STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXIX, 3, 2024, p. 13 - 28
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2024.3.01

A WOMAN'S TOUCH: QUEERIOD DRAMA AND THE SCENE OF WRITING

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Article history: Received 15 March 2024; Revised 15 August 2024; Accepted 01 September 2024; Available online 30 September 2024; Available print 30 September 2024.

ABSTRACT. ***A Woman's Touch: Queeriod Drama and the Scene of Writing***. This paper addresses the representation of women of the long eighteenth century as writers on the contemporary screen. It focuses on the experimentation with time in such representations, the seeking out of closeness and distance in the past through relationships with 'lost' texts or scenarios. This in two respects: first, the sense of a lost relationship to manuscript and manuscript 'hands' in letters and diaries in the new mediations visual and verbal of the screen; second, the sense of what has been helpfully termed by Elizabeth Freeman 'temporal drag' in the representation of same-sex relationships of the past in our media present. I focus in particular on a recent 'queeriod' drama about the life of Anne Lister, landowner and lesbian: the series *Gentleman Jack* developed and directed from her screenplay by Sally Wainwright (BBC /HBO TV series 1, 2019 and series 2, 2022). I look closely at a scene designed to illustrate intense affect formed in and through writing: a moment when we are invited to feel with, or to be touched by, the feeling of the protagonist. A turning away is also a turning toward, a perception of affect. What is transmitted is feeling itself. Writing itself 'makes' affect rather than representing it.

Keywords: *screen, adaptation, eighteenth century, Anne Lister, queer, mediation, affect*

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REZUMAT. ***O mână de femeie: ecranizările istorice queer şi scena scrierii.*** Articolul examinează modurile în care producţiile mediatice contemporane reprezintă femeile scriitoare din „lungul secol al XVIII-lea." El analizează experimentele temporale din astfel de reprezentări, apropierea şi distanţarea trecutului prin punerea în relaţie cu texte sau scenarii „pierdute". Sunt urmate două direcţii principale: în primul rând, sentimentul de estompare a relaţiei cu manuscrisul şi cu „mâna care scrie" scrisori şi jurnale în noile medieri vizuale şi verbale de pe ecran; în al doilea rând, utila idee propusă de Elizabeth Freeman a unui „glisaj temporal" în reprezentarea relaţiilor dintre personaje de acelaşi sex din trecut în prezentul mediatic. Mă concentrez în special asupra unei recente ecranizări „queeriod" despre viaţa lui Anne Lister, moşieră şi lesbiană: serialul *Gentleman Jack*, creat şi regizat de Sally Wainwright pe baza unui scenariu propriu (BBC/HBO, sezonul 1, 2019; sezonul 2, 2022). Analizez în detaliu o scenă menită să ilustreze afectul intens produs în şi prin scris: un moment care ne invită să simţim împreună cu protagonista, sau să ne lăsăm atinşi de sentimentele ei. Îndepărtarea devine în acelaşi timp apropiere, o percepţie a afectului. Ceea ce se transmite este însuşi actul de a simţi. Scrisul „produce" afectul, nu doar îl reprezintă.

Cuvinte-cheie: *ecran, adaptare, secolul al XVIII-lea, Anne Lister, queer, mediere, afect*

This paper addresses the representation of women of the long eighteenth century as writers on the contemporary screen. It focuses on the experimentation with time in such representations, the seeking out of closeness and distance in the past through relationships with 'lost' texts or scenarios. This in two respects: first, the sense of a lost relationship to manuscript and manuscript 'hands' in letters and diaries in the new mediations visual and verbal of the screen; second, the sense of what has been helpfully termed by Elizabeth Freeman 'temporal drag' in the representation of same-sex relationships of the past in our media present. Freeman describes this as a process of "retrogression, relay, and the pull of the past on the present" as we both distantiate from and identify with historical 'queer desire' (Freeman 2010, 8).

