

Emotional Intertexts: Female Romantic Friendship and the Anguish of Marriage

Holly Furneaux

Romantic friendship between women has been a fertile ground for explorations of Victorian sensory culture, inciting nuanced attention to the emotional and erotic components of intimacy. Work in this area has advanced our understanding of the histories of gender, sexuality and the family and of the history of emotions. This essay takes a new approach to contests over the (in)compatibility of female friendship and marriage, exploring the rich vocabularies through which women's pain at an intimate friend's marriage is represented. It examines the language and imagery that Charles Dickens's fiction shares with women's actual accounts, taking in life writing including diaries, letters and autobiography, with a focus on the writings of American poet Emily Dickinson, herself an astute reader of Dickens. Dickinson's reception of Dickens and imaginative use of his work to conceptualise her own experiences of female intimacy offers evidence of a shared trans-Atlantic affective culture. Exploring the gothic strain within this range of sources, I suggest that such accounts offer important evidence for the expression of extreme emotion in the period, offering insights into available languages of loss and mourning, and the points at which those verbal modes become insufficient. At the same time, a focus on this moment of anguish calls for a further complication of our increasingly nuanced understanding of the experience of romantic friendship, and exposes a wealth of hostile attitudes towards marriage, here presented less as a happy ending or fulfilling destiny and more as a fate worse than death.

In the decades after the path-breaking work of Lillian Faderman and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, critical energy was largely directed to questions of the compatibility of female romantic friendship with marriage and the contested erotic content of inter-female intimacy. In the classic account, summed up in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's popular 1849 novel, *Kavanagh*, romantic friendship is "a rehearsal in girlhood of the great drama of woman's life" (29).¹ Resonant with a range of conduct material and popular fiction in the Victorian period and seconded by Faderman and other critics, the "move of female protagonist from intense same-sex friendship to marriage" has been widely accepted as, "the approved social model of its time" (86) in the terms of Carolyn Oulton's recent account.² This model, though, as Martha Vicinus has demonstrated, did not imply an uncontested or simple transition from inter-female to spousal intimacy:

'Romantic friendship' with another woman was an accepted prelude, even preparation for, marriage, but it was also a subversive outlet for ambitions and hopes that went beyond familiar domestic subjects [. . .] From the very beginning a tension surfaced between the desirability of forming close friendships, and fears of their superseding family claims. (34-5)³

A particularly powerful component of such friction has been identified in the eroticism of female friendships. Lisa Moore, for example, identifies an ever present "tension between 'romantic friendship' and female homosexuality" (500). She argues that the category "romantic friendship" has the capacity "not only to manage and

contain women's non-marital desires and their representations but also to incite and sometimes fulfil them" (517).⁴

Sharon Marcus's recent work has helpfully contested such critical models of the tension between, and incompatibility of, romantic friendship and marriage. She is interested in the widespread commensurability of these relationships, exploring the extent to which romantic friendship, marriage and motherhood could comfortably co-exist, complement one another, and not necessarily 'resolve' the extreme emotional and often erotic content of the inter-female intimacy:

Far from compromising friendship, family and marriage provided models for sustaining it; female friends exchanged the same tokens as spouses and emulated female elders who also prized friendships with women. Marriage rarely ended friendships and many women organised part of their lives around their friend. (40)

Marcus goes on to cite examples of women who looked forward to their close friend's wedding "with a sense of pleasure rather than incipient loss" (40). Marcus's work has been hugely enabling in revising models of sexual and emotional separateness and deviance, breaking down unhelpful binaries of the sexual/chaste, same-sex/marital, queer/familial. However, in emphasising the compatibility of many intimate female friendships and marriage—relationships previously held to be mutually exclusive—Marcus overlooks a wealth of material articulating the anguish and, in some instances, impossibility of reconciling these forms of relationship.

In *Bleak House* (published in monthly parts from March 1852 to September 1853) Dickens presents an extended exploration of the emotion experienced by the first-person narrator, Esther, on the marriage of the novel's more conventional heroine, Ada. On meeting Ada, Esther is immediately drawn to Ada's physical beauty of "such rich golden hair, such soft blue eyes, and such a bright, innocent trusting face!" and her "natural, captivating, winning manner" (44). Esther's admiration for Ada's qualities of physique and temperament continues throughout a friendship that is punctuated by periods of physical separation that cause great distress to both characters. Notably, Esther's illness with smallpox occasions an emotional and physical re-negotiation of this relationship, followed by an intense reunion after her convalescence. During her illness, Esther strictly instructs her domestic servant turned nurse, Charley, to bar Ada from the sickroom: "Now, Charley, when she knows I am ill, she will try to make her way into the room. Keep her out, Charley, if you love me truly, to the last! Charley, if you let her in but once, only to look upon me for one moment as I lie here, I shall die" (504). Mary Armstrong convincingly attributes this wish to Esther's desirous investment in Ada's perceived physical perfection, arguing that "their separation is necessary to maintain not only Ada's health, but Ada as she is desired by Esther" (93). Ada's reaction to this physical barrier and cessation of their intimacy anticipates Esther's distress on Ada's marriage night:

