

A Secret Sisterhood by Emily Midorikawa and Emma Claire Sweeney — close to greatness

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Byron and Shelley, Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, Hemingway and Fitzgerald — friendships between male writers are part of our literary landscape. By contrast, as Emily Midorikawa and Emma Claire Sweeney observe in *A Secret Sisterhood*, “the world’s most celebrated female authors are mythologised as solitary eccentrics or isolated geniuses”. Midorikawa and Sweeney, whose blog *Something Rhymed* has unearthed many female literary bonds, focus here on female friendships that underpinned the writing careers of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf, explaining along the way why these important relationships have been suppressed, passed over or misinterpreted. The portrait of Austen in *A Secret Sisterhood* could not be further from the genteel lady novelist described by her early biographers. We are presented instead with a class traitor who fraternised with the emerging playwright Anne Sharp, a workhouse-born governess. Their intimacy was emotional and intellectual — a connection so intense that Jane’s sister, Cassandra, felt impelled to burn most of their correspondence. She hated that Jane and Anne shared the life of the mind; add to this Regency England’s strict observance of class distinctions and it is easy to see why the relationship was overlooked for so long. When the authors turn to Charlotte Brontë, long marginalised as a spinster scribbling with her sisters in the Haworth parsonage or tramping solo on the Yorkshire moors, they excavate the profound literary influence of her rebellious school friend, the nonconformist Mary Taylor. It was Taylor, they point out, who challenged Brontë’s self-image as a conservative thinker, and Taylor too who encouraged her to write directly about industrial agitation, resulting in the overtly political *Shirley*. Politics is also a major link in the hidden relationship between George Eliot and Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Stowe was so actively engaged in the anti-slavery movement that Abraham Lincoln is said to have credited her with starting the American Civil War. Eliot and Stowe’s transatlantic correspondence stimulated rigorous political debates about slavery and antisemitism. Eliot processed these muscular discussions and, partly inspired by Stowe, damned Victorian antisemitism in *Daniel Deronda*. Here, Eliot creates sympathetic Jewish characters, and this novel, a watershed in English literature, implicitly defies Jewish caricatures created by Chaucer, Marlowe, Shakespeare and Dickens. As with Eliot and Stowe, Virginia Woolf’s friendship with the New Zealand short story writer Katherine Mansfield began when both were known authors. Both were bisexual, and Midorikawa and Sweeney do not hide Mansfield and Woolf’s mutual attraction. Contesting accounts that brand them merely as bitter rivals, *A Secret Sisterhood* exposes the complexity of their mutual admiration, competition and support. There is a touching image of Woolf, lovingly typesetting Mansfield’s stories, letter by letter, for the Hogarth Press. Woolf recognised Mansfield as her equal and ally. She understood female

talent was weakened when it was ghettoised and divided. With this in mind, she courageously conquered the internalised societal voice that says, “If she is good then I am not.” Deconstructing superficial images of female writers, *A Secret Sisterhood* is not only a rectification of censored histories but a contemporary study with immediate resonance for women’s creative presence. Midorikawa and Sweeney have committed an exceptional act of literary espionage. English literature owes them a great debt.

A Secret Sisterhood: The Hidden Friendships of Austen, Bronte, Eliot and Woolf, by Emily Midorikawa and Emma Claire Sweeney, Aurum Press, RRP£20, 320 pages
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