

The “Gentleman-like” Anne Lister on *Gentleman Jack*: Queerness, Class, and Prestige in “Quality” Period Dramas

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This article examines the significance of queerness to class and prestige illustrated by the series *Gentleman Jack* (BBC/HBO, 2019–present). Although previous scholarship has discussed LGBTQ content and network brands, the development of “quality” television, and the status of period (heritage) drama, there has not been significant consideration about the relationships among all these elements. Based on the life of the 19th-century Englishwoman Anne Lister, *Gentleman Jack* depicts Lister’s gender and sexual nonconformity—particularly her romantic interactions with women and her mobility through the world—as a charming, cosmopolitan queerness, without addressing how this depended on her elite status. The cachet of *GJ*’s queer content interacts with both the prestige of the period genre and the BBC’s and HBO’s quality TV brands, with the show illustrating how narratives in “post-heritage” drama can gesture toward critique of class, race, and nationality privileges while continuing to be structured by these hierarchies. This article points to new avenues for theorizing how prestige in television is constructed through the interaction of content, genre, and production contexts.

Keywords: BBC television, class representation, HBO, heritage drama, LGBTQ media, period drama, post-heritage drama, quality television, queer representation

Gentleman Jack (hereafter *GJ*), a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) television series coproduced with Home Box Office (HBO),² has attracted critical attention for exuberantly depicting how the 19th-century Englishwoman Anne Lister challenged the norms of gender presentation and sexuality as “the first modern lesbian” (Roulston, 2013), with the series taking its title from a derogatory nickname that Lister earned from her masculine appearance and demeanor. Lister was a prolific diarist, and although only a small percentage of the entries have been published, there are several scholarly accounts of her life.³ Thus, *GJ*

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² The series, originally titled *Shibden Hall* after Anne Lister’s estate home, was announced in 2017 (see “BBC One and HBO Announce,” 2017). The London-based Lookout Point company was commissioned by the BBC to produce the series, with HBO named as coproducer.

³ For edited volumes of Lister’s diaries, see Liddington (1994, 2003) and Whitbread (1988, 1992). For biographical accounts, see Liddington (1998) and Steidele (2018).

creator Sally Wainwright had access to a range of historical records and academic research, also bringing on Lister scholars as show consultants.⁴ However, the show's narrative characteristics reflect not simply the dramatized adaptation of these sources, but also several key conditions of production. Lister's queerness⁵ within a period drama is not unprecedented, even for the BBC.⁶ Still, the series invites deeper consideration of the relationship between queer representation and the prestige of the genre, as well as how this pertains to the brands of the producing networks, each of which has particular associations with "quality" television.

Earlier research has discussed the use of LGBTQ content to brand television networks, with a focus on programming on U.S. broadcast, advertising-supported cable, and subscriber-supported cable television. After decades of being stigmatized and censored, a notable shift occurred from the 1990s onward, when gay-themed content gained value as a distinctive way to attract viewers, working to signal to those willing to watch that they were more hip, educated, and liberal (Becker, 2006), and, especially in a slew of reality programming, associating gay and lesbian identities with taste, good living, and consumer culture (Ng, 2013; Sender, 2007). In the UK, the production of LGBTQ-themed media also increased significantly from the 1990s onward, partly due to public broadcasting mandates around diversity, but also in response to increased competition both among terrestrial stations and from satellite channels (Edwards, 2010). An intersecting development has been the emergence of the quality television metagenre, typified by narratively complex, formally innovative texts that attracted an "upscale" audience with the capacity to appreciate these characteristics (Feuer, 2007; Thompson, 1996). Pertinent also to *GJ* is the status of period dramas, which have garnered attention in various national contexts, including the UK (e.g., Giddings & Selby, 2001; Higson, 1995, 2003; Leggott & Taddeo, 2015). As de Groot (2015) commented, period drama is

always a site of contention about memory, identity, and nostalgia . . . produced by a set of cultural institutions (e.g., Granada, ITV, and BBC) with their own agendas, by writers . . . with particular biases, and for a set of markets . . . with particular tastes and desires. (pp. x–xi)

However, the period genre has not generally been considered with regard to queer historical figures, and there has been little discussion of how LGBTQ content interacts with the "quality" attributed to period drama.

⁴ Anne Choma is listed as a senior consultant and Jill Liddington and Helena Whitbread as consultants in the end credits of each episode.

⁵ As a broad swath of research on gender and sexuality demonstrates, the meanings of terms such as *queer* and *LGBTQ* should not be assumed to be self-evident. In this article, I use *queer* to refer to sexual nonconformity and its intersections with gender nonconformity, and I use both *queer* and *LGBTQ* as cover terms to refer to a range of gender/sexual identities that are something other than cis-gendered and heterosexual, while recognizing that no umbrella term fully captures the diversity of gender and sexual expression. I also use both terms in reference to media representations of gender/sexual nonconformity, even as such representations may, as I argue, fail to challenge particular normative dynamics of power. In addition, *queer* appears in the term *queer theory* to refer to a body of scholarship commonly designated as such.

