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The suppressed sister: A relationship in the novel

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THE SUPPRESSED SISTER:

A RELATIONSHIP IN THE NOVEL

by

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Abstract

THE SUPPRESSED SISTER: A RELATIONSHIP IN THE NOVEL

by

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Contentious behavior among biological sisters frequently contradicts ideals of sisterhood in novels by women. In addition, feminist criticism, focusing on almost every imaginable relationship involving women, has all but ignored sisters. My dissertation studies these circumstances, their causes and consequences. How and why is the sister bond suppressed in favor of sisterhood?

Answers to this question may be found in female psychology, social expectations, and patriarchal myths and stories. The tales of Cinderella and Psyche are paradigmatic, providing models of female competition and inscribing a conclusion which replaces sisterly closeness with heterosexual romance.

Jane Austen's sister plot is based on these models. Her characters divide into pairs, adopting complementary personalities, but polarization does not erase competition. Instead, marriage erects social and economic barriers which enforce role divisions.

In Wives and Daughters, Cranford, and The Life of Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell shows the danger of too close an attachment to the paternal home. She, too, emphasizes differences, revealing how they lead siblings to seek a sisterhood outside the family.

In Mill on the Floss, Middlemarch, and Daniel Deronda, George Eliot paints increasingly negative portraits of sisters, indicating that siblings create differences where few or none exist. These denials of similarity heighten the heroines' isolation.

Twentieth-century novelists, including Barbara Pym, Elizabeth Jane Howard, and Margaret Drabble, revise their predecessors' texts, drafting a plot "after" the father's. They reject rules governing female behavior and question the expectation that women must get along with one another.

Finally, Emma Tennant's Bad Sister, together with several recent American novels, abandons the conventions of the realistic novel, challenging the very concept of character. Tennant undermines all distinctions, including those which treat sisters as separate individuals and those which classify certain behaviors as "good" or "bad."

These novels show a progression that has been ignored or suppressed by feminist critics, many of whom long for an idyll of sisterhood inherited from nineteenth-century portraits of the "angel in the house." In denying anger

or antagonism, women cut off a part of themselves, just as Cinderella's stepsisters amputate their toes to fit in her brittle glass slipper.

For Beth, of course,

and the sisters I have chosen

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INTRODUCTION: PSYCHE'S SISTERS

When I was in fourth grade, my sister Beth and I received our first watches, round Timexes with a picture of Disney's Cinderella on the face. Each watch came with a china statue of Cinderella, her hair golden, her blue dress billowy. We loved her story and wished we, too, had straight blond hair.

At about the same time, my mother and her sister took us to Concord, Massachusetts, to visit Louisa May Alcott's house. They bought us a hardback copy of Little Women with glossy pictures; little women ourselves, we read it avidly. Was I, Amy, like Amy March? Did my sister Beth share Beth March's silent goodness? As an aspiring writer, I felt more empathy for Jo than for Amy, and therefore the story made me uncomfortable, especially when strangers would hear our names and ask whether our other two siblings were named Jo and Meg. Alcott's novel set a standard of sisterly solidarity which I believed we could never attain, no matter how close we were, or, as Louise Bernikow has put it, "It presented me, in my childhood, an image of what I did not have" (74). Like Cinderella, Little Women seemed designed to unsettle, reminding me that my life fell short

of my ideals.

From the beginning then, stories of sisters and sisterhood have inscribed themselves in my life and marked its time. I grew up to tales of my grandmothers and their sisters; raised in a succession of foreign countries, my sister and I were thrown together for companionship. We read voraciously, anything we could find in English, and many of our favorite books were tales of sisters--Wilkie Collins's Woman in White and No Name, Austen's Pride and Prejudice, Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind.

Several years ago, however, I was struck by an odd circumstance. On the one hand, I was reading a spate of new and reissued novels which featured sisters prominently--Antonia Byatt's Still Life, Rebecca West's Fountain Overflows, Elizabeth Gaskell's Wives and Daughters, Gail Godwin's Mother and Two Daughters and Odd Woman, Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping, and Alice Walker's The Color Purple. These novels, focusing on women's development, were accompanied by a multitude of critical texts on every imaginable relationship among women. Critics covered friendships, father-daughter relationships, mother-daughter bonds, lesbian affairs--everything except sisters. A few articles and books dealt with famous sisters' biographies; others devoted a brief space (often little more than a page or two) to sisters.

A review of the literature on sisters has confirmed my

initial impression. Toni McNaron's Sister Bond is a collection of articles, primarily about the lives of famous sisters. An article by Sue Lanser in McNaron's book draws connections between the siblings in Austen's novels and Austen's relationship with her sister Cassandra. In Among Women, Louise Bernikow devotes one chapter to sisters, but she, too, deals little with novels. Christine Downing's 1988 work, Psyche's Sisters, provides a detailed analysis of the psychology of sisters' relations and of the mythology pertaining to sisters, but scarcely concerns itself with fictive sisters. Elizabeth Fishel's Sisters and Dale Atkins's Sisters are primarily psychological studies drawing on the lives of contemporary women. And Carol Lasser's recent article on blood sisters' ties as models for female friendships, though useful, is sociological and does not refer specifically to novels.

When literary critics do talk about blood sisters, they tend to slide into a discussion of nonbiological sisterhood. Nina Auerbach's Communities of Women offers a prime example of the confusion in discussions of the two terms. Auerbach opens her work with the Graie of Greek mythology (3-4), and, although she acknowledges that they are biological kin, she soon refers to the three figures as an example of sisterhood. Similarly, in her discussions of Pride and Prejudice and Cranford, Auerbach portrays the family as porous and extended; she makes little distinction

between biological sisters and sisterhood. Crucial differences in the two kinds of relationships are erased.

No doubt one source of the confusion is linguistic, because a single word, sister, describes two dissimilar bonds. Both words, sister and sisterhood, are metaphors, but they signify on different levels. When the word sister is used to describe a member of a sisterhood or a sister by choice, its meaning is more abstract than when it is used to describe a biological sister; dictionaries give the former meaning as secondary, explaining that it is a bond as or like that between biological sisters. Thus sisterhood is what Paul Ricoeur would call a "second order reference" (151). Other critics, including Jacques Derrida, have noted that the impulse to create such metaphors is evasive. Derrida describes metaphor as a "displacement" (211), "marking the moment of the turn or detour" as it "also opens the wandering of the semantic" (241). Considered from this perspective, when the word sister is applied to friends, it marks an absence; the term reminds us of what is not (a biological relationship) as well as of what is. "Metaphorization" (243) thus allows meaning to slip and permits a word to have different senses in its "bottomless overdeterminability" (243). But what are writers eliding when they glide from biological sisters to friends? Why the slippage? Is it a lack of attention? deflection? denial? suppression?

Feminist critics, beginning with Tillie Olsen, have insisted on the significance of women's silences. This silence is no exception; it allows critics to avoid discussing the frequent friction among biological sisters which is so much at odds with ideals of sisterhood. The sources of the silence are not only linguistic, but also psychological, historical, cultural, economic, and political. Indeed, this silence threatens to become a veritable black hole, engulfing every possible field of study.

Where critics have been silent, novelists have been vocal. Therefore, instead of beginning with the critical silences, which are after all marks of an absence, I have concentrated on novels and their depiction of biological sisters. I hope that this study will clarify the hold of this sister bond on the female imagination, and, in doing so, reveal why it eludes critics and is so often suppressed.

Most of the novels involving sisters in the nineteenth and twentieth century are in the realist tradition and posit some congruity between their worlds and the world outside their covers (this notion of congruity may be a convention and a fiction in itself, but that is another discussion altogether). More specifically, the relationships in the novels are in some ways mimetic of those beyond their pages, and the conduct of sisters in

these works is rooted in the behavior of living sisters.

The sister bond is a powerful factor in women's development, and women without sisters often describe the lack as significant.[1] As Hegel has indicated in his study of Antigone in The Phenomenology of the Mind, one may choose a friend, but one cannot choose or replace a brother. Although he assigns a certain spiritual and ethical primacy to the brother-sister relationship (475-499), it is true that a sister, like a brother, cannot be selected, given away or substituted. This circumstance gives the bond a privileged position, utterly unlike a friendship, which relies on mutual affinities. In Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," for example, "Tender Lizzie could not bear/ To watch her sister's cankerous care/ Yet not share" (11). Although Lizzie does not condone the actions which cause her sister's wasting away, she risks her life for her sibling. Lizzie never questions her duty, for the sisters are as "two blossoms on one stem" (7).

Because sisters grow from "one stem," much of the power of their relationship is inherent in the pre-Oedipal situation. A young boy's first attachment is to his mother; he begins to develop a sense of identity in distinguishing his differences from her. But a young girl first bonds to a member of the same sex--and this, as many feminist psychologists have noted, makes separation and the

development of an individual identity particularly difficult. The problem of separation and sameness in difference is apparent in the sister bond, too, as Louise Bernikow has indicated:

> Competition seems to be the language we use for the process of separation, seems to be the kind of activity we throw up against the desire to merge. . . . When the forces [of separation from the mother] turn lateral, the process is played out among sisters. (99)

Although psychologists including Jane Gallop and Juliet Mitchell have questioned their validity, Freud's theories of female development offer a different explanation for the competition among sisters. As a girl's Oedipal attachment to her father grows, she may vent hostility and envy not only on her mother, but also on her sister, a less powerful female rival for his attentions. She may do so by attempting to be the "perfect" little woman, or alternately, if there are no sons in the family, by becoming a kind of surrogate son.

The rivalry embedded in the process of separation from the mother cannot be detached from the history of women in our culture. Within the nuclear family, as it was constituted in the nineteenth century, sisters were largely redundant. The custom of primogeniture assigned differing roles to brothers; sisters participated alike in household tasks. If one married, the next youngest would take over her chores.

The identical position of sisters within the family further created a need to insist on difference. The most common way sisters defined themselves was (and still is) in opposition to each other:

> The work of mutual self-definition seems typically to proceed by way of polarization that half-consciously exaggerates the perceived differences and attributes of the sisters ("I'm the brightest one, and she's the pretty one"). (Downing 12)

In the nineteenth century, the need to establish difference was particularly important in the marriage market, where two sisters might be indistinguishable, bearing equal dowries. Thus, as Louise Bernikow has remarked, "What we have in common is what keeps us apart" (19).

This rivalry among sisters was supported by two factors. First, a woman, perceiving the powerlessness of other femles in the household, might turn away from them. Secondly, the polarization, the "unspoken, unconscious, pact that neither sister need develop all her potential" kept women subservient and bound to the family, as each woman "depend[ed] upon the other to continue to act in certain ways" (McNaron, "How Little We Know, How Much We Feel" 8). To some extent, these behaviors persist today; the critics I have quoted are concerned about contemporary as well as past sisters.

In opposition to rivalry, the Victorian concept of

separate spheres imposed on women an ideal of harmonious relations and calm within the home. Training manuals for young girls, such as The Female Aegis (1798), urged amity and kindness, warning mothers to "beware of teaching [their] . . . children to vie with each other; for it is to teach them envy and malevolence" (148). Brought up with such instructions, the "good" woman learned to suppress or conceal enmity or rivalry. Polarization assisted in this process; having assumed opposite positions, sisters had little middle ground for which to compete.

The value placed on conformity made the polarization uncomfortable and painful. A woman could (and can) look on her sister's differences as implicit criticism, "experiencing them as betrayal" (Downing 168). Thus the politics of the nuclear family held sisters in a double bind, torn between an imperative for harmony and subtler goads towards rivalry.

Sisterhoods received equally ambiguous support. Louise Bernikow's assessment of the power of female friendship would have been even more valid a century ago: "In friendship, women do to each other what culture expects them to do for men and in that way, female friendships are subversive" (144). Specifically, male fear of women's collective power was encoded in training manuals and contemporary journalism as distaste for

chattering, idle groups of women, criticism of unhealthy conditions in girls' schools, and suspicion surrounding Catholic sisterhoods. Although this fear initially undermined solidarity among women, later in the century, women's sisterhoods, including church groups, the temperance movement, and nursing schools, came to be seen as extensions of the home into the social realm. As such, they were glorified. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg describes expressions of "hostility" among women as "so rare as to seem almost tabooed. . ." (325) in the United States, and the same was true in England.

Carol Lasser, who has extended Smith-Rosenberg's ground-breaking work, has documented how sisters' relationships, once idealized in the nineteenth-century, fulfilled male fears, serving as a subversive model for sisterhoods. Noting that "the sororal bond [of blood siblings] could coexist in a variety of physical and emotional forms," she adds that "sorority served some women as one way of negotiating the sexual boundaries of their friendships, structuring both taboos and touches" (163-4). The sisterly relationship allowed women to focus on their own gender by offering a homosocial structure, its decidedly feminine manner in opposition to "intellectual, unemotional masculine styles" (170). And finally, in their "sentimental romanticism" (179), female friends could yield more comfort than blood sisters, and

thus sisterhoods threatened the male-dominated family.

In this century, the messages have been less mixed. Although the nuclear family has declined, women's groups have gained strength. In fact, it appears that the focus on harmony in sisterhoods may have been purchased at the expense of peace in the biological family. Novels concerning sisters have grown increasingly negative. In early ninteenth-century novels, a woman is rarely able to maintain a close sisterhood if she does not have harmonious relationships at home. Later, sisters come to represent the prison of society and conventions regarding female behavior; sisterhoods, or metaphorical sisters, are associated with women's development into distinct personalities. Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum's assessment of the situation is accurate, for sisters, instead of serving as models of closeness, become the repositories of hostility suppressed in friendships:

> The recent delight and recognition of the importance of women's relationships and the ideology of "sisterhood is powerful" has, in some ways, served to obscure much of the pain in women's friendships. (21)

I would be greatly over-simplifying if I were to limit myself to mimetic assumptions about the connection between the characters of fiction and "real life." The use of sisters in novels serves certain literary functions as well, the most obvious one being that sisters generate

plot. Dale Atkins has noted that "women seem to want to talk about their relationship with their sister" (14) regardless of whether the bond is happy or unhappy. I, too, have noticed that the merest mention of the topic of this work to a woman with a sister would prompt long stories of her childhood, recent experiences, arguments, and joys. Women with several sisters tended to concentrate intensely on one sibling, with this coupling becoming the focus of tremendous intimacy or furious battles for separation. At first, I thought this interest was merely due to the primacy of the bond. However, as I read and listened, it became clear that something in the nature of the relationship (with an only sister or an especially significant one) provoked narrative in much the same way as Tony Tanner has indicated adultery generates plot (Adultery in the Novel 12).

Like an adulterous woman, a significant sister subverts the social order by creating an excess, a duplication for which there is no place. When sisters compete for a lover, the resulting triangle is a mirror image of the adulterous triangle (while Tanner refers primarily to two men loving the same woman, here, two females pursue the same male). More than that, the existence of sisters generates tension as the reader seeks to understand how something can be at once similar and different. In other words, sisters create the kind of

suspense and delayed gratification aroused by narrative repetition.

Furthermore, the polarization which occurs in families is often employed as a subversive narrative strategy by female authors. Each sister is assigned a role or set of personality traits; her character is a fragmented part of a whole which is rent with conflicts. Through a pair of opposite sisters, "a special kind of double" (McNaron, "How Little We Know, How Much We Feel" 7), an author can thus enact an inner struggle. One sister is frequently designated as the conventional one, and the other as a rebel, permitting the author to satisfy and undermine conventions within the same text.

In Pride and Prejudice, for instance, Austen usually focuses on only two of the sisters at at time. She plays the passive sufferings of Jane off of Elizabeth's rebellious energy and contrasts Lydia's persistent tactlessness with Elizabeth's pride. At the same time, Austen implies that these apparent opposites are inseparable; the sisters depend on each other for their self definition. Even though Elizabeth has often been embarrassed by Lydia, she ultimately defends her sister, rebutting Lady Catherine's contention that Lydia is an unsuitable relation for Darcy. In protecting Lydia, Elizabeth is accepting not only her blood kinship but also a spiritual affinity. Elizabeth's resistance to the

authority of a social superior is merely a more justifiable form of Lydia's audacious rudeness. Thus an irony of Austen's text and other sister stories is that despite (or because of) the meticulous role splitting, sisters are inextricably linked. This conception of character is closest to Hélène Cixous' view that the notion of a unified character is essentially a convention, and that "'I' is more than one" (389). By extension, various stances toward convention coexist in the same text.

The fragmented characterization apparent in novels about sisters causes the reader to internalize certain conflicts. Robert Highbie and others have commented on how often "The protagonist functions as a transformation or replacement for our 'I'" (17), and Adrienne Rich has suggested that a woman might participate especially in this process, seeking "guides, maps, and possessions. . ." (On Lies, Secrets, and Silence 39). But in novels about sisters, the reader is presented with two (or more) protagonists and forced to side with one of them. The reader must then participate in a struggle for detachment from the other sister in the text, and in doing so, question her own values. Thus, instead of feeling "over and over. . . she comes up against something that negates everything she is about: she meets the image of woman in books written for men" (Rich, On Lies, Secrets, and

Silence 39), the reader of a work about sisters may also find the woman who embodies her deepest held desires for female solidarity. Indeed, she may discover a metaphorical sister (and ultimately, much of the confusion between sisters and sisterhood may arise at this moment of identification).

Writers are readers as well. This is particularly evident in twentieth-century sister stories, where authors react to their predecessors (and their fictional characters) as sisters in addition to depicting sisters in their novels. Their fictions revise earlier female stories, even as they question patriarchal conventions. A novel may then be a gesture against the oppressiveness of two conventions, one female, and one male. In The Fountain Overflows, for instance, the heroine feels trapped in a plot over which she has no control:

> Also I realized that a drama about me and my family had been composed by someone and had for some time been in the course of performance, and it would be no use for me to walk on the stage and protest that the truth had been perverted, for every member of the audience had had his mind made up for him by what had already heard. (West 132)

Although Rebecca West's heroine is a character in a story, she expresses a feeling of entrapment in the family and pre-existing plots with which many writers can identify. Alienation is caused not only by the plots themselves, but

also by the prejudices of the audience, which she describes as masculine and close-minded.

Indeed, sister stories by female authors are based on male fictions, perhaps the most significant of which are the tales of Cinderella and Psyche. Other important narratives include those of Antigone, Beauty and the Beast, Snow White and Rose Red, and King Lear. These traditional plots prepare for and support the role splitting found in nineteenth-century families and theories of female psychology. In The Uses of Enchantment, his study of European fairy tales, Bruno Bettleheim has found this division again and again, concluding that "polarization. . . dominates fairy tales" (9). Even in the story of Snow White and Rose Red, the only positive portrait of sisters, the siblings are depicted as being essentially opposite, not only in appearance, but in behavior. Resembling sisters in other tales, these sisters must disagree before they can marry happily. As Elizabeth Fishel comments, "Like Mary and Martha, they, too, represent the two paths, the seeker and the stay-at-home, the wanderer from home and mother and the mother's helper, her psychic extension" (181). The sisters in this fairy tale are complementary;[2] they achieve happiness because they do not compete (miraculously, the twin of one sister's beloved appears to marry her sibling).

"Snow White and Rose Red" is not one of the most famous sister stories. More well known sister stories "normally endorse enmity between women, who become rivals for the father's approval. . ." (Stoneman 187), and in repeating themselves, they create a pattern. This pattern owes something to the fairy tale three brothers motif, in which three siblings are tested, and the youngest, the one who initially seems least likely to prosper, succeeds. However, it is not identical to the three brothers configuration, for the overt goal of the competition among women is the love of their father or a suitor, though the real struggle, is in fact for self-determination. While the male hero's quest takes him on a journey, as Nina Auerbach has shown, the female quest is essentially spiritual and internal. Instead of voyaging into the world, the heroine searches for "rootedness" (Communities of Women 8) and home, confronting not strangers but sisters who are in effect parts of herself.

The myth of Psyche is a paradigm of the female quest, even as it illustrates the traditional suppression of the sister story in favor of a plot which favors heterosexual love. Until this century, the myth was regarded almost entirely as a romantic story (in his "Ode to Psyche," for instance, Keats does not mention the heroine's sisters). Erich Neumann's great contribution to the study of this myth is his realization that "the sisters represent an

aspect of the female consciousness that determines Psyche's whole subsequent development. . ." (73). Indeed, Neumann's analysis has been instrumental in the reappropriation of the myth by female critics, whether or not they agree with his reading of it.

In the myth of Psyche, marriage divides the heroine from her sisters. According to Neumann's translation, the sisters initially grieve at the loss of their sister (12), as if they had lost part of themselves (and indeed they have). It is only when they are reunited with Psyche at the latter's request that their envy and hostility become overwhelming.[3] Difference is the source of this envy; if Psyche's life were exactly like theirs, they would see no need for rivalry. Thus the original female dilemma of sameness and difference generates this plot, and when Psyche's sisters seek to render her unhappy, they are trying to make her resemble them, to demolish dissimilarities. Their behavior illustrates how an essential desire for closeness, a longing to merge, exists in opposition to the need for separation.

Neumann makes it clear that the sisters, in urging Psyche to "break the taboo" (74), are not entirely a malicious influence. They are engaged in the essentially masculine act of "seduction" and attempting to force their sister to look clearly (literally and figuratively) at her spouse. Carolyn Heilbrun's assertion that the sisters are

"a force of liberation" (143) is indeed correct.

The next section of the story is paradigmatic, too, as Psyche must confront Aphrodite, the angry mother, and complete her tasks. As Neumann and others have commented, the chores involve Psyche's coming to terms with her female nature, and all are significant, especially the sorting task, a sifting of her priorities and qualities. Psyche can only complete these labors with the assistance of natural forces. She is allowed to regain her husband and join the gods through divine intervention; ultimately, the myth tells us that a woman cannot capture love through her own agencies or without banishing her sisters.

In fact, few critics have considered the implications of the sisters' deaths. Psyche is forced by the angry gods to mislead her siblings, causing their fatal accidents. The myth suggests that the woman who acts as a male mouthpiece and says what is untrue to her nature will destroy her sisters, and further, that insubordinate women (who dare to exhibit behaviors traditionally reserved for men, such as verbal seduction and open expressions of anger) must be punished. The deaths of Psyche's sisters leave Psyche, the complete feminine, in need of a male to fulfill her.

The story of Cinderella repeats many elements of the Psyche myth, beginning with the envious sisters. Here, the siblings are disowned and distanced as stepsisters.

The Oedipal aspect of the tale is partly suppressed as Cinderella's pain is attributed to her stepsisters instead of her stepmother (Fishel 159). In the process, Cinderella's powerful father becomes a blank, shadowy figure, rather than the locus of anger.

Like Psyche, Cinderella must come to terms with a cruel mother and sisters and participate in a sorting task by the hearth before she can marry. Moreover, as in the story of Psyche, the aggressive, domineering sisters affect traditionally male behaviors and attempt to block the concluding marriage. In Perreault's version of the fairy tale, they must therefore be destroyed, their eyes picked out and toes cut off in a "symbolic self-castration to prove their femininity. . ." (Bettleheim 26). The friendly godmother, who assists the heroine, fades out, unnecessary after the wedding. And Cinderella undergoes her most complete transformation, from an "active" young woman into a passive, "girl. . . who must obediently wait to be rescued by a male" (Zipes 141). Heterosexual relations in the story obviate the need for sisterhood and reveal "how strongly male fantasizing about women and power are still entrenched in the fairy-tale genre" (Zipes 24).

The pattern recurs. Part of it is found in King Lear, where the heroine does not succeed in defeating her sisters' machinations. By causing Cordelia's exile,

Goneril and Regan initially liberate her from Lear's paralyzing control; however, unlike Psyche, Cordelia fails to survive her self-assertion. The fates of Goneril and Regan signify the destruction of masculine women, but Shakespeare does not provide a fairy tale happy ending for his heroine.

Antigone's story provides an intriguing variation on the standard pattern, for in this myth, the heroine herself suppresses or denies her sister. Readings of this myth from Hegel's on have concentrated on the story as one of a brother and sister, and while the brother-sister bond is central, the opposition between Antigone and Ismene is also revealing. As Marianne Hirsch notes, Antigone's action "is both a form of rebellion and a form of extinction" (24). When Antigone revolts against the marriage convention, the act that defines her destroys her. Yet is Ismene's choice one of continuity? Or is her life and marriage merely another form of extinction? The myth provides no clear answer to these questions, which recur in slightly different forms in such novels as Middlemarch. It does, however, underscore the way patriarchal tales of sisters sacrifice closeness among women to intimacy between men and women:

> Antigone ends up denying to Ismene the very sense of irrevocable kinship that motivates her to bury Polyneices. Her sense of drastic estrangement leads her to betray, with respect to her sister, the very heart of her own deepest

> convictions. The one so intensely pulled toward human interfusion becomes the most solitary. . .(Downing 83).

This paradox at the heart of the myth, which has so often been ignored, leads one to wonder whether Antigone would have sacrificed herself had Ismene, a powerless woman, been the one whose life was at stake.

Other tales of sisters, including Beauty and the Beast, which is essentially a retelling of the Psyche story, incorporate many of the same elements. I have isolated a basic plot, which, for the sake of convenience, I will call the sister plot or sister story, and which is integral to the understanding of sisterly relationships in novels by women.

Within the plot, sisters attempt to resolve the conflicting pressures from society by maintaining a surface of amiability. By the time a reader is introduced to a fictive household of sisters, childhood squabbles have been outgrown (the picture of Austen's Bennet sisters fighting over a toy is ludicrous to say the least). Thus the author's very choice of a time to begin the novel, the temporal frame, serves to suppress competition. When the sisters are adolescents, and the novelists begin their stories, the girls have assumed rigidly separate identities with parental encouragement. An example of this is Austen's careful splitting of qualities among three of the Bennet sisters: Jane is characterized by

modesty and good manners, Elizabeth by liveliness and forthrightness, Lydia by flightiness and poor taste. Austen usually focuses on two of these sisters at a time, drawing on Kitty and Mary primarily for added humor.

Although intended to circumvent competition, role splitting itself becomes a major source of tension. A repressed desire for intimacy resurfaces in efforts to make a sister identical to one's self, and sisters, powerless elsewhere, try to control their siblings. Young sisters, who often live in small communities like the town of Cranford, are surrounded by much gossip and attention. They begin to exert power among themselves, mimicking the behavior of those around them. This petty tyranny goes well beyond the normal squabbling of children, as it extends into the sisters' adolescence and undermines their romantic pursuits. For instance, in the first chapter of Middlemarch, Celia and Dorothea Brooke quarrel over their mother's jewels. Encoded in the argument is each sister's wish to prove herself superior by disparaging her sibling. Thus the relationship between sisters internalizes the educative behavior of those in the surrounding society, together with its restrictions. Celia and Dorothea have no doubt experienced similar criticism from the village chorus of women, including Mrs. Cadwallader and the devout Mrs. Bulstrode.

Versions of such behavior between sisters may be found

in other novels, including Mansfield Park, where Fanny Price gently undertakes the training of her sister Susan, and Cranford, where the elder Miss Jenkyns is constantly correcting Miss Matty. The instructions are not merely an assertion of power; they also suggest that the sisters are insecure about their roles and want their siblings to imitate and accept them. The sister who claims to be proudest of her differences may in fact feel embattled. Ultimately then, an effort to force conformity exists in opposition to the splintering impulse, and the contradiction itself is a force which generates plot.

