“Impossibility of its being deciphered”: Anne Lister, her “crypt hand” diaries, and the contrast between voicing and silencing

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, it has become increasingly important to reevaluate certain literature and figures in history to discover what was being communicated in the midst of, and through, the silence of minority groups. My particular focus is on the tradition of white female silence and the ways in which Anne Lister and her diaries (as separate entities) contributed to conversations about silence by establishing other methods of communication despite restrictions placed on women’s voices at the time. As the main focalizers in the creation and depiction of her societal and sexual identity, I discuss Lister’s “crypt hand” diaries, her self-presentation, her inheritance of Shibden Hall, and the contrast they offer between voicing and silencing. Although I argue that through these focalizers Lister does present a certain level of voicing or speaking out, ultimately this is done by using various methods of silence such as coding and implication. I also offer particular analysis of Lister’s conceptualization of her own sexuality compared with that of the women she sleeps with and how her inability to fathom their queer identities contributes to a narrative of oppressive patriarchal silence.

In the last four decades or so – particularly with the creation of movements such as #MeToo that gives voice to silenced female victims of sexual assault – scholars have increasingly found it imperative to acknowledge the problem and phenomenon of female silence and readdress the balance of its representation in literature and history. There is a tendency, particularly among linguistic scholars, to dismiss silence as merely the absence of sound. It can be auditory, as Bernard Dauenhauer explains in “Silence: An Intentional Analysis” (1976) as it works in conjunction with verbal and gestural expression. However, Robyn Warhol displays in her examination of the unnarratable, subnarratable and disnarrated in the works of Jane Austen (2007) that silence is also apparent on the page in textual form and involves an inspection of absences, white space, reticence and
codes to close the information gap. There is a long literary tradition of silencing and silent women ranging from – as a small example – Shakespeare, to Jane Austen, to Virginia Woolf. Isabella in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, as a most compelling case, has troubled readers for centuries with her ambiguous silence (not once, but twice) in response to the Duke's proposal of marriage. The play closes without a verbal response from Isabella and readers have been torn between reading her unwillingness to speak as acceptance of the proposal, and refusal. The purpose and presentation of female silence in fiction has changed and developed over time: while Austen utilized narrative refusals across her novels to upend expectations of generic romance (Warhol, 2007), Woolf famously utilized ellipses to make visually explicit her speaker's inability to communicate. In the literary canon then, women are frequently depicted as breaking silence by holding it in a variety of ways.

While this article aims to situate Anne Lister and her diaries within this specifically English literary tradition of silence, it also aims to contribute to the robust feminist conversations regarding voice and silence as taken up by some prominent scholars such as Tillie Olsen and Audre Lorde. In 1978, Olsen published a collection of essays titled *Silences* that considered the circumstances that surrounded writers' periods of silence. She paid particular attention to the factors that contributed to the silences of marginalized groups such as women, people of color and the working class. Extremely significant is her chapter 'One out of Twelve: Writers Who Are Women in Our Century' that examines the reasons why women's representation in literature is a meager eight percent of the whole. Her book makes a distinction between “natural” and “unnatural” silences, deeming the former as “that necessary time for renewal” and the latter as the “unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot” (p. 6). She argues that the unnatural silences suffered by women are caused primarily by the social circumstances that accompany being a woman, such as an obligation to family and home. Instances of these unnatural silences can be found throughout history. For example, Fanny Hensel, sister to the prolific composer Felix Mendelssohn, could have been one of the most outstanding composers of the nineteenth century, but her talents were unnaturally thwarted. Although Hensel's musical education was on par with Mendelssohn's, music could never become a career for her due to her gender. Her father made this exceptionally clear to her in a letter: “music will perhaps become his [Felix's] profession, whilst for you it can and must be only an ornament, never the root of your being and doing” (Todd, 2009, p. 28). Her talents have only been deduced through a number of diary and letter documentation from family and friends who praise her Bachian “fugal fingers” (Todd, 2009, p. 24) and her “first-rate piano-forte” playing (Todd, 2009, p. 134). Some of her compositions were
even printed under her brother’s name, adding yet another dimension of silence and erasure to her story.

