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“It is a Female Marriage!”: Lesbian Relationships in Victorian England

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**“IT IS A FEMALE MARRIAGE!”
LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND**

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Abstract: Marriage in Victorian Era England was already a strict social expectation, and this paper explores the added complexity that came with queer identity for women during this time. Through a case study of Irish writer and philosopher Frances Power Cobbe and her wife, Mary Lloyd, lesbian relationships are compared and contrasted with heterosexual marriage. Additionally, exploration of the beginnings of the field of sexology helps to illustrate the complex relationship between sexuality and gender within the context of Victorian society. Using primary texts in the genre of "lifewriting," this paper attempts to illustrate the realities of same-sex intimacy, the cult of domesticity, and the social requirement of marriage within the Victorian world.

Illustrating the Victorian World: On Marriage and Motherhood

In the Victorian world, marriage was considered absolutely necessary for women. Unmarried women were viewed as odd and unconventional; a husband was believed to be crucial for a woman's livelihood. Marriage was regarded as a duty, yet "the young, of both sexes, should be taught to look forward to it, not as a mere plaything, but as one of life's responsibilities."² Marriage between a man and a woman was the "natural" state of affairs. From arranged and strategic marriages to the careful monitoring of private diaries, women in the nineteenth century were under immense pressure to find a suitable man to marry.

This paper will center on how lesbian women fit into a period that was completely obsessed with marriage, how they conformed to societal expectations, and how early sexologists

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² William Andrus Alcott, *The Physiology of Marriage* (John P. Jewett & Company, 1856), 14.

tried to define them in late Victorian society. First, I will use an actual lesbian relationship from this era as a case study to display the reality of non-conformity. Second, I will examine how both fiction and biographical literature responded to these non-normative relationships. Finally, I will examine the field of sexology which began to pathologize the spectrum of sexuality. Using both primary sources from this period in England and modern secondary sources, an effective comparison between heterosexual and homosexual marriage among Victorians can be made. Despite differences perceived by society, when examined in hindsight, it is clear that these two partnerships were strikingly similar in function and practice.

There were immense pressures involved in the lives of women in Victorian society and conventional marriage was thought to serve an enormous cultural purpose. The relative impossibility of women being able to remain unmarried meant that the expectation of marriage was even more stressful for queer women at the time. Those who did not have a professional career such as writer, journalist, actress, or craftsperson, would have struggled to find income, and it was a privilege that some women could afford to stay unmarried. Additionally, the Victorian Era introduced the “redundant women problem” which proved cause for alarm. This rhetoric is best demonstrated by essayist William Rathbone Greg, who explicitly states how shockingly far he would go to solve the “redundant women problem.”

In the analysis of queer history from this era, there is a lack of research on the relations of lesbians in particular. The word *queer*, indeed, does include women but does not attend to the necessary specificity of women and their relations with one another.³ The concept of same-sex desire is not a blanket statement; the societal implications of a public queer relationship differ

³ Valerie Traub, “The Sign of the Lesbian,” in *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 288–89.

between genders. Modern historians recognize changes in queer histories in different places and periods. However, one thing remains unchanging in the realm of LGBTQ+ studies: “the category of normal is always defined in opposition to ‘queers.’”⁴ Many queer women were married to men and unable to pursue their true romantic feelings. Solace was sought in female friendships, but not all were lucky enough to make those connections. Danger lay within the discussion of any activities that were not heteronormative; lesbianism, in theory or practice, was taboo.

A large responsibility of women in Victorian England was the moralization of their husbands and the maintenance of their houses. The role of the wife was primarily concerned with cooking, housekeeping, and tending to children. The duties of a wife and mother as a moralizing force filled volumes of books, pamphlets, and religious sermons. Referred to as “the angel in the house,” it was expected of a woman to place the happiness of her husband and children before her own.⁵ Perfecting the role of the housewife was critical; the angel of the house desired to avert her husband’s eyes from the temptations of the market.

