

Abstract

Research Paper: Adapting Anne Lister: from Diaries to Period Dramas to Decoded Queerness

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The use of theatre and film/television dedicated to period or heritage productions brings historic realities to modern audiences. Contemporary adaptations that showcase the lives of real queer figures from the past allow the modern public to re-envision queer history. In depicting a reality where individuals existed and explored their own identities, gender expressions, and sexualities outside of social norms, period dramas engage in the decoding of queer history. This process of decoding queer history is reflected in the adaptations of Anne Lister, a queer nineteenth-century heiress who kept detailed and coded diaries about her life. Adaptations such as Emma Donoghue's *I Know My Own Heart* (1993) and Sally Wainwright's *Gentleman Jack* (2019) engage in multiple layers of 'decoding' not only to reveal the hidden parts of Lister's life, but also to emphasize the practice of hiding queer desire. In this sense, the shows visually showcase the entire process of feeling, enacting, and masking queer desire. Although people from the past could ignore or deny Lister's sexuality, contemporary audiences cannot.

My analysis of Donoghue's *I Know My Own Heart* and Wainwright's *Gentleman Jack* focuses on how the shows decode Lister's diaries to offer contemporary audiences with a vision of the past that has long been ignored. In doing so, I join queer studies scholars and historians such as John D'Emilio and Regina Kunzel in examining the influence of uncovering queer

history. Accordingly, I analyze the different tactics and devices used within the two adaptations to translate, interpret, and illustrate Lister's diaries and consider how they contribute to modern understandings of queerness. Ultimately, I argue that *I Know My Own Heart* and *Gentleman Jack* adapt Anne Lister's diaries to acknowledge and emphasize the presence of queer existence, language, and culture within nineteenth-century England and, decode the past for the present.