"THEIR HEARTS WERE MADE ENTIRELY ONE": NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERARY DEPICTIONS OF FEMALE FRIENDSHIP AND SAME-SEX INTIMACY

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By

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I analyze representations of women’s intimate friendships in American literature from the first half of the nineteenth century, looking specifically at three primary works—Charles Brockden Brown’s *Ormond; or the Secret Witness* (1799); the anonymously authored *The Factory Girl* (1854); and the poems and epistolary correspondence of Emily Dickinson to Susan Gilbert Dickinson from the 1850s. I argue for an understanding of the romantic friendships I analyze as being: 1) of primary importance to the women involved; 2) typically incompatible with heterofamilial life, especially marriage; 3) potentially sexual but almost always erotic; and 4) marked by an incipient sense of self-awareness. Within the primary texts, I trace what I identify as three recurring tropes—all-female homosocial spaces; the unspoken (and at times, unspeakable); and female-male-female (or even female-female-female) structures of desire—that expose moments of queer possibility and protolesbian identification. The roughly 60-year period I focus on in this thesis is a contested time in American lesbian history; although notable historians of women’s romantic friendships have argued that these relationships were accepted by a society that viewed them as chaste and fully compatible with heterosexual marriage, more recent scholarship has suggested that even as early as the eighteenth century, a discourse of medical pathologization had begun to
cast these relationships under scrutiny. I am particularly interested in moments of silence or ambiguity within the texts I analyze, for, as I argue, it is within these spaces that the possibility of same-sex eroticism emerges. This textual openness has allowed these works to circulate without scandal even as they issue an invitation to their readers, a moment of interpelation, in which those who might read into those silences and understand are brought into contact with the text in a process of queerly generative reading that reaches across the centuries-long temporal divide.
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Introduction

While preparing her testimony for the lawsuit Dr. Franklin Kameny brought against the federal government for its policy of rejecting the security clearance applications of out gay men, lawyer Barbara Gittings wrote to Kameny in July 1968: “This source-book sex research is very frustrating--not because of what you read but because of what you can’t read” (Kameny Papers). In searching for explicit discussions of the “perverse” sexual practices of LGBTQ people within heterosexual marriage manuals, Gittings often encountered only “missing” texts—be they the missing books she suspected had been stolen from public libraries or missing words in manuals that alluded to specific sexual practices only in metaphorical language or medicalized terminology (Kameny Papers). Whereas in the 1960s Gittings could lament the slightly euphemistic “genital kiss,” or the defensive preface stating that a volume on sexual pathology “is a professional book for distribution only to professional people” (Kameny Papers), within my thesis I look to early- to mid-nineteenth-century American literature specifically for instances of the unspoken or unspecified, the purposefully ambiguous, that I argue provide the space for queer possibility. I contend that in literature from this period, descriptions of women’s intimate friendships are characterized by moments of narrative silence, the women’s language to one another often tinged with seemingly inexplicable melancholy, a yearning for unvoiced desires. Yet these absences might be read as something more than proof of what Terry Castle has called the “ghosted” lesbian who has been forced through the “derealization machine” of pre-twentieth-century Western literature, her love reduced to an “amor impossibilita…that, by definition, cannot exist…cannot be perceived, except apparitionally” (4, 6, 30-31). Although Castle does
later “complicate the somewhat relentless (and pessimistic) argument” by allowing for the uncanny way in which the “nonexistent…nonetheless appears,” its “elegiac waving off—the gesture of would-be exorcism—becom[ing] instead a new and passionate beckoning” (46-47), she maintains that this return is primarily accomplished in the writings of the twentieth century and beyond, while I focus on the idea of absence or coded presence as an opening for sapphic possibility even in the early nineteenth century.

The language of (im)possibility reappears throughout writings on love between women during this time period. While late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century writers typically emphasized the impossibility of certain sexual actions, at least among white women from “civilized” Western countries—from Lord Meadowbank’s declaration in the 1810-11 case of Miss Pirie and Miss Woods v. Dame Cumming Gordon that the alleged carnal relations between the two female teachers was a “crime…impossible in this country to commit” because British women did not possess the “unusual [de]formation” of the clitoris that would allow for “venereal orgasm” to occur (qtd. in Faderman, Scotch Verdict 65), to Hester Lynch Piozzi lamenting, “‘[T]is now grown common to suspect Impossibilities (such I think ’em) – whenever two Ladies live too much together” (qtd. in Gonda 112)—the fact remains that again and again, these individuals were forced to confront what were, at the minimum, imagined possibilities of loving, sexual relationships between women. I chose to look primarily at literature, rather than focusing on official trial records or archival materials, to emphasize the importance of these imagined possibilities—both for nineteenth-century readers and writers, as well as contemporary audiences. Although I do include historical source materials, including letters, diary entries, and court testimony, in the context of analyzing my primary literary
sources, I think of my approach as one that is informed by history—and aware of what would have been culturally conceivable—but not bound to history’s strict disciplinary emphasis on the factual, the provable, and the definite to the exclusion of the potential and the ambiguous. In “Sexuality, History, Difficulty, Pleasure,” Christopher Looby suggests that taking a “literary study of sexuality” and “acknowledging the very literariness of sexuality as such” has an advantage over other disciplinary approaches: “it aims not to reduce or explain but to observe and appreciate the intractable difficulty of a proper chronological account of the history of sexuality” (257). A literary history of sexuality takes what Looby calls “perverse pleasure” in focusing on the “slippages and overlaps and asynchronicities” without “abandon[ing] chronology altogether” (253, 257). In this project, I look to fiction, poetry, and the literary elements of Dickinson’s letters as my primary sources for documenting a history of sapphic possibilities because, as Christopher Castiglia argues, fiction, as a “(seemingly) safely depoliticized register, survived the material normalization of middle-class values in the antebellum United States,” becoming “the archive of the socially possible, an archive of alternatives to the historically or sociologically ‘real’” (12-13). I am interested in how the writing and reading of texts that engage with the question of love between women open up lesbian possibilities—both through the protolesbian markers used to describe female characters within the texts themselves and through the queerly generative forms of reading that might collapse the centuries of temporal distance between the acts of production and of consumption. Rather than relying on either the universalizing account of same-sex desire, which posits its “persistent existence” across time in the same form we know and recognize it by today (Freccero 20), or a similar anticipatory model that reads “early
discursive formulations of erotic being... as premonitory signs of a mode of sexual
personhood that had not yet but would come into full realization” (Coviello 19), I
foreground my project in an exploration of women’s same-sex desire, which I define
broadly as any form of intimacy between women that excludes or decenters men. In this
conception of queer desire, I return to the inclusive idea of the “lesbian continuum”
articulated by Adrienne Rich in her seminal 1980 essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality
and Lesbian Existence.” This continuum “include[s] a wide range—through each
woman’s life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience” that expands
beyond “consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman…to embrace
many more forms of primary intensity between and among women” (648). In this project,
I focus specifically on the texts’ openness, which ranges from a failure to provide any
sort of neat heterosexual closure to passages rife with openly eroticized yet ambiguously
metaphorical language. It issues an invitation, a moment of queer interpellation in which
those who might understand are brought into contact with the text in a process of queerly
generative reading that reaches across the centuries-long temporal divide—partaking in
the desiring “touch across time” that Carolyn Dinshaw argues might “collapse the critical
and theoretical oppositions between transhistorical and alteritist accounts, between truth
and pleasure, between past and present, between self and other” (Getting Medieval 3, 35).

In this project, I focus on depictions of female intimacy in three primary works—
Charles Brockden Brown’s Ormond; or the Secret Witness (1799); the anonymously
authored The Factory Girl (1854); and a selection of Emily Dickinson’s poems and
epistolary correspondence to Susan Gilbert Dickinson from the 1850s. In the first chapter,
I provide a more in-depth overview of the state of sexual politics in early national history
while close-reading Brown’s *Ormond*. In the second chapter, I pair one of the surviving letters from Erlunia Smith to Ann Lilley—both working-class schoolteachers in the mid-nineteenth century—with an extended reading of the understudied *The Factory Girl* to think comprehensively about workingwomen’s intimate relationships. Finally, I conclude with a coda that analyzes Dickinson’s 1850s poetry and correspondence with Susan Dickinson, looking specifically at the moments of anticipatory mourning that coexist with and, I argue, are exceeded by frank declarations of love and the creation of alternative present temporalities through a literary revivification of memory and an invitation to a new future that extends to modern readers as well. Within these texts, I trace what I identify as three recurring tropes: all-female homosocial spaces; the unspoken (and at times, unspeakable); and female-male-female (or even female-female-female) triangles of desire, a concept I borrow from Castle—as a way of exposing moments of queer possibility and same-sex eroticism.

Throughout the thesis, I rely on the work of scholars of lesbian history, though I differentiate my project both through the specifics of my topic—women’s same-sex relationships in early- to mid-nineteenth-century American literature—and the way in which I approach it—reading thematically to identify specific tropes that might characterize what could be termed lesbian or protolesbian literature and the spaces of possibilities across time these texts reveal. Already, the literary focus of my project differentiates it from the work of many of my sources, including Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Martha Vicinus, and Sharon Marcus, who prefer what Marcus terms “lifewriting” to literature. Similarly, a significant gap exists in analyses of women’s relationships in an early- to mid-nineteenth-century American context that I aim to begin
filling in this project. While scholars like Vicinus, Marcus, Emma Donoghue, and Lisa Moore have made significant contributions in the field of nineteenth-century lesbian history in England, comparatively little exists in the field of American history. Within an American context, outside of the initial work done by Smith-Rosenberg and Lillian Faderman, the majority of the literature that looks to the first half of the nineteenth century focuses on intimate relationships between men. Peter Coviello’s *Tomorrow’s Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America*, Valerie Rohy’s *Impossible Women: Lesbian Figures and American Literature*, and Kathryn Kent’s *Making Girls Into Women: American Women’s Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity*, the three book-length sources that do consider American literary portrayals of women’s same-sex relationships, all begin their period of inquiry around or after the time I conclude my investigation. Coviello works within the timeframe of Henry James’ lifetime, starting around the time of his birth in the 1840s; Rohy begins in 1852 with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*; and Kent identifies the start of her project in the late nineteenth century. Yet, despite the lack of critical attention being paid to the time period, the first half of the nineteenth century represents a contested period in American lesbian history over the question of the public acceptability of women’s intimate relationships. The particular date at which these relationships would have come under suspicion has varied, with many relying on Michel Foucault’s use of 1870 as the “date of birth” of the modern homosexual—the moment at which homosexuality “was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodim of the soul” (43)—while others, like Coviello, cite Oscar Wilde’s trial, and some, including Faderman and Laura Doan, push the limit of acceptability for same-sex intimacy between
women all the way into the 1920s and through WWI. Another group of scholars, however, has found evidence to claim that even as early as the eighteenth century, cultural authorities cautioned against certain types of relationships between women, especially if those women were not white or wealthy.\(^1\) I am more interested in the paradigms taken up by Coviello and Vicinus—both of whom recognize the late-nineteenth-century imposition of regimes of codified sexual taxonomization between homo- and heterosexuality, even as they find proof of what Coviello calls “the first stirrings of that great taxonomical division, the initial movements of coordination and solidification,” in the early years of the nineteenth and, for Vicinus, even the eighteenth century (4).

Early scholarship on nineteenth-century American lesbian history saw the advancement of the idea of sexless, loving friends—a relationship between two wealthy white women that was generally accepted by society, in large part due to the fact that it was compatible with heterosexual marriage. Smith-Rosenberg’s groundbreaking 1975 article, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” served as the first substantial treatment of the loving relationships between nineteenth-century American women, which ranged “from the supportive love of sisters, through the enthusiasms of adolescent girls, to sensual avowals of love by mature women” (2). Analyzing the writings of the women involved in such relationships and their contemporaries, Smith-Rosenberg concludes, “Such deeply felt,  

\(^1\) Although Valerie Traub traces the “emerging erotic knowledges” that enabled a reinvestigation into female sexuality and the possibility of same-sex eroticism to 1559 and the “anatomical ‘rediscovery’ of the clitoris,” she finds that the “explosion of ‘sapphic’ narratives (literary, medical, and obscene)” did not emerge until the “early years of the eighteenth century” (10).
same-sex friendships were casually accepted in American society. Indeed, from at least the late eighteenth through the mid nineteenth-century, a female world of varied and yet highly structured relationships appears to have been an essential aspect of American society” (1). Smith-Rosenberg argues that the close relationships between women, which might involve sleeping in the same bed and partaking in displays of physical affection, including kissing and hugging, were seen as “both socially acceptable and fully compatible with heterosexual marriage,” even to “respectable and socially conservative” members of society (8). Indeed, drawing on the theory of gendered separate spheres, she concludes that women’s closeness resulted not from an aversion to men, but from joy in the companionship of other women that was meant as a precursor to the greater joys of heterosexual marriage: “[T]hey sought marriage and domesticity” (20). Smith-Rosenberg did later nuance her position in “Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New Woman, 1870-1936,” conceding that a sexual component might sometimes accompany women’s relationships. In her later article, she cites mid-nineteenth-century medical accounts of “young women, often schoolgirls or college women, in bed together enjoying genital stimulation, avowing passionate emotional attachment,” though she argues that these women, unlike their male counterparts, were not often classified as homosexual or perverted (268). Rather, she maintains that female homosexuality continued to be understood as “rare and exotic” until the “mid-1880s (and the emergence of the New Woman in America and England),” at which point a nascent discourse of scientific pathologization began to recognize women’s bonds as a potential threat to the heterosexual order (268-69).
Six years after Smith-Rosenberg’s initial article, Faderman’s equally influential work, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, was published, further advancing the image of what Faderman terms “romantic friendships” between women that were “condone[d]” by society, rather than viewed “as disruptive of the social structure” (16). To Faderman, these friendships “were love relationships in every sense except perhaps the genital, since women in centuries other than ours often internalized the view of females as having little sexual passion” (16). While she argues that these women would probably identify as lesbian feminists if they were transported to her 1980s context, she maintains—in this text and in later works—that it would be anachronistic to apply modern understandings of queer sexuality onto the past. She concludes, however, that the “new ‘medical knowledge’” that took root in American culture after World War I “cast such affection [between women] in a new light” (20), throwing suspicion over the frank avowals of love between women and effectively ending the open treatment of “love between women…as a popular literary theme in American by the 1920’s [sic]” (308). While scholarship in lesbian history has since complicated many of the arguments made by Smith-Rosenberg and Faderman—ranging from the race and class biases of their definitions, to their assertion that, at least throughout most of the nineteenth century, women’s relationships were typically chaste, socially acceptable, and compatible with heterosexual marriage—more general historical treatises and scholarship less immersed in the debates over queer women’s history have tended to rely on these two accounts as a guide for understanding love between nineteenth-century American women.
While I will address the ongoing issues of the class and race bias that narrows the focus of much of the existing scholarship on romantic friendship in my discussion of my choice of primary texts, a good deal of later scholarship has already effectively undermined the argument that all romantic friendships were affectionate but sexless—an idea often couched in nineteenth-century understandings of middle-class women as chaste and free from carnal desires. Within this literature, there exists disagreement over the extent to which the women possessed “libidinal self-awareness,” which Castle explicitly links to personal and social “identity” formations (10), before the turn of the century and the imposition of increasingly rigid sexual taxonomization. Donoghue’s 1993 work, Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801, while acknowledging the importance of Faderman’s text, aims to nuance her conception of romantic friends by “show[ing] that generations of writers and commentators did indeed perceive some women who loved women as ‘a distinct sexual and social group’” that was not always, or even typically, viewed as “harmless and innocent” (2-3). Unlike Castle and Donoghue, both of whom tie women’s same-sex desires to their conception of themselves and categorization by others as a separate sexual group, I focus on desire, affect, and language without necessarily grounding them in the question of identity. Like much of the more recent scholarship on women’s relationships before the twentieth-century, Donoghue’s focus is on British women’s writing, though many of the sources she quotes—including documents from the Pirie and Woods trial, Anne Lister’s diaries, and articles about the Ladies of Llangollen, all of which I consider in greater detail in Chapter 1—enjoyed a transatlantic cultural influence by way of the “trade circuits” that Stephen
Shapiro notes “shuttled men, cultural artifacts, and social codes throughout the oceanic matrix” (363).

Like Donoghue, Moore argues for an understanding of the threatening sexual potential inherent in women’s relationships in Dangerous Intimacies: Toward a Sapphic History of the British Novel. She claims that Faderman and Smith-Rosenberg’s writings have “obscure[d] the wariness and even prohibition that sometimes surrounded women’s friendships” by relying too heavily on “the category of gender to the exclusion of a systematic consideration of sexuality” and emphasizing the “approbatory accounts of the chastity of these relationships” over the “virulent” warnings about the “dangers of female homosexuality in such relationships” (8-9). I too am interested in this tension—specifically the ways in which it allows for the question of lesbian possibility to emerge—as well as the role that the “wariness” Moore identifies plays in the primary texts I analyze, often resulting in an anxious tone that turns discovery into a plot-driving threat. Moore finds the terms of this debate playing out within the pages of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British novels in which threatening queer desire is “disentangled” from the romantic friendships the properly British heroine enjoys, while sapphism becomes associated with racial and national others (11-12). This dichotomization, Moore argues, appropriates the dangers of female homosexuality and “domesticate[s]” them to bolster a nationalist “bourgeois ascension narrative” (20).

Also recognizing the normalizing processes to which women’s romantic friendships could be molded for nationalistic ends, Marcus claims in Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England, “[F]emale marriage, gender mobility, and women’s erotic fantasies about women were at the heart of normative
institutions and discourses” (13), and she recognizes a British nationalist project in the displacement of the danger of female homosexuality to the “French sapphist [who] was an antisocial threat to family life” (21). Although Marcus assumes that women’s long-term relationships were sexual in nature (though it is not a primary concern of hers), she, unlike Moore, argues that even erotic relationships between women “peaceably coexisted with heterosexual marriages and moreover, helped to promote them” (2, 20). Although I include a more thorough critique of some of the finer points of Marcus’ argument in Chapter 2, at least within the American literature I analyze in this thesis, I find numerous situations in which women’s erotic and affective attachments to other women fail to promote—and at times, even actively prevent—heterosexual marriage, in addition to instances in which the normalizing institutions Marcus identifies become subversive even as they retain an air of propriety.

Also investigating the play of normalcy and subversion, Valerie Traub considers representations of lesbianism in early modern British literature through two primary figures: the tribade and the friend. Her larger project in The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England responds to claims about the “silent,” “invisible,” and “[i]mpossible” nature of “female homoeroticism prior to the Enlightenment” by creating a “genealogy of female homoerotic desire” through a “lesbian-affirmative analytic” (3, 13). Traub finds frequent references to the figure of the tribade, who “is represented as the outgrowth of a monstrous bodily morphology,” and tribadism, which is figured as “an activity that transgresses both chastity and reproduction through the misuse of the body” (15, 17). Although the friend is often positioned as the ideological opposite of the tribade, Traub argues that insofar as the tribade “functions more generally as a metaphor for
excessive and unruly female desire, she threatens to come into contact with, indeed to contaminate, women whose bodies do not produce legible signs of homoerotic desire” (17), and friendship becomes “the site where chastity and tribadism eventually mingle and collide” (15). Even in sources that refer to tribadism as “chaste,” such as T.W.’s “verse letter” to John Donne—one of the “first recorded instances of a variant for tribade in English”—the practice is figured as “the source of creative generation” (24). Within the letter, T.W. writes, “Haue mercy on me & my sinfull Muse / Which rub’d & tickled with thyne” (qtd. in Traub 24). When T.W.’s muse “spend[s] some of her pithe” during their act of “chaste & mystique tribadree,” she impregnates Donne’s muse, who then “gott this Song on mee” (qtd. in Traub 24). This “tribadic model of generation”—and specifically a literary generation—begins linking the practice of queer sexuality to a type of potentially subversive ideological fertility I find playing out across the pages of the literature I analyze (25). In the nineteenth-century American context in which I work, the tribade is no longer the primary figure for female deviance—though she continues to appear in both pornography and obscene parodies—but I find the language of contagion and the threats it poses to the supposed acceptability of female friendship recurring throughout many of the texts I study, whether it is in reference to the practice of cross-dressing in Ormond or of leaving home for the mill in The Factory Girl. Like Traub, I too focus on the “faultlines – discursive contradictions, lacunae, and misrecognitions” that “would seem to enforce a powerfully effective censorship,” even as they “afforded women opportunities to express their desires under the auspices of ideological conformity” (22). For while the women I study often participate in relationships that would appear chaste, that would appear to participate in the normative institution of
romantic friendship without crossing into the territory of sapphism or gender-crossing, the language used to describe their ties not only borrows from the rhetoric of love letters and the erotically-charged genre of the novel of seduction, but it also often falls into moments of ambiguity that I argue open a space of possibility for a more subversive homoeroticism to emerge.

Rohy also focuses on the language of (im)possibility in *Impossible Women*, where she analyzes a selection of American literature from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. In this work, Rohy proposes a psychoanalytic and rhetorical reading of lesbian desire and perverse female characters as figures that represent a dual impossibility: the “supposedly nonexistent and at the same time intolerable” nature of lesbian sexuality in patriarchal culture (2) and the overarching failure of “narrative closure and interpretive certainty” (144). Readings works by authors including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, Kate Chopin, and Zora Neale Hurston, Rohy identifies a variety of recurring tropes associated with lesbian sexuality—“transference and displacement, the disembodied voice, repetition-compulsion, and the uncanny”—that, “by representing a negation of or resistance to symbolic systems, make lesbian sexuality a repository for the failures of meaning inherent in figuration itself” (5). Although I also focus on questions of the (im)possible in American literature, I emphasize what is opened by the ambiguities of language, rather than the figural failures that result from the act of representation itself.

Rohy’s more recent work on memetic fertility in “On Homosexual Reproduction” is more useful to me for the purposes of this project. Drawing from Richard Dawkin’s definition of a “meme” in *The Selfish Gene*, Rohy invokes the term to refer to queer
cultural transmission, which reproduces culturally even as it fails to reproduce sexually, and to explain how “an ostensibly sterile homosexuality threatens to overwhelm straight familialism” (109). Although Rohy works within a more modern context, analyzing the phobic discourses of the religious right in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the idea of a non-procreative but highly fertile type of queer ideological reproduction reappears throughout not only the literary works I analyze, but also in contemporary nineteenth-century medical and legal treatises through the language of contagion and influence.

