



"Something More Tender Still than Friendship": Romantic Friendship in Early-Nineteenth-Century England

Lisa Moore

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"SOMETHING MORE TENDER STILL THAN FRIENDSHIP": ROMANTIC FRIENDSHIP IN EARLY-NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

LISA MOORE

The genealogy of contemporary lesbian identities and practices is sharply attenuated: we know much more about the emergence in the early twentieth century of the term "lesbian" in sexology and popular accounts, and the women, communities, and texts through which its current meaning has been constructed, than we do about the historical lineages that made that emergence possible. Indeed, we have been cautioned by feminist historians not to look for "lesbians" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; curiously, however, this caution against anachronism has most often taken the form of an ahistorical prohibition against reading sex between women in history. In insisting upon such a reading—upon reading lesbian sex—this essay does not attempt to find "lesbians" in the early-nineteenth-century texts it examines; rather, these texts demonstrate how powerful a part the category of female homosexuality played in the cultural imaginary of the period. Such images, although not representations of "lesbians" as we now understand the term, are nevertheless part of the history of those representations and as such warrant our careful scrutiny. The conflicts these texts express and contain have their legacies in the construction both of current lesbian identities, practices, and communities and in the history of the specific forms of homophobia we struggle with today. As a conceptual category in the early nineteenth century, the possibility of sex between women played a constitutive role in the three texts examined below: in a domestic novel, in the diary of an early-nineteenth-century British woman who recorded her sexual intimacies with other women, and in a Scottish legal case in which two women teachers were accused of

"indecent behavior." By reading the tension between "romantic friendship" and female homosexuality across both fiction and non-fiction, this essay seeks to establish the status of that tension as a basic, if sometimes unstated, cultural assumption—a linchpin in the rise to power of both the bourgeois "private" and the bourgeois "public" spheres. As such, it formed an important part of the construction of specifically modern versions of sexuality, gender, the body, and the family, and of class and colonial relations, public order, and the rule of law. By implication, then, if bourgeois culture has a stake in effacing the symbolic role played by female homosexuality in its own rise to power, contemporary feminism has a stake in exposing that role.

The constitution of the category of female homosexuality in these texts is necessary to two historical processes at work within and outside them: the rise of domestic fiction over the eighteenth century and its establishment as a canonical literary genre in the nineteenth century, and the coterminous shift from an eighteenth-century idea of the self as social and socially obligated to the Romantic investment in the unique individual. Over the course of the eighteenth century (from Defoe to Richardson to Austen, for example), the novelistic heroine changed from the subject of picaresque and ribald adventures to a more clearly psychological and moral entity, the repository of the novel's characterological realism and the guarantee of its virtuous and didactic status. The novel also begins to focus, not on economically and morally marginal figures like *Moll Flanders* but on the middle-class family with the domestic woman at its center. The genre of domestic fiction thus became the story the bourgeoisie told about itself, the fable that made its rise to power seem the natural and legitimate result of its greater virtue when compared with the poor or the aristocracy.

The ideological struggle represented by both these processes is visible in the texts below as a problem of interpretation. Questions of writing, reading, knowledge, and self-knowledge are the arenas in which this struggle is played out. Romantic friendship poses a problem of reading in these texts. Although it is invoked to render relationships between women transparent and accessible to the purposes of bourgeois patriarchy—heterosexual companionate marriage, class and colonial relations, the disciplinary rule of law—it surfaces again and again as an ambiguous term that raises anxieties in the act of attempting to contain them. At this crucial

juncture in the emergence of modern notions of sexual identity and the self, women's texts (often novels) and women themselves are linked in the representation of romantic friendship. Both are seen as dangerous and hard to read in spite and because of their status as marginal, unknowable, and possibly sexual.

The relationships represented in these texts exemplify what the major feminist historian of intimacy between women, Lillian Faderman, calls "romantic friendships." According to Faderman, this is the eighteenth-century term for the "love relationships between women" that were known as "Boston marriages" and "sentimental" friendships by the late nineteenth century.¹ Although I find her term useful, my account of how romantic friendship was viewed at the turn of the eighteenth century differs markedly from Faderman's. She claims that romantic friendships were widely approved of and idealized and therefore were never conceived of as sexual, even by romantic friends themselves. My argument, on the other hand, emphasizes the conflict between approving accounts of the chastity of these relationships, virulent denunciations of the dangers of female homosexuality, and self-conscious representations of homosexual desire by women. Faderman's book shares with the other well-known feminist study of the history of women's intimacy, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's article, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,"² the assumption that intimate female friendship of the past, far from being a problematic or contested category, was straightforwardly valued and encouraged by the middle-class society in which it was found. Faderman claims, for example, that romantic friendship in the eighteenth century "signified a relationship that was considered noble and virtuous in every way" (p. 16), and Smith-Rosenberg stresses the extent to which these friendships were "socially acceptable and fully compatible with heterosexual marriage" (p. 34). Such accounts, I would argue, draw very partially on the evidence of how these relationships were viewed by contemporaries. Faderman's and Smith-Rosenberg's studies obscure the wariness and even prohibition that sometimes surrounded women's friendships, leaving us with a flattened notion of contesting constructions of female sexuality in late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century England.