In many novels, this critical behavior is counteracted when one sister allies herself with the father (or a father figure), assuming his power. She is often the sister who least submits to the prescribed "woman's sphere." For instance, Emma Woodhouse, who attempts to rule the women around her, finds her sister's maternal and conjugal behavior tiresome. In contrast, her devotion to her father gives her social status as well as a rationale for not marrying. Similarly, Mrs. Bennet notes quite correctly that Mr. Bennet favors Elizabeth. The alliance with the father splits the sisters socially and spatially; one is aligned with the realm of the study, the others live in the kitchen and the parlor.

An alignment with the father figure, however, has its costs. The bond separates one sister from the world of

women and removes her from their "sphere" (be it the realm of fashion and dancing, or of the kitchen). It also keeps her subordinate. In Gaskell's Wives and Daughters, for instance, Molly Gibson's dependence on her father and distress at his re-marriage has incestuous undertones. As one sister delays her entry into the world, she endangers her relationship with suitors. Emma Woodhouse nearly loses Knightley, and in similar cases, the young woman risks losing her lover to a sister. In Wives and Daughters Molly comes close to surrendering Roger Hamley to her stepsister, Cynthia. At this point in the sister plot, role divisions break down, and relationships are most fluid. In Sense and Sensibility, Austen casts doubt on which sister will marry Colonel Brandon; Elizabeth Bennet is attracted to Wickham; Sir James Chettam first courts Dorothea Brooke; Henry Crawford flirts with both Bertram sisters as well as with Fanny Price. Splitting has failed to eliminate competition, and the sisters' interchangeability underscores their redundancy in the marriage market. Several alternate narrative resolutions are conjured at once.

The sisters themselves are unable to perceive men's roles distinctly; the sister who allies herself with the father often mistakes her lover for a brotherly figure. In Mansfield Park, Fanny becomes Sir Thomas Bertram's protégée and perceives Edmund as a brother, as dearly

loved as her blood brother, William. Molly Gibson views Roger Hamley as a sibling and indeed he nearly becomes her brother-in-law. Knightley, as Emma's brother-in-law, even stands in a fraternal relation to her. In viewing a lover as a brother, the heroine may painfully conceal her affection. Her self-negation may show itself physically, as in Molly Gibson's ill-health in the last part of Wives and Daughters.

Corresponding to the fluidity in roles and identity, loans and transfers of clothes or other items, such as Mary Crawford's necklace in Mansfield Park, become fraught with tension. The heroine must undertake a sorting task not unlike Cinderella's or Psyche's, a task which involves deciding whom to trust. She must learn to recognize false suitors, such as Frank Churchill or Henry Crawford. This sifting may bring many solitary nights of introspection by the hearth.

If the sisters succeed in disentangling the knots of their lives (in such novels as Cranford, they fail), if the marriage plot works out to its conclusion, the sister pattern, too, settles into a different configuration. Marriage reinforces divisions, but less in terms of personality than of class and geography. Just as Cinderella becomes a princess and Psyche a goddess, Elizabeth and Jane Bennet move in different circles from Lydia, Kitty, and Mary. In Middlemarch, the Chettams

initially have little converse with the Ladislaws. Once the splitting attains a social dimension, the sisters can put aside their personal competition, allowing greater amity to exist. Each has a life of her own.

Such endings are intriguing because the relationship between sisters is presented as if it had been entirely harmonious all along, and totally devoid of competition. At the end of Sense and Sensibility, for example, Austen, writes as if only the men needed to be brought together. Similarly, the narrator comments at the end of Middlemarch that, "where women love each other, men learn to smother their mutual dislike" (577). Thus at the conclusions of the novels, the entire pattern is erased, as if it had never existed, and the relationship between women is made to fit the ideal of the sympathetic "angel in the house," devoted to all.

An alternative resolution is occasionally present in the life of an aunt (or aunts), never fully separated from the heroine's mother, despite marriage, motherhood, and changed social conditions. Aunts in such works as Mansfield Park or The Mill on the Floss replace Aphrodite or Cinderella's cruel stepmother;[4] they represent female anger, whether passive, like Lady Bertram's, or active, like Aunt Norris's. In turning against her aunts, the heroine rejects these emotions. In other texts, such as Mary Barton, the aunt represents unconventional, but more

positive traits, which are repressed in the heroine's home. Only when these traits are accepted and integrated can the heroine be happy. In Pride and Prejudice, Lady Catherine, though Darcy's aunt (and eventually Elizabeth's by marriage), plays an aunt's role in the heroine's story. As Gilbert and Gubar have indicated, Lady Catherine shares many of Elizabeth's traits (The Madwoman in the Attic 173). Her willingness to exhibit her anger is ultimately positive for Elizabeth, forcing her to confront and acknowledge her attraction to Darcy. Thus although Lady Catherine does not authorize the marriage, she is its "author" (The Madwoman in the Attic 173).

In this dissertation, I plan to trace not only this pattern, but also significant deviations and developments from it. My intention is not to force novels in their richness and complexity into a rigid mold, but rather to use the pattern as a starting point. I have chosen to focus on three nineteenth-century British women writers: Austen, Gaskell, and Eliot. Although a number of other important nineteenth-century women wrote about sisters, including Harriet Martineau in Deerbrook, Christina Rossetti in "Goblin Market," and Charlotte Brontë in Jane Eyre, I have not discussed their work at length. Many of these writers do not repeatedly turn to issues concerning biological sisters, or they include sisters only as marginal figures, as in Jane Eyre. It is tempting to

discuss works by certain authors because of the importance of sisters in their own lives, but this biographical circumstance is often inversely related to the appearance of sisters in their novels. For instance, although Villette and Shirley offer fascinating portraits of sisterhood, Brontë's work as a whole is most intriguing in its lack of biological sisters. This is another kind of suppression of the sister bond, where a blood sibling--specifically, Emily in Shirley--is distanced and turned into an unrelated friend. Charlotte Brontë (like Virginia Woolf) stands as evidence that an author's closeness to her own siblings will not necessarily lead her to write about biological sisters, as numerous critics of Austen's novels have assumed to be the case. I have selected Austen, Gaskell, and Eliot, not because of their own experiences as sisters, but because each has concentrated on the destiny of biological sisters in several texts. Their novels, spanning the century, display change and adaptation in the sister plot.

Because Austen's novels, especially Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, and Persuasion, are closest to the paradigm I have set forth, they are particularly useful in tracing the specific qualities and ramifications of the pattern. Mansfield Park and Emma will be discussed, too, though in less depth. The sisters in these novels ultimately resolve their hostility, but

only by entrenching differences through class and geographical differences. Significantly, they are not able to maintain a sisterhood while single, though Austen implies that they will have greater success once they marry.

Gaskell's Mary Barton, Cranford, Wives and Daughters and Life of Charlotte Brontë are important variations on the sister story and illustrate the dangers of never leaving the hearth. The heroine in Mary Barton is sisterless, but her aunt is significant because she represents a sexuality which has been repressed and banished from Mary's family. In Wives and Daughters, Gaskell revises the Cinderella story so that the heroine nearly loses the "prince," and she raises questions about the difference between blood sisters and stepsisters. In Cranford, the marriage quest does not succeed, and the sisters never completely separate; they are surrounded by a subversive sisterhood which enables them to maintain domestic peace at the expense of emotional growth. Finally, in The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Gaskell treats sisters and sisterhood on a different level. She adapts the life of her friend, Charlotte Bronte, to the demands and boundaries of the sister plot. In doing so, Gaskell asserts her sisterhood with another; the biography suggests that our metaphorical sisters are, above all, our creations, and helps establish the "myth of devotion"

(Bernikow 77) that distinguishes sisterhood from biological sisters. The promotion of this "myth of devotion," which has been popular among feminists, has resulted in a critical neglect of contending myths and stories based on sisterly competition. Gaskell's biography thus serves as a model for the suppression of sister stories in our century, as critics, seeking kinship with earlier writers, glorify sisterhood.

In Gaskell's works, hostility between sisters is more apparent than in Austen's novels; in Eliot's Mill on the Floss, Middlemarch, and Daniel Deronda, the conventions of sisterly behavior are even more stifling and inhibiting. In addition, sisters are less important in Eliot's works than in Austen's or Gaskell's novels. In Daniel Deronda, for instance, they hardly seem to matter at all in the plot, although their presence is crucial in the definition of Gwendolen's character. In Middlemarch, the distancing among sisters parallels the heroine's growing detachment from other women and society as a whole. Finally, instead of viewing role splitting as an accomodation or survival tactic, Eliot focuses on its dangers. For her, the sister plot is inadequate because it creates differences where few or none exist; she understands that it leads to an illusory because partial view of the self. To grow, a woman must renounce competition and accept her similarities as well as differences from other women.

Ultimately, women's stories about sisters may be perceived as revisions of each other--comments on a women's tradition as well as on the male conventions and female psychology behind the sister plot. This quality is most apparent in recent works on biological sisters, including Margaret Drabble's A Summer Bird-Cage, Elizabeth Jane Howard's After Julius, and Barbara Pym's Some Tame Gazelle and An Unsuitable Attachment. These texts confirm Nancy Miller's assertion about the intertextuality of women's literature:

> the plots of women's literature. . . are about the plots of literature itself, about the constraints the maxim places on rendering a female life in fiction. (Subject to Change 356)

The heroines in these twentieth-century works (who often bear the names of their predecessors) feel themselves deficient because they cannot live up to an ideal of sisterly behavior inherited from a male-dominated society and women's novels. Their desire for closeness, which is consistent with this ideal, exists in opposition to a need to separate. Thus crippled by their interdependence and fractured identities, the sisters are inhibited by conventions in their relations with men and other women. Each of these authors achieves a partial solution to this impasse, but their novels' conclusions are ambiguous about the possibility of achieving sisterhood.

In the conclusion, I will take up a radically different approach to the convention in Emma Tennant's 1978 novel, The Bad Sister. Tennant exposes much of what is suppressed in the sister plot; by making her novel surrealistic and using shifts in time and voice, she illustrates the destructive intertwining of sisters' personalities. Tennant's revision of Sir Walter Scott's historical novel involving sisters, The Heart of Midlothian, also alludes to primal fears that sisterhoods consist of madwomen or witches. The text is completely slippery: one moment the sisterhood is a commune in modern London, and the heroine kills her half-sister; the next, she belongs to a coven of witches, and her sister is a shadow of herself. Tennant keeps all the distinctions and role divisions fluid, and in doing so, she finally "kills" the bad sister. Or does she?

In selecting texts, I have decided not to discuss a number of relevant American novels, including Little Women and Gone with the Wind. Both books would have enhanced my analysis of the sister plot, but I felt that my inclusion of American authors might flatten distinctions between national literatures, a risk I was reluctant to take.

Moreover, I have omitted from discussion several interesting sister stories by men, most notably two by Wilkie Collins, No Name and The Woman in White, as well as George Gissing's Odd Women (revised in this century by the

American author Gail Godwin as The Odd Woman). Gissing's novel explores the relationship between sisters and sisterhoods, showing the dangers inherent in sisterhood. Although he assigns varied roles to the Madden siblings, the women do not really develop or change, nor does their relationship. Collins's stories include blank or "unnamed" sisters--women without a social position because of their illegitimacy. Their lack of name or place in the patriarchy makes them potentially dangerous and frightening as they act out their conventional sisters' rebellious instincts. Again, though, the women are essentially static; they are not working out an identity through or in opposition to each other. A final dimension is missing in the texts by men; obviously, these works do not exemplify the relationship of a woman author to her characters as she plots questions of identity and convention. Nor can they model her confrontation with the difference between biological sisters and the ideal of sisterhood.

My goal has been to return to the disparity in visions of sisters and sisterhood. Study of various novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries suggests that the terms sister and sisterhood cannot fully comprehend the possibilities for meaning contained in them; in a Derridean sense, they are overdetermined. The term sister can describe biological as well as emotional kinship, and

the biological relationship may contain none of the affinities of the emotional bond. In essence, the term sister stands for almost opposite relationships. Christine Downing, who has studied the effects of the mythology of sisters, has noticed the dangers of an emphasis on metaphor:

> Although feminism made us all newly aware of the importance of sisterhood, there was early on a tendency to conceive the sister bond only metaphorically and thus in highly idealized terms. Almost inevitably we then found ourselves subject to intense feelings of disillusionment when our "sisters" failed us. . . . (4)

The twentieth-century novels I will discuss bring this issue to the forefront and attempt to redefine the terms sister and sisterhood; earlier, Jane Austen and her peers trace the development of the contradictory definitions, an opposition not unlike the polarities in sisters' roles. To understand the linguistic problem facing contemporary women, we must therefore address nineteenth-century fictions and their elaborate depictions of the interplay among sisters. These are the plots which have shaped us; they form our bindings, our covers.

NOTES

1. These emotions have been recorded by authors representing a variety of perspectives on women's psychology, ranging from Christine Downing, who relies on Jungian analysis, to Elizabeth Fishel, who appears to be influenced by family systems theory.

2. In her discussion of fairy tale sisters, Christine Downing distinguishes between the "polarity plot" and the "complementarity plot" (30) but in fact, they are one. Sisters who are opposites are complementary.

3. In Till We Have Faces, C. S. Lewis retells the story from the perspective of Psyche's eldest sister. He, too, shows the sister's hostility as rooted in love and loss; he mitigates the homosexual and incestuous nature of the relationship by turning the sister into a warrior and ruler, thus denying her femininity.

4. In her book on nineteenth-century American novels, Nina Baym notes of similar plots that "Most guilty [of tormenting the heroine] are aunts, usually the mother's sisters" (37).

JANE AUSTEN: THE SISTER PLOTS

> I have lost such a treasure, such a Sister, such a friend as never can have been surpassed, --she was the sun of my life, the gilder of every pleasure, the soother of every sorrow, I had not a thought concealed from her, & it is as if I had lost a part of myself. I loved her only too well, not better than she had deserved, but I am conscious that my affection for her made me sometimes unjust and negligent of others. (Austen, Selected Letters 208).

Cassandra Austen's words on her sister's death have set the tone for much discussion of Jane Austen, creating a picture of the sisters' devotion which has spilled over into criticism of Austen's novels. Sue Lanser, for instance, claims that "A good woman, for Austen, is invariably a good sister, and a woman's defects are often signaled by her lack of sisterly concern" (54). Yet far more striking, and increasingly evident to the reader of Austen criticism, is the disparity between the harmonious relationship Cassandra describes and the hurtful bonds so often present in Jane Austen's novels. Contrary to Lanser's assertions, in Austen's novels, "good" women frequently fail to live up to ideals of sisterly relations. Elizabeth Bennet suppresses the truth of Wickham's character with disastrous results for Lydia, and Marianne Dashwood becomes so engrossed in her own griefs

that she ignores her sister's sorrows. Although Lanser's statement ultimately raises the question of what constitutes a "good" woman, it does not resolve the disparity between the visions of sisters evoked in Austen novels and biographies.

My intent is not to speculate on the nature of the Austen sisters' relationship or to revise biographies (although some, including Geoffrey Gorer in "Poor Honey: Some Notes on Jane Austen and her Mother," have suggested that all was not sweetness and light in the Austen home). Instead, I wish to detach the discussion of sisters in Austen's novels from her life. Her books are remarkable in the way they work and rework the elements of the traditional sister plot, shaping it in a manner that has influenced later authors. In Austen's novels, sisters are not merely used as parts of plot, as a way to comment on the social status of women, or as a narrative technique for establishing character through contrast. They often become the locus of what is repressed or displaced from the marriage plot. Cassandra's description of her life with Jane is ultimately useful not because it creates a model for sisterly behavior in the novels but because it provides the key terms of the dialogue on (and between) sisters: "friend," "concealment," "part of myself," and "others."

A review of Austen's works immediately reveals the prominence of sisters. In the juvenilia, sisters appear in Lesley Castle and The Three Sisters; they play parts in the incomplete novels, The Watsons and Sanditon, too. In Northanger Abbey, both Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe have female siblings, although they are unimportant in the novel. The number of sisters is most noticeable in the other five major books, and three of these works, Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, and Persuasion, will form the main focus of this chapter. In Sense and Sensibility, the heroines, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, are set off by Mrs. Palmer and Lady Middleton as well as by the Steeles. Pride and Prejudice includes the Bennet girls, Miss Bingley and her sister, Mrs. Hurst, the Lucas sisters, and Mrs. Bennet and her sister, Mrs. Philips. In Persuasion, Austen portrays the three Elliott siblings and their counterparts, the two Musgrove girls. Sisters are less important in Emma and Mansfield Park (where most of the interactions among female siblings involve secondary characters--the Bertram sisters, Fanny's mother and Fanny's aunts), and therefore, these two novels will be treated in less depth than Persuasion, Pride and Prejudice, and Sense and Sensibility.

Embedded in the stories of these very different sisters are episodes of pain, mortification, and even hostility. The discomfort ranges from the open

competition of the Bertram girls to the quiet shame of Anne Elliott at her sisters' snobbery, from the Musgrove girls' friendly rivalry for Captain Wentworth to Emma Watson's amazement at "treachery between sisters!" (Minor Works 118). And while Emma Woodhouse might anticipate Isabella's visit in spite of her sister's silly hypochondria, in the youthful novella Lesley Castle, Charlotte Lutterell's reaction to the death of her sister's fiancé is ridiculous:

> Imagine how great the Disappointment must be to me, when you consider that after having laboured by both Night and Day, in order to get the wedding dinner ready by the time appointed, after having roasted Beef, broiled Mutton, and Stewed Soup enough to last the new-married Couple through the Honey-moon, I had the mortification of finding that I had been Roasting, Broiling, and Stewing both the Meat and Myself to no purpose. (Minor Works 113)

These examples, which are only a few of many, support Nina Auerbach's assertion that Austen's characters often "lead a purgatorial existence together" (Communities of Women 46) as well as Patricia Beer's conviction that Austen's heroines exhibit little "solidarity" (76).

Austen's depiction of the complex interactions among sisters engages her readers from the earliest texts. Charlotte Lutterell's dismay at her sister's cancelled engagement is broadly parodic; at the same time, it reveals how sisters depend on each other. Charlotte has

derived satisfaction from planning and preparing the perfect bridal repast, and she accepts her sister's loss as her own. In The Three Sisters, too, Austen makes fun of sisterly behavior, as the girls engage in playful negotiations over an especially obnoxious suitor. Mr. Watts, who aspires to the hand of the eldest, sees the girls as interchangeable commodities: "If she does not choose to accept my hand, I can offer it else where. . . it is equally the same to me which I marry of the three" (Minor Works 64). But the three sisters do not accept the arrangement passively. They argue and tease each other in a scene which prepares for the Allabys' game of cards for a husband in Samuel Butler's Way of All Flesh. In Sense and Sensibility, Austen explores the narrative possibilities for sisters more fully. Although there are three Dashwood sisters, Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret, Austen concentrates on the two eldest, rejecting the fairy-tale triad. A popular reading of the text takes the sisters as foils for each other, figures standing in for "sense" and "sensibility" (see, for instance, Kenneth Moler's discussion of Sense and Sensibility 43-73). Such analyses assume a basic separation in the two figures, whereas in fact, from the title on, the two "add up to one divided self" (Tanner, Jane Austen 99), just as Cassandra Austen considers her sister and herself part of being. One can understand Marianne best in her contrast to

Elinor, and Elinor gains much of her sense of self in comparison to her sister. In short, as Tony Tanner has commented, they are "not a simple dualism. They are not simply ciphers for passion and reason, impulse and restraint, feeling and form, poetry and prose" (Jane Austen 99).

Indeed, Elinor and Marianne have little opportunity to separate. In their selfish machinations to give the girls as little as possible, the John Dashwoods treat them as a unit. The meager pittance grudgingly allotted to the girls, their sister, and their mother virtually ensures their continued togetherness, for their income is too low to be attractive in the marriage market.

In reaction to the social forces combining to treat them as duplicates in a crowded field, the girls pride themselves on their dissimilarities. These differences are exhibited in habitual patterns of behavior which create the illusion that the sisters are mere foils for one another. Elinor appears more practical than the romantic Marianne. Marianne's impetuousness makes her "resemblance. . . [to] her mother. . . strikingly great" (6); Elinor's commonsense concerns, including the family finances, align her with the world of men. She will not allow herself to indulge in Marianne's stereotypically female behaviors--tears, sighs, illness. She is instead "the counsellor of her mother" (6). Similar splitting is

apparent in secondary characters; Mrs. Palmer is "good-humoured and merry" (110), while her sister Lady Middleton is cold and vapid. Although Lucy Steele is calculating, her sister's less deliberate cruelties are evidence of stupidity and superficiality.

Personal differences are so strongly ingrained that sisters form complementary parts of one being, treating their individual character traits as possessions; Elinor feels awkward exhibiting certain qualities because they "belong" to Marianne.[1] When Elinor learns of Edward Ferrars's engagement to Lucy Steele, for example, she cannot express her sorrow, because, "Elinor was to be the comforter of others in her own distresses no less than in theirs. . ." (261). This behavior is part of her very being. In contrast, Marianne persists in seeking comfort. The complementarity of the Dashwood sisters operates in social settings, too, as ". . .the luxurious power to withdraw from unpleasant society is purchased for Marianne by the excess of Elinor's social martyrdom" (Nardin, Those Elegant Decorums 36).

Marianne's "luxury" is not merely detrimental to Elinor. Marianne's insistence on her sensitivity draws attention to her sibling's practicality and forbearance. Elinor, who would not appear the "martyr" without Marianne, depends on her younger sibling for her social

identity,[2] and thus differences help to create and define a self, making it recognizable.

The sisters are bound together in a complex knot of desires and needs, their relationship moving back and forth along a continuum between identification and differentiation. Even as Elinor benefits from the contrasts between her personality and Marianne's, she perceives Marianne's dissimilarity as implicit criticism. Combined with an underlying wish for integration, her insecurity kindles an urge to erase all differences. Yet the sisters suppress this longing because they would have to confront their social redundancy if they acted on it. The desire remains unfulfilled; its only trace is in instructive behavior, as when Elinor, "might suggest a hint of what was practicable to Marianne" (261), hoping to make her sister more similar to herself.

Austen only sketches out the connections between the sister story and the marriage plot in Sense and Sensibility; she reserves a fuller treatment of the theme for Pride and Prejudice. Having aligned Marianne with her mother, and made Elinor a surrogate male in the family, Austen proceeds to show how role divisions obviate the need for open rivalry over men. The handsome, impetuous Willoughby becomes Marianne's suitor--appropriately, as she, too, is impulsive and unabashedly emotional.

Rivalry is further avoided by the sisters' modes of communicating, or, to be more accurate, by the sisters' modes of not communicating. Marianne is reticent about discussing Willoughby's behavior, but after she receives his cruel letter, her grief is unrestrainable. Even then her exaggerated sorrow squelches any true communication. Elinor, who has her own affliction, is incapable of responding to such naive and insensitive assertions as, "Happy, happy Elinor, you cannot have an idea of what I suffer" (185). As Marianne works and reworks Willoughby's treachery in her mind, her talk becomes circular and disordered: "before breakfast was ready, they had gone through the subject again and again, with . . . the same impetuous feelings and varying opinions on Marianne's [side] as before" (201). This continual rehashing does not improve Marianne's spirits. Instead, it benefits Elinor, who derives gratification from the reminder that her sister has fallen victim to a man's inconstancy, too. Elinor also gains a sense of superiority from being her sibling's protector and confidante.

In turn, the elder sister keeps to herself the knowledge of Edward Ferrars's engagement to Lucy Steele. Her sister and mother's commiseration would only remind her that she misinterpreted Edward's behavior. This failure (for so Elinor perceives it) strikes at the core of her being, since she prides herself on her ability to

judge people accurately. For her, the decision to remain silent has all the strength of "necessity" (141), specifically, for self-preservation.

Elinor's silence consists not only of an unwillingness to hurt others, but also of an impulse to shield herself. Marianne illustrates the damage talk can cause; she embarrasses Elinor by assuming that Edward's ring is woven of Elinor's hair and by hinting to Mrs. Ferrars (in front of Lucy Steele no less) that Elinor's accomplishments are superior to Miss Morton's. In contrast, Elinor's unfailing politeness to Mrs. Jennings' inquiries and Lucy Steele's importunities allows her to hide painful truths. As Susan Morgan has remarked, in this novel, "Politeness is not an adequate expression of our feelings and thoughts. It really is a disguise. And that is its value. It leaves space and time for something still to be known" (204-5). By creating "space," silence and genteel manners counteract the cramped environment of the parental home, maintaining the distance and differences between sisters. Handwork is a mask, too. Dennis Allen points out that Elinor's firescreen is designed to "obscure" and that other crafts "disguise" a "lady herself" (430).

The intricate web of silence and difference does not prevent rivalry for long. The women's essential interchangeability is reasserted when Colonel Brandon chooses to wed Marianne rather than Elinor. But marriage

itself establishes rigid divisions through class and geography. The pain of personal dissimilarities is all but erased, and at the novel's close, personal rivalry is denied:

> Between Barton and Delaford there was that constant communication which strong family affection would naturally dictate; and among the merits and happiness of Elinor and Marianne, let it not be ranked as the least considerable, that though sisters, and living almost within sight of each other, they could live without disagreement between themselves, or producing coolness between their husbands. (380)

The astute reader, who has seen the lack of communication between the Dashwood sisters, and seen family affection anything but "natural" in the novel, may wonder whether Austen has forgotten what she has written or whether she is being ironic. The assertions of "family affection" are contradicted by the revealing and damning observation that Elinor and Marianne get along "<u>though</u> sisters." This reminder of past friction is supported by the relationships of secondary pairs of sisters, which remain unhappy.

In the Dashwoods' story, Austen has conceded to two conventions: the happy ending to the marriage plot and the calm surface of the equally content family. The smoothness of the closing paragraph underscores its forced quality. Austen has entered the world of romance and

fairy tale, leaving the telling "though sisters," as a marker of what has been suppressed.

In Pride and Prejudice, Austen provides a more complicated version of the sister story, in which the household contains five daughters instead of three. The number of women allows Austen to emphasize the siblings' social replication. All five are "out" together, and consequently in competition with each other. As Lady Catherine de Bourgh indicates, this is not a particularly enviable situation. Although Elizabeth argues that postponing the younger girls' entry into society until their elders married "would not be very likely to promote sisterly affection or delicacy of mind" (165), Mrs. Bennet's frantic pursuit of suitors scarcely "promotes" these qualities among the sisters either.

While the sisters occupy identical social positions and compete for recognition in the marriage market, each fills a carefully defined role in the family. Jane is quiet; Elizabeth is lively; Lydia chatters incessantly; Kitty imitates Lydia; Mary is plain and pedantic. These characterizations, though simplistic, reflect the sisters' perceptions of themselves. In fact, the sisters actually share certain emotions; for instance, Jane and Elizabeth are humiliated by their mother's schemes to find them husbands. And although they deny being similar, both

Lydia and Elizabeth display high spirits and rebellious energy.

