CHAPTER 1

Friendship and the Play of the System

In the most influential conduct book of the nineteenth century, Sarah Stickney Ellis identified The Women of England (1839) as daughters, wives, and mothers ensconced in a familial, domestic sphere. She also assigned women another obligatory role we may now be surprised to find so prominent in a guide to correct feminine behavior: friend.¹ Ellis returned to friendship between women in The Daughters of England (1842), where a chapter on “Friendship and Flirtation” affirmed the importance of a woman’s “circle of . . . private friends” as the site where “she learns what constitutes the happiness and the misery of woman.” Just as Ellis had established codes of behavior for daughters, wives, and mothers, she set out rules of conduct for female friends, stating that flirtation with men should never set women asunder: “I cannot see why [male attentions] should ever be so much the subject of envy amongst women, as to cast a shade upon their intercourse with each other.”² Ellis assigned equal value to female friends and male suitors, making friendship between women as essential to proper femininity as a woman’s obedience to her parents, subservience to her husband, and devotion to her children. Yet despite the prominence and complexity of friendship in Ellis’s works, contemporary scholars who cite her as representative of Victorian gender ideology consistently overlook her articulation of female friendship as a basic element of a middle class organized around marriage, family, and Christian belief.

I begin this book with friendship for two reasons. First, female friendship is an excellent test of the arguments that women’s relationships were central to Victorian society, that women were not defined only in relation to men, and that they formed legible and legitimate bonds with one another. Second, understanding the divergent uses of the term “friend” among Victorian women allows us to distinguish between two distinct relationships that often went under the same name: sexual and nonsexual intimacies between women. It is a common misconception that Victorians were confused about the differences between sexual and nonsexual bonds between women, not least because of an ambiguity embedded in the word “friend” itself, which in Old English meant both “a near relation” and “a person joined by affection and intimacy to another, independently of sexual or family love.” By the time of late Middle English, “friend” could
mean a beloved who was neither kin nor lover, but also a relative or "a romantic or sexual partner." Before the nineteenth century, "friend" was a capacious term that included kin, patrons, neighbors, and spouses, along with freely chosen confidants to whom one was not bound by blood, political obligations, physical proximity, or sexual intimacy.2 Twentieth-century Western societies define friendship more narrowly, but the term remains ambiguous: "friend" still refers to a sexual partner, an acquaintance with whom one shares a relatively indiscriminate sociability, and a close connection with whom one forms a dyad based on exclusivity, disclosure, and commitment. Likewise for Victorians, a friend was first and foremost an emotional intimate who was not a relative or a sexual partner, but the term could also be a euphemism for a lover. Only through a discreet but marked rhetoric did Victorians qualify that some "friends" were not friends, but special friends, life friends, and particular companions who in private communications could as easily be called wife or husband.

Victorians accepted friendship between women because they believed it cultivated the feminine virtues of sympathy and altruism that made women into good helpmates. But the embrace of friendships that trained women for family and marriage was not simply, as one might darkly conjecture, an attempt to press women's bonds into patriarchal service. It also indicated a shift in the spiritual and emotional definition of marriage from a hierarchical bond dictating that inferior wives obey their superior husbands to a more egalitarian conception modeled on friendship. A society that defined the social bond between husband and wife in terms of affection, companionship, and equality—alongside the persisting economic, legal, and political dependence of wives on husbands—easily made room for friendship. Female friends were integrated into the domestic realm as marriage brokers who helped facilitate courtship, but female friendship was defined in terms of affection and pleasure, not instrumental utility. Female friendship reinforced gender roles and consolidated class status, but it also provided women with socially permissible opportunities to engage in behavior commonly seen as the monopoly of men: competition, active choice, appreciation of female beauty, and struggles with religious belief. As friends, women could comport themselves with one another in ways forbidden with men, without compromising the respectability so prized by the middle class.

The complexity of friendship supports this book's central claim that Victorian society, in which marriage between men and women was at supreme value, did not suppress bonds between women but actively promoted them. Neither a celebration nor a rebuke, my argument takes the history of women and sexuality beyond models of subversion and containment to explore the complexity of systems in which constraint was inseparable from liberty, action, and recreation, from a degree of give built into social rules, offering those who lived by them flexibility, if not utter freedom. I call this give "the play of the system," adopting a term from Roland Barthes. In *Sade/Foucault/Loyola*, a study of three writers obsessed with social structures, Barthes contrasted logically fixed, closed, orthodox "systems" with infinitely open, destabilizing, ambiguous "systematics," which he defined as "the play of the system." For Barthes, the play of the system is external to the system, a utopian alternative to the oppressive, self-contained structure from which systematics take flight. Unlike Barthes, I use "the play of the system" to conceptualize the yield built into systems. Play signifies the elasticity of systems, their ability to be stretched without permanent alteration to their size or shape; it thus differs from plasticity, which refers to a pliability that allows a system or structure to acquire a new shape and be permanently changed without fracture or rupture. The Victorian gender system, however strict its constraints, provided women latitude through female friendships, giving them room to roam without radically changing the normative rules governing gender difference.

To understand what Victorians meant by the word "friend," and to explore how women negotiated the rules that governed them, I turn to lifewriting, a genre that includes manuscript diaries, published diaries, correspondence, biographies, and autobiographies. Female friendship, utterly absent from the philosophical discourse on amity, was the very stuff of lifewriting: women wrote about friends in their diaries, regularly addressed letters to female friends, and were memorialized in print by friends as well as relatives and spouses. This chapter is based on over one hundred published and unpublished sources, many by or about women so ordinary they left no other historical traces. A few were authors, actresses, activists, nurses, or teachers; two-thirds were married at some point in their lives. Almost all were alive between the 1830s and the 1880s. The corpus includes women from all classes and denominations, though the majority cited were middle-class Anglicans. Around ten were working-class women, who remain drastically underrepresented relative to men in the current archive of working-class lifewriting from the middle decades of the century. The rest of the sample includes the daughters and wives of shopkeepers, professionals, clerics, industrialists, gentry, rentiers, politicians, and aristocrats; girls educated at home, at day schools, and at boarding schools; and girls raised within families small and large, in London, other urban centers, and every provincial nook and cranny of the United Kingdom. I draw on unpublished sources, primarily manuscript diaries, and on published books, some intended for sale, some printed for private circulation. Because lifewriting tends to appear in print years after
its subject has died, roughly 70 percent of the works discussed here were published between the 1870s and the 1940s (about ten in each decade).

The period I focus on here, 1830 to 1880, was not homogeneous: The 1830s and 1840s were more politically and economically uncertain than the prosperous and stable 1850s; the Evangelical piety, fervor, and introspection of the 1830s gave way in the 1860s to a more athletic and irreverent generation of girls who had professional and educational options their mothers had lacked. Lifewriting reflects those changes: one finds more Evangelical anxiety about sin, salvation, and duty in the 1840s and 1850s, while in the 1860s and 1870s, women of all ages expressed themselves more through socializing, education, and aesthetic practices—visiting, reading, writing, studying visual and musical arts, attending to dress and interior decoration, frequenting theaters and galleries, instructing children, or pursuing knowledge in their own right. Writing in the 1860s about smoking, cross-dressing, flirting with men, and the bodily transformations of adolescence, Laura Troubridge (1853–1929) exhibited a boisterous playfulness rarely seen since the Regency, when Anne Lister (1791–1840) recorded her seductions of numerous women in Parisian boarding houses and English country homes.8 But lifewriting also frustrates the impulse to view individual lives as exemplifying historical trends and social position, because the genre emphasizes idiosyncrasy. For instance, missionary Caroline Head (1832–1904) was far more religious in the relatively secular 1870s than the young Anne Noel King (1837–1917) in the 1850s, despite the fact that King was raised by a grandmother devoted to Evangelical philanthropy.

Varied as the women who left records of their lives between 1830 and 1880 were, they nevertheless had an understanding of friendship not shared with those who came before and after them. The relatively unchanged discourse of amity between 1830 and 1880 identifies those decades as a coherent period within the history of friendship. Female friendship existed as a social category and practice before and after this period, of course, but the era from 1830 to 1880 was the heyday of sentimental friendships legitimated in terms of affection, attraction, and pleasure and federated into marriage and family ties. In the eighteenth century, aristocratic women viewed friendship as an alternative to marriage and justified it as the cultivation of reason, equality, and taste; in the wake of Romanticism and Evangelicalism, nineteenth-century women defined friendship as the expression of emotion, affinity, personal inclination, and religious faith.9 In the 1880s, friendship merged with altruistic activism and became a model for bridging class differences to forge a better world.10 By the twentieth century, the increasing importance of school, the emergence of adolescence as a life stage, anxiety about lesbian deviance, and the popularity of developmental models

that equated maturity with heterosexuality made it almost inevitable that same-sex friendship would come to be defined as antithetical to the family and the married couple.

**FEMALE FRIENDSHIP IN FEMINIST STUDIES**

Victorians recognized women’s friendship as a social bond comparable to kinship and conjugal love, but the last several decades of scholarship on marriage and the family have defined female friendship as external to family life. Studies of family and marriage place friendship outside the purview of their analysis or define it as a social relationship at odds with the isolated nuclear family. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall dismiss female friendships as irrelevant to their study of familial gender politics, and John Gillis argues that by the nineteenth century, the married couple existed in opposition to the collective world of friends.11 Lesbian studies place women’s friendships on a continuum with lesbian relationships and equate both with resistance to the family and marriage. As Adrienne Rich influentially argued, women’s friendships and lesbian sexual bonds both defy “compulsory heterosexuality.”12 The move to valorize women’s friendships as a subset of lesbianism and as a subversion of gender norms continues to be the dominant paradigm. In *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928*, a series of richly documented case studies in lesbian history, Martha Vicinus identifies “heterosexual marriage” as a “strong impediment to same-sex intimacy” and argues that an “undefined continuum” linked “erotic friendships” in particular with “women’s friendships” in general. Rich’s continuum becomes the apposition in Vicinus’s title: “intimate friends” are “women who loved women,” and both terms stand for lesbians who risked “social ostracism” and posed “an unnamable threat to social norms.”13

The concept of a lesbian continuum, once a powerful means of drawing attention to overlooked bonds between women, has ironically obscured everything that female friendship and lesbianism did not share and hidden the important differences between female friends and female lovers. Female friends and female lovers alike expressed affection, shared confidences, and idealized one another’s physical and spiritual qualities. But friends differed significantly from female lovers who threw themselves into obsessive passions or lived together, functioned socially as a couple, merged finances, and bequeathed property to each other. Indeed, although the lesbian continuum posits female friends and lesbian lovers as united in their opposition to patriarchal marriage, many nineteenth-century lesbian relationships resembled marriages more than friendships—and as a result shared with friendship a high degree of acceptance by respectable society.
Nor was intense friendship confined to a uniquely female world, since men also had deeply romantic friendships with one another before and after marriage. 17

Another defining move of Smith-Rosenberg’s article, though generative at the time, has led to conceptual impasses in theorizing the family, marriage, friendship, and sexuality. By contrasting the twentieth-century opposition between heterosexual normalcy and lesbian deviance to the nineteenth century’s failure to sequester friendship from erotic intimacy, Smith-Rosenberg implied that before the advent of sexual orientations, no lines were drawn separating friends, lovers, and family members. To prove the existence of a homogeneous “female world of love and ritual,” Smith-Rosenberg indiscriminately cited letters exchanged between sisters, cousins, mothers, daughters, sisters-in-law, married and single women, women of the same age and women of very different ages, lovers, friends, ex-lovers, distraught ex-lovers, and friends with reciprocal and nonreciprocal crushes who never became lovers.18 As a result, Smith-Rosenberg’s concept of romantic friendship between women has proven deeply ambiguous. Its emphasis on a broad “spectrum” of accepted forms of female intimacy suggested that Victorians were more willing to accept female homosexuality than their modern descendants (387). Yet for every scholar who cites “The Female World of Love and Ritual” to explain that Victorian women could have sexual relationships with each other without incurring social stigma, another uses it to prove the sexismlessness of the most passionate, enduring, and exclusive love affairs.19

Even scholarship that focuses on the central role of queer sexualities in defining Victorian norms adheres to orthodoxies about the family, marriage, and gender relations. After Foucault’s History of Sexuality, scholars are less prone to characterize the Victorians as sexually repressed, but the image of the Victorian family and marriage as fundamentally heterosexual prevails. The dominant frameworks for relating same-sex bonds to those of family and marriage depend on images of separateness: the statistical metaphor of deviance, the spatial metaphor of underworld and margins, and the political metaphors of transgression, subversion, and resistance. Whether writing of sexual partnerships or asexuality, scholars assume that same-sex intimacy was socially unacceptable and severed from the family and marriage, despite mounting evidence that even lesbian relationships enjoyed an unexpected degree of knowing acceptance. No less an eminence than the archbishop of Canterbury, for example, deferred to his wife Minnie Benson’s wish that her female lover move into the home also occupied by their many children.20 As lenses for viewing the past, the heterosexual paradigm of the family, the deviance paradigm of homosexuality, and the continuum theory of lesbianism have all become cloudy, preventing us from seeing the diverse forms family and
marriage took during the very period that witnessed their consolidation as vectors of power and social coherence. Certainly female marriage and erotic infatuation had continuities with female friendship, but the time has come to attend to their significant discontinuities, for only by understanding the differences among conjugality, infatuation, and friendship can we give each of those social relationships its due. In order to distinguish them, we will turn to the lifewriting that provides an atlas of Victorian England’s multiple female relations.

**Victorian Women’s Lifewriting and Relationships between Women**

The letters, biographies, memoirs, and diaries that recorded Victorian women’s lives are essential sources for differentiating friendship, erotic obsession, and sexual partnership between women. The distinctions are subtle, for Victorians routinely used startlingly romantic language to describe how women felt about female friends and acquaintances. In her youth, Anne Thackeray (later Ritchie) recorded in an 1854 journal entry how she “fell in love with Miss Geraldine Mildmay” at one party and Lady Georgina Fullerton “won [her] heart” at another. In reminiscences written for her daughter in 1881, Augusta Becher (1830–1888) recalled a deep childhood love for a cousin a few years older than she was: “From my earliest recollections I adored her, following her and content to sit at her feet like a dog.” At the other extreme of the life cycle, the seventy-one-year-old Ann Gilbert (1782–1866), who cowrote the poem now known as “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” appreciatively described “the latter years of . . . friendship” with her friend Mrs. Mackintosh as “the gathering of the last ripe figs, here and there, one on the topmost bough.”

