



Minnesota State University, Mankato
Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly
and Creative Works for Minnesota
State University, Mankato

All Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Other
Capstone Projects

Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Other
Capstone Projects

2012

Deviant Desires: Gender Resistance in Romantic Friendships Between Women during the Late-Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Centuries in Britain

Sophie Jade Slater
Minnesota State University - Mankato

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/etds>

 Part of the [Women's History Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Slater, S. J. (2012). Deviant Desires: Gender Resistance in Romantic Friendships Between Women during the Late-Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Centuries in Britain [Master's thesis, Minnesota State University, Mankato]. Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/etds/129/>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Other Capstone Projects at Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Other Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato.

**Deviant Desires:
Gender Resistance in Romantic Friendships Between Women during the Late-
Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Centuries in Britain**

By Sophie Slater

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Gender and Women's Studies

Minnesota State University, Mankato
Mankato, Minnesota

May 2012

April 3, 2012

This thesis paper has been examined and approved.

Examining Committee:

Dr. Maria Bevacqua, Chairperson

Dr. Christopher Corley

Dr. Melissa Purdue

Abstract

Romantic friendships between women in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries were common in British society. Young women were drawn to each other, often in romantic ways, in part because of the way in which the society was ordered. In this period, females generally socialized only with other females, from birth until marriage. Even after marriage the majority of women spent most of their time with other women. This deep intimacy between women was encouraged and accepted and is visible in correspondence between female friends. Although there is scholarly literature surrounding romantic friendships during this period, the way in which these relationships challenged gender norms and expectations, as well as their role in resisting the oppression of heterosexual marriage, have not been adequately addressed. By looking at sexuality in history and the way it has been constructed, as well as analyzing queer and feminist theory pertaining to sexuality, I argue that women resisted mainstream structures by devoting their lives to other women, wearing gender non-conforming clothes and living apart from men. My analysis of British women's history in this period, the ways sexuality has been viewed in history and queer and feminist theories pertaining to sexuality, show that romantic friendships between women served as an outlet to resist the systems of patriarchy and marriage, as well as gender roles. A close analysis of *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister* and the romantic friendship of Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, better known as The Ladies of Llangollen, show that some women in romantic friendships resisted gender norms and heterosexual marriage and lived their lives without men.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2	
Methods.....	7
Chapter 3	
Literature Review.....	11
Chapter 4	
Discussion.....	32
Chapter 5	
Conclusion.....	46
Bibliography.....	50

Chapter 1: Introduction

My research is centered on the lives of women who loved other women in Britain in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Women who openly lived with other women in this period were considered to be in romantic friendships. Elizabeth Mavor describes romantic friendships between women as involving: “retirement, good works, cottages, gardening, impecuniosity, the intellectual pursuits of reading aloud and the study of languages, enthusiasm for the Gothick, journals, migraines, sensibility and often, but not always, the single state.”¹ Mavor states that upper-class women often found themselves unable or unwilling to connect with the conservative men they encountered, due to the separation of the sexes that was becoming more pronounced at this time. This led some women to find comfort and partnerships with other women.² Leila Rupp reiterates this point in *Sapphistries*: “Because middle-class society tended to separate female and male social worlds, it seemed natural that women would find their soul mates among other women.”³

Romantic friendships between women were seen as acceptable and often encouraged if they occurred within the paradigm of heterosexual marriage, as Rupp states, “According to the ideal, female romantic friendship existed alongside and enriched marriage.”⁴ Sharon Marcus describes the way romantic friendships between women functioned before and during marriage to men: “Far from compromising friendship, family and marriage provided models for sustaining it; female friends exchanged the same tokens as spouses and emulated female elders who also prized

¹ Elizabeth Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship* (Ludlow: Moonrise Press, 2011), 80.

² *Ibid.*, 81.

³ Leila J. Rupp, *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love Between Women* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 128.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

their friendships with women.”⁵ Marcus describes the friendships between women that started while they were single, and then continued during marriage to men. One such relationship existed between Annie Hall and Anna Richmond. They continued to write to each other when they were married, as Annie Hall noted: “I do not see why we should not keep up writing to one another all our lives.”⁶ These women expected their friendships with other women to continue, even though they had formally committed their lives to men and marriage.

Romantic friendships were so commonplace that they were often mentioned in novels written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the most famous and popular of these novels is *A Description of Millennium Hall*, written by Sarah Scott.⁷ The main female characters, Louisa Mancel and Miss Melvyn, meet and become inseparable at boarding school. When Melvyn is forced to marry a man, Mancel moves close-by so they can still see each other. When Mancel’s husband dies the pair retires to the country and live blissfully together, joined by other women in romantic friendships. Novels such as *Millennium Hall* made visible and celebrated romantic friendships between women.

Much of the current scholarship discussing romantic friendships between women does not seek to distinguish between women’s friendships and women’s friendships that were romantic in nature. This study seeks to open a new space to discuss women’s relationships that were distinctly romantic in nature and to

⁵ Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, And Marriage In Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷ Sarah Scott, *A Description of Millenium Hall, And the Country Adjacent: Together With the Characters of the Inhabitants, And Such Historical Anecdotes And Reflections, As May Excite In the Reader Proper Sentiments of Humanity, And Lead the Mind to the Love of Virtue* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).

distinguish these relationships from friendships between women. My study looks at women who devoted their lives to other women and rejected men.

The existing scholarship on romantic friendships between women is significant as it gives voice to and sheds light on women who devoted their lives and love to other women. However, the current research does not frame their relationships as a form of resistance to societal expectations. The notion that some women in romantic friendships were resisting heterosexuality and the patriarchy has not been discussed. My research seeks to fill this gap by describing how certain women were challenging gender and societal norms by devoting their lives to other women and rejecting men. I focus on the lives of Anne Lister, Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby. All three women deviated from society's view of acceptable gender expression, resisted heterosexual marriage and rejected men. Anne Lister's diaries give countless examples of her actions and desires that deviated from societal norms and expectations which can be read as resistance. A diary entry written by Lister on July 24, 1823 reads "All this ordering & work and exercise seemed to excite my manly feelings. I saw a pretty young girl go up the lane & desire rather came over me."⁸ Lister's diaries are full of accounts of her sexual relationships with other women, her non-conforming gender appearance and her commitment to sharing her life with a female partner.

Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby fought against their family's wishes in order to spend their lives together in a committed same-sex partnership. These women devoted their lives to each other and in the process rejected traditional gender roles, heterosexual marriage and men. The way they lived their lives can be seen as resistance to heteronormative nineteenth century British society.

⁸ Anne Lister, and Helena Whitbread. *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister, 1791-1840* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 290.

The existing scholarship that discusses romantic friendships between women can be roughly divided into two categories. The first category focuses on how romantic friendships fitted neatly into nineteenth century British society and supported heteronormativity. Scholarship within this category emphasizes the emotional bonds of the friendships and refrains from depicting these as explicitly sexual. The second category seeks to claim many romantic friendships between women as being sexual in nature. Many of these scholars claim romantic friendships as same-sex sexual relationships between women. I am arguing that there is evidence to show that some women in this period were resisting societal norms and expectations by devoting their lives and love to other women and not men. These actions can be read as resistance to the patriarchal society of nineteenth century Britain.

It is essential to document and discuss the lives of women who acted against societal expectations and challenged views on gender expression and sexuality. Looking at history through a gendered lens allows us to see societies in a new light and uncover lives that otherwise would have remained hidden. It is important to research women in the past and tell their stories. My research works to give voice to women who stood apart from men, children and families.

The methodology chapter of this thesis outlines the processes and methods that I used to conduct my research. This chapter documents the texts I chose to analyze and their validity to this study. It also discusses the importance of reading about the lives of women from their own perspective and respecting the nature of the time period these women lived in. In this chapter I acknowledge my social location, how I came to research this topic area and the limitations of my study.

To understand and analyze the nature and roles of romantic friendships, I have grounded my research in British women's history, sexuality in history and queer and feminist theories of sexuality, all of which are analyzed in my literature review. Identifying the expected role and position of women in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries Britain is important to my research, as it helps to understand how romantic friendships were a deviation from the norm. Getting a sense of how society dictated women should behave enables us to see how these romantic friendships challenged the notion of what was expected and required of women in this period. A review of the literature surrounding the history of sexuality is necessary for this study, as it helps me to understand how sexuality has been identified and composed in past societies. Reviewing scholarship on queer and feminist theories of sexuality reveals how theorists have posited the nature and identity of sexuality. Looking at past ideas and constructions of sexuality is vital for identifying the nature of romantic friendships between women.

My discussion chapter provides evidence to support my claims about romantic friendships between women in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries in Britain. I analyze key primary and secondary texts about women who loved other women in this time period who, in the process of doing so, went against societal norms and expectations. This chapter gives evidence of how women in this period were expected to dress, how they were expected to behave and the importance and inevitability of marriage in society. Looking at the lives of certain women in romantic friendships at this time shows how their lives and actions resisted compulsory heterosexuality and gender norms. This chapter gives evidence to show that some women in romantic friendships were resisting marriage, men and gender norms.

