

## CHAPTER 6

### *Anne Lister's Politics*

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Anne Lister lived in tumultuous times. Born during the less sanguinary phase of the French Revolution, she grew up in an England riven by political dissent and embroiled in relentless war with France. When she was sixteen, Britain abolished the slave trade under the leadership of Yorkshire MP William Wilberforce. She came of age during the Regency and saw the accession of the controversial Prince of Wales, of the 'Sailor King' William and of the unlikely Victoria. She learned within a day about the infamous Peterloo Massacre on 16 August 1819, in not-so-distant Manchester. She saw Irish rebellion, annexation and mass immigration. Her mature years encompassed the removal of disabilities against Roman Catholics in 1829, the dramatic expansion of the franchise through the Great Reform Act of 1832 and the government-subsidised emancipation of enslaved Africans in 1833. She read her way through the literary transformations wrought by two generations of Romantic poets. She crossed the English Channel in one of the earliest steamships, rode a train from Manchester to Liverpool in the first year of its operation and explored innovations in agriculture, shipping and coal manufacture. She was in Europe, though not in Paris, when a new Revolution broke out in July 1830. By 1834 her Halifax had become a hotbed of Whig politics and soon thereafter of Chartist activity. And her life coincided with the emergence of an empire on which the sun proverbially never set.

How did Anne Lister respond to this national and global tumult while negotiating her own tumultuous love life, her complicated social relationships, her ambitious travels and her relentless pursuit of an improved estate? Which issues preoccupied her and which did she ignore? Did her views change over time? What did it mean to her to be English? In raising such questions, I also confront the partiality – in both senses – of my research. I rely gratefully for this project on the letters, diaries and diary excerpts that have already been transcribed. I draw too on the superb scholarship that already grapples with Lister's politics, most fully the work

of Jill Liddington and Catherine Euler. But I have not braved the facsimiles. And, of course, even textual resources as voluminous as Lister's diaries and letters cannot capture the conversations and actions that often provide the most reliable key to political practice. My opening litany is thus somewhat proleptic: Lister's perspectives on some or even most of the events I have outlined are unknown and may be unknowable.

In one crucial sense, of course, the phrase 'Anne Lister's politics' leaves little doubt: Lister was a lifelong Tory who campaigned for Tory members of Parliament and vocally supported Tory values, which emphasised the preservation of order and inherited traditions, the rights of country landowners, patriotic loyalty to the Protestant crown and adherence to the Anglican establishment. I had no trouble including Lister in a 2010 essay anchored by the term 'Tory Lesbians' or in arguing in 1998 that Lister's conservatism, like that of the 'Ladies of Llangollen', Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, may have been a compensatory assertion of class and caste conformity that Lister's gender, sexuality, her singleness and her singularity could not confer.

In this chapter, however, I want to complicate these claims not only by looking more broadly and more fully at Anne Lister's politics, but also by asking what the phrase 'Anne Lister's politics' might mean. Which concerns most motivated Lister? How did she position herself when the Tory party was itself riven into more liberal and conservative poles? Are there gaps or contradictions between her public and private professions? Do her exceptional life practices themselves constitute a 'politics'? And is it possible that Lister's conservatism was not so much compensatory as *constitutive*, parcel to her self-fashioning in ways that merit a deeper exploration than the ameliorative notion of 'compensation' affords?

I organise my exploration of these questions around three conceptions of 'politics': first, and most obviously, of politics as 'activities or policies associated with government', a definition I draw from the *Oxford English Dictionary*; second, as 'actions concerned with the acquisition or exercise of power, status, or authority' (also taken from the *OED*); and third, politics as a disturbance in the field of authorised bodies that inserts a new part or party of humanity, a concept I take from the philosopher Jacques Rancière. As I address Anne Lister's politics through these definitions, I will propose that her responses to national concerns (definition 1) underwrote her quest for status (definition 2), which in turn sustained a self-insertion into public life on innovative terms (definition 3). Methodologically, I take up this inquiry through a reading of the letters and diaries that focuses especially on words and phrases that Lister repeats across entries and for topics about

which she writes at length. I find particularly illuminating the occasions when she repeats, for the sake of her journal, what she has said or written to someone else, narrating herself back to herself in a form that resembles free indirect discourse. Occasions when the letters and diaries conflict overtly or even subtly also seem to me to offer important insights.

Throughout her adult life, Anne Lister was passionately Protestant and passionately English, identities that were effectively co-constitutive: as Linda Colley reminds us, in the late eighteenth century 'Protestantism lay at the core of British national identity.'<sup>1</sup> To be patriotic in Lister's lifetime was to define oneself against continental and colonial others, and especially against Catholicism, the entrenched signifier of the enemy without and within. For Lister as for most Britons, 'Protestant' meant Church of England, and if her religious investments were more formal than deeply spiritual, that is also typical for her generation and her class.

Patriotism was especially intense during Lister's formative years, when Britain and France were at war almost non-stop and when French threats of invasion and conquest were far from idle. Lister's reading list for the late 1810s and early 1820s shows a copious interest in the Napoleonic wars and in Napoleon himself. In 1810 she records attending a performance of 'Rule Britannia' and notes that 'the company consisted of about 60 of our most respectable people'.<sup>2</sup> In 1816 she gloats that Britain has 'humbled La Grande Nation, and some of them will owe us a grudge for it, for some time to come'.<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps her eagerness to celebrate the restoration of the Bourbon throne that leads her to misread Helen Maria Williams, one of the firmest English adherents of the French Revolution, as 'a staunch friend to Louis 18';<sup>4</sup> in fact, Williams hated Napoleon (who hated her) and only hoped that the restored king would respect the 'rights of man' as the French emperor had not. There are also intimations that, during this period at least, Lister was fascinated by Napoleon,<sup>5</sup> a quality that she would have shared with quite a few Britons, including her stealthily admired Lord Byron, a locus of interesting contradictions in Lister's politics to which I will return.