Gilbert used similar imagery in an 1861 poem she sent to another woman celebrating the end of a friendship begun in childhood: “As rose leaves in a china jar / Breathe still of blooming seasons past, / ’En so, old women as they are / Still doth the young affection last.”

Gilbert’s metaphors, drawn from the language of flowers and the repertoire of romantic poetry, asserted that friendship between women was as vital and fertile as the biological reproduction and female sexuality to which figures of fruitfulness commonly alluded.

Friendship was so pervasive in Victorian women’s lifewriting because middle-class Victorians treated friendship and family life as complementary. Close relationships between women that began when both were single often survived marriage and maternity. In the *Memoir of Mary Lundie Duncan* (1842) that Duncan’s mother wrote two years after her daughter’s early death at age twenty-five, the maternal biographer included many letters Duncan (1814–1840) wrote to friends, including one penned six weeks after the birth of her first child: “My beloved friend, do not think that I have been so long silent because all my love is centered in my new and most interesting charge. It is not so. My heart turns to you as it was ever wont to do, with deep and fond affection, and my love for my sweet babe makes me feel even more the value of your friendship.” Men respected women’s friendships as a component of family life for wives and mothers. Charlotte Hanbury’s 1905 *Life of her missionary sister Caroline Head* included a letter that the Reverend Charles Fox wrote to Head in 1877, soon after the birth of her first child: “I want desperately to see you and that prodigy of a boy, and that perfection of a husband, and that well-tried and well-beloved sister-friend of yours, Emma Waithman.” Although Head and Waithman never combined households, their regular correspondence, extended visits, and frequent travels were sufficient for Fox to assign Waithman a socially legible status as an informal family member, a “sister-friend” listed immediately after Head’s son and husband.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf lamented that a woman born in the 1840s would not be able to report what she was “doing on the fifth of April 1868, or the second of November 1875,” for “[n]othing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it.” Yet as an avid reader of Victorian lifewriting, Woolf had every reason to be aware that in the very British Library where her speaker researches her lecture, hundreds of autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, diaries, and letters provided exhaustive records of what women did on almost every day of the nineteenth century. One cannot fault Woolf excessively for having discounted Victorian women’s lifewriting, for even today few consult this corpus and no scholar of Victorian England has used it to explore the history of female friendship. Scholars of autobiography concentrate on a handful of works by exceptional women, and historians of gender and sexuality have drawn primarily on fiction, parliamentary reports, journalism, legal cases, and medical and scientific discourse, which emphasize disruption, disorder, scandal, infractions, and pathology. Lifewriting, by contrast, emphasized ordinariness and typicality, which is precisely what makes it a unique source for scholarship.

The term “lifewriting” refers to the heterogeneous array of published, privately printed, and unpublished diaries, correspondence, biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, reminiscences, and recollections that Victorians and their descendants had a prodigious appetite for reading and writing. Literary critics have noted the relative paucity of autobiographies by women that fulfill the aesthetic criteria of a coherent, self-conscious narrative focused on a strictly demarcated individual self. Women’s own words about their lives, however, are abundantly represented in the more
capacious genre of lifewriting, defined as any text that narrates or documents a subject’s life. The autobiographical requirement of a unified individual life story was irrelevant for Victorian lifewriting, a hybrid genre that freely combined multiple narrators and sources, and incorporated long extracts from a subject’s diaries, correspondence, and private papers alongside testimonials from friends and family members. A single text might blend the journal’s dailiness and immediacy and a letter’s short-term retrospect with the long view of elderly writers reflecting on their lives, or the backward and forward glances of family members who had survived their subjects. For example, Christabel Coleridge was the nominal author of Charlotte Mary Yonge: Her Life and Letters (1903), but the text begins by reproducing an unpublished autobiographical essay Yonge wrote in 1877, intercalated with remarks by Coleridge. The sections of the Life written by Coleridge, conversely, consist of long extracts from Yonge’s letters that take up almost as much space as Coleridge’s own words. Coleridge undertook the biography out of personal friendship for Yonge, and its dialogic form mimics the structure of a social relationship conducted through conversation and correspondence. The biographer was less an author than an editor who gathered and commented on a subject’s writings without generating an autonomous narrative of her life.

Reticence was paradoxically characteristic of Victorian lifewriting, which was as defined by the drive to conceal life stories as it was indicative of a compulsion to transmit them. This was true of lifewriting by and about men as well as by and about women. The authors of biographies often did not name themselves directly. Instead they subsumed their identities into those of their subjects. Authors who knew their subjects intimately as children, spouses, or parents usually adopted a deliberately impersonal tone, avoiding the first person whenever possible. In her anonymous biography of her daughter Mary Duncan, for example, Mary Lundie completely avoided writing in the first person and was sparing even with third-person references to herself as Duncan’s “surviving parent” or “her mother” (243, 297). The materials used in biographies and autobiographies were rarely discreet, and the diaries that formed the basis of much lifewriting revealed little about their authors’ lives. Victorian lifewriters who published diary excerpts valued them for their very failure to unveil mysteries, often praising the diarist’s “reserve” and hastening to explain that the diaries cited did “not pretend to reveal personal secrets.”

Although we now expect diaries to be private outpourings of a self confronting forbidden desires, and confiding scandalous secrets, only a handful of authenticated Victorian diaries recorded sexual lives in any detail, and none can be called typical. Unrevealing diaries, on the other hand, were plentiful in an era when keeping a journal was common.

enough for printers to sell preprinted and preformatted diaries and locked diaries were unusual. Preformatted diaries adopted features of almanacs and account books, and journals synchronized personal life with the external rhythms of the clock, the calendar, and the household, not the unpredictable pulses of the heart. Diaries were rarely meant for the diarist’s eyes alone, which explains why biographers had no compunction about publishing large portions of their subjects’ journals with no preface to justifications. Girls and women read their diaries aloud to sisters or friends, and locked diaries were so uncommon that Ethel Smyth, born in 1858, still remembered sixty years later how her elders had disapproved when she started keeping a secret diary as a child.

Some diarists even explicitly wrote for others, sharing their journals with readers in the present and addressing them to private and public audiences in the future. By the 1840s, published diaries had created a popular consciousness, and self-consciousness, about the diary form. In 1856, at age fourteen, Louisa Knightley (1842–1913), later a conservative feminist philanthropist, began to keep journals “written with a view to publication” and modeled on works such as Fanny Burney’s diaries, published in 1842. When the working-class Edwin Waugh began to keep a diary in 1847, his first step was to paste into it newspaper clippings about how to keep a journal. One young girl included diary extracts in letters to her cousin in the 1840s. Princess Victoria was instructed in how to keep a daily journal by her beloved governess, Lehenz, and until Victoria became Queen, her mother inspected her diaries daily. Diarists often wrote for prospective readers and selves, addressing journal entries to their children, writing annual summaries that assessed the previous year’s entries, or rereading and annotating a life’s worth of diaries in old age. Journals were a tool for monitoring spiritual progress on a daily basis and over the course of a lifetime. Diarists periodically reread their journals so that by comparing past acts with present outcomes they could improve themselves in the future. A Beloved Mother: Life of Hannah S. Allen. By Her Daughter (1884) excerpted a journal Allen (1813–1880) started in 1836 and then reread in 1876, when she dedicated it to her daughters: “To my dear girls, that they may see the way in which the Lord has led me.” Far from being a repository of the most secret self, the diary was seen as a didactic legacy, one of the links in a family history’s chain.

Victorian women’s diaries combined impersonality with lack of incident. Although Marian Bradley (1831–1910) wrote, “My diary is entirely a record of my inner life—the outer life is not varied. Quiet and pleasant but nothing worth recording occurs,” she in fact devoted hundreds of pages to recording an outer life that she accurately characterized as regular and predictable. Indeed, the stability and relentless routine that diaries labored to convey goes far to explain why Victorians were so eager
to read the poetry that lyrically expressed spontaneous emotion and the novels that injected eventfulness and suspense into everyday life. Diaries and novels had common origins in spiritual autobiography, and diaries played a dramatic role in Victorian fiction, but although diaries shared quotidians subjects and diurnal rhythms with novels, they were rarely novelistic. Most diarists produced chronicles that testified to a woman’s success in developing the discipline necessary to ensure that each day was much like the rest, and even travel diaries were filled not with impressions but descriptions similar to those found in guidebooks. When something unusually tumultuous took place, it often interrupted a woman’s daily writing and went unrecorded. There are few differences in this regard between manuscript and published diaries; both are similarly bland, rarely revealing anything that could not have been made public. Those whose papers recorded heady events were among the most likely to destroy them in an era when people regularly burnt correspondence and personal documents.

Keeping a diary was a religious discipline for many Victorians, who recorded their daily work and spiritual lives as part of a mission to develop methodical habits. M.R.D. Foot characterizes William Gladstone’s diary as “a mild penitential exercise: a daily occasion for self-criticism.” Marian Bradley, an Anglican minister’s wife who began to keep a diary in 1854, frequently censured herself for procrastination, impatience, and extravagance, measuring her spiritual life by a rigid moral standard that militated against any hint of worldliness, spontaneity, or selfishness. Like the narrator of a didactic novel, Bradley assessed herself in relation to Christian values and filled her diary with ethical generalizations: “We live but to work, and work while we live, up to the very gates of the other world. How important a work is mine. To be a cheerful, loving Xitian wife, a forbearing and fond wise thoughtful mother—striving ever against self-indulgence and irritability.” Using a journal to assess one’s virtue and faith was not a religious practice confined to Protestants. Philanthropist Louisa Montefiore (1821–1910), later Lady de Rothschild, was an observant Jew who also kept a diary as a form of “strict self-examination,” in the hope that carefully documenting how she managed her time and money and regulated her mind and affections would prevent her from being vain, frivolous, and fanciful.

The motives for publishing lifewriting in the Victorian period were nonetheless often explicitly denominational, and many authors described their works as “Christian biography.” The anonymous compiler of the Letters of Mary Mathison (1875) justified the privately printed book in a biographical notice: “Those who had the privilege of knowing her will treasure the record of her thoughts...and if any...should be comforted or helped forward one small step on the heavenward way by any word or thought of hers, they will not have been written in vain, and she “being dead yet speaketh.” By allowing the dead to speak, publication of journals and letters typified biographers’ fervent belief in resurrection, while the record of an exemplary faith could instruct and convert readers to a similar love of God. Albert Head hoped that his wife Caroline’s testimony about Christ, “the Saviour and Friend she loved so dearly...might stimulate others to seek for the grace of God” (xiii). So strong was the religious impulse that even those opposed to organized religion adopted its narrative of transformation through faith and good works, with writers telling the life stories of nurses, suffragists, or socialists in order to convert readers to secular causes.

Where Christian biographies emphasized narratives of spiritual evolution that provided readers with models to imitate, other forms of lifewriting appealed to the glamour of the unattainable. Aristocratic memoirs focused on their authors’ membership in exclusive social circles and participation in important political events, neither of which could be emulated by the general public. Lifewriting by elite women did not hold up a mirror to the reader but instead offered a visitor’s pass for a personal guided tour of privileged lives. In the first half of the twentieth century, when Victorian women’s lifewriting surged into print, lifewriting became valued as a form of time travel. Editors and authors no longer argued that works provided spiritual exempla or vicarious entry into an exclusive social circle but instead justified them as having a historical purpose. Victorian lifewriting provided a “picture of a dead world” and a record of a time “fast slipping out of our reach.” Its very lack of incident and typicality increased its value for nostalgic readers who were beginning to see the Victorian era as a bygone age of equipoise. With its emphasis on everyday life and interchangeable, representative subjects, Victorian lifewriting fed an appetite for vernacular social history among general readers who anticipated the scholarly interest in the lives of ordinary people by several decades.

In the 1930s a new form of lifewriting, the modernist memoir, began to emphasize inimitable personal details, subjective internal processes, and self-reflexive accounts of the development of perception and expression. Psychoanalytic theory popularized introspection and encouraged individuals to develop elaborate individual mythologies. Works like Eleanor Acland’s Good-Bye for the Present (1935) abandoned family trees and exemplary religious lives for idiosyncratic, “disconnected glimpses of childish things.” Where Victorian lifewriting usually began with familiar topographies and extensive genealogies, modernist memoirs opened with the author’s first memory and strove to represent her emerging consciousness. The new style retained some elements from the previous era, but the Victorian lifewriter’s inclination to portray individuals...
as ideal types gave way to deliberately fragmented accounts whose inability to tell a contained, linear story testified to the irreducible singularity of the biographical subject.

**Female Friendship as Gender Norm**

Contemporary readers might find themselves almost suspicious of how little there is in Victorian lifewriting to shock or surprise; can their lives really have been this dull? Deficient in arresting details and blandly uniform, Victorian lifewriting does not foster any illusions that it accurately records the historical past. But lifewriting was not pure fiction, and its very adherence to rules and commitment to typical daily life makes it a far more valuable source than conduct literature, medical writings, or police records for understanding how conventions shaped lived behavior. Consider the example of transvestism. Cross-dressing could lead to scandal and arrest, but lifewriting attests that many youths who adopted the clothes of the other sex were treated as amusing pranksters. In her 1837 autobiography Elizabeth Davis recalled “enjoying” herself “extremely” when she dressed as a man to accompany a fellow housemaid to a party and noted that her employers simply “laughed” when they caught her. In the 1840s a young woman living in London wrote to a cousin in the country about putting on a play with other girls for their fathers and mothers: “I have two parts, the good Fairy and the Lord Chamberlain because he sings a song, and he wears a turban and baggy trousers and I wear a beard and moustache.” Other accounts described boys dressing as girls and sallying forth in public to the amusement of all in the know.32

Victorian lifewriting exposes other gaps between myth and reality. Conduct books confined women to the private sphere, but in fact, many informally participated in politics. Amanda Vickery has pointed out the dearth of research on women’s consumption of newspapers, an increasingly political medium after 1750; lifewriting shows that many ordinary middle-class women who complied with gender norms actively read newspapers and discussed political events with their fathers and husbands.33 Katharine Harris’s journal documents how a middle-class teenage girl tracked the revolutions and cholera epidemics of 1848 as carefully as she followed changes in fashion and the dramas of her social circle.34 Women’s diaries and correspondence also modify our image of Victorian feminism as a powerful but marginal movement; though suffrage was a divisive issue, an otherwise silent majority supported female higher education, with many writers asserting that “women have brains, and given equal opportunities, can do as good work as men.”35 Mary Lady Monckswell (1849–1930) never formally participated in politics except as the wife of a man who held several government positions, but in 1890 she recorded her pride that a woman had attained the highest score on the Cambridge Mathematical Tripos: “Every woman feels 2 inches taller for this success of Miss Fawcett.”36

Female friendship emerges in Victorian lifewriting as a fundamental component of middle-class femininity and women’s life stories. Because the letters women exchanged with male suitors were often deemed too private or compromising for publication, and because wives had few occasions to write to husbands whom they lived with, letters between female friends and kin were the most common and copious source for documenting women’s lives.37 Anna Bower’s correspondence with three women who had been her friends since school days made up the bulk of a 1903 edition of her diaries and letters.38 The Memoir of Mrs. Mary Lundie Duncan (1842) drew heavily on the communication between Mary Duncan and a lifelong friend. The many letters included in the published version of Mary Gladstone Drew’s diaries and correspondence were addressed to her cousin and friend Lavinia.39 The editor of Lady Louise Knightley’s journals identified the central figure of the early volumes as Louise’s cousin and “inseparable companion” Edith, with whom Louise exchanged daily letters when they were separated between 1856 and 1864 (12).

