

*Department of Humanities, Northumbria University*

**Honours Dissertation**

**Female Same-Sex Desire in the Nineteenth Century:**

**Approaches from Lesbian Feminist Theory**

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# Introduction

## Studying the Invisible

Nineteenth century Britain held a very different concept of sexual orientation to modern day political and social orthodoxies. Distinct 'sexualities' such as what we identify as 'lesbianism' had not been conceptualised as heterosexual sexual acts were perceived to be the only natural form of intercourse.<sup>1</sup> Despite this there was a clear understanding that sexual desire differed per person, reflected in the common use of words such as 'inclination', 'appetite', 'predilection', 'propensity' and 'taste'. Though condemned, such 'appetites' were sometimes distinctly acknowledged: In 1708 Sarah Churchill said that Queen Anne had 'noe inclination for any but one's own sex'.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in a 1798 translation of Sappho's work there was a reference to rumours of the author's 'unhappy deviation from the natural inclinations'.<sup>3</sup> Female homosexuality was never criminalised in Britain. There was a distinct lack of legal or theological guidelines directly addressing desire between women unless cases involved cross-dressing or the use of phallic objects.<sup>4</sup> These were specifically demonised as both acts imitated behaviour typical of men, therefore women engaging in this behaviour indicated that they were attempting to take the place of men and supplant masculinity as conceptualised with publicly (if tacitly) agreed parameters.

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Traub, 'The (In)Significance of "Lesbian" Desire in Early Modern England', in Jonathan Goldberg (ed.), *Queering the Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), pp.62-83, p.62.

<sup>2</sup> Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England, 1700 – 1830* (London: The Gay Men's Press), p.15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.15; Sappho was an ancient Greek Poetess renowned for her love for other women. She lived on the Isle of Lesbos, which originated the word Lesbian.

<sup>4</sup> Emma Donoghue, *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture, 1668 – 1801* (London: Scarlet Press, 1993), p.25.

Due to the absence of an explicit social definition, women who desired women were afforded a degree of freedom from state control whilst also being exposed to discrimination as deviants from social norms. As a result, Anna Clark has said that ‘female sexual desire has been both invisible and all too visible’.<sup>5</sup> In other words, they could be shunned by a strictly regulated society without being paraded in male dominated criminal courts. Consequently, sources concerning relationships between women are scarce and fragmented. Documents are coded, encompass euphemism, innuendo, allusion and double-speak to allow ‘polite’ conversation to exhibit shock and social opprobrium without sinking into a linguistic gutter. I will return to the use of language later. This dissertation has utilised women’s letters, diaries, poetry, fiction, personal papers and ephemera to unearth women’s emotional and physical desires towards one another. Additionally, contemporary publications, professional journals and newspapers offer insight into how society viewed, judged and condemned women’s relationships. This allows for a nuanced perspective of the nineteenth century lesbian as a multi-faceted, three-dimensional and holistic figure with an evolving self-identity.

In the search for female same-sex, relationships there are three components traditionally associated with historical lesbianism. The first is evidence of direct sexual contact between women. Secondly, evidence of women subverting gender roles by renouncing traditional femininity. Thirdly, a conscious inclusion of their desires into their identity. These have created several archetypes of the historical lesbian that influence our conceptualisation of women’s same sex relationships.<sup>6</sup> These archetypes were conceived following the rise of the Women’s

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<sup>5</sup> Anna Clark, ‘Female Sexuality’, in Deborah Simonton (ed.), (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), pp.54-92, p.54.

<sup>6</sup> Alison Oram and Annmarie Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook: love and sex between women in Britain from 1780 – 1970* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.2.

Liberation Movement and the Gay Liberation Movement in the 1960s, which were interlinked with the origination of queer studies. Prior to this, scholarship had chiefly bypassed the topic of queer women. Emerging research intended to reclaim women's hidden histories, seek continuity between lesbians in the past, and present to form a tangible and continuous queer history. The process of 'finding literary foremothers' was also important for women to understand the tools of their oppression and how this had been challenged prior to the liberation movements. As Kitzinger stated, 'a major part of early work was the process of bearing witness, of making visible our lesbian past'.<sup>7</sup> This led scholars to perceive the nineteenth century as a 'golden age' where women's 'romantic friendships' were - within unwritten but nevertheless proscribed limits - accepted by society. Carrol Smith-Rosenberg presented women as sexless in her groundbreaking article *The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America*.<sup>8</sup> Critics responded to less to the content of the article itself than to the scholarship it inspired.<sup>9</sup> For example, in her crucial book *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Lillian Faderman concluded that the lack of sources explicitly discussing erotic activity between women indicated that female same sex desires were desexualised, describing women as having 'love relationships in every sense except perhaps the genital'.<sup>10</sup>

Both academics were lesbian-feminists who promoted lesbianism as a woman's absolute refusal to accept male supremacy. As men and their patriarchal frameworks are the source of women's oppression, lesbian-feminists view heterosexuality as women co-operating in their own

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<sup>7</sup> Celia Kitzinger, *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 1987), pp. 3-4.

<sup>8</sup> Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America', *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Autumn 1975), pp.1-29.

<sup>9</sup> Molly McGarry, 'Female Worlds', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Autumn 2000), p.9-12, p.9.

<sup>10</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1985), pp.1-496, p.16.

oppression.<sup>11</sup> Wishing to find forebears in historical women led them to conclude that nineteenth century lesbians forged independent, platonic, same sex bonds outside of male influence. This became the 'romantic friend' hypothesis, which does not fully demonstrate the ephemerality of female same sex desire in the past and how it was expressed in a variety of complex, individual ways.

We must consider the importance of sexual acts in defining the lesbian. For example, Queen Ann's letters to Sarah Churchill are deeply loving, emotional, and at times erotic, but not explicitly sexual. If, as historians generally suggest, her relationships with women were sexual, it remains vague what exactly is meant by this. Simply sharing a bed? Kissing? Mutual stimulation? For a world framed by binary and reproductive sexual boundaries, there was over this lengthy period a singular lack of imagination on the part of historians and commentators on what exactly may have occurred in such encounters. Therefore, the focus of this dissertation will be on exploring the dynamics of different desires between women to investigate how they built their identity to include their queer desires, and how this was influenced by religion, gender norms, writing and literature. This enables us to avoid placing excessive focus on how to label them in modern terms.

The first chapter will explore the ideas presented in lesbian-feminist scholarship and compare these with more recent holistic views posited by Marylynne Diggs, Lisa Moore, Emma Donoghue and Stuart Curran. Moore's *'Something More Tender Still Than Friendship': Romantic Friendship in Early Nineteenth Century England* was particularly useful in the formation of my argument against the lesbian-feminist view, along with Diggs' *Romantic Friends or a 'Different*

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<sup>11</sup> Kitzinger, *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*, p. vii.

*Race of Creatures'? The Representation of Lesbian Pathology in Nineteenth-Century America.*<sup>12</sup>

The latter allowed me to explore pathology's influence over society's, and historian's, understanding of female same sex desire, which will also be discussed in this chapter.

Chapter two will deconstruct the three key components of the lesbian-feminist theory: that historically queer women were lesbians, that they were feminists, and that their relationships were platonic. I will then demonstrate how a fresh reading of women's correspondences and diaries can help the historian understand these women's complex emotions and desires. Deborah T. Meem's *Eliza Lynn Linton and the Rise of Lesbian Consciousness* and Sally Newman's *Archival Traces of Desire: Vernon Lee's Failed Sexuality and the Interpretation of Letters in Lesbian History* both greatly shaped my interpretation of women's letters and diaries as historical aides containing tools of self-expression as well as evidence of the mundane.<sup>13</sup>

Chapter three will evaluate how several women's identities incorporated same sex desire alongside normative aspects of the nineteenth century woman. This involves exploring how various women constructed a sense of self through shared religion, education and gender subversion. Anna Clark's *Anne Lister's Construction of Lesbian Identity* was seminal in my understanding of how identity building utilises the tools available to women in the period they lived.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Gillian Sutherland's, *Self-education, class and gender in Edwardian Britain:*

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<sup>12</sup> Lisa Moore, "'Something More Tender Still Than Friendship': Romantic Friendship in Nineteenth Century England', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3, The Lesbian issue (Autumn, 1992), pp.499-520; Marylynne Diggs, 'Romantic Friends or a "Different Race of Creatures"? The Representation of Lesbian Pathology in Nineteenth-Century America', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Summer 1995), pp.319-320.

<sup>13</sup> Deborah T. Meem, 'Eliza Lynn Linton and the Rise of Lesbian Consciousness', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (April 1997), pp.537-560, p.538; Sally Newman, 'Archival Traces of Desire: Vernon Lee's Failed Sexuality and the Interpretation of Letters in Lesbian History', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2005), pp.51-75, p.61.

