

*Labels, Plaques and Identity Categories:  
Finding the Words for Anne Lister*

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**Prologue: Shibden Hall**

It's 6 March 2020, a bright cold day in Halifax, and Shibden Hall is closed to the public. Not because of Covid-19 – the first UK lockdown hasn't happened yet – but because the boiler's not working. Angela Clare from Calderdale Museums is waiting at the gate to show us round: me, my friend Harriet from Manchester and two American fans of *Gentleman Jack* who didn't know the house was closed and happened to turn up at just the right moment. 'Wear lots of layers,' Angela had warned me; 'it'll be freezing.' There's a school visit going on as well, and our paths keep almost crossing with troops of primary school children wearing mob caps and aprons. After the house, we go out into the carriage barn, and Angela gestures through the doorway to the courtyard of the Folk Museum, with its reconstruction of shops and crafts. 'Everything beyond this point is fiction,' she says. I take a photograph on my phone, but when I check it later there's nothing there.

My photograph of the plaque on the wall at Shibden comes out fine. I was there nearly a year ago for the unveiling, on Lister's birthday, 3 April 2019. That was a cold wet day. People huddling under fleece blankets in the unheated carriage barn to hear Helena Whitbread and Jill Liddington give their talks, next to the one electric heater. The mayor, speaking warmly about how Anne Lister had been part of his life as a teenager in Halifax, because Helena was a friend of his mother and had talked about Anne Lister at his mother's kitchen table. The rain, finally stopping just in time for the mayor to unveil the plaque. Lots of people taking photographs of Helena and Jill underneath it.

None of us in the UK or the USA had seen *Gentleman Jack* at that point, though we were all keen to know how it would turn out. We had no idea how much was about to change, how many conversations about Anne Lister would be sparked, in and beyond Halifax and across the globe.

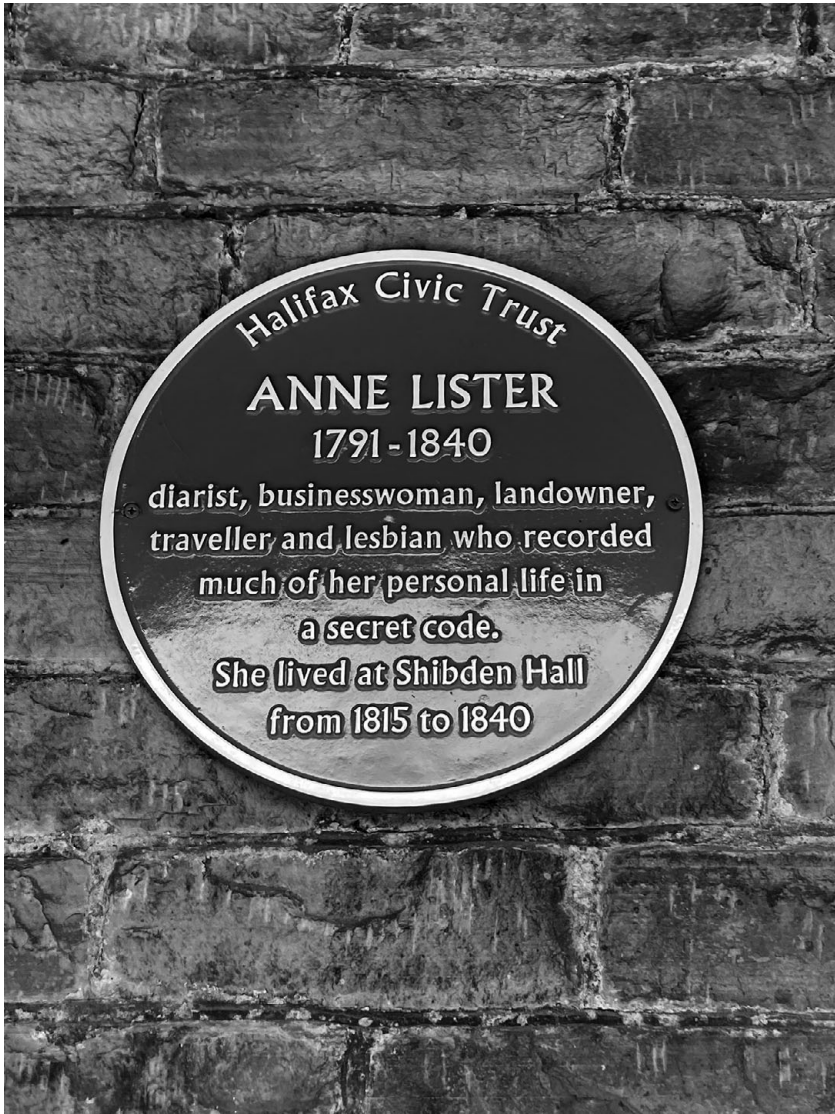


Figure 6 Shibden Hall plaque. Photography Chris Roulston, 2022.

How many people would beat a path to her door, would make the pilgrimage to Halifax and Shibden in search of her.

What was already clear, in that pre-*Gentleman Jack* spring of 2019, was just how powerful a thing a plaque could be, and what fierce emotions it

could provoke. By the time the Shibden Hall plaque was unveiled, there had already been not one, but two plaques commemorating Anne Lister's place in LGBTQ+ history, both of them at the same site in York, though not at the same time.

### **A Tale of Two Plaques**

On 24 July 2018, York Civic Trust unveiled the first rainbow plaque in the UK, in recognition of Anne Lister and her union with Ann Walker.<sup>1</sup> The plaque, outside the church of Holy Trinity in Goodramgate, York, where the two women celebrated their union by taking communion together, immediately sparked controversy for its wording: 'ANNE LISTER / 1791–1840 / Gender-nonconforming / entrepreneur. Celebrated marital / commitment, without legal / recognition, to Ann Walker / in this church. / Easter, 1834.'

