

**Friend or Foe:
How far were sororal relations depicted positively
in nineteenth-century England?**

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Sisterhood was commonly used in nineteenth century literature as an instrument to achieve a conventional end or to advance a romantic storyline; however, the shifting economic landscape and changing attitudes towards women meant that sisterhood was becoming a seemingly more complex concept, exposing competition and hostility amongst sisters. This paper explores two artefacts centred on sisterhood and suggests that sororal relations in nineteenth century England were portrayed both negatively and positively, revealing a more profound kind of feminism.

In nineteenth-century England, an ‘ever more tightly knit and strongly hierarchical nuclear family’ arose as protection against social instability and the growing dehumanisation and mechanisation associated with the economy.¹ Women had to create at home a refuge for men from the economic trenches and ‘feminine desire’ had to be contained ‘in such a way as to create the home as a sphere of moral perfection so elevated above the predatory struggle of the new economic strife’, with the sister upheld as a ‘sanctum sanctorum of moral virtue’ who had to be ‘enduringly, incorruptibly good’.² However, sororal relations in Victorian texts were depicted as ‘competitive, problematic, and theatrical’.³ Fascinated by differences between women whilst being uncomfortable about any alliances, Victorians exploited the frequently romanticised and domestic device of sisterhood to reveal rivalry, antagonism and sexual competition amongst women. This paper will focus on Christina Rossetti’s

¹ Leila Silvana May, *Disorderly Sisters: Sibling Relations and Sororal Resistance in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (London: Associated University Presses, 2001), p.15.

² May, *Disorderly Sisters*, pp.17-18.

³ Helena Michie, *Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.21.

'Sister Maude' (see Appendix) and John Everett Millais's painting entitled *Hearts are Trumps* (see Appendix, Figure 1), to examine whether and how these artefacts uncover such rivalry and competition and the extent to which sororal relations were depicted positively in nineteenth-century England.

'Sister Maude' utilises the traditional folktale of two sisters fighting over a lover and concentrates on the death of the speaker's lover; the poem implies such death is due to the speaker's sister's destructive jealousy. Rossetti illustrates a negative portrayal of sororal relations, exposing the devastation jealousy between sisters can bring and the darker aspects of sisterhood. The poem's simple title reinforces its focus on the speaker's sister, Maude, and sisterhood.

The rhetorical questions at the start of the first stanza immediately alert the reader to the treachery committed by Maude, who told the speaker's parents about the speaker's 'shame' and 'dear', presumably the speaker's secret love (ll.1-2). Maude's deceit is emphasised by the perfidious description of Maude, who 'lurked to spy and peer' (l.4), as well as the repetition of 'Who told' at the start of each of the first two lines and of 'Maude' in the third line. The caesura in this stanza's third line further highlights that it was the speaker's own sister who carried out such betrayal. The use of the possessive 'my' that is regularly repeated throughout this stanza (for example, 'my shame' (l.1) and 'my sister' (l.3)) stresses the focus on the speaker's own feelings and the heightened pain from the personal betrayal.

The loss of the lover and the speaker's anguish are emphasised powerfully, for example through the alliteration and hard sounds in the second stanza (for instance, 'Cold he lies, as cold as stone' as the 'comeliest corpse' with his 'clotted curls' (ll.5,6)). The admiring description of the dead lover as 'worthy of a queen's embrace' (l.8) underlines the speaker's immense love for him, which helps the reader to appreciate the magnitude of her grief for his passing. The sibilance in the third stanza reinforces the speaker's hissing-like wrath towards her sister as Maude 'might have spared' (l.9) her lover's soul, the speaker's soul and her own soul too. The semi-colon at the end of the second line of this stanza emphasises the speaker's belief that even if the speaker had not been born, her lover would still not have been interested in Maude, which heightens the sense of competition between the sisters.

The poem contains several religious references, mirroring beliefs in society at the time and the gravity of the situation. The fourth stanza reveals that whilst the speaker's parents may sleep in Heaven or at its gates, her sister will not attain any such sleep 'early or late' (l.16) due to her sins (the poem's regular rhythm is interrupted by the shorter line concluding the fourth stanza, stressing Maude's fate). It is telling that the speaker refers to 'my' parents instead of 'our' in the last two stanzas, implying that through her betrayal, her sister is no longer part of the family unit; this is reinforced by the colons used at the end of the second line of the penultimate stanza and the fourth line of the last stanza, which physically separate the lines about the speaker's parents (and the lines concerning the speaker and her lover in the last stanza) from the lines regarding Maude. This further underlines the distinction between

them and that Maude is very different in her sinning, character and destiny. In addition, the semi-colon at the end of the second line of the last stanza also serves to divide up the stanza into distinct sections: the first two lines relate to the speaker's parents, the next two are in respect of the speaker and her love and the last two lines concern Maude, who is without a partner. This assists in highlighting Maude's isolation, deviation and dissimilarity from the others.