Many of the limitations of Faderman's and Smith-Rosenberg's arguments spring from their reliance on the category of gender to

the exclusion of a systematic consideration of sexuality in their efforts to understand women's intimate friendships. For Faderman, sexuality is a "limited" vantage point from which to regard these relationships, for it is only "in our century that love has come to be perceived as a refinement of the sexual impulse" (p. 19). By dismissing sexuality from her account of romantic friendship, Faderman can forge a link between the women she is studying and the particular lesbian feminist community out of which she is writing—a link that paradoxically refuses to see lesbian community as importantly constituted by sexuality. "In lesbian-feminism," she writes,

I found a contemporary analog to romantic friendship in which two women were everything to each other and had little connection with men who were so alienatingly and totally different. . . . I venture to guess that had the romantic friends of other eras lived today, many of them would have been lesbian-feminists; and had the lesbian-feminists of our day lived in other eras, most of them would have been romantic friends. (P. 20)

Their (gendered) difference from men, then, rather than their (sexual) desire for women, draws romantic friends and lesbian feminists to one another. This polemical interpretation of contemporary lesbian-feminist communities and relationships, Faderman makes clear, is an attempt to intervene in the misogynist medico-legal view, found, for example, in Freud's "Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman,"³ that lesbians relate to women in the same way men do, as failed and ridiculous pseudomen. But important as such interventions have been in feminist theory, Faderman's approach serves feminism poorly. Faderman purports to offer an account of lesbianism as woman-centered, having nothing to do with men or masculinity (although paradoxically, it is their difference from men that defines lesbians) and everything to do with feminism. In such an account, gender becomes the primary analytic category and sexuality is seen at best as a subcategory of gender and certainly completely determined by it.

Smith-Rosenberg's argument, although more careful and less polemical, nonetheless shares this basic analytic grid. She argues that the "emotional segregation of men and women" in nineteenth-century U.S. society produced "a specifically female world . . . built around a generic and unself-conscious pattern of single-sex or homosocial networks" (p. 35). For her, the basic pattern of women's interactions was "an intimate mother-daughter relation-

ship" (p. 41), and she frequently describes the relationships between the women she studies in familial terms, for example as "sisterly bonds" (p. 39). Thus, although she takes pains to point out the "intensity and even physical nature" (p. 32) of women's intimate friendships, Smith-Rosenberg ultimately wants to locate that physicality within a set of nonsexual, familylike interactions between women. Like Faderman, Smith-Rosenberg opposes an account of same-sex relationships that sees them only "in terms of a dichotomy between normal and abnormal." Instead, she suggests an approach that "would view [these relationships] within a cultural and social setting rather than from an exclusively individual psychosexual perspective" (p. 28). This relocation from the individual to the social, for Smith-Rosenberg, is a move from analyses of sexuality to those of gender. This conceptual reframing, however, obliterates the possibility of an analysis of sexuality as a phenomenon both distinct from gender and social in its production and effects.

My own exploration of the early-nineteenth-century discourse of romantic friendship gives priority to the ideological work of sexuality as a social category related to but distinct from gender. I offer Maria Edgeworth's 1801 novel, *Belinda*, as a symptomatic representation of the contradictory status of the ideology of romantic friendship in the period. Following an examination of the novel, this analysis turns to the diary account of Regency Yorkshire-woman Anne Lister's numerous sexual affairs with women in order to clarify the ways in which women readers of domestic fictions like *Belinda* may have found spaces among the contradictory imperatives of romantic friendship within which to construct themselves as female homosexual characters.⁴ Finally, *Woods and Pirie v. Dame Cumming Gordon*, an 1811 Scottish legal case in which two female teachers were accused of having a sexual relationship by one of their pupils, establishes one instance of the way in which this ideology shaped notions of public virtue and legal truth.

BELINDA AND THE "MAN-WOMAN"

Like many eighteenth-century novels⁵ of heterosexual love and marriage, Maria Edgeworth's 1801 *Belinda* is named for its heroine. Despite this conventional marker of the marriage plot, however,

Belinda's relationships with her suitors are relatively marginal: the men are often absent, relegated by the narrative to the Continent or belatedly summoned by it from the West Indies. Belinda's romantic friendship with Lady Delacour, the rakish woman of the world who launches her into society and finally, precariously, into marriage with Clarence Hervey, pushes the marriage plot to the margins. But the implicit pleasures and explicit dangers of romantic friendship cluster most clearly around the figure of Harriot Freke, the crossdressing "man-woman"⁶ whom Belinda supplants as Lady Delacour's intimate friend in the novel's second chapter. This brief discussion of the novel, then, focuses primarily upon this emblematic figure and not upon the more conventional relationship between Lady Delacour and Belinda. For Harriot Freke's displacement from Lady Delacour's affections fails to banish her from the narrative itself. Her several reappearances work to expose the political and moral ruin threatening young ladies who trust too much to intimacy with other women and the grave consequences for society of such relationships. Thus, Belinda's judgment of Mrs. Freke also defines one of the chief didactic aims of the novel itself; she provides "a lesson to young ladies in the choice of female friends" (p. 230).

Lest her functions in the novel be misunderstood, Harriot Freke's name itself signals her unnatural status in the novel's terms. The most important clue to and symptom of her freakishness is her dress. From her first appearance at a masquerade, during which Lady Delacour looks for her dressed as "the widow Brady, in man's clothes" (p. 14), until her final defeat when she is mistaken by Lady Delacour's gardener for "the fellow . . . who has been at my morello cherry-tree every night" (p. 282) and caught and wounded in the gardener's "man-trap," Harriot Freke exults in dressing like a man. Wearing men's clothes also allows Mrs. Freke to adopt gestures implicitly coded in the novel as "masculine": polishing a pistol on the sleeve of her coat (p. 46), throwing her hat upon the table (p. 204), striking the sole of her boot with her whip (p. 205). An early scene sets up her masculinized position with regard to the heroine as well. Desiring Belinda's presence in her house, Mrs. Freke attempts to "carry her off in triumph" from the home of the virtuous Percivals. All the activity of the attempted elopement is seen to be what Belinda calls the "knight-errantry" of Mrs. Freke; Belinda, whom her would-be rescuer calls a "distressed damsel,"

can only "draw back" from the spectacle of an active woman. Her masculine activity, of course, is the kind conventionally ridiculed in the domestic novel: Mrs. Freke's movement through a room is the inattentive bluster of the vain buck, like that of Austen's John Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*.

