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# Sororal bonds actualized: sisterhood in Charlotte Bronte's Shirley and Louisa May Alcott's Work

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Sororal Bonds Actualized: Sisterhood in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*  
and Louisa May Alcott's *Work*

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A Thesis

Presented to

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts in English Literature and Writing

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By

Lorin Richard

Spring 2019

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## MASTER'S THESIS

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## **Introduction**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both British and American women fought for basic human rights. In England, the women's suffrage movement began in 1866, following the women's suffrage movement of America that began in 1848. While the movements had some differences, at the core was the common need for equality within both the social and familial structures of society. Authors, particularly female authors, were moved to reflect their resistance to gender inequality in their novels in both England and America. Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Shirley*, was published in 1849; while Louisa May Alcott published her novel, *Work: A Story of Experience*, in 1873. Brontë and Alcott both created double heroines in their 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels to resist constricting sex and gender systems by partaking in a sisterhood instead of a traditional male-focused power dynamic.

Women, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to present day, must prioritize their relationships with other women and share collective resources to liberate themselves from the position of gendered minorities. Women can rely on sisterhood, an all-female network that expands to include women of different classes, races, and generations, to form a bond that may sometimes be biological, but is always mutual between two women. Brontë and Alcott show that a sisterhood is formed in two ways, first by the love and solidarity towards other women, and secondly, by sharing time, encouragement, and cumulative resources as commodities. In the male-centered world of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women were often used as possessions owned by the men in their lives. The Laws of Coverture, in both England and America, forced women to be completely dependent on their male

partner as soon as they married. When women entered into a marriage contract, they were giving up their possessions, money, land, and the limited agency they were allowed as unmarried women and widows. By subverting the patriarchal gender systems, 19<sup>th</sup>-century women were capable of de-commodifying themselves.

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century gender systems that are highlighted in both *Shirley* and *Work* keep women in specific roles: daughter, wife, and mother. The limitations of these roles, imposed by patriarchal gender systems to promote a male-centered society, discourage women from progressing the female gender by unifying against oppression and transgressing the male world by disrupting the patriarchal societal norms. Brontë and Alcott employ their novels to convey to their female readers that if women were to align themselves with other women, instead of only with men, women could work towards alleviating their own gendered oppression. In their respective novels, the absence of a dominating male presence allows sisterhood to flourish; the presence of a dominating male figure severely hinders, or at least limits, sisterhood. Some of the female characters only partake in sisterhood temporarily while others continue to fight against the limitations of sisterhood imposed by men. Brontë and Alcott show that women, as a group, must repair themselves through sisterhood by claiming agency, which would allow them to resist the gender systems of a patriarchal society. By creating opportunities for women to make informed decisions on who will be their spouse and by allowing women to find fulfilling work, women's agency, as a whole, will increase.

Scholars have long been interested in sisterhood. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Carol Lasser, Linda Eisenmann, and Lillian Faderman investigated the unique relationships between women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations

between Women in Nineteenth Century America,” Smith-Rosenberg argues that female friends can be emotional lovers and that men are unable to penetrate that relationship or the female world. In “‘Let Us Be Sisters Forever’: The Sororal Model of Nineteenth-Century Female Friendship,” Carol Lasser claims that a female network, a sisterhood, must be mutually supportive, especially in times of crisis. In “Sisterhood and the Family Claim in Nineteenth-Century America,” Linda Eisenmann illustrates the ways in which sisterhood sustains families and how women might turn unpaid domestic work into paid labor. In *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, Lillian Faderman maintains that while opportunities for women to work were limited in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fulfilling jobs “created a whole new class of females – an elite who maintained that position not by virtue of their connection to a powerful father or husband but solely by their own effort” (204). Faderman notes the importance of women’s independence and the limitations placed on women who wanted to work: the lack of support from men and the responsibility of raising children. She explains that 19<sup>th</sup>-century women had “practical reasons for not marrying [...] but their emotional reasons were even more compelling” (204). Faderman writes, “these New Women lived in an era when women saw other women as kindred spirits and men as the Other” (205).

Women were able to turn to their sisters, their “kindred spirits,” instead of feeling the necessity to marry for economic reasons and live a life society expected of them. By working fulfilling jobs, sisterhood became another option for women. Reading these cultural critics’ articles provides a historical context to sisterhood in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that can be applied to our reading of *Shirley* and *Work*, which then informs us of Brontë and

Alcott's own representations of their gendered realities and their questioning of women's relationships and status in society.

Sisterhood in the 19<sup>th</sup> century often was successful at liberating women from their emotional and economic dependency on men, but there were also self-imposed restrictions when the sisterhood was not mutual, when the care was not returned. Some women were not capable of joining a sisterhood because they were unable to share resources or because they chose not to participate in the female network at all, while some women decided to passively support their fellow sisters, such as participating in female friendships only until they were married, when the husband and children would replace sisterhood. There was a stark difference between support and solidarity. Support could be offered from a distance, a shallow version of sisterhood. For example, a woman could offer support to a fellow woman who was much like herself but retract her support when the other woman strayed from the set gender expectations. But solidarity required a full investment in sisterhood, a full immersion in the unity of all women, both like and unlike one another.

Of 19<sup>th</sup>-century female writers, Margaret Fuller pushed sisters to reach across boundaries in her non-fiction work. She emphasized not just the importance for sisterhood but also the requirements of a successful sisterhood in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1845. Fuller goes further than Brontë and Alcott and does not try to be subtle with her message when she explains that she “met a circle of women, stamped by society as among the most degraded of their sex” (146). Fuller calls out to women to unify and not divide among their own sex by asking, “Now I ask you, my sisters, if the women at the fashionable house be not answerable for those women

being in the prison?” (146). Women must not allow society to dictate the way women treat each other; women must lift each other up and offer support. Fuller writes, “Seek out these degraded women, give them tender sympathy, counsel, employment. Take the place of mothers, such as might have saved them originally” (147). Women are able to sustain one another in a way man cannot, and it is women’s responsibility to protect and nurture one another in times of need. Fuller tells women who might not feel compelled to help these “degraded women” that even if they are unsuccessful, they might “leave a sense of love and justice in [the degraded women’s] hearts” (147). Offering the love and understanding of another woman would be enough.

Published in 1953, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* applies to the past, present, and future. She defines woman as Other: “she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity” (xiii). De Beauvoir explains that men are viewed as the absolute and women as incomplete, lacking. De Beauvoir determines that women are “half of a whole,” with man being the other half, but that they remain “Othered” instead of equal because a unity between women is invisible. The Othering of women can be seen in society’s treatment of 19<sup>th</sup>-century women.

Given this sense of Othering, Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” revisits the same subject in 1982, and offers a definition for her term “lesbian existence;” she writes, “we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support [...]” (648-49). Rich’s definition for “lesbian existence” can be applied to sisterhood as

well. Sisterhood works towards opposing unhappy marriages, creating emotional fulfillment between women, and allowing access to paid labor.

Women must align themselves with fellow women, especially women who are from a different class or race; this diversity creates unity. In “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women,” bell hooks defines solidarity as a “community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood” (138). While bell hooks’ article was published in 1986, over a century after *Shirley* and *Work*, the importance and sentiment of sisterhood is the same. Sisterhood relies on the unity of women through differences, not only similarities. A symbolic sisterhood, a unity between women, is hard to create with gender often being their only commonality, but women can relate to one another through their experience of being the Other. Twentieth-century theorists are continuing to note the Othering of women in society and building on the foundation that 19<sup>th</sup>-century theorists laid.

It is difficult to unify women that come from different races or different classes because it would mean acknowledging differences and barriers, but in these two 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels, Brontë gives examples of cross-class and cross-generational sisterhood while Alcott goes beyond by also including examples of cross-racial sisterhood. Bell hooks argues that solidarity in sisterhood is found through differences, not similarities (135). Brontë and Alcott reinforce the importance of solidarity between sisters in their novels. In *Shirley*, Caroline bonds with Hortense, Shirley, and Mrs. Pryor. In *Work*, Christie meets Hepsy, Rachel, and Mrs. Sterling, among other women, as she navigates life. In these specific women, each of the protagonists find three versions of sisterhood to rely on. Both female authors showcase how unity through sisterhood can be done and

*why* it should be done. Their female characters have different levels of independence and agency, but the women ultimately are rewarded for their loyalty towards one another across social boundaries, such as class, age, and race.

### **Male Kinships and the Othering of Women**

Male kinships formed by each gender greatly impact women's agency and level of oppression. In Gayle Rubin's 1975 article, "The Traffic in Women," she defines "kinship" as a system that governs whom women are married to, for the benefit of men. Rubin writes, "If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the women being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it" (909). Women are "gifted" between men to establish connections for the men, often without consideration of the woman. Both Brontë and Alcott challenge this kind of male kinship in their respective novels. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, kinship between men was formed by the exchange of women, using females as the commodity. Kinship through marriage without the personal approval of the women is attempted, but not executed, in both *Shirley* and *Work*. When a father is not present, an uncle steps in to arrange the transaction of his niece for his own personal gain. While the gain might not always be monetary, it is, at a minimum, based on reputation and the elevation of the family's social standing. By including these plot lines, Brontë and Alcott comment on this type of marital transaction. Neither believes that a marriage without equality or love can be successful. In each novel, the readers are given examples of marriage based on a true partnership, then contrasted with marriages where the female character seems to be in a male-driven business agreement that she would rather not be involved in. Female characters partaking in a sisterhood increased their own agency while offering a

continuous support network to their sisters, and in this way they were better able to resist male kinship either by not marrying or by choosing their own marital partner.

Rubin's explanation of male kinship focuses on the differences between men and women because they are categorically the same, yet they are forced to be oppositional. Much like Simone de Beauvoir's thoughts on women being "half of a whole," Rubin writes, "Gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes. It is a product of the social relations of sexuality. Kinship systems rest upon marriage. They therefore transform males and females into 'men' and women,' each an incomplete half which can only find wholeness when united with the other" (912). Woman contains traces of man; man contains traces of woman. In a patriarchal culture, both women and men find themselves positioned around masculinity, while femininity is viewed as lack of masculinity. Masculinity is the standard, and femininity is the absence of masculinity which devalues women and reinforces society's view of women as inferior.

Sisterhood aids in the rebellion against male kinship by focusing on the value of women. Brontë and Alcott create heroines who refuse to be viewed as property by men who subscribe to patriarchal social orders where women are exchanged between men by the offering of daughters and nieces as wives to other men. The gifting of women creates kinship between men that would otherwise not be possible. The old tradition of a man asking a father for his daughter's hand in marriage or the father giving his daughter away to her husband at the marital ceremony creates a bond between the men and reduces the women to commodities. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, social structures and systems in England and America depended upon and upheld this male-centered kinship. Rubin explains that marriages based on kinship "exchange sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage

names and ancestors, rights and people [...] in concrete systems of social relationships” (911). Men used the women in their lives to form a relationship with other men, with hardly any consideration of the women. Brontë and Alcott complicate these patriarchal social systems for their readers by removing the traditional father, but the authors still include the father figure, the uncle, who each stands to benefit from their niece’s marriage.

