

Introduction

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The diaries of Anne Lister (1791–1840) challenge our understanding of the history of sexuality, and of the social, economic and political contexts of nineteenth-century society. Containing twenty-six bound volumes from 1816 to 1840, as well as loose pages from 1806 to 1810, the Lister archive is more than five million words long (three times the length of Samuel Pepys’s diary), with 15 per cent written in Lister’s ‘crypt hand’ or code, detailing her intimate and sexual relationships with women. The importance of the Lister diaries has gained increasing recognition in recent years. This is the first volume of essays to bring together an international range of scholars and researchers working on the Anne Lister archive. It showcases the burgeoning and dynamic field of Anne Lister Studies both within and beyond academia.

The diaries’ survival is nothing short of miraculous. They were first discovered in the 1880s by John Lister when he inherited Shibden Hall. Once he cracked the code with the help of an antiquarian friend, Arthur Burrell, and realised what it contained, he placed the diaries behind wooden panels. What followed over the next hundred years was sporadic interest in the diaries from historians who never alluded to the coded sections.¹ In the 1980s, the Lister diaries were finally properly catalogued and made available to the public as an accessible archive, one hundred years after they were first discovered.² The history of the diaries as a material artefact, with their repeated return to the literal and proverbial closet, reflects the complicated trajectory of queer history itself, with its legacy of shame, occlusion and censorship.

An archive that pushes the boundaries of the social, sexual and gendered norms of early nineteenth-century Britain, the Lister diaries refuse to fit neatly into available scholarly categories. This has often resulted in their placement in an outlying class of their own. As Susan S. Lanser has argued, the Lister diaries form part of a broader narrative of how pre-twentieth- and twenty-first-century intimacies between women were ‘entangled with

1806
 Monday August 11th Eliza left us
 Had a Letter from her on Wednesday
 morning by Mr Ratcliffe the 13th Inst
 Wrote to her on Thursday 14th by Mr Lund
 Wrote to her again on Sunday 17th put into
 the Post office at Leeds on the Monday following
 that Evening the 18th Had a parcel from
 her Music Letter & Lavender
 had a Letter Wednesday August 20th
 Answered on the 21st
 Sunday 24th wrote to ER put into the Post ^{Monday} on ^{to two}
 Wednesday 27th has a Letter from her in answer
 Friday 28th rec^d a parcel from ER by Mr Lund
 Sunday 30th Wrote to ER in answer to ten sheets
 by Mr Lund ~ Sunday 7 of September wrote
 Tuesday 9th had a Letter from her
 Wednesday 10th had a Letter from ER
 Friday 12th had a Letter from ER
 Thursday 11th wrote to ER in answer to hers of the 10th
 Sunday Sep^r 14th Wrote to ER by my Uncle &
 Aunt I Lister going to Hull on the same
 day a short Note to Miss Hargrave enclosed
 with 3 Handkerchiefs 1 Slip in a parcel
 with my Letter to ER in answer to one
 from her on Saturday 13th by Mr Vasslet
 enclosing me a Cornelian Brooch
 Monday August 25th 1806 Rode with Mr
 Mitchell to Bakers the first time Sever
 was out of Yorkshire
 Sunday Sep^r 16th had a Letter from ER in answer to
 mine by my Uncle & Aunt by the Post they being at Hull
 Wednesday rode with Mr Mitchell to fix by ^{through} ^{England}
^{Warrick} and ^{Brighton} on that day was the ^{Prætorian}
 at Leeds Wednesday Sep^r 17th 1806

Figure 2 Anne Lister's first diary entry (11 August 1806). West Yorkshire Archive Service, Calderdale, SH:7/ML/E/26/1/0003.

contests about authority and liberty, power and difference, desire and duty, mobility and change, order and governance',³ yet the Lister diaries cannot be seen as representative in that they have no comparable analogue.⁴ Writing soon after publication of the first extracts from the diaries, Martha Vicinus cautioned against using them as a yardstick by which to measure other queer/lesbian histories.⁵ While not claiming the Lister diaries as a reference point, the chapters in *Decoding Anne Lister* nevertheless explore how this unusual archive intervenes in histories of the nineteenth century and helps us to redraw and reimagine the constantly evolving fields of gender and sexuality as well as those of life writing and the role of women in social and political life. They also ask in what ways the social, political and economic conditions of early nineteenth-century Britain enabled the emergence of a figure such as Anne Lister. And what potential the material history of the diaries can unearth as we continue to engage with, uncover and interpret their extraordinary content.