At first she [Ada] came very often to the door, and called to me, and even reproached me with sobs and tears; but I wrote her a long letter, saying that she made me anxious and unhappy, and imploring her, as she loved me, and wished my mind to be at peace to come no nearer than the garden. After

that she came beneath the window, even oftener than she had come to the door. (499)

This poignant scene of the weeping friend stood alone outside the other's window and bedchamber is recast when Esther, having learnt of Ada's secret marriage to their cousin, Richard, re-visits their lodgings on Ada's first night there. Esther eloquently expresses the difficulty of surrendering the beloved Ada to her new husband: "I had given my darling to him now, and I meant to go; but I lingered for one more look of the precious face, which it seemed to rive my heart to turn from" (788):

I was so lonely, and so blank without her, and it was so desolate to be going home with no hope of seeing her there, that I could get no comfort for a little while, as I walked up and down in a dim corner sobbing and crying. (789)

A similar record of the somatic response of tears and parallel languages of blankness and loneliness recur repeatedly in the letters Emily Dickinson wrote after her intimate friend Sue Huntington Gilbert became engaged to her brother, Austin Dickinson, on 23 March 1853. In the letter just prior to this engagement when Dickinson is assisting the courting couple's correspondence, she writes:

I love the opportunity to serve those who are mine, and to soften the least asperity in the path which ne'er 'ran smooth', is a delight to me. So, Susie, I set the trap and catch the little mouse, and love to catch him dearly, for I think of you and Austin—and know it pleases you to have my tiny services. Dear Susie, you are gone—one would hardly think I had lost you to hear this revelry, but your absence insanes me so—I do not feel so peaceful, when you are gone from me [. . .] Yes, Susie it is very lonely, and yet it is sweet too to know that you are happy. (12 March 1853, 229)

In Dickinson's letters over the period of this long engagement (the marriage took place on 1 July 1856) this effort to reconcile herself and share her beloved friend's happiness continues, but the theme of loneliness is poignantly developed. In a letter of August 1854 Dickinson compares her desolation in Gilbert's absence to the awareness of a stone "that it is very cold, or [a] block, that it is silent, where once 'twas warm and green" (304).⁵ The sense of isolation which pervades her correspondence of this time culminated in a desperate appeal in one of her final letters to Gilbert before a break in their correspondence:

Susie—it is a little thing to say how lone it is—anyone can do it, but to wear the loneliness next your heart for weeks, when you sleep and when you wake, ever missing something, *this*, all cannot say [. . .] I would paint a portrait which would bring the tears, had I canvass for it, and the scene should be solitude, and the figures—solitude—and the lights and shades each a solitude. I could fill a chamber with landscapes so lone, men should pause and weep there. (3 Dec 1854, 310)

The heavy repetition of this letter points to the excess of pain, an experience beyond linguistic expression. Soon after this, in a letter detailing her frustration with the lack of information her brother provides her with about Sue, particularly her physical

appearance, Dickinson writes in terms that directly resonate with Esther's effort to seek relief in nocturnal wandering:

I miss you, and mourn for you, and walk the Streets alone – often at night, besides I fall asleep in tears, for your dear face, yet not one word comes back to me from that silent West. If it is finished, tell me, and I will raise the lid to my box of Phantoms, and lay one more love in; but if it lives and beats still, still lives and beats for me, then say so, and I will strike the strings to one more strain of happiness before I die. (Jan 1855, 315)

Esther's shock at the abrupt severance of her access to Ada, then, resonates with nineteenth-century women's personal records. These typically oscillate in tone, registering a conflict between the horror of the sudden loss and an attempt to rationalise the situation as inevitable and, perhaps, a positive development for the engaged friend. As Esther puts it on the day she learns of Ada's marriage:

It was only natural that I should not be quite accustomed to the loss of my Darling yet. Three or four hours were not a long time, after years [. . .] I so longed to be near her, and taking some sort of care of her, that I determined to go back in the evening, only to look up at her windows. (789)