As in Sense and Sensibility, divisions serve a multitude of purposes, revealing the dependence and interplay among sisters, even as they obscure the sisters' social redundancy. Moreover, here, too, Austen focuses on only two of the sisters at a time, either Elizabeth and Jane or Elizabeth and Lydia. Concentration on a pair of sisters sets differences in relief so that the siblings appear diametrically opposed, drawing attention to the way sisters define their identities in relation to each other.[3] Elizabeth and Lydia take particular pleasure in their differences from their siblings, and especially their elders. Elizabeth is mortified by Lydia's flamboyant flirting, and she boasts of being more discerning than Jane (though this famous discernment does not permit her to see through Wickham's wiles unaided). A fragment of a conversation between her and Jane reveals how sisterly differences allow the girls to "define themselves by studying each other, comparing and contrasting. . ." (Brownstein 108). Elizabeth begins by praising Jane's tolerance extravagantly: "you are too good. Your sweetness and disinterestedness are really angelic; I do not know what to say to you." Yet Elizabeth's approving remark may have a sardonic intent, for Elizabeth, who prides herself in her careful choice of language, is

usually thrifty with compliments. The subtext of Elizabeth's remark is defensive; she quickly returns to herself, condemning her own actions to elicit reassurance, "I feel as if I had never done you justice, or loved you as you deserve." Almost automatically, Jane complies, "Miss Bennet. . . threw back the praise on her sister's warm affection" (134-135). Clearly, this ritual has been performed many times.

Lydia's communications also evoke an intricate game of double (though not necessarily hidden) messages. Her effusive, excessive delight at her marriage, her ostentatious move to take precedence over Jane, her insensitive offer to find spouses for her sisters, are not as ingenuous as she wishes them to appear. Lydia, "who never heard or saw anything of which she chose to be insensible" (310), thoroughly enjoys the scene; she is rubbing in the fact that she is married and thus socially superior to her single sisters.

These dialogues demonstrate how sisters constantly judge, compare, and seek the reassurance of each other. But why are Lydia and Elizabeth particularly disposed to this prolonged game of oneupsmanship? Elizabeth's sense of herself is founded on her superior discrimination; her personality is determined by her differences from her siblings, whom she considers representatives of conventional femininity. Lydia's behavior is no doubt in

part the youngest sibling's revenge for having been last all her life. Lydia gains self-definition from her identification with her mother and other women. Her pride in her conquests and social successes is designed to strengthen that bond and to remind her siblings of their "failures" in that area.

For Lydia and Elizabeth, as for their sisters, the constant comparisons and embarrassments bring "pain" as well as "pleasure" (326). Even as Elizabeth feels mortified by Lydia's behavior, these gestures confirm her sense of self. Thus a sister's misdeeds shape the heroine's personality as much as her own actions. This circumstance is intimately connected to the construction of personality in the text. Because the sisters are split off parts of one self, they are in fact reacting to tendencies of their own which have been denied. A male hero will learn from travel and adventure, but these heroines remain close to home, and are formed by forces within that frame.

The friction among sisters is augmented by the girls' competition for parental approval. A scarcity of adult love and attention accompanies the literal poverty of the Bennet household. The young women in the novel, like those Elizabeth Fishel interviewed for her book on living sisters, must compete for what little affection exists:

> the gold cup of parental love . . . is never perceived as a cup which runneth

> over, rather a finite vessel from which the more one sister drinks, the less is left for the others. (153)

A sense of scarcity leads to jealousy which role splitting cannot erase. Instead of sharing, Lydia and Elizabeth must have parents of their "own."

While Elizabeth is closeted with her father or enjoying brisk walks, her mother shepherds the younger girls into town, where they participate in the rounds of female gossip, shopping, and flirting with the militiamen (Elizabeth's attraction to Wickham takes her briefly into this world, but her final choice of the patrician Darcy reinforces an alliance with her father to the exclusion of her mother). Lydia, Mrs. Bennet's favorite, is spoiled and forgiven everything.

Jane, who does not encourage her mother's foolishness, is not as critical of others as Elizabeth and her father tend to be. Such neutrality is important since it allows Jane the independence to begin her romance with Bingley.

Admitted to the sanctum of her father's study, Elizabeth is his acknowledged favorite and his confidante: ". . . Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters" (5). She has inherited her father's "mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice" (5), which makes her mistrusted and at times disliked by other women. These feelings are mutual. She wastes no time, for instance, in noticing that Miss Bingley's behavior at

its best is "all that was affectionate and insincere" (383).

In linking herself with her father, a young woman allies herself with power which intimidates other young women. Elizabeth is comfortable with her father, but Kitty is afraid of him and does not understand his humorous threats. This alignment also conveys the privilege of being included in family secrets, as when Mr. Bennet tells his eldest daughters of Mr. Gardiner's measures to ensure Lydia's marriage. He does not think of including his wife in this confidence, and when Elizabeth and Jane suggest that Mrs. Bennet ought to know, "without raising his head, [he] coolly replied, 'Just as you please'" (305). Lizzy and Jane are left to act as intermediaries; their ability to carry such important news to their mother is an indication of their strength in the household--and of their mother's powerlessness.

Moreover, these elements of secrecy and power give the favored daughter's relationship with her father an eerie resemblance to incest. As Elizabeth is admitted to knowledge forbidden to her mother, the distinctions between the terms "daughter" and "wife" loosen. Françoise Basch has noted how easily relationships become fluid:

> They [single women] move in world where characters and authors frequently confuse filial, conjugal, fraternal and passionate love, sublimate passion into chaste fraternal love, convert paternal

love into conjugal love. (271)

Austen is referring to just such a world, not of literal incest, but of shifting boundaries and definitions concerning human relations. This confusion exists in spite of the rigid divisions among sisters.

In fact, this fluidity in heterosexual relations stems from the same roots as sisters' role divisions. The desire to assert her separateness from a sister, to be more than an undifferentiated "daughter," can lead a young woman to sanction a relationship which appears to transgress boundaries. The special bond with her father removes the girl from the anonymous category of "daughter"; she begins to replace "wife." Ordinarily, "the naming function of language" is "one of the strongest announcers and enforcers" of the incest taboo:

> The process of naming is the process of categorizing, which is the unconscious establishment of limits, in this case sexual limits. . . . In other words, the semiotics of incest--the social code--may be far more potent than the biology of in-breeding--a genetic code. (Twitchell 9)

But in Austen's novels, language cannot always "enforce" the taboo. The very "process of naming" is alien to sisters, who find it lumps them together.[4]

This fluidity in the "categorizing" of relationships spills over into the marriage plot. Just as Elizabeth's relationship to her father has its ambiguities, her

interactions with suitors are undefined. Wickham exists in the category of "suitor" before he becomes a brother-in-law; Darcy is initially mistaken for a surrogate father because he scolds and corrects Elizabeth.[5] At this stage, the sisters' interchangeability resurfaces, as illustrated by Wickham's shifting affections.

The fluidity in heterosexual relations, together with the existence of secrets from which one or more sisters may be excluded, results in reduced communication (much like the restraint between Elinor and Marianne Dashwood). Elizabeth silences herself regarding Wickham's character, not only because she is bound to secrecy, but also because she fears that Lydia would doubt her anyway (and perhaps Elizabeth wishes to remove an embarrassing irritant from the family?). Jane and Elizabeth confide in each other less openly, too; conversation with or without undertones is minimal. Anger and sorrow are displaced onto the powerful, nasty older woman, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Because Lady Catherine is outside the family, she is a "safe" repository for otherwise inexpressible emotions. Like Aphrodite in the myth of Psyche, Lady Catherine acts as a model of female strength, at once an obstacle in the heroine's path and an enabler who forces her to come to terms with herself when her sisters are powerless.

The increased silence between the sisters is an essential part of the sister plot, because it throws the

heroine closer to her suitor. Secrets, reinforced by Elizabeth's physical distance from her sisters, begin to wear her down. She starts to appreciate Darcy on her trip with the Gardiners. His solace after Lydia elopes consoles the heroine for the lack of Jane's companionship.

Another factor which brings the heroine closer to her suitor is rivalry from outside the family. None of Elizabeth's sisters competes openly with her for the "right" suitor, Mr. Darcy. Instead, Lady Catherine's officious meddling on behalf of her daughter forces Elizabeth to acknowledge her attraction to Darcy. The role splitting and lack of communication within the family have made participation in a sister's quest for a spouse almost impossible. Even when Elizabeth wants to bring Jane and Bingley back together, she is virtually helpless. Only Darcy's instigations and Miss Bingley's spite can overcome Jane's diffidence.

Once the sisters are engaged, conflict is resolved through means other than role splitting in a conclusion which resembles the end of Sense and Sensibility. Jane and Elizabeth are separated from the irritants in the family; once married, the two eldest see little of Lydia, Mary and Mrs. Bennet, while Mr. Bennet is permitted to drop in unannounced. Kitty is "improved" (385) by her two eldest sisters and kept away from Lydia's noxious influence. The divisions are reinforced by class; the

Darcys are social superiors to the Wickhams and thus have little occasion to mingle with them.

In Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility, Austen incorporates elements of traditional myths and fairy tales in her sister plot. Like Cinderella, Elizabeth Bennet is associated with her father and uncomfortable in the world of women; Elizabeth also shares Cinderella's exclusion from the higher ranks of society. Yet the greatest resemblance between Austen's tales and Cinderella or Psyche is the role splitting among sisters, which is also apparent in Persuasion.

Persuasion revises archetypes more radically than the other two novels. Instead of associating her heroine with the world of men, Austen places Anne in the position of the outcast youngest child. She changes the fairy tale three sibling pattern, making the tested child the mother's favorite and the middle sibling (a revision which fits actual sibling patterns, since middle children often feel neglected). Finally, like Psyche, Anne has had a lover and lost him, though not so much through her sisters' influence as through the persuasion of Lady Russell, her surrogate mother and a Venus figure in the novel.

Anne is displaced within her family and within society. The pain and mortification caused by her sisters, especially Elizabeth, though masked by a surface

of calm and politeness, are severe. Whereas Elizabeth Bennet may feel some sisterhood toward Charlotte Lucas, for most of the novel, Anne lacks contact with congenial or sensible peers. She and Mrs. Croft are little more than acquaintances; Mrs. Smith does not move in the same social circles or truly understand Anne's motives. Lady Russell, when she is present, remains intimidating and peremptory.

The situation is worsened by the family's financial plight and move to constricted quarters. Physical poverty is a metaphor for the family's emotional deprivation. Sir Walter Elliott is unable to pay attention to Anne because if he did so, he would be scanting Elizabeth, and worse, himself. Instead, he views Anne as a disposable, if useful, commodity; she is to occupy herself quietly without demanding any attention, or she is to be thrust out of the way.

Austen's portrayal of family relations in this novel is darker than in her earlier works. In Mansfield Park and Sense and Sensibility, relationships among secondary sisters are inferior to those involving the heroine and her siblings. In Persuasion, Anne feels isolated in the midst of her snobbish siblings, while the secondary set of sisters, the Musgroves, get along quite well. Louisa may be livelier and more forthright than her sister, and the

two may initially compete for Captain Wentworth, but their anger toward each other is short-lived.

A more significant sign of Austen's pessimism is her treatment of Anne's relationship with her father. Instead of favoring the heroine, Sir Elliott prefers Elizabeth: "For one daughter, his eldest, he would really have given up any thing, which he had not been very much tempted to do" (5). Although Elizabeth is nominally mistress of the household, she is a failure at housekeeping, and Lady Russell finds little resemblance between the daughter and her deceased mother. On the other hand, Anne shares her mother's managerial expertise as well as her gentleness: "it was only in Anne that she [Lady Russell] could imagine the mother to revive again" (6).

This reversal indicates Austen's shifting opinion of the alignment with the father. In the earlier novels, the heroine's closeness to her father is a mark of her (and his) good sense, even though the association sets the woman apart from other females. For instance, when Elizabeth Bennet considers Mr. Collins's proposal, her father jokes that no matter what she decides, she will lose the affection of one parent. Elizabeth has no qualms about seeking her father's approval and not her mother's. In Sense and Sensibility, Elinor appears admirable for performing fatherly duties for her mother and sisters. But in Persuasion, the father's favorite inherits only his

foolish snobbery. Elizabeth's vanity effectively shields her from close contact with her equals, except the obsequious Mrs. Clay, and her toadying to nobility underscores the absence of any genuine esteem between her and other females. Elizabeth's intimacy with Sir Walter Elliott, though different in character from Elizabeth Bennet's bond to her father, has a similar effect in isolating her from her gender.

Austen has further manipulated the materials of the standard sister plot in stretching it temporally. In Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice, the main sisters' marriages occur within a short period of time. Here, the marriage plot is interrupted, and the result is heightened friction among the sisters and continued fluidity in family relationships. Anne and Wentworth's courtship is suspended when he sets sail, and Austen takes up and completes another marriage plot instead.

The latter story dislocates the sister pattern. Anne, having relinquished Wentworth, is stuck within the family, as if she were bound in a relationship with her father. Instead of treating Charles Musgrove as a brother and then realizing his potential as a husband, Anne turns a suitor into a fraternal figure. When Charles Musgrove proposes to Anne, she rejects him, and he "not long afterwards found a more willing mind in her younger sister. . ." (28). This sequence shows that Anne has learned from her

loss of Wentworth; she resists Musgrove's proposals even though the influential Lady Russell "lamented her refusal. . ." (28). Musgrove's quickness in shifting his attention from one sister to the other, like Wickham's, underlines not only masculine weakness but also the girls' redundancy in the marriage market. Finally, Anne's reflections on Musgrove's marriage reveal that she can feel envy. Despite her apparent tolerance of her sister's behavior, Anne believes that Charles might have been better off marrying a different kind of person:

> a woman of real understanding might have given more consequence to his character, and more usefulness, rationality, and elegance to his habits and pursuit. (43)

Austen's initial description of Anne as having "an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding. . ." (5) is echoed by this description of the ideal mate for Charles. Yet although Anne hints that she might have been a superior spouse to Charles, she does not grieve seriously over him. Instead, she understands that a husband, like a father, can convey power and status, and, as the Cinderella of her family, she is effaced:

> Only Anne--no rank, no effective surname, no house, no location; her words are weightless, and physically speaking she has always to 'give way'--that is, accept perpetual displacement.

(Tanner, Jane Austen 209)

Unmarried and unloved, Anne has no "place" of her own in society or the family.

The interchangeability of sisters, while a motif in Austen's other novels, is especially prominent in the main plot of Persuasion. Musgrove's proposals in the "interim" story prepare for similar behavior on the part of the other male characters. Wentworth briefly excites competition between the Musgrove sisters when he dallies with both. Mr. Elliott, too, transfers his affections from Elizabeth to Anne. Initially, any socially appropriate woman will do for the men; a sign of Wentworth's excellence is that he comes to recognize Anne's as an individual, rather than as part of a group or unit.

Male inconstancy increases the competition among women, contributing to the silences which pervade this most inward of Austen's novels.[6] The Elliott sisters are remarkable in their lack of understanding of each other, and Anne's restraint is formidable. She does not discuss her attraction to Wentworth, her grief over her family's treatment of her, or her discomfort with Mr. Elliott's attentions, as she has "habitually used the minor rules of propriety to conceal her feelings and motives. . ." (Nardin, Those Elegant Decorums 142). Anne's reserve distances her from the sisterhood of other women as well

as from her family. Mrs. Smith has to base her impressions of Anne on gossip received third-hand, and as a result, she is surprised to discover Anne's distaste for Mr. Elliott. Silence, which began for Anne as a way of dealing with family, has become part of her self-effacement.

Anne's sisters hinder more than help her, and ultimately, as with Elizabeth Bennet, competition from outside the family (Louisa Musgrove) forces her to acknowledge love. At the end of the novel, Anne goes to sea, physical distance separating her from clamorous sisters and a haughty father. Space replaces silence. Austen allows the heroine a new sister in Mrs. Admiral Croft, for Anne, having extricated herself from the family web, is able to make friends elsewhere. But even though the break from family is more complete than in Pride and Prejudice, Austen fails to erase tension or create harmony as in Sense and Sensibility. The author ultimately leaves the problem of sisters in the balance; she shows how role splitting harms siblings, but offers no true resolution.

In Mansfield Park and Emma, siblings are less central than the novels discussed so far, but, like Persuasion, both offer ambiguous endings to the sister plot. Mansfield Park illustrates what happens when marriages which entrench differences nevertheless fail to banish rivalry; Aunt Norris, Mrs. Price, and Lady Bertram

continue to express anger in their manipulations of each other and their families. With this model, it is little wonder that the Bertram sisters squabble perpetually (indeed, their behavior serves as an inverse example of the ideal of sisterhood). Crawford's flirtation with both girls escalates their competition, which is interrupted only when they unite in tormenting Fanny.

Why do the Bertrams squabble so much more than Austen's other sisters? Aside from Aunt Norris's preference for Maria, they are neglected by their elders, and neither is aligned with a parent. Thus the sisters scarcely differentiate; the role splitting apparent among other female siblings in Austen's novels is virtually nonexistent.

Austen does provide a happier model of sisterly behavior in Fanny's relationship with Susan. These sisters are companionable because they have not fought for parental attention or suitors during their separation. Moreover, both benefit when Fanny trains Susan. The latter acquires social niceties and manners, while Fanny begins to feel that she belongs and is useful. Like Anne Elliott, Fanny has practiced the art of self-effacement (as Leo Bersani states, "she almost <u>is not</u>," 76), and she must assert herself in educating her sister.

The relationship between Fanny and Mary Crawford, a would-be sibling, provides another example of sisterly

behavior. While the Bertrams' bond is completely negative, and the Prices' relationship is educative, Mary at once helps and hinders Fanny. By encouraging the heroine to accept Henry's proposal, Mary hopes to become her sister. And when she plans to wed Edmund Bertram, who treats Fanny as a "brother" (10),[7] Mary also stands to be Fanny's kin. Mary's gift of Henry's chain (to bind Fanny?) reveals the duplicity of her motives as well as of the suitor. Because she is a would-be sister rather than a biological sibling, she is not completely enmeshed with Fanny, and Fanny is free to reject her assistance. Moreover, Mary is an enabling figure in spite of herself. She ultimately functions as the rival outside the family who makes the heroine conscious of her love for a surrogate brother.

The conclusion of Mansfield Park offers a wider range of possibilities for sisters than the closings of Austen's other novels. Fanny's marriage confirms her alliance with the Bertrams as well as her geographical and social distance from the Prices. Like Kitty Bennet, Susan must be "improved" to be imported to her sister's home, while William is permitted a an occasional visitor. The Bertram sisters are separated when Maria is banished. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the conclusion is the way Austen treats unresolved conflicts in the older generation. Aunt Norris, whose constant meddling has served as an implied

rebuke to Lady Bertram, is finally displaced. It takes Maria's flight with Crawford--a blow aimed in part at her own sister--to accomplish this. Noxious and irritating siblings continue to be vanquished by distance, but Austen admits the possibility once again of altering less embarrassing sisters.

In Emma, Knightley, like Edmund Bertram, is presented in a fraternal relationship to the heroine; he is Emma's brother-in-law. Emma cannot recognize his love because she is preoccupied with her relationship with her father. In fact, Emma acknowledges that one reason for her eagerness to promote others' marriages is that she has little desire to wed and leave her family. Thus in this novel, Austen explores the dangers for the heroine who is too tightly enmeshed in the family dynamic, a problem Gaskell later studies in Wives and Daughters.

Emma's closeness to her father, combined with role splitting, separates her from her sister Isabella, who has chosen to marry and start a family. The result is poor communication between the sisters throughout the novel. Emma may converse a great deal with her sister and father, but these discussions revolve around insignificant details pertaining to their health, drafts and the weather. This talk is scarcely more meaningful than the endless chatter of Miss Bates, which Emma mocks so harshly. Crossed communications occur outside the family, too, most

notably, when Emma misinterprets the behavior of Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, but these errors are more comprehensible because they involve strangers. The weak communication at Hartfield is remarkable precisely because it occurs at home, where, as Gilbert and Gubar have noted:

> readiness to talk frequently masks reticence to communicate. . . . The civil falsehoods that keep society running make each character a riddle to the others, a polite puzzle. (The Madwoman in the Attic 158)

Not only are sisters "riddles" to each other, but each is unfamiliar with the part of herself which has been marked off as her sister's territory. For instance, Emma denies any interest in marrying, using "her social function as the concerned aunt to suppress her own unconscious love of Mr. Knightley and her jealousy at the very thought of his marrying anyone but herself" (Siefert 80). Emma's eventual decision to marry Knightley is therefore evidence of heightened self-awareness.

The foolish Isabella Knightley proves an intriguing alternative to Emma. While at first she appears merely a comic character, the contrast between her and Emma underlines the liabilities of too close an alignment with the father. As long as Emma gains power and status from her father's position in the village, she cannot leave home for long periods of time; she may enjoy being an aunt, but she will not be a parent. Isabella may not have

the strength to stand up to her father on her own, but she uses her husband's whims and doctor's "orders" (which may or may not be fictive) to get her own way. Thus obsessions with physical comforts and health, inherited from Mr. Woodhouse, allow Isabella to detach herself, instead of confining her in an incestuous bond. Characteristically feminine indirection is her primary mode of managing others; her manipulations are often more effective than Emma's more direct and ambitious plans for others.

In Emma, Austen also takes up the problem of sisterhood. Like Anne Elliott and Elinor Dashwood, Emma lacks the companionship of peers. But more importantly, without effective models for friendship in her sisterly relationship, Emma does not know how to treat Jane Fairfax or Harriet Smith. She perceives them as sisters so often see each other--as extensions of herself--and refuses to acknowledge their individuality or right to privacy. For example, Emma cannot separate her opinion of Jane from her estimation of herself. If she values Jane, she cannot approve of her own behavior:

> Why she did not like Jane Fairfax might be a difficult question to answer; Mr. Knightley had once told her it was because she saw in her the really accomplished young woman which she wanted to be thought herself; and though the accusation had been eagerly refuted at the time, there were moments of self-examination in which her conscience

could not acquit her. (166)

The conclusion of Emma never truly resolves the problems of sisterhood or the heroine's excessive closeness to her father. Instead, Emma's marriage allows her to stay home with her father and to marry Knightley. One does not imagine her achieving her sister's independence from Mr. Woodhouse. The happiness at the end of the novel is forced; one also has difficulty picturing Knightley living contentedly in Mr. Woodhouse's household, and Emma remains separated from her peers. Emma is virtually a prisoner at Hartfield, satisfying two exigent men.

Thus Austen's major novels suggest the difficulties of achieving sisterhood in the light of unhappy sisterly relations. Sisters play a significant narrative and structural role in her novels, and they ultimately form part of that darker underside, the reverse weave of the novel--what has to be suppressed, distanced or unfulfilled in a heroine for her to accept a traditional marriage and for the novelist to create a conventional ending. Like Psyche's sisters, the siblings in Austen's novels may play an enabling role in the heroine's development, but they are distanced with the completion of the marriage plot.

NOTES

1. Contemporary psychologists Stephen Bank and Michael Kahn have observed a similar phenomenon in a clinical setting: "A determination not to become like a particular brother or sister means that one has given up certain options of behavior and has relegated them to the other sibling" (110-1). Bank and Kahn describe this quality as common to both sexes, but within Austen's novel, this particular type of possessiveness is primarily female. Neither Ferrars brother has a monopoly over stupidity or weakness for Lucy Steele. John Dashwood may have arrogated for himself the right to be selfish, domineering, and snobbish, but the "determination" in his case "to give up" traits was supported by cultural and social norms. With living sisters, the decision to appropriate certain personality traits takes place in childhood; novelists, on the other hand, use this splitting to achieve a semblance of verisimilitude as well as to fulfill narrative or thematic goals.

2. Here, the role splitting among sisters functions on two levels. It benefits the sisters socially, but it also engages readers' sympathies for Elinor, forcing them to question the value of sensibility. In the process, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that Elinor's attempts to be the model woman of nineteenth-century training manuals often make her look smug, just as similar efforts on Fanny Price's part in Mansfield Park verge on priggishness.

3. The role of "emotionally significant pairs" of siblings has been documented by Bank and Kahn, who have noticed that the relationship "can be either negative or positive, in the service of either love or hate. Each sibling appears to obtain more pain or more pleasure from one sibling to the exclusion of other children in a family" (50). Elizabeth Bennet is divided both ways; she derives support and affection from Jane, and negative self-definition from Lydia. Whenever she focuses on one of these sisters, she "excludes" the other.

Kahn and Bank have traced this bond in adolescence, where "There is no neutrality or indifference . . . a particular sibling is the one who really 'counts.'" They have found that in families like the Bennets', where there are an odd number of children, one sibling is always left out (51), just as Mary is excluded from the frequent pairing of Jane with Elizabeth and Kitty with Lydia. The shifting alliances indicate the essential instability of

the Bennet family; the fact that in both dyads, the younger sibling is most powerful also creates tension. These factors contribute to the friction among sisters.

4. Indeed, the "naming function of language" may illustrate and perpetuate women's social redundancy. The recurrence of women's Christian names in Austen's novels, the abundance of Janes, Annes, Fannys, and Elizabeths, underscores the fact that they duplicate each other. Women's family names are not their own, but rather markers of their social status and kinship; men, possessing both their own Christian and family names (and often referred to by family names alone) have more standing in Austen's society.

5. One could argue that she never completely moves beyond seeing Darcy as a father figure. Rachel Brownstein notes that like Mr. Bennet, Darcy "admires her [Elizabeth] above all other women" and is "haughty and exigent" (102) throughout the work.

6. Characters such as Elizabeth, Mary, and Mrs. Clay may talk incessantly, but they communicate little, and their speech ultimately has an effect similar to silence.

7. R. F. Brissenden has remarked that Edmund's fraternal relationship to Fanny "has distinctly incestuous overtones; and it is these . . . that give the relationship between these two rather ordinary people its underlying power" (165). As a brother, Edmund is appealing not only because he replaces the distant William, but also because he offers an apparently asexual, and hence nonthreatening, relationship. Edmund emanates none of the uncontrolled sexuality which frightens Fanny in Henry Crawford.

ELIZABETH GASKELL: EMBROIDERING THE PATTERN

Elizabeth Gaskell, like Jane Austen before her, traces the development of young women's identities in "emotionally significant pairs" of sisters (Bank and Kahn 50). But Gaskell does not envision the heroine's wedding as an inevitable conclusion to the sister plot. Instead of reinforcing the divisions between sisters with marriage, Gaskell offers alternate endings. She emphasizes the allure and danger of home: in Cranford and The Life of Charlotte Brontë, she depicts young women who never marry or establish independent households, while in Wives and Daughters, she portrays a young woman whose marriage long seems unlikely. For Gaskell, friendships with other women, or sisterhoods, begin to replace male lovers in women's closest relationships outside the family.

Sisters are important in Gaskell's technical plan as well as in her thematic design. Role splitting takes on fixed patterns, and the contrast between sisters "results in the novels being narrow in scope and well unified" (Rotner 192). Although oppositions in Gaskell's novels may include other characters, Gaskell achieves the most drama and friction in the juxtaposition of two individuals who are as close as sisters. The greater the distance

between characters, the less the tension; not as much is at stake in the relationship.

Gaskell's treatment of the sister bond is consistent with her experience, in contrast to Austen, whose intimacy with her sister is countered by often contentious relationships among fictive siblings. Gaskell's mother died when she was young, and she was raised by a widowed aunt in a household of women. Her father remarried, but Gaskell was never close to him or her new family. Her letters express a longing to be more intimate with her father, as well as disappointment in her step-mother and step-sisters, whom she saw only once in the twenty-five years following her father's death.