<sup>14</sup> Anna Clark, 'Anne Lister's Construction of Lesbian Identity', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (July 1996), pp.23-50.

*women in lower middle-class families* greatly expanded my conception of the role of literature and learning in women's lives.<sup>15</sup> This will demonstrate how queer women embodied many forms and experienced changing desires.

Through the examination of existing historiography alongside women's letters, diaries and literature, this dissertation will aim to evaluate how historians have conceptualised women's same sex relationships in the nineteenth century and how we can build on these foundations when attempting to view women's desires through their own eyes.

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<sup>15</sup> Gillian Sutherland, 'Self-education, class and gender in Edwardian Britain: women in lower middle-class families', *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (June 2015), pp.518-533.



## Chapter One

### **Making the Invisible Visible: Evolving Perceptions**

This chapter will explore and evaluate the lesbian-feminist historiographical view of female same-sex relationships. I will show how these relationships were perceived in the nineteenth century, particularly during the rise of sexology and the suffrage movement, and how this has shaped the lesbian-feminists interpretation that women lacked sexual identity. I will then establish how I will approach women's relationships going forward in the shifting sands of current political and social orthodoxies.

In 1975, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg published *The Female World of Love and Ritual*, which placed emphasis on women's domestic spheres as being consciously autonomous spaces away from direct male influence. She asserted that in their private circles' women possessed an emotional and cultural independence they had no real access to in the patriarchal American culture. As such, these relationships had a significant emotional function equal to that of heterosexual relationships. By placing their same sex love firmly in a familial setting, sexual contact was immediately disregarded.<sup>16</sup> Ten years later Lillian Faderman published *Surpassing the Love of Men*, a seminal text in the field that, like Rosenberg, presented nineteenth century women as sexless beings who had subconsciously absorbed the concept that women had no libido outside procreation or wifely duties. This presented the historical lesbian as an 'asexual woman' lacking individual sexual identity. Concurrently, sexual relationships between women were not possible and all bonds were primarily emotional.<sup>17</sup> This theory consciously positioned

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<sup>16</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual'.

<sup>17</sup> Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, pp.1-496.

women in a space separate to and opposed to that of men, despite most middle and upper class women in the nineteenth century being economically and socially dependent on the males around them. Faderman's assertion that 'women's intimate relationships were universally encouraged in centuries outside of our own' has since been challenged by academics such as Vicinus who frame this as an idealistic view of the past providing a 'purified' view of queer history.<sup>18</sup> Though this resonated with the radical feminists of the 1970s and 1980s, recent scholarship has highlighted the inconsistencies in this limited approach. Academics such as Diggs agree with Faderman's primary principle that 'homosexuality is a historically specific category of sexual identity', and that erotic or loving same sex relationships had diverse meanings at different points throughout the past.<sup>19</sup> However, most predominantly agree with Moore's counterargument that female friendships were not as accepted as suggested as each case was perceived differently and defined by contemporary social norms.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Faderman has been condemned for construing the lesbian couple as the pinnacle of lesbian existence, defining lesbianism as 'an all-consuming emotional relationship in which two women are devoted to each other above anyone else'. Donoghue criticised this conception of the lesbian:

'This reduces the rich variety of lesbian culture to its most privileged form, the exclusive bond. So many of us have been left out of such history; celibate women, lesbian friends, women who have more than one lover at a time, and all of us who experience lesbian culture not just as a nation of couples but as many communities.'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Martha Vicinus, 'Distance and Desire: English Boarding School Friendships, 1870-1920', in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (ed.), Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: New America Library, 1989), pp.212-232, p.228.

<sup>19</sup> Diggs, 'Romantic Friends'.

<sup>20</sup> Moore, 'Something More Tender Still Than Friendship'.

<sup>21</sup> Oram and Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*, p.53.

Norton has highlighted how the phrase 'romantic friendships' is 'often used as a convenient excuse for ignoring sexual possibilities'.<sup>22</sup> Incurvati and Curran stress that whilst it is important not to define these relationships by physical acts, this can entirely avoid the discussion of sexual acts by putting such friendships on a pedestal, which enters them into the platonic realm.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Moore accuses the theorists of disregarding sexuality altogether and placing excessive focus on how these women would have fitted into modern dichotomies. Women often perceived their love to be spiritual, occupying an idealistic plain, but they also possessed tangible physical desires. Moore instead advocates for the forging of a new place for these historical relationships that lies outside the separate spheres of gender and sexuality. The lesbian-feminist's focus is overtly narrow and does not represent how female same sex relations were perceived or lived. Sexual attraction manifests itself in a multitude of complex habits and emotions; it is not as simple as to ask whether these women's genitals made contact. A certain 'type' of sexual activity is not necessary to qualify a relationship as lesbian. The medical paradigm demands clear 'symptoms' and cause and effect but in the nuanced world that the period of history covered by this dissertation covers, this is an unrealistic simplification. In the words of Sharon Marcus, 'Queer theory led me to ask what social formations swim into focus once we abandon the preconception of strict divisions between men and women, homosexuality and heterosexuality, same sex bonds and those of family and marriage.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, p.414.

<sup>23</sup> Stuart Curran, 'Dynamics of Female Friendships in the Later Eighteenth Century', *Nineteenth Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp.221-239, and Rick Incurvati, 'Introduction: Women's Friendships and Lesbian Sexuality', *Nineteenth Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp.175-186.

<sup>24</sup> Sharon Marcus, *Between Women, Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2007), p.13.

Faderman depicted the nineteenth century as a pre-sexological culture in which women had the opportunity to form close relationships with each other. These relationships were presented as devoid of sexual desire before the onset of sexology introduced a new philosophy of self-loathing.<sup>25</sup> This suggested that prior to the rise of pathology; their social relationships, religion, class, economic situation and location rather than inner beliefs or desires defined a person's identity. Sexuality was a public concern regulated by the church and state.<sup>26</sup> With the emergence of sexology, gender norms became increasingly defined by the male and female roles in reproduction. Therefore, when a woman desired those of her own sex, she possessed an identification characteristic typical of a man and was therefore perceived as a 'pseudo man'.<sup>27</sup> When a woman used her body in place of a man's she was imitating a distinct masculine role. This undermined patriarchal gender norms, as it was not acceptable for a woman to be an active partner in sexual relationships.<sup>28</sup>

These beliefs were utilised and expanded on by sexologists, leading Foucault to suggest that the boundary between sexual identities and sexual acts was more fluid before sexology: 'the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species'.<sup>29</sup> Figures such as Havelock Ellis and Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing defined a series of 'conditions' from the perspective of a strict binary gender identity with heterosexuality as the norm. Phrases such as 'sexual inversion', 'antipathic instinct' and 'homo-sexual feeling' began to enter popular culture and the concept of the modern homosexual entered public discourse, at least within some

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<sup>25</sup> Diggs, 'Romantic Friends', p.317.

<sup>26</sup> Ulinka Rublack, *The Crimes of Women in Early Modern Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.134.

<sup>27</sup> Donoghue, *Passions Between Women*, p.25.

<sup>28</sup> Traub, 'The (In)Significance of "Lesbian" Desire', p.66.

<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 (1976), trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), p.43.

permitted circles.<sup>30</sup> Such social commentaries came from scientists and doctors and therefore stemmed from a position of social power.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, this greatly influenced how human relationships were categorised by doctors, clerics, educationalists, welfare workers and legislators. As a result, these concepts have become fixed within the public discourse where, even today, medicalised models of social, sexual and learning difficulty 'deviancies' are widely accepted. Very often, the definitions employed are the markers to this rigid type of thinking and categorisation.<sup>32</sup> The construction of a lesbian pathology also depoliticised the perceived threat such women presented to the patriarchal version of reality. By labelling female same sex desire as a mental condition, the conscious power was removed.<sup>33</sup>

Sexological perceptions increasingly entered everyday life, as demonstrated by changes in popular fiction. *A Mortal Antipathy* (1885) by Oliver Wendell Holmes depicted female same sex relationships as pathological conditions that obstructed heterosexual marriage. The character of Lurida is frail due to her studies and spends time translating the poems of Sappho, later being brought back to full health upon her marriage, as though an aversion to masculine or penetrative sexuality was merely a phase or medicalised condition to be cured by the introduction of the regulatory weapon of the phallus.<sup>34</sup> However, it would be a simplification to split the history of lesbian identity into pre-sexological and post-sexological areas, as there were interactions between the two. Diggs maintains that 'the nineteenth-century was a period of contentious struggle over the definition and representation of lesbian sexuality' rather than an age of female

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<sup>30</sup> Diggs, 'Romantic Friends', p.330.

<sup>31</sup> Oram and Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*, p.7.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.54.

<sup>33</sup> Kitzinger, *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*, p.3.

