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Source: *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Jul., 1996), pp. 23-50

Published by: University of Texas Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3840441>

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Anne Lister's Construction of Lesbian Identity

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ANNE LISTER WAS a Yorkshire gentlewoman who resided in a manor house called Shibden Hall in the early nineteenth century. An heiress, she was able to educate herself in the classics, she expressed no interest in men, and she did not have to marry. In coded portions of her extensive diaries, Anne Lister wrote of her passionate relationships with women, noting every “kiss” (her term for orgasm) she experienced. Although she did not use the word lesbian, at age thirty, she wrote, “I love and only love the fairer sex and thus, beloved by them in turn my heart revolts from any other love but theirs.”¹

Anne Lister illuminates not only lesbian history but questions of representation and agency in the larger field of the history of sexuality as well. Until recently, historians of homosexuality have followed the social constructionist paradigm that our sexual identities are shaped, even determined, by discourses rather than by our own desires. For instance, women who loved women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were thought to have followed the model of “passionate friendship.”² Nineteenth-century women, it was thought, could not even conceive of

I wish to thank Anne Carter, Stephanie Sieburth, Karen Haltunen, and the anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* for insightful comments on this article. The Calderdale archives staff in Halifax, England, were most helpful. I would also like to thank the University of North Carolina at Charlotte Foundation for funds necessary for travel and research.

¹Helena Whitbread, ed., *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister, 1791–1840* (London, 1988), p. 145.

²For a pioneering exploration of this theme, see Leila Rupp, “Imagine My Surprise: Women’s Relationships in Historical Perspective,” *Frontiers* 5 (1980): 61–70.

sexual desire for each other, having no words for such feelings. Instead, they kissed, embraced, and exchanged intensely romantic letters, but rarely if ever progressed to genital sex. As a result, society regarded such friendships as perfectly respectable, even touching. In 1811, two school teachers won damages against a pupil's relative who accused them of lesbianism, because the judges believed such behavior was impossible between women.³ Women, therefore, could not develop a lesbian identity, because no such notion existed in their culture.

Similarly, Michel Foucault posited that until the late nineteenth century a man who engaged in sodomy was punished for committing an act regarded as sinful and/or criminal, but he was not regarded as having a homosexual personality. The homosexual identity only arose when sexologists and psychiatrists began to define those who committed certain acts as effeminate homosexual men or masculine lesbians.⁴ Passionate friendships that were previously regarded as respectable then became stigmatized as perverted.⁵ Yet many lesbians and gay men believed that such theories explained their desires and gave them an identity as biologically different rather than criminally deviant. Drawn together by this new sense of self, gay men, and to a lesser extent lesbians, created subcultures in urban, bohemian areas.

Foucault stressed that homosexuals and other "deviants" could subvert, resist, and manipulate these identities; for instance, a gay man could take a doctor's definition of him as congenitally mentally ill and assert that he was born with these desires so there was nothing wrong with him. Similarly, a lesbian could take the notion that she was a member of a "third sex," incorporating a masculine personality in a feminine body, to take pride in her "butch" identity.⁶ Nonetheless, according to the Foucaultian paradigm, there was little room for individual agency. Despite the ability of homosexuals to twist expert definitions, they were never seen to originate their own sexual identity.⁷

This Foucaultian paradigm has been breaking down in the last few years. On an empirical level, Foucault's chronology has been shown to

³Lilian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (New York, 1981), and *Scotch Verdict* (New York, 1983), p. 281.

⁴Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978).

⁵Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York, 1985), p. 265.

⁶Jennifer Terry, "Theorizing Deviant Historiography," *differences* 5 (1991): 55–74.

⁷As in Joan Scott, "Experience," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan Scott (New York, 1992), p. 34. To be sure, Scott acknowledges agency, but concentrates on the discursive construction of the subject. See also Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993), pp. 6–8.

be false. Randolph Trumbach, Theo van der Meer, and George Chauncey have extensively documented gay male subcultures that flourished in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cities, long before sexologists and psychiatrists invented “the homosexual.”⁸ Anne Lister's diaries made clear that women who engaged in passionate friendships could be quite aware of their sexual feelings—and act on them, as Martha Vicinus, Terry Castle, Trumbach, and Lisa Moore point out.⁹ By discovering Sapphic references in eighteenth-century English diaries, letters, dramas, and pamphlet literature, Emma Donoghue has shown that contemporaries could potentially conceive of lesbian desire, although they continued to perceive it as a sin. Trumbach has also argued that in late eighteenth-century England, a Sapphic role developed for masculine, lesbian women.¹⁰

The theory that individuals could only acquire a “homosexual identity” when it was invented by sexologists—that they are inserted into discourses—does not hold water historically. An alternative would be the theory of “sexual scripts,” which holds that sexual desires are learned, rather than innate.¹¹ Men who had sex with other men may have been socialized into their subcultures through mock rituals of gender inver-

⁸For instance, see Randolph Trumbach, “London's Sodomites: Homosexual Behavior and Western Culture in the 18th Century,” *Journal of Social History* 11 (1977): 1–33, “Sodomitical Subcultures, Sodomitical Roles, and the Gender Revolution of the Eighteenth Century: The Recent Historiography,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 9 (1985): 109–21, and “Sex, Gender, and Sexual Identity in Modern Culture: Male Sodomy and Female Prostitution in Enlightenment London,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 2 (1991): 186–203; George Chauncey, *Gay New York* (New York, 1995); Theo van der Meer, “Sodomy and the Pursuit of a Third Sex in the Early Modern Period,” in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York, 1994), pp. 137–88; and Gert Hekma, “‘A Female Soul in a Male Body’: Sexual Inversion as Gender Inversion in Nineteenth-Century Sexology,” in Herdt, ed., pp. 189–240.

⁹Martha Vicinus, “‘They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong’: The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity,” *Feminist Studies* 18 (1992): 481; Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York, 1993), p. 93; Randolph Trumbach, “The Origins and Development of the Modern Lesbian Role in the Western Gender System: Northwestern Europe and the United States, 1750–1990,” *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* 20 (1994): 289; Lisa Moore, “‘Something More Still Tender Still Than Friendship’: Romantic Friendship in Early Nineteenth-Century England,” *Feminist Studies* 18 (1992): 511.

¹⁰Emma Donoghue, *Passions between Women: British Lesbian Culture, 1668–1801* (London, 1993); see also Randolph Trumbach, “London's Sapphists: From Three Sexes to Four Gender in the Making of Modern Culture,” in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York, 1991), pp. 112–41—a revised version can be found in Herdt, ed., pp. 111–36, 518–28. For an earlier example, see Patricia Crawford and Sara Mendelson, “Sexual Identities in Early Modern England: The Marriage of Two Women in 1680,” *Gender and History* 7 (1995): 362–77.

¹¹For a recent discussion, see Edward O. Laumann and John H. Gagnon, “A Sociological Perspective on Sexual Action,” in *Conceiving Sexuality: Approaches to Sex Research in a*

sion in their pubs and learned the codes necessary to pick each other up in the street. But the notion of sexual scripts is complicated by the intensely negative attitudes toward sodomy and masculine women in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century society. Of course, the notion of “stigma” helps us understand that people can take up even a rather negative role, for any identity is better than none.¹² Men who had not been initiated into urban subcultures would hear about the “mollies” or “sodomites” and know that, however hated, their kind did exist. However, people isolated from subcultures sometimes formulated their own more positive sexual identities. For instance, Theo van der Meer discovered the case of an eighteenth-century rural Dutch preacher who asserted that his desires for young men were “proper to his nature.”¹³

These theoretical problems become even more pressing when considering the case of early nineteenth-century lesbianism in England. Although lesbian subcultures probably existed among dancers and prostitutes in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Paris, no evidence for such subcultures has been found in England so far.¹⁴ Anne Lister therefore could not have been socialized into a subculture. While knowledge about male sodomy was widespread, Sapphic references seem to have been largely confined to sophisticated and cosmopolitan circles of intellectuals and theater people in London and Bath. Anne only moved in these circles after she had several intense sexual relationships with

Postmodern World, ed. Richard G. Parker and John H. Gagnon (New York, 1995), pp. 183–214.

¹² Ervin Goffman, *Stigma* (New York, 1986); Ken Plummer, *Sexual Stigma* (London, 1973).

¹³ Van der Meer, “Sodomy and the Pursuit of a Third Sex in The Early Modern Period,” p. 200.