In raising her own children, Gaskell desired harmony, but not the peace created by identical interests. Her letters indicate that she wished her four daughters to avoid competition by developing different and complementary parts of themselves. Thus each girl's school was selected to meet her particular needs. This hope for comradeship among her daughters may have sprung out of her own youthful isolation or out of a sense that solidarity, even dependence, among sisters was "right." Mrs. Gaskell's remarks in a letter to her daughter Marianne imply that she took training manual warnings to heart:

> I could not bear my life if you and Meta did not love each other most dearly. . . . it is so dreary to see sisters grow old (as one sometimes does), not caring

> for each other, and forgetting all early home-ties. (435)

If Gaskell saw no evidence of closeness among sisters in the actuality of her past, she might project such intimacy into the future, not only for her daughters, but also for the heroines of her novels.

In discussing Gaskell's works, particularly Cranford, Wives and Daughters, and The Life of Charlotte Brontë, one must deal with these two conflicting notions: an incomplete, repressive, yet powerful family in opposition to an impulse toward intimacy, which might be mythic, existing "as a reference, not as an actuality . . . " (Wright 53). Critics who ignore this opposition limit their view of Gaskell's texts. David Cecil, for instance, comments that "Bitterness and disillusion are as remote from Mrs. Gaskell's comprehension as violence. Every discord is resolvable to her. . ." (186). One can hardly believe that Coral Lansbury is also describing Gaskell when she writes that,

> . . . she regarded it [the family] as a stifling and often blighting influence on children's lives. . . . Women's lives were stunted and children were forced to live with uncongenial siblings. . . . the happy families in the novels and stories have little in common with usual family patterns. (Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis 8)

The "happy families" referred to by Lansbury, exhibiting "little in common with usual family patterns"

(what is usual?), may include metaphorical "sisters," step-siblings, friends, and neighbors. Gaskell takes as a given a troubled or incomplete family and asks, how do we "make" family? What is family? Is it a fiction? What is a sister? What is the difference between a biological sister and a woman we choose to call "sister"?

Gaskell sets the pattern for her treatment of sisters in two works preceding Cranford--Mary Barton and "Mr. Harrison's Confessions." Sisters are of marginal importance in the main plot of Mary Barton. Mary herself has no sister. The heroine's mother dies in the third chapter of the novel, and the girl's aunt Esther is conspicuous primarily by her absence. Esther is the character excised from so much Victorian literature and discourse--the fallen woman, the prostitute. Yet Gaskell indicates that she is important nevertheless, making her the subject of the first line of dialogue.

Esther has just left home, and her disappearance causes her pregnant sister "overpowering and hysterical. . . grief" (43). While Mrs. Barton is the sentimentalized Victorian mother, Esther is dangerously sexual. John Barton considers his wife's prettiness part of her maternal attraction, but he regards Esther's beauty as "a sad snare." Power is the underlying issue; Esther's comeliness gives her self-confidence, and "there was no holding her in" (43). Mrs. Barton accepts her husband's

severity, but her sister rebels and flees the hard, patriarchal "advice" (admonishments?) of John Barton (43).

The sisters are complementary parts of one being. With the loss of Esther, female sexuality is virtually excluded from the novel, and Mrs. Barton cannot survive. Barton blames Esther's "giddiness, her lightness of conduct" (58), which is so often a euphemism for seductive female behavior, for his wife's death. Young Mary's life is characterized by repression thereafter. She is unusually close to her remaining parent, restraining even her mourning "because it flashed across her mind that her violence of grief might disturb her father" (57). Yet "her mysterious aunt, Esther, had an unacknowledged influence over Mary" (63). The thought of the beautiful, distant Esther sets Mary apart from her peers and enables her to attract the patrician young Carson.

Every time Esther resurfaces, sexuality does, too. Once, she is taken for a drunken woman in a perverse equation of intoxication, sexuality, and loss of control in women. Next, she visits her niece to save Mary's lover, and, accidentally revealing the truth of John Barton's misconduct, she forces Mary to reconsider her closeness with her father. Thus Esther points Mary in the direction of a fulfilling, adult sexuality (independent of John Barton), and away from her flirtation with Carson.

Having achieved her aim, Esther dies, and the heroine's acceptance of her sexuality is signalled by her marriage. While no such integration is apparent in Gaskell's later works, this novel is significant in illustrating Gaskell's division of sisters' personalities and in charting the effects of this split.

In "Mr. Harrison's Confessions," a sketch for Cranford, a rural town is thrown into disarray by the arrival of an eligible young bachelor who titillates the spinsters. As in Austen's novels, the hero of this story initially plays a brotherly role. Mr. Harrison's housekeeper, the widowed Mrs. Rose, who has matrimonial designs on him, views him with "quite an older sister's interest. . ." (450). The Misses Tompkinson are especially eager in their pursuit of Mr. Harrison, and their personalities prepare for the differences between the Jenkyns sisters in Cranford. The younger, Miss Caroline, appears "very delicate and die-away"; she is "soft and sentimental," and easily "shocked at her sister's outré manners." In contrast, the "hard and masculine" Miss Tompkinson dominates her sister (415). The Tompkinsons are far less sympathetic than Matty and Deborah Jenkyns; moreover, perceived through the obtuse consciousness of the young doctor, these women remain stock figures, almost burlesques. The relationship between the siblings is never fully realized. They are a

reminder of what the Misses Jenkyns might have been without the elaborate deceits of Cranford.

Unmarried and economically deprived, the Misses Jenkyns in Cranford are analogous to the ridiculous Miss Bates in Emma. Although Gaskell's sisters occupy a marginal position within Victorian society, they are not objects of charity for the neighboring gentlemen. Their lives illustrate the intricate nexus of sex, power, class, and money in the novella: "Beneath its idyllic veneer, the interest of Cranford comes from the tension between power and deprivation in its analysis of the etiquette of penury in the town of redundant women" (Auerbach, Communities of Women 80).

Life in the Jenkyns home replicates the world of an Austen novel. Funds and affection are in limited supply, and the girls have developed strategies to restrict competition for these commodities. By developing certain personal qualities in herself to the exclusion of others, each girl is able to attract her share of parental attention. Matty plays the part of the conventional woman. Her "mother's darling" (88), she constantly fusses about her appearance, and she falls in love with Holbrook. In contrast, Deborah is renowned for her masculine headgear; she sports "a hybrid bonnet, half-helmet, half-jockey cap. . ." (57). She adopts her father's righteousness and prefers the eighteenth-century

rationality of Dr. Johnson's Dictionary to the humorous fictions of Pickwick Papers. For a time, each sister is supplanted with her favorite parent by her brother Peter. However, Peter's failures soon restore Deborah to her place in her father's esteem (93). In contrast, Matty assumes a timid mien, considering herself inferior, not only because she is neither parent's favorite, but also because she has been identified with her mother, who is of secondary importance in the household. Instead of the occasional sharpness between sisters found in Austen novels (such as Elizabeth Elliott's scorn for Anne, or Elizabeth Bennet's mortification at Lydia's behavior), friction here is veiled, part of the euphemistic "elegant economy."

The girls' training produces repressed women. Miss Matty is forced to relinquish her lover, Mr. Holbrook, because he is of an inferior social rank. Unlike Emma Woodhouse, Deborah is never able to detach herself sufficiently from her father's influence to marry. Matty hints at the irony and futility of the sacrifice, pointing out that Deborah prides herself on rejecting non-existent proposals. Nevertheless, being the model daughter gives Deborah stature in the parish:

> She was such a daughter to my father, as I think there never was before, or since. His eyes failed him, and she read book after book, and wrote, and copied, and was always at his service in

any parish business. (102)

In this passage, Gaskell refers to the sacrifices of Milton's daughter in his blindness, neatly blending the allusion with an intimation of the unusually close (and almost incestuous) nature of the father-daughter bond.

What is repressed and banished, as in Mary Barton, is adult sexuality, as embodied by Peter. Virility can never be acknowledged by the family; Peter is punished for masquerading as Deborah dandling a baby, and, like Esther, he runs away. The possibility of sexual fulfillment for his sisters goes with him. The mother dies, as in Mary Barton, and Deborah stays with the rector, with Matty as her companion. Yet Deborah, try as she might to assist her father with parish duties, can never replace Mrs. Jenkyns (102), precisely because she has not developed her sexuality. Further evidence of the girls' repression abounds in the novel, from their discomfort with servants having "followers" (as if men were mere appendages), to their retreat to their bedrooms when indulging in the suggestive act of sucking oranges. The completeness of their ignorance is most apparent when Matty is genuinely unaware of Martha's advanced pregnancy.

Initially, Matty is stunted by this repression and by her sister's dominance. Miss Jenkyns, as Patsy Stoneman has noted, "has assimilated the conditions of her own subordination" (89). She criticizes Major Brown for

enjoying Dickens and tyrannizes her younger sister. The patriarchal authority Deborah assumes extends to censoring her sister's thoughts:

> Miss Matilda Jenkyns (who did not mind being called Miss Matty, when Miss Jenkyns was not by) wrote nice, kind rambling letters; now and then venturing into an opinion of her own; but suddenly pulling herself up, and either begging me not to name what she had said, as Deborah thought differently, and she knew; or else putting in a . . . recantation of every opinion she had given in the letter. (51)

Miss Jenkyns, having taken "the Hebrew prophetess for a model in character" (51), exerts such power that even after her death, her younger sister constantly defers to what she imagines to be her wishes. Although Deborah's unwise investment leads to Matty's ruin, Matty never voices criticism or anger, so reluctant is she to betray Deborah's principles. The younger Miss Jenkyns has come to depend on Deborah's standards; they provide a secure set of guidelines for her conduct, ordering her life.

Martin Dodsworth's assertion that "Miss Matty is made a scapegoat for the sins of her sister" (138) is only partly true then. Besides, the death of Miss Jenkyns brings with it the "end of the severe patriarchal code" (Auerbach, Communities of Women 82); Miss Matty soon finds subtle ways of altering the order at Cranford. When Holbrook reappears, only to die shortly afterwards, Miss Matty reveals the seriousness of her emotions by wearing

widow's caps. Matty also gives Martha permission to see young men, allowing her servant what her sister forbade her.

Although Matty longs for a turban to wear to Signior Brunoni's conjuring performance and grows more assertive after her sister's death, she never assumes Deborah's masculine headgear or domineering tone. With the loss of her income, Matty is forced for "the first time in her life. . . to choose anything of consequence for herself. . ." (173). Even though she worries about how her refined sister might have judged her, Matty opens a business: ". . . I don't think, if Deborah knows where she is, she'll care so very much if I'm not genteel. . ." (196).

Without Deborah, Miss Matty must acknowledge money and sex, the two greatest subjects of repression in her life. The polite fictions of the town allow her to do so evasively; she affects not to notice much about Martha's growing attachment to Jem, and she gives away so many of her candles that it is scarcely as if she is in business at all. She succeeds not by adopting masculine traits, like her sister, but by subverting traditional femininity. Although Deborah is not alive to condemn her sister's commercial venture, such critics as Martin Dodsworth are troubled by Matty's shopkeeping. Preferring to view Cranford as "a novel of escape," Dodsworth finds "psychological accuracy is strangely out of place in a

genre noted for evasion. . ." (133). But the case is quite other. For Gaskell, the "evasion" of Cranford is its "psychological accuracy"; spinster ladies like Miss Matty, to retain their position and respect, have to work by devious means, clothing their cows in flannel waistcoats, leaving signs of a masculine presence in their homes to deter burglars. In Communities of Women, Nina Auerbach notes that such little stratagems give the Amazons of Cranford what power they have: "Part of its [the female community's] artillery is the power of deceit" (87).

The unmarried women in the community are remarkable for their similarity to Miss Matty, while her relationship with her sister is defined by difference (for instance, they share her nocturnal terrors, her excitement about fashion, and her bewilderment over finances). The sisterhood assists her when she has lost her money as a result of her sister's unwise investment. And, even as the women enable her to perpetuate the myth of her gentility, they are her audience. For them, she survives the dark chill of trimmed candles lit alternately; for them, she engages in curious manoeuvres to prevent the sun from fading her carpet. The sisterhood's main characteristic is its subversiveness. Even as it enables Matty to undermine conventions, it pretends to support them.

The end of the story is evasive, too. A man comes to the rescue, but he is no Prince Charming, no suitor in the guise of a brother, like two heroes of Austen's novels, Knightley and Bertram. Gaskell offers only Peter Jenkyns, Matty's biological brother. Moreover, Peter does not bring back sexuality. He has been emasculated; like an old umbrella, Peter is no more than a "stick" in "petticoats" (40), and "there is no need for him to dress in women's clothes for he shares the very spirit of Cranford" (Lansbury, Elizabeth Gaskell 74). Peter joins the community, participating in the endless rounds of tea, the quiet gambling over cards (the only permissible risk in Cranford), the gossip and story-telling, at which he becomes proficient.

In all the excitement and bounty of Peter's return, an important secret is ignored, "Gaskell has Peter 'save' Matty from an evidently successful enterprise. . ." (Fair 104). As Peter assumes Deborah's position as the eldest, his sister becomes "my little Matty" (208) again. Recent events are erased, and Matty's new-found independence is forgotten. Her business is closed, and significantly, the spirit of Deborah rises from the grave in one last gesture, "the handsomest bound and best edition of Dr. Johnson's works" is presented to the narrator as a gift from both sisters (211). The text of the father thus resurfaces to impose rigid definitions on words and to

discourage the laxity which allowed feminine evasiveness to flourish.

Elizabeth Gaskell does insert an alternate story of sisters in the work when she traces the fortunes of Jessie Brown. Jessie's courtship is completed, but Gaskell implies that marriage is not necessarily a happier solution. Both Jessie's father and sister die before she can marry. Once she is Mrs. Gordon, Jessie is not allowed to continue in the female economy of Cranford; she may only return as a visitor. In a later short story, "The Cage at Cranford," she introduces the village to a mysterious and controversial item. The cage-like crinoline she sends represents an outsider's view of the oppressive life single women lead in the village.

The death of a sister does not permit Miss Matty to leave Cranford's cage or to achieve a fully integrated, mature personality of her own. The division between sisters is not reinforced by status or geography following marriage as in Austen's novels, for the heroine never leaves home. Instead, Matty's primary relationships outside the family are with a sisterhood of other spinsters, who join her in the feminine game of evasion, the pretenses to wealth and comfort in the midst of deprivation and powerlessness. Similar deceits may exist in the world outside Cranford, but here, the heroine is more fully insulated by her circle of acquaintances. At

her hearth, she is surrounded by the happy faces of her brother as well as the women who supported her in her misfortunes. And they, once again, help her to create a fiction. With them, it is as if Matty's life had never changed. The novel ends in the permanent childhood of romance, in a world where delicate lace can be retrieved from the belly of a cat.

The fragile happiness of the spinsters at the end of Cranford is moved away from center stage in Wives and Daughters, where the Misses Browning are not major characters. Wives and Daughters is a more traditional Victorian novel than Cranford. It has a marriage plot involving two charming young heroines and assorted suitors, one of whom is threatening and villainous even as he is revoltingly mediocre. While Cranford refers ironically to the archetypal Amazons, Wives and Daughters alludes most directly to Cinderella; like the latter, Wives and Daughters may be considered a sister story, even though it involves step-siblings.

In Wives and Daughters, as in "Cinderella," the heroine's intimacy with her father precedes her ties with her step-family. Molly is the quintessential "daddy's girl," bound in a relationship which ultimately determines the nature of her sisterly bond. Therefore, although this relationship may appear peripheral to our discussion, it must be treated in depth.

Initially, Molly Gibson leads an idyllic existence, adored by the household servants and protected by her widowed father. Molly's desire that she and her father should "never lose each other" (58), though childish prattle, has a sinister aspect. After she is accidentally left behind at the home of the local gentry, Molly wishes to be "chained" to the doctor (58), in a bond which would be a physical manifestation of her emotional dependence. Gibson enjoys considerably more power in the relationship than Molly; as she herself remarks (58), he may know that she wants him, but he need not come. And Mr. Gibson, instead of reassuring his daughter, teases her. Gibson's joking is only superficially affectionate paternal banter; it masks his unwillingness to respond adequately to the emotional content of his daughter's appeals:

> . . . but even to her, in their most private moments, he did not give way to much expression of his feelings; his most caressing appellation for her was 'Goosey', and he took a pleasure in bewildering her infant mind with his badinage. He had rather a contempt for demonstrative people, arising from his medical insight into the consequences to health of uncontrolled feeling. (63)

Under a veneer of affection, Gibson is the stereotypical father of Victorian novels, domineering, manipulative, afraid of feminine emotion, and of what is so often referred to as "uncontrolled"--sexuality. In deflecting Molly's entreaties with humor, he protects himself, even

as he offers her just enough affection to keep her longing for more.

The repressive nature of Gibson's character is further apparent in his attitude toward his daughter's education. He hires a governess, Miss Eyre, not to train Molly to be a young woman, but "to keep her a child. . ." (65). He concedes to "the prejudices of society" (65) in allowing Molly to learn reading and writing. But his daughter, a true descendant of Eve, thirsts for knowledge: "It was only by fighting and struggling hard, that bit by bit Molly persuaded her father to let her have French and drawing lessons" (65). The Biblical parallel is strengthened by a subtle allusion: ". . . she read every book that came in her way, almost with as much delight as if it had been forbidden" (65). Intellectual pursuits hold for Molly all the allure of forbidden fruit; despite her father's efforts, she is avid for both.

The incestuous nature of Molly's relationship with her father is underscored when she experiences a kind of fall. When Mr. Gibson intercepts a note from one of his apprentices to Molly, he is quick to interdict this text, too. Expulsed from the "Eden of childhood" (Easson, Elizabeth Gaskell 194), Molly is sent to stay with family friends, the Hamleys. A further result of Molly's "fall" is the loss of her exclusive relationship with her father, as Mr. Gibson seeks a second wife to protect Molly at

home. In his proposal, "Mother" precedes "wife," making Gibson's intentions perfectly clear (140).

Although Angus Easson is correct in not wishing to "press the analogy too far," Molly does perceive Mrs. Gibson as a "wicked stepmother" (Elizabeth Gaskell 194). She misreads her father's motives, believing that Mrs. Kirkpatrick, who has been sought to keep her at home, is the cause of her banishment. As Coral Lansbury asserts, "Molly's reaction to the news of her father's forthcoming marriage is less that of a daughter than a lover or wife" (Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis 199). But Gibson's training serves him well, and Molly suppresses her jealousy:

> She was afraid of saying anything, lest the passion of anger, dislike, indignation--whatever it was that was boiling up inside her breast--should find vent in cries and screams, or worse, in raging words that could never be forgotten. It was as if the piece of solid ground on which she stood had broken from the shore, and she was drifting out to the infinite sea alone. (145)

Molly's silence is convenient for Gibson, who has "half-guessed" her anguish; it allows him to persist in the illusion that he is doing what is best for her and to retain his power over her. Thus "Masculine silence promotes not only dutiful self-suppression but deviousness and evasion in women. . ." (Stoneman 180); Gibson may not

be as intimidating as the Reverend Jenkyns, but his power is equally effective.

Molly is a better pupil than her father could imagine. She becomes manipulative, persuading the physician to take her on his rounds while her stepmother is out of town, and, "They were quite like bride and bridegroom. . ." (488). Evidently, had Mr. Gibson not remarried, he would have had his dearest wish, perpetual and uninterrupted "happy intercourse" (488) with his daughter. It is no wonder that Hyacinth Kirkpatrick finds cause to compete with her stepdaughter as she earlier vied with her daughter Cynthia for Preston's attentions.

Just as Molly's quasi-incestuous bond with her father determines the hostile nature of her relationship with her stepmother, it also defines the quality of her interactions with her new sister. Critics have compared Molly's rivalry with Cynthia for the love of Roger Hamley to Fanny Price's competition with Mary Crawford in Mansfield Park (see, for instance, Pollard 232). However, while Austen emphasizes the lack of sisterly relations among Fanny, the Bertram girls, and Mary Crawford, Gaskell wishes her characters to be considered siblings and notes in a letter to her publisher that ". . . these two girls--contrasting characters,--not sisters but living as sisters in the same house are unconscious rivals for the love of a young man. . ." (Letters of Mrs. Gaskell 731).

Although Cynthia and Molly are not raised together, the girls resemble biological siblings because they have no opportunity to select each other and are bound for life by (or because of) their parents' marriage. Furthermore, like blood sisters, they must compete for resources including parental attention and the love of eligible suitors. This rivalry is "unconscious"; like the blood sisters in Austen's novels, these girls go to tremendous lengths to avoid and deny their competition.

Initially, Gaskell performs the feat of gradually transforming two strangers into sisters. Molly begins by stating that sharing her home with Cynthia "will almost be like having a sister" (192). Later, although Molly has difficulty calling Clare "mamma" (207), she has no difficulty in accepting Cynthia, because the latter is not a rival for the man who matters most to Molly, her father. Besides,

> Cynthia had so captivated Molly, that she wanted to devote herself to the new-comer's service. Ever since she had heard of the probability of her having a sister--(she called her a sister, but whether it was a Scotch sister, or a sister à la mode de Bretagne, would have puzzled more people)--Molly had allowed her fancy to dwell much on the idea of Cynthia's coming . . . (254).

Cynthia's initial attraction is akin to a seduction: "Molly fell in love with her, so to speak, on the instant" (253). Eventually, Cynthia's affection and growing

intimacy replace continual, uninterrupted closeness with Dr. Gibson in Molly's life. The daughter thus compensates in part for the havoc her mother creates, and with her chatty half-sister, Molly finds an outlet for the emotions she has had to repress in her father's presence.

From the start, Gaskell indicates that the girls' closeness is not a result of similarity but of "contrasting characters" developed through their separate upbringings. While Molly continues to dress childishly, Cynthia "look[s] quite a woman" (252). Molly is tousled, often shabby and in need of new garments, but Cynthia's clothes are always neat and elegant (in this, if nothing else, she is her mother's daughter). Finally, Molly is innocent in the ways of men, while Cynthia is adept in the arts of flirtation and seduction and has contracted a clandestine engagement. Molly has been raised under her father's thumb; Cynthia has been trained among women.[1]

As in an Austen novel, the girls' carefully demarcated roles do not prevent competition for lovers. With Osborne's marriage and his removal as an eligible partner for one of the girls, both find themselves attracted to Roger, and relationships in the novel become fluid. Prior to this point, Molly has repeatedly been compared to Roger's dead sister, Fanny, and she has stood in a fraternal relationship to him (284). He has shown her "brotherly kindness" (280) and, indeed, were he to marry

Cynthia, he would be a kind of brother to Molly. Like Edmund Bertram with Fanny Price, Roger has provided Molly with the learning after which she thirsts in opposition to her father's wishes. He has also consoled her about her father's remarriage. His presence as a surrogate male relative helps her overcome her grief.

Like Fanny Price in Mansfield Park, Molly finds herself the confidante of the man she loves in his courtship of another. Trained to repress negative emotions, Molly never acknowledges the competition, but Gaskell signals the situation by entitling the chapter in which it appears "Rivalry." The contention is especially hurtful to Molly because Cynthia and Roger's love excludes her; she is no longer first with either of the individuals who came closest to replacing her father in her heart.

Once the rivalry arises, Molly resents being called Cynthia's sister. She affects "indifference" to the matter, as if she had never enjoyed the appellation, and attempts to distance herself from Cynthia:

> Now Molly's love for Cynthia was fast and unwavering, but if anything tried it, it was the habit Roger had fallen into of always calling Cynthia Molly's sister in speaking of the latter. From any one else it would have been a matter of indifference to her, and hardly to be noticed; it vexed both her ear and heart when Roger used the expression, and there was a curtness of manner as well as of words in her reply. (355)

The pain in the passage reveals that Molly's love for Cynthia is anything but "fast and unwavering." Molly's disingenuousness about being called Cynthia's sister reveals divided loyalties. As a "good" sister, Molly believes she should not envy Cynthia's fortune; as a "good" friend, she should be happy that Roger is in love. But she has feelings she does not acknowledge for Roger. As the girls' undeclared rivalry grows, their differences are accentuated, too:

> . . . the two girls seemed to have parted company in cheerfulness. Molly was always gentle, but very grave and silent. Cynthia, on the contrary, was merry, full of pretty mockeries, and hardly ever silent. (388)

Significantly, Mrs. Gaskell next refers to Cynthia as Molly's "friend" (389), not her sister. The division represents a rupture in identity. In the same paragraph, Molly perceives Cynthia's "constant brilliancy" as "the glitter of pieces of a broken mirror, which confuses and bewilders" (389). Molly is looking at the parts of what she could have been, longing for wholeness. She is "confused" because she desires (to be) Cynthia, the other, sexual half of self, and to be loved by Roger. Yet she remains imprisoned in her father's standards, so that she feels she has no right to such happiness. She persists instead in blaming herself for being upset at the "natural" attraction between Roger and Cynthia (389).

Molly's sense of guilt at not being "good" results in her trying even harder. Because the standard of "goodness" she has inherited from her father consists above all of restraint, Molly strives to appear controlled and loyal, defending Roger and Cynthia: "What seemed neither to hurt Roger nor annoy Cynthia made Molly's blood boil. . ." (356). Molly replaces guilt with protective anger because she considers the former an unfeminine emotion. No wonder Roger prefers Cynthia, she seems to think.

As Molly keeps trying to please, she must continue to repress her genuine sorrow. As Patricia Spacks comments, "She becomes good, people are always telling her how good she is. But she is not happy: and finally she falls into the familiar Victorian decline. . ." (The Female Imagination 93). The self-destructive nature of the behavior is apparent in the text: "She would have been willing to cut off her right hand, if need were, to forward his [Roger's] attachment to Cynthia; and the self sacrifice would have added a strange zest to a happy crisis" (390).[2]

Molly's sacrifices are ultimately maturing; as a result of her relationships with women, she is able to achieve the adulthood her father has denied her. Mrs. Hamley's death and Mrs. Gibson's failure to behave in a motherly fashion create a gap which Molly begins to fill

by nurturing others. She courageously retrieves Cynthia's letters from Preston (though no one rescued Mr. Coxe's letter for her); thus Cynthia "regresses, as it were, to a child; while Molly . . . enacts a mother's role . . ." (Berke and Berke 100). In addition, Molly's "maternal influence" is apparent in the Hamley household, where she provides comfort and solace after the death of Mrs. Hamley (Lansbury, Elizabeth Gaskell 113).

Molly's transformation is not entirely maternal. Patsy Stoneman characterizes the end of the novel as a revision of the Cinderella myth which emphasizes sisterhood rather than motherhood: "The positive quality derives from female friendship. There is wry satisfaction in Cynthia/Cinderella being rescued not by but from a Prince Charming, and by a Molly. . ." (187). In sisterhood, it seems, one can play the saving role of the fairy godmother (as Matty Jenkyns's friends pitch in to help her in her financial distress).