The chapter in which this scene appears is entitled "The Rights of Woman," and in it Mrs. Freke produces several mutually inconsistent "plump assertions" purporting to represent arguments for the equality of women with men. These "assertions," culminating in her cry of "I hate slavery! Vive la liberté! . . . I'm a champion for the Rights of Woman" (p. 208), are firmly and reasonably opposed by Mr. Percival, who claims to be "an advocate for [women's] happiness" instead of their rights. Harriot Freke's clothing is linked in this chapter to her freedom of movement and her opposition to the "slavery" of women. All are coded as the ineffective dandyism of the failed suitor, and all are made to seem ridiculous and unnatural in a woman.

By ridiculing Harriot Freke, Edgeworth vividly satirizes a whole cluster of proto-Romantic Jacobin ideas—feminism, domestic and political revolution, opposition to slavery, sexual freedom. Harriot Freke's male-parodic behavior, however, links these ideas to the possibility of a female erotic agency directed, not at men but at other women. Harriot Freke is the "wrong" suitor for Belinda, true; but that she could be represented as a suitor at all raises fundamental problems in the novel's attempt to construct the sexuality of the domestic woman. Thus, although Harriot Freke is figured as a joke here, she also poses a danger to Belinda, the danger of inappropriate female friendship. Clearly, to associate with such a woman would compromise Belinda in the eyes of her host and of her suitor, Mr. Vincent, who is also present during the scene. Thus, when Mr. Vincent asks if she is not afraid of making an enemy of Mrs. Freke, Belinda replies, "I think her friendship more to be dreaded than her enmity" (p. 211). Belinda has successfully learned and reproduced the novel's most important stricture about female friendship—that women who attempt to usurp the position of men are not just inappropriate but dangerous friends for young ladies hoping to marry well.

The novel opposes Harriot's freakish courtship of Belinda with Lady Delacour's ladylike attentions, establishing romantic friendship between "normal" feminine women as an appropriate rela-

tionship within which the women can express intense romantic feeling. But the passionate language of romantic friendship fails to uphold a stable distinction between the two kinds of intimacy between women. For example, Lady Delacour asks herself: "What was Harriot Freke in comparison with Belinda Portman? Harriot Freke, even whilst she diverted me most, I half despised. But Belinda!—Oh, Belinda! how entirely have I loved—trusted—admired—adored—respected—revered you!" (p. 164). The rivalry and comparison set up here between Harriot and Belinda suggests a troubling equation between two characters who are supposed to represent moral opposites.

The public stakes of "the choice of female friends" become clear in a scene early in the novel. Lady Delacour recounts the many adventures in which she has been involved with Harriot Freke, adventures which culminate in Lady Delacour's being challenged by another woman, Mrs. Luttridge, to a duel. The occasion is an election, in which Lady Delacour and Mrs. Freke are canvassing for one candidate and Mrs. Luttridge for his opponent. Incensed by a caricature Lady Delacour has drawn of her, Mrs. Luttridge is heard to say that "she wished . . . to be a man, that she might be qualified to take proper notice of [Lady Delacour's] conduct" (p. 44). Significantly, the social problem begins with one of reading: Harriot Freke has read an essay by Clarence Hervey on "The Propriety and Necessity of Female Duelling," the argument of which she uses to convince Lady Delacour to duel. Lady Delacour tells Belinda that she is persuaded by "the masculine superiority, as I thought it, of Harriot's understanding," as well as by Harriot's assurance that she "should charm all beholders in male attire." Both Mrs. Luttridge and her second appear in men's clothes as well. As the crossdressed women fire into the air, a mob of the local electorate pours on to the scene. Lady Delacour suddenly realizes that "an English mob is really a formidable thing," especially when she herself is the object of its wrath. She says she is "convinced that they would not have been half so much scandalized if we had boxed in petticoats" (p. 47) rather than dueling in boots and jackets. Their danger increases until Clarence Hervey arrives, driving a herd of pigs; he convinces the mob to follow him in order to race a French man driving a flock of turkeys and diverts the crowd's attention to this nationalistic contest. Lady Delacour's improperly loaded pistol backfires and she sustains a wound to her

breast. Everyone else escapes without physical harm, but the political consequences are more serious. "The fate of the election turned upon this duel," Lady Delacour says. "With true English pigheadedness, they went every man of them and polled for an independent candidate of their own choosing, whose wife, forsooth, was a proper behaved woman" (p. 49).

The force of this scene depends upon the centrality of the novel's—and the period's—anxieties about how improper female friendship can lead women to usurp the positions of men, resulting not only in confused gender and sexual boundaries but also in personal and political violence. These anxieties underscore the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of policing the boundaries of romantic friendship. For although, on the one hand, such a friendship could be argued to guarantee female virtue, because it fixed women's desires and attentions upon one another rather than upon possibly sexual relations with men; on the other hand, female friendship could also result in a dangerous female autonomy from men, even an attempt to take the place of men (in this case by dressing like them or dueling like them).⁷ The usurpation of male-gendered clothing and behavior by women, then, produces a dislocation in the social organization of sexuality. The sexual agency made possible by romantic friendship disrupts heterosexual norms, calling into question the gendered terms within which the domestic space is organized. "Masculinity" and "femininity" are revealed as arbitrary social codes rather than as the given essences argued for by domestic fiction. And in the context of the domestic novel, wrenching sexuality from gender in this way sets in motion a whole set of political upheavals that threaten to collapse the tightly knit interrelations of gender, class, nation, and sexuality upon which the novel's authority depends.