Marylynne Diggs and Vicinus, working within an American and a transatlantic context, respectively, have responded to the paradigms set forth in early scholarship by Faderman and Smith-Rosenberg in a way that complicates their often idyllic views of romantic friendship in the nineteenth century. Diggs criticizes the “continued reliance on the romantic friendship model” because it “overlooks both the pathologizing and the resistant discourses that emerged in the United States well before the turn of the century” (320). Similarly, Vicinus finds the fact that “such strenuous efforts were made [in the nineteenth century] to define and delimit the bodily nature of female friendship” as proof that “the barrier between admired romantic friends and excoriated Sapphists must have seemed permeable” (xviii). Where Faderman and, to a lesser extent, Smith-Rosenberg both rely on a clear temporal shift at the end of the nineteenth-century—the moment of a “last breath of innocence,” as Faderman terms it (297)—both Diggs and Vicinus find competing visions crossing that temporal line, with images of threateningly intimate relationships between women showing up centuries before the rise of sexology and pairs of romantic friends being regarded as innocent even into the twentieth century. Within
this thesis, I too am interested in the ambiguity of the early to mid-nineteenth century and the possibilities for queer affect, desire, and representation its literature reflects. Coviello finds within the “fragile, uncollapsed spaces of illegibility or definitional ambiguity” in the years before sexual taxonomization “precious room for much besides suffering and loneliness: for invention, say, or teasing obliquity, or coy solicitation, as well as evasion, improvisation, and all the other vectors of extravagant imagining” (7). While he focuses on the potential these spaces held for nineteenth-century writers, I am also interested in considering what these texts and their early erotic imaginings enable for modern audiences as they participate in circuits of queer desire that might, somewhat anachronistically, claim these nineteenth-century writers for a queer canon, even as they interpellate twenty-first-century readers into affective ties that threaten to collapse the spatiotemporal distance between production and consumption upon which the very notion of anachronism rests.

In “Romantic Friends or a ‘Different Race of Creatures’? The Representation of Lesbian Pathology in Nineteenth-Century America,” Diggs examines nineteenth-century medical treatises alongside the “medicated novels” of Oliver Wendell Holmes and the “resistant” literature of Margaret J.M. Sweat and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman to characterize the nineteenth century as “a period of contentious struggle over the definition and representation of a lesbian sexuality—a struggle in which writers of popular fiction were, by the 1850s, active participants” (321). While, with the exception of her brief reading of Freeman’s “The Long Arm,” Diggs locates literature as lying either on the resistant or on the pathologizing side of the debates over same-sex intimacy, I am interested in ways in which texts might appear to describe only chaste romantic
friendships (or, in some cases, merely friendship), passing into common circulation without scandal or remark, even as they enable queer forms of reading and desire that recognize in moments of silence or ambiguity that which dares not speak any more directly. As Vicinus argues, “[S]elf-fashioning involves self-knowledge. This inevitably grounds sexual desire in a language. The women I study were enormously inventive in creating a satisfactory language, spoken and bodily, for their own desires that bears little resemblance to the elaborate terminology of the post-1928 period,” creating a new sapphic “language of love…through metaphor” (xxiv-xxv). Although I am interested in situational ambiguities, in addition to the types of linguistic play that constitutes Vicinus’ focus, I find her framework for “tracing repetitive patterns” without attempting to forge a temporally linear “progress narrative” quite helpful for my project (xiv).

Within this thesis, I argue for an understanding of the romantic friendships I analyze as being: 1) of primary importance to the women involved; 2) typically incompatible with heterofamilial life; 3) potentially sexual but almost always erotic; and 4) marked by an incipient sense of self-awareness. The women I study tend to value their romantic friendships above their ties to husbands, other women, and even family members. As in Sophia Westwyn Courtland’s decision in *Ormond* to abandon her husband in search of her lifelong friend, Constantia Dudley, vowing that “it was [her] inflexible purpose to live and to die with” Constantia (178), these women demonstrate—over and over again, through words and through actions—their preference for the intimate bond they share with another woman over the other relationships in their lives. Related to this point is the fact that the romantic friendships I analyze are typically incompatible with heterosexual marriage, threatening its primacy through inverted
female-male-female structures of desire. Although all of the texts I look at except *Ormond* do end in or contain scenes of heterosexual marriage, the wedding marks a distinct break or shift in the women’s relationship and is often presaged by the women’s tearful partings and anxious pleas not to wed. These moments are seen most clearly in the 1850s correspondence of Emily Dickinson and Susan Dickinson, where marriage constituted not simply a plot device, but a very real threat that might irreparably alter their relationship. Dickinson repeatedly imagines scenes of abandonment, the night “[w]hen frightened – home to Thee I run - / To find the windows dark - / And no more Dollie – mark” (F218 l. 10-12), and writes to Susan Dickinson, who was in Michigan at the time, of her “solitude,” despairing that Austin Dickinson, Susan Dickinson’s fiancé, “will see you, Darling! What I cannot do. Oh *could* I!” (L176). Although I do not attempt to declare with certainty whether or not these relationships were consummated, the language used to describe private scenes between the women is often openly erotic and marked by moments of ecstatic exclamation and unspeakable desire. While the scenes of unspeakability are most pronounced in the gothic *Ormond*, in contrast to the private epistolary correspondence, which is characterized by a greater degree of openness, almost all of the works feature, at some point, scenes of what Kathryn King has termed “an unnarrated (and unnarratable) space” that I argue leaves room for the potential of queer sexuality to emerge (qtd. in Gonda 116). Finally, I contend that the women I analyze display an incipient sense of self-awareness, often marked by the anxiety with which scenes of discovery—whether threatened or real—are regarded. This threat highlights the early strains of prohibition around the boundaries of the acceptable and the unacceptable within intimate female friendships, and the women’s anxious response to it reveals a
degree of identification with a type of intimacy and relationship that move away from chaste romantic friendship and toward the deviance of sapphism.

Recognizing the constraints of space, I do not claim that the texts I analyze in this project are representative of the early- to mid-nineteenth-century literary canon, nor have I attempted a comprehensive sweep of the whole 60-year scope. Instead, I chose these case studies as emblematic texts in their own right—texts that all engage with same-sex female intimacy, but do so in unique ways. Ormond, my earliest and only male-authored text, as a novel often read as falling within the gothic genre, most clearly engages with questions of unspeakability—one of the tropes I identify throughout the texts I analyze. I chose to include this text not only because the gothic was an important genre of the time period and deserves due consideration in a project on nineteenth-century literature, but also because its generic conventions allow it to engage openly with the permeability of identity that characterizes many of the imaginative letters women wrote to one another, in which they fashioned themselves as adopted sisters, unofficial teachers, spiritual mentors, and even husbands. I am most interested, however, in the explicitness with which this text deals with the “contagion of example” and the forms of queer tutelage that threaten to undermine patriarchal narratives of proper sexual development (Brown 158). I argue that Ormond falls within a tradition, traced to radical French pornography, of a form of voyeurism, or secret witnessing, tied directly to the language of erotic pedagogy. These connections allow for an open discussion of the queerly generative forms of reading inspired by the spaces of lesbian potential in all of the texts I analyze in my thesis.

While economic necessity certainly propels much of the plot of Ormond, I hoped to engage questions of working-class women’s relationships more directly, which is why
I chose to include the anonymous mid-century novella *The Factory Girl*, as well as a discussion of one of the few remaining letters between Smith and Lilley, two working-class teachers. In much of the existing literature on women’s romantic friendships in the nineteenth century, scholars have tended to assume that these relationships were a white, middle- and upper-class phenomenon. The ideas of separate spheres and the presumption of women as generally sexless that supported Smith-Rosenberg’s article on the “female world of love and ritual” and Faderman’s assessment of women’s romantic but non-sexual relationships are both markedly middle-class notions. Working-class women not only toiled in the public spaces of mills and factories, rather than staying home and interacting in leisurely ways with female friends, but they were also viewed by medical and sociological authorities as being excessively sexual. Recent scholarship has gone further in paying attention to class—though working-class women are still most often acknowledged as an absence due to what has been seen as insufficient surviving records of workingwomen’s affective lives—but the work is limited. Marcus argues, “A few working-class women wrote about intimate friends in their lifewritings, but most avoided overt displays of affect and mentioned female friendships only briefly,” and those who did, she concludes, “wrote of friendships primarily in the context of the search for work and shelter” (69). Treating working-class women in a more sympathetic way, Vicinus, for example, acknowledges the absence of many truly “poor” women in her survey of the literature and recognizes the role class and race privilege played in determining who had the freedom of “self-fashioning” and whose correspondence and diaries might have been saved for modern readers to look back upon today (xxx). Karen Hansen is one of the few scholars whose work has truly focused on same-sex intimacy between both working-class
and African American women in nineteenth-century American history. Her 1995 article, “‘No Kisses Is Like Youres’: An Erotic Friendship Between Two African-American Women During the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” examines the correspondence of Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus, two African American women who enjoyed a loving, decades-long relationship, and a chapter of her 1994 book, *A Very Social Time: Crafting Community in Antebellum New England*, looks at same-sex friendships, including romantic friendships, between workingmen and women. Although these two historically grounded studies are significant for the critical intervention they make in addressing the race and class biases of existing literature on American women’s same-sex relationships, they certainly leave room for additional scholarship. This gap, while notable on its own, becomes even more significant when taken alongside some of the better-known scholarship in working-class history, which has accepted the assumptions voiced in early lesbian history by scholars like Smith-Rosenberg and Faderman about women’s romantic friendship as an exclusively middle- and upper-class practice. These types of assumptions have allowed historians like Christine Stansell to mention homosexuality only once in her comprehensive study, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*. She relegates the practice to the Bowery, finding the “beginnings of a gay male subculture” in working-class nightlife and youth culture (92). Yet, she argues, the “social conditions for a lesbian milieu seem to have been absent in what was still a heavily masculine culture,” and the allure of spaces like the Bowery for women “seems to have been exclusively heterosexual” (92). In addition to the dance halls and other sites of working-class nightlife, I am also interested the factories and the dorms, which Stansell does not acknowledge as potential locations for same-sex desire or interaction, as spaces that
might foster intimacy between factory girls. While raced and classed others were
certainly regarded with an increased burden of suspicion, and while economic necessity
did compel most working-class women to marry, I argue that less studied correspondence
between workingwomen and short fiction and poetry pieces from working-class
newspapers comprise a complementary archive that extols the pleasures of same-sex
intimacy in language that is as affectively charged, if somewhat more veiled, as that of
the better known middle-class archive.

Finally, I conclude with an examination of the poems and letters sent by Emily
Dickinson to Susan Dickinson during the 1850s—the decade in which Susan Dickinson
became engaged to and eventually married Austin Dickinson. Focusing on Dickinson’s
sapphic ties has become much more common in the past couple of decades after years of
(enforced) silence, resulting in a wealth of well-researched scholarship. Although much
of the criticism on the women’s relationship during this decade has focused on the fallout
produced by Susan Dickinson’s engagement and marriage and the sense of loss that
permeates Dickinson’s writing, I look at the role that discussions of memory and
childhood play in Dickinson’s 1850s letters to think about the ways in which she carves
out a space for alternative present temporalities—not a present regressively stuck in the
past, but rather, a multiplicity of presents wrought through active remembrance, through
a desire for queer time. I end—both the coda and the project—with a discussion of the
imagined futures Dickinson presents in her writing. I argue that they are distinctly queer
futures that extend beyond the bounds of her lifetime, inviting future readers into these
affective circuits that both threaten and promise to collapse the centuries of temporal and
spatial difference through a form of queer cultural reproduction.
In analyzing the literary texts that were intended for a public audience, I argue they utilize ambiguity to retain a semblance of propriety that allowed them to escape detection in the nineteenth century, even as they interpellate their readers—both past and present—into structures of queer spectatorship and identification. In addition to these structures of sapphic interpellation, I contend that all of the works I analyze also invoke the tropes of all-female homosocial spaces; the unspoken and the unspeakable; and reconfigured triangles of desire to create a space for lesbian potential both within the text and among the readers. While I elaborate further on the tropes I identify in the following chapters, I will provide a brief overview of them as they operate in general and in the specific texts I analyze. Given their literary quality, I find these tropes best illustrated through their usage and subsequent interpretation, so I will analyze them here through a reading of an early-twentieth-century letter sent to Elizabeth Bishop by Miss Talbot, one of the teachers at her school. I find that the note, quoted below in its entirety, contains and exemplifies each of the tropes.

Elizabeth my dear, Come up the path through the fir trees and white birches to my little cottage by the sea and there by the fireside, where nothing is ‘developed’ save friendliness and poems and contentment, I would tell you that this was meant to be a wee book to slip into your pocket and to say ‘Merrie Christmas’ for me…

There are fairy colors in the driftwood blaze in my fire. I picked up the stick down in the rock cave at low tide; and now it is dry it flames a tale in emerald and turquoise and copper-red. I think you would understand it [underlined by EB in wavy lines]. Outside there is a Christmas moon of clear and
silvery beauty. Shall I tell you things that can only be told here—ah well, someday when you come…

Meanwhile Christmas joys, and the star-shine of a poem, and my love.

(qtd. in Kent 167-68)

From the very first line, the letter voices a call, an invitation, to move to an all-female space—the cottage, which is already a location identified by Vicinus, along with the “bedroom (or bed), and garden,” as being conducive to “liberat[ing] same-sex passion” (234). Throughout this thesis I argue that female homosocial spaces operate as counterpublics of queer possibility, allowing for a reconfiguration of women’s relationships outside of the patriarchal system under which women, especially women whose socioeconomic class did not afford them the privilege of choosing to remain unmarried, were defined by their ties to men. In invoking the term “counterpublic,” I draw on Nancy Fraser’s concept of the “subaltern counterpublic” as outlined in her 1990 essay, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy.”

Calling attention to the distinctly “bourgeois, masculinist” character of Jürgen Habermas’ idealized public sphere (62), Fraser suggests that counterpublics developed as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses” that exist alongside and under the regimes of normalization set forth by the wealthy, white, male-dominated public sphere and its attendant discourses (67). They encompass not only social groups that would seem to exist more clearly in the public sphere, but also “journals, […] publishing companies,

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film and video distribution networks,” and private spaces of “withdrawal and regroupment,” which shift the emphasis from public visibility and theoretically universal participation to what might otherwise be seen as the solitary act of consumption and participation in a more private form of discourse—both written and verbal (67-68). In other words, Fraser moves from a definition of these spaces as “publics” to “publicist,” insofar as they allow for the creation of counterdiscourses that could be “disseminate[d]…into ever widening arenas”—a concept that Habermas himself embraces in de-emphasizing the “empirical manifestation” of a given public sphere (67).

While the all-female space of the factory is certainly different than the type of intimacy fostered in the cottage Miss Talbot invited Bishop to share with her, the “retreat” in New Jersey that Constantia imagines sharing with Sophia (204), or the private correspondence between Emily Dickinson and Susan Dickinson, they all function as a type of alternative counterpublic that removes the women from the prying eyes of men and the strictures of patriarchal society, while creating new spaces for queer possibilities.

Talbot’s letter also plays with the unspeakable, which, while taken up in different ways across the texts I examine, remains constant in its presence. Talbot muses, “Shall I tell you things that can only be told here—ah well, someday when you come…” Bishop herself remarks upon this line and its indirect eroticism, writing in a note to her lifelong friend Frani Blough, “And what do you suppose she didn’t dare say?” (qtd. in Kent 167). The rhetorical question that comprises the first half of Talbot’s thought harkens back to the question of space, affirming that the difference between the semi-public space of a written note and the private confines of a shared cottage changes the rules of what might be spoken and what must be left to imagination and inference within the blank space of
ellipses. Writing of the early-twentieth-century lesbianModernists, Vicinus argues that
the ellipsis “contains the very act that cannot be described but can still be known. It begs
for interpretation, yet resists it” (234). Readers, especially queer readers, might easily
identify the imprecise yet unambiguously present eroticism of the ellipsis following
Talbot’s repeated reminder of her invitation to Bishop to join her and her more explicit
admission that she has things to tell Bishop fit to speak aloud only in the private space of
the cottage. The earlier ellipsis, however, is a less obvious stand-in for the “same-sex
passion” Vicinus argues ellipses mask, even as they accentuate (234). While Kent sees
the potential eroticism of those lines only in the fact that, by thinking of her letter “as a
book to slip into Bishop’s pocket,” Talbot finds “a way…to get close to Bishop’s body”
(168), I would argue that outside of the physicality of the letter-as-object that the ellipses
might reference, they also implicitly continue and emphasize the potentially erotic nature
of the promises hinted at in Bishop’s references to the cottage as a space to facilitate the
“develop[ment]” of “friendliness and poems and contentment.”

The notion of a private space where the unspeakable might occur is easily found
in the gothic Ormond, where Constantia and Sophia’s joyous reunion can take place only
behind closed doors, not a word of their evening activities making it into the otherwise
open and detailed text. These moments participate in “the erotics of silence” Kent
describes—a form of eroticism associated “with the power and poignancy and even
sexiness of what cannot be acknowledged yet is so palpably there” (175). The
unspeakable operates differently in The Factory Girl, where moments of ecstasy and
private intimacy are written about at length, yet cloaked in metaphor, hidden in plain
sight in scenes of joint prayer in the bedroom. Similarly, within working-class texts—not
only *The Factory Girl*, but also Smith’s letter to Lilley—women’s comments about other women’s physical attractiveness and desirability are often couched in promises that the speaker is simply speaking and thinking as a male suitor might, rather than admitting to any desires she herself might harbor. Although Dickinson’s poetry and correspondence with Susan Dickinson might, through their dashes and the lines and ideas left purposefully incomplete, through the “omitted center” Jay Leyda describes as the “riddle, the circumstance too well known to be repeated to the initiate, the deliberate skirting of the obvious” (xxi), share an engagement with the type of unspeakability reflected in the Modernist ellipses, her oeuvre as a whole might also be thought of as something treated as unspeakable, be it through the intended self-censorship of Dickinson’s directives to burn her papers after her death, or the bowdlerizing actions of Austin Dickinson and Martha Dickinson Bianchi, who edited out all traces of Dickinson’s romantic attachment to her sister-in-law (Faderman, *Surpassing* 174). These moments of silence not only open up a space of potential for readers in the know to fill in, but they also suggest a need for privacy that hints at the early incursions of the rapidly approaching regime of a science of sexuality and its suspicious gaze.

As opposed to the ease with which triangulated structures of desire are identified in the plot devices and recorded marriages in *Ormond, The Factory Girl*, and the relationship of Emily Dickinson and Susan Dickinson, Talbot’s letter to Bishop, taken on its own, appears to lack a third party. Although the dramatic tension of these triangles threatens the happiness of the same-sex pairs, the female-male-female (or, more radically, female-female-female) structure also, as Castle argues, “destabilizes the ‘canonical’ triangular arrangement of male desire, is an affront to it, and ultimately—in the radical
form of lesbian bonding—displaces it entirely” (72). While the female-female bond is ultimately threatened by the cementing of a female-male bond through marriage in two of the three texts I analyze, the powerful presence of the women’s relationships is not forgotten, precluding any easy heterosexual closure—whether it be through the survival of Dickinson’s writing and its melancholic anticipation of the ways in which heterosexual marriage would take precedence over her same-sex relationship with Susan Dickinson, or in the image of queer reproduction even within heterosexual marriage that concludes The Factory Girl, allowing Mary’s ties to her now deceased friend Elizabeth to continue after her death through the figure of the child, also named Elizabeth, who is being raised on stories of her namesake’s virtues. Within Ormond, the one text in which the female-female bond triumphs, seemingly unthreatened in its primacy despite the relatively unpersuasive and easily forgotten framing narrative of a letter to a potential suitor, the third terms to Sophia and Constantia’s relationship include Sophia’s husband, whom Sophia leaves behind in Europe in favor of finding and living with (or dying in the attempt to find) her dear friend; Martinette de Beauvais, Constantia’s cross-dressing friend in Philadelphia who threatens to usurp Sophia’s place of favor in her absence but is quickly forgotten upon Sophia’s return; and the titular Ormond, whose courtship, disguises, and villainy prove the greatest threat—one ended only by his death at the hands of Constantia.

Unlike these examples, Talbot’s letter to Bishop seems dyadic, the only threat to the pair being the chance that Bishop would decline Talbot’s offer to join her at the cottage. While the absence of a third term between two women certainly still falls within the paradigm Castle identifies as dismantling patriarchal structures of traffic in women,
Bishop’s letter, when taken in a broader context, actually facilitates a secondary queer process—one that leads directly into structures of lesbian interpellation. As I mentioned earlier, Bishop sent a letter to her friend Blough, including her comments on the “sweet” and “romantic” note from Talbot, along with a copy of the note itself. Bishop then signs her own letter, “and my love” (qtd. in Kent 167) drawing “a line from her teacher’s three final words [‘and my love’] to her own closing” (Giroux qtd. in Kent 168). At the most basic level, in sending her note to another reader, Bishop introduces a third party—another woman who has her love, as she is careful to stress—but she also opens up the space for any potential third woman by taking on the same role Talbot did in her first letter—the one who writes and courts another woman. Kent notes the ways in which Bishop’s literal connecting of her signature and Talbot’s functions as a demonstration of the “eroticized pedagogic relationships” she identifies in mid-nineteenth-century women’s writing (169), but I would argue that it also reveals Bishop’s successful interpellation into structures of lesbian desire. Where Kent argues that, by “including Elizabeth in some sort of unspecified ‘understand[ing],’ Miss Talbot interpellates her as special, as knowing, as also sharing a secret” (168), that interpellation is incomplete until Bishop responds in some way to Talbot’s hailing her. Bishop’s response comes in the form of both her textual markup of Talbot’s note—as Giroux notes, she underlines “in wavy lines,” the sentence, “I think you would understand it”—and her appropriation of Talbot’s language of love, drawing a line as if to cite her own signature, to demarcate her move from the desired to the desiring. In this way, her act of receiving and reading becomes part of the process of self-identification and interpellation into structures of queer desire. In a similar way, I argue that readers of the primary texts I analyze are also
drawn into forms of queer consumption as they assume the role of the desiring voyeur, the ones who watch scenes of same-sex intimacy play out across the pages, and who, if they do recognize those scenes for what they are, if they are part of the audience that “would understand it,” become complicit in not only the queerness of the plot, but also the forms of queer cultural reproduction that the writing and reading of these texts might entail.
Chapter 1: “Throw Over Your Man”:
Female Bonding and Unspeakable Erotics in *Ormond; or the Secret Witness*

“I am going to say something that is almost unbelievable. These women [in Philadelphia], without real love and without passions, give themselves up at an early age to the enjoyment of themselves; and they are not at all strangers to being willing to seek unnatural pleasures with persons of their own sex.”