As Kit Heyam, co-organiser of the Rainbow Plaques project in York, recalls: 'within hours of the plaque unveiling, I was receiving angry and often abusive messages on social media. Within a day, this had escalated: a petition was launched against the plaque and several people had got hold of my work phone number.'<sup>2</sup> The online petition, which accused the organisers of erasing lesbian history and demanded that the plaque be replaced with one that would describe Lister as a lesbian, gained upwards of two thousand signatures in its first week and was widely reported in the news media.<sup>3</sup> On 3 September, York Civic Trust announced its decision to change the plaque's wording.<sup>4</sup> A consultation period was introduced on the proposed new wording from 30 October to 25 November 2018, and on 10 December the Trust announced that 95 per cent of those who had responded to the survey were happy with the revised wording, which was as follows:

ANNE LISTER / 1791–1840 / of Shibden Hall, Halifax / Lesbian and Diarist; took sacrament here / to seal her union with Ann Walker / Easter 1834.<sup>5</sup>

The new plaque was unveiled on 28 February 2019, to mark the end of LGBT History Month in York; York Civic Trust also took the opportunity at this point to correct the rainbow border of the plaque, which had initially been upside down. A talk by Helena Whitbread followed the unveiling of the new plaque – a significant choice, given Whitbread's pioneering role in presenting Lister's diaries to the world and her unwavering view of Lister as a lesbian.<sup>6</sup>

At the unveiling of the Shibden Hall plaque in April 2019, a representative from the Halifax Civic Trust commented privately that they had

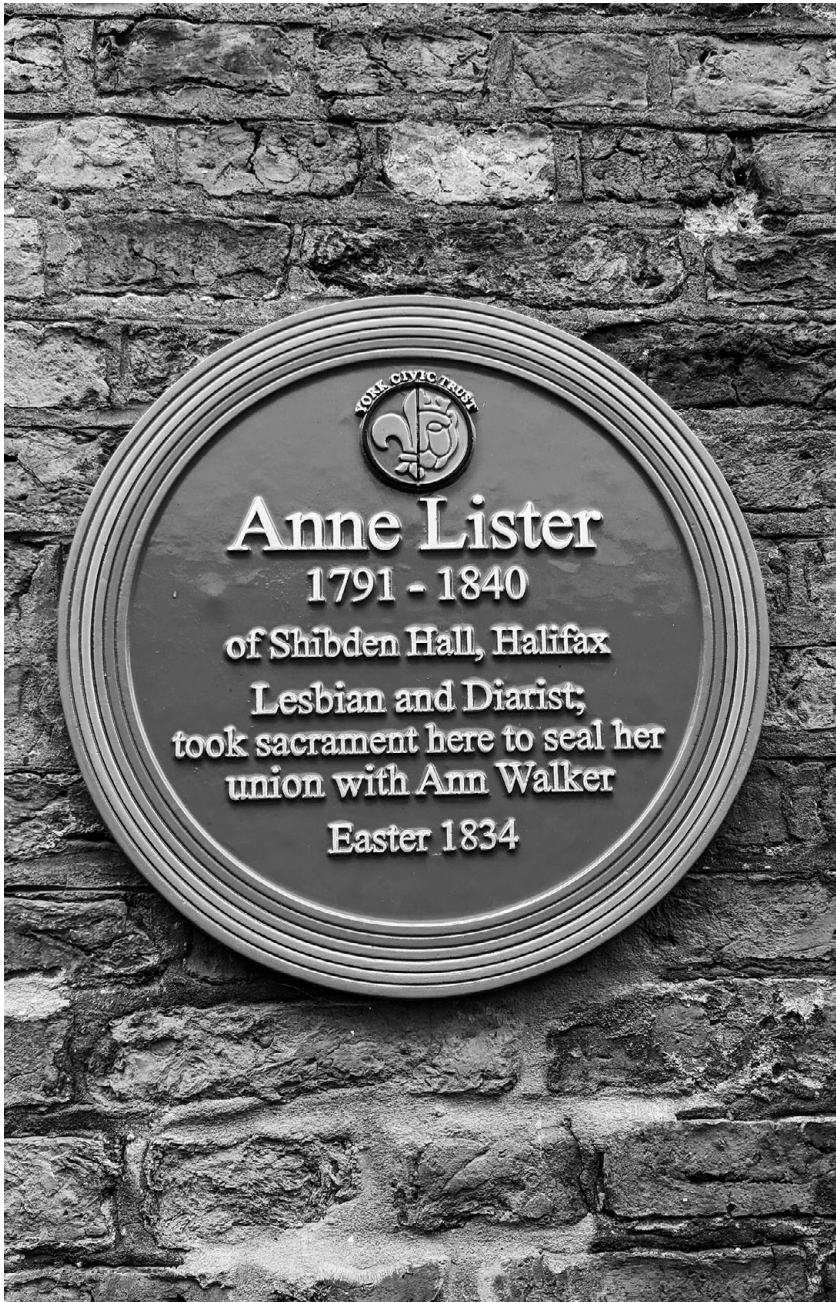


Figure 7 Lister/Walker plaque. Photography Eva Attridge-Hall, 2022.

learned from the York experience, and that the word lesbian would definitely be on this one. Unlike the two versions of the York plaque, the Shibden plaque didn't try to sum Lister up in two words ('gender-nonconforming entrepreneur' versus 'lesbian and diarist'), but offered a more expansive description: 'Anne Lister / 1791–1840 / diarist, business-woman, landowner, / traveller and lesbian who recorded / much of her personal life in / a secret code. / She lived at Shibden Hall / from 1815 to 1840.' In fairness, the Shibden plaque had an easier task than the York one; its matter-of-fact statement about Lister's connection with Shibden Hall left more space to describe her, and no room for controversy.