⁶ As I note later, the BBC miniseries *Portrait of a Marriage* (1990), *Tipping the Velvet* (2002), and *Fingersmith* (2005) include queer women as protagonists.

GJ provides a number of analytical sites to address these issues, with respect to its representations of Anne Lister and how the show is situated within contemporary production contexts. The upcoming discussion thus begins with a review of scholarship on LGBTQ representation, quality television, and period drama. I then examine how Lister's gender and sexual nonconformity on *GJ* constitutes departures from the typical female protagonist in British period drama, even as Lister's queer expression is dependent on hierarchies of class, race, and nation that have long structured the narratives of the genre. The analysis underscores how the particular circumstances of *GJ*'s production—a BBC/HBO series presenting a historical lesbian figure for contemporary consumption—have shaped these textual characteristics, and suggests that despite a range of shifts identified for more recent, "post-heritage" texts (Monk, 1995, p. 33), the queer content of *GJ* marks the show as less iconoclastic than its protagonist might on first glance suggest.

Queer Representation, Period Drama, and Quality Television

A key set of developments in television for *GJ* concerns the frequency and status of LGBTQ representation. In the UK, this has been partly shaped by public service broadcasting mandates; the Communication Act 2003, applicable to the BBC and to the commercial ITV and independent Channel 4 channels, states that these services should ensure that "cultural activity in the United Kingdom, and its diversity, are reflected, supported and stimulated by the representation in those services" (Communication Act, 2003, p. 235).⁷ However, in earlier decades, such diversity was reflected primarily through racial/ethnic diversity (e.g., see Cottle, 1998); characters with gender nonconforming attire and behavior stereotypically associated with gay men and, rarely, lesbians appeared in a range of mid-20th-century British television shows, but generally with no confirmation of their sexual orientation (Buckle, 2018; Edwards, 2010). The launch of Channel 4 in 1982 with a remit to serve viewers who were not the main targets of either the BBC or ITV was an important turning point, resulting in the channel providing more programming for LGBTQ audiences than any of the other terrestrial channels (Buckle, 2018; Edwards, 2010). From the 1990s onward, the number and, in many cases, complexity of LGBTQ depictions increased significantly across all channels because of a confluence of changes within both the media industry and society at large (Edwards, 2010).

At the industry level, reforms in the regulation of British television beginning with the Thatcher government meant that the BBC, although remaining publicly funded to a large extent, faced decreased government funding and competition from, first, other terrestrial television stations and then a range of additional satellite networks; it thus sought to secure new sources of revenue, leading to strategies for strengthening its brand and attracting new viewers (Born, 2004; Johnson, 2013). Concomitantly, sociopolitical integrations of LGBTQ people were in part being realized through commercial interest in gays and lesbians as "cosmopolitan" consumers (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004). Such associations of LGBTQ identity with cultural capital, as Edwards (2010) noted, meant that particular kinds of LGBTQ media content, "'different' enough to bring cosmopolitan pleasure but not so different or confrontational as to be 'disruptive' to capitalism or hetero-patriarchal standards of behaviour," were directed toward "straight, cosmopolitan viewers" (pp. 85–86) and deployed for branding purposes as each of the terrestrial channels—including

⁷ This act replaced the earlier Telecommunications Act 1984 and established the Office of Communications (Ofcom) to replace several previous regulatory bodies.

multiple channels under the BBC umbrella—sought to establish identities distinct from other terrestrial, satellite, and cable channels. There are parallels to the U.S. context in these respects; as Becker (2006) discussed, while the 1990s saw increases in the number of shows on major networks incorporating gay and lesbian content, the primary goal was to attract affluent, predominantly White and politically progressive heterosexual viewers at a moment when the broadcast networks had been hemorrhaging audiences to a slew of cable networks. Although reality programming, which grew rapidly in the UK, United States, and globally, has provided new forms of LGBTQ representation (e.g., see Lovelock, 2019), in earlier series, the focus was often on gay men and lesbians in lifestyle domains; their sexual identities were secondary to their roles as recognized or aspiring experts on style, fitness, and pop culture (see Himberg, 2014; Sender, 2007), again reflective of more general developments oriented toward integrating gays and lesbians as consumers. These imperatives contributed to many desexualized, “safe” LGBTQ representations that did not seriously challenge dominant structures of power or question how sexuality intersected with other inequalities, such as gender, race, and class.

