ABSTRACT
Queer pilgrimage is a journey made by an individual or a group to a location, permanent or transitory, which bears relevance to the lives, cultures, and politics of queer people. It is undertaken for the pilgrim/s to feel an affinity with the space itself through emotional and/or physical proximity. Since Gentleman Jack first aired in 2019, acts of queer pilgrimage have increased substantially to key sites associated with Lister, including to Shibden Hall (her ancestral home), Halifax, York, and beyond. In this article I draw upon two forms of queer pilgrimage in relation to Anne Lister. The first is this substantial increase in tourism and attraction to sites associated with Lister. The second is the queer pilgrimage Lister herself undertook in 1822 to the Ladies of Llangollen at their home, Plas Newydd. In drawing out these two comparatively, I propose that historical and contemporary forms of queer pilgrimage have more in common than may initially be apparent, namely a commonality between the queer pilgrims of the 19th and 21st centuries around a desire for community.

Since the premiere of season 1 of Gentleman Jack in April 2019, visitation to Shibden Hall and the town of Halifax has exploded with numbers travelling to Anne Lister’s home trebling the summer after it first appeared on television (Hammond, 2019). With the premiere of season 2 of Gentleman Jack in April 2022, this drive to visit Lister’s hometown has been renewed, and has been dubbed the “Gentleman Jack effect” (Lea, 2021). In an interview with Reverend Jane Finn, the former minister for Halifax Minster, Anne Lister Birthday Week¹ organiser Pat Esgate specifically referred to this and other journeys made by Lister enthusiasts to Halifax as acts of pilgrimage (Anne Lister Birthday Week (ALBW), 2021).

Whilst Anne Lister (1791–1840) can be clearly identified as a literary figure in the contemporary canon,² visits to Halifax such as those conducted for Lister’s birthday could be argued to fit various definitions of pilgrimage beyond that of the literary pilgrimage, which became popular...
in her own time (Westover, 2012). These may include (but are not limited to); cinematic pilgrimages (Stone, 2016), fan pilgrimages (Williams, 2017) or lesbian pilgrimages (Millward, 2007). Indeed, these different forms of pilgrimage may not be so distinct. Lister’s literary contributions and her sexuality are intertwined in their significance, which is evident in Emma Donoghue’s description of Lister’s journals as “the Dead Sea Scrolls of lesbian history” (Whitbread, 2010). Howe (2001) explains that she uses the term “queer” in relation to queer pilgrimage to allow further complex articulation beyond “gay” or “lesbian” and I similarly utilise queer here for its expansive meaning both for the potential subject of the queer pilgrimage and the pilgrims themselves.

This article utilises the conceptualisation of queer pilgrimage (see Curran, 2019; Howe, 2001; Oram, 2011; Walsh, 2021) and applies this directly to the life and subsequent interest in Anne Lister. It is defined here as a journey made by an individual or a group to a location, permanent or transitory, which bears relevance to the lives, cultures, and politics of queer people. It is undertaken for the pilgrim/s to feel an affinity with the space itself through emotional and/or physical proximity. First, I will present how present-day queer pilgrims engage with key sites where Lister lived, loved, and travelled, and consider how Shibden Hall managers are responding to such pilgrimage. Second, I will present how Anne Lister herself conducted queer pilgrimage. Here, I focus primarily on Lister’s visit to the Ladies of Llangollen in 1822 and draw direct comparison between these two queer pilgrimages. In doing so, I propose that historical and contemporary forms of queer pilgrimage have more in common than may initially be apparent, and that a shared motivation between the queer pilgrims of the 19th and 21st centuries may be the desire to locate their community.

**Queer Pilgrimage towards Anne Lister**

Shibden Hall’s doors remained closed for much of 2020–2021 because of the Covid-19 pandemic, however, since the hall reopened for the spring in 2022 visitor numbers are already climbing rapidly, with over 2,200 visitors being recorded between the 1st of March and early April by Chris Southwell, steward at Shibden Hall (Southwell, 2022, personal communication, 5 April). Janet Lea describes that when she visited Halifax in 2019, she noticed that “what I had in common with every person I met was our visceral and palpable connection to Lister” (2021, p. iii). Similarly, Pat Esgate describes how a motivating factor for organising Anne Lister Birthday Week was to “give them [Lister enthusiasts] a reason to come to Halifax” (Bourdillon, 2022). Consequently, she refers to Halifax as a “Lourdes for lesbians”, directly invoking the notion of a journey of faith,
and key sites associated with Lister have become central locations for enthusiasts and tourism in these areas has flourished.