¹⁴ Emma Donoghue and Randolph Trumbach suggest that we simply have not found such evidence because we have not been looking in the right way. That is possible, but in the course of extensive research on other projects into popular literature, prostitution, cross-dressing, police court records, newspapers, and trials in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in London, Glasgow, Yorkshire, and Manchester I actively looked for such evidence and found none. It is possible that lesbian networks or subcultures did not exist in England in the way they existed in France and Amsterdam. I hope further research proves me wrong! Such subcultures existed in Paris among dancers, actresses, and prostitutes, as Michael Ryan, a doctor, noted in his *Prostitution in London* (London, 1839), pp. 56, 179. Ryan said he had seen no evidence of such women in London. For Paris, see D. A. Coward, “Attitudes to Homosexuality in 18th Century France,” *Journal of European Studies* 10 (1980): 246–47; Marie-Jo Bonnet, *Un choix sans equivoque: Recherches historiques sur les relations amoureuses entre les femmes, XVIe–XXe siècle* (Paris, 1981), p. 65. For Amsterdam, see Theo van der Meer, “Tribades on Trial: Female Same-Sex Offenders in Late Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam,” in *Forbidden History: The State, Society, and the Regulation of Sexuality in Modern Europe*, ed. John C. Fout (Chicago, 1992), pp. 189–210.

women, and after she had begun trying to develop her own sense of a lesbian self.

To understand Anne, we must therefore construct a model of the individual acquisition of a sexual identity that is more nuanced than simply acquiring a pre-given role.¹⁵ This is not, as Judith Butler fears, to assert that “there is one who arrives in the world, in discourse, without a history.”¹⁶ Instead, I want to restore agency to the process by which some individuals attempt to create a sense of self as “something that has to be worked on, invented, and reinvented . . . the modern self . . . is a reflexive process, made and remade by the person in terms of his or her own experience,” to quote Jeffrey Weeks.¹⁷ I will take Anne Lister as an example of how some individuals deliberately construct their own identities with three elements: their own temperaments and inherent desires; their material circumstances; and the cultural representations available to them.¹⁸ While many people in the nineteenth century probably passively accepted conventional socialization, an individual whose desires and circumstances dissonantly clashed with his or her cultural role may have been more likely to forge a singular sense of self.

Anne Lister recorded her quest for self-identity in her extensive diaries and notes on her readings.¹⁹ She apparently kept notes for her journal every day and then copied them into bound volumes both in regular script and in code.²⁰ This code, based on Greek, originated in the context of her first love affair as a young girl. She and Eliza Raine, and later she and Marianna Belcomb, used the code to write love letters to each other, which Anne often copied down in her journals. The code, of course, was used for sexual matters (she also put a cross in the margins

¹⁵For a discussion of the “incoherence” of binary oppositions in terms of the development of the identity “homosexual,” but also how gay people have developed a sense of identity, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, 1990), p. 9.

¹⁶Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (n. 7 above), p. 228.

¹⁷Jeffrey Weeks, “History, Desire, and Identities,” in Parker and Gagnon, eds., p. 38. For further discussions of the self, see Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift, eds., *Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation* (New York, 1995), pp. 5–35; and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), p. 289. Foucault himself became more interested in the process of self-construction in the last years of his life. See Luther H. Martin et al., eds., *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst, MA, 1988); and Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, vol. 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1986).

¹⁸For a similar discussion of a materialist approach to working-class autobiographies, see Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832–1920* (Oxford, 1991), p. 7.

¹⁹For a study of diaries in general, see Robert A. Fothergill, *Private Chronicles: A Study of English Diaries* (London, 1974), p. 30.

²⁰Jill Liddington, “Anne Lister of Shibden Hall, Halifax (1791–1840): Her Diaries and the Historians,” *History Workshop* 35 (1995): 61.

to indicate she had an orgasm), but also recorded private thoughts and discussions about her relationships with her family and neighbors. Although her descendant John Lister cracked the diary's code in the late nineteenth century, he and subsequent archivists were horrified at her sexual explicitness, and they concealed the key to the code for generations.²¹ In 1988, however, local historian Helena Whitbread, with the help of more modern archivists, transcribed and published a volume of excerpts from the diaries, publishing another in 1992. I have also read and transcribed selections from the diaries and her extracts from her readings. The diaries reveal that Anne was extremely strong-minded, self-willed, opinionated, energetic, intelligent, iconoclastic, curious, and manipulative.

Material circumstances both enabled Anne to pursue her lesbian desires and constrained their open expression. The oldest daughter of a retired captain turned gentleman farmer, Anne Lister conventionally would have married and become a genteel wife according to the influential ideology of separate spheres. However, she engaged in her first lesbian sexual relationship in boarding school and determined never to wed. Fortunately, her money allowed her the eccentricity of spinsterhood and the opportunity to educate herself in the classics and to travel abroad. Yet Anne also owed her wealth, in part, to the force of her personality. Her aunt and uncle bequeathed Shibden Hall to her to keep it in the family after her brother had died but also because she proved to her aunt and uncle that she could run the estate more capably than her ne'er-do-well father.²²

Waiting for her inheritance, she lacked the funds for most of her life to support a female lover in style. Her first lover was Eliza Raine, a young woman of color who stood to inherit from her West Indian planter father. Next, Anne took up with Isabella Norcliffe, daughter of a wealthy family, but soon fell in love with Marianna Belcombe. Unfortunately, Marianna married for money—being the penniless daughter of a doctor—yet Anne and she continued as lovers for years. Frustrated at this state of affairs, Anne spent some time in Paris, where she had affairs with Maria Barlow and Madame de Rosny. However, what she really wanted was a life-partner who could match her socially and financially; Lister attained this goal, although not true love, with neighboring heiress Anne Walker in 1832 and lived and traveled with Walker until her own death in 1840.²³

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²² Anne Lister Manuscript Diaries, July 21, 1820, SH/7/ML/E/4, Calderdale Archives, Halifax. Henceforth referred to as Manuscript Diaries.

²³ Helena Whitbread, ed., *No Priest but Love: The Journals of Anne Lister, 1824–1828* (Otley, England, 1992), pp. 4–5, 204–6.

The flux of sexual morality characteristic of the late eighteenth century still flavored Anne's cultural milieu. Anne read about and discussed Queen Caroline's 1820 trial for adultery, which also exposed George IV's much more extensive sexual shenanigans.²⁴ She knew Byron's poetry, and his bad reputation. The father of one of her friends kept a mistress fairly openly. She also noted in her journal the arrest of the Bishop of Clogher for having sex with a guardsman.²⁵ Because she belonged to an old landed family (though one rather obscure and reduced) she faced fewer constraints on her behavior than she would as the daughter of a father engaged in commercial or industrial occupations. Such men's credit depended, in part, on the conventional behavior of their daughters and wives.²⁶ Anne only had to please her uncle and aunt. Anne therefore knew that upper-class, especially aristocratic and royal, people engaged in libertine behavior, but she also realized that such antics had to be concealed.

Anne's diaries reveal that despite her public probity as a genteel heiress, she knew she was a renegade at heart. Like many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century diarists in this era of the "invention of the self,"²⁷ Anne tried to create a coherent identity while at the same time recording herself playing many different roles. The diary is a way of constructing a private sense of self, but since it is written day by day, rather than invented as a self-conscious whole (as an autobiography would be) the tensions and contradictions between identity and behavior become more apparent. As Irving Howe writes, "Once perceived or imagined, the self implies doubleness, multiplicity. . . . I may be fixed in social rank, but that does not exhaust, it may not even quite define, who I am or what I mean."²⁸ The eighteenth-century fascination with the masquerade and the era's acceptance of hypocrisy meant that one could create several different selves to suit public and private identities. Like many eighteenth-century politicians, for instance, Boswell publicly spoke with the rhetoric of virtue, presenting himself as a respectable gentleman, but privately confided to his diary his liaisons with prostitutes.²⁹ Later nineteenth-century diarists such as the anonymous author of *My Secret Life* and Arthur Munby, who was fascinated with working-class women, also recounted

²⁴ Manuscript Diaries, September 5, 1820.

²⁵ Whitbread, ed., *I Know My Own Heart* (n. 1 above), p. 212.

²⁶ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class* (London, 1987), p. 208.

²⁷ John O. Lyons, *The Invention of the Self: The Hinge of Consciousness in the Eighteenth Century* (Carbondale, IL, 1978), p. 8.

²⁸ Irving Howe, "The Self in Literature," in *Constructions of the Self*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick, NJ, 1992), p. 249.

²⁹ Felicity Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject* (Baltimore, 1989), p. 25.

their illicit sexual or romantic adventures.³⁰ Similarly, Anne Lister appeared to be a genteel, Anglican landed heiress, albeit a touch eccentric, while secretly recording her sexual adventures and speculations in code.

