

Alice: Hello everyone and welcome to Queer as fact, a queer history podcast. I'm Alice

Hamish: I'm Hamish

Irene: I'm Irene

A: We're a fortnightly podcast and each week one of us will talk about a person, a place or a period from queer history. This week I will be talking about Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake who were two women who lived essentially as a married couple in the USA in the early eighteenth century

[Music plays]

A: Charity Bryant was the older of the two, Sylvia and Charity, so I am going to talk about her first. She was born on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May in 1777 in North Bridgewater in Massachusetts, so she was born in the third year of the American war of independence and that's going to be important because all the, like republican ideals about, like, independence and fraternity and stuff affect how she lives her life and are really important at the time. She's the youngest of eight children

I: That is too many children

A: That is too many children. These are puritans in the early eighteenth-century, they're all gonna have too many kids

I: Cool, I'll get -

A: That's the situation

I: prepared for that

H: Is - What was the average number of kids at the time? Was that, like, slightly too many children or, like, a normal number of children or

A: I --

H: or not enough children?

A: I'm not sure but Sylvia's also the youngest of eight children

H: Okay

A: and most of their siblings have eight or more children

H: Okay

A: So Sylvia has seven siblings and between them they have 64 kids

H: Okay, that's -

A: So she came from a small family, of eight children. Um, her mother died of T.B. a couple of months after she was born and her father remarried to a woman called Hannah Richards who was not very nice to the kids, they didn't get along well, and so she was very close to all her siblings but by time she was fifteen they had all moved out of home because of the conflict between them and their stepmother, and also between them and their father.

I: He made some poor choices.

A: Yeah, he apparently wasn't very nice either. He, um, presented like a good public face but in their – in the kids' letters to each other they're like "Yeah, our dad has an awful temper and I'm really sorry you have to deal with him." So, like, their parents aren't great. So in 1797 when she was twenty Charity's dad kicked her out of home. We don't actually know why he kicked her out of home but probably it was because she was showing no interest in getting married and because she may have been having a relationship with a girl who lived near her.

I: So, it's like "I'm going to kick you out of home. I was hoping you were going to leave of your own accord by getting married but you're not..."

H: That -- We discussed this in the last episode where [inaudible] I don't know if he was able to support her or if he was

A: Yeah

H: being a dick or if he was... because that was definitely, like, a thing they did whereby your children getting married and leaving and then supporting themselves by, you know, becoming part of another family and germinating off was a thing.

I: Yeah

A: Yeah, so it would have been very hard for her family to support her if she stayed single for her whole life. She had a -- so, their family was pretty well off but she did have an aunt, who was also called charity, who died in a poorhouse because she never got married and they just couldn't afford to support her. Yeah, there was a reason that he really wanted her to get married

I: How did they manage to raise eight children if they can't afford to support one single woman?

A: That is a very good question. The girls married pretty young and moved away and the boys also moved away for work as soon as they could.

I: They still raised eight children for a while there, like, this still isn't gonna add up.

H: Yeah, that's true but it –

A: Yeah

H: There's definitely that thing where children in a time where scarcity is rampant and it's it's hard to get around and live are a sort of a calculated risk where eventually you will get old and even if they can't give you their kidneys yet they can give you their houses and their their hospitality and their support when you can no longer farm or work, which is not something that you could <6> otherwise </6> support yourself in and so people raise large families hoping that their progeny will be able to support them.

I: Well in that case she has -- Charity has value as a single woman at home.

A: She does, but they're -- can't afford to keep her or they're possibly upset about her pursuing relationships with other women. We don't have an actual record of why they kicked her out, these are

just the probable reasons. Yeah, I'm not saying that her parents were great people. Her letters show that they were not great people.

I: Okay, continue.

A: But I'm saying that this might have been some of their reasoning. So another reason that it was seen as important at the time for girls to marry was that in the republic they were really focused on being good citizens. For men that meant, like, participating in politics and voting (if you owned land, and were white) and for women that meant producing sons who could be good citizens. So for a woman to get married and have sons was the way to be a good citizen. So that also informs why her family wanted her to get married.

