

*'Building Castles in the Air': Anne Lister
and Associational Life*

Cassandra Ulph

In recent years the explosion of interest in Anne Lister, accelerated in no small measure by Sally Wainwright's television series *Gentleman Jack* (2019), has seen her become one of the most famous daughters of the Yorkshire cloth town of Halifax. When I first began researching Lister and her association with the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society in 2012, her story was known by local historians and many scholars of queer literature and history, women's writing and intellectual history, but in the intervening ten years popular interest in her life has grown exponentially and internationally. The impact of Wainwright's re-telling of Lister's story, which builds on years of research by Jill Liddington, Helena Whitbread and others, can be seen in Halifax in material and economic terms, with a boom in 'Lister Tourism' to Shibden Hall. In September 2021, a public sculpture in her memory, 'Contemplation' by Diane Lawrenson, was unveiled in the town's Grade I listed Piece Hall, where it is now on permanent display.

Lister's new cultural prominence seems in keeping with the recent history of the town, and in particular alongside the renovation of the eighteenth-century Piece Hall, which reopened in 2017 following a multi-million-pound renovation and conservation project. As the only remaining Georgian cloth hall (a purpose-built marketplace for the trade of 'pieces' of cloth) in Britain, the Piece Hall is central to Halifax's secular history as a key point on the transpennine route of the cloth trade, and to its development as a civic centre. Lister played a significant role in the economic and civic development of Halifax during her own lifetime, through her management of the Shibden Hall estate and the development of buildings in the town centre, as well as through political campaigning. This chapter connects what is known of Lister's economic and political participation in Halifax life to her intellectual and social identity, by exploring her involvement in the associational life of the town and, in

particular, the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society, of which she was famously the first female member.

Under Existing Rules: Women in the Lit. and Phil.

Lister's membership of the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society (or the Lit. and Phil.) is relatively well known, but her active participation has tended to be assumed rather than comprehensively proved. The society was inaugurated in 1830 and, within a year, had elected Lister as an ordinary member. The society's Centenary Handbook in 1930 relates its history, and records simply that 'at the first Annual Meeting . . . it being the opinion of the council that Ladies were eligible as members Miss Anne Lister, of Shibden Hall, was duly elected'.¹ Similarly, the original minutes of that meeting, held in the Calderdale Archive in Halifax, emphasised that, as far as the committee were concerned, no positive change to the society's constitution needed to be made. In some senses, the resolution passed on 3 October 1831, 'that it is the Opinion of the Meeting under the existing Rules Ladies are eligible as Members', could hardly be called a resolution at all.² This clarification of the rules – one which was clearly deemed necessary – was prompted by the more concerted voice of the ordinary members at the monthly general meeting in September, at which 'it was Resolved, that it is the Opinion of the present meeting that the Attendance of Ladies at the monthly meetings is very desirable and that the same be submitted for consideration and adoption at the ensuing annual meeting'.³ Lister was duly elected on 7 October 1831.

Despite the apparent enthusiasm for female members at the monthly meeting, where their attendance was deemed not merely permissible but 'desirable', as far as can be established through the society's own records, Lister remained the only one elected in her lifetime (she died in 1840), and the extent of her active engagement with the society is unclear. Helena Whitbread states that Lister 'became the first woman to be elected to the Committee of the Halifax Branch of the Literary and Philosophical Society because of her academic contributions to that society', but there is no evidence that Lister was ever more than an ordinary member, and evidence of her attendance at meetings is elusive.⁴ During her nine years of membership, Lister was often travelling, abroad and in the UK, so her regular attendance was unlikely.⁵ What is known is that she contributed significantly to the building of a new museum, a total of £150 in the space of little more than a year. When a subscription for the museum was raised,

Lister's name was first on the list.⁶ In Lister's correspondence, the Lit. and Phil. is most frequently mentioned where a financial transaction, such as the payment of membership fees or a contribution to the museum fund, takes place; her involvement (or not) in the associational activities of the society is less well documented.

The Halifax Lit. and Phil.'s establishment, and Lister's election to it, took place at a relatively late stage of the 'Lit. and Phil.' movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Literary and philosophical societies in this period have been seen, generally speaking, to operate within a masculine model of civic sociability. Davidoff and Hall, for example, observe that 'this public world was consistently organized in gendered ways and had little space for women'.⁷ Although Peter Clark (in his study of British clubs and societies before 1800) identifies an increase in female participation in associational life in the late eighteenth century, he notes that this is limited to particular areas: 'during George III's reign, women began to make more of an impact particularly with the appearance of new subscription associations and philanthropic societies, but the great majority of societies remained exclusively male'.⁸ There is some evidence to suggest that this exclusion was, in the case of the literary and philosophical societies, by default rather than by design. Just as Halifax Lit. and Phil. would later confirm that women were allowed as members 'under existing rules', the Newcastle Lit. and Phil. claimed that it had *theoretically* allowed female members since its inception in 1793, but it wasn't until 1798 that the question of female participation was seriously considered, when a query from John Clennell about female membership prompted the proposal of a category of 'reading members'.⁹ Reading members would be allowed to attend lectures, but not the monthly meetings that ordinary members attended. This new category would allow for the 'delicacy' of female members; by implication, the kind of membership that had previously been available to women in theory would have been considered 'indelicate' and therefore unlikely to be adopted in practice.