The last stanza maintains the idea of the speaker's parents potentially being rewarded in Heaven (accentuated by the alliteration in 'a golden gown' and its rhyming with 'a crown') and even the speaker and her lover possibly being allowed into Heaven, although the speaker appears to believe that Maude deserves to go to hell due to her awful actions; instead of access to Heaven, the speaker says to her, 'Bide you with death and sin' (l.22). The repetition of 'sister Maude' stresses again that it is the speaker's own sister who committed such betrayal and reflects the speaker's fury towards Maude, echoing the repetition of 'Maude' at the poem's start, which perhaps emphasises the speaker's dwelling on Maude's role in her tragedy and that she is unlikely to forgive and forget her sister's actions. The poem's use of sibilance subsists into the fourth stanza, which continues to underline the hissing vitriol of the speaker, and the sibilance in the last two lines of the final stanza conveys the speaker's satisfaction at the vision of her sister in hell, a suitable punishment.

The poem's regular and strict rhyming pattern (where the even lines rhyme) reinforces its traditional folk source. However, the last stanza is composed of six lines, contrasting with the four lines the other stanzas are made up of. Such irregularity enables increased concentration on Maude and her fate in the two additional lines and underscores Maude's own irregularity, misdeeds and abnormality as a sister through apparently unsisterly actions. 'Sister Maude' depicts a negative and jealous relationship and the desolation resulting from envy, competition and 'unsisterly' behaviour amongst sisters. The poem succeeds in portraying opposites, for example, the good of the speaker's lover versus the evil of Maude and heaven versus hell, which intensifies the negativity surrounding sororal relations that runs through the poem.

Looking at *Hearts are Trumps* by John Everett Millais will facilitate a fuller analysis as to how far sisterhood was represented positively during this period. The favourable portrayal of the stylish twenty-something daughters (Elizabeth, Diana and Mary) of Walter Armstrong conveys a 'gentle and nostalgic vision of family life' (accentuated by the delicate flowers in the background and the soft, pastel colours used in the painting, which underscore the femininity of the sisters), which contrasts with and, therefore, emphasises the painting's insinuation of sisterly competition in searching for a husband, highlighted by the card game and the straightforward title.⁴ The style of the painting evokes the 'Grand

⁴ 'Hearts are Trumps', Tate <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-hearts-are-trumps-n05770>> [accessed 06 Jan 2018].

Style' work of Joshua Reynolds, which idealised the imperfect, and thus instantly introduces the spectator to the idea that sisterhood is not perfect.⁵

The relatively simple background is kept subdued, adding to the heavy attention on the sisters, particularly Mary (who sits on the right), which enables the spectator to concentrate on them and the messages they convey. Their dresses are very similar, highlighting the sisterly connection between them, but specific details cause Mary to stand out. Mary holds most of the trumps and stares directly at the viewer, which maintains attention on her. One of Mary's sisters is focused on her cards and the other is gazing at Mary, indicating different views literally and symbolically as well as competition between the siblings. Whilst Elizabeth and Diana have resigned facial expressions, Mary appears to look determined and knowing, with her eyebrows lowered and a slight stern frown, which underlines her competitive nature and the rivalry between the sisters. The sisters wear different necklaces, perhaps to emphasise their differences, but Mary wears the darkest and thickest necklace and is the only one with a headpiece (accentuated by the dark screen behind her, which also helps her contrasting light figure to stand out even more), which again draws the viewer's eye towards her, as opposed to the other sisters. Mary's role as the dominant figure in the painting is fortified by her position at the forefront and as the seemingly closest sister to the viewer, with the side-table breaking up the viewer's eye-line towards the sister opposite Mary.

The cards table appears to be trapping the women's dresses as their clothing billows around the table legs. This seems to suggest that the sisters and the game they play are entwined and that competition (not only in cards, but also in finding a husband and love) is a significant part of their lives. The sisters also appear to be trapped by their competition and game-playing, and cannot escape. The feeling of imprisonment is reinforced by the enclosing screen behind the women, which also hints of secrets, highlighting the game-playing between the sisters.

The composition appears to be based on vertical lines of direction, for example vertical lines run down the table legs, screen and bodies (with curves, for example of the dresses, delivering variation). This adds to the painting's straightforward feel. Nothing feels too jarring in the painting, thereby creating a more intimate atmosphere, which underscores the sisterly connection between the women in the painting.