The repertoire of available selves, however, was much more restricted for women, let alone lesbians, than for heterosexual men. As Felicity Nussbaum points out, Boswell could try out diverse masculine roles from a variety of cultural sources—the rogue from the theater, the hero from the classics, the patriarch from the Bible.³¹ Women could respectably acquire only one role: that of marriage and motherhood. Of course, many apparently conforming women could express covert, perhaps unconscious, discontent, as in the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell and Fanny Burney. Yet, as Patricia Meyer Spacks notes, they consciously conformed to femininity in their diaries, while Anne explicitly wrote about her masculine persona and lesbian activities.³²

The only potential role in which Anne might have imagined herself was that of a partner in a passionate friendship, such as the Ladies of Llangollen. Anne was fascinated with the Ladies of Llangollen, two Irish gentlewomen who had run off to live with each other in Wales. They provided a celebrated exemplar of feminine, yet respectable romance, rarely seen as sexual.³³ But passionate friendship was of limited use as a paradigm for Anne's relationships. First, she and her great love did not have the financial means to live together; marriage or dependence on relatives were their only options.³⁴ Second, it is unclear how totally acceptable passionate friendship was in their time.³⁵ The Ladies of Llangollen were occasionally subtly stigmatized as masculine and lesbian. Anne herself felt she could communicate her dream of taking a woman as a life-partner only to her dear uncle and aunt and to a close friend of radical opinions. Finally, Anne found passionate friendship insufficiently sex-

³⁰For *My Secret Life*, see Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians* (New York, 1966), pp. 91–92; for Munby, Leonore Davidoff, “Class and Gender in Victorian Britain: Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick,” *Feminist Studies* 5 (1979): 87–133.

³¹Nussbaum, p. 36.

³²Ibid.; Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Imagining a Self* (Cambridge, MA, 1976), p. 191.

³³Donoghue (n. 10 above), pp. 124, 150; Elizabeth Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen* (Harmondsworth, 1973).

³⁴Similarly, Anne's contemporaries and fellow Yorkshire residents Charlotte Brönte and Ellen Nussey wrote passionate letters to each other and yearned to live out their lives together, unmarried, in a little cottage. See Elaine Miller, “Through All Changes and Through All Chances: The Relationship of Ellen Nussey and Charlotte Brönte,” in *Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History*, ed. Lesbian History Group (London, 1989), p. 36.

³⁵See Marylyne Diggs, “Romantic Friends or ‘A Different Race of Creatures’: The Representation of Lesbian Pathology in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Feminist Studies* 21 (1995): 317–40.

ual as an ideal. She was convinced the Ladies of Llangollen were lovers.³⁶ What Anne sought was a notion of the self that could integrate her sexuality with other aspects of her life.

Anne therefore could not simply take up roles already existing in the culture, but instead, creatively put together the fragmentary cultural materials available to her to understand her desires for women. As de Lauretis describes this process, individuals absorb “external representations” and then “rework the fantasy in their internal world” of the self.³⁷ Anne’s internal reworking of external representations was particularly difficult because depictions of lesbianism were so forbidden and few. Much of her search for lesbianism involved reading between the lines for subtle hints of desire between women and imaginatively reworking heterosexual sources to fit lesbian relationships. The lesbian reader, as Jean Kennard points out, can don and doff masks of consciousness at will, rummaging through representations for her own costumes.³⁸

Anne formed her sexual identity by creatively reading two main sources: the classics and romantic writers. Men of Anne Lister’s class who desired sex with other men could find in the classics an alternative sexual identity.³⁹ Byron and his friends, for example, read the poetry of Catullus and Martial, which praised the beauty of youths as well as women, pondered elements of Plato’s Symposium, which celebrated the spiritual aspects of love between men, and enjoyed Juvenal’s bawdy, explicit humor when he satirically asked why a man should marry when he could enjoy the pleasures of a boy. Anne copied Byron’s quip in *Don Juan* that editors of Martial segregated all his “indecent” poems together in the end of a volume, ostensibly to warn against their obscenity but conveniently collecting them for the curious.⁴⁰ Anne would have realized that Byron’s poem “To Ellen”—“Oh, might I kiss those eyes of fire, A million scarce would quench desire. . . .”—imitated Catullus’s verse addressed to the boy Juventius and, hence, conveyed a powerful homoerotic charge.⁴¹

³⁶Whitbread, ed., *I Know My Own Heart* (n. 1 above), p. 210.

³⁷Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington, IN, 1994), p. 308.

³⁸For a theory of lesbian reading, see Jean Kennard, “Ourselves Behind Ourselves: A Theory for Lesbian Readers,” in *Gender and Reading*, ed. Elizabeth Flynn and Patrocínio Schweickart (Baltimore, MD, 1986), p. 63–77, quoted in Judith Roof, *A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory* (New York, 1991), p. 162.

³⁹Louis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love* (Berkeley, 1985), pp. 89–98; Joan DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho, 1546–1937* (Chicago, 1989), p. 210; Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, NY, 1994).

⁴⁰Extracts from Readings, vol. 6, fol. 41 (1819), SH 7/ML/EX 1, Calderdale Archives, Halifax. Henceforth referred to as Extracts from Readings.

⁴¹*The Poetical Works of Byron* (Boston, 1975), p. 88, lines 1–2. Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington, IN, 1989), pp. 13–14.

The explicitly homosexual versions of these works, however, were only available in Greek and Latin, and translators increasingly bowdlerized and “straightened” them out. The classics therefore provided a hidden, subterranean circuit of sexuality unknown or little known to the general public. At the same time, the classics were the visible pillar of masculine and aristocratic power.⁴²

There is no evidence, however, that Anne imagined herself as a Greek or Roman male lover. Like Byron, Anne found representations of her desires in classical texts, but the task of excavating them was much more difficult for a nineteenth-century woman than it would have been for an upper-class educated man. Classical knowledge was usually unavailable to women, deprived of university educations. Anne herself had a private tutor. Yet with typical duplicity, she publicly stated that classical learning was improper for ladies because it “undrew a curtain better for them not to peep behind.”⁴³ When Anne herself peeped behind this curtain, she had to deploy her own imagination and self-regard to cope with the misogyny she found in such classical authors. In Greek and Roman society, citizen males exhibited their virility through sex with “inferiors,” whether boys, women, foreigners, or slaves. At the same time, any sign of “effeminacy” was seen as humiliating to the individual and a dangerous indication of societal decadence.⁴⁴ But references to lesbianism were few, oblique, and usually scornful.⁴⁵ Anne therefore had to summon all her considerable scholarly and monetary resources to track down rare editions and read in French and Latin to find any references to sexuality between women.

On the most basic level, the classics provided her with the names and concepts of her desires, unavailable to most women of her time and class. At age twenty-three, when she embarked on her first serious sexual relationship with a woman, she made notes on a detailed sexual vocabulary through her extensive reading, writing in coded Latin definitions of the clitoris, tribadism, eunuchs, pederasts, and so on.⁴⁶

Words for sexual acts and organs were not enough; what Anne sought was an identity. Sappho may have been a precedent. However, during Anne Lister’s time, classical scholars generally bowdlerized Sappho’s

⁴²Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, MA, 1980), pp. 63–64, 169, 280–81.

⁴³Whitbread, ed., *No Priest but Love* (n. 23 above), p. 20.

⁴⁴Eva Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (Berkeley, 1993); Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor* (New York, 1992).

⁴⁵Judith P. Hallett, “Female Homoeroticism and the Denial of Roman Reality in Latin Literature,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3 (1989): 209–27.

⁴⁶Extracts from Readings, vol. 6, fol. 33.

poems into heterosexual versions.⁴⁷ So she turned to Pierre Bayle's dictionary entry on Sappho. Bayle portrayed Sappho as a brilliant, learned woman whose "amorous passion extended even to the persons of her own sex." Bayle's Sappho thus bears a close resemblance to the character of Anne Lister herself. Bayle wonders why she was called "masculine Sappho" by Horace, citing several sources that conclude that it was because "she was tribas [tribade, or lesbian], and that it denotes the inclination she had for the sciences, instead of handling the spindle and the distaff." But this dictionary entry, replete with footnotes and contending interpretations about every fact of her life, also indicated the difficulty of finding a coherent "truth" about Sappho.⁴⁸ Similarly, Anne did not take on a "Sapphic" identity wholesale, but creatively pieced together fragments from many sources to form her own sense of a lesbian self. After noting "most interesting" (but nothing else) regarding her reading of Bayle, Anne Lister set about tracking down his references to Sapphic allusions in Juvenal, Martial, and Horace.⁴⁹

Juvenal, whom Anne studied extensively, used obscene language to satirize Roman society as populated by effeminate men, drunkards, and adulterous women—the aristocratic vices of his age. One of the commentators Anne read on Juvenal, the Reverend D. H. Urquhart, excused the poet as a great republican spirit whose frank verses simply attacked the immorality of his time.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, most contemporary translations of Juvenal were highly censored. But perspicacious Anne found a seventeenth-century Latin commentator, Lubinus, who revealed another layer of Juvenal to her: a mine of information about homosexuality, both male and female. Anne definitely read Juvenal for prurient reasons, but she had to read between the lines.⁵¹

When Juvenal refers to lesbian behavior, it is in oblique and negative terms: for instance, when Tullia and her foster sister Maura

pass the ancient shrine of Chastity,
It's here
They stop their litters at night and
piss on the goddess' form,
Squirting like siphons, and ride each
other like horses, warm

⁴⁷DeJean, pp. 116–98.