Audre Lorde too explores intersectionality and patriarchal power in relation to silence before intersectionality was a term. In her speech “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” Lorde speaks of her experience with breast cancer and the silence into which she descended as a result. She said, “The women who sustained me through that period were Black and white, old and young, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual, and we all shared a war against the tyrannies of silence” (Lorde, 2007, p. 41), therefore suggesting that there is a regime of power that uses the mechanism of silence to repress those who have been historically “othered”. Though Lorde understood the temptation for women – and especially Black women – to remain silent, believing that it will protect them from judgment and prejudice, she ultimately argued that their silence “will not protect [them]” (Lorde, 2007, p. 41) because they will face oppression and violence regardless of whether they stay silent.

Female silence has come to encompass the suppression of female sexuality, particularly women’s love for women. Adrienne Rich has drawn attention to the “silence and lies” that has historically erased lesbian sexuality (Rowanchild, “Skirting”, 2000, p. 145). In “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980), Rich (2003) attempts to challenge this erasure by outlining that most women are socialized into heterosexuality from an early age without being aware of alternative options. Martha Vicinus echoes Rich by stating “conceptual confusion is perhaps inevitable in regard to lesbians, given the historical suppression of female sexuality in general” (1992, p. 469). Vicinus was no doubt influenced by Michel Foucault’s History of Sexuality (1978) in which he argued that the seventeenth century had a “tolerant familiarity with the illicit” but in the nineteenth century “sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction” (p.6). During the Victorian era women were increasingly seen as asexual beings who could not crave sex unless it was for the purpose of producing offspring, and thus the expression of female sexuality was denied and controlled. Rich’s idea of compulsory sexuality is essential here because sex could not be about reproduction for lesbians, and as this narrative is assuming heterosexuality, it denies the existence of women who have sex with other women. So too did the popularization of the platonic terms “romantic friendship” and “passionate friendship” during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to describe intimacy between women lead to the silencing of a clear lesbian history. Vicinus argues that in order to combat this silence “we must first decode female sexual desire, and then within it, find same-sex desire. By necessity we need to be sensitive to nuance, masks, secrecy, and the unspoken”
(1992, p. 469), to look at what is not said as well as what is to even begin to discover a full history and give voice to the historically voiceless.

Beginning from these dual points of departure, this article examines the contribution of the nineteenth-century Yorkshire gentlewoman and acclaimed “first modern lesbian” (Roulston, 2013) Anne Lister and her diaries to the tradition of female silence. As Lister was a bourgeois white woman, this article has primarily followed theories and examples of silencing white women and white lesbians. Lister’s extensive diary documentation of explicit sexual activity with women does much to implode the silence that surrounds female and lesbian sexuality and the myth that “most love relationships between women during previous eras [...] were less physical than they are in our times” (Faderman, 1981, p. 19). Yet passages of Lister’s diaries are written in a code that presents a predilection for the “secrecy” argued by Vicinus. Jack Halberstam writes of Lister’s code in Female Masculinity (1998):

The code, of course, is a remarkably suggestive metaphor for the whole enterprise of recording and reading sexual histories, and it is suggestive of the various disguises in which alternative sexual identities may cloak themselves (pp. 66–67).

This perfectly encapsulates the need for Lister’s diaries to be considered in the literary tradition of silence. In terms of societal position and sexuality, Lister and her diaries (as separate entities) offer a continual contrast between voicing and silencing. Despite this contrast, Lister inevitably conforms to the trajectory of the tradition particularly in her use of codes and her reenforcement of power structures. In order to establish this, I have looked specifically at Lister’s crypt hand, her self-presentation and the renovation of her home Shibden Hall as these act as the main focal points for the construction of her identity. Lister’s understanding of her own sexual orientation coupled with the historic unspeakability of female same-sex desire work to silence the experiences and validity of likewise sexually inclined women that she encounters. Almost determined to be a singular oddity, she relegates these women to the shadow of her own identity.