<sup>34</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1870; reprint, Boston: Little, Brown, 1911), p.255.

innocence as suggested by the lesbian-feminists.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the emergence of sexuality as pathological and of sexology as 'a specific professional discourse dedicated to studying sexual variation' simply added to other discourses surrounding sexual health and advice. There were numerous influences and complexities in the specification of sexual identities and the evolution of perceptions surrounding female same sex relationships and identity was not as monolithic as suggested.<sup>36</sup>

Throughout the century, some women were able to become increasingly independent as social changes affected the setting of their friendships, love and sexuality, whilst sexological discourse made such groups more visible under the guise of medical diagnosis. There were increased opportunities for women in education, employment and economic independence and consequently there was an increase in unmarried women, sparking discussions about 'surplus' women. This opened new possibilities for female same sex love and loving relationships.<sup>37</sup> Faderman labelled such groups the archetype of the Victorian lesbian moulded by class, romanticism and changes in schooling, religion and social roles; women established networks surrounding shared political, educational and vocational interests. Such groups were linked to the suffrage movement and were pathologised.<sup>38</sup> Figures such as Karl Abraham saw these independent 'masculine' women as repressed lesbians: 'they consider that the sex of a person has nothing to do with his or her capacities, especially in the mental field. This type of woman is well represented in the women's movement of today'.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, Krafft-Ebing discussed women

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<sup>35</sup> Diggs, 'Romantic Friends', p.321.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.321, 323.

<sup>37</sup> Oram and Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*, pp.51-52.

<sup>38</sup> Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, p.18.

<sup>39</sup> Karl Abraham, 'Manifestations of the Female Castration Complex,' *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, Vol. 3 (March 1922), pp..1-29, p.9.

who rejected perfume, arts and cosmetics but pursued science, smoking and drinking: ‘the consciousness of being born a woman, and, therefore, of being compelled to renounce the University, with its gay life, and the army, induces painful reflections’.<sup>40</sup> The women’s organisations were aware of their association with lesbianism and were accused of neglecting their sisters by A. Ruhling: ‘[Women’s organisations] have done nothing – and I mean not a thing – to protect so many of their best known and most devoted pioneers from ridicule and scorn as they enlightened the broader public about the true nature of [lesbianism]’.<sup>41</sup> Curran conceptualised female literary circles as exclusive spaces for women to share ideas and cultivate relationships based on education, intelligence, poetry and prose. His work highlighted how several female poets focused on Sapphic love to create a space in which they could explore their relationships with one other. This demonstrates how women’s writing can expose their personal worldview surrounding their desires.<sup>42</sup>

One major limitation of the ‘romantic friend’ hypothesis is that its focus is primarily on middle class white women in committed relationships. Though this focus is narrow, it highlights the importance of education and financial independence to a visible lesbian existence. Due to low literacy levels and poor standards of living, working class women’s lives were largely represented by others rather than themselves, especially in the case of ethnic minorities, making it difficult to understand how such women manifested their desires.<sup>43</sup> There are, however, still examples to be found. Rizzo has researched paid and unpaid female companions in the

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<sup>40</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, trans. Franklin S. Klaf (1886; New York: Bell Publishing Co., 1965), p.264

<sup>41</sup> Kitzinger, *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*, pp.42-43.

<sup>42</sup> Curran, ‘Dynamics of Female Friendships’, pp.221-239.

<sup>43</sup> Oram and Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*, p.6.

eighteenth-century and asserted that these economic relationships could often be more significant than women's heterosexual marriages.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, VanHaitsma has demonstrated how the loving relationship between two African American teachers utilised common epistolary practices.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Nolan focused on working class lesbian subculture, finding that women engaging in same sex relations were aware of sexological ideas, leading to feelings of shame and disgust.<sup>46</sup>

Evidently, there were varying ways for women to inhabit same sex loving spaces. However, the pervasiveness of white, wealthy, educated couples in research demonstrates how acceptance of female 'romantic friendships' depended upon the circumstances of the women involved: wealth, status or membership of an aristocratic bohemian world could protect women from censure.<sup>47</sup> Financial independence was often required to pursue a lesbian existence, at least over a long period, though this does not preclude short-term relationships. Many of the women Anne Lister was involved with were financially dependent on a man or upon Anne herself. As a member of the Yorkshire gentry, many of her sexual partners possessed an inferior social and financial status to her. One lover, Marianne, left Anne to get married in order to gain a higher income.

Anne recorded her extensive love life in a series of coded diaries found and preserved by one of her descendants.<sup>48</sup> This raises the issue of finding sources overtly regarding female same

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p.53.

<sup>45</sup> Pamela VanHaitsma, 'Queering "the Language of the Heart": Romantic Letters, Genre Instruction, and Rhetorical Practice', *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp.6-24.

<sup>46</sup> Blathnaid Nolan, 'Up Close and Personal: Lesbian Sub-Culture in the Female Factories of Van Diemen's Land', *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3-4, pp.291-304.

<sup>47</sup> Oram and Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*, p.51.

<sup>48</sup> Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, p.420.



sex love. Anne's case is rare as many private diaries and correspondences were destroyed by the women themselves or their families to protect their reputation. Rich has stated that as a result, '[T]he destruction of records, memorabilia, and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence inhibits research on female solidarity, friendship and sensuality'.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, surviving literary sources were usually created by educated, middle class women such as Silvia Townsend-Warner, who preserved her correspondence with Valentine Ackland as it would have been a 'slight' to dispose of them: 'they were preserved not hoarded'.<sup>50</sup> This has led to the association of nineteenth-century lesbianism with middle and upper class women as the primary forms of communication available to same sex partners were available to educated, literate women. In fact, this enforced silence of a significant proportion of the female population may even signify a greater prevalence of same sex relationships here, as the working classes were not expected to have a public voice in 'polite' society. Certainly, the presence or survival of sources cannot be linked in any way to the prevalence or otherwise of a fact.

As many women communicated through writing, Francikova has investigated the linguistic devices used by women to express their devotion. The use of exaggerated, metaphorical speech was a symptom of the rhetoric of the times and an example of the bonds women shared.<sup>51</sup> For example, by using simile, metaphor and allusion to express personal and shared connotations of same sex passion, sex and love, those familiar with poet verse and sexual imagery could infiltrate superficial linguistics. Euphemisms were commonly employed to ensure that the

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<sup>49</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence', *Signs*, Vol. 5, No.4 (Summer 1980), pp. 631-660, p.659.

<sup>50</sup> W. Maxwell (ed.), *Letters: Sylvia Townsend Warner* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1982), p.256.

<sup>51</sup> Dasa Francikova, 'Female Friends in Nineteenth-Century Bohemia: Troubles with Affectionate Writing and 'Patriotic Relationships'', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Autumn 2000), pp.23-28.

initiated could enjoy 'deviant' language with decreased risk. Many, such as 'peculiar', 'private' and 'singular', evoke negative connotations; this demonstrates how women adapted a patriarchal language structure to their own needs. This creates problems for the historian when researching love between women in the past as it is essential to negotiate first the language used. Phrases used to refer to sexual and emotional relations between women have, and are still, changing. Historical names included 'rubster', 'tommy' and 'tribade', and 'sapphist' in England.<sup>52</sup> However there was no clear, specific language for women who placed themselves outside the norm by resisting heterosexuality, and they were therefore not able to construct their identity around existing communities sharing their personal desires. They could only understand their behaviours within the social context of the period.<sup>53</sup>

Historians have suggested different terms to allude to historic lesbianism: Vicinus used the term 'homoerotic', taking a historiographical middle ground between the nineteenth-century romantic friend and the twentieth-century lesbian partner.<sup>54</sup> However, this cleanly split the past into categories of nonsexual intimacy and sexual activity. Rich's use of 'lesbian existence' is useful and inclusive as it 'suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence.'<sup>55</sup> When studying female same sex desire in the past it is important to be aware of how our self-perception and sexuality today affects what we search for in historical women, as 'the historical past was a very different sexual place.'<sup>56</sup> Incorvati cautioned against the dangers of anachronism, arguing that categorising sexuality should not be

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<sup>52</sup> Donoghue, *Passions Between Women*, p.25.

<sup>53</sup> Oram and Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*, p.1.

<sup>54</sup> Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: work and community for single women, 1850 – 1920* (London: Virago, 1985), p.161.