H: [Sarcastically] Hooray, the past.

A: [Sarcastically] Hooray.

I: [Sarcastically] Yes.

A: So, her father kicks her out and she goes to live with her sister Anna and Anna's husband Henry who live about fifty kilometres or thirty miles away, which is a long way. While she was living with Anna charity supported herself by becoming a schoolteacher. She wasn't actually particularly interested in educating her students, she didn't really care about her students, but being a schoolteacher at the time was one of the few ways that a woman could become financially independent and at the same time maintain respectability. So women working in other jobs was seen as, you know, "You're out in the world in the public sphere and that's really inappropriate" but if you're in a schoolhouse with kids then women are supposed to look after kids so that was seen as more okay. But it also appealed to Charity because a lot of young women at the time were becoming schoolteachers and so it was a place for her to meet other likeminded young women who were independent, educated and also potentially queer.

I: I was going to say, when you say "Likeminded young women" you mean that she's hoping to, like, hook up with people.

A: Yeah, she became a schoolteacher to pick up. There are books at the time, like, there was a dictionary I read, a dictionary of, like, seventeenth century slang that defined the word dildo and it was like, "A dildo is a phallic object made of whatever they made dildos of at the time used by schoolmistresses and nuns.

[Laughter]

A: To be like, this is what these women are doing with each other.

H: Is that just because of the -- the like, frigid schoolmistress trope would that exist then?

I: Yeah, I don't think they meant, like, "This is what these women are doing with each other", I think they meant "These women aren't getting sexual fulfilment from a man, this is how they're masturbating.

[Short laugh]

A: Okay, that was one example. There are a lot of other, like, there are pornographic novels at the time and as well things that aren't porn but they're genuinely just like, diaries and stuff of women who were schoolmistresses talking about the lesbian sex they had.

I: So basically becoming a schoolteacher is, like, a lesbian subculture thing.

A: Yeah, pretty much.

I: Weird, nobody told me this.

A: Well, this is why they all, like, ask you if you're going to go into teaching when you tell them that you do an arts degree.

I: I'll look on them more favourably next time. I'll assume it's a pickup line.

A: Yeah, it's a pickup line. "Oh hey, are you in to [suggestively] teaching."

[Laughter]

A: So, umm, she forms a lot of close friendships with her fellow schoolteachers.

I: [Suggestively] Close friendships?

A: I'm getting to that. A lot of close friendships and a lot which are... They're never explicitly sexual because she destroyed a lot of her letters and diaries so we're missing out.

H: [Suggestively] But she did destroy a lot of her letters and diaries.

[Laughter]

A: Yes

I: Yes

A: Because they destroyed a lot of letters and also, like there's a lot of letters that remain that are euphemistic and if you know the context of, you know, they'll quote literary sources that if you read the next paragraph after the one she quoted they're having sex. So it's pretty clear from her interactions with a lot of these women that –

I: They're having sex

A: They're having sex. They're in romantic and sexual relationships. From the outside these close relationships would not have seemed that unusual. The idea of these close, like, one-on-one intimate friendships between young people of the same gender was encouraged because it fit with the idea of fraternity as being a very important part of the foundation of the American republic.

I: I see...

A: It was contrasted with, like, loyalty to the monarch. Like I said before the, possibility that they were having sex is also there and it was definitely recognised at the time. These books I talked about like this dictionary or these pornographic novels were about lesbian schoolmistresses. Like, society as a whole knew that there could be lesbian schoolmistresses but because sex and romance were less closely linked than we link them today people wouldn't have looked at these relationships and just immediately gone, "Oh yes, they are having sex."

I: Yeah

A: So, generally they could get away with this and this was a good space for young queer women to explore their sexuality, meet other young queer women and form relationships. And outside concern really only arose once they started prioritising these friendships over marriages and turning down suitors because they didn't want to leave their friends.

I: So, what you're basically saying it that the, sort of, romantic friendship – the, like, same gender romantic friendship situation here is, like, a practice run for marriage.