**Deliberate suppression of the diaries and sexual unspeakability**

Over the course of her life, Lister wrote twenty-six volumes totaling over four million words, one-sixth of which was written in a code, devised by herself, referred to as her “crypt hand” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 111). That these decoded passages ever came to light is miraculous considering their repeated suppression by numerous historians over the course of one hundred years. Jill Liddington details the journey of Lister’s diaries passed from one hand to the other, with not one of the three disclosing Lister’s
proclivity for women despite being privy to the knowledge (Liddington, 1993). John Lister, who inherited Shibden Hall after the death of both Lister and her partner Ann Walker, began publishing edited selections from the diaries in 1887, focusing on Anne’s entrepreneurial skills and the circles she moved in. At this point his selection was due to his inability to crack the secret code and not deliberate censure. This was until, with the help of his friend Arthur Burrell, they were able to decipher two letters: h and e. Burrell recalled years later:

> We then examined one of the boxes behind the panels and halfway down the collection of deeds we found on a scrap of paper these words ‘In God is my …’ We at once saw that the word must be ‘hope’; and the h and e corresponded with my guess. The word ‘hope’ was in cipher […] The part written in cipher - turned out to be entirely unpublishable. Mr Lister was distressed but he refused to take my advice, which was that he should burn all 26 volumes. (Liddington, 1993, p. 52).

With some of the passages having been decoded and rendered readable, Lister’s diaries subsequently entered the realm of the unspeakable. The crypt hand passages mainly contain an “intimate account of homosexual practices among Miss Lister and her many ‘friends’” (Liddington, 1993, p. 52). That the two men decided to keep their discovery hidden is not entirely unjustified given that, in 1885, all sexual acts between men became criminalized. Lesbians were not directly impacted by this new law but revealing such a truth could bring devastating effects upon the legacy of the Lister family, not to mention public scrutiny. Had Burrell’s advice to burn the diaries been followed this would have resulted in the irrecoverable erasure of female and lesbian experience and the willful silencing of the knowledge that female genital sex and relationships were more frequent in the nineteenth century than originally thought. This tradition of presenting only the more savory details of Anne’s life continued until the publication of Helena Whitbread’s I know My Own Heart in 1988.

More than detailing her sexual encounters with women, Lister’s crypt hand recorded her insecurities, both personal and financial. In summary, they appear to depict what Lister found to be a source of shame for either herself or her family. Caroline L. Eisner argues that the coded passages represent Lister’s desire to separate private from public (2001). To an extent, this is true as the crypt hand allowed Lister to place her sexuality into a carefully controlled box. It was an expression of the deepest parts of her identity that she rarely allowed to seep past the strict border of the code. Yet these passages are intermingled with daily writing of her public life just as clear on the page despite her confidence in the “impossibility of its being deciphered” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 111). For example, in one singular passage she describes the everyday of “Could not sleep last night. Dozing, hot & disturbed” and in the very next sentence writes
in code “a violent longing for a female companion came over me. Never remember feeling it so painfully before” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 285). This juxtaposition of code with everyday events not only separates her “public” self from her “private” self, but reveals a tension between Lister’s outward presentation as a confident woman and internalized queer self-loathing. The code represents how other people see her, and how she conceptualizes herself, namely as something that cannot be understood upon a first glance, and as something one must work to figure out. Regardless of whether she entirely understood or was at peace with her sexuality, it was never entirely silenced nor a textual absence. The diary moves between the two fluidly, a testament to her wonderfully ever-present sexual identity. She created the code to protect her secret, but placing these passages alongside those of the mundane merely draws attention to them as a method of concealment and is therefore the perfect combination of transparency and secrecy, voicing and silencing.