The emergence of the quality television metagenre has constituted a different set of influences, with edgier queer content sometimes constructing the prestige of television programming. Although highbrow/lowbrow distinctions had long been made about television, the 1980s was the first time that a set of TV series across different outlets became recognized as sharing characteristics garnering the “quality” label. In the United States, this occurred first by programming on broadcast networks (Thompson, 1996) and then, over the following decade, more expansively on cable television channels seeking to establish brand identities premised on attracting more affluent, educated viewers (Lotz, 2018). Defined by innovations in storytelling and formal characteristics, quality television typically offers viewers strongly constructed narratives that do not shy away from serious social and political issues, with high production values and distinctive aesthetic qualities that may play with genre and other conventions (e.g., see Cardwell, 2007; Feuer, Kerr, & Vahimagi, 1984; Thompson, 1996). Nelson (2007) discussed the UK context in terms of “high-end TV drama” characterized by “big budgets and the high production values associated with them, along with a ‘primetime’ position in the schedule of a major channel” (p. 2), with the specificity of British television’s “strong public service ethos”; this meant that a “social realism” (p. 171) theme, where dramas addressed significant social issues, was also threaded through domestically produced high-end programming, such as *Shameless* (Channel 4, 2004–2013). The concomitant rise in the overall status of television relative to its long-time stigma as lowbrow “mass” entertainment was also a result of television industry executives invested in “legitimizing television” (Newman & Levine, 2012); they worked to, as Bourdieu (1979/1984) had put it, “consecrate” (p. 3) particular forms of creative culture as high-status art, attracting the critical attention of prestigious gatekeepers such as the *New York Times*, the reviews of which could then be fed back into the programs’ marketing (see also Anderson, 2008).

Significantly for LGBTQ representation in U.S. productions, the subscriber-supported cable channel HBO became a key site of quality television programming beginning in the 1990s (see Leverette, Ott, & Buckley, 2008; McCabe & Akass, 2007). Its first scripted drama series, *Oz* (1997–2003), featured sexually explicit scenes between men not previously seen on American television shows. A few years later, Showtime’s earlier strategies of including more explicit sex than that available on broadcast and regular cable dovetailed with the inclusion of LGBTQ-centric programming, including the U.S. *Queer as Folk* remake (2000–2005) and *The L Word* (2004–2009). Such shows, along with others in the quality TV genre, were

acquired by British channels such Channel 4 and Sky Atlantic, helping to shape those networks' own quality TV brands as well (e.g., see Grainge, 2009; McCabe, 2000; Weissman, 2012).

LGBTQ content is now common across the television spectrum in both the UK and the United States (see GLAAD, 2020; Rooks & Bourne, 2019). However, *GJ* stands out in terms of the particular forms of Anne Lister's queerness, which is instantiated through her romantic interactions and a confident mobility in the world comprising a classed, "gentlemanly" demeanor and cosmopolitanism that are both familiar from the male protagonists of other period dramas and distinct as a less commonly depicted "female masculinity" (Halberstam, 1998). Furthermore, as a biographical period drama, *GJ* exemplifies another dimension of the relationship between queer content and quality TV, given that period drama has its own line of development and relationship to the "prestige" programming that has been significant for the BBC and British television.

Brunsdon (1990) identified several constitutive elements of the prestige associated with British period drama, also known as "heritage" drama: adaptation from a respected literary source, the casting of acclaimed British actors with strong backgrounds in theater, a budget allowing for high production values, and the characteristic of "heritage export," producing "a certain image of England and Englishness . . . in which national identity is expressed through class and imperial identity" (p. 86)—all of which mitigated the low-culture, mass status of television in the mid-20th century. The work of Higson (1995, 2001) and others further examined the construction of British national identity through heritage film and television that present "symbolic stories of gender, ethnicity, and identity, clothing them in elegant costumes, and staging them in the most picturesque landscapes and houses of the Old Country" (Higson, 2001, p. 249). Monk (1995) offered a key turning point when she argued that several British films of the 1980s and 1990s, such as *A Room With a View* (Ivory, 1985), *Maurice* (Ivory, 1987), *Orlando* (Potter, 1993), and *Carrington* (Hampton, 1995), had shifted sufficiently away from the characteristics of more traditional heritage drama, including "a deep self-consciousness about how the past is represented" (p. 33), that they could be considered "post-heritage" films. The incorporation of Monk's perspectives has moved the scholarship to more nuanced analyses of the relationship among period dramas, history, and national identity, with these texts analyzed as provoking not simple nostalgia for the past, but a more ambivalent response about British identity (Higson, 2003, 2006). More recently, Abbiss (2020) suggested that the concept of post-heritage be deployed as a critical framework for assessing period drama, rather than treated as a genre or subgenre, especially given earlier recognition that it is impossible to delineate a "clear break" between heritage and post-heritage drama (Higson, 2003). Because the purpose of my analysis is not to make such a distinction, I draw on this literature to situate the characteristics of *GJ* within developments for recent period dramas overall, especially the degree of ambivalence toward the past and its social hierarchies, the extent to which the traditional visual spectacle of the genre is subverted, and the representation of sexual content. Such shifts from more conventional period dramas to post-heritage texts have played out at the BBC, with particular implications for queer representation.