The emphasis on female friendship in Victorian women’s lifewriting mirrored the ways in which didactic literature defined it as an expression of women’s essential femininity. In The Women of England and The Daughters of England, Sarah Ellis articulated the tenets of a domestic ideology based on strict divisions between men and women: She counseled women to accept their inferiority to men and to cultivate moral virtues such as selflessness and empathy as counterweights to the male virtues of competitiveness and self-determination. Ellis praised female friendship for several reasons. It trained women not to compete with men by requiring them not to compete with one another; it fostered feminine vulnerability by developing bonds based on a shared “capability of receiving pain”; and it reinforced married love by cultivating the sexual differences that fostered men’s desire for women (Women, 75, 224). In The Daughters of England, Ellis explicitly argued that friendship trained women to be good wives by teaching them particularly feminine ways of loving: “In the circle of her private friends . . . [woman] learns to comprehend the deep mystery of that electric chain of feeling which ever vibrates through the heart of woman, and which man, with all his philosophy, can never understand” (337). Ellis argued that female friendship produced marriageable women by intensifying the opposition between the sexes, but she then undid gender differences by positing similarities between friendship and marriage. The emotions fostered by friendship were also
those required for marriage, leading Ellis to call marriage a species of friendship, and friendship "the basis of all true love" (Daughters, 388).

Far from compromising friendship, family and marriage provided models for sustaining it; female friends exchanged the same tokens as spouses and emulated female elders who also prized their friendships with women. Marriage rarely ended friendships and many women organized part of their lives around their friends. Louise Creighton (1850–1936), married to an Anglican vicar and eventually the mother of six children, wrote letters to her mother in the 1870s that often mentioned extended visits from her childhood friend Binnie and other married and unmarried female friends. Just before she acceded to the throne, Princess Victoria wrote of her governess Lezhén as "my best and truest friend I have had for nearly 17 years and I trust I shall have for 30 or 40 and many more." On the day Victoria married Albert, Lezhén gave the queen a ring, and their pledges of an enduring bond held true, with Lezhén enshrined at court long after the queen's wedding. Like any monarch, Queen Victoria practiced a politics of display, but what she performed most vigorously was her adherence to domestic middle-class ideals. It is therefore not surprising to find her commitment to lifelong friendship echoed in the aspirations of Annie Hill, a middle-class girl who in 1877 wrote to her friend Anna Richmond, "I do not see why we should not keep up writing to one another all our lives like Aunt Maria and her great friend have done." The friendships that created bonds between individual women also forged a sense of connection between generations.

Friendship and marriage could be overlapping and mutually reinforcing. While engaged to her husband-to-be, Mary Duncan sent him poems and the gift of a hair brooch, and at the same time wrote a poem for her best friend, whom she addressed as "loved one" and "dear one" (163, 179–80, 147). Just as Duncan experienced no conflict in loving her fiancé and her friend, other women expressed affection for friends by hoping they would happily marry. Writing in 1865 of the friend who came "to bless my life," twenty-three-year-old Louisa Knightley fantasized about her eventual wedding with a sense of pleasure rather than incipient loss: "I have grown to love Edie very dearly—the Sleeping Beauty, whom life and the world are slowly awakening. May the enchanted Prince soon come and touch the chord that will rouse her from the dreams of childhood and make of her the perfect woman!" (105–6).

In a long passage from The Women of England on women's duties, what begins as a discussion of friendship between women blurs almost imperceptibly into a peroration on marriage between women and men. By the last sentence of this passage, it is clear that Ellis's subject has shifted from female friendship to male-female marriage, but where does the shift begin?

Have [women] not their young friendships, for those sunny hours when the heart expands itself in the genial atmosphere of mutual love, and shrinks not from revealing its very weaknesses and errors; so that a faithful hand has but to touch its tender chords, and conscience is awakened, and then instruction may be poured in, and medicine may be administered, and the messenger of peace, with healing on his wings, may be invited to come in, and make that heart his home? Have they not known the secrets of some faithful bosom laid bare before them in a deeper and yet more confiding attachment, when, however insignificant they might be to the world in general, they held an influence almost unbounded over one human being, and could pour in, for the bane or the blessing of that bosom, according to the fountain from whence their own was supplied? Have they not bound themselves by a sacred and enduring bond, to be to one fellow-traveller along the path of life, a companion on his journey.

(47–48)

Ellis's overuse of pronouns, personifications, and body parts to represent people makes it difficult to assign gendered subjects to her sentences. The reference to a faithful hand awakening conscience accords with Ellis's understanding of female friendship's moral benefits, and the "messenger of peace" who enters the opened heart is only figuratively male and could refer to the female friend or the husband. The invocation of "an influence almost unbounded over one human being" invokes an intensity and exclusivity that Ellis associates with marriage and cautions against in friendship, but the gender neutrality of the phrase "human being" makes the phrase applicable to both relationships. Only the final sentence refers unambiguously to the husband, and even then, the emotional solace he receives originates in the "fountain" of female friendship that taught his wife to love. Ellis's use of pronouns similarly underscores the interdependence of friendship and marriage. Her final sentence oddly joins the "one fellow-traveller," who represents the husband, with a plural pronoun, the "they" who have bound themselves to be his companion, and who represent women trained to wedlock by the "mutual love" of friendship. Ellis's suggestive formulation embodies marriage's dependence on prior bonds between women to the point of suggesting that a man marries both his wife and the friends whom she has incorporated into her simultaneously individual and multiple person.

Lifewriting confirms the links conduct literature made between female friendship and conventional femininity, for only women invested in portraying themselves as atypical failed to write of their friendships. Women who succeeded in masculine arenas and advertised their exceptional achievements in published autobiographies often accentuated their distance from standard femininity by downplaying the role that female friends played in their lives. Battle painter Elizabeth Butler (1846–1933),
pedagogue and professional author Elizabeth Sewell (1815–1906), and radical activist Annie Besant (1847–1933) all omitted the rhapsodic descriptions of friendship that characterized lifewriting by women eager to demonstrate how well they had fulfilled the dictates of their gender.44 Outright disdain for female friendship was rare. One of the few extant examples of a woman mocking female friendship is an exception that proves the rule. A sophisticated transplant raised in Paris by parents from the Anglo-Irish gentry who returned to England in 1868, Alice Miles was eager to distinguish herself from her earnest English relatives. In a diary that remained unpublished until the late twentieth century, she wrote that women were obligated to marry for money, not love. Her contempt for British domestic sentiment led her to dismiss the earnest devotion between female friends she encountered in England as hypocrisy or stupidity. She believed instead in “the natural aversion women always seem to entertain towards each other and the still more decided preference they habitually evince towards mankind!” Nevertheless, Miles enjoyed forming a friendship with a young woman “perfectly acquainted” with every “naughty story...making the tour of London,” whom she praised as “a regular little rose bud...looking perfectly bewitching.” Even the cynical Miles, who believed that affection between woman was merely a “sign...that a man is at the bottom of the emotion,” could not resist the pleasure she took in a woman pretty and wicked enough to be a potential rival.65

Successful women who represented themselves as proper ladies defined their lives in terms of their friendships with women as well as their devotion to family and church. Anglican novelist Charlotte Yonge (1823–1901) described her life as structured by three great friendships, beginning in childhood with a favorite cousin, “My dear, dear Anne, whom I loved always with all my heart!” (66). Yonge’s account of her youthful love for Anne provides an unusual instance of a girlhood friendship being checked by adults:

The passage depicts mothers attempting to limit how girls express their affection, but not the fondness itself. Yonge’s gentle reuke of the mothers’ censure is ratified by her adult status as a novelist whose works were eminently respectable and ladylike. The very act of recollecting Anne and the landscape of their love in the present evades the maternal effort to subdue it in the past. Never an overt rebel, Yonge neutralizes maternal disapproval and strictures by calling the mothers “hard,” thus subtly impugning not only their judgment but also their femininity, which suffers in comparison with the “love” between the two girls, hyperfeminine in its “tenderness.”

FRIENDS AND “FRIENDS”

To understand what friendship between women was, we must first understand what it was not. Before turning to the ways in which female friendship illustrated the play of the Victorian gender system, we must develop grounds for distinguishing it from other relationships between women. This is a detour, for the subject of this chapter is female friendship; erotic desire and marriage between women are the focus of subsequent sections. But friendship, erotic infatuation, and female marriage have so often been conflated, and women’s relationships so commonly understood as essentially ambiguous, that the detour is a necessary one. The language of Victorian friendship was so ardent, the public face of female marriage so amicable, the comparisons between female friendship and marriage between men and women so constant, that it is no simple task to distinguish female friends from female lovers or female couples. The question “did they have sex?” is the first one on people’s lips today when confronted with a claim that women in the past were lovers—and it is almost always unanswerable. If firsthand testimony about sex is the standard for defining a relationship as sexual, then most Victorians never had sex. Scholars have yet to determine whether Thomas Carlyle was impotent; when, if ever, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor consummated their relationship; or if Arthur Munby and Hannah Cullwick, whose diaries recorded their experiments with fetishes, cross-dressing, and bootlicking, also had genital intercourse.66 Just as one can read hundreds of Victorian letters, diaries, and memoirs without finding a single mention of menstruation or excretion, one rarely finds even oblique references to sex between husband and wife. Men and women were equally reticent about sexual activity inside and outside of marriage.67 In a journal that described her courtship and wedding in detail, Lady Knightley dispatched the first weeks of wedded life in two lines: “Rainald and I entered on our new life in our
own home. May God bless it to us" (173). Elizabeth Butler, whose autobiography included "a little sketch of [her] rather romantic meeting" with the man who became her husband, was similarly and typically laconic about a transition defined by sexual intercourse: "June 11th of that year, 1877, was my wedding day."68

The lack of reliable evidence of sexual activity becomes less problematic, however, if we realize that sex matters because of the social relationships it creates and concentrate on those relationships. In Victorian England, sex was assumed to be part of marriage, but could also drop out of marriage without destroying a bond never defined by sex alone. The diaries and correspondence of Anne Lister and Charlotte Cushman provide solid evidence that nineteenth-century women had genital contact and orgasms with other women, but even more importantly, they demonstrate that sex created different kinds of connections. The fleeting encounters Lister had with women she met abroad were very different from the illicit but sustained affair Cushman had with a much younger woman who became her daughter-in-law. Those types of affairs were in turn worlds apart from the relationships with women that Lister and Cushman called marriages, a term that did not simply mean the relationships were sexual but also connoted shared household, mingled property, and assumptions about exclusivity and durability. We can best understand what kinds of relationships women had with each other not by hunting for evidence of sex, which even if we find it will not explain much, but rather by anchoring women's own statements about their relationships in a larger context. The context I provide here is the complex linguistic field of lifewriting, which brings into focus two types of relationships often confused with friendship, indeed often called friendship, but significantly different from it: 1) unrequited passion and obsessive infatuation; and 2) life partnerships, which some Victorians described as marriages between women.

The most famous and best-documented example of a Victorian woman's avowed but unreciprocated passion for another woman is Edith Simcox's lifelong love for George Eliot, which has made her a staple figure in histories of lesbianism.69 Simcox (1844–1901) was a trade-union organizer and professional writer who regularly contributed book reviews to the periodical press and published fiction and nonfiction, including a study of women's property ownership in ancient societies, discussed in chapter 5. From 1876 to 1900, Simcox kept a journal in a locked book that surfaced in 1930. Simcox gave her life story a title, *The Autobiography of a Shirtmaker*, that foregrounded her successful work as a labor activist, but its actual content focused on what Simcox called "the love-passion of her life," her longing for George Eliot as an unattainable, idealized beloved whom she called "my goddess" or, even more reverently, "Her."70 Simcox knowingly embraced a love that could not be returned, though she was aware of reciprocated, consummated sexual love between women. Her diary alludes to a "lovers' quarrel" among three women she knew (61) and mentions her own rejection of a woman who "professed a feeling for me different from what she had ever had for any one, it might make her happiness if I could return it" (159).

Tellingly, though twentieth-century scholars often refer to Simcox euphemistically as Eliot's devoted "friend," Simcox rarely used the term, and modeled herself instead on a courtly lover made all the more devoted by the one-sidedness of her passion. Simcox defined her diary as an "acta diurna amoris," a daily act of love, and aspired to keep it with a constancy that would mirror her total absorption in Eliot (3). After bringing Eliot two valentines in February 1878, Simcox wrote: "Yesterday I went to see her, and have been in a calm glow of happiness since—for no special reason, only that to have been near her happens to have that effect on me... I did nothing but make reckless love to her... I had told her of my ambition to be allowed to lie silently at her feet as she pursued her occupations" (25). George Lewes, the companion whom Eliot's friends referred to as her husband, was present at most of these scenes, and he and Eliot tolerated and even enjoyed Simcox's attentions, which they consciously construed as loverlike. During a conversation about Elizabeth Barrett Browning's love poems, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Eliot told Simcox "she wished my letters could be printed in the same veiled way—'the Newest Heloise,'" thus situating Simcox's missives to her in the tradition of amatory literature (39). In private, Simcox indulged fantasies of a more sensual connection, reflecting on a persistent "love that made the longing and molded the caress," and recalling how “[i]n thinking of her, kisses used to form themselves instinctively on my lips—I seldóm failed to kiss her a good night in thought” (136).

