-sacrifice and the perception of the sisters as “delightful
specimens of the namby-pamby, sentimental class of young ladies”
(“Christmas Garland” 3). Within contemporary reactions to the book, we can
see the playing out of the larger Victorian struggle to understand the
relationships between sisters, particularly when a man is involved.

In Dickens's attempt to turn the sisters' conduct into conduct book, he
creates the major flaw in the story: the improbability of the sister plot and the
characters of the two sisters unintentionally produces a fairy tale.\(^{10}\) However,
as flawed as The Battle of Life is (and because of the flaws), it does give us a
highly idealized account of sisterhood and the sororal bond. If, as Slater
claims, Dickens's writing in general is preoccupied with sisterhood and how it
extends to all women's relationships (367-368), then this story becomes an
attempt not only to identify those qualities of the sisterly ideal which he
admires, but it also becomes his attempt to connect sisterhood to men in order
for them also to enjoy its benefits (again similar to some of the arguments in
the Deceased Wife's Sister Controversy).

Dickens resurrects Marion, whose absence has been like her death, in
order for her self-sacrifice to be noted and praised. Otherwise, the family (and
of course the readers) would be left believing Marion jilted Alfred for someone
less worthy of her love and would leave Marion in a fallen state. Marion's
explanation of her disappearance and her resulting sacrifice becomes

\(^{10}\) According to Norman Page, Dickens himself worried that the complex
plot could not be worked out in a small space and wondered if he should have
saved the story for a long novel; he considered abandoning the project (260).
The book supposedly gave Dickens bad dreams—perhaps anticipating critical
reaction.
Dickens’s description of the ideals of sisterhood. To make sure we understand the nature of the sacrifice, Marion explains in repeated detail her love for Alfred:

... I loved him from my soul. I loved him most devotedly. I would have died for him, though I was so young. I never slighted his affection in my secret breast for one brief instant. It was far beyond all price to me. Although it is so long ago, and past, and gone, and everything is wholly changed, I could not bear to think that you, who love so well, should think I did not truly love him once. I never loved him better, Grace, than when he left this very scene upon this very day. I never loved him better, dear one, than I did that night when I left here. (172)

The only way Marion’s self-sacrifice could begin to be a greater sacrifice than that of Grace’s was for her to make clear that her love for Alfred was as intense as Grace’s. But Dickens’s does not let the sisterly love end with the sacrifice. The love for her sister must surpass that of her love for Alfred, remain pure, and be connected to the ideals of Christian community. She connects her actions to religious sisterhoods and sees her behavior as a secular version of theirs. In having renounced her past, learned her lesson, and become “wholly changed,” she can declare “the battle is long past, the victory long won” (174). She announces that now her “ecstasy” derives from seeing Grace in her new life “as a happy wife and mother,” Alfred as Grace’s husband, and a little niece and namesake bringing joy to their lives (174). Furthermore, she remains pure in her sister love by never marrying Warden, whom she did not love: “My heart has known no other love, my hand has never been bestowed apart from it. I am still your maiden sister, unmarried, unbetrothed: your own loving old Marion, in whose affection you exist alone and have no partner, Grace!” (174). Her sacrifice clearly includes giving up the ways of the secular world (marriage and family) in favor of sisterhood and devotion to her sister’s family.
In dealing with the intertwining of the sister plot with marriage, the lover Alfred, the third person in the triangle, cannot be ignored. His relationship to the two sisters forms a strange ménage à trois. Alfred has been living with Grace and Marion as their brother, or, as Slater writes, “as near to being their brother as is compatible with decency” (98), yet he has fallen in love with Marion and plans to marry her when he returns from the Continent. He calls Grace “Sister” which to him “seems the natural word” (117). He envisions Grace in his future as the sister-in-law to whom he owes much, and as payment for keeping watch over Marion, he plans to repay her once he and Marion are married: “... it shall be one of our chief pleasures to consult how we can make Grace happy; how we can anticipate her wishes; how we can show our gratitude and love to her; how we can return her something of the debt she will have heaped upon us” (117-118). What he does not know in that speech is that Marion already knows the answer, but she does not consult with Alfred for the solution. Instead, sure that in time Alfred will come to love Grace, Marion plots how she (they) can make Grace happy, how she (they) can anticipate her wishes; how she (they) can repay the debt. Alfred becomes an unknowing partner in Marion’s machinations. In this love triangle, Alfred is the object of the two sisters’ love, but instead of them fighting over him, they each work to suppress that love and give him up to the other; their love for each other has primacy over their love for Alfred. He is never consulted, nor does Grace tell him that Marion left a letter explaining that she hoped he would transfer affection to Grace. When Alfred learns of the manipulation years later, instead of being angered he is overwhelmed that Grace never told him what Marion did and now knows "the priceless value of the heart I gird within my
arms and thank[s] GOD for the rich possession," but he also understands Grace’s “constant heart” and her unwavering love for Marion (170).

Alfred loves Grace first as sister, now as wife; he loves Marion, first as sister, then as lover, now as sister; he loves his daughter Marion; Marion loves her sister and brother-in-law, once lover; Grace loves Alfred as husband, once as brother. The triangle rounds out into a circle of love—"a world full of hearts . . . a world of sacred mysteries" (175). The ideal triangle (circle) is described by Dickens early in the story. Except that Marion provides the connecting point for the three, it does not matter which sister is which because by the end of the story, Marion and Grace have similar identities and appearance, and it becomes the desired picture of familial love for all three characters:

The younger sister had one hand in his [Alfred's]; the other rested on her sister's neck. She looked into that sister's eyes, so calm, serene, and cheerful, with a gaze in which affection, admiration, sorrow, wonder, almost veneration, were blended. She looked into that sister's face, as if it were the face of some bright angel. Calm, serene, and cheerful, the face looked back on her and on her lover. (118)

It is easy to understand why twentieth-century critics are cynical about Dickens's displacement of his desires on to the Jeddler sisters' story and why nineteenth-century critics saw the story as improbable.11 As with many of the Deceased Wife's Sister stories, the self-effacing women become self-replacing as sisters take on each others' identities, but placed within the desires of the sororal bond, the replacement of one sister with another is for the good of everyone. In their conflated identities and love for one another, the

11 Several dramatic versions of The Battle of Life played on stage during the Victorian period. In one melodrama, Heathfield and Warden fight a duel and Grace is rescued from an attempted suicide (Glancy 246-247). This play presents an alternative version of sisterhood and triangular desire in which jealousies and rivalries are allowed—perhaps a more plausible plot.
sisters are participants in a family drama in which all hurts are healed, no one is ever angry—only sorrowful, and everyone lives happily ever after. To twentieth-century eyes, the relationships appear incestuous—as they may have to some nineteenth-century ones. It is only Dickens's postscript at the end in which he suggests that Marion eventually marries the redeemed Michael Warden which saves us from envisioning an ideal Rachel, Leah, and Jacob story. Instead of the two sisters fighting over which one gets to sleep with Jacob (Alfred), they would gently and lovingly argue over allowing the other sister the privilege. In either case, Jacob (Alfred, Dickens) wins; he sleeps with the sister he loves. While the ideal sister relationship as presented in The Battle of Life is supposed to be a model of Christian love and self-sacrifice, covering the triangular desire with both sororal and Christian ideals and sentimental language does not save the story or Dickens from the suspicion that it is a cover up for a male desire to have two sisters at once.

III

The writers we have met thus far avoid the messy and nasty side of rivalry between sisters usually by laying an idealized gloss of sisterhood over their stories. If a woman does sacrifice her love for the benefit of her sister, she receives her own reward and/or is perceived as the heroic good sister. However, two women poets, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti, refused to ignore not only the potential dangers of rivalry between sisters but also the potential dangers of living up to and/or believing in an idealized view of sisterhood.
Harriet Martineau mentioned Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Bertha in the Lane" in the context of her search for a "real life" story to write about in her novel, and she seems moved by any of the stories she found in which two sisters love the same man. As Glennis Stephenson reports in her research on contemporary reaction to "Bertha in the Lane," Martineau was not alone in her response: "The poem soon became renowned for the prodigious quantity of tears it inspired—and the high quality" (3). Readers apparently saw it as a testimony to sisterly love and self-sacrifice. When two critics reveal their unease over sections of the poem that reveal the dying sister's bitterness with her lot in life, they both decide that the poem is flawed rather than admit that the poem is at odds with the ideals of womanliness (Stephenson 4). I extend Stephenson's argument further to claim that their objections to the poem lie in its inability to live up to the sisterly ideals of self-sacrifice—the ideals that extend notions of womanly self-sacrifice to the sister. Since the sororal bond was highly idealized and privileged, then those reading the poem on the surface level only would weep at the pathos and beauty of the sisters' story—in fact, that is all they would want to see in the poem. However, if we examine the dramatic monologue closely, we can see that what appears to be a poem about unconditional love and unselfish sisterly self-sacrifice is instead a poem of self-sacrifice filled with undercurrents of tension and barely suppressed anger. It is not a sentimental poem applauding the ideals of sisterhood, but rather it is an examination of "the feelings of a woman attempting to live up to such an impossibly high ideal" (Stephenson 4).

The dying sister, older than Bertha by seven years, calls Bertha to her and presents her with a wedding gown she has sewn. She then retires to her
bed to die (she has also sewn herself a shroud), draws her sister close to her, and in her death speech reveals to Bertha how she overheard her fiancé Robert declare his love to Bertha. In presenting the wedding gown, she appears to be relinquishing her claim on Robert and giving him to Bertha, but as she speaks, she reveals the tension between sisterly duty and sexual desire. In contrast to our previous encounters with sisterly self-sacrifice, this sacrifice is not made to seem no sacrifice at all.

She professes love for her sister—"Love I thee with love complete" (14) and does not blame her sister for stealing Robert—"Oh,—I heard thee, Bertha, make / Good true answers for my sake" (104-105). Instead she blames Robert and herself. Robert is once again a man who decides too fast:

Could he help it, if my hand
   He had claimed with hasty claim?
That was wrong perhaps—but then
Such things be—and will, again.
Women cannot judge for men . . . .
When he saw thee who art blest
Past compare, and loveliest,
He but judged thee as the rest. (108-119)

The dying sister cannot place herself in competition with Bertha. Instead, she blames her age, her lack of beauty (compared to Bertha), and her grave demeanor. Bertha is a rose compared to her as a crocus, Bertha "like merry summer-bee" compared to her "like may-bloom on thorn-tree" (180-181). Of course Robert would prefer Bertha, and once again, there is an attempt to deflect and deny rivalry.

However, by placing blame on Robert and herself, the dying sister does intensify Bertha's anguish and guilt. Although we never know Bertha's complicity for sure, her sister makes her squirm:
Ah!—so bashful at my gaze,
That the lashes, hung with tears,
   Grow too heavy to upraise?
I would wound thee by no touch
Which thy shyness feels as such.
Dost thou mind me, Dear, so much? (22-28)

Yes, Bertha does mind, and later when the sister mentions the ring she still wears, Bertha grows pale. While the dying sister may not wound by touch, she does apparently wound with words. By using the dramatic monologue, Browning effectively silences Bertha. Our only understanding of her complicity and her feelings are through the wounded sister's interpretation of them, and as the monologue progresses, we are more and more aware that the elder sister believes Bertha is not the innocent woman she wants her to be. Gilbert and Gubar have no doubt as they declare her to be a “bad” sister whose “heat and fire contrast with the pale coldness of the dying angel whose lover she has seduced” (463).