Similarly, women seem to have been admitted to public lectures of the Manchester Lit. and Phil., but not to its meetings. A letter by a female correspondent to the *Leeds Mercury* in 1819 claims that 'at the celebrated societies of Liverpool and Manchester, ladies are admitted', and proposes the same measure be adopted at the Leeds Phil. and Lit. Another correspondent, a week later, 'seconds her motion' by citing the example of Birmingham Philosophical Society, 'in which is to be seen every Monday night, (in the Winter season,) an assemblage of the most respected *Ladies*

of that town and neighbourhood. And why not?'¹⁰ It seemed, then, that by this point women were being admitted to several major societies, but (Birmingham apparently excepted) this was usually a kind of auxiliary membership that did not penetrate the concentric inner circles of ordinary and committee membership. The pattern that emerges here is one of distinction between theory and practice: while the rules did not theoretically exclude women, the practices of such societies remained discursively gendered.

The Late 'Lit. and Phil.' Movement and Shifting Modes of Participation

The practices of the Halifax Lit. and Phil. are best understood as consciously modelled on antecedent societies, as demonstrated by the records of committee meetings from 1830 and 1831. These reveal the extent of borrowing from established nearby societies – those of Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle and York, in particular – in terms of both organisational and physical structure. For example, the Halifax membership certificate was copied from the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the museum's cabinet maker (and the plans to which he worked) borrowed from the Yorkshire Philosophical Society, and envoys were dispatched to all corners of the north: 'Mr Smith and Mr Leyland having undertaken to examine the Museums at Manchester and Liverpool, and Mr E Alexander those at York and Scarborough'.¹¹ The committee's intention was to replicate the success of neighbouring societies by abiding by an established set of practices. It seems reasonable, then, that in the matter of female participation, Halifax would take its cues from these older, more established societies. However, a gradual shift in focus of literary and philosophical societies towards civic improvement meant that attendance at monthly meetings and public lectures did not necessarily remain the dominant modes of participation.

The Halifax Lit. and Phil. was established, first and foremost, with a view to tangible civic improvement, which would be expressed in the concrete form of a museum. As David Livingstone has argued, 'the museum voiced the values of its curators and disclosed their mental geographies'.¹² The immediacy with which the Halifax society set about establishing an architectural manifestation of those values anticipates the Victorian preoccupation with the spatial and material nature of public culture that Livingstone identifies: 'While its architecture was intervening in the cultural struggles of late Victorian society, the museum as an

institution did much to promote what has been called an 'object-based' approach to knowing in the decades around 1900.¹³ The material manifestation of knowledge, and the need to house that knowledge, is thus one of the driving principles behind the establishment not only of the museum, but of the society itself. Furthermore, the gendering of scientific space required the founders to consider, in its admission practices, the mediation of such supposedly 'masculine' knowledge for an unregulated (possibly female) audience, in accordance with the paternalistic values the museum embodied. The minutes of the inaugural meeting of the Halifax Lit. and Phil., on 30 August 1830, launch immediately into the details of trusteeship of the proposed institution, and its projected status in the Halifax community. The meeting resolved as follows:

[W]ith a view to extend more generally the great Advantages and Information to be derived from the Establishment of the Museum, Individuals, not being Members of the Society, be allowed to become Subscribers to the Museum, on payment of the annual sum of One Pound, and that in Consideration of such payment they, together with the Members of their Families actually resident with them, shall have the Privilege of visiting the museum at all times during the Hours of Attendance to be fixed by the Society's Rules, and also of introducing personally or by Ticket, Friends and Strangers resident upwards of Five Miles from Halifax, but such subscribers are not to have any Control whatever over or interest in the Museum, nor to be considered in any way Members of the Society.¹⁴

This resolution outlines the complex relationship between the society and the museum, which were intricately connected whilst remaining separable. The society was to curate the museum, the trustees of which would 'consist of Depositors of Collections to the actual value of fifty pounds and upwards, and of Contributors in Money or Specimens to the Amount of Twenty pounds'.¹⁵ Trustees, then, did not necessarily have to be members, and it was possible to subscribe to the museum, thus receiving the tickets, without joining the society. As Catherine Euler notes, being a subscriber to the museum meant Lister had tickets such as these in her gift, which she could bestow on her servants. Euler points out that 'these gifts, which were not gifts, were a display of gentry paternalism which was not really paternalism. It reflected self-interest more than philanthropy.'¹⁶ Yet, as Davidoff and Hall have argued, 'philanthropy came to occupy the status of a profession for some women', thus Lister's philanthropy could also be means of cementing her social status along appropriately feminine lines.¹⁷

Regardless, philanthropy and self-interest in this case were highly compatible. In contrast to the Machiavellian function of the museum as symbolic of princely power, Tony Bennett has argued that 'nineteenth-century reformers . . . typically sought to enlist high cultural practices for a diversity of ends: as an antidote to drunkenness; an alternative to riot; or an instrument for civilizing the morals and manners of the population'.¹⁸ Established before the governmentalisation of cultural spaces that gathered pace in the late Victorian period, the Halifax Museum's system of ticketed access would seem to fulfil all these functions, allowing Lister to reinforce her construction of dynastic status, whilst offering a practical mechanism for the regulation of the behaviour of her dependants.

