“I’ve all the world in thee”: Lesbian Poetics and Discourses of Sexuality in the Long Eighteenth Century

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“No bridegroom’s nor crown-conqueror’s mirth/To mine compared can be:/They have but pieces of the earth,/I’ve all the world in thee,”¹ wrote poet Katherine Philips to a close friend she nicknamed “Lucasia.” Posthumously appointed the “English Sappho” by her contemporaries after her tragically early death, Philips was only the first in a line of several women poets living in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries who wrote equally passionate verses describing other women—what, today, we might identify as lesbian poetry. Decades later, Charlotte Charke penned an autobiography detailing her life, including a time during which she assumed the name “Charles Brown” and lived with a woman she called “Mrs. Brown.”

At the same time, public discourse was constructing a sort of spectre of the lesbian or “tribade,” as they were termed at the time. As outlined in both pseudo-medical pamphlets speculating on lesbian bodies and short stories detailing swashbuckling lesbians who wore men’s clothing in order to marry women, this dangerous and lascivious tribade would teach other woman how to pleasure themselves and that sex could be pleasure-rather than reproduction-driven, thereby upsetting heteropatriarchal society and solidifying women’s sexual autonomy.²

How were lesbian writers articulating their feelings against a wider perception of them as monstrous and predatory? How did they code their erotic and romantic feelings into their writings in order to avoid being publicly lambasted, while at the same time, reaching women who were like them? It is these essential questions, among others, that my project assesses.

In my project, I attempt to draw patterns from the evident discourses in order to answer these questions. Using both poetry and prose works by lesbians as well as fiction and anatomical texts written by outsiders, I work to answer the above questions in order to understand how lesbians were responding in writing to an exaggerated social caricature they had no control over.

Poets responded to this by articulating wishes to transcend the body completely and coding critiques of heterosexuality in works troubling the definitions of love and friendship. Charlotte Charke works around these stereotypes by expressing immense guilt and taking a confessional tone. In their responses, each of these writers demonstrates a pattern of working specifically against the overwritten physicality imposed on them by sensationalizing texts, placing expressions of their desires and emotions on levels not immediately apparent to the heterosexual reader.