Shibden Hall is now being curated specifically to emulate how it might have looked during Lister’s time. Lister herself only lived permanently at the hall for 25 years, however she is the owner that is centred in the space today. Nicola Watson compares two kinds of heritage house: those “made by the author in the likeness of the author” vs “a ‘back-formation’,” the latter being how available information on previous owners is used to present a possible version of their space (Watson, 2006, p. 92). A recent installation at the local Bankside Museum in Halifax, “Shibden 600” celebrated the building’s history and highlighted other occupants of the grounds over the last six centuries, including Anne Lister’s father and uncle. However, since the rise in visitation numbers in response to *Gentleman Jack*, the stewards of Shibden Hall have made various changes to the space to further associate it with *Anne* Lister, an evident example of ‘back-formation’ in the space.

For example, nursery furniture (collected after Lister’s death) had previously been displayed in a bedroom but was removed for the re-opening of Shibden Hall in March 2022. Oram (2011, p. 11) references how queer domestic layouts disrupt heteronormative historical narratives, and arguably, Shibden Hall is being designed to convey the queer domesticity of Lister and later Ann Walker. The front lawn of Shibden Hall was also changed with the striking Paisley Shawl Garden commissioned in the 1850s (Clare, 2018, p. 32) covered over with turf.³ Chris Southwell said that this was chosen because it would align the lawn and the garden space more with how the garden would have looked during Anne’s time as the owner (Southwell, 2022, personal communication, 18 January). Whilst this does not correlate with a specifically queer understanding of the space, it does orientate the visitor to see this not just as Shibden Hall, but as the home of Anne Lister, “the first modern lesbian” (Roulston, 2013).

Another key location for pilgrims to Lister sites is Holy Trinity Church, Goodramgate in York where Lister and Ann Walker took the sacrament in Easter 1834. This is a highly recognisable site for Lister enthusiasts since a rainbow plaque was commissioned in 2018, thus marking it as a queer heritage site precisely because it was where Lister and Walker got “married” (Joyce, 2019).⁴ In *Fit for Another World – The Legacy of Anne Lister* (YST, 2022), Anne Choma reiterates the church’s role as a pilgrimage site for Lister enthusiasts, specifically in regard to it as the place where Lister “wed” Anne Walker. Whilst it has increased in popularity like Shibden Hall since *Gentleman Jack* first aired in 2019 (YST, 2022), the church has been of interest to queer individuals engaged with the intersections of faith and sexuality since the turn of the century. Alan Bray visited Holy Trinity in 2001 and described his experience as “curiously
uncanny” (2003, p. 244) and said that his emotive response to the space was due in part to his realisation that the interior of the church had changed little since the 1830s, so was the same when Lister and Walker had been there over 160 years before.

Such queer pilgrimage in a religious setting for some, however, can be challenging. Howe argues that the queer pilgrimages “serves to upset the correlation of pilgrimage with dominant and exclusionary religions” and concludes that “a pilgrimage to a gay homeland might be construed as overtly anti ‘religious’” (2001, p. 54, n.3). But this does not seem to be the case for Lister enthusiasts, nor for Lister herself who was devoutly Anglican. These forms of queer pilgrimage therefore combine the queer and the religious. The same is true for Halifax Minster where visitors can view the damaged remnants of Lister’s gravestone, but not her gravesite, as it was obscured and possibly moved during renovations in the late 19th century (Oliveira et al., 2020). A guestbook, specifically entitled “Pilgrimage Journal” and provided by Reverend Jane Finn, is located next to the gravestone and features notes from various Lister pilgrims who have visited the Minster since 2019.

Lister enthusiasts are not only keen to visit the specific locations of Lister’s life but also engage with the tourist (and arguably pilgrimage) behaviours of Lister too. Janet Lea conducted interviews throughout 2020 with Gentleman Jack fans and stated that “Wherever Miss Lister and Miss Walker had gone, gay tourists went too” (2021, p. 65). Relatedly, Adeline Lim’s In the Footsteps of Anne Lister (2021) engages with her own desire to engage with locations relating to Lister. Lim, like many of Lea’s other interviewees, identifies Gentleman Jack as being the source from which their admiration for Lister was borne (Ibid., p. xvii). She, however, describes her motivations as occurring not through a queer affinity but through her desire to emulate Lister and travel to escape emotional turmoil, having recently experienced grief herself (Ibid., p. xxi).