Amid their wifely obligations, many queer women sought female friendships, fostering a camaraderie that fueled opposition to marriage. The “cult of domesticity,” or “true womanhood,” was an idealized set of societal standards placed on women. Piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity were the mark of femininity during this period, as prescribed by American child-rearing manuals that were ever-present in the nineteenth century.⁶ The cult of domesticity stamped out all creative, social, and professional whims of Victorian women, and men with

⁴ Rebecca Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Women Since 1500* (Oxford, England ; Greenwood World Pub., 2007), xvi.

⁵ Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Women Since 1500*, 59.

⁶ Maxine L. Margolis, *Mothers and Such: Views of American Women and Why They Changed* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 12.

working wives were often stigmatized. Female friendships (also referred to as *romantic friendships*), therefore, proved a vital social function and were widely accepted and even encouraged to maintain wives' spirits.⁷ Opposition to marriage, on the other hand, was not hard to find (though the social expectation was unwavering in severity). From quite a negative perspective, Author Sarah Grand remarked that marriage consisted solely of "crocheting, child-rearing, and husband attending."⁸ Thus, unmarried women were dubbed "redundant" because they did not fit into the traditional "wife" or "mother" roles.

Narratives of Sapphism: Works of Fiction and Frances Power Cobbe

Contemporary literature of the era (circa 1900) grappled with the concept of women's autonomy and sexuality. *The Awakening*, written in 1899 by American author Kate Chopin, "deals with women struggling with their desires to define and control their lives, especially sexually."⁹ According to Chopin, there should be no such choice between a woman's autonomy and intimacy.¹⁰ Despite the seemingly unstoppable rise of the family unit in ideological significance, marriage had taken on a new form in the nineteenth-century world: it became less a social alliance and more so a union based on love.¹¹ While this may seem rather obvious to the twenty-first-century reader, marriage arrangements were more often than not predetermined

⁷ Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain*, 40.

⁸ Iveta Jusová, *The New Woman and the Empire* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), 17.

⁹ Susan Koppelman and Cairns Collection of American Women Writers., *Two Friends and Other Nineteenth-Century Lesbian Stories by American Women Writers* (New York: Meridian, 1994), 175.

¹⁰ Koppelman and Cairns Collection of American Women Writers., 177.

¹¹ Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain*, 59.

since the eighteenth century, all in the name of financial and societal status. However, the incorporation of *feelings* into the selection of a partner certainly altered the marriage narrative.

In what is now regarded as classic literature, the discussion of marriage for love versus strategy began to influence actual marriage conventions. A tradition of middle-class domestic fiction of the Victorian Era was to use marriage between characters as a vehicle with which to subdue characters' desires to transgress social roles.¹² Author Elizabeth Robins used marriage as a commentary on the compatibility between people of the same class, which further cemented the idea of a static social hierarchy. Robins' literature uses marriage as a plot to solve "private dilemmas" and reconcile socioeconomic problems.¹³ Such a phenomenon is not independent of literature; arranged marriage was commonplace in reality. The marriage plot acted as a vehicle by which heteronormative marriage became the foundation of British society. It was only at the end of the nineteenth century that "new woman" literature began to provide a space for women to explore their identities and be honest with how miserable marriage has the potential to be.

This was not just a discussion in circles of literature, though. Frances Power Cobbe was an Irish writer and philosopher known for her feminist ideals. In the late 1850s, Cobbe had traveled to Italy to visit a friend and was introduced to Mary Lloyd, an acquaintance of her host. The friendship between the two quickly grew, and they had moved in together by the mid-1860s. The couple settled in London and bought a house together in South Kensington and at last, the "lonely wanderings" of Cobbe were over.¹⁴ The two women had both pursued careers and thus

¹² Jusová, *The New Woman and the Empire*, 24.

¹³ Jusová, 102.

¹⁴ Frances Power Cobbe, *Life of Frances Power Cobbe, as Told by Herself*, 1894, 396.

were able to afford to remain unmarried: Cobbe a writer and philosopher, and Lloyd an accomplished sculptor.

