

Something Much Dearer: Surpassing Female Romantic Friendship Through the Writings of Margaret J.M. Sweat

By Shawna Lipton

Few scholars have critically researched 19th Century New England author Margaret Jane Mussey Sweat. Her novel is cited in only a handful of books and articles, but it is the first American novel written by a woman to feature explicit commentary on same-sex desire between women¹. An examination of the homoerotic content in her work aids in the formation of a queer literary and social history. Lillian Faderman asserts in her book Surpassing the Love of Men that prior to 1900 women in the U.S. had no difficulty in distinguishing sentimental gesture from true romantic friendship. When ... they told each other, 'I love you,' they meant precisely that. When they wept for sorrow or joy at the loss or the return of the beloved friend, their tears were real... Their language and behavior are incredible today: Thus such friendships are usually dismissed by attributing them to the facile sentimentality of other centuries, or by explaining them in neat terms such as 'lesbian,' meaning sexual proclivity. We have learned to deny such a depth of feeling toward any one but a prospective or an actual mate. Other societies did not demand this kind of suppression. (Faderman 84)

Faderman identifies an important dynamic: women could have meaningful friendships with one another that included romantic sentiments, but were not defined as homosexual. This distinction was valuable to the project of second wave feminism, which valued homosocial bonding and sought literary foremothers to exemplify such ideals. But while theories of romantic friendship have been highly influential, they do not address the full range of emotions being expressed between women in this period.

Margaret Sweat's work necessitates just such a critical re-examination of female-female interaction in the 19th century. Her expressions of same-sex desire were unprecedented in American literature at the time of their publication. In her poem "You and I", the speaker clearly states that her relationship surpasses the bounds of friendship, which is "too cold a word" to describe the connection she feels with her object of desire. The physical contact described eradicates the possibility of mere friendship, which is presented as a discrete category from that of being "lovers".

Friends we can
never be, But,
between you
and me,
Something much dearer!
Friends can exist apart,
We two have but
one heart, We must
be nearer! (Verses
1880)

Sweat's desire to be "nearer" and "dearer" than friends can be classified as "homoerotic" because "homoeroticism" exists on a continuum without clear boundaries. A continuum of female homoeroticism accommodates relationships that predate the conceptual category of "homosexual" and exceed the traditional bounds of "friendship" which suppress erotic possibilities.

The term “romantic” when applied to two women seems to imply that women seek to care and nurture, without the desire for sexual gratification. “Romance” seems to stand in opposition to Sexuality as a disembodied, emotional ideal. Furthermore, the theory of romantic female friendship proposes that a period of idealized same-sex bonding existed prior to the sexological codification of homosexuality. In actuality, the idea of the homosexual as a discrete identity category was forming during exactly the same time period purported to be golden age of romantic female friendship. Medical texts and books on social etiquette published between 1820 and 1860 warned against the dangers of female intimacy because of its potential threat to the institutions of marriage and procreation.

Margaret Sweat’s 1859 epistolary novel, Ethel’s Love-Life explicitly documents the experience of a woman who enjoys physical and emotional intimacy with other women but fears the threat her homoerotic desire poses to her heterosexual coupling. Ethel writes; “these passions [between women] are of much more frequent occurrence than the world is aware of—generally they are unknown to all but the parties concerned, and are jealously guarded by them from intrusive comment” (Sweat 82). Sweat’s novel indicates the tenuous position of women’s relationships in mid-nineteenth-century American culture:

Neither actively and institutionally encouraged nor absolutely disqualified by scientific discourses of pathology, same-sex erotic relations were possible to the extent that ... The ultimate function of the relationship must be preparation for marriage. (Diggs 330).

Although Ethel is not ashamed of her attachments to women, she also expresses the need to moderate her passions. Ethel’s future husband Ernest becomes her confessor, able to absolve her of her youthful sexual dalliances. Her anxiety that her homosexual lust cannot be contained, exposes “the emergence throughout the nineteenth century of a specific sexual identification built upon the pathologizing of erotic and exclusive relationships between women” (Diggs 319-21). In one letter Ethel writes:

Women often love each other with as much fervor and excitement as they do men. When this is the case...the emotions awakened heave and swell through the whole being as the tides swell the ocean. Freed from all the grosser elements of passion as it exists between the sexes, it retains its energy, its abandonments, its flush, its eagerness, its palpitation, and its rapture...The electricity of the one flashes and gleams through the other, to be returned not only in degree as between man and woman, but in kind, as between precisely similar organisms (D’Emilio 125-6).

Not only does the speaker align women’s relationships with heterosexual couplings in both “fervor and excitement,” she extols love between two women as a superior form because of their similarity to one another. Freed from the “grosser elements of passion as it exists between the sexes” true intimacy thrives. Sweat’s writing demonstrates a desire to give primacy to homoerotic female friendships, which forces them to compete with the heteronormative system they exist within.

The divide between controllable and unregulated same-sex desire is personified in Ethel’s portrayal of her two very different female lovers, Claudia and Leonara. Ethel’s first same-sex partner Claudia is described in terms of her “feminine beauty, bewitching grace,” and ability to “fascinate and to subdue.” Ethel seems to idealize Claudia, making reference to her “serene loftiness” and “unselfish

devotion." Claudia seems to embody moral purity, and Ethel displays an almost religious faith in her: "I have loved Claudia thus- loved?- nay, I worshipped her. I poured out at her feet all the wealth of my young girlish heart; and what a glorious life I led with her strong high soul (Sweat 85).