We might rightly ask what it means politically that Lister, for all her professed love of England, chose to spend so much of her time outside it. It is touching to see a fifteen-year-old Anne writing in her journal that a trip to the small town of Bacup in August 1806 was 'the first time I ever Was out of Yorkshire',<sup>6</sup> and then to absorb the voluminous list of her adult travels: Scotland, Wales, Ireland, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Holland, Denmark, Prussia, Italy, Finland and Russia, with Paris a familiar point of return. In the early years, Lister's writings are filled with encomiums to

England, which becomes the ground of comparison next to which every elsewhere falls short: writing to the Duffins, she extols 'this favoured island, the admiration of every enlightened and impartial mind' is 'where the wise man sees abundant reason to be satisfied and happy'.<sup>7</sup> On her first trip to Paris in 1819, she finds the French capital a 'shabby' disappointment at first compared with London.<sup>8</sup> But she thinks Dieppe 'might almost pass for English'.<sup>9</sup> Rouen reminds her of Manchester, and in 1822, she identifies London's Regent's Crescent as 'now, surely, the finest street' in all of Europe, though this would be a Europe she has at that point hardly seen.<sup>10</sup>

As Lister becomes a habitual traveller, England does cease to be the measure of all things beautiful, but it remains the measure of all things right. In the 1820s and perhaps beyond, Lister seems to show a certain guilty pleasure in loving the continent. She writes on 31 March 1825, in one of her self-reflexive passages,

I leave Paris, said I to myself, with sentiments how different from those with which I arrived. My eye was accustomed to all it saw – it was no longer a stranger nor found fault as before with all that differed from what it left at home. Imperfectly as I speak the language, I felt almost at home in Paris & seemed to feel so in France.<sup>11</sup>

As soon as she is home, however, she seems to need to prove her patriotism: just two weeks later, she writes a letter affirming that 'French manners & habits of thinking [are] very different from ours', and then, even more dismissively in another recounting of her own words, 'My being in Paris was a mere nothing. Scarce deserved the name of being abroad. Like a dream which I had already forgotten'; indeed, she 'told them all I was more than ever English at heart'.<sup>12</sup> On another occasion, after thinking wistfully about France, she writes, 'But don't mistake me. Ours is the land of righteous law & liberty; & I would not change my birthplace for all the loveliest spots that smile upon the god of day. But we may migrate now & then, & yet be patriot still.'<sup>13</sup> In a society where the Grand Tour is not only a commonplace for upper-class men, but in some circles even an expectation for men and a possibility for women, this level of protest is interestingly intense.

I have not found the same defensiveness regarding Lister's later travels, perhaps because they enabled her to meet continental royalty while also advancing her relationships with the English elite. She does still enjoy marking English – and Yorkshire – superiority; in summer 1831, returning from travels in Holland, Belgium and several English cathedral towns, she

pronounces that 'up to this moment, no ecclesiastical building I have ever seen equals York cathedral', while more equivocally attributing to Norwich 'the best bread and butter I have ever tasted, *save* in Lombardy'.<sup>14</sup> And by the time she reaches Moscow in 1840, she can call the city's beauty 'indescribable' and the Kremlin 'unrivalled', aesthetically leaving England behind. Yet even then her justification is English, and poignantly so when we remember that she never returned to England: evoking Samuel Johnson, she extols the 'enlarging' benefits of travel and her hopes 'to be richer in these by and by; and then it will be more flattering to this fair city [Moscow] to repeat, that I still think it the most beautiful town I have ever seen'.<sup>15</sup>

Given her prolific patriotic protestations, it is significant but not surprising that Lister's travels were not necessarily 'enlarging' of her views at home. A common gesture in the diaries is to recognise and record the opinions, problems and sometimes the sufferings of local people, but then to affirm viewpoints that I propose to call kingly – and this at a time when challenges to absolutism pervaded the European continent. We see often in Lister's writings support for kings whom others of her class and political leanings are unwilling to defend. For example, although she acknowledged the legitimacy of French frustrations with the ultra-right French king Charles X, whom Isabella Norcliffe's mother, Ann, was more typical in naming a 'despot',<sup>16</sup> Lister takes the trouble to praise Charles's philanthropy toward his servants. Ann Norcliffe also professes herself glad when the time comes in England that 'William 4th reigns instead of George 4th!'<sup>17</sup> while Lister seems to have been among a distinct minority of women to support the wildly unpopular George. The Prince Regent's behaviour towards his estranged wife, Caroline, so outraged English women that (despite Caroline's own clear transgressions) tens of thousands of them, including some 3,700 'ladies' from Halifax, signed petitions supporting the queen when some members of Parliament wanted to try Caroline for adultery rather than allow her to take part in George IV's coronation.<sup>18</sup> But Lister used a trip to Italy in 1827 to visit Caroline's villa and affirm that 'unfortunately, we heard quite enough to persuade us, our King was quite right not to suffer such a queen to be the crowned queen of England'.<sup>19</sup>

No surprise either, then, that it was with the crown that Lister had also sided on the occasion of the Peterloo Massacre of 16 August 1819, when some sixty thousand peacefully assembled petitioners, a majority of them women and children, were charged by cavalry, killing dozens of unarmed demonstrators and slashing and trampling another three to five hundred.