⁴⁸Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, 2d ed., edited, revised, and corrected by Mr. Des Maizeaux (London, 1738), 5:44.

⁴⁹Manuscript Diaries (n. 22 above), March 16, 1820.

⁵⁰Reverend D. H. Urquhart, *Commentaries on Classical Learning* (London, 1803), p. 332.

⁵¹For instance, Donoghue (n. 10 above) notes that Mrs. Thrale was not able to detect the lesbian allusions in Juvenal, although she was looking for them (p. 267).

And excited, with only the moon as
witness. Then home they fly.⁵²

In commenting on such passages, Lubinus not only defined fellatio, pederasty, and tribadism, he also explained that Juvenal borrowed his image from an epigram of Martial, who much more explicitly referred to “tribadism,” that is, women rubbing each other.⁵³ Martial’s epigrams, which Anne knew, are even more negative than Juvenal about lesbianism. He attacks a woman named Bassa for appearing to be chaste and doing without men, but in reality “fucking” women.⁵⁴ Philaenis works out with dumbbells, guzzles wine, steak, and girl’s “juicy quims,” in the words of one late Victorian translator; but the poet attacks her for transgressing her sex and wishing she would “learn to suck a penis,” a vicious insult in Roman culture.⁵⁵

As Judith Roof notes, lesbian readings of cultural texts produce the “split, self-contradictory, desiring subject”—both taken in by and refusing negative images.⁵⁶ For Anne, although Martial’s depictions of lesbian women were intended to be negative, they at least gave evidence that lesbianism existed. Furthermore, she may have enjoyed Martial’s depiction of Philaenus’s pursuit of athletic workouts, wine, and women, a lusty, vigorous image of womanhood quite different from those available to her in early nineteenth-century England.⁵⁷ In fact, she seems to have found reading Juvenal in Latin sexually stimulating.⁵⁸ When Anne read these poems, she did not react with shock, horror, and self disgust but, rather, learnedly speculated as to whether Bassa used a dildo or not, based on philological evidence.⁵⁹

Even as classical and romantic texts structured the possibilities for her own sexual identity, her own lesbian desire provided the lens through

⁵² Juvenal, *The Sixteen Satires* (London, 1975), satire 6, lines 306 ff.

⁵³ Extracts from Readings, vol. 6, fol. 33.

⁵⁴ Martial, *Epigrammes*, translated into French prose by Michel de Marolles (Paris, 1655), bk. 1, no. 91.

⁵⁵ Martial, bk. 7, no. 67, in J. P. Sullivan and Peter Whigham, *Epigrams of Martial Englished by Divers Hands* (Berkeley, 1977); the translator for no. 67 is George Augustus Sala.

⁵⁶ Roof (n. 38 above), pp. 162, 172.

⁵⁷ For instance, feminist classicists have argued that other Roman authors, such as Propertius, might be read as providing more varied and vigorous images of women than usually available, even if their intent was sexist. As Barbara K. Gold notes, the feminist reader can try to hear “voices speaking against the text” (“But Ariadne Was Never There in the First Place: Finding the Female in Roman Poetry,” in *Feminist Theory and the Classics*, ed. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin [New York, 1993], p. 89). See also Judith P. Hallett, “Feminist Theory, Historical Periods, Literary Canons, and the Study of Graeco-Roman Antiquity,” in Rabinowitz and Richlin, eds., p. 63.

⁵⁸ Manuscript Diaries (n. 22 above), July 21, 1820.

⁵⁹ Fragment in Extracts from Readings, October 3, 1814, in code.

which she read these texts. Anne Lister was able to insert her desire in the absent spaces of these readings. While desire between men was extensively depicted in these texts, presented in a range of ways from the scornful to the heroic, lesbianism was almost invisible, just fragments, traces, fantasies. Therefore, she had more freedom to flesh out her sense of self.

Anne's quest for a self, however, combined many disparate elements in tension. As Foucault has written, the classical and Christian notions of the self differed in several key respects. The Greeks and Romans tended to concentrate on the "care of the self," on discipline, moderation, and self-discovery; for the most part, philosophers cared much more about the danger of excessive indulgence in sex rather than the sex of one's partner. In contrast, Christians espoused the renunciation of the self for the higher love of God.⁶⁰ Anne Lister's journal reveals the ethical dilemma she found herself in as she tried to draw upon the classical and Christian traditions in developing her sense of self. The classics provided both a pattern of a disciplined, open-minded quest for knowledge and sexual knowledge itself; Protestantism set a tradition of spiritual self-examination, in which diaries charted the writer's progress from sin to devotion through "meditative dialogues between the body and the soul."⁶¹

Anne often faced the problem of reconciling her strong Anglican religious beliefs with her powerful sexual desires. The same day she masturbated thinking of another woman and reading Juvenal, she wrote, "There is no comfort but in god oh that my heart were right with him and then I should have peace—lord have mercy on me and not justice."⁶² It is significant that she stressed mercy rather than justice. If she had been an Evangelical, she would have been much more tormented by thoughts of sin. Instead, her faith accommodated both a devout Anglicanism and iconoclastic researches into comparative religion. In her notes on readings, she observed the motifs of the cross and the Trinity in different religions and studied the worship of the phallus in India and other cultures. She also copied Edward Gibbon's statement that of all the great Roman emperors only one was "entirely correct"—that is, heterosexual—in his sexual tastes.⁶³ It is possible that her scholarship en-

⁶⁰ Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in Martin et al., eds. (n. 17 above), pp. 27–48.

⁶¹ Lyons (n. 27 above), p. 88.

⁶² Manuscript Diaries, July 21, 1820.

⁶³ Extracts from Readings (n. 40 above), vol. 4, fol. 103, 104, 138 and vol. 6, fol. 25 (1819). Also Manuscript Diaries, February 3, 1831. She read an article called "Phallic Worship" in *Modern Antiquities* vol. 5, p. 31, and seems to have read Richard Payne Knight's work on phallicism, the cross, and the Trinity. For Richard Payne Knight, see Randolph

abled her to see that Christianity's strict hostility to sexuality was atypical among religions and to develop her own, more flexible morality. For instance, in struggling with the question of whether her affair with a married woman was "fornication" and therefore sinful, she concluded that her lover's marriage for money was "legalized prostitution."⁶⁴ At another moment, however, she feared that her connection with the married Marianna was "adultery."⁶⁵ Similarly, when her uncle died, she lamented, "if only my heart were clean."⁶⁶ Her religion gave her solace through prayers rather than guilt; for instance, saddened by a letter from her mistress Mrs. Barlow, she cried and prayed to God "to cleanse the thoughts of my heart by the inspiration of his Holy Spirit," and then "felt a little relieved."⁶⁷ But she also wanted to cement her relationship with Marianna, and later with Anne Walker, by taking the sacrament together.⁶⁸ She declared to Mrs. Barlow, echoing Rousseau, that they had "no priest but love."⁶⁹

Anne exhibited a similar ambivalence in her attitude toward Romantic texts such as novels.⁷⁰ On the one hand, she wanted to engage in a quest for self-improvement, of disciplined reading in science, the classics and history, avoiding frivolous activities and discussion. In conversation with acquaintances, she denounced Lady Caroline Lamb's *Glenarvon*—a roman à clef about the author's affair with Byron—as an example of the immorality of novels.⁷¹ On the other hand, she enjoyed the decadent power of novels to overwhelm her sense of discipline and propriety—to her diary, she repudiated novel reading as "stirring her emotions," lamenting that it had "got her into scrapes," that is, an affair with Marianna Belcomb's sister. But she obviously savored being bad, lacerating herself (figuratively) for delicious, wicked, indulgences.

The Romantic tradition was most important to Anne in allowing her

Trumbach, "Erotic Fantasy and Male Libertinism in Enlightenment England," in *The Invention of Pornography*, ed. Lynn Hunt (New York, 1993), pp. 279–80; and G. S. Rousseau, "The Sorrows of Priapus: Anticlericalism, Homosocial Desire, and Richard Payne Knight," in *Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment*, ed. G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter (Chapel Hill, NC, 1988), pp. 101–55.

⁶⁴ Whitbread, ed., *I Know My Own Heart* (n. 1 above), p. 281.

⁶⁵ Whitbread, ed., *No Priest but Love* (n. 23 above), p. 168.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁶⁸ Trumbach, "The Origins and Development of the Modern Lesbian Role in The Western Gender System" (n. 9 above), p. 292; and Whitbread, ed., *No Priest but Love*, p. 281.