This study is important as it is necessary to speak of and write about women whose lives deviated and went against societal expectations. Giving voice to women's resistance is essential as it shows that women in the past have existed happily and comfortably outside the realms of heterosexual marriage. The lives of women who loved other women in the past are often hidden; as Rupp says, "we do not always know as much as we would like about the lives and loves of people in the past."⁹ My thesis gives voice to women in the past who have left written accounts of their love for other women. My project seeks to highlight these women who devoted their lives to other women and resisted societal norms and expectations.

⁹ Leila J. Rupp, *A Desired Past: a Short History of Same-sex Love In America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 7.

Chapter 2: Methods

I used content analysis to conduct my research for this project. After considering the options available to me, and the nature of the questions I sought to address, I decided that content analysis would be the best method to serve my research. My project involves looking at previous research and writings on romantic friendships between women, both primary and secondary sources. My project is rooted in historical research and analysis and reviews preexisting data. By viewing preexisting data my research gains a level of authenticity as it is in essence “naturalistic” and “noninteractive.”¹⁰ This particular method is extremely useful for my research as it takes into account the reality that “texts are not produced within a vacuum but are the products of a given time and space.”¹¹ As I am doing historical research, it is important to acknowledge and be aware of the nature of the period I am studying, as it will have an effect on my findings. Using content analysis with a feminist lens is a way of “critically interrogating the texts and products that comprise culture to resist patriarchal understandings of social reality that push women and other minorities to the peripheries of their culture.”¹²

My academic background in history led me to this area of study for my project. As a queer feminist, I think that it is important and necessary to study and document women from the past who focused their time, energy, love and affection on other women. It is important to acknowledge my identity as a feminist living in the twenty-first century who is researching the lives of women from the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries in Britain. This is particularly important when thinking

¹⁰Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy. *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2007), 227.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹² *Ibid.*, 224.

about the nature of the romantic friendships between the women I studied. It is vital that I study and analyze these romantic friendships in the context they occurred, and do not bring to my research my own experiences and feelings about the nature of these relationships. It is important to acknowledge that the way these relationships appear to people studying them in the twenty-first century is very different from how they were perceived and lived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain. Removing the context of these romantic friendships would invalidate their experiences and meanings. In an effort to avoid ahistoricism, I took steps to remove my own personal suspicions and thoughts about these relationships and made a concerted effort to study them in the context they occurred.

Ideally I would have liked study primary sources written by women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain, such as letters, diaries and journals. Time, access and financial constraints meant that I had to use primary sources that had been reproduced in texts compiled by historians. The texts I have chosen are valid for the purpose of this study, as they depict the lives of women in romantic friendships who went against social expectations and societal norms and I am using them to create original research.

For my research, I chose to analyze documents that reference and discuss romantic relationships between women during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries in Britain. The first major source I analyzed is *The Diaries of Anne Lister 1791-1840*.¹³ Lister's diaries give accounts of her romantic friendships with other women. I analyzed Lister's diary entries to show that women involved in romantic friendships were resisting societal norms. By performing content analysis on Lister's diaries, I found evidence to suggest that resistance existed in certain romantic

¹³ Anne Lister, and Helena Whitbread. *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister, 1791-1840* (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

friendships between women in this time period. I also analyzed the documented romantic friendship of Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, better known as The Ladies of Llangollen. To analyze their relationship and lives together I used the text written by Elizabeth Mavor that provides detailed accounts of their existence as women defying societal norms.¹⁴ This text uses journal entries written by Eleanor Butler as well as letters written by and to the women and household account books to show the scope and depth of their romantic friendship.

Analyzing texts written by women about their experience is imperative for my study as it gives voice to the women's own particular standpoints. Smith discusses how difficult it has been for women throughout history to articulate their thoughts and feelings as they can only verbalize and document their lives by using the tools men have provided for them. This has led to women becoming "alienated from their experience."¹⁵ By using content analysis as my research method, I can be aware of the way women's experiences were documented and explained in reference to the time period they were living in.

Analyzing these texts about romantic friendships between women enabled me to provide evidence for my claims about these relationships as being forms of resistance to gender norms, the patriarchy and expected female sexuality. Careful reading and examination of the words and feelings expressed by Anne Lister, Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby show that these women were going against and resisting the expected modes of behavior of that time period.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship* (Ludlow: Moonrise Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Dorothy E. Smith, "Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology," in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual And Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004), 22.

From my preliminary research I learned that romantic friendships between women, that may have been sexual, occurred in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Upon looking further into these romantic friendships I learned about Anne Lister and The Ladies of Llangollen. This led me to wonder to what extent their relationships could be characterized as romantic friendships, and to what degree they engaged in close relationships with one, or in the case of Anne Lister, multiple women. After analyzing these texts, I found that these women could be classified as engaging in romantic friendships and sometimes sexual relationships with other women. The way that these women expressed same-sex desires can be considered to show evidence of resistance to compulsory heterosexuality and gender norms.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review places my project in the context of women's experiences, expectations and lives during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Britain. In order to understand how romantic friendships between women in this period were, as I am arguing, a form of resistance for certain women, a review of literature on sexuality in history is necessary. Surveying important feminist and queer theories regarding sexuality further grounds my argument and works to frame the context of romantic friendships between women.

It is necessary to have a firm understanding of what women were doing in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Getting a grasp of their daily lives, activities and how they communicated with others is vital for understanding how romantic friendships were an act of resistance and defiance by the women involved. We cannot see how romantic friendships between women were unusual and unexpected if we do not place them within the context in which they occurred. A review of the literature surrounding sexuality in history is essential in understanding how romantic friendships between women were viewed and addressed by society at the time. Reviewing the way sexuality was shaped, molded and encouraged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain enables us to see how and why romantic friendships between women occurred. Looking at queer and feminist theories concerning sexuality is imperative for gaining context surrounding how society thinks about and understands sexuality. Reviewing key theories about sexuality enables me to claim romantic friendships as a form of resistance.

British Women's History

Up until the last fifty years women's history has often been overlooked in historical discourse. One has to actively search to find what women were doing in specific time periods. Although we are beginning to see more and more research surrounding women's history, we still have a way to go before women's voices can be heard loud and clear. However, it is possible to gain some kind of perspective on the actions, desires, expectations and lives of British women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

One of the foundational works concerning this time period is *Family Fortunes* by Davidoff and Hall.¹⁶ This text gives a detailed overview of the lives of men and women in the English middle class from 1780-1850. This time period saw men becoming firmly rooted in the public sphere of work and politics, while women were increasingly confined to the private sphere of home and family, leading to "the fixing of individual social and sexual place."¹⁷ Davidoff and Hall state that marriage was the corner stone of middle class society in Britain at this time and the vehicle for women to gain legitimacy, "with marriage, women assumed their full adult status."¹⁸ They note that women often felt forced into marriage, so as not to burden their families or because of pressure from friends. With marriage came the expectation of children and motherhood. Women were expected to have maternal instincts and spend their married life catering to their families: "Women first had to face the physical and emotional demands of childbearing and infant care through a good portion of their

¹⁶ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men And Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-185*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 319.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 322.

adult lives.”¹⁹ Davidoff and Hall suggest that it was women’s responsibility to monitor and encourage manners and respectability: “adult women acted as gatekeepers for admissible behaviors.”²⁰ Women were expected to behave in a proper and respectable manner and to encourage others to follow their lead.

In regard to women’s sexuality, Davidoff and Hall note that, “by the early nineteenth century, there had been a gradual shift from the earlier view of women as sexually voracious towards the innocence and passivity of Victorian sensibility.”²¹ Sexuality was not openly recognized in society, it was suppressed and hidden. Davidoff and Hall posit that same-sex male eroticism was evident, “but sexual acts between men were regarded with outraged horror.”²² While same-sex male relationships were met with suspicion and outrage, female friendships “flourished and were freely referred to in passionate terms.”²³ Davidoff and Hall suggest that there is no way for us to gauge the exact nature, both emotional and physical, of such friendships. The period surveyed by Davidoff and Hall is described as “a time when middle-class feminism has been taken as quiescent or non-existent.”²⁴

This view on British Feminism in the period is disputed by Elizabeth Fay in *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism*,²⁵ as she details the activities and actions of the Bluestockings, a female-centered group of the period. They were a circle of upper-middle class women who met regularly for conversations about topical issues and society. They also keenly supported women writers and artists, encouraging them in

¹⁹ Ibid., 335.

²⁰ Ibid., 399.

²¹ Ibid., 401.

²² Ibid., 402.

²³ Ibid., 402.

²⁴ Ibid., 454.

²⁵ Elizabeth A. Fay, *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism* (Malden: Blackwell, 1998).

their chosen fields and took “serious interest in women’s education and intellectual achievements.”²⁶ These women were also concerned with fighting against forced marriages and slavery. However, they have been described as somewhat conservative in their intellectual pursuits.²⁷

Moira Ferguson gives an account of the function of close friendships between women in her text *First Feminists: British Women Writers, 1578-1799*.²⁸ Ferguson suggests that close female friendships had publicly emerged by the eighteenth century. These female-centered friendships had steadily become more open and noticeable in society. Ferguson gives the example of Mary Wollstonecraft and Fanny Blood’s relationship as one of a close female friendship. Friendships such as theirs and other women of the time period portrayed a “growing self-assurance among women and resistance to patriarchal values.”²⁹ These women were exerting their individual ability to choose whom they formed friendships with, and it enabled them to control what they wanted from such relationships. Ferguson notes that women were gaining emotional and sometimes financial support from other women.

