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Devoted Sisters

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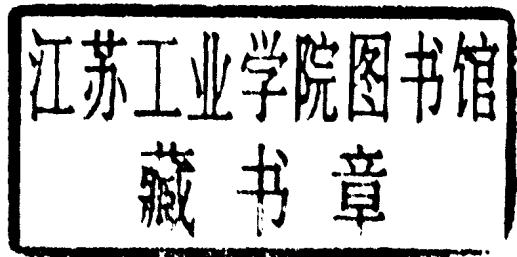Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature

SARAH ANNES BROWN

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Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature

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The Nineteenth Century General Editors' Preface

The aim of the series is to reflect, develop and extend the great burgeoning of interest in the nineteenth century that has been an inevitable feature of recent years, as that former epoch has come more sharply into focus as a locus for our understanding not only of the past but of the contours of our modernity. It centres primarily upon major authors and subjects within Romantic and Victorian literature. It also includes studies of other British writers and issues, where these are matters of current debate: for example, biography and autobiography, journalism, periodical literature, travel writing, book production, gender, non-canonical writing. We are dedicated principally to publishing original monographs and symposia; our policy is to embrace a broad scope in chronology, approach and range of concern, and both to recognize and cut innovatively across such parameters as those suggested by the designations 'Romantic' and 'Victorian'. We welcome new ideas and theories, while valuing traditional scholarship. It is hoped that the world which predates yet so forcibly predicts and engages our own will emerge in parts, in the wider sweep, and in the lively streams of disputation and change that are so manifest an aspect of its intellectual, artistic and social landscape.

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Vincent Newey
Joanne Shattock

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Preface

One apparently simple question formed the starting point for this book: why does the sister bond seem to have had such a strong resonance in nineteenth-century literature? Paired or grouped, allies or rivals, similar or (more usually) sharply contrasted, sisters offered an irresistible structuring framework to both novelists and readers.

There is no simple solution to the puzzle of the sister relationship's special power in the nineteenth century, although a number of possibilities suggest themselves. One explanation can be found in the social conditions of the time. The nineteenth century witnessed vital changes in the position of women and a correspondingly vigorous debate about women's proper role in society. Many novels of the period, such as Geraldine Jewsbury's *The Half Sisters*, focus on contrasting sisters, one of whom chooses a domestic life, the other a demanding artistic career.

Another partial explanation can be found in nineteenth-century demographics. Improved public health meant that families became larger in the nineteenth century until the availability of contraceptives reversed this trend in the twentieth century.[1] Thus a greater proportion of women had (and were) sisters than was the case before or after this time. The same is of course true of brothers, but somehow this is not reflected so clearly in the literature of the period; significant paired brothers seem comparatively few and far between in nineteenth-century fiction. Although not discussed at length in this study, the brother/sister relationship is much more important, and provides the emotional focus of numerous works including *Dombey and Son* and *Mill on the Floss*.

The period's emphasis on sisters is partly perhaps an extension of a more general preoccupation with the emotional lives of women rather than men, particularly in the Victorian novel; a cursory glance at eponymous heroines - Emma, Belinda (either Rhoda Broughton's or Maria Edgeworth's), Ruth, Shirley, Romola - is suggestive of the familiarity and ubiquity of such portraits of a lady. Although there are also a great number of eponymous heroes (particularly in Dickens) these tend to be dignified with a surname (Adam Bede, John Halifax, Gentleman, David Copperfield) as though in recognition of a man's more active, public role in life. And this hints at another reason for the popularity of sisters as a topic; whereas a male hero might leave home and fend for himself, a woman, until her marriage (frequently the climax of her novelistic life), will live quietly among her family. In *Adam Bede*, for example, although both Adam and Seth live at home, Adam is so engaged by his work that we are scarcely aware that he shares a home with his brother. And although both love the same woman, Dinah Morris,

they do not have to wait (in the manner of sisters) for Dinah to choose between them. Each takes his chance with her in turn.

Christine Downing offers a further reason for the greater importance of sisters to brothers:

> Because the first primary relationship in the lives of female children is to a same-sex other, the mother, same-sex bonding would, I suspected, have greater salience in the lives of women than in the lives of men, and sisters would figure more powerfully in women's psychology than brothers in men's (Downing, 1988, p.14).

And we may compare Adrienne Rich's evocation in 'Sibling Mysteries' of:

> How sister gazed at sister
> reaching through mirrored pupils
>
> back to the mother ... (Rich, 1978, p.50).