Women can break through traditional boundaries by choosing to prioritize relationships with other women instead of, or in addition to, the customary marriage. Lillian Faderman notes that some feminists, such as Margaret Fuller, “saw same-sex love as far superior to heterosexuality” (160). But it is important to note that sisterhood and marriage are not oppositional. At the end of both novels, the heroines are married, but not to the men they were originally promised to by their uncles. By choosing a personally appropriate though unexpected partner, the female character destabilizes male kinship, for example, when Brontë’s Shirley accepts a marriage proposal from Louis Moore, a man who is not as financially advantageous as the suitors her uncle had recommended or when Alcott’s Christie refuses Joe Butterfield, a farmer who would be a beneficial alliance to her uncle. The female characters choose their partners for themselves, even when their choice of partner is outside of the societal norm. *Shirley’s* Caroline and Shirley and *Work’s* Christie also make it a point to note that they will remain unmarried before entering into a union without love. Sisterhood allows women to resist the social structure of marrying for the benefit of men which keeps females in a place of inferiority. By reaching out to other women, women can create a kinship between females, a sisterhood.

Brontë and Alcott demonstrate that by disrupting traditional institutions of male agency and social orders, such as marriage based on male kinship, women can create a new norm where women are in control of themselves and their choices in marriage. In patriarchal societies, men prioritize their connections with other men, and women prioritize their connections with men: their husbands, fathers, brothers. By women placing a higher value on relationships with other women, both before and after marriage, a shift occurs, a balance between genders is created thanks to benefits resulting from these all-female relationships. While neither Brontë nor Alcott is arguing for a feminist utopia, the authors stress the importance of remaining loyal to female relationships, biological or not. Faderman writes that “what women writers who lived the experiences themselves could depict, was strength and encouragement to achieve in the world which romantic friends of the late nineteenth century could give each other” (167). In *Shirley*, Brontë allows the heroines’ male counterparts a larger presence, but Caroline’s relationships with Shirley and with Mrs. Pryor are at the heart of the novel. In *Work*, Alcott showcases the female characters and their relationships with each other, while the male characters are often found on the outskirts of the novel. Women must detach herself from the one man she depends on, such as father, husband, or brother, in favor of aligning herself with other women. They can achieve liberation by becoming less dependent on a dominating male presence within the home, refusing to be used as commodities, and identifying themselves with other women.

Women must acknowledge their lack of unity and actively avoid sexism against one another. Patriarchal societies have convinced women that other women are a threat to them. In Victorian England and America, the patriarchal system in place resulted in men

often exploiting women through the marriage market. However, it is also true to say that women cause damage to their own sex and sisterhood by constantly being in a state of competition for the most eligible bachelor since marriage was one of the few “careers” available to middle-class women. By constantly pitting women against one another, society can ensure that a sisterhood will not be successful. It is up to women to unify as a whole. Brontë and Alcott used their novels to reclaim the female sex from the distorted identity that their patriarchal cultures had created. They employed their novels to showcase the problematic position of women hindered by patriarchal laws such as the Laws of Coverture.

### **Labor**

Already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, writers such as Fuller, Brontë, and Alcott were arguing that women can gain independence through working outside of the home with the assistance of their sisters. They argued that women must remove themselves from the private sphere of the home and join the public sphere of the workforce. In “A Conversation in the Air: Women’s Right to Productive Labor in Eliza Potter’s *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* and Louisa May Alcott’s *Work: A Story of Experience*,” Kristin Allukian analyzes two novels, including Alcott’s *Work*, that follow women in the workplace. Allukian argues that “buried in Alcott’s sentimental language is Christie’s desperate yearning to leave the domestic sphere and construct an identity of which she can be proud” (575). Allukian investigates the relationship between working outside of the home and forming a unique identity. The domestic sphere is questioned in Brontë’s *Shirley* as well; Caroline wishes to be a governess, explaining that even the difficult parts of the job would give her life meaning (179). Women need to see themselves both inside and outside of the home

to reveal the many possibilities they are capable of. Liberation for women can be achieved through productive labor. In both *Shirley* and *Work*, the characters yearn for not just labor outside of the home but also labor that is self-fulfilling and leads to personal growth. When Christie tries out many jobs – servant, actress, governess, companion, seamstress – and when they do not seem to suit her, she moves on. She eventually settles on working as an activist for future generations of women.

Both Brontë's and Alcott's novels are set in a time of crisis to emphasize the need for sisterhood. *Shirley* takes place in Yorkshire during the industrial depression of 1811-1812 and *Work* takes place before, during, and after the American Civil War. First Shirley and Caroline, then Christie and Rachel showcase the way women are able to lift up their local communities and survive difficult times by working. They also highlight female patriotism, sisters in arms coming together to use their resources to support their respective country and countrymen. In Brontë's novel, Shirley and Caroline, among many other female characters, find themselves concerned with the poor, the hungry, and the unemployed in their province. Similarly, in *Work*, Christie joins the many women who do their part during the Civil war; she enlists as a nurse without a second thought. When her husband, David, first decides to enlist in the military, she announces that she will also go, as a nurse: "she did not offer to detain him now; he did not deny her right to follow" (Alcott 226). Christie refuses to stay at home to wait for David. She insists on going out to do her part for the war. The female characters in both novels could sit by idly, but they refuse. Instead they reach out in any way they can to help alleviate the pressures put on their home communities. Shirley offers her finances and Caroline offers

up her needlework; Christie drops everything to care for the wounded and Rachel makes care packages for the soldiers.

### **Agency and Marriage**

Brontë's Caroline and Alcott's Christie have one major trait in common: they prioritize sisterhood and the larger female network over marriage. In *Shirley*, Caroline finally receives a proposal from Robert and although it is something she has been looking forward to for years, she insists that she could only marry him if they could include her newly reclaimed mother, Mrs. Pryor: "But I cannot desert her, even for you" (538). In *Work*, Christie also takes great care of the women she loves; when preparing for her wedding, she assures David's sister and mother who are soon to be her in-laws, "Remember, I don't take his heart from you, I only share it with *my sister* and *my mother*" (emphasis added 234). The female characters embrace their bonds with each other. It makes little difference whether those bonds are biological or not. Becoming sisters, taking part in a sisterhood is a conscious choice; it is not by chance. By prioritizing the females in their lives, they claim their control from the men. Caroline loves Robert, but not at the expense of her mother. Christie loves David, but not at the expense of her sister-in-law and mother-in-law. Solidarity in sisterhood is a crucial choice because when women place other women at the center of their lives, there is a disruption of the patriarchal norms, moving towards restoring a much-needed equality. By favoring to continue female bonds even after marriages take place, these female characters add to their level of agency.

In both novels, we encounter female orphans and widows who share the commonality of not being directly linked to a father or husband. As female orphans,

Shirley, Caroline, and Christie have an increased amount of agency at their respective ages of twenty-one, eighteen, and twenty because they do not have a father and they are yet to marry. However, they do have a close male relative who tries to dictate the girls' life choices. Class has a direct impact. An orphan left with no assets would be forced to rely on whatever familial ties they have left or forced to marry as a means to forge such ties. A wealthy orphan like Shirley who has funds and property is self-sustaining, and her maintaining of remaining familial ties would be optional.

Widows, on the other hand, do not “belong” to any man. They no longer “belong” to their fathers because of their marriage, but they also do not “belong” to their husbands who have passed. They may own property and often get to make their own decisions. The widows in both novels, Mrs. Pryor and Mrs. Sterling, are financially and emotionally independent and do not rely on a man for their survival. In *Shirley*, Mrs. Pryor explains that she has worked as a governess and has enough money to buy a home and support herself. In *Work*, Mrs. Sterling owns her home and nursery. While her thirty-one-year-old son, David, lives with her, it is clear that she is the head of the household. But again, widows, like orphans, must have access to money and property that they have inherited to survive since they live within a society that prohibits or severely limits women's ability to work.

### **Intimacy between Women**

Faderman and Smith-Rosenberg relate how women had very special relationships with one another in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Homosocial relationships between women were emotional and intimate, and even after marriage, the relationship between two or more women would remain unaltered. Men and women, in both Victorian and American

societies, were emotionally isolated from the other gender. Unmarried men and women were not permitted to interact in many ways, their intermingling was often regulated, but strictly female relationships were not monitored in the same way. Young women often became very close with one or two female friends. In a moment of crisis, such as childbirth, nursing their infants, sickness, times of grief, and death, it is other women who are present, both emotionally and physically there to sustain them. A woman's ability to support other women in times of need transcends time and setting.

Adrienne Rich, focusing on American women, in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience," writes that "it is the women who make life endurable for each other, give physical affection without causing pain, share, advise, and stick by each other" (656). Although Rich is a 20<sup>th</sup>-century author, the issues she brings up pertain to 19<sup>th</sup>-century sisterhood. She argues that women are not violent, both physically and emotionally, towards each other, but that men are "charismatic though brutal, infantile, or unreliable" (656). She urges women to look to one another as "a source of energy" instead (657). Nineteenth-century women helped each other and had access to each other in a way they did not have access to men. Smith-Rosenberg explains that it was completely acceptable for women to profess their love for one another and to spend weeks or even months together (10). Both American and English 19<sup>th</sup>-century men understood these relationships and essentially stayed out of the women's way.

In both novels, Brontë and Alcott include physical intimacy between two women. In *Shirley*, Caroline insists that her friendship with Shirley is special and cannot be replicated, as when Brontë writes, "At which words Miss Keedlar put her hand into Caroline's with an impulsively affectionate movement" (203). This type of spontaneous

touch is common with single, and even married, women, but it would never be allowed between 19<sup>th</sup>-century unmarried women and men. Caroline's touch "soothe[s]" Mrs. Pryor and causes her to be "quiet and tranquil" (185). There is a calming effect between women in the two novels. In contrast, the unexpected physical touch from a man is not calming; while watering her plants, Caroline believes it is her mother's hand that has "circled her, and rested quietly on her waist [...] she received the touch unstartled" (535). But when she realizes that the hand is Robert's, she drops "her watering-pot" (535). Although Robert is usually a welcomed visitor, his unanticipated touch has caused him to be an "intruder." In *Work*, this type of physical touch between women is even more frequently noted. When Christie agrees to help Hepsy learn to read and count in order to educate her, ultimately helping her free Hepsy's mother from slavery, Christie has "tears of sympathy shining on her cheeks, and both hands stretched out" towards Hepsy (23). Christie cannot relate to Hepsy's former life as a slave or how Hepsy is trying to free her family who are still kept in slavery in Virginia, but the overwhelming emotion she feels towards her sister causes her to reach out in a physical affection which is warmly received as "a solace" (24).

A sister's affection towards another sister is visceral. When Rachel finds "herself deserted by womankind," she throws "out her hand with a half-defiant gesture" and it is Christie who takes it; "That touch, full of womanly compassion, seemed to exorcise the desperate spirit that possessed the poor girl in her despair [...]" (89). Some of the women turn their backs on Rachel, a fallen woman, others feel bad for her but will not compromise their own positions, but Christie's love for Rachel is unwavering even though she is disappointed in Rachel's past. When Rachel returns the favor, she not only

metaphorically saves Christie but also literally saves her from drowning herself. Christie is calmed and “gently cradled on a warm, human heart” (101). Rachel can empathize with Christie’s despair and the depression she is feeling and comes to her aid when she needs it the most.