In the wake of her partner's death in 1896, Cobbe insisted that she be buried next to Lloyd, a request that was granted eight years later upon her death in 1904.¹⁵ According to a long-time friend of Cobbe, Blanche Atkinson, Cobbe struggled deeply with Lloyd's death.

The sorrow of Miss Lloyd's death changed the whole aspect of existence for Miss Cobbe. The joy of life had gone. It had been such a friendship as is rarely seen—perfect in love, sympathy, and mutual understanding. No other friend—though Miss Cobbe was rich in friends—could fill the vacant place, and henceforward her loneliness was great even when surrounded by those she loved and valued.¹⁶

To many, it seems that Cobbe regarded Lloyd as a spouse as much as other women considered their husbands. The companionship of the two never faltered and neither ever married; Cobbe says in her autobiography that no other person in her life understood her as Lloyd did.¹⁷ Though never said explicitly by either woman in their letters or writings, the relationship between the two rings distinctly queer.

The “friends” Victorian women mentioned in letters and diaries often held a more significant role in the writers' lives than was let on. As literary scholar Sharon Marcus shows, referring to someone as a “very special friend” was code for an intimate relationship; many women wrote publicly about their cohabitation and sharing of assets with such a “friend.”¹⁸ In a contemporary work, English physician and teacher Sophia Jex-Blake was public in 1858 with her supposed inability to “love men as other women did” which sounds remarkably similar to the

¹⁵ Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 53.

¹⁶ Blanche Atkinson, “Life of Frances Power Cobbe, as Told by Herself,” in *Introduction*, 1894, vi.

¹⁷ Cobbe, *Life of Frances Power Cobbe, as Told by Herself*, 710.

¹⁸ Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*, 50.

modern definition of lesbianism.¹⁹ Though Cobbe repeatedly referred to Lloyd as a “perfect friend” it is clear that her affection runs deeper than that. In 1873, Cobbe wrote a poem dedicated to Lloyd, with stanzas full of compliments and professions of admiration and a refrain that reads “I want you – Mary.”²⁰ However, Cobbe and Lloyd’s ability to remain unmarried was a relatively rare opportunity.

Often, when one thinks about lesbian relationships before the twentieth century, it is assumed to have been secretive and scandalous, which was not always the reality. In most cases, women conducted affairs extramaritally, in what scholars call *romantic friendships*. Women who attempted to engage in these extramarital relationships not only risked their marriage, family, and financial stability but also their social status and that of the women they became intimate with. For many, the risks outweighed the rewards. A now-infamous record of this scenario is that of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West. Both prominent English authors, the women’s personal lives were far from private. Their relationship was rather public as well, and they openly described their desire for one another in letters. Several decades following Cobbe and Lloyd, their explicit mention of their passion for one another revealed a change in public opinion concerning the stigmatization of queer women. Woolf and Sackville-West were quite outspoken in their letters. Scholar and author Karyn Z. Sproles notes in her analysis of the letters that the women frequently “revisit[ed] Freud’s consistently misunderstood notion of the castration complex or penis envy.”²¹ Of course, since Woolf and Sackville-West were married to men and

¹⁹ Marcus, 46.

²⁰ Marcus, 50.

²¹ Karyn Z. Sproles, “Love Letters and Feminine Sexuality,” in *Desiring Women*, The Partnership of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West (University of Toronto Press, 2006), 133–34.

conducted this short-term affair extramaritally, they likely incurred less scrutiny than women who pursued a lesbian relationship more analogous to marriage.

Journaling and lifewriting, on top of letter correspondence, were routine practices for most people in the Victorian Era. These records now provide crucial insights for modern historians. It was common for women's journals to be published in the genre of "lifewriting."²² While letters reveal interpersonal dialogue, journal writing included private thoughts and speculations. The term "lesbian" was never used in diary entries regarding a potential partner. It seems that women during this period looked "toward a new definition of women who loved women as members of a third sex."²³ "Sapphist" was a more common term of the era, but the phenomenon mostly remained nameless until well into the twentieth century.