<sup>55</sup> Oram and Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*, p.54.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p.1.

the primary concern of those studying the lesbian experience, as binary sexualities are a recent concept.<sup>57</sup> As we tend to define ourselves in contemporary Western cultures by our linguistic frameworks, a discussion of the language used to denote the presence and type of 'deviant' sexuality is essential. Throughout this dissertation I will use the term 'lesbian' to refer to women who desired women in this period; I see this term as similar to the contemporary use of 'sapphist'. I will also use 'queer' to refer to those with non-conforming desires as, in the words of a 1991 Pamphlet circulated in London, 'Queer means to fuck with gender'. It is also important to note that this term does not obliterate the differences within the LGBTQ+ community: 'At times we need this umbrella to solidify our ranks against outsiders. However, even when we seek shelter under it, we must not forget that it homogenises, erases our differences'.<sup>58</sup>

I agree with Moore in thinking that we must forge a new space for the historical lesbian existence. In the words of Ruth Mazo Karras, 'It is important not to apply a double standard of evidence here: we do not require an eyewitness report of genital contact to state that a given man and woman's attraction to each other was sexual, and we should not require it for two women either'.<sup>59</sup> It is important to be aware of how we ourselves perceive female same sex desire; we must search within the dynamics of love between women and consider how they interacted with each other, rather than focusing on vague probabilities. The perception of Victorian women as sexless creatures created a vision of them as soft, childlike beings devoid of sexual desire: 'many of the romantic friends... might have shared sex, "genital" or otherwise. It is crucial to distinguish between the dominant ideology's explanation of romantic friendship - that

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<sup>57</sup> Incurvati, 'Introduction', pp.175-186.

<sup>58</sup> Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York, New York University Press, 2003), p.44.

<sup>59</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: doing unto others* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p.139.

it was sexless, morally elevating and no threat to female power – and the reality of such bonds between women'.<sup>60</sup> Rich introduced the idea of a 'lesbian continuum' to distance the study from scientific, patriarchal definitions of sexual contact that were seen to constrain historians and eroticise female communities: 'as we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence, we begin to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself'.<sup>61</sup> As a result, we can include all women-identified women in lesbian historiography. Mary E. Wood found the construction of lesbian identities within 'the confusions of, and resistances to, the implicitly heterosexual ideology of separate female and male spheres.'<sup>62</sup>

Identifying women's own perceptions of their desires is vastly important when considering how they constructed a lesbian consciousness. Anne Lister's diaries demonstrate a high level of self-awareness regarding desires amongst sophisticated women in Yorkshire. She had a distinct sense of identity as a woman who desired her own sex, whilst also investigating her own nature with the knowledge available at the time: 'Got on the subject of Saffic regard. I said there was artifice in it. It was very different from mine and would be no pleasure to me. I like to have those I loved near me as possible.'<sup>63</sup> Norton goes as far as to say Lister possessed 'a fully formed lesbian personality whose characteristics... are easily recognisable to modern lesbians'.<sup>64</sup> Although it is important to search for lesbian consciousness's the past, it would be a simplification of Anne Lister's complex identity to place her into an anachronistic category.

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<sup>60</sup> Ian McCormick, *Secret Sexualities: A Sourcebook of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century Writing* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.175.

<sup>61</sup> Kitzinger, *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*, p.4.

<sup>62</sup> Diggs, 'Romantic Friends', p.320.

<sup>63</sup> Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, pp.419-421.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, pp.418-419.

Historians in modern times seek to define and categorise women according to today's understanding of sexuality; those who study them and create generalisations to understand relationships in the past construct historical phenomena. However, these constructs can sometimes hinder our understanding of aspects of the past as they impose modern ideas upon phenomenon that were dependent upon attitudes and social norms of the time. By using lesbian-feminist theory, I will be able to explore how the filters through which we see the past can influence our interpretation of nineteenth century female same sex desire, and how we can attempt to view these women through their own eyes.

## Chapter 2

### **De-romanticising the Romantic Friend**

The lesbian-feminist theory as developed by Carrol Smith Rosenberg and Lillian Faderman, amongst others, contains three key points that shaped the community's perception of female same sex love in the past. Firstly, is the expectation that women experiencing same sex desire in the nineteenth century would have been feminists had they lived in the present? Secondly, that these women would have identified as lesbians in the present day. Thirdly, that women's relationships were platonic. Certainly, the modern tendency and willingness to describe the sexual act would have been a difficult conceptual leap for any from this period. All three points rely on the lesbian-feminist world view that for a woman to be a true feminist she must entirely reject heterosexuality, the cornerstone of male supremacy: 'separatism asserts in the most literal sense that every personal act is the creation and expression of political ideology, that either of the patriarchy or of lesbian feminism'.<sup>65</sup>

The lesbian-feminist academics constructed female same sex relationships around the assumption that women lacked autonomous sexual desire separate to the control and regulatory structures of the male sexual needs and desires. Faderman stated that 'most of the female romantic friends that I was studying probably did not have sexual relationships'.<sup>66</sup> On the issue of sexual contact between women, it is true that modern society closely associates intense feelings of love with sexual intercourse, leading to an 'assumption that what is true of behaviour

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<sup>65</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, 'The Politics of Transliteration: Lesbian Personal Narratives', *Signs*, Vol. 9, No. 4, The Lesbian Issue (Summer, 1984), pp. 663-682, p.666.

<sup>66</sup> Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, p.17.

and attitudes today has been true at all times'.<sup>67</sup> However, this is from the perspective of a post-pathological society that places sexualities in clear dichotomies and overlooks the fact that desire has manifested itself in different ways over time. Smith-Rosenberg excludes the possibility of diverse manifestations of love and passion, restricting the construction of historic lesbian relationships to within the boundaries of chaste and devoted sisters, cousins and mothers.<sup>68</sup> Several women in the nineteenth century did advocate spinsterhood and celibacy as a way for women to escape marital slavery. Christabel Pankhurst saw spinsterhood as a political statement: 'there can be no mating between spiritually developed women of this new day and men who, in thought and conduct with regard to sex matters, are their inferiors'.<sup>69</sup> However, it would be a gross simplification to conclude that because a woman did not marry she did not engage in love affairs with men or women, or that because a woman was married she did not love other people. Generalising to such an extent is not constructive in our understanding of women's desires.

Lesbian feminists assert that women who desired women in the past would have identified as feminists in the sense that they would reject patriarchal society and live outside heterosexual norms. This view is founded on evidence of women's involvement in various forms of political activity and examples of a select few women living on independent means, such as the Ladies of Llangollen.<sup>70</sup> However there lies difficulty in imposing modern ideas of women's group identity and liberation onto those living in a pre-pathological culture, before 'being lesbian or gay became a core identity around which people came together with others like themselves

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p.18.

<sup>68</sup> Smith Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual', p.2-3, 11.

<sup>69</sup> Kitzinger, *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*, p.41.

<sup>70</sup> Irish cousins Sarah Ponsonby and Eleanor Butler eloped to Wales in 1778 and lived together until Butler's death in 1829. They are often portrayed to be the epitome of romantic friendship. See Elizabeth Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship* [1971] (London: Penguin, 1973).

and built their lives'.<sup>71</sup> Prior to this relatively richly sourced period the picture becomes more ambiguous as there was no clear and visible identity with which women who desired women could relate to. There were, however, aspects of popular culture that were associated with 'sapphic' women and seemingly adopted by women deviating from heterosexuality. Though there was no distinct lesbian subculture until recent times, Norton has identified a 1792 report of a 'female whipping club' in London consisting of married women who enjoyed whipping one another from their calves to posteriors.<sup>72</sup> Rumours such as this are more likely to be 'titillating fiction', but they do show an awareness of women's capacity for diverse sexuality, albeit through the exploitative gaze of male society. However, this lack of visibility does not indicate that there were not traits and characteristics adopted by women to denote their 'subversive' identities. Women's political meetings have been called 'the closest equivalent to a lesbian gathering at the time' and are continually popularly characterised as the meeting place of congenital invert and mannish lesbians.<sup>73</sup> By creating the stereotype of these hybrid 'men-women', patriarchal society established a series of characteristics that could be visually interpreted as deviant to label such targets as 'non-women'.<sup>74</sup>

Towards the end of the nineteenth century social changes including the rise of the middle classes allowed women to begin to enter men's worlds creating what Faderman called a 'sisterhood of kindred spirits' as women united to work in male dominated spaces.<sup>75</sup> Women possessed status and power in their female networks whilst desiring the same position in society;

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<sup>71</sup> Meem, 'Eliza Lynn Linton', p.538.

<sup>72</sup> Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, p.417.

<sup>73</sup> Meem, 'Eliza Lynn Linton', p.550.

<sup>74</sup> Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.9.

<sup>75</sup> Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, p.160.



consequently, they lived within and outside the patriarchy. Their power, such that it was, was in a private sphere, where they could slip under the patriarchal radar and hope that opportunities presented themselves from their tentative viewpoint. The private sphere has long been the battleground of the regulators of sexual mores, even though their battles were fought in the dark and without an adequate lexicon. Often women's segregation was enforced by society rather than being chosen as men created spheres of influence completely separate from women. Although this alienation did not lead directly to the creation of a feminist identity amongst women, it did allow them to achieve levels of financial independence through white-collar work. This enabled women to see their female friendships as emotional alternatives to marriage.<sup>76</sup> Consequently, Newman has suggested that 'lesbians might create their own modes of relating that may not parallel heterosexual roles'.<sup>77</sup> However, in a period where women's sexuality was not seen outside of heterosexual roles, women to express their devotion to one another often used the template of the marriage. For example, a woman may take on a more 'masculine' role and provide a kind of cypher of gender-traditional relationships as a useful and ingrained template of private and public behaviours. This was more than an extension of 'dressing up', and instead moved into wilful and overt examinations of cultural archetypes around gender.