The painting is quite large, meaning viewers need to stand back to allow their eyes to sweep over it, which boosts the scene's dramatic effect and the drama of games and competition among sisters.⁶ The spectator feels he can step into the expanse of space apparently deliberately created in the bottom of the painting (as if he can sit at the table as a fourth player), making him feel involved and that he has a role in interpreting this work; this lends the painting a sense of realism and authenticity.

⁵ See 'Sir Joshua Reynolds', Tate <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/sir-joshua-reynolds-444>> [accessed 10 Jan 2018].

⁶ The frame's dimensions are 2010 × 2550 × 140 mm.

The painting seemingly reflects the position of women at the time; women had limited rights and privileges and depended on men in many ways, meaning husbands and accordingly husband-searching were important to women, perhaps more than sisterhood. For instance, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Jane, in spite of her search for identity and family, eventually discards the sisterhood of her cousins (Mary and Diana Rivers) for Rochester, exemplifying that marriage was often achieved at the expense of sisterhood, with a woman leaving her family for masculine security.⁷ Tea and its associated equipment (for example, porcelain tea-cups) were in demand during the period. The tea-cup in the painting not only hints at the fashionable status of the sisters, but maybe also, as a symbol of the domestic sphere which was associated with women, of women's struggle for equality and the vote and of the growing 'spread of independence' for women (tea-rooms became popular with women, acting as a safe haven to meet and discuss political plans), signals the shifting position of women in society.⁸ The prevalence of Chinese-inspired décor and items continued into the nineteenth century but became less popular, and the chinoiserie of the screen and the porcelain tea-cup in the painting perhaps echoes the changes that occurred regarding women and their status during the period.

It is hard to reconstruct nineteenth-century sisterhood and locate competitive or resentful signs amongst sisters. This is due to effectively individual fictions being produced by sources (such as journals, letters and conduct books) and because of the 'poverty of historical material on relations between women',⁹ with most women's letters having only been conserved as a result of their relationship with a male public figure and with very little sociological data existing on sisterly relationships (despite seeing sisters frequently taking on opposing roles within the family in contemporary literature). Nonetheless, particular laws can be useful in indicating how sisterhood was viewed at the time in society. The Deceased Wife's Sister's Act, passed into law in 1835 and only repealed in 1907 (despite much protest during the nineteenth century, including common flouting of the law), is deemed 'an arcane footnote to the progress of English law'.¹⁰ Many historians believe the law, which prevented a widower marrying his late wife's sister, produced unwarranted controversy;¹¹ nevertheless, it could be considered a sign of contemporary cultural concerns regarding the family and sexuality, including an endeavour to regulate the relations of sisters and craft a concept of sisterhood. Although the law was apparently founded on biblical taboos, public discussion surrounding it seemed to concentrate on the jealousy between sisters and raised questions focused on this, such as whether sisters are competitors and whether marrying your sister's widower is an act of betrayal or loyalty to

⁷ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1992).

⁸ Paul Chrystal, *Tea: A Very British Beverage* (Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing, 2014), p.26.

⁹ Michie, *Sororophobia*, p.23.

¹⁰ Michie, *Sororophobia*, p.23.

¹¹ Michie, *Sororophobia*, p.23.

her memory. This perhaps affected and reflected relations between sisters whilst alive, and promoted a sense of sisterly competition, which we see in the artefacts this paper examines. Similar sisterly jealousy can be identified in the ‘logic of the law’ in the first few divorces awarded to women by Parliament at the start of the nineteenth century.¹² Unlike men, women were not able to obtain a parliamentary divorce on the grounds of adultery. Two of the first three divorces granted to women in England concerned the ‘aggravating’ grounds of ‘incest’ on top of adultery (committed by the husband with the wife’s sister), pitting sister against sister as well as husband versus wife. It therefore appears that the artefacts discussed reflect popular perceptions in society at the time of sororal relations being negatively associated with rivalry, antagonism and envy, chiefly in relation to men.

As we can see from ‘Sister Maude’, sisterhood can be regarded as an artistic convention and a protective framework within which women can fall, as well as a prompt of the evils of women and possibly also female sexuality. As Helena Michie commented, and as evident from both artefacts, sisterhood appears to be ‘a playground, or, more sinisterly, a battlefield...’.¹³ Despite apparently undermining female and sisterly unity, the artefacts can be considered to enhance feminist notions of sisterhood and generate a more complex and deeper kind of feminism that acknowledges and encourages differences. Both artefacts depict differences between the sisters, thereby injecting independence, dignity and choice into their relations and allowing the portrayal of female identity through sisterhood, with such sisterly relations providing ‘safe and familiar and familial space’ for the expression of such differences.¹⁴ Furthermore, the competition prevalent in the artefacts and Victorian works in general permits us to appreciate that within ‘the protective idiom of sisterhood’, women could express emotions (like fury) that they were not able to in other relations, notably those with men.¹⁵ The depictions of sisterhood enable the portrayal of a multitude of ‘stereotypically unfeminine feelings and behaviours’.¹⁶