Femininity and Gender: An Ongoing Argument

Exploration of sexuality and gender identity is far from a modern phenomenon; queer women in the nineteenth century expressed these feelings in countless letters and diary entries, now immortalized in their lifewriting. Elaborate play with pronouns was also common and many women referred to their partner with masculine terms and men's nicknames.²⁴ Such manipulation of gender roles and identities is interpreted in several ways by modern historians, from a political statement to a case of gender dysphoria. The ease with which Victorian women adopted masculine personas is indicative of a much more forgiving society than the conventional narrative of the Victorian period suggests.

²² Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*, 27, 33, 41.

²³ Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 112.

²⁴ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928*, 9.

There is a significant exploration of the gender binary and its fluidity in Victorian literature which introduced more liberalized definitions of womanhood and femininity. Francis Power Cobbe theorized about the social success that would accompany modernized gender roles. In her piece, *What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?* she identifies a distinction between the genders but does not discount women's abilities on this basis. Instead, she points out women's unique faculties and suggests that "the more each of them can be drawn out, trained, and perfected, the more *womanly* she will become."²⁵ This dynamic mentality—both within literature and in greater society—gained popularity but nonetheless remained an aspect of nineteenth-century subculture. Cobbe, who famously remained unmarried and pursued a career remarked, "The woman who means to pursue aright either literature or science, will consider it her business to prepare herself for so doing, *at least* as much as if she proposed to dance on the stage or make bonnets in a milliner's shop."²⁶

William Rathbone Greg takes an opposite view to Cobbe. He lamented that young girls who were working to earn wages should instead be preparing for the labors of domestic life.²⁷ Both Cobbe and Greg's essays are a product of the 1860s, evidencing the distinct polarization of this argument. In another essay by Cobbe, entitled *Celibacy v. Marriage*, it is argued that the interests of women are unduly sacrificed to fulfill their husbands' destinies.²⁸

Visibility for queer women was undoubtedly hard to come by in this period, but literature provided a rare avenue by which courageous authors could challenge the status quo. Discussion

²⁵ Frances Power Cobbe, "What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?," *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, 1830-1869 66, no. 395 (November 1862): 605.

²⁶ Cobbe, 609.

²⁷ William Rathbone Greg, *Why Are Women Redundant?* (Trübner, 1869), 5.

²⁸ Frances Power Cobbe, "Celibacy v. Marriage," *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, 1830-1869, 1862, 42.

of femininity and gender identity are often brushed over in contemporary literary criticism, but it was perhaps impossible to explain this instance in Sarah Grand's novel, *The Heavenly Twins*.

Grand described her character Angelica as feeling more comfortable when in menswear than the dresses she was forced to wear on account of her sex.²⁹ Though this event occurred in literature, it is reflective of reality in many ways. Literature was a way for people to push boundaries that were difficult to push in real life and provided visibility to queer women at the time who lacked the freedom to speak about it.

The "old maid" dilemma was a persistent and nagging issue in the minds of conservative Victorian men. In 1869, Greg noted in his discussion of unmarried women that the excess of single women in England was unacceptable and suggested that these maidens could simply be shipped away to a country with more bachelors.³⁰ Greg's rhetoric is not unlike his contemporaries. The discussion of women's marital status seemed to be a prevalent problem in men's lives, assuming that there was some fault within women who chose to remain unmarried, pursue careers, or not have children.

A woman in the Victorian Period was faced with an impossible decision: pursue a career (and forfeit a family) or have a family (and abandon professional ambitions). For nineteenth-century actress and playwright Elizabeth Robins, "a professional career and a childless life appeared the most prudent option" for success in her circumstances.³¹ Oftentimes, biblical passages were invoked to promote the idea that a heterosexual relationship is the only natural state of being. In this sense, the man is expected to conduct his marriage just as Adam ruled over

²⁹ Jusová, *The New Woman and the Empire*, 33.

³⁰ Greg, *Why Are Women Redundant?*, 13.

³¹ Jusová, *The New Woman and the Empire*, 98.

Eve.³² In a lesbian marriage, however, there is no man to take the role of Adam and many failed to understand how a marriage could function without the guiding hand of a man. Nonetheless, Christian rhetoric was most often employed to emphasize the true reason for marriage: children.