Many historians have spoken of seeking a 'lesbian consciousness' in women's private correspondences in an attempt to identify a sense that these 'proto-lesbians' displayed the characteristics that classify the lesbian who defines herself overtly in contemporary lore (that is, fully embracing the label as applied). Meem uses the term 'proto-lesbian' to refer to figures who

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<sup>76</sup> Kitzinger, *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*, p.41.

<sup>77</sup> Newman, 'Archival Traces of Desire', p.61.

represented the form of the 'Sapphist' or who had an understanding of lesbianism as something integral to identity.<sup>78</sup> Anne Lister has been used to suggest that women who desired women had an awareness that their sexuality was distinct from the norm. Lister's diaries display a certain level of awareness of the figure of the lesbian in a social and cultural sense, as she used her understanding of texts referencing homosexuality to flirt with women. She remarked that 'Miss Pickford has read the Sixth Satyr of Juvenal. She understands these matters well enough' and was later given a note by a woman, which referenced the legend in which Achilles dresses as a woman: 'I have a question to ask you. Etes-vous Achilles?' In addition to this, she also later discusses the rumours surrounding Marie Antoinette's love of women with her female companion. Such references create the impression of an understanding between such women who were 'connected with the ladies', in Lister's words.<sup>79</sup> Anne recognised that her desires diverted from the norm and used literature to create a sense of identity and a way of communicating with women like herself. When recounting a conversation with a lover she outlined her understanding of her desires: '[I] said how it was all nature. Had it not been genuine the thing would have been different. I said I had thought much, studied anatomy, etc. Could not find it out. Could not understand myself. It was all the effect of the mind. No exterior formation accounted for it.'<sup>80</sup> Lister also referred to female same sex desire as 'Sapphic regard'. The archaic female poet was often invoked by women to express their love for each other. This left a legacy of poetic writings that the patriarchy could tolerate – or even be titillated by – so long as the male could 'take over' sexual control when required and assert the predominant sexual agenda,

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<sup>78</sup> Meem, 'Eliza Lynn Linton', p.537.

<sup>79</sup> Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, pp.419 – 420.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, p.421.

shielded by the notion of supportive scaffolding of orthodoxy. Even so, in 1900 in France, Natalie Clifford Barney published *Quelques Portraits-Sonnets de Femmes* (Translated: *Some Portrait-Sonnets of Women*). This book of love poetry unfortunately eludes judgement as her father discovered the publication and bought up the remaining stock of the title then had them burned.<sup>81</sup> A few years later, Renée Vivien (a lover of Barney's) wrote and published her own lesbian poetry, full of references to Sappho's poems and not exactly sub-textual in their content:

### **The Touch**

*The trees have kept some lingering sun in their branches,  
Veiled like a woman, evoking another time,  
The twilight passes, weeping. My fingers climb,  
Trembling, provocative, the line of your haunches.  
My ingenious fingers wait when they have found  
The petal flesh beneath the robe they part.  
How curious, complex, the touch, this subtle art—  
As the dream of fragrance, the miracle of sound.  
I follow slowly the graceful contours of your hips,  
The curves of your shoulders, your neck, your unappeased breasts.  
In your white voluptuousness my desire rests,  
Swooning, refusing itself the kisses of your lips.<sup>82</sup>*

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<sup>81</sup> Francesco Rapazzini, 'Elisabeth de Gramont, Natalie Barney's "eternal mate"', *South Central Review*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Autumn 2005), pp. 6-31, p.11.

<sup>82</sup> Renee Vivien, 'The Touch' in *The Muse of the Violets: Poems*, trans. Margaret Porter and Catherine Kroger (Tallahassee, FL.: Naiad, 1982), p.27.

Different ways of relating were often communicated in women's private correspondences and diaries, exposing a love language that encompassed spiritual imagery, feelings of nostalgia, intense emotional desire and use of symbolism. Women corresponding with each other used various devices to express their passions, physical or otherwise, such as the use of imagery depicting roses or birds. Vernon Lee recounted her first meeting with her lover Kit Anstruther-Thomson in a letter: 'the little white rose on my pillow told me that a new, greater, eternal (I think, dear Kit!) [love] had begun'.<sup>83</sup> Kit, in return, always signed off by saying 'I blow you a kiss' which was depicted as a flock of birds on the page.<sup>84</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century manuals, were produced to advise on generic romantic letter writing which set conventions in epistolary exchanges that could be adapted by those writing to same sex partners. Women subverted the cultural norms included in letter writing rhetoric to act out their desires; this entrenched in women a heteronormative approach to lesbian romance, demonstrating the 'plasticity of desire as expressed through the letter'.<sup>85</sup> Women routinely employed heteronormative rhetoric to express themselves. Two African American women in the mid-century, Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus, kept a correspondence, which frequently used forms of address that blurred gender norms and exploited the use of familial addresses. Having no distinct language to express their passion on their own terms, they instead used phrases such as 'my loving sister', 'my ever dear friend', 'my dearest & most affec[tionate] friend', 'my only dear & loving friend'; additionally,

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<sup>83</sup> Vernon Lee to C. Anstruther-Thomson, letter no. 870, dated 18 August 1904, in Newman, 'Archival Traces of Desire', p.52.

<sup>84</sup> Newman, 'Archival Traces of Desire', p.56.

<sup>85</sup> VanHaitisma, 'Queering "the Language of the Heart"', p.7.

Brown used gendered norms to express her life-long attachment to Primus, writing ‘what a pleasure it would be to me to address you My Husband’.<sup>86</sup> She frequently expresses a longing to marry Primus and a strong regret they were prevented from doing so as they are both women: ‘no kisses is like yours. ...You are the first Girl that I ever love ...you are the last one...I mean just what I say...if you was a man what would things come to’.<sup>87</sup> Likewise, female duo Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who published work under the pseudonym ‘Michael Field’, called each other ‘sweet wife’ and ‘my dear husband’ in notes to one another, and declared themselves ‘closer married’ than heterosexual couples they knew.<sup>88</sup>

Similarly, Flora Tristan pondered on the strength of her love for her companion Olympe: ‘how I wish I were a man so I could be loved by a woman. I feel, dear Olympe, that I have reached a point where the love of no man could satisfy me – perhaps a woman’s could?’<sup>89</sup> Mary Duclaux wrote to Vernon Lee professing her wish that they could set up home together: ‘Ah if you could have only come to be the queen and pearl of the house how much more it would have seemed like home!’<sup>90</sup> Duclaux had, however, just moved into the house with her new husband, who clearly did not constitute ‘home’ for her. Many letters construe a strong sense of longing between women separated by marriage, work or family which leads to the common patterns of pining and reassurance from one or both women, and the desire to be alone together in peace: Charlotte Bronte remarked to Ellen Nussey ‘if we had a cottage and a competency of our own I do think we

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, pp.11-12.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p.18.

<sup>88</sup> Virginia Blain, “‘Michael field, the two-headed nightingale’”, lesbian text as palimpsest’, *Women’s History Review*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1996), p.249, 244.

<sup>89</sup> Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, p.154.

<sup>90</sup> Newman, ‘Archival Traces of desire’, p.69.

might love until Death without being dependent on any third person for happiness.<sup>91</sup> These women, through the later Victorian period, were flexing their muscles within the deeply conservative straightjacket of public mores.

Conversely, many women conducted romances with each other whilst also married to men, as seen in the case of Sarah Scott and Barbara Montagu, known as Lady Bab. When Scott moved to London following her marriage Lady Bab accompanied the newly-weds and set up home with them. Scott refers to them both equally in correspondences, telling her mother that 'Lady Bab is middling well, Mr. Scott quite so', and adding 'I must add nothing but my love .... & Lady Bab & Mr. Scotts comp[lemen]ts to both.' This highlights the flexibility and fluidity of women's sexualities as well as the undefined dynamic of romances between women that allowed them to adapt heterosexual norms to allow for their desires.<sup>92</sup> Likewise, Brown and Primus regularly discussed their relationships with other women as well as other men, and both later marry.<sup>93</sup> Eva Slawson, a twentieth century clerk, also remarked in a letter to her childhood friend that the women she lived with, Minna, 'felt she could share a man with me.'<sup>94</sup>

Marriages could also be traumatic times for female same sex partners. American women Molly and Helena maintained a communication after they left school and tried to negotiate a crisis in their relationships when they both married a few years later. During this time, Molly wrote 'I wanted so to put my arms round my girl of all girls in the world and tell her... I love her

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<sup>91</sup> T.J Wise and J.A Symington (eds), *The Brontes: Their Lives, Friendships, and Correspondences in Four Volumes* (Oxford: Shakespeare's Head, 1932), p.61.