Dating back to its media monopoly days, the BBC has been a longtime producer of period dramas, beginning with radio and then shifting to include television (see Giddings & Selby, 2001). The cultural capital of both the genre and the corporation led to significant collaborations with American media partners, including the landmark establishment of *Masterpiece Theatre* (now *Masterpiece*) for PBS's WBGH Boston station in 1971, which became a key site for British period dramas. This was consonant with PBS having

been “established . . . in the elitist image that many people perceived the early BBC to be,” such that “emphasis was put on high art, literature, history and traditional education values” (Weissman, 2012, pp. 101–102). As the BBC came under increasing pressure to compete successfully with other major media corporations, both domestic and international, the period drama remained a fertile site, particularly with the enormous success of the BBC’s 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* series. The expense of producing a period drama with high production values, alongside its appeal to international audiences, has continued to drive coproductions (a trend not limited to the BBC, as *Downton Abbey*, from Britain’s ITV and NBC Universal’s Carnival Films, exemplifies).

It should be noted that when period drama is biographical, it has historically had a more ambivalent status, subject to critical dismissal for often choosing “sensational subjects” whose romantic lives had played out publicly in gossip news (Andrews, 2016). Still, Andrews (2016) argued that several television movies produced by BBC4, the BBC’s “niche” digital channel, about well-known British cultural and political figures such as former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, the ballerina Margot Fonteyn, and actors Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, helped build the BBC brand despite a complex interplay between the network’s cultural capital and the “trashiness” of a genre that treads uncomfortably close to celebrity culture. Furthermore, biographical television drama has grown in repute globally as quality television networks, such as HBO and Showtime, as well as streaming platforms such as Netflix, with *The Crown* (Netflix, 2016–present), have made well-received television series based on historical figures.⁸

Post-heritage drama has been marked by increased sexual explicitness as producers have sought more and younger viewers. With such content becoming the norm, its inclusion does not necessarily diminish contemporary period drama’s continuing quality patina, particularly if it is British. For example, increases in the provocativeness of heterosexual sexual content have been noted for *Masterpiece Theatre*’s rebranding into *Masterpiece*, which, among other things, entailed more programming that “give[s] greater voice to sexual desire and render[s] its fulfillment onscreen”; examples include the miniseries *Jane Eyre* (BBC1, 2006; West & Laird, 2011), and, of course, *Downton Abbey* (ITV/PBS, 2010–2015). Another example, *Parade’s End* (BBC/HBO, 2012/2013), was discussed by Hockenfull (2015), who noted that in featuring female characters “who are represented as independent and sexually promiscuous,” this series had “its origins in heritage drama, yet corresponds with what Nelson terms high-end TV and Claire Monk labels postheritage production” (pp. 191–192).

For queer representation more specifically, Monk (1995) noted that a set of post-heritage British films differed from traditional heritage drama in their “overt concern with sexuality and gender, particularly non-dominant gender and sexual identities: feminine, non-masculine, mutable, androgynous, ambiguous,” attributable partly to “a strategy of product differentiation” (p. 33): *Maurice*, *Orlando*, and *Carrington* all had main characters who were gay, bisexual, or genderqueer, and Higson (2001) also mentioned *Mrs. Dalloway* (Gorris, 1997). In recent years, perhaps partly spurred by the success of *Carol* (Haynes, 2015), there has been a mini-proliferation of period films about queer women (e.g., see Gates, 2020), including

⁸ Andrews (2016) mentioned the HBO film *Behind the Candelabra* (Soderbergh, 2013), about the American entertainer Liberace, and the series *Masters of Sex* (Showtime, 2013–2016), based on the lives of sexology researchers William Masters and Virginia Johnson.

British biographical dramas *Colette* (Westmoreland, 2018), about the French author; *The Favourite* (Lanthimos, 2018), about Britain's Queen Anne and two lovers; *Vita & Virginia* (Button, 2018), about the relationship between Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf; and *Ammonite* (Lee, 2020), about 19th-century British paleontologist Mary Anning's romance with another woman. However, the trend has occurred to a far lesser extent on television, making *GJ* stand out in this regard.⁹

In British period television, LGBTQ characters appeared as early as ITV's *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1971–1975; Brown, 2015), but not initially as main characters. The genre eventually supported the emergence of more central gay and lesbian narratives in a handful of series; depictions of queer sexuality that

might have appeared shocking or distasteful, needlessly controversial or too cutting-edge for BBC audiences were tempered by their appearance within the respectable and much-loved period drama format, . . . turn[ing] "the *Pride and Prejudice* effect" to their advantage in delivering television that was at once sexually other, and identifiably period in content and aesthetic. (Edwards, 2010, p. 170)

These representations also enjoyed "both the temporal distancing effect of 'safety' and the heritage appeal of 'quality'" (Harper, 2014, p. 126). Fictional period narratives sometimes feature working-class queer characters; on both *Upstairs, Downstairs*, and *Downton Abbey* (ITV, 2010–2015), there were gay footmen (see Brown, 2015), while *Tipping the Velvet* (BBC, 2002) and *Fingersmith* (BBC, 2005) had working-class lesbian protagonists based on the source novels by Sarah Waters. However, in biographical dramas, the main subjects are typically members of the upper class, both because of who is generally understood to be a subject worthy of scholarly or popular interest, and because they are much more likely to have left written and other records of their lives. This is true of queer subjects as well: *Portrait of a Marriage* (BBC, 1990) was centered on British aristocrats Vita Sackville-West, Harold Nicolson, and Violet Trefusis, and *Life in Squares* (BBC2, 2015) was about the Bloomsbury Group of intellectuals and writers, including Virginia Woolf, Duncan Grant, and Lytton Strachey.¹⁰ Thus, the status of the queer characters in these series is bound up with their privileged class and race positions, and how these comprise a particular form of elite British identity, even if such status is ambivalently presented.