This redefinition of Molly's role is crucial in the conclusion of the novel. Wives and Daughters again echoes Mansfield Park, for when Cynthia rejects Roger, Molly remains to comfort him. Mr. Gibson finds himself in competition with another man for his daughter's affections: "'Lover versus father!' thought he, half sadly. 'Lover wins'" (701). Mrs. Gaskell never completed the novel, so we cannot know how Mr. Gibson resolves his

trouble. Perhaps like Austen's Mr. Bennet he remains a frequent visitor in his daughter's home, seeing it as a haven from his wife's importunities.[3]

Like the concluding marriages in Austen's novels, this one is not entirely satisifying. Gaskell's heroine marries a man who has been tarnished by his love for a flighty young girl. He is a man of science, like Molly's father, and not a man of emotion. In The Adolescent Idea, Patricia Spacks questions the dynamics of the ending:

> Does Molly's getting the man she wants sufficiently compensate for what she has endured? At a deeper level, the happy-ending match seems virtually irrelevant. . . . The more profound story. . . shows Molly turning inward rather than outward, . . . developing psychological rather than sexual power: the power of limited needs. (36)

In focusing upon Molly's psychological rather than sexual influence, Spacks implies that Molly is never a fully integrated character. Sexuality remains split off in Cynthia (like Mary Crawford), sent to London, that center of masculine power and iniquities. As in an Austen novel, competition is excised, made unnecessary by geographical distance. But here the distance is even greater than in an Austen book. The girls are no longer perceived (and no longer perceive themselves) as sisters; rather, they are friends, part of a sisterhood. They no longer need to be close but have chosen to be so. Even the title of the novel erases the crucial sororal relationship.

If Gaskell carries distancing at the end of Wives and Daughters to the extreme of turning sisters into friends, in The Life of Charlotte Brontë, she attempts the reverse--turning a friend into a sister. In discussing this work, one must consider the nature of the biographical and critical impulse in women writers. What is the satisfaction women gain from writing about other women authors? Is it the same fulfillment anyone--male or female--might gain from writing a life?

The claim that any biography is truthful is problematic, if not spurious; in the case of Gaskell's biography, the issue is especially complex and relevant to the themes of sisters and sisterhood. Indeed, from the beginning of Gaskell's text it is clear that narrative demands supersede fact. Some of Gaskell's material comes from the hearsay of a dismissed servant. She suppresses controversial information after acknowledging requests from Brontë's family, questioning her own instincts, and receiving threats of litigation. Arthur Pollard has commented that in the end the work so ennobles its subject that ". . . The Life was an intentional piece of hagiography" (159). But Gaskell's evasions and emphases do not merely glorify Charlotte Brontë. They also shed light on Gaskell's needs and ambivalences. The act of writing the biography obviously raised questions about closeness and family for Gaskell herself; significantly,

she visited her stepmother and stepsister for the first time in twenty-five years while she was writing the biography (Gérin 167).

Most of all, the initial situation of The Life resembles that in one of Gaskell's novels: three young sisters in a small town struggle under the tyranny of a widowed father. Gaskell's care in depicting the setting and in capturing its atmosphere in the opening chapters reveals everywhere a shaping hand. She makes no attempt to be objective as she describes the moors:

> . . . grand, from the ideas of solitude and loneliness which they suggest, or oppressive from the feeling which they give of being pent-up by some monotonous and illimitable barrier, according to the mood of mind in which the spectator might be. (55)

Both moods, "grandeur" and "oppression," prepare for the claustrophobic aura of the parsonage.

The fictive quality of the memoir is heightened when the sisters are introduced not as living persons but as completed texts, their lives neatly summarized on stone tablets in the church. The story's conclusion is predetermined and available, as in a work of fiction (where one can surreptitiously peek at the closing) rather than in life. Finally, Gaskell's tactic of quoting letters extensively as testimony contributes to the similarity between the "life" and a novel, for ironically, the use of the epistolary form with an accompanying claim

to veracity is one of the oldest novelistic techniques extant. Referring to the arguments swirling around the first edition of The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Alan Shelston correctly notes that, ". . . Mrs. Gaskell had ideal material for a novel, but she seems to have forgotten that it was not a novel she was writing" (28-9).

Patrick Brontë, as presented in the early chapters of the book, is indeed the typical patriarch of Gaskell's novels (Shelston 26). He is as irascible as John Barton and as stern as the Rector of Cranford. Mr. Brontë consistently appears in this awesome guise in the memoir, from the time he shreds his wife's bright green dress (89) until he objects to Charlotte's late marriage as if she were a "child to be guided and ruled" (508).

Like Molly Gibson, the Brontë girls are shaped by paternal authority. They quickly learn from their father to suppress their "wild strong hearts" and "powerful minds" (are these euphemisms for sexuality or intellectual creativity?), burying them ". . . under an enforced propriety and rigidity of demeanour and expression, just as their faces had been concealed by their father, under his stiff unchanging mask" (108). Gaskell also records traces of Patrick Brontë's domination in the juvenilia: "There is hardly one of her prose-writings at this time in which . . . their 'august father' does not appear as a sort of Jupiter Tonans or Deus ex Machinâ" (120).

Patrick Brontë's commanding sternness, together with the remote situation of the Haworth Parsonage, limit the girls' ability to marry or leave home, and constitute a similarity to the situation in Cranford. The sisters lack the skills to mingle in social settings, and at least one of them has to remain at the parsonage to nurse a succession of invalids: an aunt, Patrick Brontë, their brother Branwell, an aging servant, or one of themselves. The deaths of the two eldest Brontë sisters at school make travel and distance appear even more dangerous, as "Charlotte Brontë learned to associate any departure from Haworth with suffering and death" (Lansbury, Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis 147).

More than in Cranford and Wives and Daughters, Gaskell feels compelled to make the sibling relationship in the Life fit the Victorian model of feminine harmony. Her portrait of the sisters' affectionate interdependence has laid the groundwork for an idealization of their bond. However, these glorified myths ignore the fact that Gaskell's portrait relies on differences between the sisters. She stresses the deleterious effects of paternal oppression and emotional deprivation as well as the sisters' development of individual roles to avoid competition.

Critics, who may be seeking "sisters" themselves, commonly attempt to fuse the sisters. For instance, in

Communities of Women, Nina Auerbach stresses the sisters' "unity": "To her [Elizabeth Gaskell], the sisters' dream of founding a school for girls is . . . a means of consecrating their unity by living together." Moreover, Auerbach merges the Brontës' pseudonymous personas: "In their essence, Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell were one person to Elizabeth Gaskell, and the lash that drives them apart is treated with all the outrage of a broken covenant" (Communities of Women 93).

In fact, Gaskell goes to great lengths to separate Charlotte from her sisters (the book is entitled The Life of Charlotte Brontë, after all, and not The Life of the Brontë Sisters). The vision of harmony among the siblings ultimately appears more as a longing than as an actuality. In numerous passages, Gaskell draws distinctions among the girls' personalities as carefully as Austen delineates the characters of the Bennets. She cites the comparisons in Ellen Nussey's introduction to Charlotte's siblings at length:

> . . . Emily was a tall, long-armed girl, more fully grown than her elder sister; extremely reserved in manner. . . . Anne, like her eldest sister, was shy; Emily was reserved. (147)

Mrs. Gaskell makes equally fine distinctions when describing Branwell's portrait of his sisters, but here, as in her novels, she creates an opposition by comparing Emily and Anne to "twins" (178),[4] and setting the younger

girls apart from Charlotte. For Gaskell, a "pillar," which might not appear so "great" to others, "divides" the portrait:

> One the side of the column which was lighted by the sun, stood Charlotte, in the womanly dress of that day of jigot [sic] sleeves and large collars. On the deeply shadowed side, was Emily, with Anne's gentle face resting on her shoulder. Emily's countenance struck me as full of power; Charlotte's of solicitude; Anne's of tenderness. (155)

Gaskell cannot resist imagining that the light is a manifestation of Charlotte's special, happier fate: "I had some fond superstitious hope that the column divided their fates from hers, who stood apart in the canvas, as in life she survived. I liked to see that the bright side of the pillar was toward her--that the light in the picture fell on her . . ." (155). Thus Gaskell picks out her own "sister" from the portrait.

Much as differences are significant to Gaskell, she does not portray all three of the sisters equally. The imperative to focus on an "emotionally significant pair" and to use their contrasts to heighten her depiction of character is apparent here, as it is in Austen's novels. As the biography progresses, Mrs. Gaskell concentrates especially on the differences between Emily and Charlotte, allowing Anne to fade away. She attempts to turn Charlotte into a calm, gentle Victorian heroine, a Molly Gibson or Mary Barton. Thus in Woman and the Demon, Nina

Auerbach reads Gaskell's biography as a work which "commemorates the tragic virtue of a pattern Victorian woman":

> Gaskell makes her [Charlotte Brontë] as immobile as an enchanted princess, an anguished servant of and martyr to her doomed and demanding family. (127)

Suzann Bick, too, idealizes Charlotte, comparing her to her mother (38). Like Molly Gibson, Charlotte is portrayed as a virginal if "motherly friend and guardian to both [sisters]. . ." (111). Nursing the sick at home, Charlotte cancels visits to remain with her family, makes plans, and organizes the sisters' efforts to be published. Her manner is the quiet but subversive mode observed in Molly Gibson and Matty Jenkyns; she arranges for the publication of Jane Eyre, then breaks the news of its popular success quietly and indirectly to her father.

In separating Charlotte from her sisters and their passions, Gaskell minimizes her friend's rage, though traces of it seep into the descriptions of Brontë's restless nocturnal pacing. Gaskell further denies Brontë's anger by countering a letter from Charlotte signed "Caliban" (205) with another in which Brontë denies the validity of ". . . intense passion, I am convinced that there is no desirable feeling. . ." (204). Gaskell notes, too, that for a time Brontë signed letters as "Charles Thunder," but dismisses this claim to Jove's

authority, commenting that Brontë was merely "making a kind of pseudonym for herself, out of her Christian name, and the meaning of her Greek surname." For Gaskell, such an assertion of anger and power could not be heartfelt; she refers to it as "assumed smartness" (202).

In contrast to Charlotte's repression, Emily strides about the moors and matches her dog's ferocity. Her unfashionably large sleeves render her conspicuous in Brussels, and her death is portrayed as a veritable battle with her body:

> Stronger than a man, simpler than a child, her nature stood alone. . . . on herself she had no pity; the spirit was inexorable to the flesh; from the trembling hands,the unnerved limbs, the fading eyes, the same service was exacted as they had rendered in health. (354)

Emily, all energy and vitality, can only destroy herself in her efforts to suppress the physical. Yet in death, the physical is supremely dominant; it annihilates the spirit with itself.

Gaskell's depiction of Emily's death as a struggle between her and Charlotte illustrates that sisterly competition and friction have not been fully extinguished. Even in death, Emily "adhered tenaciously to her habits of independence. She would suffer no one to assist her" (356). Charlotte is excluded from Emily's battle with death; she cannot interfere, though her sister's funeral

leaves her in almost unbearable solitude. Coral Lansbury has focused on the anger present at this time: "These are not the devoted sisters of sentimental fiction but two tragic women bound to each other by hostility as well as love" (Elizabeth Gaskell 87).

What are the sources of this hostility? Besides Charlotte's dependence on Emily for companionship, Gaskell emphasizes the rapidity with which Emily's decline follows Branwell's death. Indeed, by turning M. Héger into a father figure, Gaskell leaves Branwell as the brother-lover of the sister plot, the man over whom the women fight (as in Cranford, the closeness and inescapability of the family is emphasized by the fact that this figure is a biological brother). Charlotte's sorrow over leaving Héger is turned into grief over Branwell's dissipation, even though in the process, Gaskell must "deliberately . . . antedate the disaster overtaking the brother, Branwell, which in fact did not occur till eighteen months later" (Gérin 171). Branwell becomes the object of the women's subterfuges as they attempt to keep him away from drugs; like a lover, he becomes the focus of evasion and silence. Branwell's demise depletes Charlotte's energies, and with the subsequent deaths of her sisters, she is bound to remain with her father. Thus the burials of Charlotte Brontë's siblings reenforce the prison-like quality of the author's home.

Moreover, the passions which Emily has enacted for Charlotte are driven even further underground and into her fictions.[5] In reading this part of Gaskell's biography, one is struck by the depths of the writer's depression, her frequent ill health and headaches. Gaskell sees no release from these tensions in Brontë's marriage. Instead, Gaskell portrays Brontë as wearing away, still trapped at home, in a "marriage [that] secured papa good aid in his old age" (520). Conjugal life destroys her, and the woman so often depicted as being maternal dies giving birth. Gaskell could not have created a heavier irony if she had invented the whole story.

In her biography as in her fiction, Gaskell leaves readers with an unsatisfying ending to the marriage plot. Her "heroine" suffers as much as a spinster as she does as a wife. But, as in Cranford and Wives and Daughters, Gaskell ultimately offers an ideal of sisterhood, in this case between herself and Charlotte Brontë. Her Life stands as a portrait of the sister Gaskell might have chosen, one whose likeness to herself and not her differences are emphasized. As Yvonne Ffrench has commented, "Temperamentally, they are both opposites" (36), though readers of the biography might have trouble realizing this point, so effectively has Gaskell excised her friend's anger. Moreover, by stressing the importance of Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor in Brontë's life and

quoting their correspondence, Gaskell adds to the ideal of sisterhood. In contrast, we are never allowed a full view of the Brontë parlor; we hear the girls' muffled pacing but not their conversation.

Gaskell pays homage to her friend-sister in Cranford, too, where the Brontës resurface in the Jenkyns sisters, reading their mother's love letters, ashamed of their brother, and tyrannized by their father. The pain of the "beleaguered [Brontë] sisters" has "seeped into and animated the genteel exclusiveness of Cranford . . ." (Auerbach, Communities of Women 91). But if the Jenkyns sisters are stand-ins for the Brontës, they are altered and softened by the delicate allure of Gaskell's fiction.

Against the hard fact of a sister's presence, then, and the impossibility of disowning her no matter how one insists on difference, Gaskell places the possibility of sisterhood, as a creation, an act of choice. Sisterhood involves not competition but collusion in the subtle games of evasion which pervade so much of women's communication. This interest is one which reappears prominently in the works of twentieth-century authors.

NOTES

1. Gaskell's use of contrasting personalities at this point in the novel is not limited to sisters. Gaskell provides a pair of brothers, Roger and Osborne Hamley, but they only underline the differences between brothers' and sisters' relationships. Although Osborne and Roger must share limited funds, and Roger makes sacrifices to pay Osborne's debts, Gaskell restricts their competition in other areas. Osborne marries a French woman, and is thus removed from the Hollingford marriage market. Moreover, the loss of funds to pay Osborne's debts does not truly hinder Roger's prospects; instead, he succeeds as a naturalist and comes to represent the man of the future. Osborne, the oldest son and his parents' promise, withers and dies in a feminine decline. For brothers then, Gaskell finds ways out of the family; only the sibling who does not grasp the chance to escape suffers the feminine ending.

2. Molly's "strange zest" at the possibility of "sacrifice" echoes Elizabeth Bennet's combined pleasure and pain regarding Lydia. As always, sisters' emotions are mixed. If Molly is not to benefit from having the man of her choice, she will gain satisfaction from her martyrdom for the sake of her worldly sister.

3. Perhaps, too, he finally realizes that in retaining possession of his daughter, he loses a primary source of his power over her, his ability to dispose of her at will in the marriage market. Jane Gallop points out the danger of incest when women are valued as commodities: "If the father were to desire his daughter he could no longer exchange her, no longer possess her in the economy by which true, masterful possession is the right to exchange" (The Daughter's Seduction 76).

4. Although this closeness between Anne and Emily may have existed more in Gaskell's imagination than in actuality, it might also exemplify a particular type of psychological bonding among siblings. Whereas authors such as Austen and Gaskell have emphasized differences between sisters in their development of fictional characters, psychologists such as Heinz Kohut, Marjorie Taggart White, and Marcella Baker Weiner have theorized about a "twinship transference" based on "shared skills, talents and experiences" (White 105). This "twinship" arises when other forms of transference fail for an individual, and is a "compensatory

structure" (White 114). For Anne and Emily, for instance, the lack of opportunities to develop transference through their parents may have led to just such a "twinship" of near total empathy and undifferentiated emotions.

5. Gaskell has not merely used Brontë's sisters as a way of divorcing her from her anger. Gaskell has also dissociated her friend from her novels and heroines, passing over the publication of Jane Eyre with one sentence, explaining that "analysis" of the work is unnecessary because everyone has read it (326). In her uneasiness with Brontë's passions, Gaskell has divided Brontë the woman from Brontë the author, creating "two parallel currents" which resemble the split between sisters (334). Gaskell thus becomes a stand-in for repressive patriarchal authority, a Deborah Jenkyns enforcing societal standards. Her careful maneouvering reveals Gaskell's own uncertainties about the manifestation of women's literary and sexual energies: "Gaskell's depiction of Charlotte as the exemplar of conventional female virtue stems not only from her desire to separate Charlotte from her heroines, but also from Gaskell's own ambivalent response to the role of the creative process in woman's life" (Bick 35). Ultimately then, Gaskell treats Brontë's texts as "ugly stepsisters," even as she adopts the role of the monitory elder sibling.

GEORGE ELIOT: SUPERFLUOUS SISTERS

The Dodson sisters' constant criticism of each other's household economies, Celia Chettam's gossip with Mrs. Cadwallader about her sister's possible remarriage, Gwendolen Harleth's scorn for her ignorant, useless siblings--these illustrations from George Eliot's Mill on the Floss, Middlemarch, and Daniel Deronda seem to belie any connection between the words sister and sisterhood. At best, these women embody clichés of female cattiness and petty competition; at worst, they remind readers of the archetypal sister story, Cinderella.

Instead of being threatened by the possibility of never leaving home or each other like Gaskell's heroines, Eliot's characters are uprooted, scattered early in the novels by unwise marriages or financial reversals. Open bickering replaces the veneer of politeness found in Austen's works; Eliot's sisters often seem connected by nothing but blood, and blood has little power.

Eliot herself had an ambivalent relationship with her sister Chrissey. Although she assisted Chrissey in her domestic crises (of which there were many), Eliot felt

uncomfortable in her sister's household and was hurt by her brother's interference in this relationship (Redinger 166, 175). For the novelist, Chrissey represented the weakness of conventional femininity; similar women populate Eliot's works, and the author's treatment of these characters may reflect her reservations concerning her own sister.

Eliot's distance from Chrissey may be apparent not only in the hostility among her fictive siblings but also in sisters' relative unimportance in her narratives. Gwendolen Harleth's sisters remain faceless and indistinguishable. The Dodsons, as aunts of the heroine, occupy a marginal position in the narrative, even though they exert a great influence over the Tullivers, and Celia Brooke resembles a stock figure for much of the novel, a foolish female absorbed with her baby, fashions, and the superficial details of others' appearances. The rare sisters who do get along with each other, such as the Meyricks in Daniel Deronda, are even less developed than Celia. Their bonds to each other are not fully described; for instance, although the Gascoignes play a significant role in Gwendolen's life, Mrs. Davilow's relationship with Mrs. Gascoigne is sketchy at best. Many of the female siblings in Eliot's novels are so distanced that the texts scarcely seem to concern sisters at all.

The disloyalty among sisters dramatically sets off the

social isolation of her unconventional heroines. Eliot finds no moral value in conforming to contemporary ideals and being a "good" sister. Even though Dorothea Brooke may be better than Maggie Tulliver's aunts, her superiority is not connected to her behavior as a sister, for she, too, can deliver a stinging retort or a pointed snub. Eliot's heroines are critical, if not harsh, towards their conforming sisters; they show none of Matty Jenkyns's deference to Deborah and the patriarchal code of Cranford. In fact, the distance between Eliot's sisters reflects the division between the heroine and society's expectations of her, or, to put it differently, conventional sisters (like Chrissey) come to represent society.

Although these women appear to have little use for each other, sisters in Eliot's works do serve stylistic and thematic functions. The siblings, who form complementary parts of one being, are opposites, but Eliot differs from Gaskell in her use polarities. Instead of concentrating on the sisters' dissimilarities, Eliot is concerned with the process by which sisters establish these differences, creating contrasts where few exist (both sisters, after all, are products of her imagination as well as occupants of virtually identical social positions). She ultimately suggests that role splitting is an artifice, based on an illusory view of the self. Sisters are therefore intimately connected with Eliot's thematic focus on the

multiple evasions of truth among Middlemarch residents.

The distinctions between sisters in Eliot's novels are also in perpetual flux. Eliot does not consistently assign qualities evenly among sisters. She creates an imbalance, so that one sister appears to have all the personality and the other none. This tactic heightens tension among sisters and undermines social expectations; as they renounce the fictive construct of "character," such women as Dorothea Brooke withdraw from feminine competition and reject traditionally sanctioned female behaviors. Yet distancing, alienation, and separation all imply relationship, for one must be detached from something or someone. George Eliot's heroines' aspirations ultimately enmesh them further with society and their sisters. In coming to terms with her siblings, a heroine must confront society; she cannot be packed off, like Elizabeth Bennet, to a verdant, enclosed estate. Jenni Calder's description of the family in The Mill on the Floss as "dependent on an integral unity which it doesn't, cannot have" (125) summarizes the paradox involving sisters in Daniel Deronda and Middlemarch as well, a paradox which may be resolved best by Celia Brooke Chettam.

George Eliot's revisions of the sister plot are immediately evident in The Mill on the Floss. Even though the novel is more obviously a story of a brother and sister, the Dodsons are instrumental in almost every major

development. In the opening chapters of the book, for instance, Mr. Tulliver considers sending Tom to school, and Mrs. Tulliver calls in her siblings for advice. The move is as automatic as it is self-destructive; upon gaining the acquaintance of the daunting Aunt Glegg, the reader wonders why Mrs. Tulliver insists on consulting her.

The Dodsons' strife is a bitter caricature of sisterly behavior in Austen's novels, where marriage makes role splitting unnecessary by erecting barriers of class or geography. Even Aunt Norris's snobbery and manipulations in Mansfield Park are less damaging than the constant chorus of the Dodsons. Maggie's aunts remain locked in youthful competition; significantly, they consider themselves Dodsons and constantly point out Dodson traits in Tom.

An irony of The Mill on the Floss is that the Dodsons initially appear to embody the ideal of Victorian wifehood and sisterhood. The women are anything but distant; living in close proximity, they regularly visit and consult each other. Moreover, there is no lack of of communication among them. They share village gossip, compare each other's housekeeping and economies, and show off their prized possessions. When Maggie returns from her escape with Stephen Guest, Aunt Glegg offers shelter as evidence of familial solidarity.

Such intimacy, however, is as illusory as Aunt Glegg's

"false fronts" of glossy curls, for the Dodsons as a group before the public treat each other far differently than they do in private: "while no individual Dodson was satisfied with any other individual Dodson, each was satisfied, not only with him or herself, but with the Dodsons collectively" (97). The public face, the Dodsons "collectively," is the vestige of an intimate family. Its sterility is evident in the fact that only two of the sisters have children, and Mrs. Tulliver and Mrs. Deane's three offspring combined are no match for Aunt Moss's brood of eight.

Similarly, meaningful family rituals have been replaced by petty rules. Although these regulations might once have served a purpose, their only remaining function is to remind the women of their superiority:

> There were particular ways of doing everything in that family: particular ways of bleaching the linen, of making the cowslip wine, curing the hams and keeping the bottled gooseberries, so that no daughter of that house could be indifferent to the privilege of having been born a Dodson, rather than a Gibson, or Watson. (96)

The Dodsons' household rules create illusory distinctions, for readers are given no evidence that "that family" is indeed any different from the Gibsons or Watsons, and the similarity in names implies that other resemblances might exist as well. Moreover, the emptiness of family forms is apparent in the fact that so many of them pertain to

death. Mrs. Tulliver shows her love for her husband by saving the best sheets for his shroud. Her sensuality has been channelled into the futile anticipation of the texture of the linens "mangled beautiful, an' all ready, an' smell o' lavender" (58) next to their corpses. "Funerals were always conducted with peculiar propriety in the Dodson family" (96)--appropriately, as Nina Auerbach has noted, "Given their tendency to embalm life's crises in layers of ritual. . ." (Romantic Imprisonment 237).

Ritual and propriety, like the padding on Aunt Pullet's precious bonnet, protect the Dodsons from any show of genuine compassion or warmth (even the display of Aunt Pullet's hat, which could be a light-hearted event, is treated with "funereal solemnity" 150). The frequent visits mask stinginess, not only with money but also with affection. The Dodsons will only help the impoverished Tullivers if they will be chastened and "humble . . . in mind" (290). Similarly, Aunt Glegg will take in Maggie if she will affect the proper humility (631). Utterly self-serving, she anticipates praise for her generosity and preservation of family unity, even as she expects to benefit from Maggie's "dutiful" (631) household assistance. Aunt Glegg's convenient offer thus reminds Maggie that her aunt's greatest pride is her economy; Mrs. Glegg lives by the platitude, "waste not, want not," refusing to acknowledge the waste that will occur if she

dies with her best lace untouched.

The Dodsons are so rigidly entrenched in their attitudes that they are oblivious to such paradoxes. They are unconscious of the irony that their defensive behavior is destructive. Occupying similar positions in the social hierarchy of St. Ogg's (with the exception of Bessie Tulliver), they constantly assert their individuality by emphasizing their differences from and superiority over their sisters. This is a private version of the Dodsons' "collective" snobbery in town; as separate human beings, the Dodsons exist primarily to antagonize each other. Aunt Pullet's elaborate preparations for the Tullivers' visit, for instance, are calculated not only to preserve her possessions but also to draw attention to their value. Implicit in Aunt Pullet's behavior is criticism of her sister Tulliver for having such careless children. Just as Aunt Pullet's pride is her home, Aunt Glegg's is her parsimony, and Aunt Deane's is Lucy. Each has her territory staked out, including Mrs. Tulliver, who was selected by Mr. Tulliver for her good looks and stupidity (68).

Among themselves, the sisters squabble and take sides to protect their territories. Kindness is so rare that when Aunt Glegg offers to harbor Maggie, Mrs. Tulliver notes with surprise that her sibling is behaving "like a sister" (631). More often, the excess chatter exists only

to humiliate or educate, and at the most trying times:

> When one of the family was in trouble or sickness, all the rest went to visit the unfortunate member, usually at the same time, and did not shrink from uttering the most disagreeable truths that correct family feeling dictated. . . . (96-7)

The Dodsons pretend that "family feeling" is not a matter of emotion but of correctness or incorrectness; exhibiting it properly (i.e., hurting others) is a duty. Indeed, like Deborah Jenkyns, the sisters gain power by assuming the authority of convention and outperforming each other in propriety.

When the sisters ally themselves against the Tullivers under the guise of being helpful, the Dodson chorus becomes the voice of authority, of the society they try to control with their ossified standards. Mrs. Tulliver reveals the Dodsons' true importance when she glides from speaking of her sisters to "folks" as if they were the same:

> I'll tell your aunt Glegg and aunt Pullet when they come next week, and they'll never love you any more. O dear, O dear, look at your clean pinafore, wet from top to bottom. Folks 'ull think it's a judgment on me as I've got such a child--they'll think I've done summat wicked. (78)

The Dodsons, with their arcane rituals, collect to judge other women and discourage nonconformity as if it were a moral lapse. It is no wonder, then, that as a child

Maggie feels desperate enough to escape their censure; an outcast from the family, she considers herself alienated from the entire community.

The Dodsons' behavior has another effect, too. Lucy and Maggie are often thought to be like sisters (563, 620), and the aunts constantly compare the cousins to Maggie's disadvantage. In this way, the Dodsons prepare for their rivalry to be perpetuated in the next generation. And they succeed. Without models of womanly solidarity or sisterhood, Maggie has little cause to feel compunction for running away with Stephen Guest.