In her diary two days later, Lister records the 'sad work at Manchester – a crowded meeting of these radical reformers', misrepresenting the crowd as a 'mob armed with pistols' while making no mention of royal sabres; for her, the 'reports are so vague and monstrous' that she 'scarce knows what to believe'.<sup>20</sup> Lister's scepticism is understandable, for 'monstrous' indeed became the judgement of history; the poet Percy Shelley spoke for the majority of Britons when he memorialised this senseless rampage of 'Rulers who neither see nor feel nor know'.<sup>21</sup> But Lister was explicit in her worry over the 'grievous . . . unsettled state of peoples and governments' and in declaring 'liberty and equality' to be both an 'absurdity' and an 'impracticability'.<sup>22</sup>

This belief in the impossibility – and, for all we know, the undesirability – of 'liberty and equality' probably also extends to Lister's views about enslavement and abolition. The public record gives no evidence of any holdings that implicate Shibden during Anne Lister's lifetime or the lifetimes of her uncle and aunt. Profits from enslavement do appear in the Lister family record: as Liddington notes, two of Anne's great-uncles, Thomas and William, 'emigrated to Virginia in the 1730s, pinning their hopes on the tobacco trade' and enslaving some fifteen Africans.<sup>23</sup> The greatest beneficiary of slavery in Lister's family, however, was the Lister who inherited Shibden after Ann Walker's death: Thomas's grandson John, whose wife, Louisa Grant, owned a sizeable St Vincent plantation. In the 1830s England imperilled its fiscal stability to award 20 million pounds to British enslavers – and nothing to the enslaved; Louisa Grant Lister received a whopping £12,765 13s. 8d. for the mandatory emancipation of 485 enslaved persons.<sup>24</sup> The website of the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery shows several other Listers receiving more modest compensation for one or more emancipated persons. Ann Walker's brother-in-law George Sutherland also held persons in bondage in St Vincent and received a significant sum.

Slavery and abolition were hot topics in Yorkshire during Lister's life. On the one hand, the region's economy and many of its landowners were implicated beneficiaries of what S. D. Smith calls 'gentry capitalism': the efforts of 'landed and respectable' gentry 'to increase their wealth and influence through colonial trade'.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, Yorkshire was also a site of intense abolitionist activity, not least among women and not least because William Wilberforce, Parliament's prime mover for abolition, was a long-time Yorkshire MP, and ultimately it was anti-slavery sentiment that won county support. At this juncture we do not know Anne Lister's views on this critical issue of her times, and she would certainly have lacked

the means to become a 'gentry capitalist'. When Lister (slightly mis)quotes from William Cowper's *The Task* in 1825 to say that 'we all agree with Cowper, "England! My country! With all thy faults I love thee still"', she may or may not have recognised that for Cowper slavery was first among those faults.<sup>26</sup>

As far as I have read, slavery comes up only once in the transcribed diaries, but that entry, at more than 1,200 words, comprises one of Lister's longest records of a single conversation. The entry reports the experiences of a John Robinson, who visited Shibden on 22 January 1818 to contract for repairs. Robinson had spent two years on a Liverpool slave ship and 'gave us an amusing account of what he had seen'. He describes the brutal capture and transport of some six hundred Africans, 'chained by tens together', four of whom jumped overboard in their shared chains rather than accept captivity. Without critical comment, Lister recounts the treatment and the suffering of these Africans and dwells on the details of their sale in Jamaica: 'men bought at about £13 a piece – women £2 less, tho if pregnant only £1 less, and, if with a fine child at the breast, the same price as the men'.<sup>27</sup> The entry also records Robinson's account of African customs, an account that dehumanises the captives and implies that they mistreat their own children such that many of them die. If Lister supported abolition or even amelioration, one would expect a report like this one, written a decade after the slave trade was banned, to have included at least a word of critical comment. But we have only her silence here, and it is challenging to imagine that this silence does not speak complicity.

Lister was not silent about Catholicism, however, and eventually her views took an ultra-conservative and minoritarian stance. As I have noted, in Lister's day anti-Catholicism was parcel to Englishness: triumph over the Gunpowder Plot engineered in 1605 by the Catholic Guy Fawkes engendered a decreed national holiday and a prescribed liturgy in the Book of Common Prayer that officially lasted until 1859; the 1701 Act of Settlement set forth an order of appointment to the English throne that would guarantee perpetual Protestant accession; and the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots that terrorised London in 1780 remained a recent reminder of English hysteria over Parliament's efforts to remove minor restrictions against Roman Catholics put in place by the Anti-Popery Act of 1698. Nonetheless, new efforts for fair treatment began percolating in Parliament by 1805 in the wake of Great Britain's 1801 Act of Union with Ireland. These efforts culminated in the passage of the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829, which allowed Catholics to hold parliamentary office though not yet to enter the universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

The Tory party and its public were deeply divided over the 1829 bill. If Lister occasionally maintains that she has 'always been for the Roman Catholics', as Catherine Euler reports, the diaries had also expressed anti-Catholic views.<sup>28</sup> In 1817 Lister comments that 'the order of Jesuits is the most dangerous and insidious enemy we can possibly suffer to set itself up against the protestant religion'; that diary entry also cites at some length concerns about an increase in Catholics in Lancashire where, she claims, 'almost all the neighbouring population has been brought over to the popish Faith'.<sup>29</sup> While she delights in the majestic cathedrals of the continent, she laments that 'there are now a thousand Roman Catholic chapels in England'.<sup>30</sup> By 1825 she is calling upon 'all Protestants to stand firm in support of their religion'.<sup>31</sup> And echoing longstanding British ideology, she warns that the 'foreign influence' of Catholics 'will not go down with Englishmen'.<sup>32</sup>

But what almost surely solidified Lister's opposition to the Catholic Relief Act of 1829 was her new friendship with Lady Louisa Stuart, granddaughter of the Earl of Bute and of the renowned writer and traveller Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. I propose this friendship as a key to understanding Anne Lister's politics in all three of the respects that I take up here. For most Tories, the Catholic Relief Act was a compromise for the sake of the union; in Lister's resistance to that compromise, we see not only the conventional insistence on Britain as an exclusively Protestant state, but Lister's thrall to Lady Stuart, a relationship that, as Jill Liddington has observed, 'hardened [Lister's] conservative politics'.<sup>33</sup> Importantly, this relationship emerged in Lister's life at a time when Britain itself was on the cusp of changing in ways that Lister would find disturbing.