One of the problems with the York plaque was that the Church of England's continuing refusal to recognise same-sex marriages necessitated careful wording about what exactly had happened between Lister and Walker; the desire to claim the church as the site of one of the first same-sex marriages, or the first lesbian wedding, could not be fully realised.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as Simon Joyce notes in his article 'The Perverse Presentism of Rainbow Plaques', Lister's diary entries don't fully support this claim: Lister and Walker did not celebrate the anniversary of taking communion together at the church, but instead marked the date when they had agreed to make the commitment to each other.<sup>8</sup> Joyce suggests that there is a parallel between the controversy over the York plaque and how *Gentleman Jack* 'downplays [Lister's] gender nonconformity in order to focus instead on her relationship to Ann Walker as a prototypical example of marriage equality'.<sup>9</sup>

Joyce argues that both sides of the plaque debate were based on pre-suppositions that would have made no sense in Lister's historical context, namely 'that we each have a way of self-identifying in terms of gender and sexuality and that this should be considered an unimpeachable truth about ourselves'.<sup>10</sup> The term 'gender-nonconforming', in his view, was rooted in 'a fantasy of stable identity that was just as anachronistic as the labels that had been rejected'.<sup>11</sup> Discussing Jack Halberstam's reading of Lister in *Female Masculinity* as closest to a 'stone butch' in terms of modern identity, Joyce says that if Halberstam is right, 'the York Civic Trust's first instinct was actually more grounded in Lister's own sense of self than its second' and that the impulse to define Lister as 'a lesbian *avant la lettre*' might be more anachronistic than calling her gender-nonconforming.<sup>12</sup>

Anachronism was only part of the story, however, and not the part that made most noise. As Heyam recalls, 'Some of the angry messages (and all of the abuse) came from anti-trans activists who saw Anne's plaque as a symptom of how, in their eyes, advances in trans rights were eroding the

rights of lesbians.’<sup>13</sup> Heyam is at pains to point out that ‘the majority of anger and hurt came from lesbians and bi women who were explicitly supportive of trans rights, but still felt Anne was an important part of their historical community’, and that respect for these women’s concerns prompted the revision of the plaque.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the plaque’s wording was widely interpreted as having more to do with contemporary LGBTQ+ politics than with the potential for anachronism in applying modern identity categories to historical figures. York Civic Trust’s press statement that the choice of ‘gender-nonconforming’ rather than ‘lesbian’ was an attempt to ‘future-proof’ the plaque’s description of Lister did not help matters; a discussion in the comments on a Facebook post sharing York LGBT Forum’s announcement about the plaque interpreted the reference to ‘future-proofing’ as a sinister prediction of further lesbian erasure.<sup>15</sup> A blog post by the linguistics professor Deborah Cameron linked the plaque’s wording to a recent BuzzFeed article about evolving attitudes to gender identity, particularly amongst young people, and the implications of those changes for the future of supposedly old-fashioned binary labels such as gay and lesbian; the issue about the plaque’s wording, Cameron concluded, was not ‘what we can’t know about the past, it’s what we don’t agree on in the present’.<sup>16</sup> Shon Faye, who discusses the controversy in a chapter which begins with the disruption of the 2018 Pride parade in London by the anti-trans group Get The L Out, a couple of weeks before the unveiling of the York plaque, comments: ‘This fierce dispute over the precise description of a dead Victorian woman is more about contemporary LGBT politics than it is about history.’<sup>17</sup>

Heyam’s account of the Rainbow Plaques project is surprising and at times moving. As they explain, the original impetus for Lister’s plaque came from an event Heyam co-organised for York LGBT History Month in 2015, in which people were invited to create cardboard rainbow plaques that marked spaces of significant LGBTQ+ history – personal, local or global – which would be displayed for twenty-four hours across the city. Two of these plaques marked Lister’s association with York, one at her school, King’s Manor, and one at Holy Trinity Goodramgate. Participants in the project were keen for Lister to have a ‘real’ plaque at the church, which they saw as ‘the site of one of the first lesbian marriages in the UK’.<sup>18</sup> This plan was eventually realised in 2018, through a collaboration between York Civic Trust and York LGBT Forum, in conversation with the Churches Conservation Trust, but something clearly went badly wrong in the shift from that creative, community-led, local and temporary project to a permanent memorial.

As Heyam says, the response to the first York plaque showed ‘just how many people Anne Lister was important to, and how few of those people our consultation had managed to reach’. Rather than being a deliberate decision motivated by concerns about anachronism, the omission of the word ‘lesbian’ from the plaque seems to have been the result of that failure: ‘No one had highlighted this word as important in our consultation,’ Heyam says, ‘and (with what seems in retrospect like enormous naivety) I’d assumed that this was because everybody *knew* Anne Lister was a lesbian.’<sup>19</sup> Such naivety is indeed startling; given the long and painful history of lesbian invisibility, what ‘everybody knows’ is precisely what can’t be taken for granted, and it does seem astonishing that nobody realised this was going to be a problem. Heyam’s explanation of ‘gender-nonconforming’ is perhaps less surprising, though it contrasts strikingly with Joyce’s reading of the term as rooted in ‘a fantasy of stable identity’. For the decision-making committee, Heyam says, ‘this was a description of Anne’s *behaviour* . . . But to many people, it read as a label for Anne’s *identity*: a statement that they weren’t a woman, and were therefore not a lesbian either.’<sup>20</sup> (Heyam uses they/them pronouns for the historical figures in their book, for reasons they outline in their Author’s Note.)

Heyam expresses sadness that the new plaque ‘makes no mention of Anne’s gender nonconformity’ and that ‘we’ve lost an opportunity to commemorate how Anne represents an overlap between trans history and lesbian history’.<sup>21</sup> They argue that we should ‘focus less on the impossible task of identifying which historical figures are “really” trans and which aren’t, and more on acknowledging the diversity of creative, non-conforming and fluid approaches to gendered dress in the past, and appreciating both the individuality and the shared experiences they represent’.<sup>22</sup>

When the news about the first York plaque was announced, in the summer of 2018, I was struck – as many people were – by the discrepancy between the BBC news headline, ‘Plaque in York Honours “First Modern Lesbian” Anne Lister’, and the wording of the plaque itself, which described Lister as ‘Gender-nonconforming entrepreneur’.<sup>23</sup> I knew very quickly that I wanted to write something about Lister, labelling and identity categories, but I also had a sinking feeling about what I was letting myself in for. And I felt caught in a difficult in-between space, in my own response to that initial news story and the issues it raised. I was aware that some of the loudest voices in the outcry against lesbian erasure in the original wording of the York plaque were coming from a position of intense and persistent hostility to trans and queer identities, a position

that has been increasingly visible in the UK in the past few years.<sup>24</sup> As part of my work for this chapter, I read all the comments on the original online petition, an experience I found deeply disheartening. To be clear: I identify as both queer and lesbian; I want my queer history to be inclusive and nuanced, but I had my own pang about the original wording of the plaque. I wanted the word 'lesbian' to be there, even while knowing that using it would be anachronistic, and probably not what Lister would have wanted. 'Gender-nonconforming entrepreneur' felt like a very unsatisfactory and partial description.