Betty Rizzo goes further into the nuances in relationships between women in her study of letters, fiction and memoirs by middle-to upper-class women in eighteenth century Britain titled *Companions Without Vows: Relationships Among Eighteenth-century British Women*.³⁰ Rizzo’s work offers an analysis of relationships between employers (mistresses) and companions, which were a common occurrence

²⁶ Ibid., 153.

²⁷ Ibid., 154.

²⁸ Moira Ferguson, *First Feminists: British Women Writers, 1578-1799* (Bloomington: IndianaUP, 1985).

²⁹ Ibid., 35.

³⁰ Betty Rizzo, *Companions Without Vows: Relationships Among Eighteenth-century British Women* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994).

in the period. These companionate relationships mirrored marriage relationships of the time period.³¹ Women could rule over their chosen companions, as their husbands ruled over them, or could choose to treat their companions as they wished their husbands would treat them: “men commonly recognized the high-handed, even sadistic, behavior that wives often endured at the hands of their husbands as tyrannical only when replicated in the mistress-companionate relationship or when the tyrant was a woman rather than a man.”³² Rizzo posits that at the beginning of the eighteenth century, men argued that women could not wield authority due to their passionate and irrational natures. However, this ideology changed over the course of the century into a notion that women were inherently submissive and subordinate, and therefore incapable of wielding power and needed their decisions to be made for them.³³ Conduct books of the period made it difficult for women to be anything other than what was expected of them.³⁴ Rizzo states that these books pressured women to “stress their sensibility, to conceal their sense and ability to reason, to remain deferential and contingent.”³⁵ As noted by Davidoff and Hall, a woman’s sensibility and proper conduct was essential to wider society.

Rizzo records that Mary Astell suggested in her publications that women should steer clear of marriage, to avoid being victimized by it.³⁶ By the mid-eighteenth century marriage critiques and concerns were kept to private letters and not evident in published works. Plays such as Elizabeth Griffith’s *The Platonic Wife*

³¹ Ibid., 1.

³² Ibid., 2.

³³ Ibid., 2.

³⁴ Ibid., 14.

³⁵ Ibid., 18.

³⁶ Ibid., 4.

(1765) were denounced and in this case, quickly removed from boards as the heroine fought for and obtained equality within her marriage.³⁷ Therefore, Rizzo suggests that it is best to garner information on tension between the sexes from private records. Rizzo also comments on the “not-saids” of this time period, meaning there was a lack of dialogue about women’s reluctance to do certain things, such as to birth many children. These thoughts were kept in women’s solely private spheres, and were not evident in letters or published works.³⁸

Lillian Faderman, in her book *Scotch Verdict*: Miss Pirie And Miss Woods V. Dame Cumming Gordon*,³⁹ asserts that women in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries were ideally: “passionless: both her instincts and her socialization kept her chaste until marriage,” she only became sexually active within marriage to procreate.⁴⁰ Therefore, as women did not need to, or want to be fulfilled by men sexually, then it was unfathomable to think that they may be attracted to other women.⁴¹ Faderman describes romantic friendships between women as “an accepted social institution.”⁴² She goes onto speculate about the nature of the relationship between the women her book focuses on: “I think Marianne Woods and Jane Pirie loved each other.”⁴³ Faderman suggests that the two women would not have been satisfied with marrying men and living conventional married lives, therefore they found a way to live together and without men.

³⁷ Ibid., 5.

³⁸ Ibid., 5.

³⁹ Lillian Faderman, *Scotch Verdict*: Miss Pirie And Miss Woods V. Dame Cumming Gordon* (New York: Morrow, 1983).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁴¹ Ibid., 18.

⁴² Ibid., 26.

⁴³ Ibid., 43.

Nicole Reynolds analyzes the romantic friendship between the Ladies of Llangollen in her article, *Cottage Industry: The Ladies of Llangollen and the Symbolic Capital of the Cottage Ornée*.⁴⁴ Reynolds describes the relationship between Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby as socially accepted, a “cause célèbre.”⁴⁵ Reynolds suggests that their relationship and the nature of the eighteenth century “created a space for the expression of a sexual identity that might today be called lesbian.”⁴⁶ Their relationship was viewed by their contemporaries as a romantic friendship, described as “an avowedly private, uniquely ‘feminine’ realm of experience.”⁴⁷ Reynolds notes that they were “at once celebrated and notorious, of the polymorphous pleasures of female romantic friendship.”⁴⁸ There were discussions of the nature of the women’s friendship and speculations regarding the possible illicit sexual passion that existed between them. To combat speculation and insinuation about the nature of their friendship, Ponsonby and Butler created a “public myth of themselves” that posited them as the “Ladies of Llangollen.”⁴⁹ The myth they created for themselves allowed them to root themselves in “the virtues of rustic laborers and the refinements of the leisured – their own – class.”⁵⁰ Reynolds suggests that from reading the journals and letters of Butler and Ponsonby, the women clearly viewed

⁴⁴ Nicole Reynolds, “Cottage Industry: The Ladies of Llangollen and the Symbolic Capital of the Cottage Ornée,” *Eighteenth Century: Theory & Interpretation* (University of Pennsylvania Press) 51, no. 1 (2010): 211-227.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 213.

themselves as married and that this notion was accepted and encouraged by their closest friends.⁵¹

Their home and lifestyle presented an alternative option to women of the time, one that avoided and disrupted the expected patriarchal domestic arrangements. They had a library that was central to their daily lives and offered them much enjoyment, even though home libraries were a symbol of masculine privilege and authority.⁵² It was a space of resistance, where women had their own agency and practiced their own ways of intimacy. Reynolds says of their relationship, “the genius they so carefully cultivated, and for which they so often were celebrated, skirted dangerously close to deviance.”⁵³

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s “The Female World of Love and Ritual” is the foundational text concerning women’s relationships with other women during the Victorian period. Her work focuses on the diaries and letters written by men and women in the middle class in urban and rural America from the 1760s-1880s. She posits the idea of viewing same-sex female friendships “within a cultural and social setting rather than from an exclusively individual psychosexual perspective.”⁵⁴ The structure and gender roles of the society must be taken into account when examining these relationships. The whole networks of women’s relationships must be considered, she argues.⁵⁵ An analysis of these letters and diaries leads Smith-Rosenberg to claim that female-centered relationships were a vital part of American

⁵¹ Ibid., 216.

⁵² Ibid., 219.

⁵³ Ibid., 217.

⁵⁴ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” in *The Girls' History And Culture Reader: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Miriam Forman-Brunell and Leslie Paris (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 150.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 150.

society. Women focused on each other, with men playing bit parts in their lives.⁵⁶

Important events in women's lives, such as child birth and menopause, were conducted within a circle of close female friends, "devotion to and love of other women became a plausible and socially accepted form of human interaction."⁵⁷

Smith-Rosenberg chose to focus on the emotional aspects of these close female friendships, avoiding any engagement with questions of sexuality: "The essential question is not whether these women had genital contact and can therefore be defined as homosexual."⁵⁸ Smith-Rosenberg's work has been used by scholars to both deny and claim sexual behavior between women in close-female friendships. In "Imagine my Surprise" Leila Rupp suggests that Smith-Rosenberg's work has given other scholars the license to censor and produce more "acceptable" accounts of prominent women's lives and use her work to conclude that women of the time were not sexually active with other women.⁵⁹ Rupp states that although it is critical not to impose our own modern terms for sexuality and identity on the past, "we have gone entirely too far with the notion of an idyllic Victorian age in which chaste love between people of the same sex was possible and acceptable."⁶⁰ Rupp suggests that the complete denial of sexuality during this period has led some feminist scholars to "claim as lesbians all women who have loved women in the past."⁶¹ After taking into account the differing opinions by scholars, Rupp notes that when talking about

⁵⁶ Ibid., 149.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 155.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 154.

⁵⁹ Leila J. Rupp, "Imagine My Surprise: Women's Relationships in Mid-Twentieth Century America," in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming The Gay And Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Deuberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey Jr. (Ontario: New American Library, 1989), 398.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 398.

⁶¹ Ibid., 398.

women-centered relationships between women “we have not reached consensus on the issue of characterizing these relationships.”⁶² There is still plenty of research to be done.

Lillian Faderman in her book *Surpassing the Love of Men*, states that romantic friendships between women in the eighteenth-century were rarely discouraged as these relationships were seen as a positive way for women to interact socially.⁶³ Faderman suggests that eighteenth century society in Britain would have found it “unlikely that even their sensuality, which included kissing, caressing and fondling, would become genital,”⁶⁴ allowing women to be intimate with each other in public without a second thought.

Both Faderman’s and Smith-Rosenberg’s scholarship suggests that close, passionate relationships between women were encouraged and seen as part and parcel of middle-class society. This view of society’s acceptance of romantic friendships is challenged by Lisa Moore in “‘Something More Tender Still Than Friendship’: Romantic Friendship in Early-Nineteenth-Century England.” Moore argues that Faderman and Smith-Rosenberg failed to acknowledge the “wariness and even prohibition that sometimes surrounded women’s friendships.”⁶⁵ Moore sees Faderman as having overlooked the role of sexuality in romantic friendships in order to focus her analysis on gender.⁶⁶ Smith-Rosenberg’s portrait of intimacy between women that is grounded in the family is challenged by Moore, who suggests that she “wants to locate that physicality within a set of non-sexual, family-like interactions between

⁶² Ibid., 396.