Arguably, part of the queer pilgrimage is knowing that the pilgrim is taking the same route as other members of the queer community—“This game of spotting the other queers...is part of a circuit of identification...a process of reoccupying space and making it queer” (Oram, 2011, p. 197). One manner in which Lister enthusiasts can be observed to simultaneously engage with one another and Lister is through the sharing of maps. Some have been published in response to the premiere of Gentleman Jack (Clare, 2018) and feature routes specifically written for fans of the television series (Goddard, 2019), whilst others have been curated by enthusiasts to make Lister’s travels beyond her home county better known. These maps and trails of Lister’s travels that go beyond Halifax and Yorkshire mean that Lister enthusiasts can still trace the diarist and conduct queer pilgrimage outside of her county and even the UK, making
any of the places she visited an opportunity to walk “in her footsteps.” Indeed, contemporary Lister enthusiasts are following in Lister’s footsteps more than they may have expected, as Lister herself also engaged in queer pilgrimage.

**Queer Pilgrimage of Anne Lister**

Lister undertook multiple pilgrimages of her own, including her visit to Loch Katrine in 1828 with Sibella Maclean (SH: 7/ML/E/11, McHugh, 2018), and trips with Ann Walker to the homes of Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in June and July 1834 respectively (SH:7/ML/E/17/0049 and SH:7/ML/E/17/0065, Raia, 2021). However, here I focus primarily on her endeavour to travel to Plas Newydd during her 1822 trip to Snowdonia, Wales, with her aunt Anne. I argue this pilgrimage can be understood as distinctly queer and shares commonalities with the types of pilgrimage happening around Lister sites in the present day.

Plas Newydd was the home shared by the “Ladies of Llangollen,” Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Sarah Ponsonby in North Wales. They lived there from 1780 to 1831, having famously escaped Ireland together and triumphed over their families’ disapproval of their relationship. Considered at the time to represent the “model Romantic Friendship” (Vicinus, 2004, p. 6), the couple subsequently “became the archetype of lesbian existence” (Oram, 2014, p. 46), and caught the attention of young women, like Lister. Several researchers have referenced Lister’s 1822 visit to Plas Newydd (McHugh, 2018; Oram, 2011; Roulston, 2013; Vicinus, 2004; Whitbread, 2010). Whitbread (2010) commented that the journey to Plas Newydd was one of two “high spots” in Lister’s trip. Lister was certainly aware of the rumours about the ladies’ relationship to one another, and the language in a *La Belle Assemblee* article emphasised the romantic albeit supposedly platonic connection between them, saying “heaven had formed them for each other” (Genlis, 1808, p. 99). When Lister did receive an invitation to meet with Sarah Ponsonby on the 23rd of July, Lister wrote in her journal: “This is more than I expected. I wonder how I work my way & what she will think of me” (SH:7/ML/E/6/0031, McHugh).

On the 23rd of July 1822, in the grounds of Plas Newydd, Lister recalled to Sarah Ponsonby that she first heard about the ladies in the women’s magazine, *La Belle Assemblée*. Here she refers to the September 1808 issue, in an article entitles “The Fair Recluses of Llangollen” by Madame de Genlis (pp. 99–104). During her visit, Vicinus presents Lister as the lesbian detective, “on the lookout for signs of lesbian affection” (2004, p. 45) during her visit and argues that “the intrepid Lister wanted more” insight into the Ladies’ lives than her brief visit permitted her.
Lister’s visit to Plas Newydd has been characterised as a quest to visualise a queer relationship structure she might emulate (Roulston, 2013), but I would add that she was also locating those “like her,” to share communality, if not community. Lister felt comfortable in Ponsonby’s company, stating that after initially feeling surprised at the other’s appearance “my attention was wholly taken by her manners & conversation” and that “there was a je-ne-sais-quoi striking” (SH:7/ML/E/6/0032, McHugh). This unknown quality to Ponsonby will stay as such, but as Lister initially states that her hostess was “certainly not masculine” (Ibid.), it can be inferred that she is drawing from her knowledge of the rumours about the Ladies of Llangollen and commenting that whilst Sarah is not masculine, there is something about her which Lister does not have the language to describe or would not say explicitly.