Dickinson writes to another woman she was close to, her childhood friend of twelve years, Emily Fowler, five days after Fowler's marriage: "I knew you would go away, for I know the roses are gathered, but I guessed not yet, not till by expectation we had become resigned" (21 Dec 1853, 267). These sentiments are echoed across a wide range of women's correspondence throughout the nineteenth century. Louisa Lumsden, for example, expresses a mixed reaction to her intimate friend, Constance Maynard's receipt of a proposal. The two had become intimate at Girton College, and when the older Lumsden received an invitation to run a new school for girls, she persuaded Maynard, who later went on to become the first head of Westfield college, to join her. There, in May 1877, Maynard received a proposal, which Lumsden urged her to accept, at the same time as expressing her sense of loss, as she clearly anticipated that Maynard would accept: "It is all right, I knew it must come – but *so* soon? All my life is altered for me [. . .] Oh let me grieve, it is a hard, a cruel blow" (*Green Book* 193-4). Maynard turned down the offer explicitly because of her preference for the alternative love offered her by Lumsden: "As I put on my cloak and set off to school I used to hug myself and think, 'now I know what love is!' and anything Dr Robertson offered seemed timid and colourless in comparison" (*Autobiography* 223).⁶ Earlier in the century Jane Austen recorded a similar ambivalence towards the impending marriage of her dearly beloved niece, Fanny Knight, experiencing a horror of the husband-to-be: "Oh what a loss it will be when you are married. You are too agreeable as a Niece. I shall hate you when your delicious play of Mind is all settled down into conjugal and maternal affections. Mr J. W. frightens me.—He will have you.—I see you at the altar." Austen goes on to temper this extreme reaction with a more realistic acceptance of the match: "Do not imagine that I have any real objection [. . .] I only so not like you shd [sic.] marry anybody" (20 and 21 Feb 1817, 329).

Dickens's portrayal of Esther's emotional reaction to Ada's marriage registers, in a distinctly gothic mode, the problems women faced in becoming reconciled to this

utter transformation of their prior relationship. Though Esther insists that her nocturnal visit to Ada provided relief—“it really did me good” (790)—there is little of comfort in Dickens’s account of this painful pilgrimage. Death imagery pervades Esther’s presentation of her discovery of Ada’s marriage. On their way to Richard’s lodgings (soon to be Ada’s marital home) Esther imagines that “there were more funerals passing along the dismal pavements, than [she] had ever seen before”, and describes their arrival at “Richard’s name in great white letters on a hearse-like panel” (p783). Clearly such references also prefigure Richard’s impending death, but their applicability to Esther’s psychological state is clarified by the interpellation of a reference to the death of Joe the crossing sweeper within the account. Joe and Esther are closely identified, most explicitly through shared illness—before Joe’s disease kills him he has passed it on to Esther, whom it permanently scars. Dickens’s sequencing of the painful death of Joe, with whom Esther is doubled, is suggestive of Esther’s psychological trauma at Ada’s marriage.

Esther’s emotional experience here is conveyed through a macabre mode, through which this scene is consistently gothicised. On Esther’s furtive return after dark to the newly-weds’ home she expands upon her sense of decay and destruction, attributing these to the physical environment, and reiterates her morbid perception of the door: “I listened for a few moments; and in the musty rotting silence of the house, believed that I could hear the murmur of their young voices. I put my lips to the hearse-like panel of the door, as a kiss for my dear” (790). Esther’s narrative emphasises the “strange”, “uncongenial [. . .] overshadowed stony-hearted” atmosphere, and the presence of the distinctly vampiric Vholes contributes a fantastical element:

The sight of his lank black figure, and the lonesome air of that nook in the dark, were favourable to the state of my mind. I thought of the youth and love and beauty of my dear girl, shut up in such an ill-assorted refuge, almost as if it were a cruel place (789).

This gothic mode articulates the horror of a separation, whose pain has become too intense for expression in worldly terms, even those of realistic death. Here, Dickens implements gothic imagery as an effective language of loss, able to convey the combined horror and melancholy of parting. The genre’s established association with extreme emotion facilitates an expression of intense feeling which could not otherwise be articulated. Existing critical accounts of this scene, recognised as one of the novel’s most disquieting moments, express shock and bafflement at the intensity of the emotion presented. Echoing the otherworldly and deathly images of the scene, Oulton describes how “Esther ghoulishly listens at the door of their new home, as if reluctant to relinquish her role as chaperone and confidant”(90). Less sympathetically, Geoffrey Carter asserts that: “this has to make a modern reader feel very uncomfortable; Esther is listening, tip-toe, outside the wedding chamber on the wedding night! At the best, this is grotesque interference in other people’s privacy; at worst it is voyeurism masquerading as selfless love” (143). However, Dickens’s delineation of Esther’s reaction to Ada’s marriage coheres with first-hand contemporary accounts of such a situation; when placed alongside these, Esther’s compulsive return to Ada offers a convincing enactment of frequently suffered emotional yearning.