As a well and widely read woman, however, Lister would not have been ignorant that the diary had increasingly made its way into the public sphere in the early 1800s. David Amigoni (2017) writes:

Although diary keeping had a long history, there is no doubt that its emergence in the earlynineteenth century as a widely practiced and even more widely consumed literarygenre meant that by the 1830s it was impossible for a diarist to write without a degree of self-conscious positioning within a published tradition, and without being fully aware of the ambiguous status of the dairy’s claim to privacy (p. 25).

Lister once told her aunt that she had an “ambition in the literary way” and a “wish for a name in the world” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 96) and frequently referred to her diary entries as a “rough draft” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 42), both of which strongly suggest that she was actively writing herself into this published tradition. In Bram Stoker’s Dracula (2003) the diarist Mina Harker willingly hands over her diary to Van Helsing to read:

I could not resist the temptation of mystifying him a bit […] so I handed him the shorthanddiary. He took it with a grateful bow, and said: -

‘May I read it?’

‘If you wish,’ I answered as demurely as I could. He opened it, and for an instant his face fell. Then he stood up and bowed…

… ‘Alas! I know not the shorthand’ (p. 195).

Mina almost revels in the knowledge that Van Helsing will not be able to interpret her diary and takes pleasure in his compliments of her cleverness that has evidently outsmarted him on this occasion. As Lister presents herself, and is presented, as a self-sufficient and highly intelligent woman, and was confident that her code could never be deciphered, it is
highly likely that she wanted her diary to be read purely to enjoy the bafflement of its perusers. Lister certainly did allow for a potential readership as Anira Rowanchild states that Lister gave copies of the key to her code to her lovers (“Skirting”, 2000). It is possible that Lister was taken with the idea that the only people who would be able to read, fully, a printed version of her diary were those she had specifically selected.

The crypt hand was as much a method of controlling her lesbian sexuality and identity as it was due to the unspeakability of sex itself during the nineteenth century. As the rhetoric surrounding female sexuality had become preoccupied with sex only for the purpose of reproduction, women were not supposed to enjoy sex for any other purpose, let alone enjoy sex with other women where this function would not be fulfilled. Lister therefore needed a method for talking about the unspeakable. Foucault’s Repressive Hypothesis claims that nineteenth-century writers expanded the ways they talked about sex, and rather than overtly describing it they would resort to implication: “It is quite possible that there was an expurgation – and a very rigorous one – of the authorized vocabulary. It may indeed be true that a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor was codified” (1978, p. 20). Lister very literally coded the things she deemed uncommunicable to the public, yet even in code she had codes and euphemisms for sexual terms. She refers to intercourse as either “kisses” or “grubbling” and uses the peculiar epithet “queer” to mean vagina or female genitals; the phrase “go to Italy” is used to mean a full sexual relationship and she marks an orgasm with an “x” or “cross” (she writes of her future wife, Ann Walker, “incurred a cross last night thinking of Miss Walker” (Liddington, 1994, p. 41)) just as she marks masturbation with a “+” (Vermeer, 2017). Discourse surrounding masturbation was prominent from the late eighteenth to late nineteenth centuries and many medical men such as Samuel-Auguste Tissot espoused that its practice would incur illness, disease and insanity (Phipps, 1977). His work, L’Onanisme was treated with great authority and was cited by Immanuel Kant who viewed masturbation as a violation of the moral law (Phipps, 1977). Together they changed the perception of masturbation in medicine and religion for the next two centuries. By the mid nineteenth-century female masturbation, especially, became seen as an act that required discipline and punishment. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, in their examination of female sexuality in “The Victorians, Sex, and Gender” (2014) reference practitioner Isaac Baker Brown who recommended that should the clitoris be found in an “enlarged” state caused by “self-abuse”, the only cure for the habit was the complete “amputation” of the stimulus altogether (pp. 3–4). The public denouncement of masturbation and female sexual activity in general drove it underground and made it a shameful act that is evident in Lister’s inability to articulate it in explicit terms even in her private, coded journals.
Of course, Lister was not the only person to have kept a coded diary over the course of history. Samuel Pepys, a contemporary of Lister, is one of the most widely known diarists in the history of English literature. He extensively chronicled life and events in late seventeenth-century London, including the plague, and has thus become an invaluable source to historians. His diaries were written in a form of shorthand created by the stenographer Thomas Shelton, and as such were not as difficult to decode as Lister’s. Comparable to the attention that Lister’s diaries have received are the diaries of Beatrix Potter, the author of the *Peter Rabbit* books. Although Potter’s diaries did not record any explicit details of her sex life as Lister’s did, their decoding had a similar effect on her reputation. She was transformed from being simply the writer of rabbit tales to, as Leslie Linder, the decoder of the diaries, writes, “a charming person called Miss Potter” (Linder, 1966, p. xxvi) and became a figure worthy of study in her own right. Potter’s coded passages contained comments on politics, literature, the arts, and transcripts of adult conversations. Linda Lear, in her 2008 biography of Potter, suspects that her code writing was initially devised for the purpose of protecting her thoughts from her overbearing mother who imposed traditional feminine values upon her. It became, Lear argues, not only a means of expressing herself, but a form of control over her life (“Transitions”, no pagination); an attempt to reconcile the woman her parents expected her to be, and the woman that she was. She, like Lister, appeared to be confident that her code would not be deciphered, given that she writes prior to an honest criticism of Michelangelo, “no one will read this” (Linder, 1966, p. 114). Unlike Lister, however, there is no indication that Potter imagined any sort of potential readership for her diaries, given that Linder believes that her closest friends had no knowledge of her code and she “never spoke of it” (Linder, 1966, p. xxiii). Neither did she leave behind a cipher.