But the dying sister has difficulty living up to being an angel; she does not want to be the self-sacrificing sister that the angel image requires. Their dying mother asked her to be a mother to Bertha, and up to this point, she believes she has fulfilled all her duties, done what she was supposed to do, and given what she could, including “Love that left me with a wound” (41). Angela Leighton claims it is “not sisterly generosity which provides the moral of the tale, but motherly duty” (64), but what Leighton does not acknowledge is that assuming the dead mother's role is part of the sisterly ideal and an expectation for the older sister—as Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, and others also knew.
The dying sister feels the ghostly presence of the mother who has come to take her, but she asks her mother to “keep aloof / One hour longer” (50-51) because she still has something to say to her sister and she still hopes Robert will come (“Hush!—look out— / Up the street! Is none without?” [124-125] and later “Are there footsteps at the door? / . . . Some one might be waiting for / Some last word that I might say . . . ” [190-193]). The mother’s presence suggests that the dying sister is to suppress her feelings and die in silence: “But thy smile is bright and bleak / Like cold waves—I cannot speak, / I sob in it, and grow weak” (47-49). One contemporary critic of the poem would agree with the mother—he saw it and the sacrificing sister’s heroism marred because the sister tells what she did (“Poems” 1244). However, unlike Linda Woodward in Trollope’s *The Three Clerks*, the elder sister cannot bear her sacrifice silently and bravely and instead needs to demonstrate it to Bertha; she desires that Bertha see and acknowledge her martyrdom (Stephenson 6). Her words of comfort to Bertha are always undercut by her bitterness, repressed anger, and obvious hope that Robert will change his mind and come to her. She insists on being buried with the ring she still wears and asks that rosemary, a symbol of fidelity, loyalty, and remembrance, be spread around her. Obviously, she wants both Robert and Bertha to remember that she has been betrayed. Additionally, as Stephenson notes, in death she wants to look like the bride awaiting the bridegroom (5)—although she insists “That if any friend should come, / (To see thee, Sweet!)” (200-201), she just wants the room to look pleasant and not gloomy. But the “any friend” is Robert who, if he does not come to her in life, will come to her in her death.
The revelation of her discovery develops slowly and carefully with detail that leaves no doubt of her suffering. Before she overhears Robert and Bertha, she tells her sister, through her descriptions of the natural world, about a life that was alive, fertile, and bright:

Hills and vales did openly
Seem to heave and throb away
At the sight of the great sky:
And the silence, as it stood
In the glory’s golden flood,
Audibly did bud, and bud. (71-77)

Her walk with Bertha is intimate: “How we wandered, I and you, / With the bowery tops shut in . . . / How we talked . . . ” (79-82). But after they separate, she becomes aware that Bertha is not alone and that Robert is confessing not only his love for Bertha but the fact “that he owed me all esteem” (130). She faints from what she hears, and when she wakens, it is night and she is cold, both physically and emotionally. Once more, nature helps her describe her feelings upon seeing her sister again: “And the flowers, I bade you see, / Were too withered for the bee,— / As my life, henceforth, for me” (152-154) and later, “Whosoe’er would reach the rose, /Treads the crocus underfoot” (178-179).\(^\text{12}\) Robert has trodden on her, and she wants Bertha to understand and feel the consequences of his actions. She continually asks her sister to draw near her, ostensibly to feel Bertha’s presence by kisses and caresses, but also to allow the dying sister to watch Bertha’s reactions. She responds to Bertha’s every move (“Do not shrink nor be afraid” [10]; “Do not weep so, do

\(^{12}\text{In Sir Walter Scott’s } \textit{The Pirate}, \textit{Norna of the Fitful Head} says to Mordaunt Mertoun, “You cannot be so dull of heart . . . as to prefer the idle mirth and housewife simplicity of the younger sister to the deep feeling and high mind of the noble-spirited Minna? Who would stoop to gather the lowly violet that might have the rose for stretching out his hand?” (353)
not shake” [103]), and while she offers words of comfort, she clearly wants Bertha to suffer, or she would not reveal what she does. (If Barrett Browning had wanted the dying sister to suffer in silence, this dramatic monologue would have been a soliloquy.) She tells Bertha not to cry on her grave lest “Through the woollen shroud I wear / I shall feel it on my face” (213-214), but by this point in her revelations, it is clear that she does want to feel Bertha’s tears now while she still lives and after in the grave. It is and will be her one consolation. By the time she finishes her detailed version of the triangle, there is little doubt that if Robert and Bertha marry, it will not be a happy marriage. The sister’s last words before focusing on her death serve to remind Bertha of the mornings “when I watched . . . the way / He was sure to come that day” (222-224). Bertha will undoubtedly live with the guilt inflicted on her by her sister’s story, and Robert, to whom it is clear the sister also wants the story told, must live with Bertha’s anguish, if not his own.

At the end, the dying sister connects her sacrifice and sisterhood with Christian love. She asks Jesus, a “Victim” who comprehends “Love’s divine self-abnegation” to “Cleanse my love in its self-spending” (232-234), but her monologue reveals her uneasiness and resentment with the burden and sacrifice such a love exacts. In seeing Christ as a “Victim,” she also sees herself as a victim. If sisterhood is a model of Christian community, Barrett Browning’s poem calls into question the terrible price a sister pays for living up to the ideal. “Bertha in the Lane” questions how much a woman is to sacrifice for her sister and whether or not a sister can be selfless and self-sacrificing without feeling victimized. Sisterhood does not appear worth pain and death.
There is some irony involved in Christina Rossetti's contributions to our understanding of the ideals of sisterhood—*Goblin Market*, her most famous poem, helps to create the myth while her other sister poems which show the difficulties of maintaining sisterhood and in believing in the ideal often go unnoticed. And yet most of these poems were written about the same time as *Goblin Market* (around 1859) and appeared in the first edition of *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in 1862. A woman's sexuality and her sexual desires divide sisters and disrupt sisterhood, but instead of glorifying the sororal bond through sisterly self-sacrifice and redemption as in *Goblin Market*, these other poems explore feelings of envy, betrayal, and jealousy that arise from women's involvement with men. Clearly, the rules outlined in *Goblin Market* are expectations for sisters, and part of the problem the sisters face in these poems involves violating those sororal rules.

"The Lowest Room," composed in 1856 and thus the earliest of the sister poems, was not added to the collection until 1875. It most obliquely presents the conflict between two sisters. Although we do hear the younger sister's words throughout the first part of the poem, the entire incident is told from the elder sister's perspective. What we see of the younger is from the elder sister's eyes; what we hear is what she chooses to tell us of the argument. Rather than directly confronting her sister, the elder sister hides her negative feelings in a discussion over competing ideologies. Rivalry is located within proper womanly behavior, and the younger sister, who believes in and lives up to the nineteenth-century expectations for womanly behavior, receives the appropriate nineteenth-century reward: the man, marriage and a daughter who will repeat and reinforce her life, while the elder sister remains
single and unfulfilled.

In attempting to live the passive woman's role, the elder sister has become lifeless as she finds herself confined in the domestic sphere:

Like flowers sequestered from the sun
And wind of summer, day by day
I dwindled paler, whilst my hair
Showed the first tinge of grey . . . . (1-4)

Her entrapment leads her to consider her sense of self and her place in life. She longs for the good old days of Homer instead of this modern age where she leads an "aimless life" (81). As she struggles to articulate her feelings, we learn she feels trapped and unfulfilled in the domestic sphere, where not only her actions must be restrained but her passions as well. Homer's world appeared to permit a fuller range of emotion: "They hated with intenser hate / And loved with fuller love" (59-60). In addition, Homer's world not only allowed "men of might and right" to act, but permitted all women, too, to act: "The princess laboured at her loom, / Mistress and handmaiden alike" (73-74). Her sister at this time is embroidering, but to the elder sister the work is clearly different; it does not count as labor, as real work. Instead, she sees the women's work of her time as valueless and the respect a wife gets as less than what a slave received then.

The younger sister, who as a good sister has asked the elder to explain her grief "That I may grieve" (10), listens patiently and responds appropriately until she is provoked enough to reprimand her sister. The younger one believes that each of them can "Attain heroic strength" in the present age (116). Her model is Christ, not Homer and his heroes. The lesson to be learned from Homer is "Only Achilles in his rage / And sloth is less than man" (127-128). References to rage and sloth must rebuke the elder sister because
she is full of repressed rage and she does not do the woman's work like her sister. Meanwhile, the younger continues to explain how she sees their home "a haven of pure content" (15) and that "they who won the lot / Of sacrifice" are capable of happiness in fulfilling their role (195-196). The sisters are diametrically opposed in their views of their lot in life, and each sister believes she is right.

Within the older sister's complaint about the present age is also a resentment of her realization that "Some must be second and not first; / All cannot be the first of all" (7-8)—the resentment which cuts to the heart of the argument. This complaint follows four lines in which the speaking older sister describes the younger, more beautiful sister:

Her tresses showed a rich mass,
Her eyes looked softer than my own,
Her figure had a statelier height,
Her voice a tenderer tone. (13-16)

We also learn the younger is "mild," "gentle," "easy to be led," and one who usually respects what her sister says (161-164), while the elder is "Not half so glad, or wise, or good" (166). The elder, greying sister loses to the younger one on every parameter because the younger embodies the womanly ideals physically, emotionally, and intellectually. The elder sister never admits to rivalry, but she does admit to envy and "A selfish, souring discontent" (171) that she resolves by reducing life to Solomon's "Vanity of vanities" repeated over and over (176; 181; 183).

While the sisters may not be rivals for a particular man (although the younger does have a lover and the elder does not), "they are competing for
legitimacy" (Rosenblum 163). And while the sisters may not admit to rivalry, the rivalry is present, and it is sexual. The elder sister's comparative descriptions of her sister clearly mark their relationship as competitive. Furthermore, she furtively watches her sister walk into the garden “All gracious with content” and notes how she selects and arranges just the right flowers, sings a song (appropriately not quite her merriest because she is troubled over upsetting her sister), and meets her lover—the reward for good behavior. The winner in the competing ideologies game wins a man.

When the scene shifts to twenty years later, we see the elder sister still sitting and observing the younger one, who has been legitimimized by becoming a wife and mother. She thrives in her role of domestic angel receiving both heavenly and earthly authenticity: “Her passion-flower climbs up toward heaven / Tho' earth still binds its root” (251-252). The elder is alone—her lot in life to be alone and “Not to be first” (165). While it has not been easy, she has learned her lesson, but although learned, it is still resisted. She says she is “Content to take the lowest place” (271), and she has established her own

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13 Rosenblum attributes any rivalry to an implicit hostility between Rossetti and her dominating brother Dante:

... we know that Dante Gabriel had a strong antipathy to The Lowest Room, and that Christina, who usually took his advice in poetic matters, firmly refused to withdraw the poem from subsequent editions... If we imagine the first sister's complaints as addressed to a domineering older brother, than we can better understand, perhaps, the querulous tone and the inevitability of the rebuke: the rebuke is administered both to an aspect of herself that would presume against the authority of the brother and to that figure himself as he is incarnated in the first speaker, insofar as she expresses curiosity and aggression. Rossetti plays both the role of the sister who would aggress against the brother/mother and the role of sister/mother who rebukes the destructive brother. (164)
"world of interests" (263). The sisters may live together in harmony, but it is one that requires the elder sister to suppress her own interests in a private world of stillness and contemplation while watching the younger sister thrive. Ironically, by failing to accept the teachings of the dominant ideology, she leads a life of apparent inactivity; the activity is in her mind only. Her sister lives an active, full life.

In spite of her claim of contentment, at times the elder sister finds life a burden and hopes yet for legitimacy:

Yea, sometimes still I lift my heart
To the Archangelic trumpet-burst,
When all deep secrets shall be shown,
And many last be first. (277-280)

Her obvious reference to Christ's directive to "strive to enter [heaven] by the narrow door" because "some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last" (Mark 13:24; 30) indicates her belief that she has chosen the more difficult path through life, and that she hopes her reward will come. Not content for a passive acceptance of self-sacrifice by taking the lowest place, she hopes for an apocalyptic upheaval to destroy the current ideology and replace it with one that will place her first. However, the fact that she desires an Apocalypse and recognizes that one is needed speaks to the depth of the winning ideology's roots and to the fact that she still desires an active, energetic response to life. In the end, she lets herself and not her sister have the last word.

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14 The phrase "the lowest place" echoes another Rossetti poem by that name which was published in the 1893 Verses, although the date of composition is unknown (Crump 431). That poem reads as a prayer in which the supplicant is asking for God's assistance in being content with the lowest place because she is not strong enough to bear it on her own.
Although the argument in “The Lowest Room” is serious, it only slightly stretches the sororal bond, and the sisters do not reject one another because of their conflicting ideologies. However, the ballads “Sister Maude” and “Noble Sisters” portray sororal bonds not only frayed but destroyed as one sister betrays another. These are the two most vicious of Rossetti’s sister poems; the rage is not contained because as Jeanie Watson notes, “if you cannot trust the love of a sister, what can you trust?” (55) Although the betrayed sisters in these two poems are themselves transgressive (both have illicit lovers), the sister who betrays is more transgressive because she has violated the rules of sisterhood. The betrayed sister becomes a victim twice—she loses her lover and her sister. The sense of loss is thus doubled as she is denied the two most significant loves in her life.