The complex relationship between the society, the museum and its subscribers underscores the committee's assumption that visitors to the museum would extend to the friends, neighbours and families of their membership, and subscription would reach beyond the society's membership, the core of which was Halifax's wealthy elite. The paternalist dissemination of knowledge embodied in this model of access, filtered through traditional family networks or patronage relationships, does not necessarily extend to inclusion or proprietorship. It is this same paternalism that Euler identifies in Lister's bestowal of tickets on her servants. From its inception in 1831, then, the society reinforced the existing hierarchy of Halifax's wealthy and established industrialist families. Arnold Thackray has noted an important generational shift in his study of the Manchester Lit. and Phil., one of the several major societies either side of the Pennines from which the Halifax one borrowed:

By the 1830s and 1840s the descendants of Manchester manufacturers were active in the consolidation of science within the central value system of English life and, in response to the challenges they now faced from a new urban lower class, in finding deeper conservative meanings in the very structure of natural knowledge.¹⁹

Just as Thackray here identifies the movement of the descendants of manufacturers into a bourgeois respectability, so the founders of the Halifax society were overwhelmingly drawn from wealthy and powerful families such as the Waterhouses and Rawsons, who had made their money, a generation back, in woollen and worsted manufacturing.²⁰ Many of those listed as 'founders' in the society's 1930 centenary handbook also appear as part of a committee formed for the support of those affected by the Luddite uprisings of 1811–16 (which had particularly targeted wealthy industrialists). The membership of this committee is detailed in a notice in the *Leeds Intelligencer*, which records:

a numerous and highly respectable Public Meeting of Inhabitants of the Town and Parish of Halifax, called by the Constables of Halifax, to take into Consideration the Services of those Gentleman who so meritoriously exerted themselves during the late Disturbances in the West Riding of the County of York, and held on Wednesday, the 12th of May, 1813, at the White Lion Inn.²¹

These 'Gentlemen' included several founder members including the society's first two presidents, Christopher Rawson (banker, and later chairman of Halifax and Huddersfield Union Banking Co., 1836–43) and John Waterhouse Jr, son of woollen merchant John Waterhouse Sr.²² The exertions in question had taken the form of financial assistance to William Cartwright, whose factory had been one of the targets of the uprising, and of keeping the 'public peace'. The interests of the cloth trade that had built Halifax's merchant elite were protected and the social status quo maintained.

That such prominent local 'Gentlemen' were also some of the key proponents in establishing the society at Halifax suggests a change in the nature of the Literary and Philosophical Society as an institution by 1830. Underlining the role that the Manchester Lit. and Phil. had formerly played in 'the social legitimization of marginal men', Thackray argues that 'when political power finally arrived it was members of the "Lit. & Phil." who, as the local elite, naturally exercised it'.²³ The Halifax Lit. and Phil. was established at precisely this crucial political moment; following the death of George IV in June 1830, electoral reform began to look like a serious prospect, with the first Reform Bill being brought before the House of Commons in March 1831 and its final iteration being passed by the House of Lords in June 1832. It is this political moment to which Thackray refers, when the members of the Lit. and Phil. constituted the 'social elite', and it is in this context that the Halifax society was inaugurated. The founding membership of the society itself represented the next generation of literary and philosophical societies in a literal sense. Edward Nelson Alexander was probably a descendent of William Alexander MD, Halifax, who is listed as an honorary member at Manchester in 1798 and early subscriber to the Halifax Circulating Library in 1768; the Rev. William Turner, minister of Northgate End Unitarian Chapel, Halifax, was the son of another William Turner, an honorary member of Manchester Lit. and Phil. and founder of the Newcastle Lit. and Phil.²⁴ Many of those early members had also been members of other, smaller societies such as the Halifax Convivial Society (formerly the Conversational Society), at which Lit. and Phil. founder member John

Stott, engraver, gave at least two lectures; the society also had strong links with the Mechanics' Institute (founded in 1825), of which John Waterhouse Jr. was chair, and of which the Rev. William Turner would become president.²⁵ Furthermore, the prominent Halifax families that established the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society echoed the names that appeared on the first committee of the Halifax Circulating Library in 1768: Alexanders, Waterhouses, Rawsons and Briggses dominated, and a Miss Lister (possibly Lister's aunt Anne) is also amongst the names in the first subscription book.²⁶ All this positioned Halifax Lit. and Phil. as a natural inheritor of the modes and mores of these earlier societies, and the result of an evolution those societies had already undergone.

'This my Native Town': Anne Lister's Investment in Halifax

In some ways, a shift in core membership of the literary and philosophical societies from marginality to centrality, as posited by Thackray, might preclude Anne Lister's membership of such a society. Her 'masculinity' had long been the subject of Halifax gossip, and by 1831 she was living in what she considered a 'married' state with her partner, neighbouring heiress Ann Walker. Lister's homosexuality continues to attract more popular and academic attention than any other aspect of her life, and her relationship with Walker is repeatedly cited as an important early example of same-sex marriage, as other chapters in this volume explore in more detail. In the context of her role in Halifax civic life, what is crucial is that Lister was doubly marginalised, through her sex and her sexuality, and that discourses of gender and sexuality necessarily inflected those of politics, power and social status. While the first literary and philosophical societies may have offered a route to respectability for 'marginal *men*', the Halifax Lit. and Phil. belonged to the later generation of more conservative institutions that Thackray describes, so should have been unlikely to welcome this unconventional woman as a member; the fact that they did admit her is therefore highly significant.