Sisterhood, this special bond between women, both physical and emotional, can be attributed to the fact that only another woman could fully understand the pains and joys of being a woman, especially in a patriarchal society. When Christie is considering leaving the Sterlings’ home, Mrs. Sterling assures her that “nothing can ever come between” them (187). Christie lays “her cheek against that wrinkled one, and, for a moment, was held close to that peaceful old heart which felt so tenderly for her, yet never wounded her by a word of pity” (187). Mrs. Sterling is able to understand Christie’s fears and disappointments without her ever uttering a single word. Mrs. Sterling is able to comfort Christie because she can relate to the young woman in a way that a 19<sup>th</sup>-century man might not. Alcott concludes the novel: “With an impulsive gesture Christie stretched her hands to the friends about her, and with one accord they laid theirs on hers, a loving league of sisters, old and young, black and white, rich and poor, each ready to do her part to hasten the coming of the happy end” (274). Alcott describes the sisterhood formed by friendship, a cumulative concern for one another regardless of age, race, or class. Sisterhood is not limited by the differences between women, it is a bond with female friends that men are not privy to. From Christie’s little girl, Ruth, who gave her a reason to live again, to Hepsey’s mother, “blind now, and deaf; childish, and half dead with many hardships, but safe and free at last,” this “feminine household” is an image of sisterhood (230, 256).

The first chapter of this paper will explore sisterhood versus heterosexual marriage, including sisterhood in conjunction with heterosexual marriage. Brontë's *Shirley* illustrates how sisterhood and marriage can work in harmony if women continue to prioritize their sisters after marriage. The second chapter will investigate the absolute need for women to have access to rewarding paid labor in order to remain independent, marry for love, and continue to be a part of their sisterhood in Alcott's *Work: A Story of Experience*. Lastly, the third chapter will take into consideration the readership of the two 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels and the limitations and successes of sisterhood by examining the positions of the women at the end of each novel.

**Chapter 1** –“Affection that no passion can ultimately outrival”: Sisterhood and Marriage in Brontë’s *Shirley*

Heterosexual and homosocial relationships compete to be at the center of Charlotte Brontë’s 1849 novel, *Shirley*. Caroline Helstone, the protagonist, finds herself torn between her love for Robert Moore, the mill owner, and her loyalty to the important women in her life: Hortense, Shirley, and Mrs. Pryor. Caroline’s homosocial relationships range in levels of intimacy that reflect the presence or absence of a dominating male. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes about the importance of homosocial relationships, “For nearly half a century these women played a central emotional role in each other’s lives” (4). By surveying many letters written between female friends in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Smith-Rosenberg found that the emotionally intimate relationship between women was “both socially acceptable and fully compatible with heterosexual marriage” (8). In *Shirley*, Brontë gives readers varying levels of intimacy that could occur within a sisterhood to show that support from other females aids women in their heterosexual marriages. Sisterhood and marriage are not oppositional; by having the emotional support of sisterhood, women can survive the 19<sup>th</sup> century heterosexual marriage.

Brontë first introduces the readers to Caroline’s cousin and tutor, Hortense, who she shares a sisterly fondness with. While Caroline finds herself in Hortense’s presence as often as possible because Hortense happens to live with her brother, Robert, Caroline also has a true connection and admiration for Hortense. While Hortense feels out of place in Yorkshire and holds strong to her Belgian roots, she explains that Caroline “appreciates [her] better than anyone else” since Caroline notes Hortense’s “education,

intelligence, manner, principles – all, in short, which belongs to a person well born and well bred” (57). Caroline makes Hortense feel loved and respected, and while Hortense at times seems to be harsh towards the young Caroline, there is a mutual sisterly affection because they both acknowledge their appreciation for one another. When Caroline is kept away from her cousins’ cottage by her uncle, she sees Hortense at an event for the town school. Brontë writes, “she wanted to jump up and run to her and kiss her” (259).

Caroline is overcome with emotion at the sight of her estranged cousin and her “impulse [to run to Hortense] was very strong” (259). Their fondness for one another is obvious to other characters and the exchange of resources (French lessons and needlework) creates a connection, but there is little mention of Hortense at the end of the novel. Caroline’s affection for Hortense is fully shifted over to Robert, Hortense’s brother. The relationship between Caroline and Hortense is genuine, but it primarily seems to be situated around Robert. It seems Hortense was the intermediary between Robert and Caroline. Brontë uses this example of Caroline and Hortense to show readers the varying levels of intimacy in sisterhood, while the women do not portray an unbreakable bond, they do exchange resources for the benefit of one another.

Caroline and Shirley Keedlar, an orphan who has inherited her family’s property and income, are mutually invested in one another despite financial differences. Although the two heroines are both middle class, they find themselves in different social standings with one being wealthy and independent and the other being dependent on her guardian, but that never gets in the way of their friendship. While Shirley is upper-middle class and wealthy, bringing in one thousand dollars a month, Caroline is often described as wearing simple dresses and making do with provisions when there were guests in her uncle’s

home. Shirley is independent; Caroline is dependent on her uncle due to her age of eighteen. Shirley is completely aware of her financial privilege and would rather share her wealth instead of flaunt it. Class can be a huge divider in sisterhood, unless privilege is acknowledged and resources are shared.

Shirley has an honest concern for Caroline and her well-being. When Caroline believes Robert and Shirley are interested in one another, she is disappointed because she has grown fond of Robert and dreams of becoming his wife. Caroline comes to the decision that if she is not to marry Robert, she must not marry at all, but she does not try to stand in Robert and Shirley's way: "I gave Robert up, and gave him up to Shirley, the first day I heard she was come, the first moment I saw her – rich, youthful, and lovely. She has him now. He is her lover. She is his darling" (197). Caroline feels so strongly for Robert and knows that Shirley could help with his mill financially. She would not stand in the way of Robert's success and happiness. She views Shirley as worthy of Robert and Robert worthy of Shirley. Her affections for both individuals stop her from speaking out on her own behalf.

The homosocial relationships between women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were often visited by jealousy. Smith-Rosenberg refers to letters between two female friends; she writes that they "discuss the transition both women made to having male lovers" (7). The women worried about their relationship ending when a marriage was had. In Brontë's novel, Shirley yearns for Caroline to reaffirm her commitment to their friendship. When Caroline resolves to leave and become a governess, she upsets Shirley who questions her: "You don't care much for my friendship, then, that you wish to leave me?" (203). The two women are not physical lovers, but Smith-Rosenberg argues that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

female friends were emotional lovers (7). Shirley takes Caroline's desire to leave personally and has feelings of jealousy at the thought of her friend going away to work as a governess. Caroline counters that she *does* wish to be with Shirley: "I shall never find another friend so dear" (203). For the 19<sup>th</sup> century woman, a female friend is a crucial part of her life. When Caroline explains to Shirley that she will never find someone to replace her friendship, she means it. When Shirley feels that her relationship with Caroline is being interrupted by Robert, Caroline tells her, "I esteem you, I value you; you are never a burden to me – never" (222). Caroline's words seem to appease Shirley. Caroline goes on to say, "Shirley, I never had a sister – you never had a sister; but it flashes on me at this moment how sisters feel towards each other – affection twined with their life [...] I am supported and soothed when you, - that is, *you only* – are near, Shirley" (222). Caroline feels it necessary to ensure that Shirley knows that Robert could not take Shirley's place in Caroline's life. Caroline does not care to be apart from Shirley but cannot bear the thought of seeing Shirley and Robert together. Robert comes between another one of Caroline's relationships, but not as easily as he did with Caroline and Hortense's connection.

Shirley, unlike Hortense, asserts herself and her sisterhood with Caroline. Hortense steps away to allow Caroline's relationship with Robert to take center stage; Hortense only participates in the sisterhood as a placeholder to marriage. Shirley, on the other hand, mentions her contempt for Robert's potential interruption of her relationship with Caroline. In response, Caroline makes light of her affection for Robert, explaining that she values him as her cousin. Shirley insists that he "keeps intruding between" Caroline and herself (221). She tells Caroline, "Without him we should be good friends;

but that six feet of puppyhood makes a perpetually-recurring eclipse of our friendship” (221). Shirley refers to Caroline as a “good friend,” which is not to retract from the importance of her sisterhood with Caroline; “The female friendship of the nineteenth century” can be described as “the long-lived, intimate, loving friendship between two women [...]” (Smith-Rosenberg 1). Shirley admires Robert as a person and tenant of hers, but she has no patience for him when he gets in the way of her friendship, her sisterhood, with Caroline. Through Shirley and Caroline’s friendship, Brontë shows the importance of prioritizing homosocial relationships over heterosexual ones.

When Robert does, in fact, propose to Shirley to benefit from her wealth, Brontë uses Shirley’s coy response to his proposal to show that Shirley is thinking of her friend, Caroline. After Robert offers marriage to Shirley for financial reasons, she turns him down, saying, “I never loved you. Be at rest there. My heart is as pure of passion for you as yours is barren of affection for me” (448). Shirley insists that Robert has misread her feelings for him and he explains that she often “blushed” and seemed to startle at the sound of his name. Shirley responds to Robert: “Not for *your* sake!” Robert asks for an “explanation, but could get none” (448). Shirley remains silent because her loyalty lies with Caroline. Although Caroline never openly confessed her feelings for Robert to Shirley, it was clear that the female friends knew more about one another than what was verbally admitted. Shirley feels betrayed by Robert’s disingenuous proposal, telling Robert: “That is to say that you have the worst opinion of me; that you deny me the possession of all I value most. That is to say that I am a traitor to all my sisters” (448-49). Shirley may have said “sisters” for a couple reasons. She might say “sisters,” plural, instead of “sister,” singular, to protect Caroline. She might also be referring to women in

general, her sisters of the female sex. Shirley has explained her disdain for marriage without love, but there is an underlying message here. Shirley would not marry for gain, but more importantly she would not marry at the expense of her friendship with Caroline. Brontë demonstrates the mutual respect between friends when both women prioritize their friends' emotions over their own feelings. Both women are willing to turn down a proposal from Robert to appease their sister; their devotion to one another is mutual.

It was uncommon for girls to criticize each other, but it was perfectly acceptable for them to criticize unfavorable suitors. Smith-Rosenberg writes, "Indeed, while hostility and criticism of other women were so rare as to seem almost tabooed, young women permitted themselves to express a great deal of hostility toward peer-group men" (20). Smith-Rosenberg goes on to explain that young women would often "band together" against "unacceptable" or undesirable suitors, protecting their sisters from the men and their impending proposals (20). Young women would shield each other from the unwanted attention of young men.