Belinda is one of those eighteenth-century novels that uneasily condemns the reading of novels themselves on the grounds that they give their young women readers dangerous ideas about how to act in the world.⁸ This self-undermining anxiety spills over into ambivalence about all acts of writing and reading—about who writes, who reads, and what effects these activities have on the susceptible minds of women. In this scene, women reading—Harriot Freke's and Lady Delacour's response to Hervey's essay—has indeed produced women rioting, or women *and* rioting. And this nexus—of autonomous, indecent women and an enraged pop-

ular mob—is a potent threat in this novel and, I would argue, in the definition of romantic friendship as well. If inappropriate friendships between women can throw an election and rouse the common people of an English county to protest *en masse*, then the stakes of separating off “virtuous” romantic friendship, in which women’s reading is controlled by propriety, from “indecent” female intimacy, which fails to distinguish appropriate texts for women, are high indeed. The explicit anxiety in this scene might be political unrest, but such public consequences were shadowed by the possibility of privatized, sexual indecency between women as well. Both spectacles of rebellion are linked to the fear that in order to mark the boundary between “virtuous” and “indecent” female friendships, one might have actually to represent an indecent character like Harriot Freke in order to condemn her but that such a representation might also have the power, as it does within the text,⁹ to entice women to imitate her rather than to turn from her in horror. Such representations, in short, might give female readers access to the very acts and attitudes that the category “romantic friendship” exists to suppress.

Harriot Freke, significantly, is not a duelist here. Throughout the novel, her distanced agency places her outside the world of conventional femininity in which the heterosexual plot of the novel takes place. Appropriately, then, the character who most clearly recognizes her as a transgressor of gender boundaries, bestowing upon her the epithet “man-woman,” is the Black slave Juba, whom Mr. Vincent, one of Belinda’s suitors, has brought with him from Jamaica. Indeed, it is in her interactions with Juba, placed late in the novel, that the wider ramifications of Mrs. Freke’s aberrant status are clearest. Her relationship with Juba pivotally establishes the importance of female sexual “normality” in anchoring not only domestic and familial relations but also class and colonial ones.

The major incident in which Juba takes part begins with a reference to Harriot Freke’s characteristically distanced agency in the sexuality of the women around her: “It is somewhat singular that Lady Delacour’s faithful friend, Harriot Freke, should be the cause of Mr Vincent’s first fixing his favourable attention on Miss Portman.” Juba parks his master’s carriage in Mrs. Freke’s space. Next, Mrs Freke, who heard and saw the whole transaction from her window, said, or swore, that she would make Juba repent of what she called his insolence.

The threat was loud enough to reach his ears, and he looked up in astonishment to hear such a voice from a woman. . . . Mr Vincent, to whom Juba, with much simplicity, expressed his aversion of the *man-woman* who lived in the house with him, laughed at the odd manner in which the black imitated her voice and gesture. . . . (Pp. 199-200)

Of course, this scene establishes not only Mrs. Freke's inappropriate masculinity but Juba's appropriate or normal masculinity as well. In retelling the incident to Mr. Vincent, Juba is clearly a man among men, for this moment at least.

Juba's account is the only utterance in which the novel makes Harriot Freke's masculinity explicit; the narrator and other characters allude to qualities which are read, in the context of the novel's conventional construction of femininity, as masculine, but it takes Juba, a character as "freakish" (in the novel's world) as Mrs. Freke herself, to name what is so shocking about her. This passage draws attention first to his "simplicity," the uncivilized propensity for seeing right to the heart of things manifested in his "astonishment" at hearing a woman swearing. Because he has not been perverted by the metropolitan fashion that makes Harriot Freke's oddities tolerable in the polite world, he can identify them as repulsive and oxymoronic by demonstrating an instinctual "aversion of the *man-woman*." But equally important is Juba's affinity with her. His ability to imitate "her voice and gesture" indicates not just the racist notion that Africans are imitative, monkeylike, but also suggests that, because of his own "odd manner," Juba can successfully parody Mrs. Freke's. Juba, then, is as freakish in his colonial simplicity as is Harriot Freke in her metropolitan decadence. Both primitiveness and decadence help define the boundaries of the middle-class female virtue that is the novel's ideological ground.

At the moment when Juba and Mrs. Freke clash, all the alternative possibilities for representing female sexuality that are being generated and unsuccessfully contained in Belinda's world of female domestic power break out into the larger national and international space.¹⁰ The incident underscores the importance of publicly identifying and repudiating Harriot Freke's aberrant power. Thus, she is punished by being brutally mangled in a "man-trap" set to catch garden thieves, and the novel insists that as a result of her wound "the beauty of her legs would be spoiled, and . . . she would never more be able to appear to advantage in man's apparel" (p. 284). Harriot Freke's body is torn from the narrative when its

compelling power as a freakish spectacle threatens to overwhelm its exemplary function. We see no more of Harriot when she can no longer wear men's clothes.