Lister was doubtless among the many who were surprised in 1830 by the collapse of a Tory hegemony that had lasted for the better part of seven decades. The Whig takeover also ousted Lady Stuart's nephew Charles from his position as ambassador to France and coincided with the 'July Days' in France that led to the abdication of Charles X, days that Lister marks with the language of 'horror' and 'carnage'. Lady Stuart, ever the arch-conservative, worried in a letter to Lister that 'the terrible state of this country . . . seems fast verging to that of France'.<sup>34</sup> Britain's new and more liberal government was solidified by the Reform Bill of 1832, which expanded the male franchise to include many of Lister's own tenants. An interest in electoral politics turns up in Lister's journal as early as 1807, when she mentions that 'Mr R went to York to vote'<sup>35</sup> – and one wishes she had said more about what is now called the Great Yorkshire Election



that returned William Wilberforce and gave a second seat to the Whig Lord Milton, supporter of electoral reform and workers' rights, over the Tory enslaver and plantation magnate Henry Lascelles, who, incidentally, as Carol Adlam and San Ní Ríocáin have discovered, turns out to be a distant relation of Eliza Raine.<sup>36</sup>

Lister brings up electoral politics more fully in 1817 when her diary for four days running is focused almost wholly on the local contest between Scott and Haworth, with copious detail and passionate commentary about the poll,<sup>37</sup> and in 1823 she is musing about Tory candidates who might be recruited to run for Halifax. But her political investments heat up most intensely after the collapse of the Tory government in 1830, when the question of electoral reform becomes paramount. Lister wrote on 5 March 1831 that she was

not committed on the reform question as yet. I have always lately and to the Stuarts and people here *professed myself* a friend of the Duke of Wellington. In my heart I scarce know whether to wish for the reform or not. I think I rather incline towards it but I shall wait for circumstances before I declare myself. Not even my aunt as yet know[s] what I wish about it.<sup>38</sup>

Here we see a private Lister uncertain of her position, unwilling to be open about that uncertainty, perhaps waiting to see what Lady Stuart will do. For as Liddington discusses more deeply in *Female Fortune*, the friendship with Lady Stuart and the high-level connections that it conferred on Lister seem to have won out when she was undecided. And in the next three parliamentary elections – 1832, 1835 and 1837 – when Lady Stuart's own nephew James Stuart Wortley was a candidate for West Yorkshire, Lister found herself even more firmly on what Liddington calls 'the uncompromising diehard wing of the Tories' where her opposition to the Catholic Relief Act already placed her in 1829.<sup>39</sup>

The Reform Bill brought politics literally home: even as it explicitly disenfranchised women, who had only rarely dared to vote, it gave Lister the landowner a new influence. As Euler and Liddington have documented more fully, Lister openly strong-armed her eligible tenants to vote (Tory) blue and publicised her vow to 'not take a new tenant who would not give me a vote':<sup>40</sup> 'I had made up my mind to take none but blue tenants.'<sup>41</sup> She probably did help Wortley squeak into a one-vote victory in 1835 – he had come in at the bottom of four candidates in 1832 – but after that second election, she insists that she will 'give up talking politics – no hope of gaining people over, such is the spirit abroad for innovation'.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Halifax became a Whig and then radical stronghold in spite of

Lister and her fellow landowners, and Wortley's humiliating defeat in 1837, when (though incumbent) he came in again at the bottom, also showed Lister the limits of her influence. Already with Wortley's 1832 loss, however, she was expressing dismay and ambivalence about her involvement in politics. 'I hardly thought myself capable of such strong political excitement and mortification,' she wrote thereafter. 'I am completely sick of public events.'<sup>43</sup>

In moving towards the second conception of 'Anne Lister's politics', I want to dwell on that word 'mortification' and on what that sentiment might have meant for Lister as a precarious member of her class. I have agreed with Jill Liddington that Lady Stuart was a catalyst for some of Lister's more conservative positions. In Lister's letters to Lady Stuart we can find many a performance of conservative lament; she tells us in a diary entry, for example, that she began one letter to Lady Stuart by saying that 'The political mind of the people is sadly warped . . . The registration [of new voters] has not gained us much, if anything.'<sup>44</sup> But I would argue that the real catalyst for Anne Lister's politics lay in the preservation – or enhancement – of her rank. I see Lister's adulation of Lady Stuart as less about politics as national governance than about politics as 'actions concerned with the acquisition or exercise of power, status, or authority'.<sup>45</sup> I propose, in short, that the quest for status drove Lister's Tory politics rather than the other way around. For, if we look at the diaries across time, what mattered most to Lister was to secure her identity as a member of the landowning elite. And it seems to me too that it is in the diary entries about status that we find a particular intensity of hyperbolic and redundant prose.