The Dodsons thus play a significant role in The Mill on the Floss. They are responsible for Maggie's becoming acquainted with Stephen Guest (through the Deanes) as well as for Mr. Tulliver's fatal loan. But most of all, George Eliot's portrayal of the occasionally ridiculous family of sisters lays the groundwork for her treatment of sisters in later novels. Mrs. Tulliver's surprise when Mrs. Gleeg acts "like a sister" is evidence of the slippage between the idealized meaning of the term sister inherited from patriarchal conventions and its applied meaning in the siblings' lives. The discrepancy in the definitions becomes increasingly noticeable in George Eliot's other works as well as in the twentieth-century novels which will be discussed in the last two chapters of this study.

In Middlemarch, too, sisters play a significant part,

although their relationship initially appears marginal in Eliot's larger design. The plot of the novel is initiated by a spat between sisters. As Celia and Dorothea sort their mother's jewels, Dorothea asserts her individuality as the intellectual, unworldly sister, but only with mixed success. In fact, it is in part because Celia catches her sibling admiring jewels that Dorothea finds herself attracted to Casaubon; she must defend her difference.

The debate over the jewels introduces an abbreviated version of the sister plot. Eliot shows the destructive effects of one sister's attachment to a father figure in Dorothea's first marriage. When Sir James Chettam rapidly transfers his affection from Dorothea to Celia, just as Mr. Collins offers his hand to Charlotte Lucas after Elizabeth Bennet rejects him, she reminds readers of the sisters' social equivalence. Eliot also provides Will Ladislaw as a brother-lover; Casaubon's will initially acts with the force of an incest taboo (and indeed Dorothea rationalizes her interest in Will as legitimate concern for a member of her husband's family). Her recognition of Will as a lover and potential spouse, as with Fanny Price and Molly Gibson, occurs only after Dorothea fears she has lost him to a rival. Finally, marriage erects social barriers between the sisters.

The skeletal summary of the plot above illustrates the marginality of the sister story in Middlemarch. Eliot is

preoccupied with larger plotting; to the extent that she focuses on sisters, she is concerned with their shifting interactions as they strive to differentiate. The traditional role splitting and alliances work no better for the Brookes in Middlemarch than they do for the Dodsons in The Mill on the Floss. Neither the convention of the novels--the sister plot--nor the convention of educative literature--the sisterhood--provide much solace for the isolated Dorothea. Thus in examining sisterly communications, Eliot forces readers to evaluate the conventions and their failures as well.

From the first pages of the book, Celia and Dorothea appear to exhibit opposite personal qualities. Celia is commonsensical, while her sister aspires to higher ideals. Yet the contrast's sole purpose is not the banal one of introducing character. Many readers feel challenged to side with one sister or the other, to commit to one view of life to the exclusion of the other.

Reading commentaries on Middlemarch, one notices how rapidly critics make such a commitment. Their opinions tend to extremes, as if one's reaction to Dorothea Brooke held all the import of a political stance (which, in some ways, it does). Ellen Moers's description of Dorothea might equally be applied to Rosamond Vincy or Gwendolen Harleth at their vainest, so negatively does she judge Dorothea:

> she is good at nothing <u>but</u> to be admired. . . . Ignorant in the extreme and mentally idle. . . Dorothea has little of interest to say, but a magnificent voice to say it in. (194-5)

Moers's bitterness belies an expectation of a more noble heroine. Indeed, almost as often as they take sides, critics and other readers express feelings of betrayal. Lee Edwards begins, "I saw in Dorothea an endorsement . . . of energy and social commitment on the part of a woman" and ends with disappointment, "For <u>Middlemarch</u> is finally not an endorsement of this energy, but. . . a condemnation of it" ("Women, Energy, and <u>Middlemarch</u>" 685). Patricia Beer acknowledges a different dissatisfaction, finding Celia at first "a sympathetic character," though she is later troubled by Celia's "malice" and must seek motives to justify her behavior (196). How is it that Dorothea, who initially appears a visionary (albeit with priggish instincts), becomes "poor Dorothea," and Celia, who is so practical, comes to resemble a caricature of a doting mother? How and why does Eliot shift the terms of the contrast during the novel so that it is difficult and uncomfortable to side unequivocally with one sister?

Repeatedly, critics refer to Celia as Dorothea's "foil," emphasizing the polarization of the two sisters (see, for instance, Redinger 469, Siefert 16, and "<u>Middlemarch</u>" 646). But the various meanings of "foil" offer a fuller understanding of the complexity of Celia's

role. A foil can be an obstacle or an obstruction--which Celia initially appears--and also a defensive weapon. Although the former seems opposed to the latter, both apply to Celia as she is viewed from shifting perspectives.

The opening scene of the novel illustrates how Eliot constantly alters the terms of the contrast between Celia and Dorothea, or to use one of her metaphors, moves the pier glass. The reader, prepared by the introduction to view Dorothea as an exceptional woman, is confronted in the first sentence with a completely conventional perspective: "Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress" (1). The heroine is presented as an object to be admired; that is all. The narrator then compares Dorothea's clothing to "provincial fashion" and sets up an opposition between the sisters: "[Dorothea] was usually spoken of as being remarkably clever, but with the addition that her sister Celia had more common-sense" (1). In the minds of the unidentified speakers, the sisters are inseparable; they cannot refer to Dorothea without mentioning her sibling. "The addition" to the sentence implies that "clever" is being used sarcastically, and that the speakers prefer Celia. So far, Dorothea seems anything but exceptional, and the next sentence confuses the discussion still further:

> Nevertheless, Celia wore scarcely more trimmings; and it was only to close observers that her dress differed from her sister's, and had a shade of coquetry in its arrangements; for Miss Brooke's plain dressing was due to mixed conditions, in most of which her sister shared. (1)

The first half of the sentence implies that Dorothea, far from being a potential saint, is hardly different from her sister. Dorothea's apparel is not the result of intellectual, moral or religious convictions; it is due to "mixed conditions" shared by Celia. In the next part of the sentence, the speaker veers away, criticizing Celia, but in the end, the narrator reminds us of the similarity of the sisters' lot.

The opening of the novel is ambiguous. If the differences between the sisters are not immediately apparent, do they in fact exist? If they do exist, are the differences great enough to be significant? Is Dorothea's character morally superior to Celia's, and the character of an aspiring Saint Theresa? Or are the sisters' differences products of their imaginations? Who are the "close observers" and what is their authority? Obviously, some of these questions, especially those concerning authority, could be asked of any novel; here, as elsewhere, the reader is led to wonder not only about the characters' personalities, but also about the validity of the distinctions between them.

The remainder of the chapter is scarcely more enlightening. Throughout, the girls' statements and gestures can be interpreted in more than one way. For instance, Celia remarks petulantly (and pointedly) that Dorothea has kept their mother's jewels exactly six months (5). Dorothea laughs in response; given Celia's mortification, one must assume that this laughter expresses sarcasm as well as sympathy. Similarly, Dorothea's "air of astonished discovery" (5) could be an example of Miss Brooke's famous blindness or coyness (coming from Celia, the request is anything but astonishing). And Dorothea's consternation as she "seemed to despair of her memory" (5) is also questionable, because she has near perfect recall of her duties and studies. The terms "air" and "seemed" undercut Dorothea's candor; is she merely making her sister squirm? The episode itself has the tone of a set piece, a kind of performance the sisters have undertaken dozens of times, complete with Celia's prepared rationalizations, "necklaces are quite usual now," and effective "rising sob" (5).

The studied quality of the conversation suggests that the women's behavior, like that of the Dodson sisters, has become ritualized. In this case, the routine allows Dorothea to make "a strong assumption of superiority" (6) quite unsupported by her actions, especially when she

accepts the emeralds. Celia plays the victim whose "blond flesh" feels "a Puritanic persecution" (6). Despite the occasional spiteful remark, her opposition remains covert:

> Since they could remember, there had been a mixture of criticism and awe in the attitude of Celia's mind towards her elder sister. The younger had always worn a yoke; but is there any yoked creature without its opinions? (7)

Later, the balance shifts. Dorothea appears on the defensive as she must bear Celia's remarks about Casaubon's moles, eating habits, and general demeanor. Celia's mode of communication remains covert, however, as she attempts to warn Dorothea of Casaubon's sterility.

No matter how carefully distinctions are established, they collapse. Dorothea suppresses her sensuality, but it still exists; she rejects Sir James Chettam's offer of a horse, though she has enjoyed cantering nonetheless. Dorothea tries valiantly to be a "good" and dutiful wife and woman, but she acknowledges wistfully to Will that Celia "never was naughty in her life" (52), implying that she, Dorothea, has been "naughty."

Nevertheless, a pattern emerges, as the narrator becomes detached from the "speakers" and "observers" of Middlemarch. Dorothea is supported by the narrator, because she has high aspirations and must suffer their frustration. Celia is favored by the authorities of the community (Mr. Brooke, Sir James, and Mrs. Cadwallader),

because she poses less of a threat to their standards. Ranged with the town's leaders, Celia, like the Dodson sisters, becomes a representative of the society which restricts Dorothea (and the reader, too, must choose between the narrator's view and Middlemarch's predilection). Celia is empowered not only by her own position, but also by Dorothea's practice of self-negation.

Dorothea perceives marriage as an opportunity for self-sacrifice. She makes her life a long series of renunciations: of finery, personal aspirations, and dreams of conjugal companionship. Envisioning herself dutifully taking orders from her husband, she considers her unwillingness to fulfill Casaubon's dying wish her greatest failure. Dorothea believes that goodness involves an emptying of personality, a giving up of will (and, for a time, Will), even though such self-denial is painful. Ultimately, although Moers's remark that Dorothea "does little but harm in the novel" (194) may be an exaggeration, there is no question that Dorothea accomplishes little of what she intended, "absorbed into the life of another, and . . . only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother" (576).

On the other hand, Celia becomes increasingly assertive. As Dorothea affects meekness, Celia grows strong and judgmental, and once she has a child, Celia

claims authority over her sister. Her silliness and submission are merely protective cover. Although Robert Coles portrays Celia as the traditionally passive, dominated Victorian woman (175), Celia is ultimately able to manipulate her husband, her sister, and others. Her achievement is yet another reversal of the expectations created by the Prelude. Celia defends her sister and smooths her way, even when it is not to her advantage (as when she encourages Dorothea to consider a second marriage, even though little Arthur might then lose the opportunity to inherit Mr. Brooke's estate). When Dorothea does remarry, Celia brings her back into the family: "Such being the bent of Celia's heart, it was inevitable that Sir James should consent to a reconciliation with Dorothea and her husband. Where women love each other, men learn to smother their dislike" (577).

By the end of the novel, each woman offers an alternative to traditional role splitting among sisters. Dorothea has attempted to renounce personality. Although she has ostensibly gained a vision of common humanity following her confrontation with Will and Rosamond, Dorothea continues to separate herself from others and to disparage Celia's capabilities. In fact, Dorothea's final words in the novel, which are addressed to her sister, suggest narrowness more than universal sympathy: "you

would have to feel with me, else you would never know" (567). On the other hand, Celia's apparent stupidity--her belief that she can indeed "know" what Dorothea feels--empowers her. What Celia learns is that despite her sister's denials, Dorothea shares many of her feelings, such as the sensual pleasure in an exquisite gem and the desire to marry a lively young suitor.

In Middlemarch, as in The Mill on the Floss, Eliot suggests that the traditional division of roles among sisters is inadequate. Role splitting leads to an illusory (because limited) view, as when Dorothea ignores Celia's real accomplishments. To gain a fuller vision, a woman must give up competition. She must acknowledge that she is a part of, not apart from, the world of women. Furthermore, by presenting this theme as a problem in reading in Middlemarch, George Eliot adds another dimension to the work. The reader, like the characters, must confront preconceptions about personality.

Daniel Deronda provides an more negative view of sisters and sisterhood than Middlemarch. Gwendolen Harleth's silly, ignorant siblings are as irritating to her as the Dodsons are to Maggie Tulliver; when Gwendolen's family loses its money, the gravity of the predicament is increased by the number of mouths to be fed. Gwendolen perceives her sisters primarily as an obstacle, a source of misery in her life, keeping her "a

princess in exile" (53) from the special fate she believes to be hers. Her sisters' very existence convinces her that "Girls' lives are stupid: they never do anything they like" (101). Unaccomplished and utterly conventional, the girls are paralyzed by catastrophe: "Your poor sisters can only cry . . . and give . . . no help" (44).

While Molly Gibson wishes to accept her stepsister as a biological sibling, Gwendolen Harleth feels no kinship with her half-sisters, who are blood relatives. She hates the younger girls because, even more than Lydia Glasher, the "superfluous" (611) siblings represent "a woman's life" (190) restricted by society. Significantly, Isabel leaves a hidden panel unlatched, terrifying Gwendolen with its depiction of an "obscure" figure fleeing death; Isabel has exposed the futility of Gwendolen's attempt to escape a traditional woman's existence (56).

In fact, Gwendolen, like Dorothea, resembles other women and shares their fate. She must contrive elaborate tactics to persuade herself otherwise; among them, "Gwendolen shuns her own sex, girls like her who reflect her own insignificance" (Brownstein 101). She detests her sisters because they reveal her own superfluity and lack of accomplishments. She is only marginally more proficient than they are, and her age rather than superior talents may account for this difference. Gwendolen's sole

significant advantage over her sisters is her beauty; consequently, she is determined to use it in creating her future. The fear of "a woman's life," as embodied in her sisters, thus precipitates Gwendolen's story.

Initially, the role splitting in Daniel Deronda, which allows Gwendolen to insist on being different and superior, seems rather rudimentary: Gwendolen has all the personality, and her half-sisters have none. As in Middlemarch, the sister plot is abbreviated and disastrous. Without a father, Gwendolen allies herself with her uncle and takes over at home, having "usurped the man's position in relation to her mother" (Redinger 475). She orders her mother about and is alienated from the women around her: ". . . Gwendolen was not a general favourite with her own sex . . ." (150). Instead of accepting her cousin Rex, who lives so close as to be a brotherly suitor, she perceives the limitations of his life. Aspiring to social heights and feeling no attraction, she refuses his offer. She prefers to wed the paternal Grandcourt, though the match is a catastrophe. Gwendolen finds herself uprooted, and she is rejected by Deronda, who becomes another brotherly figure in his helpfulness and denial of any romantic relation between them. The features of the traditional sister plot thus offer Gwendolen no happiness or concluding marriage with a brother-lover.

George Eliot's vision of sisters in Daniel Deronda is more concentrated and pessimistic than in Middlemarch. She provides no Celia-figure, no well developed alternative to Gwendolen's isolation. Mirah, potentially a surrogate sister, is friendly with the Meyrick girls (even as she deprives them of the object of their affections), but she is awed by and uncomfortable with other women. Although Catherine Arrowpoint is kind to Gwendolen, the heroine is uncomfortable with the heiress's genuine artistry and altruism.

The Meyricks initially appear to offer an alternative to Gwendolen's alienation from her sisters and peers, presenting a positive model of sisterly behavior. After taking second place to a brother all their lives, they are conscious of being "of minor importance in the world. . ." (717). Having fewer illusions than Gwendolen about a young woman's social position, they work together instead of competing for recognition.

On the other hand, as a reflection of the heroine's trio of half-sisters, the Meyricks are poor and socially redundant; they further resemble the superfluous siblings in their almost complete lack of individuality. Readers find it difficult to distinguish between Amy and Mab, for instance. The Meyricks get along so well that they appear to be caricatures of idealized sisterly intimacy, and one wonders whether Eliot's intention in including them in the

novel is ironic. Moreover, because the Meyricks have never separated, they have difficulty accepting the individuality of nonbiological siblings. Embroidering stories around Mirah as if she were a character in a romance, they appropriate her life. They revere the stately Gwendolen, considering her an artifact to be appreciated (and significantly, their brother refers to her as the "Vandyke Duchess" 707). Transforming the lives of other women, the diminutive, impish Meyricks resemble fairies, and in fact, Mab bears a fairy's name. The Meyricks are in an authorial position, creating the sisters they desire, but neglecting to develop their own identities or to establish a genuine sisterhood with peers.

In the end, Eliot offers no completely positive view of sisterly behavior. She allows Gwendolen no foil, no constructed character against whom she may define her identity. Rather, in confronting her ordinariness, Gwendolen must realize her similarity to her sisters. Thus Daniel Deronda is ultimately no fairy-tale world; the novel is replete with threesomes and foursomes, but no special child emerges to win the prize, because all the offspring are essentially the same:

> There is a daunting superfluity of women in Daniel Deronda: three Meyrick girls, three Mallinger girls, three illegitimate Grandcourt daughters, Gwendolen's sisters, and the three Mompert girls she is almost engaged to

> teach. Gwendolen's sense of distinction is understandably uncommon. (Brownstein 211n)

As much as Gwendolen's sense of privilege is "uncommon," it is also undeserved, as she rapidly learns.

Daniel Deronda shows the futility and falsity of distinctions between sisters; furthermore, it illustrates how the desire for recognition isolates and nearly destroys Gwendolen, stifling much of the warmth in her nature. In the final chapters of the novel, Gwendolen sees herself not as the heroine of a Byronic "romance" (774), too proud to acknowledge her sorrows, but as a human being. She longs to see her "troublesome sisters coming out [of their house] to meet her" (831), and "Her final acceptance of her mother and stepsisters represents her final acceptance of the woman within herself, an acceptance that has both positive and negative implications" (Bonnie Zimmerman, "Gwendolen Harleth and 'The Girl of the Period'" 214). These implications are mixed because in some ways her recognition constitutes a "retreat to the womb" (Zimmerman 214) and undifferentiation.

To improve, Gwendolen must be stripped of many of her impulses and much of what has constituted her character; she must allow more space for her sisters' growth. Her development thus parallels Dorothea's more than Celia's. Her sisters, too, must change. They can no longer treat

Gwendolen as an awesome, distant heroine. Instead of being dependent, passive spectators in their sister's life, they must live for themselves, though nowhere does Eliot describe what their lives might be. Presumably, they remain socially redundant.

At the end of Daniel Deronda, as in the conclusion of Middlemarch, the heroine and her siblings are forced to revise their self-perceptions. But in the later novel, George Eliot signals no greater happiness or achievement because of these altered views. Gwendolen's subdued personality has little force or significance in the world of the novel, even though she asserts that she will be "better" (882). Gwendolen's change can only be effective on a different level, that of the reader, who, as in Middlemarch, must first participate in and then renounce the heroine's aspirations to a special fate.

PYM, HOWARD AND DRABBLE: REVISING THE SISTER

Compared to two of the twentieth-century's most popular depictions of sisters, Gone with the Wind and Whatever Happened to Baby Jane (both more famous as films than as printed texts), Gwendolen Harleth's distaste for her siblings and gender appears trivial. Although George Eliot addresses the hostility between biological sisters more explicitly than her predecessors, later women novelists further expose the gap between biological siblings' behavior and ideals of sisterhood (though many of these texts, too, pale in comparison to the works mentioned above). This disparity has preoccupied such diverse authors as Rebecca West, May Sinclair, Margaret Drabble, Barbara Pym, Elizabeth Jane Howard, Elizabeth Taylor, Emma Tennant, and Doris Lessing as they have struggled to come to terms with the shifting position of women in society. These women react as readers as well as writers in their treatment of the topic, commenting on nineteenth-century sister stories.

Barbara Pym, Margaret Drabble, and Elizabeth Jane Howard, writing toward the middle of the century, are particularly concerned with sisters and sisterhood. For instance, Harriet and Belinda Bede, the heroines of Barbara

Pym's first novel, Some Tame Gazelle, are modelled on the author and her sister. The Bedes reappear in her later work, An Unsuitable Attachment, which features another pair of sisters as well. In her first novel, A Summer Bird-Cage, Margaret Drabble seeks to resolve sibling conflicts, and Elizabeth Jane Howard's After Julius portrays a mother and two daughters confronting not only the men in their lives but also each other (as the traditional love triangle of heterosexual romances is replaced by a triad of women). None of these novels is particularly experimental structurally; all have continuous, linear plots. Instead, the texts re-examine issues which have appeared often in novels about sisters and raise critical questions about relationships among women.

Specifically, these texts are about the connections between contemporary novelists and their predecessors as well as their works. The authors of these novels treat earlier writers as older sisters, at once emulating them, paying homage, and struggling to break away from their influence. Repeatedly, writers name their characters after heroines in other books; the surname of the speaker in A Summer Bird-Cage is Bennett, and a character in After Julius was baptized Emma. Although literary allusions are not limited to nineteenth-century stories about sisters (Emma's promiscuous sibling is called Cressida, and one of the sisters in An Unsuitable Attachment is named Penelope

Grandison), Austen's novels are the source of a disproportionately large number of names.

Direct references to novels concerning sisters are made, too, as when the mother in After Julius re-reads Pride and Prejudice. Robert Long and Margaret Ezell have noted the resemblances among the heroines of Some Tame Gazelle and Cranford (Long 210, Ezell 456), while for Gail Cunningham, "A Summer Bird-Cage, with its neatly wrought comparisons and contrasts of marriage types, inevitably recalls Pride and Prejudice. . ." (131). A scene in A Summer Bird-Cage reflects on Middlemarch as well. The heroine's sister Louise is seen honeymooning in Rome, all dressed in grey and "posed expensively against an artistic background" (68) which resembles the setting of Will Ladislaw's encounter with Dorothea in Rome.

Drabble, Pym, and Howard also pay homage to their predecessors in featuring elements of the traditional sister plot. In each text, sisters' roles are laboriously divided. The women criticize each other gently or compete bitterly. In Some Tame Gazelle, a lover, Theo Grote, transfers his allegiance from one sister to the other, and then to a third woman, recalling in part Sir James Chettam, Wickham, and Mr. Collins. A character in After Julius is considered "brotherly" (140) by the heroine before she accepts him as a lover, while her sister forms an attachment to a father figure.

In some cases, the authors' admiration for their predecessors has been openly declared. Pym, for instance, acknowledged that she especially enjoyed reading Austen (Long 201). Margaret Drabble has stated on several occasions her respect for George Eliot (Poland 256, Milton 52) as well as for Elizabeth Gaskell (Milton 52, Cooper-Clark 72).

However, the allusions, are, as often as not, ironic or based on deliberately illusory interpretations of the nineteenth-century novels. The authors do not merely intend to pay homage:

> Another way of relating to such a lineage, though, is through the creation of parodic and allusive texts--novels, stories, and plays that function quasi-critically and refer to or revise female pre-texts. (Gilbert and Gubar, No Man's Land 208)

Thus Drabble's Louise may resemble Dorothea Brooke on her honeymoon in Rome, but Louise is also openly adulterous and mercenary. In making her Emma shy, passive and silent, Elizabeth Jane Howard complicates her allusion not only to Austen's heroine, but perhaps also to Flaubert's Madame Bovary. And in A Summer Bird-Cage, the heroine compares a rare instance of intimacy with her sister to the politeness of an Austen novel or Middlemarch (171), conveniently forgetting the behavior of such sisters as Maria Bertram, Lydia Bennet, and Elizabeth Elliott, not to mention the bickering between Dorothea and Celia Brooke.

The references to nineteenth-century novels are placed before the reader's eyes, tantalizing, like signposts to positive significance, only to swivel in the opposite direction or to mislead the unwary.

Indeed, the authors are as inconsistent in their statements regarding their predecessors as they are in their use of allusions. According to Janice Rossen, Pym felt ambivalent about being compared to Austen, finding the latter's work "an impossibly high standard to attain" (9). Drabble has repeatedly criticized Austen in interviews. In her eyes, Austen shares the negative qualities of Louise in A Summer Bird-Cage: "I think she's a pernicious and terrible influence, Jane Austen, sort of malicious and exclusive and socially unjust, really " (Firchow, "Margaret Drabble" 106).[1] Twentieth-century authors thus treat their predecessors not only as influential literary mothers but also as literary siblings and rivals. Their works concern their relationships to other authors as well as the dilemmas of fictional siblings, and in this sense, they owe a great deal to Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Brontë. Finally, these writers seek not only an appropriate voice for certain issues in their own time, but also to come to terms with issues which insist themselves across time.

The intertextuality of these novels is even more apparent when one considers the infrequency of references

to myths and tales concerning sisters. Cinderella and Psyche are rarely alluded to directly or indirectly; at best, the myths and tales are ambiguous models, and at worst, they are irrelevant. These authors may be writing about sisters because, as Margaret Drabble has pointed out, "they're just archetypal situations" (Firchow, "Margaret Drabble" 121), but most of the types come from female adaptations of patriarchal plots. Masculine texts are brought up only to be criticized, swept aside, or replaced.

If the traditional sister plot no longer fits Eliot's world, it is even less suited to the twentieth century, where marriage is less likely to be the primary concern of spinster sisters living alone. Nevertheless, these texts value certain conventions. All contain shadows (at least) of a traditional courtship plot, even as they search for alternatives. Specifically, in depicting their heroines, the authors are divided: how can they create a sexual, unrepressed character, appropriate to twentieth-century standards, and keep her a conventionally "good" girl? Coming to terms with this question involves bringing sisterly conflicts to the forefront:

> . . . in Pride and Prejudice the relationship of the sisters to one another is peripheral and mostly assumed; the central concern is the question of whether or not the Bennet sisters can each individually relate rightly to the right man. In A Summer Bird-Cage the relationship of the two

> sisters to the different men (plural in each case) in their separate lives is peripheral and assumed. . . . The central concern . . . is the question of what kind of a relationship will be established between the sisters, which represents a significant reordering of traditional priorities. (Arnold Davidson 306-7)

As sisters become "central," the treatment of their communication is more explicit. Clothes in particular constitute the vocabulary for complex negotiations involving identity. Other items, such as fireworks exploding during a quarrel, function as obvious symbols, drawing attention to the restrictions and artifice of the traditional plot.

On the level of the author then, these novels reshape convention, establishing a stance toward other women writers as well as patriarchal codes governing female behavior. Joanne Creighton's observation that Margaret Drabble's "mediating and often equivocal position between the traditional and the modern . . . makes her an important voice in contemporary fiction . . ." (Margaret Drabble 8) applies to Elizabeth Jane Howard and Barbara Pym as well. On the level of character, the novels depict women who must deal with their interdependence. Many of the heroines live vicariously through their sisters; as they observe and comment on their siblings' lives, these women function as authorial surrogates within the narrative.

Barbara Pym inserts herself and her sister Hilary into Some Tame Gazelle and An Unsuitable Attachment, the earliest and latest to be published of the novels in this chapter. Nevertheless, the world has changed little from one novel to the other; most of the women in An Unsuitable Attachment are employed, but they have little sense of vocation and continue to occupy themselves with parish affairs, gossip and courtship. The sisters in both texts exist in apparent harmony, although one's penchant for living through her sibling ultimately creates difficulties.

On the surface, Some Tame Gazelle appears to be a conscious revision of Cranford, with its spinster sisters and active community of women. A fundamental difference exists, however. No patriarchal law hovers over the lives of Pym's characters as it does in Cranford. The men verge on being ridiculous: Archdeacon Henry Hoccleve is pedantic; Count Bianco is foolish; and the young curate, Mr. Donne, is immature. Because the men are ineffectual, the women have no need to ally themselves with them, as Deborah Jenkyns relies on her father's authority. Instead, the Bedes are virtually equal at home. Belinda manages practical matters and worries incessantly about etiquette while Harriet plays the aging coquette.