Emily Dickinson cast her fear of resigning Gilbert to a male suitor in similarly fantastical terms to those used by Dickens in *Bleak House*: “I have thought today of when the ‘bold dragon’ shall bear you [. . .] away, to live in his high mountain—and leave me here alone; and I could have wept bitterly over the only *fancy* of ever being so lone” (21 Jan 1852, 168). She exploits analogous fantasy imagery in a letter to Emily Fowler, after her marriage:

Dear Emily, when it came, and hidden by your veil [. . .] we kissed you [. . .] and went back to our homes, it seemed to me translation, not any earthly thing, and if after a little you had ridden on the wind, it would not have surprised me. (21 Dec 1853, 277)

Esther’s figuration of Ada’s “strange” nuptial environment and Dickinson’s imagined transmutation of her newly married friend represent the absolute cultural disjunction between unmarried and wedded women. In these accounts, and perhaps most vividly in Louisa Lumsden’s poignant request, “Oh let me grieve”, the separation of romantic friends is compared to the extremes of earthly experience, with the loss often equated to bereavement.

The sense of a dramatic, irreversible shift is echoed in conduct book advice offered to intimate female friends on sustaining their relationship after marriage. In *A Woman’s Thoughts About Women* (1858) Dinah Craik insists that such a bond “must change its character, [. . .] be buried alive and come to life again in a totally different form” (137). In this uncharacteristic move into a metaphorical register, Craik equates the effect of marriage on female friendship to perhaps the most horrific referent in mid nineteenth-century popular imagination, live burial. William Alger employs comparable fatalistic language in *The Friendships of Women* (1868), throughout which he repeatedly observes that “marriage is often *the grave* of feminine friendships” (19, emphasis added). Alger demonstrates awareness of the extreme suffering occasioned by this death-like separation in his suggestion that after marriage female friendship often “died of a slow consumption” (290). Through Esther’s vision of Ada incarcerated within the “hearse” framed coffin room in “musty rotting silence”, Dickens similarly draws on an imagery of live burial to describe the newly married woman. Such language both marks marriage as a potentially fatal disruption to female friendship, whilst laying bare the social expectation and legal situation under which a woman’s individual identity ceased at her marriage. As I have argued elsewhere (2005), writers of the period utilised a culturally active horror of live burial, not the most remote possibility given the lack of reliable tests for the point of death, to critique women’s experience of the marital law of coverture. As William Blackstone (in the dominant law book of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) famously explained, “the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection and *cover* she performs everything” (430).⁷ Under coverture, therefore, a married woman was not recognised as having her own legal rights or obligations, rather, her legal identity was subsumed under that of her husband, a situation consonant with these imaginative visions of insubstantiality, the diaphanous “rid[ing] on the wind”, or premature burial. The emotional intensity invested in these responses to the legalese of coverture demonstrates a widespread awareness of the distinctly gothic gendered implications of marital law.⁸

Though men did eloquently express their distress at the marriage of their closest male friend, the “similarity in depictions of intense friendship, whether male or female” (Oulton 71) should not be overstated. In his survey of ‘romantic friendships’ between men in nineteenth-century America Jonathan Ned Katz suggests that intimate male friends could experience similar pain, or at least ambivalence, at the marriage of their friend. Katz explores Abraham Lincoln’s response to the fiancée of his closest friend, Joshua Fry Speed, arguing that “evident in Lincoln’s response to Speed’s engagement are his deep love for Speed and his anger at losing his most intimate male friend to a wife—a common experience of the era’s romantic men friends, as other stories show” (25).⁹ In one of his variety of pieces celebrating bachelor life for Dickens’s journal *Household Words*, Wilkie Collins developed exactly such a story of the male “shock of losing a dear friend, in order that a bride may gain a devoted husband” (506).¹⁰ Adopting the persona of a confirmed “old bachelor”, Collins issues an invective against wives who disrupt their husband’s closest male intimacies, arguing that “there are other affections, in this world, which are noble and honourable, besides those of conjugal and parental origin” (505). This bachelor is particularly concerned with the “other affection” of extreme romantic friendship between men who “would once have gone to the world’s end to serve each other”:

I shall never be as fond of any human being again, as I was of that one friend, and, until the beautiful woman came between us, I believe there was nothing in this world that he would not have sacrificed and have done for me. Even while he was courting, I kept my hold on him [. . .] The beautiful woman grudged me my one small corner in his heart, even at that time; but he was true to me – he persisted – and I was the first to shake hands with him when he was a married man. I had no suspicion then that I was to lose him from that moment. (506)

Though this bachelor persona is clearly unhappy at what he experiences as his friend’s infidelity and his personal experience of “los[ing] him”, there is no sense that the friend’s own identity is to be lost on his marriage.