Prior to *GJ*, there was also a BBC film adaptation about Anne Lister's life, *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister* (Kent, 2010). Harper (2014) identified narrative and visual elements that present Lister as being "voyeuristic and, at times, predatory" (p. 122), and argued that although Lister is "able to infringe upon male sexual privilege due to her social status" (p. 124), she values her class privilege over any substantial challenges to gender hierarchy. Thus, "the queer woman's freedoms in the Regency era . . . pertain to

⁹ The only other major English-language period drama with a queer female protagonist is *Dickinson* (Apple TV+, 2019–present), about Emily Dickinson, although ensemble period dramas such as the brief BBC revival of *Upstairs Downstairs* (BBC One, 2010–2012) and *Call the Midwife* (BBC One, 2012–present), set in 1950s–1960s London, included lesbian relationships.

¹⁰ *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (BBC, 1990), about the lesbian author Jeanette Winterson, was based on her semi-autobiographical novel of the same name; however, a miniseries covering the childhood of a woman who was in her 30s at the time of production is not a period drama in the same way, although it is set in the past.

patriarchal conventions such as inheritance, landownership and social mobility, which, importantly, constitute a 21st century notion of British heritage" (p. 124). Harper argued that the film therefore still exemplifies the problematic social conservatism typical of the period genre.

Harper's (2014) analysis offers some insights relevant for this article; in considering *GJ*, I also identify how Lister's queerness differs from the typical female protagonist in British period drama and highlight how her ability to transgress certain gender and sexual norms derives from her status as a wealthy English landowner. However, my discussion offers a sharper analysis of how Lister's queer agency intersects with her privileges of class, race, and nationality, and I refer to queer theory approaches to critique the representation of such agency, which do not draw on the trope of the predatory lesbian. I also contextualize *GJ*'s queer content within the intersecting trajectories of post-heritage drama and quality drama. The masculine-of-center Anne Lister on *GJ* is a much less common example of queer representation, particularly for period drama, and as such, is consonant with both post-heritage and quality television more generally for pushing the boundaries in terms of representations of sex and sexuality. At the same time, with Lister's queer expression entwined with social hierarchies that have long structured the narratives of the genre, the series has been able to appeal to broader audiences of both period and quality television, while burnishing the brands of both the BBC and HBO.

Anne Lister's Classed Queerness on *Gentleman Jack*

The first (and so far only aired) season of *GJ* is centered on Lister's courtship of Ann Walker, a wealthy heiress, in her search for a wife, thus aligning it with classic period dramas that revolve around personal relationships. Much of the series is filmed at the real-life Anne Lister's ancestral home, Shibden Hall, as well as various other Yorkshire mansions and locations in and around the nearby town of Halifax ("*Gentleman Jack*," n.d.). As such, *GJ* also has the genre's visual hallmarks: the staple setting of the "country house" and "the use of the landscapes and houses throughout the country as backdrops and locations" (Leggott & Taddeo, 2015, p. ix). At the same time, with an unabashedly queer protagonist, multiple sex scenes, and fourth-wall breaks of characters speaking or reacting to the camera, the show has some clear departures from the more traditional characteristics of the genre. This section examines key elements of Lister's gender and sexual nonconformity on *GJ*, discussing how these constitute queer representation that is consonant with developments around such content for both quality drama and post-heritage drama. While storylines about women overcoming gender barriers in terms of personal and professional endeavors are not uncommon, *GJ*'s Lister combines these with a demeanor that reads as masculine and the sexual practices of a lesbian "top." In also addressing how Lister's class positionality is presented, I situate Lister's depiction on *GJ* against scholarship that critiques how certain liberatory discourses about queer expression rest on privileges of class, race, and nationality, thus tempering much of the discourse about the "groundbreaking" character of the show.