A: I... never read it in those terms but, like, yeah?

I: Okay, because that's a sort of familiar thing that I have run into in other places. There's that kind of "Queer relationships are acceptable when you're young."

A: Mmm... Yeah, they were definitely accepted to be one-on-one relationships. They would exhibit jealousy when, [Indignantly] "Oh, I thought I was your friend. Why is she you friend? You only need one friend."

I: So, this is like the Mallory Towers friendships.

A: Yeah, it's like what you read in boarding school novels in, like, the early [to] mid nineteen-hundreds. Yeah, it's those friendships.

I: Yeah.

A: Unfortunately for charity her relationships with other women did end up generating a lot of gossip. She didn't get away with pretending not to be a lesbian.

I: What did she do wrong? What gave her away?

A: There's a couple of reasons why Charity's relationships may have generated gossip, even though romantic friendships were pretty acceptable at the time. One reason is that Charity didn't behave in the way a young woman was appropriately supposed to behave. She wasn't very modest about herself: when you read all her friends' letters they'll say "Oh," you know "I'm not very good at writing but I tried to express myself in this poem" and Charity's just, like, "Guys, I wrote you a poem! It's great, read my poem!" Umm, she's very outgoing, she's very assertive and she's very self-confident so she's not considered to behave appropriately for a young woman already.

I: So it's not necessarily her relationships that are causing the gossip here? She could be having relationships with men and would possibly have caused just as much drama.

A: Absolutely, yeah. And the situation that Charity is going to experience where this gossip causes her a lot of trouble, a lot of women and men experience similar issues in heterosexual relationships, yeah, absolutely. But another thing that does come up is that she's described as looking like a man. And it's not in the way she dresses; when people are comparing her to "Oh, who does Charity look like?" they don't compare her to any of her sisters, they all say "Charity looks like her brother, Peter." And it's just in her face and the way she holds herself and the way she walks, they say she looks like a man. So in the eyes of society she behaves like a man and she looks like a man and she's having these relationships with women, and at that point people start to talk. There's very few sources that openly acknowledge what they were talking about because people won't write about lesbianism, is probably the situation

there. They all write these letters saying “Oh, you know, I can’t commit this to paper but we know what’s going on here.” So, we all know, it’s like the love that dare not speak it – its name.

So Charity begins her teaching career staying with her sister Anna and she ends up leaving that town because of the gossip that starts being generated about her relationships with other women. So for the next three years she continues to move around Massachusetts and New Hampshire and all the surrounding states staying with various relatives and trying to find a community where she can form relationships with other women without suspicion and where this gossip doesn’t follow her.

I: I guess it’s lucky she had seven siblings.

A: It is lucky she had seven siblings. Two had died by this point.

H: That’s the other reason you have eight children.

I: Yes

A: That’s true one died in the war and one died of T.B. But yeah, these are very, like, tight knit communities and everyone has seven siblings who lives in seven of these different communities so everyone finds out what’s going on. She can’t escape this gossip. It’s very hard for her and eventually in 1800 after she has a particularly bad breakup and there is particularly vicious gossip in which several of her friends and the girl he broke up with participate she, um, takes to bed for two months and eventually she returns home to live with her father.

I: Oh no, Charity, don’t do that.

A: Um, so –

I: When they say “Takes to bed for two months...”

A: Umm, I’m not clear whether this is physical illness or mental illness or physical illness brought on by anxiety or any of those things. The lines are much less clear than we might make them today.

I: What I was actually going to say was, was she actually in bed for two months? That seems impractical. When did she eat?

A: I don’t know the details

I: Okay.

A: But she stopped working, I assume she stopped leaving the house.

I: Yeah.

A: Around this time that she moves back home she writes a letter to her sister in law Sally, who’s a good friend of hers, saying that she’s decided she’s never going to get married and she doesn’t give a clear reason but what she does say is “Could I see you, I would tell you much, but write I cannot.” So that once again suggests that she’s basically being like, “Look, I’m just not interested in guys. I can’t say this on paper because letters -- the way they were getting letters around at this time was like “Oh, you’re going to visit Sally, here, can you take this letter?” Not in envelopes, just a piece of paper. Take this when you go to see Sally. So anyone could have read her letters.