Brontë introduces a third female friendship to showcase a cross-generational sisterhood. Caroline becomes very fond of Shirley's governess, Mrs. Pryor. The governess is very concerned with Caroline, as well. When they are first introduced, Mrs. Pryor requests that Caroline visit her and Shirley often, Mrs. Pryor conveys her concern for Caroline's loneliness: "You must feel lonely here, having no female relative in the house; you must necessarily pass much of your time in solitude" (186). Mrs. Pryor feels for Caroline's lack of female companionship. Later, when Caroline is unwell, Mrs. Pryor will not leave her side. Finally, Mrs. Pryor has a confession to make. She tells Caroline that she is her biological mother: "It means that, if I have given you nothing else, I at

least gave you life; that I bore you, nursed you; that I am your true mother. No other woman can claim the title; it is mine” (361). Caroline’s finding out that she has a mother causes her health to improve; she feels she has something to live for. Brontë is simultaneously highlighting the potential for sisterhood to save a fellow woman and undermining the importance of a man. It is important to note that the sisterhood between Caroline and Mrs. Pryor is solidified *before* the realization that they are biologically related. Caroline becomes vocal about her love for Mrs. Pryor, her mother. Robert claims to be envious of the relationship, telling Caroline that she talks about Mrs. Pryor so highly that “it is enough to make one jealous of the old lady” (502). Sisterhood and the mother-daughter relationship is perceived as a threat to their relationship by Robert. Caroline does not soothe Robert’s ego; she does not deflect the conversation, but instead she goes on to correct Robert’s perception of “mama.” Caroline explains that her mother is not old, is not young, but is wise and “rich in information” (502). Her mother’s needs come first. Caroline tells Robert, “I am her waiting-woman as well as her child” (502). There is no one, not even Robert, who will come between Caroline and Mrs. Pryor’s bond. Mrs. Pryor had left Caroline as an infant as a result of her traumatic marriage and her love for Caroline, but she worked to reclaim the relationship. It might have been easier on Mrs. Pryor to keep her true identity a secret, but she overcomes the trauma of her marriage to reclaim her daughter. Sisterhood *always* prioritizes female bonds, not just when they are convenient.

The women in Brontë’s novel, even Shirley who has her own property and income, are second-class citizens in that the men in power are constantly trying to impose their choices on the women or ignoring them altogether. Caroline’s uncle “had taken little

trouble about her education; probably he would have taken none if she, finding herself neglected, had not grown anxious on her own account, and asked, every now and then, for a little attention, and for the means of acquiring such amount of knowledge as could not be dispensed with” (65). Caroline worried that she was “inferior” in comparison to other middle-class girls her age and jumped at “the kind offer made by her cousin Hortense” to learn needlework and French (65). Women are made to feel inferior and lacking, so much so that the women themselves *believe* that their feminine qualities are insufficient. When Caroline mistakenly thinks Robert is admiring Shirley’s beauty, she thinks to herself, “I saw that Robert felt its beauty, and he must have felt it with his man’s heart, not with my dim woman’s perceptions” (197). The patriarchal society has tainted Caroline’s view of herself, but Caroline and Shirley continue to grapple with their position as a second-class citizens.

In fact, when Shirley and Caroline witness the ambush at the mill, they do not tell a soul. Shirley imagines how Robert will lie to them: “I dare say he thinks he has outwitted me cleverly. And this is the way men deal with women [...] Men, I believe, fancy women’s minds something like those of children. Now, that is a mistake” (296). Shirley believes the men compare the intelligence of a woman to that of a child and she is right to believe that the men often do not give women much credit. It is probable that Robert would hardly believe that Caroline and Shirley made the trek to the mill in the middle of the night in hopes of warning the men of the impending attack. Shirley’s sentiment is parallel to Margaret Fuller’s, who writes, “Knowing that there exists in the minds of men a tone of feeling toward women as toward slaves, such as is expressed in the common phrase, ‘Tell that to women and children;’ that the infinite soul can only

work through them in already ascertained limits [...] (33). The male characters and male readers must change the way they perceive women. Caroline wishes to go speak with Robert, but she knows that it is not her place; she tells Shirley, “I promise not to try to see Robert again till he asks for me. I never will try to push myself on him” (293-94). Caroline does not tell Robert that they have seen the attack because it is not her place, she has no right to. Shirley convinces Caroline not to approach Robert as her appearance would be a disruption to the segregated male and female worlds. As second-class citizens, women are constantly censoring themselves and waiting to be on a man’s terms instead of their own.

The women have limited rights and opportunities which always places women below men, even if they are wealthy property owners like Shirley. Lillian Faderman references Carroll Smith-Rosenberg when explaining that “reform movements [in the 19<sup>th</sup> century] often were fueled by the sisterhood of kindred spirits who were righting a world men had wronged” (160). Women binding together will remove women from their position of second-class citizens.

Historically, in the nineteenth-century, the women were expected to remain in their domestic realm and not “wander” into the public, masculine realm. Brontë reflects her own struggle with the private and public realm through Caroline’s silence about the attack on the mill. But to gain more agency, the women must work outside of the home. Early in the novel, Caroline voices her dissatisfaction with her inability to work. She tells Robert, “I should like an occupation; and if I were a boy, it would not be so difficult to find one. I see such an easy, pleasant way of learning a business, and making my way in life” (61). Women would be allowed much more agency if they were capable of earning a

wage and supporting themselves instead of relying on marriage and a husband. In “Implementing Feminist Economics for the Study of Literature: The Economic Dimension of Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* Revisited,” Joanna Rostek writes, “Established definitions of what counts as part of the economy tend to privilege a male viewpoint that dismisses activities and perspectives of women” (79). Gendering labor keeps women in a place of inferiority by insisting that women’s work, such as work in the home or charitable work, is to be unpaid.

Caroline reaches out to Miss Ainley, an old maid or spinster, to see if Caroline could be of service to their community. Miss Ainley tells Caroline to aid certain women and children in Briarfield (157). Caroline’s charitable work “forced her to be employed; it forbade her to brood; and gleams of satisfaction chequered her gray life her and there when she found she had done good, imparted pleasure, or allayed suffering” (158). Caroline helps these impoverished women with needlework, which gives her a sense of purpose. While charitable acts are not an actual form of paid employment, she does find joy in aiding other women because it keeps her mind and body busy, but it does not keep her from lamenting over Robert. Women must have more opportunities than the traditional gendered work, such as needlework. Caroline’s charitable work does keep her occupied, but it does not offer her full satisfaction as she continues to fill the void that Robert has left in her life. Brontë shows readers, through Caroline, that women need fulfilling work to be able to liberate themselves from the obligation of marriage, especially when marriage is not an option.

Women’s work must include more than working in the home. Rostek describes the private, domestic sphere as “non-economic” (79). Charitable work can be fulfilling,

but without paid labor women will not be able to move outside of the domestic sphere. Shirley asks Caroline if she wishes to have a profession, and Caroline says she wishes it “fifty times a day” (193). Caroline longs to have something to do with her time, something more than what is allowed of women. Rostek explains that men belong to the public sphere and engage in activities such as “politics or warfare” (79). Women’s work is taken for granted and there is a “gendered structural imbalance within the production of knowledge” (Rostek 80). Women have been kept away from certain fields; that limitation has had a ripple effect, reaching to “political, social, economic” realms (80). Women are given very few options, most of their labor being exploited, such as needlework.

As the society of Yorkshire was becoming industrialized, men clung to the gendered spheres to ensure that women did not join the public sphere. Peter Capuano, in “Networked Manufacture in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*,” explains how *Shirley* is an example of the expectations of middle-class women “to remain at a literal and symbolic distance from the new world of mechanized production” (236). Women were a threat to the underemployed men. Capuano writes, “The technological changes that prove so destructive to the Yorkshire croppers allow lower-class women to perform work previously accomplished by skilled tradesmen” (238). In *Shirley*, Brontë creates this tension between middle-class women and working-class men; both are at the mercy of the economy. The middle-class women, such as Caroline, want to work to become self-sufficient and self-fulfilled, and the working-class men need to work to keep food on the table and support their families.

Not any job will do, though; a job must be both financially and emotionally rewarding to bring happiness. When asked if labor alone could fulfil someone, Caroline

answers, “it can give varieties of pain, and prevent us from breaking our hearts with a single tyrant master-torture” (193). Labor, particularly fruitful labor, can give women an option other than being a spinster or being at the mercy of their husbands. In the same family, a brother might be a business owner, while his “sisters have no earthly employment but household work and sewing, no earthly pleasure but an unprofitable stagnant state of things makes them decline in health” (196). Brontë highlights the fact that middle-class single women become mentally and physically unwell by being forced to not partake in occupations, but instead being forced to try to find a husband, which is difficult when “the matrimonial market is overstocked” (196). Rostek writes, “marriage is not just about sentiment, but also about supply and demand, particularly for middle-class women, for whom marriage is at that time the most likely career option” (83). If women were allowed options beyond the roles of wife and mother, they might find themselves to be self-reliant and self-sufficient, removing women from their status of gendered minorities. Women could turn to the labor market instead of the marriage market.

Brontë draws attention to the dangers of marrying for passion or out of necessity. Rebecca McLaughlin, in “‘I Prefer a Master’: Female Power in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*,” writes, “Shirley advises Caroline to distrust choosing a marital partner based on passion alone in favour of a longer, more thorough surveillance and knowledge of the man” (218). Shirley tells Caroline to watch a man for an extended period of time to be able to observe his true character. The female characters worry about being in an unhappy marriage. Brontë also employs Mrs. Pryor to highlight the risks of marrying without love and equality, but as an obligation. Mrs. Pryor’s describes her suffering at the

hands of her late husband (364). She explains that she gave up Caroline as a baby because she had “too recently crawled from under the yoke of the fine gentleman – escaped galled, crushed, paralysed, dying – to dare to encounter his still finer and most fairy-like representative” (365). Brontë is warning against abuse within marriages. In the case of Mrs. Pryor, the abuse she received at the hands of her husband caused her to not raise her only child, Caroline. Shirley is cautions Caroline’s complete investment in Robert, “To advance Moore’s fortune you would cut off your right hand” (321). Through her characters, Brontë is critical of one-sided marriages. If women have the support of a sisterhood and do not *need* to marry for survival, they can then marry for love, which Brontë is describing as a protection for women.

Brontë asserts the importance of friendship between partners and flexibility in a marriage. McLaughlin explains that when Shirley and Louis marry, Shirley “maintain[s] the power she possessed as a single woman, only learning how to negotiate a balance of that power between herself and the man she loves [...]” (221). When Louis thinks of Shirley, he explains that his love for her stems from her imperfections. He contemplates how much easier their marriage could be if she was as poor as he is. Louis thinks to himself, “If I were a king and she the housemaid that swept my palace-stairs, across all that space between us my eye would recognise her qualities; a true pulse would beat for her in my heart [...]” (437). Brontë makes it absolutely clear that Louis does not want to marry Shirley for financial gain and that if roles were reversed and it was him that was rich and she that was poor, he would still love her for her perfections and flaws. Brontë creates a couple, Shirley and Louis, who both give and take charge in their marriage, to showcase the success of a union based on equality.

Caroline does not care for financial gain through marriage either. When Robert tells her that she could live with him and Hortense if he had more money, she says, “That would be pleasant; and if you were poor – ever so poor – it would still be pleasant” (82). Caroline’s affection for Robert is not out of necessity, but love. When she believes she will not marry Robert, she thinks to herself, “Probably I shall be an old maid. I shall live to see Robert married to some one else, some rich lady. I shall never marry” (149). Caroline simply will not marry if she cannot marry the man she loves. She does not entertain the idea of marrying someone else for any sort of profit, although she has no other proposals. Robert, on the other hand, is willing to marry for economic reasons until he is relieved of his financial burdens. Rostek writes, “Although Robert eventually reconsiders and repents his overly materialist attitude, the fact remains that the union between him and Caroline can only take place once the Orders in Council have been repealed and his pending bankruptcy averted” (82). He is not only aware of his misstep but also embarrassed by his proposal to Shirley. Robert feels he can marry for love once finances are no longer a concern.