The signs of Lister's status insecurity are manifold and, given the precarity of her family's finances especially before she went to live at Shibden, that insecurity is, of course, founded in fact. In her most overblown prose, the twenty-one-year-old Anne exhorts her brother, Sam, as 'the last remaining hope and stay of an old, but lately drooping family', to 'seize it in its fall. Renovate its languid energies; rear it with a tender hand, and let it once more bloom upon the spray. Ah! let the well-ascended blood that trickles in your veins stimulate the generous enthusiasm of your soul, and prove it is not degenerated from the spirit of your ancestors.'<sup>46</sup> She is thrilled in 1817 to have the official copy of her family's pedigree 'entered in the college' and will 'make it a rule to have the pedigree brought down & read aloud the 21st day of every June and December'.<sup>47</sup> She admits to her diary in 1825 that 'I always doubt my own importance & if people are not civil in calling, etc., fancy they mean to cut,

or not to know, me. I shall never feel right on this point till I am evidently in good society & rank, with a good establishment.<sup>48</sup> She believes that 'one can hardly carry oneself too high or keep people at too great a distance'.<sup>49</sup> She fears that 'without some intellectual superiority over the common mass of those I meet with, what am I? *Pejus quam nihil* [worse than nothing].'<sup>50</sup> She acknowledges her awe of Lady Stuart's elevated rank and contemplates a strategy for recruiting a Tory candidate for Halifax that will bring her renown, even as she recognises her own wine-induced foolishness: 'Began building castles about the result of my success, the notoriety it would gain me. An introduction to court. Perhaps a Barony, etc . . . I thought to myself, how slight the partition between sanity & not.'<sup>51</sup> Ironically, however, Lister has come of age at a time when the status of status is itself becoming precarious; as Clara Tuite puts it, 'in the 1820s, in the wake of the French Revolution, Waterloo and Peterloo, and the consolidation of English radical culture into the parliamentary reform movement, the aristocracy's supposedly natural claims to rule are not self-evident'.<sup>52</sup> Lister is chasing the end of a curve.

It is poignant, then, that the political theme that runs most through the diaries is Lister's insistence on her status, along with an oft-articulated contempt for anyone she deems lower either by birth or by manners. The word 'vulgar' appears copiously in the diaries, as she dismisses people as 'a vulgar set', 'a sad vulgar set'.<sup>53</sup> She avows in 1825 that 'Vulgarity gravifies & sickens me more than ever.'<sup>54</sup> She suddenly sees Emma Saltmarshe as 'sadly vulgar', and her 'heart sighed after some better & higher bred companion that it could love'.<sup>55</sup> Ann Walker also gets the label 'vulgar' at one early moment in their acquaintance.<sup>56</sup> Even Lister's venereal disease must be pronounced high-class, as she assures Mrs Barlow that it did not come 'from anyone in low life. I never associated with people below myself.'<sup>57</sup> And vulgarity, it seems, begins at home, for Lister's own parents fall under that label: they 'were both grown 10 times more vulgar than ever', she writes in her diary in 1817; tellingly, she conceals that admission in code.<sup>58</sup>

People in trade also, of course, fall within the low-class label, despite or because of the Lister family's own history; Lister derides Maria Barlow's beau as 'a thorough tradesman . . . clean & neat but thoroughly a tradesman',<sup>59</sup> and resists attending a fair on a Sunday, the 'vulgar day' with 'all the common people there'.<sup>60</sup> Closer to home, she opposes her sister Marian's marriage to a wool stapler and sets Marian a rule that she not invite to Shibden 'people she knew I did not wish to have anything to do with'.<sup>61</sup> English 'blood' is also a status marker for Lister. The simple

recognition that she is attracted to a French woman unleashes this sermon against intermarriage: if she were a man, she

would only have married an Englishwoman. Would not mix the blood . . . I was proud of my country. Loved the little spot where my ancestors had lived for centuries. Should inherit from them with pure English blood for five or six centuries and my children should not say I had mixed it. I loved my king & country & compatriots & would not take more fortune away from them. I should be head of my family & it should remain English still.<sup>62</sup>

When Lister writes to Lady Stuart that ‘The spirit of the times is hard to manage’,<sup>63</sup> it is tempting to weigh the word ‘manage’ as a sign of her aspiration to control her world. It is ironic, of course, that her unconventionality – her refusal to marry, her insistence on singular and genderqueer fashion, and the open secret of her love of women – undermined the very status she sought to secure, doubtless also intensifying her elitist discourse.

Yet Lister’s views departed dramatically from those of her more conservative friends on at least one subject (apart from her obvious but secret views about sex between women): her passion for that most controversial – and most high-born – of Romantic poets, Lord Byron, whose writings she cherished along with Rousseau’s *Confessions* and whose death in 1824 shocked and saddened her. Byron was both a political radical and a scribe of what were deemed obscenities; many of his initial upper-class admirers abandoned him after the publication of *Childe Harold*, and most of the remaining fans after the publication of *Don Juan*, to which even Byron’s own publisher, John Murray, would not affix his name. Friedrich Engels probably did not exaggerate much when he wrote in 1843 that ‘Byron and Shelley are read almost exclusively by the lower classes.’<sup>64</sup> In terms of both politics and propriety, one could have expected Lister to prefer Wordsworth, but she acknowledges, in reporting a conversation with the Belcombes in July 1821 about ‘the merits of modern poets’, that while Steph preferred ‘Southey, Hope, and Wordsworth to Lord Byron’, ‘not so Mariana and I.’<sup>65</sup> The diaries suggest that Lister fancied herself a Rousseauvian individualist and something of a Byronic hero in ways that sit uneasily with her need for social belonging, as does her cathexis to Byron, whose politics could not have been more unlike her own.