I: Yes, I mean she could have potentially have been saying there “I’ve just been through a very bad breakup, I’m very emotional about it, I never want to be in a relationship again.” Like, it could be that.

A: It could be that, except that, umm, she writes this letter just before she goes back home and while she’s at home she gets in another relationship.

I: Okay. I mean, that’s what people do. They break up with someone and they’re like, “I hate this, I’m never dating again, it’s the worst.” And then next time you talk to them they’re going out with a different person.

A: Yeah, it could be a rebound. Umm, another thing is that she, throughout her life has a lot of relationships with women. She writes them love poems, she receives quite romantic letters from them. There’s no poems to men, there’s no letters from men. She’s

I: Okay

A: She’s just has no interest in men, pretty clearly.

H: So how did we end up with all of these letters?

A: So, I can’t remember exactly what I said but I probably was unclear; some of her letters that she received remained. The letters that she wrote were destroyed. So she wrote to everyone later in her life and said “Please destroy the letters that I wrote you.”

H: Right

A: So we still have a lot of the letters she received, so we know a fair bit of who was writing to her and we also have some of the poems that she wrote. She wrote a lot.

H: Okay. How’d – How did we end up with those?

A: So, Charity’s papers that she didn’t destroy stayed in the family, so did Sylvia’s papers, they were eventually given to a local historian and they’re now in an archive in a local history museum where a woman named Rachael Hope Cleves went and looked at them all and wrote a biography, which is where I got pretty much all of my sources.

H: Rad

I: Good historiography there.

H: Yes

A: Yup, that was my bibliography for you.

I: In conclusion we’re saying she’s definitely not attracted to men, there’s no sign of that.

A: Yeah, there’s no evidence that she’s attracted to men.

I: Good

A: So after five years of living at home with her father she’s forced to move again, probably because of her ongoing relationship with Mercy Ford, who was the girl that she maybe was kicked out for having a relationship the first time.

H: That's kind of cute.

A: They've known each other since they were teenagers. We don't have evidence for their relationship the first time, we definitely have evidence for it now, so it's not unreasonable to think that maybe that was happening five years before. So finally in 1807 after moving around a few more times she moves to Weybridge to stay with her friends Polly and Asaph Heyward. Polly is Sylvia's sister.

I: Ah, okay.

A: So, just to backtrack and talk about Sylvia a little bit, Sylvia was born seven years after Charity on the thirty-first of October in 1784. Ah, she was born in Easton, which is the next town over from North Bridgewater where Charity was born. Unlike Charity's family Sylvia's family wasn't well off. Easton was a very poor town, it had a reputation for crime. Around the time of Sylvia's birth her family went bankrupt. They had to sell their land and all the siblings separated to either find work or stay with relatives who could somehow support them so we don't actually know where exactly Sylvia grew up but it was probably living with relatives and because she was the youngest probably her mother as well. Her brother Asaph, who is not the Asaph I mentioned a minute ago, that's her brother in law Asaph.

I: So Asaph is a weirdly common name in this society

A: Yeah, Asaph is a very common name. A bunch of people are called Asaph.

I: What is Asaph?

A: It's an old testament name.

H: It sounds like an old testament name.

I: I don't remember it from the old testament

A: It's an obscure old testament name. All the strange names you hear in this story are going to be old testament names. They're puritans and these are the sort of names they give their kids.

I: Okay

A: So yeah, her brother Asaph moves to Weybridge where he finds a job and marries well and he's eventually able to buy land and invite the rest of his family to come out and join him. So when she's fifteen Sylvia moves out to Weybridge. Her family's doing a bit better then, so she's able to continue her education until she's seventeen, which is much later than was expected for a woman at the time. She probably does this because it provides her with an excuse not to get married for longer. She can go "No, I'm not courting at the moment, I'm in school." Umm, her family is sort of confused by the fact that she wants to get educated and not get married but at this point they're pretty supportive. Umm, they assume that if she's not going to get married she'll probably stay home and support her mother when her mother's old like we were saying before, so they're kind of okay with it. So during this time she stays with her mother sometimes. Sometimes she stays with her sister Polly and Polly's husband Asaph and, umm, that's where she's staying in February of 1807 when charity comes to stay.