It is important to note that marriage for love is a privilege granted to individuals who have money and are of a certain class. Rostek claims that Brontë “emphasizes that marriage and love are circumscribed by property: one has to be able to afford the luxury of being united to a beloved person” (82). When Robert’s mill is safe, and he has become successful, only then does he acknowledge that it is time for him to find a wife without concern of finances. According to Rostek, Brontë does not shy away from the fact that marriages are “not just emotional but downright economic concerns for women and men” (82). Patriarchal societies support men in marriages, leaving women at the mercy of their

spouse. Rostek writes that “when the laws of coverture basically made a married woman the property of a man, love and affections – in addition to faith in God and a marriage settlement not everyone could afford – became for women important, if imperfect, means of insuring themselves against subsequent (economic) abuse by their husbands” (84). By entering into a union based on love and friendship, women might protect themselves from tyrannical husbands who take advantage of patriarchal laws.

Unmarried orphans have a different level of agency from other women because no man has claim to them. An orphan, Shirley has inherited her parents’ property and finances because there are no male heirs. As her guardian, her uncle tries to control her, but Shirley successfully resists. Her uncle, Mr. Sympson is agitated to find out that Shirley has turned down four marriage proposals, one from the very wealthy Sir Philip Nunnley, which would economically benefit her and him. Mr. Sympson is furious, and when Shirley notes his dissatisfaction on the matter, he responds, “*I disappointed? What is it to me? Have I an interest in it? You would insinuate, perhaps, that I have motives?*” (Brontë 460). Although she has made it clear to her uncle that she does not belong to him or owe him any explanation about her choices in marriage, he is motivated by fear, “My family respectability shall not be compromised” (464). Although Shirley is financially stable as a property owner, her uncle worries about his family name and its reputation if Shirley were to marry someone that society deemed inappropriate for her.

Shirley’s uncle views her as “property” he has inherited after the death of her parents, but Shirley insists on rejecting his imposition: “Having ceased to be a ward, I have no guardian” (459). At twenty-one years old, Shirley has an increased amount of independence and is no longer considered a child. While Mr. Sympson cannot control

Shirley because she is of age, he still feels the need to manipulate her life decisions for the benefit of his family's prominence. Shirley does not compromise, she tells him, "I disclaim your dictatorship" (464). Mr. Sympson tries to intimidate Shirley, but she remains confident, rebellious even. Her agency is quite out of the ordinary and sends her uncle into a state of shock. By not belonging to any man and by aggressively rejecting her uncle's attempt at controlling her, Shirley refuses to be a pawn in the male-centered kinship system prominent in Victorian England. By not marrying the suitors her uncle has deemed fit, she subverts the transfer of her income, land, and agency to a man who might not keep her best interest in mind.

Shirley Keedlar staunchly opposes patriarchal rules for marriage by choosing a man who society would perceive as somewhat unsuitable for her to marry. Louis Moore, Robert's younger brother, is middle-class, but he has not acquired any land and works as a tutor. When Louis and Shirley confess their love for one another, she refuses to be completely submissive. She reminds Louis, "You name me leopardess. Remember, the leopardess is tameless' [...]" (522). When Shirley's uncle is shocked by her choice in a spouse, it is Shirley who comes to Louis' defense: "Not one word of insult, sir' interposed she; 'not one syllable of disrespect to Mr Moore in this house'" (525). But when Mr. Sympson continues to degrade his niece, the often soft-spoken and feminine Louis becomes outraged and starts to strangle Shirley's uncle (526). Both Shirley and Louis refuse to be obedient towards her uncle. Shirley fights for every bit of liberty she is afforded. She chooses her life partner; she chooses where and how her money is spent; and she asserts that does not need to report to anyone.

Shirley, Caroline, Louis, and Robert find themselves in a predicament and “each is resolved by a blurring of gender distinctions in the love matches, which is exemplified by the fact that the money belonging to the androgynous Captain Keedlar empowers all four protagonists finally to live profitably for self and community” (747). The financial privileges of Shirley allow her and her loved ones, Louis, Robert, and Caroline to become successful. Without Shirley’s income, Louis would not have become the magistrate, Robert would have lost the mill, and Caroline would not have been able to marry Robert. But the scenario is unlikely; Shirley is in a unique situation for a woman and also possesses a bold and confident character.

As a widow, Mrs. Pryor has an increased level of agency because her husband has passed away. She has worked as a governess for long enough to be able to purchase her own home and to have her daughter, Caroline, live with her. Mrs. Pryor tells Caroline, “I must tell you that I possess a small independency, arising partly from my own savings, and partly from a legacy left me some years since. Whenever I leave Fieldhead I shall take a house of my own” (321). Single female orphans and widows are afforded the luxury of independency, but only when they have inherited income or property in some way.

It is understandable that one would believe that a sisterhood between women of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and heterosexual marriages were not compatible. But by looking at the solidarity and sisterhood in Brontë’s *Shirley*, it is evident that the women relied on each other for emotional support when they were unable to turn to their spouses because of gender segregation. By marrying for love, the women protect themselves from economic losses and from unhappy or abusive marriages. Brontë recognized the need for female

agency through paid labor and in marriages, but in *Shirley* she never fully committed to pushing women out of their inferior positions.

**Chapter 2** - "Rachel flung out her hand with a half-defiant gesture, and Christie took it":  
Sisterhood and Paid Labor in Alcott's *Work*

From its very beginning scene, Alcott's *Work* intensely focuses on the female-only relationships as a form of fighting the Othering of women, predating Simone de Beauvoir. The male characters are complex and critical to the novel, but they never come close to disrupting the relationships centered around sisterhood. Women are capable of "saving" other women from society's injustices in a way men cannot. Women possess a certain quality, an understanding towards other women. In *Work*, we often see one woman guiding another and offering her a place to rest and revive herself; this act of guiding and protecting is a form of "saving." Tara Fitzpatrick, author of "Love's Labor's Reward: The Sentimental Economy of Louisa May Alcott's *Work*," explains that women must also find rewarding work to protect themselves from "the capitalist market" (28). Like Shirley and Caroline, Christie is an orphan. Christie lives with and is dependent on her guardians, Aunt Betsey and Uncle Enos. Much like Caroline in *Shirley*, Christie connects with several women, but three relationships stand out: her relationship with Hepsey, with Rachel, and with Mrs. Sterling. The necessity of engaging in rewarding and paid labor is evident as Christie meets several sisters as she tries different jobs once she leaves her uncle's home and does not succumb to marrying for economic reasons.

Christie meets Hepsey during her first job, working as a servant; together they forge a cross-racial sisterhood. During the interview, when Mrs. Stuart confesses that her cook, Hepsey, is black, Christie responds that she has "no objection to color" (17). Alcott notes the social injustices of race and gender; she contrasts Christie's reaction to Hepsey

to the last servant's reaction. Katy, the prior servant, refused to form a sisterhood with Hepsey because of Hepsey's race. Christie disapproves of Katy; when Christie says, "I suppose Katy thought her white skin gave her a right to be disrespectful to a woman old enough to be her mother just because she was black. I don't; and while I'm here, there must be no difference made" (19). Christie acknowledges Hepsey's race, but she rejects the social expectations that they should be treated differently. Their differences do not stop Christie from supporting Hepsey because they connect over their shared femaleness.

As Hepsey and Christie work, Mr. Stuart tells Christie to clean his boots. Mr. Stuart's unappealing request is Christie's first experience with paid labor. She finds the task to be degrading and decides not to comply. Hepsey offers to clean the boots instead, telling Christie, "You jes leave de boots to me; blackin' can't do dese ole hands no hurt, and dis ain't no deggydation to me now; I's a free woman" (18). Hepsey explains the difference between slave labor and paid labor; she tells Christie that she had been a slave until she ran away North five years prior. As Hepsey is saving up money to liberate her own mother from slavery, Christie jumps at the opportunity to contribute. Alcott writes, "Hepsey's cause was hers; she laid by a part of her wages for 'ole mammy" (23). The pair remain friends for years to come. As bell hooks reiterates, race, particularly between white women and Black women, is often a large barrier to sisterhood, but when solidarity in sisterhood is practiced, that barrier can be removed. While Christie is not making much money working as a servant when she learns of Hepsey's family, she understands her white privilege and insists on redistributing her resources, in this case money and literacy, to Hepsey, a black woman. Christie creates a life-long bond with a woman who

is very much unlike herself. Hepsey shares her past experiences with Christie, passing on knowledge and life-lessons, helping to educate Christie and re-shape her views of society.

Alcott creates a cross-racial and cross-generational sisterhood between the two women. Hepsey is a former slave and old enough to be Christie's mother. Their bond breaks down the barriers between race, class, and generation. The two women exchange resources that the other one of lacking. Christie knows how to read and write; Hepsey has a lifetime of experience to share. While their background are wildly different, there is no doubt that their sharing of knowledge and care for one another makes them sisters.

True solidarity in sisterhood involves an understanding for one another. Christie has the strongest connection to her friend Rachel<sup>1</sup> (our second heroine), who she meets while working as a seamstress. Rachel seems reserved at first, but Christie persists, trying to gain a friend. Rachel tells Christie, "You can never need a friend as much as I do, or know what a blessed thing it is to find such a one as you are" (84). Christie kisses her and promises that she will love her friend dearly. When Rachel is "outed" and ostracized by their boss for being a fallen woman, Christie points out the hypocrisy, describing Rachel as "a meek culprit at the stern bar of justice, where women try a sister woman" (86). Rachel's past as a fallen woman is revealed to all the employees and she is viewed as morally flawed. Rachel explains how pained she is for having "deceived" Christie who thought Rachel was an "honest" girl, but Christie assures her that even though she is "grieved and disappointed, [she will] stand by [Rachel] still" (88). Christie asks the women to think of their own daughters. Some of the women seemed moved to forgive Rachel's past, but Miss Cotton, the forewoman, refuses to work with Rachel. When all of

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel's real name is Letty. She uses the name Rachel to avoid her past. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to her as Rachel only.

the women avoid eye contact with Rachel, she finds “herself deserted by womankind [and so] she would desert her own womanhood” (89). When Rachel realizes Christie will not desert her, she falls at Christie’s feet, grateful for this unwavering sisterhood. All the other employees turn away, but Christie chooses her friend over a job and reputation: “Christie, remembering only that they were two loving women, alone in a world of sin and sorrow, took Rachel in her arms, kissed and cried over her with sisterly affection, and watched her prayerfully” (91). Rachel is fired from her job and viewed as a damaged woman because of the social expectations of women to remain pure. Christie specifically condemns their boss, “I’ll do slop-work and starve, before I’ll stay with such a narrow-minded, cold-hearted woman” (90). Alcott uses the example of Christie and Rachel’s boss to highlight the damaging effects of “narrow-minded” women; she comments on the importance of women holding each other up in a time of need.

Christie would rather align herself with a fallen woman than align herself with their boss, a woman who uses her own limited power to continue to uphold structures that force other women into inferiority. Women could find freedom in uniting with women unlike themselves by broadening their scope of sisterhood and by sympathizing with women who have different experiences from their own. Christie and Rachel’s boss could benefit from being more compassionate, like Christie is, towards women she does not consider “pure.” By remaining complicit in society’s ostracism of women who fall outside of societal norms, women such as Miss Cotton continue to perpetuate the inferiority of the female sex.