No wonder, then, that Lister tended to keep her love of Byron, and especially of the castigated *Don Juan*, secret. She reports in 1820, for example, that ‘Mrs Waterhouse asked me afterwards if I had read *Don Juan*. I would not own it.’<sup>66</sup> Byron’s poetry does become code in her courting of Miss Brown: ‘do you like Lord Byrons poetry’, Anne asks, to be

answered, 'yes perhaps too well'.<sup>67</sup> Lister alludes in her journal to reviews that condemn *Don Juan* 'of course', but is glad that they also 'do justice to the genius shown in the work'.<sup>68</sup> On 19 May 1824, when she records the death of 'his lordship', she asks, 'Who admired him as a man?' 'Yet "he is gone & forever!" The greatest poet of the age! And I am sorry.'<sup>69</sup> Lister later acknowledges admiring not just the poems but the poet: in 1827 she visits Clarens and 'sat an hour where Lord Byron would be taken and spent two or three days. A young lady who went the other day, kissed his bed twenty times . . . Lord B – seems to have been much liked by the people around here – the old woman told us, she had cried like a child when she heard of his death.'<sup>70</sup> Tuite has argued that despite their differences, 'in gender, rank, sexual practice, party-political identification, religion and region', Lister's 'sociable performance is paradigmatically Byronic';<sup>71</sup> certainly Lister's passion for Byron suggests that his aristocratic entitlement and Romantic self-fashioning outweighed his politics. It seems, however, that she mostly kept this to herself.

Lister's passion for a poet of high rank but low morals, along with her renowned self-understanding as a Romantic individualist 'different from any others who exist' in the Rousseauvian sense,<sup>72</sup> suggests a person whose politics were not so simply conservative as I have implied. This leads me to the third and most innovative way of approaching 'Anne Lister's politics': what Majid Yar describes as the attempt 'to introduce new, heretofore 'non-political' issues, into the realm of legitimate political concern'.<sup>73</sup> Yar's concept derives from the philosophical approach of Jacques Rancière, who argues that politics 'happens' when a group 'with no firmly determined place in the hierarchical social edifice' inserts itself as a part or party of humanity entitled to its full rights and benefits.<sup>74</sup> In Slavoj Žižek's rephrasing, politics happens when the members of a particular constituency 'not only demand that their voice be heard' but 'present themselves as the representatives, the stand-ins, for the Whole of Society'.<sup>75</sup> In our own time, both LGBTQ rights and Black Lives Matter have operated in this way: by inserting a new polity and insisting that it stands for humanity itself.

I would suggest that Anne Lister, though usually acting on her own rather than claiming a shared identity, was bent on propelling just such a redistribution. If she was simply following her 'nature', as she often claimed, she also made no attempt to conform to the standards of femininity current in her day: at the age of eighteen she reports a second-hand comment of 'pity that she doesn't pay more attention to her appearance', and yet within the week is purchasing 'gentlemen's braces' that would

make her even more conspicuously 'singular'.<sup>76</sup> She believed, and may have been right, that marriage could give her 'rank, fortune and talent, a title and several thousand a year', yet she 'refused from principle' to take that heteronormative path.<sup>77</sup> She wilfully inserted herself into all-male social, political and commercial spheres as an unmarried female landowner and entrepreneur, effectively claiming the rights of rank against the disabilities of gender. She was elected to the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society during its first year of operation in 1830–1 and was the only female member during her lifetime. Anira Rowanchild, noting that there were at least two other unmarried female landowners in the area – both of whom had been at school with Lister – observes a 'relative flexibility of social discourse in relation to class and gender in this rapidly expanding provincial town';<sup>78</sup> I wonder whether Lister helped to make that flexibility possible. Lister also, of course, inserted what could readily be recognised as a same-sex partnership into Halifax society when she brought Ann Walker to live at Shibden, and both women paid with slurs that included a fake marriage announcement for 'Captain Tom Lister' and Miss Ann Walker in the Yorkshire press;<sup>79</sup> after all, Walker had a perfectly good (or even better) home of her own nearby. Cassandra Ulph makes an astute comment when she evokes the question that Lenore Davidoff and Catherine Hall raise in their iconic *Family Fortunes*: 'Men built, men planned, men organized, men acted. Meanwhile, what did women do?'<sup>80</sup> To which Ulph wryly answers, 'Anne Lister would not recognize the question.'<sup>81</sup> It is this insistence on taking her unconventional place in the world that I would argue constitutes 'Anne Lister's politics' in a different way.

One dramatic sign of Lister's investment in this practice of politics as a 'disturbance in the field' occurs in an incident involving that icon of Lister's aristocratic imagination, Lady Stuart. Lister was apparently insistent that her relationship with Ann Walker be accepted in even the highest of her social spheres. In 1836, when Lady Stuart neglected to invite Walker to accompany Lister on a visit to Richmond, Lister wrote insisting that she would not visit without Ann. As Anira Rowanchild tells it, she received a 'surprisingly ingratiating' reply from Lady Stuart: 'My house *is now entirely at your service* for yourself and Miss Walker . . . I have had my own Bedroom pulled to piece[s] to have it *washed & glazed* . . . [I will sleep] in the Dressing room. Your friend can occupy what was . . . [my niece] Vere's room.'<sup>82</sup> Here Lister stands up to that same ultra-Tory Lady Stuart, daughter of an earl and granddaughter of the famed Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the woman she has for a decade been effectively fashioning and

refashioning herself to please – by insisting on having Ann Walker recognised as her essential companion. This is a fine example of Lister enacting a politics not of reaction but of reform – a word that she herself, of course, might have been loath to use.