There is an understandable impulse to equate Lister's unconventional personal life with unconventional politics, but this would be an oversimplification. As a local landowner from an established family, Lister was part of the conservative, Anglican elite of Halifax. Euler observes that Lister was 'not "ahead of her time" in any obvious way', calling her a 'snobbish but untitled member of the lesser gentry, and an enthusiastic Tory'.²⁷ Lister had many tenants, and under the reformed system anyone renting a property for £50 per year or more was eligible to vote in local elections;

Jill Liddington describes how in one case Lister increased a tenant's rent to £50 temporarily during the election year of 1833, but then made them a 'gift' equal to the increase (on the understanding, of course, that they voted 'blue').²⁸ As outlined by Euler and Liddington, Lister's election-rigging activities ranged from bribery to intimidation, and she was not above threatening to turn tenants off her property should they support the Whig cause. Lister's political ambition is manifest in her diary as early in 1823 – prior to inheriting Shibden – following a discussion with the Waterhouses of the prospect of a new MP for Halifax. She imagined writing to the Chancellor of the Exchequer for advice on who this should be, and then 'began building castles about the result of my success, the notoriety it would gain me. An introduction to court. Perhaps a Barony, etc.' Although Lister immediately dismisses her fantasy as the result of 'too much negus', observing 'how slight the partition between sanity & not', this episode exemplifies her desire for an aristocratic model of success, aptly figured as 'building castles', that was remote for many men of her class, and nigh-impossible for a woman.²⁹

Aware of the social reality, nevertheless Lister did not let her gender limit her ambition. As Euler outlines, political influence was something Lister actively courted:

Anne Lister knew exactly where the blue political power in the borough lay: with those old gentry families with whom she had been on visiting terms since her youth. She made a point of visiting the men who would consistently play their part for the next decade: James Edward Norris, Christopher Rawson and John Waterhouse.³⁰

Lister was part of a powerful network by birth and rank, and her willingness (and ability) to champion the Tory cause cemented her position within that group of 'old gentry families', who sought her support in the political campaigns of the 1830s. The same group who sought to determine the political future of Halifax were arguably more successful in directing its civic development: as noted above, Christopher Rawson and John Waterhouse were the first two presidents of the Literary and Philosophical Society, and between them held the office for thirty-three years.³¹

The evidence that remains of Lister's involvement in the Literary and Philosophical Society is mostly limited to her financial contributions. Although by the time of the society's inception Lister's financial circumstances were materially improved, her investment of £150 in the building of the museum in 1833–4 is significant at a time when she was often required to draw on her partner, Ann Walker, for money to make

improvements to her estate.³² As Lister's editors have frequently observed, her attention to financial details is minute and shrewd; her accounts and journals take sedulous note of her income and outgoings, and she is reluctant to involve herself in unnecessary expense. Indeed, such prudence was necessary; Liddington notes that by 1832, 'her aristocratic ambitions already outstripped her modest estate income'.³³ However, when Lister did invest, there was a pattern to that investment. Euler's analysis of the Shibden Hall records demonstrates that Lister was often driven by dynastic motives over and above the financial, noting, for example, that 'when she planted trees on the estate, she planted oaks and hollies in their thousands, with less regard to profit and loss than in almost any other area of activity'.³⁴ Short of 'building castles', long-term plantation was an 'improvement' that smacked more of dynastic pride than Lister's usual shrewd financial calculations. Not content with a metaphorical castle, she ultimately erected a huge property in the centre of Halifax, the Northgate Inn, and her address at the ground-breaking ceremony in 1835 conveys characteristic ambition: 'I am very anxious that this . . . should be an accommodation to the public at large, but more especially to this my native town in whose prosperity I ever have felt, and ever shall feel, deeply interested.'³⁵ Lister's speech here is intended to cement her status as part of the civic elite, constructing an 'accommodation' not only for the people of Halifax, but for the increasing traffic of the rapidly industrialising town; it was also a financial speculation, giving her a landlord's interest in the centre of town. Her subscription to the *Lit. and Phil.*'s new museum represents a similar speculation, reinforcing the civic status of the ancient family of the Listers alongside the rich industrialists who were expanding the town. Lister Lane, in the centre of modern-day Halifax, seems testament to her success in this regard. Whether her personal standing in the *Lit. and Phil.* itself reflected her investment is less certain.

Lister's decision to focus her investments locally is prefigured in 1821, in an episode that also casts light on her associational activity. Lister was an honorary member of the York Female Friendly Society, with which she had been associated through the family of her lover, Mariana Belcombe. According to Jane Rendall, Mariana was active on the committee until around 1815. Lister's name appears on two lists of Honorary Members of the York Female Friendly Society, one begun in 1796 but updated later, and another begun in 1811. In both cases Mariana Belcombe's name appears a few entries above Lister's. Also present are the names of Ann and Charlotte Norcliffe, mother and sister respectively of another of Lister's lovers, Isabella.³⁶ In 1821, however, Lister gave up her membership:

Letter . . . from York about the Friendly Society there, of which I have been an honorary member (12s. a year) ever since 1810 or 1811 but, during my last stay at York, I asked Miss Marsh to withdraw my name from their books. Whatever I can give in charity, my uncle & aunt have long said should be given here [i.e. in Halifax], to which Miss Marsh readily agreed.³⁷

Lister remained in contact with the Belcombes and Norcliffes throughout her life, despite Mariana's marriage to Charles Lawton in 1816 – in fact their affair continued³⁸ – so her withdrawal from the York society in 1821 seems to have been motivated by financial expediency rather than estrangement from that circle.