When they meet again, it is Rachel who saves Christie: “You were almost gone, but I kept you; and when I had you in my arms I knew you [...]” (102-103). When

Rachel leaves and Christie is left alone, Christie falls into despair. She feels deserted and wonders where Rachel might be. Christie feels hopeless about her lack of work and her less than ideal living arrangement. Rachel finds Christie right as she is about to drown herself. Christie had saved Rachel's dignity and Rachel saved Christie's life in return. The relationship between Christie and Rachel beautifully highlights the fact that women are capable of saving one another especially when they have no one else to turn to. Within a patriarchal system, a woman's understanding of another woman allows them to connect to each other, to offer unconditional love. Both women save the other simply by being present and offering emotional support in a time of need and against the other women not partaking in a sisterhood. Their relationship continues on indefinitely. Sisters must mutually be available.

Christie forms a second cross-generational bond with Mrs. Sterling when she takes up a job to help Mrs. Sterling with house chores. Right away Mrs. Sterling takes on a maternal role towards Christie, offering physical affection and kind words. They got on so well together "that mistress and maid soon felt like mother and daughter, and Christie often said she did not care for any other wages" (153). The women often refer to each other as "mother" and "daughter" (161, 180, 184). For example, when a young girl, Kitty, who has run away from home to avoid marriage visits their cottage, Christie has feelings of jealousy. Mrs. Sterling reassures her: "No one will take thy place with me, my daughter" (184). While David is unaware of Christie's unease, Mrs. Sterling not only takes notice but also reminds the young woman that she has Mrs. Sterling's devotion and loyalty. Even when it seems possible that David might take an interest in Kitty, Mrs. Sterling's sisterhood with Christie remains unchanged. No man has influence over their

relationship. Christie continues to prioritize her relationship with Mrs. Sterling and their loyalty to one another never falters.

Alcott creates many strong women in *Work* to work against society's continued perception of women as the weaker sex. Alcott draws attention to the fact that woman's emphasis on emotion and love is viewed as a negative quality by a male-centered society. The narrator refers to logic as a masculine quality, a "trait often very trying to feminine minds" (166). Feminine traits are not appreciated in patriarchal societies, even though they serve society just as much as masculine traits. Fitzpatrick argues that women "were encouraged to promote the traditional ideals – moderation, selflessness, and piety [...]" (28). Unfortunately, traditional ideal and traditional women's work, such as housekeeping, meal preparation, childrearing, and other day-to-day household duties are unpaid, which causes society to view the tasks as unimportant. Women's qualities and women's work are often taken for granted.

Alcott highlights women's desire for paid work. Through paid labor, women can become less dependent on the men in their lives. Lillian Faderman wrote that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, early feminist movements were "opening new jobs for women, which would allow them independence, and in creating a support group so that they would not feel isolated and outcast when they claimed their independence" (178). Sisterhood and paid labor go hand in hand. Christie laments over her limited agency as a girl, "I'm old enough to take care of myself; and if I'd been a boy, I should have been told to do it long ago. I hate to be dependent; and now there's no need of it, I can't bear it any longer" (4). Alcott is noting the trouble with gendered labor. Men are paid to work and be independent. Women work but because their labor is unpaid; they are financially at the mercy of men.

Fitzpatrick explains that gendered labor reinforces “work for love, work *as* love [and how that] could become a culturally persuasive rationale urging men to work for money and women to for free” (31). This standard for labor devalues women’s contributions and work. Women are taught that to be virtuous is to sacrifice and go without, but Alcott’s novel resists “the nineteenth century’s feminized ideal of domestic virtue and voluntary self-sacrifice” (Fitzpatrick 30). Alcott shows readers that a woman’s work does carry value and that women are capable of moving outside of the domestic sphere.

Alcott uses her protagonist Christie to draw attention to the economic barriers on individuals who happen to be born female. Even when women are allowed to work, there are limited choices available. Not just any job will do; Alcott writes that women can “earn at last the best success this world can give us, the possession of a brave and cheerful spirit, rich in self-knowledge, self-control, self-help” (10). For women, marriage should not be the only path to success; paid labor offers women a different avenue to gain not just independence, but also happiness and satisfaction in life.

More so than Brontë whose focus is largely on middle-class women, Alcott acknowledges the different classes of women and the many different career fields they might be interested in. She writes, “There are many Christies, willing to work [...] for there is work enough for all [...]” (94). Not all women are suited for the same types of professions. Alcott notes the importance of options. Fitzpatrick explains that Alcott “describe[d] work for women that would be at once personally rewarding and socially constructive, arguing implicitly that the domestic sphere was not limited to the traditional family home [...]” (33). Women need to be allowed to choose for themselves what work would bring them happiness and fulfillment.

Women must find rewarding work; money itself is not enough to produce contentment. At the end of the novel, Bella, Christie's friend who she met when working as a companion to an ailing girl, confesses her unhappiness. Bella expresses her lack of fulfillment after she is done tending to her husband, whom she loves dearly. Bella, an upper-class woman, says, "I have nothing after my duty to him is done" (268). Christie assures Bella that working will help her gain a sense of pride. Christie says, "If you choose you can find plenty of work in your own class; for, if you will allow me to say, they need help quite as much as the paupers, though in a very different way" (269). Alcott is telling her female readers that even if they do not *need* to work, they can simply *want* to work. There is a way for all women to find gratifying work. Alcott understands that an upper-class woman such as Bella might have a hard time figuring out her position in the workplace.

All women, no matter their class, can find rewarding work. Lydia Schultz, in "‘Work with a Purpose’: Alcott's *An Old Fashioned Girl* and the American Work Ethic," argues that Alcott is illustrating for her readers that "this environment of wealth without work or purpose turns girls and women into emotionless, unfeeling 'wood birds,' trapped in the 'gilded cage' of wealth, turning them into objects to be observed, not feeling, living women" (35). Christie would agree and explains how upper-class women can work to better society by setting a positive example for other wealthy women and by persuading "the smaller class of men who do admire intelligence as well as beauty" to support women in their search for independence (271). Christie tells Bella that upper-class women can prove to upper-class men that they are both beautiful and intelligent. Schultz writes, "Alcott is advocating work of some sort for all people, appropriate to their class

and situation” (36-37). Through Christie, Alcott is calling to her female readers to work no matter their class.

Alcott demonstrates how women belong in the work place. She writes, “Being women, of course they talked as industriously as they worked; finger flew and tongues clacked with equal profit and pleasure [...]” (125). Women are stronger and more productive together. In many instances throughout the novel, women are multitasking; they are able to contribute to their household in more ways than one. Linda Eisenmann explains that women are capable of doing “whatever is necessary to keep the family knit together” (468). Women can inhabit both the domestic, personal sphere *and* the working, public sphere, moving between them as needed. Christie is able to multitask being a mother, a friend, and an activist without compromising her commitment to any of her roles.

Alcott’s views on personal growth versus financial growth are apparent when her character, Christie, has two chances at marrying for financial support instead of love. Christie vehemently rejects her proposal from Joe Butterfield, disrupting a possible male kinship alliance between Uncle Enos and Joe. The marriage arrangement would economically benefit the men, both farmers, but it would not benefit Christie. Alcott writes, “She would either marry Joe Butterfield in sheer desperation, and become a farmer’s household drudge; settle down into a sour spinster, content to make butter, gossip, and lay up money all her days; [or] try to crush and curb her needs and aspirations till the struggle grew too hard, and then in a fit of despair end her life [...]” (11). Being forced to marry out of familial duty is unimaginable for Christie. She cannot suppress her desire to work outside of the home.

Aunt Betsey insinuates that Christie might forget her curiosity for the world once she settles down and marries. Christie tries to convince her Aunt Betsey that she is better suited for labor than marriage to a man she does not love. Alcott writes,

‘My Enos has not come along yet [...] so I’m not going to sit and wait for any man to give me independence, if I can earn it for myself.’ And a quick glance at the gruff, gray old man in the corner plainly betrayed that, in Christie’s opinion, Aunt Betsey made a bad bargain when she exchanged her girlish aspirations for a man whose soul was in his pocket. (8-9)

Christie resists marriage without love, a marriage based solely on economics. Christie is fully aware that a marriage based on emotion might not be profitable. Her late parents married for love and lived in working-class poverty before leaving Christie an orphan (9). Yet Christie views her mother and father’s marriage a success, despite their financial struggles, and she is sure of her choice to leave her aunt and uncle’s farm.

Christie increases her agency by choosing to leave her uncle’s home and walking away from her dependency on him or any man. Christie says, “I won’t marry Joe; I won’t wear myself out in a district-school for the mean sum they give a woman; I won’t delve away here where I’m not wanted; and I won’t end my life like a coward, because it is dull and hard” (11-12). She makes a conscious choice to go out and work, even when the job is not considered appropriate for her. Kristin Allukian explains that being an actress was “not a profession deemed appropriate by the cult of true womanhood, it was an arena where ‘women who had already lost ‘respectability’ could find lucrative careers” (583). Christie rejects the notion that acting is improper; she describes actresses as “doing their work creditably and earning an honest living” (26). Christie does not have a father or

husband who will dictate what jobs she decides to take on; she makes up her own mind. She independently navigates her career choices and life.

Alcott acknowledges that marrying for comfort instead of love can be tempting for women. Christie is unsure of the very wealthy Mr. Fletcher's interest in her. When she comes to the realization of his interest in her, she says to herself, "I'll try not to be worldly-minded and marry without love, but it does look tempting to a poor soul like me" (52). She is tempted by the comforts Mr. Fletcher's money can provide her and is not above entertaining a proposal from him. However, when he does propose marriage, he is cocky in his delivery, which does not sit well with Christie. She rejects the marriage proposal because his "most generous words seemed to her like bribes" (55). While his position in society, his money, and his ability to travel are appealing, "This was not the lover she had dreamed of, the brave, true man who gave her all" (55). Her pride and her heart would not allow Christie to sell her "liberty for the Fletcher diamonds," which came as a relief, even to herself (58).

Alcott does warn women against self-sacrifice for the common good. When Christie meets Mr. Fletcher again, five years later, he does not want to buy her affection, but he is genuinely in love with her, which pleases Christie. She considers this change in Mr. Fletcher; she realizes that with his wealth, she could help many people, but she finally recognizes that she must not marry for reasons other than respect and love. Alcott makes a point to insist that women must not sacrifice themselves for others. Christie thinks to herself, "however much Mr. Fletcher might love his wife, he would be something of a tyrant, and she was very sure she never would make a good slave" (202). Alcott is investigating the idea that a woman who is in a marriage based on financial

inequality would be placed in a troublesome situation. When Christie speaks with a female ally, Mrs. Wilkins, about her potential marriage to Mr. Fletcher, Christie is coy, embarrassed to admit to the temptation of marrying for money. Mrs. Wilkins questions Christie, “Oh, she’s goin’ to marry for a livin’ is she?” (204). Mrs. Wilkins tries to remind Christie of the dangers of a transactional marriage. She tells Christie that women who marry solely for economic reasons are sacrificing their happiness.