I consider a recent 'queeriod' drama about the life of Anne Lister (1791-1840), landowner and lesbian: the series *Gentleman Jack* developed and directed from her own screenplay by British screenwriter Sally Wainwright for two series, the first screened on British and American television in 2019 and the second in 2022). Anne was a prolific letter-writer and diarist, recording her business dealings, wide-ranging reading in philosophy, science and classical literature, her extensive travels, alongside her sexual and romantic liaisons. I look closely

at a scene from the first series designed to illustrate intense affect formed in and through writing: a moment when we are invited to feel with, or to be touched by, the feeling of the queer protagonist.

The act of writing is an act of touch – hand on pen, pen to paper. This representation of haptic experience has an oddly distancing effect. When we watch a writer writing on screen we are reminded of a medium that we are *not* experiencing and the protagonist here turns away from their intersubjective relationship with *us* as their screen recipients and the other bodies who perform with them on screen to a different form of mediation. This is especially true of the diary—in which the 'postal principle' as Sybille Krämer terms it is entirely circular: the message remediates a self to the self. The absorptive process of reading letters and writing diaries involves a visible turning away from one form of mediation to another which appears to exclude an audience.

Paradoxically, these moments of writing in which hand touches another surface are also moments of display usually of intense feeling, moments in which we are invited to feel with, or to be touched by, the feeling of the protagonist. A turning away is also a turning toward, a perception of affect. What is transmitted is feeling itself. The medium of feeling becomes the writing body and, according to Sybille Krämer's thinking, the medium becomes the "generative and hence conditional mechanism" (35) of that message. Writing itself makes affect rather than representing it.

Anne Lister is one example among many of women of the long eighteenth century who are mediated to us on screen through their representation as writers, writers who speak to an audience across time from the past in their manuscript writings. Anne Lister was born in Halifax, England, in 1791 and died at the age of 49 in Georgia, Eastern Europe, in 1840. Anne wrote a detailed diary of her daily life and left behind twenty-six volumes of 7,722 pages. The diaries give a great insight into Anne's life as a landowner, business woman, intrepid traveller, mountaineer and lesbian. These diaries, travel notes and letters are held by West Yorkshire Archives. In 2018 the diaries and travel notes of Anne Lister were conserved and digitized by Calderdale Museums in conjunction with West Yorkshire Joint Archive Services, who house them, funded by Sally Wainwright, screenwriter and director, from the Wellcome Trust Screenwriters Fellowship." Over five million words in Lister's manuscript hand are being transcribed by a team of volunteer code breakers and these are being added to the catalogues of West Yorkshire Archive Service and are freely available to view as they appear.[2]

[2] See West Yorkshire Archive Service. (https://www.catalogue.wyjs.org.uk). And 'Packed with Potential' website for researchers of Anne Lister and her circle launched in 2019. https://www.packedwithpotential.org. Both accessed 13 March 2024.

The diaries from the early 1830s and Anne Lister's romance with neighbouring heiress in Halifax, Ann Walker, provide the basis for Wainwright's two series, along with books about her life by Anne Choma, Jill Liddington and published collections of some of her diary writing by Helena Whitbread.

Wainwright's series is based on Anne's actual writings—it is a form of 'adaptation'. Critic Linda Hutcheon provides a helpful inclusive and expansive definition of 'adaptation': "Adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (*as adaptations*) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (Hutcheon, 7-8). So between every new treatment of a historical moment and our historical present there will be a number of intertexts (visual and verbal) that overwrite and are potential reference points (like a time-traveller's sense of multiple alternative worlds).