What enabled Anne Lister, lesser gentry and relatively impoverished landowner that she was, to press Lady Stuart in this way? Lister was aware that Lady Stuart's fortunes were declining; a diary entry of 10 June 1834 recognises that *'there is a sad want of money and she is not in her splendour now – but all kindness to me and I will behave with tact I think I shall get on in high life and carry on with me Miss Walker by and by'*.<sup>83</sup> But this is also the point at which I would revise my thinking about what I have called Lister's *compensatory* conservatism. When I introduced the term in 1998, I argued that in eighteenth-century England, same-sex friendship was coded as a high-status phenomenon and that 'women whose erotic orientation might be seen as directed toward other women', or what I called 'gentry sapphists' like Elizabeth Carter, Sarah Scott, the 'Ladies of Llangollen' Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, and the Dutch couple Aagje Deken and Betje Wolff, could 'exploit the symbols of class status to sustain an image of sexual innocence. Rather than mere passive beneficiaries of a class-based bifurcation, in other words, these women were sometimes active agents in cultivating their class status as a screen'.<sup>84</sup> I took Lister as a prime example, though I noted that her appearance 'attracted more familiar treatment than a respectable gentrywoman had reason to expect'.<sup>85</sup> In my 2010 essay 'Tory Lesbians', I argued again that Lister's 'self-fashioning threatened her social status', which she attempted to 'shore up . . . through an aggressively conservative class politics'.<sup>86</sup>

It is possible that both Lister's conservatism and her assertions of status began as compensation. But the word 'constitutive' carries a more positive agency that seems to me appropriate in her case. Conservative politics placed Lister so squarely in the right wing of the landed gentry as to provide some reassurance that she was not a sexual threat. Conservative politics authorised her to do what single women didn't do – both in the board room and in bed. Rather than seeing her as someone who effectively *became* conservative by virtue of her difference, I would now say that her conservatism emboldened her to embrace that difference.

Lister's conscious cultivation of status, which enabled her self-fashioning as visibly and remarkably queer, thus constitutes a claim of privilege as powerful in its way as Byron's, and one that arguably gave her the best of both worlds. For as Chris Roulston reminds us, 'Lister simultaneously sought conformity and nonconformity, belonging and difference,

community and radical individualism.<sup>87</sup> We see that uneasy mix in a politics that is conformist by dictionary definitions but insistently non-conformist, even anti-conformist, by understandings of politics like Jacques Rancière's. As Amanda Vickery puts it in *The Gentleman's Daughter*, most women of Lister's class wore propriety like a 'tight-fitting suit' in order to achieve freedoms of other kinds.<sup>88</sup> But Lister engaged in literal self-fashioning. Certainly Lister's spirit was also entrepreneurial; she craved knowledge and experience, was fascinated by how things work and took pleasure in new inventions, scientific discoveries and technological improvements. Had her means been more opulent, her status more secure, her patrons differently positioned in national politics, she might well have engaged differently in the politics of both status and governance. But we can say that it was with boldness, brilliance and remarkable self-invention that Anne Lister of Shibden Hall confronted her tumultuous times.

### Notes

- 1 L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 369.
- 2 26 June 1810, *Anne Lister Papers*, West Yorkshire Archive Service, Calderdale [hereafter *Lister Papers*], SH:7/ML/E/26/1. Lister often abbreviated common words; I have chosen to write them out in full.
- 3 25 October 1816, *Lister Papers*, SH:7/ML/E/26/2.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 The intensity of Lister's reading about Napoleon may be evidence in itself. But see also, for example, her diary entry for 8 November 1816, when she names the *Secret Memoirs of Napoleon* 'the most interesting work I have read for long' (*Lister Papers*, SH:7/ML/E/26/3).
- 6 25 August 1806, *Lister Papers*, SH:7/ML/E/26/1.
- 7 M. Green (ed.), *Miss Lister of Shibden Hall: Selected Letters, 1800–1840* (Lewes: Book Guild, 1992), 22 December 1819, p. 54.
- 8 15 May 1819, *Anne Lister Papers*, West Yorkshire Archive Service (WYAS), Calderdale, SH:7/ML/E/3.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 22 December 1819, p. 53.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 7 September 1822, p. 61.
- 11 H. Whitbread (ed.), *No Priest but Love: the Journals of Anne Lister from 1824–1826* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 31 March 1825, p. 88.
- 12 Whitbread, *No Priest but Love*, 17 April 1825, pp. 98–9.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 15 December 1825, p. 143.
- 14 Green, *Miss Lister*, 20 August 1831, pp. 157–8.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 13 January 1840, p. 196.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 130. In this letter Ann Norcliffe asks Lister *not* to be 'so horribly diplomatic as you were in a letter written some time since in answer to a



remark I made upon the detestable Polignac ministry, and the despotism of the ex-King [Charles X]'. Lister may have been silently dissenting from that charge of despotism.