Alcott is not arguing that marrying for love and being a part of a sisterhood must be oppositional and mutually exclusive. She employs her strong female characters to emphasize the importance of wives having an equal amount of agency as their husbands, and she creates a sisterhood that ensures the women have the support they need to achieve this agency and survive marriage. Christie meets David Sterling when she is hired to help Mrs. Sterling around the home. Christie and David’s relationship is slow moving, but after years of friendship they eventually confess their love and admiration of one another. Christie agrees to be married. The difference in this arrangement from the previous one with Joe Butterfield is that there is no beneficiary, no kinship between men to be made. She has found her equal in David; he has found his equal in Christie. As he prepares to leave for war, he asks Christie to be his wife, not only for his benefit, but for hers as well. He reminds her that as his wife, she will have access to his material items and legacy if he perishes in battle. Neither one loses their independence when unifying in marriage in spite of the Laws of Coverture. Their relationship is not based on male kinship; it is based on friendship, love, and respect for one another. David becomes proud as he marvels over Christie’s preference of him over the wealthy Mr. Fletcher. Christie explains that she enjoys the finer indulgences in life, but that she loves her “independence

more” (217). She tells David that she would rather be his wife than Mr. Fletcher’s and that she has “longed more intensely for the right to push up the curly lock that is always tumbling into [his] eyes, than for [Mr. Fletcher’s] whole fortune” (217). Material possessions do not sway Christie, the love and tenderness she feels for David does.

Mrs. Sterling is also a woman in charge. As a widow she is able to take control of her household because she does not depend on a man. She has molded her cottage to be a “refuge for many women [...] a half-way house where they could rest and recover themselves after the wrongs, defeats, and weariness that come to such in the battle of life” (154). Even though her son, David, lives with her, it is clear that Mrs. Sterling is in charge and that she does not need to cater to her son or society.

Alcott brings to light the negative aspects of gendered ideals and the problematic nature of the private and public spheres that keep opportunities away from women. She explores the differences between rewarding work and working out of necessity. Alcott argues that women must prioritize sisterhood and find fulfilling paid labor to alleviate themselves from their dependency on man. By working, women become independent from men and can turn to sisterhood for emotional support when they would otherwise be socially outcast.

### Chapter 3 - Limitations and Successes of Sisterhood in *Shirley* and *Work*

Both Brontë and Alcott felt there was an absolute need for women to have more options than marriage alone. Lillian Faderman notes that middle-class women had only three options in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: “She could marry, teach, or die” (184). Brontë herself turned down three marriage proposals and instead worked as a teacher to help her family financially. When she finally did accept a marriage proposal, it was from Arthur Bell Nichols, a poor pastor. Alcott never did marry but devoted her life to women’s rights. She was very outspoken of her preference to be a spinster rather than to be the property of any man. On February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1868, when writing about “independent spinsters,” Alcott asserts, “liberty is a better husband than love to many of us” (197). She continued to emphasize that merely having a husband was not worth the freedom of being an independent woman.

In their respective novels, Brontë primarily writes to male readers, while Alcott primarily writes to female readers. The authors’ difference in location, time, and family upbringing contributed to their differences in delivering their messages on sisterhood. While 19<sup>th</sup>-century America had strict roles for women, English Victorian ideals were even more severe. Alcott’s novel was also published twenty-four years after Brontë’s, which might have influenced the different levels of assertiveness from the two authors. In “Sustenance and Balm: The Question of Female Friendship in *Shirley* and *Villette*,” Linda Hunt describes “Brontë [as] old-fashioned. Rooted in the traditional world of women herself through her close ties with her sisters and her women friends, and by her domestic responsibilities [...]” (66). Brontë, raised by a minister, had a traditional

upbringing. Alcott was also raised as one of several sisters, but her family was less traditional, her father being a philosopher. Alcott's father opposed slavery and stood for women's rights, both of which can be seen in Alcott's work. Alcott would have been surrounded by her father's intellectual friends, such as Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau, who was rumored to have been the inspiration for her character, David. The wildly different ways in which Brontë and Alcott were nurtured influenced them as authors, which are evident in their different approaches to sisterhood in their novels.

In *Shirley*, Brontë's narrator overtly addresses the male readers multiple times as a form of persuasion. Gisela Argyle, in "Gender and Generic Mixing in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*," writes that "Brontë turned in *Shirley* to the community and to experience in social and political terms, which are represented through a 'disembodied' mystifying third-person narrator" (742). The narrator, over thirty times, addresses the male reader directly and the assumptions or biases that male readers would have carried prior to reading *Shirley*. The narrator asks the readers,

Men of Yorkshire! do your daughters reach this royal standard? Can they reach it? Can you help them reach it? Can you give them a field in which their faculties may be exercised and grow? Men of England! look at your poor girls, many of them fading around you, dropping off in consumption or decline; or, what is worse, degenerating to sour old maids – envious, back-biting, wretched, because life is a desert to them; or what is worst of all, reduced to strive, by scarce modest coquetry and debasing artifice, to gain that position and consideration by marriage which to celibacy is denied. Fathers! cannot you alter these things? Perhaps not all at once; but consider the matter well when it is brought before you, receive it as a

theme worthy of thought do not dismiss it with an idle jest or an unmanly insult.  
(330)

The narrator continues to make a specific plea towards male readers and fathers. The narrator insists that fathers will benefit from finding for their daughters “an interest and an occupation” that will save young women from the embarrassment of the marriage market. Brontë, through her narrator, is hoping to appeal to and convince the “Men of England” that women are being treated unfairly. Brontë felt she would be more successful in creating change by persuading Victorian male readers since men were the ones in power. Deborah Wynne, in “Charlotte Brontë’s Frocks and *Shirley*’s Queer Textiles,” writes that “Brontë had hoped that *Shirley*’s omniscient, bluff, satirical ‘male’ narrator would establish unequivocally the idea that [the author] was a man” (150). Brontë may have believed that she would have made a greater connection with male readers if they did not know that *Shirley* was written by a female author.

*Shirley* appeals to readers by ending in two happy marriages instead of leaving the female protagonists single. Hunt describes Brontë’s compromising ending, “*Shirley* resists marriage as long as possible, but the novel ends, of course, with the double wedding of the heroines” (59). Brontë could have ended the novel with *Shirley* and Caroline as the focus, but instead she neatly arranges the marriages, so as not to disrupt the readers’ expectations. Joanna Rostek explains that Brontë negotiated the ending of her novel to avoid “social ostracism” and noted that “her conflict with patriarchy resurfaces in the guise of a caricature of certain women’s lifestyle” (87). The novel constantly alludes to the discontent of marriage and the happiness that female friendship brings, but Brontë still chooses to marry the two heroines to the Moore brothers,

insinuating that a sisterhood between two unmarried women will not emotionally suffice. Hunt argues that “There is a self-consciously fictive quality to the ending of *Shirley* which indicates the author’s awareness that she has not resolved the major question raised in her novel: what kind of life is possible for the woman who does not marry” (60). Brontë realized the limitations within her novel, but compromised with the ending instead of pushing the boundaries of societal expectations. By conceding, Brontë undermines her own powerful message about sisterhood.

In *Work*, Alcott acknowledges the need to persuade both genders, but she primarily uses her narrator to speak to women. In “The Art of Character in Louisa May Alcott’s *Work*,” Faye Halpern writes that “American women may not be fighting on the battlefields or offering orations on the Fourth of July, but they are still able to exercise their power (which takes the form of ‘influence’) on the men around them, who only seem to hold all the power” (67). Alcott reaches out to her female readers to make a change and to use their influence on the men in their lives to help the female cause. Unlike Brontë, Alcott turns to female readers to call for change, not men. Alcott uses Christie to be the voice to persuade; Halpern explains that “The masses need to be more than convinced; they need to be persuaded” (70). Christie’s honesty creates a connection for the reader; “The fact that her words are broken by grief – this lack of fluency – makes her persuasive” (Halpern 71). Christie’s speech is given with raw emotion; she calls out to *all* women, no matter their age, race, or class.

When Christie and David decide to marry, it is to offer protection for Christie if he dies in war; they use the Laws of Coverture to their benefit because they know that as his wife, Christie would have the rights to his assets. In “‘It Spoke Itself’: Genius,

Political Speech, and Louisa May Alcott's *Work*," Victoria Olwell describes Christie's speech about the rights of women at the end of the novel as an "attempt to extend the sentimental novel's logic of sympathy into a public social movement," mirroring Alcott's larger intention of having the novel appeal to her readers' emotions (53-54). Alcott wrote the novel with female readers in mind, but she also wanted to persuade male readers. Alcott shows her female readers that marriage, such as Christie and David's, based on equality can be successful; however, with David's death at the end of the novel, there are no men to be found. Alcott calls to her readers, both female and male, to understand the great potential of sisterhood and she refuses to compromise her message for the sake of male readers. David's death and Christie's refusal of Mr. Fletcher ensures that there are only women left in Christie's household at the end of the novel.

Both authors make an argument for not only stronger women but also *kinder* men. Brontë and Alcott highlight the need for a reeducation of men through the evolution of their male characters. Brontë's Louis is feminized through his job as a tutor and his sensitive nature when he sympathizes with his students, but his brother Robert requires an injury to experience a change of heart. Robert tells Caroline, "I thought I should die. The tale of my life seemed told. [...] I believed I should never see you again; and I grew so thin [...]" (488). Robert nears death before he learns that his concentration on finances and material possessions is flawed. He finally realizes that he must be kinder and must marry the girl he loves, even if she is not wealthy.

Alcott also shows the complexities of her male characters, Mr. Fletcher and David. When Christie first meets Mr. Fletcher, his cockiness and arrogance loses him his opportunity to court Christie. Her adamant rejection of him, despite his wealthy status,

causes Mr. Fletcher to reflect and when they meet again, he is patient and understanding. In the war, Mr. Fletcher is wounded and loses his arm, his experiences in the war have evolved him into a man worthy of love.

Alcott introduces readers to David as a kind man, described as being “devote[d] to his flowers, and [leading] a very quiet life,” but yet he is also viewed as a courageous Captain in the war. When David and Christie are working in the nursery, David is trying to arrange flowers for a mother whose baby has died. David acknowledges Christie’s female talents. David explains, “I want them to look lovely and comforting when the mother opens the box, and I don’t seem to have the right flowers. Will you give it a touch? Women have a tender way of doing such things that we can never learn” (147). David is moved and emotional at the need to create the arrangement for the infant who has passed. Even though he showcases his feminine qualities, he realizes that he has to reach out to Christie to find just the right flowers and to arrange them; and she does. Christie notices the difference between David and other men she has met. She compares David to Englishmen, describing them as “Blunt and honest, domestic and kind” (167). She tells him that she finds these men to be “true as steel [...] the manliest men in the world” (167). Alcott employs David to show a man who successfully balances both feminine and masculine qualities. Tara Fitzpatrick writes, “Appealing to the example of wartime heroism, Alcott refused to portray selflessness as an exclusively feminine virtue” (30). Alcott refuses gendered values by creating male characters like David who believe in self-sacrifice.