⁶³ Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing The Love Of Men* (New York: William Morrow, 1981), 77.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 80.

⁶⁵ Lisa Moore, “Something More Tender Still: Romantic Friendship in Early-Nineteenth-Century England,” *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 3 (1992): 501.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 502.

women.”⁶⁷ Overall, Moore criticizes Faderman’s and Smith-Rosenberg’s need to view sexuality as intertwined with gender, and she states that her own work “gives priority to the ideological work of sexuality as a social category related to but distinct from gender.”⁶⁸ Moore uses excerpts from Anne Lister’s diary entries that comment on the fiction and non-fiction books she read and her documented reactions to them, to suggest that this “produces and defines female homosexuality as an early-nineteenth-century conceptual category.”⁶⁹

In “‘Lesbian-Like’ and the Social History of Lesbianism” Judith M. Bennett calls for a queering of women’s history. She argues that women’s history must no longer be viewed through “such a distorting heteronormative lens.”⁷⁰ Bennett argues for the need to liberate and emancipate minorities throughout history. She uses the phrase “lesbian-like” to encompass women who strained against gender roles, refused to accept marriage and spent their lives living with and supporting other women.⁷¹ Using this term enables more women to be counted in lesbian history, such as “sexual rebels, gender rebels, marriage-resisters, cross-dressers, singlewomen.”⁷² This concept of describing women who strayed from societal norms as lesbian-like enables us to view women in the past outside of the heterosexual norm. These women who lived different and fulfilling lives can be seen as existing outside of the heterosexual paradigm.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 503.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 503.

⁶⁹ Moore, *Tender Still*, 512.

⁷⁰ Judith M. Bennett, “‘Lesbian Like’ And The Social History Of Lesbianisms,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 1-2 (2000): 5.

⁷¹ Ibid., 9.

⁷² Ibid., 14.

Rupp, in her book *Sapphistries*, takes an alternative approach in the debate over claiming lesbians in the past. Rupp makes that point that even today, where the term lesbian in a known and accessible identity, women from varying cultures and societies choose to avoid this label and use other terms and words to identify their love and commitment to other women.⁷³ Instead, Rupp uses the term Sapphistries to incorporate all female-bodied women from the past: “I choose to use a term that does not apply to women themselves but to their histories and stories.”⁷⁴ By using this definition Rupp is able to move away from the debate about whether women were sexually active with other women in the past, and instead focus on telling the stories of women who cared passionately about other women in varying times and places.

In her book *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*, Sharon Marcus looks at letters, diaries, memoirs and literature surrounding women to analyze the formation and perception of relationships between women. Marcus highlights the varying ways that women devoted their passion and lives to each other, from unrequited love to female friendship and female marriages. Marcus posits that the discussion of relationships between women needs to be taken away from the debate between the boundaries of homosexual and heterosexual behavior, and instead talked about and seen as fitting into Victorian culture’s construction of gender and sexuality, where these same-sex female relationships were compatible with heterosexual marriage: “Victorian society’s investment in heterosexuality went hand-in-hand with what we could call compulsory homosociability and

⁷³ Leila J. Rupp, *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love Between Women* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

homoeroticism for women.”⁷⁵ With this in mind, Marcus suggests that women who devoted their passions, emotions, finances and lives to other women were unaware that what they were doing was revolutionary in any way, be it socially or sexually.

As we can see from the literature surrounding women’s history of this period, women had clearly defined roles and behaviors expected of them. Their daily lives and routines were expected to revolve around marriage, family and children. However, not all women abided by these rules and showed the sensibility expected of them. Women in romantic friendships were actively resisting the roles and paths laid out for them. By choosing to live their lives with and for other women, they were actively resisting the patriarchy and expected codes of behavior.

Sexuality in History

The way sexuality has been viewed and studied in historical contexts has shifted and changed over time. Notions of how and what should be studied have varied greatly depending on who was doing the research and when it was completed. One of the foundational texts in this area is Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1*.⁷⁶ Foucault suggests that power is mainly constructed in the interests of fostering and preserving life. He suggests that strict controls have been attributed to the regulation of population and the discipline of the body. Sex and sexuality have played a large role in this idea of power over life, as we have come to view these controls as the way a healthy sexuality develops. Foucault posits that as individuals we view our sexuality as being intrinsically linked to whom and what we are, when in fact it is just a social construct that makes us easier to

⁷⁵ Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, And Marriage In Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 61.

⁷⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

control. He argues that the power relations that mold the varying discourses on sexuality largely determine the way we think about sexuality. He exerts that it is ironic that the belief that sex is the answer to our liberation is actually a manifestation of the power that the institution exerts on us. Foucault suggests that if we are to resist this institutional power we should turn our focus to the body and the physical pleasures that sexuality tries to appropriate, not on sexuality itself. Foucault talks about removing any discussion of the pleasures of sexuality and instead reinforcing the dangers. Foucault created spaces for historians to ask new questions about past sexuality. His work invited new ways to study and analyze sexuality in the varied past.

In discussing historical attitudes on homosexuality, Vern and Bonnie Bullough, in their work *Sin, Sickness & Sanity: A History of Sexual Attitudes*,⁷⁷ review the shifting nature of the way sexuality has been viewed in society. They note that classifications on homosexuality have moved from a religious model, to a medical model and, even though both of these models are now defunct, their legacies remain. Bullough and Bullough note the importance of classifying and categorizing different forms of sexual behavior within normal society in order to label deviant behavior. Bullough and Bullough discuss the role that deviancy and decency play in conceptions of sexuality and note how this comes to pass. They suggest that people who find themselves labeled as deviant “may conform or attempt to conform to the description” or will actively reject the stigmatized behavior they are being accused of.⁷⁸ They show how it is that we come to have certain views and notions of what sexuality is and how it should be enacted in different periods of time.

⁷⁷ Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Sin, Sickness & Sanity: a History of Sexual Attitudes* (New York: Garland, 1977).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 199.

In *The Lesbian Premodern*⁷⁹ a collection edited by Noreen Giffney, Diane Watt, and Michelle Sauer, scholars of women's history and sexuality posit their thoughts about same-sex female love in the early modern period in Europe. In the chapter titled "Lesbian Ghosts" Martha Vicinus discusses the "boundary-blurring relationships" that existed between women in the past and between the past and present.⁸⁰ When discussing the way sexuality has been studied in history, Vicinus notes that "the postmodern belief that all identities are fluid, multiple, and fractured has helped to move sexuality studies away from unexamined definitions of sex and gender."⁸¹ She asserts that new ways of thinking are needed for looking at and examining the nuances of varied sexual behaviors.

Valerie Traub's chapter titled "The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography" offers musings on the way sexuality in history has been studied and notes "the field's center of gravity has resulted in some remarkable period-based studies that will inform our understanding for a great while."⁸² Traub applauds the varied research regarding differing time periods, but she laments the way this research has been carried out. She states that research has generally been conducted "along traditional period lines."⁸³ This, therefore, leads to ignoring areas where "historical boundaries meet."⁸⁴ Traub suggests that this method leads to certain periods of time being lost or overlooked, as they cannot easily be pulled into one exact period. Traub calls for

⁷⁹ Noreen Giffney, Diane Watt, and Michelle M. Sauer, *The Lesbian Premodern* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁸⁰ Vicinus, Martha, "Lesbian Ghosts," in *The Lesbian Premodern*, ed. Noreen Giffney, Diane Watt, and Michelle M. Sauer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 193.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁸² Valerie Traub, "The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography," in *The Lesbian Premodern*, ed. Noreen Giffney, Diane Watt, and Michelle M. Sauer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 27.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

future study to include “a more ambitious and capacious response to our growing historical knowledge.”⁸⁵

Katherine Crawford’s book *European Sexualities, 1400-1800*⁸⁶ provides an overview of the construction and nature of sexuality in the early modern period. Crawford notes that during the early modern period of history in Europe, people frequently acted surprised when they came across women engaging in sexual acts with other women, even though these images and portrayals were easy to come across. Female on female sexuality was defined as very different and separate from male on male sexuality “in part because what women did with women was considered something of a mystery.”⁸⁷ Crawford suggests that the age of the Renaissance in Europe reframed sexuality in the early modern period. Re-embracing and reclaiming antiquity led to new thinking about deviant sexual behavior that challenged the dominant norms of society. Crawford notes that during the Renaissance female-female eroticism was viewed positively, but by the eighteenth century it had negative connotations and was seen as dangerous. Female sexuality that was independent of men was threatening to wider society and the social order, therefore “previously acceptable accounts of sexual attraction between women disappeared.”⁸⁸ To combat anxiety about deviant female sexuality, these deviant women were placed within heterosexual paradigms. Stories about women dressing as men and taking female lovers abounded.⁸⁹ Crawford notes that by the eighteenth century female-female sexual desire had been shaped to serve as a form of male arousal, further confining

⁸⁵ Ibid., 32.

⁸⁶ Katherine Crawford, *European Sexualities, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁸⁷ Ibid., 190.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 214.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 210.

women's sexuality in heterosexual norms.⁹⁰ Crawford's research suggests that by the late-eighteenth century, women who were committed to other women would have been acting out of kilter to regular society.