- 17 Ibid., p. 131.
- 18 Colley, *Britons*, p. 265.
- 19 Green, *Miss Lister*, p. 110.
- 20 18 August 1819, *Lister Papers*, SH:7/ML/E/3.
- 21 P. B. Shelley, 'England in 1819', in Z. Leader and M. O'Neill (eds.), *Percy Bysshe Shelley: the Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 446.
- 22 Green, *Miss Lister*, pp. 131, 47.
- 23 J. Liddington, *Female Fortune: Land, Gender and Authority: the Anne Lister Diaries and Other Writings, 1833–36* (London: Rivers Oram, 1998), p. 6.
- 24 See Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery, [www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/search/](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/search/).
- 25 S. D. Smith, *Slavery, Family, and Gentry Capitalism in the British Atlantic: the World of the Lascelles, 1648–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 9.
- 26 Whitbread, *No Priest but Love*, 15 December 1825, p. 143. The passage from *The Task* (Book 11) actually reads as follows: 'England, with all thy faults, I love thee still— / My country!'
- 27 22 January 1818, *Lister Papers*, SH:7/ML/E/1.
- 28 C. A. Euler, 'Moving between Worlds: Gender, Class, Sexuality, Politics, and Women's Networks in the Diaries of Anne Lister of Shibden Hall, Halifax, Yorkshire, 1830–1840', unpublished PhD thesis, University of York (1995). Lister's confounding language even in that letter belies her claim: she says here that she 'would do them a kindness handsomely, not reluctantly grant what I dare not withhold' (ibid., p. 113).
- 29 17 June 1817, *Lister Papers*, SH:7/ML/E/1.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Whitbread, *No Priest but Love*, 25 November 1825, p. 141
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Liddington, *Female Fortune*, p. 23.
- 34 Green, *Miss Lister*, p. 142.
- 35 27 May 1807, *Lister Papers*, SH:7/ML/E/26/1.
- 36 C. Adlam, pers. comm.
- 37 See entries for 11–17 May 1817, *Lister Papers*, SH:7/ML/E/1.
- 38 Euler, *Moving between Worlds*, p. 242.
- 39 Liddington, *Female Fortune*, p. 128.
- 40 Ibid., 4 November 1835, p. 197.
- 41 Ibid., 6 January 1835, p. 140.
- 42 Ibid., p. 162.
- 43 Green, *Miss Lister*, 2 September 1835, p. 175.
- 44 Liddington, *Female Fortune*, 10 November 1835, p. 197.
- 45 'Politics, n.', *Oxford English Dictionary* online.

- 46 Green, *Miss Lister*, February 1813, p. 38.
- 47 26 April 1817, *Lister Papers*, SH:7/ML/E/1.
- 48 Whitbread, *No Priest but Love*, 3 October 1825, p. 24.
- 49 H. Whitbread (ed.), *I Know My Own Heart: the Diaries of Anne Lister, 1791–1840* (London: Virago, 1988), 5 May 1820, p. 124.
- 50 Whitbread, *No Priest but Love*, 23 September 1825, p. 133.
- 51 Whitbread, *I Know My Own Heart*, 18 July 1823, p. 264.
- 52 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, 2006), pp. 186–210, p. 195.
- 53 7 May and 14 July 1817, *Lister Papers*, SH:7/ML/E/1.
- 54 Whitbread, *No Priest but Love*, 18 April 1825, p. 99.
- 55 Whitbread, *I Know My Own Heart*, 31 May 1824, p. 344.
- 56 Whitbread, *I Know My Own Heart*, 18 June 1822, p. 189.
- 57 Whitbread, *No Priest but Love*, 28 November 1824, p. 58.
- 58 30 January 1817, *Lister Papers*, SH:7/ML/E/26/3.
- 59 Whitbread, *No Priest but Love*, 5 April 1825, p. 91.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 6 September 1824, p. 15.
- 61 Liddington, *Female Fortune*, 10 December 1834, p. 134.
- 62 Whitbread, *No Priest but Love*, 29 October 1824, p. 39.
- 63 Liddington, *Female Fortune*, p. 153.
- 64 F. Engels, 'Letter to the *Swiss Republican* (1843)', in K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Literature and Art* (Moscow: Progress, 1976), p. 162.
- 65 27 July 1821, *Lister Papers*, SH:7/ML/E/5.
- 66 Whitbread, *I Know My Own Heart*, 25 July 1820, p. 131.
- 67 29 April 1818, *Lister Papers*, SH:7/ML/E/2.
- 68 13 September 1820, *Lister Papers*, SH:7/ML/E/4.
- 69 Whitbread, *I Know My Own Heart*, 30 May 1824, p. 344.
- 70 Green, *Miss Lister*, 27 August 1827, p. 10.
- 71 Tuite, 'The Byronic Woman', pp. 189–90.
- 72 See the first words of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*.
- 73 M. Yar, 'Hannah Arendt', *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://iep.utm.edu/arendt/>, accessed 3 May 2022.
- 74 J. Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 22.
- 75 S. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: the Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 188.
- 76 21 and 27 March 1809, *Lister Papers*, SH:7/ML/E/26/1.
- 77 Liddington, *Female Fortune*, p. 18.
- 78 A. Rowanchild, 'Skirting the Margins: Anne Lister, Self-Representation, and Lesbian Identity in Early Nineteenth-Century Yorkshire', in R. Phillips et al. (eds.), *De-Centering Sexualities: Politics and Representations beyond the Metropolis* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2000), pp. 145–58, p. 148.
- 79 Liddington, *Female Fortune*, 10 January 1835, p. 143.

- 80 L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p. 416.
- 81 C. Ulph, “‘Under the Existing Rules’: Anne Lister and the Halifax Literary and Philosophical Society”, *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 73.4 (2019), 462–85, 484.
- 82 Rowanchild, ‘Skirting the Margins’, 151–2 (original emphasis).
- 83 Lister diary entry, 10 June 1834, ‘In Search of Ann Walker’, <https://insearchofannwalker.com/Tuesday-10th-june-1834/>, accessed 24 July 2022.
- 84 S. S. Lanser, ‘Befriending the Body: Female Intimacies as Class Acts’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32.2 (1998–9), 179–98.
- 85 *Ibid.*, 190.
- 86 S. S. Lanser, ‘Tory Lesbians: Economies of Intimacy and the Status of Desire’, in J. C. Beynon and C. Gonda (eds.), *Lesbian Dames: Sapphism in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 173–89, p. 186.
- 87 C. Roulston, ‘Sexuality in Translation: Anne Lister and the Ancients’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 30 (2021), 112–35, 120.
- 88 A. Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 294.