Besides the derogatory "Gentleman Jack" nickname, the real-life Lister did have a male nickname (Freddy) that was used affectionately by her lover Mariana Lawton. However, both in her journals and on *GJ*, Lister has the gender identity of a woman, though one with a markedly masculine presentation. While Lister did not completely forsake feminine attire, such as corsets and long skirts, and kept her hair conventionally long, her clothing was different in a number of respects from what women of the time generally wore. The wardrobe of Suranne Jones, who plays Lister on the series, is partly based on information from Lister's diaries,

which described her clothing as predominantly black (a color women at the time usually wore only for mourning) and including items normally worn only by men, such as a greatcoat, or those with more masculine cuts even if sometimes made for women, such as riding habits. *GJ* also included a top hat that was not mentioned in Lister's diaries because its profile was more obviously masculine than the "small black soft cap" that the real-life Lister wore ("Q&A: Costuming Gentleman Jack," 2019, para. 17). Lister's journals also describe how the way she moved was disdained for being markedly unfeminine (see Roulston, 2013), and on the show, Lister is often shown striding confidently and undertaking other unladylike actions. Costume designer Tom Pye commented that Suranne Jones's wardrobe was designed to readily allow actions such as "leaping up and down from stage coaches, and jumping over walls" ("Q&A: Costuming Gentleman Jack," 2019, para. 25).

At the crux of Lister's "gentleman-like" ways on *GJ*, which the real-life Lister labeled as such in her diaries (see Steidele, 2017/2018), is how she treated her love interests. This is apparent through Lister's gallantry and chivalrous demeanor with Ann Walker and Mariana Lawton. For example, when Lister travels in a carriage with one of them, she invariably exits first and then assists the other woman or, conversely, first gives them her hand to help them into the carriage before getting in herself (seen with Lawton in Episode 1.01 and with Walker in 1.04 and 1.08). In comparison, when travelling by carriage alone, she enters and exits by herself, and indeed refuses any assistance from the footman. Additionally, there are subtler gestures and movements. With a dip of her head, for example, Lister conveys a "ladies first" signal for another woman to proceed ahead of her; she does so in 1.08 when she indicates with a slight head motion that Walker should precede her onto a pathway to the church where they are headed. In such ways, Lister on *GJ* comes across indeed as gentlemanly, that is, exhibiting a gendered deference to (other) elite women's presumed lesser physical capabilities, which call for conventionally courteous actions.

In line with such interactional dynamics, Lister's journals also documented her sexual practices as invariably those of a partner who actively pleased the women she was with; the television series reflects this in several key scenes, especially with Ann Walker. While Walker does signal verbally and in subtle nonverbal ways that she welcomes Lister's attentions, she is the receptive partner, shown to be accepting Lister's kisses, caresses, and penetration. Lister is also depicted as the active sex partner with Mariana Lawton, and there is a brief flashback scene of Lister performing oral sex on another lover (Mrs. Barlow). Like other scenes on the series, the sex scenes are beautifully lit and framed. For example, sex between Lister and Walker in 1.03 takes place in the elegant drawing room and bedroom of Walker's magnificent mansion, with daylight streaming in the windows. Thus, the scenes, while depicting sexual intimacy that must be hidden from others, are not sordid, but contribute to the overall visual spectacle of the series as they underscore Lister's skill with multiple partners.

Other examples of Lister's gender nonconformity are not directly tied to her sexual nonconformity, but reinforce how she is queerly empowered through multiple rejections of strictures on women. Lister's activities as a landlord and other financial pursuits related to Shibden Hall, which draw from the real-life Lister's diary entries and other historical records, provide several examples of her occupying normatively masculine domains. In the series premiere, Lister takes over the task of collecting rent from her tenants in person (the man who had done this prior had become indisposed), eliciting consternation from her sister Marian, who notes

that "it's a man's job" (Wainwright, 2019, Episode 1, 00:20:08).¹¹ Later on, Lister decides to establish a coal mine, which involves looking over financial information, negotiating with male business rivals (sometimes at the local pub usually frequented only by men), making business decisions, and even at one point going down one of the coal mine shafts on her estate.

Writing about the real-life Lister, Halberstam (1998) noted that "social status obviously confers mobility and a moderate freedom from [its] disgrace . . . Anne, in a sense, can live out the contradiction of female masculinity because she is upper-class" and has "economic freedoms associated with aristocratic landowning power" (p. 69). Lister was also documented as having supported the conservative Tory party and, among other actions, compelled her tenants to vote accordingly (see Clark, 1996; Liddington, 1998). *GJ* creator Sally Wainwright did acknowledge that Anne Lister was "something of a dinosaur (even in her own time) in regarding those from the deprived classes as insensate commodities" (Choma, 2019, pp. 9–10). However, much of how *GJ* depicts Lister's class status serves to soften the exercises of her privilege, and, certain plotlines, being fictional, cannot be attributed to the imperative of representing "true life" events.

The series explicitly addresses Lister's class positionality in a few key scenes. In the first episode, her political views are made apparent in a conversation with family members and neighbors. Lister's sister Marian is talking about the 1832 Reform Act, which had recently enfranchised a minority of men beyond the landed aristocracy, as a positive political development. Lister dismisses Marian's opinion, turning the topic instead to the fact that as a woman, she is excluded from voting, despite being the landlord of male tenants who are now able to vote. Lister's denigration of her sister is portrayed as part of her charm, and when she asks, "Has my sister been entertaining you all with her turgid and uninformed opinions about the Reform Bill?" (Wainwright, 2019, Episode 1, 00:50:42–00:50:47), the visual focus of the scene is how much Ann Walker is captivated by Lister's magnetic presence. Even though Marian is shown to be irritated by her sister's condescension—she rolls her eyes at the camera in one of the show's characteristic fourth wall breaks—the tension is framed as an interpersonal one between siblings rather than a critique of Lister's politics.