Moreau de St. Méry, Notes from 1793-98, in *Gay American History* (1976)

“If a man and a woman are in bed together, venereal congress would be presumed. And perhaps even if a man and a man are in bed together without necessity, an unnatural intention may be inferred. But a woman being in bed with a woman cannot even give a probability to such an inference. It is the order of nature and of society in its present state. If a woman embraces a woman, it infers nothing.”

John Clerk (May 22, 1811), in *Scotch Verdict* (2013)

The turn of the nineteenth century represents an early bound of the contested period in lesbian scholarship I discussed in the introduction. While it certainly falls early in the period Faderman and Smith-Rosenberg identify as the heyday of women’s romantic friendships, during the time in which they argue these relationships continued to receive widespread acceptance in society and were free from any sexual connotations, scholars like Traub and Donoghue have mined historical records to prove that by *Ormond*’s publication in 1799, a distinctly erotic female same-sex sexuality not only existed, but was also named and pathologized by medical, legal, and even cultural authorities, thereby bringing women’s intimate relationships under scrutiny. The historical documents, including the notes from Moreau de St. Méry’s time in America at the end of the eighteenth century and the court records from the case of Miss Pirie and Miss Woods v. Dame Cumming Gordon in Scotland in 1810-11 quoted above, reflect the terms of the debate still being waged between lesbian historians today. Despite prosecutions of female husbands, medical treatises on tribadism and the dangers of mutual masturbation between women, and volumes of pornographic material depicting scenes of female eroticism,
many cultural authorities refused to admit the possibility of sex between women, suggesting that to make the practice known to the public would provide it with legitimacy and corrupt the minds of “normal” women. These arguments, couched as they often are in nationalist fervor and an insistence that the women of this country could never descend to these means, nevertheless belie an anxiety that Lord Meadowbank gives voice to in the Pirie and Woods trial: the possibility, even probability, that were these means to become “widely known…the public [would] lose in terms of innocence, purity, and…happiness” (qtd. in Faderman, Scotch 258). Similarly, Charles Brockden Brown’s 1799 gothic novel, Ormond; or the Secret Witness, recognizes the possibility that women’s close friendships might give way to same-sex eroticism, even as many contemporary authorities continued to insist upon the official propriety of the relationships. Grappling with the possibility of lesbian desire in a period of social change and conservative backlash, Brown exploits the trope of unspeakability to write about and around a form of eroticism that generates profound cultural anxieties. The potential impropriety of the relationship between Constantia Dudley and Sophia Westwyn Courtland, while never named explicitly as such, emerges in the ruptures of the reader’s understanding—from the moments of silence and unspeakability made visible through the voyeurs, or “secret witnesses,” who observe and threaten to reveal what happens between the women behind closed doors, to the text’s failure to reach a satisfying heterosexual closure as female-male-female structures of desire dominate the narrative and subvert patriarchal structures.

Existing scholarly work on Ormond and queer female desire has often focused primarily on the cross-dressing Martinette de Beauvais, a French woman who disguised herself as a man to fight alongside her husband in the French Revolution, as opposed to
Sophia and Constantia’s loving relationship, which constitutes the focus of this chapter. In “‘Imperfect Disclosures’: Cross-Dressing and Containment in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Ormond*,” Heather Smyth takes Martinette as one of the key examples of Brown’s focus on theatricality and the instability of identity, though she argues that the text is ultimately a conservative one, promoting masculine education and values and reinforcing the propriety of existing gender hierarchies, even as it exposes the exploitable fissures in them. Paul Lewis responds to Smith in “Attaining Masculinity: Charles Brockden Brown and Woman Warriors of the 1790s,” arguing that the portrayal of Martinette’s transvestism is, in fact, radical, for it exposes the performativity of gender. More importantly, Lewis sees a shift in Brown’s text from the other accounts of female warriors in that Martinette is allowed to voice her own story of bloody combat and military success—a shocking narrative that ultimately serves to save Constantia’s life by empowering her to kill Ormond, her would-be rapist, in a moment of “masculine” violence (49).

Also elevating Martinette as the radical queer character in *Ormond*, Stephen Shapiro, while acknowledging the potential for reading same-sex intimacy in Sophia and Constantia’s friendship, focuses on Martinette as emblematic of the type of progressive politics he sees Brown espousing. For Shapiro, *Ormond* is less concerned with politics at the level of the individual than with the possibilities of a “collective experience” of sexuality (359)—one that forms “a radically queer community” made visible to “some ideal readers” through “literary tales of coded gender masquerade” (368). Although I too am interested in the way that the texts I analyze participate in a form of queer circulation among “ideal readers,” I am less focused on the overt displays of gender-crossing that
would have been accessible to a broader public, even if that public failed to count the representations in a queer literary canon, than I am in those quieter forms of intimacy, in the silences and ambiguities that create a space for queer potential. Yet those are precisely the type of depictions Shapiro undervalues, dismissing recent sympathetic readings “by female critics” of “Sophia’s heated description of her affinity with Constantia…as Brown’s welcoming of homoerotic attraction” as missing the “purpose” of Brown’s contrasting of Sophia with Martinette (376). According to Shapiro, Sophia embodies “the forces of conservatism” and stands as Martinette’s “ideological opposite”—“provincial, resistant to alterity, and reactionary” (376)—while her relationship with Constantia “looks to establish a privatized coupling that accepts the regulations of mainstream society, and indeed desires to accommodate heterosexual regulations in marriage as a discrete safeguard behind which female emotional relations may continue to develop” (376-77). In conceptualizing Sophia and Constantia’s relationship, Shapiro cites Faderman’s reading of the women’s ties as being “portrayed in terms…considered appropriate for a friend” (*Surpassing* 114-15). Although I work within the framework of the intimate, female-female couple whose queerness Shapiro dismisses, my reading of romantic friendship in general and Sophia and Constantia’s relationship in particular moves beyond Faderman’s model and recognizes the subversive queer potential these forms of bonding might embody. As I discussed in the introduction in my overview of Marcus’ and Traub’s work, I find that even the most normative of same-sex arrangements—the monogamous, dyadic couple that speaks primarily in the acceptable rhetoric of romantic friendship—might contain subversive elements, even as it masks them from the censorious gaze of patriarchal authority figures.
My analysis is closest to Kristin M. Comment’s in “Charles Brockden Brown’s *Ormond* and Lesbian Possibility in the Early Republic.” From the start, Comment recognizes that Sophia and Constantia’s relationship is of primary importance in the novel and, as seen through early critics’ responses to the text, exceeds the bounds of acceptable romantic friendship (57). Her project explores “the female homoeroticism in the context of cultural debates about women’s rights throughout the 1790s” (57). She traces the discussions about women’s education and rights in the early republic—including the conservative backlash of the 1790s and early 1800s in response to the earlier radicalism—to think about how those cultural mores play out in understandings and receptions of women’s intimate relationships. She ultimately finds ambiguity in the text’s portrayal of Sophia and Constantia’s friendship, arguing, “I believe the novel’s overall effort to evoke a specter of lesbianism and then rescue the heroines from it, along with its clear rejection of Martinette’s gender and sexual transgression, reflects the broader cultural design to contain lesbian possibility and female autonomy as a real and serious threat to heteropatriarchal values” (72). Although she recognizes moments of transgression within the text, the potentially subversive content, which constitutes the focus of my analysis, is secondary to what she identifies as Brown’s more conservative intent. Comment ultimately locates Sophia and Constantia’s romantic friendship within a larger project that she sees as attempting “to control radical ‘threats’ produced by the French Revolution and Enlightenment thinking by embracing conventional family values and metaphorically projecting them onto the nation as a whole” (74). Although I agree with Comment’s reading of the subversive potential of certain scenes—namely, the unpersuasive framing narrative and the night of passion observed by Ormond—I am less
interested in Brown’s specific intentions or his personal politics than Comment and Shapiro are. Instead, I focus on the protolesbian possibilities such an ambiguous portrayal of women’s intimate friendships opens up and the forms of queer spectatorship into which the audience is drawn in a novel preoccupied with questions of voyeurism and secret witnessing. In focusing on the language of the text, as opposed to the intentions Brown may or may not have had in writing it, I do not mean to dismiss the novel’s potential political effects; rather, I locate the radical progressive politics Shapiro discusses in the potential the text holds for those “ideal readers” who do recognize something beyond normativity in not only the character of Martinette, but also the relationship between Sophia and Constantia.

Brown’s *Ormond* takes place in Philadelphia during the 1790s—a decade that includes the 1793 epidemic of Yellow Fever that ravished the city, killing about 5,000 and forcing 17,000 more to flee from “a city whose population was roughly 55,000,” as Philip Barnard and Shapiro note in their introduction to the text (xxvi). In addition to decimating the population, the epidemic exacerbated class, racial, and ethnic tensions in the city—all of which the text explores—as the upper classes fled, leaving only the lower classes, who were left without work, and the free blacks and immigrants, many of whom were believed to be immune to the disease and were sometimes accused of spreading it for their own gain (Barnard and Shapiro xxvi). This period in American history was also a significant time of self-evaluation, as the post-Revolutionary country worked to construct a national ideology. Despite the country’s early radically progressive leanings, the 1790s and early 1800s saw a return to a form of federalist conservatism. Smyth explains, “It was necessary, in the new republic, to define the qualities of the model
citizen, and particularly the model female citizen….The desire for these qualities [‘an independent thinker and patriot, a virtuous wife, competent household manager, and knowledgeable mother’] required a reappraisal of white women’s education” (245). However, as Smyth points out, this “post-Revolutionary vision for women coalesced into an image of Republican Motherhood”—a fundamentally conservative gesture (245). Across the ocean, Britain’s reactionary response to the French Revolution led to what Katherine Binhammer has called a decade of “sex panic” in the 1790s (qtd. in Comment 59). Comment argues that this panic spread quickly to America, leading to a renunciation of the violent radicalism that had come to characterize the French Revolution and a “conservative turn in American popular culture and politics” that manifested itself in late eighteenth-century American novels’ “interest in the control of women’s bodies as a means of preserving the ‘virtue’ of the republic” (60-1). In addition to the nationwide political debate in the 1790s over women’s rights and education that foregrounded questions of gender and sexuality, by setting *Ormond* in the localized history of Philadelphia’s Yellow Fever epidemic, Brown also draws attention to the particular anxieties that converged around the already fraught terrain of class politics, race, and immigration during the years of the outbreak. In writing characters whose identities shift across class, race, and gender borders, Brown destabilizes attempts to find one clear political message in the text. The result is a novel that has been read as both radical and conservative—typical of Brown’s work and the scholarly responses to it—balancing the shifting political allegiances of the new nation, while grappling with the contested concept of female friendship.
Ormond recounts the story of Constantia, starting with her father’s economic downfall after being swindled by a confidence man, the family’s move to Philadelphia, her mother’s death, and her father’s ensuing blindness. Narrated by Sophia Westwyn Courtland, Constantia’s primary romantic friend, the tale traces Constantia’s rejection of three separate marriage proposals, her escape from multiple attempted rapes, her developing relationship with the cross-dressing Martinette and her brother Ormond, and her final reunion with Sophia. Unlike the sentimental heroines of many of the roughly contemporary American novels from the turn of the nineteenth century, Constantia, who has received a decidedly masculine education, assumes charge of the family’s finances, supervises the household management, and finds work as a seamstress. Brown, read by many scholars as a feminist in the tradition of Mary Wollstonecraft based on his 1798 tract advocating women’s education, Alcuin; A Dialogue, does not hesitate to praise Constantia for her actions. He writes, “[W]hen the task of comforter fell upon her, her strength was not found wanting” (16). He commends his heroine for exceeding the bounds of her sex—a move Smyth argues should be read as a conservative gesture in its androcentrism and valorization of the masculine—describing how her “powerful and cultivated mind” (18) enables her to save her feminized, “powerless” father (23) as the “infirmities of sex and age vanished before the motives to courage and activity flowing from her new situation” (18).

While Brown does tend to praise as masculine the achievements of his female characters, citing their ability to exceed the “infirmities” of their sex, he attributes their ability to access that “masculinity” not in terms of gender-crossing, but rather, through the fact of their receiving a traditionally masculine education. Mr. Dudley, who educates
his daughter “to make her, not alluring and voluptuous, but eloquent and wise,” refuses to follow the typical prescriptions for a woman’s instruction (25). Brown explains, “Instead of familiarizing her with the amorous effusions of Petrarcha and Racine, he made her thoroughly conversant with Tacitus and Milton.³ Instead of making her a practical musician or pencilist, he conducted her to the school of Newton and Hartley, unveiled to her the mathematical properties of light and sound, taught her as a metaphysician and anatomist” (25-6). Constantia is thereby “render[ed]…superior to the rest of women” (26) not only by her education, but also by her own “ardent thirst of knowledge” (22). Although these qualities will, ironically, be precisely the ones that attract Ormond’s romantic advances, contrasted as Constantia is with Helena Cleaves, his sentimental mistress, Brown makes it clear that Mr. Dudley’s intent was to edify his daughter for her own merits, as opposed to training her to attract a man. Even Sophia, one of the more conservative characters, writes, “Education, besides, had created in [Constantia] an insurmountable abhorrence of admitting to conjugal privileges, the man who had no claim upon her love” (66). The only downside Constantia acknowledges of this education is its failure to prepare her for work as an instructor for young female charges; instead, she becomes “mistress of her needle…to employ for her own subsistence” (19). Her education and employment place her in a tradition of both early feminism and potential sexual deviance. While the Industrial Revolution was still in its early stages in America, the casual associations of lower-class urban women workers with sexual impropriety,

³ Mr. Dudley’s decision to educate Sophia in Latin also allows Constantia access to what Caroline Gonda identifies as eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century coded queer language: “Latin literature offered representations of female same-sex desire that were closed to many women readers,” allowing women like Anne Lister to “assess” other “masculine wom[e]n with an apparent erotic interest in women” by asking them “if they were classical” and judging their knowledge of Greek and Latin (111).
including prostitution, had already begun to take root—a theme which I explore in greater
detail in Chapter 2.4 In addition to her being coded within distinctly un-feminine
traditions, Constantia’s impoverished socioeconomic status also severely limits the
degree of lenience afforded to her romantic friendships with other women—both of
which push analyses of the text further away from Faderman’s reading of their
relationship as wholly innocent.

Although critics have tended to view Brown’s Ormond as more of a
representation of conservative romantic friendship or heterosexual cross-dressing than of
queer potential, I would cite the text’s invocation of moments of unspeakability and its
failure to bring about heterosexual closure, coupled with its undoing of conventional
male-female-male triangulation5 and its emphasis on the passionate, rather erotic aspects
of Constantia’s friendships with Sophia and Martinette as my rational for reading the text
in a sapphic tradition. Both Traub and Castle have investigated the role of the lesbian as
the unspoken presence, the unacknowledged specter haunting history and literature.
Though Traub focuses on early modern British texts, I find her “lesbian-affirmative
analytic” (15) and framework of investigating the “paradox of practicing impossibilities”
(6) useful for analyzing this particular work, mired as it is in conventions of gothic
unspeakability. Traub asks, “To what extent is it appropriate to extrapolate presence from
absence, cultural possibilities from asseverations of impossibility?” (11). Perhaps unlike

4 Brown explains that Constantia “was no longer shocked by the clamours of debauchery,
and [was] exposed, by her situation, to the dangers of being mistaken by the profligate of
either sex, for one of their own class” (24). See Alice Kessler-Harris, Out to Work: A
History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States (Oxford UP, 1982), Part I for a
comprehensive overview of women workers from the colonial period through the Civil
War.
5 For a description of male-female-male triangulation, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,
Between Men English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (Columbia UP, 1985).
some of the sources Traub uses, the gothic as a genre more broadly and same-sex female
desire as the specter behind the unspeakable more specifically seem to demand precisely
this sort of reading. Even outside of the gothic, I apply this paradigm to the other texts I
analyze, looking for queer possibilities in the spaces created by absences, silences, and
ambiguities. In The Apparitional Lesbian, Castle argues that the difficulty in “see[ing] the
lesbian” arises from the fact that “she has been ‘ghosted”—or made to seem invisible—
by culture itself” (4). This regime of “derealization” has been perpetrated, according to
Castle, because the lesbian represents a profound threat to Western patriarchal authority
(5-6). She also finds this form of obliteration through disavowal functioning in the law,
which “has traditionally ignored female homosexuality—not out of indifference…but out
of morbid paranoia….Behind such silence, one can often detect an anxiety too severe to
allow for direct articulation” (6). While Castle draws support for her conclusions from the
1921 debate over adding a clause about lesbian activity to the Criminal Law Amendment
Act of 1885, this same sort of anxiety arose in 1810-1811 during the Pirie and Woods
trial when Lord Meadowbank insisted upon keeping the court records sealed, lest women
should learn about such crimes, which are “equally imaginary with witchcraft, sorcery, or
carnal copulation with the devil” (qtd. in Faderman, Scotch 65). While many of the
judges who found for Miss Pirie and Miss Woods revealed (perhaps inadvertently) in
their questioning of the witnesses and notes from the trial a great deal of knowledge
about what lesbian sex might entail, they upheld, as Lord Meadowbank did, “the
important fact that the imputed vice has been hitherto unknown in Britain,” and deduced
that Jane Cummings, having spent the first eight years of her life in India, must have
learned of those terrible practices elsewhere, in that “other” land (qtd. in Faderman,
A rejection of heterosexuality and an emphasis on its failure to provide resolution run throughout the text, from Constantia’s repeated rejections of marriage proposals to the uncertainty surrounding the framing narrative that should close the text. The novel begins as a note to “I.E. Rosenberg,” an individual of unspecified gender with an unspecified purpose who is later revealed to be in contact with Sophia and Constantia in England. Critics have read this character in any number of possibilities, from a potential male suitor, to Martinette come in male drag to rescue Constantia from the boredom of life in England. Even conventional readings of Rosenberg as a male suitor fail to provide any real promise of heterosexual resolution at the close of the text. Sophia begins the novel by ambiguously writing, “You are anxious to obtain some knowledge of the history of Constantia Dudley. I am well acquainted with your motives, and allow that they justify your curiosity” (3). I will return at the conclusion of this essay to the ways in which Sophia’s addresses implicate the reader as a secret witness, but for now, this address merely suggests the presence of an ambiguous someone curious about Constantia’s story.

While the reasoning Wil Verhoeven proposes for the latter possibility—the fact that “Rosenberg is Mon(t)rose [one of the names Martinette takes in disguise] translated into German and inverted” (Shapiro 378)—seems to stretch beyond the limits of plausibility, in a work as invested in masquerade and disguises as Ormond, in which an upper-class white man easily passes as a black chimney sweep while his sister plays five different roles in a 200-page novel, the possibility cannot be completely dismissed.

Scotch 259). This framework of analysis, in which the lesbian operates as what Annamarie Jagose has called “a dense cipher for the limit conditions of cultural visibility” (qtd. in Traub 34), provides the necessary conditions for an investigation of the ways in which female same-sex eroticism haunts the text of Ormond, erupting in scenes that approach the limits of the unspeakable, nearly avowing precisely those possibilities derealized by cultural authorities.
Sophia’s preemptive defensiveness in asserting that “Constance, like all the beings made known to us, not by fancy, but experience, has numerous defects,” suggests nothing more than the fact that she hopes Rosenberg will appreciate Constantia as much as she, “her friend,” does (4).

Yet as the story proceeds, the reader is forced to question whether, if Rosenberg is a suitor, Sophia actually wants him to continue his pursuit of her friend. While she acknowledges that she writes only in “consideration of…[his] attachments to [her] friend,” she merely states that she hopes his “perusal of this tale may afford [him] as much instruction as the contemplation of the sufferings and vicissitudes of Constantia Dudley has afforded” her (222). As Sophia details Constantia’s behavior throughout the text, especially Constantia’s speeches detailing her reasons for rejecting the marriage proposals of her first three suitors and her final act of murdering a former suitor who attempts to rape her, the reader wonders whether those details might be spared in a narrative intended to bring about yet another marriage proposal. In “The Failure of Heteronormativity in the Gothic Novel,” George Haggerty writes, “Gothic endings are incredibly dissatisfying…because they can never contain the horrors and transgressions, largely sexual, that have come before” (100). In Ormond, however, the text does attain satisfying closure if the reader will accept a happy ending like the one the Ladies of Llangollen achieved, as opposed to the one Ann Radcliffe’s heroines found. Shapiro locates in the novel’s conclusion an exploration of “the possibility of avoiding marriage’s compulsory and commodified heterosexuality” (370). For Shapiro, however, the possibility opened by avoidance is not that of a same-sex alternative; rather this refusal functions as a “segmentifier” that “forces the narrative to begin anew” as yet another
male suitor emerges (370). In his reading, the possibility of avoiding heterosexual marriage is temporary, and the interim relationship between Sophia and Constantia serves only as a conservative placeholder. Comment also notes that the text “ultimately fails to bring Constantia’s vision of an ideal heterosexual union to fruition,” but, unlike Shapiro, she suggests that in revealing the failure of “companionate heterosexual marriage,” it might “actually point to a viability, and even a preference for, homosocial (if not explicitly homosexual) unions” (69-70). While Comment draws these conclusions from Rosenberg’s unspecified gender and the novel’s emphasis on the potential for “female economic independence” in eighteenth-century Philadelphia (70), I argue that the text itself offers up the possibility merely by demonstrating the ways in which Constantia’s relationships with her female friends fulfill precisely those conditions for companionate marriage that all of her male suitors fail to meet.