Marriage, The “Social Requirement”

The luxury of deciding between marriage and professional life cannot be understated. Many women, especially those in lower social classes, had no choice but to enter domestic life, and thus unmarried women or couples who elected not to have children were a minority in the nineteenth century. To some, it was extremely cut-and-dry: women who could not “attract a virile man and procreate” were unnatural and useless.³³ This rhetoric was extremely isolating for many queer women. Citation of the divine command “increase and multiply and replenish the Earth” was common among both women and men to promote what was considered success in marriage.³⁴ Women who were *unable* to have children were considered poor spouses, almost regarded as worse than women who had no *desire* to have children. Mona Caird, author of an 1897 novel, *The Morality of Marriage: And Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Woman*, discussed the compulsion to have children, inquiring what proportion of mothers actually wanted to have children.³⁵ Regardless of the exact proportion, it is undeniable that women who acted on desires to remain single or childless were ostracized and ogled at in society, earning themselves the now-cliché title of “old maid.”

³² Alcott, *The Physiology of Marriage*, 10.

³³ Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 149.

³⁴ Alcott, *The Physiology of Marriage*, 181.

³⁵ Mona Caird, *The Morality of Marriage: And Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Woman* (G. Redway, 1897), 134.

As the beginnings of the feminist movement gained momentum, education and employment became more readily available for middle-class women. The Industrial Revolution additionally facilitated the rise of the middle class.³⁶ Despite this social change, gender roles persisted. Work, politics, and war were designated for men and family and the home for women.³⁷ Established career women such as Cobbe were not oblivious to marriage's crucial societal function, but a marriage and a career were simply incompatible, which forced women to choose one or the other.

While Victorian women saw education as an opportunity to escape the cult of domesticity, men recognized it as a threat to marriage. The emergence of homosocial structures in middle- and upper-class society (in the form of flourishing female friendship) was part of the virtuous conduct that marked gentry women as well-bred.³⁸ As women gained more opportunities for education in the late nineteenth century, more women were able to support themselves, maintain careers, and remain unmarried, which indeed threatened the institution of marriage.³⁹ The many women who entered these careers had to grapple with the fact that it would most likely come at the expense of marriage and motherhood. Historians pinpoint the emergence of a "modern" type of Victorian woman: social conflicts, such as changing class structures and power relations, were being expressed in terms of gender and sexuality.⁴⁰ For the majority of women, though, they did not pursue one of these emerging careers as Frances Power Cobbe and Mary Lloyd did. For many, marriage was seen as an inescapable fate, full of

³⁶ Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain*, 59.

³⁷ Jennings, 76.

³⁸ Jennings, 47.

³⁹ Jennings, xviii.

⁴⁰ Jennings, 57, 59.

“constraints, unhappiness, and injustice.”⁴¹ In a lesbian marriage, there was no understood partner dynamic. Women in relationships such as these supported themselves with work while maintaining a marriage. In the case of Cobbe and Lloyd, the two appeared at social events as a couple and shared property, assets, and income. The two women were spouses in every sense of the word.

Novelist Mona Caird also remarked that the subjugation of women in heterosexual marriage was an unnatural imbalance. Her discussion of equality in gender roles is surprisingly progressive and her opposition to marriage is a sharp contrast to the writings of conservative men like William Rathbone Greg.⁴² Victorian society was reliant on marriage for structure, describing the institution as “the golden chain that binds society together,” and without it, the world order may as well collapse.⁴³ Queer women like Cobbe and Lloyd who pursued a female marriage and even those who deeply disliked the typical family unit recognized it as “an important source for imagining and constructing same-sex intimacy.”⁴⁴ Scholar of English Literature and Women's Studies, Martha Vicinus, notes that lesbian couples throughout history have imitated the institutions and practices of heterosexual couples. She poses the question: *How can they not, surrounded as they are by powerful normative codes?*⁴⁵ This inquiry is vital to understanding the function of female marriage during this period. Once free from the social expectations of heteronormativity, there is little to change in marriage practices other than the identity of the

⁴¹ Koppelman and Cairns Collection of American Women Writers., *Two Friends and Other Nineteenth-Century Lesbian Stories by American Women Writers*, 45.