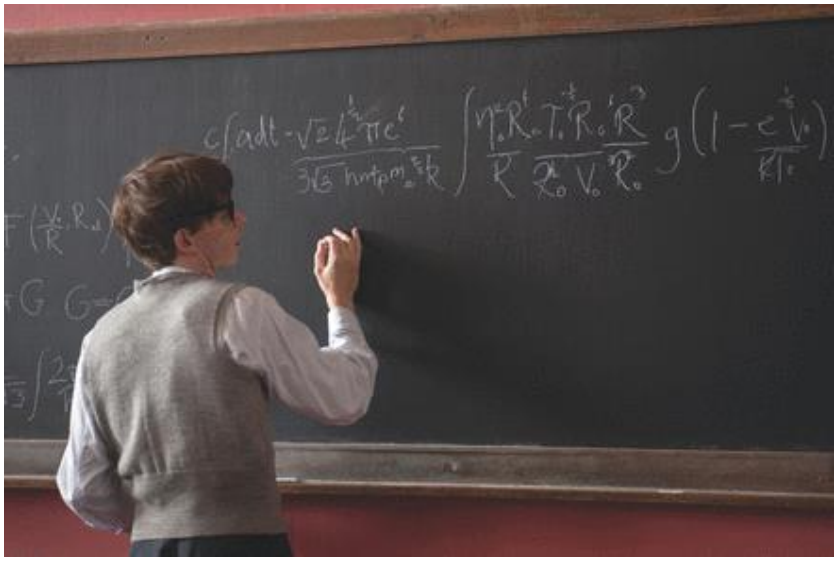
To what extent does the past have a potentiality to adapt itself? What hidden futures does it carry that it might not – in its own moment – have recognised? Our consumption of any art form is not an attempt to return to the actual moment of its production but an aesthetic experience put together by a mixture of intertexts, allusions and references publicly and privately known.

We might more properly call the screen treatment of Anne Lister a historiographical metafiction (a phrase coined by the same theorist Linda Hutcheon)—historiographical metafictions are works that speculate on their own adaptation of the historical past as they represent it. And they draw on a variety of materials and expertise in their making. So, there are often textual 'sources' behind such works, especially modern or less modern biographies but also primary texts. However, they are not 'adapted' for the screen so much as texts with which these often self-consciously anachronistic or asynchronous fictions are in dialogue. For example, screen writer and director Sally Wainwright describes her series as 'inspired by' Anne Lister's diaries pointing us to the aesthetic autonomy of the screen fiction from its 'sources'.

Writing might seem to be a difficult thing to treat in a form that is mainly visual and spoken. When we watch characters write they seem to withdraw from us as viewers, to enter their own private worlds. How do women writing women writing overcome this sense of the written text as the least amenable to the screen of any form of text? Painting, gesture, music, speech, all promote connection and communication with an audience where 'writing' often seems to promote separation and apartness.

Turning points: the gendered touch of the equation and the manuscript

I have been repeatedly struck by the similarity and the difference between the representation of forms of knowing traditionally associated with men and women. Put simply, men of genius are frequently depicted immersively preoccupied in figuring out equations in classrooms and women of genius are equally frequently depicted immersively preoccupied in writing at their desks or in their rooms. Some of this has to do with men's access to institutions of learning in the past by comparison with women's experience of being educated, if at all, in homes. Compare for instance two film treatments of gendered genius: inspired physicist Steven Hawking works out his equations in *The Theory of Everything* on a blackboard, while author Jo in Greta Gerwig's adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* spreads out her handwritten pages on the floor of an attic. In both cases, brilliant minds build order from multiple elements.



The Theory of Everything. 2014. Directed by James Marsh, screenplay Anthony McCarten, Working Title Films.

Little Women. 2019. Directed and screenplay by Greta Gerwig. Columbia Pictures

Such screen moments are also usually narrative 'turning points'—the point of the pen and the end of the chalk mark a moment of self-actualisation, when the genius of the protagonist becomes apparent to them and to us as audience.

This is not an absolute rule (nothing is), and indeed film makers like to play with disturbing those conventions. Two films provide example that self-consciously want to upend those conventions of class, sex and race privilege: *Hidden Figures* (2016) giving us the black women who served as 'computers' in the early days of NASA for space travel proving their genius in figuring equations at the blackboard and Lin Manuel Miranda's presentation of immigrant male creatives composing letters and pamphlets through casting black and mixed race actors in the roles of the white founding fathers of America in his *Hamilton* (2015). In both these cases, however, film-makers point out the *unusualness* of such behaviour or casting in relation to the task or script: we know that the invisible labour of black women often underpins economic advance and goes unacknowledged and that literacy was a contested issue in the emancipation of slave populations in America.