The division of roles between the sisters is the traditional opposition. Robert Long considers it a

"caricature . . . . Harriet is plump and elegant, while Belinda is thin and almost dowdy . . ." (25). And Frederick Keener considers ". . . Belinda's buxom sister Harriet--Sensibility in proportion to Belinda's Sense--. . ." (93). More specifically, Harriet worries about having fashionable clothes tailored and criticizes the frumpy Belinda for hiding herself in old, shapeless garments or fussing about the seamstress's predilections. While Harriet flirts in flowered dresses, Belinda considers herself below the notice of men, asexual. Harriet thrives on homage and admiration; Belinda's solace is in solicitude.

In relationships with men, each woman has her territory. Harriet enjoys not only the quasi-filial respect of her curates but also the ritual of rejecting Count Bianco's proposals, while Belinda lives wistfully for Henry Hoccleve, a college friend who married another. The sisters exist in a constant state of titillation created by ungratified, postponed desire. Their first dinner with Mr. Donne is seasoned with "social niceties and sexual innuendo" (Long 26). Belinda speculates about the curate's underwear; then Harriet offers him a ripe pear: "He seemed to be getting rather sticky and there was some giggling and interchange of large handkerchiefs between him and Harriet" (16). No physical contact occurs, but the sexually suggestive offer of fruit and

exchange of handkerchiefs provoke Harriet to "giggles" and "tittering" (17).

Because the sisters make no attempt to consummate heterosexual relationships, they need never confront the illusory nature of their hopes. Rarely do they feel disappointment; each curate, like each conversation with Henry, brings the possibility of success. This state of constant expectation is in many ways preferable to the staleness of such marriages as Henry Hoccleve's: "For Harriet curates are a renewable resource and so her relationships with them have a passion, a freshness, a timelessness that no marriage could supply" (Nardin, Barbara Pym 66). In the end, unrequited love benefits both sisters. Harriet derives gratification from being sought, but not possessed, by the count. Life mending a curate's socks would be considerably less exciting than her world of possibilities. Belinda gains satisfaction from looking after others as well as from Henry's odd moments of appreciation, as when he invites her to tea.

Since the desired men, Henry and the curates, are equally unattainable, the siblings find no reason to compete with one another. Instead, each offers her sister what that sister seeks in a man. Harriet is often a little bossy (even though she is the youngest, she "behaves like an older sister . . ." 99). She overlooks Belinda's abilities, just as Henry deprecates Belinda.

Belinda allows Harriet to sort through her clothes and order her about in the same way as Harriet mothers her curates.

As in Cranford, the appearance of male outsiders unsettles the sisters' household. Yet Pym differs from Gaskell in offering her protagonists opportunities to marry. Mr. Mold, a librarian, and Theo Grote, an ex-suitor of Harriet's, are refused by Harriet and Belinda respectively. The Bedes share Elizabeth Bennet's conviction that marriage for its own sake is an unacceptable alternative: "If merely being married or being loved were the point, Harriet would certainly marry her ardent Italian . . ." (Benet 27). Moreover, the proposals indicate that the women do not indulge in unrequited love "because there is no one else" or "for lack of more suitable choices . . ." (Benet 22). They are responsible for their position as spinsters, and not victims of society, circumstance, or economic necessity.

Not only are marriages averted, but proposals, or even the threat of them, are perceived as disruptions. Knowing that Harriet will refuse Count Bianco, Belinda can afford to show compassion toward him and tell him not to "lose hope" (213). Belinda also enjoys catering to Harriet's curates and gains vicarious pleasure in her sister's attractiveness to men, as long as she senses no real danger to her orderly existence: "Her only serious

anxiety in the course of the novel is that the unpredictable Harriet might choose to marry Mr. Mold or Theo Grote" (Benet 27). Indeed, during Mr. Mold's visit, we are told:

> Had she [Belinda] known what was going on, she would probably have rushed into the drawing room, even if she had still been wearing her old gardening mackintosh and galoshes, and tried her best to stop it, for one was never quite sure what Harriet would do. (140)

On learning of her reprieve, "The look of relief that brightened Belinda's face was pathetic in its intensity" (142).

Diana Benet asserts that Belinda fears the proposals because they "represent the evils of change . . . " (27). More than that, marriage involves a serious loss for each sister, depriving her of the qualities split off in her sibling and of the complementarity both have depended on for comfort and survival. Finally, marriage might precipitate a loss of illusion. Single, the Bedes have their affection for each other and their unrequited lovers; married, they might have neither. Expelled from the "world of romance, aspiration, love-longing, loneliness, despair," the women would be left only with the "extreme triviality" (Bayley 53) of village life. Thus in choosing singleness, the sisters retain the "sanctuaries of their imaginations . . ." (Long 39).

In leaving the sisters single by choice, Pym

implicitly comments on convention. In contrast to the Misses Jenkyns, the Bedes have suitors; unlike Charlotte Lucas, they have the financial resources to reject tiresome men; and in opposition to Miss Bates, they can remain spinsters without becoming caricatures. The apparent similarities to a "Victorian courtship novel" (Long 38) are deceptive; "the romantic materials" are "dislocate[d]" (Benet 16) to create questions and discomfort in the minds of readers.

Specifically, while the novel "celebrate[s] . . . singleness" (Nardin, Barbara Pym 71), it leaves several issues unresolved. First, because the sisters' singleness depends on indirect communication, innuendo, and illusion, their happiness is fragile. They are vulnerable in a world where an Agatha Hoccleve may propose directly to her beloved. Moreover, the sisters are isolated from other women. Although they have tea with Edith Liversedge and Connie Aspinall, they do not share the intimacy of Cranford's Amazons. Belinda finds Edith Liversedge "dishevelled," "brusque," and an "embarrassment" (29), and her distaste for Agatha Hoccleve is scarcely concealed when they quarrel over such petty matters as marrow squash. Harriet has fewer dealings with other women and views Belinda's defensive manoeuvres with Miss Prior, the seamstress, with mixed impatience and disgust. She reserves her jealousy for Miss Berridge, Mr. Donne's

intended, whom she considers "toothy" (235). The Bedes view their peers with envy, distrust, and anxiety, because other women can break up their dreams or force them to confront reality. This hostility appears discrepant in a novel which otherwise seems to celebrate female closeness; however, it is at the heart of Pym's intent as she depicts the complexity of relations among women.

Defensiveness can be found in other areas of the sisters' lives, too. Their relationship is not perfectly balanced, and they have spats over lunch menus and Belinda's apparel. As in more traditional sister novels, the women are preoccupied not only with satisfying their individual needs, but also with establishing mastery, even in the small circle of home. The difference is in frequency; the Bedes quarrel less often than some of their literary precursors.

Still greater defensiveness exists with regards to men and marriage, even though Pym presents the Bedes' singleness as a triumphant choice. The continuing antagonism and competition between Belinda and Agatha, as well as Harriet's envy of Mr. Donne's wife, imply incomplete acceptance of the situation. Belinda's pathetic observation of and incessant curiosity about the Hoccleve household underline this point. Her interest, down to knowing precisely what Agatha serves the seamstress for lunch, is purely critical, for she wishes

to vindicate her sense of inferiority at not being chosen by Henry. The repression in the sisters' lives is apparent not only in the evening with Mr. Donne, but also in a meeting of women, which Janice Rossen calls an "impromptu frolic":

> This scenario reflects the blessings of the single state, but the characters' schoolgirlish behaviour strikes a slightly ironic note; it suggests a sort of immaturity . . . . Spinsterhood can reflect arrested development . . . . (Rossen 59)

Although the women have chosen to be single, they make no real accomodation to and have little contact with the larger world, where many do marry, make friends, and find sexual fulfillment. The imaginative life of the Bedes remains a defensive posture. Even as Pym pretends to glorify the choice of spinsterhood as part of her ironic comment on Cranford, she is bound to Cranford's circumstance: the single sisters are in many ways inhabitants of an isolated realm of romance.

The Bedes reappear briefly in An Unsuitable Attachment; having inherited Count Bianco's wealth, they are being shepherded about Rome by a young curate, Basil Branche. The sisters are marginal in the plot, serving primarily to explain Branche's appearance. But by using characters from an earlier book (as she often does), Pym also draws attention to herself and the fictive quality of the text. In this case, the Bedes are a deliberate

contrast to two more worldly siblings, Penelope Grandison and Sophia Ainger. The latter are more traditional novel heroines, being young and attractive.

An Unsuitable Attachment takes place in a small London parish, where the vicar, Mark Ainger, makes the rounds of the West Indian neighborhoods. Most of the women in the novel work or have worked: Penelope has an office job, Ianthe Broome is employed in a library, Daisy Pettigrew assists in a veterinary clinic, and Sister Dew is a retired nurse. Only the married woman, Sophia Ainger, lacks an occupation.

Although the setting and circumstances in this novel are more contemporary than in Some Tame Gazelle, many of the same issues persist. The female characters have little sense of vocation, and employment outside the home does not significantly alter their lives. Penelope's occupation remains obscure; it is merely something that fills the hours and pays the bills. Ianthe chooses to work in a library because it is "necessary for her to do some kind of work" and her mother considers it "a ladylike occupation" (25). With men, the women are curiously conservative, as when Ianthe expects to be given a seat on the Underground. Similarly, Penelope intends to be walked home after dinner, and "like so many modern young women she had the right old-fashioned ideas about men and their work" (69).

Not surprisingly then, little has changed between sisters. Sophia, the elder of the two, lavishes her affection on the cat, Faustina. Concerned with parish affairs and propriety, her interests verge on obsessions. She has little else to occupy her, having neither job nor children, and frequently finding her husband cold and distant. Penelope is more dramatic, both in her personality and in her appearance:

> Penelope had the same colouring [as Sophia] and generally romantic air, but was shorter and dumpier with rather fat legs. She wore a black sacklike dress, a large silver medallion on a chain, black nylon stockings and flat-heeled shoes. Her hair was dressed in a 'beehive' style, which was now collapsing on one side. The Pre-Raphaelite beatnik . . . . (39)

Penelope's odd clothing reflects her insecurities; her flashy chain and high perched hair indicate a desire to be noticed, while her shapeless, colorless garments betray a lack of confidence in herself and her body. Moreover, the "collapsing" hair implies that Penelope has difficulty maintaining any polish she might wish to project. Penelope's appearance is in part a reaction against her sister, her trendy clothing and messy hair opposed to Sophia's conservative, neat apparel. Denying her sexuality with her baggy garments, she avoids an unhappy marriage like Sophia's.

Sophia's marriage has ostensibly eliminated competition for men; nevertheless, friction remains, however submerged. Sophia's unsatisfying relationship with her husband does not prevent her from contriving to introduce Penelope to Rupert Stonebird, a new neighbor: "Sophia was taking a keen interest in him and had even been considering him . . . as a husband for her sister" (35). Certainly, Sophia wishes her sibling to have companionship, but her "interest" is more self-serving and contradictory than that. No doubt Sophia perceives her sister's single state as a critical comment on her own marriage. At the same time, she takes vicarious pleasure in Penelope's exploits. If Penelope marries, Sophia will lose this source of excitement in her life; should Penelope's marriage be happier than hers, she might lose the gratification of looking after her sister, inviting her to dinner, and lending her suitable clothing. Penelope, in turn, senses her sister's ambivalent impulses.

The sisters unite, however, in Penelope's competition with Ianthe Broome, another neighbor, who initially succeeds in attracting Rupert Stonebird. Because she is an outside rival, Ianthe plays a role analogous to Mary Crawford's, though their personalities are almost contraries. Ianthe's taste and manners are impeccable. She wears old-fashioned classics--furs, silks, wools.

None of her clothes are made of synthetic materials. Instead of being garish, Ianthe's garments tend to be faded. When Penelope remarks that Ianthe's scarf is "so tiresomely good, like all Ianthe's things" (123), her "good" seems morally loaded as well as a reference to the scarf's quality. Moreover, as Margaret Ezell notes, Ianthe is also a threat to the older sister, "being a canon's daughter who seems to be able to manage any parish or social affair with competent grace. Sophia. . . sees in Ianthe an elegant gentility she lost by marrying a poor clergyman" (462).

The tensions between the biological sisters and their neighbor "sister" are most apparent when Rupert invites Ianthe and others to a dinner party. The wife of one of his guests becomes ill at the last moment, so he asks Penelope. Penelope, lacking the time to change at home after work, stops at her sister's house to borrow party clothes. A muted struggle over apparel becomes an expression of the sisters' competing personalities.

The scene in which the two siblings pick a garment for Penelope is a comic vignette. Traditional Sophia may be eager to see Penelope married, but her budget is limited, and she worries that her harum-scarum sister might ruin one of her few good dresses: "'There's my new green wool,' said Sophia, a little reluctantly, 'but I haven't worn it yet'" (121). The fear that her younger sister

might wear the new dress first is powerful because Sophia is concerned that the dress will somehow be "broken in" by her sister, that it will become part of Penelope rather than of Sophia. In fact, Penelope does not properly appreciate the offer. To her, wool is too conventional, so she rejects the dress. Despite her misgivings, Sophia reiterates that the party outfit must be "suitable," and she tempts Penelope by saying that Ianthe will no doubt wear wool. This, of course, spurs Penelope to wear a different fabric, and, after the women reject yet another dress, Sophia remembers a parcel of hand-me-downs from a wealthy woman. Sophia thought they were "much too grand for me to wear. I am sure we could find something for you" (121).

Implicit in this discussion is the notion that what suits one sister's image is not appropriate to the other's. A physical fit is the last factor considered. Penelope's rejections include subtle put-downs of Sophia's life, but the solution--someone else's cast-offs--neutralizes the loan somewhat. The clothes still come from Sophia, but they are more appropriate to Penelope's tastes:

> Half an hour later Pen was encased--for it was a fraction too tight for her--in the lamé cocktail dress with the hem roughly tacked up, the sequin trimming torn away from the neck and a string of black beads hanging below the waist. (122)

Predictably, Sophia offers a touch of good taste, a string of pearls, but "the beads seemed to go with the piled up hair style and long pointed-toe shoes that Penelope was wearing" (122).

One imagines that Penelope looks ridiculous, tottering in high heels and a narrow skirt. Yet if her goal is to look different from Ianthe, she succeeds. After greeting her, Rupert notices,

> he was talking rather too much . . . but her appearance in the dress of silver lamé--like some kind of armour remembered from chidhood play-acting . . . --was quite startling and such a contrast to Ianthe's sober blue dress (123).

The comparison of the dress to armor is appropriate, because for Penelope the party is battle; her quest is for a husband rather than for a fair maiden. At the same time, "play-acting" in borrowed clothes, Penelope appears childish (in contrast, on another occasion Rupert realizes that Ianthe's "silk dress and jacket brought back to him reveries of his mother at parish garden parties of his childhood" 209).

Throughout the evening, Penelope feels awkward and uncomfortable, especially when comparing herself to the graceful Ianthe, who seems at ease in this gathering of anthropologists. When the women guests retire, they notice that Penelope has split the back of her dress. The debate that follows echoes the scene between sisters, only this

time the guests are offering suggestions to a "despairing" (129) Penelope. Penelope rejects their assistance; she is upset at being exposed (literally and figuratively) before these other women, especially because one of them is her rival for a man's affections. Humiliation before the men occurs later, when she returns to the sitting room and must contrive to keep her back turned.

Penelope's "armour" has slipped despite her careful preparations. Ironically, such exposure is only an extreme version of what the sisters desired, for on some level, they must have been aware of the possibility of exposure when they selected such a tight dress. They wished for Penelope to be seen as a sexual object, to be noticed above Ianthe--but not so overtly. The language of clothes is intended to be subtle; their function is to communicate and draw attention by covering, not by exposing. Thus the outfit succeeds almost too well, but even near success is failure. Discovering the tear, Rupert finds Pen "provocative and rather endearing" (131). He is about to kiss her, but Sophia reappears, and Penelope enters "the house with head bent, feeling that she had been a failure" (131), ignorant of the unfortunate effects of her sister's interference.

Penelope's disastrous choice of dress is influenced by her wish to be different from her sister as well as from Ianthe. What the dress reveals in its tightness and

gaudiness is her ambivalence as well as her sister's contradictory impulses. Sophia, by instigating the loan and reappearing at the wrong moment, shows herself helpful and harmful throughout, and ultimately both women are exposed.

Trading clothing in an attempt to alter her sister's image is no more effective or satisfying for Sophia than her efforts to live through Penelope. In fact, Penelope finally attracts Rupert's attention not because Sophia has fulfilled her "duty to her sister" (193) but because Ianthe marries another man. In a displacement of the traditional sister story, Ianthe chooses John Challow, who "could be . . . well, a younger brother" (96). Rupert, who has played the role of the paternal comforter, is free to marry Penelope. As in earlier novels, competition from an outside rival and the near loss of the suitor lead a character to marry. The only difference is that the "perfect" rival gains the brotherly lover, and the young sister wins the fatherly man.

Significantly, Sophia is disturbed by Ianthe's marriage, wishing her neighbor had remained single: "I never thought of her as getting married--it seems all wrong . . ." (247). Sophia's dismay seems out of proportion to the occasion; after all, Ianthe is little more than an acquaintance. Yet Sophia's disappointment is comprehensible when one considers Diana Benet's assertion

that "these people are unconsciously creative as they watch each other . . ." (103). Much of Sophia's pleasure, like that of the Bede sisters, has come from the imagination, and she "wanted her [Ianthe] to stay as she was, almost as if . . . [she had] created her" (247). Ianthe, with her flawless clothes and manners, has played a crucial part in Sophia's schemes, keeping them at an exhilarating pitch where success remains just beyond reach. By removing herself as an obstacle to Penelope's marriage, Ianthe threatens Sophia's excitement. She challenges Sophia's confidence as she enters a marriage which may well be happier than her neighbor's. Most of all, Ianthe has served as a focus of displaced emotions for Sophia. As a block in Penelope's life, she has often acted out Sophia's hidden impulses; her utter propriety is merely an extreme version of Sophia's conservatism. Faced with Ianthe's marriage, Sophia feels abandoned. Ianthe is not what Sophia imagined--instead of being an extension of Sophia's will, she is a separate individual. In her anger, Sophia projects on Ianthe all the rivalry and hostility she cannot express should her sister marry.

In An Unsuitable Atachment then, Pym presents the problem of a sister who lives vicariously through her sibling. The unexpected marriage of an unrelated "sister" forces the characters to reassess their stances toward convention as well as their self-images. Sisterhood

outside the family is not possible, because a friend becomes the repository of repressed emotions. Harmony between siblings is bought at the expense of friendship with other women.

In Elizabeth Jane Howard's After Julius, the triangle of women consists of two sisters, Emma and Cressida, and their widowed mother. As in An Unsuitable Attachment, an expression of the sisters' relationship towards each other is found when they trade clothes; in this novel, however, they swap roles with apparel, and Howard's attempted solution to the difficulties of sisters lies in this reversal.

As in other sister stories, Cressida and Emma are presented as opposing personalities. Cressida is beautiful, even more promiscuous than her namesake, and troubled. Lackadaisical about her career as a pianist, she has a self-destructive penchant for affairs with married men. Rarely does she return to her childhood home, and when she does, she entertains herself by arguing with her mother. In conventional terms, she is a "bad" girl, whereas her sister Emma is "good." Emma is timid and sexually inexperienced; at times, she appears childish, as in her frequent weekend visits to her mother. Despite the fact that she holds a responsible position in her father's publishing firm, she does not take her career seriously, having chosen it after she "failed to do

anything which she privately thought worthwhile . . ." (16). The sisters live together fairly harmoniously. While Emma picks up after Cressida, literally and figuratively, Cressida makes enough amorous mistakes for two. Acting as a monitory exemplar, she enables Emma to retain romantic illusions for herself.

The equilibrium is disrupted as the book opens, however. Intrigued by the peculiarities of one of her authors, Emma invites him home for the weekend. Esme, the girls' mother, is expecting a visitor, too, her ex-lover Felix. The appearance of these two men, one a stranger and the other absent for twenty years, unsettles the lives of the three women. The author, Dan, puzzles both sisters, but charms Emma with his simplicity and childlike delight in sweets. Failing to recognize him as a suitor, Emma perceives Dan as a "brother" (140), and thus initially finds him less threatening than other men. He in turn is piqued by Emma's sympathy and understanding, even though he instinctively distrusts women. He is awed by Cressida's beauty and critical of her behavior, considering her "a tart" (132). Worse, "he was afraid that Emma might turn out to be like her sister . . ." (104). In fact, Cressida, like Sophia, plays a mixed part in her sister's romance; she may contrive to help, but her way of life is unacceptable to Dan. She unwittingly confirms Dan's suspicions about her when Esme's Saturday

dinner guests include Cressida's lover and his wife.

In a scene which parallels Sophia and Penelope selecting clothes, Emma seeks Cressida's assistance in dressing for dinner. Aware of Dan's opinion of Cressida, Emma has defended her sister nonetheless (feeling attacked for having such a relation), and wishes to radiate some of her sibling's sexuality. While Dan is the first male to attract Emma in years, Cressida has resolved to reform herself and to renounce men. The sisters thus reverse roles. As Cressida casts off her lover, so she casts off her apparel: "a tremendous clearing out of clothes in her room--a lot of them were not going to be suitable for her new life, and others she was simply tired of . . ." (135). Hoping to be unobtrusive, Cressida wears black. Emma adopts some of Cressida's rejected garments, selecting a revealing sleeveless cashmere sweater, cinched tightly at the waist with a belt.

The evening is an unmitigated disaster. Jennifer Hammond, the wife of Cressida's lover, discovers the affair before Cressida can terminate it. Jennifer confronts Cressy cruelly, and Emma comes to her sister's defense, begging the Hammonds to leave. Sickened by the scene, Dan decides to depart, too. Thus the "helpful," experienced older sister ruins her sibling's evening.

This, however, is not the end of the novel, for the reversal continues. Felix returns to London with

Cressida. Refusing to make love to her, he claims that she has allowed herself to be emotionally violated by too many men. He will wait for her affection, and orders her not to undress. Dan, on the other hand, returns with Emma to the girls' London flat. Seeing her in a revealing wrap bathrobe (significantly, one selected by Cressy), he imagines that Emma, too, is sexually experienced. Emma, "like a petrified doll" (248), allows herself to be raped. Only afterwards does Dan realize what has occurred, as Emma is lying "broken" (250).

In After Julius, neither woman can achieve happiness until she has travelled her sister's path. Cressida must be with a man without having sex; Emma is raped. At various points in the reversal, each woman is seen as a prostitute or "tart." Not only does the woman who borrows become a powerless "doll," but by taking another's image, she sells herself.

As the sisters reverse positions, they attempt to come to terms with patriarchal standards of behavior they have internalized as well as with each other. For Cressida, being a "bad girl" is unsatisfying; as a "good girl," Emma finds herself isolated. The rules governing women's conduct are simply inadequate, a point implicit in the book's title (Julius is the girls' father): Howard's novel is "after" the father's in being imitative of the courtship plot, but it is also "after" the father's in

seeking a story to replace it. Finally, it is "after" the father in its attack on his standards.

The father's story, sent to Esme by his brother, is embedded in the text. A protracted account of events occurring twenty years before those in the novel, it initially appears redundant and digressive. But Julius's death has determined the other characters' behavior. His manuscript implies that he sacrificed himself after becoming aware of Esme's infidelity, and that his death was no passive acknowledgment of impotence or failure. It was a tremendous power-play; he died a war hero, a martyr, scapegoat to a woman's loose faith. Afterwards, guilt separated Esme and Felix. Cressida's knowledge of the events contributed to her cynicism concerning sex, and the lack of a paternal model left Emma uneasy in the presence of men.

Occurrences in the novel alter the situation. Discovering that they have little in common, Felix and Esme can no longer blame Julius for making them feel inadequate and driving them apart. Felix, who has drifted most of his adult life, makes an active choice to pursue Cressida; in doing so, he replaces the father he and Esme deprived her of as a teenager. Finding a lover who is a poet like her father, Emma allows romance to enter her life.

The conclusion of Howard's novel is not entirely

satisfying, however. Esme retires to her room to read Pride and Prejudice; thus the mother, representing the female past and its literary traditions, remains alone and rejected. In addition, although the sisters' closeness persists, they continue to be isolated from other women. Neither expresses sympathy for Jennifer Hammond. Howard hints, too, that Emma's relationship with the poetic Dan may eventually be a repetition of her parents' marriage, which failed because "Poetry was his [Julius's] prevailing passion," and "In all moments of emotion he resorted to poetry . . ." (22). In the end then, Howard hedges on the possibility of change; the stale words of male poets linger.

Howard also emphasizes the persistence of tradition in her use of stock images and obvious symbols. Specifically, the fireworks after the explosive dinner and the parallel between Cressida's and Esme's promiscuity draw attention to the construction of the novel. Often, symbolism is so apparent as to seem aesthetically naive, as when Emma indulges in a ritualistic bath before making love with Dan. Such obvious techniques reveal the conventional aspects of the sisters' story, as well as the inherent emptiness of its divisions and signs. Thus even as Howard questions the possibility of change, she stresses the need to strive for a new text, a story "after" the father's.

In her first novel, A Summer Bird-Cage, Margaret Drabble, too, attempts to refashion the patriarchal sister story; like Howard, she manipulates imagery to draw attention to its inadequacy. Ultimately, the rift between sign and referent is related to a split between the concept of sisterhood and actual sisterly behavior, a division which was apparent in Eliot's portrayal of the Dodsons.

The intense focus on sisters in A Summer Bird-Cage suggests that Drabble herself is attempting to resolve questions about the nature of sisterhood in her own life. Her description of a growing rift between herself and her eldest sibling, A. S. Byatt (who herself has written several novels on sisters), parallels a passage in A Summer Bird-Cage. Of herself and Byatt, Drabble says:

> I used to tag along after her and she was always . . . well, she used to play with me a lot when we were little . . . I think this is what went wrong. I used to expect her to go on playing with me and of course she got bigger and didn't want me around. That made me sad and I always felt that I had been shut out, rejected by her. (Milton 54)

The heroine of A Summer Bird-Cage, Sarah Bennett, echoes her creator:

> But the humiliating period after she had cast me off and before I learned to appear to have cast her off I remember very clearly. Particularly I remember the ends of term, when she would come home from boarding school, while I was still going to the local girls' school: I would cross the days off on my

> calendar for the last fortnight of term with excitement . . . . And every time she came there would be the same cold disillusion, the same sharp lesson in withdrawal. (102)

Sarah must resolve her continuing attraction to and irritation with her sister; her conflicting emotions reflect Drabble's experience.[2]

In addition to drawing on biographical details, Drabble sets her heroines against portraits of sisters in earlier literature and has them respond to these nonbiological siblings. Drabble's comments on pre-texts are more intricate and revealing than those of Pym and Howard, illustrating the effects of characters' misreadings--as well as readings--of earlier novels. As I have indicated, an obvious precursor to the novel is Pride and Prejudice, a work about another set of Bennet(t) sisters. As Arnold Davidson asserts, Sarah, like Elizabeth Bennet, must come to terms with her pride and prejudice (303). He compares Louise to Jane Bennet "in that she weds a man who is socially most suitable" and to Lydia in her "openly licentious behavior" (303-4).

Margaret Drabble has acknowledged basing the plot of A Summer Bird-Cage on Middlemarch (Bergonzi 22) as well as on Pride and Prejudice, and Susanna Roxman has traced similarities between Louise and Dorothea Brooke: "They are both dark and exceptionally beautiful; they are moreover intelligent, intense, and serious. Their sisters

are a little afraid of them . . . . Sarah and Celia have fewer traits in common" (16). The similarities are more ironic than not; Louise's frequently cold, cruel, and mercenary behavior contradicts Dorothea's warm, compassionate, and unselfish actions.