⁴² Caird, *The Morality of Marriage*, 6–11.

⁴³ Alcott, *The Physiology of Marriage*, 14.

⁴⁴ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 229.

⁴⁵ Vicinus, 7.

participants. Thus, it is not conformity to a conventional mold but instead the personalization of a tried-and-true form.

Just as the standard husband-wife couple would, romantic friends who fell in love followed the normative patterns for wedding and married life. They went through the motions of courtship before exchanging declarations of marriage as was customary in the Victorian Era.⁴⁶ Cobbe and Lloyd, for example, exchanged countless letters before moving in together, a correspondence that persisted throughout their relationship when Cobbe traveled for work. The two legally were regarded as unmarried, but were nonetheless involved in a long-term committed relationship as were their heterosexual contemporaries. In fact, as noted in Cobbe's *What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?* the 1851 and 61 censuses revealed that about thirty percent of women remained unmarried.⁴⁷ By the end of the nineteenth century, reports of "numerous unmarried women involved in long-term romantic friendships" were commonplace.⁴⁸ Such is the case of Cobbe and Lloyd. While many men saw this as problematic, early feminists recognized this as the beginning of queer liberation.

Such freedom opened the door for lesbian women to pursue one of the basic tenets of a relationship: cohabitation. In a fashion that reflected husband-wife coupling, Cobbe and Lloyd lived together for over thirty years. Cobbe remarked that the love of Lloyd was as integral to her life as was her mother's affection in her youth.⁴⁹ This analogy was not uncommon for women's relationships with other women. In many cases, these romantic friendships began as a "cross-age

⁴⁶ Vicinus, 7.

⁴⁷ Cobbe, "What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?," 594.

⁴⁸ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 163.

⁴⁹ Cobbe, *Life of Frances Power Cobbe, as Told by Herself*, 393.

mother-daughter relation before they became a husband-wife marriage.”⁵⁰ Early sexologists, in an attempt to understand homosexual relationships, settled on a natural definition of passion for women as a “refashioning [of] the language of mother-daughter love.”⁵¹ It is crucial to remember that the only example of love between women that was present in the Victorian Era was mother-daughter relationships. Just as queer people mirrored the normative codes of heterosexual couples, women who loved women used what experience they had in order to make sense of their experiences.

Queer, educated, career women who could financially support themselves had the opportunity to pursue a domestic relationship with other women, a privilege Cobbe and Lloyds enjoyed. Cobbe would refer to Lloyd as “my old woman” and “my *wife*.”⁵² According to scholar Sharon Marcus in her study *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*, it is important to remember that language can be difficult, and that romance was not always evident where sexual relations occurred, and the same vice-versa. She states:

Elements of friendship, kinship, marriage, and romance in lifewriting...references to passion, exclusivity, idealization, complicity, private language, and mutual dependence [and] declarations of love are as insufficient to prove a sexual relationship between Victorian women as lack of evidence of sex is to disprove it.⁵³

Cohabitation between women was the closest many could get to formal marriage. Throughout the late nineteenth century, Cobbe and Lloyd sustained an intimate relationship and lived together in what was described as a “dear old house with my beloved friend for companion” in

⁵⁰ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 109.

⁵¹ Vicinus, 113.

⁵² Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*, 52.

⁵³ Marcus, 54.

Cobbe's autobiography.⁵⁴ Though gay marriage would not be legalized in England for over a century, the existence of queer couples has been prominent throughout history.

Though considered novel in society, lesbian relationships like that of Cobbe and Lloyd were relatively analogous in retrospect to conventional marriages. The phenomenon of a lesbian couple was something ogled at by many contemporaries; one observer of a queer couple in 1852 remarked, almost incredulously, "they live together, dress alike... It is a female marriage."⁵⁵ In a way, Cobbe and Lloyd were outliers: they were unmarried women in a society in which women were expected to marry. On the other hand, though, the two engage in common domestic activities, modeling their relationship after the heterosexual couple, as if they felt that their love for each other matched that of the love other women felt for their husbands.