Lister’s visit to Plas Newydd can be considered an effort to connect with a queer homeland through the context of Plas Newydd and how the Ladies presented themselves. Nicole Reynolds discusses how the Ladies presented Plas Newydd, particularly to their lady visitors, stating “Plas Newydd made possible a complex performance of bourgeois domestic life, one that both mirrored and inverted the imperatives of the heterosexual family unit” (2010, p. 212). She goes on to say, “the Ladies presented to women a viable alternative to the impositions of patriarchal domestic arrangements” (Ibid.). Lister saw this, and though she was hesitant to think for certain that the Ladies were attached romantically, she expresses how she left feeling incredibly positive but later felt low and moody once away from Plas Newydd and wrote in her diary “I envied their place & the happiness they had had there” (SH:7/ML/E/6/0031, McHugh). Howe describes that this feeling can impact queer pilgrims leaving the queer homeland because “many queer tourists leave home because “many queer tourists leave home because it is there that they have undergone spiritual exile; a "homeland" offers the sanctuary that many “back homes” do not” (2001, p. 53). Thus, the queer pilgrim, uses the act of travel to locate both the connection and meaning they are looking for, but also their homeland where who they are is accepted. For Lister, leaving Plas Newydd meant leaving a space where she could imagine, through its occupants, the future she hoped for.

In work conducted about this visit, Vicinus stated that Lister “made a pilgrimage” (2004, p. 45), whilst Roulston refers to it as “a form of pilgrimage” (2013, p. 276). Here, I stake a specific claim that this was, for Lister, a queer pilgrimage. Indeed, Oram (2011) referred to contemporary visits to Llangollen as queer pilgrimages (2011, p. 204), connecting it to her wider commentary on journeys made to historic houses owned by queer people. Similarly, Roulston (2013) utilises the visit by Lister to demonstrate Lister’s construction in the present as a “modern lesbian.” Queer pilgrimage therefore is not a modern phenomenon, but a crucial
commonality which ties Anne Lister in 1822 and current enthusiasts in 2022 together in a more intimate way than may have first been expected.

**Conclusion**

Lister-related locations are ever-expanding as new knowledge of the diarist becomes available and thus, the potential for further queer pilgrimage is increasing. Additionally, in September 2021 a statue of Lister was unveiled at the Piece Hall in Halifax and in the lead-up to Lister’s 231st birthday on Sunday 3rd April 2022, Sally Wainwright, the creator of *Gentleman Jack*, prompted those interested in Lister to celebrate and lay flowers there. On the day, Wainwright emphasised a collective desire to “to honour her memory...we want to lay flowers on her grave”. As Lister’s exact gravesite is unknown, the statue, *Contemplation*, created by Diane Lawrenson, has come to stand as an equivalent to a gravestone for Lister enthusiasts. As such, it, alongside all other locations associated with Lister have become sites of community, leading to connection and meaning. Two hundred years before this, Lister herself found connection and meaning through visiting the Ladies of Llangollen and a significant part of her legacy is becoming an integral part of a queer homeland for lesbians and queer people today.

Such connection and community has been especially important to Lister enthusiasts more recently after HBO rescinded its support of *Gentleman Jack* in July 2022. In response, visitation to Lister-related locations has been encouraged and utilised to promote the series’ subject and its impact on the enthusiastic communities borne from it. These have included a flash mob at Shibden Hall with participants travelling as far as Europe and the USA (Lan, 2022) to celebrate the television show that brought them together and request its renewal. From this, queer pilgrimage can be seen to be a route in which fans can connect with Lister, but also for Lister enthusiasts to maintain a connection with one another, and *Gentleman Jack*.

Divided by centuries, Anne Lister and her enthusiasts share the common aim of locating community: in this instance, a queer one. Drawing from the existing concepts of queer pilgrimage, I have identified contemporary visits to Lister-related locations as examples of this form of identity tourism and for the first time identified Lister’s visit to the Ladies of Llangollen as queer pilgrimage specifically. In doing so, I argue a commonality around the seeking and desire for community underpins both forms of queer pilgrimage, despite the 200-year divide.

**Notes**

1. This is a series of events organised in early April, made up of meetups, excursions and talks to discuss and celebrate Lister. [https://www.annelisterbirthdayweek.com/](https://www.annelisterbirthdayweek.com/).
2. Her personal documents are considered to be of national cultural significance, with her journals having been inscribed onto the UK Memory of the World Register in May 2011 (UNESCO).

3. Lister's relative, Dr John Lister, who inherited Shibden Hall following the death of Lister’s partner, Ann Walker, had the garden designed. Following this, his son, also named John Lister collected the mentioned nursery items, based on his antiquarian interests.

4. Lister and Walker understood their union was not legally binding, but the exchanging of rings and the taking of the sacrament was important to them both and symbolic for their relationship. This, along with the changing of their wills to provide for each other were the full extent of “marriage” which they could engage with, doing so 180 years before the Same Sex Marriage Act (2013) became law in the England and Wales.

5. See https://wwwpackedwithpotential.org/travel-maps

6. Lady Eleanor Butler was unable to meet with Lister because at the time, she was “couching by absorption” (Whitbread, 2010, p. 221)—a procedure to remove cataracts.

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