Regardless of their differing motivations for writing in code, both Lister’s and Potter’s uses of it formalizes their awareness of their nonnormative worldviews and displays that the patriarchal power to silence women stretched even into the realm of the private. Moreover, Olsen’s *Silences* (2003) presents the grim truth that narratives like Lister’s and Potter’s – disadvantaged by gender and, in Lister’s case, sexuality – unless backed by time and money, fall through the cracks and are silenced.

**‘Poor shibden’: External renovations as a code for internal transgression**

Akin to her diary in terms of its clear separation yet fluidity between “concealment and revelation” (“Georgic”, 2000, p. 90) is Lister’s remodeling of Shibden Hall, which she came to inherit in 1826 after the death of her
uncle. Robyn Lydenberg notes that in the history of the novel there is an existing trope of a house as “an embodiment of the psychological and physical states of its inhabitants” (2012, p. 58). As Lister’s remodel evidently mimics her diary format, and she had sole control over Shibden’s renovation and design, this becomes even more significant. In the section that follows, voicing and silencing becomes synonymous with showing and hiding as it deals with the external presentations of Lister’s identity. Rowanchild offers a close study of Lister’s changes to her home as a representation of her identity in “Georgic, Gothic and picturesque in Anne Lister’s self-production”. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, changes in architecture and design of more wealthy households meant less privacy for women: a lady’s dressing room was frequently placed on the principal parade floor, thus left open to visitors and exposing them to close observation (Rowanchild, “Georgic”, 2000, p. 94). Lister’s remodeling of Shibden, Rowanchild expands, defied these new changes:

She instructed that a floor that had been fitted into the late medieval hall in the sixteenth century should be removed and an impressive gallery created. At the same time, she directed that an underground passage should be created along with the new cellar vaults ‘to avoid the housemaids having to pass along the gallery to the red room [her own bedchamber] and north chamber’ (“Georgic”, 2000, p. 94-95).