These acts of writing and scribing (whether the equation or the poem or the novel) often have a difficult or unwarranted effect for the viewers of screen drama. They seem to turn the character away from an intersubjective relationship

with other characters and with the screen audience and make them peculiarly opaque and introspective. They are so preoccupied with the mechanics and the affect of these outdated technologies—the blackboard and the notebook—that they don't seem to be in our time and with us. And of course 'reading' text is not an especially popular or attractive or experimental element in screen representation. Those summaries of 'what happened next' at the end of a biographical drama, or the introductory text that rolls over the screen as we start a film rarely attract our attention or stick in our memory. Sybille Krämer explains that the aim of media is to promote its own disappearance from the view of its audience in order to fulfil the postal principle of its transmission:

> A medium's success thus depends on its disappearance, and mediation is designed to make what is mediated appear unmediated. The perceptibility of the message, or the appearance of what is mediated, is thus inversely proportional to the imperceptibility of the messenger, or the disappearance of the mediator. (31)

The presence of explicatory text, the presence of writing, is more obtrusive and less likely to build a relationship in screen drama than the use of voice. Hence, voiceover in which a narrator tells us where we are and intervenes to move narrative on or speculate on it is a longstanding (but still perceptible) device. Preference often lies in giving the voice of the narrator found in a written source to characters; this is a particularly common technique in adaptations of Jane Austen's novels for the screen. Patricia Rozema, for example, in her adaptation of *Mansfield Park* (1999) gave much of Austen's narrative voice to her protagonist, Fanny Price.

In any choice, however, what remains is the metafictional reminder of the presence of the medium itself and the introduction of distance from the haptic 'touch' of affect built between character and audience, as the 'writer' turns away from us and from their physical proximity to other bodies on screen to another surface than the screen, the page or the blackboard/whiteboard.

So how and in what ways can we see screen drama 'adaptations' overcoming the resistant retrogressive implications of 'writing' in their treatment of writing women? Not only in terms of the representation of an outworn medium or a medium that seems somehow antithetical to screen treatment, but also in terms of a sense of the conventionality of the woman writing: an act of domestic privacy and withdrawal that is too often understood as a 'hidden' form of resistance to inequality, a technique of release or 'expression' only to the self rather than an act of performance or public expression?

Conspiracy, Conspiring, Courting: Queen Anne and *The Favourite*

These hidden 'turned away' aspects of writing (especially in letters and diaries) often feature in screen treatments as forms of partisan political alongside or as well as mediators of erotic experience. This is especially true for screen treatments of the eighteenth century where screen 'adaptations' of writing by women of the period invites us to think (differently) about their hidden agency in history. Think of Catherine the Great's prolific letter writing as a form of political collaboration and ally-building in the recent television series *The Great* (2020-2024), or the letters of the conspirators in Choderlos de Laclos' *Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) working together to seduce and corrupt a complacent bourgeoisie in pre-Revolutionary France, adapted into a stage play and later a film with great success.

To illustrate this presentation of women's writing as a form of political agency in period drama, let us consider a recent queeriod screen treatment of the eighteenth century and women who wrote (letters) and, coincidentally perhaps, another Anne. I had long thought that Queen Anne (monarch of England 1701-1714) was an impossible subject for biographical representation on stage, page and screen: profoundly dull, difficult, a pawn in high court politics and a sad story of a failed maternity that also put the future of government at risk. However, Frances Harris' magnificent biography *A Passion for Government. The Life of Sarah Duchess of Marlborough* (1991) shed new light on Anne's court as a place of female influence and intrigue. Helen Edmundsen wrote a successful play performed at Stratford: *Queen Anne* presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2015 and directed by Natalie Abrahami. The play was a riot of energy and focussed on the close relationship between Anne and her childhood friend, Sarah Churchill, who became the wife of the Duke of Marlborough and wielded huge influence and wealth as leading mover behind the Whig party in the early decades of the eighteenth century. Powerful women win powerful enemies and one way that Sarah's political enemies sought to undermine her was by suggesting that she and Anne were lesbian lovers. Equally Sarah's major rival and the tool of the Tory opposition against her influence, Abigail Masham, was accused of seducing Anne from her Whig loyalties through sexual pleasure. That Sarah and Anne maintained a long correspondence under the suggestive pet-names of Mrs Morgan (Sarah) and Mrs Freeman (Anne) before they fell out in 1710 only helps to add to the salacious interest or possibility. All of this comes together in a rich cocktail of a film, profoundly ambivalent about whether it celebrates lesbianism or participates in the toxic lesbian slur against powerful women: *The Favourite*, co-produced and directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, from a screenplay by Deborah Davis and Tony McNamara, 2018. A gun-toting,