In trying to define her love for Eliot, Simcox significantly refused to be content with one paradigm; instead, she accumulated analogies, comparing her love for Eliot to both "[m]arried love and passionate friendship" (60). Like a medieval ascetic, Simcox eroticized her lack of sexual fulfillment, arguing that her love was even more powerful than friendship or marriage because, in resigning herself to living "widowed of perfect joy," she felt "sharp flames consuming what was left... of selfish lust" (60).71 In an unsent 1880 letter to Eliot, Simcox again found herself unable to select only one category to explain her love: "Do you see darling that I can only love you three lawful ways, idiotically as Frater the Virgin Mary, in romance wise as Petrach, Laura, or with a child's fondness for the mother" (120). By implication, Simcox also suggested that there would be an unlawful way to love Eliot—as an adulterer who would usurp the uxurious role already occupied by Lewes. She concluded by
explaining that her relationship with Eliot was too unequal to be a friendship (120). In the absence of the sociological and scientific shorthand provided by sexology or a codified subculture, and in the absence of a genuinely shared life that could be represented by a common history or joint possessions, women like Simcox represented their unrequited sexual desire for other women by extravagantly combining incompatible terms such as mother, lover, sister, friend, wife, and idol.

Other women deployed similar rhetorical techniques of intensification and accumulation to express sexual loves that were not equally felt and did not lead to long-term partnerships. At age twenty, Sophia Jex-Blake (1840–1912), one of England’s first female doctors and an activist who helped open medical education to women, met philanthropist Octavia Hill (1838–1912). In a biography of Jex-Blake written in 1918 that still adhered to Victorian rhetorical conventions, Margaret Todd called her subject’s relationship with Hill a “friendship” but qualified it as one that made “the deepest impression . . . of any in the whole of her life.” Jex-Blake considered the degree of love she felt for women to be unusual, writing around 1858, “I believe I love women too much ever to love a man” (78). During a brief relationship that Hill soon broke off, the two women may have been sexually involved, but even so their feelings were never evenly matched. During the period when the women were closest, Hill reduced their bond to mere chumminess by calling herself and Jex-Blake “great companions” (85). By contrast, Jex-Blake was in awe of Hill and described her as both child and mother, roles often eroticized for Victorians, writing in her diary of “My dear loving strong child . . . I do love and reverence her” (85). Even after the relationship ended, Jex-Blake thought of Hill as her lifelong spouse, referring twenty years later to the “fantastic faithfulness” she maintained for her first love, to whom she left “the whole of her little property” in repeated wills (94). Like Simcox, Jex-Blake used intensified language to underscore the uniqueness of her emotions. When she described inviting Hill on a vacation that included a visit to Llangollen, a site made famous by the female couple who had lived there together, Jex-Blake wrote of her “heart beating like a hammer” (85) and then described Hill’s response: “She sunk her head on my lap silently, raised it in tears, then such a kiss!” (86). Female friends often exchanged kisses, but Jex-Blake’s account took the kiss out of the realm of friendship into one of heightened sensation.

Although it was common for female friends to love each other and write gushingly about it, Simcox and Jex-Blake also wrote of feeling uncommon, different from the general run of women. Simcox identified closely with men and Jex-Blake felt unable to love men as most women did; both were extraordinarily autonomous, professionally successful, and self-conscious about the significance of their love for women. Other women also had intense erotic relationships that went beyond friendship, but were less self-conscious about those relationships, which they rarely saw as needing special explanation, and which usually lasted years or months rather than a lifetime. An example of outright insouciance about a deeply felt erotic fascination between women is found in the journals of Margaret Leicester Warren, written in the 1870s and published for private circulation in 1924. Little is known about Warren, who was born in 1847 and led the life of a typical upper-middle-class lady, attending church, studying drawing and music, and marrying a man in 1875. Her diary attests to a fondness for triangulated relationships that included an adolescent crush on her newlywed sister and her sister’s husband, and a brief, tumultuous engagement to a male cousin whose mother was the dramatic center of Warren’s intense emotions. In 1872, when Warren was twenty-five, she began to write incessantly about a distant cousin named Edith Leycester in entries that revealed in the experience of succumbing to another woman’s glamour: “Edith looked very beautiful and as usual I fell in love with her . . . Tonight Edith took me into her room. . . . She is like an enchanted princess. There is some charm or spell that has been thrown over her.” Numerous similar entries recorded an infatuation that combined daily familiarity with reverent mystification of a sophisticated and self-dramatizing woman.

Warren’s fascination with Edith lasted several years. Unlike Simcox and Jex-Blake, Warren never self-consciously reflected that her feelings for Edith differed from conventional friendship, but like them, Warren ascribed an intensity, exclusivity, and volatility to her feelings for Edith absent from most accounts of female friendship. Indeed, Warren rarely referred to Edith as a friend when she wrote of her desire to see Edith every day and recorded their many exchanges of confidences, poetry, and gifts. Warren fetishized and idealized Edith, was fixated on her presence and absence, and used superlatives to describe the feelings she inspired. Within months of meeting Edith, most of Warren’s entries consisted of detailed reenactments of their daily visits and the emotions generated by each parting and reunion: “Edith was charming tonight and I was happier with her than I have ever been. She looked beautiful” (287). Warren created an erotic aura around Edith through the very act of writing about her, through a liberal use of adverbs and adjectives, and by infusing her friend’s most ordinary actions with dramatic implications. Describing how Edith invited her to visit her country home, for example, Warren wrote, “Edith came in and threw herself down on the chair and said quietly and gently ‘come to Toft!’” (291). Although Warren got along well with Edith’s rarely present husband, Rafe, she relished being alone with her and described the awkward, jealous scenes that took place whenever she had to share Edith with other women (362, 369).
Warren found ways to dwell on the details of Edith's beauty through references to fashion and contemporary art. Like many diarists, Warren had an almost novelistic capacity to observe and characterize people in terms of prevailing aesthetic forms. She described Edith with flowers in her hair, looking like a pre-Raphaelite painting, and recorded her desire to make images of Edith: "I sd. like to paint her... it wd. make a good 'golden witch' a beautiful Enchantress" (290–91). A ride with Edith inspired Warren to pen another impassioned tableau: "All the way there in the brougham I looked at Edith's beautiful profile, the lamp light shining on it, and the wind blowing her hair about—her face also, all lit up with enthusiasm and tenderness as she leaned forward to Rafe and told him a long story... I... only thought how grand she was" (369–70). Shared confidences about Warren's broken engagement to their male cousin became another medium for cultivating the women's special intimacy. By assuring Warren that she did not side with the jilted fiancé, Edith declared an autonomous interest in her: "I wanted you to come here because—because I like you." She was sitting at her easel and never looking at me as she spoke for I was standing behind her, but when she said 'because I like you,' she looked backwards up at me with such an honest, soft, beautiful expression that any distrust I had still left of her trueness melted up into a cinder" (290).

Just as Warren heightened her relationship with Edith by writing about it so effusively and at such length, the two women elevated it by coyly discussing what their interactions and feelings meant. Before one of her many departures from London, Edith asked Warren: "[A]re you sorry I am going?... How curious—why are you sorry?" Then I told her a little of all she had done for me... how much life and pleasure and interest she had put into my life, and she said nothing but she just put out her hand and laid it on my hand and that from her means a great deal more than 100 things from anyone else" (293). Edith's gesture drew on the repertory of friendship, but in the private theater of her journal, Warren transformed the touch of a hand into a uniquely meaningful clasp. This is not to say the relationship was one-sided. If Warren's diary reports the two women's interactions with any degree of accuracy, it is clear that both enjoyed creating an atmosphere of pent-up longing. Edith fed Warren's infatuation with provocative questions and a skill for setting scenes: "She asked what things I cared for now? And I said with truth, for nothing—except seeing her" (303). Three days later, just before another of Edith's departures, Warren paid a call:

When tea was over, the dusk had begun and I... sat... at the open window. By and bye Edith came and sat near me.... The room inside was nearly dark, but outside it was brilliant May moonlight.... Edith sat there ready to go, looking very pale and very sad with the light on her face.... We did not talk much. She asked me to go to the party tonight and to think of her at 11. She said goodbye and she kissed me, for the first time. (303–4)

Warren is exquisitely sensitive to every element that connotes eroticism: a darkened room, physical proximity, complicit silence, a romantic demand that the beloved remain present in her lover's mind even when absent, a kiss whose uniqueness—"for the first time"—suggests a beginning. Any one of these actions would have been unremarkable between female friends, but comparison with other women's diaries shows how distinctive it was for Warren to list so many gestures within one entry, without defining and therefore restricting their meaning. Warren's attitude also distinguishes her emotions from those articulated by women who took their love for women in a more conjugal or sexual direction. Her journals combine exhaustive attention to the beloved with a pervasive indifference to interrogating what that fascination might mean. Never classified as friendship or love, Warren's feelings for Edith had the advantages and limits of remaining in the realm of suggestion, where they could expand infinitely without ever being realized or checked.

Women who consummated a mutual love and consolidated it by forming a conjugal household were less likely to leave records of their most impassioned moods and deeds than those whose love went unrequited or undefined. Indeed, women in what were sometimes called "female marriages" (a term I discuss further in chapter 5) used lifewriting to claim the privilege of privacy accorded to opposite-sex spouses. Like the lifewritings of women married to men, those of women in female marriages assumed intimacy and interdependence rather than displaying it, and folded their sexual bond into a social one. They described shared household and networks of acquaintances who recognized and thus legitimated the women's coupldom, liberally using words such as "always," "never," and "every" to convey an iterated, daily familiarity more typical of spouses than friends.74 Martha Vicinus's Intimate Friends cites many nineteenth-century women who described their relationships with other women as marriages, and Magnus Hirschfeld's magisterial, international study of The Homosexuality of Men and Women (1914) noted that same-sex couples often created "marriage-like associations characterized by the exclusivity and long duration of the relationships, the living together and the common household, the sharing of every interest, and often the existence of legitimate community property."75 Sexual relationships of all stripes were most acceptable when their sexual nature was least visible as such but was instead manifested in terms of marital acts such as cohabitation, fidelity, financial solidarity, and adherence to middle-class norms of respectability.
Because friendship between women was so clearly defined and prized, one way to acknowledge a female couple’s existence while respecting their privacy was to call women who were in effect married to each other “friends.” Given that “friends” was used to describe women who were lovers and women who were not, how can we tell when “friends” means more than just friends? Frank Hird’s 1904 biography of renowned painter Rosa Bonheur, whose monumental 1853 canvas The Horse Fair endeared her to the British public, is a good place to begin to answer this question. Bonheur was French, but Hird was an Englishman writing about her for English readers. The biographer was well placed to understand that terms designating social relationships could have more than one meaning, since he himself was the adopted son of his older male lover. Hird referred to Bonheur’s lover of several decades, Nathalie Micas, as her “devoted friend and companion,” but he supplemented that term with detailed accounts of Bonheur’s feelings for Micas throughout her life and after her death, which he called a deep “blow” to Bonheur. The care of the “friend’s” body in the crises of illness and death and in daily life was one sign of a conjugal relationship between women euphemistically called friends. Without ever hinting that Bonheur and Micas had sex, Hird showed that they had higher levels of involvement and intimacy than even the closest of female friends, who rarely lived together for long periods of time and almost never pooled their wealth or arranged to be interred together. Theodore Stanton, the editor of Bonheur’s reminiscences, also made clear that her tie to Micas was in effect a marital one. He cited painter Joseph Verdière’s description of Bonheur painting “while Nathalie Micas was taking a bath in a room opening into the studio” (94), and noted that the two women merged finances (103), wrote wills making each the other’s primary heir, and arranged to be buried in the same plot (81).

Because female friendship was recognized as an autonomous social relationship with its own duties and privileges, Hird was not simply trivializing or veiling Bonheur’s relationship with Micas when he called them friends. At a time when marriage was increasingly conceived as an affective relationship as well as a legal and economic one, husbands and wives also expressed love by calling one another companions. The friendship of a spouse, however, was usually deemed superlative, and when Bonheur used the term to describe Micas, she similarly vested it with the exclusivity that Sarah Ellis identified as “calculated only for the intercourse of married life” (Daughters, 336, 337). Micas was “my dearest and best friend,” or simply “my Nathalie” in letters Bonheur sent to family, friends, and fellow artists. She assigned Micas multiple roles, describing her as friend and guardian angel and comparing her to a mother and wife (Reminiscences, 43, 188). Their social circle followed suit, with friends often referring to them as a “couple” (Reminiscences, 8, 81). Bonheur’s memoirs cited many sources that referred to the women’s “long companionship” and “deep affection,” their reciprocal care of each other, and Nathalie’s jealousy of Bonheur’s other relationships (Reminiscences, 99, 101, 109, 102). The editor of those reminiscences fleshed out what he meant by the women’s “peculiar friendship” by citing letters in which Bonheur referred to Micas’s mother as her mother-in-law, and by devoting an entire chapter to Micas’s family history, a treatment usually reserved for a biographical subject’s spouse (Reminiscences, 122, 110). Although Bonheur insisted “My private life is nobody’s concern,” she also published the many letters of condolence she received after Micas’s death in her memoirs.

There are many instances of published writing acknowledging marital relationships between women by calling them friendships. Victorian women in female couples were not automatically subject to the exposure and scandal visited on opposite-sex couples who stepped outside the bounds of respectable sexual behavior. Instead, many female couples enjoyed both the right to privacy associated with marriage and the public privileges accorded to female friendship. The Halifax Guardian obituary of Anne Lister in 1840 recognized her longstanding spousal relationship with Anne Walker by calling her Lister’s “friend and companion,” a gratuitously compound phrase. Emily Faithfull, whom we will encounter again in chapter 6, was a feminist with a long history of female lovers. An 1894 article entitled “An Afternoon Tea with Miss Emily Faithfull” described her home in Manchester, decorated by “Miss Charlotte Robinson,” whom Faithfull readily disclosed “shares house with me.” Faithfull left all her property to Robinson in a will that called her “my beloved friend” whose “countless services” and “affectionate tenderness and care . . . made the last few years of my life the happiest I ever spent.” To call one woman another’s superlative friend was not to disavow their marital relationship but to proclaim it in the language of the day.