<sup>92</sup> Anne A. Huse, 'The Three-Person honeymoon in the letters of Katherine Philips and Sarah Scott', *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2018), pp.4-16, p.11.

<sup>93</sup> VanHaitsma, 'Queering "the Language of the Heart"', p.18.

<sup>94</sup> Gillian Sutherland, *In Search of the New Woman: Middle-Class Women and Work in Britain, 1870 – 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.111.

as wives do love their husbands, as friends who have taken each other for life – and I believe in her as I believe in my God... I'm going to hang on to your skirts ...You can't get away from [my] love.' She also wrote directly to Helena's betrothed to assert her prior claim to his fiancée 'do you know sir, that until you came along I believe that she loved me almost as girls love their lovers. I know I loved her so. Don't you wonder that I can stand the sight of you.'<sup>95</sup> Similarly, upon Mary Duclaux's first marriage to James Darmesteter, she wrote an impassioned letter asking Lee for forgiveness, saying 'but I am not sure you will care to go on knowing Mary Darmesteter. That is what I wish to know dear love. I hope you will say yes and if at the present, as it is very likely, you feel only numb and indifferent to me that you will let me send you my letter as the Madonna lets my hand lay flowers on her shrine.'<sup>96</sup> Depictions of the Virgin Mary as the idyllic woman were common throughout the century and many texts alluded to the erotic attractions of venerating her idols: 'In the anti-Catholic nineteenth century the Madonna image was very important, stressing a traditional link with older Christian ideals which transcended dogma and doctrinal controversy'.<sup>97</sup> Queer women also seem to have invested in this idealisation.

Letters are the primary tool of the historian studying love between women in this period, and the nature of private correspondences implicate the researcher directly in the construction of meanings from letters that were never intended for them: 'we who read these letters can never forget that we are not their destined recipients.'<sup>98</sup> The lack of sources directly addressing women's understanding of their sexualities leads to varying interpretations of women's personal

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<sup>95</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual', p.7.

<sup>96</sup> Newman, 'Archival Traces of Desire', p.68.

<sup>97</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Women: Christianity's Creation of the Sex War in the West* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1986), p.75.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, p.66.

lives. As a result, those studying historical female same sex desire struggle with a 'paradoxical double-bind' in which they seek evidence yet also seek to 'critique the construction and operation of a particular notion of 'evidence''.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, a great deal can be construed from the physical object of the letter as well as the words within it. For example, the time span of the correspondence and the volume of letters can indicate the importance of the writers to one another and 'it is in the very material weight of the letters, in their volume, that [we] may discern an alternative way of conceptualising this desire.'<sup>100</sup> Many letters include sketches or notations from both the sender and the receiver. For example, in the case of the letters between Brown and Primus, letters from Primus are not accessible but her contribution can be seen on the back of the envelopes she received, on which she had noted the dates she received and replied to Brown's letters.<sup>101</sup> In addition to this, it is rare that a correspondence will survive unedited or altered by executors, family members or significant others. When Vernon Lee's letters were bequeathed to Oxford, 'sensitive' passages were removed at the writer's own request.<sup>102</sup> Likewise, many women requested that their personal papers be burned on the event of their death.

Considering the nuances involved in not only studying letters but also defining women's identities, which were constructed over a century ago, it would be a simplicity to say that women who formed intense emotional attachments to each other would have identified as lesbians or feminists. Women's social and sexual identities were complex and temporal, and involved

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p.54.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p.73.

<sup>101</sup> VanHaitsma, 'Queering "the Language of the Heart"', p.14.

<sup>102</sup> Newman, 'Archival Traces of Desire', p.62.



attachments formed out of love and those made for convenience or financial gain, as in the case of Anne Lister's Marianne. Each relationship had individual aspects but running through them were themes commonly associated with the figure of lesbian, indicating a sense of familiarity with the nature of same sex desire amongst 'proto-lesbians'. Despite Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's emphasis on the asexuality of nineteenth century women, she observes that women experienced 'a wide latitude of emotions and sexual feelings.' This statement allows for the more recent construction of 'queerness' which encompasses identities outside the given norm, and supports the central argument of this dissertation, that sexuality is experienced along a spectrum of desires and sentiments.<sup>103</sup> I will be using this perspective when exploring women's construction of identity surrounding their same sex desires.

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<sup>103</sup> McGarry, 'Female Worlds', p.11.

## **Chapter Three**

### **‘I believe in her as I believe in my God’: Constructing Contemporary Identity**

We must lose assumptions about how women loved each other and what this entailed, as human desire is nuanced and subjective. These women existed along a lesbian continuum that entailed varying forms of attraction and devotion. Their desire was not something created by society. However, the language, norms and stereotypes of the time did affect how they manifested their desires and expressed them. By focusing on the women’s emotional experiences, we can explore how they constructed their own identities surrounding and including their desire for women. Examining their personal writings and correspondences demonstrates how ‘queer’ women in the nineteenth century used the knowledge and tools available to them to build cohesive self-image. Such tools included pathological and sexological ideas, close readings of classic texts alluding to homosexual relations, religious symbolism, and adopting stereotypically masculine traits to embrace their sexual and emotional desires. By using writing and integrating or rejecting homosocial theories and ideas into their lives, these women created complex and multifaceted personalities and relationships, creating visible characteristics that are recognisable to queer women today. Although these women did not create a distinct ‘lesbian’ or ‘feminist’ community, they used similar techniques to express their affections and create space to express their love for women. In this chapter, I demonstrate how taking a nuanced view when investigating these women’s identities as expressed through writing can help us understand how proto-lesbian women saw themselves and integrated this identity into their lives.

One way in which women found ways to incorporate their desires into their identity was through subverting gender norms by dressing, acting or taking on roles as men. In many cases when women took on a male guise as part of a lesbian relationship, they likewise adopted a male persona as a way of legitimising and imagining love between two women.<sup>104</sup> Cross-dressing has long been associated with female same sex desire and homosexuality more widely, and Anne Lister was notorious in her local area for her masculine appearance and characteristics, causing her to become a figure of ridicule. Once when walking through her neighbourhood, where she was known as 'Gentleman Jack', a man asked her 'does your cock stand' implying that whilst she had the features of a man, she did not possess the true epitome of masculinity.<sup>105</sup> Anne wore her hair short and dressed in black bodices that resembled men's shirts and was recognisable for her striding gait. Her greatest lover, Marianna Lawton (nee Belcomb), told Anne that her 'form, voice, & style of conversation' were masculine as was a 'peculiar flattery & attraction' she possessed, and that on anyone less intelligent or talented it would be 'disgusting'.<sup>106</sup> Three years later Anne caused shame to her lover by arriving to meet her from York unannounced with 'wild hair and sweaty clothes' after walking over the moors. Marianna's horror at her bold manner hurt her so deeply their relationship never recovered.<sup>107</sup> This reveals how typically masculine traits were an integral part of Anne's identity and how she used these to assert herself in her male, landowning society. However, the same was clearly not the same for Marianna who was disconcerted and ashamed of Anne's unconventional appearance and assuredness. Anne herself frequently

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<sup>104</sup> Tim Hitchcock, Redefining Sex in Eighteenth Century England, *History Workshop Journal*, No. 41 (Spring 1996), pp. 72-90, p84.

<sup>105</sup> Helena Whitbread (ed.), *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister, 1791-1840* (London: Virago, 1988), p.49.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, p.1, 12, 116, 167, 223.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, p.277.

contemplated her own place within the masculinity-femininity spectrum and recorded how those around her responded to her behaviour and dress. Anna Clark has argued that Anne did not want to become a man but sought to take male freedoms and operate, in an overt way, with aspects of patriarchal privilege.<sup>108</sup> A large part of Anne's masculine charm was due to her open flirtatious manner and reputation as a ladies-woman, leading a Mr Lally of York to proclaim that 'he would as soon turn a man loose in his house' as her, and Anne herself to assert: 'Tis well I have not a penis. I might never have been continent'.<sup>109</sup>

In popular culture, lesbians were frequently depicted as women who wanted to be men or take the place of men. In Delarivier Manley's *The New Atlantis*, the 'real' sapphists can be easily identified by their masculine manner: the Marchioness de Lerma is described as 'having something so robust in her Air and Mien, that the other Sex wou'd have certainly claim'd her for one of theirs, if she had not thought fit to declare herself by her Habit (alone) to be of the other'.<sup>110</sup> In Susan Lanser's words a 'masculine marker gets written on that body – a marker of clothing, stature, features, skills-in short, some signifier that sets apart the woman who desires women as manlike, and hence queer, and allows others to identify and beware of her'.<sup>111</sup> Due to this association, lesbians in the past have sometimes been considered to constitute a 'third sex' who were half man and half woman; this was linked to the emerging discussions of inversion in the latter half of the nineteenth-century. Such figures were seen to represent a hidden number

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<sup>108</sup> Clark, 'Anne Lister's Construction of Lesbian Identity', p.46.