Considering the artefacts as historical evidence clearly raises various issues. Each can be deemed evidence for the artist’s emotions, people’s opinions of sisterhood at the time and/or the artist’s opinions on sisterhood or of the general feeling concerning sisterhood. Both the poem and painting could be viewed as eyewitness sources; as both artists lived during the period, they could accurately report what transpired and the mood at the time (especially as they are dealing with facts known by most contemporaries), so subsequently we feel we can trust both artefacts as historical evidence. However, since each artefact was created by one person, each may be judged as the artist’s outlook and

¹² Michie, *Sororophobia*, p.24.

¹³ Michie, *Sororophobia*, p.20.

¹⁴ Michie, *Sororophobia*, p.17.

¹⁵ Michie, *Sororophobia*, p.21.

¹⁶ Michie, *Sororophobia*, p.21.

thus biased (reiterated by the poem's first person narrative style). Rossetti's interest in female relations and friendship can be seen in her years volunteering at a penitentiary, a charitable establishment focusing on the recovery of women who were judged to be 'fallen', such as prostitutes.¹⁷ It may consequently be difficult to maintain her poem represents society or general opinion. Nonetheless, it is often argued that a poet's job is to capture the sentiment at the time, which may assist in counteracting any bias.¹⁸ Furthermore, Millais's intended audience appear to be members of elite society. For instance, the painting's backdrop of very ornate furnishings, the luxurious-looking clothing and the well-groomed hair of the sisters betray wealthy belongings and habits that are not representative of the lower classes, and the messages delivered through this artefact are therefore similarly unrepresentative of such classes. Moreover, before being displayed at Tate Britain, Millais's painting underwent major painting and frame conservation; as a result, the work may be deemed to be not completely by Millais's own hand and not entirely in his originally-intended state. Its reliability as evidence may be reduced. However, it has been said that the restoration 'resulted in returning the image to an appearance closer to when it was painted in 1872'.¹⁹

Together, both artefacts reveal, in different ways, how sororal relations were represented negatively in nineteenth-century England. Each artefact negatively exposes the game-playing and 'treachery of sister against sister in a ruthlessly competitive marriage market' that existed in the nineteenth century and appears to frustrate any concept of sisterly concord.²⁰ Nonetheless, the artefacts' portrayal of sisterhood can be deemed to positively endorse a richer type of feminism that promotes differences and individuality by illustrating the contrasts between the sisters, and sisterhood can be considered to enable women to convey emotions they were unable to in other relationships. Both artefacts thus succeed in reflecting the varying and increasingly complex attitudes of the time (perhaps mirroring society's growing perception of women as more complex than initially thought) and painting sororal relations in nineteenth-century England both positively and negatively.

¹⁷ 'Christina Rossetti', *BBC: Poetry* (2014) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/poetryseason/poets/christina_rossetti.shtml> [accessed 20 Jan 2018].

¹⁸ It has been stated that the poet's business is to examine 'not the individual, but the species'; see Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.28.

¹⁹ 'John Everett Millais's Hearts are Trumps 1872', *Tate* <<http://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/john-everett-millaiss-hearts-are-trumps-1872>> [accessed 10 Jan 2018].

²⁰ 'Christina Rossetti', *Poetry Foundation* (2018) <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/christina-rossetti>> [accessed 15 Jan 2018].

APPENDIX

Sister Maude

Christina Rossetti

Who told my mother of my shame,
Who told my father of my dear?
Oh who but Maude, my sister Maude,
Who lurked to spy and peer.

Cold he lies, as cold as stone, 5
With his clotted curls about his face:
The comeliest corpse in all the world
And worthy of a queen's embrace.

You might have spared his soul, sister,
Have spared my soul, your own soul too: 10
Though I had not been born at all,
He'd never have looked at you.

My father may sleep in Paradise,
My mother at Heaven-gate:
But sister Maude shall get no sleep 15
Either early or late.

My father may wear a golden gown,
My mother a crown may win;
If my dear and I knocked at Heaven-gate
Perhaps they'd let us in: 20
But sister Maude, oh sister Maude,
Bide you with death and sin.



Figure 1. Sir John Everett Millais, *Hearts are Trumps* (1872).

Oil on canvas, support: 1657 × 2197 mm and frame: 2010 × 2550 × 140 mm. © Tate, London. CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0
(Unported): <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-hearts-are-trumps-n05770>>.

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