Despite the power and appeal of the sister relationship in literature comparatively little has been written on the topic even though individual sister relationships have attracted much attention. The most significant accounts of the relationship which I draw on for my own research are Michael Cohen's *Sisters: Relation and Rescue in Nineteenth-Century British Novels and Paintings*, Masako Hirai's *Sisters in Literature: Female Sexuality in Antigone, Middlemarch, Howards End and Women in Love*, Amy K. Levin's *The Suppressed Sister: A Relationship in Novels by Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Women* and Helena Michie's *Sororophobia: Differences among Women in Literature and Culture*. Leila Silvana May's *Disorderly Sisters: Sibling Relations and Sororal Resistance in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* examines sisters' significance within a wider context of sibling relations, and persuasively argues that the attention lavished on the 'vertical' parent-child pole of the familial axis has led to neglect of the equally significant sibling bond. Although it largely deals with later fiction, Diana Wallace's *Sisters and Rivals in British Women's Fiction 1914-1939* is a particularly interesting contribution to the topic.

Many decisions affecting this book's scope have had to be taken in the course of my research. Although I have confined the study to nineteenth-century sisters I have discussed earlier representations of the relationship - such as Mary and Martha - whose influence is undeniable. And, perhaps more controversially, I have drawn on studies of twentieth-century sisters such as Bank and Kahn's *The Sibling Bond* and popular books such as Elizabeth Fishel's *Sisters*. With one important exception, I have limited my study to books written in English. The exception is Madame de Staël's *Corinne*, which I felt needed to be included here because its impact on later representations of the sister relationship was so overwhelming. Very early in my research I decided that this was to be a study of both British and American literature. Despite the important differences between the two traditions,

both draw on the same tropes of sisterhood, and there is much evidence of influence and exchange between these nations' sister texts, although some local phenomena (such as the Deceased Wife's Sister Act) may certainly be identified.

Note

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1.   Kane, 1995.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The Choice of Sisters

> All women are rivals fundamentally but it never bothers them because they automatically discount the success of others and alibi their own failures on the grounds of circumstance ... but between sisters it's a little more serious. The circumstances are generally about the same so they have fewer excuses with which to comfort themselves. That's why sisters can hate each other with such terrifying intensity (*The Dark Mirror*).

Robert Siodmak's film of 1946, *The Dark Mirror*, opens with the discovery of a dead body. Suspicion soon focuses on twin sisters, played by Olivia de Havilland, one of whom was seen entering the victim's apartment on the night of his murder. The film's psychologist hero - and its audience - has to decide which of the two sisters is the charming and gentle woman she seems to be and which is a deranged murderess. The choice is not a difficult one; the same Rorschach ink blot which makes Ruth see two ladies dancing is interpreted by Terry as the 'lamb of death'. Gradually we learn more about the girls' early life, and particularly about their curiously different effects upon men. Although Terry initially attracted beaux through her lively manner, one by one they all realised they preferred her sister Ruth, perhaps because they sensed Terry's mental instability. The murder victim was merely the last in a succession of men both had dated; it was his eventual preference for Ruth which caused Terry to kill him. (As Olivia de Havilland's own sister, Joan Fontaine, remarked 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned ... especially in favour of her sister'.[1]) Terry's subsequent attempts to drive Ruth mad and delude her into believing that it was she who committed the murder fail, and the guilty twin is arrested.

The film's symbolism encourages us to perceive the twins as two halves of a composite individual by frequently shooting one sister in a mirror, as though she were her twin's reflection. (Similarly the peculiar bond between Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason is most strikingly suggested when Jane sees her rival reflected in a looking-glass.)[2] Thus although the film places the sisters in opposition to one another, and forces us to approve Ruth and reject Terry, we are simultaneously encouraged to resist this choice and fuse the twins together. Indeed it is the dread of being taken away from Ruth rather than simple jealousy which drives Terry to pin the murder on her sister. We might reflect on the possible significance of the twins' different roles, on the fact that the same man who falls in love with Ruth is responsible for revealing her evil sister's guilt. Although Terry is ostensibly the

dominant sister it is Ruth who gains the eventual victory. This ambiguous resolution may be compared with the scene at the end of *The Stepford Wives*; the film's spirited heroine is destroyed by a mannequin of herself, her biddable and domestic alter ego. Although attractive and sympathetic Ruth, like the mannequin, represents the acceptable face of womanhood who must be divided from her rebellious, unfeminine hidden self, here represented by Terry.