Another set of narrative choices in framing Lister's class privilege concerns her relationships with her tenants. The series premiere shows Lister as a landlord determined to collect rent that has fallen into arrears under her father's lax supervision. When she secures a large amount of such rent from one tenant, Sam Sowden, and demands that he make repairs to the house to her satisfaction, he is furious, threatening, "There'll come a time, when the tenants throw the landlords off the land. You know that, don't you?" Lister gets into his face and replies, "Well then, Sowden. When the time comes, us landlords must make sure we give as good as we get" (Wainwright, 2019, Episode 1, 00:33:49–00:34:15). The exchange is set up to show Lister as a firm but reasonable landlord, while Sowden's menacing appears to be motivated by misogyny as well as class animus; indeed, we learn from other scenes that he is physically and verbally abusive to his wife and children. Later in the season, Sowden's son murders him, and his sudden disappearance leaves the family fearing eviction, but they are gratefully happy when Lister extends their tenancy. In a different plotline not based on any event chronicled in Lister's diaries, the son of another tenant suffers a severe injury after falling from a

¹¹ Time stamps for episode dialogue are for the BBC-aired episodes. Times may be slightly different for the HBO-aired episodes because of different selections of "Previously on" clips between the two networks and because HBO cut several scenes that had aired on the BBC.

carriage during an accident most likely caused by Lister's business rival, Jeremiah Rawson. Lister visits the boy to see how he is doing and then arranges with a friend to have the boy enrolled in a local school. In trying to find out more about the accident from a witness, Lister comments, "They're my tenants, the Hardcastles. They're my people, and I'd like to know the truth" (Wainwright & Harding, 2019, Episode 4, 00:07:00–00:07:07). As fictionalized storylines, these narrative elements are intended to flesh out the characterization of Lister, and in this respect, Lister comes across as fair and benevolent; that is, while she is not in favor of allowing her commoner tenants to exercise political agency, she nevertheless displays a reliable patrician concern for their welfare.

Lister's passion for travel forms another key thread on *GJ* that highlights her gender nonconformity while leaving her privileges of class, race, and nationality largely unaddressed. Drawing from her journals, the show depicts some of Lister's sojourns to locations in Great Britain, including the coastal town of Hastings, the larger town of York, and London, as well as through France, Germany, and Denmark. Her trip to Europe illustrates Lister bucking gender convention when she decides to travel without escort, aside from two servants—unusual, as another character observes, for "a woman of your rank" (Wainwright, 2019, Episode 8, 00:01:46–00:01:52). Importantly, Lister's travels also construct her cosmopolitanism, which is part of her appeal to Walker (and viewers). In 1.02, during their first significant conversation, Lister regales a captivated Walker with tales of her past experiences of Paris, which included living on the Left Bank and studying anatomy with a renowned scientist (Georges Cuvier). Walker is also starry-eyed in 1.03, when Lister invites her to travel with her to Italy and Switzerland, particularly because Walker herself has never been abroad. Episode 1.08 shows Lister socializing with well-heeled friends during her European trip, even meeting the Queen of Denmark at a formal gathering in Copenhagen.

Though most of the episode segments set abroad focus on Lister's interpersonal interactions, various shots appear with appropriate grandeur, such a waterfall outside a German palace, and sumptuous interior scenes at the Frederiksberg Palace, Amsterdam. As discussed, a characteristic of post-heritage drama is a more openly ambivalent lens on the past; thus, even amid the spectacle of lush landscapes and architectural splendor, a greater degree of social critique regarding "the ethos and value systems" (Abbiss, 2020, p. 828) of the past worlds presented is suggested. However, neither the visual nor narrative elements of *GJ* that point to the inequalities undergirding 19th-century European imperial power seem to invite critical evaluation. Rather, they situate Lister within environs grander than Shibden Hall or Walker's estate, and although she never feels fully at home in Europe, her queerness does not exclude her from enjoying the sociality and status of those circles.

As a Briton—even a woman, and a queer one at that—the real-life Lister's status derived from, and comprised, the power structures of British empire, which, among other things, facilitated the mobility of elite British subjects through both British and other territories. Indeed, queer mobilities more generally are implicated in maintaining sociopolitical hierarchies; as Aizura (2018) noted in discussing transgender subjects traveling for medical treatment,

travel and mobility themselves are concepts freighted with the history of global and transnational travel and its representation: Colonial and imperial exploration and

settlement and migration by sea, land, and air . . . travel and migration have opened up capacities for particular subjects but closed down possibilities for others. (p. 3)

Discussions about queer place-making, tourism, and migration have also highlighted that seeking geographical locations more hospitable to expressions of queerness should not be seen simply as liberatory practices that thwart the homophobic or heteronormative realities of home (e.g., see Kam, 2020; Puar, 2002). As Puar (2002) argues, claims of queer space such as “gay ghettos” also occur “in tandem with a claiming of class, gender, and racial privilege as well” (p. 112) that typically goes unacknowledged.