⁶⁹ Whitbread, ed., *No Priest but Love*, p. 49.

⁷⁰ Of course, many other people of her class and time enjoyed Byron while trying to be very respectable (see Davidoff and Hall [n. 26 above], p. 259).

⁷¹ L. Moore (n. 9 above), p. 512.

to create a sense of self that could begin to reconcile her ethical and sexual concerns. The Romantics' strength of character came not from their self-control but from the uncontainable force of their passions. While the eighteenth century could accept the duplicity of self as part of the masquerade, the Romantic diarists wanted to strip down to the "essential" inner core that had to be hidden from the world.⁷² Anne Lister wrote to her friend Sibella Maclean that "I rarely meet with those who interest me, who have the charm that brings me back to that disguised, and hidden nature, that suits not with the world."⁷³

Rousseau was key for the Romantic notion of the hidden inner self defined by passionate, forbidden desires, very suited to the production of lesbian identity. Anne Lister quoted in her diaries the beginning of Rousseau's *Confessions*, in which he declares "I know the feelings of my heart. . . . I am not made like any of those I have seen. I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. Whether Nature had acted rightly or wrongly in destroying the mould in which she cast me, can only be decided after I have been read." Rousseau defined his singular nature through confessing his adventures in masturbation, masochism, unhappy love affairs, and describing himself as "so effeminate but yet indomitable."⁷⁴ Yet Anne, like Mary Wollstonecraft, had to read Rousseau against the grain, emulating the way he used sexual frankness and androgyny to create a unique notion of the self, but rejecting his rigid attitudes toward women and homosexuality.⁷⁵ As Charles Taylor points out, Rousseau rejected the notion of original sin. Instead, "the first impulse of nature is always right," and it is "social opinion" that is "perverted." The Romantic self, therefore, allowed the transgression of social norms, and indeed, the quest of originality and uniqueness impelled such nonconformity.⁷⁶

Byron, as Castle observes, was another key Romantic figure whose libertinism may have inspired Anne.⁷⁷ At the same time, the fact that Byron masked his homoerotic desires also meant that Anne had to read him with perspicacity and imagination, inspiring her to emulate both his romantic heroism and his duplicity. Anne publicly denounced Byron's poem *Don Juan* as indecent; in private she loved his verses and mourned

⁷² Lyons (n. 27 above), p. 199; Fothergill (n. 19 above), pp. 30, 151.

⁷³ Muriel Green, ed., *Miss Lister of Shibden Hall: Selected Letters (1800–1840)* (Sussex, 1992), p. 77.

⁷⁴ *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (New York, 1947), p. 3.

⁷⁵ Similar to Barbara Taylor's discussion of how Rousseau inspired and angered Mary Wollstonecraft ("Mary Wollstonecraft and the Wild Wish of Early Feminism," *History Workshop Journal* 33 [1992]: 209).

⁷⁶ C. Taylor (n. 17 above), p. 357.

⁷⁷ Castle (n. 9 above), p. 104.

his death bitterly.⁷⁸ His theme of forbidden love may have appealed to her, the “unhallowed bliss,” “The smile none else might understand.”⁷⁹ Byron’s romantic orientalism also hinted at transgressive sexuality. In an incident of his most famous poem, for instance, the aggressively heterosexual Don Juan is disguised as a woman and sold as a slave girl to a Sultan’s harem, where concubines vie for “her” sexual attentions.⁸⁰ Similarly, Anne loved the humid sentimentality of Thomas Moore’s poem “Lallah Rookh,” which was perfumed with the orientalist sensuality of slave girls chasing each other “Too eloquently like love’s pursuit.”⁸¹

Romantic texts allowed Anne to convey lesbian passion. For instance, Anne gave Miss Browne, a “sweet interesting creature” who lived in the neighborhood, a copy of Byron’s poem “Cornelian” as a veiled token of her feelings.⁸² This poem was about a poor young man who gave a cornelian ring to the poet, a gentleman, as a token of his affection. Although the ring was not a precious gem, the poet valued it above all else; and Anne seemed to have understood that the poem referred to a love affair, not just a friendship.⁸³ At the same time, the poem conveyed Anne’s understanding that Miss Browne was not genteel enough to become Anne’s romantic partner. On her part, Miss Browne seems to have felt repelled by Anne’s advances and married a local young man. While Anne had kissed Miss Browne, she never openly expressed her intentions but safely veiled them through her romantic allusions.

Anne’s use of Byron’s poem to communicate romantic interest obliquely is a good example of the way in which she, to use de Lauretis’s terms, “rearticulated” cultural materials through her “self-representation—in speech, gesture, costume, body stance and so on.”⁸⁴ In fact, Anne developed her lesbian sense of self most explicitly in discussions with other women. Yet Anne had to convey her intentions, and her knowledge, in coded terms that enabled her to control interactions with potential friends and lovers. Concealment, of course, was necessary, to

⁷⁸ Manuscript Diaries (n. 22 above), July 25, 1820, also Whitbread, ed., *I Know My Own Heart*, p. 344.

⁷⁹ Byron, “To Thyra,” quoted in Crompton (n. 39 above), p. 178.

⁸⁰ Susan J. Wolfson, “‘Their She Condition’: Cross-dressing and the Politics of Gender in *Don Juan*,” *English Literary History* 54 (1987): 606.

⁸¹ Thomas Moore, *Lalla Rookh*, 8th ed. (London, 1818), p. 65.

⁸² Whitbread, ed. *I Know My Own Heart* (n. 1 above), p. 78.

⁸³ Crompton, pp. 98–102. Interestingly enough, Byron had tried to suppress this poem when Edlestone, his beloved, was arrested for homosexual acts. Anne therefore may have had a very rare copy.

⁸⁴ De Lauretis (n. 37 above), p. 308.

survive as a lesbian in a hostile world.⁸⁵ However, Anne was also a manipulative person who wanted to control every situation, and often played off lovers against each other, reading aloud one lover's letter to her to another, and deceiving friends about her lesbian nature.⁸⁶ Anne typically at first denied her lesbian inclinations and then revealed and justified her feelings only when the other woman had made herself vulnerable. Once she had, Anne justified lesbianism as "natural."

Anne used classical texts to inquire more openly about lesbian sexual knowledge. For instance, she asked Miss Pickford, another learned lady she suspected of being a lesbian, if she had read the Sixth Satire of Juvenal, and Miss Pickford's positive answer confirmed her hunch.⁸⁷ But Anne was not attracted to Miss Pickford, despite her classical erudition, for Anne was not "an admirer of learned ladies . . . [who are] not the sweet, interesting creatures that I love."⁸⁸ When Miss Pickford discussed her own relationship with a Miss Threlfall, Anne said she did not "censure" them, since their feelings were guided by nature and "mutual affection," rather than artificially learned. For herself, she told Miss Pickford, "I am taught by books, you by nature. I am very warm in friendship, perhaps few or none more so. My manners might mislead you but I don't, in reality, go beyond the utmost verge of friendship."⁸⁹ Anne was quite aware that she was deliberately misleading Miss Pickford about her own nature: she wrote, "The success of my deceit almost smote me."⁹⁰ A few months later, when the love of her life, Marianna Lawton, felt horrified at the "unnatural" nature of their connection, Anne "observed upon my conduct & feelings being surely natural to me inasmuch as they were not taught, not fictitious but instinctive."⁹¹

A few years later, in France, Anne again used learning to hint a little more frankly at her predilections. Discussing various Latin poets with a Madame Galvani, she began by observing how indecent they were—ostensibly to disapprove of them—but in actuality to convey her knowledge of sexuality. Observing Anne flirting with Mrs. Barlow, her fellow lodger Miss Mack asked her "Etes-vous Achilles?" Clearly, she referred here to the story of Achilles being dressed as a girl and his later passion-

⁸⁵For contemporary concealment, see David Bell and Gill Valentine, "The Sexed Self: Strategies of Performance, Sites of Resistance," in Pile and Thrift, eds. (n. 17 above), p. 148.

⁸⁶Whitbread, ed., *No Priest but Love* (n. 23 above), pp. 42, 53, 124, 165.

⁸⁷Liddington (n. 20 above), p. 61.

⁸⁸Whitbread, ed., *I Know My Own Heart*, p. 237.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, p. 273.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, p. 297.

ate love for Patroclus.⁹² Only a woman with classical learning would understand this as a coded reference to homosexuality. In response, Anne “laughed and said she made me blush.” Her future mistress Mrs. Barlow then asked her if she had heard of the rumors of Marie Antoinette’s lesbian affairs, but Anne typically denied that women could do such things. In similar language as she used with Miss Pickford, Anne declared that “she went to the utmost extent of friendship but that was enough.” Clearly, Anne had to sound out another woman before she believed she could safely reveal her desires; she wanted other women to incriminate themselves first by stating their own knowledge. Once she had started to make love with Mrs. Barlow, she declared again that her attraction to women was “all nature,” in words reminiscent of her earlier conversation with Marianna.⁹³

Anne Lister’s notion of her “nature” combined classical sexual knowledge with the romantic sense of inner passions whose truth derived from their transgression of society’s laws. For her, her sexual desires for other women were natural and, therefore justifiable. Furthermore, they composed her “nature” as an individual.