A survey of the three separate marriage proposal rejections reveals that Constantia takes issue not just with her compatibility with those specific men, but, more importantly, with the very institution of heterosexual marriage and its uneven distribution of power. Rather than allowing herself to be swept away with romantic passion—though this will be exactly how she reacts to certain women in the text—Constantia takes a measured response, allowing the “pleadings of love” to “speedily [give] place to quiet thoughts and steadfast purposes” (16). The unnamed first suitor, “not unworthy in himself, and amply recommended by the circumstances of family and fortune,” desires to marry immediately out of youthful impetuosity (16). When her father’s financial misfortunes are exposed, the youth quickly revokes his already-rejected proposal; Constantia, however, does not suffer “any very acute distress on this account,” since she “had no design of entering into
marriage, in less than seven years from this period” (17). She here defines marriage as “a contract to *endure* for life”—one that “included vows of irrevocable affection and *obedience*” (16, emphasis mine). Although Sophia suggests that Constantia’s “scruples” resulted only from “the imperfectness of the acquaintance,” a problem which would give way with “the progress of time and knowledge,” the language she uses to describe Constantia’s view of matrimony belies a deeper reason—one that rejects the very basis of heterosexual marriage (16). Given what Barnard and Shapiro identify as her refusal “to subordinate herself as an object that can be transferred according to the wishes of her parents, male suitors, or narrow economic self-interest,” the question arises of whether Constantia would ever marry (fn. 17).

Constantia’s second suitor, Balfour, a merchant and “Adventurer from Scotland” made rich through “a strict adherence to the maxims of trade” (63), is described in terms not suited to excite the passions. Constantia views him as “middle-aged, of a figure neither elegant nor ungainly, and an aspect that was mild and placid, but betrayed few marks of intelligence” (63). Although he rescues her from the first attempted rape she will experience over the course of the novel, her response to him is merely one of gratitude, “treat[ing] him as one from whom she had received a considerable benefit,” but not as an object of passion or affection (64). Once she realizes Balfour’s intentions, she reflects on his situation and decides to reject him based on “the poverty of his discourse and ideas” (65). Once more, she offers reflections on marriage as an institution and the “nature of the altar-vows” (66). Stressing the “rational” dimension of every part of “that relation,” she investigates the “duty” of each participant and the “peculiar aggravations” of “nuptial [sic] life” (65). She wonders, “Allowing that the wife is enriched by marriage,
how humiliating were the conditions annexed to it in the present case? The company of one with whom we have no sympathy, nor sentiments in common, is, of all species of solitude, the most loathsome and dreary” (65). Despite the initial question, her second sentence could still be read merely as an indictment of this particular suitor, but then her reflections continue. Thinking of her current self-sufficient state as the “mistress of the product of her own labour,” she realizes, “Marriage would annihilate this power. Henceforth she would be bereft even of personal freedom. So far from possessing property, she herself would become the property of another….Homely liberty was better than splendid servitude” (65-6). As Constantia navigates the travails of poverty and managing a household, she recognizes her capacity for independence, becoming ever more wary of an institution that would deny her that ability. For while her friendships allow her to flourish as an individual, even as she describes the sort of fusion in sentiment hoped for in a companionate marriage, heterosexual marriage inscribes a gendered power differential and denies the possibility of true equality between partners.

Constantia’s final marriage proposal comes from Ormond, the titular villain and master of disguises. Ormond falls in love with her, despite having a mistress, Helena, on whose behalf Constantia has been advocating. In an instance of what Smyth sees as the novel’s implicit dismissal of the feminine, Ormond elevates Constantia for her rational intelligence and “manlike energy” (118). Helena, rejected by Ormond “for another more worthy” (120), does not behave as a scorned woman; instead, she “rejoice[s] at” Ormond’s choice of the “noble and accomplished” Constantia and states, “Most joyfully

7 Mr. Dudley dismisses these fears, not for a lack of propriety, but simply because he fails to see a need for “any rigorous obligation” to accompany the “formal and unmeaning” marriage vows (66). Ultimately, however, he allows his daughter to make her own choices.
do I resign you to her, my dear friend” (127). This moment provides one of the novel’s early instances of Castle’s model of inversion of the male-female-male triangulation of desire that Sedgwick identifies in *Between Men*. Castle suggests that “female-female desire” destabilizes “this supposedly intractable patriarchal structure” of the exchange of women between men, for Sedgwick’s model only holds “as long as its single female term is unrelated to any other female term” (72). While I will return to this model of inverted triangulation later, this intermediate disruption, in which a woman and a man traffic in women—Helena resigning her position as mistress and entrusting her female friend to Ormond’s erotic care—has already begun to reveal the cracks in the patriarchal authority structures in *Ormond*. The significance of the placement of this revelation—at the moment of the villainous Ormond’s intervention in the text—serves to diffuse some of the anxieties about this intrusive male presence by suggesting a possible way out through the “most radical transformation of female bonding—i.e., from homosocial to *lesbian* bonding—[in which] the two female terms merge and the male term drops out” (Castle 73). Even if we hesitate over the anachronism of calling these bonds “lesbian,” Brown provides a new mode of escape from the entrapment of heterosexual marriage: intimate female friendship.

The moments in the text that read most like a traditional romance are those descriptions of Sophia and Constantia’s relationship and reunion. While Sophia’s role as the narrator may provide some explanation for the belittlement of Constantia’s new female friendships as inferior compared to their great love, the fact remains that in word and action, they enact a performance of romantic passion. The tale follows both sides of a separated pair through their individual trials to their joyous reunion at the novel’s
conclusion. Sophia describes the “paroxysm[s]” of the “deepest melancholy” Constantia endures when she reflects on her lost friend, and the ways in which she turns to “recollections of scenes” and a “ditty which they [sang] together” at their “last interview” for solace (139). The lyrics Constantia sings in these “fits” of melancholy reflection, “pregnant with such agonizing tenderness, such heart breaking sighs,” describe a young lover’s reflections as he commits suicide to “meet again to part no more” with his beloved (139). It is in these moments that Constantia is described as seeking “solitude, that the progression of her feelings might endure no restraint,” embodying the characteristics of a more traditional romantic heroine (139). Finally, the two meet, both having traced a portrait of Sophia back to a small shop, desperately hoping to find each other, and led as if “a mysterious destiny conducted [their] footsteps to the same spot” (191). When Constantia hears her friend’s voice she “swoon[s],” and Sophia is no less overcome with emotion: “I could not bear to withdraw my eyes from her countenance. If they wandered for a moment, I fell into doubt and perplexity, and again fixed them upon her, to assure myself of her existence” (191). While Smyth reads this moment as one of a conservative transformation, in which Constantia is “recast as a sentimental heroine” who “shrieks and swoons” (252), she fails to take into account the fact that it requires another woman, a female friend, to produce these sorts of romantic emotions in the previously rational, unaffected Constantia.

Throughout the text, Sophia appears to be the only character fitted to meet Constantia’s requirements for marriage, and the pair’s reunion at the end of the text erupts in moments of unspeakability, glossing over conversations and particulars after chapters of painstakingly detailed descriptions of their search for one another. For
Constantia, “[m]arriage could be justified…only by a community of affections and opinions” (133-4)—a situation she fails to find with any man the text presents, but that perfectly captures her relationship with Sophia, as seen in the description: “Henceforth, the stream of our existence was to mix; we were to act and to think in common: Casual witnesses and written testimony should become superfluous: Eyes and ears were to be eternally employed upon the conduct of each other” (193). Although Sophia has married Courtland while abroad after just a few weeks’ acquaintance, she originally sought him out only to see if he had news of Constantia, and she leaves just one day after their marriage, not for their honeymoon, but for a trans-Atlantic voyage alone to recover Constantia. Sophia vows, “If this end could not be accomplished, it was my inflexible purpose to live and to die with her” (178). Both women repeatedly affirm their desire to be with each other for eternity through their song and promises. Sophia describes disembarking amid scenes of their childhood bliss, seeking her friend’s countenance in every female face she saw. In America again, far away from her new husband, she exclaims, “Happiness, of which I had began to imagine myself irretrievably bereft, seemed once more within my reach” (181). Yet upon hearing the rumor of Constantia’s death spread by Thomas Craig, the confidence man who swindled Mr. Dudley, Sophia quickly forgets the hope she had held for finding the object of her “unlimited attachment” (183), declaring, “I received it as true, and at once dismissed all my claims upon futurity. All hopes of happiness, in this mutable and sublunary scene, was fled. Nothing remained, but to join my friend in a world, where woes are at an end and virtue finds its recompence” (184). These remarks provide a queer uncoupling of futurity and heterosexuality, as Sophia affirms that only in her same-sex relationship did she find a desire for futurity;
her marriage will be forgotten as Sophia joins her love in the “ultimate and everlasting union” of death, just as their song proclaims (184).

The joy of their eventual reunion supersedes all emotion found in the novel and ultimately provides the text’s satisfying resolution through the inverted triangulation that will erase the threat of Ormond and male intervention more generally. After the reunion in the shop mentioned earlier, Sophia describes their time together:

The succeeding three days, were spent in a state of dizziness and intoxication. The ordinary functions of nature were disturbed. The appetite for sleep and for food were confounded and lost, amidst the impetuositities of a master-passion. To look and to talk to each other, afforded enchanting occupation for every moment. I would not part from her side. (191-92)

Comment argues that this account “contains language unusually carnal in its implications” (64), while Julia Stern describes the image as one of “physical fusion” (qtd. in Comment 64). The “master-passion” described here imbues the relationship with what Comment refers to as an “‘unnatural’ quality…not found in writing about ‘innocent’ romantic friendship” (64). Barnard and Shapiro describe how Sophia’s narration in the following passages “falls into the poetic diction and style of the literature of Sensibility to convey the emotional intensity of her reunion with Constantia” (fn. 192). She seems nearly rapturous as she exclaims, “And yet, O! precious inebriation of the heart! O! pre-eminent love! What pleasure of reason or of sense, can stand in competition with those, attendant upon thee?…thy boon is happiness!” (192). In contrast to these ecstatic exclamations,

8 This alternative form of futurity, while linked to death in the song, ultimately participates in the larger project of this thesis, which considers the ways in which the works I analyze participate in forms of non-heterosexual reproduction—namely, the queerly generative forms of reading and writing these protolesbian texts inspire.
upon hearing of Ormond and his proposal, Sophia is once more shaken: “I could not but harbour aversion to a scheme, which should tend to sever me from Constance, or to give me a competitor in her affections” (193, emphasis mine). While she goes on to delineate Ormond’s specific flaws—which is perfectly reasonable, given that he has murdered Constantia’s father and will attempt to rape Constantia shortly hereafter—the final clause of her lament suggests that any suitor would prove disagreeable to her.

This moment reveals the inverted triangulation that will shape the final chapters of the novel. Although Castle concludes that her reconfigured model has no “literary applications” in the “canon of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English and American fiction” because female homosocial bonds “are inevitably shown giving way to the power of male homosocial triangulation” (73), in Ormond, female bonds carry the text through to its conclusion. Ormond himself recognizes the shifting structures of power, storming in on Constantia and angrily declaring, “One impediment [Mr. Dudley] is gone. I hoped it was the only one, but no: The removal of that merely made room for another” (195). This “insuperable” obstacle to his desire is none other than Sophia (196). Despite Smith-Rosenberg’s vision of romantic friendships as “fully compatible with heterosexual marriage” (“Female World” 8), Ormond insists that there is a threat, that these bonds are more than those of platonic friendship. As Comment notes, “[H]omoerotic female bonding clearly represents the ultimate threat to male dominance and control” (72). Ormond then declares himself a secret witness to their meeting, having seen “the effects of [their] romantic passion for each other…the rapturous effusions and inexorable counsels of the new comer” (197). Constantia, typically cool in the face of Ormond’s emotions, momentarily panics at the revelation of his knowledge—a knowledge he
declares “infallible” (213). If that is indeed the case, it suggests that something decidedly not innocent and platonic has occurred behind the closet doors through which Ormond spied on the women. His jealousy, Comment observes, “clearly raises the possibility of a sexual relationship between the two women” (65). Constantia reflects, “Disclosures were of too intimate and delicate a nature, for any but a female audience…. Yet his words implied a full acquaintance with recent events, and with purposes and deliberations, shrowded, as we imagined, in impenetrable secrecy” (197). While the words he overheard, to which the audience is also privy, would have revealed only Sophia’s urging Constantia to rebuff Ormond’s advances—a fact both women readily admit—the actions he might have secretly observed, all of which took place in the “hours usually dedicated to sleep” (199) remain barred from the reader’s knowledge, left in the “unnarrated (and unnarratable) space” of queer sexual possibility (King qtd. in Gonda 116).

Although Sophia, after hearing of this secret witness from Constantia, reviews their conduct and decides that “nothing incompatible with purity and rectitude” had passed (201), Comment, relying on an understanding of Brown’s ultimate repudiation of the subversive potential of women’s romantic friendships, explains that this confession “both ‘saves’ Brown’s heroines from charges of sexual impropriety and confirms that a suspicion of such impropriety would naturally exist in the minds of both Ormond and Brown’s readers” (65). However, Sophia’s denial need not necessarily bar the possibility of a sexual component to the women’s relationship. Not only did the laws fail to prohibit sexual acts between women—insistent as the legislators were in maintaining the impossibility of such actions—but the confession also mirrors a possibility Traub identifies in the seventeenth-century poet Katherine Philips’s work: Philips crafts “a
strategy of legitimation that is at once profoundly confrontational and conventional: in addition to the idealizing similitude which she ascribes to her loving relationships, over and over again she insists that her love for the other woman is ‘innocent’” (297). While someone like Faderman reads such a gesture as a sincere mark of women’s inability to conceive of their relationship in sexual terms,9 Traub argues that it should be viewed as “Philips’s appropriation of innocence as the proper term for passion among women” (298). As I noted in the introduction, I am less concerned with the specifics of what these women might have done together than I am in the ways in which unnarrated space leaves room for queer readings by those “ideal readers” Shapiro imagines. Even after admitting their innocence, Sophia and Constantia quickly resume finding ways to stay together through death. Before returning with Sophia to London, Constantia wishes to visit her property in New Jersey—a property she decides “to retain possession” of in the hope “that some future event would allow her to return to this favorite spot, without the forfeiture of [Sophia’s] society” (205). Given that Courtland, Sophia’s husband, has made clear his intentions to remain in Europe, this line of reasoning leads either to a hope for Courtland’s untimely death or a sentiment more akin to Virginia Woolf’s, “Vita—throw over your man” (qtd. in Nicolson and Trautmann 393). Yet again, a possibility is left open for the women’s relationship, eroticized or not, to fill the heterosexual void the novel fails to resolve.

9 In Scotch Verdict, Faderman argues against Ollie, her lover/interlocutor, “We are twentieth-century women, and we cannot escape from our sexuality. It has been foisted on us through our culture. In our day women are encouraged to think of themselves as sexual, and we are inescapably a product of our society. Women in 1810 received precisely the opposite indoctrination. We would feel as uncomfortable today being asexual as they would have felt being sexual” (250).
This trajectory connects Constantia and Sophia to a tradition of romantic friendships that verged on the unacceptably erotic. The most obvious contemporary couple in this tradition is the Ladies of Llangollen: Eleanor Butler, a member of the Ormond family, and Sarah Ponsonby. An article on the couple entitled, “Extraordinary Female Affection,” printed in the New York Daily Gazette in 1790, constantly skirts around the unspeakable possibility that lurked in the background of this relationship between two single women who had refused heterosexual marriage in favor of living with one another. The article traces their “particular friend[ship]” through their forced separation by their families, their elopement and capture, and their final escape to a Welch vale. The writer describes how, although “[m]any attempts were renewed to draw Miss Butler into marriage,” she “solemnly and repeatedly declar[ed], that nothing could induce her to wed anyone” (“Extraordinary”). About a year after their escape, relatives happened upon them while looking for accommodation, but again, “no entreaties could prevail on the Ladies to quit their sweet retreat” (“Extraordinary”). Describing the women and the division of labor, the writer classifies Miss Butler, who “superintends the gardens, and the rest of the grounds,” as “tall and masculine…appear[ing] in all respects a young man,” while Miss Ponsonby, who “does the duties and honours of the house,” is described as “polite and effeminate, fair and beautiful” (“Extraordinary”). Despite the masculine/feminine coupling, the refusal to marry men, and the happiness found only in each other’s company, both the articles of the 1790s and the writings of Faderman refused to name any desire other than that of platonic romantic friendship.10 In the years

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10 Although Faderman classifies that friendship in a tradition of lesbian existence, she denies its sexual potential, much as she does in her readings of Ormond in both Surpassing the Love of Men and Scotch Verdict.
following, however, Anne Lister, one of the earliest avowed lesbians, writes in her diary of her 1822 trip to visit the Ladies of Llangollen and considers their erotic life after receiving a note from her beloved, Marianne, asking, “Tell me if you think their regard has always been platonic & if you ever believed pure friendship could be so exalted. If you do, I shall think there are brighter amongst mortals than I ever believed there were” (210). “I cannot help thinking that surely it was not platonic. Heaven forgive me, but I look within myself & doubt. I feel the infirmity of our nature & hesitate to pronounce such attachments uncemented by something more tender still than friendship,” responds Lister, thus avowing the impurity of the exalted friendship (210). *Ormond*, much like the early articles on the Ladies of Llangollen, presents Sophia and Constantia’s relationship in terms that at once obscure the erotic possibilities and, paradoxically, reveal the potential that something might need to be concealed.

Constantia’s relationship with Sophia is not, however, the only element of the text aligned with markers of queer female identifications; Martinette, who constitutes Constantia’s primary female attachment during her separation from Sophia, also falls outside of heterosexual conventions (as do most of Brown’s main characters), coded in a history of cross-dressing women warriors. First mentioned by Baxter in a wildly inaccurate misreading, which includes moments of gender, ethnic, and class ambiguity, she is (mis)named as Ursula Montrose. Though Constantia has barely seen her, she feels her destiny connected to this woman’s and “imagined that Ursula Monrose would prove worthy of her love, and felt unspeakable regret at the improbability of their ever meeting” (56). When she meets her in a pawnshop, learning her real name, Martinette de Beauvais, she is drawn to her once more. She describes the woman as “small but of exquisite
proportions” with a “darkness” that “testified the influence of a torrid sun…without obscuring, the glowing tint of her cheek.…Her’s [sic] were the polished cheek and the mutability of muscle, which belong to woman, but the genius conspicuous in her aspect, was heroic and contemplative” (60). Martinette’s androgynous, ambiguously raced appearance, which Constantia decides “language [is] inadequate” to capture, “absorb[s]” her attention (60). The reader is then informed by Sophia that this striking woman’s features are nearly “suited, with the utmost accuracy,” to Constantia’s (61). This queer double-viewing, as the reader hears of a woman’s beauty through the words of Constantia, which are transcribed and amplified by Sophia, who sees in Martinette a copy of the woman whose beauty she admires, leads into Constantia’s description of her desire to “prolong the dream of future confidence and friendship” with a “companion fitted to partake in all her sympathies” (139)—a wish that is finally granted when Martinette visits her, explaining, “I came, as I said, to say thank you, but, to say the truth, that was not all. I came likewise to see you” (141). Over the course of Martinette’s visits, “Constantia [becomes] daily more enamoured of her new acquaintance” (141).

Like Constantia, Martinette received a masculine education, but has added to it “a knowledge of political and military transactions, in Europe, during the present age, which implied the possession of better means of information, than books” (141). Martinette is able to describe scenes of battle with “a warmth and freedom in her details which bespoke her own co-agency in these events,” even though her gender should have barred her from them—an impossibility explained through her revelation that she had disguised herself as a man to fight alongside her husband in the French Revolution (143). While heterosexual desire neutralizes her motives for cross-dressing at first, her husband,
Wentworth, dies almost immediately after their marriage, and in reflecting on her initial passion for him, she muses, “If I thought it possible for me to sink again into imbecility so ignominious, I should be disposed to kill myself” (152), and vows never to sacrifice her liberty to marriage again (155). Like Sophia’s husband, Wentworth seems to have been placed into the novel merely to diffuse potential anxieties about Martinette’s gender transgressions. Yet, as Lewis describes, Martinette is unique not only in the fact that she has the chance to tell “her own story, celebrating its moments of triumph over men and regretting her moments of sentimental attachment to them” (44), but also in that she “is neither punished nor rebuked” for her gender-crossing (46). In contrast to Martinette’s apathetic response to her husband’s death, she rapturously describes her performance of masculinity: “I delighted to assume the male dress, to acquire skill at the sword, and dexterity in every boisterous exercise. The timidity that commonly attends women, gradually vanished. I felt as if embued [sic] by a soul that was a stranger to sexual distinction” (154). These scenes of story-telling also make her attractive to Constantia, who “listen[s] greedily” to Martinette’s tales “with unspeakable eagerness” (142). As Mary Chapman briefly notes, this dynamic “resembles nothing more than Othello’s seduction of Desdemona through a recitation of military exploits” (31). Like Martinette, Othello is the exoticized outsider who “enchant[s]” a women with his war stories (1.2.63), while Desdemona, like Constantia, listens “with greedy ear” (1.3.150). The Shakespearean echoes introduce to their relationship a sexual element that becomes doubly threatening when coupled with Martinette’s cross-dressing, which Smyth explains “disrupts the metonymy of sex-gender-sexuality,” leaving “not just gender constructions but desire in flux” (251). Martinette’s enticing tales of transvestism threaten to inspire in
Constantia a desire not only for Martinette, but also for the experience of cross-dressing, as Martinette admits that many women were drawn to disguise themselves as men and fight “by the contagion of example” (158).

Finally, Martinette’s willingness to embrace the violence of the revolution, her readiness to admit that she has killed and would kill again for love of liberty, enables Constantia’s final triumph against Ormond, even though the revelation initially shocks her. Lewis suggests that Constantia’s horror “should be seen as the immediate pain of an inoculation that ultimately saves [her] life” (47). For when Ormond traps her alone to rape her, a “prize” he’ll take whether she is “[l]iving or dead” (215), she refuses to become the virgin martyr whose sacrifice would fail even to thwart her attacker; instead, she stabs him in a scene of gender reversal that Shapiro reads as Constantia’s “deflower[ing] Ormond” and “a gesture of symbolic castration” (377). This act of female penetration, modeled in Martinette’s tradition of cross-gendered militarism, enables the literal disassembling of Sedgwick’s triangle in the novel’s final moments. In the scene, Constantia lies between “two figures, breathless and supine” (219); the murdered male villains, Ormond and Craig, have fallen from the height of patriarchal control over her body to become mere corpses strewn in her path toward a happy ending with Sophia.