The rhetoric of female marriage was best exemplified in lifewriting by and about Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904). A professional writer and political activist, Cobbe championed feminism, protested vivisection, and lived for decades with Mary Lloyd, a sculptor, whom one acquaintance wrote of as Cobbe’s “special woman friend.” The social network that embraced the two women included Fanny Kemble, John Stuart Mill, Henry Maine, Charles Darwin, and William Gladstone, many of whom recognized that Cobbe and Lloyd formed a conjugal unit who lived and traveled together and were to be jointly saluted in correspondence and invited as a pair to social gatherings. Renowned actress Kemble, who published several autobiographical works during her lifetime, openly discussed Cobbe and Lloyd as a couple. In an 1877 letter to Harriet St. Leger,
published in 1890, Kemble mused: "I think Mary Lloyd really suffers from London; nevertheless not half so much as Fanny would from living out of it. They talk of going away, but... I think they are likely to be here for some time yet." Kemble rented a house formerly occupied by Lloyd and Cobbe, and whether writing of how Cobbe had to cancel engagements when Lloyd got lumbago, mentioning that "Fanny Cobbe and Mary Lloyd are coming to lunch with me on Monday," or casually referring to "them," "they," and "their" when Cobbe was her primary subject, she took it for granted that the women were a conjugal unit.91 Kemble's vision of the relationship corresponded to Cobbe's, who recalled "falling fast asleep while [Fanny Kemble] was reading Shakespeare to Mary Lloyd and me in our drawing-room" and whose own autobiography was peppered with references to "us," "our house," and "our neighbors."92

In her own lifewriting, Cobbe combined the rhetorics of friendship and of marriage in ways typical of women in committed sexual relationships with other women. When Lloyd died, Cobbe sent Bonheur a photograph of herself with Lloyd and their dog; Bonheur, who had recently lost Nathalie Micas, responded with a photo of herself with Micas and their dog. Like pet names, pets were often a way for women to represent a marital bond. Cobbe multiplied models for her partnership with Lloyd, comparing Lloyd's "soul-satisfying affection" to maternal love and more pragmatically describing Lloyd as "a friend who shared all expense of housekeeping with me."95 Superlatives abound in Cobbe's descriptions of Lloyd as "my beloved friend" and "my own life-friend," and she made the spousal implications of the second phrase explicit in letters to a married female friend that called Lloyd a "truant husband" when Lloyd was traveling, as well as "my old woman" and "my wife."96 Although Esther Newton influentially argued that only the masculine partner makes the lesbian couple visible, the ease with which Cobbe shifted between describing Lloyd as a wife and a husband complicates the very notion of the "mannish lesbian."97 Cobbe was indeed mannish: she identified with the masculine world of politics, wore her hair short, and adopted streamlined fashions perceived as male. Yet her proto-butch style was compatible with thinking of Lloyd as both a cozy wife and a rakish husband.

Paralepsis, in which one talks about something by stating that one is not going to discuss it, was another aspect of the rhetoric of female marriage. Cobbe drew attention to her relationship with Lloyd yet kept it private by making telling declarations of information held in reserve. In an article published in Contemporary Review in 1900, Cobbe called Lloyd her "life friend," and her autobiography invoked the marital privilege of privacy to explain why she wrote sparingly about Lloyd: "Of a friendship like this...I shall not be expected to say more."98 The 1904 edition of her Life, published after both Lloyd and Cobbe were dead, included an introduction that cited Cobbe's account of asking Lloyd's permission to write an autobiography, along with Lloyd's request for "reticence."99 To communicate that she had consulted Lloyd was a clear announcement of the connection between the two women's lives, for women who were only friends rarely made such requests or demanded that their relationship be kept private. As with Bonheur, paraleptic declarations of discretion were a way to advertise a marital relationship between women that Cobbe never attempted to conceal. In the first edition of her autobiography, published in 1894 while Lloyd still lived, Cobbe ended her story on a note of conjugal triumph, explaining that a recent legacy had made it possible for the couple to live in the family home they had previously been forced to rent out: "I have rejoiced that the comfort and repose of our beautiful and beloved home is secured to my friend and myself." Cobbe bid her readers goodbye noting that they left her "in this dear old house, and with my beloved friend for companion."100

Even though Cobbe announced she would not discuss Lloyd at length in her autobiography, she assigned her pride of place in her text. A photograph of "our house" was the frontispiece of a book whose narrative arc situated Cobbe's first meeting with Lloyd as an epoch-making and life-defining event: "[F]rom that time, now more than thirty years ago, she and I have lived together."101 Cobbe used pronouns to embody her marital bond with Lloyd, peppering her text with references to "we," "our garden," "our home," "our dear little house," and "our pretty little house."102 Specific anecdotes depicted a life shared with Lloyd at all hours over many years; Cobbe reported, for example, how "one morning before Breakfast [Miss Lloyd] found, and in an incredibly short time, bought the dear little house in South Kensington which became our home with few interruptions for a quarter of a century."103 Before breakfast, after dinner, during life, after death, Cobbe repeatedly showed how she and Lloyd regularly traversed boundaries that the closest friends rarely crossed. Although her published autobiography opted for the language of friendship over the marital terms she used in letters to close friends, it also openly reported "my friend's" dying words and announced Cobbe's plans to be "laid beside" Lloyd after her own death.104

Cobbe's use of terms common to friendship and marriage to represent her love for Lloyd peaked in a poem Cobbe wrote in 1873 that was published only in the second edition of her autobiography, which appeared in 1904, after both women had died. The poem opens with an apostrophe to the "Friend of my life!" and each of its eight quatrains ends with the refrain, "I want you—Mary." In succeeding stanzas, Cobbe evokes nature, domestic scenes, body and spirit, life and death, to build up a picture of her love for Lloyd: "In joy and grief, in good and ill, / Friend of my heart, I need you still; / My Playmate, Friend, Companion, Love / To dwell
with here, to clasp above, / I want you—Mary."

Cobbe's multiplication of terms and invocation of many registers of intimacy show what she did not directly tell, her spousal bond with the “friend” whose very name, repeated more often than any other word in the poem, was a homonym for “marry.”

Women like Bonheur and Cobbe described “friendships” that were de facto marriages by assembling elements of friendship, kinship, marriage, and romance. Their lifewritings demonstrate that terms we might have imagined were fixed for middle-class Victorians, such as “friend” or “wife,” were deployed flexibly and could have contradictory meanings. As a result, we can distinguish female friends from female lovers only by situating those words in the fullest possible context. The meaning of an individual statement must be established in relation to a biographical archive, and when that archive is sparse, we may be unable to determine what a given term or exchange meant. In cases where we know that letters and journals were burned or suppressed, the absence of evidence can suggest the existence of an illicit relationship, but it was so common to destroy personal papers that nothing definitive can be concluded from that fact alone. Sexual relationships between women that conformed to a marital model were not considered so illicit that open discussion of a relationship guarantees that it was not sexual. Conversely, just as it is reasonable to determine that sometimes women who called each other “friends” had sexual relationships with each other, in many cases it is equally reasonable to conclude that women were simply friends, despite writing of and to each other in the language of love. Declarations of love are as insufficient to prove a sexual relationship between Victorian women as lack of evidence of sex is to disprove it. But in iterated, cumulative, hyperbolic references to passion, exclusivity, idealization, complicity, private language, and mutual dependence, we can locate a tipping point that separated Victorian women’s ardent friendships from the sexual relationships they also formed with one another.

The Repertory of Friendship

Having established friendship’s intimate links to proper womanhood, and having demarcated the unrequited passions, obsessive infatuations, and conjugal relationships often conflated with friendship, we can now turn to female friendship itself. What repertory of gestures, emotions, and actions defined friendship? How did women mark their friendships and how did friendships evolve? How did friendship interact with kinship and marital bonds, religious belief, and the Victorian gender system?

One of the most striking differences between Victorian and twentieth-century friendship is how often Victorian friends used “love” interchangeably with weaker expressions, such as “fond of” or “like,” and how often women used the language of physical attraction to describe their feelings for women whom a larger context shows were friends, not lovers. In 1864, when Lady Knightley’s beloved cousin Edith died, the twenty-three-year-old offset her grief with a romantic quotation: “And yet through all I feel sure / It’s better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all” (71). A year later, Knightley rhapsodized that a new woman, also named Edith, “has come to bless my life. . . . I have grown to love Edie very dearly” (105–6). In 1927, the Dean of Windsor wrote of the “warm tender love” the Duchess of Kent had felt for her aunt, Augusta Stanley, whose “passionate response” led to a “mutual love [that] spelt happiness in both lives.”

The author of The Life and Friendships of Catherine Marsh (1917) wrote of Marsh’s 1836 meeting with her friend Caroline Maitland as love at first sight: “[F]rom the first meeting the two girls were mutually attracted” (23). That attraction led to a lifelong correspondence, but the very existence of so many letters shows that the women rarely saw each other in person. Ann Gilbert, a paragon of domesticity, wrote of reaching “blood-heat-fever-heat on the thermometer of friendship” with a neighbor girl (77), but nothing in her lengthy autobiography suggests that the relationship went beyond the “amitié” that Anna Jameson distinguished from “amour” in an 1836 letter to Ottillie von Goethe.

Lifewriting provides many instances of a woman recording her attraction to other women or boasting of being “intimate” with other women in youth and adulthood; Ann Gilbert recalled how as a girl, her sister became “by instantaneous attraction” another girl’s “bosom friend” (24, 78). In an 1881 memoir published in 1930, fifty-one-year-old Augusta Becher recalled a youthful meeting with a young woman who “proved just charming—took me captive quite at once” and went to dinner wearing “lilies of the valley I had gathered for her in her hair” (37–38). Ethel Smyth’s autobiography discussed her own sexual affairs with women in coded terms but openly described how her mother and the children’s author Juliana Ewing “were attracted to each other at once and eventually became great friends” (68, 111). Others wrote of loving (rather than liking) women; in 1837, Emily Shore (1819–1839) wrote of her friend Matilda Warren, “I love her more and more. . . . It is difficult to stop my pen when once I begin to write of her.” The two women argued fine points of religious doctrine but concluded “that, after all, we agreed in loving each other very dearly.”

Addressing her friend Catherine Marsh in 1862, twenty years after they first met, a married woman wrote, “My Katie, you were mine in 1842, and you have been twenty times more mine every year since,” reveling in friendship as the proud possession of a beloved intimate (40).
Such expressions of love between friends, as we have seen, were perceived as fulfilling the social function of feminization that led Sarah Ellis to promote friendship alongside motherhood and marriage as one of the duties of women. In The Bonds of Womanhood, historian Nancy Cott influentially argues that in the United States, domestic ideology promoted friendship between women as one way of confining women to a female world and to female roles, even as female friendship also laid the foundations for a feminist movement that sought to open the male worlds of education and professional work to women. But even women who were not active feminist reformers enjoyed the ways that friendships allowed them to go beyond the limits assigned to their gender without being perceived as mannish or unladylike. Friendship was both a technology of gender and an enactment of the play in the gender system. As friends, for example, women were able to exercise a prerogative otherwise associated with men: taking an active stance towards the object of their affections. In an 1880s memoir about the 1830s, Georgiana Sitwell, later Swinton (1823–1900), recalled a governoress who “was romantic, worshipped the curate, and formed a passionate attachment to our newly imported French governess.”

Sitwell remembered the governess as uniformly “romantic” in her stance toward men and women, but different in her demeanor toward her male and female objects of affection: deferential and implicitly secretive in her “worship” for the curate, expressive and dynamic in the “passion” she “formed”—that is, chose and shaped—for her fellow governess. Caroline Wigley, later Clive (1801–1873), reflected in an 1838 diary entry about her friendship with novelist Catherine Gore: “When I was so many years younger I used to fall into the most violent friendships and the one I felt for her was nearly the strongest of my passions. Of course she did not return it to an ugly, half-taught, unintelligible girl like me, and I remember crying for half a night because she went out of London without bidding me farewell.”

By contrast, Wigley was far more reticent about any frustration she felt in her love for Archer Clive, which went unreciprocated for several years. Counseled to be passive in relation to men, women were allowed to act with initiative and spontaneity toward female friends, and friendship enabled women to exercise powers of choice and expression that they could not display in relation to parents or prospective husbands.

Bonds with parents and siblings were given, not chosen, and friendship was for many girls their first experience of an affinity elected rather than assigned. For women who grew up in families with over ten children, friendship was also a girl’s first experience of a dyad rather than a swarm. While women had the power to turn down marriage offers and had subtle ways of attracting men they wanted as spouses, they were not allowed to choose a mate too overtly; only in Punch lampoons did women propose to men, and it was considered equally improper for women openly to initiate courtship. It was perfectly acceptable, however, for a woman to make the first move toward friendship with another woman, or to solidify amity by writing to a female acquaintance, calling on her, or giving her a gift. Aristocratic women had exchanged gifts, miniatures, and poems for centuries, and in the Victorian era the practice became widespread among middle-class women of all ages. One of adolescent Emily Shore’s several intimates, Elizabeth, gave her a “chain made of her beautiful rich brown hair” before leaving England, which Shore considered a token of her friend’s affection and looked forward to displaying as a sign of social distinction: “I have generally worn a pretty little chain of bought hair, and when people have asked me ‘whose hair is that?’ I have been mortified at being obliged to answer ‘Nobody’s.’ Now, when asked the same question, I shall be able to say it is the hair of my best and dearest friend” (269). Mature women painted portraits of friends and composed poems about them that they then bestowed as gifts, creating a friendship economy based on artifacts whose praise of a friend’s beauty, loyalty, and achievements also implicitly lauded their maker for having chosen so wisely.

Female friendship allowed middle-class women to enjoy another privilege that scholars have assumed only men could indulge—the opportunity to display affection and experience pleasurable physical contact outside marriage without any loss of respectability. Women who were friends, not lovers, wrote openly of exchanging kisses and caresses in documents that their spouses and relatives read without comment. Women regularly kissed each other on the lips, a gesture that could be a routine social greeting or provide intense enjoyment. Emily Shore, whose Bedfordshire Anglican family was so proper they did not allow her to read Byron, described in a diary later published by her sisters the “heartfelt pleasure” she obtained from a visit to her friend Miss Warren’s room: “She was sitting up in bed, looking so sweet and lovely that I could not take my eyes off her. . . She made me sit on her bed, and kissed me many times, and was kinder to me than ever [and] held my hand clasped in hers” (203). Writing in 1862 to her friend Mrs. Mary Austin, Jane Carlyle recalled their parting after a recent visit: “Oh, my little woman, how glad I was to recognise your face through the glass of the carriage window, all dimmed with human breath! And how frightened I was the train would move, while you were clambering up like a school-boy to kiss me!”

Frances Power Cobbe wrote in her autobiography of how the married Mary Somerville, a good friend but never a lover, “kissed me tenderly [and] gave me her photograph”; Cobbe in turn felt “such tender affection” for Somerville “that sitting beside her on the sofa . . . I could hardly keep myself from caressing her.”

Cobbe never wrote of caressing
Mary Lloyd, for respectability required lovers and spouses to avoid public signs of a shared sexual life. Friends, by contrast, could openly exchange material tokens of their affection and exhibit themselves giving and receiving the caresses and kisses of friendship.