Lister's membership of the York Friendly Society is evidence of just one institution with which she had links before the Lit. and Phil., and one of several examples of how selectively she participated in associational activity. Within a week of withdrawing from this society in York, Lister declined an invitation to another: she records being asked by Mr Edward Priestley,

if I would be a subscriber to a book society they wished to establish. About 12 subscribers at one guinea per annum each, the books to be disposed of every year to the highest bidder of the subscribers, but if none wished to purchase, the recommender of the work should take it at half-price. I said should be sorry their plan fell through for want of one subscriber but that such a thing was quite out of my way who went so often to the Halifax library & had there as much reading as I had time for. The thing originated with the young ladies at Crownest, tho Mr Edward Priestly [*sic*] had long ago thought of it, it was so long before they could get popular new works from the Halifax library, but I have no difficulty of this sort.³⁹

The Halifax library mentioned here is almost certainly the above-mentioned Halifax Circulating Library founded in 1768 which, despite its name, was in fact a subscription library.⁴⁰ While Priestley complained of the long wait for 'popular new works', Lister's claim that she had 'no difficulty of this sort' is explained by a private arrangement with the librarian, detailed in her diary a year earlier: 'Gave the librarian five shillings as I said, last September, I would do every half-year on condition of his managing to let me have as many books at a time as I wanted. Not, however, that I think of exceeding the regulated allowance by more than two.'⁴¹ Lister's status as a member of the Shibden Hall family, as much as her judicious application of five shillings, probably explains her ability to circumvent the library's rules in a way that the Priestleys and the Walker family at Crow Nest – wealthier than but socially inferior to the Listers – would not have been able to do.⁴² It also demonstrates Lister's rather

individualistic approach to the mutual basis of the subscription library, as she has no qualms about exceeding the 'regulated allowance' for members, if only by two books.⁴³ What this reveals is Lister's sense of her own exceptionality within the Halifax community, in both social and intellectual status.

Castles in the Air: Imagining Female Participation

The Halifax Circulating Library was one of several avenues of self-improvement open to residents (including women) before the inauguration of the Lit. and Phil., and not the only one in which Lister participated. According to her diary, for example, Lister attended lectures in the Halifax area by prominent natural philosophers: in August 1817, she records attending at least two lectures by 'Dalton', presumably John Dalton of the Manchester Lit. and Phil.; in March 1819 she attends a lecture by the renowned geologist Thomas Webster at the Assembly Rooms; and in 1823 she refers to attending a further lecture by a 'Mr W', possibly also Webster. She remarks in particular her surprise on finding 'his oratory . . . disfigured by frequent instances of bad grammar': 'I have read Mr Webster's book on chemical & natural philosophy & not remembering or observing in it any heinous sins against grammar, I did not expect that his oral language would be so thickly strewn with the misuse of the person of his verbs.'⁴⁴

Lister's attendance at these lectures is part of a wider round of entertainments in which she is a regular participant. In late 1819 and early 1820, she records attending Oratoria in Southowram, an officer's ball in York and a display of Madame Tussaud's waxworks in Halifax; in 1824 she attends an exhibition of two 'Esquimaux Indians' and a balloon launch.⁴⁵ For Lister, Webster's lectures in particular held the promise of social and possibly even sexual contact with other women. Clara Tuite has observed of Lister's diaries, 'how different spaces of sociability, such as the circles of Halifax society, work to tolerate and enable different degrees of gender and sexual deviance'.⁴⁶ Indeed, Lister exploited those tolerant spaces in order to pursue her flirtations. She relates telling her aunt 'of my fancy for Miss Browne. Told her I had gone to the lectures for no other purpose than to see her.'⁴⁷ Anne Lister senior seems to have been aware of her niece's interest in women (although she may have refrained from enquiring too closely into the details), and Lister's journal records her occasionally 'testing' her aunt's knowledge, so this statement is probably a deliberate exaggeration. After all, Lister's claim that she had 'no other purpose' in

attending Webster's lectures sounds disingenuous given that she has in fact read his work on natural chemistry. Neither her interest in chemistry, nor her romantic interest in Miss Browne, conforms to contemporary ideals of genteel femininity, which she seems to take pleasure in confounding.

Lister's use of intellectual sociability as a means of meeting or pursuing potential sexual partners is well established. As Stephen Colclough observes, Lister used the 'shared act of reading, the shared intimacy of the page' to enact 'the transition from "friendship" to "romance"'. She gave gifts of particular texts as a coded sexual overture, and used shared literary tastes as a barometer of sexual affinity; in Miss Browne's case, Lister interpreted her taste for Byron as evidence of her attraction.⁴⁸ Similarly, I would argue, she reinforced homosexual and homosocial relationships with more structured networks and social encounters such as her membership, along with Mariana, of the York Female Friendly Society, or her attendance of lectures with Miss Browne and later Miss Pickford, who Lister describes, rather disparagingly, as a '*bas bleu*'.⁴⁹ Lister's attitude to intellectual community with her female networks was rather contradictory, however. Of Miss Pickford, she remarks that 'she is better informed than some ladies & a godsend of a companion in my present scarcity, but I am not an admirer of learned ladies. They are not the sweet, interesting creatures I should love.'⁵⁰ On the one hand, she suggests that Miss Pickford's company is a poor substitute for the preferred 'sweet, interesting creature' who is by implication 'not learned'. On the other, she expresses her frustration with one of her lovers, Isabella Norcliffe, for retarding her 'improvement': 'I am never much good at study when she is with me, and I am wary of this long stoppage I have had to all improvement.' While Lister had entertained hopes that Isabella might prove the long-term companion she wanted, she gradually became convinced of both her intellectual and social inadequacy to the task, concluding that 'she [would] by no means relish the sort of elegant society I covet to acquire'.⁵¹ Lister's idea of 'improvement' was doubly intellectual and material, particularly prior to inheriting the Shibden Hall estate: 'I must . . . study only to improve myself in the hope of the possibility of making something by writing.'⁵² The 'improvement' Lister seeks, to enable her to 'make something', prefigures the political 'castles' she builds. Her determination to 'make something' is realised in her development of the Northgate Inn and her significant investment in the Halifax Museum.