The global significance of the Lister diaries was marked by their inclusion in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register in 2011. The diaries are also reaching far beyond the world of scholars and archivists and generating a dialogue among genealogists, amateur historians, diary transcribers and avid fans of the BBC/HBO *Gentleman Jack* series. A community has evolved around the figure of Anne Lister that is engendering a broader and more public discussion about our understanding of queer sexuality, gender variance and women's roles from the nineteenth century to the present. As the controversy over the plaque commemorating Lister's union with Ann Walker at Holy Trinity Church, York, reveals, the Lister diaries have striking relevance to our current conversations around public history and memorialisation, and to how we shape those conversations in the light of the suppressed and occluded queer, lesbian and gender nonconforming past.⁶

The Lister diaries bear out the idea that if attended to correctly, the past can redirect our understanding of the present. The chapters in this collection reflect the encounter between past and present by showing how Lister's transgression of gender and sexual boundaries not only marked and shaped every aspect of her lived experience, but also challenges our understanding of the evolution of sexual and gendered narratives up to the present. *Decoding Anne Lister* includes interviews and essays on Lister's queer sexuality and gender variance, her role as a diarist, her pushing of gender barriers through her involvement in local politics and in the managing of her Shibden Hall estate, her adventurous and at times gender-defying travels through Britain, Europe and the Russian

Caucasus, and the highly successful adaptation of the Lister diaries into the BBC/HBO series *Gentleman Jack*. Revealing not only the life of an exceptional woman but also the local and global world in which she lived, the Lister diaries reconfigure the more traditional trajectories of nineteenth-century histories of gender and sexuality, and of social and political life.

Lister was keeping her diary at a time of extreme political, social and economic transformation and upheaval. Key events included the Napoleonic wars (1803–15), the expansion of the British empire, the Industrial Revolution (1760–1840), the Peterloo Massacre (1819) and the 1832 Reform Act, several of which are commented on in the diaries.⁷ Within this public history, Lister navigated and challenged the codes, rules and norms of genteel society while also being very much of her time, participating in class and institutional privilege, wanting to advance her own social connections and seeking the advantages afforded her by her landowner status once she inherited Shibden Hall in 1836.⁸ As much as they defy sexual and gender norms, the diaries also document a need and desire for social and political belonging, foregrounding a tension that is itself a constitutive part of queer, lesbian and gender nonconforming archival histories.

The bound volumes of the diaries begin in 1816, towards the end of Jane Austen's life and at the start of Charlotte Brontë's, and Lister herself made occasional references to having literary aspirations.⁹ However, in contrast to published literary works of the period, Lister's private diaries have provided frank and explicit observations on romantic and sexual queer intimacies, gender nonconformity, social belonging and exclusion, and invaluable social commentary on class and local politics. Lister's status as a woman of privilege who was simultaneously operating outside the normative codes of her class provides a unique insight into the norms of nineteenth-century society as well as how those norms could be contested. The diaries help us to understand how, among the many transformative effects of the Industrial Revolution, the radical separation of the private and public spheres within an increasingly influential and economically powerful bourgeois class contributed to create a space for a queer figure such as Anne Lister. As Sharon Marcus has shown, the separation of the gendered spheres meant that, rather than being a thing apart, female intimacy was encouraged and supported. Both married and unmarried women were free to develop romantic female friendships, with the underlying assumption that homosociality would never slide into homosexuality. Marcus argues that these relationships were intricately woven into

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nineteenth-century society, so that 'female friendships peaceably coexisted with heterosexual marriages and moreover, helped to promote them'.¹⁰ This active encouraging of female friendship left the field relatively open for those women who chose to cross the unspoken boundary between sentimental friendship and sexual intimacy, Lister and her lovers being among them.

In her diaries, Lister becomes a key liminal figure who exposes the boundary crossings of her society. For if Lister was herself exceptional in terms of her gender nonconformity and her refusal of the codes of femininity, her many lovers were less so. How, in this homosocial world of separate spheres, did Lister manage to seduce so many women who did not question their gender identity or sexuality to the same extent as she did? Lister's tales of seduction would suggest that the boundary between the homosocial and the homosexual in bourgeois and aristocratic Britain was fluid in ways that were tacitly acknowledged if never explicitly stated. If this is the case, Marcus's analysis suggests that this fluidity actively created a space for Lister rather than positioning her as an entirely exceptional subject.