Queer/Feminist Theories of Sexuality

Various scholars have been active in positing theories concerning sexuality in regards to queer and feminist theory. There are varying ways of deciphering sexuality within queer and feminist theory. Queer and feminist theorists have sought to challenge dominant assumptions about sexuality and encourage us to see and view sexuality in differing ways.

One of the most respected and recognized feminist theorists involved in the discussion of female sexuality is Adrienne Rich. Her famous essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality And Lesbian Existence*⁹¹ provides an analysis of how and why society constructs female sexuality. Rich calls for heterosexuality to be viewed and noted as a political institution and believes that "this assumption of female heterosexuality seems to me in itself remarkable."⁹² Rich suggests that women have been brought up in a manner that results in their seeing marriage and attraction to men as necessary and a certainty whether it fulfills them or not. She argues that pornography: "widens the range of behavior considered acceptable from men in heterosexual intercourse" creating a situation where women lose all agency in their sexuality and have no space to be loving and intimate with other women as heterosexuality is all they are

⁹⁰ Ibid., 212.

⁹¹ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality And Lesbian Existence* (Denver Co.: Antelope Publications, 1982).

⁹² Ibid., 9.

presented with. This results in “the enforcement of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring male right of physical, economical, and emotional access.”⁹³

Rich calls for an attempt to “move toward a dissociation of lesbian from male homosexual values and allegiances.”⁹⁴ She believes that it should be separated as it is a “profoundly female experience”⁹⁵ that can be related only to women and not men. In this essay Rich posits the Lesbian continuum, and suggests that all women exist within in it and move along and in and out of it over the course of their lives. Starting with close friendships between young girls and leading to mother-daughter relationships, women are constantly involved in some form of lesbian association with other women, whether they frame it as such or not. Rich asserts that “women have always resisted male tyranny.”⁹⁶ She suggests that “heterosexuality has been both forcibly and subliminally imposed on women”⁹⁷ forever, but women have always attempted to resist it throughout history.

In *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, And the Lesbian-feminist Roots of Queer Theory* Linda Garber proposes the term “identity poetics” as a way to connect identities and involve previously marginalized groups, such as lesbians of color and working class lesbians in the discourse surrounding lesbian identity. Garber discusses the tension that exists between queer theory and lesbian-feminist theory and describes the resultant polarization as “overwrought and unproductive.”⁹⁸ She instead chooses to join together lesbian feminism and queer theory. Garber believes that connections

⁹³ Ibid., 19.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁹⁸ Linda Garber, *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, And the Lesbian-feminist Roots of Queer Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 1.

between the two can be seen when viewing work by working class lesbians of color. By reframing the way sexuality is discussed in queer and feminist theory, Garber believes that more voices will be heard and a clearer picture will be formed about sexuality. Garber sees this as possible by way of “identity poetics.”

Judith Butler examines the intersections of gender and sexuality in her work titled *Gender Trouble*.⁹⁹ Butler asks if there is a pre-existing “political shape to ‘women’” that was established before their points of views were politically created.¹⁰⁰ She asks how this came to be and if it is the reason for societal notions of “the female body.” Butler says that if the “inner truth of gender” is a falsification and that “true gender” is a fable enacted visibly on the outside of our bodies, then there can be no true or false genders.¹⁰¹ Butler describes gender as a performance that is continuously repeated in a form of public action. Butler asserts that gender should be viewed as something that is never fixed, but can shift and change depending on time and place. Butler posits that within our society our assigned sex decides how we will perform gender, which then leads us to enact sexual desire toward the other gender, creating a continuum. Butler sees gender as a performance that is fluid and ever shifting; therefore our sexuality should mirror this and not be fixed. Sexuality should be as free flowing as gender.

Catharine Mackinnon details her thoughts on sexuality in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*.¹⁰² Mackinnon argues that a feminist theory of sexuality places

⁹⁹ Judith Butler, “From Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,” in *Feminist Theory: a Reader*. 3rd ed., ed. Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski (Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2010).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 434.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 439.

¹⁰² Catharine A. Mackinnon, “Sexuality from Toward a Feminist Theory of the State,” in *Feminist Theory: a Reader*. 3rd ed., ed. Wendy K. Kolmar, and Frances Bartkowski (Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2010).

sexuality within a “theory of gender inequality, meaning the social hierarchy of men over women.”¹⁰³ This leads to feminist theory becoming a site where women’s position is analyzed and ideas for change are created. Mackinnon posits that sexuality, especially female sexuality, “must be studied in its experienced empirical existence”¹⁰⁴ rather than through texts and language. She sees sexuality as a place where “gender pervasively occurs and through which gender is socially constituted.”¹⁰⁵ In discussing lesbian sexuality, Mackinnon notes that women who have sex with women still have their sexuality constructed by and under male supremacy. It does not matter if a woman is sexually involved with men or not—men still limit and frame her sexuality. Mackinnon and Butler both see gender as an imperative factor in the way sexuality is formed and constructed in society, especially in relation to women.

In *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*¹⁰⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa discusses the nature of living on the border between cultures and places and how this leads to one never feeling accepted or united at any point in any place. To remedy this disconnect and alienation, Anzaldúa calls for us embrace the “new mestiza” to live as individuals who are aware and accepting of the conflicting parts that make our individual identities. This extends to the way we think about and categorize sexuality. Anzaldúa posits that sexuality should exist outside binaries and should not be limiting: “as a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races

¹⁰³ Ibid., 414.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 414.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 415.

¹⁰⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: the New Mestiza = La Frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987).

because there is the queer of me in all races.”¹⁰⁷ Anzaldúa sees the “new mestiza” as bringing hope and change to people by encouraging them to embrace their individuality and sexuality and using it to unite people from all spaces and places: “we are a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls.”¹⁰⁸ Anzaldúa calls for an acceptance of fluidity within sexuality, much like Butler.

The different theories concerning sexuality, particularly as it pertains to women, show that fluidity is needed and necessary in order for women to feel free and comfortable in their bodies. These theories show that women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were fighting a hard and uncompromising battle against compulsory heterosexuality. Still today, a woman is assumed to be heterosexual unless proven otherwise and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain this was no different. Women who sought to vie against the required heterosexuality were actively resisting what society expected and wanted from them.

Conclusion

A detailed analysis of the three bodies of knowledge I examined, British women’s history, history of sexuality and queer/feminist theories of sexuality, reveal that romantic friendships between women existed and were acknowledged by the general population in Britain. It also demonstrates that there is a gap in the research scholarship surrounding reading these romantic friendships as a form of active resistance to the patriarchy and societal norms. Having grounded my argument in the existing literature, my research seeks to show that women in romantic friendships in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were actively and purposefully resisting gender norms and societal expectations.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 80.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 85.

Chapter 4: Discussion

The foundational texts on romantic friendships between women by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Lillian Faderman have been used by scholars in two opposing ways: to claim same-sex sexual relationships between women and deny the existence of sexual relationships between women in the past. Smith-Rosenberg's decision to focus on the emotional lives of woman-identified women led scholars to ask questions about the physical nature of these women's relationships. As Leila Rupp has stated, this created a culture of claiming as lesbians all past women who devoted their lives to other women.¹⁰⁹ This desire to uncover hidden sexualities is understandable, but care must be taken in how these women are categorized, so as not to impose our own societal expectations on past lives.

A dialogue is needed about how women in romantic friendships navigated and negotiated their relationships within society. Rupp's *Sapphistries* creates a good starting point for looking at woman-identified women throughout history by discussing how they lived their own lives and moved through society. Rupp tells the story of women who loved other women in past societies, without attempting to impose current notions of sexual identity on to these women.

Sharon Marcus' recent work on romantic friendships between women in Victorian era England does not impose current notions of sexuality and identity on past women; instead, she claims that these relationships fitted neatly into the heterosexual marriage model of the period. Marcus posits that these women in romantic friendships were conforming to society's expectations. In contradiction to Marcus' thoughts about the social awareness of women who deviated from norms and devoted their lives to women, I argue that some women were aware of how

¹⁰⁹ Leila J. Rupp, "Imagine My Surprise: Women's Relationships in Mid-Twentieth Century America," in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming The Gay And Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Deuberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey Jr. (Ontario: New American Library, 1989).

revolutionary their actions were. By analyzing of the lives of Anne Lister, Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, I will show that some women in the Victorian period were fully aware of how out of the ordinary their lives were and were in fact attempting to resist the paths society expected them to take.

Anne Lister was born on April 3, 1791 in Halifax, England to an upper-class, land-owning family. Lister had four brothers who all died young; as a result, she inherited the family estate and Shibden Hall. Lister went to live at Shibden Hall at the age of twenty-four, with her unmarried aunt and uncle on whom she was financially dependent. Lister devoted much of her time to educating herself and was an avid reader. Our knowledge about Lister comes from her diaries. She wrote about everything of concern in her life from local and political gossip, to her social visits with other women and the latest developments in industry and science.¹¹⁰ There are approximately four million words contained in twenty-seven volumes of her diaries. Roughly a sixth of the material is written in Lister's personal code and the rest is heavily abbreviated.¹¹¹ Lister's diaries and correspondence provide us with a clear and detailed picture of how she filled her time, whom she loved and how she presented herself.