Because the novel's heterosexual plot has been so problematized, the act of ending the narrative becomes a problem as well. The last lines of the novel are, paradoxically, not part of a novel at all but a heroic couplet, the kind of summary statement that often concludes eighteenth-century plays: "Our tale contains a moral; and no doubt/You all have wit enough to find it out." It is significant that the final couplet should refuse to identify the novel's "moral." This gesture indicates both the novel's overt concern with moral questions and its inability to deal coherently with the central ones it raises. The absence of a moral from the novel's conclusion signals the possibility that these questions have not been fully recuperated by its awkward and incoherent version of heterosexual closure. For the linchpin of the novel's moral universe is the purity of its heroine, a purity guaranteed by the reformation of her intimate friend. Central to this reformation is Lady Delacour's rejection of Harriot Freke and the sexual irregularity she represents. The novel tries to make this process unproblematic by having Lady Delacour cast off her friend in the second chapter. But because the novel places the issue of female friendship at the center of so many other systems of authority, Harriot Freke must be constantly summoned back into the story to demonstrate the threat posed by inappropriate female friendship to gender relations, sexual norms, nationalism, and race and colonial relations—to establish these relations by constructing their opposites in the world in which Harriot Freke might be desirable and powerful.

READING NOVELS: A "FEARFUL ROUSING"

Such a fictional world, in which the ridiculed and marginalized female "suitor" has the power to threaten and disrupt the heroine's progress toward heterosexual marriage, has clear links with emerging Romantic notions of the antihero as social outcast. The Jacobin Harriot Freke holds political, social, and sexual views remarkably similar to those of a historical person, Anne Lister, who might have been one of her readers. Lister's diary provides an example of how eighteenth-century ideas about the potential threat of novel reading to female virtue, combined with a Rousseauist in-

vestment in individual emotional and sexual singularity, could come together to produce female homosexual desires, practices, and texts. Lister, born in 1791 in West Yorkshire, kept voluminous diaries that recorded details—often in code—of her numerous sexual affairs with women, most frequently with a married woman named Marianne Lawton with whom she was involved for several years. Lister's struggles to understand and justify her own desires are most often struggles over literary interpretation—that is, struggles over reading and the sexual effects of texts.

The effect of domestic fictions like *Belinda* proves most problematic for Lister. In recording her response to such fiction, Lister clearly participates in turn-of-the-century assumptions that inappropriate reading will allow women access to information that might threaten their virtue. She habitually reads novels, sometimes aloud to her friends, sometimes alone. Following an afternoon of reading aloud, Lister notes that the company agreed "that Lady Caroline Lamb's novel, *Glenarvon*, is very talented but a very dangerous sort of book."¹¹ The danger seems to increase when Lister is alone:

From 1 to 3, read the first 100pp. vol. 3 *Leontine de Blondheim*. . . . It is altogether a very interesting thing & I have read it with a sort of melancholy feeling, the very germ of which I thought had died forever. I cried a good deal . . . Arlhofe reminds me of of C— [Marianne Lawton's husband], Leontine of M— [Marianne], & Wallerstein of myself. I find my former feelings are too soon awakened & I have, still, more romance than can let me bear the stimulus, the fearful rousing, of novel reading. I must not indulge it. I must keep to graver things and strongly occupy myself with other thoughts and perpetual exertions. I am not happy. I get into what I have been led with . . . Anne [a woman with whom she had had an affair she kept secret from Marianne]. Oh, that I were more virtuous and quiet. Reflection distracts me & now I could cry like a child but will not, must not give way. (P. 146)

One of the dangers of novel reading, then, is that it might lead one to compare the fictional situation too closely with "real life" and thus create a heightened emotional and sexual state that might work against virtuous determinations like Lister's vow to see no more of Anne. In order to remain "virtuous and quiet," then, one must avoid "the stimulus, the fearful rousing, of novel reading."

Nonfiction, however, seems to produce for Lister a less problematic—although paradoxically more socially disruptive—form of identification. In attempting to explain to her own satisfaction her continuing devotion to Marianne, Lister claims that, like Rousseau, she

must follow her own genius: "Je sens mon coeur, et je connais les hommes. Je ne suis fait comme aucun de ceux que j'ai vus; j'ose croire n'être fait comme aucun de ceux qui existent. Rousseau's *Confessions*, volume and page, first."¹² Instead of producing confusing sensory and emotional responses, as did fiction, Rousseau's memoir allows Lister a more respectable form of identification with a "moral" nonfictional text. Significantly, fiction is coded as both female (inasmuch as Lady Caroline Lamb is the only novelist mentioned) and morally dangerous in Lister's diary. By distancing herself from the dangerous femininity of fiction and instead strategically rereading Rousseau's masculinist memoir, Lister is able to align her desires with those of a central cultural figure, genre, and text. Like Harriot Freke's reading of Hervey's essay on female dueling, Lister's appropriation of male-authored texts allows her to produce a self-representation that exceeds the limits on female behavior these texts themselves work to produce. Lister's account of her desire for Marianne assumes that female homosexuality, as something that can be explained with recourse to Rousseau's notion of the true and unique self, lies at the heart of mainstream cultural concerns.

Crucially, then, Lister's most explicit statement of self-conscious identity, a statement that has the force of a Romantic manifesto, involves an even more concrete rearrangement of a male-authored text. In 1821, she writes:

Burnt . . . Mr Montague's farewell verses that no trace of any man's admiration may remain. It is not meet for me. I love, & only love, the fairer sex & thus beloved by them in turn, my heart revolts from any other love than theirs. (P. 145)

Like Harriot Freke adopting men's clothes in order to proposition the heroine, Lister (who also crossdressed) skillfully pillages the male-authored texts available to her in order to authorize her desires, transforming these masculine accoutrements into something else altogether: the conditions of production of female homosexual character. Whether swearing off literature, quoting it, or burning it, Lister's interaction with texts, as manifested in her own writing, produces and defines female homosexuality as an early-nineteenth-century conceptual category.