Lister does belong to a larger group of pre-sexological nineteenth-century gender-nonconforming women who formed intimate sexual relationships with one another, among them the Ladies of Llangollen, Anne Damer, Emily Faithfull, the Michael Fields, Minnie Benson, Ethel Smyth and Frances Power Cobbe.¹¹ Yet the Lister diaries engage with questions of sexuality, sexual pleasure and gender nonconformity in a unique manner. Broadly speaking, historical scholarship dealing with desire between women has had to develop ways of understanding this desire outside of empirical modes of representation. Lanser has argued that there was a dissonance between the relatively few known examples of female same-sex eroticism prior to the twentieth century and 'the larger space and excessive language accorded it in print'.¹² She shows how the Sapphic circulated as a discourse denoting subversion and threat in inverse proportion to its embodied reality. Other scholars have argued that because of their elusive quality, sexual relationships between women cannot be 'revealed' through historical proof, but rather approached through what Judith Bennett has called their 'definitional uncertainty' and explored in terms of the 'not said' and the 'not seen'.¹³

In contrast, in terms of sexuality the Lister diaries stand out as remarkably explicit, self-aware and hyper-visible.¹⁴ Although Lister used her 'crypt hand' to record her intimate relationships and sexual experiences, she described sex with anatomical precision. Here, for example, is Lister's

account of having an orgasm with Mrs Barlow in Paris in 1824: 'I had kissed & pressed Mrs Barlow on my knee till I had had a complete fit of passion. My knees & thighs shook, my breathing & everything told her what was the matter.'¹⁵ Lister's ongoing fascination with anatomy and the workings of the human body as well as her eclectic reading practices appear to have given her the psychological and intellectual confidence to name and describe her sexual practices and experiences in ways that would have been unthinkable for most women of her era. In Ann Walker's newly discovered diary from 1834 to 1835, comparisons can be made between Walker's and Lister's same-day entries to show that Walker never discussed sex in the way Lister did.¹⁶ As we have seen, this explicitness led to the diaries being repeatedly returned to the closet, and upon publication of the first extracts in 1988, rumours circulated that the Lister diaries must be a hoax.¹⁷

Ground-breaking as the Lister diaries have been, their openness has complicated how we think about queer/lesbian and gender nonconforming histories, in that they have established a standard of 'proof' that is yet to be found in other comparable archives. The status of Lister's gender variance, alongside her unwavering erotic interest in women, has also helped to shape Lister scholarship. Jack Halberstam's identification of Lister as an example of 'female masculinity'¹⁸ finds ample evidence in the diaries. From her early decision in 1817 'always to wear black',¹⁹ to having 'drawers put on with gentlemen's braces'²⁰ and to arranging her hair 'curled . . . like the crest of a helmet at the top of [her] head',²¹ Lister repeatedly defied the dress codes of traditional femininity. She also occasionally fantasised about having a penis, as in an entry from 7 May 1821, 'Supposing myself in men's clothes & having a penis.'²² She engaged in traditionally masculine interests, such as opening her own coal pit and having a sophisticated knowledge of pistols, which she did not hesitate to use when needed. Lister was also quite often mistaken for a man, both at home – 'The people generally remark, as I pass along, how much I am like a man'²³ – and, on one occasion, three times in one day as she travelled through Strasbourg.²⁴ She understood herself as having 'manners like those of a gentleman'²⁵ and would often explicitly perform masculinity in the way she held her cane or twirled her watch. These performative gestures and identifications with masculinity extended to her seduction practices, where she often consciously adopted the role of husband, as with Eliza Raine and Mariana Belcombe, and she also tended to fall for conventionally attractive, feminine women.

Lister's self-presentation in the diaries can therefore be framed in terms very similar to the behaviours of the eighteenth-century female husband, whom Jen Manion describes as having an 'ability to flirt, charm, and attract female wives' and whose gender embodiment demonstrated that 'gender was malleable and not a result of one's sex'.²⁶ Lister's explicit descriptions of sexual desire and sexual practices also fit into Ula Klein's analysis of representations of female cross-dressers as able to teach 'readers how to recognize the realistic, pleasurable, and serious possibility of female same-sex desires that are not apparitional but, rather, tangible, visible, and embodied'.²⁷ To this extent, Lister's performative and embodied expressions of masculinity correspond to the cross-dressing or trans model more closely than to the elusive or apparitional 'lesbian' one.