These accounts of disrupted male intimacy, often focused on antipathy towards the friend’s wife, are clearly of a different register to the languages of “translation”, unearthliness and live burial used of the female equivalent situation. As Sarah Butler Wistar expressed it in an 1870 letter to Jeannie Field Musgrove who had been her best-friend for twenty-one years:

Dearest Darling—How incessantly have I thought of you these eight days—all today—the entire uncertainty, the distance, the long silence—all are new features in my separation from you, grievous to be borne [. . .] I have thought and yearned over you these two days. Are you married I wonder? My dearest love to you wherever and *whoever* you are. (Qtd. in Smith-Rosenberg 56)¹¹

Here, the severance of geographical relocation is compounded by an uncanny sense of the friend utterly transformed by marriage. The sense of a double loss, both of the intimacy of the friendship and of the identity of the beloved friend, pervades representations of women’s pain at marital parting. Smith-Rosenberg’s description of how Wistar “underwent a period of extreme anxiety” after Musgrove’s marriage

resonates with other examples. In one instance Faderman describes Alice French (who wrote as Octave Thanet) as “crushed” (216) by the marriage of her girlhood friend, Jane Allen Crawford. Various biographers have advanced strong arguments that Gilbert’s marriage caused Emily Dickinson to have what would now be termed a nervous breakdown, a theory that explains the sudden suspension of a previously regular correspondence between the women.¹²

This suddenly silenced record of suffering is tempered by Dickinson’s efforts to renegotiate the friendship. After a break in correspondence in the mid-eighteen fifties and Gilbert’s marriage, Dickinson resumed her regular correspondence with her sister-in-law, who was now living next door, and their friendship continued until Emily’s death three decades later. Dickinson articulates her reworking of the parameters of this relationship in a poem that she sent to Sue, celebrating their sisterly status:

One Sister I have in our house –
And one, a hedge away.
There’s only one recorded,
But both belong to me [. . .] (*Letters* late 1858 343)

After painful renegotiation the two women succeed in using this positive sororal model to revive their friendship in the way prescribed by Craik; their relationship has “change[d] its character, [. . .] and come to life again in a totally different form.” This experience of resurrected friendship lends some support to Marcus’s argument that widely accepted ideas of female friendship as a threat to marriage were of later date: “Only in the late 1930s, after fear of female inverts had become widespread, did women’s lifewritings start to describe female friendship as a developmental phase to be effaced by marriage” (58). In *Bleak House* Ada and Esther’s renewal of intimacy is significantly assisted by Richard’s untimely death: “They gave my darling into my arms, and throughout many weeks I never left her” (985). When Esther marries Woodcourt, she offers Ada and her infant son a haven at the newly modelled Bleak House, where baby Richard benefits from the love of his “two mamas” (988).¹³ In a cancelled passage in the manuscript of *Bleak House*, Dickens had allowed Ada to envisage a simple life of unmarried cohabitation with Esther: “‘If the Lord Chancellor would decide against my interests as far as that is concerned, or at least would say I was only entitled to -----, how much could you and I live upon Esther?’ said Ada blushing” (*Bleak House*, Norton, 821). That both Dickinson and Dickens’s Esther do eventually find ways to accommodate their female friendships within variously enlarged models of family shows that domestic space could expand to accommodate intense same-sex relationships. The longevity of these friendships is also a signal of one way in which married women maintained their agency despite restrictive marital laws.