Significantly, Lister herself is skeptical of the theory that romantic friendship was completely determined by the ideology of female sexual passivity. When Marianne writes to ask her, after a visit to the famous Ladies of Llangollen,¹³ whether she thinks that

relationship "had always been platonic," Lister records the following reply:

I cannot help thinking that surely it was not platonic. Heaven forgive me, but I look within myself and doubt. I feel the infirmity of our nature & hesitate to pronounce such attachments uncemented by something more tender still than friendship. (P. 210)

For Lister, sexual love between women was not only possible but also likely in the context of romantic friendship.

"HINDOO LAWS": FEMALE HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE COLONIAL BODY

The social importance of the category romantic friendship is made explicit in a Scottish legal case that was tried in 1811, just ten years after the publication of *Belinda*. The facts of the case are briefly these: Jane Pirie and Marianne Woods met in 1802 in Edinburgh and became intimate friends immediately.¹⁴ In 1809 they opened a boarding school for young gentlewomen. In November 1810, the grandmother of one of their pupils and one of Edinburgh's most influential noblewomen, Lady Cumming Gordon, withdrew her granddaughter, Jane Cumming, from the school for what she called "very serious reasons" ("State of the Process," p. 135) and recommended that several other families do the same. Within a few days, the school was emptied. In May 1811, Pirie and Woods brought a charge of libel against Lady Cumming Gordon. When the hearings began, Lady Cumming Gordon's lawyer, George Cranstoun, submitted a statement that accused Pirie and Woods of "indecent and criminal practices" ("Petition for Lady Cumming Gordon," p. 2). The central piece of evidence was the following testimony from Jane Cumming, in which she describes what happened one night while she was in the bed she shared with her teacher, Miss Pirie.

She wakened one night with a whispering, and heard, Miss Pirie say, "O do it darling [punctuation sic], and Miss Woods said, "Not to night;" . . . then Miss Pirie pressed her again to come in, and she came in, and she lay above Miss Pirie . . . Miss Woods began to move, she shook the bed, and she [Cumming] heard [a noise like] . . . putting one's finger in the neck of a wet bottle. . . . [Finally] she heard Miss Woods say to Miss Pirie, "Good night, darling, I think I have put you in the way to get a good sleep to-night." ("State of the Process," pp. 70, 73.)

The libel case was ultimately decided, by a margin of one vote, in favor of Miss Pirie and Miss Woods – that is, the judges decided that

they were innocent of the "indecent and criminal practices" of which they had been accused. However, Dame Cumming Gordon successfully petitioned Parliament to excuse the teachers' claims for damages. Unable to support themselves over the nine-year course of the trial, Woods and Pirie had separated, reduced from flourishing businesswomen to the ranks of the genteel poor.

The case turned on the problem of defining romantic friendship. Witnesses were repeatedly asked if they had ever seen the teachers "kissing, caressing, and fondling each other, more than . . . could have resulted from ordinary female friendship" ("State of the Process," p. 49). The lawyer for the two women played heavily on the outrage to virtuous friendship that the charges represented.

They little thought, that that warm and interesting mutual regard, which springs from the finest and purest feelings of the human heart, and can only exist in pure and virtuous breasts, should be to them the source of the foulest condemnation, or be converted into the means of fixing upon them an imputation of the blackest and most disgusting atrocity. ("Petition of Miss Marianne Woods and Miss Jane Pirie," p. 3)

The heavy stress on notions of fineness, purity, and virtue in these statements indicates the importance of a naturalized norm of emphatically nonsexual friendship between women to which the relationship between Woods and Pirie is implicitly compared. This is the view to which Faderman and Smith-Rosenberg refer in their analyses. The language used to invoke this norm reveals that one of its major functions is to make "virtue" a quality "natural" to women—that is, to render women's sexuality and sexual agency *un*ordinary, complicated, devious, unnatural, impure, and vicious. But the necessity of reiterating these terms, often within the same sentence, points to the lawyer's anxiety over the instability of the norm that he must nonetheless invoke as stable and unproblematic.

The very possibility that sexual acts could occur between women in the absence of a man dislodged a whole system of interpreting women's "ordinary" acts and desires. Lord Meadowbank, indeed emphasizes what poor strategy it was for teachers to sleep with pupils, rather than each other, during the school term if they really wanted to have sex together. This argument rests on the assumption that for teachers to sleep in the same bed would have been a perfectly ordinary occurrence that would raise no suspicions—yet it also reveals the capacity of acts of "ordinary" female friendship to mask the indecent acts that were supposed to be

their antithesis. Lord Meadowbank points out that

under the unsuspected state of female intercourse and habits in this country, they could have been under no difficulty, had it so pleased them, so to have arranged the household, as to have afforded them ample opportunity of every possible indulgence, without suspicion of any impropriety. ("Speeches of the Judges," p. 9)

Inadvertently, this statement demonstrates the impossibility of successfully scrutinizing female friendship, because its "unsuspected state" makes its sexual status unknowable, at least to the male judicial observer. If you can't tell from the outside whether "female intercourse and habits" might be masking "every possible indulgence," how can you rely upon the "unsuspected state" of such habits as the basis for a legal decision?