breeches- and eye-patch-wearing hard-as-nails performance by attractive actress Rachel Weisz does plenty to foster the kind of sapphic gaze that has had equal attractions in the butch treatment of Anne Lister in *Gentleman Jack*. Sarah Churchill gathers the letters that Anne sent her in their correspondence as Mrs Morley (Anne) and Mrs Freeman (Sarah) having threatened to publish them if Anne does not comply with her request to remove her new favourite Abigail Masham from office. She chooses to burn rather than publish them but is still dismissed from court with no more cards to play.

The Favourite still, co-produced and directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, from a screenplay by Deborah Davis and Tony McNamara, 2018

The presence of writing as witness of court intrigue and women's part in it is an important element in historical drama. Think of the related drama, the television series of *The Great* spinning fiction around another powerful eighteenth-century Queen known to be a prolific letter writer who attracted sexual gossip. Australian playwright Tony McNamara was commissioned by the Greek director Lanthimos to co-write the script for *The Favourite* with Deborah Davis because Lanthimos admired McNamara's play about Catherine the Great based on Catherine's witty, learned correspondence. After *The Favourite's* release, McNamara built on his play to produce the script for the series titled *The Great.* The circulation of letters as a means of connecting women in

gynocentric resistance to predatory environments acquires additional valence in the context of 'queeriod' drama in which powerful women are seen as deploying letters and their circulation in order to gain control of, and access to, the bodies of other women for their pleasure or power. It also generates a measure of discomfort about the complicity that is built between intradiegetic letter writer and extradiegetic audience. The direct-to-camera address of Anne Lister in *Gentleman Jack* fosters this sense of viewing from the main protagonist's point of view and participating in her enjoyment in flirtation. What happens though when we find her writing in her diaries or writing letters where we are excluded from the content of the message and do not share in its circulation? Such writing is designed for others, or serves as a means of self-reflection, to neither of which we are privy. Her audience is invited to adopt a position of distance, potentially irony, or to recognise the inaccessibility of the interior lives of figures in the past precisely at the point that they are represented as setting down an intimate record of them.

Gentleman Jack still, 2019 season 1, Written and directed Sally Wainwright. BBC/HBO.

Cool and hot: Gentleman Jack's queer theatricality

In this section I want to return to that question of whether the past secretes potentialities that modern adaptation or treatments might 'mobilise'. And also relate it to the sense that 'writing' needs to be re-mediated in screen representation and to be translated into the terms and codes of a screen

economy which is a mixture of the visual and the verbal, and largely spoken. Writing, I have argued, has proved a strangely resistant form or mode for the communication of affect and intersubjective connection on film. I concentrate on the representation of the secreted potentiality to 'show' lesbian connection that women in the eighteenth century knew full well was only protected legally and ideologically by its apparent *illegibility* and hence *invisibility.* Anne Lister's sexual life was enabled it appears—even or despite her public eccentricities as a woman who adopted characteristics of male dress—because of the impossibility of thinking lesbian sexuality for the majority of her contemporaries.

Ilia Ryzhenko speaks of 'hot' theatricality as a vehicle for productive anachronism in a 2022 essay about *The Favourite.* Hot theatricality is for Rynchenko a moment of asynchrony that is confrontational and purposely jarring for its audience.