In “Sister Maude,” as in Browning’s “Bertha in the Lane,” the betrayed sister speaks. She accuses her sister of revealing an illicit affair to their parents because the sister had desires for the same man—a double sin because she tattles and does it for selfish reasons. Instead of sacrificing herself to save the fallen sister, the betraying sister lets her own sexual desires disrupt the sisterhood. The betrayed sister believes her lover is dead because her sister told their parents about him. Now, the speaker remains unfulfilled and unredeemed. She does not blame her parents for doing what they had to do, nor does she feel much shame for her affair. Instead, her rage is directed at the betraying sister. She insinuates that she risked all their souls for a man who would not look at her even if the betrayed sister “had not been born at all” (11). The ballad becomes one long vituperation and finally a curse: “But sister Maude, O sister Maude, / Bide you with death and sin” (21-22).
Sisterhood shifts the triangle once again, as the betrayed sister makes clear that the sisters are not supposed to be rivals for the same man. In violating the sororal code of conduct, the betraying sister set up the triangular relationship between two women and one man. The betraying sister does not let sisterhood mediate, but rather she lets her desires prevail. As a result, everyone loses.

"Sister Maude" appeared in the 1862 Goblin Market edition, but was withdrawn until William Michael Rossetti issued a volume of his sister's work in 1896. He asserts that she withdrew the poem because it was too similar to Tennyson's 1832 "The Sisters," but it is not really at all similar. As Dorothy Stuart notes, the story of a woman and her lover betrayed by her jealous sister "has been retold by numberless ballad-singers . . . never better than in the Scottish version known as 'Binnorie'" (99). It is more likely that the poem was withdrawn because the words coming from the enraged sister's mouth were considered too improper by both Rossetti and her critics (Charles 66; Rosenblum 160). Since her reviewers wrote mostly for religious and conservative journals, her poems and Rossetti herself tended to be judged in terms of their representation of traditional Christian teachings and ethics (Charles 66). While the sister's betrayal is played out against a Christian background, the speaker disrupts the moral code: the illicit lovers have a chance of entering heaven, but Maude is condemned to hell. Violating the sister's code of conduct is far more unforgivable than the lovers' sins. "Sister Maude" would not have fallen within an acceptable Rossetti canon because it does not embody the Christian ideal that critics found so significant in the

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*In Tennyson's revenge poem a woman kills her sister's lover because her sister, now dead, was seduced by him. She makes him fall in love with her, and although very much attracted to him, she stabs him to death.*
Goblin Market sororal bond, and yet, in its own way, it certainly speaks to Rossetti's belief in the value of sisterhood, a relationship apparently more valuable than any other.

“Noble Sisters” also focuses on sororal betrayal. The love is again illicit; the betrayed sister has been waiting for secret messages from her lover. But what she learns when she questions her sister is that her sister, under the guise of sister love, has lied and thwarted the betrayed sister's opportunity for love. Not only has she turned back the lover's messengers, but she sends the lover away by telling him the sister is already married. When the betrayed sister admonishes her sister (“Fie, sister, fie, a wicked lie . . . .”[49]) and announces that not only will she never have any love but him, but that she will go in search of him, the betraying sister, this time, pronounces the curse and identifies the problem:

‘Go seek in sorrow, sister,  
And find in sorrow too:  
If thus you shame our father's name  
My curse go forth with you.’ (57-60)

The disruption that this man caused is a disruption to the father's good name. The betraying sister privileges the rules of the father and the patriarchal order over sisterhood. Her own desire for an honorable name and thus a chance at an honorable marriage is more important than love for her sister. Instead of self-sacrifice to save the fallen sister (fallen because the love is secret) or a direct confrontation with her sister, the betraying sister is willing to sacrifice the other's happiness and the sororal bond in order to maintain society's approval and respect. Her motive and method are wrong (unsisterly), and thus her attempts to protect and save her sister are only under the guise of sisterly love and ring as false as her lies.
Although the love may be illicit, the lover, like the lover in "Sister Maude," is portrayed as honorable—"A young man tall and strong, / Swift-footed to uphold the right / And to uproot the wrong . . . " (38-40). We do not know why the sister must at this point keep the love a secret, but it is clear that she considers the love noble. Thus, the betrayal which the betraying sister sees as honorable and a means of salvation is not redemptive—nor is it wanted. The betrayed sister is left both unfulfilled and denied of love. The title of the poem becomes ironic. Although both sisters see themselves as noble, they also see one another as transgressive.

In these three Rossetti poems, a disruption to sisterhood leaves one sister unfulfilled in another part of her life. The resolution in "The Lowest Room" leaves the sisterhood intact, but the rebuked elder sister must present an outward appearance of having learned her lesson in order to maintain a relationship with her sister. Both "Sister Maude" and "Noble Sisters" end with a curse and certainly no possibility of reconciliation. Implicit in these poems is the need to maintain sisterhood for the good of the self, and yet it cannot be a false sisterhood, a lie. There is still a sisterly conduct book in place, a list of shoulds implicitly attached to these poems: rivalries and jealousies should be overcome; betrayal should not happen. Transgressive sisters need to be saved, not betrayed. The negative is used to define sisterhood, but Lizzie and Laura are still paradigms for appropriate sororal behavior.

"Maiden-Song" was composed after the other sister poems and first appeared in The Prince's Progress and Other Poems in 1866. It does not present the sisterly extremes of Goblin Market and the acrimonious sister

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16 Jeanie Watson believes that the illicit love is because the sister is indeed married but argues that "Noble Sisters' asserts that true love is the right that must be upheld and the wrong of an unloving marriage uprooted" (56-57).
poems. This song also differs from the other Rossetti poems in this chapter in that it is not told in first person by one of the sisters; thus it lacks the intensity of emotion found in the other three. Instead, the third person distancing, the rhythm (not rushed like the ballads), and the simple rhyme assist in giving the appearance that the three sisters have worked out a harmonious resolution to their competition and differences. However, like the sister in “The Lowest Room,” Meggan and May must accept second place and must recognize Margaret as fairest of them all. In making adjustments, the sisters are shown as reconciled to who they are and what they can have in life.

The three sisters are at an age for marrying. All three are beautiful, but fair Margaret outshines tall Meggan and dainty May. One day Meggan takes May with her to look for strawberry leaves, but she instructs Margaret to stay home. It is clear that the two are used to going out together, and although it is not clear early in the poem why Margaret is left behind, later it becomes apparent that when Margaret is not with them, May and Meggan become “The loveliest maidens near or far” (60). On the particular day of the poem, Meggan’s singing attracts a herdsman while May’s entices a shepherd. The herdsman proposes to Meggan, and she accepts because:

‘Better be first with him,
Than dwell where fairer Margaret sits,
Who shines my brightness dim,
For ever second where she sits,
However fair I be:
I will be lady of his love,
And he shall worship me . . . ’ (97-103)

Meggan understands her position in relationship to Margaret, understands the consequences of being Margaret’s sister, and realizes that her herdsman will raise her to a first position with him instead of the lowly second she must be in
with her sister. Her words are words of recognition and acceptance rather than acrimony. There can be no competition where her sister Margaret is concerned. For May it is much the same, and she accepts her shepherd, who offers all he has to her, because ""Where Margaret shines like the sun / I shine but like a moon"" (146-147). One sister dominates, and for the sisters to be a sisterhood, which they seem to desire, the other two must accept her position as first and theirs as second. This is not a triangle that places the women in competition with one another only because two of them understand they cannot compete with the third. Of course, Meggan and May realize that the reason they have their two men is because "Fair Margaret stayed alone at home" (153), and according to the sisters' plan, they will marry before they return home—no sense in taking any chances.17 Interestingly, the two sisters, apparently more equal in beauty, do not feel in competition with one another. Instead, they band together to accept the consequences of their place and seem comfortable spending time with one another. Unity still seems a priority—as long as Meggan and May have a place where they also shine.

Margaret, meanwhile, receives her appropriate reward. When her sisters do not return when she expects them, she worries and goes out into the garden to look and wait. In her concern, she, too, sings; she sings to call them home, and of course, in her sisterly concern, it is the most beautiful song ever sung. The king hears her, as does every other living creature in the area, and they all hurry to her. She sings Meggan and May and their husbands home.

17 "A Ring Posy," which also appeared in *The Prince's Progress*, is a reverse of "Maiden-Song." Like Meggan and May, Jess and Jill are lovely and can sing, but they are not yet married. Margaret's counterpart and opposite, the narrator, is not beautiful but "thin and sallow-pale" (7). However, as she boasts, she is the one who is married.
and at the end of her song, she is claimed by the king. The song of concern for her sisters becomes her mating song, and indeed, her song connects everyone, including "friend and foe" (218). Her desire for sisterhood, for reunion with her missing sisters, leads her to a larger connection with a husband and with the community. Her love extends to all, thus reinforcing her superiority to her sisters, whose love seems more selfish and less inclusive.

Rivalry and jealousy between sisters goes back far beyond the nineteenth-century, but as Christine Downing aptly notes in her research on sisters in mythology, fairy tales, and psychology, it has never been easy "to admit [sororal rivalry] as a given, to enjoy it as a challenge" (29). While the norm for men is autonomy, for sisters it is the connectedness of sisterhood. The works in this chapter generally reveal the Victorian unease with the possibility that potential husbands in sisters' lives could disrupt the harmony of that bond. It was difficult for both women and men to acknowledge that rivalry existed because it had the potential not only to disrupt the bond but to destroy it. There was fear that the conflict and competition could not be resolved. Jealousy suggested that one sister had something the other desired (usually a man), and the myth of mutuality and equality was disrupted. Victorians had reason for discomfort with rivalry and jealousy because those feelings challenged the idealization. Thus, attempts had to be made to deny or disguise jealousy and rivalry—or even make them disappear. From the saccharine sweetness of Charles Dickens's *The Battle of Life* to the bitter hostility of Christina Rossetti's "Sister Maude," there is the ever-present code of conduct of sisterhood that is to mediate any difficulty when a man enters the picture.
CHAPTER IV
"THE ASSURANCE WHICH WE GAVE TO EACH OTHER": THE SECULAR SISTERHOOD OF CRANFORD

"In the first place, Cranford is in possession of the Amazons" (39)—thus begins Elizabeth Gaskell's humorous and touching series of sketches devoted to a community of single women and widows, some of them biological sisters, living on their own in a small town in 1830s England. Cranford provides insight into the connections between biological and metaphorical sisters by showing how principles of biological sisterhood are extended to others. This community of women provides a paradigm of secular sisterhood that works, and furthermore, in a Victorian society that privileges marriage for women, the sisterhood found in Cranford becomes a metaphor for an alternative way of life.

In 1851, the census report indicated that there were almost 360,000 more women of marriageable age in England than there were men (Nestor 3). In addition, 42 percent of women between the ages of 20 and 40 were not married and 2 million of the 6 million British women had to support themselves (Poovey 4). This set of statistics indicated a particularly acute problem for middle class women because if a woman did not marry, she had very few options and little purpose in life (Vicinus 3). According to cultural dictates and

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1 All quotations and page references are from Elizabeth Gaskell's Cranford/Cousin Phillis. New York: Penguin Classics, 1976.

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beliefs, the “natural” role of women was that of wife and mother, but the census figures indicated that an enormous number of women were to lead unfulfilled lives. This crisis gave mid-Victorian England an additional pressure to finding an answer to the Woman Question and to finding a place for these women to be and something for them to do.² On December 13 of the same year as the census report, “Our Society at Cranford,” what was later to form the first two chapters of Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford, appeared in Charles Dickens’s Household Words. Cranford answers the question of what to do with what were called “redundant,” “superfluous,” or “odd” women by giving them a community of their own. But in doing so, Gaskell also raises an important question of her own: given the way women’s nature has been defined and the limited options available to her, what would happen if the woman’s sphere was hegemonic?

The esprit de corps of Gaskell’s women is grounded in the tenets of biological sisterhood, but unlike most of the other works I have examined, Cranford is not an idealized version of either biological or metaphorical sisterhood. Nor is it the Utopia others have suggested.³ While Cranford

²For a lengthy discussion of what Martha Vicinus calls women’s “revolt against redundancy” (10), see Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920. See also Mary Poovey’s Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England. Both women respond to W. R. Greg’s solution presented in his 1862 essay “Why Are Women Redundant?” He proposed shipping the unmarried women to the colonies and the United States where there were excess numbers of unmarried men.