Lister's acceptance in Halifax society depended, in many ways, on her exceptionality. There was no public language with which to talk about lesbian sexuality; in a landed culture dominated by primogeniture, female

landowners were the exception rather than the rule. Her admission to the Literary and Philosophical Society, according to the rules, was not an exception, yet in practice this did not open the floodgates to female membership, and Lister herself seems to have attended rarely. Women, particularly the wives and daughters of members, participated in other ways, particularly through the disseminated access to the museum through families, and contributions made to the collections.⁵³ The museum was an interface between the scientific community and the public, and women's bodily presence as a constituent part of that audience was therefore mediated in a variety of ways. As David Livingstone notes, 'for all the rhetorical claims to the disembodied character of scientific knowing, there was a long-standing "understanding" that female corporeality rendered women unsuitable for intellectual pursuits in general and for science in particular. Scientific space, by and large, was masculine space.'⁵⁴

Livingstone's observations in relation to spaces of science, from the laboratory to the museum, are applicable by extension to the Literary and Philosophical Society as an institution, which had bodily presence of its ordinary members at the heart of its associational model. (Corresponding members, of course, complicated, but were not an adequate substitute for, this physical presence.) Indeed, Lister could have elided some of this troubling corporeality by becoming a subscriber to the museum without joining the society, and for less money. However, the Halifax Lit. and Phil. presented another opportunity to make her mark on the local community, just as she hoped to do in politics and in 'making something'. In a partially coded diary entry of 27 February 1831, excerpted (and deciphered) by Liddington, she writes:

Thinking as I dressed of the Literary & philosophical society just established at Halifax. I have thought of it repeatedly since hearing of it – *building castles in the air about the part I myself may take in furthering it – about its becoming celebrated* – etc etc. Think of rules that might be for the good of the Society – ladies should be admitted as fellows . . . To prevent overflow of useless members let everyone be elected on the doing some benefit to the society by mind or money.⁵⁵

Once more, we find Lister building 'castles', with her thoughts turning to the society being 'celebrated', just as she had fantasised in 1823 about political 'notoriety'. Again, Lister has identified a pre-existing structure to which she might contribute, establishing her local importance 'through mind or money', but with the emphasis on the money. It is revealing, I think, that 'the 'castles in the air' she builds 'about the part I myself may take' are recorded in code, concealed from prying eyes or (she may have

supposed) her future editors. In concealing her ambition of making a public contribution to civic life, using a cipher more frequently employed to record her emotional and sexual encounters with other women, Lister tacitly discloses the potential impropriety of that ambition as equivalent to sexual transgression. The diary entry of 27 February 1831 as quoted by Liddington is incomplete, however. The complete entry in the original diary includes the following passage, and reveals Lister's concern with the more prosaic problems that the female body, in the case of 'ladies admitted as fellows', would present in a civic space:

It strikes me it would be well in such a case to have a sort of sumptuary law so that there could be no tendency to any inconvenience about dress, & what more incommodious than a large bonnet over which nobody can see & which too often prevents the unfortunate wearer from either seeing or hearing clearly – let there be a costume – black, with a small brimmed hat that could incommode nobody.⁵⁶

Lister recapitulates the problem of conspicuousness for women participating in public life, as a matter both originating in, and solvable through, sartorial choices. The potential of fashion, such as that for 'large bonnets', to 'incommode' both its wearer and other audience members can be overcome by 'costume', which can similarly prevent 'inconvenience about dress'. The 'inconvenience' Lister identifies might be one of cost, but it seems likely that she has in mind the problem of knowing what to wear as much as being able to afford it. On 2 September 1817 she recorded that 'I have entered upon my plan of always wearing black,' and Whitbread notes her 'secretive attitude towards discussing or writing about her clothes. She obviously felt reticent about her dress and appearance and was constantly the subject of criticism for her shabby and unfashionable wardrobe.'⁵⁷ In imagining a place for women in public institutions, she also imagines a place in which her own singular appearance is rendered unremarkable, or even becomes the sartorial model for female intellectualism.