> It makes sense to speak of instances of cinematic theatricality as 'hot' or 'cool' […]. Hot theatricality refers to the kind of flashy theatricality that disrupts the barrier between the diegetic world of the film and the spatio-temporal conditions of its audience (direct address of fictional characters to the audience is an obvious example), leaving no ambiguity about the fact that the film is aware of both its artificiality and the presence of its viewers. Cool theatricality, by contrast, produces complex signs that may reveal themselves as acknowledging the audience vaguely, or upon interpretation against the grain of the text, and are generally less aggressive and obtrusive. (359)

There is plenty of 'cool' theatricality in *Gentleman Jack*. An obvious example occurs in series 2, episode 5 where Anne Lister, over the dinner table at Shibden, pontificating on political unrest, gives a wonderful impersonation of Margaret Thatcher's voice, intonation and demotic tone in her first public address as prime minister on 4 May 1979. The line 'where there is discord, may we bring harmony' spoken by a woman seems anachronistic (Anne Lister could not of course have known Margaret Thatcher). Anne though turns to the camera and reminds us that these lines are taken from a prayer by St Francis of Assisi, just the kind of pious voice Anne Lister would have known well. By a comical reversal, the audience might now speculate that Margaret Thatcher might be comically impersonating Anne Lister, or Suranne Jones the actress' portrayal of her.

But hot theatricality takes the self-reflexive awareness of the queer attractions of past lesbian lives to an audience alert to secret meaning a step further: hot theatricality purposely invites us as viewers to both distantiate and identify with a historical past in which lesbianism is apparently 'invisible' to the social world in which it is happening right under everyone's eyes. These moments of hot theatricality invite us to sympathise with a character otherwise

unsympathetic in their autocratic treatment of social inferiors (Queen Anne or Anne Lister) because they allow us to witness them potentially witnessing a future where lesbianism would be visible.

Episode 4 of the first series of *Gentleman Jack* gave us one of the earliest occasions of Anne Lister's voiceover, ostensibly taken from her diary itself. This might seem to be the most traditional of moments for a period adaptation: music and narrative voiceover traditionally orient the affect and point of view of audience in period drama. We have so far largely 'heard' Anne through her address to us through the camera. Now we see her in conflict with herself as the voiceover of her diary struggles to perform an act of will to overcome feelings that have become too difficult for her. This is I suggest a scene of 'hot theatricality' because it breaks that sense of our own confidence that we 'know' Anne's game, as she confides in us about her tactics in winning over Ann Walker and her fortune.

The sequence of scenes begins in Ann Walker's bedchamber where we find her hesitating over whether to accept a likely proposal from the widower of her best friend after a night of pleasure with her lover Anne Lister. Anne Lister tells Ann Walker that she will give her the weekend to decide and to let her know by Monday April 3 (the actual date of Anne Lister's birthday). Ann Walker is full of anxiety and hopes their friendship could continue after marriage but Anne Lister is clear it must be a clean break or none at all. As Anne Lister collects her clothes scattered around the room, we hear her voiceover from her diary. " 'Well', said I to myself as I walked off, 'a pretty scene we've had' and 'I will be easily reconciled either way'." However, she is crying, her hand trembling and her shirt is loose. These lines are indeed Anne Lister's although in Lister's account it was Ann Walker who asked for the weekend to be alone and consider after the two spent an unhappy night together on Thursday night, the pair parting on the Friday morning. On 2 November 1832, Anne Lister wrote in her journal: "Well said I to myself as I walked off a pretty scene we have had but surely I care not much and shall take my time of suspense very quietly and be easily reconciled either way" (*Diary* full transcript, vol. 15, p. 268).

Having delivered this ultimatum we see Anne Lister back at her desk scribbling her account of the exchange at her writing desk, her hand trembling and her hair disordered. She rushes from her writing desk to a chamber pot under the table to vomit and she rages (presumably at her God whom she has earlier insisted does not judge her innate lesbian instincts) "Don't do this to me" "Don't you dare do this to me again". Here, Anne recalls earlier losses (Vere Talbot is recalled in earlier episodes) of lesbian partners to heterosexual marriage. But we are also asked to recognise that writing is not merely 'expressive', that the screen may allow us to 'see' what writing tries to screen. If Anne insists this