³See, for example, Coral Lansbury’s discussion. She views Cranford as “a village of old women, single and widowed, women who live joyfully together in a small Utopian community” (72). In stark contrast, Martin Dodsworth claims that “the lack of true vitality” in Cranford is because there are no men (140). “The dangerous elements of feminism” must be dealt a blow in order to humanize Cranford again (143)—certainly not a Utopian vision.
portrays the benefits of sisterhood, it also offers a gentle critique of its problems. The tie that binds the women is both supportive and repressive, yet the benefits gained from the support outweigh the repression. At the beginning of Cranford, the narrator Mary Smith describes each of the women as having “her own individuality, not to say eccentricity, pretty strongly developed . . . but somehow good-will reigns among them to a considerable degree” (39-40). As the novel progresses, we see that their “good-will” extends into genuine concern for one another which in turn develops into action on behalf of each other. The community of Cranford succeeds because the women are able to maintain a delicate balance between selfhood and interdependence, and the power which the women gain from their sense of community provides them with an agency they would not have on their own.

Elizabeth Gaskell uses the Cranfordian sisterhood to examine gender and class issues, particularly as they relate to women. In order to make the women’s sphere hegemonic, she exaggerates the separation of men’s and women’s spheres and emphasizes Victorian notions of masculinity and femininity. To reinforce and symbolize the distance between the spheres, Gaskell locates the gentlemen geographically outside of Cranford; they are allowed entrance when they fulfill a need, usually economic. When they do intrude, they disappear as Mary Smith is quick to note at the beginning of the novel:

If a married couple come to settle in the town, somehow the gentleman disappears; he is either fairly frightened to death by being the only man in the Cranford evening parties, or he is accounted for by being with his regiment, his ship, or closely

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4 Eileen Gillooly also identifies the woman’s sphere as hegemonic (884) while Jane Spencer notes that “the woman’s sphere seems to have expanded into an entire community of women” (80).
engaged in business all the week in the great neighbouring commercial town of Drumble . . . In short, whatever does become of the gentlemen, they are not at Cranford. (39)

The gentlemen's world is located elsewhere—in Drumble or London, on a ship, or on Hoibrook's estate, and it does not seem particularly important to the women of Cranford what they do, as long as they stay away. The men who do live in Cranford are separated from the women by class; they are relied on for goods and services, but their class rank, lower than that of the genteel Cranford women's, keeps them at a distance.®

More important than where the men are is the fact that "In the first place, Cranford is in possession of the Amazons" (39; underlining mine). The Cranford women's Amazon status is ironic, yet Amazonian in its own right. The women may be "in the first place," but the town possesses these women because they cannot live anywhere else without giving up their hegemony. The men-hating Amazons of Greek mythology lived "near the borders of the world," attacking the men's territories and always being defeated (Cotterell 179). The Cranfordian Amazons also live near the borders of the world, but when Gaskell focuses on the women's world rather than the men's, the men's world is made to appear on the border, to appear marginalized. The women do not venture out to attack; they are not interested in nor can they usurp the men's world. Rather, the men come to them, and unless men are willing to adapt to Cranford, they do not survive. The otherness of men is so apparent in Cranford that when Miss Matty's maid is sneaking a "foilower" into the house, Mary Smith senses that "a vision of a man seemed to haunt the kitchen" (65).

® A similar situation is described in Gaskell's "Mr. Harrison's Confession": "... five'sixths of our householders of a certain rank in Duncombe are women. We have widows and old maids in rich abundance. In fact my dear sir, I believe that you and I are almost the only gentlemen in the place . . . " (213).
Cranford is obviously the women's place, and the men are obviously outsiders.

Gaskell defines the strength of these Amazons by locating it generally in the feminine and specifically in the genteel. In Cranford, the more a woman fits the womanly ideal, the more Amazonian she is (Auerbach 83). These women do not cut off a breast, a sign of their womanliness, in order to draw a bow, a man's weapon. Rather, the weapons which they bring to the battle with the masculine world include kindness, gentleness, and a strong sense of sororal community based on reciprocity, mutuality, a concern for the welfare of others, and a strict code of gentility. Hate is too strong an emotion for the Cranford women; instead, their feelings for men are dealt with in kinder, gentler, feminine reactions: ""A man,' as one of them observed . . . , 'is so in the way in the house!'" (39); and as Mary Smith comments, "... in our love for gentility, and distaste of mankind, we had almost persuaded ourselves that to be a man was to be 'vulgar'" (45; underlining mine). Mankind is vulgar; womankind is genteel.

Class also helps reinforce and maintain the separate spheres as well as the women's hegemony. In Cranford "all the holders of houses, above a certain rent, are women" (39), and this class status provides them with another part of their Amazonian strength. In a Victorian world which both socially and economically marginalized single women, unlike their married counterparts they did have the right to own property (Auerbach 79). While the Cranford women must practice what they call "elegant economy" (42) in order to maintain their homes (rented or owned), their upper-middle class status

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*I did not intentionally borrow from George Bush. Gaskell repeatedly uses "kind" and "gentle" to describe the women. If Bush wanted a "kinder, gentler nation," he could have looked to Cranford as a model.*
endows them with the ability to live alone and not rely on other family members to take them in. They also can hide their penury behind their gentility. In fact, their shabby gentility becomes a part of their femininity. Talking about money and spending money is vulgar and "savoured of commerce and trade" (41), hence of masculinity. By negatively referencing masculine otherness throughout Cranford, the women reinforce the desirability of their position. To be what men are not maintains their privileged position in Cranford.

Separating the spheres and defining the boundaries and rules for gender as rigidly as Gaskell does at the beginning of Cranford alerts us to the problem single genteel women faced in mid-Victorian England and the difficulty mid-Victorian England faced in acknowledging their presence and their needs. By 1850, there was general agreement "that a single woman from the middle class should remain at home throughout her adulthood and fulfill her duties as daughter and sister" (Vicinus 10; underlining mine). There was little room for her in the developing financial-industrial world, and her employment prospects were generally reduced to the low-paying, marginalized, domestic work of governess, seamstress, and companion (Vicinus 3). (As Suzann Bick notes, Gaskell herself had difficulty reconciling the traditional role of wife and mother with that of author, apparent, for example, in her biography of Charlotte Brontë [35].) In Cranford, Gaskell places women "at home," but it is in their own homes, and the daughter-sister roles extend beyond the traditional familial lines first to the other women and finally to the men of Cranford. Aware that women have been cut off from the men's world, she gives them a world of their own with only the typical
resources available to them.

As a community of women, Cranford is solidly located within the principles of sisterhood. Several sister pairs live within the town, and their relationships with one another are themselves modeled after the expectations of Victorian sister relationships. In turn, their relationships form the basis for the sister bond that pervades Cranford. Thus, once again, as sisterhood mediates the women's relationships with one another, there is the desire to pull the sisters into a circle of unity and protection rather than maintain a divisive and lonely triangle as René Girard's model suggests should happen. These sisters place their relationship with one another before other relationships, and their connections with one another sustain them throughout their lives—even after one of the sisters dies. It is clear that the relationship with a sister gives a woman a place to be when there is nowhere else for her to go, but paradoxically, it is also clear that sometimes the reason a woman has nowhere else to go is because she has chosen to be with her sister. As they form a loving bond with one another, they also demonstrate the tensions and frustrations when the individual suppresses one desire in favor of the duties and connections of sisterhood, also a desire. In other words, the desire for a sister often competes with the desire for marriage and children. Yet once again, choosing sisterhood, especially when it involves self-denial and the sacrifice of personal desires for the sake of a sister, is admired by others and in Cranford becomes a model for others. The privileging of sisterhood has its own benefits and its own rewards that allow the sisters to suppress other desires, make choices to be with the sister, and sustain the bond without much jealousy, rivalry, or resentment.
The Miss Barkers are one set of sisters in Cranford, although the elder Miss Barker is already dead by the time we meet the Cranford women. We do not know why they never married; in fact, we do not learn much about the Miss Barkers. We do know that after saving enough money while working as ladies’ maids, they set up a milliner’s shop in order to make a living together. They were solid businesswomen, learning how to develop an elite clientele and earning enough money to permit Miss Betty to retire comfortably and buy a cow (a sign of respectability in Cranford) after her sister’s death. Mary Smith also reports that the Miss Barkers were “self-denying, good people” who took meals to the poor and “only aped their betters in having ‘nothing to do’ with the class immediately below theirs” (106). No matter what the Miss Barkers may have said to keep up appearances and no matter how exclusive they made their shop, their kindness extended to anyone in need, and they were admired for it. When Miss Betty gains verification and acceptance in Cranford society, a subject I will deal with later, she wishes her sister were there to share the honor. They become an example of the Victorian sisters who band together to sustain themselves economically, in a way which eventually benefits Miss Betty socially.

The Miss Browns are another pair of conventional Victorian sisters. Their mother is dead; their father, until his death, is one of the few men who tries to live in Cranford. Their story is one of self-sacrifice for the sister’s sake, including the pain of one who cannot sacrifice for the other. The sisters are, of course, different. The elder Miss Brown is around forty, plain, careworn, and dying. Miss Jessie is ten years younger and “twenty shades prettier” (44). Much is made of her innocence and the dimples and prim curls that irritate the
other Cranford ladies (their indirect jealousy of her marriage eligibility) until they learn of all she does and all she suffers for her sister. At first we suspect that Miss Brown, being plain and forty and dressing not as well as her sister ("any female observer might detect a slight difference in the attire of the two sisters—that of Miss Jessie being about two pounds per annum more expensive than Miss Brown's" [44]), has done her older sister duty and cared for the younger, more beautiful sister, but instead the situation is reversed; the elder sister is ill and dying. However, we do learn later that she is irritated because she has not been able to fulfill her role:

Miss Brown used to accuse herself, not merely of hasty and irritable temper: but also of being the cause why her father and sister were obliged to pinch, in order to allow her the small luxuries which were necessaries in her condition. She would so fain have made sacrifices for them and have lightened their cares, that the original generosity of her disposition added acerbity to her temper. (50)

It is not a contest to see which sister can out-sacrifice the other. Instead, Miss Brown recognizes what she, as a daughter and sister, is supposed to be like and that her illness has forced her to go against her nature, i.e. woman's nature. Her debilitating illness has transformed her into a woman full of "unmitigated crossness" and "bitter self-upbraidings" (50) rather than the generous, self-sacrificing woman she wanted to be.

Miss Jessie becomes somewhat of a heroine to Mary Smith (and earns her respect) when she learns how much Miss Jessie bears because of her sister's illness and with what "absolute tenderness" she handles her sister's volatile temper (50). To Miss Matty, she is an angel, for she suspects how much Miss Jessie and her father have sacrificed for Miss Brown's comfort. In typical Cranfordian style, the new-found respect for Miss Jessie permits the
women to forgive her social faux pas: "I forgave Miss Jessie her singing out of tune, and her juvenility of dress, when I saw her at home" (50); "My dear! you could never laugh at her prim little curls or her pink bows again, if you saw her as I have done" (54). But also in Cranfordian style, all the women respond to Miss Jessie's self-denial and her sister's illness with kindness and thoughtfulness translated into action. The community of women reaches out to embrace their fellow sisters in ways that Mary Smith acknowledges do not happen elsewhere:

I had often occasion to notice the use that was made of fragments and small opportunities in Cranford; the rose-leaves that were gathered ere they fell, to make into a pot-pourri for some one who had no garden . . . . Things that many would despise, and actions which it seemed scarcely worth while to perform, were all attended to in Cranford. Miss Jenkyns stuck an apple full of cloves, to be heated and smell pleasantly in Miss Brown's room . . . . (54)

Their simple acts, which include fixing dinner and sitting by an ill person's bedside, are acts of kindness which are designed to relieve suffering and provide support, and they are acts which also reinforce the idea that vulgar amounts of money are not a panacea for woes.

When Captain Brown dies, Miss Deborah Jenkyns sets aside her differences with the family and announces that she "must go to those girls" (56). Under Miss Jenkyns's guidance, the women organize themselves around Miss Jessie. Miss Pole, Miss Matty, and Mary Smith sit with Miss Brown while Miss Jessie and Miss Jenkyns attend the Captain's funeral. Then, as Miss Brown is also dying, they make plans to offer relief to Miss Jessie. Miss Jenkyns once again takes charge, "evidently in a state of great friendly excitement" (58). Within days Miss Jessie loses all her family, but the
Cranford women are ready to step in and fill the empty space. She is taken in, both physically and emotionally, by the Jenkyns sisters, who invite her to live with them. In fulfilling the bonds of sisterhood, no one is to be left destitute and alone.

Only after her sister's death do the women learn the extent of Miss Jessie's self-sacrifice. Years earlier she had received a marriage offer from a man in her father's regiment, but because of her sister's illness, she had declined his offer. When Major Gordon learns of Captain Brown's death, he finds Miss Jessie and proposes to her once again. This time she accepts. She and her husband leave Cranford—after all it is no place for a married couple, but she retains an affectionate tie to the women. As her daughter Flora grows up, she, too, becomes a visitor in Cranford. Women may leave, but the extended family that is Cranford is always a home to which they can return. It is also a place where they can send their daughters and where their daughters are welcomed and want to be.