<sup>109</sup> Helena Whitbread (ed.), *No Priest but Love: The Journals of Anne Lister, 1824-1828* (England, Otley, 1992), p.127, 153.

<sup>110</sup> Catherine Craft-Fairchild, 'Sexual and Textual Indeterminacy: Eighteenth Century English Representations of Sapphism', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Sep. 2006), pp. 408-431, p.415.

<sup>111</sup> Susan S. Lanser, "'Queer to Queer": The Sapphic Body as Transgressive Text', in Katharine Kittredge (ed.), *Lewd and Notorious: Female Transgression in the Eighteenth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), pp. 408-431, p.34.

of the female population ready to corrupt more innocent women at the first opportunity. According to early psychologist Krafft-Ebing, 'psychic hermaphrodites and also many homosexual women do not betray their anomaly either by external appearances or by mental (masculine) sexual characteristics.'<sup>112</sup> Using male nicknames for female lovers or calling them 'husband' was also a way in which women incorporated gender subversion into the personal identities. Mary Benson, wife of the Archbishop of Canterbury, was called 'Ben' or 'Robin' by her intimate female friends, whilst Radclyffe Hall went by the name 'John'. Michael Field, the artistic niece and aunt duo, were nicknamed 'Michael' and 'Henry' in their social circle, an intimate group who enjoyed word play with their pronouns and pet names. Such ways of communicating mirrored traditional heterosexual habits and dating patterns, including the exchange of gifts and keepsakes. This lent a validity to these female relationships, as women attempted to define their desires using heteronormative language. In Martha Vicinus' words, this implied 'the creation of a self-sufficient world where masculinity could be assumed with the ease of a change in clothing and naming'.<sup>113</sup>

It was common for women of the lower and middle classes to read widely to supplement their education, particularly before compulsory education for young girls in the nineteenth-century. Female friends of D. H Lawrence working as teachers read vicariously; Jessie Chambers read French alongside Shakespeare and Blake in her spare time whilst Helen Corke read in both German and English.<sup>114</sup> Gillian Sutherland has established that 'with literary exploration went

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<sup>112</sup> Claudia Breger, 'Feminine Masculinities: Scientific and Literary Representations of "Female Inversion" at the Turn of the Twentieth Century', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Special Issue: Studying the History of Sexuality: Theory, Methods, Praxis (Jan. – Apr. 2005), pp. 76-106, p.88.

<sup>113</sup> Martha Vicinus, "'The gift of love": Nineteenth-century religion and lesbian passion', *Nineteenth Century Contexts*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2001), pp. 241-264, pp.249-251.

<sup>114</sup> J. Chambers, *D.H Lawrence: A Personal Record* (London: Cape, 1935), pp.56-63, H. Corke, *In Our Infancy: An Autobiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p157.

exploration of personal and sexual relationships and a kind of moral self-education'.<sup>115</sup> This outlines how queer women were aided in the construction of identity by the exploration of academia and learning, as later demonstrated by Corke when she concluded that she was bisexual after reading Edward Carpenter's *Love's Coming of Age*.<sup>116</sup> Anne Lister is an example of women using literature and learning to construct their identity. She read widely in attempts to explore and solidify a sense of self that included and justified her desires for women. She had to closely interpret or rework texts to find elusive hints referring to female same sex desire, often using heterosexual sources to find representation in literature.<sup>117</sup> She particularly used ancient Greek and Latin texts such as Martial, Juvenal, Catullus, Horace and Plato and said of herself: 'I am taught by books'.<sup>118</sup> Whilst outwardly denouncing 'indecent' works, in private Anne deeply enjoyed the romantic writers.<sup>119</sup> In her diary, she discussed Jean Jacques Rousseau's statement that 'I know the feelings of my heart. ... I am not made like any of those I have seen' and loved Thomas Moore's description of relations between oriental slave girls.<sup>120</sup> Anne particularly liked Byron's *Don Juan* and copied his quips referring to Martial's 'indecent' works into her diary.<sup>121</sup> Byron's poetry evoked homoeroticism and gender transgression, and Anne would have recognized his classical references. For example, Byron's poem 'To Ellen' imitated Catullus' work addressed to a boy named Juventius.<sup>122</sup> Anne also used classical and textual references to flirt

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<sup>115</sup> Sutherland, 'Self-education, class and gender in Edwardian Britain', p.524.

<sup>116</sup> H. Corke, *D. H Lawrence: The Croydon Years* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), p.13.

<sup>117</sup> Clark, 'Anne Lister's Construction of Lesbian Identity', p.31.

<sup>118</sup> Whitbread, *I Know My Own Heart*, p.237.

<sup>119</sup> Anne Lister Manuscript Diaries, July 25<sup>th</sup>, 1820, SH/7/ML/E/4, Calderdale Archives, Halifax.

<sup>120</sup> Clark, 'Anne Lister's Construction of Lesbian Identity', pp.37-38.

<sup>121</sup> Extracts from Readings, vol. 6, fol. 41 (1819), SH 7/ML/EX 1, Calderdale Archives, Halifax.

<sup>122</sup> Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp.12-14.

with and seduce women, alluding to sources linked to homoeroticism and interpreting her companion's response. For example, Anne gave a local woman named Miss Browne a copy of Byron's 'Cornelian' as a suggestion of her feelings. In this poem, the writer is given a cornelian ring by a poor young man and vows not to lose it as a sign of his devotion.<sup>123</sup>

Likewise, in the correspondence between Ruth Slate and Eva Slawson, two young female clerks in the early twentieth-century, recently perused books were discussed and reviewed frequently. They particularly enjoyed George Eliot but also explored John Ruskin, Olive Schreiner, Grant Allen, Thomas Hardy and H. G. Wells.<sup>124</sup> Both found new emotional and intellectual avenues through consuming countless library books, seeking solace and companionship in novels. After reading Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, Ruth wrote in her diary, 'much of what I have been thinking and feeling so strongly is here expressed'.<sup>125</sup> Eva later found companionship with a war-widowed mother, Minna Simmons, whom she met at church. Eva moved into Minna's home part-time to help with the children and was there to deliver her daughter Joan.<sup>126</sup>

Women forged their character by writing to each other and in diaries, using this private space to explore their feelings and desires. Diarists engaged in self-exploration as part of the eighteenth and nineteenth century's era of the 'invention of the self'.<sup>127</sup> Poetry also played a particularly important part in this. Stuart Curran stated that '[poetry] being a preserve mostly of

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<sup>123</sup> Whitbread, *I Know My Own Heart*, p.78.

<sup>124</sup> Sutherland, 'Self-education', p.527.

<sup>125</sup> Ruth Slate, diary entry of 28 May 1908, WL, 7RSJ/A/01/14, f. 31.

<sup>126</sup> T. Thompson (Ed.), *Dear girl: The diaries and letters of two working women, 1897–1917* (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1987), p.247.

<sup>127</sup> John O. Lyons, *The Invention of the Self: The Hinge of Consciousness in the Eighteenth Century* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), p.8.

male writers in previous generations made it a natural arena for women seeking to define themselves as artists'.<sup>128</sup> Women found poetry to be a socially acceptable method of self-expression as it was a sign of accomplishment. This gave women 'a shared ethos with others pursuing similar paths both in and beyond the domestic circle'.<sup>129</sup> Female poets also invariably dedicated their works to the women in their life, invoking female unity as she intentionally calls for a collaboration with another woman.<sup>130</sup> Christina Rossetti frequently addressed women in her work:

*Did you kiss me?*

*Come and kiss me*

*Never mind my bruises*

*Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices....*

*Eat me, drink me, love me;*

*Laura, make much of me.*<sup>131</sup>

Correspondences and diary writing seem to have been extremely popular amongst women; something Gillian Sutherland has suggested was a result of 'the Protestant emphasis on the need for a regular moral accounting'.<sup>132</sup> Religion also played an important part in the way they viewed their desires. In the words of Martha Vicinus, 'the Victorians lived with, in, for, and against religion. Religion was both a personal force and a social organization'.<sup>133</sup> Several women's

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<sup>128</sup> Stuart Curran, 'Mothers and Daughters: Poetic Generation(s) in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 4, Forging Connections: Women's Poetry from the Renaissance to Romanticism (2000), pp. 575-590, p.575.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, p.575.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, p.576.

<sup>131</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market* (1862; repr., New York: Dover, 1983), pp.46-47.