Ultimately, a consideration of *Ormond* that focuses on the spaces of lesbian possibility suggests an alternative way of reading the text’s gaps and its moments of silence—as techniques for implicitly communicating the unspeakable cultural anxieties surrounding female desire that also open up more subversive modes of reading that fill in those gaps with the potential eroticism of women’s intimate friendships. Having traced the ruptures in structures of both patriarchal and textual authority—namely, male-female-
male triangulation and heterosexual resolution—one point remains to be considered in
greater detail: the text’s audience. Secret witnessing, inscribed in the title as a key
concern, not only implicates the masquerading Ormond and the well-intentioned Sophia,
but also the writer and the reader. In his personal correspondence, Brown “describes
himself as an interloper spying from the closet”—the exact image he uses to depict
Ormond at his most voyeuristic (Hewitt 84). Shapiro claims that Brown “refunctionalizes
the period’s existing ideology of universalizing sentimental vision” by “routing it
through…French pornographic tales of voyeurism and sexual initiation” (363). The
strong French influence in America during the 1790s, which brought about a questioning
of sexual mores and a proliferation of easily accessible French pornography, sexualizes
Sophia’s—and, by extension, the reader’s—gaze. My survey of late eighteenth-century
radical French pornography reveals it to be a highly conventional genre that regularly
employs the trope of a voyeur who finds a scene of sexual perversity, quite often some
form of same-sex female intimacy, which provides either visual gratification, if the secret
watcher is a man, or sexual instruction, if the watcher is a woman.11 If one trusts
Shapiro’s argument that Brown was intimately familiar with these stories—and there are
certainly other similarities to be found between moments in Ormond and scenes from
pornographic tales like Nicolas Chorier’s L’Académie des Dames and Mathieu-François
Pidansat de Mairobert’s L’Espion Anglais—then Sophia and Constantia’s relationship
necessarily moves beyond the bounds of socially acceptable friendship. Sophia’s

11 Acknowledging the limitations of my survey of the literature, I, having only a
questionable proficiency in French gained through years of Catholic high school
instruction, relied on existing English translations of these texts, which may well have
overlooked some of the French double entendre and which were often available only in
excerpts or edited volumes.
romantic sentiments in choosing to live and die with Constantia, rather than remaining with her husband, take on erotic overtures if she is to be read like Tullie in Chorier’s tale, who tells Octavie that she “would happily choose [her] kisses over those of” her husband (113)—a sentiment that leads to far more than Brown dared to speak of, but that nonetheless becomes a possibility for the unspeakable actions that take place behind closed doors when taken in this tradition of secret witnessing. In this moment, however, the reader is also made complicit in what becomes an avowal of the very possibilities judges, legislators, and moral authority figures relentlessly sought to deny—the possibility that two women might share sentiments “more tender still than friendship,” that the conclusion of *Ormond* might represent satisfying closure without Sophia’s preemptively defensive framing, and that there might just be a way for women to escape structures of patriarchal dominance. Although all of these potentialities remain unspoken, just as the love that dares not speak its name masqueraded under the guise of romantic friendship, the text’s “low-culture” literary progenitors and its moments of rupture and uncontainability threaten to undo precisely the stability a late eighteenth-century audience presumed it would find, while partaking in a pornographic tradition of what Shapiro terms “tutelage through didactic voyeurism” (368) that offers the possibility of the literary generation and reproduction of a queer erotic education through the “contagion of example.”
Chapter 2: Producing Intimacy: 
*The Factory Girl* and Workingwomen’s Romantic Relationships

“Look! thy step—oh how elastic, 
and made *with grace* the most exquisit. 
Your voice too! Ah, shall I speak it? 
There is celestial music in it; 
And then they form, ow powers divine! 
*Could I but make this angel mine.*”

-Erlunia Smith to Ann Lilley, 31 May 1841

Found in one of Erlunia Smith’s letters to Ann Lilley, these lines of poetry might have come from the correspondence of any pair of nineteenth-century romantic friends. Yet Smith and Lilley, unlike most well-studied couples, were not middle- or upper-class women; rather, they were both schoolteachers. After meeting at a teaching academy, they stayed in touch through affectionate letters that Hansen describes as “bristl[ing] with the tension between teasing, attraction, and the quest for intimacy” (*Social Time* 59). Unlike many of the wealthy women frequently cited in the scholarship on nineteenth-century romantic friendship, both Smith and Lilley were acutely aware of public scrutiny. Smith, still unmarried at twenty-eight, was the object of gossip and public “lament” (Hansen, *Social Time* 59). While she dismissed the criticisms, she also felt compelled to couch these lines of verse in defensive rhetoric, instructing Lilley, “Now Ann these few lines are the supposed ideas of some of your Plainfield gallants” (qtd. in Hansen, *Social Time* 59-60). Although she might write in the persona of a male suitor who desired to make Lilley his own, she anxiously clarifies that she is not one of them, lest her letter be read by the wrong person. This anxiety of discovery highlights the heightened scrutiny that surrounded workingwomen as a class deemed (hetero)sexually deviant. Although much of the scholarship on both romantic friends and workingwomen in the nineteenth century assumes that the former were wealthy and white, and the latter excessively heterosexual,
archival research done by Farah Jasmine Griffin and Hansen has uncovered loving correspondence between pairs of African American women and working-class women that suggests they too enjoyed relationships with other women that were “as intimate and romantic as those documented in the white middle-class female world of love and ritual” (Hansen, *Social Time* 27). While there were key differences—notably a degree of anxiety based on the increased scrutiny raced and classed others faced and a greater likelihood that one or both of the women would eventually marry a man out of economic necessity, which often brought the relationship to an untimely end—workingwomen “actively sought intimate friendship” and, Hansen contends, did not allow the “fear of homosexuality and consequent stigmas” to “stifle” their affectionate relationships, even though “sexuality [was] inescapably an undercurrent” (*Social Time* 75, 77). Thinking about working-class women’s writings, Kathryn Cady similarly argues that their apparent invisibility in literature should not serve as proof of their non-existence; rather, Cady suggests that silence in workingwomen’s writing “is used to present a homosocial alternative to heterosexual marriage” (26). Cady views silence as a defensive tactic that “may have offered a shield obscuring working-class female sexuality, which was so often regarded as necessarily promiscuous and always heterosexual” (36). This silence operates in ways similar to the gothic unspeakable, creating a space for queer potential while leaving the text seemingly safe from public scrutiny. Yet in both historical and fictional examples, workingwomen’s potential for economic independence, which unsettles the ideological divide between public/private and male/female, raises the specter of sapphic relationships, even as that specter often remains unnamed and unacknowledged as such.
Within this culture of anxious and defensive rhetoric, *The Factory Girl*, which was published in 1854, appears unique for the relative forthrightness and seriousness with which the text treats Mary’s romantic relationship with Elizabeth. In the novella, Mary, a young woman from rural New Hampshire, finds herself seduced by two visiting factory girls and, unable to think or dream of anything but the factory and the women who occupy it, eventually convinces her parents to let her leave the space of the heterosexual home to follow the lure of capitalist production and earnings and the women who so attracted her. When she finally makes it to the mill, Mary meets a Christian woman, Elizabeth, with whom she bonds almost instantly. Elizabeth offers to room with Mary and teaches her about the work and the culture of the factory. Although Mary is happy for some time, she strays when Sarah, another factory girl who prefers dances to church, entices her to abandon Elizabeth and spend time with her instead. Mary’s choice of Sarah is figured as a romantic betrayal, and she finds her way back to Elizabeth only through a near-death experience. Over the course of the novella, the narrator details Mary and Elizabeth’s evolving bond, describing the intimacy fostered through scenes of reading and joint prayer, the guilt and mourning surrounding Mary’s betrayal of Elizabeth, and the vows of eternal love taken during their ecstatic reunion. Although the majority of the text focuses on Mary’s time in the textile mill and her loving relationship with Elizabeth, the potential threat the women’s relationship poses to the future-oriented heterofamilial project is ultimately quelled: Mary leaves the factory, cutting short her ecstatic reunion with Elizabeth; Elizabeth dies before Mary returns; and Mary finally leaves the factory for good, settling into domesticity with her husband and three children in a cottage in rural New Hampshire. Despite—and perhaps because of—the safety the ending promises
for heterosexual structures, the text, which claims to be based on a true story, offers a rare
glimpse of same-sex desire among factory girls. Thus, like the letters between Smith and
Lilley, it works to unsettle long-held assumptions about the classed nature of romantic
friendship and the heterosexuality of working-class women in nineteenth-century
American culture. Yet, while Mary and Elizabeth’s relationship engages with many of the
tropes associated with romantic friendship, *The Factory Girl* also appropriates the general
plot structure of the novel of seduction within an all-female homosocial space, drawing
Mary into a female-female-female erotic triangle in which Elizabeth and Sarah vie as
rivals for her affections. By moving a relationship that would appear relatively “safe” in
the mold of loving romantic friendship into the sexually suspect space of the factory, *The
Factory Girl* makes threatening certain arenas for same-sex female desire, such as
religion and fashion, that have historically been interpreted as tools of normalization.

I begin this chapter by looking at the language of contagion used to describe the
“factory fever” that lures Mary away from “safe” heterofamilial space of the countryside
into the mill, to which Mary is drawn by the enchanting sight of the beautiful Woodbury
girls who work in the factory and can afford to buy themselves nice clothing. Mary finds
herself unable to think or dream of anything other than her desire to be like those girls, to
have the type of clothing they have—a desire born out of looking that I argue participates
in the novella’s broader concerns with a desiring queer female gaze, which I consider
alongside Marcus’ discussion of Victorian fashion culture. I argue that these scenes of
spectatorship exceed the normalizing functions Marcus describes and implicate not only
Mary and the narrator, but also the implicitly female reader, who is interpellated into
structures of queer female desire as the “you” of the narrator’s address. These scenes of
looking and same-sex female desire continue in the homosocial space of the mill, which I consider as a locus of Kent’s identificatory erotics. As a site of capitalist production, the mill also serves to define the factory girls as improperly reproductive women—marked as they are by an anti-domestic relationship to production. I then analyze the development of Mary’s intimate relationship to Elizabeth in the mill—a relationship often described with the language of romantic friendship, even as it exceeds those bounds. I invoke Marcus’ and Vicinus’ discussions of religion’s role in women’s romantic friendships and the way in which the language of piety might mask same-sex intimacies to analyze Mary and Elizabeth’s experiences of joint prayer and embodied Christianity. Their bond, however, is disrupted by the intrusion of a third female term, Sarah, as the narrative takes on the general plot structure of the novel of seduction, even as it queers the genre by having two female rivals vie for the affections of another woman. It is within these generic scenes—the moment of deceit and betrayal; the near-death experience that leads to repentance; and the final reunion—that the text becomes most explicit in its queer encodings of Mary’s relationship with Elizabeth. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the failure of Mary’s heterosexual marriage to provide a sense of closure, marked as her marriage is by reminders of her lingering affections for the now-deceased Elizabeth.

Before the author of *The Factory Girl* brings her readers to the titular factory, she presents a pastoral scene of rural New Hampshire, our heroine’s hometown. Panning over the landscape, she describes the land’s “gentle slopes and rugged mountains, its meadows and forests, its shady streams and smiling lakes, its music-making waterfalls, and Edens of fruits and flowers” before finding her way to its “independent,” “unaffected,” and “faithful” inhabitants (7). The “farmers and their families”—already pictured together in
the loving “home circle around the...blazing hearth stone”—engage in a God-ordained form of labor, blessed to toil with the hardships, “the products of Adam’s sin,” rather than spending “their time in idleness or in mischief” (7). Unlike the drive for “[p]rofit and pleasure” in the emergent factory economy, these farmers simply work to provide for their families through the long winters (7). Their labor refers always back to heterofamilial structures. Life revolves around the joys of family and home, “the dearest spot on earth,” a space “hallowed by the related forms and associations of tenderly loved friends” (8). These idyllic scenes abound with descriptions of natural fecundity, centered on the heterosexual family. As “bounteous Spring” returns “like a ministering angel from the sun,” the young animals emerge to frolic and the flowers bloom once more (8). Finally, the author draws her readers to the heroine’s house: “[A]way back in a quiet village of New Hampshire, environed by hills, stood a cottage half concealed by lilacs and the lattice-climbing bean—the home of the family circle and happy hearts” (8). Amid these edenic scenes the reader finally meets Mary, the “idol of home” (9), crowned with “the triple wreath of youth, beauty, and innocency” (8). Although I argue here that the opening scenes of pastoral imagery and natural fecundity parallel the domestic imperative toward heterofuturity, Mary’s communion with nature could also be read in the model Dorri Beam offers for interpreting the “stylistic floridity” of nineteenth-century women’s writing, in which “personified elements of nature...speak to alternative sensual ways of being in the world that marriage will imperil” (2). In this reading, Mary’s sense of being at home in nature both parallels and predicts her decision to go to the factory, as both offer alternatives to the heterofamilial arrangement to which Mary, as a young woman of modest means living in the nineteenth century, would otherwise be fated.
Yet as it stands, Mary’s communion with nature has been disrupted; she finds no joy in “the familiar and diamond-sprinkled firmament—her ears were shut to the melody of evening bells—her lovingly-tuned heart responded to no music of the dewy breezes—the rolled withered leaf fell from her rosy fingers” (9). What, the reader might ask, could have broken Mary’s connection to the home? Invoking the language of contagion—a trope phobically associated with the specter of homosexuality that will reappear in later descriptions of Mary’s interactions with the factory girls—12—the narrator explains that Mary has fallen ill with the “factory fever,” a disease whose symptoms cannot “be allayed by a mother’s advice or promises,” but must instead be treated by indulging the young woman’s desire to leave the home and work in the factories (11). Having “seen the Woodbury girls and heard their stories a little too long,” Mary finds her “feelings too much excited by the thought of leaving home, and fine things” (11). During the day, she fails to brighten the household as she had, forgetting the “cheerful and contented spirit” she once brought to the family, and by night she barely sleeps, “for her dreams were full of factory” (11). Despite her mother’s protestations and warnings, her inducements to “[s]tay at home this summer and help” her with all of the domestic duties, Mary will not be deterred (10).

Although the narrator identifies Mary’s primary motivations in going to the factory in terms of material desires—she dreams of “fine clothes” and “fine things” (11)—they evolve from controllable wants to insatiable desires after Mary’s “too long” encounter with the Woodbury girls and the fantasies that encounter inspires. While the

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desiring female look may have been a socially acceptable form of normalization in the realm of fashion, its recurrence throughout the text and the effect it has on Mary—drawing her away from the home and into the factory—both suggest a queer impulse behind her gaze. Analyzing Victorian fashion plates, Sharon Marcus contends, “Victorian women as well as men enjoyed objectifying women and entertained active, aggressive impulses toward femininity,” yet the female homoeroticism encouraged by commodity culture was understood as “a component of respectable womanhood” by a culture that “encouraged women and girls to desire, scrutinize, and handle simulacra of alluring femininity” (112). Urging her readers not to consider the vocabulary she uses from a twenty-first-century perspective, Marcus claims that Victorian culture accepted “female homoeroticism,” for an appreciation of female beauty was seen as a necessary “componen[t] of conventional femininity” (113). She argues here for a clear distinction between the sexual, which was tied to pornography and desire, and the erotic, which she argues involved “intensified affect and sensual pleasure, dynamics of looking and displaying, domination and submission,” but did not cross a line of acceptability (114). Despite the threatening conflation of the images and vocabulary used in Victorian pornography and in fashion culture—both featured scenes of domination and submission, as well as a pleasure in looking, sometimes covertly, at the female body—Marcus maintains that this “share[d] erotic repertoire” simply reflected their appeal to a common cultural imaginary and need not contaminate the plates’ normalizing function in promoting a distinctly heterosexual femininity (114-15). Yet, while Marcus would locate the plates firmly within the acceptably erotic realm of her dichotomy, she also finds instances of “masturbatory allusion[s]” frequently accompanying scenes of women
looking at and touching one another in the fashion plates (131). She describes a plate featured in *Le Journal des demoiselles*:

An 1888 plate shows a seated woman, one hand buried deep in a small bag that rests on her thigh just below and alongside her crotch, the other resting on a table but also tangled in the fur trim of the dress of the woman standing in the center…. While furtively handling her social peer’s dress, the seated woman gazes at the well-dressed servant who, eyes slightly averted, hands her tea and also has a hand buried in her pocket. (131)

These scenes of voyeurism and clandestine touching suggests a subversive, queer element in women’s desiring looks that would unsettle, if not cross, the divide Marcus attempts to draw between the acceptably homoerotic and the threateningly homosexual. While she claims that homoeroticism served as one of the “dominant codes of femininity,” Marcus differentiates it from “lesbianism” and Victorian-era’s “restrictive, literal definitions of the sexual,” which she argues necessitated “acts that involve genital arousal” and “wishes to perform or fantasies about engaging in such acts” (113). Even as Marcus insists that fashion culture falls clearly on the side of the homoerotic, rather than the homosexual, the depictions of masturbation she locates in popular fashion plates undermine that distinction by foregrounding scenes of dual pleasure: the pleasure of a socially-condoned, fashion-conscious looking and the embodied masturbatory pleasure taken while gazing upon the female form.

In a similar, though less explicit scene of conflation between the acceptable and the threatening, Mary’s desiring gaze at the Woodbury girls and their clothes lingers “too long,” and these alluring images return to her during sleepless nights, leaving her out of
sync with the heterosexual family unit and the scenes of domesticity to which a fashionconscious looking should have drawn her. Enumerating some of the literary tropes used in antebellum American literature to figure otherwise “unnameable” same-sex desires, David Greven includes “a look that lingers far too long and seems to suggest a special need to look” (30). While I will return to the question of a “special need to look” in relation to Mary and the narrator’s voyeuristic roles, in this scene, the focus falls on the duration of the look and the effects it has on Mary, who later identifies her own desiring gaze as the root of her separation from the family. In her first days at the mill before she has grown accustomed to the pace of factory life, Mary reflects on the happy home life she once enjoyed and cries out, “[T]hose Woodbury girls set me into it; I wish I had never seen them” (34). In each description of Mary’s interaction with the Woodbury girls, their presence and her observation of them appears to produce these disruptive effects automatically. Mary cannot imagine a different outcome upon seeing the beautiful girls in their beautiful clothing; instead, she can only wish that she had never seen them at all.

While the “fever” caught through exposure and looking leads Mary to the factory—a locus of cultural anxieties about working-class women’s sexuality and female economic autonomy—her journey to the factory does not “cure” her desires, nor does she cease looking at the beautiful women who surround her. While traveling to the factory town with a group of strangers, Mary spends a good deal of time describing the “other ladies with nice dresses and gold chains” (20). The wealthy women are amazed by the rural scenery and animals they have never before seen, while Mary is amazed by their worldly grace. The narrator recounts one such scene in which Mary’s travelling
companions, upon seeing geese for the first time, cry out: “O what beautiful animals are those?” (20). Mary’s first instinct, the narrator informs us, is to name the women themselves as the obviously “beautiful” creatures—a response she “barely escape[s]” giving before correcting herself and explaining that the other women are looking at geese (20). In contrast to the extensive consideration given to these women Mary deems beautiful, she describes the man later revealed as her future husband as being “of good raiment and address—and rather of a studious bearing” (20). The actions later identified as the “clue” to his enchantment with Mary—his looking at her, rather than the scenery, even as Mary looks at the other women—is misread by Mary as “mean[ing] nothing” or proof of his being “cross-eyed” (20). Upon her arrival at the factory, her preference for looking at and describing women continues. Although both men and women exit the different buildings, the narrator takes care to inform the reader that Mary thought the factory girls “looked pretty smart” (24), and she “wait[s] patiently” for her host, “for she had enough to do in looking” (25).

The seduction by scenes of factory labor and factory girls is an experience shared by Mary, the narrator, and the reader. The narrator, who has herself worked in the mills, introduces her audience to the factory, detailing: “Don’t you see those bright smiling faces turned toward you, as if welcoming you to their place of labor? […] Why they are factory girls. They factory girls, with heads so glossy, sparkling eyes, and appearance so smart? How the factory girls have been underrated and belied!” (18). Although this passage is certainly a political response to critiques of women’s labor, it is also a moment of shared visual consumption and sapphic enticement as the female narrator regales her implicitly female audience—comprised of young women, many of whom, the narrator
assumes, will go to or have “been there [in the factory] themselves” (17)—with images of the factory girls’ enchanting beauty that seem to beckon us in with Mary. Just a few lines later, while philosophizing about what characteristic of the factory girl “win[s] our esteem and love,” she addresses her audience, interjecting: “But you are not listening to my philosophy—what are you looking at so attentively?” (18). The object of our visual attention, it is revealed, is Mary. Importantly, the “you” address interpellates the female readers into structures of visual consumption of women’s bodies. We become, by implication, the ones who are distracted by a pretty woman.