Drabble's most radical use of pre-texts occurs within the story as characters misinterpret other novels. During a rare evening of friendship between the Bennett sisters, Sarah is "struck as we sat there by the charming convention of the scene--sisters idling away an odd evening in happy companionship. It was like something out of Middlemarch or even Jane Austen" (171). Sarah's "charming convention" is in fact anything but harmony and light. Dorothea would sniff at the very idea of "idling" an evening, and her conversation with Celia is frequently full of barbs. Sisters in Austen, too, are likely to be spiteful. Nevertheless, Sarah persists in her conviction that the hostility between her and Louise is atypical:

> Doubtless there are sisters who immediately rush to see each other after returning from abroad, and doubtless there are even more sisters who, if having a party, would invite each other to it as a matter of course, but we didn't belong to either of these groups. (101)

This sense of abnormality lends an air of defensiveness to Sarah's narrative as she strives to justify and rationalize her relationship with Louise. Moreover,

Sarah's feeling of isolation is accentuated by her consciousness of not "belonging" to a tradition of sisters, and she experiences intense role confusion. When she considers Cinderella, she does not know whether she is "Cinderella or rather one of her ugly sisters after the pumpkin episode" (14). Reluctant to place herself in a line of hostile siblings, Sarah is convinced that anger is "bad" and constantly suppresses it, denying even literary examples of friction among siblings. For instance, she does not select Gwendolen Harleth as a model. She strives to squelch emotions which do not conform to her ideals of feminine behavior. As Sarah pushes away undesirable emotions, Louise, stunningly beautiful, like Cressida in After Julius, comes to represent all Sarah's "bad" impulses.

Louise is the "Snow Queen" (46), cold and distant toward her sister and others, "She was never a one for touching people . . ." (27). Occasionally, she makes brief appearances in Sarah's life, a prima donna collecting accolades. Dropping in on Sarah unannounced at Oxford, Louise takes her younger sibling out to lunch and shows off not one but two male escorts. Sarah is hurt by Louise's behavior and longs for the closeness she imagines literary sisters experience. This desire is revealed when Sarah finds herself "honoured" by a rare instant of "accessibility" (23) in Louise.

Sarah benefits, too, from her sister's icy elegance. Louise has a certain notoriety; one of Louise's friends takes Sarah out for the sole purpose of gossiping about Louise's scandalous affair. After Louise's marriage, Sarah is invited to luxurious dinner parties and admitted to the inner circle of London celebrities. If Louise enjoys being set off by her frumpier sister, Sarah gains a puritanical sense of superiority from her sister's disasters. Louise and her lover may have "needed an audience to build up the striking, wicked image of themselves," but Sarah profits, too, "gazing with admiration into the dangerous caves of the fiercer breed. I didn't mind. It soothed my conscience" (187). The sisters depend on each other's reactions, which are predictable and self-affirming.

What Sarah fails to acknowledge is that Louise's "vacant" (27) behavior is only an exaggeration of her own dislike of intimacy. Sarah's discomfort at buttoning up her sister's dress, "I could feel her hard breasts rising and falling under my clumsy hands," (27) signals a "subtle eroticism" (Manheimer 130) between the sisters. Neither admits attraction or resemblance, and by emphasizing Louise's detachment and beauty in contrast to her own awkwardness, Sarah is able to maintain her distance. In fact, Sarah desires Louise's body in its audacious, sexual flaunting of patriarchal rules, but she also perceives it

as dangerous and disruptive. As Virginia Beards comments, "Here is a woman who has internalized the values of her culture yet who, unfortunately, still wanly questions them" (42). Sarah fears incest and lesbianism, not only because they are taboo, but also because she believes they might involve merging her identity with Louise's.

Sarah is equally troubled by the enigmatic nature of Louise's distance: "I wondered why she was such a mystery, why she didn't fit together, why she was so unpredictable . . . . And yet I suppose that I knew more facts about Louise than about anyone else in the world, except perhaps our mother . . ." (67). Sarah considers Louise's opacity her own failure, "I felt my powers of deduction were at fault" (67), another sign that their relationship is aberrant. The little Louise offers Sarah and the world is a performance. Her apartment has the air of a "film set" (130), perfectly matched and decorated. Sensing the artifice in her sister's life, Sarah explains how Louise might wear "a bra that is actually dirty" (27) under her splendid silk wedding gown, for "She had never been tidy behind the scenes, as it were, but only for show" (120). Louise's inconsistencies frustrate Sarah, reminding her that she does not know what is "behind the scenes" or comprehend her sister's reasons for marrying.

Exploring her sister's bedroom, speculating with

friends about Louise's intimate life, reading her diary--Sarah considers knowledge of Louise's most private moments her right, her territory. She is so "fascinated with the details of Louise's private life" (Rose, "Margaret Drabble: Surviving the Future" 4) that her interest verges on obsession; Sarah even compares herself to a "voyeuse" (73).

Sarah's curiosity has two facets. First, it is competitive. Her study of every intricacy of Louise's appearance, culminating in the discovery that Louise's bright red lipstick is a "disastrous error" (118), is designed to make her feel superior to her seemingly flawless sister. Studying Louise, Sarah is studying the other, the rival, the woman who reminds her of her redundancy in the family, her "age-old, cradle-born superfluity" (21). At the same time, Sarah's conviction that Louise has no right to privacy implies that she recognizes no separation between herself and her sibling, that the "other" is in fact part of herself, only suppressed. In Joanne Creighton's astute assessment of the relationship,

> Sarah is obsessed with her older sister Louise, to whom she is bound in a competitive, uncommunicative, yet symbiotic relationship. Repulsed by Louise's coveting of material possessions and social smartness, Sarah, however, understands neither Louise nor the part of herself which is like her sister. (Margaret Drabble 40--emphasis

added)

When Louise gazes at herself in the mirror, it is as "though she were some object foreign to herself" (132); the same might be said of Sarah gazing in the mirror at herself or Louise.

Sarah's relationship with Louise is a model, albeit an extreme one, for her dealings with other women. On the surface, Sarah gets along better with her peers than with Louise. She shares an apartment with Gill, a newly separated woman, but their friendship rapidly deteriorates as Sarah replays her relationship with Louise. Sarah expects Gill to clean up after her, as if Gill were the seemingly impeccable Louise. When Gill is distressed about her marriage, Sarah distances herself, finding it "terrifying" (107) that this "sister" is not as resilient as her idol, Louise. With her dowdy cousin Daphne, Sarah is even less comfortable, for she sees in Daphne an exaggerated version of her own clumsiness. Sarah plays Louise's role of noblesse oblige, graciously inviting her cousin for tea with her and a male friend. Significantly, when Sarah learns that she has more in common with Louise than with Daphne, she ceases to feel any obligation to treat Daphne well. Thus, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese asserts, Sarah and Louise (like other Drabble heroines) "defiantly live at the expense of other women" (247). Sarah blames her sister for her alienation from her peers:

> In the end she taught me the art of competition, and this is what I really hold against her: I think I had as little desire to outdo others in my nature as a person can have, until she insisted on demonstrating her superiority. She taught me to want to outdo her. (103)

Sarah takes no responsibility for her own acts, although she is as competitive as Louise. She has split off yet another aspect of herself, denied it, and assigned it to her sister.

The situation changes when Louise is caught by her husband while she is bathing with her lover. Pretensions to invulnerability are stripped with her clothing, and she turns to Sarah for help. This reversal--with the glamorous Louise arriving on Sarah's doorstep clad only in a bathrobe--initiates a reassessment of the "complementarity so profound that they are dependent on each other for identity" (Manheimer 128). Just before that, Louise had taken Sarah backstage at the theater; now she invites her sister backstage in her own life. As a result, Sarah learns to accept her resemblances to Louise. Instead of being an "inverse double" (Manheimer 128), Sarah, too, finds herself attractive, mercenary, lost: "sympathy in Sarah's consciousness, leads to a self-recognition that also stresses . . . similarity . . ." (Arnold Davidson 310).

The knowledge that Louise is vulnerable and that she has the power to refuse Louise comfort releases Sarah from anger. Sarah, who initially confessed, "I hate being parted from my luggage" (10), admits at the end:

> . . . something very very old snapped in me. It snapped as though it had been a piece of old and rotten string, long useless, long without any power to tie, and yet still wrapped round and confining an ancient parcel of fears and prejudices. It snapped and the parcel spilled apart all over the floor. (191-2)

The tie, "very very old" and "long useless," is Sarah's worn out notion of sisterly behavior, the "parcel of fears and prejudices" her own emotions about living up to this notion. Or, to put it another way, the "tie" is Sarah's ideal of sisterhood, the "parcel" the actual set of emotions making up the relationship.

Unknotted at this time are all of Sarah's fictions, not only about sisterly behavior in general, but about Louise. Just as the characters in An Unsuitable Attachment must acknowledge that their conception of Ianthe is a fiction, Sarah must realize that she has created the Louise she describes:

> She was merely and accidentally my sister whereas Simone [a friend] was a personal person of my own.
>
> This is a lie, but a lie that I am often near to believing. (72)

The created Louise, "the personal person of my own," is part of Sarah, her fear of intimacy, her suppressed

eroticism, her competitiveness with other women. To believe that Louise is anything (or anyone) else is indeed a "lie."

As the parcel of Sarah's metaphor slips apart, so does the metaphor of sisterhood, which is as illusory as any human creation. In the absence of intimacy between sisters, Sarah wishes her sister were "merely and accidentally" a biological relative, with no "personal" influence or effect. Sarah's almost puritanical criticism of Louise is a reflection of this desire for simplicity and "mere" connotation in the term "sister." She longs for Louise to be as she "almost" is on her wedding day, "the real thing . . . meaningless and pure . . . . By virtue of form, not content. Symbol, not moral" (33).

In the course of the novel, Sarah finds that the desire to divide "symbol" from "moral" (or "form"--biological kinship--from "content"--metaphorical relationship) involves a deep and troubling split in herself. Yet if she cannot have what is "pure and meaningless" or its opposite, the "long useless" ideal of sisterhood, what remains?

Drabble may unpack the "parcel," but she offers no satisfying solution for Sarah, no easy unity:

> . . . this impulse to seize on one moment as a whole, one aspect as the total view, one attitude as a revelation, is the impulse that confounds both her and me, that confounds and impels us. To force a

> unity from a quarrel, a high continuum from a sequence of defeats and petty disasters, to live on the level of the heart rather than the level of the slipping petticoat, this is what we spend our life on, and this is what wears us out. (206)

Louise and Sarah develop friendlier relations with each other, even share secrets, once they acknowledge their complementarity and similarity. Yet the novel ends with the "slipping petticoat," curiously akin to Penelope Grandison's split dress, and reminiscent of Louise's exposure in the tub. The "petticoat" fashioned of "petty disasters" is inevitably displayed or "worn out," even as it "confounds" or "wears out" its owner. Similarly, the "parcel" is never refastened, and no new seams are sewn. Drabble's answer then is limited and individual, based on the particular and literal rather than the "total" or "symbolic." She gives us an example of sisters who communicate, but no Amazonian girdle of sisterhood. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues, "Drabble so seduces with her illusion of referents, [that] she exposes herself to deep reproach for her failure to deliver: reproach, that is, for the particular intellectual narcissism that plays with meaning, promises meaning, offers communication . . ." (246). Like Elizabeth Jane Howard and Barbara Pym, Margaret Drabble sketches a story "after" the patriarchal code and nineteenth-century novels (both imitative and subsequent), but offers no general solution.

Ultimately, none of the authors discussed in this chapter offers an entirely satisfying conclusion, and readers may feel betrayed after they sympathize with characters such as Sarah who seek an end to female competition and hostility. Yet these writers do not deserve "deep reproach" for not "delivering"; as Drabble has indicated, neatly tied "parcels" are no longer possible. Instead of closure, these authors seek openness, questioning the very ideal which classifies certain female behaviors as wrong or "bad." They imply that women who believe blindly in the ideal are overlooking a tradition of texts in which women do not get along. Moreover, to conform to such ideals, women must cut off and disown parts of themselves, just as Cinderella's stepsisters amputate their toes to fit her shoes. What is necessary is a new definition of sisterhood, one that is neither merely descriptive of a biological relationship nor prescriptive of female behavior. In demonstrating this need and challenging traditional definitions, Drabble, Pym, and Howard are pressing for a new mode of sisterhood "after" the father.

NOTES

1. Despite Drabble's well documented and often cited distaste for Austen's work, it appears that the twentieth-century writer has moderated her dislike. In an interview with me at the 1988 MLA convention, Drabble reiterated her conviction that the portrait of Elizabeth and Jane Bennet is "idealized," but commented that as she re-reads Austen, her opinion of the nineteenth-century author has become more positive. She expressed particular sympathy for Mary, who is left out of many of the family interactions, wondering how the story might differ if written from Mary's point of view.

2. In fact, in our interview, Margaret Drabble referred to the first person narration in the novel as an "impersonation": "the narrator, who I suppose is me" addresses readers in a voice that is "close to the speaking vocabulary that I had at that age."

CONCLUSION: KILLING THE GOOD SISTER, OR THE RETURN OF THE WITCH

Torn between a political desire for a harmonious sisterhood and the frustration of a tense relationship with her blood sister, Margaret Drabble's Sarah exemplifies the dilemma of the contemporary heroine. Critics' silence on the subject of biological sisters may mask a similar disappointment in the disparity between ideal and actuality. Luise Eichenbaum has described this discomfort as "a post-feminist self-imposed censorship on certain feelings that women consider unacceptable. Feelings, for example, of competition and envy. . ." (32).

The problem is a significant one. Women obviously do not wish to portray themselves as envious, jealous individuals just as they attain positions of respect and responsibility. Yet in emphasizing only the "good," pacifying emotions, they risk stifling a part of themselves. Coming to terms with a sister (be she a friend or relative) who embodies negative emotions is therefore vital.

The importance of the issue is apparent in contemporary novels by American and British women. Whereas in

nineteenth-century works, the sister story is usually of secondary importance to the courtship convention, books published after A Summer Bird-Cage scrutinize sisters' relationships more and more closely. In fact, the sister plot sometimes becomes the marriage plot, when intimate relations among women and lesbian affairs replace heterosexual romance. Recent novels in English focusing on sisters include Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping, Gail Godwin's A Mother and Two Daughters as well as The Odd Woman, Alice Walker's The Color Purple, Ursula Holden's Wider Pools, Nancy Thayer's Three Women at the Water's Edge, and Emma Tennant's The Bad Sister. These books testify to the importance of biological sisters, but they also illustrate the necessity of coming to terms with other women as individuals--apart from the political imperative to feel sisterhood toward women collectively.

Although I have confined my study primarily to British texts, I wish to comment on several American novels which present more positive solutions to the problems of sisters than the works discussed in the last chapter. Toni Morrison's Sula traces the effects of distance on nonbiological sisters who are eventually reunited. Similarly, in The Color Purple, Alice Walker's heroine Celie and her sister are able to form distinct personalities during a prolonged separation. A relationship between Celie and Shug Avery replaces sisterly

intimacy as well as heterosexual love; instead of trading sexually revealing dresses with her peers like Howard's and Pym's heroines, Celie tailors trousers, traditionally reserved for males, for the women in her life. Ultimately then, these novels suggest an irony, that the painful physical separations experienced in many Afro-American families may facilitate the development of female identity.

An element which is beginning to appear even more often is a stretching of the conventions of the realistic novel. The constricting nature of these forms is apparent in the obvious coincidences in Howard's and Drabble's works, and other novelists have begun simply to abandon the traditions. Their works hint at alternate ways of constructing or portraying female character, as well as at new modes of defining feminine experience.

In The Color Purple, for instance, Alice Walker applies an old convention, the epistolary form, to original materials. Her novel consists of letters written by a nearly illiterate woman to God and her sister Nettie. Celie's language undermines the rules of male grammar; at the same time, because her husband suppresses the letters, the novel is in fact a dialogue with the self.

Although Nettie has two existences, neither impinges on her sister. In Africa, Nettie engages in a complicated relationship with another woman, Corrine, as they attempt to define their sisterhood. Corrine and her husband Samuel

are Nettie's employers, but when they all move to Africa, the three become increasingly close. Corrine denies feeling any jealousy, but she insists that Nettie call her and Samuel sister and brother, claiming that the Africans might otherwise mistake Nettie for Samuel's "other" (146) wife. Corrine's fear of being replaced mirrors biological sisters' consciousness of their redundancy, as well as their awareness of the scarcity of love. In fact, after Corrine's death, Nettie does marry Samuel; adopting her friend's surname, she takes on part of her identity. Nettie's preoccupation with a non-biological sister, together with geographical distance, gives her little force in Celie's life. In her other existence as part of Celie's imagination, Nettie is equally powerless, for she is easily controlled.

Instead of being trapped in a daily struggle with her sister, Celie is free to participate in a sisterhood of "amazons" (198), women brought together by men and suffering rather than by choice like Cranford's Amazons. For instance, Celie initially meets Shug when the latter is her husband's mistress. For both, homosexual intimacy gradually replaces heterosexual relations based on power and cruelty, as Celie learns to express desire for an unrelated woman. She need not break the incest taboo which makes Drabble's Sarah so uncomfortable with Louise. Thus even as Alice Walker proceeds beyond the authors discussed

in the last chapter to abandon the fiction of character and the illusion that two sisters might be fully separate, she reshapes romance.

Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping traces the bonds of sisters through several generations, recording family history in a uniquely feminist and intricate mode. The heroine and her sister are raised by their grandmother and, after her death, by their great-aunts. When the latter prove unequal to the task, the girls' wandering Aunt Sylvie reluctantly agrees to stay with them. Sylvie's return creates an initial irony; although she has been considered the black sheep in the family, she comes to care for the orphan girls, who have been abandoned by the suicide of their more conventional mother (appropriately named Helen). Nurturing the orphans, she "reminds" the heroine, Ruth, of her mother, until "Sylvie began to blur the memory. . . and then to displace it" (53). Categories begin to dissolve; the "bad" aunt turns out to be more caring than the "good" mother, and in the process distinctions between characters are abolished.

Sylvie is alien to the constricted society of Fingerbone, a town whose very name suggests its dryness and lifelessness. Under her influence, the house, "a mere mound, no more a human stronghold than a grave" (3), becomes open to wind and rain. Piles of empty cans and old newspapers clutter the rooms, detritus and history

alike turned to decoration. Sylvie encourages the girls to break the town's rules for women, dressing them in colorful garments and allowing them to skip school. In a traditional role division, Ruth craves the unconventional, joining her aunt's rebellion, while her sister Lucille conforms. Significantly, Lucille expresses her desire to be "normal" in an obsession to sew clothes exactly like her schoolmates'. She moves in with the Home Economics teacher, selecting a mentor whose occupation contrasts Sylvie's shoddy housekeeping and transience.

Sylvie draws Ruth into her mystical world, inviting her niece to her hideaway, an abandoned house on an island. The dream-like sequences on and by the water reappropriate the motif of the aunt as an outcast, the recipient of what the heroine is expected to repress or reject. But whereas Mary Barton's aunt must die, Aunt Sylvie is not tamed by the men of Fingerbone. She is associated with primal energies and witchcraft (she loves night and the full moon); after initiating the heroine into female mysteries, Sylvie prepares to guide Ruth into the world. When the townspeople threaten to take Ruth away from her aunt, Sylvie sets fire to the house, creating the illusion that the two have died. Transients together, they relinquish their identities and home as they travel the rails, always on the edge of danger. Sylvie and Ruth have no need to compete, for they want no place in society.

Emma Tennant's The Bad Sister, which returns us to our emphasis on British novels, is perhaps the most audacious departure from the sister plot of the realistic novel. Tennant relies on Jamesian ambiguities to throw into question the very concept of character as well as notions of "good" and "bad."

Tennant's novel is a collage of various stories, including The Tempest, Cupid and Psyche, and Jane Eyre, but most of all it revises Scott's Heart of Midlothian and Cinderella. The body of the text (literally and figuratively, for it will turn up a female corpse) is framed by an "editor's narrative," which ostensibly presents the truth about a popular scandal. The male editor claims to offer a rational and complete version of the story, but above all, he reveals his total incomprehension of the heroine. Embedded in his initial narrative is another account by a priest who has befriended the heroine.

The "facts" of the story, as they can be construed, are that a Scotsman named Michael Dalzell fathered a baby in an illicit affair shortly before his wife gave birth to a girl. As a child, the illegitimate Jane Wild shadowed her half-sibling. On several occasions, she attempted to hurt her half-sister and to embarrass her father. As an adult, Jane Wild has been seen in the company of a woman named Meg, who runs a feminist commune in London. Meg, a friend of and surrogate for Jane's mother ("M for mother,

for murder, for Meg. M for her. She made me [Jane] a shadow, discarded . . ." 96), is another of Dalzell's former mistresses. Meg shares the anger of so many of the aunts in traditional sister stories, and does not limit herself to subtle manipulations in expressing it. Instead, Meg guides Jane in her revenge against the father who deprived her of her inheritance and rightful place in society. Michael Dalzell and his legitimate daughter (the "good" sister by conventional standards) are assassinated; according to the editor, Jane Wild is responsible for the murders, swayed by the "fanatical" (30) influence of Meg.

Seen as a version of Cinderella, Jane is the heroine robbed of her place in the family by her father's marriage, only her behavior more closely resembles that of a cruel stepsister than of the passive Cinderella. Instead of winning the prince at a ball, Jane kills her sister on the way home from a party. Instead of donning fabulous dancing clothes, she dons male garb. And instead of being helped by a fairy godmother, her mentor is the witchlike Meg, who incorporates aspects of the cruel stepmother. Finally, rather than marrying and living happily ever after, Jane is found dead in the Scottish countryside. Mutilation is not so much the destiny of her rival as the heroine's own fate; she is discovered with a stake through her heart like a vampire, and indeed, throughout, Tennant implies that the

half-sisters prey on each other.

Seen as a retelling of Scott's historical romance, this work illustrates the effects of an irresponsible nobleman's affair with a woman of lower class. Tennant's heroine, Jane Wild, is divided in her very name; she bears a variant of the appellation of Scott's heroine, Jeanie, and part of the name of his villainess, Madge Wildfire. Tennant's Meg is named after Scott's Madge and her mother, Margaret Murdrockson. In addition, in both books, the illegitimate daughter is possessed by a model of feminine anger; in Scott's novel, the baby is abducted by Madge, and in Tennant's fiction, Jane is controlled by Meg. Tennant further distorts and dislocates the plot of the original by altering the goal of the heroine's quest. Jeanie Deans leaves home to win her half-sister's release, while Jane Wild travels to assassinate her sibling, thus freeing herself.

The center of the novel consists of Jane's journal, which constantly deviates from the editor's account. Jane drifts in and out of coherence, in and out of time, in and out of her body. She occasionally inhabits an embroidery which depicts a historical romance. In the tapestry, the sisters are pursued by their master, named George after the seducer in The Heart of Midlothian. They have been excluded from the "formal" garden (of Eden?) because "We would bring chaos, a bad smell in the place of the polite

handkerchief smells" (66). At other times, Jane inserts herself into a version of The Odyssey where she and her sister (rather than the men) are transformed into swine, their sexual urges revealed. Even the "real" world around her appears surrealistic, a city of symbols made concrete. Her apartment neighbors a home for battered women and Paradise Island, a nightclub for lesbians. At Meg's, she waits in a red room which resembles the chamber at the opening of Jane Eyre, where another Jane loses control, surrendering to her anger.

Beyond the male "surface" (54), Jane resides in a world of sorcery devoid of distinctions, such as the one between sanity and insanity. She can be suddenly whisked out of her body and into the street, her new form hermaphroditic and swathed in male clothes. With Meg's assistance, she is destroying her old self, abandoning her conventional existence with her boyfriend and his excessively solicitious mother, Mrs. Marten.

Lost in the convolutions of Jane's thought, the reader has no way of knowing what is sheer fantasy. Does the other sister exist? or is she a figment of Jane's imagination? Certainly, Jane sees herself as double ("Deuter Jane" 95), but she perceives the other as a woman of many guises, as her half-sister, as Miranda, her lover's ex-girlfriend, as all rivals collectively. Is the editor's narrative Jane's invention, or is she the creation of a mad

editor? Does her lover, Tony Marten, exist? Is he different from the devil, Gil-Martin, whom Jane joins at the end? The matter is complicated because the entire work is fiction; as when reading The Turn of the Screw, one must confront deeply embedded levels of unreality. Discussing characters or parts of characters is virtually impossible.

Jane and her half-sister are fused yet distinct. Jane plots revenge on a tormenting sibling, ". . . inside you day and night, enemy or friend, enemy shadow . . . or sister" (83), believing that she can "sample, for a while, the feeling of completeness" (77) without her. The two cannot exist at once; one's life is a threat to the other. But to kill her sister, Jane must extinguish herself. She must "translate" (75) herself into a "sacrifice . . . a living shadow, . . . a drinker of blood, . . . a dark predator or victim. . . " (78). In the end, she has no existence of her own, but finds only "my terrible absence is there in the glass. . . my non-existence there is almost concrete. . ." (133). Clearly, Tennant offers none of the harmony apparent in the conclusions of novels by Austen, Eliot, Gaskell, Drabble, Pym, or Howard.

Whereas most of the novels discussed in this study move toward a closed final picture of the heroine, this text starts with the frame (significantly, a male one) and undermines it from within. Tennant ultimately suggests that female character might best be described as a process,

not towards a closed or static personality, but constantly in dialectical turmoil. Joining her heroine in asking, "What happened to women, that they were forced into these molds" (130), Tennant proposes an alternative which always "changes and dissolves. . ." (131). Thus the novel fulfills Jane Gallop's ideal of identity:

> Both psychoanalysis and feminism can be seen as efforts to call into question a rigid identity that cramps and binds. But both also tend to want to produce a "new identity," one that will now be adequate and authentic. I [Gallop] hold the Lacanian view that any identity will necessarily be alien and constraining. . . . Identity must be continually assumed and immediately called into question. (xii)

For Tennant's Jane, identity is in fact "alien"; what Meg offers is liberation from her female body and all the "shoulds" imposed by society. She teaches Jane to be a "bad" sister.

By giving up personality as a possession and permitting herself to be possessed, Jane achieves freedom. Abandoning personality as a belonging implicitly involves rejecting role splitting; a quality can no longer be mine or yours. Moreover, it allows Jane Wild to move freely in and out of sisterhood as she visits her friends Gala and Meg.

It would be contradictory to Tennant's purpose to give this novel a closed reading, to treat it as a solution rather than as a process in itself. In fact, the end is

ambiguous. Both sisters are destroyed. Jane is ultimately a corpse, a feminine silence. According to the narrator, in death, her face is "completely blank and smooth. . ." (140); by renouncing personality, Jane has erased herself and cancelled her text. However, another way of construing her silence is as a feminine cover of coyness, a refusal to participate in a male narrative.

Jane's journal ends with her leaving her body, "I go past so much higher than they . . . I'm pulled by the moon, although it's small and new." She is preparing to meet her demon-lover Gil-martin, a fatherly figure radically different from the patriarchs of the Victorian novel.

Has the bad sister been killed? Or has she merely taken flight?

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