Her main aim of the remodel was to build a home that displayed her wealth and ancestry, asserted her societal position, while at the same time granted the perfect amount of privacy. Lister’s garden improvements included the planting of trees onto the original field perimeter that obscured the majority of Shibden grounds from the casual eye (Whitbread, 1992) including the moss hut that she built during her courtship of Ann Walker. The hut was a microcosm of both Shibden and her diary and acted as another code (Rowanchild, “Skirting”, 2000): placed in a public location yet she had complete control over who accessed it and it concealed scenes of a sexual nature between her and Ann. The grounds also featured many “winding paths” (Rowanchild, “Skirting”, 2000, p. 147) that acted as a form of displacement, deflection and confusion for easily navigating the grounds, just as her code prevented easy access to her private thoughts.

It appears that Lister’s home may have been influenced by the model of the miniature ferme ornée (ornamental farm) built by the Ladies at Llangollen. Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby were two upper-class Irish women who eloped to North Wales, built a home and lived in it together for fifty years. These women are an extreme example of how powerfully the idea of “romantic friendship” took hold in the nineteenth century. They became celebrities of their time after an article was published in 1790 with the title “Extraordinary Female Affection” and they received
many visitors to their home Plas Newydd, including Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, Lord Wordsworth and Anne Lister. After her visit to their home, she writes of the cottage as “the prettiest little spot I ever saw” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 229) and “endeared… to me by the association of ideas” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 227). She incorporated many Gothic elements into Shibden's remodeling that were prominent in Plas Newydd’s interior. Their home demonstrated that “Profit and Pleasure may be… agreeably mix’d together” (Sayre, 2002, p. 168) and Lister certainly took pleasure in the newfound secrecy her home offered her.

Lister concludes after her visit to Llangollen, “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” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 229). She refuses the script of “romantic friendship” that had widely been ascribed to the ladies, yet simultaneously depicts what they have as an almost unfathomable utopia. Prior to her visit she writes:

My expectations were more than realized & it excited in me, for a variety of circumstances, a sort of peculiar interest tinged with melancholy. I could have mused for hours, dreampt [sic] dreams of happiness, conjured up many a vision of ... hope (Whitbread, 2010, p. 215).

Plas Newydd, to Lister, represented a promise of some sort of normalized future in which she is able to live with a female lover and retain social belonging. When describing her visit to the Ladies she juxtaposes their story against her and her great love Marianna Lawton’s, exposing Marianna’s inconsistency. Perhaps this is why she writes “I felt low after coming away” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 223) and feels “interest tinged with melancholy” as not only does she come to the realization that Marianna will never be able to provide the stability and homeliness of the ladies but also that this ideal of “romantic friendship” is potentially the highest aspiration she can achieve. Even if she does find a woman to settle down with, she knows that their relationship will be sentenced to a world of silence where it is unrecognized and willfully ignored as anything further than intimate friendship.

**Clothing, masculinity and importance: Perpetuating a patriarchal narrative of silence**

In terms of her own outward appearance Lister neither desired nor attempted to silence who she was. Lister writes in 1817, “I have entered upon my plan of always wearing black” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 24). Based on the three existing portraits (Portrait of Anne Lister by Joshua Horner
c. 1830. On display at Shibden Hall) that exist of Lister, her clothing cannot necessarily be referred to as masculine as she still adopted skirts and petticoats, but neither was it the feminine ideal of the time. In early nineteenth-century society, it was considered very unbecoming of a woman to don black when she was not in mourning, with white being the more traditionally acceptable feminine dress (of course one cannot forget the connotations of virginity and purity that came with it). It was not until the last years of the century that women began adopting simple and more masculine-looking shirts and day wear. Lister’s choice of clothing coupled with her “mustaches” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 319) earned her the name of “Gentleman Jack” among the townspeople and prompted multiple occasions of harassment. Lister wrote, “The people generally remark, as I pass along, how much I am like a man... three men said, as usual, ‘That’s a man’ & once axed ‘Does your cock stand?’” (Whitbread, 2010, pp. 60–61). Despite the berating she received, she did not choose to modify her clothes to prevent further instances of insult. Unlike her diary, her clothing was not something that could prove her sexual preferences, and thus she had less reason to be silent.