Anne also tried to explain her nature as biological. In Paris, she began to study anatomy in an effort to discern her own nature, attending dissections and discovering the similarities between male and female embryos. Finding no external signs of her own peculiar nature, as she thought of it, she “alluded to there being an internal correspondence or likeness of some of the male or female organs of generation.” She derived this theory from reading the popular sex manual, *Aristotle’s Masterpiece*, which depicted the female genitals as like the male’s turned outside-in—that is, the penis analogous to the vagina, and the testicles resembling the ovaries.⁹⁴ She did not, therefore, regard herself as a man trapped in a woman’s body or a woman with biologically masculine attributes; rather, she seemed to think that since males and females were not that physically different, she could express her unique nature as she wished.

She seems to have been fascinated with androgynous beings, such as learned, masculine women of antiquity, or effeminate, even homosexual men. In her notes on readings, she quoted excerpts on Pope Joan, hermaphrodites, and eunuchs.⁹⁵ Some further clues to Anne’s androgyny can be found in her borrowings from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. For instance, when she told Miss Pickford stories from Ovid, another way in

⁹²Whitbread, ed., *No Priest but Love*, pp. 26, 29.

⁹³Ibid., p. 49.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 49. For such theories, which were common medically until the eighteenth century and persisted after that in popular culture, see Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

⁹⁵Extracts from Readings (n. 40 above), vol. 2, fol. 133.

which she hinted at knowledge of lesbianism, Anne chose to mention the tale of Tiresias.⁹⁶ Observing the moon one evening, she “smiled and said the moon had tried both sexes, like old Tiresias, but that one could not make such an observation to everyone.”⁹⁷ Tiresias was a seer who had been transformed from a man to a woman for seven years after striking two mating snakes. Having experienced life and love as both a man and woman, he agreed with the god Jove that women “received more pleasure out of love.”⁹⁸ By choosing to cite Tiresias, Lister selectively read the messages of Ovid. She enjoyed the thought of switching from masculinity to femininity but implied that women have more pleasure than men. Instead of regarding her love as unnatural and doomed, she read in Ovid a sense of human nature as fluid, as constantly metamorphosing. Significantly, she did not cite the only tale in his *Metamorphoses* in which a woman turned into a man to love another woman. In this story, Iphis, a woman who is brought up as a boy, becomes betrothed to her female beloved. In agony at her feelings, which she knows to be unnatural, for among animals “a female never fires a female’s love,” she prays to the goddess Isis for help, who obliges by turning her into a male on her wedding night.⁹⁹ Anne did not want to turn into a male; she simply took male privileges.

Ovid also provided Anne with other myths of metamorphosis that could help her conceptualize her relationships. Anne referred to Miss Browne as “Kallista” in her diaries; Kallista is Greek for “most beautiful” but also refers to the myth, retold by Ovid, of the nymph Callisto, beloved of Diana, chaste leader of the hunt who rejected male company.¹⁰⁰ When Callisto rests while hunting, Jove comes upon her, and in order to seduce her, disguises himself as Diana. When Callisto becomes pregnant, Diana turns her into a bear in disgust and anger at her betrayal.¹⁰¹ If Miss Browne was Callisto, who did Anne see herself as: Jove or Diana, or one in the disguise of the other? As Jove, Anne could inflame her fantasies of “taking” lower-class young women in a masculine guise. As Diana, Anne could imagine a comradeship of free, virginal young women hunting and

⁹⁶ Interestingly enough, “Michael Field” (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, poets who lived, loved, and wrote together) also cited the tale of Tiresias in their oeuvre applying classical precedents to same-sex love (Chris White, “Poets and Lovers Evermore: The Poetry and Journals of Michael Field,” in *Sexual Sameness: Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing*, ed. Joseph Bristow [New York, 1992], p. 30).

⁹⁷ Whitbread, ed., *I Know My Own Heart* (n. 1 above), pp. 235–36.

⁹⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A. D. Melville (Oxford, 1986), pp. 60–61.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹⁰⁰ Castle (n. 9 above) also notes that Anne may be referring to this Callisto but does not develop the interpretation (p. 104).

¹⁰¹ Ovid, pp. 36–40.

loving in the forest and identify with her rage when Jove raped Callisto, just as she resented the marriages of the young women she admired.

This duality between female companionship and masculine sexual predation permeated Anne's relationship with women. As she wrote to her friend Sibella Maclean, she sought "the rational union of two amiable persons . . . a mind in unison with my own."¹⁰² She continuously yearned for a true companion, a love who would be only hers.¹⁰³ The model, a sexual version of passionate friendship, was flexible in terms of gender. She referred to her first lover from boarding school days as her "husband," and Isabella Norcliffe, the second significant woman in her life, seems to have been rather gruff and masculine.¹⁰⁴ In contrast, her great love, Marianna Lawton (née Belcomb), referred to her as Fred. After she left boarding school, Anne was able, with a private tutor, to pursue the "masculine" tasks of classical learning and to develop a personal style flavored by masculinity. She liked to stride about the Yorkshire moors, her short hair tousled by the wind, and decided to wear all black bodices, which resembled men's coats, to save money (leaving more for books) and also to conceal her less than voluptuous figure.¹⁰⁵ Yet Marianna, who had married a man for money, felt ashamed at her sexual relationship with the increasingly masculine Anne. In 1820, Marianna was already uneasy about Anne's flirtatious ways: in one session of pillowtalk, she "owned that [Anne's manners] were not masculine but such as my form, voice, & style of conversation, such a peculiar flattery & attraction did I shew, that if this sort of thing was not carried off by my talents & cleverness, I should be disgusting."¹⁰⁶ Anne managed to mollify Marianna's anxieties that night with a "good kiss" but a later incident marred their relationship forever. In 1823, Anne strode across the moors for miles to meet Marianna as she came from York, leaping over "three steps" to bound into the coach with wild hair and sweaty clothes. Marianna recoiled with horror, and Anne felt irrevocably hurt.¹⁰⁷

Frustrated with her relationship with Marianna, Anne turned her masculine persona from a stigma into a way of appropriating masculine sexual privilege for herself, pursuing mistresses as well as potential "wives." Anne's masculinity signaled to lovers that a woman could sexually desire other women, in a way both threatening and alluring. Flirting with Marianna's sisters, she wrote, "my manners are certainly peculiar, not all mas-

¹⁰² Green, ed. (n. 73 above), p. 87.

¹⁰³ Manuscript Diaries (n. 22 above), July 21, 1820, and January 3, 1831.

¹⁰⁴ Liddington (n. 20 above), p. 62; Whitbread, ed., *No Priest but Love* (n. 23 above), p. 127.

¹⁰⁵ Whitbread, ed., *I Know My Own Heart*, pp. 1, 14, 167, 223.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

culine but rather softly gentleman-like. I know how to please girls.”¹⁰⁸ Anne here differentiated among different kinds of masculinity, choosing an upper-class manner rather than a crudely lower-class approach. Mrs. Kelly (her former innamorata Miss Browne) refuted people who thought Anne should wear a bonnet. “She contended I should not, and said my whole style of dress suited myself and my manner & was consistent & becoming to me. I was more masculine, she said, She meant in understanding.”¹⁰⁹ In Paris, some of her new acquaintances even wondered if she were a man, but Mrs. Barlow “herself thought I wished to imitate the manners of a gentleman but now she knows me better, it was not put on.”¹¹⁰ Back in Yorkshire, Anne, frustrated in her relationship with Marianna, began an avid flirtation with Marianna’s sister Mrs. Harriet Milne, who was notorious for her heterosexual affairs. After church one day, Mrs. Milne responded to Anne’s “marked attention” by admitting “she liked me in my greatcoat and hat,” flushing as she spoke. It is possible that Mrs. Milne could conceive of an affair with Anne in libertine terms, another thrill much like a heterosexual affair. She wrote to Anne, “Is it possible that I can have feelings which have never yet been roused to action? Affections that were dormant until you called them forth?” Although Mrs. Milne may be referring to experiencing desire for a woman for the first time, it is more likely she meant that although she had known Anne for years, she had never before felt sexually attracted to her.¹¹¹

On Anne’s part, Mrs. Milne’s letter made her think, “Tis well I have not a penis. I might never have been continent.”¹¹² Anne also sometimes imagined sexual desire herself in masculine, phallic terms. At one point, she wrote, “All this work and ordering and exercise seem to excite my manly feelings. I saw a pretty girl go up the lane and desire rather came over me.”¹¹³ Noting a fantasy of taking a young woman of her acquaintance into a shed and being “connected” with her (having sex) she recounts her “foolish fancying” “supposing myself in men’s clothes and having a penis, tho’ nothing more.”¹¹⁴ It’s quite important that she says, “Tho’ nothing more.” The phallus was a sign of her desire *for* a woman, rather than of her desire to *be* a man. As de Lauretis observes, “masculinity alone carries a strong connotation of sexual desire for the female body.” When a woman imagines having a phallus, the phallus becomes

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

¹¹⁰ Whitbread, ed. *No Priest but Love*, pp. 37, 198.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹¹³ Whitbread, ed., *I Know My Own Heart* (n. 1 above), p. 267.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

a “fetish,” or a signifier, for what she is normally denied: the female body.¹¹⁵ For Lister, therefore, imagining having a phallus was a way of representing her desire for a woman (and for male privilege) in a culture that gave her almost no other ways of representing a *sexual* lesbian desire.