The dynamic of the sister relationship in this film provides us with a useful paradigm or template for the complex textual presentation of sisters in the nineteenth century. The sister relationship in literature is the focus for a number of different choices. The writer - or perhaps more accurately the text - invites the reader to choose between sisters. Often, as with Terry and Ruth, the choice is less obvious than it seems; indeed the more apparently straightforward the choice, the more likely it is that the reader will feel a reflex or revulsion away from the 'good' sister. This process of selection is frequently paralleled within the novel by its hero whose own choice may or may not be shared by his creator. And sisters themselves have choices to make, perhaps between a virtuous or an evil life, as in *The Dark Mirror*, perhaps between domesticity and a career. All these different choices have a special resonance in the nineteenth century, a fact which may explain why the literature of the period contains so many and such memorable sisters.

In *The Dark Mirror* the interest lies in contemplating the disparity between the sisters' physical identity and complete mental and moral opposition. This blend of sameness and difference - presented here in a particularly extreme form - lies at the heart of the relationship's appeal to artists and writers. Sisters have both an individual and a collective identity; variety and contrast are given special significance and piquancy by the ballast of shared heredity and upbringing; divergences are more pointed when they emerge from a single source. The peculiar fascination of the relationship is well described by Helena Michie in her discussion of Branwell Brontë's famous portrait of his sisters: 'Who can resist comparing the sisters to each other? Who can resist the structure of opposition, the grid of difference and sameness? We feast on the differences between the sisters, on the arguments and difficulties that arose among them' (Michie, 1992, p.56). The contemplation of this 'grid of difference and sameness' manoeuvres the spectator into making a choice between the sisters. More readers of the nineteenth-century novel will have paused to consider whether they prefer Emily to Charlotte (or indeed to Anne) than will have weighed up the rival claims of, say, Dickens and Hardy. It is that which sisters have in common - even if it is no more than the mere fact of relationship - which makes it more likely that people will seek to choose between them.

The close affinity between sisters may produce a uniquely affectionate relationship yet also - as suggested in the opening quotation from *The Dark Mirror* - provides a breeding ground for bitter jealousy and competition. Euripides' Electra, for example, suggests that her mother Clytemnestra might profitably have courted comparison with her morally lax sister Helen: 'When Helen, your sister, had behaved in such a way, you could have won great renown; bad deeds attract

people's attention and provide a standard of comparison for judging the good' (Euripides, 1998, p.168). Such a spiteful strategy is scarcely sisterly. Yet despite the closeness of the relationship it is one over which we have no choice, and thus contrasts with the voluntary yoke of friendship.

Although they cannot opt out of sisterhood, sister heroines are generally presented with some power to choose their own destiny, Like Clytemnestra and Helen they are likely to take contrasting paths through life; real and fictional sisters seem to share the urge for de-identification; each experiences the need to find her own niche, and subconsciously selects opposing aspects of her potential character to develop at the expense of those cultivated by her sister. The use of sharply contrasting sisters in literature may thus be explained with reference to 'real life' as well as fictional interest and convenience. Despite all the pressures of heredity and upbringing which we might expect to produce similar sisters, other pressures conspire to drive sisters apart in order that each can forge her own personality: 'It is as though unconsciously the pairs ... evolve a system in which they develop only certain parts of themselves in order to cut down on or avoid altogether the powerful pulls towards competition found within virtually any family' (McNaron, 1985, p.4). A typical manifestation of this de-identification is described by Louise Bernikow: '... they had made or accepted a conventional sibling division, my mother and my aunt, one becoming the serious, intellectual, "smart" sister, the other outgoing, sociable, the "pretty" sister' (Bernikow, 1981, p.75).

In nineteenth-century literature such differences between sisters are often accounted for by quirks of heredity. Sisters' characteristics may be traced back to one parent or another. Elizabeth Bennet, for example, takes after her quick-witted father whereas her younger sisters inherit their mother's folly. Another variation, identified by Michael Cohen, may come into play when the sisters have only one common parent; moral disparity between a man's two wives - as in Scott's *Heart of Midlothian* (1818) - will produce two very different half-sisters. Cohen argues that this relationship was favoured by Victorian writers as a strategy for explaining moral differences between sisters: '... there are mothers who produce pure offspring and mothers who produce impure offspring - not, inconveniently and inexplicably, one mother who produces both' (Cohen, 1995, p.121). But although the idea of sisters selecting different paths through life, even different personalities, may be traced back to Euripides and continues to operate to this day, we may identify an additional urgency in the presentation of sisters' choices during the nineteenth century. This was a particularly dynamic period for women. Changes in the law gave them greater independence from male control,[3] and their initially restricted career choices widened considerably.[4] There could be no easier way of presenting the difficult choices women had to make than through the use of contrasting sisters one of whom chooses marriage, the other a brilliant career. The use of sisters rather than friends or strangers to exemplify different paths open to women enabled the results of such choices to emerge with particular clarity. When two girls are bound together by ties of blood and childhood experience, any great

disparity in their eventual fates may be traced more securely to the moment their paths diverged, to the different choices they made.