Halberstam places Lister within the trope of “female husband” (a woman who behaves as a husband to married women) as that is most likely how Lister would have conceptualized herself with the terms available to her but also due to her consistently masculine self-identification (1988, p. 65-73). Halberstam points to Lister’s desire to be Marianna’s “husband” and her “sensitiveness of anything which reminded [her] of [her] petticoats” (1988, p. 71) as evidence. She also disliked her sexual partners touching her “queer” as it “womaniz[ed] [her] too much” (Whitbread, 1992, p. 5). She favored her relationship with Marianna above all because Marianna did not “see [her] as a woman too much” (Whitbread, 1992, p. 173). The remedy Lister sought to her harassment issue was “acquiring more importance” in society so that she may “do with impunity what [she] could not do now” (Rowanchild, “Georgic”, 2000, p. 90). She achieved this primarily in her coal mining ventures competing against wealthy businessmen and through inheriting Shibden. Women at this time did not typically involve themselves in business or monetary affairs and so Lister’s idea of “importance” is inherently tied to the realm of men and the masculine, and her clothing – mimicking the black riding gear of businessmen – a part of the code of importance. It is important to note that Lister, though desiring the privilege of a man, did not appear to desire to be a man herself. When Miss Barlow laments that it would have been better if Lister had been born a man so that they could marry, Lister 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” (Whitbread,
1992, p. 36). Rather, if she were simply part of the “men’s world” she could have the societal status, sexual privilege and personality of a man without the stigma, all the while keeping close company with fellow women.

Although Lister may not have wanted to be a man physically, her desire to acquire masculine importance consequently meant that she contributed somewhat to the patriarchal system of silencing women and suppressing female sexuality. Even though her recordings of her affairs with women affirm that there were other women sexually attracted to women during Lister’s time, she writes “I am made unlike anyone I have ever met. I dare say that I am like no one in the whole world” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 306). Jennifer Frangos believes that in identifying with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s isolation her statement expresses a desire not to find others like her, but to be the only one of her kind in existence (1997). Lister frequently brings up in conversation the “subject of [her] own oddities” such as her “manner of walking & [her] voice” as well as her “whole style of dress” to emphasize her “singularity” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 172). The singularities that she outlines here relate to her masculine identification and can be traced back to the reading of a variety of ancient, classical and romantic texts, as is shown by Anna Clark (1996) and Chris Roulston (2021). Clark argues that Romanticism, with its focus on individuals and their uniqueness, subsequently rendered Lister unable – or perhaps unwilling – to validate the sexualities of other queer women, but as Roulston states that these texts were usually reserved for “elite masculinity” (2021, p. 113), Lister’s rejection of a queer community also stems from her socioeconomic class and status. Being upper class may have initially granted Lister access to a type of knowledge that was usually reserved for wealthy men, but it was the persona she created from these texts that allowed her to continue to elevate her societal position as her distinctive traits and personality gave her celebrity-like status in Halifax. While this meant, as Susan Lanser writes, that Lister did constantly have to negotiate tensions between upper class propriety and her relationships with women (2010), her status as an oddity – or social commodity – ultimately prevented her from being ostracized by the elite, and so she clung to it.