Public perceptions of Anne Lister, including my own, were soon to be influenced by a new factor: *Gentleman Jack* was broadcast from 22 April to 10 June 2019 in the USA and from 19 May to 7 July in the UK, nicely timed to coincide with Pride Month in each case. Shibden Hall rapidly became a site of pilgrimage for fans of the series; visitor numbers to the house trebled, and media interest in Anne Lister soared. Lots of well-meaning straight colleagues started asking me if I'd seen *Gentleman Jack* or heard of Anne Lister.

In the run-up to the UK broadcast of the television series, I was interviewed by a journalist, Rebecca Woods, who was writing a piece about Lister for the BBC website.<sup>25</sup> Our email correspondence about Lister and questions of identity made me think about a conversation earlier in 2019 with Dominique Bouchard from English Heritage, about academia and public engagement on LGBTQ+ topics. Dominique had suggested then that we might have to be less nuanced in presenting queer history for a general audience, if the result of trying to be nuanced is that we end up not saying anything at all or end up obscuring or erasing the queerness of historical subjects. In my discussions with Rebecca Woods, the journalist, I tried to emphasise the importance of Lister's place in lesbian history, but I kept getting caught between wanting to say 'yes, of course she's a lesbian' and being acutely aware of the problems with ascribing modern identity categories to historical subjects, and indeed with ascribing lesbian identity in particular to Anne Lister, the woman so often labelled 'the first modern lesbian'.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Dead Sea Scrolls of Lesbian History**

In 2009 or 2010, the historian Laura Doan was approached by a researcher asking if she would be willing to talk about Anne Lister for a television documentary that would present Lister as the first modern lesbian. Mindful of the problems with identity history, Doan explained that she



couldn't talk about Lister as unproblematically an example of lesbian identity. The researcher, a bit flustered, went off to check with the programme-makers and came back saying, 'I'm sorry, we really need her to be a lesbian!'<sup>27</sup>

Doan, not surprisingly, did not take part in the documentary, which was made to accompany James Kent's 2010 film, *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*. Capitalising on the release of the film, Virago published a revised version of Helena Whitbread's original 1988 selection from Anne Lister's diaries, *I Know My Own Heart*, retitled *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*. Above a still from the film showing Maxine Peake and Anna Madeley as Anne Lister and Mariana Lawton, the front cover bears a quotation from Emma Donoghue: 'The Lister diaries are the Dead Sea Scrolls of lesbian history; they changed everything.'<sup>28</sup>

That was rather how it felt, in 1988; the revelations of an early nineteenth-century woman's sexual desire for and sexual exploits with numerous other women were so astonishing that some people actually thought they must be a hoax. It was just too good to be true.<sup>29</sup> The version of lesbian history which Terry Castle mischievously described as 'no lesbians before 1900' was overturned by Lister's detailed record of her love affairs, flirtations, seductions, 'grubbling' (i.e. groping) and multiple 'kisses' (her term for orgasms).<sup>30</sup> Lister's declaration, 'I love, & only love, the fairer sex', was taken up as a statement of lesbian sexual identity, and her assessment of the Ladies of Llangollen's relationship as 'something more tender still than friendship' offered an exhilarating sense of identification.<sup>31</sup> Lister's use of a personal code – her 'crypt hand' – for passages about her sexual activities provided a wonderful metaphor for what had been hidden from history.

Not everyone accepted this view of Lister or her revolutionary effect on lesbian history. In a 2019 blog post on the representation of butchness in recent television dramas, Jack Halberstam noted disapprovingly that there is 'a tendency now to regard Lister as a "lesbian"'. Criticising *Gentleman Jack* for making 'that same mistake', Halberstam stated that

no such word would have been used during Lister's life-time and the markers of Lister's difference from other women concerned his/her cultivated masculine appearance and his/her desire for women. S/he did not understand herself to be part of a community of others like herself and s/he considered her partners to be women while s/he was something else, something closer to manhood.<sup>32</sup>

Another queer theorist, Annamarie Jagose, similarly insists that 'Lister's many sexual partners do not understand themselves, any more than she understands them, as sharing with Lister a sexual preference, let alone

anything like a sexuality. Without exception, Lister's sexual relations with women are not defined as transacted between subjects of the same gender.<sup>33</sup> As Chris Roulston suggests, 'For eighteenth-century scholars, Lister has repeatedly created a crisis of classification. Labeled as both "the first modern lesbian" and as an example of female masculinity, Lister appears to inhabit and simultaneously to elude the various categories in which she has been placed.'<sup>34</sup> Caroline Baylis-Green argues that 'Lister's *Diaries* show her inhabiting a number of differently gendered personae and subjectivities, which fit more comfortably within a genderqueer or non-binary framework.'<sup>35</sup> Simon Joyce suggests that one of the difficulties for readers of Lister's diaries is 'the absence of stable identity signifiers' but also Lister's need for them, which means that 'she tacks between a number of sexual registers: same-sex desire, the Romantic language of intimate friendship, a language of gender transitivity, and a masculine discourse of sexual libertinism'.<sup>36</sup>

### **'I look within myself & doubt': Lister's Self-Construction**

Despite all these caveats, the 'first modern lesbian' label has adhered to Lister with remarkable persistence, not always helpfully. Jill Liddington's consciously careful description of Lister's diaries as 'the earliest and most candid first-person experience of living a lesbian life' suggests that what's important is not identity, but experience, and particularly the recording of that experience.<sup>37</sup> One of the drawbacks of the 'first modern lesbian' label is that it obscures Lister's work as a writer, presenting the diaries as a straight-from-the-heart outpouring of authentic lesbian emotion. Lister was a self-conscious writer, who reread, indexed and reflected on her own writing, and who thought about becoming a published author.<sup>38</sup> The record of her life comes to us mediated through her deliberate self-construction – she is our source, and that's as problematic as for any other first-person narrative, memoir, journal or epistolary record. Whoever we think she's performing for, even if it's just herself, the sense of an audience and an effect complicated any attempt to see this as an unmediated, innocent or transparent account of the heart she claimed to know so well. Even that claim, 'I know my own heart', is textually mediated, and quoted in French from the opening page of Rousseau's *Confessions*.<sup>39</sup> As Anna Clark notes, Lister's construction of identity drew on Romantic literature (Rousseau and Byron) as well as Greek and Latin classical texts.<sup>40</sup>