David feels unworthy of love and a wife. When readers are surprised to find out that Christie’s friend, Rachel, is also David’s long-lost sister, David confesses that he had

wronged his sister and that is why he never felt he was allowed to show his love for Christie. By mistreating one woman, he felt he had mistreated all of womankind. The return of his prodigal sister allows David to marry Christie because he has paid off his debts to womankind by gaining the forgiveness of Rachel. His reeducation rewards him with the return of his sister, Rachel, and the woman he loves, Christie. David is a balanced male character. Fitzpatrick writes, "David's work quite deliberately transgresses the traditional gender divisions of the domestic ideal: he operates a nursery from the home he shares with his mother [...]" (45). David's character and his work are not traditionally masculine, and yet he is the ideal man that Alcott creates. While at war, he receives a gunshot that will ultimately kill him as he is helping women and children escape. Mr. Wilkins, a friend and a comrade in war, tells Christie about David's encounter,

'He fed and warmed 'em, comforted their poor scared souls, give what clothes we could find, buried the dead baby with his own hands, and nussed the other little creeters as if they were his own. [...] Things was goin' lovely when the poor gal who'd lost her baby must needs jump out and run up to thank the Captain agin for all he'd done for her. Some of them sly rascals was watchin' the river [...] and they fired. [...] Lyin' right acrost the path with two dead men in front of him; for he'd kep 'em off like a lion till the firin' brought up a lot of our fellers and the rebs skedaddled.' [...] 'Are they safe?' 'They be, Captain,' sez I. 'Then it's all right,' sez he, smilin' in that bright way of his, and then dropped off as quiet as a lamb. (248-49)

Mr. Wilkins' commentary of David shows David's bravery and courage while tenderly caring to the women and children escaping slavery. David's compassion is evident from the care he takes to bury the dead child; his strength is apparent in his ability to fight off the men shooting at them for as long as he did. He gladly and knowingly gives up his life for the freedom of others.

While *Work* ends with the absence of men, *Shirley* ends in a polite compromise. Brontë's ending is centered around sisterhood but also on heterosexual marriages for Caroline and Shirley. Joanna Rostek explains the compromise some female authors felt, "Caught between equally strong impulses to reject and to adhere to the gender norms of their times, female authors kept oscillating between contestation and conformity" (86). Brontë subtly comments on the importance of paid labor for women and the inequality found in most marriages, but she is careful in how she approaches the subjects to avoid a complete refusal of her suggestion for sisterhood and possible social dismissal as well. Hunt writes that Brontë "even probes the possibility that female friendship could be a preferable alternative to romantic attachments to men" (55). Brontë does investigate a female friendship, Caroline and Shirley, in lieu of a heterosexual relationship. She could have chosen to end the novel with the two women together, but instead she inserts the men, Robert and Louis, into the women's lives. Hunt argues, "For the two heroines of *Shirley*, economic realities ultimately dictate that the comforts of the intense bond they share are valuable as a prelude to marriage rather than a substitute for it" (55). The emotional bond between the two women, Caroline and Shirley, are only acceptable *until* they marry and once they marry, the women are to shift their emotional dependency on to their husband. Hunt misses the third option, traditional marriages that continue to

prioritize their female friendships. Women could marry and maintain independency by engaging in a sisterhood and working outside of the home. Shirley and Caroline marry and manage the day school. Although Victorian societal and economic expectations urge women to marry and to leave sisterhood behind, women could challenge these expectations. Hunt explains that Caroline and Shirley “submit to the authority of Robert and Louis Moore, content to run a Sunday school and day-school for the children associated with the estate and the mill and to have a humanizing influence on their husbands” (59). Caroline and Shirley could not only continue to persuade and influence their husbands but also work to move outside of the domestic sphere by running the day school which insists women only engage in female activities such as running a Sunday school.

In *Work*, on the other hand, Alcott ends with not only a focus on sisterhood, marriage for love, and paid labor but also a promise to future generations of women. Alcott does not submit to the pressures to compromise the way Rostek argues that some 19<sup>th</sup>-century female authors do. Olwell argues that Christie’s speech “permits the women’s entrance into political discourse – allows them, that is, to elevate their atomized pain into collective action” (63). Alcott directs her message through Christie’s speech at women to join together “needlewomen, typesetters, servants, intellectuals, activists, wives, and mothers into a collective identity capable of advocating for their civic betterment *as women*” (Olwell 63). Instead of relying on men to make a change, Alcott calls on women to resist their inferior place in society and to come together as a whole, as sisters, to fight to elevate themselves in their position as women. At the end of *Work*, the men are all gone, either dead or noticeably absent from the last scene. The focus is left on

the women to hold each other up and fight for the equality they deserve against a patriarchal society.

Brontë creates two levels of sisterhood: sisters through emotional connections and sisters through shared resources; while Alcott also includes these levels, she takes sisterhood one step further and creates a female network that works towards the bigger picture, a sisterhood through solidarity and activism. Alcott uses Christie's "speech and the sympathetic exchanges [to] not only cement the bonds between members of Christie's community but also motivate their activist work [...]" (Olwell 54). Brontë stops short of a collective sisterhood; Alcott does not shy away from sisterhood as activism through her novel.

Yet Brontë, like Alcott, does use her position as an author as a form of activism. Rostek explains that "Writing from a female perspective – in fact, from the perspective of a female author aspiring to the male territory of a literary career – Charlotte Brontë highlights the frustration of women who, like herself, are neither content nor can afford to spend their entire lives cooking, stitching and caring for needy family members" (87). Through the act of authorship, the writing of *Shirley*, Brontë attempts to move herself and other women outside of the domestic sphere. And, within the novel itself, she highlights the limitations and problems with requiring women to stay within the home and not enter the public sphere. Kristin Allukian explains that female authors, including Alcott, also "conceived of writing and lecturing not only as social activism but also as paid labor that would enable them to earn a living" (570). The novels were a way to speak out to society and also to be paid for their labor that would allow Brontë and Alcott more independency and the ability to move in and out of the female and male realms.

## Conclusion

In Brontë's *Shirley* and in Alcott's *Work*, both authors introduce sisterhood as a tool to increase female agency by encouraging women to work outside of the home and to marry for love and equality. Alcott takes the sisterhood network further than Brontë by engaging women as a whole, including multiple classes, races, and relationships, and by encouraging women to find fulfillment in their sisters without turning solely to heterosexual relationships for emotional endurance out of financial necessity.

Both novels offer different levels of sisterhood in order to showcase how women can be emotionally fulfilled by other women without turning to marriage for emotional or financial survival. Yet the two authors differ in their portrayal of sisterhood: Brontë creates passive, more reserved female bonds, whereas Alcott is much more assertive in her message of sisterhood's ability to be just as important to a woman as a heterosexual marriage, sometimes much more important than a heterosexual relationship.

Some female friendships are based on the exchange of resources. In *Shirley*, Hortense offers Caroline lessons and the pair grow to be very fond of one another. In *Work*, Christie and Hepsy also exchange resources, but there is another level to their relationship. As bell hooks argues, there *must* be a redistribution of assets to achieve the equality that is required of sisterhood. Christie finds herself personally feeling the need to right the wrongs that have been done to Hepsy. She realizes that as a young white woman she is capable of helping her friend Hepsy, a former slave. This redistribution of resources unites women by acknowledging the divisions within the female gender instead of assuming that women are united purely by the fact that they are women. Women have

a multitude of experiences based on their specific life background such as class and race, and that *must* be acknowledged.

Both Brontë and Alcott create an emotionally intimate bond between two young women, best friends that become sisters-in-law. In *Shirley*, Caroline and Shirley have a lot in common and both have each other's best interest at heart. Neither one is willing to fight over Robert Moore and they are committed to each other, until they marry and that commitment is shifted to their husbands. Instead of allowing her characters, Caroline and Shirley, to remain attached to one another at the end of the novel, Brontë marries them to brothers because as Hunt argues, "[...] in the actual world all they can be is sisters-in-law" (59). By marrying the double heroines to brothers, Brontë has assured the readers of their bond without disrupting societal norms. Brontë does not acknowledge the possibility that one, or both, of the heroines could have become a spinster. Alcott, on the other hand, complicates the relationship between best friends, Christie and Rachel. By making Rachel a socially ostracized fallen woman, Alcott shows the intense bond, the solidarity between the two characters when Christie is willing to give up her own job and reputation to show solidarity with her dear friend. When Rachel still leaves due to her sense of social ostracism and Christie is left alone to despair, it is Rachel who comes back just in time and literally saves Christie from drowning herself. Christie is shocked to find out that Rachel is David's long-lost sister several chapters later, and their bond becomes even stronger when Christie gives birth to Rachel's niece. As a fallen woman, Rachel does not have the option to marry. Alcott gives us a character who will, in fact, remain an old maid; she also arranges Christie to be single after the death of her husband, David. Christie has the opportunity to marry Mr. Fletcher after the loss of her husband, but she

makes the choice to remain a widow. There could be many reasons why Alcott would have written Rachel as a fallen woman and Christie as widow, but I would argue that Alcott is creating a scenario where her double heroines can remain together, uninterrupted by a male presence.

Both novels also include mother-daughter relationships. Brontë reveals Mrs. Pryor as Caroline's "lost" mother. Alcott introduces Christie to Mrs. Sterling, who immediately takes on a mother role and later becomes Christie's mother-in-law. These cross-generational relationships show a level of nurturing, care, and emotional support that the male characters are not able to offer women. Women sustain one another, the family unit, their local communities. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women came together through sisterhood to offer support as nurturance and through cross-generational sisterhood, a family network was created, biological or not.

By being allowed opportunities to work and gain financial independence, women would be able to support themselves and not be forced to marry out of economic necessity. In both of the novels, Brontë and Alcott write about women's desire to work outside of the domestic sphere. Working inside the home without pay has caused not only a devaluation of women's work but also a devaluation of women in society. When women are permitted to leave the home and partake in paid labor, they increase their independence, no longer needing to be dependent on men for financial needs allows for a marriage of equals. When women are being paid for their labor, they no longer have to rely on marriage as a career. By allowing women to make informed decisions on who they marry, women will be better able to protect themselves from unhappy, or worse abusive, marriages.

Both authors work in the realities of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century woman, Alcott more unapologetically than Brontë. In *Shirley*, even the most independent female character, Shirley, must succumb to the Laws of Coverture when she marries Louis and hands over her wealth to him. Alcott challenges the Laws of Coverture in *Work* by only marrying Christie to David as a way to protect the woman, not the man. Alcott also acknowledges the realities of a fallen woman through Rachel and the realities of childrearing through Mrs. Wilkins.

Both *Shirley* and *Work*, although written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, lay the foundation for 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> century women to come together to build a sisterhood network that will unify women before they can rebel against their position of inferiority. For 19<sup>th</sup>-century readers, the female authors were highlighting the injustices done towards women and urging readers to make a change. Brontë calls to male readers, “The Men of Yorkshire,” to stand up for their daughters who are being exploited for being dealt the unlucky hand of being born a female in Victorian England. Alcott does the same, but she speaks primarily to her female readers, explaining that they might not see the fruits of their labor right away, but they will make a difference for future generations of women, creating an even larger sisterhood. 21<sup>st</sup>-century women can apply their readings of these 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels to their own lives. Some women continue to prioritize heterosexual marriages over a sisterhood as a means of financial and societal security. While women are now allowed into most fields of work that were traditionally reserved for men, they are still being paid less money than a man would be for the exact same job. And while women are allowed to move outside of the domestic realm, they are still judged harshly for not balancing the private and public sphere perfectly, from society’s perspective.

Society tells us that a woman *must* mother and if she decides to work then she must *not* allow her maternal duties to affect her career, but our male counterparts are not held to that same standard as fathers and careermen. By reading these novels, I argue that if women were to prioritize our female bonds, *insist* on kinder men, and work towards equal pay, we would start to liberate ourselves from our position as Other.

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