I: So they're about to meet each other.

A: Yes, they are about to meet each other. So, Charity is twenty nine at this point, Sylvia's only twenty two. There's no record of their first meeting, which is disappointing because when Charity records her



first meetings with all her previous girlfriends she writes all these things of “I felt a spark when her hand first touched mine” and, you know...

I: She’s very dramatic

A: She’s very dramatic, and that would have been fun but there’s no record, sadly.

H: I mean, maybe it was fun enough that she then later burnt it.

A: That’s possibly true, maybe she did write it down. But Sylvia did write two poems that spring after they met in the February that can be pretty clearly read to be about Charity. They’re both about the coming of spring and she talks about the arrival of the Goddess of May who “Awakens the frozen landscape” and Cha--

H: Wow okay

A: Charity was born in May and Sylvia explicitly writes in other writing that she always associated Charity with May

I: Okay, that seems fairly clear

A: And there’s also in lesbian poetry at the time there’s a pretty common paradigm of using the landscape as a metaphor for the female body, quite in – quite erotic poetry that describes a landscape.

I: Okay, so when she says a frozen land -- awakening the frozen landscape what she means is “I was so aroused.”

A: Yes, what she means is “I was so aroused and we had great sex.” Yep. So, both these poems about spring end sadly lamenting the passage of time because Charity was supposed to only be visiting for a short time and she was supposed to go back to stay with her sister Anna after three months. But Charity didn’t go home. She kept writing home saying “Oh, I’m sick. I can’t come home.” She was supporting herself at the time by making clothes, she worked as a tailor, which was something she’d learned from her sister in law Sally and she’d say “Oh, there’s so much work here. My work is in such high demand. I can’t go home.” and so she kept finding these excuses to stay longer with Sylvia

H: I’ve found a very nice blackb’ry bush that still has many blackb’rries on it...

[Laughter]

A: So, in June 1807, ah, Sylvia goes to stay with her mother because she can’t stay with her sister forever because as a single woman she has to spread around who supports her

I: Fair enough

A: So she goes home to stay with her mother for a month and from all the records we have this month is the only time that Charity and Sylvia spend apart from when they met in February to when Charity eventually dies over forty years late.

H: Aww

I: Wow

H: That's sweet

A: Yeah. So while Sylvia's gone, rather than being like, "Well, I guess I'll go home." Charity works really hard at her catering business, she saves up enough money to rent herself a room and she writes to Sylvia and invites her to come back and be her "Apprentice."

So yeah, on the third of July, Sylvia leaves her mother to come and move back in with Charity and for the rest of their lives they celebrate this day as their anniversary.

I, H: Awww

A: And Charity writes a little memoir in 1844 (it's quite short) and about this day she writes, "On the third day of July 1807, Sylvia consented to be my helpmate and came to be my companion in labour." And then she's crossed out "in labour" just to be like, "It wasn't for work reasons, guys."

[Laughter]

I: That was a very, like, Livejournal entry thing to do

[Laughter]

I: The, like, strikethrough -- the, like, humorous strikethrough thing

A: Yeah

I: Yeah

A: Umm, a couple of other things about that sentence: So she says "Sylvia came to be my helpmate." Helpmate is what it say in genesis in the King James version of the bible when

I: About Eve

A: Yeah, when God creates Eve for Adam. He's like "I need to make Adam a helpmate." So because of that, at the time it was a very common way for American protestants to say "My wife" was to say "My helpmate."