In many ways, Anne Lister's motivations in joining the Literary and Philosophical Society – civic improvement, the reputation of the town and of her family, and political consolidation – were the same reasons motivating its founders. Lister's financial contribution suggests a strong reason for them to welcome her as a member, but evidence that she regularly attended the associational forum that was the monthly meetings is not forthcoming in the minutes. In fact, Liddington suggests that Lister, despite being a member of the society, may have been excluded from events, such as members' dinners, because of her sex.⁵⁸ However, it was Lister's desire to construct an edifice, 'to build something', that, at least

imaginatively, united her with the men of the Halifax Lit. and Phil. In this, both were partially successful. Although its collections were absorbed into the new Bankfield Museum in 1897, the society's lecture theatre and museum in Harrison Road, Halifax, still stands, albeit in private hands.⁵⁹ The Northgate Hotel, the foundations of which Lister laid in 1835, became the Theatre De Luxe, which finally closed in 1938 and was demolished after the Second World War to make way for a shopping plaza, but her mark remains on the town through the buildings and streets that bear her name. Ultimately, though, while Lister harnessed the conventional channels of wealth and landed status to 'make something', it is her unconventional life, and the remarkable writing she left behind, that have brought her the notoriety she dreamt of, and proved her greatest legacy to her native town.

Notes

- 1 *Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society, 1830–1930: Centenary Handbook* (Halifax: Stott Brothers, Lister Lane, 1930), p. 19.
- 2 *Council Minute Book of the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society, 1831–39*, West Yorkshire Archive Service, Calderdale, MISC 49/7, 3 October 1831.
- 3 *Transactions of the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society, 1831–39*, West Yorkshire Archive Service, Calderdale, mm. MISC 49/14, 2 September 1831.
- 4 H. Whitbread (ed.), *I Know My Own Heart: the Diaries of Anne Lister, 1791–1840* (London: Virago, 1988), p. xxvii. Unless otherwise indicated, references to Lister's diary are taken from this edition. The Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society (like others in Britain) was an autonomous institution, rather than a "branch" of any national association (albeit with links to other similar institutions through kinship, shared membership and friendly correspondence).
- 5 For a rough guide to Lister's movements during this period, see 'Chronology', in M. Green (ed.), *Miss Lister of Shibden Hall: Selected Letters, 1600–1840* (Lewes: Book Guild, 1992), pp. 7–13.
- 6 *Council Minute Book*, 11 March 1833.
- 7 L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p. 416.
- 8 P. Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580–1800: the Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 130–1.
- 9 According to Jon Mee and Jennifer Wilkes, 'Ladies ... were allowed tickets for the lectures at half price, although they were not allowed to be full members of the parent society. Although the committee responded to an enquiry from John Clennell by claiming "ladies are & always have been admissible as members by the rules of the Society", in 1799 it had introduced the idea of "reading members" as a "mode [of membership] less revolting to

- their delicacy”; Mee and Wilkes, ‘Transpennine Enlightenment: the Literary and Philosophical Societies and Knowledge Networks in the North, 1781–1830’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38.4 (2015), 599–612, 606. As Mee notes, ‘Clennell . . . did encourage women members in his various associational ventures in Hackney early in the nineteenth century’; J. Mee, ‘Introduction’, *Networks of Improvement: Literature, Bodies and Machines in the Industrial Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming), pp. 475–82, p. 477.
- 10 *Leeds Mercury*, 20 and 27 February 1819. Thanks to Jon Mee and Jenny Wilkes for information about female membership (or lack thereof) at Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society and Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society.
 - 11 *Council Minute Book*, 6 December and 30 August 1830.
 - 12 D. Livingstone, *Putting Science in Its Place: Geographies of Scientific Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 33, 57.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
 - 14 *Council Minute Book*, 30 August 1830.
 - 15 *Council Minute Book*, p. 2.
 - 16 C. Euler, ‘Moving between Worlds: Gender, Class, Politics, Sexuality and Women’s Networks in the Diaries of Anne Lister of Shibden Hall, Halifax, Yorkshire, 1830 to 1840’, unpublished PhD thesis, thesis, University of York (1995), p. 210.
 - 17 Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p. 431.
 - 18 T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 22.
 - 19 A. Thackray, ‘Natural Knowledge in Cultural Context: the Manchester Mode’, *American Historical Review* 79.3 (1974), 678–9.
 - 20 The composition of the list of ‘founders’ makes interesting reading, particularly for the occupations of its members. Of the fifty-five ‘founders’ listed, six were bankers (mostly with links to cloth-merchant families such as the Rawsons), eight were legal professionals (i.e. solicitors, barristers or attorneys), eight were doctors and nine were woollen and/or worsted manufacturers or merchants. There were also three clergymen (from the Anglican, Unitarian and Methodist churches), a schoolmaster, a drawing master and a handful of artisans or small tradesmen, including the bookseller Roberts Leyland. Thus, the demographic of the Halifax Lit. and Phil. at its inception was largely, if not exclusively, the wealthy and socially influential. *Centenary Handbook*, pp. 6–15. The Waterhouses were particularly prominent in Halifax and are listed amongst the ‘Testamentary Burials’ detailed in the Rev. J. Watson’s *Biographia Halifaxiensis*, in which the family merits numerous entries (pp. 174–5 and *passim*).
 - 21 *Leeds Intelligencer*, 24 May 1813.
 - 22 Other members of the committee featuring on the society’s list of ‘founders’ included: George Pollard JP, of John Pollard and Co. wool merchants, lieutenant-colonel of the 2nd West York Yeoman Cavalry and chairman of the Halifax Commercial Banking Co., 1859–66; William Henry Rawson,