Like Lister, the Ladies of Llangollen also left behind written accounts of their lives. Although not as diligent and dedicated to diary entries as Lister, they did keep household account books and correspondence between them and the outside world. Sarah Ponsonby was sent to boarding school at the age of thirteen where she met

¹¹⁰ Jill Liddington, *Presenting the Past: Anne Lister of Halifax 1791-1840* (West Yorkshire: Pennine Press, 1994), 7-8.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

twenty-nine year old Eleanor Butler.¹¹² They bonded over a love of books and independent natures. At the age of eighteen Ponsonby was separated from Butler and sent to live with family friends. The living situations of both women became untenable when Ponsonby was romantically pursued by the man in whose house she was living, and Butler's mother was intent on sending her to live in a convent.¹¹³ Butler and Ponsonby decided that they would only be happy if they could run away and retire from society and live "a quiet life together in a country cottage."¹¹⁴ The women attempted and failed to run away together on March 30, 1778. They were found sleeping in a barn, dressed in men's clothes and were taken back to their respective homes.¹¹⁵ After much protesting and family disagreements, Ponsonby and Butler were allowed to go away together and set off on a tour of Wales.¹¹⁶ They eventually settled in a cottage they named Play Newydd.¹¹⁷ Money was a constant problem for the women and they had to survive on meager allowances from their families.¹¹⁸

Gender Expression

The start of the nineteenth century saw distinct changes in acceptable clothing for upper and middle-class men and women in Britain. Prior to the 1830s men of a certain class level were expected to dress in very bright eye catching colors.¹¹⁹ By the

¹¹² Elizabeth Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship* (Ludlow: Moonrise Press, 2011), 5.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹⁹ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men And Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-185*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 410.

1850s clothing norms for men had transitioned into “stiff, dark, heavy materials.”¹²⁰ The look of Victorian patriarchal authority was one of somber colors giving off strong overtones of defined masculinity. The contrasting looks between men’s and women’s clothes “was becoming a powerful part of gender segregation.”¹²¹ Masculinity was displayed by ruggedness and by dressing as if appearance was of no consequence.¹²² Women were expected to wear “ringlets, soft colours, sandals laced with ribbons, increasingly full skirts.”¹²³ This look was well suited to small, dependent women who resembled girls.

In “Men in Skirts” Steven Connor notes that men’s and women’s fashions and clothing only became “conspicuously polarized” from the mid-nineteenth century.¹²⁴ Helena Michie describes the Victorian era as “a time of hyperbolic gender difference.”¹²⁵ Earlier cultures had viewed gender as a vertical hierarchy that progressed gradually and was organized in terms of religion and closeness to God. Michie suggests that this system was inherently changed by the Victorians who began to see the genders as total opposites and so “everything that was defined as not masculine was by definition feminine, and vice versa.”¹²⁶ These differences and binary opposites were accounted for in dress, appearance and bodies. Men and women living in Victorian society were constantly made aware of their gender and how society expected them to portray it, especially within middle and upper-class circles.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 412.

¹²¹ Ibid., 414.

¹²² Ibid., 414.

¹²³ Ibid., 413.

¹²⁴ Steven Connor, “Men in Skirts,” *Women* 13, no. 3 (2002): 268.

¹²⁵ Helena Michie, “*Under Victorian Skins: The Bodies Beneath*,” in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Herbert F. Tucker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 407.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 409.

Anne Lister's diary entries suggest that she was well aware of how the social circles that she moved through expected her to dress and present herself, but she chose to ignore and act against these gender expectations. Lister's diaries contained notes on her daily movements, thoughts and feelings, most of which was written in English. When reflecting on parts of her day that she did not want others to be privy to, she used a secret code that she developed herself. For the most part, the content of her diaries that are coded deal with her sexual and emotional feelings for other women, her financial situation and sometimes her clothing.

On Wednesday, April 2, 1817 Lister writes in code: "Began this morning to sit, before breakfast, in my drawers put on with gentlemen's braces...& my old black waistcoat and dressing-gown."¹²⁷ As I discussed previously, men and women were expected to dress in clothes appropriate for their gender. Here, Lister is telling us that she is wearing clothes that are not acceptable for her gender and has coded this information, as she knows that this is inappropriate for a woman of her class and stature, yet she does it anyway. When writing about gender-appropriate clothing, Lister writes in plain English, not code: "Tried on a pair of drawers Marian sent me & some black raw silk stockings ... like which my father brought me 3 pairs."¹²⁸ The fact that she wrote in code when reflecting on wearing or altering clothes that were generally worn by men suggests that Lister was fully aware of the boundaries she was crossing. She also notes when other women commented on her appearance, "said my whole style of dress suited myself.... I walked differently from other people.... I was more masculine, she said."¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Anne Lister, *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, ed. Helena Whitbread (London: Virago Press, 2010), 9.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 369.

This suggests that Lister was aware of the statement she was making by dressing in a way that led her contemporaries to call her “Gentleman Jack” and comment on her “masculine appearance.”¹³⁰ When commenting on her experiences of walking around her village Lister writes in code: “At the top of Cunnery Lane, as I went, three men said, as usual, ‘That’s a man’ & one axed [sic] ‘Does your cock stand?’”¹³¹ On another occasion, when reflecting on an excursion to York, Lister noted: “some men & women declared I was a man.”¹³² These diary entries suggest that Lister’s gender expression deviated significantly from the norm as people heckled her in public. Lister even writes about actively giving away clothes that she would never wear due to their feminine appearance: “gave my father, to take to Marian, a green & yellow shot Italian gauze evening gown, a muslin ditto, a blue satin waist ... very little worn.”¹³³

In the scholarship surrounding romantic friendships between women that I have discussed, non-conforming gender expression is not analyzed in any great detail. There is no real mention of women in romantic friendships dressing inappropriately, e.g., like men. Women in romantic friendships were generally existing within the homosocial bonds that society encouraged and fostered. Wearing clothing not appropriate for their gender would threaten this notion of societal acceptance. I argue that Anne Lister was resisting societal expectations by wearing clothes that were more masculine than feminine. As her diary entries show, Lister was well aware of how she was presenting herself to society. She was actively dressing in a manner that was not befitting for a woman of her social stature. Her diaries suggest that more public

¹³⁰ Ibid., xxii.

¹³¹ Ibid., 60-61.

¹³² Ibid., 76.

¹³³ Ibid., 89.

attention and comment was paid to her gender presentation than to her romantic relationships with other women. Lister notes that women who she met in passing became hostile toward her upon realizing her difference in appearance, “Before this, they wanted to know me but ever since, they have lost no opportunity of shewing more than once, at the expence [sic] of common civility, that they are determined not to know me.”¹³⁴ Engaging in a romantic friendship with another woman was one thing, but dressing in masculine clothing was completely another.

Just like Anne Lister, Eleanor Butler was viewed by her contemporaries as dressing and behaving in a way that betrayed her gender, “being in the common view over-educated, masculine and satirical.”¹³⁵ Her education and knowledge of books and languages gave her cause to be called masculine. The public view of the ladies of Llangollen as masculine and gender-nonconforming only increased when they set up home together in Wales. Visitors to their cottage are documented as commenting on their clothing choices and suggesting they appeared like men: “there is not one point to distinguish them from men.”¹³⁶ These apparently masculine outfits included: “men’s coats, and regular black beaver men’s hats” and “enormous shoes, and men’s hats” leading to them being mistaken for “a couple of hazy or crazy old sailors.”¹³⁷ Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby were living together in a romantic friendship, visibly under the gaze of the public, shunning marriage and heterosexual relationships and people were seemingly most concerned with the way they were dressing. Just like in the case of Anne Lister, these women were considered odd more for their clothing than their living arrangements and apparent same-sex partnership.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 318.

¹³⁵ Mavor, *Llangollen*, 35.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 198.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 198.

Mavor suggests that this public opinion of Butler and Ponsonby dressing in masculine clothing was a myth and “popular misapprehension.”¹³⁸ Whether this was in fact a myth or reality, it is notable that so much attention was paid to the way the women were dressing. For there to be so much recorded talk of Butler and Ponsonby’s clothing it must have deviated somewhat from societal expectations.

Marriage Resistance

Marriage was encouraged and expected of women from middle-and upper-class families in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The structure of British society depended on marriage, as Nancy F. Cott suggests in *Public Vows*: “legal monogamy benefited social order, by harnessing the vagaries of sexual desire and by supplying predictable care and support for the young and the dependent.”¹³⁹ Cott notes that marriage, as an institution, has been used to shape and form the way gender is ordered within society: “marriage uniquely and powerfully influences the way differences between the sexes are conveyed and symbolized.” Marriage has been used as a vehicle to separate the roles and expectations of men and women. Cott posits that even the unmarried have to bear the ideological burden enforced by the marriage institution, as it is so hard to fight against and get away from.¹⁴⁰ Marriage has been used to define what counts as legitimate sexual behavior.

In *The Rise of Respectable Society*, F. M. L. Thompson writes that those who purposefully did not marry were, “the minute proportion of the residuum, the dregs of society, which was incorrigibly disreputable.”¹⁴¹ People were expected to mature and

¹³⁸ Ibid., 199.

¹³⁹ Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: a History of Marriage And the Nation*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 10.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴¹ F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: a Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830-1900*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 91.

then marry; young women were expected to grow up to be wives. For women, marriage was where they “assumed their full adult status.”¹⁴² Society suggested that marriage brought financial stability, status, comfort and respectability. Women often felt forced into marriage by their families for financial reasons and to avoid being burdens.¹⁴³ For as long as marriage has existed as an institution there have been ways to avoid or resist it.