Lister's sense of her own sexual and gender identity is hard to pin down. Here, engaging with one of the available terms from her own time, she

rejects the idea of a connection between her own desires and actions and Sapphism: 'Got on the subject of Saffic [*sic*] regard. [I] said there was artifice in it. It was very different from mine & would be no pleasure to me.'<sup>41</sup> Lister repeatedly insists on the naturalness of her desire for the fairer sex, and also on her own exceptionalism. Her quotation of Rousseau's claim to be unlike anyone else has often seemed to be taken too much at face value, so that she ends up bearing the whole evidentiary burden of 'proving' lesbian existence in the early nineteenth century. But she is, I think, looking for women like her, not as sexual partners but as models (like the Ladies of Llangollen) or as kindred spirits (like the masculine bluestocking Miss Pickford).<sup>42</sup> She has a network of women friends, some of whom are let into the secret of her code or 'crypt hand', as Anira Rowanchild notes, and with whom she also shares reading practices and gifts of books, as Stephen Colclough has shown.<sup>43</sup> I think there is more of a community here than Halberstam allows for, and I'm interested in the way it keeps dropping out of the picture, whether in critical accounts or dramatisations. Both *Gentleman Jack* and the 2010 film *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister* focus mainly on the pair-bond – Lister's unhappy relationship with Mariana Belcombe in *Secret Diaries*, and her courtship of Ann Walker in the first series of *Gentleman Jack*. I also think there is something prescriptive in Halberstam's and Jagose's definitions of Lister as not-lesbian because she doesn't want likeness or sameness in her sexual relations, or because she does not see herself as the same as the woman she's having sex with. As I kept finding myself saying to the BBC journalist, it's complicated.

Lister's use of her reading for self-construction has been charted by Anna Clark, Stephen Colclough, Chris Roulston, Marc Schachter, Laurie Shannon, Amy Solomons and Stephen Turton amongst others; but she also constructs herself through the mirror of other women who 'love, & only love, the fairer sex'.<sup>44</sup> Lister's fascination with the Ladies of Llangollen is a particularly rich site for such self-construction, and the effects of her visit to Plas Newydd continue to shape her visions of the life she longs for, in ways that are both practical (her improvements to Shibden's house and grounds) and imaginative.<sup>45</sup> Lister's assessment of Butler and Ponsonby's relationship, prompted by Mariana's question about whether it could be platonic, has been much quoted and discussed:

I cannot help thinking that surely it was not platonic. Heaven forgive me, but I look within myself & doubt. I feel the infirmity of our nature & hesitate to pronounce such attachments uncemented by something more tender still than friendship. But much, or all, depends upon the story of

their former lives, the period passed before they lived together, that feverish dream called youth.<sup>46</sup>

But Mariana is not the only woman with whom Lister discusses Butler and Ponsonby; Emma Saltmarshe, a married friend and former flirt, earns Lister's disfavour with her contemptuous account of the Ladies and their estate:

Mentioned my having seen Miss Ponsonby . . . Not a little to my surprise, Emma launched forth most fluently in dispraise of the place. A little baby house & baby grounds. Bits of painted glass stuck in all the windows. Beautifully morocco-bound books laid about in all the arbours, etc., evidently for shew, perhaps stiff if you touched them & never opened. Tasso, etc., etc. Everything evidently done for effect. She thought they must be 2 romantic girls &, as I walked with her to see her off, she said she had thought it was a pity they were not married; it would do them a great deal of good.<sup>47</sup>

At the risk of over-reading – always a risk with literary critics – I can't help hearing another layer of meaning in Emma Saltmarshe's contemptuous remarks about the Ladies' beautifully bound and displayed books, 'perhaps stiff if you touched them & never opened'. I'm not saying this is a meaning that Emma intends, though in an earlier journal entry Lister comments on Emma's own tendency to over-interpretation: 'She often thinks I mean ten times more than ever entered my head, & fancies smiles & looks & *double entendres* I never dreamt of.'<sup>48</sup> In the wake of Lister's exchange with Mariana about the non-platonic nature of the Ladies' relationship, Emma's suggestion that the Ladies' female bonding may also be 'done for effect', and that they'd be better off married, is a jarring one.

Emma's attack on the Ladies' books and reading seems particularly ill-judged, given the importance that books and reading have in Lister's own life, her sense of her identity and her relationships with other women. When Lister meets Sarah Ponsonby, she compliments Ponsonby on a beautiful bookcase she has noticed earlier, and they discuss reading, translation and poetry. 'Contrived to ask if they were classical,' Lister notes, to which Miss Ponsonby replies, 'No . . . Thank God from Latin & Greek I am free.' They also talk about Byron, who has sent the Ladies 'several of his works', and Lister asks if Miss Ponsonby has read *Don Juan*: 'She was ashamed to say she had read the 1st canto.' As with the question about being classical, Lister seems to be looking for confirmation of likeness, but with limited success.<sup>49</sup>

Lister's visit to the Ladies is a complex event which opens up a world of identification and desire beyond the pair-bond with Mariana. She imagines

the possibility of her own desires for domestic partnership with a woman through the Ladies, a process that is strongly evident in her letter to Sibbella Maclean of 19 October 1825. Lister's attempts to persuade Sibbella to come and spend significant time at Shibden, and get to know her better, are bound up with a painful vignette about Butler and Ponsonby's declining health in old age.

Do turn to my letter again. Perhaps it is merely in that dry sort of style that you would better understand if you had passed a winter with me at Shibden. I have sometimes, they tell me, a way of saying things peculiarly my own. I smiled to read, that it would not now surprise you 'so much', even if I should marry. Be prepared for all things, for I am persuaded 'joy flies monopolists'; and, if you are 'one', and I am not another 'made to live alone'. I could be happy in a *garret*, or a cellar with the object of my regard, but, in solitude, a prison or a palace would be all alike to me. 'Did Mrs B(arlow) ask your opinion as to marrying?' No! but knowing the circumstances, I have ventured to give it. I have ventured to urge, that the rational union of two amiable persons must be productive of comfort. Trust me, Sibbella, however much you may fancy you differ with me on this subject, we are at heart agreed. There is no pleasure like that of thought meeting thought 'ere from the lips it part'. Give me a mind in unison with my own, and I'll find the way of happiness – without it, I should feel alone among multitudes, and all the world would seem to me a desert.