This challenge to cultural assumptions about sexless female friendship posed an interpretive problem for the judges – the problem of how to read women's representations of female homosexual desires. In their speeches, the judges repeatedly figure the very existence of this problem and the ambiguities it raises about female heterosexual virtue as threats, not just to the students in the boarding school but also to society itself. Lord Meadowbank asserts that besides the students, the teachers, and Lady Cumming Gordon,

there is a fourth party whose interest is deeply at stake, I mean the public: for the virtues, the comforts, and the freedom of domestic intercourse, mainly depend on the purity of female manners, and that, again, on their habits of intercourse remaining, as they have hitherto been, – free from suspicion. [Thus your Lordships] have taken every precaution within your power, though necessarily with small hopes of success, to confine this cause by the walls of the Court, and keep its subject and its investigation unknown in general society. ("Speeches of the Judges," p. 2)

The difficulty for the judges was to try to determine which was the more unlikely: that a schoolgirl had imagined her teachers acting together in such a way as to "supply the absence or neglect of males" ("Speeches of the Judges," p. 16) or that the teachers themselves had not only imagined but carried out such acts. Thus, the question of the "truth" of the case comes to rest on a choice between, not women's sexual passivity and their agency but on two equally problematic forms of that agency.

This impasse threatened to disrupt a system of cultural authority in which women's sexual virtue held in place and legitimated the

very forms of gender, class, and national power which authorized the court's investigation itself.¹⁵ In an attempt to shore up the "natural" status of passive female sexual virtue and hence guarantee their own authority, the judges looked to factors other than gender to shift the origin of the no-win choice between Jane Cumming's "truth" and that of her teachers. Thus, evidence that women could imagine or carry out sexual acts without the presence of a man placed an added burden on the explanatory powers of race and coloniality to locate the origins of the problem of stable female virtue.

Significantly, Jane Cumming, the pupil who first described the teachers' relationship to her grandmother, had been born in India of an Indian mother and a Scottish father, Lady Cumming Gordon's son. Dark-skinned and illegitimate, she spent the first several years of her life in India with her mother's family. Several of the judges felt that her "Hindoo" background was the source of her story. Lord Meadowbank refers to "two Hindoo laws" which, in his mind, establish the strictly foreign character of sex between women by marking out the activity of the deviant foreign body.

There is no sort of doubt, that women of a peculiar conformation, from an elongation of the *clitoris*, are capable both of giving and receiving venereal pleasure, in intercourse with women, by imitating the functions of a male in copulation; and that in some countries this conformation is so common, that circumcision of the *clitoris* is practised as a religious rite . . . and I dare say, it is also true enough, that as a provocative to the use of the male, women have been employed to kindle each other's lewd appetites. Nor is it to be disputed, that by means of tools, women may artificially accomplish the venereal gratification. . . . But if tools and tribadism [clitoral penetration] are out of the question, then I state as the ground of my incredulity . . . the important fact, that the imputed vice has been hitherto unknown in Britain. ("Speeches of the Judges," pp. 7, 8)

Ultimately, most of the judges were to use this argument – that race determines sexuality more importantly than does gender, at least in the case of deviance – to acquit the two Scottish teachers. Of course, Pirie and Woods were never examined to determine whether they bore the "peculiar conformation" that would make it possible for them to have sex together, according to this theory: rather, their "normality" was assumed on the basis of their race. The possibility that British female bodies or British female erotic imaginations were capable of sexual congress with each other was thus diverted in the trial through recourse to a racist myth of a deviant, sexualized

Eastern woman's body which, like her sexual conversation, was unnaturally similar to a man's.

CONCLUSION: FREKISH FRIENDSHIP

The formal and ideological difficulties posed by the necessary function Edgeworth's character Harriot Freke plays in defining domestic female virtue arise from the capacity of the category "romantic friendship" not only to manage and contain women's non-marital desires and their representations but also to incite and sometimes fulfill them. In the context of the Scottish judges' fears about public safety and Anne Lister's potent construction of herself as a sexual agent, Edgeworth's novel cannot convincingly dismiss Harriot Freke's power and example through satire and ridicule. The figure of Harriot Freke invokes both the spectacle raised by the Woods-Pirie case, the spectacle of the sexual recolonization of British women's intimate relationships by subaltern "indecentcy," and the potential, made manifest in Anne Lister's diaries, that women's reading and writing could create a homosexual agency for women. The dangerous appeal of Harriot Freke's presence in *Belinda*, both for the women within the narrative and the women readers outside it, is marked by the novel's attempts to mask her freedom and power by mediating her agency in the chaotic actions she is nonetheless blamed for causing. Nancy Armstrong argues that in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture, the domestic woman "exercised a form of power . . . the power of domestic surveillance."¹⁶ Harriot Freke, as the figure for indecent female friendship, plays the necessary Other to bourgeois women in the privatized domestic space where they hold and exert this power. However, she also threatens the sanctity of that space by revealing the conflict of the several systems of authority based on gender, class, and race that make it possible.

Significantly, it is the production of specifically sexual figures within this female-gendered space that disrupts these systems. It is only by reading these sexual figures—reading them precisely as sexual—that this important tool in the bourgeoisie's story about the legitimacy of its own rise to power becomes visible. Female homosexuality, at once produced and banished in the invocation of romantic friendship, provides a unique category with which to analyze a specific moment in the transition from eighteenth-

century notions of "character" to the Romantic investment in identity that continues to shape homosexuality and homophobia today. The case of female homosexuality as a specific problem for reading and interpretation has a history distinct both from that of male homosexuality and from that of "women," a history fascinating and important in its own right and crucial to our understanding of the stakes of the wider historical processes that produced it and which it exposes.

NOTES

I wish to thank all those whose comments on drafts of this essay helped shape my ideas about Edgeworth, romantic friendship, and lesbian theory: Laura Brown, Mary Jacobus, Laura Mandell, Biddy Martin, Terry Rowden, Charlotte Sussman, and Alok Yadav.

1. Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981), 16. All references are to this edition; subsequent citations appear in parentheses in the text.

2. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," in *The Signs Reader: Women, Gender, and Scholarship*, ed. Elizabeth Abel and Emily K. Abel (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983). References will be included parenthetically in the text. Despite Smith-Rosenberg's focus on nineteenth-century American women, I consider her account useful for a study of the earlier turn-of-the-nineteenth-century British discourse of romantic friendship for both empirical and theoretical reasons. First, she uses several eighteenth-century examples, and some of the women whose letters and diaries she quotes traveled or lived in England. Second, she uses these case histories to support more general claims about "the long-lived, intimate, loving friendship between women" and its relation to female sexuality more generally (pp. 27, 54).

3. In "Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman," Freud says of his patient that "in her behaviour towards her love-object she had throughout assumed the masculine part. . . . She had thus not only chosen a feminine love-object, but had also developed a masculine attitude towards that object." More generally, he ends the essay by describing a "female homosexual" as "a woman who has felt herself to be a man, and has loved in masculine fashion." See Philip Rieff, ed., *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 141, 159.

4. I use "character" here as a term historically antecedent to what we would now call "identity."

5. Marilyn Butler points out that Edgeworth based her account of London fashionable life in *Belinda* on the stories of her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, who had lived in London during the 1770s. Maria Edgeworth had never actually visited the metropolis at the time she wrote this novel in 1800. In the sense that *Belinda* describes the 1770s as if they were the present, it is more clearly an eighteenth-century novel than, for example, the contemporary works of Jane Austen. See Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 149.

6. Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda*, Pandora Press Edition (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 200. All references are to this edition; subsequent citations appear in parentheses in the text.

7. The crowd shifts its attention from the duel to the race because Clarence plays on their Gallophobia, exhorting them to help on his pigs "for the love of Old England." Significantly, Harriot Freke had explained their predicament to him in French, presumably so that the crowd wouldn't understand that she was appealing for help. Mrs. Freke is linked to things French at other points during the novel as well, as for example, when she declares herself a champion for the Rights of Woman with the slogan "Vive la liberté!" And the Frenchness of Lady Delacour's name, as well as her position at the head of a salon of wit and fashion and her independence from her husband, underline the novel's equation between the inappropriate agency these women wield and their aristocratic, "Frenchified" notions of social relations. Such a rejection of French ideas, always a strain in English popular thinking, was particularly acute for the bourgeois English in the period following the French Revolution. The middle class distanced itself from both the popular violence of the French lower classes and the luxurious excesses of the aristocracy in an attempt to reassure itself that such an event would not happen in England. As Louis Crompton notes, "nowhere did English Francophobia find more impassioned expression than in attitudes toward sex." See his *Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in Nineteenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 4.
8. Janet Todd notes that "the corrupting power of books was a commonplace of eighteenth-century thought" (Janet Todd, *Women's Friendships in Literature* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1980], 210 n. 16). Nancy Armstrong discusses how, in their moral and educational writings, Maria Edgeworth and her father "accept the view that prevailed during the eighteenth century, which said fiction behaved subversively and misled female desire" (15). The danger not just of reading but of reading novels had become so conventional by midcentury that satirizing it could form the major narrative structure of Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752) as well as Jane Austen's better-known *Northanger Abbey* (1818), written in the 1790s.
9. After Belinda's rejection of her, Harriot Freke reappears in the novel with another young lady in her thrall.
10. Thanks to Terry Rowden for helping me formulate this connection.
11. Helena Whitbread, ed., *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister, 1791-1840* (London: Virago Press, 1988), 296. All references are to this edition; subsequent citations appear in parentheses in the text.
12. Whitbread, 283. Whitbread translates these lines thus: "I know my own heart & I know men. I am not made like any other I have seen. I dare believe myself to be different from any others who exist" (frontispiece).
13. Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby eloped from their matchmaking families in 1778 and lived together in Llangollen, Wales, until Butler's death in 1829. They became something of a tourist attraction and were often held up by contemporaries such as Burke, Wordsworth, and Southey as exemplars of selfless (because nonsexual) love. However, an account entitled "Extraordinary Female Affection," which appeared in a local Welsh newspaper in 1790, ridiculed Butler's masculinity and cast doubts on the respectability of the Ladies. Less public accounts of the relationship, then, tended to be more skeptical of its chastity. See Elizabeth Mavor, ed. *A Year with the Ladies of Llangollen* (London: Penguin Books, 1984).
14. *Miss Marianne Woods and Miss Jane Pirie against Dame Helen Cumming Gordon* (New York: Arno Press, 1975). This edition is an unedited reprint of the original trial materials, in which each portion of the testimony is paginated separately. My references will include section title and page number and will be included parenthetically in the text. See also Lillian Faderman, *Scotch Verdict: "Miss Pirie and Miss Woods v. Dame Cumming Gordon"* (New York: William Morrow, 1983). This volume consists of excerpts from the trial transcripts, which Faderman claims are "edited . . . con-

siderably, but always with a concern for the accuracy of the ideas expressed in the original documents " (iii), interspersed with Faderman's own speculations about the case. According to Faderman, this is the case upon which Lillian Hellman based her 1934 play, *The Children's Hour*.

15. As Nancy Armstrong points out, the creation of the domestic authority of the virtuous middle-class woman allowed for the emergence of "that middle-class power which does not appear to be power because it behaves in specifically female ways." See her *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (London: Oxford University Press, 1987), 26. I would add that one such way was that judicial authority came to operate on the model of familial authority, as a moral and protective, rather than punitive and coercive, force. Thus, safeguarding virtue—and hence necessarily defining, identifying, and *producing* it—became a matter for the courts as well as the churches.

16. *Ibid.*, 19.