An Ur-narrative of sisterhood which might be adduced in this context is the well known account of Martha and Mary in Luke's Gospel:

> Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house.
>
> And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word.
>
> But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.
>
> And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:
>
> But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her (Luke 10:38-42).

This is a potentially problematic narrative as Martha's domesticity (seen, in the nineteenth century particularly, as woman's proper sphere) is shown to be subordinate to Mary's quest for spiritual enlightenment. This problem is avoided by the Victorian poet Robert Montgomery in his poem 'Martha and Mary' through the particular colouring he gives to each sister's actions. Mary's is an essentially passive devotion:

> So her tender spirit drinks
> Into its essence those reviving words
> By Jesus uttered; while her lifted gaze
> Deepens before him, as those radiant truths
> His doctrine darts upon her asking mind -
> Brighter and brighter to her soul descend! (Montgomery (1847) p.151).

Martha's activity, on the other hand, is characterised as inappropriate and unnecessary:

> But Martha, like the restless billow, works
> Hither and thither with excited mind.
> She on the household hath her heart bestowed
> By zeal mistaken ...
> The Christ rebuked her, for the sad unrest
> That tasked her being with an over-toil
> Unwise, as needless (pp.151-2).

Her domesticity is described in terms which we might expect to find used of an unfeminine activity such as demanding study; it is the product of a restless nature. The final expression of disapproval, the phrase 'unwise, as needless' might also

typically be applied to some academic endeavour, unsuited to the weaker female intellect. More in the spirit of Luke is *Middlemarch* where the Mary-like Dorothea is privileged above her conventional and domestic sister Celia.

In the course of this study I discuss several examples of sisters who must choose between domestic happiness and a career; a paradigmatic text for this particular type of sororal contrast is Christina Rossetti's 'The Lowest Room' (Rossetti, 1979, vol. 1, p.200).[5] This takes the form of a debate between two sisters on the respective merits of Homer's heroes and those of their own age. The elder and more intellectually ambitious sister considers the nineteenth century 'days of dross' while the younger, prettier sister deplores the morality of ancient epic. The poem then jumps forward twenty years as the elder beholds her sister a happy wife and mother while her own lot is: 'to live alone/ In mine own world of interests,/ Much felt but little shown' (202-4). Cosslett comments on the typicality of this relationship: 'These two sisters represent a powerful and enduring relationship of types in Victorian literature. The elder, unconventional and discontented ... though full of frustrated passion, she is physically unattractive and unacceptable as a conventional marriage partner. ... The younger sister is conventionally attractive, very blonde, and skilled at feminine accomplishments' (Cosslett, 1988, p.20). The elder sister's apparent acceptance of 'the lowest place' is contradicted by her citation of the scriptural text 'the last shall be first' (Matthew 19:30), as though asserting precedence over the sister who has outdone her in worldly terms. In fact it seems that even in 'real life' sisters will find something to envy, something to pity or shun, in one another: 'She is both what I would most aspire to be but feel I never can be *and* what I am most proud *not* to be but fearful of becoming' (Downing, 1988, p.12).

Whatever difficulties a text may place in the way of the reader making a definitive choice between sisters, the invitation to make a choice of some kind is almost invariably implicit within the narrative. Even where two sisters are broadly similar women the novelist will naturally wish to differentiate between his two heroines.[6] One typical strategy is to make one sister more conventionally beautiful with regular features but identify the other as more 'attractive', perhaps more striking or lively. In Trollope's *The Small House at Allington* (1862-4), for example, we are told that although Bell is 'the beauty of the family' (p.18) she is 'less vivacious than her sister Lily' (p.19). Later Trollope contrasts them more explicitly, almost acknowledging that the way he distinguishes between them is a little hackneyed: 'I wish it could be understood without any description that they were two pretty fair-haired girls, of whom Bell was the tallest and the prettiest, whereas Lily was almost as pretty as her sister, and perhaps was more attractive' (p.48). When, in James' *The Europeans* (1878), the Baroness Münster asks her brother Felix which of their new found cousins is the prettier he answers 'Charlotte' to which she immediately replies 'I see. You are in love with Gertrude' (p.26). She is undoubtedly responding to his tone and expression, but her shrewd guess is in part perhaps a metatextual observation on the workings of one particular sororal trope. It is significant that both Lily and Gertrude immediately win the male