The letter circles around ideas of marriage, as Lister works to persuade Sibbella of their compatibility and the pleasure it can bring, her prose joining Sibbella and herself as two beings not 'made to live alone' and insisting that 'we are at heart agreed'. The union of like minds becomes something close to a kiss, 'thought meeting thought "ere from the lips it part"'. Lister's hunger for loving companionship and understanding is palpable here; solitude without love is a prison, and the lack of 'a mind in unison with my own' transforms the world into a desert. When Lister turns to the subject of Butler and Ponsonby, presumably in response to something in Sibbella's letter, her own hopes and fears about the possibility of a long-term relationship with Sibbella (older than Lister, aristocratic, potentially the Eleanor Butler to her Sarah Ponsonby) are never far from the surface:

I was sorry to find it possible for any party of travellers to give such an account of Lady E. B(utler) and Miss Ponsonby. The latter is several years (ten I think) younger than the former, and must be four or five or more years less than eighty. Her first appearance struck me as much, and perhaps, as unfavorably as possible, but there was a flash of mind that bore down on all, and I shall never forget the enchantment that it threw on all around.

Lady E. B(utler) I have never seen. She was once clever. What she is, it might be humiliating to inquire, for, in this world, minds, like bodies, do appear to wear out. About the time I was at Llangollen the difficulty of seeing the ladies (any one might see the place) seemed considerable. I regret that it is lessened, but the burden of age may lessen the quantity of self-derived resources and thus aggravate the necessity of picking up amusement wherever it is to be had. Lady E. B(utler) has been quite blind more than a year. She had always high spirits, and was always, in this respect, a contrast to her graver friend whom I can well enough imagine to consenting to admit strangers for her friend's sake, and sitting, scarcely uttering a word, intently and almost unconsciously gazing on the eye that could behold that gaze no more. Changed indeed must she be, if there be not a spirit still within her, that, if one spark had lighted it, could not have beamed with all the light of noonday life and intellect! But no more. Should we decay as these have done, may there at last, remain some proud and haughty feelings of reserve, that bars us from the stare of strangers! . . . But do try your utmost to let us have an opportunity of coming to a fair understanding of each other's dispositions, &c. &c., next spring. I shall not dare to think much of it for fear of disappointment, but a fortnight will be infinitely better than nothing; and I would endeavour to return with you if possible. Surely, *I shall know you* some time.<sup>50</sup>

Lister imagines what the emotional impact of Lady Eleanor's blindness must be for Ponsonby, even to the extent of seeing Butler from Ponsonby's point of view. It's a complicated act, in which Lister not only imagines an intrusion into the private space of the female couple (whose domestic idyll she seeks to emulate), but performs such an intrusion, becoming a spectator and (in her identification with Ponsonby) a participant in this domestic scene of fragility and vulnerability set against (and menacing) enduring same-sex love. The scene becomes a projection into her own possible old age with Sibbella or another woman companion, at risk of being exposed to the curious and perhaps mocking, gloating, vulgar or disrespectful 'stare of strangers'.

### Plaques and Projections

The first time I went to Shibden, for a study day on Lister in the summer of 2014, there was a screening of *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister* in the Hall in the evening, and from time to time I would glance sideways and see the film's images of Maxine Peake as Lister and Anna Madeley as Mariana reflected in the glass of the Lister family portraits. (Or that's how I remembered it; when I went back to Shibden, I realised the reflection must have been in the photograph of John Lister and his fellow

antiquarians, because that's the only one that has glass!) I'm very aware of how *Gentleman Jack* maps and projects a particular image of Lister on to Shibden, in ways more lasting than those fleeting reflections. (Angela Clare's chapter in this volume discusses some of the more lasting material effects of those projected images).

One of the most poignant things for me about season one of *Gentleman Jack* was seeing Suranne Jones as Lister moving through real places that mattered in Lister's life – Shibden, Holy Trinity Goodramgate. Both of those places are altered now by the record of Lister's presence nailed to the walls; the Shibden plaque, in particular, must have been covered up or edited out or filmed around for the shooting of season two. A plaque fixes something in the past, but it's also a tug along the gathers of fabric that pull together past and present. It links person and place but also separates them, holds them apart. It opens up complicated questions about the fixed and the fleeting, and about identity and time.

In his 2018 preface to the twentieth-anniversary edition of *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam offers the image of the butch as a 'bodily catachresis', something that can't be named, or can only be named by a misnomer because the words don't exist for it yet.<sup>51</sup> Halberstam identifies 'what shall hereafter be known as "the temporal paradox of the butch" – s/he is out of time and ahead of his/her time and behind the times all at once'.<sup>52</sup> There's a parallel here with Chris Roulston's 2013 article about Lister as the first modern lesbian, and the way Lister's identity moves both forwards and backwards.<sup>53</sup> But it also made me think about Fanny Derham, in Mary Shelley's 1835 novel *Lodore* – a character who is not a butch as such, though she is described as 'more made to be loved by her own sex than by the opposite one'.<sup>54</sup> Fanny is both closely associated with the ancient world through her reading of Greek and Latin, and someone whose story cannot yet be told by the novel but must wait for an unspecified future time. Like Alice through the looking-glass, I once suggested, the lesbian character of the 1830s can have jam tomorrow, jam yesterday, but never jam today.<sup>55</sup> Questions of lesbian identity seem to present the difficulty, the impossibility even, of being present/being in the present/being now.

Identity categories are necessary fictions, necessary because as queer people we are still under attack. They are powerful and they're tricky, whether playing over the surface or affixed as a prosthesis or a monument. I talk on Skype with two friends in Canada about all this. 'The plaque is always late from history, but it becomes history itself,' says Nathalie Dupuis-Désormeaux, historian of eighteenth-century music and

twenty-first-century composer. She's right: the plaque promises history, the 'real', in a way that – say – the new statue of Anne Lister at the Piece Hall in Halifax doesn't. It can be harder to see the plaque as just another story, another version of Lister, even if that's all it can be. 'The plaque is almost parasitic, like a copyright sign,' the art historian Cristina Martinez tells me.