Female amity gave married and unmarried women the opportunity to play the social field with impunity, since a woman could show devoted love, lighthearted affection, fleeting attraction, and ardent physical appreciation for multiple female friends without incurring rebuke. The editor of Emily Shore’s journals noted that when Shore wrote of loving Matilda Warren her diary was also “filled most especially with her passionate love” for a woman named Mary (207). Thomas Carlyle wrote indulgently about Geraldine Jewsbury’s affection for his wife Jane as well as about “a very pretty . . . specimen of the London maiden of the middle classes” who “felt quite captivated with my Jane.”108 Marion Bradley, wife and mother, wrote of her deep bond with Emily Tennyson and in an 1865 diary entry observed more casually that her new governess was “a gentle, lively, wise, cultivated little creature . . . I love her and hope always to be very thoughtful for her and good to her.”109 Equal latitude was afforded to unmarried women. The biography of Agnes Jones (1832–1868), written by her sister and published in 1871, narrated her life in terms of two arcs: achievements as a nurse and love for various women. In adolescence, her sister’s “ardent affectionate nature was drawn out in warmest love” for a teacher, followed by an “attachment” to a fellow missionary that “ripened into a warm and lasting friendship” as well as a close connection with another “devoted friend” (15, 21).

In an era that saw no contest between what we now call heterosexual and homosexual desire, neither men nor women saw anything disruptive about amorous badinage between women, and therefore no effort was made to contain and denigrate female homoeroticism as an immature stage to be overcome. Only in the late 1930s, after fear of female inverters had become widespread, did women’s lifewritings start to describe female friendship as a developmental phase to be effaced by marriage.106 Since then, erotic playfulness between women has either been over-interpreted as having the same seriousness as sexual acts or under-interpreted and trivialized as a phase significant only as training for heterosexual courtship. Victorian lifewriting demonstrates, however, that expressions of playful attraction and love were strongest precisely between women who never became lovers, and far from being practice for marriage, were as common after it as before. Jane Carlyle wrote to her unmarried friend Susan Hunter in 1835, “My dear Susan Hunter—What an infidel you are to dream of my ever forgetting your existence or your kindness! Woman though I be, and though Mr. John Jeffrey once said of me . . . that I was ‘distinguished as a flirt,’ in my time, I can tell you few people are as steady in their attachments. That I was attracted to you, a person of your quick observation could hardly fail to observe. . . . I liked you, and have continued to like you to this hour.”110 Six years after flirting with Hunter by coyly protesting that she was no coquette, Carlyle wrote to her friend, now Mrs. Stirling, of the persistence of their mutual affection: “I rejoice to see that marriage has not spoiled you. . . . I find in your letter . . . proof of . . . admirable good sense. . . . You love me the same as ever.”111 Carlyle’s letter raised no Victorian eyebrows; it was published in an edition of her correspondence compiled by her husband and his biographer James Froude.

Victorian society harshly condemned adultery, castigated female heterosexual agency as unladylike, and considered it improper for women to compete with men intellectually, professionally, or physically. But a woman could enjoy, without guilt, the pleasures of toying with another woman’s affections or vying with other women for precedence as a friend. In maturity as in youth, women delighted in attracting and securing female friends whom they often singled out for being beautiful and socially in demand. In a letter to her brother in 1817, the unmarried Catherine Hutton of Birmingham (1756–1846) boasted, “I have been a great favourite with a most elegant and clever woman.” To a married female friend who often gave her fashion advice she wrote of acquiring yet another “new” friend: “[S]he is beautiful, unaffected, and to me most friendly.”110 Female rivalry over men was discouraged because it implied that women fought for and won their husbands, but women were allowed the agency of competing for one another’s favor. Lady Monkswell crowed about having “supplanted” one woman as the “great friend,” of Mrs. Edith Bland, and the relative who edited her published letters and diaries included many other instances in which she bragged of similar successes (12). Such relish in contending with women over women was possible without any loss of ascribed femininity, even as it took women well beyond the parameters of womanhood as defined relative to men.

Just as women boasted of making conquests of female friends, they also openly appreciated each other’s physical charms. Women commented compulsively in their journals and letters on the appearance of every new woman they met, even when they did not know the woman personally. In an 1874 journal entry penned a few months after her marriage, the twenty-five-year-old Lady Monkswell mentioned a “very nice dinner” attended by “[b]eautiful Mrs. Julian Goldsmid with whom I am in love . . . a fair Italian about 26, with lovely blue eyes, a sweet smile and a sweet voice” (11). After Lady Goldsmid’s death in 1892, Monkswell recalled a relish she had felt almost in spite of herself: “She was not the least the sort of woman that I like, but she was kind and nice to us and so very attractive that I feel almost an affection for her” (207). As confirmation
that she liked Goldsmid for her looks alone, Monkswell provided an elaborate inventory of Goldsmid's bodily charms, praising her skin, eyes, hair, and teeth, “[d]arling, clever little hands, lovely arms and wrists ... well shaped legs and feet” (208). Monkswell's tastes were catholic and exuberant. In 1877, after meeting a “most beautiful girl ... a Miss Graham of Netherby ... magnificent dark red-brown hair, dark drooping blue eyes, the most beautiful full, red, finely cut lips (and in the words of Rossetti, ‘I saw her smile’),” Lady Monkswell exclaimed, “Let us have a few more girls of this style” (25).

Lady Monkswell was typical in her willingness to write about the pleasure she took in other women’s beauty. After marriage, Caroline Clive began to keep a diary jointly with her husband, in which she wrote of an 1845 meeting with poet Caroline Norton in lengthy detail only excerpted here: “[P]erfect beauty, eyes with long eye-lashes on both lids, the lower touching her cheek, a mouth that opens in a way like ideal mouths ... lovely skin and shape, a flowing, glowing silk gown and cashmere shawl edged with gold” (223). In 1858 Lucy Lyttleton, later Lady Cavendish (1841–1925), described meeting a Mrs. Preston: “The most fascinating beauty I have ever seen: shady deep eyes, all expression and grace; and such a lovely classical mouth, figure and manners most winning and refined.”

Margaret Leicester Warren wrote in 1858, when she was about twelve, of an afternoon spent talking “to the little Lasselses particularly to Amy a very nice and pretty girl of 14”; describing women she met in London three years later, she wrote of Lady Adelaide, “quite beautiful” and Miss Grant, “also very pretty, very light indeed with pale yellow hair and like the women in ‘Once a Week’” (vol. 1, 12, 71). Emily Shore wrote of an “exquisitely, perfectly beautiful” woman she saw while traveling with her family in Hastings who impressed her so much she devoted over a page to anatomizing the unknown’s features, expression, and dress (144–45). In her Records of Girlhood (1879), Fanny Kemble recalled two sisters with “beautiful figures as well as faces” who wore dresses “low on the shoulders and bosom” and wrote of one, “I remember wishing it were consistent with her comfort and the general decorum of modern manners that Isabella Forrester’s gown could only slip entirely off her exquisite bust.”

A culture of female fandom that spurred girls to worship ballet dancers and opera singers trained them from a very young age to enjoy women’s physical attributes even outside the context of personal acquaintance. The special affection girls developed for their favorite female stars is evident in Queen Victoria’s girlhood diaries from the 1820s and 1830s, excerpted and published in 1912 under the editorial guidance of Viscount Esher, a married man who had lifelong erotic friendships with men and boys. Perhaps because of his own susceptibility to cross-generational, same-sex attraction, Esher included alongside Victoria’s later appreciation of her Consort Albert’s beauty her warm adolescent responses to the many female performers she saw in ballets and operas and whose costumes she recreated in her extensive doll collection. In 1833, at age fourteen, she wrote of Marie Taglioni, who “danced and acted QUITE BEAUTIFULLY!! She looked very pretty. Her dress was very pretty.” Two years later, Victoria began an entry praising opera singer Giulia Grisi’s “face and neck ... such a beautiful soft shape. She has such beautiful dark eyes with fine long eyelashes, a fine nose, and a very sweet mouth,” and then dilated on Grisi’s hair, dress, and manner. In youth as in maturity, Victoria was always eager to adopt middle-class mores, and her interest in the physiques of female performers was as typical of mid-Victorian, middle-class femininity as her later devotion to the roles of mother and wife. In turn, the queen herself became an object of other women’s attentive gazes. When Henrietta Halliwell-Phillipps, the wife of a Shakespeare scholar, heard Jenny Lind perform in 1847, she expatiated in what was usually a terse diary on the queen’s appearance at the opera: “She was dressed in blue satin with tiara necklace, earrings & bracelets of splendid brilliants & all the front of her dress covered with diamonds. She looked very well & pleased.”

Women took note of other women’s attractions not only as models to emulate but as pleasurable objects to consume. Women who felt physically attracted to other women were not seen as less feminine because of the attention they lavished on other women’s bodies, but more so. Luxurianting in women’s charms and viewing women as physical objects are activities some now think of as the prerogative of men. Lesbian enjoyment of women’s bodies is considered an appropriation of masculine desire, while heterosexual women are often imagined as inspecting one another in a spirit of hostile rivalry, unable to enjoy feminine beauty unless narcissistically admiring their own. Victorians, however, saw both men and women as inclined to appreciate women’s looks, a phenomenon that chapter 3 explores in relation to fashion and consumer culture. Constance Flower, later Lady Battersea (1843–1931), recalled seeing the Empress of Austria at a dinner and finding her “the most graceful, attractive vision that eyes could desire to rest upon.” When her neighbor Lord Dudley observed that the Empress and his wife were “the two most beautiful women in the world,” Battersea placidly agreed: “And I thought he was right.” Adrienne Rich has influentially argued that “compulsory heterosexuality” works by stifling all kinds of bonds between women, from the homosocial to the homosexual, but Victorian society’s investment in heterosexuality went hand-in-hand with what we could call compulsory homosociability and homoeroticism for women. The imperative to please men required women to scrutinize other women’s dress and appearance in
order to improve their own, and at the same time promoted a specifically feminine appetite for attractive friends and lovely strangers.

Conduct literature praised female friendships for developing in women the loyalty, selflessness, empathy, and self-effacement that they were required to exercise in relation to men. Women’s lifewriting shows an acceptance of that idealized and ideological version of female friendship; few women left records of conflict or rivalry with friends, though some acknowledged engaging in jealous competition with relative strangers over prized acquaintances and intimates. At the same time, friendship provided a realm where women exercised an authority, agency, willfulness, and caprice for which they would have been censured in the universe of male-female relations. Female friendship provided women with a sanctioned realm of erotic choice, agency, and indulgence, in contrast to the sharp restrictions that middle-class gender codes placed on female flirtation with men. A woman who wrote of spending time alone with a man in his bedroom or giving him a lock of hair without being engaged to him would have transgressed the rules governing heterosexual gender, but to write of doing so with another woman was to describe an accepted means of forming social bonds and acquiring social status in the realm of homosocial gender. The celebration of women’s friendships shows that femininity was defined not only in relation to masculinity but also through bonds between women that did not simply tether them to the gender system but also afforded them a degree of play within it.

“Purified and Made One in Jesus”

For every woman whose letters and journals emphasized her frank enjoyment in looking pretty women up and down, there was another who recorded her delight in spiritual communion with a female friend. Victorian women in particular valued how female friendship reconciled the sacred and the profane. Victorian society was famously riven by contradictory commitments to the material and the spiritual, and scholars have amply shown how men struggled to reconcile physical lust and spiritual love in their sexual lives. Women also struggled to merge the real and the ideal—through marriage, motherhood, and female friendship. Caro-line Head’s biographer described her as “deeply attached” to several teachers in adolescence, including one “who was greatly used in strengthening her spiritual life, and of whom she wrote in enthusiastic terms to her aunt: ‘Dear Miss O. gets more lovely every term, I am so fond of her!’ Later in life they sought each other’s help and sympathy, and the affection never declined.” The biographer identifies Head’s love for her teacher as a spiritual force providing “help and sympathy,” but in the youthful letter the author cites, Head links her fondness to physical admiration for the “lovely” Miss O. (23). In turn, a friend of Head’s recalled how the physical and spiritual illumination of first seeing Head’s “bright, glowing face” created a bond both romantic and religious as “our hearts were drawn together in union with Christ” (266).

Emily Shore rhapsodized in an 1838 journal entry about how her friend Mary combined actual and angelic beauty: “Oh, Mary! You are still to me something like a fairy dream, too beautiful to be real—a being so pure, so perfect, so lovely, even here so angelically fascinating, that I can hardly believe heaven can add a charm to her; and yet I can actually feel and know that she loves me amongst those she loves most dearly” (268). In an 1834 letter, Mary Lundie Duncan described longing to find “a friend to whom I could unfold all my heart... There is one here, and when circumstances permit us to meet, a sweet savour is shed around more than one succeeding day.—I have many christian friends, but it requires an attraction of heart, which may be better felt than described, to fill exactly the place Missdoes. Now, do not think me a romantic girl, for my love to her is founded on love to God” (129). Aware as she wrote that her affection for her new friend was beginning to sound too similar to worldly “romantic” pleasures, Duncan hastened to assert its basis in religious feeling.

Women wrote of love for God and love for female friends with equal erotic fervor and experienced both as intense sensations that were equally physical and spiritual. Mary Lundie Duncan thanked her best friend for letters that “have not infrequently come when I was in want of quickening and stirring up, and have helped [me] to draw more near to my Saviour, for a time at least” (98). In Victorian lifewriting, passionate references to hearts on fire and burning with love are a sure sign that a woman is about to discuss Jesus. Conversely, women who described joint prayer as a way to develop intimacy borrowed from narratives of seduction to describe religious encounters with new acquaintances. In a letter to her sister, published by her husband in an 1878 memorial volume of correspondence, thirty-six-year-old bible-class teacher Rebekah Taylor wrote of a passionate triangle she formed with another woman and Jesus: “Miss D—— called this morning, and I think we had a nice time together. We beat about the bush a long while, and at last got on to what touched our hearts—the blessed, precious Lord Jesus. . . . To hear it said, when anyone is pouring out a little of the rapture of his soul as he gazes on His beauty, ‘He wants cooling a little,’ is like an iceberg to me. However, I found a ready response with her...” Taylor’s account, like a tale of amorous conquest, begins with an oblique approach, followed by passionate disclosures, rapturous union, and joy in having found a partner who shares her ardor. A letter of recollection appended to the biography of Agnes
Jones similarly described a friendship consolidated through shared religious practice: "I shall never forget my first meeting with her. I made a short call. ... [H]er quiet, ladylike, self-possessed manner particularly struck me. This call was followed by one or two more, but we did not get below the surface (probably from reserve on both sides) until about the fourth call I made, my darling friend threw herself on the ground at my side, and begged that I would pray for and with her, for she felt 'in great need.' We almost always met twice every week" (386–87). After a gradual disclosure of shared religious feelings through words and gestures, a regular liaison is cemented in which prayer becomes a vehicle for creating a deep bond.