H: Hmm

I: Okay

A: The other interesting thing about that sentence is that she says "She consented to be my helpmate." In the law of the time consent was all that was needed for a common law marriage. You didn't need a religious minister or, I don't know what it's called, the equivalent of a civil celebrant. If it could be proven that both parties had consented, under common law that was considered a marriage. And that extended to marriages between people who wouldn't legally be allowed to marry usually, so marriages between slaves or marriages where one or both of the parties was underage. If it could be proved that they consented it was legally a marriage.

I: Okay

H: Huh

A: So although it's pretty unusual for these two women to be living as a married couple at the time there's precedent for it --

H: Precedent with gay people or...

I: Or just generally precedent with people who were not usually allowed to get married. It was sort of like "If it looks like a marriage I guess it's a marriage."

A: Yeah, I don't know of any precedent with gay people so I'm going to hazard a no, but yeah, precedent for people who couldn't get married living together and acknowledging that they'd both consented to a marriage, to be considered a legal marriage. So Charity's still writing home to Massachusetts pretending she's sick.

[Laughter]

I: Charity!

A: Yeah. Um, so she's only told her real story to her sister Anna, who's probably the sister she's closest to. She writes to Anna saying, yeah "This apprentice has moved in with me." She doesn't explicitly say "We're married." But I think Anna knows what's going on. Um, Anna writes back and says "From your representation Sylvia appears to possess a degree of excellence which entitles her to a place in my heart. Your friends are mine, and whoever performs the offices of kindness towards you does it to me also.

H: [Suggestively] Performs the offices of kindness

A: I'll just clarify, what she says when she's talking about "Performs the offices of kindness" is that Charity was often sick and she mentions in her letter to Anna that Sylvia will look after her when she's sick, so Anna's saying, you know "She takes care of you, that's really important to me." So Anna's pretty supportive of their relationship, umm, but anyway by the spring of 1808 Charity is running low on excuses not to go home. She can only be sick for so long. But she doesn't want to leave Sylvia and she writes a poem about this which is called On the Prospect of Separation and I just want to quote a line from this for reasons that will become clear. She says:

"This heart, to her inclined by every gentle tie that binds the tender heart."

And I wanted to quote that because that was almost exactly what Captain Moonlight said about James Nesbit in our first episode

H: Oh yeah

I: I did not remember that

A: Yeah, George Scott said about James Nesbit: "Nesbit and I were united by every tie that could bind human friendship." So I liked that that was the same.

So eventually Charity solves this problem by taking Sylvia to Massachusetts with her to meet her family. It was very common at the time in American society for newlyweds to do a bridal tour where they went and visited all the relatives who hadn't been able to come to the wedding and introduced them to their new spouse. It was a precursor to a honeymoon basically, and this is what Charity and Sylvia do. So first they go and see Anna and Anna writes them these letters which are basically letters of

recommendation. She gives it to Sylvia and says, you know, "Read this out to all my other siblings." And it says, you know, "Sylvia's great, Sylvia and Charity are really well suited, this is really good and so that sort of enables, umm, Sylvia to be accepted by the rest of the family and this is the first step to the family, and by extension their communities, to accepting their relationship. They go on to see Charity's father and several other of Charity's family, old friends and old lovers.

I: Is Charity's father fine with this? Like, we know Charity's father is not a good person already. We thought he threw her out because she was in relationships with women.

A: I think he's not as not fine with this as you would expect. And I think part of the reason is that because Charity lives very far away and he doesn't have to deal with it any more.

H: [Inaudible]

I: Okay, so he really doesn't want lesbians under his roof.

A: He doesn't want to have to support her, he doesn't want to have lesbians under his roof, if she's going to live with her partner in Weybridge which is -- I don't remember how far away I said -- it's not his problem so he's kind of okay with it.

I: Okay

A: Not great, but okay.

H: I -- The old girlfriends seems like a weird thing to do on a honeymoon

A; Yeah, so the issue with the old girlfriend (this woman is named Lydia Rickards) and, um, she was the girlfriend that Charity was with just before she met Sylvia and the reason she left Lydia was not because they had broken up, it was because people had found out about their relationship and Charity basically had to leave, once again because of the gossip. And, to be honest she essentially abandoned Lydia. She just kind of stopped writing to her and Lydia was writing saying, you know, "When are you going to come back to me? Why aren't you coming home?" and Charity was saying "Oh, I'm sick" when she'd moved in with her wife.