Cristina's observation about the plaque as copyright sign raises questions of ownership and durability very much at odds with the literally ephemeral cardboard rainbow plaques of Heyam's 2015 project, conceived as an act of love and affective attachment. Heyam's introduction to *Before We Were Trans* notes that they avoid the term 'reclaiming' in the writing of trans history, because of its links with the language of capitalist ownership; they cite Gabrielle M. W. Bychowski's observation that this sort of language fosters an idea of historical representation as 'a scarce resource we need to fight over'.<sup>56</sup> The language of capitalism and ownership has a particular sharpness in relation to Lister and representation, as we wait to find out what will become of *Gentleman Jack* in the wake of its cancellation by HBO: the #SaveGentlemanJack campaign on social media takes place amidst anxious speculation about who might pick up the rights, who has the money to back the series.

The conversational stakes about Lister and identity are higher now than they were when the television researcher told Laura Doan, 'I'm sorry, we really need her to be a lesbian!' There's so much more noise, including the constant outpouring of mainstream media stories about trans issues, most of them hostile. But there's also the amplification created by the *Gentleman Jack* effect: the numbers who feel a sense of identification with Anne Lister, who feel they know her, who have a sense of ownership, as fans and sometimes as researchers. What does it mean, in this context, to talk about what 'we' need Anne Lister to be?

Thanks to the energy unlocked by the television series, the availability of knowledge and information about Lister has increased too, opening up the world of the diaries through the WYAS transcription project. Research on Lister and her world is alive and well in the work of the Anne Lister Society, the Anne Lister Research Summit, the websites 'Packed with Potential' and 'In Search of Ann Walker', funded PhD projects, a special issue of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, and indeed the present volume. In 2014, the audience for the first Anne Lister Study Day fitted (rather tightly) into one small room at Shibden Hall; the idea of a week-long celebration of Lister that could fill Halifax Minster was unimaginable. Whatever happens with *Gentleman Jack*, the future of Lister Studies is something to celebrate, and so is this messy, complicated, expansive



conversation about who we think she was, and why and how she matters so much.

### Conclusion: No Time like the Present

It's April 2022, and I'm back at Shibden, on the Complete Anne and Ann Coach and Walking Tour, as part of the festivities for the long-awaited Anne Lister Birthday Week. The lawn in front of the house is covered with stalls selling *Gentleman Jack*-themed gin, notebooks, walking sticks, art, postcards, memorabilia, and pin badges of the Shibden plaque and of the revised York plaque. There are people in Victorian costumes; I'm not sure which ones are *Gentleman Jack* fans doing cosplay and which ones are stallholders. A man and a woman in Victorian dress are walking around on stilts. It's snowing, just a little, but the sun comes out while our tour group is going round the house. I'm thinking about all the other times I've been here, about the layers of memory and identity that line these walls. Thinking about the inaugural Anne Lister Society meeting later this week, and how the audience for my work on Lister feels so different in 2022 from the one I imagined when I started it in 2018. I'm thinking about what it means, finding the words for Anne Lister: how and where she found the words for herself; how and where we find the words for her, and how they slip or how they stay. About who 'we' are, too, and what we do: code-breakers, scholars, fans, critics, theorists; Civic Trusts and other affixers of plaques; screenwriters, artists; LGBTQ+ people in search of our own history. About the way these categories, too, layer and overlap. About how it's complicated, it's always complicated, finding the words for identity, and how the pursuit of knowledge is bound up with emotion and desire. This is not neutral territory; it never was.

Shibden in brilliant sunshine; I go out to the carriage barn again and take another picture of the doorway. *Everything beyond this point is fiction.*

### Notes

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- 2 K. Heyam, *Before We Were Trans* (London: Basic Books, 2022), pp. 87–8.
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- 4 'Statement on Anne Lister's Rainbow Plaque', issued September 2018 by York Civic Trust, Churches Conservation Trust, York LGBT Forum and York LGBT History Month, [https://gallery.mailchimp.com/d75e42de126fedb389cf4f417/files/od6bf24a-8d10-4ded-9755-181c32598987/2018\\_09\\_01\\_Consultation\\_Rainbow\\_Plaque\\_Postion\\_Statement\\_Final.pdf](https://gallery.mailchimp.com/d75e42de126fedb389cf4f417/files/od6bf24a-8d10-4ded-9755-181c32598987/2018_09_01_Consultation_Rainbow_Plaque_Postion_Statement_Final.pdf), accessed 22 February 2023.
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- 6 'Helena Whitbread: Anne Lister Plaque Unveiling in York', YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/Jfs297sN7bc>, accessed 8 August 2002.
- 7 '[O]ne of the problems was that trying to say "marriage" without saying "marriage" (which we had to do because other organisations involved in the plaque were concerned about "historical accuracy" and religious sensitivity) took up quite a lot of words!'; K. R. Heyam, comment on York LGBT Forum, 'A Sneak Peek at the First Ever PERMANENT Rainbow Plaque!', Facebook, 21 July 2018, [www.facebook.com/yorklgbthistory/posts/pfbidoy8mT4jzrSoDkhzSmwxSzbUJUpmcSSWtfrH1h2sPBGzJpjPJNPNYn4YTJfFKDjLj21l?comment\\_id=2033959806678210](http://www.facebook.com/yorklgbthistory/posts/pfbidoy8mT4jzrSoDkhzSmwxSzbUJUpmcSSWtfrH1h2sPBGzJpjPJNPNYn4YTJfFKDjLj21l?comment_id=2033959806678210), accessed 10 August 2022.
- 8 S. Joyce, 'The Perverse Presentism of Rainbow Plaques: Memorializing Anne Lister', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 41.5 (2019), 601–10, 603.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 601.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 604.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 606.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 608.
- 13 Heyam, *Before We Were Trans*, p. 88.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Comments in discussion on Facebook post, 30 July 2018, quoting York LGBT History Month's statement about the controversy, [www.facebook.com/nimda.wgrid/posts/pfbidoph4w8k8KoHEW6ra8W4cnUNKpFLJQ1jARcmtp4KQWKydWDYrQxHy1Fp1LqjckhMmPl](http://www.facebook.com/nimda.wgrid/posts/pfbidoph4w8k8KoHEW6ra8W4cnUNKpFLJQ1jARcmtp4KQWKydWDYrQxHy1Fp1LqjckhMmPl), accessed 10 August 2022. York Civic Trust's statement about the wording was reported in Lydia Smith, 'Anne Lister: 2,000 People Sign Petition against "Erasure" of "First Modern Lesbian" Plaque', *PinkNews*, 3 August 2018: 'York Civic Trust told *PinkNews* the decision of the plaque wording was the result of a "long-thought-out process" at the request of the LGBT partner groups who "had argued it among themselves". "The wording that we chose was supposed to be – I don't know whether it's going to be successful – but it was supposed to be factual and 'future-proofed' so it's understandable into the future without changes in social connotation," York Civic Trust chief executive Dr David Fraser said. "We are conscious that we may have got it wrong," he added'; [www.pinknews.co.uk/2018/08/03/anne-lister-2000-people-sign-petition-against-erasure-of-first-modern-lesbian-plaque/](http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2018/08/03/anne-lister-2000-people-sign-petition-against-erasure-of-first-modern-lesbian-plaque/), accessed 10 August 2022.