Dickinson, as a particularly attentive and active reader of Dickens’s work, had the literary model of Esther’s experience to draw upon when conceptualising the particularly traumatic moments of Sue’s engagement and marriage. She recorded her reading of *Bleak House* as it arrived in monthly parts in a letter to Gilbert, commenting approvingly, “it is like him who wrote it” (5 Apr 1852, 195). This response was a part of Dickinson’s long engagement with Dickens’s work. She had read her father’s collection of Dickens’s novels, “the most popular author in the

Dickinson's family library" (Kurijiaka 65), even scissoring out sections for her own purposes.¹⁴ Martha Nell Smith has examined Dickinson's excising of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1), attaching, with pink thread, the novel's illustrations to her poem of childhood mortality, 'A poor-torn Heart—a tattered heart', which she sent to Gilbert (now Dickinson) in the late 1850s.¹⁵ This intertextual document is a particularly vivid example of the way in which Dickinson and Gilbert used literary materials throughout their relationship. As Smith has pointed out, they "characterized their relationship in literary terms" with Dickinson "comparing her love for Susan to Dante's for Beatrice and Swift's for Stella." In turn, Susan was to liken their intimacy with its decades of epistolary exchange to "the intense dynamic of poet Karoline von Gunderode's correspondence with writer Bettina von Arnin" (Smith "Sue" 79). Interestingly, Alger reprints sections from this correspondence in *The Friendships of Women*, selecting material that develops his fascination with female friends' extreme responses to the threat of separation, whether by intervening relatives, marriage or death. He quotes, for example, a letter revealing von Arnin's erotic response to Gunderode's threatened suicide:

[Gunderode] hastily opened her gown, and pointed to the spot beneath her beautiful breast. Her eyes sparkled with delight. I could no longer control myself: I broke into loud crying, I fell on her neck, I dragged her down to a seat and sat upon her knee, and wept and kissed her on her mouth, and tore open her dress, and kissed her on the spot where she had learned to reach the heart. (311)¹⁶

Dickinson and Gilbert also enjoyed the quieter tragedy of disrupted female friendship provided by Longfellow's *Kavanagh*, which they read together in 1851. Strangely, as Faderman has pointed out, this text is often used by those biographers keen to contain Dickinson's extreme feeling for Sue within a context of conventional romantic friendship ("Emily Dickinson's Letters" 207).¹⁷ This novel though, hardly provides a promising model of the compatibility of female intimacy and marriage. On learning of her "bosom-friend's" engagement to a man that she also secretly loves, Alice Archer is briefly eloquent about the pain this causes her, before literally losing the will to live—"exhausted, fainting, fearing, longing, hoping to die" (29, 117):

How very happy you are, and how very wretched am I! You have all the joy of life, I all its loneliness. How little you will think of me now! How little you will need me! I shall be nothing to you,—you will forget me.
(116)

In describing her emotional response to the impending engagement between her brother and Gilbert, Dickinson turns not to the broken-hearted death of Alice Archer nor to the high tragedy of Arnin and Gunderode, but to the more ambivalent comic-tragic figure of Miss Julia Mills from Dickens's *David Copperfield* (May 1849 - November 1850). In the 12 March 1853 letter, previously quoted, that immediately preceded Gilbert's engagement, Dickinson wryly describes the discomfort of her position by referencing this literary go-between: "Miss Mills, that is, Miss Julia, never dreamed of the depths of my *clandestinity*, and if I stopped to think of the figure I was cutting, it would be the last of me" (299). Recent editors of this correspondence, Ellen Louise Hart and Smith, have noted the "markedly shaky handwriting" (4) of this letter. The commensurate uneasy wavering of tone in this epistle from the comic to

expressions of maddening loneliness, which Dickinson herself notes—“one would hardly think I had lost you to hear this revelry”—resonate with Dickens’s largely comic, but in places poignant, treatment of Miss Mills. Like Dickinson, Julia Mills colludes in assisting the match that occasions her pain. When separated from his intended bride, Dora Spenslow, David Copperfield enjoys the mediated accounts of Dora provided by her “bosom friend” (445), Julia Mills. Throughout, Miss Mills is shown to be ideally qualified for this position, given the parity of feeling that she and David have for Dora. As David puts it, “the sun shone Dora, and the birds sang Dora. The south wind blew Dora, and the wild flowers in the hedges were all Doras to a bud. My comfort is, Miss Mills understood me. Miss Mills alone could enter into my feelings thoroughly” (447). Julia readily conspires to share the journal she maintains about her relationship with Dora, and David describes this document as “her sympathetic pages” (514). Like Dickinson, who writes to Gilbert in frustration at Austin’s failure to provide details of his fiancée’s physical appearance, Julia Mills has a distinctly bodily appreciation of her friend.¹⁸ Typically employing possessive constructions such as “my sweet D”, Julia provides minute details of Dora’s complexion, describing her as “beautiful in pallor” with a “slight tinge of damask revisiting [her] cheek” (518). Despite David’s insistence on treating Miss Mills’s emotions as farcical, he describes her as “more than usually pensive” on the announcement of his engagement to Dora: “She gave us her blessing, and the assurance of her lasting friendship, and spoke to us, generally as became a Voice from the Cloister” (452).