The only part of a lesbian marriage that differed greatly from a heterosexual one was the legality of the partnership. Husband-wife marriage was "on the books," so to speak, granting legal and financial advantages once the papers were signed. In a queer marriage, however, it was a struggle to obtain legal priority as the recipient of their spouse's income over blood-kin or the typical partner.⁵⁶ If a lesbian couple dared to establish a home together, as Cobbe and Lloyd did, they inevitably faced countless economic and social difficulties, often incurring public scrutiny.⁵⁷ The Victorians in the late nineteenth century had already undergone immense societal transformation, and further deference from what was known as "normal" was certainly not preferred by most.

⁵⁴ Marcus, 53.

⁵⁵ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 9.

⁵⁶ Vicinus, 28.

⁵⁷ Vicinus, 18.

A Third Gender? Early Sexology

Sexology during the Victorian Era was undoubtedly somewhat of a pseudoscience, attempting to categorize a spectrum of sexuality and gender identity. The condition of *gender inversion*, as it was referred to in this period, referred to effeminacy in men or masculinity in women.⁵⁸ In the case of lesbian relationships, sexologists assumed that one partner must experience gender inversion, thus indicating the cause of same-sex desire. Indeed, it was undeniably easier to explain same-sex desire if one woman was to cast herself as the male partner.⁵⁹ At this time, information on the topic was far from plentiful, and “gender inversion and sexual object choice were still confused, perhaps because it was hoped that the former made visible the latter.”⁶⁰ Of course, this area of study was still in its infancy and took on a different tone at the turn of the century. Throughout the 1900’s, sexologists became increasingly suspicious rather than curious of queer people. Condescending categorization is blatantly visible in this era.

Sexologists’ characterization of the lesbian as a “mannish-woman” or “boy-woman” was vehemently rejected by the women themselves. It is interesting to note, though, that this was not dissimilar to the mid-century theory that lesbians were an entirely separate sex.⁶¹ Many queer women detested this caricature of masculine lesbians, believing that sexologists thought them nothing more than “an imitation of the despised male.”⁶² Due to the extreme categorization of sexologists, the *androgyne* model became more popular among masculine lesbians, who found

⁵⁸ Vicinus, 11.

⁵⁹ Vicinus, 80.

⁶⁰ Vicinus, 205.

⁶¹ Vicinus, 178.

⁶² Vicinus, 191.

personal definitions of femininity in all forms.⁶³ This freed queer women from the constricts of the gender binary by allowing them to adopt traits typically categorized as either feminine or masculine.

Reality was more often than not in direct opposition to the definitions of lesbians by sexologists. They were not psychologically abnormal, did not imitate men, and were not estranged from their bodies sexually.⁶⁴ More accurate markers of lesbian marriage were developed later, including androgynous or masculine nicknames, exchange of terms of endearment between women, and similar or matching dresses.⁶⁵ As the field expanded, there was a greater focus on “psychological and social, rather than physical, attributes in order to identify the sources of lesbian erotic desire.”⁶⁶ Surely to the relief of many, it was also declared that gender inversion was not a disease, but instead an “innate biological and psychological anomaly.”⁶⁷ Though this was not exactly a positively connotated conclusion, it was far less alienating a definition than the ones that preceded it.

As mentioned, an integral facet of societal perception of lesbians is their masculine or feminine presentation. Feminine-presenting lesbians are less likely to incur discrimination and, both today and in the Victorian Era, are less likely to have their sexuality be the focus of speculation. Throughout history, men’s voices on women’s issues have been amplified over women’s first-hand testimony. It is no surprise that Greg, in his “Why Are Women Redundant?” article, makes explicit mention of unmarried women who displayed more masculine traits,

⁶³ Vicinus, 191.

⁶⁴ Vicinus, 178.

⁶⁵ Vicinus, 10.

⁶⁶ Vicinus, 83.