<sup>132</sup> Sutherland, 'Self-education', p.527.

<sup>133</sup> Vicinus, 'The gift of love', p.241.



experiences demonstrate how their personal Christianity became woven into their desires and emotional attachments. Mary Benson, nicknamed Ben, married into the church aged eighteen, entering an unhappy marriage with Edward Benson who later became Archbishop of Canterbury. Mary's close attachments to other women supported her through the breakdown of her marriage and personal religious struggles. Vicinus asserts that as a result, 'her experience of erotic desire—and emotional support—became for Mary Benson a model of divine love'.<sup>134</sup> Where Lister viewed her earthly desire as part of her nature, Benson saw her attachments as evidence of God's love and fervour manifested in the connection between two individuals. She utilised religion to explain her desires to herself and help herself understand how they aligned with religious teachings. Therefore, her relationships with women were deeply connected to her personal faith. Love was a gift she thanked God for in her diary: 'Ah Lord, thou has given me in some measure the gift of love'.<sup>135</sup>

Anne Lister had strong Anglican beliefs that she attempted to realign with her strong sexual desire for women. Reading Juvenal, Anne became aroused and masturbated thinking of another woman, afterwards writing in her diary that 'there is no comfort but in God, oh that my heart were right with him and then I should have peace - Lord have mercy on me and not justice'.<sup>136</sup> This is demonstrative of how Anne's personal religion focused on mercy and forgiving sins, much like Mary's. However, Anne read very widely and incorporated comparative religions into her theology, making notations on various uses of the Trinity and the cross and the Indian

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid, p.242.

<sup>135</sup> Mary Benson, Undated [retrospective] diary entry, Benson Deposit, 1/79, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Oxford.

<sup>136</sup> Anne Lister's Manuscript Diaries, July 21, 1820

phallic worship.<sup>137</sup> Similarly, the duo known as 'Michael Field' used pagan rituals and games to rationalise their same sex desires.<sup>138</sup> This allowed Anne to form her own personal faith that worked around her 'sinful' desires; in one instance she decided that her affair with the married Marianna was not sinful 'fornication' as Marianna married for money and was therefore entered into 'legalised prostitution'.<sup>139</sup> However, the fluid nature of her faith also caused her doubts, and at another point, she feared that their relationship was adulterous.<sup>140</sup> Anne did find solace in her relationship with God, finding relief in prayer and purgative thoughts. After receiving an upsetting letter from a Miss. Barlow, she asked God 'to cleanse the thoughts of my heart by the inspiration of his Holy Spirit', and later lamented 'if only my heart were clean'.<sup>141</sup> Such thoughts depict a struggle between Anne and her faith, but out of this struggle, Anne was able to create a firm identity encompassing multiple aspects of her character. Anna Clark inferred that 'Her reading may have enabled her to see that Christianity's strict hostility to sexuality was atypical among religions and to develop her own, more flexible morality'.<sup>142</sup>

Religion was also deeply interwoven with the institution of marriage and the imagery surrounding it. Marriage represented religious fulfilment between two souls, sanctified by heaven. For non-heterosexual couples, marriage would legitimise their union and represent god's acceptance of their emotional attachment. Mary Benson found reassurance in her belief that God represented and was manifested by love. Anne Lister, however, sought direct validation of

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<sup>137</sup> Extracts from Readings, vol. 4, fol. 103, 104, 138 and vol. 6, fol. 25 (1819). Also, Manuscript Diaries, February 3, 1831.

<sup>138</sup> Blain, 'Michael Field', p.249

<sup>139</sup> Whitbread, *I Know My Own Heart*, p.281.

<sup>140</sup> Whitbread, *No Priest but Love*, p.168.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, p.143, 156.

<sup>142</sup> Clark, 'Anne Lister's Construction of Lesbian Identity', p.36.

her union with Ann Walker, a local heiress. In Easter 1834, the two took sacrament to celebrate their marital commitment in a church in York. However, despite their differing spirituality, these two women both found acceptance in God's love and forgiveness. Both found a connection with God through their desires. Mary compared her love for companion Chat to the resurrection, 'bringing forgiveness for past sins, a rebirth in faith, and a new future'.<sup>143</sup> Likewise, she called her lover Tan, 'beloved Tan, my Mother in Christ'.<sup>144</sup> In a middle-class society where women were a commodity for marriage, in loving each other they could form loving unions under God by choice. As she wrote, 'I remember so well when I first discovered that in really loving, one loved through man to God'.<sup>145</sup>

Formal religion could also be a positive force for women's rights activism. Jacqueline DeVries states that 'both religious and agnostic women of the nineteenth century repeatedly turned to the Bible and Church traditions to legitimate a wide range of social claims'.<sup>146</sup> For example, women played a prominent role in alternative religions such as spiritualism, theosophy, Quakerism, or Christian Science.<sup>147</sup> Religion enabled women to create emotional spaces in which they could love each other and God. Faith played an integral role in Ruth and Eva's relationship, and the two sent each other summaries of sermons and addresses they had attended. Both taught Sunday school classes and led discussion groups. Through connections with Quaker groups, they both taught at a school that combined religious and social teaching.<sup>148</sup> In addition,

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<sup>143</sup> Vicinus, 'The gift of love', p.252.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, p.249.

<sup>145</sup> Mary Benson, 30 April 1907, BD 3/38. This is among the edited and typed letters in the Benson collection.

<sup>146</sup> Jacqueline DeVries, "'A New Heaven and Earth": Feminism, Religion, and the Politics of Identity in England, 1890-1925', Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana (1996).

<sup>147</sup> Vicinus, 'the gift of love', p.241.

<sup>148</sup> Sutherland, 'Self-education', p.528.

they were also members of the Mutual Improvement Society.<sup>149</sup> Religion allowed these women to expand their knowledge and self-understanding as well as providing them with a network of like-minded peers. This could be a comfort for married women who could find solace away from the home; E. F. Benson wrote of his mother: 'Two things only remained to her of her own which were not [her husband's]: these were her personal relation to God, and her personal relation to her children and friends'.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> C. S. Davies, *North Country bred: a working-class family chronicle* (London: Routledge, 1963), p.76.

<sup>150</sup> E. F. Benson, *Mother* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925), p.27.

## Conclusion

### Shifting Sands

During the nineteenth century, there was a rising public perception of homosexuality. The increasing dissemination of sexological texts, increasing visibility of 'masculine' women, a growing discomfort with women's friendships alongside militant agitation for women's suffrage, all shaped how society viewed female same sex relations, and how these women viewed themselves.<sup>151</sup> Lauretis has outlined how individuals absorb 'external representations' and 'rework the fantasy in their internal world'.<sup>152</sup> However, ultimately women's same sex desire was only one facet of their identities. We must therefore see these women as each possessing an individual sexual identity that is more nuanced than adopting a pre-given role; in this way we can reveal the 'incoherence' of binary oppositions.<sup>153</sup> As Elly Bulkin has expressed, the key issue when examining their relationships is not whether their love for other women was expressed sexually. Furthermore, we should examine women's same sex love and desire regardless of their relationships with men.<sup>154</sup> Women conducted their relationships with passion and determination, forming evolving bonds that we may possibly never fully understand, as sexuality manifests differently in distinct spatial and temporal locations. Consequently, the nineteenth century 'may have countenanced multiple desires and sexual subjectivities different from those that emerged after the solidification of the modern sexual regime', such as intense friendships,

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<sup>151</sup> Deborah, Cohler, 'Sapphism and Sedition: Producing Female Homosexuality in Great War Britain', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Jan., 2007), pp. 68-94, p.71.

<sup>152</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1994), p.308.

<sup>153</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p.9.

<sup>154</sup> Elly Bulkin, "'A whole new poetry beginning here": Teaching Lesbian Poetry, *College English*, Vol. 40, No. 8 (Apr., 1979), pp. 874-888, p.885.

the adoption of masculine roles in female relationships, and the perception of love between women as a connection with god.<sup>155</sup> In light of this, Jeffrey Weeks has suggested how, by understanding this, the historian can restore agency to historical women and view their sense of self as 'something that has to be worked on, invented, and reinvented'.<sup>156</sup> In this dissertation, I have deconstructed the tools we use to view women's same sex relationships in the nineteenth century and demonstrated how this has influenced historiography to impose modern perceptions onto past relationships. By addressing and critiquing how we ourselves perceive sexuality we can conduct a renewed reading of sources regarding female same sex love, and doing so can hopefully inch closer to a deeper understanding of the reality of their complex and ardent relationships.

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<sup>155</sup> McGarry, 'Female Worlds', p.10.

<sup>156</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, 'History, Desire and Identities', in Parker and Gagnon (eds.), *Conceiving Sexuality: Approaches to Sex research in a Postmodern World* (London: Routledge, 1995), Chapter. 2, p.38.

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