The parallel that Dickinson found between the, albeit often ironic, representation of Miss Mills and her own painful position points to the serious potential within Dickens’s account of a woman bereft of her female friend by courtship and marriage. Dickinson’s reworking of this narrative anticipates Dickens’s own more serious treatment of the subject in his next novel, *Bleak House*. Esther’s eloquent expressions of her distress at losing Ada provide a tonal revision to Dickens’s earlier accounts of this situation in *David Copperfield*, and in *Dombey and Son* (October 1846–November 1848), in the strangely moving slapstick of Susan Nipper’s distraught reaction to the marriage of her mistress and beloved friend, Florence Dombey.¹⁹ In his treatment of Esther, Dickens departs from a characteristically ambivalent treatment of emotion, that which Dominic Rainsford has described as “both sympathetic and satirical, both tragic and farcical”, “a note which hovers indefinitely between sympathy and satire” (190). That modern critics are nonplussed by Dickens’s effort to provide an unambivalent rendering of Esther’s distress demonstrates the extent to which criticism is still wary of engaging with the emotional content of works of this period. By recognising the coherence between *Bleak House*, Dickinson’s writing and a range of contemporary accounts, it is clear that women’s negotiation of their intimate friendships at the point of marriage was a key nineteenth-century concern. Far from reducing female intimacy to a phase to be rapidly dissolved at marriage, these writers provide language for expressing the emotional intensity of a relationship that was, for many, the greatest drama of woman’s life.

Notes

¹ Quoted by, for example, Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (London:

Women's Press, 1981), 170; see also Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1985).

² For an important earlier account of the way that female friendship in Victorian literature “operates to assimilate one or both of the women into marriage”, see Tess Cosslett, *Woman to Woman: Female Friendship in Victorian Fiction* (Brighton: Harvester, 1988), 3.

³ In Vicinus's more recent work, *Intimate Friends: Women who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004), she extends her exploration of women's sexual self-fashioning, investigating the still elided histories of women who were erotically attached to other women. Vicinus cites examples of women who discovered that “heterosexual marriage, with its public recognition and social obligations, was a strong impediment to same-sex intimacy” (69).

⁴ For an exploration of the erotic dynamic of friendship between women in America during this period see Marylynne Diggs, ‘Romantic Friends or a “Different Race of Creatures”? The Representation of Lesbian Pathology in Nineteenth Century America’, *Feminist Studies*, 21.2 (1995), 317-340.

⁵ See letters written to Austin Dickinson on 7 May 1853 and 19 June 1853 for further references to loneliness.

⁶ For further discussion of this relationship see Vicinus, *Independent Women*, 200-203, and entries in the ODNB, ‘Constance Maynard’ by Janet Sondheimer and ‘Louisa Lumsden’ by Elizabeth Morse.

⁷ For a summary of the importance and influence of this text see the introduction to volume 1 of Blackstone's *Commentaries of the Laws of England*, iii.

⁸ For more on the critique of coverture, see my ‘Gendered Cover-ups: Live Burial, Social Death and Coverture in Mary Braddon's Fiction’, *Philological Quarterly*, 84.4 (2005), 425-450.

⁹ Katz cites the hero, Ned, of Frederick Wadsworth's Loring's 1871 novel, *Two College Friends*: “When this war is over, I suppose Tom will marry and forget me. I never will go near his wife – I shall hate her.” As Katz suggests, “the fictional Ned's fantasy about Tom's future wife reminds us of Lincoln's real-life response to Speed's fiancée” (144-145). Xavier Mayne's early twentieth century study of homosexuality devotes a section to examples of “the anguish of a Uranian when partnerless by marriage.” Mayne provides a range of poignant literary and actual accounts of male and female suicides on the marriage of their intimate friend. *The Intersexes* (privately printed, 1908), 544-552.

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion of male marital avoidance and the representation of marital intimacy in competition with bonds between men, see my *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities*, especially chapter two.

¹¹ This quotation comes from Sarah Butler Wistar's 18 June 1870 letter to Jeannie Field Musgrove found in the Sarah Butler Wistar Papers (*Correspondence 1855-98*) at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹² See especially pages 223-5 in Lillian Faderman's ‘Emily Dickinson's Letters to Sue Gilbert’, *Massachusetts Review*, 18.2 (1977), 197-225, and John Cody, *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1971). Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith comment on the “surprising” nature of this lack of letters around the wedding period, including any of congratulation, but recognise an alternative explanation, as letters may have been exchanged in this period but later lost or destroyed. *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan*

Huntington Dickinson, eds. Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith (Massachusetts: Paris Press, 1998), 63.