While she fantasized about having a penis, in lovemaking she does not seem to have used a dildo. To Mrs. Barlow, she repudiated “Sapphic” love as “artifice,” by which she seems to have meant the use of a dildo.¹¹⁶ Of course, she may have been lying, and she was certainly fascinated by such practices.¹¹⁷ Yet Anne preferred the active role in lovemaking. When Mrs. Barlow felt inside Anne’s bosom, Anne “let her do it, observing I should hope to do the same,” but added that “I do what I like but never permit them to do so.” She also reacted negatively when Mrs. Barlow tried to touch her “queer” (genitals) because it was “womanizing me too much.”¹¹⁸ However, it is interesting that Mrs. Barlow expected to be able to touch Anne, perhaps having experienced or desiring more reciprocal lovemaking. Anne certainly “received” as well as “gave” many orgasms in her other relationships. Yet Anne preferred Marianna because Marianna did not “see her as a woman too much,” not only sexually but in terms of observing the intimate details of her life such as menstruation. Marianna knew how to “manage” Anne’s temper, which was quite difficult; Anne was also “sensitive” to “anything that reminded me of my petticoats.”¹¹⁹

This sensitivity in part derived from the fact that Anne’s petticoats prevented her from her goal: marrying Marianna openly. Her phallic obsession should be seen in the context of the privilege maleness gave one in her society. For instance, Mrs. Barlow and she carried on protracted negotiations about the nature of their sexual relationship, which were often put in phallic terms. As Anne recorded in her diary, when she made advances, Mrs. Barlow “began joking, saying I had nothing to give; meaning I had no penis.” But she went on to make clear that the male organ was not the issue, for she “then declared she was the last to care for my having one. If I only wore breeches it would be enough.” Mrs. Barlow really wanted Anne to be like a husband to her, to support her and acknowledge her. “But if, in fact, I would really claim her as my own she would be satisfied.” Anne responded that “I often felt the want of

¹¹⁵ De Lauretis (n. 37 above), p. 228.

¹¹⁶ Whitbread, ed., *No Priest but Love* (n. 23 above), p. 49.

¹¹⁷ Whitbread, ed. *I Know My Own Heart*, p. 291, and *No Priest but Love*, p. 32.

¹¹⁸ Whitbread, ed., *No Priest but Love*, p. 85.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

breeches—the want of being a proper protector to her.”¹²⁰ Clearly, the breeches—a phallic symbol—symbolized the male social role of being able to marry a woman, to protect her, and to support her.

Did Anne ever imagine passing as a man? Indeed, a number of women of her time lived as men, including one intellectual, Mary Diana Dods, who passed as another woman's husband.¹²¹ Miss Pickford also enjoyed flirting with young women when she passed as a captain.¹²² Yet passing as a man would have meant that Anne would give up her respectable position as an heiress, and with that, any possibility of an independent livelihood. Furthermore, Anne never declared that she felt like a man trapped in a woman's body. She enjoyed the company of women too much to pass as a man. Her negotiations with Mrs. Barlow are quite revealing on this subject. Mrs. Barlow lamented they could not marry, sighing, “It would have been better had you been brought up as your father's son,” implying they could then marry. But Anne replied, “No, you mistake me. It would not have done at all. I could not have married & should have been shut out from ladies' society. I could not have been with you as I am.”¹²³

To use Butler's notion of “performativity,” Anne Lister's combination of femininity and masculinity undermined and threatened conventional gender dichotomies during a period of great anxiety about the blurring of boundaries between the genders. During the era of the Napoleonic Wars, ballads celebrated female sailors while caricaturists mocked dandies who wore stays.¹²⁴ While public awareness of sodomy and the subculture of effeminate male homosexuals was high at this time (certainly reaching Anne) the linkage of lesbianism and female cross-dressing was much more occluded. Female sailors and soldiers were generally presented as heterosexual, donning male garb only to search for their lovers. To be sure, tales and supposed autobiographies of cross-dressing women

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹²¹ Betty T. Bennett, *Mary Diana Dods: A Gentleman and a Scholar* (New York, 1991); for another intellectual woman who passed as a man, see the case of Theodora de Verdion, the daughter of a Berlin architect who passed in England as a man. She was often rumored to be a woman, but her eccentricity, swearing, and heavy drinking kept such rumors at bay. She died in 1802. See *Kirby's Wonderful and Eccentric Museum* (London, 1820), 7:48; J. T. Smith, *Antient [sic] Topography of London* (London, 1817), p. 20.

¹²² Whitbread, ed., *No Priest but Love*, p. 290.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹²⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), p. 136. For discussion of gender images in the early nineteenth century, see my “Womanhood and Manhood in the Transition from Plebeian to Working Class Culture” (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1987), pp. 165–222. For examples, see *Tegg's Caricatures* (London, 1819), 5:312, 323, 331–32.

sometimes presented them as flirting with young girls who mistook them for men, and occasional “female husband” cases appeared in the newspapers and ballad literature.¹²⁵ Cross-dressing actresses such as Madame Vestris, who performed in York before at least one of Anne’s friends, were openly thought to allure women as they performed in breeches roles. A poem about Madame Vestris proclaimed, “Her very hair and style would corrupt with a smile— / Let a virgin resist if she can.” These accounts both acknowledged that a woman could attract another woman sexually and evaded the possibility of lesbianism; first, they could only conceive of a woman attracting another woman if she were passing as a man, and second, they denied that this attraction could be fulfilled without a penis. The poem about Madame Vestris goes on to undercut the possibility of this lesbian allure: “Her ambrosial kisses seem heavenly blisses— / What a pity she is not a man.”¹²⁶ Similarly, an 1816 caricature entitled “My Brother’s Breeches—or not quite the thing” portrayed a young woman wearing breeches, telling her friend, “There Maria I think I make as good a Man as my Brother.” Maria retorts, “No indeed Cousin! I should think not *Quite*.”¹²⁷

Anne’s androgynous appearance—she was obviously a woman in skirts, yet she walked like a man—threatened contemporaries because she did not completely cross-dress but still took male freedoms. While for Anne, the lack of a penis symbolized her lack of social power, her very success with women also undercut the assumption that a penis was necessary at all. As Butler argues, when a lesbian “has” a phallus she exposes the “phantasmatic status” of the seemingly natural link between maleness and power and exploits the eroticism of a phallus that does not need to be attached to a man, although at the same time she also signifies the phallus as a traditional masculine symbol.¹²⁸ Perhaps this is why men reacted to Anne with such hostility. For instance, when Anne was walk-

¹²⁵ For example, the story of Helen Oliver, a journeymen plasterer who seems to have gotten the idea for cross-dressing from a ploughman, actually a woman in disguise, who was thought to be her male lover. See “Helen Oliver,” in Miscellaneous Collection of Broad-sides, 1875, b. 30 (4), British Library; *London Times* (April 20, 1822). For flirtation, see “The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Mary Lacy, the female sailor,” in C. D. Donald, Collection of Broad-sides (Glasgow, 1890), Mitchell Library, Glasgow. For female husband, see Michael Ryan, *Medical Jurisprudence* (London, 1836), p. 227. For a general discussion and more examples, see Clark, pp. 196–213; Julie Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids* (London, 1989), p. 59; Rudolf M. Dekker and Lotte C. van de Pol, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1989).

¹²⁶ *Memoirs of the Life, Public and Private Adventures of Madame Vestris* (London, 1839), p. 54; see also C. E. Pearce, *Life of Madame Vestris* (London, 1923), p. 56.

¹²⁷ M. Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the British Museum* (London, 1978), no. 12843.