- chairman of Halifax and Huddersfield Union Banking Co., 1856–64; and Christopher Saltmarshe of the firm of Rawdon and Saltmarshe, stuff and woollen cloth merchants. *Centenary Handbook*, pp. 6–15.
- 23 Thackray, 'Natural Knowledge', pp. 678, 680.
- 24 *Memoirs of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society*, vol. v (1798). Thanks to Jon Mee for this reference. William Turner of Halifax (1788–1853) was the son of William Turner (1761–1859), the minister of Hanover Square Unitarian Chapel in Newcastle and former student at Warrington Academy, and the grandson of yet another William Turner (1714–94), minister at Westgate Unitarian Chapel, Wakefield. The founding membership of the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society also included Methodist and Anglican clergymen, so appears to have been non-denominational in this sense.
- 25 See A. Porritt, '18th and 19th Century Clubs and Societies in Halifax', *Transactions of the Halifax Antiquarian Society* (1963–5), pp. 65–93.
- 26 E. P. Rouse, 'Old Halifax Circulating Library, 1768–1866', *Papers, Reports, &c., Read before the Halifax Antiquarian Society* (1911), p. 47.
- 27 Euler, 'Moving between Two Worlds', p. 393.
- 28 J. Liddington, *Female Fortune: Land, Gender and Authority. The Anne Lister Diaries and Other Writings, 1833–36* (London: Rivers Oram, 1998), p. 51.
- 29 Whitbread, *I Know My Own Heart*, 18 July 1823, p. 264.
- 30 Euler, 'Moving between Two Worlds', p. 245.
- 31 Rawson was president from 1830 to 1842, with Waterhouse succeeding him, remaining in post until 1863. *Centenary Handbook*, pp. 33–6.
- 32 See Liddington, *Female Fortune*, p. 135 and *passim*.
- 33 J. Liddington, *Presenting the Past: Anne Lister of Halifax, 1791–1840* (Halifax: Pennine Pens, 1994) p. 39.
- 34 Euler, 'Moving between Two Worlds', p. 173.
- 35 Lister, diary for 26 September 1835, cited in Liddington, *Female Fortune*, p. 191.
- 36 'Private Funds: Resolutions and Memoranda. Book completed at both ends. The Cash Book belonging to the Honorary Members of the York Female Friendly Society Instituted August 1st 1788', York City Library, MS Acc 50/24. I owe this information to Jane Rendall.
- 37 Whitbread, *I Know My Own Heart*, 19 January 1821, p. 143.
- 38 Diary entries relating to Lister's relationship with Mariana Lawton are collected in H. Whitbread, *No Priest but Love: the Journals of Anne Lister from 1824–1826* (Otley: Smith Settle, 1992).
- 39 Whitbread, *I Know My Own Heart*, 25 January 1821, pp. 143–4.
- 40 Like the Lit. and Phil. more than sixty years later, the founding of this library was influenced heavily by similar institutions in Liverpool and Manchester. See Rouse, 'Old Halifax Circulating Library', p. 47.
- 41 Lister, diary for 4 January 1820, cited in Liddington, *Female Fortune*, p. 113.
- 42 'The young ladies at Crownest' included Ann Walker, Lister's future partner.
- 43 Conversely, the library committee viewed such transgressions starkly, instituting a rule in 1786 that 'If any subscriber take out from the library any more

- books than are allowed by Rule 9, or shall take out any book without having it entered to his account, he shall forfeit for every book so taken the sum of 2s. 6d.' As of 1790, the librarian was liable to a fine of half a guinea should he be found to have delivered a book to any subscriber except at the regular hours. According to Rouse, the committee 'enforced their own rules vigorously'; 'Old Halifax Circulating Library', pp. 53–7. This penalty (10s. 6d.) was significantly more than the 5s. bribe Lister was offering for a comparable infraction, reinforcing the argument that she was exercising primarily social rather than financial influence over the librarian.
- 44 Whitbread, *I Know My Own Heart*, 18 and 27 August 1817, pp. 12–13; 27 March 1819, p. 84; 19 February 1823, p. 235.
 - 45 See *ibid.*, pp. 101–20, 337–40.
 - 46 C. Tuite, 'The Byronic Woman: Anne Lister's Style, Sociability and Sexuality', in G. Russell and C. Tuite (eds.), *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain, 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 206.
 - 47 Whitbread, *I Know My Own Heart*, 3 March 1819, p. 82.
 - 48 S. Colclough, *Consuming Texts: Readers and Reading Communities, 1695–1870* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 139.
 - 49 Whitbread, *I Know My Own Heart*, 30 November 1819, p. 106.
 - 50 *Ibid.*, 1 March 1823, p. 237.
 - 51 *Ibid.*, 17 September 1819, p. 99.
 - 52 *Ibid.*, 30 October 1819, p. 102.
 - 53 For instance, one set of minutes records 'the Thanks of the Society . . . to Miss Walkinson for Present of a Young Crocodile'; *Council Minute Book*, 25 October 1830.
 - 54 Livingstone, *Putting Science in Its Place*, p. 78.
 - 55 Liddington, *Female Fortune*, 27 February 1831, p. 45.
 - 56 27 February 1831, *Anne Lister Papers*, West Yorkshire Archive Service, Calderdale, SH:7/M/E/14 (my transcription).
 - 57 Whitbread, *I Know My Own Heart*, 2 September 1817, p. 14.
 - 58 See Liddington, *Female Fortune*, 11 May 1834, pp. 103–4.
 - 59 Harrison House (10 Harrison Road, Halifax) is a Grade II listed building with Historic England; www.historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1133909, accessed 15 March 2016. In 2017 it was acquired by Malik House Business Centres.