protagonist's love; we might have expected the more obvious beauty of Bell and Charlotte to have made a stronger initial impact. This is the pattern identifiable in Charlotte Lennox's *Sophia* and Jane West's *A Gossip's Story*, two eighteenth-century novels which depict men first falling for a lovely but flawed girl before realising that her plainer sister is the better woman.[7] It would seem that nineteenth-century heroes were created with the lessons of their predecessors already learnt, that the frequent negative correlation between beauty and worth in a pair of sisters had become a plot given rather than a plot twist. Such a system of checks and balances often operates within sister pairs, giving them different but equally valuable assets - a Biblical variant is to give one sister beauty, the other fertility. The most famous example is the story of Leah and Rachel, but the same division can be found in the book of Samuel which tells of Saul's two daughters, Michal and Merab.

Women cannot help being more beautiful or more fertile than their sisters. More interesting examples of sororal contrast have a moral dimension, and invite the reader to choose between the different types - how free that choice is varies greatly. A number of texts present us with one girl who is passionate, creative, uncontrolled and (generally) dark who is contrasted with her more restrained, conventional and fairer sister. A simple model for this strategy can be seen in the fairy tale 'Snow White and Rose Red':

> The widow had two children who looked like the rosebushes: one was Snow White and the other Rose Red. They were more pious and kind, more hardworking and diligent than any other two children in the world. To be sure, Snow White was more quiet and gentle than Rose Red, who preferred to run round in the meadows and fields, look for flowers, and catch butterflies. Snow White stayed at home with her mother, helped her with the housework, or read to her when there was nothing to do (Grimm, 1987, p.516).

The sisters encounter a friendly black bear who turns out to be a king's son disguised by a curse. At the end of the story he regains his proper form and marries Snow White; Rose Red marries his brother. Although the two girls' different temperaments conform with their contrasting complexions there is no particular invitation to choose between the sisters. The ending, with its carefully equitable division of the spoils, implies that both are equally deserving. Contrasting sisters in a full-length novel are unlikely to receive such evenhanded treatment from either narrator or reader. An influential example of more complexly contrasted sisters can be found in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Antigone and Ismene are the daughters of Oedipus by his own mother Jocasta. When Creon, the king of Thebes, forbids the burial of the girls' brother Polyneices, Antigone resolves to defy this decree and award him due funeral rites. Although a loyal and loving sister who wishes to partake of Antigone's punishment for this transgression, Ismene advises caution at the beginning of the play and opposes her sister's decision to defy Creon.[8] Sophocles presents Antigone as more forceful, more masculine, than the womanly

Ismene. The pattern of sororal contrast between Antigone's (self-)destruction and Ismene's survival is replayed in texts such as Madame de Staël's *Corinne* and Wilkie Collins' *No Name*, and is well described by Christine Downing in *Psyche's Sisters*, a study of the sister relationship in myth and psychology: 'These sisters represent two essentially opposed moralities. They are not really rivals; nor is one given strength and the other relegated weakness. Each in her own way is equally powerful and fully female. Though as close to each other as two humans can be, they are fundamentally *other*' (Downing, 1988, p.84). Masako Hirai's observations on the ambivalence and complexity of our response to Antigone and Ismene are equally applicable to many of the later sisters included in this study: 'It depends on our own value system how we assess one sister against another. In other words, our sense of value is tested by the way we interpret the sisters' words and actions' (Hirai, 1988, p.36).