Miss Jessie earns admiration and respect from the Cranford women, but at the same time, she presents an idealized version of the self-sacrificing sister. She is all sweetness and understanding, always placing her sister's needs above her own. Her trials are handled with the utmost equanimity. She sees the kindness of others directed at her sister, but her modesty and self-effacement never permit her to acknowledge how much of it is because of what others see in her. She provides a model of self-control and restraint, and when the other women help tend Miss Brown, they receive first-hand understanding of Miss Jessie's nature:

Miss Pole, Miss Matty, and I, meanwhile, attended to Miss Brown: and hard work we found it to relieve her querulous and never-ending complaints. But if we were so weary and dispirited, what
must Miss Jessie have been! Yet she came back [from her father's funeral] almost calm, as if she had gained a new strength. She put off her mourning dress [so her sister will not suspect the father's death], and came in, looking pale and gentle; thanking us each with a soft pressure of the hand. She could even smile—a faint, sweet, wintry smile—as if to reassure us of her power to endure; but her look made our eyes fill suddenly with tears, more than if she had cried outright. (57-58)

The ideal sister is also the ideal woman, and thus Miss Jessie is rewarded for her self-denying goodness, first by the support of all the other Cranford women, but most importantly, by the appearance of Major Gordon, the deus ex machina who will rescue her from impending poverty and the inevitability of single life in Cranford. When she becomes the major's wife, her dimples, so much a symbol of her innocent sexuality, "were not out of place" (61).

The last set of biological sister pairs to examine, Deborah and Matilda (Matty) Jenkyns, are also the most important pair in Cranford. Nina Auerbach rightly identifies their relationship as the "heart of the Cranford community," also calling them the unofficial reigning queens of the town (80). Although a titular nod is given by the Cranford women to Mrs. Jamieson by virtue of her status as daughter-in-law to a baron, the Jenkyns sisters provide the leadership for the Cranfordian sisterhood. Their home becomes a center for discussing rules and obtaining advice and support. While Deborah is alive, she organizes activities such as the support of the Brown family, and after her death, the community turns to Matty. Deborah and Matty live together and must rely on each other for comfort and support, both emotional and financial. Their parents are dead, and their brother Peter has not been heard from for years and is presumed dead. As with the other sister pairs, their message is that sisters take care of each other; it is as much a desire as a duty. And, as
the heart of Cranford, they also extend their hearts to the other women.

As a sister pair, they, like the Brown sisters, are different from one another, and their difference becomes Gaskell’s means for examining who defines women’s nature and who establishes options for women’s lives. Although the Cranford world is located in the women’s sphere and it is feminine, a tension exists over who controls the feminine—the world of the father as represented by Deborah Jenkyns or the world of the mother as represented by her sister Matty. Deborah dies early in the novel, but her death does not provide an easy resolution, for her sister remains haunted by Deborah’s and thus the father’s presence.

Miss Deborah Jenkyns reminds Mary Smith of the Old Testament prophetess Deborah:7 “I secretly think she took the Hebrew prophetess for a model in character . . . . and altogether had the appearance of a strong-minded woman; although she would have despised the modern idea of women being equal to men. Equal, indeed! she knew they were superior” (51). The patriarchal judge Deborah is a fitting model, for Miss Deborah is her father’s daughter, his favorite and, after his son failed him, his pride. She carries on her father’s code, but it is translated into the strict feminine code of gentility which she both embodies and upholds. Her dress is the masculine feminized—she wears a cravat and “a little bonnet that is like a jockey-cap” (51), which at Captain Brown’s funeral resembles a helmet. Her father’s firmness becomes “a tender indulgent firmness” (57), and she rules her sister

7 Judges 4. Deborah directs Barak to take his army to the Kishon river where she will have drawn out the general Sisera and his army. Barak defeats the army, but another woman, Jael, has the privilege of killing Sisera by driving a peg through his temple and into the ground.
Matty and Cranford with a firm kindness, grounded in the rules of the father. Deborah chose her single life in order to fulfill what she saw as her duty. The day of their mother’s funeral she told her sister “that if she had a hundred offers, she never would marry and leave [her] father” (102). Matty claims Deborah “was such a daughter to my father, as I think there never was before, or since” (102). Following the expected conventions of the time, she becomes the self-sacrificing daughter, who sought to substitute for both the son and wife her father lost, but she never quite succeeds in replacing either one. When Peter briefly returns while their father is still living, Deborah “was quite put in a corner” (103) because, of course, the daughter can never replace the son. Where she does develop her authority is in the feminine world of Cranford, first in connection to her sister, then in relationship to the other women.

In stark contrast to Deborah is her sister Matty. If Deborah represents her father, Matty represents her mother. Deborah was her father’s right hand; Matty her mother’s. Where Deborah is stern, forceful, and strong, Matty is gentle, tender, and weak. Pauline Nestor suggests that this pairing of the masculine and the feminine in the two single sisters offers a substitute to the marriages they never had (50), and certainly the two women live out the lives of their parents, fulfilling their roles in both the household and their community. Deborah is the more dominant and dominating sister, and Matty can only live in her shadow. Both self-deprecating and self-effacing, Matty defers to Deborah and sees herself at most as Deborah’s support. When Deborah

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*Modifying the rules of her father is reminiscent of Jeanie Deans in Scott’s *The Heart of Midlothian*. She also developed a modified form of her father’s principles.

* Nestor also notes that this pairing by Gaskell first appeared in the Tomkinson sisters in “Mr. Harrison’s Confession” and was repeated in Miss Browning and Miss Phoebe in *Wives and Daughters* (50).}
takes on the job of caring for her father, Matty describes how she sees herself in relationship not only to Deborah but to others as well: "I did all I could to set Deborah at liberty to be with him; for I knew I was good for little, and that my best work in the world was to do odd jobs quietly, and set others at liberty" (102-103).

Living in Deborah's shadow gives Matty no confidence of her own, and as a result, she is unable to identify her own strengths. When she and Deborah write letters to Mary Smith, Matty is apologetic, yet it is clear that Mary learns more from Matty and enjoys the letters far more than the ones from Deborah. Matty's inferiority complex nearly paralyzes her as the small incident with the letters shows:

Miss Matilda Jenkyns (who did not mind being called Miss Matty, when Miss Jenkyns was not by) wrote nice, kind, rambling letters; now and then venturing into an opinion of her own; but suddenly pulling herself up, and either begging me not to name what she had said, as Deborah thought differently, and she knew; or else putting in a postscript to the effect that, since writing the above, she had been talking over the subject with Deborah, and was quite convinced that &c.—(here probably followed a recantation of every opinion she had given in the letter). (51)

Matty's life in her sister's shadow becomes a series of postscripts and recantations which only begin to change after her sister's death.

Matty is a spinster because of Deborah's influence. Thomas Holbrook, a cousin of their friend Miss Pole, was once a suitor, but when he proposed, Matty turned him down. According to Miss Pole, although Matty was willing, "Thomas would not have been enough of a gentleman for the rector and Miss Jenkyns" (69). Once again, the desires of the sister (and father) and sisterhood took precedence over the desire for a husband, but while Matty rejected Holbrook in favor of the sister, the decision left her uneasy all her life.
Years later, when she meets Holbrook again, she is clearly affected as the old pleasures are remembered and the old wounds are reopened. Although she will not speak with Mary about her previous acquaintance with Holbrook, Mary believes it is because "she had probably met with so little sympathy in her early love, that she had shut it up close in her heart; and it was only by a sort of watching . . . that I saw how faithful her poor heart had been in its sorrow and its silence" (78). Matty treasures the book of Tennyson's poems which Holbrook gave her, keeping it by her bed after he dies. She also requests that the milliner make her a cap like Mrs. Jamieson's—a widow's cap that she wears in his honor, her way of silently mourning her loss.

Matty seems quietly aware of her unfulfilled life (Nestor 54). She has repressed her sexuality and desires for motherhood in favor of sisterhood, and it is not without regret and pain. In one of the most touching scenes in *Cranford*, Matty tells Mary Smith about her recurring dream of having a child of her own. Liking children but fearing she has lost the knack with them, she tells Mary that she has "a strange yearning at my heart whenever I see a mother with her baby in her arms . . . I dream sometimes that I have a little child . . . she comes to me when she is very sorry or very glad, and I have wakened with the clasp of her dear little arms round my neck" (159). She ends her reverie by warning Mary not to be afraid of marriage, imagining it might be "a very happy state" (159). Matty's sexuality is so repressed and her desire for children so buried in dreams that she does not recognize her maid Martha's pregnancy, and Martha must ask Mary Smith to visit in order to tell Matty of the impending birth.
Matty is reminded of what she gave up when she sees Holbrook again, and his death brings Matty to a quiet confrontation with her dead sister and her feelings for that sister. While she respected and deferred to Deborah, loved her dearly, and privileged the sororal bond, her resentment over Deborah's control, her yearning for what could have been with Holbrook, and her conflicted feelings about her sister surface indirectly in a defense of Deborah:

... as if to make up for some reproachful feeling against her late sister, Miss Jenkyns, which had been troubling her all the afternoon, and for which she now felt penitent, she kept telling me how good and how clever Deborah was in her youth; how she used to settle what gowns they were to wear at all the parties... and how Deborah and her mother had started the benefit society for the poor... and how Deborah had once danced with a lord... and how she had nursed Miss Matty through a long, long illness, of which I had never heard before, but which I now dated in my mind as following the dismissal of the suit of Mr. Holbrook. (80-81)

But in dealing with her feelings, she also begins to relax the rules. The same day as Holbrook's death, Matty changes her mind on Deborah's strict rules forbidding "followers" for the help, thus paving the way for her maid Martha to marry. Although Matty herself was not allowed to marry, she does not want to see herself responsible for "grie[v]ing any young hearts" (82). Holbrook's death helps free Matty from her dead sister's control, but it also opens up the ideals of sisterhood and thus the circle and extends the bond across class lines to include other women in its embrace. Matty intuitively senses that the strict code for sisterhood must be changed, its exclusiveness and rigidity relaxed.

With Deborah's death, Matty ascends to the leadership position in Cranford, thus transferring the power from the masculine control of sisterhood
and the community to the feminine, but the transfer does not happen easily because Matty continues to live in the shadow of her sister and Matty is unaware of her power. At first, Deborah's rules, the rules by which the sisters, their guests, and the other Cranford women lived, are made more stringent. Since Matty "was meek and undecided to a fault," following her sister's rules not only preserves Deborah's presence but also allows Matty to continue not making decisions for herself. For a long time, in everything from eating oranges to visiting Holbrook's estate, she is guided by what Deborah would have said and done. Caps, the symbol of what the Cranford women are, point to Matty's problem with her sister and the beginning of its resolution. At home Matty wore one of her sister's best caps, but when she was to be seen by others, she wore the widow's cap that honored Holbrook. One day when Miss Betty Barker calls, Matty, in her haste to change caps, ends up wearing both of them—at a time when she must decide how appropriate it is to attend a tea party at Miss Barker's. Until Matty can feel comfortable with her own sense of self, she does wear two caps (metaphorically), but those caps also represent the way Matty begins to blend the old with the new in order to usher in new possibilities for the women. Significantly, the literal wearing of the two caps comes at a time when Matty accepts an invitation to visit a home which previously would have been out of the realm of her genteel world, and Mary appropriately notes that Matty "did not feel the unusual weight and extraordinary height of her head-dress" (107).¹⁰

¹⁰ In another cap episode, Matty wants Mary Smith to bring her a turban from Drumble that she could wear to a big event. However, Mary is "anxious to prevent her from disfiguring her small gentle mousey face with a great Saracen's head turban" (129). An exotic and masculine turban would not fit the feminine Miss Matty; instead, Mary buys her a proper woman's cap.
Like Miss Jessie earlier in the novel, Matty cannot believe others respond positively to her because of who she is and not because she is Deborah’s sister. However, it is precisely because of who Matty is that she is much beloved in Cranford. Although self-effacing Matty does not believe that Mary Smith would come to stay with her (“since my dear sister’s death, I am well aware I have no attractions to offer” [63]), Mary clearly adores Matty. And so do all the other Cranfordians. Thus, when Deborah dies and Matty is left alone, she is not alone. The other women rally around her and offer her their comfort and support. Miss Matty and Miss Pole spend more time together, and Mary Smith visits as often as she can, frequently for extended periods of time. Following a hunch, Mary also begins a search for Matty’s lost brother.