At the same time, while certain of Lister's lovers or women she was interested in claimed to wish she were a man, often so that they could share a more public life with her – Miss Browne, a potential love interest, tells Lister in February 1819 that 'she could not help thinking she wished I had been a gent'²⁸ – Lister herself resisted a full identification with masculinity. Her occasional 'wish to be a gent'²⁹ seems to have coincided with her desire to be freer to seduce her female lovers, rather than to inhabit a masculine identity in any permanent way. For example, her Parisian lover, Mrs Barlow, tells Lister: 'It would have been better had you been brought up as your father's son,' to which Lister firmly replies: '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.'³⁰ In this key exchange, Mrs Barlow's wish that Lister had been brought up as her 'father's son' is repudiated. It seems rather that Lister sought the freedom afforded by nineteenth-century homosocial culture to delight in the intimacy of female society where she could be, in her words, 'as I am'. Yet this simple phrase reveals the complexity of Lister's relationship to her gender, one with which scholars continue to grapple and which leaks into our current-day debates on gender identity and sexuality. In a more ambivalent entry from 1830, at the age of thirty-eight, Lister wrote: 'Said I to myself as I came in this evening, alas I am as it were neither man nor woman in society.'³¹ Not only does this entry reveal Lister's understanding of gender as a mode of constraint imposed by a set of social conventions, but it also exposes her sometimes melancholic relationship to her gender variance.

Lister consistently refused to envisage heterosexual marriage, even a marriage of convenience, repeatedly claiming that she 'never intended to marry at all'³² and that any kind of sexual contact with a man aroused in

her feelings of revulsion. This placed her at odds with several of her female lovers, especially with Mariana Belcombe – whom Lister described as the love of her life – who married Charles Lawton in 1816, largely because she had no other means of financial support. The question of marriage haunts the diaries and brings with it the ongoing conundrum of Lister's gender identity. Far from being a radical, Lister was a product of her gentry class and wanted a marriage on her own terms, in which she would take on the role of husband married to a wife. Finally claiming a marital-style partnership in 1834 with a neighbour, heiress Ann Walker, Lister achieved a lifelong goal. This is the narrative that has served as the basis of the *Gentleman Jack* TV series, once again connecting past and present, and speaking to our current global struggles over LGBT+ marriage equality.

In the diaries, the governing normative frameworks of gender and sexuality and Lister's subversion of them underwrite every other aspect of her lived experience. Whether Lister was confronting the local coal baron, Mr Rawson, expanding and renovating her Shibden Hall estate, climbing the highest peaks in the Pyrenees or mastering Greek and Latin more competently than her tutors, she refused to be constrained by the imposed limits of femininity, claimed her gender variance and asserted her right to desire whom she pleased, even if this produced moments of shame, humiliation and exclusion. The essays and interviews in this volume show how Lister's fascination with her own 'oddity' and her desire to understand herself were inseparable from her drive and ambition, which in turn paradoxically foreground the opportunities as well as the constraints of her nineteenth-century society.³³

Increasingly, the Lister diaries are being interpreted as a liminal archive that touches on multiple disciplinary fields, including life writing, travel writing, social history, women's writing and women's history as well as queer, lesbian and gender nonconforming histories of sexuality. *Decoding Anne Lister* is divided into five parts with a foreword by the award-winning Irish Canadian author, Emma Donoghue, who, upon discovering Helena Whitbread's edition of the extracts in 1990, wrote the first play based on the Lister diaries.

By focusing on key aspects of the Lister archive, each section shows how the diaries shed new light on questions of gender, sexuality, identity construction and sociability, and on the social, political and economic frameworks of nineteenth-century society. *Decoding Anne Lister* also examines how this archive from the past intervenes in our present. The opening and closing interviews with Helena Whitbread and Sally Wainwright discuss the emergence of the Lister archive from its near-total obscurity

to its status as an iconic prime-time television series. Caroline Gonda's interview with Helena Whitbread engages with the challenges of how to bring an archive such as the Lister diaries to public attention, what obstacles were encountered, and what a transformative role the diaries played, and continue to play, for local histories and for queer and women's histories in general.