¹²⁸ Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (n. 7 above), p. 89.

ing in her own neighborhood, a male passerby asked, "Does your cock stand?"¹²⁹ This insult hinted that even if she was a masculine woman, she did not have the real signifier of masculinity. Despite Anne's notoriously masculine appearance, she was often sexually harassed when walking in her neighborhood.¹³⁰

Rumors spread in York about her seductive ways: a Mr. Lally had apparently said, "He would as soon turn a man loose in his house as me." He also joked that Anne's relationship with Isabella Norcliffe failed because "two Jacks" could not go together.¹³¹ In the neighborhood, she was known as "Gentleman Jack," an epithet which may have evoked "Jack Whore," a term for a "large masculine overgrown wench."¹³² While Donoghue and Trumbach find several references to "Tommies" as an epithet for masculine lesbians, this usage does not appear in the Anne Lister materials, and the only contemporaneous reference I have found is that the male habitués of a gay pub scornfully referred to their wives as "tommies."¹³³ "Jack Whore" probably did not have lesbian connotations; "masculine" women were often referred to in newspapers of the time but without any hint that they desired women.¹³⁴ However, Anne's masculine appearance seems to have confused and enraged passers-by. As Marianna and she walked through the fields, a countryman asked them if they were man and wife.¹³⁵ Waiting for a carriage in York, "several prostitutes . . . would have it that I was a man & one of them gave me a familiar knock on the left breast and would have persisted in following me but for" the manservant.¹³⁶ It is more likely that English prostitutes would think that Anne was a hermaphrodite than that they would have a word for lesbian, according to examples I have found in contemporary popular literature.¹³⁷

¹²⁹ Whitbread, ed., *I Know My Own Heart*, p. 49.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹³¹ Whitbread, ed., *No Priest but Love* (n. 23 above), p. 127.

¹³² *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (London, 1811; reprint, London, 1981).

¹³³ Robert Holloway, *The Phoenix of Sodom, or the Vere Street Coterie* (London, 1813), pp. 10, 30.

¹³⁴ For example, *Weekly Dispatch* (April 11, 1841), (May 18, 1845); *Daily News* (July 12, 1846).

¹³⁵ Whitbread, ed., *No Priest but Love*, p. 171.

¹³⁶ Whitbread, ed., *I Know My Own Heart* (n. 1 above), p. 65.

¹³⁷ In 1811, a woman severely beat a male neighbor for supposing she was a "hermaphrodite" (*Morning Herald* [January 10, 1811]); a violent, large, masculine woman with a low voice was supposed to be a "hermaphrodite" (*Weekly Dispatch* [March 27, 1831]); in a no-doubt apocryphal anecdote about Madame Vestris, which may nonetheless indicate popular attitudes, Madame Vestris and her sister Miss Bartolozzi "sallied out after dusk in man's apparel, and made love to the ladies," when a prostitute suspected their true sex and declared, "I'll find out whether you are Moffrydites or men" (*New Rambler's Magazine*, vol. 2 [n.d. (ca. 1830)], p. 112). See Donoghue (n. 10 above), pp. 25–57, for hermaphrodites.

Masculinity, of course, had many different residual meanings during this period and was often contested. It was not just about sexuality, but also connoted economic and political power. The first three decades of the nineteenth century were a time when rakish aristocratic libertinism was challenged by middle-class respectability.¹³⁸ Anne often emulated the first ideal, especially during the 1820s when she embarked on foreign adventures of seduction; but she also knew the real foundation of aristocratic power—landowning—remained, and she wanted access to that power. Despite the 1832 Reform Act, which gave the vote to middle-class men, as Anne knew, landowners still controlled their tenants' votes. In her diary, she secretly leaned toward supporting the Reform Bill to grant middle-class men the suffrage. Although, with typical duplicity, she denounced the Reform Act publicly; she realized that with Halifax's new members of Parliament she could exercise great power as a landowner, and openly pressured her tenants to vote Tory.¹³⁹ Since she became a landowner, even her neighbors, who may have expressed hostility toward her masculinity, had to acknowledge her economic and political power.

Yet Anne also became frustrated by the contradiction between her status as the proprietor of Shibden Hall and her lack of political power as a woman. Although she ridiculed the idea of female suffrage at the time of Peterloo in 1819, she started thinking differently during the Reform Act debates of 1831–32. Confiding to her diary that she believed ladies ought to be admitted to the new Literary and Philosophical Society of Halifax (as long as they did not wear large bonnets!) led her to “my old thought and wish for ladies under certain restrictions to be restored to certain political rights, voting for members. . . . Why should [civil and political rights] be withheld from any persons of sufficient property interest in the state and education to be fairly presumed to know how to make a good use of it.”¹⁴⁰

In the 1830s Anne also devoted more energy to finding a respectable romantic partnership with a social equal commensurate with her social status, rather than rakishly pursuing mistresses in Paris. She found Miss Anne Walker, a neighboring heiress, but it was not a happy romantic relationship. Miss Walker felt quite uneasy about their sexual interactions, perhaps regarding it as sinful as had Marianna. To reassure her, Anne wished to sanctify it as a marriage by taking the sacraments together—and by establishing a partnership as equals to validate their sexual relationship. However, she continued her duplicity with Anne

¹³⁸ Davidoff and Hall (n. 26 above), p. 110.

¹³⁹ Manuscript Diaries (n. 22 above), March 5, 1831; Liddington (n. 20 above), pp. 68–69.

¹⁴⁰ Manuscript Diaries, February 27, 1831.

Walker. Although occasionally she fancied herself in love with her, she also knew she was playing a romantic part in order to seduce her and became impatient with Anne Walker's evasive coyness. To her journal, she wrote, "She likes me but my affections are not so fearfully and irretrievably hers as she thinks and I shall manage well enough."¹⁴¹ She did not want a wife in Anne Walker, or a mistress, but an equal partner who could match her money, who could lobby politically her tenants, and who could travel with her. Anne Walker carried out these activities with her, despite a spoiled, melancholy temperament, but Anne never seemed truly in love with her. And she yearned for adventure beyond Yorkshire. Eventually, the two Annes traveled all over Europe and finally to Russia, but Anne Lister died of a fever in a remote area of the Caucasus and Miss Walker went insane upon her return.¹⁴²



What does Anne Lister's story tell us about the prevalence of the Sapphic role in early nineteenth-century England? Anne Lister's readings and diaries give little evidence that she stepped into a preexisting Sapphic role. Despite occasional references in pamphlets or correspondence, the Sapphic role was not a consistent, well-known cultural motif, unlike the "molly" or sodomite. Rather, it was something to be hidden, to be hinted at, barely imaginable. Instead, Anne, and probably others such as Miss Pickford, had to invent and reinvent their own lesbian identity. Anne did not find hers in the libertine world of the eighteenth-century Sapphic role; rather, she created her lesbian self out of romanticism and classical knowledge.

By writing a secret diary, and behaving as duplicitously as she often did, the self Anne Lister created was not unified but deliberately compartmentalized and contradictory. Anne also reinflected her gendered persona over time. As a young woman, she found that the model of passionate friendship was inadequate to express her sexual feelings and actions and unrealistic in an era when her lovers had to marry for money. Masculinity signaled for her the social power and sexual desire for women she sought, imagining herself as a libertine rake with a wife and a mistress. But she did not want to be a man, only to enjoy male privilege, and simply took the freedoms she desired when wealth enabled her to do so.

Anne Lister did not become part of a lesbian subculture, only a fragile network of lovers, ex-lovers, and friends. The fact that Anne seduced

¹⁴¹ Ibid., November 12, 1832.

¹⁴² Whitbread, ed., *No Priest but Love* (n. 23 above), p. 206; Manuscript Diaries, November 5, 1832, for her equivocal courtship.

so many women reveals how much lesbian potential lurked among the unhappy wives and proud spinsters of middle- and upper-class Yorkshire. There may have been many other women whose lesbian relationships have gone unrecorded. At the same time, seducing such women required careful, protracted campaigns in which Anne had to explain and justify her lesbian nature. And Anne Lister was not able to create a lesbian network, let alone a subculture, because of her chronic concealment, and duplicity tangled her love relationships into webs of deceit and competition. Romanticism justified her lesbianism as part of her nature, but its focus on the unique individual also hampered her ability to support other lesbians. Meeting the masculine and learned Miss Pickford helped Anne realize that there were other women such as herself in the world, but her scornful treatment of her friend prevented them from developing more solidarity.

While some of this behavior was due to her manipulative and controlling personality, it was also necessary camouflage. As Anne strode about the moors around her home and seduced the women of her social circle, her acquaintances and neighbors had to devise epithets to describe this incongruous, proud woman. Anne Lister's case therefore impells us to reassess our theoretical notions of the creation of a sexual self. Anne Lister did not step into a Sapphic role or assume a stigma; instead, she invented her own fragmented lesbian identity and confused the categories of masculinity and femininity.