While her sister Deborah ruled Cranford with an authority based on a strict code of conduct, Matty’s power in Cranford stems from her unconditional love and the kindness she extends to others. As she becomes a model others admire and desire to emulate, she gently influences Cranford in a way that is far different from her sister’s. Mary Smith offers her observations on the relationship between Matty and the other people in Cranford:

It was really very pleasant to see how her unselfishness and simple sense of justice called out the same good qualities in others. She never seemed to think any one would impose upon her, because she would be so grieved to do it to them. I have heard her put a stop to the asseverations of the man who brought her coals, by quietly saying, “I am sure you would be sorry to bring me the wrong weight;” . . . People would have felt as much ashamed of presuming on her good faith as they would have done on that of a child. (201)

Patricia Wolfe notes that “it is amusingly symbolic that Matty is never able to answer questions of decorum without becoming supremely perplexed. Miss Matty’s only answers to social questions are based upon naive good sense and a high degree of personal benevolence, not upon a superimposed code of social behavior” (167-168).
Or, as Mary's father discovers, "a good innocent life makes friends all around. Confound it! I could make a good lesson out of it if I were a parson" (196).

Matty needs no rules of sisterhood to mediate her relationships with others, as she learns when she gradually weans herself from Deborah's rules. And as she connects to others, they respond to her. By the end of the book, Matty becomes the embodiment of the sisterly ideal in Cranford and the connecting point for all its inhabitants. Cranford begins with the Amazons in general, but it ends with Matty, as the Amazons' chief representative and the heart of Cranford:

Ever since that day there has been the old friendly sociability in Cranford society; which I am thankful for, because of my dear Miss Matty's love of peace and kindliness. We all love Miss Matty, and I somehow think we are all of us better when she is near us.

Matty teaches her lessons of love by example; her goodness comes from her heart. When the other women gossip and titter about Mrs. Jamieson and Lady Glenmire, Matty is obviously uneasy about their cutting remarks. She tries to be forgiving about Mrs. Jamieson's own distasteful comments about the Cranford women, making excuses for Mrs. Jamieson's behavior but finally deciding that part of her hurt feelings stems from knowing that she never would have said the unkind things Mrs. Jamieson did. Although the Cranford women panic because of suspected robbers in the neighborhood, Matty, Miss Pole, and Mary set aside their fears for their safety out of loyalty to Mrs. Forrester in order to join her for their yearly gathering on the anniversary of her wedding-day. Their code of kindness would have been violated and Mrs. Forrester left alone, and so Matty and the others were "gallantly determined to nail their colours to the mast, and to go through Darkness-lane rather than fail
in loyalty to their friend" (147). Their camaraderie and their courage also permit them to confess their fears to one another, moving another step beyond the bounds of propriety to the more intimate sisterhood of shared feelings, particularly of shared pain, fear, and sorrow.

When the bank in which Matty has invested fails, she wants to repay the poor people who suffer although she herself suffers as badly, and she also believes the bank directors must be suffering from self-reproach over what happened. But just as she wants to help others, the community rallies around her. Her maid Martha refuses to leave and finds a way to keep Matty's home intact by moving quickly with plans to marry her "follower" Jem Hearn, which will then allow Martha to stay in the house and keep Matty as a boarder. An anonymous friend (probably Mrs. Fitz-Adam) buys much of Matty's furniture and gives it back to her, so she can keep many of her things around her. The rector purchases the family library, but when he "discovers" that he does not have room for all the books, he asks Matty to keep some of them for him. When Mary Smith makes plans for Matty's tea shop, Matty is upset about being in competition with the other tea seller in town and first seeks him out to inquire if her business adventure will hurt his. However, the shopkeeper Mr. Johnson supports Matty by telling everyone that "the teas he kept were of a common kind but that Miss Jenkyns had all the choice sorts" (200-201) and encouraging the townspeople to buy tea from her. Both Mary and her father recognize that this is Cranford, and the support for Matty would not have been found elsewhere in the competitive business world of Drumble or London. But that becomes Gaskell's point. The woman's world of Cranford operates differently from the men's world of London, and as Mary's father knows, a
lesson could be made from both Matty, as the moral center of Cranford and the embodiment of its ideals, and the town itself.

Matty's friends hold a meeting to raise money for her. Although most of the women are not well-off financially, they decide to offer what they can to Matty and set up a fund, without her knowledge, which will help her meet expenses. Miss Pole tells Mary Smith in confidence:

'I [Miss Pole] have conversed in private . . . with these ladies on the misfortune which has happened to our friend,—and one and all of us have agreed that, while we have a superfluity, it is not only a duty but a pleasure,—a true pleasure, Mary!'—her voice was rather choked just here, and she had to wipe her spectacles before she could go on—'to give what we can to assist her—Miss Mathilda Jenkyns.' (191)

That the women are willing to talk about money at all speaks to the depth of their feelings for Matty, and it is not surprising that they want to keep the arrangements as secret as possible. Characteristic of the Cranfordian code of gentility, rather than speaking about amounts of money out loud, they write what they can give Matty on slips of paper. The desire to help Matty is so intense that the women wish they had more to offer. "For dear Miss Matty's sake" the women uncharacteristically wish they were rich, but as it is, the women offer enormous financial self-sacrifice for Matty. Mrs. Forrester's story becomes a nineteenth-century version of the parable of the widow's mite (Mark 12:42-44):

And yet that sum which [Mrs. Forrester] so eagerly relinquished was, in truth, more than a twentieth part of what she had to live upon, and keep house, and a little serving-maid . . . And when the whole income does not nearly amount to a hundred pounds, to give up a twentieth of it will necessitate many careful economies, and many pieces of self-denial—small and insignificant in the world's account, but bearing a different value in another account-book that I have heard of. She did so wish she was rich, she said; and this wish she kept repeating, with no
thought of herself in it, only with a longing, yearning desire to be able to heap up Miss Matty's measure of comforts. (193)

Mrs. Fitz-Adam, who does have more money, asks Mary to find a way for her to give more without offending anyone. She remembers the kindness which Miss Matty offered her years before when she was just a country girl and Matty was obviously troubled with her own problems (one of many oblique references to the Holbrook incident), and she admits that she has loved Matty ever since and "would do anything for her. We all would" (194).

The bond of sisterhood with which they encircle Matty, they extend to others, too, partly because of the lessons Matty teaches. After Deborah dies, class lines begin to blur slightly. The invitation to tea by Miss Barker becomes a class issue as the women must confront their prejudice and decide who is acceptable as a friend. Miss Barker, the retired shop owner who now owns a cow, works hard to learn the appropriate etiquette for entertaining. She has carefully thought through whom to invite and explains her decisions to Miss Matty as she extends the invitation. In wisely deciding who to invite and who to exclude, Miss Barker gently increases the circle of sisterhood without causing offense. At another time, the women discuss Mrs. Fitz-Adam, a farmer's daughter who seems to have married well, and finally accept her into the group; the only problem is Mrs. Jamieson, who is the last to relax the class distinctions and who is seen as the last defender of old ways.

When the widow Lady Glenmire comes to stay with Mrs. Jamieson, she is gradually absorbed into the Cranford community, partly by her own doing when she sets aside Mrs. Jamieson's rules. As a widow who has given up her home in Edinburgh, Lady Glenmire is yet another woman who has nowhere else to go. Cranford can provide a place for her, but the Cranford women,
caught up in their ideas about her rank in society, do not realize her need. Mrs. Jamieson, also concerned about rank, tries to keep her Cranford friends from Lady Glenmire. When they are finally invited to tea, the women worry about what to say because they believe she is different from them. However, once they find they can talk with her about common, everyday occurrences, a “friendship begun over bread and butter, extended on to cards” (124). Before the evening is over, Mrs. Forrester is relating the story about the cat eating the lace (and later vomiting it back)—which Mary offers as proof that they had forgotten who Lady Glenmire is and accepted her as part of Cranford. It is Lady Glenmire who further breaks down the barriers by marrying Hoggins, the surgeon and brother of Mrs. Fitz-Adam. Her marriage indicates her unwillingness to let sisterhood dictate her behavior (Keating 24), but it also breaks both class and gender barriers. In the communal and sororal world of Cranford, the possibility of autonomous decision-making is rare, which is part of what makes Lady Glenmire’s decision to marry so shocking to the Cranfordians. Lady Glenmire does what Miss Matty and Miss Jessie, who deferred to their sisters, could not do. Apparently, she decides that the ties of metaphorical sisterhood do not bind as tightly as those of biological sisterhood.

Of course, Lady Glenmire’s marrying at all at her age is shocking in its own right as is her decision to marry beneath her. Her marriage forces the women to decide between the rigid rules established in the community, that are guarded by Mrs. Jamieson, and the desires of their own hearts to continue to embrace Lady Glenmire, whom they like better. They wait for Mrs. Jamieson to return to town to give them guidance, but in the interim, they gradually feel
themselves weakening. Even after her return they do not follow her example because both Mrs. Gordon (Miss Jessie) and Peter Jenkyns return to help break up the code of gentility and thus break down the barriers even further, and with Peter's return that continues to include softening the sharp division between the spheres. Outsiders like Lady Glenmire, Mrs. Gordon, and Peter Jenkyns, who understand the benefits of Cranford and yet see possibilities for even more benefits, are not locked into the Cranford order and thus can help encourage change. Without a rigid rules monitor like Deborah Jenkyns, the world of Mrs. Jamieson and Deborah is disrupted by a new more inclusive order, one that no longer listens to a single voice of authority or to a strict code of conduct but rather operates on a more communal decision-making basis.

Mary Smith is another significant addition to the Cranford community because she serves as a bridge between the sisterhood of Cranford and the outside world. In her role as connecting point, she becomes a means by which the women can make use of the services the other world has to offer. She brings the caps and the latest news. She asks her father to come to Cranford when Matty needs his financial advice and can connect the other women's desire to help Matty with her father's expertise. Mary writes to Peter and thus initiates his return. Mary can try to explain to Matty the ways of the world (such as Martha's pregnancy), and because of her connection with the economics of the world at large (which she acknowledges she does not completely understand), she is the one who knows they need to think of something for Matty to do by which she can earn some money, and she also understands that there are not many options for the genteel woman.
But at the same time that Mary can help the Cranford women, they also provide a place for her to be. As Mary ages, she gradually becomes more and more accepted by Cranford and she accepts their lifestyle more. Her descriptions of Cranford become liberally sprinkled with "our" and "we" as she joins in their activities. She gently laughs at the Cranford women's foibles, but she also describes and laughs at her own. In many ways, she is the daughter Matty never has (Gillooly 886). By never marrying and in caring for Matty and her own father (which keeps her torn between Drumble and Cranford), she becomes like Deborah and so many other women in Victorian England—the dutiful daughter who never marries. But Mary's position also points out the plight of the single daughter. Where does she go and what does she do after the parents die? In Mary's case, Cranford provides the solution. After her father dies, Cranford can become her home, and she will become part of the next generation of Cranford women. Indeed, Mary Smith's common, ordinary name and the lack of much information about her as a character make her representative of any young single woman in England in a similar situation. Mary's possible future also points out the obvious about Cranford: the only way it can regenerate is to accept new widows and spinsters into its society. Miss Pole wisely realizes the problem when she favors relaxing the class lines: "As most of the ladies of good family in Cranford were elderly spinsters and widows without children, if we did not relax a little, and become less exclusive, by-and-by we should have no society at all" (109).

12 For a discussion of the role of humor in Mary Smith's narrative, see Eileen Gillooly. She argues that humor "arises in part from the narrative sublimation of Mary Smith's aggression—aggression provoked by the conflict between self-denial and desire, between the internalized cultural demand to submit oneself to the role of daughter and a psychological resistance to that demand" (890).
As narrator, Mary Smith also serves as a bridge between the reader's world and Cranford. Like Lady Glenmire and other outsiders, she interprets Cranford society in a way that none of the Cranfordians could ever do. Her irony, her humor, and her poignant descriptions assist her in carefully delineating the differences between Cranford and the world outside of it and pointing them out to the reader. Through Mary we see both the positive and negative sides of Cranford, but at the same time, we also see the mostly negative side of the masculine (financial, industrial) world. By the end it is obvious that she prefers the feminine world of Cranford. As she notes about the world in which her father lives, "I fancy the world must be very bad, for with all my father's suspicion of every one with whom he has dealings, and in spite of all his many precautions, he lost upwards of a thousand pounds by roguery only last year" (201).