Even in the dance hall, a space of heterosexual possibilities, scenes of queer spectatorship abound as Mary’s desiring, consuming gaze follows the women of the ball, nearly erasing the men’s presence. The ball foregrounds Mary’s gaze and again implicates the readers as spectators themselves. In anticipation of the dance hall scenes, the narrator notes that Mary “was beautiful in person and manners, and was not only attractive to her own sex” (47). Here, she draws attention to patterns of same-sex looking, while making heterosexual looking seem almost unnatural, or at least secondary in its consideration. Similarly, Elizabeth disparages the women who spend what she sees as an inordinate amount of time preparing themselves for the dances by explaining, “I would rather see the simplicity of natural appearance; it is more graceful and engaging than all your artistic flummery, your ball-learned etiquette, and Paris mincing. And I have heard some young men of good understanding say so too” (49). Yet again, a woman’s aesthetic preferences take priority over men’s opinions; Elizabeth hopes to sway Mary by telling her what it is she values in a woman’s appearance and noting, as if to police her own speech, that men may feel similarly. Here, Elizabeth’s afterthought mirrors Smith’s
preemptive clarification in her letter to Lilley that her lines of verse are written from a male point of view. In both instances, working-class women reveal an awareness of the heightened scrutiny they face; while wealthy white women might have freely participated in the practice of female looking Victorian fashion culture authorized, classed others, already regarded with suspicion, responded with a complementary defensiveness. Within the presumed heterosexual space of the dance hall, however, the narrator becomes increasingly forthright. She describes the “beauty of dress and person and a seeming pleasure of young hearts….All is mirth and motion and irresistible bewitchery, and dreamy forgetfulness of all things but the present” (55). In Mary’s descriptions of Sarah and the dances, the notions of enchantment and bewitchment reoccur, mingling with the language of desire, pleasure, and attraction (57-58). At the first dance, Mary knows not how to proceed. Cast in the role of “spectator,” she is instructed by Sarah: “[W]atch me and you will soon learn the step…[Y]ou look and see” (55). Even when all Mary can do is watch another woman without herself participating in the heterosexual dance culture, she praises the experience as “enchanting” and ultimately decides to pursue dance classes with Sarah (57). Her decision is grounded not only in the “embrassment [sic] of not knowing,” but also the memory she cherishes: “[T]hey looked so pretty on the floor; she never saw anything so nice before, and the bewitchment still breathed about her soul” (57). Where Christine Stansell identifies the appeal of dance halls as the opportunity for “mixing with men” outside of the watchful eye of the family, the ball scenes in The Factory Girl represent an alternate possibility for women like Mary: the threat and allure of the space as primarily a homosocial—if not homosexual—one (125).
Although numerous historians have argued that working-class women represented a deviant form of heterosexuality—an exclusionary move mirrored in much of the existing scholarship on romantic friendship as a middle- and upper-class phenomenon—workingwomen’s potential for economic autonomy, coupled with their removal from traditional family structures, raises the specter of lesbianism. Of course, female mill workers were tied to what Cady calls “degraded heterosexualities—exploitation, promiscuity, or prostitution” (30), but those associations need not lead to the dismissal of homosexual possibilities between workingwomen as well. As John D’Emilio argues in “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” by profoundly transforming “the structure and functions of the nuclear family, the ideology of family life, and the meaning of heterosexual relations,” capitalism and its free-labor system “created the material conditions for homosexual desire to express itself as a central component of some individuals lives” (6, 12). Although D’Emilio locates the solidification of these changes in the first half of the twentieth century, the first stirrings of change are visible throughout the nineteenth century as capitalism took root across the United States, beginning in the Northeast where The Factory Girl is set. While Stansell does not acknowledge queer possibilities among working-class women and dismisses the possibility of a “lesbian milieu” existing in the male-dominated nightlife and youth culture of the Bowery (92), she does recognize that the factory girl “conjured up threatening possibilities” of her refusal to return to the proper domestic sphere and submit to a husband (129). In explaining that factory girls “violated prescribed gender roles by making their own money in an urban setting, outside of the watchfulness of family and assumed safety of the farm,” Cady reveals ways in which the language of gender inversion was used to describe workingwomen—a
linguistic trope also commonly invoked to stand in for same-sex female desire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (26). Additionally, by moving women outside the home and into the capitalist economy, Cady argues, factory and mill work also “sparked fears of women becoming not only economically but also sexually and relationally independent from men” (39). Mary herself affirms many of these sentiments at the close of the text, advising her daughters against ever going to the factory, as it “is not the place to form character and gather knowledge for the duties of a wife and a mother—not just the scenes to step from to the centre of home and make it paradise” (76). The place to practice and learn under a properly heterosexualizing and domesticating influence, one assumes, is the private sphere of the home.

Nineteenth-century American culture, however, witnessed the continued erosion of the division between the public and private spheres—a split only ever achieved in prescriptive literature—as increasingly large numbers of women moved into the public sphere through institutions such as schools, factories, and textile mills. In Making Girls into Women, Kent writes, “In the shift away from the home, a new form of what I will call ‘identificatory erotics’ emerges: in undergoing the disciplinary rigors of increasingly rationalized forms of subject formation, girls not only want to be but increasingly want to have the teacher, supervisor, [and] coworker” (6). She argues that the young women’s “desires, to be and to have, become at times indistinguishable from one another,” which provides the opportunity “for the always already eroticized homosocial relations within

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[these relationships] to emerge (at least sometimes) explicitly as such” (7). Kent’s understanding of the queer potential within the regulatory process of female subject formation helps make sense of Mary’s relationship with Elizabeth, which seems, at times, sentimental and maternal, yet at other points reads as quite passionate and erotic.

The space that contains these women’s relationship—the factory—holds particular significance within Kent’s understanding of the role “the ideology of industrial capitalism” played in “changing ideologies of the production and reproduction of persons and things” (14). Just as she finds “lesbianism as an identity emerg[ing] at this unstable conjunction between mothers and ‘others,’ public and private realms,” so too might readers locate queerness in the homosocial space of the sex-segregated factory and the relationships between the new hires and experienced factory girls (16). Although Kent focuses on old maids and spinsters as the women who participate in forms of unnatural (re)production that are, by the second half of the nineteenth century, linked to unnatural sexualities (24, 33),14 similar anxieties appear in descriptions of younger working-class women as well, further elucidating the linkages Kent identifies between women who fail to reproduce and women who produce in the wrong ways. Within The Factory Girl, the narrator even calls one of the young mill workers an “old maid” in describing her defense

14 Other critics, such as Cady, draw attention to instances in the Offering in which “old maids” are valorized as “lay nuns,” “caregivers,” and “leaders in social reform,” even as their male counterparts, bachelors, were more consistently “deemed antisocial” (32). I would argue, however, that the spinster’s valorization in certain contexts in working-class literature—namely, when she supports heterofamilial structures—is compatible with larger social anxieties about her potentially unnatural relationship to men, mothering, and domestic labor more generally. In the literature that would valorize the spinster, she acknowledges her position as a failure—a failure to marry and bear children before her time ran out—and her acceptance is predicated upon the disavowal of her lifestyle as a freely chosen or desirable one. Elizabeth’s positive portrayal need not preclude readings of her as a queer figure capable of inspiring same-sex desire in Mary.
of the workingwomen’s right to dance and pursue pleasure as a reward for their hard work, illustrating the easy slippage between the two groups (49). Stansell analyzes the writings of working-class men in the mid- and late-nineteenth century on the “lamentably independent” factory girls who refuse the confines of domesticity, ignoring their husbands’ demands and relishing the relative economic freedom they might achieve through factory work (126, 129)—a form of antidomestic labor and production seen as antagonistic to a properly reproductive heterosexual marriage and the “labor of love” (Kent 23). For these nineteenth-century men, even the women who returned to the heterosexual familial arrangement after their time away carried some trace of the factory’s unnatural associations with them; they might have married, but, like spinsters and old maids, they still failed to achieve a proper heterosexual subjectivity. Even Mary, who leaves the factory to marry a man and begin a family in the countryside, is always marked by her having been in the factory; she will always be the titular “factory girl,” whose subjectivity is defined by an experience that left her out of sync with home life, removing her from the proper developmental trajectory for young women. The slippage in these associations between queer women and laboring women suggests the appropriateness of reading not only Elizabeth, who does die a single workingwoman, but also Mary, who eventually settles down in the domestic sphere, within the mold of the protolesbian spinster—both in its ties to unnatural modes of (re)production that Kent identifies and in the model Heather Love draws from Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* in which the spinster is one who “has chosen her Self, who defines her Self, by choice, neither in relation to children nor to men, who is Self-identified…a whirling dervish, spinning in a new time/pace” (qtd. in Love 306).
In addition to the factory’s role in removing women from their proper reproductive role in the family economy to the industrial production of the public sphere, the factory as a space and the effects it had on women were also rhetorically tied to another form of non-procreative sexual perversion: female masturbation. The language moral reformers used to describe the sickly and frail women working in the factories mirrors the symptoms doctors and reformers identified as evidence of female masturbation—the “secret vice” of the nineteenth century that was already explicitly linked to practices that would today be classified as lesbian. Surveying nineteenth-century American medical literature, Charles Rosenberg finds a “growing concern with masturbation” that moves beyond mere medical concern, revealing a “depth of anxiety” that “scores of writers both lay and medical” tapped into in identifying onanism as “the ‘master vice’ of the period” (136). Greven groups the “onanist, the prostitute, and the sodomite” together as the “nineteenth century’s unholy trinity of vice, representing non-reproductive, non-marital forms of sexuality” (3). Yet, as Vern L. Bullough and Martha Voght argue, the meaning of “onanism” expanded to encompass “almost all forms of sexual activity not resulting in pregnancy” during this time period (145). Thus, the implicit link that Rosenberg and Greven found between deep cultural anxieties about non-procreative sexuality and a growing concern over masturbation becomes explicit in Bullough and Voght’s revisions of onanism’s scope. Even when the term did refer to what nineteenth-century medical writers would have thought of as female masturbation, the practices described would today be seen as homosexual in nature. Drawing on a tradition begun by Samuel Tissot in his eighteenth-century treatise on onanism, female masturbation was often defined not as a solitary practice, but as a mutual one. Tissot links
a predisposition to female masturbation with a woman’s possession of “the souillure clitoridienne [elongated clitoris] the origin of which must be ascribed to the second Sappho” (30). In addition to causing “the phenomenon [of masturbation], and the hateful abuse of it, the evil,” an elongated clitoris, Tissot argues, also prompted “some of these imperfect females [to] have attempted to perform the functions of the male” and predisposed them to “love others of their sex with as much ardor as the most passionate men” (30-31). The physical symptoms used to diagnose masturbating women—especially young women—are present in the text’s factory girls as well, suggesting another possible linkage between their unnatural relationships to labor and to sexuality. George Capron and David B. Slack, in their popular mid-nineteenth-century treatise, *New England Popular Medicine*, describe the symptoms of women’s “inordinate lust,” their term for masturbation, as: “sadness of the countenance, a pale complexion, lascivious looks and gestures, and a want of the spirit in the motions of the body” (324). Within *The Factory Girl*, Mary’s first impression of the factory workers is that the labor must be unhealthy, for “a great many of them look pale and not well at all” (33-34). When returning from the “violent and protracted dances as occur at Balls” (50), the young women are described as languorous, “sleepy and tired,” suffering the “physical effects of ball-rooms” (56-57). Although the balls are seen as spaces of deviant heterosexuality, much like working-class women were thought of as excessively heterosexual, the language used to describe their effect is reminiscent of the symptoms thought to result from a form of non-reproductive sexual perversion that excludes men. While the physical manifestations described by Mary might also result from the factory girls’ exhaustion after hours of labor, the fact that they continue to experience these symptoms on their days off, coupled with the
nineteenth-century linkage between laboring women and improperly sexual women, suggests the appropriateness of reading the shared symptoms as a product of more than mere coincidence.

Additionally, the factory as a location and the types of relationships it houses fall under the description Tissot provides of situations that might foster the practice of female masturbation—most notably, all-female spaces and interactions between “young pupils” and tutors or domestics (30). Tissot’s belief is echoed in the writings of nineteenth-century American “sexual health reformers such as Sylvester Graham and Mary Gove Nichols,” who, Greven explains, “believed that it was precisely homosocial proximity that led to vice. Children who onanistically polluted themselves tutored other children in onanism, a sexual pedagogy that led to the ‘unnatural commerce’ of same-gender sex” (100). This language of contagion echoes the discussion of “didactic voyeurism” from Chapter 1 and works within the larger paradigm of queer cultural reproduction through circuits of literary production and consumption that I will draw back to in the conclusion. The female homosocial spaces Tissot cautions against—especially ones with tutelary relationships between working-class women and their charges—recall the nineteenth-century sex-segregated factory. Although moral reformers often focused on the potential cross-class sexual education that could result from tutors and servants polluting the imaginations of their upper-class charges, the mentions of boarding schools and other homosocial spaces in the literature cast suspicion on the nineteenth-century factories and dormitories not only for the heterosexual impropriety that might occur away from the watchful eye of the nuclear family, but also for the unnatural same-sex tutelage that might be fostered there.
Despite the associations between deviance and working-class life, throughout *The Factory Girl* Mary and Elizabeth’s relationship often reads like a typical romantic friendship; they bond quickly and intensely, and the narrator invokes common rhetorical tropes used by female friends to describe their relationship. The hostess with whom Mary stays on her arrival in the factory town introduces her to Elizabeth, “a good girl” who might help her find work and board (26). Following Elizabeth through her daily routine, Mary asks her numerous questions about her life and work in the factory and, the narrator emphasizes through repetition, *watches* her as she works and goes about her day. Before the morning is over, Elizabeth is already described as “beginning to like” Mary, for “congenial hearts feel each other’s presence soon,” and she quickly assumes a caretaking role over Mary, anticipating her needs and assuring Mary that she will “call on” her after work (26). The hostess is overjoyed to hear that the two girls have bonded already, assuring Mary that Elizabeth’s “associations will be pleasant and shielding” against the influence of the “wild ones,” to which Mary replies after a moment of hesitation, “I always like good girls, and I know I shall love to go with Elizabeth; she is so pleasant and kind” (26-27). It is soon revealed that Mrs. A, who runs a boarding house for the factory girls, has determined that Mary “might occupy the same room with Elizabeth; which was equally pleasing to the two girls as their sympathies were already warm and interchanged” (27). Within days, Mary grows quite attached to Elizabeth both for her friendship and for the assistance she provides in the transition away from home and into factory life. Her emotions vacillate wildly in her first days of work, depending almost exclusively on whether she is near Elizabeth. Left alone, she laments, Elizabeth “is out now, and every thing has gone worse since her absence. No one cares for me” (32); yet
when Elizabeth returns she exclaims, “Isn’t she the best girl there is here?” and admits, “I don’t know what I should have done, had it not been for Elizabeth” (34). Although the narrator continues to describe the women as “not intimate friends” and “strangers” during the early period of their relationship, she also recognizes how their time together “invigorate[s] the toilworn body or refresh[es] the care-pressed spirit,” and comments on how they cloister themselves in their room, “shut from the world, within an atmosphere of friendship and purity,” suggesting a closer bond than her commentary has yet admitted (36).

By the end of Mary’s first week at the factory, the two women have grown even closer, united through a shared experience of familial duty and religious piety—though, I will argue, the embodied nature of their religious bond undermines its supposedly pure quality. Comparing Elizabeth to her mother—a common trope in the discourse of romantic friendship, in which a woman sometimes “found a replica of her beloved mother in an intimate friend” (Vicinus 110)—Mary seeks Elizabeth’s approval and looks to her for guidance (42). She also praises Elizabeth in her letters home, writing to her mother: “I have such a good girl to room with; her name is Elizabeth. O, I do like her so much; she helped me when I came down….I wish you could see her; you must love her she is so kind to me” (43-44). The two women also share in a perfect union of sentiment, another common characteristic ascribed to romantic friends; as they read a letter together, “Elizabeth rejoiced with [Mary], and shared her sad feelings; and thus her joy was doubled and sorrow halved” (46). In Mary’s letters and her thoughts, she compares her feelings for Elizabeth to her feelings for the other factory girls, always concluding that Elizabeth was “the dearest” to her, even after she begins to wonder about the “wild” girls
she had originally avoided (47). Looking in on the two women tucked away in their bedroom, the narrator writes, “[T]he congenial hearts of Mary and Elizabeth found bliss in drawing from the sacred Fountain and in converse—the union of pure and loving spirits will make Paradise” (41). The sensual—even erotic—language used here to describe their union, which is located in their private room and removed from the prying eyes of those around them, suggests an increasingly important bond between the two that falls into the category of sexual relationships, as opposed to socially condoned female friendship, as defined by Marcus. She explains:

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. (54)

Even in the early stages of their relationship, the language used by Mary, Elizabeth, and the narrator casts the two women’s relationship in terms of the intimate bond Marcus identifies.

Quite often, Mary’s attraction to Elizabeth is described as her attraction to the other woman’s Christianity—they pray together, attend Bible school nightly, and help one another observe the Sabbath—but the language of piety masks the more complex emotions that draw Mary to Elizabeth. While religion does provide the basis for scenes of open dialogue and emotional vulnerability, it also creates a space for a more generalized sense of intimacy between the two women that quickly exceeds the confines of Christian
devotion. Notable scholars of nineteenth-century romantic friendship—namely, Marcus and Vicinus—have identified the significant role religion played in facilitating and, for Vicinus, masking the love shared between women. According to Marcus, the “delight in spiritual communion with a female friend” mutes the “profane” elements of a woman’s “frank enjoyment in looking pretty women up and down,” while still allowing for spaces of female intimacy and celebrating an appreciation of feminine virtue (62). At one point, Marcus admits that 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” (63; emphasis mine). Despite her recognition of the significant eroticism and the physicality of women’s relationships—even those grounded in love of God—just two pages later Marcus abandons half of her argument, shifting to a view of women’s religiously-grounded friendships as a “model of how to love from afar” without the “primal body contact” that characterized spousal relationships (64-65). Not only do these comments read as incongruent with the very evidence Marcus herself cites to make her initial claims, but they also assume a twenty-first-century understanding of religion’s relationship to the body, ignoring descriptions of what Coviello calls “embodied devotional experience” and the physicality of faith found in nineteenth-century American writings (105). In a passage that vacillates between claims of the physical eroticism or the chaste spirituality of these women’s relationships, Marcus argues that the “eroticism of such accounts was all the stronger for being unconscious, unself-conscious, and inseparable from genuine religious feeling” (64). While the women she studies may not have been self-conscious in their diaries and letters, the examples she cites in which women write of their experiences of joint prayer with language “borrowed from
narratives of seduction” to describe the passionate erotic triangles created between the two women and God undermine the idea that the eroticism was unconscious (63). The fact that these women could and did recognize the intimacy they enjoyed with their female friends as rivaling the deep affective bond they felt for God makes visible their awareness of the strength of their ties to other women and the potentially subversive role these ties could take in interfering with their proper spiritual devotion.

Unlike Marcus, Vicinus recognizes the possibility that religion and religious language might have been less genuine, functioning as a cover to justify women’s potentially unacceptable love for other women. Given that one of the larger projects in Vicinus’ work is studying the “enormously inventive language, spoken and bodily,” that women created “for their own desires” in the period before 1928 and the introduction of sexology’s “elaborate terminology,” her refusal to accept all statements of religious devotion between women at face value is only natural (xxiv-xxv). She writes, “Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century women used the language of religious love to explain their passionately erotic and spiritual feelings….A spiritual language could both conceal and reveal, providing an acceptable public face, while allowing lovers to speak a private code to each other” (87). Although the elements of the relationship that needed to remain hidden only sometimes involved “carnal affections,” the women nonetheless found within their “inchoate feelings” a spark of intimacy that required cover—a spark akin to the ambiguous but undoubtedly erotic spaces of lesbian potential I identify in the other texts I analyze in this project (87). Vicinus focuses here on the example of Mary Sidgwick Benson, the unhappy wife of Edward Benson, an Anglican clergymen who became the Archbishop of Canterbury during their marriage. For Benson, a loveless
marriage to a controlling clergyman drew her far from her faith, while a “woman’s supportive love taught her to know God’s love” (93). Whereas she remembers her honeymoon with Edward Benson with distaste, writing, “The nights! I can’t think how I lived,” she describes falling in love with a woman, the first in a series of significant relationships with other women, in a much different tone: “Then I began to love Miss Hall—no wrong surely there—it was a complete fascination….I have learned the consecration of friendship—gradually the bonds drew round—fascination possessed me…then—the other fault—Thou knowest—I will not even write it—but, O god, forgive—how near we were to that!” (qtd. in Vicinus 90). From this experience of closeness to God—she speaks of Miss Hall as a blessing, perhaps a sign sent by God to revive her dwindling faith—Benson “evolved from an unhappy wife to a powerful mother-confessor” who “forged a deeply intuitive spirituality that drew women to her” (Vicinus 88). Although Benson viewed “religion and erotic love for women” as “inextricably twined cords” in her life, she also struggled to reconcile her Christian faith with the extent of her sexual desires for other women (qtd. in Vicinus 88). Where kissing, touching, and holding another woman might be offered up to God as a form of spirituality and devotion—two women “fused together—united into that spiritual union which is both human & divine”—she drew a line of acceptability for herself, asking in one of her recorded prayers: “Once more, & with shame O Lord grant that all carnal affections may die in me….Lord look down on Lucy [Tait] and me, and bring to pass the union we have both so entirely & so blindly, each in our own region of mistake, continually desired” (qtd. in Vicinus 94-95). While Benson may have been somewhat unique in her forthrightness—her later diary entries on her relationships with Tait and Tan Mylne speak
more directly to her desiring impulses, or what she calls “a fierceness, a tingling…the restless desire” (qtd. in Vicinus 96)—the overlap between love of God and love of woman was an experience shared by many nineteenth-century women.

The narratives Marcus and Vicinus recount help to elucidate the queer elements in Mary’s religiously-oriented relationship with Elizabeth in *The Factory Girl*. In one of their earliest scenes of intimacy, the women come together in a moment of prayer. The narrator sets the scene: “It is half past nine; Mary and Elizabeth are in their room, sitting in thoughtful silence. Elizabeth seemed to be struggling with opposing feelings” (27). After a time, she calms and smiles at Mary, taking “a small Bible, with a silver clasp from her drawer, and [saying] as follows: ‘My dear Mary, you are mostly a stranger to me, and I was hesitating between self-pride and duty, or what you would think of me and a sacred obligation’” (27). Eventually Elizabeth confesses that she has “never omitted the promise made [to her] dear mother” before her death, and she tells Mary, “[T]o-night I cannot lie down to rest in peace, till I have redeemed my pledge, as well as done my duty. I must read in this precious Bible, and I love to read” (29). Mary, who has also promised her mother that she will continue to be pious, “could not refrain from getting her Bible,” a parting gift from her mother, “and telling Elizabeth her story. And then they read together….Night beholds such pleasant and hopeful scenes rarely” (29). Although this scene appears, at least on the surface, quite innocent, as the two women join together in upholding their religious and filial duties, Elizabeth’s confession creates a space for intimacy and the sharing of memories of their beloved mothers. This practice also forges a new ritual that will leave the women alone together each night, cloistered away behind closed doors in their bedroom. This scene closely mirrors a historical anecdote Marcus
recounts about Rebekah Taylor, a bible-class teacher, who writes of the “passionate triangle she formed with another woman,” Miss D—, and Jesus (63). Marcus describes Taylor’s 1878 letter: “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” (63). In both instances, the “passionate disclosures” lead to scenes of ecstatic intimacy often rife with sapphic signifiers.