⁶⁷ Vicinus, 203.

deeming them “abnormal.”⁶⁸ Of course, when examining this through a modern lens, it rings more clearly of an instance of queer identity, whether that be gender non-conformity or simply a masculine stylistic preference among lesbians.

Cobbe was one of the few women in this era to adopt this: she had particular interests in the “masculine world of politics, wore her hair short, and adopted streamlined fashions perceived as male.”⁶⁹ Cobbe’s friend, Blanche Atkinson, remarked in the introduction to Cobbe’s autobiography that:

For convenience sake, she had adopted a style of dress for herself to which she kept, letting ‘Fashions’ come and go unheeded, she was not indifferent to dress in other women, and admired colours and materials, or noted eccentricities as quickly as anyone. She once referred laughingly to her own dress as ‘obvious.’⁷⁰

Cobbe and Atkinson’s shared casual discussion of masculinity in women is evidence of the long-standing societal acceptance that “some women were born more masculine in appearance and aptitude.”⁷¹ Cobbe’s unconventional nature does not seem to bother Mary Lloyd or herself.

Within this relationship, the women had created a “self-sufficient world where masculinity could be assumed with the ease of a change in clothing.”⁷² In a lot of ways, queer women who made lives together freed themselves of societal expectations with their inherent unabashed self-sufficiency.

⁶⁸ Greg, *Why Are Women Redundant?*, 10.

⁶⁹ Greg, 10.

⁷⁰ Atkinson, “Life of Frances Power Cobbe, as Told by Herself,” xxiii–xxiv.

⁷¹ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 3.

⁷² Vicinus, 9.

The Legacy of the Lesbian: Final Thoughts

Though Cobbe and Lloyd did not often engage in masculine or androgynous nicknames, countless other couples did, “perhaps as an escape from patriarchal authority and its claim to the naming of women in marriage.”⁷³ Within a lesbian marriage, there was no *Mrs. Husband’s Name*, retaining women’s individuality and independence in a way heterosexual women could not. Contemporary author Alice French adopted the androgynous pen name of Octave Thanet so as to “avoid the bias of anti-feminist magazine editors.”⁷⁴ Thanet’s work became iconic at the turn of the century, as she fearlessly “discounts the notion of male superiority, promotes the value of education for women, and advises *against* marriage.”⁷⁵ Countless other authors and professional women practiced this, heterosexual and homosexual. With each pseudonym, women slowly broke out of the shell cast around them by men in power. Women’s Studies scholar Iveta Jusová, in her analysis of this phenomenon, stated that:

As long as the system of meaning-production is controlled by male authorities, invested in the maintenance of the existing gender relations and status quo, women’s use of ambiguity [came] with a heightened possibility of being misconstrued and trivialized as irrationality or madness.⁷⁶

The beginnings of the feminist movement were perpetually dampened by the resistance of men. Women attempted to circumvent this, but in most cases, the gender bias of society at large was impossible to navigate.

⁷³ Vicinus, 8.

⁷⁴ Koppelman and Cairns Collection of American Women Writers., *Two Friends and Other Nineteenth-Century Lesbian Stories by American Women Writers*, 78.

⁷⁵ Koppelman and Cairns Collection of American Women Writers., 78.

⁷⁶ Jusová, *The New Woman and the Empire*, 109.

Queer women today have the bravery of lesbians like Frances Power Cobbe and Mary Lloyd to thank for the beginnings of the feminism and queer liberation movements. Though the more masculine partner in a female marriage may attract more negative attention, it is also “she who is remembered, rather than her more outwardly conventional and feminine partner” in the sphere of queer legacy.⁷⁷ Unapologetically queer women such as Cobbe dressed and lived as they liked, paving the way for the generations of queer women to follow. Cobbe employed the masculine without embracing the patriarchal. The prescriptive literature of the nineteenth century concerning domesticity became less viable and though the lesbian “might be an unacknowledged minority, to be condemned or ignored, but she could not be eradicated.”⁷⁸ Queer women are inextricably intertwined with the feminist cause, fighting for their rights and using their “deviant female sexuality” to their advantage.

⁷⁷ Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*, 3.

⁷⁸ Vicinus, 172.

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