- 16 D. Cameron, 'Coming to Terms with the Past: What Should we Call Anne Lister?', [www.debuk.wordpress.com/2018/11/08/coming-to-terms-with-the-past-what-should-we-call-anne-lister/](http://www.debuk.wordpress.com/2018/11/08/coming-to-terms-with-the-past-what-should-we-call-anne-lister/), accessed 7 August 2022.
- 17 S. Faye, *The Transgender Issue* (London: Penguin, 2021), p. 80.
- 18 Heyam, *Before We Were Trans*, p. 87. Images of the cardboard Rainbow Plaques project can be seen at [www.sahgb.org.uk/features/rainbow-plaques-making-queer-history-visible](http://www.sahgb.org.uk/features/rainbow-plaques-making-queer-history-visible).
- 19 Heyam, *Before We Were Trans*, p. 88.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid. p. 89.
- 22 Ibid., p. 90.
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- 26 C. Roulston, 'The Revolting Anne Lister: the UK's First Modern Lesbian', in K. Browne et al. (eds.), *Revolting Bodies: Desiring Lesbians*, special issue of *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 17.3–4 (Spring 2013), 267–78.
- 27 L. Doan, keynote address, 20th Annual Lesbian Lives Conference, 'The Modern Lesbian', Brighton, 15–16 February 2013.
- 28 H. Whitbread (ed.), *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister* (London: Virago, 2010). Virago's subsequent reprinting was titled *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister, vol. 1: I Know My Own Heart*; they also reprinted Whitbread's second volume of selections, *No Priest but Love*, as *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister, vol. 11: No Priest but Love* (London: Virago, 2020).
- 29 '[A] daily memoir of so extraordinary a candour that it was difficult not to think it a forgery'; E. Mavor, 'Gentleman Jack from Halifax', *London Review of Books* 10.3 (1988), 18–19, quoted in F. Brideoake, *The Ladies of Llangollen* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2017), p. 31; 'more than a few readers (myself included) questioned the diary's authenticity'; A. Jagose, *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 14.
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- 31 Monday, 29 January 1821, in Whitbread, *Secret Diaries* (2010), p. 161, and Sunday, 3 August 1822, p. 229.
- 32 J. Halberstam, 'A (K)night of a Thousand Butches', blog post 21 May 2019, [bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2019/05/21/a-knight-of-a-thousand-butches-by-jack-halberstam/](http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2019/05/21/a-knight-of-a-thousand-butches-by-jack-halberstam/), accessed 23 July 2022.
- 33 Jagose, *Inconsequence*, p. 21

- 34 C. Roulston, 'Transgender Identifications and the Case of Anne Lister', paper presented to the 2015 Annual Meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth Century Studies, Los Angeles, 19–21 March.
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- 37 J. Liddington, talk given at Anne Lister Birthday Weekend, Halifax Minster, 2 April 2022.
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- 42 The WYAS transcription project shows the complexity of Lister's relationship with Miss Pickford in ways there isn't space to discuss here, including Lister's suspicion that Miss Pickford is becoming emotionally attached to her.
- 43 A. Rowanchild, "'My Mind on Paper": Anne Lister and the Construction of Lesbian Identity', in A. Donnell and P. Polkey (eds.), *Representing Lives: Women and AutoBiography* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 199–207; S. Colclough, "'Do You Not Know the Quotation?": Reading Anne Lister, Anne Lister Reading', in J. C. Beynon and C. Gonda (eds.), *Lesbian Dames: Sapphism in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 159–72.
- 44 Clark, 'Anne Lister's Construction'; Colclough, 'Do You Not Know The Quotation?'; C. Roulston, 'Sexuality in Translation: Anne Lister and the Ancients', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 30.1 (January 2021), 112–35; M. Schachter, 'Making Sense in the Margins: Anne Lister's Notes on Juvenal', paper presented at the Anne Lister Society inaugural meeting, Halifax, 8 April 2022; L. Shannon, 'Anne Lister Reading Genesis: Apples and Etymologies', paper presented at the Anne Lister Society inaugural meeting, Halifax, 8 April 2022, and Shannon, this volume; A. Solomons, "'I am happy among my books – I am not happy without them": Navigating Anne Lister's Reading', paper presented at the Anne Lister Society inaugural meeting, Halifax, 8 April 2022; Turton, this volume.
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- 47 Sunday, 10 August 1822, in *ibid.*, p. 230.

- 48 Sunday, 24 June 1821, in *ibid.*, p. 171.
- 49 Tuesday, 23 July 1822, in *ibid.*, p. 221
- 50 Anne Lister to Sibbella Maclean, 19 October 1825, in M. Green (ed.), *Miss Lister of Shibden Hall: Selected Letters, 1600–1840* (Lewes: Book Guild, 1992), pp. 87–9.
- 51 J. Halberstam, 'Preface to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition', in *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), p. xx.
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- 53 Roulston, 'The Revolting Anne Lister'.
- 54 M. Shelley, *Lodore*, ed. L. Vargo (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1997), p. 317.
- 55 C. Gonda, 'Lodore and Fanny Derham's Story', *Women's Writing* 6.3 (1999), 329–44.
- 56 Heyam, *Before We Were Trans*, p. 27.