Cranford is a safer place for Mary Smith and all the other Cranford women, and it becomes clear that the safety comes because the men are elsewhere. As in other accounts of Victorian sisterhood, men are capable of providing a rupture in the bond, but even more, the Cranford women see men as some kind of threat to their well-being. Certainly, there are examples of the harm men cause the Cranford women: the bank failure causes financial ruin for Matty and many others who can ill afford to lose money. Matty's rejection of Holbrook is because of the rules of the father, passed on by the daughter. In the way Mary describes the coal dealer potentially cheating Matty and her father losing money to rogues, she implies that the world outside of Cranford is not based on kindness, mutuality, and concern for others. Rather, the men's world is deceitful and corrupt. In the women's eyes, the Cranford community,
and thus the sororal bond, transcends that corruption. Their decision to live together provides a refuge from the threatening other world. Indeed, the otherness of men is partially seen through the otherness of their rules for living, and those rules are usually not compatible with Cranford rules. As a result, the men's and women's spheres as portrayed in Cranford frequently appear antithetical rather than complementary.

During the robber panic, the women are afraid not only for their own safety, but they are also afraid that someone in the community might be causing the trouble. They comfort themselves “with the assurance which [they] gave to each other, that the robberies could never have been committed by any Cranford person” (139). They rationalize that no Cranfordian would ever disgrace himself or herself by being dishonest or by demonstrating poor breeding because they are above that kind of behavior. Thus, Mrs. Forrester concludes that the robbers must be strangers. Placing bad behavior outside the world of Cranford also places it in the world of men, and the women further attempt to make potential danger as other as possible by locating it with the Turks, the French, and the Red Indians. Perceiving trouble as coming from outside allows them to continue to believe in the security they have in Cranford.

As Jane Spencer accurately observes, their “fear of men is displaced onto fear of foreigners” (83). But then, the Cranford women believe men are foreigners, exotic strangers from another world. The otherness of men, and as a result their mysteriousness, is best seen in Signor Brunoni who appears in Cranford to stage his magic show.¹³ A man such as this conjuror gets the

¹³ I am not the first, nor will I be the last to discuss Sr. Brunoni’s role as exotic other in Cranford. See, for example, Wolfe (169) and Auerbach (84).
women to think differently about the world around them: conjuring, witchcraft, even ghosts become the topics of conversation after Miss Pole reports that she has seen the mysterious stranger. And indeed, he is mysterious. When Miss Pole snoops at the Assembly Rooms, she meets the stranger coming and going, giving evidence that he can magically move from one place to another:

I bethought me that I had dropped my glove in the Assembly Room . . . so I went back, and just as I was creeping up the passage left on one side of the great screen that goes nearly across the room, who should I see but the very same gentleman that had met me before, and passed me on the stairs, coming forwards from the inner part of the room, to which there is no entrance . . .” (131).

But Miss Pole is not to be outdone, and she works hard to understand magic, carefully studying an old book which shows how the tricks are accomplished so that she can offer a “scientific explanation” of the mysteries (132), and she attends the show armed with instructions. Miss Pole's attempt to learn Brunoni’s secrets, and thus the secrets of men, is a valiant effort to show her ability to master the male and thus defend herself and the others against the mystery. But although Miss Pole later claims to know men (“my father was a man, and I know the sex pretty well” [145]), she fails in her attempts to “know” Brunoni. When the curtain is raised, he is dressed as “the Grand Turk,” complete with the turban Matty covets, confounding Miss Pole who does not recognize him as the man she saw. Neither can she explain his tricks. The other women are equally baffled. Before his performance, Mary Smith describes disembodied eyes staring out from the curtain. Another voice describes him “like being of another sphere” (134), and Sr. Brunoni’s performance so thoroughly mystifies Miss Matty and Mrs. Forrester that they ask Mary Smith to look around and see if the rector is present. They will feel
more relieved if they know that the Church sanctioned the other-worldly performance.

It is right after Brunoni’s appearance in town that the robber panic takes place; he is a prime suspect as they transfer their fears of his magic into fears over their welfare, and they transform him into a French spy. Supposedly seeking solace from one another, Matty and Miss Pole tell each other such ghastly stories of robbery and murder that Mary Smith reports her own terror of their tales. The most grisly story, interestingly, shows the triumph of a young servant girl, who is alone in a house, over evil robbers. A peddler leaves a sack in the kitchen of a large house, saying he will be back that night to get it. But the girl, examining a gun, accidentally fires it, and it “went off through the open kitchen door, hit the pack, and a slow dark thread of blood came oozing out” (141). Miss Pole’s obvious delight in telling this story that also includes “Italian irons, heated red hot, and then restored to blackness by being dipped in grease” (142) demonstrates her hostility toward men and her psychological need to triumph over the male with a violence and vengeance uncharacteristic of the Cranfordian femininity. She has been bested by a man (Sr. Brunoni), is terrified of the robbers, and now desires revenge. The innocent servant girl, more a biblical Jael than an Amazon warrior, does battle for her and triumphs over the other-worldly men.

Only when Sr. Brunoni is unmasked and found to be Mr. Sam Brown, an injured man who has a wife, a little girl, and a twin brother, does the panic end. And when the foreign man is found to be English, ordinary, and in need, they reach out to help him and his family:

But, indeed, it was wonderful to see what kind feelings were called out by this poor man’s coming amongst us. And also wonderful to see how the great Cranford panic, which had been
occasioned by his first coming in his Turkish dress, meited into thin air on his second coming—pale and feeble, and with his heavy filmy eyes . . . . Somehow, we all forgot to be afraid. I dare say it was that finding out that he, who had first excited our love of the marvellous by his unprecedented arts, had not sufficient every-day gifts to manage a shying horse, made us feel as if we were ourselves again. (155)

Matty's penny ball (no hot iron or loaded gun for her), which she rolled under her bed to determine if anyone was hiding under it, is changed into a toy for Brown's daughter. Instead of pulling together in fear, the women once again can pull together in kindness and goodwill and reach out as they did to the other Brown family earlier.

Captain Brown poses a different kind of threat to the Cranford women. His masculine otherness invades the town not as a mysterious visitor but as a permanent resident. At first, he appears to stand for everything Cranford is not: obviously masculine, loud, boisterous, impervious to their slights, ignorant of their code. A retired army officer who served in India, he now works for the "obnoxious railroad," the main symbol of masculine power and industrial progress in Cranford, the very thing against which the town had petitioned (42). He challenges their carefully constructed code of conduct by violating their rules and defying some of their myths about men. Part of their code of gentility is based on silence, but he speaks loudly what they will not even whisper about poverty, exposing what they try so hard to cover up. However, in spite of all his difference, they finally learn that he operates from a similar ethic of kindness and goodwill. At a card party held in Mary's honor, she finds he is solicitous to everyone, and part of his manliness is seen in his care for others:

He immediately and quietly assumed the man's place in the room; attended to every one's wants, lessened the pretty
maid-servant's labour by waiting on empty cups, and bread-and-butter-less ladies; and yet did it all in so easy and dignified a manner, and so much as if it were a matter of course for the strong to attend the weak, that he was a true man throughout . . . and yet, in all his attention to strangers, he had an eye on his suffering daughter . . . (46)

His kindness, coupled with "his excellent masculine common sense," wins over the women (43). Although Deborah Jenkyns believes Captain Brown dies from reading *Pickwick Papers*, a novel about male communities, he instead dies because of his kindness when he saves a child from an on-coming train, symbolically fulfilling their fears that their world of kindness will be run over by the on-coming industrial world.

When the men such as Captain Brown and Sr. Brunoni are demystified and seen for what they are and not as what they appear, the Cranford women find out they are not as large a threat as they first appeared, nor are they as other. Differences frequently get reduced to wiping one's shoes before entering a house or eating peas with a fork. The men's world as a whole is strange and frightening, seemingly antithetical to the sisterhood of Cranford, but the individual men the women encounter can be understood and accepted, erasing many of the differences and making others seem more surface level.

At the same time that the women fear and mistrust men, they also recognize that there are times when they need them. Captain Brown can find the cause of a smoking chimney or offer advice on how to keep a bare-skinned cow warm, and his advice, even when in jest, is trusted (43). Miss Pole hangs a man's hat in the hall in an attempt to deter robbers. Mr. Smith is called to Cranford when Matty needs financial advice. Deborah Jenkyns
encourages Major Gordon's reappearance as Miss Jessie's suitor in order to save her from a life of poverty. Mary Smith knows how much Matty misses her brother, and when she learns that there is a possibility that he is alive, she writes to him, and his return saves Matty from the penurious life to which she is reduced after the bank failure. Even Miss Matty, who is terribly afraid of men, finally comes to understand Lady Glenmire's decision to marry Mr. Hoggins:

'I don't deny that men are troublesome in a house. I don't judge from my own experience, for my father was neatness itself, and wiped his shoes on coming in as carefully as any woman; but still a man has a sort of knowledge of what should be done in difficulties, that it is very pleasant to have one at hand ready to lean upon. No, Lady Glenmire, instead of being tossed about, and wondering where she is to settle, will be certain of a home among pleasant and kind people, such as our good Miss Pole and Mrs. Forrester.' (180)

The sisterhood of Cranford has much to offer the women, but at the same time there is an absence in their lives, both financial and emotional. They live with unfulfilled desires, "elegant economy," and carefully constructed rules and rationalizations in order to cope with their situations in life. Even the isolation of Cranford and its identity as a safe and desirable sisterhood does not protect them from the understanding that the men's world outside of Cranford not only offers more economically but is a world of lovers and marriage from which they have been excluded. When the women enter the Assembly Room for Sr. Brunoni's magic show, they are reminded of the past days of dances, flirtations, and possibilities. Matty's sigh is for the past and for what could have been, and both she and Mrs. Forrester "bridle up as they entered, and walk mincingly up the room, as if there were a number of genteel observers..." (133). But now, the room itself is dingy and dusty, and no more beautiful young women dance there. The only observers now are ordinary
townspeople, young schoolboys, and other old women. Mrs. Forrester's yearly gathering on the anniversary of her marriage symbolizes both the longing for the past and the hope that is Cranford as she gathers the women who are now her family around her so that she is not alone when she remembers what she once had.

Throughout the book Matty reveals her wistful longing for marriage and her belief that no matter what the Cranford women say, marriage might not be so bad. As Mary and Matty sit together one night after the robber panic, Mary learns that Matty evidently looked upon a husband as a great protector against thieves, burglars, and ghosts; and said, that she did not think that she should dare to be always warning young people against matrimony, as Miss Pole did continually;—to be sure, marriage was a risk, as she saw now she had had some experience; but she remembers the time when she had looked forward to being married as much as any one. (157)

Even Miss Pole, the most vocal defender of the single life, is suspected to have once had her eye on the rector. Her protestations and complaints about men appear as a defense mechanism and a rationalization that she has internalized over the years, and as Pauline Nestor observes, her warnings against men have no influence on the Cranford women (52). As Mary Smith says, “If I had been inclined to be daunted from matrimony, it would not have been Miss Pole to do it; it would have been the lot of poor Signor Brunoni and his wife” (159). The women provide a warm, caring substitute life for one another, but it is clear that they never rejected the possibility of other options.¹⁴

¹⁴For a discussion of how Cranford represses and denies sexuality see chapter three of Peter Allen's *Sexuality in Victorian Fiction*. He asserts that “their sexual anxiety is displaced into domestic surveillance” (64). For Allen, suppressing sexuality is a means by which the women maintain class difference and protect themselves from being absorbed into a man's identity.
When their long-buried desires for men surface and in remembrance of what they lack, they offer opportunities for marriage to the younger Cranford women, as we have already seen with Miss Matty and her maid Martha, and with Deborah and Miss Jessie. And Matty tries to tell Mary Smith not to be afraid of marriage. Lady Glenmire’s announcement of her engagement may have shocked the Cranford women who had convinced themselves that a life without a man is a better life, but at the same time, Mary Smith notices that the good Lady’s face “seemed to have almost something of the flush of youth in it; her lips looked redder and more trembling full than in their old compressed state, and her eyes dwelt on all things with a lingering light, as if she was learning to love Cranford and its belongings” (169). In addition, the other unmarried women “flutter out in an unusual gaiety and newness of dress, as much as to say, in a tacit and unconscious manner, ‘We also are spinsters’” (169). Lady Glenmire’s engagement becomes both a horror and a hope as they realize that she will live with a vulgar man but also have the security and a different kind of happiness that so many of them lack.

