



Anne Lister

(1791-1840)

At first sight, many young LGBTs might not think of Anne Lister as inspirational. After all, she was a well off 'lady' who lived in the early 19th Century. Not much there to identify with. She was a snob to boot and made her tenants vote Tory. She owned an estate (Shibden Hall) in Halifax, West Yorkshire. But you would be wrong to dismiss her. For one thing, she was a lesbian, and what a lesbian.

Anne had several intimate relationships with women before she 'married' Ann Walker, a local heiress from Halifax. Her very first lesbian relationship was when she was 14/15 and away at boarding school in York. It was with her room-mate, Eliza Raine, who was of mixed heritage: Eliza's mother was Indian and her father an English surgeon who had worked for the East India Company.

The reason we know so much about Anne Lister is because she began writing a diary in 1806 when she was 15. In fact, over her life-time she wrote nearly four million words, one-sixth of which was written in code, a code Anne devised herself when she was 16/17 so that she could write about her intimate feelings as there was no-one else she could talk to about such things. It is rare that we get insight into anyone's honest and emotional feelings, let alone those of a lesbian.

The word homosexual did not come into use until the late 19th Century whilst the word lesbian, to mean women who love women, was introduced in the 20th Century. When Anne was living there were no words to describe lesbians although the term 'molly' was used for effeminate gay men and Anne Lister may well have heard about them. Anne was taught Greek and Latin and read about homosexuality in the Greek classics.

Imagine growing up lesbian in the early 1800s. What would you call yourself? How would you meet other women similar to yourself? What would you call an orgasm? What would you call having a relationship with another woman? Anne invented her own words and phrases to describe all of these and much more, working out subtle ways to discover whether other women liked women in the same way she did.

Of course, homosexuality was illegal at this time and, if convicted, men could be hung for it. It was believed that women, at least middle and upper-class women, did not (and could not) have sexual relationships with other women but had 'passionate' friendships which were acceptable because they were supposedly platonic.

In fact, this belief continued until the story of Anne Lister broke out, and we have Helena Whitbread to thank for that. Helena published "I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Ann Lister, 1791-1840," in 1988; it was later re-issued as "The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister," following success of the BBC film of the same title (2010). Helena's second book, "No Priest But Love: The Journals of Anne Lister from 1824-1826," was published in 1992; she is now half way through writing the complete biography of Anne Lister. Helena is the expert on Anne Lister having been studying her and translating the code for 30 years.

I asked Helena to identify a quote to include in this brief introduction. Helena said Anne Lister's awareness of her 'difference', or "oddity" as she called it, was never far from the surface as evidenced by several comments in her journal, including the following:

Said to myself as I came in this evening, "Alas, I am, as it were, neither man nor woman in society. How shall I manage?" [26th January 1830]

"But manage she did," Helena adds, "and, whatever her faults, her achievements, as her life progressed, mark her out as a woman of great abilities and fearless courage."

This quote reveals Anne's understanding of the dilemma which her sexuality had plunged her into through no fault of her own but her courage and perseverance enabled her to negotiate her way through a difficult life.

Anne Lister was also a scholar, business woman, intrepid traveller and mountaineer.

Jan Bridget

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