The eroticism of such accounts was all the stronger for being unconscious, unself-conscious, and inseparable from genuine religious feeling. People who thought of God as a friend easily linked friends to God. Between 1800 and 1860, Anglicans and nonconformist Dissenters alike were powerfully influenced by the Evangelical emphasis on religious affect, on emotions experienced as visceral sensations. Where Catholics venerated church authorities, English Protestants valorized a subjective, experiential, personal relationship to Jesus and sought to be near Christ, trust Christ, and be like Christ. After the 1830s, as the Evangelical stress on sin and punishment began to wane, it became common for women to think of Christ as Caroline Head did, as "the Saviour and Friend" whom they "loved so dearly" and with whom they strove to realize "that blessed personal relationship 'He is mine and I am his'" (xiii, 20). Histories of Evangelicalism have focused on its investment in strict gender roles, its male promoters and adherents, and female susceptibility to charismatic male divines, but it clearly also offered women a way to dignify friendship as a factor contributing to spiritual rebirth.

Friends helped each other to receive the grace of faithful, limitless love for their deity, and the love of friends was itself a type of grace. For Caroline Head, a personal relationship with Christ had its earthly equivalent in friendship. Her "best-beloved friend, Emma Waithman" assisted in Head's own spiritual awakening, and both women defined their resulting friendship in religious terms, with Waithman expressing faith in their "bond of union" and Head convinced that the two "shared every spiritual blessing" (19–20, 264). For those who labored to feel what Marion Bradley called "personal feelings of love" for Christ, friendship was a means to personify that love. In her journal Bradley wrote that she felt love of Christ most strongly when spending her "usual Sunday afternoons with [her] dearest" Emily Tennyson and when feeling inspired by her friend's "devoted personal love to Xt." Their religious bond strengthened their friendship, and Bradley wrote of telling Tennyson that she could talk to her "as I never can quite talk with anyone else—she said she felt it also—that we understand each other heart and soul."126

Friendship became itself a form of religious training by helping women cultivate self-examination and worldly detachment. The philosophical discourse of male friendship had always emphasized the friend as a truth-telling critic; women similarly saw friends as agents of spiritual growth. Louise Knightley, for example, recorded a dying friend's warning against "an old fault," a sense of superiority to others (63). Friendship also helped women realize the Evangelical desire to detach from the body and the world in order to emulate and approach a God they could not see directly. When conceptualized as a bond that connected souls and thrived even in the face of minimal physical contact, friendship offered women a model of how to love from afar. For Mary Lundie Duncan, the friend shared with God the ability to love without physical presence: "I must love you at a distance, and rejoice to know that... I am not forgotten. It is a sweet thought, and if not forgotten by you, how much less by Him who has graven my name on the palms of his hands" (235). Loving the faraway friend echoed the human love of a Christ simultaneously distant in his divinity yet proximate in his humanity, and prayer thus became a medium of friendship as well as worship. As a form of religious communication that addressed an invisible deity, prayer lent itself to maintaining connections with friends who were similarly abstracted by physical separation. Duncan maintained contact with a close friend she never saw after leaving school by rising early to compose regular letters to her (97), and by arranging simultaneous prayer sessions that linked the two women when they were apart: "Dearest! May I think that every Friday night you pray specially for me? This is what I mean to do for you, and I think we should both derive much comfort from it" (205).

Friendship helped women to cultivate key tenets of Evangelical Christianity, such as indifference to material gain, acceptance of death, and belief in an afterlife. Victorian Christians often feared that love for a parent, child, or spouse risked becoming a form of idolatry. Hannah Allen wrote in 1838 of her upcoming marriage, "I am fearful at times, lest I should allow my affections to cleave too closely, to the hindrance of my spiritual growth. Oh! that I may make no idol in my heart... may we both be ready and willing to yield up our all to thee" (64). Love for kin could become mired in the body, a problem for a belief system that valued the spirit over the flesh. In its attachment to life, love for a husband or child militated against the resolute acceptance of death dictated by faith in heaven. Such love also risked making human beings equal in importance to God, a sacrilege for those who believed in a divine supremacy. Because friendship involved close connection without the primal bodily contact or all-consuming commitment that existed between spouses or
parents and children, it was the ideal social relation through which to cultivate belief in resurrection and reunion after death. Deep love for friends who were physically distant helped women like philanthropist Mary Mathison, the wife of a Trinity College fellow, "not to love this world too much" and to practice welcoming death as the gateway to resurrection (103). As Mary Duncan wrote to her best friend, "To love in Christ is the happiest earthly feeling, and I trust it is thus we love each other. It seems a preparation for another state of being, where, indeed, God will be all in all; and, though we are widely separated here, may we not worship together there?" (99). On the eve of her friend Margaret Taylor's 1852 emigration to New Zealand, Maria Richmond similarly promised that "once in every 24 hours I shall think of you and all our love, and dwell on the thought of our meeting again and possessing each other when earthly troubles are over."[21]

Friendship, Kinship, Marriage

By conceiving friendship as facilitating union with Christ and as itself a type of union in Christ, Evangelical Victorians paved the way for understanding friendship as analogous to the most fundamental forms of kinship regulated by religious and civil law. Friends were clearly distinct from spouses and family members in many ways; less physically intimate, more prone to be idealized as perfect than idolized despite their imperfections. Women drew clear distinctions between the love felt for a friend and for a spouse and often articulated their belief that marriage demanded unique feelings of love that went beyond even the warmest friendly devotion. Margaret Warren, for example, experienced great distress when she became engaged to a man for whom she felt only a "kindly affectionate feeling" that she identified as "not...the love that a woman should give to her future husband" but "only the love of pity and of friendship" (48).

Marriage thus involved a singular and exclusive form of love, but it was also understood to include and even aspire to the love proper to friendship. Deeply religious women wrote of marriage and friendship as analogous relationships, both based on shared faith and both understood as ultimately a bond with God. Mary Duncan saw her marriage and friendships alike as aspects of her spiritual training. She referred to and addressed her husband-to-be as "friend" (147, 188). She ascribed her happiness after becoming engaged to "joy in being united to one who would serve God with me" (202), just as she defined the "bond" uniting her to her closest female friend as "our fellowship with heaven" (98). Writing to a friend about her engagement to Albert Head, Caroline Hanbury exulted, "We are so perfectly one 'in the Lord'...[W]henever we are togetherness we three together, Jesus, Albert and I" (91). For those who took seriously the doctrine "We are all one in Christ," the concrete differences between spouses and friends became less significant.

Less religious spouses similarly aspired to be the best and truest of friends. Sarah Ellis defined marriage in terms of friendship when she wrote in The Daughters of England that "friendship is the basis of all true love" because true love and friendship had the "same...ultimate aim...the moral and spiritual good of its object" (388). In the early 1820s, Richard Low Beck confided to his married cousin and friend Sophy, "I have no other idea of matrimony than its being when well entered into the most exalted friendship this earth affords."[22] The courtship letters exchanged between John Torr and Maria Jackson in the late 1830s articulate married love as a form of friendship, but one more steady than what Torr called "mere friendship." Like the women in female marriages who accumulated metaphors for their relationships (supreme friend, sister, mother, wife, lover), Jackson told Torr in 1840, "You are friend, brother, lover, all in one." Convinced that "a perfect degree of friendship can exist only in marriage," Jackson believed that the best marriages were those between people who had been friends before falling in love. She celebrated her luck at contracting a "marriage of affection...where friendship was almost perfect before—marriage only placing it on a more secure footing and giving opportunities for its exercise."[23] Lady Monkswell inaugurated her diary in 1873 by noting that "On this auspicious day I became engaged to be married to my old friend of 3 years standing—Mr. Collier" (1).

To call a husband a friend was a form of marital decorum that made a relationship based on sex respectable in a society that forbade its open discussion, but it was more than a formula for downplaying the sexual nature of marriage. Because friendship was so effusive, a wife who named her husband her friend was also expressing the warmth of her love for him. Scholars have often characterized middle-class Victorian marriages as distant, and many no doubt were. Revisionist accounts of domestic happiness have drawn primarily on the sentimental outpourings of husbands, but many women wrote openly about their affections for men after becoming engaged to them. Henrietta Halliwell-Phillipps, who defied her father to marry James Halliwell, rarely expressed emotion overtly in her diary, but each year she noted her husband's birthday and the anniversaries of their first meeting and wedding day.[24] In her first journal entry after her 1841 marriage to Lord John Russell, Fanny Elliot Russell (1815-1898) wrote of wanting to become "more and more the companion and friend of him whose heart is mine as truly as mine is his"; two years later she wrote her mother that the "constant sympathy, encouragement, and approbation of John can make everything easy to me."[25] After her husband's death in 1869, Jane Keppel (1804-1883) recalled him as her "dear
companion for nearly four and forty years; the sharer of all my thoughts, my joys, and my sorrows ... the tender admiring lover as well as husband.” Women who were unhappy with their husbands also wrote about it, openly expressing frustration and anger. In the 1830s, utilitarian writer and translator Sarah Austin wrote to a potential male lover about her disappointment in a chronically depressed mate, while Lady Stanley of Alderley (1807–1895) sent acrimonious letters to her husband throughout the 1840s. But like contented female couples, husbands and wives who were happy basked in the ways that their unions combined ardor, friendship, and marriage.

The ease with which women viewed their husbands as friends carried over into a propensity to describe friends as spouses. Just as she recommended that husbands imitate friends, Sarah Ellis explained that a good friend would emulate a good wife, suppressing caprice, ill temper, and selfishness (Daughters, 350, 360–61). Sometimes comparisons between friendship and marriage were jocular wishes that presupposed the imposibility of a friend ever becoming a wife. After thanking Anna Richmond for her “demonstrative proofs of love,” Annie Hill wrote in 1877: “I wish indeed that you were a ‘nice young man,’ even minus the black whiskers! How happy would I be if I could find a husband that I could love and trust in so thoroughly as I do you.” Writing to a friend in 1852, Maria Richmond inched closer to the fantasy of marrying her when she bemoaned the difficulty of finding a perfect husband: “I sincerely hope dear Margie, that should you continue single ... you will, however old you may be, come out and marry me, helping to farm my little estate and to lecture my nephews and nieces.” Others made more solemn comparisons between friends and spouses. Scottish working-class autobiographer Janet Bathgate compared “the love that bound” her to her friend Jenny Burnet “to that of David of Jonathan” and wrote a poem describing their affection as “the tie that binds.” Catherine Marsh wrote of how her fifty-year friendship with Harriet Dalrymple “grew and strengthened till Death did us part” (49), and Ann Gilbert described the first of a series of annual summer trips she took with her friend Mary as a “honeymoon of delight” (427).

Women also compared friends to parents and siblings, though as with marriage they were aware of the differences between the two kinds of relationship. The friend could be a surrogate mother, and many women called their friends sisters. Conversely, writers often portrayed close affection between sisters as the highest form of friendship. As Christina Rossetti put it in her poem Goblin Market, “[T]here is no friend like a sister.” In a more circumspect vein, Sarah Ellis wrote, “[T]here may be faithful friendships formed in after years; but when a sister is a sister’s friend, there can be none so tender, and ... so true” (Women, 230). Ellis did not posit an automatic equivalence between sisters and friends but noted instead that sisters were not always friends, thus assuming a distinction between the two relationships that meant they could approximate one another only under the right conditions.

Often compared to a husband, mother, or sister, the friend was nevertheless also in a category of her own. Friendships had some of the force and status of spouses, parents, or children, but without sharing households or sex, as spouses did, and without immersing themselves in the total caretaking provided between parents and children. One reason friendship had such allure for Victorians was its unique position as a form of love perceived as moral, uplifting, and genuine even though—or because—it entailed few of the material entanglements and responsibilities attached to middle-class family life. In its concentration of pure sentiment, friendship became a luxury good that expressed freedom from instrumental relationships. A woman who had a close friend was able to display that she could afford to lavish time and attention on someone who did not directly promote her interests. As such, paradoxically, sentimental friendship became a form of labor, for the middle-class values that discouraged women from waged employment taught them to consider emotional work their business.

Middle-class women were the social stratum most prone to emphasize friendship as a matter of sheer emotion. Upper-class women wrote of love for friends but also vaunted acquaintances to prove membership in elite social networks. A few working-class women wrote about intimate friends in their lifewriting, but most avoided overt displays of affect and mentioned female friendships only briefly, focusing instead on relationships with female employers and coworkers that did not lend themselves to unreserved expressions of feeling. A certain degree of physical distance was as necessary to friendship as emotional closeness, and servants and roommates rarely had that kind of space from one another. Like men of all classes, working women understood friendship in terms of what Ellen Ross has called “survival networks” and were most likely to befriend coworkers, roommates, teachers, and employers; only a handful of women infused the shared struggle for existence with a romantic sense of spiritual and emotional affinity. Working-class women thus wrote of friendships primarily in the context of the search for work and shelter, and their memoirs mostly failed to single friendship out as a category. The few that did linked friendship to work or the reproduction of labor; in her autobiography, straw-plait worker Lucy Luck (1848–1922) thus defined one “true friend” as a woman who provided employment and mentioned an acquaintance who informed her about a job opportunity.
Friendship illustrated the play in the middle-class family system by providing women with a relationship outside the family and marriage that could be imagined as freely chosen, based purely on affinity and affection. At the same time, however, female friendships were securely connected to domestic relationships, not simply by analogy but also through concrete interactions that knit friends to kin. Ann Gilbert wrote of befriending a pair of sisters with her own sister (78) and of another friend's daughter becoming her sister's "friend and correspondent" (99). In a literal expression of friendship as kinship, female friends often named their daughters after one another and stood as godparents to one another's children. Cornelia Crow Carr named her daughter after her best friend Harriet Hosmer, who in turn called Carr her "best friend and sister" and referred to herself as little Harriet's aunt.\textsuperscript{136} Marriage, kinship, and friendship literally mingled when the children of friends married. Ann Gilbert's lifelong friendship with Anna Forbes was an "intimacy begun in the glow of young extravagance," then "strengthened...matured [and] riveted by the enduring connection that linked a daughter of hers with a son of mine" (83). Hannah Allen's "dearest friend" became her sister-in-law when she married Hannah's brother-in-law (25), and Caroline Head's son married the niece of her beloved friend Emma Waithman (247).