Unlike Lady Glenmire and Hoggins, it is too late for Miss Matty and Holbrook, but she does find security and happiness with her brother Peter. Just as Sr. Brunoni and Captain Brown are found to have many of the same good qualities of the Cranford women, the returning Peter Jenkyns brings with him the concern, kindness, and gentleness found in his sister Matty. And just as the sisterhood of Cranford provides a place for single and widowed women to be, it also provides a home for Peter Jenkyns, old, single, and childless. The women, fond of this “Oriental” man who tells wonderful stories, accept him into their circle. He, in turn, breaks down the final barrier between Mrs.
Jamieson, who still wants to exclude Mrs. Fitz-Adam, and the other women and helps connect them in a bond free of rancor, for “it harasses Matty so much to hear these quarrels” (217). In the women’s world, differences that cause quarrels and ill-will ultimately must be resolved not by a triumph of one over another but by a quieter working out of a resolution made acceptable to all, one that allows the women to preserve their dignity. Peter’s actions in resolving the dispute, like those of the Cranford women when the bank fails, is for his sister’s sake, reversing the Victorian norm for brother-sister relationships.

The final inclusiveness of the Cranford sisterhood is the inclusion of the masculine into their world and not the other way around, and it is accompanied by a healthier, less fearful recognition of the constructed gender barriers between men and women and an understanding of what men and women have to offer each other. The relationship of the individual “vulgar” men and the sisterhood of genteel women provides a means for Gaskell to express her concern over the separation of men’s and women’s spheres and the problems of gendered expectations for men and women. In *Cranford* Gaskell points out that a culture which bases social roles and behavioral expectations on sex differences rather than similarities does not work, especially for women. The women develop irrational fears of men based on differences and remain economically marginalized even in Cranford, their “elegant economy” serving only as a cover for their poverty. But she also demonstrates that men and women can understand one another better if they look for similarities rather than differences. Significantly, what is important is not how much women are like men but how much men are like women.
Although sisterhood marks an absence for the women, it is clearly a positive, comfortable place for them to be because, as Gaskell makes obvious, there is no other space for these single women in a world that privileges marriage and that defines masculine and feminine in terms of binary opposition. In a new industrial-financial world that appears lonely, corrupt, and mysterious, Cranford provides a refuge and a space for connection to others. By reinterpreting the woman's sphere and locating it in sisterhood, Gaskell provides the women with an agency and power they would not otherwise have and with a community they would have been denied in another place. The community of women also has much to offer the world outside of the town through its message of unity and support and its ethic of kindness. Yet, in the end, the sisterhood that is Cranford remains in Cranford, clearly reminding us of how confining the woman's sphere can be and how marginalized these women are. Only by telling their story does Elizabeth Gaskell get the women and their message out of the town.

Gaskell was not alone in addressing concerns about the confining woman's sphere. In her study on work and community for single women in the last half of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century, Martha Vicinus asserts that a growing dissatisfaction with prescribed women's roles gradually spread through the middle class during the 1850s and 1860s and that single women out of necessity had a major part in attempts to redefine those roles (12). However, attempting any change in the sharp divisions between the spheres proved particularly difficult. As Mary Poovey notes, “the message that the natural difference between ‘manly’ men and ‘womanly’ women dictated social roles permeated mid-Victorian culture in sermons,
conduct material, and popular literature . . . " (6). Changing the norms meant changing what most people had come to understand as fundamental truths about men and women. To make any changes palatable, reformers such as the feminist Anna Jameson sought to move the domestic world and its benefits into the public world “that the maternal as well as the paternal element should be made available, on the principal . . . that the more you can carry out the family law, the ‘communion of labour,’ into all social institutions, the more harmonious and the more perfect they will be” (Jameson qtd. in Vicinus 15).

But rather than a maternal language developing among the women and the communities they formed, a language and ethic based on sisterhood developed, partially evidenced by the resurgence of both religious and secular sisterhoods during that time. “For my sister’s sake” spread beyond the family to women in general as women provided support for one another in their endeavors to move into the public sphere. Additionally, groups of women formed communities in which they could live together:

A natural reaction to the isolation of so many spinsters was to form their own communities, united by their own tasks, fulfilling social needs that could not be met by married women or by men. Independent women wanted their own space, apart from the domestic world of their married sisters and from the male world in which they often moved. A community was a refuge from which to launch into the wider world, but most of all, it was a home. (Vicinus 31)

Martha Vicinus’s words echo the desires of the Cranford women, but at the time Gaskell wrote Cranford, moving into the “wider world” was problematic for most women. The unity and support within the narrowly defined context of Cranford kept them comfortable but excluded from the mainstream. The town remains a frustration in that the few options available to
the women may be emotionally self-sustaining, but they are not economically self-sustaining. Because Miss Matty was ill-equipped for the world of work, she needed either the financial assistance of the other women or the return of her brother. (Even in that assessment there is an obvious economic difference: many women are needed to provide enough financially but only one brother is needed.)

In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, published four years after the completion of *Cranford*, Gaskell again reasserts her belief in the potential power of agency in sisterhood as she emphasized the sisters banding together to provide economically for the family. Their employment followed along traditional options: they became governesses and teachers, and they sought a way to open a school of their own. Finally, they considered publishing their work. But in the biography the women only made occasional forays out into the public world before retreating back into the private sphere. Much like Mary Smith, Charlotte Brontë usually was the connecting point between the outside world (London) and the sisters’ world. Both *Cranford* and *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* demonstrate both the problems single middle class women faced in providing for themselves and the strength that can be gained from joining forces. They also provide a mid-century version of sisterhood.

The problem of the “redundant” women did not go away. Instead, the numbers of single women grew larger as the century advanced. *The Odd Women*, written forty years later, provides an updated version of *Cranford* and shows the possibilities for a secular sisterhood at the end of the century. The single women have moved out of the small, provincial town to the big city to
take part in the new industrial world. Alarmingly, there are still women like Miss Matty who have not received an education that would allow them to provide for themselves when the family fails them. Alice and Virginia Madden's father believed women ought not to be troubled with economic matters, but when he dies and leaves them few financial provisions, the sisters find that they are ill-equipped to take care of themselves or the younger sisters in the family. They earn pitiful salaries as companions and governesses and have difficulty sustaining employment. By the time they are in their thirties, they are portrayed as lifeless old-maids, aged far beyond their years, and living in poverty so severe that they are starving. Monica, the only other sister to survive, must earn her keep at a drapers, working long hours under intolerable conditions. The little sacrifices Alice and Virginia make for Monica's sake are pitiful and do little good. The biological sisters fail one another because they have no means of providing economically for one another, and their economic poverty also leads to an emotional poverty. Too hampered by their passive femininity, they can only dream of opening a school together. They become the paradigms for the failed myth of the womanly ideal:

Now could one have a better instance than this Madden family of the crime that middle-class parents commit when they allow their girls to go without rational training? Of course I know that Monica was only a little child when they were left orphans; but her sisters had already grown up into uselessness, and their example has been harmful to her all along. Her guardians dealt with her absurdly; they made her half a lady and half a shop-girl. I don't think she'll ever be good for much. And the elder ones will go on just keeping themselves alive . . . . They'll never start the school that there's so much talk of . . . . And yet they are capitalists; eight hundred pounds between them. Think what capable women might do with eight hundred pounds. (107)
The speaker above is Rhoda Nunn, a friend from their childhood and one of the “capable women.” As one of the “new women” of the late nineteenth-century, she has gained an education that will in turn provide her with employment. Full of energy and vitality and well-aware of the problems with traditional views of woman’s nature, she works with Mary Barfoot to provide job training for other potentially redundant women. When biological sisters fail or when there is no other family member available to help, Rhoda and Mary step in to offer their assistance. The message in *The Odd Women* is that men fail women; they can only offer marriage, and the message from most of the marriages in the book is a negative one, for men as well as women. Thus, it is left up to women to help women, to form communities of support for one another. But sisterhood in *The Odd Women* moves from the sentimental and idealized kind found in earlier works to a practical one in which the women are more aware of what a connection to other women can and cannot do.

The bonds of sisterhood, as in *Cranford*, extend across familial lines and who constitutes the sister is yet an issue (the lower classes still being excluded). But unlike former efforts “for my sister’s sake,” the new women redefine sisterhood by questioning self-sacrifice, self-denial, and self-abnegation. As Rhoda tells Virginia Madden, “Self-sacrificing may be quite wrong, I’m afraid” (21). Instead, the women provide opportunities and support so that young women can learn to help themselves. Even as Mary Barfoot seeks to help a fallen woman, Rhoda convinces her that the sacrifice of the school’s reputation (because of its association with a disreputable

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15 All quotations and page references are from George Gissing’s *The Odd Women*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1977.
woman) is not worth saving one woman.

Monica Madden is the kind of young woman Rhoda and Mary do desire to help, but she rejects their assistance, seeing their school as an “old-maid factory” (50) and choosing instead to marry a man she does not love. Her marriage proves repressive, and she becomes yet another victim of the Victorian expectations, finally dying in childbirth. At one point in the narrative, when Monica needs someone to talk with, she rejects her sisters because they do not have “the sympathetic intelligence necessary for aiding her; Virginia was weaker than she herself, and Alice dealt only in sorrowful commonplaces, profitable perhaps to her own heart, but powerless over the trouble of another’s” (307). Their sisterhood is obsolete and ineffectual. Instead, Monica turns to Rhoda Nunn because she is stronger and because Monica knows that she will say something helpful. What has happened to her sisters terrifies her as she fears herself becoming one of them, but Rhoda tells her that her mistake “was in looking only at the weak women” (316). She needed to look outside her family to other examples of successful women and “learn to think bravely and nobly of yourself!” (317)

The Madden sisterhood follows in the conduct book tradition of sisterhood as shared pain, but the opportunities for women provided by Rhoda and Mary offer a sisterhood of hope. At the end, Rhoda, knowing how hard the young baby’s life will be, encourages the Madden sisters, who will raise Monica’s daughter, to “make a brave woman” of her, and when asked how the school prospers, she tells them: “We flourish like the green bay-tree. We shall have to take larger premises. By-the-bye, you must read the paper we are going to publish. . . . Miss Barfoot was never in such health and spirits—nor I
myself. The world is moving!” (336). The world was also moving in Cranford, but the women’s community of Cranford was not part of it. Forty years later, the world still moving, the community of women established by Mary and Rhoda sought to ensure that this time they would be a part of it not apart from it. Perhaps if they had been born at a different time, Marian Halcombe, Jeanie Deans, Lizzie, and even Norah Vanstone might have been a Rhoda Nunn or a Mary Barfoot.

When I began to study sisters and sisterhood during the Victorian period, I suggested that René Girard’s paradigm for desire needed to be revised when women were used as more than objects of desire. As I have suggested in different places, the triangle tended to change dimensions, indeed to become a circle. At times it was difficult to consider triangular desire at all because the model for sisterhood is based on connection and community, and when it worked well, there was no need for a paradigm of sisterhood to mediate the relationships. The persistent message was that the relationship with a sister should be a more significant concern than individual triumph over that sister.

The idealization of sisterhood in Victorian literature was not without problems. The expectations for sisterhood often produced improbable situations and behaviors. Furthermore, there was a tension between celebrating the power of sisterhood and containing it within the appropriate domestic (and feminine) boundaries. Sister narratives could be liberating, but they were also used to keep women in their place. Although sisterhood revealed a hope for a better world, it was often kept separate from the public world. Nevertheless, as the family in general was to provide a refuge from the
outside world, the bond between sisters was to provide a refuge and a
comfortable place to be for women.

The idealization of sisterhood in Victorian England does create a tie
that binds. It expresses the power and potential of the sororal bond; it takes
what may have been the best relationship many women had and celebrates it.
However, when that same celebration becomes a means to write yet another
code of conduct for women and construct yet another paradigm for womanly
behavior, sisterhood becomes as confining and domesticating (and as
contradictory) as any of the other codes of appropriate feminine conduct. At its
most simple, the term sister denotes biological connection, but its connotations
always become culturally inscribed.

When a metaphor of sisterhood is invoked, whether in the nineteenth or
the late-twentieth century, we must remember that it, too, is not only culturally
inscribed but also based on an ideal. It suggests a common bond of unity and
strength and a shared connection that is powerful enough to transcend
differences and disturbances—the sum being greater than the parts. It, too,
comes with the problem of negotiating selfhood and interdependence.
Sisterhood may be a viable metaphor for relationships among women, but
because it can be weighed down with the baggage of rules and regulations
imposed on it by the ideals of the past and present, it can also be a
problematic one. When the metaphor itself transcends the rules applied to it,
sisterhood can also provide a community and a place for women to be.
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