Women in early-modern Europe sometimes had options that extended beyond marriage. It was possible for single women in certain areas to live full lives without the financial support of a man. Nancy Locklin illustrates this point in the article “‘Til Death Parts Us.”¹⁴⁴ Locklin uncovers and analyzes domestic partnerships between women that occurred during the eighteenth century in Brittany. There was legal provision for two women, related or not, to form a “perpetual society” with each other. Two women could arrange for their money and property to be left to each other upon their death. Locklin states that this legal code allowed “two women to set up a home and a life together in the same way that spouses do.”¹⁴⁵ In Brittany two women were legally and socially permitted to share a home and support each other. This contrasts with many places in Europe at this time where women living together would have been met with suspicion or prevented from doing so.¹⁴⁶ Locklin’s article suggests that women did indeed have legitimate alternatives to marriage and convents

¹⁴² Davidoff and Hall, *Fortunes*, 322.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 325.

¹⁴⁴ Nancy Locklin, “‘Til Death Parts Us: Women’s Domestic Partnerships in Eighteenth-Century Brittany,” *Journal of Women’s History* 23, no. 4 (2011).

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

as “they could work and live and, most importantly, set up households based upon affection and emotional fulfillment.”¹⁴⁷

Lister, Butler and Ponsonby made it known that marriage to men was not something any of them wanted to be involved with. The way they lived their lives and fought for their independence suggests they were resisting heterosexual marriage. Anne Lister wrote extensively in her diary about her feelings on this. While talking to a female friend, Lister reflected on her thoughts about her situation, “Said I should never marry. Could not like men. Ought not to like women.”¹⁴⁸ This is just one example of Lister openly telling a friend that she had no interest in marrying. This entry suggests that she was aware of just how far from the societal norm her feelings were. She rejected marriage and embraced women, knowing that this was not how she should think or behave. The gravity of her remarks to her friend are realized when, the next day, she took them back “I contradicted all I said last night. Argued upon the absurdity & impossibility of it & wondered how she could be such a gull as to believe it.”¹⁴⁹ This suggests that Lister would open up to other women on her alternative views on marriage and then wait for a reaction, to see if the women felt the same way she did. Figuring out whom to trust with her desires must have been a hard task. This reinforces just how different and unusual Lister’s thoughts were. She also made it known to her family that she had no intention of marrying. In a discussion with her uncle she said, “I took care to say, however, that I never intend to marry at all.”¹⁵⁰

Eleanor Butler had to fight against the one acceptable alternative to marriage: convent life. Butler’s mother was exasperated with her aging, unmarried daughter and

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 54.

¹⁴⁸ Lister, *Diaries*, 2.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 17.

believed that sending her to devote her life to God was the only reasonable outcome for the family.¹⁵¹ Instead of accepting her family's wishes and choosing the marriage alternative that was offered, Butler rebelled. Sara Ponsonby also chose to reject marriage. Correspondence between Ponsonby and her widow friend Mrs. Goddard shows that the young woman was alarmed and horrified at the thought of her employer, Sir William, pursuing her. Ponsonby openly made her feelings about Sir William known, "show my disgust and detestation of him."¹⁵² Both Butler and Ponsonby were determined to fight against marriage and the acceptable alternatives so they could live together. It was not easy to convince their families, "a ten day psychological war of attrition, between Miss Ponsonby and Miss Butler on the one hand and everyone else on the other."¹⁵³ This shows the nature of their resistance to societal and familial expectations. They fought and argued and protested until their families relented.

Rejection of Men

There exists documented evidence of women throughout time rejecting men and embracing women. Rupp's book *Sapphistries* gives a global account of women loving other women from the start of human civilization to the present day. Rupp finds evidence of women rejecting men in favor of other women throughout time in varying cultures and societies. Rupp states, "from the very earliest societies, the possibility of love between women has been acknowledged, even if it is feared, ignored, or denied."¹⁵⁴ Women who are inclined to be with and love other women have always found a way to be close to each other. Rupp suggests that in some

¹⁵¹ Mavor, *Llangollen*, 24.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁵⁴ Rupp, *Sapphistries*, 227.

cultures and societies it was possible and acceptable for women to love other women within the framework of heterosexuality, but “it was female masculinity and independence from male control that made love between women threatening to the social order.”¹⁵⁵ This assertion is evident in the lived experiences of Lister, Ponsonby and Butler. All three women actively pursued women and rejected men.

Reading Anne Lister’s diaries leads us to believe that she was wholly committed to women and had little time for men: “I cannot live happily without female company, without someone to interest me.”¹⁵⁶ Lister’s diary entries show that there were occasions when men attempted to woo her, but she always rejected them and was suspicious of their interactions, “Surely it is meant as an insult. To annoy is all such fellows want & they shall not succeed with me.”¹⁵⁷ Lister could not even fathom the idea that a man would be romantically interested in her, perhaps because she was never interested in them. Male attention was not something she craved, desired or missed and when she encountered it, she knew not how to act.

From reading Lister’s diaries, it is obvious that she was sexually involved with other women. In her own private code she writes explicitly about her experiences with other women, “Had a very good kiss last night. Anne gave it to me with pleasure.”¹⁵⁸ In her scholarship on Anne Lister’s construction of lesbian identity, Anna Clark has noted that Lister used the word kiss to denote an orgasm.¹⁵⁹ Marianna Lawton was the love of Lister’s life. They enjoyed a four-year affair and had dreams of living together. The affair came to an end when Marianna bowed to societal pressure and

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 227.

¹⁵⁶ Lister, *Diaries*, 71.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 107.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵⁹ Anna Clark, “Anne Lister’s Construction of Lesbian Identity,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7, no. 1 (1996): 23.

married a man, leaving Lister behind.¹⁶⁰ They saw each other on and off over the years and took every available opportunity to be close to one another, “I took off my pelisse & drawers, got into bed & had a very good kiss, she showing all due inclination.”¹⁶¹ Lister and Lawton wrote to each other in code, with the letters containing declarations of love and the desire to be together. Lawton wrote to Lister, “As long, my dear Fred, as I reign undisturbed over your heart, I am satisfied. ’Tis the only kingdom in the world that I covet.”¹⁶² From their correspondence it seems that Lawton was constantly worried that Lister would find someone else to love and settle with, “I shall not lose you, my husband, shall I?”¹⁶³ Lister was in fact continually searching for a woman to replace Lawton in her heart. Her diary describes her attempts to woo numerous women, but she found fault with the majority of them and constantly compared them to Lawton. When writing about her relationship with Isabella Norcliffe she says, “A kiss of Tib, both last night & this morning...but she cannot give me much pleasure.”¹⁶⁴

Sarah Ponsonby and Eleanor Butler were much less explicit in their feelings for each other, in print at least. Butler recorded in her journal the times that her “beloved” attended to her when she was ill, “My Tender, my Sweet Love lay beside me holding and supporting My Head.”¹⁶⁵ Their journals and letters show that they were truly devoted to each other and did everything together.¹⁶⁶ They had done

¹⁶⁰ Lister, *Diaries*, xxiv.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁶⁵ Mavor, *Llangollen*, 97-98.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

everything within their power to set up a home together and they made sure to make the most of their lives together.

Butler's journal entries describe the nightmares she had surrounding men. Her dreams were peppered with strange men lurking and threatening her. This fear spilled over into her daily life, "For Eleanor is afraid of men."¹⁶⁷ Butler took great pains to avoid interactions with men she did not know, putting that responsibility in the hands of Ponsonby. Although not terrified of men in the same way as Butler, Ponsonby showed disdain for their attentions. The catalyst for her running away with Butler was the attentions lavished on her by her male employer. Ponsonby ran from him and into the welcoming arms of Butler.

A close reading of the lives of Anne Lister, Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby paint a picture of resistance and defiance. All three women actively pursued the paths they wanted their lives to take, and by doing so went against societal norms and expectations. These remarkable women managed to live the majority of their adult lives as they saw fit. Scholars researching romantic friendships between women have been inclined to show how women in the past devoted their lives to each other and lived within societal norms and the paradigm of heterosexuality. In the case of Lister, Butler and Ponsonby I believe this to be false. As I have shown, these three women actively pursued their own style of living that rejected men and embraced women whole-heartedly. Instead of placing their relationships and lives under the umbrella of what was acceptable and heterosexual, I think we should embrace them and celebrate them for what they were: women loving women apart from men.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 96.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The lives of women in romantic friendships in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries in Britain have been mostly presented as conforming to heterosexuality. These women who devoted their lives and love to other women have been viewed as quietly living as they pleased, in ways that were perfectly compatible with gender and sexual norms for women. Their lives together have been understood as falling within societal norms and expectations.¹⁶⁸ In analyzing gender expression, marriage resistance and rejection of men in the lives of Anne Lister, Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, I am arguing that these women resisted societal expectations and heterosexuality. These women's lives show that women who loved other women and not men were resisting marriage, men and gender conformity. Lister, Butler and Ponsonby were not attempting to live within respectable society; instead, they forged their own paths through their love of other women. My research shows that there were women who refused to act and live in accordance with the accepted and heteronormative society of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries in Britain. Some women had the resources, determination and vision to live in a manner that pleased and fulfilled them, not societal expectations. Lister never even considered taking the conventional path of marriage to a man. She decided that she could only partner with other women: "I love, & only love, the fairer sex & thus beloved by them in turn, my heart revolts from any love than theirs,"¹⁶⁹ and that is what she did. These women resisted social expectations and made rewarding lives for themselves on the margins of nineteenth century British society.