With Sophocles' sisters, as with many of their nineteenth-century descendants, a difference in character or opinions need not be a bar to complete devotion. 'But what is life to me, without my sister?', asks Ismene (Sophocles (1998) p.21). A related sister relationship in Sophocles is that between Electra and Chrysothemis; whereas Electra wants to be revenged on her mother, Chrysothemis, though acknowledging that her sister's wishes are justified, timorously prefers inaction: 'but since *they* rule,/ I must submit, or lose all liberty' (Sophocles, 1998, p.113). George Steiner's observation on the *Nachleben* of Ismene is an incidental reflection on the way this trope of sororal contrast has since developed: 'Iconography and staging have not been kind to Ismene. She is the blonde, hollow one' (Steiner, 1986, p.144). Colouring, as we shall see in the next chapter, always has a signifying role, and is a key factor in determining a sister's character. Steiner also notes that the name Chrysothemis means 'the golden one' (p.145); in her case, as in that of almost all her literary descendants, gentlemen may prefer blondes but readers rarely do. Occasionally the blonde rather than the dark sister represents 'uncontrol', but generally under a less than positive aspect; obviously hair colour is no more a prescription for character in literature than in life, but it is possible to identify a trend whereby sensibility and lack of restraint in fair-haired women tend to be associated with frivolity, shallowness and sexual laxity rather than with sincere and passionate emotion.

The impulse to choose between sister heroines in texts such as *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) or Madame de Staël's *Corinne* (1807) - two exemplary versions of the trope of sororal contrast from the beginning of the century - is unavoidable, even though not all readers will make the same choice and our sympathy may veer between sisters several times over the course of a novel. A sister's success within the text - perhaps through gaining a husband where her sister fails - may trigger a corresponding failure outwith the text as she loses the reader's favour. A potent paradigm is *Corinne* - which I discuss at length in Chapter One - whose blonde heroine gains the hero's hand while her dark sister wins more sympathy from the reader and gives the novel its name. Sometimes a sister may seem to take the initiative in a very particular way, making an apparent sacrifice of her happiness,

reputation, or beloved in order to make a corresponding gain within the
metanarrative. Because sacrifice is a way of gaining power it is (surprisingly) a
sign of rivalry between sisters, and often invokes the idea of specific sexual
competition even if this isn't present in the literal narrative. These tensions are the
focus of Chapter Three.

The invitation to the reader to choose between sisters within a single novel is
replicated at the intertextual level. There is a good deal of significant interplay
between novels featuring sisters; indeed we might want to think of later novels
reacting to their predecessors in a sisterly way, consciously or unconsciously de-
identifying from an earlier text, frequently reversing or questioning the choices
earlier writers encouraged their readers to make between sisters - although in fact
such early nineteenth-century texts as *Corinne* and *Sense and Sensibility* are too
shifting and unstable for us to talk of 'reversing' them in a stark or simple way.[9]
Put another way, the relationship *between individual* sisters is replayed as the
difference *between groups* of sisters. Elizabeth Abel's remarks on female
friendship are equally - perhaps even more - applicable to blood sisterhood: 'The
distinctive dynamics of fusion and differentiation that characterise fictional female
friendships suggest that equivalent dynamics may operate in a literary avatar of
friendship: influence' (Abel, 1981, p.432). The writers I discuss in this study (not
all women of course) bicker amongst themselves, and strive to differentiate
themselves from one another, but also emulate their elder role models. Liane
Ritchey Sillett associates the way nineteenth-century sisters conversed and read to
one another with the harmonious and receptive relationship between many sister-
novelists of the period: 'As these female narrative artists read, reread, and imitated,
they also listened to each other. This retelling was reflected in the narrative
structure of their novels. Women practised a conversation ritual built around
exchanging dialogue with sisters early in life and took delight in reading aloud to
each other' (Sillett, 1994, p.235). And one of the characteristics of nineteenth-
century representations of sisters is the awareness shown by each new voice of the
wider tradition of sisterhood which she has been shaped by and is now helping to
shape in her turn. Such is the relationship between *Sense and Sensibility* and
Middlemarch (1871-2) for example, and novels about larger groups of sisters
display particular intertextual self-consciousness. These 'conversations' between
sister novels are discussed in Chapters Four and Five.

Group novels share the same patterns and divisions which we may trace in
accounts of paired sisters, although our sense of contrast is inevitably somewhat
diffused where the focus is fragmented among three or more girls. Again and again
we find the same 'types', typically the blue stocking, the mother figure, the spoiled
baby, the invalid and the beauty, but differently configured according to the tastes
and prejudices of each writer. Such variety, as Elizabeth Fishel identifies, has a
special appeal for readers: 'So part of its [*Little Women*'s] magical appeal for girls
grasping onto the first thin reeds of an identity is the clarity and definition of the
sisters' individual roles, a neat novelistic order imposed on what seems the chaos
and haphazardness of growing up' (Fishel, 1994, p.105). As with paired sisters, we