Furthermore, the narrator goes on to reveal that Mary’s performance of religious piety is inspired less by preexisting religious devotion than by Mary’s attraction to Elizabeth and desire to spend more time with the older woman. This dynamic was common in the nineteenth century, during which time an older woman, especially a teacher, might inspire Christian devotion in her young charges by first inspiring in them an attraction to her physical beauty (Marcus 62-63)—a model that mirrors Kent’s arguments about how a young girl’s desire to be a non-familial older woman (here, a pious Christian woman) intermingles dangerously with her desire to have that woman, potentially promoting queer attachments even in the most normalizing of subject-forming processes. For an example of this type of relationship Marcus cites the writings of Caroline Head, whose spiritual awakening is facilitated through her physical attraction to her teachers, especially Miss O., with whom she remains dear friends for life. Head writes to her aunt, “‘Dear Miss O. gets more lovely every term, I am so fond of her!’” and one of her school friends recalls a similar experience in which “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’” (qtd. in Marcus 62-63). Similarly, in The Factory Girl, describing these two “tenderly united
spirits” enjoying “a season of communion with the Holy Scriptures and with God,” the narrator explains that Mary, “although herself unacquainted with the joy of piety: yet her own heart beating so near the christian [sic] heart of Elizabeth caught a little of its spiritual bliss and melody” (36). In a clear illustration of what Kent calls “the instabilities between conversion and perversion” (13), this passage reveals that what draws Mary to Christianity is Elizabeth, rather than the more acceptable logic that Mary uses when talking about Elizabeth to her mother, in which she was drawn to the other woman because Elizabeth was such a devout Christian. Instead, the narrator here invokes the language of contagion—as she has with the factory and will again with the temptations that Sarah represents—suggesting a queer desire drawing Mary toward various women as the shared impulse that leads her to the factory, to Christianity, to the balls, and back to Christianity once more.

This embodied Christianity reintroduces the “profane” physicality that Marcus argues female friendship removes, for it is in looking at and drawing near to Elizabeth that Mary secondarily finds spiritual communion with God. When Elizabeth invites Mary to Bible class, she does not go because her mother and her pastor have instructed her to do so; rather, she attends because she “could not refuse Elizabeth’s request” (41). Their nightly prayer—already an intimate experience confined to the bedroom space—is often described with suggestive imagery that amplifies the scene’s queer undertones. Their prayers begin at twilight, a time frequently associated with same-sex desire and clandestine encounters, as “the rays of day and night were struggling each for the
mastery” (33). Describing one scene of joint prayer, the narrator writes, “[F]ree from the day’s toil the hearts of the two girls mingled together in the fragrance and joy of summer” (38). This union—a term whose significance is amplified and extended into a sacred ritual resembling marriage upon Mary and Elizabeth’s reunion—leaves the women spent and searching for the “bed of repose” (38), despite the comments Mary made before their “invigorat[ing]” prayer (36) about feeling so much more alert and energetic after work now that she has come to understand the mechanics of the labor. The evocative imagery used to describe the joint prayer and its effects on the women reveals the similarities they share with the nineteenth-century women whose same-sex love operated through eroticized religious experiences.

The narrator’s descriptions of the pair only intensify when Sarah, one of the “wild girls” Mary has been warned about, intervenes in Mary and Elizabeth’s relationship, creating a queer erotic triangle that places Mary’s loyalty to Elizabeth and her newfound desires into conflict. Elizabeth’s speeches strike a tone of passion and jealousy as she fights for the exclusivity of her relationship with Mary. The plot structure the text assumes here—a tale in which an innocent young woman (Mary), far from the guidance of her Christian mother, falls for the temptations of a charismatic rake (Sarah), who puts her life and her purity in danger, until she is finally redeemed in what appears to be a deathbed scene through the actions of a noble companion (Elizabeth)—mimics that of the novel of seduction. These parallels, in highlighting the eroticism lurking beneath these women’s conflicts, reveal the potentially subversive nature of their friendships and

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simultaneously queer the genre of the novel of seduction by replacing the male-female-male erotic triangle with an all-female one and allowing Mary to survive and ecstatically rejoice in her reunion with Elizabeth—at least for a few weeks.

From the start of the text, queer revisions of the novel of seduction abound, as Mary is lured away from home by the sight of two beautiful young women—a fantasy that infects her with “factory fever”—and is then drawn into the factory dorms and away to the balls by pretty factory girls. Yet these alluring images are not ones that Mary’s mother has prepared her to resist, guided as she has been under the assumption that Mary’s tempters will be male. Before Mary’s departure, her mother cautions, “You soon leave the home-circle for the first time—stepping without the paths and associations of home-friends—going beyond the watchful eye of a mother who tenderly loves you” (13). She recognizes the danger of Mary’s being “enticed to places of music and merriment,” though she, like Stansell, assumes the allure will be the possibility of heterosexual mingling (14). Similarly, just as the factory girl “appeared in urban journalism and reform literature…in connection…with the problems of sexual immorality and prostitution” (Stansell 125)—both of which were tied to heterosexual threats like pregnancy and single motherhood—Mary’s mother warns Mary of the possibility of being “betrayed and ruined”—language typically associated with the figure of the fallen woman—and reminds her of the factory girls who have “perished like the serpent-charmed dove,” left in “disgrace and painful seclusion” (13-14). She and the pastor instruct Mary to choose her companions carefully, invoking the signs of religion and nature as guides for Mary to follow if she wishes to avoid perdition. Yet where the authority figures in the text warn of the corrupting influence of certain “vicious” female
associates who might lead her to dangerous mixed-gender spaces, they assure Mary that Christian companions will serve as buttresses against what they, like most nineteenth-century moral reformers, assume must be purely heterosexual temptations.

Once inside the factory, Mary appears safe under Elizabeth’s “shielding” influence until the introduction of a dangerous female rival, Sarah, who seduces Mary with talk of well-deserved pleasures and whose charm proves too alluring for Mary to resist, despite Elizabeth’s warnings. Sarah, who works next to Mary at the looms, approaches her one morning to tell her about the balls and inquire about her ties to Elizabeth. Sarah contrasts Elizabeth, who she describes as “too dull; too old-womanish, somehow,” and her own “good, lively acquaintances,” with whom she has “some grand times” (39-40). While Sarah’s friends “make it pleasant,” she warns that Elizabeth will “deprive [Mary] of a great deal,” and offers, “Come out with us if you want some good times. We must have amusement, or we should all die” (39-40). From the start, the relationship between Sarah and Elizabeth is described in antagonistic terms, with the two women vying for Mary’s exclusive loyalty. Although Mary is initially uncertain, Sarah has planted the seeds of discord between her and Elizabeth. She invites Mary to “[c]all over to [her] looms some time,” for she has much to tell her, and Mary is left with “new thoughts…. [T]he word pleasure made enchantment, and awakened desire in Mary’s heart” (40). The language of desire and pleasure reoccur whenever Mary thinks of Sarah. Although the object of desire is technically the ball, Mary is enchanted with Sarah herself as the embodiment of all the pleasures dance halls might hold, just as it was Elizabeth who drew her to Christianity.
Not only does Mary return frequently to Sarah’s suggestions, which haunt her imagination at night and even during Bible school, much like the promise of the factory had at home, but she also begins to repeat certain phrases that Sarah has used as if she has once more “caught” a fever transmitted through looking at and spending time with beautiful young women. Most obvious here are the phrases: “Profit and pleasure” (7), which appears often but shifts meanings depending on its context, and “[W]e girls should enjoy ourselves the best way we can; we have it hard enough any way” (39). Interestingly, Mary herself first voices a version of the latter phrase when explaining her reasons for wanting to go to the factory to her mother: “I think ’s strange I can’t have things like other girls—I work hard enough” (10). The notion of deserving pleasure for working “hard enough” connects, as seen in the “profit and pleasure” phrase, to an ideology of excess profit promoted by industrial capitalism and often still deemed unnatural in the mid-nineteenth century. As Kent argues, the work done by queerly coded spinsters, unlike the labor of properly reproductive bourgeois white women, “is often represented [in nineteenth-century literature] as, at best, a ridiculous, excessive copy of such endeavors, or a cheapened, commodified version of it (something spinsters do for money, as opposed to love and selfless dedication)” (23-24; emphasis mine). Once Sarah utters the phrase linking factory girls’ hard work to their right to pleasure, it appears to attach metonymically to her and everything she represents. When Mary attempts to defend her desire to go to the balls to Elizabeth, she argues, “[W]e factory girls ought to have some privileges. I think we have it hard enough” (48). Elizabeth recognizes this rhetoric as Sarah’s, referring to the ideas as a “contagious disease” and warning Mary of what might happen to her character if she continues to associate with Sarah and her
friends (48). At this point in the narrative, the rivalry between Sarah and Elizabeth is made visible outside of Mary’s own deliberations. Although the text seems to be staging a moral battle between the pleasures of the balls and the duties of Christianity, the women who voice these ideas are not mere representatives of two competing ideologies, but rather, the main attraction in a battle whose ideological underpinnings are always already secondary to the women’s relationships.

Ultimately, Mary submits to Sarah’s wishes—a choice that introduces suspicion, deceit, and betrayal into her relationship with Elizabeth. As Sarah pleads more and more ardently for Mary to accompany her to the dance hall, her promises becomes increasingly suspect as the narrator thrusts her into the role of the seducer. The narrator recounts scenes in which Sarah borrows money for a dress, which she will never repay, and promises Mary that she is being deprived of real joys by not frequenting the dance halls, “evinc[ing] something more at heart than Mary’s welfare” (51). The request that ultimately sways Mary’s heart is based not on the fun she might have at the ball, but on the pleasure her going will induce in Sarah. Sarah pleads, “Come do, just this once to please me. You have nice clothes, and such beautiful hair—you will appear so well. I wish I was half as handsome, I guess I should attract some notice among the—well no matter who. You’ll go wont you? […] Say you’ll go, wont you?” (52). Here the possibility of attracting notice from an unnamed party—presumably the men whose aesthetic preferences Elizabeth suggests might match her own (49)—remains insignificant compared to the women’s pleasures in looking at and being with each other. Once Mary has decided to go to the ball just this once, against the warnings of Elizabeth and her mother, an element of deceit disrupts her relationship with Elizabeth. Mary is at
first “troubled,” asking, “[W]hat will Elizabeth say? how shall I go against her wish?” (52). Elizabeth in turn grows suspicious, noting the changes in their dynamic as Mary “shunned her, and [was] silent more than usual for a day or two” (53). Finally, during a confrontation Mary admits that she is going to the ball, and Elizabeth tearfully pleads her case one last time. The narrator describes the scene: “‘How could you do so and not let me know it?’ said Elizabeth in a sad and almost hopeless, yet tender tone. ‘Have I not always been your best friend? I wish you the most happiness, Mary, all through life, and therefore would not have had you gone once’” (53-54). Although Elizabeth’s initial arguments to Mary and the other factory girls were grounded firmly in morality and Christian duty, she reveals in the end that she views Mary’s decision as a betrayal of their personal relationship—Mary has chosen another woman over her. At last, Elizabeth warns Mary: “I have plead a mother’s love and solicitude, the fatal result likely to follow, and the truest and prayerful advice of friendship—what more can I say? Would my affections were wound so firmly round thee as would retain thee in the place of safety!” (54). Although Elizabeth’s speech emphasizes, as the narrator and Mary have done throughout this scene, her conflation with Mary’s mother, the particular type of “affections” she has shown for the younger woman exceed those properly ascribed to mother and daughter. Even though, as Kent argues, the “familial relationships between mothers and daughters…are at times openly eroticized in nineteenth-century sentimental culture” (5), Elizabeth and Mary’s relationship seems to contain but also surpass the eroticized familial relationship between mothers and daughters. Where earlier in the text, Elizabeth does comfortably fill a maternal role in mentoring Mary in factory labor, by this point in their relationship, Elizabeth’s plea so incites her passions that she finds
herself “too much overcome” by emotion and must leave their bedroom—a scene that will be repeated numerous times as Elizabeth grieves the loss of her relationship with Mary (54). Elizabeth’s speech in this scene makes visible the erotic valences that undergird her maternal care for Mary, allowing the reader to recognize Mary’s choice of Sarah as a betrayal not only of her mother’s warnings, but more importantly, of her romantic relationship with Elizabeth.

Reacting to the loss of her relationship with Mary, the grieving Elizabeth uses language that evinces more than platonic feelings. On the night of the ball, Elizabeth attempts to console her “aching heart” with scripture, but even after hours of reading, she still “felt bereaved and sad like a lonely dove mourning for its gentle mate, and nought but the hope of return could satisfy” (55). The language of coupling used here is striking, given the romantic, typically heterosexual, resonances implied in the image of the partnered dove, who mates for life. Where Cady argues for an understanding of silence as a marker for non-heterosexual eroticism or affection between women in working-class texts, given the intense scrutiny under which classed others labored, The Factory Girl stands out as a text that speaks frequently and effusively of the love between two women, though the language is often metaphorical. Later, Elizabeth speaks openly of her “alienation” from Mary: “[S]he felt, she knew that Mary’s heart was distancing and growing cold. She had anticipated it in time, for the sympathies and affections of friends must commingle without reserve or fear, to make them one; but she was not prepared for the sudden change…and the tear of love guarded her closed eyes as she slept” (58; emphasis mine). The narrator’s willingness to allow Elizabeth to speak of Mary and herself as an implicitly monogamous, loving couple who are united in an image of
marriage, even as the language is of “friendship,” stands against what Rachel Hope Cleves identifies as the norm in factory settings. In an article on the prehistory of same-sex marriages, Cleves considers the example of “manless weddings,” which were often staged at college commencements, as a phenomenon that “could be both alluring and dangerous” for those women whose relationship also “had an erotic dimension” (1076). She notes that in the late nineteenth-century, workingwomen too “staged mock marriage ceremonies in the boarding houses,” though less frequently, since they “had less protection from sexual innuendo than their [wealthy] collegiate counterparts” and were subjected to increased scrutiny during a time in which “social conservatives…linked women’s increasing [economic] power to the specter of lesbianism” (1076). Although Cleves admits that some of the ceremonies “may have symbolized committed affective bonds between the women,” she argues that workingwomen “found greater need to perform the ‘strangeness’ of manless weddings” by adding parodic elements to the ceremony—most notably at the Eleanor Club boardinghouses, through the cast addition of a “recently escaped inmate of an insane asylum’ who tried to disrupt the ceremony” (1076). The seriousness with which Mary and Elizabeth’s relationships is treated in The Factory Girl—a tone that will continue through the women’s loving reunion—sets the text apart as one of the few preserved examples of an extensive consideration of love between working-class women staged without parody or satire.

As Elizabeth mourns the loss of Mary as her constant companion, Mary too feels herself alienated from Elizabeth and the activities they once shared. The narrator describes Mary’s return home from the ball: “It was three o’clock when Mary crept softly to her own room, and she felt estranged as she would gladly have laid her repentant head
upon sleeping Elizabeth’s placid bosom” (56). The image of Mary “creeping” back into her room, coupled with descriptions of her “guilty conscience,” which keep her awake at night, haunting her with “condemning” visions of “Elizabeth’s spurned and pleading form,” casts Mary as the philandering wife, while Elizabeth is made into a cuckolded spouse (56). The narrator writes of the week after the ball, “They worked in the same room, but there was a girl who worked between them” (58). This image makes visible the erotic triangle so common to novels of seduction, even as it queers the trope by replacing the traditionally male-female-male triangle with an all-female one. Mary finds herself unable to attend religious services, read the Bible, or even kneel in prayer, for she understands that now her “heart and life were with Sarah” (61). Watching Mary’s retreat from the church and from her company, Elizabeth knows she “could not give her up” (65) and prays to God for Mary’s salvation, “hoping ever” for her companion’s return (61). Although Elizabeth uses the language of salvation in her nightly prayers, upon Mary’s return, her plea for “reformation” becomes a joy in “reunion”—and a reunion not only with God and spirituality, but more importantly, with Elizabeth (61).

As in most novels of seduction, Mary’s reformation can only be achieved through an experience that brings her into contact with death, though in *The Factory Girl*, the narrator reworks this trope, allowing Mary to survive and to reconnect with Elizabeth in an ecstatic moment. Just days after one of the other factory girls dies suddenly at the dance hall, Mary returns to the balls, too seduced by the pleasures of being “*the* beautiful of the beauteous” to recognize the first woman’s death as a warning (66). Early in the evening, “a strange feeling suddenly steals over [Mary]—she pauses—her heart flutters unusually—all things whirl about her” (66). As she falls, she cries out: “Am I dying?
save me! […] I cannot die, where’s Elizabeth, mother,” before sinking into a state “pale and still as death” (66). While Mary may have felt her “heart and life” to be only with Sarah now, in what she believes are her final moments it is Elizabeth for whom she cries out; it is Elizabeth who supersedes Mary’s mother as the beloved figure Mary wants most to see before dying. When she first wakes from her faint in a carriage, she is surrounded by her attendants, who she believes are “dark fiends” (66). Yet again, Elizabeth is the first person she thinks of, asking, “Where am I? Am I dead? It’s dark—help me Elizabeth” (66). Finally, the narrator presents the women’s reunion:

> When Mary next opened her eyes, Elizabeth was bending over her, fanning and bathing her faint and fevered temples. And a smile of serenity overspread her countenance as she said: “Is it you, Elizabeth? O I am with you again. I am safe. How light it is? Is it heaven? I do not see those black creatures with a white dress…. How they tried to devour me—but you came between them and saved me.” (67)

Just as Mary was drawn to Christianity through her attraction to Elizabeth, so too does she view her salvation from death and damnation as a result of Elizabeth’s intervention, rather than God’s.

In the ecstatic moments of reunion, Mary and Elizabeth reconcile and join together once more, proclaiming their affection for one another in terms that read like wedding vows. The women rejoice in each other’s company, as Mary exclaims, “I am so glad you are with me,” and Elizabeth instructs her to “trust we can be happy yet” (67). While Mary rests, Elizabeth sits, “the gentle watcher, like a sleepless and guardian angel,” watching her “[f]air and lovely charge” slowly recover (67). In the morning,
while Elizabeth’s “own soul beats with new joy, the sympathetic soul of Mary catches the song, and she awakes. She has revived, and feels strong” (67). With Elizabeth, contagion becomes a healing influence, even as it retains its queer connotations, and Mary begs for her forgiveness, promising, “I won’t go again never with them. I’ll go with you, will you let me? O Elizabeth, will you forgive?” (68). Elizabeth declares all wrongs forgiven “freely,” and tells Mary, “I…most joyfully receive you to my heart. Let us be friends again, true and constant” (68). Mary agrees that they “can be dear friends again,” but despite the repetition of the word “friendship,” the ensuing conversation is rife with the rhetorical markers—references to “passion, exclusivity, idealization, complicity, private language, and mutual dependence”—Marcus identifies as signs of a relationship that goes beyond mere friendship. Mary declares, “‘Let us join right hands and hearts never more to be sundered.’ And her warm hand grasped that of Elizabeth who sealed the pledge upon her fair white forehead. All was now silent, while joy which is deep and still, reigned supreme” (68). She proposes, “Let us read together to-night, Elizabeth,” and later they “knelt together” in prayer, as their “nearness…unite[d] their hearts” (68-69).

Elizabeth thanks God for returning Mary to her, “and her long expected hope beamed full upon her heart—she was satisfied” (69). After reading and praying together, the “two happy ones soon slumbered side by side” (69). Taken together, these scenes read like a wedding narrative: the two women join hands, kneel, and pledge perpetual union to one another, then move to their bedroom to consummate their vows in shared reading—a practice already characterized with suggestive, erotic imagery earlier in the text—and finally, satisfied, fall asleep side-by-side. In the days following this scene, Mary begins to
return to religious services and Bible study with Elizabeth. The narrator describes their relationship:

Now their affections more sympathetically entwined, and their hearts were made entirely one, cemented by heavenly love. Religion purifies and intensifies the natural affections, and the ties of christian friends are dearer and more truthful. And if death take one away, their hearts are not sundered: their persons only are separated for a little season, to form a more perfect union in the society of the forever holy and happy. (70)

Once more, the language the narrator uses to describe Mary and Elizabeth’s union is reminiscent of Christian marriage vows, while the religious rhetoric appears to sanctify their queer union.

Ultimately, Mary leaves the factory and is shown, in the end, to have married a man and begun a family, following the accepted heterosexual trajectory, while Elizabeth, the narrator mentions, “has long [since] passed to her rest in heaven” (76); yet the language used to describe Mary’s marriage mimics the language used to describe her relationship with Elizabeth, who she continues to love, suggesting queer implications in the text’s seemingly “safe” conclusion. Even without what I see as reminders of queer attachments that refuse to disappear in the post-factory narrative, multiple scholars have argued that a conventional ending should be seen as a mask for the radical possibilities embedded within the text, rather than a return to normalcy that negates all that came before. While Cady argues that it is in silence that “sexualities made themselves felt in the *Offering* that cannot fit the productive heterosexist ideology that categorizes and hierarchizes (re)productive versus unproductive sexual behavior” (39), Susan Harris
argues that the “overplot” of mid-nineteenth-century women’s sentimental novels “functions to disguise multiple hermeneutic possibilities,” which were available to “different groups of readers” (13)—a position that recalls Palumbo-DeSimone’s contention that to understand nineteenth-century women’s short stories, modern readers must attempt to recognize the importance of that which would be understood by the story’s original readers without ever being said. While Cady’s silences or Palumbo-DeSimone’s “unsaid” might have characterized the narrator’s non-description of Mary and Elizabeth’s time alone in their bedroom, Harris’ argument for a “Janus-face[d]” text and reader better helps to make sense of The Factory Girl’s return to a highly conventional ending (19). Harris argues that even as these “writings show an intense, almost paranoid awareness of the needs, and censures, of ‘the public,’” the writers and readers are “equally intensely aware of other possibilities for female protagonists than the ones they publicly espouse” (19). This awareness of the public’s scrutiny—an awareness that was only heightened for working-class women—recalls what I referred to earlier as a scene of Elizabeth’s rhetorical self-policing, in which she espouses her own theory of what she looks for in a woman before adding that many men must also feel the same way. Thus, the ending of The Factory Girl would seem to assure readers that Mary has abandoned her ties to Elizabeth and the factory, affirming, “Yes, this is Mary, no longer the factory girl, but forever parted with [the] noise and toil” that signify the capitalist space of profit-driven work, as opposed to the feminized labor of the domestic sphere (74). She has moved to a “cottage,” found on a hill “far in the interior of New-Hampshire”—a location that recalls Mary’s hometown and the type of God-ordained labor practiced there—where she lives happily with her husband and children (76).
Yet in this scene of heterofamilial bliss, certain details unsettle the closure it seeks to provide. Mary explains that she and her unnamed husband “are help meets for each other,” abandoning the notion of “heaven-made matches” in favor of their “mutual and increasing love” (76), while her relationship with Elizabeth, who is granted the specificity of a name, contains suggestions of fate and soulmates, as the two women find themselves drawn to each other almost immediately, their “congenial hearts feel[ing] each other’s presence” (26). Even in the highest praise given to Mary’s relationship with her husband—the narrator’s explanation that she has “often visited the family of Mary—I love to—there is joy in that home—the altar of prayer is there, and the atmosphere balmy with kindness and true affection” (76)—the words used to elevate their marriage are the same the narrator used to describe Mary’s union with Elizabeth. The two women also unite in “joy,” which flows freely between them from their first meeting, to their happy reunion (36, 67, 68); scenes of joint prayer sanctify the women’s bond and allow them nights of private intimacy; and it is through their true affections that “their hearts were made entirely one” (70). Similarly, the narrator writes of how Mary’s “heart still cherishes pure gratitude and love for Elizabeth,” and she regularly “tells the story of Elizabeth” to honor the woman’s memory (74-75). Even at the text’s close, with Mary apparently settled in a life of heterosexual domesticity, markers of her ties to Elizabeth persist. Mary’s conservative final guidance on “the place to form character and gather knowledge for the duties of a wife and a mother” seems significantly less conservative—queer even—when the reader realizes it is an echo of Elizabeth’s earlier question to Mary: “Will knowing how to take a certain step give you knowledge to dispense light and joy through a household, or power to discharge the sacred duties of a mother?” (60). Just
as linguistic mimesis served as a marker for Mary’s shifting allegiances and increasing attraction to Sarah, so too might this moment of ideological transmission reveal that even within the traditional family setting, Mary’s queer attachment to Elizabeth has not faded.

