I will argue that the eventual heterosexual marriage plots within the Victorian novel are irrelevant to the main relationships explored in the text — those between women. Female friendship is more than a precursor to marriage — it is more important for these character’s development than heterosexual marriage. This reading of these texts removes some of the conclusiveness and security that comes with the marriage plot. It forces the reader into murky territory in which love, affection and desire are not so easily distinguished, and in which the pairing of women is not always easily defined or understood. While being grounded in critical works discussing the novels of many Victorian authors, I will focus my textual analysis primarily on Shirley by Charlotte Brontë and Wives and Daughters by Elizabeth Gaskell. It is in the examination of the critique of marriage, the inclusion of physical intimacy and gazing, and the masculine gendering of Molly and Shirley that these relationships between women come to the forefront of my examination. It is limiting to only view the relationships between Caroline and Shirley and Cynthia and Molly as ‘friendships’ — they are romantic relationships that satisfy the women more deeply than any heterosexual relationship ever does.

By giving more critical attention to these relationships than to those between women and men, the actual lived experience of the Victorian woman — fictional and factual — can be better understood. The women in these novels, who dominate and propel the narrative, deserve the equivalent amount of attention. In these novels, women spend a good amount of time interacting with, living with and talking to their female friends and relations, and a comparatively short amount of time interacting with any male suitors. The intimacies formed between these female friends take up a large amount of narrative space. They propel the emotional development of the female protagonists, serve as the mechanism through which these characters are able to vocalize their internal experience to the reader, and generally complete their existence in their respective communities.