Courtship and marriage promoted close ties between women when wives developed affectionate relationships with their husbands' mothers.\textsuperscript{137} While relationships between mothers- and daughters-in-law were not usually termed friendships, in cases of broken engagements the relatively freestanding amity between a woman and her suitor's mother often came to the fore. When Margaret Warren rescinded her betrothal to her cousin Amyas in 1871, she was as distressed about upsetting his mother as she was about disappointing him. One of her diary's most heartfelt entries recorded telling Amyas's mother she was ending the engagement even before she informed Amyas himself: "I rose to go and asked if I might take her hand. She gave it me and kissed me—and then all my pride gave way and as I knelt by her sofa with my hands in hers as she has often held them before—we both cried together.... I remember saying 'Oh if I had but loved Amyas one quarter as much as I love you it would have been all right' and indeed that was true. Her hand was lying on my hands—her pretty long white fingers with the old blue rings on them and I could not help it—I stopped down and kissed them before I went." (72). Warren's life had been disrupted after her own mother's death and the prospect of acquiring a new maternal figure had made marriage to Amyas appealing, but she also desired his mother as a friend, an object of affection who would be both an intimate and an ideal.

Courtship, engagement, and marriage often created new friendships between women linked by a man. Charlotte Yonge wrote enthusiastically in 1858 of "the beauty and charms" of her brother's new wife (199). Richard Low Beck, who confided in his married friend and cousin Sophy about his courtship of Rachel Lucas, was eager for the two women to get along, writing to Sophy how he was "much gratified..." by hearing Rachel has formed a most favourable opinion of thee" and expressing his hope that Sophy thought equally well of his bride-to-be. The fact that he and Rachel named their first daughter after Sophy, and that Rachel faithfully wore a brooch Sophy gave the couple, suggests that marriage did indeed help Rachel adopt her husband's female friend as her own.\textsuperscript{138} When poet John Keats got engaged to Fanny Brawne, he asked her to correspond with his sister, and the two women continued to exchange affectionate letters after Keats's death. Brawne's projected marriage to Keats created a link between her and his sister that was consolidated when Brawne helped introduce Fanny Keats to the man she eventually married.\textsuperscript{139}

The complementary relationships among family, marriage, and friendship operated in multiple directions. Family and marriage were compared to friendship, coexisted harmoniously with friendship, and spawned friendships; in turn, friendships promoted courtship and marriage. Lady Battersea wrote of how Louise and Hannah, two women she knew, "became close friends, and Leo's happy marriage [to Hannah's sister] was to some extent the result of this friendship."\textsuperscript{140} The marriage of Lady Augusta Bruce to Arthur Stanley, later Dean of Westminster, was thoroughly mediated by a female friend who colluded with Stanley's sister to arrange the social call at which Stanley could propose: "My Dear Miss Stanley... Wd. it facilitate the first meeting if Dr. Stanley and Augusta came to lunch with me on the 4th. He wd. call upon me and wd. talk of his travels during the repast, and I wd. slip out (whispering 'On, Stanley, on!') and they then really ought to arrange everything in 5 minutes." Arrange things they did, and Augusta, who before her marriage served as lady-in-waiting to Queen Victoria, explained, "One great value of Dr. Stanley to me would be that I might continually be talking to him of my darling [Queen Victoria], and teaching him to love Her!"\textsuperscript{141} From start to finish, marriage was embedded in the world of female friendship.

By helping each other marry, friends expressed their love for one another in a world that valued female friendship but deemed marriage the most important tie a woman could forge with another adult. In 1885, William Gladstone's daughter Mary (1847-1927) was among the last of her friends to get engaged, and since she herself had experienced loneliness while still single, she was concerned that her remaining unmarried friends might feel abandoned.\textsuperscript{142} Some women managed such feelings by doing their best to help their friends make good matches, and as a result even the most intense female friendships promoted the hegemony of marriage.
Fanny Butler (later Kemble) recorded how she was “sorry to leave Philadelphia on Mrs.——’s account. I am growing to her,” but also noted, “She amuses me much by her intense anxiety that I should be married. ... my single blessedness seems greatly to annoy her.”

In addition to orchestrating introductions and proposals, friends abetted courtship by persuading their intimates that marriage was emotionally appealing, and married women propounded the joys of marriage to female friends as ardent as any suitor. Ann Gilbert, then Taylor, wrote to her recently married friend Anna Forbes Laurie about every stage of the Reverend Gilbert’s courtship, and informed Laurie immediately after accepting his proposal, recalling that her friend had helped persuade her to say yes: “I am learning with tolerable facility to believe what you told me when you said, ‘Oh, this delightful, mutual love’” (191).

Toward the end of George Eliot’s Middlemarch (1871–1872), a scene takes place that exemplifies the power of Victorian novels to fuse marriage and romance. As Will turns to bid Dorothea farewell, she erupts into speech, expressing the vehement feelings her first marriage had smothered: “Oh, I cannot bear it—my heart will break,” said Dorothea, starting from her seat, the flood of her young passion bearing down all the obstructions which had kept her silent. ... In an instant Will was close to her and had his arms round her, but she drew her head back and held his away gently that she might go on speaking.”

As Dorothea and Will embrace in the timeless present of fiction, they exercise over even the most skeptical contemporary readers a pull almost as strong as the one they exercise on each other. It is scenes like these that continue to epitomize the Victorian novel for readers and critics of Anglophone literature. Undergraduates who flock to courses on the nineteenth-century novel consistently distance themselves from the Victorians precisely in the terms Foucault debunked—they were sexually repressed, we are sexually free. Yet they also identify with Victorian novels, especially their concatenation of romantic fulfillment and marriage: “There is no happiness in love, except at the end of an English novel,” the narrator of Anthony Trollope’s Barchester Towers (1857) informs us, with an archness absent from the firm narrative decree issued by an otherwise timid heroine in Charlotte Brontë’s Shirley (1849): “When people love, the next step is they marry.”

Readers enjoy not just the sexuality but the heterosexuality of Victorian novels, an enjoyment all the easier to swallow because of how rarely Victorian novels mark heterosexuality as such. Critics are more self-conscious about the novel’s aesthetic dependence on heterosexuality, but insist on it all the more strongly for their awareness of it as a generic marker. Some equate the novel’s formal capacity to generate a sense of closure with its embrace of marriage as a social institution (Boone, DuPlessis). Others define the genre in terms of oedipal quests and conflicts that fuel narrative momentum (Barthes, Brooks). Still others posit heterosexual marriage as a principle of social structure or political participation, arguing that novels equate adultery with the breakdown of social hierarchies (Tanner) or the double bind of duty and desire (M. Cohen). Critics
usually mentioned the clitoris in descriptions of sexual acts between women or between women and men. Although William Acton and others famously asserted that women experienced less sexual desire than men, most Victorians, including Acton himself, did not believe that women experienced no sexual pleasure at all. See Steven Marcus, The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England (New York: Basic Books, 1964), 27–31. For a concentrated sampling of academic and popular medical manuals published between 1831 and 1888, written by men and women, that described what they variously called women’s lust, passion, orgasm, sensation of desire, and desire for intercourse, see excerpts collected in Patricia Jalland and John Hooper, eds., Women from Birth to Death: The Female Life Cycle in Britain 1830–1914 (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), 232–34. See also Peter Gay, The Bourgeois Experience from Victoria to Freud, vol. 1, Education of the Senses (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) and John Maynard, Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). In The Technology of Orgasm, Maine studies the use of vibrators as a form of medical treatment for women in late-nineteenth-century America. Her work suggests that women, like men, had the option of paying for sexual pleasures they could not obtain from their spouses; where men paid prostitutes, women paid medical practitioners to provide them with vulval massages that were considered a treatment for hysteria and other nervous diseases; see 38, 87, 110.

45. The Romance of Lust (n.p., n.d.), 69. For other pornographic texts that represented sex between women, see chapter 3.

46. See Anna Jameson, Memoirs and Essays (London: Richard Bentley, 1846), 276–77, and Thomas Laycock, A Treatise of the Nervous Disorders of Women (London: Longman and Co., 1840), 141, cited in Alison Oram and Annemarie Turnbull, eds., The Lesbian History Sourcebook (London: Routledge, 2001), 97. Laycock is not explicitly worrying about lesbianism in the sense of an exclusive sexual orientation towards women, however, since he sees girls’ experiences of “novel feelings towards the opposite sex” as the source of their enervating experiments with one another.

47. Detailed discussions of the scholarship in each of these areas appear in individual chapters.


50. Vicinus and Merrill offer thorough documentation of the familial and marital language used by women in female couples; I cite and discuss additional examples in chapters 1, 3, 5, and 6.

51. See Michael Lacey, The Misfit of the Family (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Butler, Undoing Gender; Christopher Nealon, Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Michael Moon, A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and


CHAPTER 1
Friendship and the Play of the System


18. Smith-Rosenberg’s opening examples are, for instance, quite different: She herself notes that the women in her second example were “lovers—emotionally if not physically” (371), unlike the women in her first example—yet both pairs exemplify the “female world.”


25. [Mary Landie], Memoir of Mrs. Mary Landie Duncan: Being Recollections of a Daughter by Her Mother, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: William Oliphant & Son, 1842), 228. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.


35. Although preprinted diaries were common, many women kept their diaries in blank books. Lady Louisa Rothschild and Byron's granddaughter Anne Noel King used small, bound blank volumes to keep sporadic, nonuniform diaries, while another woman whose journal spanned twenty years and ten volumes used a large account book to sum up each day in one to three lines. *Diaries of Lady Louisa de Rothschild, 1837 to 1907*, British Library Ms. ADD. 47949–47962; *Lady Anne Noel Blunt, diaries, British Library Ms. Add. 53817 ff.*; journal kept by Mrs. M. Palfreyman, 1840 to 1861, *British Library Ms. ADD. 49276*.


42. Marian Bradley, British Library, Ms. EG. 3766 A, 32.

43. Almost any Victorian woman's diary illustrates this point, but for a particularly representative example, see Gifford, ed., *Diary of an Oxford Lady*.


45. Marian Bradley, Ms. EG. 3766 A, 7. A tension between evangelical and Romantic impulses structures many Victorian diaries; Bradley adopted a lyrical, expressive, and spontaneous persona only when describing nature.

46. Lady Louisa de Rothschild, née Montefiore, British Library Ms. ADD. 47949, 4.

47. "Christian biography" is the term the anonymous author uses to describe her work in *Memorials of Agnes Elizabeth-Jones* (London: Strahan & Co., 1871), 1. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text. On the religious aims and ideals that subtended collective biographies of women published during the nineteenth century, see Booth, *How to Make It as a Woman*, 79–80.


54. Katherine Harris, diary, 1847–50, British Library Ms. ADD. 52503; see 95, 152. The diary of Marian Bradley recorded news about the Crimean War in 1854; see British Library, Ms. EG. 3766A, 32–41. Georgiana Bloomfield's collection of letters exchanged among her sisters is an excellent example of open discussion of political events by upper-class women; *My Sisters* (Hertford: Simson, 1892).

56. Hon. E.C.F. Collier, ed., *A Victorian Diarist: Extracts from the Journals of Mary, Lady Monkswell* (London: John Murray, 1944), 163. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text. Monkswell also recorded her open disagreements with her husband over political issues such as home rule for Ireland, which he supported and she opposed.

57. For an example in which the biographer excluded love letters her subject received from a man, see Beale, ed. *Recollections of a Spinster Aunt*, 4.


60. James T. Covert, *A Victorian Family as Seen through the Letters of Louise Creighton to Her Mother* (Lampeter, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), 65, 123, 265. In letters to her mother, Creighton also often wrote about her daughter’s friendship with a neighbor girl, 155, 161.


63. Porter, MacDonald, eds., *My Hand Will Write* 201.


73. Margaret Leicester Warren, *Diaries*, vol. 2 (printed for private circulation, 1924), 233, 247, 249. Further references are to this edition and volume, unless a different volume number is noted, and appear in the text.


75. Hirschfeld, *The Homosexuality of Men and Women*, 805. Hirschfeld noted that such marital arrangements were more common among women because men living together were more likely to arouse suspicion, 806.


80. Frederick Delman, “Afternoon Tea with Miss Emily Faithfull,” *The Young Woman* 3 (1894–1895), 318.


83. See Frances Anne Kemble, *Further Records*, 1848–1883, vol. 2 (London: Richard Bentley, 1890), 41–42, 81, 88. Cobbe was still alive when Kemble published the letters cited.


85. The reference to Lloyd as a friend with whom Cobbe shared housekeeping is from her *Life* (1904), 438; on Cobbe’s exchanges with Bonheur, see Mitchell, *Frances Power Cobbe*, 351.

86. Cobbe called Lloyd her “life-friend” in an article entitled “Recollections of James Martineau, the Sage of the Nineteenth Century,” *Contemporary Review* 77 (February 1900), 186, cited in Mitchell, *Frances Power Cobbe*, 359. Cobbe called Lloyd “my beloved friend” in *Life of Frances Power Cobbe*. By Herself*, vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1894), 645; remaining references are all from


88. Cobbe, Life (1904), 393, 711.

89. Cobbe, Life (1904), v, 708.

90. Cobbe, Life (1894), vol. 2, 645.

91. Cobbe, Life (1904), 393.


93. Cobbe, Life (1904), 395.

94. Cobbe, Life (1904), 711, 708.

95. Cobbe, Life (1904), 710.

96. Albert Baillie, ed., Letters of Lady Augusta Stanley: A Young Lady at Court (London: Gerald Howe, 1927), 12, 14. Baillie was Stanley’s nephew and the Dean of Windsor.


105. Bradley diary, Miss. EG. 3766B, 27.

106. In 1939, Lady Sybil Lubbock defended the “element of romance” in “the deep attachment” that she formed for an older English girl in her youth by calling it a “devotion” that lasted only until she “was really grown-up”; The Child in the Crystal: Reminiscences of Childhood (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939), 210. Laura Doan has shown that as late as the 1920s, many in England failed to perceive close attachments between women as deviant; Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of Modern English Lesbian Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).


112. Ethyl Smyth worshipped Jenny Lind, as recounted in Impressions that Remained, vol. 1, 92; the painter Elizabeth Butler began her career as “worshiper of Beauty” with a girlhood admiration for Ristori, An Autobiography, 7. The woman whose journals are excerpted in Beale, ed., Recollections of a Spinster Aunt, wrote to her cousin about her interest in Grisi, Taglioni, Eßler, and Madame Vestris, 11, 22.

113. See Kaplan, Sodom on the Thames, 102–65.

114. Esher, ed., Girlhood, vol. 1, 74, 114. Victoria was also very sensitive to male beauty and commented on it more freely after she reached eighteen and her mother no longer read her diary. From her first meeting with her future husband, Albert, she wrote of her pleasure in his looks, 262–63.


120. Bradley diary, Miss. EG. 3766-B, 11.


Chapter 2
Just Reading: Female Friendship and the Marriage Plot