The women’s relationship even impinges upon the supposedly sanctified realm of heterofuturity, as Mary’s oldest daughter, named Elizabeth, serves as a reminder of Mary and Elizabeth’s love. The narrator writes of how Mary “loves to take her [daughter] in her arms” and remind her that “she named her for [Elizabeth’s] sake, and hopes she will be as good when she becomes a woman” (75). Not only does the daughter function as a constant reminder of Mary’s beloved companion through her name, but she is also described as looking like a perfect “miniature” of Mary and learning to act like the deceased Elizabeth—a description that erases all traces of Mary’s husband while allowing the young Elizabeth to appear almost as a product of the two women’s love (74). Where Kent and Rohy saw nineteenth-century protolesbian identity as representing “a failure to mother,” “failures at both reproduction and production” (Kent 6), and a sexuality “not yoked to the Oedipal drama and the work of reproduction” (Rohy, Impossible Women 11), the young Elizabeth becomes a marker for the subversive ways women’s queer ties might infringe upon the future-oriented project of heterosexual marriage. Through Elizabeth’s ideological transmission—reflected in Mary’s linguistic mimesis and the young Elizabeth’s character-forming project—she returns as a queer specter, disrupting the clear structures of allegiance that “should” be found in the traditional family unit by creating one last queer erotic triangle that even death cannot resolve.
Coda: “I dwell in Possibility”: 
Alternative Temporalities in Emily Dickinson’s 1850s Poetry and Correspondence

It has become popular in scholarship on Emily Dickinson’s 1850s letters and poems not only to assert the primacy of her ties to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, but also to identify a rupture in their relationship during Susan Dickinson’s engagement and the early years of her marriage to Austin Dickinson. The scholarship on this period tends to focus on the cooler tone Emily Dickinson often strikes in her writing and to locate the space for the fulfillment of her desire for Susan Dickinson only in the eternity of death. I too identify a tone of anticipatory melancholy in Dickinson’s letters and poems to her sister-in-law—a mourning for what she sees as the inevitable sundering of their ties as Susan Dickinson’s marriage to Austin Dickinson and her commitments as a wife and a mother threaten to supersede her relationship with Emily Dickinson. However, I argue that the preserved correspondence of the pair reflects an alternative possibility as well—a possibility that falls outside of heterotemporality—satisfaction in a past that lingers in the present and in the future with a yet-to-be-known readership. I will begin by considering how Emily Dickinson and Susan Dickinson’s correspondence reflects an ongoing eroticized relationship to the past, often littered with memories of their time together and references to childhood or young adulthood. I argue that these ecstatic retellings create a space of potential that outlasts the tone of fear and anticipatory melancholy that characterizes their letters about heterosexual marriage and the breaking of same-sex ties. I conclude by thinking about these letters as emblematic of the thesis as a whole for the

way in which they engage with a yet-unknown audience, reaching across vast spatial and
temporal distances as they interpellate a queer audience into structures of generative
literary consumption.

Within Dickinson’s poetry and letters sent to Susan Dickinson, the theme of
mourning for a lost time of togetherness comingles with celebrations of the past and
alternative presents—couched in the conditional, yet no less real in their presence. In
particular, I focus here on the returns to childhood that figure prominently in Dickinson’s
letters to Susan Dickinson in the mid-1850s—the same time period of Austin Dickinson’s
courting of and eventual marriage to Susan Dickinson. I begin by looking at two letters
from June 1852—L93 and L94, both of which have been read side-by-side by Marietta
Messmer and Coviello—and pair them with a consideration of L173 (c. 1854) and F5
“One Sister have I in the House —” (1858)—both of which were composed after the
announcement of Susan Dickinson’s engagement and, in the case of F5, after the
wedding itself. In L93 Dickinson moves from discussing her joyful anticipation of Susan
Dickinson’s return after nearly a year apart—a joy that is, nonetheless, tinged with
melancholy for a day when their separation might be permanent—to recounting the tale
of an evening walk with Mattie during which they “whispered [their] childish fancies”
about “[t]hose unions, my dear Susie, by which two lives are one” (L93). She notes,
“You and I have been strangely silent upon this subject, Susie, we have often touched
upon it, and as quickly fled away, as children shut their eyes when the sun is too bright
for them” (L93). Messmer reads these mentions of childhood against marriage—
especially, accompanied as they are, by Dickinson’s admission that the thought “of each
’sunnyside’ where we have sat together, and lest there be no more, I guess is what makes
the tears come” (L93)—as proof of Dickinson’s increasingly desperate “desire to return to childhood…to prevent both herself and her addressees from growing up and becoming ‘women’” (88). Similarly, Coviello takes L93 as a “love letter of ‘childish fancies’” that “devolves into a mediation upon the ‘anguish’ to which any entanglement in the world of adult [hetero]sexual exchange seems poised to bring to Dickinson and her friend” (73). I want to focus, however, on two particular moments in the letter that have not received critical attention to think about how Dickinson leaves open space for the possibility of a union between herself and Susan Dickinson, even as she laments the possibility of an occasion that would take the other woman away from her forever.

In discussing the marriages of which she and Susan Dickinson “are not yet admitted,” Dickinson writes that this type of union, which “can fill the heart, and make it gang wildly beating, […] will take us one day, and make us all it’s own, and we shall not run away from it, but lie still and be happy!” (L93). I argue that Dickinson’s emphasized “us,” coupled with the “happ[iness]” she predicts such a union would bring, suggests an ambiguous voicing of the possibility that she and Susan Dickinson could be the “two lives” made one by “this sweet and strange adoption” (L93). Indeed, Dickinson continues later in the letter, in lines left unquoted by either Messmer or Coviello, to declare, “And now in four weeks more – you are mine, all mine, except I lend you a little occasionally to Hattie and Mattie, if they promise not to lose you, and to bring you back very soon” (L93). In F5 Dickinson repeats this possessive gesture: “One Sister have I in the House – / And one a hedge away. / There’s only one recorded – / But both belong to me” (l. 1-4; emphasis mine). Here, Dickinson’s language harkens back to the image she creates of marriage as a “sweet and strange adoption” in L93 by claiming Susan Dickinson as hers
in an unofficial, “chose[n]” capacity (l. 25). Although the language of sisterhood falls under the rubric of the “socially condoned” romantic friendships Smith-Rosenberg and Faderman describe, I would posit that the possessive language is key to understanding why Austin Dickinson demanded the text of this particular poem be “inked over,” the poem only surviving because “Sue had her own copy” that remained “intact” (Smith 20).

For even though Dickinson wrote and sent F5 after Susan Dickinson’s marriage, she continues to emphasize their togetherness, her choice of “Sue – forevermore!” (l. 27)—a moment of queer possibility that I argue is echoed in the descriptions of childhood and memory in L94 and of divergence and return in L173.

Within L94, sent a week after L93 and three weeks prior to Susan Dickinson’s return to Amherst, Dickinson speaks of how much she has missed her beloved friend and how eagerly she anticipates their reunion. She imagines, “That you and I in hand as we e’en do in heart, might ramble away as children, among the woods and fields, and forget these many years, and these sorrowing cares, and each become a child again” (L94)—lines that Coviello reads as proof of a “yearning for a return to what [Dickinson] marks as the grieflessness of childhood” (67). He focuses primarily, however, on the admission, “[W]hen I seek to say to you something not for the world, words fail me” (L94), and the way in which it suggests that whatever “Dickinson wishes to say to Gilbert, she implies, it will not be uttered in the world’s language. Nor will it be quite in the world’s time” (67). Asking, “Where can two women love one another? Where can two nineteenth-century American women be present to one another in the full breadth of their devotion, their need, and their ardor?” Coviello answers for Dickinson: the “eternity” of death and, while still on earth, “within the sustaining grief, the eccentric bereavement, of one for the
loss of another” (67, 71). Although I agree that Dickinson carves out a time apart from the normal bounds of heterotemporality, I argue that it is less a desire to return to the actual time of childhood or to live on only in “anticipated afflictedness” and the eternity of death (Coviello 71) than of a present shaped by and read through memories of a happier past. Dickinson continues in this letter:

I miss my biggest heart; my own goes wandering round, and calls for Susie—

Friends are too dear to sunder, Oh they are far too few, and how soon they will go away where you and I cannot find them, don’t let us forget these things, for their remembrance now will save us many an anguish when it is too late to love them!

(L94)

I would argue that these lines suggest an urgent attachment to the present—one that is filtered through and occupied by scenes of the past. Taking these instructions as a paradigm for future action, I contend that rather than the desire to join Susan Dickinson once more in the time after death—what Ellen Louise Hart has called the “territory beyond the grave, an eternity where [Dickinson] can locate and transform her lifelong love for Susan” (255)—Dickinson’s language in L94 suggests a fear of the belatedness of such a position. I argue that her calls for “remembrance now” create a new space of queer potential in the present through the revivification of the past by repeated recounting and reliving. Lest I run the risk of straying too close to phobic associations that “variously deem homosexuality a form of regression, a violation of narrative form, a case of arrested development, a threat to futurity, and a ‘bad copy’ of heterosexual love” (Rohy, “Ahistorical” 67), I should clarify that in speaking of the ways in which Dickinson’s present is run through with retellings of the past, I mean to suggest that she creates a
multiplicity of present times, rather than dwelling belatedly in the past, yearning only for a return to childhood or the grave. I think here of the paradigm of “timeliness’s motion” that José Esteban Muñoz articulates in Cruising Utopia: it is “a temporal unity, which includes the past (having-been), the future (the not-yet), and the present (the making-present)” (186). Dickinson’s own clarification of how she will spend the three weeks until Susan Dickinson’s return—“I shall grow more impatient until that dear day comes, for till now, I have only mourned for you; now I begin to hope for you” (L94)—issues a call for the type of imagined “now” I argue Dickinson hopes to achieve through writing and retelling. Unlike the melancholy tone that scholars including Coviello, Messmer, and Hart have focused on in this letter and L93, Dickinson positions hope as the logical successor of grief, suggesting that she has mourned not for a relationship that has been lost forever, but rather, for a type of intimacy that will return. In her “hope,” she seems to imagine what Muñoz calls the “queer time that is not yet here but nonetheless always potentially dawning” (187), positioning herself to claim the important time of a new “now” that is still in the process of becoming, a “now” that Dickinson, through remembrance and hope, will participate in creating.

A later letter to Susan Dickinson, L173, appears to fulfill Dickinson’s paradigm of shifting from mourning to hope—a hope she herself creates. This letter, written after the announcement of Austin and Susan Dickinson’s engagement, is frequently cited as proof of a serious falling out between the two women, given the opening line: “Sue – you can go or stay – There is but one alternative – We differ often lately, and this must be the last” (L173). Critics have disagreed, however, on the basis of this separation, with many attributing the fight to a difference of religious opinion (Hart and Smith 69), while others
note its proximity to the announcement of Susan Dickinson’s engagement and suggest jealousy as a potential cause (Farr 123-36). The text of the opening paragraphs certainly suggests an anticipated loss, as Dickinson remarks, “You need not fear to leave me lest I should be alone, for I often part with things I fancy I have loved, – sometimes to the grave, and sometimes to an oblivion rather bitterer than death” (L173). Dickinson positions herself as one that has “lived by this” type of intense love—“idolatry,” she calls it—and punishing loss (L173). Yet despite these experiences of loss and the anticipatory mourning they inspire, the last paragraph of the letter and the poem Dickinson includes with her note allow for a reading of Dickinson not just as someone who has “lived by” loss, but also as someone who has lived through loss and created hope and alternative paths in spite of it. In the final lines of prose, she writes, “We have walked very pleasantly – Perhaps this is the point at which our paths diverge – then pass on singing Sue, and up the distant hill I journey on” (L173). A similar image is later echoed in F5: “Today is far from childhood, / But up and down the hills, / I held her hand the tighter – / Which shortened all the miles –” (l. 13-16). Where Dickinson anticipates walking the hills alone in L173, she speaks of a moment of childlike joy in journeying together with Susan Dickinson once more in F5. Yet the play of tenses and temporalities in these lines makes it unclear whether the two women have joined together once more in the present of 1858 after the anticipated divergence of their paths in 1854 or if Dickinson is recounting a memory from their youth. For while she makes it clear that they are now “far from childhood,” she switches to a more ambiguous past tense with “held,” leaving the reader uncertain about the timing of the event. This uncertainty, however, opens the
possibility of this moment’s being in the time of the present shot through with the pleasures of the past I argue Dickinson creates through her writing.

In pointing to their distance from childhood in F5 and gesturing toward two separate paths in L173, Dickinson acknowledges the existence of the path she should be taking, the path of “straight time” that Susan Dickinson had already turned toward in marrying Austin Dickinson. Instead, Dickinson displays a willingness to forge alternative queer temporalities on her own—living in the “queer time” that Jack Halberstam argues allows its “participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (2). For even in the nineteenth century when society, to a certain extent, accepted women’s pledges of lifelong love and allegiance to one another, they still characterized those relationships as “rehearsal[s] in girlhood of the great drama of woman’s life” that “prefigure the closer relations which will one day come in and dissolve their earlier intimacies” (Faderman 170). Dickinson, however, not only rejects the linearity of straight time, composing letters that, Coviello argues, “collapse space, suture the temporalities of composition and reception, mingle presence and absence” (69), but also dares to imagine in the poem included with L173 a future—and not merely the future of death’s eternity, but a future of the living—in which Susan Dickinson returns to her once more. Unlike the language of the first half of the letter, which seems so sure of the impending loss of Susan Dickinson’s love, the lines of verse reflect a certainty of reunion. Although the “I” and the robin of the poem are neither named nor even gendered, the similarity of the situation—a coming departure and anticipated return—to that described in the first half of the letter allows for a reading of
the speaker as Dickinson herself and the robin as Susan Dickinson—a common assumption in critical analyses of the poem (Farr 125-26). The first stanza opens: “I have a Bird in spring / Which for myself doth sing – […] And as the summer nears – […] Robin is gone” (l. 1-6). “Yet,” the speaker immediately follows, “do I not repine / Knowing that Bird of mine / Though flown […] will return” (l. 7-12). In fact, the speaker asserts that the bird is spending time “beyond the sea” learning a “Melody new for me” (l. 10-11). The language of possession—similar to that used by Dickinson in L93 and F5 to describe her relationship with Susan Dickinson—is repeated throughout the verses, affirming the bird’s belonging to and singing only for the speaker. In the third and fourth stanzas, the speaker confronts her “doubting heart” (l. 17) and “Each little doubt and fear, / Each little discord here” (l. 22-23), only to declare them “Removed” (l. 24). The fifth and final stanza serves as a repetition with minor differences of the second stanza, changing the first line from, “Yet do I not repine,” to, “Then will I not repine” (l. 25), invoking the language of a reasoned conclusion now that she has assuaged her fears and dispelled her doubts about the bird’s fidelity to her. Although Judith Farr finds the reasoning for the speaker’s failure to “repine” to be that “the speaker cannot bear to concede her own pain” (126), I would argue that Dickinson here insists on the viability of alternative futures, of possibilities that see her reunited with Susan Dickinson in spite of her impending marriage, in spite of the logic of heterofuturity that would see their same-sex ties ultimately severed. The final line of the final stanza is also changed slightly from the second stanza; what once read, “And will return” (l. 12), now reads simply, “Return” (l. 30). Situated alone on a line—the only one-word line other than “Removed”—and falling directly above Dickinson’s signature, the “Return” stands out as both an
affirmation of Dickinson’s confidence in her relationship with Susan Dickinson and an implicit directive to the poem’s recipient—a request for her to return, to upend Dickinson’s expectation of loss voiced in the letter and dispel the doubts she proclaims “Removed” in the poem.

This reaching into the future extends beyond the bounds of Dickinson’s lifetime, however, as her letters and poems reach a modern audience and enjoy a form of queer cultural reproduction that Dickinson herself seems to anticipate when she declares, “Susie…in pen and ink – my heart kept on” (L 176). In identifying this queer generation across time, I borrow from Kent’s notion of “identificatory erotics,” but stretch it across the centuries, working in the model of “queer historiography” Dinshaw lays out, in which history is developed “through the concept of affective connection—a touch across time—and through the intentional collapse of conventional historical time,” as “multiple temporalities [mingle] in a single moment” (“Got Medieval?” 203, fn. 209). Scholarship on Dickinson has been rather vocal about the affective resonances of the reader’s relationship to the texts. After examining mid-nineteenth century poetry reviews to “reconstruct the platform of reader-writer relations” during the time in which Dickinson wrote, Willis J. Buckingham declares, “Dickinson…characteristically insists that the reader does not remain passive…author and reader establish a relation of exchange” (234). Specifically, he finds that the ideal relationship between writer and reader was “that of preceptor and enamored pupil” (236)—hinting at the queer “eroticized pedagogic relationships” Kent locates in nineteenth-century women’s relationships (169)—and defines “poetic experience” as “rapture,” the reception of power in the context of love” (237). Of course, for Buckingham and R. McClure Smith, this erotic reader-writer
relationship was always heterosexual—a fact R. Smith makes explicit in his engagement
only with “the male reader” (108). R. Smith characterizes Dickinson’s poetic voice as “a
language aware of its being regarded as an object of a specifically male critical desire”
(109), while the male reader is forced into “the often uncomfortable state of being a
desiring subject” whose desires are, more often than not, frustrated by the “linguistic
opacities” of Dickinson’s poetry (112). Identifying the collapse of the “appropriate
critical distance” between male critic and text, R. Smith cites a long line of critics who
have faced the same recurring problem: “falling in love with the poet”—from Archibald
MacLeish’s admission, “[M]ost of us are half in love with this dead girl,” to Robert
Hillyer’s 1922 observation of “the slow spreading of the Dickinson cult—‘year by year
knowledge of the secret spreads, as friend whispers to friend and confides the inimitable
poet to a new lover’” (qtd. in R. Smith 115-16). Even R. Smith himself is not immune to
the charm, recognizing “the temptation that Dickinson invariably offers to her male
critics—to become, momentarily, Master” (116). Suzanne Juhasz’s declaration that the
appropriate mode of reading Dickinson’s letters “is seduction, because Dickinson’s
letters are always love letters,” however, must give these male critics pause (“Reading”
171). For, despite the great efforts they have gone through to impose an enforced
heterosexualization of the reader-writer relationship, creating masculine subjects out of
ungendered “thee” and “you” addressees, the fact remains: both the intended mid-
nineteenth-century audience for many of these poems and letters and half of their
contemporary readers are female. What, then, to make of this relationship of intense
erotic desire, when both the seducer and the seduced are women?
This movement of same-sex seduction across time is precisely what interests me about not only Dickinson, but also the overarching project of this thesis—the affective “touch across time” enabled by the texts I analyze and the circuits of queer resonance and reproduction they inspire. The “contagion by example” of Martinette’s cross-dressing and the “didactic voyeurism” in *Ormond*; the “factory fever” caught through queer looking and the linguistic and ideological mimesis of eroticized pedagogical relationships in *The Factory Girl*; the revivification of remembrance in writing and the invitation to an alternative future that extends to not only the original recipient but to Dickinson’s future audiences—all of these moments offer a space of queer cultural reproduction both within the texts among the characters and beyond the texts among their readers. At the most basic level, these texts, insofar as they present visions of same-sex attachments outside of the logic of heteropatriarchal society, generate new possibilities for ways of living available to readers who recognize them. As Adrienne Rich notes in her 1976 essay, “‘It Is the Lesbian in Us…’": “In that library I came to believe—a child’s belief, but also a poet’s—that language, writing, those pages of print, could teach me how to live, could tell me *what was possible*” (200). Yet finding representations of queer lives and the possibilities they hold in the pages of literature can be a challenging task; as Bonnie Zimmerman notes, the search for a lesbian literature often “involves peering into shadows, into the spaces between words, into what has been unspoken and barely imagined” (460). Even with the promises of all the resources of the academy at our disposal, on the first day of “Introduction to Queer Theory,” we were reminded by our professor that this history of queer lives has often been one cloaked in secrecy, veiled in coded speech, silenced through censorship—that we were not to expect an easily defined
canon of the love that dared not speak its name. No, we were handed fragments of Sappho’s poetry, salvaged but incompletely restored. This, we understood, was our archive. At first, I found nothing more unsatisfying than the breaks in verse, the bracketed guesses at the ends of words, already conveyed only through translation. But as I circled back over the course of the semester to other works of literature—to the texts written in the days before sexual taxonomization or those written in an age of acute homophobia, to those novels and poems I had read in Catholic school classrooms but only now learned belonged to a tradition well beyond what we had learned—I found something more than dissatisfaction in the gaps, the silences, the ambiguities; I found potential. The potential for a queer community built across time through the desiring touch of “textual intimacy” (Dinshaw, Getting Medieval 50). The potential for Emily Dickinson and Susan Dickinson’s “little destiny” to live on “as writing and its interpretation” (Coviello 69). The potential for the ghosted lesbian of literature to insistently haunt the margins of texts, to linger in homosocial spaces and same-sex female bonds, to insist upon her own viability to those who know to look.
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