is a 'pretty scene' and she can live with her lover's decision quite easily in her *writing*, her bodily performance on screen contradicts those claims: the hand that writes visibly shakes, she finds herself vomiting uncontrollably. Now it seems a screen representation invites us to see a 'truth' that writing is designed to screen. Or—for a literalist concerned with truth to record or to what seems to be a reasonable interpretation of the source material in adaptation—*Gentleman Jack* misinterprets the evidence that Anne Lister was keen to be rid of Ann Walker whose attachment to her had become a burden. Or—and perhaps more reasonably—*Gentleman Jack* offers its own interpretation that Anne Lister may not have indeed known her *own* feelings and may have represented her feelings to herself in her own writing—a journal supposedly revealing those truths—strategically in order to manage her feelings (or try to conceal them from herself). The screen version offers an ironic perspective—it reads between the lines. So this too is an instance of what we can call 'hot theatricality'—the 'adaptation' of the past which invites our present reflection on what it is to 'know' our own and another's shifts of attachment and identification. Anne Lister's assertion 'I know my own heart' is here put under pressure. Some ten years before this incident on 20 August 1823 Anne quoted Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* in her journal: "I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. But I am made unlike anyone I have ever met. I dare to say that I am like no one in the whole world" (*Diary*, vol. 7 full transcript, p. 101). Anne may have 'known' that she was exclusively attracted to other women, but a narrative dramatic treatment can remind us that any person of any sexuality may not always succeed in being entirely 'honest' with themselves: especially, indeed, in the scene of their most intimate writing, the place of confessional composition of the self.

I return to this issue of what is screened and what is shown in queeriod drama to conclude. The 'screen' is a term much used in the eighteenth century. In our modern parlance 'screen' refers to the screened works of both television and film. But is also and still something which stands in front of something else. A screen both protects (from the heat of the fire) and hides (from public exposure). We might think of the film of *Emma* (2020) which concludes with Emma and Knightley 'screened' from Mr Woodhouse who is attempting to get warm beside the fire as they plan for their future together. The queeriod drama makes more complex this sense of providing access to interior lives, lives lived secretly in the interior of the historical moment, in period drama. Think of the recent adaptation by Sara Collins of her own novel, *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* for ITV. The actress Karla Simone-Spence playing Frannie, a queer and black character, frequently moves into the light (toward a window, toward the camera) to reveal her crying face—and she is a remarkable and moving weeper. This both marks or signifies this moment now in screen history where non-white actors can take

the 'lead' role and be the bearer of affect, but it also often seems also to signify the requirement that this affect be comfortable and familiar to the audience (Frannie is educated, literate, a servant not a slave, teller of her own tale).

Should we recognise these screen experiments in the capacity of the black or queer protagonist to take the place of the traditionally white feeling figure of heritage screen drama—as forms of metatextual representation of the kind of racial 'experiments' that the drama (and its source text) indict: experiments that are explicitly recognised as performed by those seeking to secure white privilege even in the process of advocating for and implementing abolition? The liberal turn to the present in these screen and stage treatments may also be a way of wilfully obscuring or screening the more uncomfortable stories of this formative period in history. Here, multi-culturalism, trans and queer identities feel like 'new' or 'additional' presences in a familiar structure, defusing the 'heat' of their asynchrony.

So the traditional close up of the white, heterosexual woman on screen who 'transmits' affect for a willing and waiting audience is self-consciously and theatrically reworked in modern screen adaptations. The faces of women of colour, women who love other women, women who were assigned male sexual identities at birth, take the place of those figures and become the agents of writing and the mediators of affect. Sybille Krämer's media philosophy though might make us think a little more sceptically about this apparently progressive move. In the end, we might ask, is this about democratising a medium or simply shoring up its capacity to mediate, securing its power as what she terms 'a quasi-sovereign actor' and its authority in forming 'constitutive conditional relationship'. Here the 'erotic' principle is revealed to screen a postal one: the medium's transmission of its constitutive command of 'affect' itself. The medium is both then, and always, as Krämer so deftly demonstrates, both parasite (occupying and feeding off the bodies that are its host) and angel (the body that disappears in the act of transmission): "The angel and the parasite not only complement each other; rather, to be more precise, it is necessary to recognize that one-sidedness and non-reciprocity are inherent to two-sidedness and reciprocity" (Krämer 2015, 62).

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