Although Lister had ambitions 'in the literary way' and 'a wish for a name in the world',³⁴ the diaries themselves were a personal, private document, never intended for the mass public readership they have acquired today. Extracts of the coded sections of the diaries finally saw the light of day in 1988, when Virago published *I Know My Own Heart*, edited by Whitbread, at that time a Yorkshire-based independent scholar. Whitbread then published a second volume in 1992, *No Priest but Love*, with extracts covering Lister's time in Paris between 1824 and 1826. Jill Liddington has also published three volumes of extracts from the diaries: *Female Fortune* (1998), with extracts from 1833 to 1836, *Nature's Domain* (2003), with extracts from 1832, and *As Good as a Marriage* (2023), with extracts from 1836–8. These published extracts enabled Sally Wainwright to conceive and develop the *Gentleman Jack* series, a project which, as Wainwright's interview shows, took many years to be funded by the BBC.

Emma Donoghue's interview with Sally Wainwright at the end of our volume reveals the journey the diaries have made since the 1980s. Both Donoghue and Wainwright have had a longstanding interest in the Lister diaries and have contributed to their adaptation for a broader audience. Donoghue's interview with Wainwright focuses on the complicated process of adaptation for television and how to 'stay true to [the diaries'] spirit and texture'. Wainwright also discusses the challenges of navigating the overwhelming richness of the source text to extract the content needed to shape and fashion a queer historical television drama. Alongside the published extracts, Wainwright immersed herself for months in the Lister archive, initially doing her own transcriptions and wanting to understand this exceptional diarist from the source.

In Part I, "Nature was in an odd freak when she made me": Lister, Sexuality, Gender and Natural History', Laurie Shannon and Anna Clark engage more closely with Lister's understanding of her 'odd' sexuality by unpacking and analysing what kinds of resources were and were not available to help her craft her narrative of the self. While access to the classics and their frank references to same-sex erotic practices offered an invaluable resource for Lister, Shannon argues that Lister's interest in natural history played an equally key role in providing an ethical as well

as a scientific framework for her self-understanding as an ‘oddity’, giving her ‘permission’ and ‘authorisation’ to be who she was. Shannon’s analysis of Lister reverses the binary between the natural and the unnatural or deviant, arguing that Lister saw herself as ‘following natural prescriptions’ rather than perceiving herself as a ‘freak’ of nature. Calling Lister’s approach ‘queerly traditional’, Shannon argues that Lister’s understanding of the questions of nature and the natural continues to be relevant in how we understand sexuality today.

Clark’s chapter explores Lister’s engagement with anatomy and unpacks her desire to grasp the workings of the human body, particularly as it relates to sexuality. While Lister understood the sensations of sexual pleasure in a scientific way, she recorded discovering the clitoris for the first time in 1831. Clark analyses this late discovery by contextualising it within debates about the relative importance or irrelevance of the clitoris in contemporary medical texts and examines Lister’s own sources for learning about female anatomy. Clark argues that little work has been done on nineteenth-century understandings of female anatomy and that Lister’s studies in France with Georges Cuvier and Geoffrey Saint-Hilaire – recently made available as online diary transcriptions – allow us to compare British and French understandings of female anatomy during this period.

Lister’s forays into natural history and anatomy were part and parcel of her thirst for knowledge. That thirst is reflected in her intimate diary writing and in her interest in the power of language more generally. Part II, “‘My spirit’s oil’: Lister Reading, Lister Writing”, examines how both Lister’s creation of lexicons and her use of the diary form were central to her self-construction and to her knowledge acquisition. Fascinated by words in all their variety, Lister compiled lexicons from different languages that helped her to develop a knowledge base about sexuality. As Stephen Turton argues, by the time Lister turned thirty, ‘she had compiled her own private glossary of erotic and anatomical terms as a means of making sense of her sexuality’. Lister’s ‘imaginative use’ of dictionaries and her compilation of lexicons provide us with further insights into her use of language, and her idiosyncratic adaptation of certain terms shows how she challenged the linguistic norms of her day. Turton shows how Lister’s close attention to lexicography formed a crucial part of her self-understanding and enabled her to expand linguistic possibilities in terms of non-normative approaches to gender and sexuality.

Lister’s diary writing, in turn, was as much a map of the social world as a form of personal record keeping. She meticulously recorded others’ comments about her, for example how acquaintances found her ‘deep-toned