Lister’s desire to remain an oddity becomes even more apparent when she does in fact encounter women who are very much like her in terms of sexual agency and intellect, most notably Miss Pickford. She writes of Pickford that “she is too masculine & if she runs after me too much, I shall tire. Her manners are singular. Sometimes she seems a little swing-about” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 278). Meeting with Miss Pickford makes her wonder “are there more Miss Pickfords in the world than I have ever before thought of?” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 296) and helps “clear up [her] doubts whether such a one really existed nowadays” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 299). She subtly acknowledges what Miss Pickford is, yet when Pickford
confesses, Lister “told her it would not be safe to own it to anyone else” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 292). Certainly, the suppression of female sexuality and the condemnation of homosexual men have much to do with why Lister tells her so, but it is also undoubtedly due to the competition that Pickford presents, as well as a hint of jealousy at the ease with which Pickford acknowledges her attraction to women. Lister makes careful record of how her friends find her “in every respect superior” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 122) to Pickford, which creates a clear link between the two women and encourages Lister’s attempts to stifle Pickford’s sexuality that rivals her own. In response to Pickford’s confession, Lister also denies her own sexuality and so too the potential of a lesbian community: “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. Here my feelings stop […] I am now let into her secret & she forever barred from mine” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 296). She would rather let Pickford believe that she is alone in the world and suppress part of her own identity than give up the notion of herself as singular. The role that homonegativity plays in this rejection of confidence with Miss Pickford, and in the silencing of both of their narratives cannot be ignored. I have already touched upon Lister’s combination of code with daily writings as an expression of queer self-loathing, but as it is Pickford’s perceived masculinity that is targeted by Lister – as seen by “she looked better, more feminine than in her habit” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 278) – there is also a possible manifestation of shame, discomfort, and disgust at seeing herself reflected in another.

Chris Roulston points out the importance of Lister’s rhetorical question concerning “more Miss Pickfords”, emphasizing her use of the plural to suggest that Lister has identified a certain type of women loving women (2021, p. 127). Yet, in not using “more of us” Lister refuses an affinity with Pickford’s sexuality despite clearly belonging to some part of it. Her use of “such a one” produces the same effect as, clearly, from her experiences with other women she knows that such women do exist. Jessica Campbell, in her article in this issue, points out that Lister believed that there was a difference between occasionally having sex with a woman and desiring a long-term relationship with a woman akin to a marriage (2022). Herein lies part of the problem: Lister clearly sees herself as belonging to the latter category, but does not seem to consider the women she sleeps with as having the same desire. Rather, she typically believes that they are strictly heterosexual, and she has succeeded in seducing them into sexual acts without a thought that they may have also had a preexisting inclination for women. In her pursuit of Miss Browne she writes: “I think if I chose to persevere, I can bring the thing to what terms I please” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 75) and “she begins to like me more than she is, perhaps, aware… wishing I was a gent; I can make her believe anything,
etc.; bespeaks my influence, & a few more walks & perhaps she will understand her feelings better” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 95). Later, she meets the widow Maria Barlow during a stay in Paris in 1824. Despite recording that Miss Barlow references the sapphic practices of Marie Antoinette to her (Whitbread, 1992, p. 31), thereby proving an existing interest in sexual relations between women, after a handful of short visits, Lister writes of Miss Barlow, “in spite of all, I have no serious thoughts of her at present, tho’ I am so far seducing her” (Whitbread, 1992, p. 69). Again, Lister considers herself the seducer in the scenario even though Miss Barlow appears to be making similar advances. Lister adopts a positively male mentality of seduction in which the woman will either be “won over” by, or “give in” to, her persistence and charm that not only dismisses the sexual agency and desires of these women, but silences their own creation of identity narrative.

**Conclusion**

When one looks at the life on Anne Lister from our own modern day perspective, one hails her as a revolutionary in the field of queer and gender studies because her diaries have changed everything once thought about female same-sex desire in the early nineteenth century. Yet, she still fell prey to the trappings of the tradition of female silence and most certainly conforms to it. But is that such a bad thing? Foucault’s Repressive Hypothesis demonstrates the importance of reconsidering female silence and analyzing the methods of communication that women adopted when restrictions were placed on their voices. Lister’s sexuality and identity – on the level of explicit speakability – were silenced and suppressed by the culture of shame that permeated society, but that does not mean that they were not present implicitly. Lister contributes to the system that upholds silence whilst simultaneously challenging it. While her treatment of her female lovers’ forms part of a long tradition of silencing queer voices, in resorting to coding, euphemism, outward presentation and implication, Lister and her diaries prove that one can subvert silence by conforming to it.

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