¹³ This plot resonates with wider narratives of pluralised patriarchy, in which female intimacy flourishes as the basis for community and family, such as George Eliot's *Romola* (1862-3) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856).

¹⁴ See Martha Nell Smith, 'Emily Scissorhands: Reading Dickson Reading' in *Variants 2/3*, ed. Dirk van Hulle (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 279-291.

¹⁵ Smith points out that "the fact that her own surname christened her 'Dickens' son' was surely not lost on this writer given to puns and verbal play. What is also clear from Dickinson making this poem in direct response to Dickens and then sending it to Susan Dickinson is the women's communion and mutual play as readers" ("Emily Scissorhands" 284).

¹⁶ See also Alger's description of two young women friends who "preferred death to separation. They took laudanum, and were found dead in each other's arms" (271).

¹⁷ Dickinson refers to *Kavanagh* in her letters to Sue of Autumn/Winter 1850, and 24 February 1853.

¹⁸ See *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, Jan 1855: "Austen told me about you when he came from the West – though many little things I wanted to know, he 'had not noticed'. I asked him how you looked and what you wore, and how your hair was fixed, and what you said of me – his answers were quite limited" (315-6).

¹⁹ In the published section of her thesis Mary Armstrong explores the presentation of Susan Nipper's love for Florence, examining the exact parity of feeling, between Susan and Florence's other failed suitor, Mr Toots, who Susan eventually marries. 'Pursuing Perfection: *Dombey and Son*, Female Homoerotic Desire, and the Sentimental Heroine', *Studies in the Novel*, 28.3 (1996), 281-302.

Works Cited

- Alger, William Rounseville. *The Friendships of Women*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1868.
- Armstrong, Mary. "What Can You Two Be Together?": Charles Dickens, Female Homoerotic Desire and the Work of Heterosexual Recovery." Diss. Duke U, 1995.
- Austen, Jane. *Jane Austen's Letters*. Ed. Deidre Le Faye, 2nd edn. London: The Folio Society, 2003.
- Blackstone, William. *Commentaries of the Laws of England. Volume 1: Of the Rights of Persons*. 1765. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2002.
- Carter, Geoffrey. "Sexuality and the Victorian Artist, Dickens and Swinburne." *Sexuality and Victorian Literature*. Ed. Richard Cox. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1984. 141-160.
- Collins, Wilkie. "Bold Words by a Bachelor." *Household Words* 13 December 1856 (XIV): 505-7.
- Craik, Dinah Mulock. *A Woman's Thoughts About Women*. London: Pickering and Chatto, 1993.
- Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. London: Penguin, 1996.
- . *Bleak House*. Eds. George Ford and Sylvere Monod. New York: London, 1977.
- . *David Copperfield*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.

-
- Dickinson, Emily. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Eds. Thomas Johnson and Theodora Ward. 3 vols. Massachusetts: Belknap P, 1958.
- . *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson*, Eds. Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith. Massachusetts: Paris P, 1998.
- Faderman, Lillian. "Emily Dickinson's Letters to Sue Gilbert." *Massachusetts Review* 18.2 (1977): 197-225.
- . *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*. London: Women's P, 1981.
- Katz, Jonathan Ned. *Love Stories: Sex Between Men Before Homosexuality*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001.
- Kurijiaka, Susan. "Dickens." *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopaedia*. Ed. Jane Donohue Eberwein. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998. 65.
- Longfellow, H.W. *Kavanaugh: A Tale of New England*. Liverpool: John Walker, 1849.
- Marcus, Sharon. *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007.
- Maynard, Constance. *Autobiography* (Part 4). May 1877. MS. Westfield College Archives, London.
- . *Green Book* (No. 14). 27 May 1877. MS. Westfield College Archives, London.
- Moore, Lisa. "'Something More Tender Still than Friendship': Romantic Friendship in Early Nineteenth-Century England." *Feminist Studies* 18(1992): 449-520.
- Oulton, Carolyn. *Romantic Friendship in Victorian Literature*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.
- Rainsford, Dominic. "The Comedy of Sadness in *Dombey and Son*." *Dickens: The Craft of Fiction and the Challenges of Reading*. Eds. Rossana Bodanei et al. Milan: Unicopli, 2000. 185-192.
- Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1985.
- Smith, Martha Nell. "Dickinson, Cartoonist." *Dickinson Electronic Archives*, <http://www.emilydickinson.org/cartoon/>.
- . "Sue Huntington Gilbert." *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopaedia*, Ed. Jane Donohue Eberwein, p79.
- Vicinus, Martha. *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920*. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1985.