However, as depicted by *GJ*, Lister’s charismatic queerness is bolstered by her facility to go where she pleases, in the manner she desires. The earlier BBC miniseries *Portrait of a Marriage* provides a different example in its depictions of Vita Sackville-West and her lover Violet Trefusis taking multiple excursions together away from Britain, mostly to France. Though set a century later, both were also wealthy White British women, with their trips to Europe allowing them to express their passion for each other in ways they were unable to in England. Although there is no overt critique of their privileges of class, race, and nationality, the women’s romantic relationship ends poorly, and their sojourns from home are also framed as irresponsible indulgence—particularly on the part of Sackville-West, who was married with two young children. On the other hand, on *GJ*, the travel narratives come triumphantly full circle over the course of Season 1: In the premiere, Lister is returning to Halifax after her love interest becomes engaged to a man, while in the finale, Lister returns home from Europe and is finally accepted by Walker, culminating in a commitment ceremony that Lister and Walker conduct between themselves during a regular church service in York. Thus, the narratives of Lister’s travels exemplify now-conventional discourses that assert the liberating potential of mobility for queer agency without interrogating the privilege that undergirds it.

Conclusion

With the relationship between LGBTQ content and prestige on television programming having undergone significant shifts in recent decades, it is useful to examine the representations of a queer protagonist in period drama, a genre long associated with “quality,” within *GJ*’s broader production contexts. As a BBC series, *GJ* has been subject to the UK’s public service regulatory requirements, which in recent years have spurred greater sexual, as well as racial and class, diversity. However, the increases in LGBTQ characters and narratives in multiple genres, not just quality television, also significantly reflect increased competition among networks and the imperative to find new audiences. Thus, the investment of the BBC and HBO in *GJ* no doubt reflects their estimations of audience interest in lush productions of British period narratives more than a commitment to diverse representation per se. Within such conditions are genre-specific characteristics and developments that are particularly pertinent to my analysis. While previous scholarship on period drama, including post-heritage texts, has noted an expansion toward less sexually staid narratives, there has been little theorization about the significance of queer representation in the genre. In addition, there is often an implication that the very presence of LGBTQ characters marks a progressive turn, akin to other characteristics identified with post-heritage texts, such as the interrogation of historical social inequalities.

An interesting tension exists between traditional period drama and quality television more generally around the extent to which a text seriously critiques problematic sociopolitical conditions. Quality television overall has been much more frequently associated with addressing such issues, but *GJ* raises the question of how having a queer protagonist like the show's Anne Lister might shift the character of the period genre in this regard. Lister exemplifies a masculine-of-center lesbian figure who is still relatively uncommon on television, particularly in period dramas, though in the last few years, it has become more common in programs set in contemporary times (e.g., see Davis, 2020). It is on this basis that the show has been received as groundbreaking for a period drama and for queer women on television more generally (e.g., Hogan, 2019); the analysis in this article is not intended to discount the representational significance of having Lister's story realized as a well-funded, prestige television show. However, Lister's gender and sexual nonconformity are interwoven with her class status and British identity in ways that both downplay the problematic elements of such privilege and reinforce the associations of queerness with classed prestige. As I discussed, this stems from the specific narrative and aesthetic elements of the show, but is also buttressed by the fact that the British period genre has long been assigned the "quality" categorization, even when it has been critiqued for its conservatism.

Recent analyses of contemporary period series, such as *The Crown* and *Downton Abbey*, have highlighted their moves away from the characteristics of traditional period drama, and the importance of these innovations in helping to construct their networks' distinct "quality" or "high-end" brands (e.g., see Abbiss, 2020; Chapman, 2014; Redvall, 2019). In considering a post-heritage, quality TV drama such as *GJ*, this article has directed a more critical lens to such "quality," illuminating how queer representation interacts with other prestige elements of the genre and pointing to new avenues for theorizing how LGBTQ content contributes to the status of both period/post-heritage media and British drama overall. Furthermore, in being attentive to both the public service mandates of British television and the quality television mantles of networks such as the BBC and HBO, the article provides a stronger understanding of developments in post-heritage drama toward certain forms of representational diversity. Tying these insights about genre and industry to broader critiques about queer privilege, I underscore how the presentations of Lister's gender and sexual nonconformity are in line with contemporary discourses of queer empowerment that subsume the hierarchies of class, race, and nation in ways consonant with the construction of the BBC's and HBO's cachet. With the continued resurgence of period/post-heritage programming across the televisual landscape (Netflix's race-bent *Bridgerton* series, which premiered in 2020, being one prominent example), this cluster of issues in genre analysis, selective diversity in media representation, and the production of prestige within television should continue to draw scholarly attention.

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