¹⁶⁸ Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, And Marriage In Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007)

¹⁶⁹ Anne Lister, *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, ed. Helena Whitbread (London: Virago Press, 2010), 161.

My research reveals the need for further study of the lives of women who loved other women in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries in Britain. It is imperative to voice the experiences of women in the past who defied societal expectations and gender norms. Women who lived out of the ordinary lives, like Lister, Butler and Ponsonby, should be noted and celebrated as radical women of their period. Telling the stories of these remarkable women helps us to see how women in the past have resisted the paths that nineteenth century British society expected them to take. These women went against the grain and opted to live in a way that made them happy, whether socially acceptable or not. The diaries, letters and journals of women who lived with other women, or without men, need to be evaluated in order to see just how many women were resisting what their society asked of them. Looking at other documents such as police records from the period could also be useful for identifying women who behaved in opposition to what society expected.

This project was limited to a reading of secondary sources. An analysis of primary documents written by single women could reveal more lives that were as remarkable as those of Lister, Butler and Ponsonby. If these three women were able to live woman-identified lives, then there may have been other women like them. Locklin's research about domestic partnerships between women in Brittany in the eighteenth century shows that women in other European countries were living with other women and not men.¹⁷⁰ More research into the lives of women who did not marry needs to be done in order to reveal the lives of women who went against expected societal norms and lived without men.

More of an intersectional analysis is also necessary in research regarding the lives of woman identified women. Women of color in Britain who devoted their lives

¹⁷⁰ Nancy Locklin, "'Til Death Parts Us: Women's Domestic Partnerships in Eighteenth-Century Brittany," *Journal of Women's History* 23, no. 4 (2011).

to other women need to be documented. More research is needed about the role of social class in romantic relationships between women. The women I studied were all from upper-middle class families, so looking at romantic relationships between women in the lower and working class would offer a deeper analysis and a different perspective. Looking further into other countries would also be revealing. We know that the equivalent of romantic friendships in the United States existed and were categorized as “Boston Marriages.”¹⁷¹ Looking at the lives of women who formed “Boston Marriages” could reveal similar resistance to that displayed by Lister, Butler and Ponsonby.

The typical woman in a romantic friendship has been seen for too long as a non-threatening, compliant, young adult who was waiting for marriage to a suitable man. Or as a woman married to a man who continued a close friendship with a female friend. Admittedly such women in romantic friendships did exist, as previous scholarly research has shown. My own research shows that it is time to look beyond the image of woman-woman romantic friendships existing only before and alongside marriage. Instead we need to talk about and give voice to the women who were in romantic friendships with other women because that is what they wanted out of life; they chose women over men. As I have shown, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain there were women who wore clothes that defied gender norms, rejected men and resisted marriage. Their stories need to be told to highlight the many ways in which women in the past have resisted gender expectation and the patriarchy. The dialogue of how we view women in romantic friendships needs to be expanded, and a close reading of the lives of woman-identified women would be beneficial.

¹⁷¹ Leila J. Rupp, *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love Between Women* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 131.

We need to bring women who devoted their lives and love to other women to the center of the discussion about romantic friendships. Bringing these remarkable women from the margins to the center of feminist historical analysis would encourage more research and engagement with their radical lives. Perhaps then, the term romantic friendship is not fitting for the way these women lived their lives. For Butler and Ponsonby the term romantic friendship does not seem fitting of their commitment to each other. These women fought against their families to live together and then set up house and spent the rest of their days together. This level of commitment appears to be much more than romantic friendship. Mavor, the most prolific researcher of the Ladies of Llangollen, states how she came to categorize their relationship: "I have preferred the terms of romantic friendship as more liberal and inclusive and better suited to the diffuse feminine nature."¹⁷² This way of viewing Butler's and Ponsonby's relationship does not give voice to their documented non-conforming gender expression and their rejection of men and heterosexual marriage. Categorizing their relationship as a romantic friendship silences the radical nature of their partnership. For this reason we need to place women like Butler and Ponsonby at the center of our analysis of romantic friendships in the period and create a new term that fully accounts for their relationship.

In today's political climate of right wing attacks on same-sex relationships and any sexual behavior that strays from the confines of heterosexuality, it is imperative to look to the past and note the lives of women who defied societal norms. Women have always found ways to live with and love other women, even when their society condemns it. Voicing this resistance can aid the battle that we face to move toward equality.

¹⁷² Elizabeth Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship* (Ludlow: Moonrise Press, 2011), xi.

Bibliography

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands: the New Mestiza = La Frontera*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987.
- Bennett, Judith M. "'Lesbian Like' And The Social History Of Lesbianisms." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 1-2 (2000): 1-24.
- Bullough, Vern L, and Bonnie Bullough. *Sin, Sickness & Sanity: a History of Sexual Attitudes*. New York: Garland, 1977.
- Butler, Judith. "From Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity." In *Feminist Theory: A Reader*. 3rd ed., edited by Wendy K. Kolmar, and Frances Bartkowski, 434-442. Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2010.
- Clark, Anna. "Anne Lister's Construction of Lesbian Identity." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7, no. 1 (1996): 23-50.
- Connor, Steven. "Men in Skirts," *Women* 13, no. 3 (2002): 257-271.
- Cott, Nancy F. *Public Vows: A History of Marriage And the Nation*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Crawford, Katherine. *European Sexualities, 1400-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Davidoff, Leonore and Catherine Hall. *Family Fortunes: Men And Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Faderman, Lillian. *Scotch Verdict*: Miss Pirie And Miss Woods V. Dame Cumming Gordon*. New York: Morrow, 1983.
- . *Surpassing The Love Of Men*. New York: William Morrow, 1981.
- Fay, Elizabeth A. *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism*. Malden: Blackwell, 1998.
- Ferguson, Moira. *First Feminists: British Women Writers, 1578-1799*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Garber, Linda. *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, And the Lesbian-feminist Roots of Queer Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.
- Hesse-Biber, Sharlene Nagy, and Patricia Leavy. *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2007.

- Liddington, Jill. *Presenting the Past: Anne Lister of Halifax 1791-1840*. West Yorkshire: Pennine Press, 1994.
- Lister, Anne. *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*. Edited by Helena Whitbread. London: Virago Press, 2010.
- Locklin, Nancy. "‘Til Death Parts Us: Women's Domestic Partnerships in Eighteenth-Century Brittany." *Journal of Women's History* 23, no. 4 (2011): 36-58.
- Mackinnon, Catharine A. "Sexuality from Toward a Feminist Theory of the State." In *Feminist Theory: a Reader*. 3rd ed., edited by Wendy K. Kolmar, and Frances Bartkowski, 413-425. Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2010.
- Marcus, Sharon. *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, And Marriage In Victorian England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Mavor, Elizabeth. *The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship*. Ludlow: Moonrise Press, 2011.
- Michie, Helena. "Under Victorian Skins: The Bodies Beneath." In *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, edited by Herbert F. Tucker, 407-424. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.
- Moore, Lisa. "Something More Tender Still: Romantic Friendship in Early-Nineteenth-Century England." *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 3 (1992): 499-520.
- Reynolds, Nicole. "Cottage Industry: The Ladies of Llangollen and the Symbolic Capital of the Cottage Ornée." *Eighteenth Century: Theory & Interpretation (University of Pennsylvania Press)* 51, no. 1 (2010): 211-227.
- Rich, Adrienne Cecile. *Compulsory Heterosexuality And Lesbian Existence*. Denver Co.: Antelope Publications, 1982.
- Rizzo, Betty. *Companions Without Vows: Relationships Among Eighteenth-century British Women*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994.
- Rupp, Leila J. *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-sex Love In America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- . "Imagine My Surprise: Women's Relationships in Mid-Twentieth Century America." In *Hidden From History: Reclaiming The Gay And Lesbian Past*, edited by Martin Bauml Deuberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey Jr. 395-410. Ontario: New American Library, 1989.
- . *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love Between Women*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- Scott, Sarah. *A Description of Millennium Hall And the Country Adjacent: Together With the Characters of the Inhabitants, And Such Historical Anecdotes And*

Reflections, As May Excite In the Reader Proper Sentiments of Humanity, And Lead the Mind to the Love of Virtue. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.

Smith, Dorothy E. "Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology," in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual And Political Controversies*, edited by Sandra Harding, 21-33. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America." In *The Girls' History And Culture Reader: The Nineteenth Century*, edited by Miriam Forman-Brunell and Leslie Paris, 149-178. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011.

Thompson, F. M. L. *The Rise of Respectable Society: a Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830-1900.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Traub, Valerie. "The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography." In *The Lesbian Premodern*, edited by Noreen Giffney, Diane Watt, and Michelle M. Sauer, 21-35. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Vicinus, Martha. "Lesbian Ghosts." In *The Lesbian Premodern*, edited by Noreen Giffney, Diane Watt, and Michelle M. Sauer, 193-203. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.