Ethel's love for Claudia, although formative, appears innocent and nurturing in contrast with her more overtly erotic connection with Leonara. Ethel's first description of her female lover Leonara involves, "longing, burning looks" and "hot kisses." She is fascinated by her "stormy, fiery, tempestuous nature." Ethel is forced to give up her relationship with Leonara before she can devote herself to Ernest and get married: "I could crown but one king within my heart- to him and to him alone, could I reveal myself completely- yet though I wish not to worship but one, I could have loved her and enjoyed much with her" (Sweat 96). Even though she loses in the end, this reference to Leonara as a possible "king" of Ethel's heart genders Leonara male, and puts her in competition with her other male suitor.. So within the text of Ethel's Love Life, the reader is presented with two images of the woman-desiring-woman: the one who may experience physical connections with other women as a passing fancy, and the one who poses a threat to binary gender and heteronormativity.

Margaret Sweat continues to explore the dynamics of female-female love in her 1880 collection of poems Verses. Sweat's poetic lovers do not aspire to heteronormativity, as did her novel's protagonist Ethel. These lovers revel in the clandestine nature of their interactions, protected from judgment and scorn. The poem, "My Ladye Love" opens, "I have a little ladye love,-/I shall not tell her name." The book is dedicated not to Margaret Sweat's husband, but a secret lover: I name thee not, yet ever in my heart Thine image may be found... So, though I do not name thee to the crowd, Nor thy sweet titles call, One word I whisper when thine ear is bowed That tells thee all.

Another poem in the collection is similarly dedicated: "TO ." These dedications display the mystery in which Sweat must enshroud her desire to protect her love from society's disapproval. However, the poems also suggest that the guise of close friendship allows women to engage in relationships with one another that surpass the bounds of public acceptance, and revel in the intimacy created by concealment.

The lines, "One word I whisper when thine ear is bowed/That tells thee all," describe the increased physical closeness necessitated by a covert love, and the enhanced significance of the lovers' private language.

Although the poetic sentiments Sweat expresses could broadly apply to any manner of secret or adulterous romance, the ambiguous engendering of the verses' speakers and subjects combined with their echoes of the same-sex dynamics in Sweat's novel invite a queer reading. A heterosexual coupling would hardly necessitate the level of scrutiny and self-reflection Sweat expounds. In the poem "You and I," Sweat struggles to name and define her passion:

How shall we name the tie
 By which both you and I Are bound together?
 We have been fond and true
 All the fair summer through, And winter weather.
 Friendship's too cold a word,
 Our hearts too deep are stirred, For that calm feeling!
 Too full of fire are we, Too fond and full and free
 Our hearts revealing!

Friends we can never be, But, between you and me,
 Something much dearer!
 Friends can exist apart,
 We two have but one heart, We must be nearer!
 Friendship is very well, But we- ah we can tell
 Of something rarer!
 We know of sweeter blisses, Clapsed hands and loving kisses,
 There's nothing fairer!
 Since friendship's not allowed, And since a tiny cloud
 Our bliss still covers,-
 Let us enjoy its charm,-
 Let us,- and what's the harm?
 Let us be lovers!

This text illustrates how Sweat's poetry defines the difference between intimate sexual and emotional relationships more clearly than Ethel's Love Life, defying the possibility that romantic language and kisses did not signify sexual desire.

In the book, Ethel says of Claudia: "I know that I visit her in the night hours as she visits me- that there is an invisible bond which still unites each to the other...I do not miss her in my daily walk in the world, for in the world we were little associated together" (Sweat 91-2). In the poem, "Give Me the Night," the speaker commands:

Give me the night, let others take the day,
 I grudge them not the sunshine's garish light:-...
 Give me thy heart, let others take thy smile,
 I grudge them not the unessential part
 Of kindness and courtesy the while
 Thou walkest with them, - but give me the Heart!

For some sex lovers, daylight represents normativity, whereas nighttime entails freedom. The nighttime is preferred over the daytime, as it is rife with erotic possibilities. The "heart" an organ concealed from others is coveted above all other "unessential" parts associated with the "kindliness" and "courtesy" attributed to superficial performances of femininity. In the opening to the poem "Song," Sweat expands upon this theme:

Give me no kiss at meeting, When our meeting is by day, And a careless crowd
 around us May hear each word you say;-
 But with one of your keenest glances
 Look deep in my faithful eyes,-
 And let yours with a glad assurance
 Tell of trust that never dies.

This double consciousness and delight in the affront to social norms flies in the face of the romantic friendship hypothesis and complicates Sweat's portrayal of homoerotic desire. Margaret Sweat's poetry and prose written in the mid 19th century celebrates the intimacy and enjoyment of women's same-sex relationships. She illustrates that 19th century women exchanged covert letters, arranged clandestine meetings, and stole embraces – which undermines the idea that such behaviors were socially innocuous because they could not be construed as sexual. But neither can these relations be anachronistically termed homosexual. The re-conceptualization of 19th century women's "romantic

friendship” as “homoerotic desire” is necessary in order to encompass physical expressions of longing, erotic possibilities, and surreptitious pleasure.

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