

Romantic Friendship in Victorian Literature, by Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton; pp. x + 168. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2007, £50.00, \$99.95.

Caroline W. de la L. Oulton's project is an ambitious one: to examine the representation of male and female romantic friendships in Victorian literature while challenging the perception that such romantic friendship was merely a screen for or displacement of "what we would now term homosexual or lesbian feeling" (1). In her introduction, Oulton announces that "long before the upsurge of gay and lesbian studies, the nineteenth century itself had hosted a long-running debate about the nature and role of friendship in its own right" (1). Yet despite this attempt to distinguish her approach from queer theory, *Romantic Friendship in Victorian Literature* remains haunted by the persistent emergence of erotic feeling in the literary friendships she discusses. Ultimately, this study does less to prove that romantic friendship was a distinctive phenomenon from homosexual desire and more to show the inextricable connection between them.

One of the disappointing features of Oulton's study is that it appears so often unaware of the critical literature on romantic friendship, especially in the arena of queer theory. This shortcoming is particularly noticeable in her chapter on male friendship, in which she discusses the David-Steerforth relationship in *David Copperfield* (1850-51) without considering the groundbreaking chapter in D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (1988) or Mary Poovey's important analysis in *Uneven Developments* (1988). Further, her discussion of romantic friendship in Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850) shows no awareness of Christopher Craft's important reading of the poetics of homoerotic desire in *Another Kind of Love* (1994). Such omissions create the impression that the "gay and lesbian studies" she invokes early on is a straw man or woman, lacking in specificity.

Oulton is on surer ground in her treatment of female romantic friendships, perhaps because there have been fewer influential readings of novels such as Ethel Arnold's *Platonics* (1894) or Mary Cholmondeley's *Red Pottage* (1899). Indeed, Oulton deserves credit for bringing these interesting and neglected fin-de-siècle novels back into the critical spectrum. The strongest features of Oulton's argument emerge when she considers the aspects of friendship that were unconventional or transgressive. For example, the prevailing view that such romantic friendship is a preparation for marriage, and "its centrality . . . usually displaced only by the inevitable love plot" (7), is backed up by readings of novels such as *David Copperfield* (in which the romantic friendship with Steerforth is supplanted by marriage to Agnes) and poems such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1857) (in which the heroine's friendship with Marian Erle is eventually displaced by her marriage to Romney). Oulton's discussion of *Aurora*

Leigh also reveals the class transgressions of the poem, which features a romantic friendship that crosses class boundaries.

Oulton is willing, however, to entertain exceptions to this pattern of friendship trumped by marriage, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) where the marriage is destroyed and the romantic friendship between Robert Audley and George Talboys remains intact. Yet Oulton's strongest reading of an individual novel is surely that of Wilkie Collins's *Armadale* (1866), in which the "conflict between romantic love and friendship" (124) is resolved very differently than in Charles Dickens's works: in *Armadale*, "male friendship is shown to be ultimately more durable than heterosexual involvement, as Lydia [Gwilt] is redeemed by dying in place of her husband at the right moment" (125). Oulton's argument piques the reader's interest when she addresses the conflict, rivalry, and jealousy that inform both male and female friendships, disrupting the saccharine tendencies of the Victorians to portray same-sex friendship as a pre-sexual Eden. Notable in this respect is Oulton's discussion of Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-53) in which she explores the latent hostility in Esther's friendship with Ada, in which "Ada is withheld from the offices of self-sacrificing friendship that would justify Esther's representation of her as the model heroine" (92). Similarly, Oulton points out in her discussion of *Armadale* that the "mutual jealousy of friends and potential marriage partners actually lies at the very heart of romantic friendship, and operates as a driving force in several of the novels considered here" (123).

The structure and organization of Oulton's book are less than ideal, as works that belong together in terms of genre or period are discussed separately. For example, the analysis of *Lady Audley's Secret* is included in a chapter on male friendship, while the analysis of its fellow sensation novel *Armadale* is oddly inserted in a chapter on satirists, disrupting the obvious parallels with Braddon's novel. This structural awkwardness is symptomatic of a deeper problem with Oulton's study, namely the paucity of historical context or reference. This might seem a surprising criticism given Oulton's opening discussion of Victorian conduct manuals and religious treatises such as Sara Ellis's *The Daughters of England* (1845), Percival Pickering's *An Essay on Friendship* (1875), and Anthony Thorold's *On Friendship* (1896), with which Oulton attempts to ground her examination of fictional works. Yet despite the interest of such nonfictional sources, they provide little in the way of historical orientation for Oulton's study. The often jarring discontinuities of Oulton's argument are especially intrusive in chapter 2, when she abruptly leaps from discussing Hellenism in mid-century Oxford to the 1890s and Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* (1897), providing little sense of how views of male friendship had been transformed in the interim. Moreover, it seems extraordinary that Oulton makes no mention in her book of the 1885 Labouchere Amendment, which criminalized all forms of sexual activity between men, and radically transformed the social and cultural landscape of same-sex desire.

Ultimately, Oulton's thesis that male romantic friendship is to be distinguished from homosexuality protests too much and requires special pleading. In her discussion of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), for example, Oulton makes the bizarre claim that "it should not be forgotten that the known victims of his [Dorian's] predatory sexuality are all female" (150-51): a remark that overlooks Basil's accusatory question to Dorian—"Why is your friendship so fatal to young men?"—in which he specifically references "that wretched boy in the Guards who committed

suicide” and “Sir Henry Ashton who had to leave England with a tarnished name” ([Oxford World’s Classics, 2006], 127). Such blind spots in Oulton’s analysis reflect the weakness of its historical argument. The significance of Oulton’s topic is immense and is richly deserving of historically and theoretically informed analysis. Unfortunately, Oulton’s study is too often disappointingly superficial in its treatment of this vitally important theme.

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