H: That's a rude surprise

A: [Disapprovingly] Yeah.

I: [Disapprovingly] Charity

A: It wasn't a great move on Charity's part

I: No

A: But, um, she reconciles with Lydia

H: Somehow

A: Yeah, it's not an easy reconciliation. It takes a while, there's several letters. But eventually they do reconcile and, um, after they visit Lydia on this bridal tour, Lydia writes and says "Much of my love attends Sylvia. The world is no longer kept in ignorance. May you long be happy in each other."

H: Aww

A: So --

I: Okay, so Lydia's moved on. Lydia's okay.

A: [Brightly] Yeah, and she continues to visit Charity and Sylvia and write to them throughout their lives and they stay friends.

H: That's good. Badger.

A: So that's good. I also like that she said "The world is no longer kept in ignorance." Which may have been "Oh, so this is why you said you were sick." But may have also been "You're publicly in a queer relationship now, good for you." I don't know which one it is.

I: Possibly both

A: Maybe both

I: I don't know, it sounds a little passive aggressive.

A: It could be a little passive aggressive. Lydia, um, never marries. Probably because of her relationship with Charity and how that ended badly. So yeah, it's not great.

I: Probably because of her relationship with Charity?

A: Yeah, so after she realises that Charity is living with Sylvia she writes a letter to Charity basically saying "I've realised that being this invested in a friendship" [friendship] is what she calls it, which -- they used friendship broader than we do. Um, yeah. "I've realised that it's bad to be this emotionally invested in a friendship, it causes too much pain. I'm going to focus on God, I'm going to stay single." And she does. She becomes quite pious and she never marries. So, finally the last thing that Charity and Sylvia do before they return to Weybridge is that Charity gives her brother Peter enough money to buy a wedding ring. That's a lot of money at the time.

I: Do people not usually buy wedding rings?

A: Usually the husband buys a wedding ring for the wife.

I: Okay

A: So, for a woman, who -- it's hard for a woman to earn money. Enough money for a wedding ring is a lot of money. And probably what I'm guessing happened here is that Charity bought a wedding ring for Sylvia.

I: Yeah

A: So they're married now

I: That's nice

A: Yeah. And in January 1809, the next year, they've saved up enough money to get a house together.

I: They obviously didn't eat any smashed avocado.

[Millennial chuckling]

A: Hmm?

H: This, ah, tailoring business seems to be going quite well.

I: Yeah

A: Yeah it is very successful. And it's mentioned that they do really well when a lot of people around them are struggling in economic crises

H: Huh

A: They're still managing to support themselves. They have a --

I: Are they doing crime?

A: Um, Charity is really good at her job. She has, as well as the skill of sewing she has the skill of cutting patterns which, there are no pre-printed patterns at the time and cutting patterns is quite a specialist skill. And they also work really, really hard. They're working, like, eighteen hour days. And Charity writes about this time, their sort of early years living together "I'm surprised I made it out alive."

H: Okay

I: Okay

A: It's not -- It's not great and they do acknowledge that it's bad for their health, how much they're working, but it does enable them to live together as women without anyone to support them --

H: Mm

A: And to get a house together

I: After which they can chill a bit?

A: They don't chill very much. There's not much chill in this story. They're intense people. So the land they had their house on belonged to a widow called Sarah Hagar and they were probably able to rent it for the duration of their lives and build on it. Living on another woman's land was a way for them to gain respectability because widows were considered quite respectable and there was no way for anyone to say "Oh, these two women are living on a man's land, he's keeping them as mistresses" or anything.

H: Hm

A: So they gained independence and respectability and they lived together and it was good. Their house was very small at the time. It was twelve feet by twelve feet.

H: Oh, okay.

A: Which is

I: So it's like this room?

A: Yeah. It's about three and a half metres square. It's probably a bit smaller than this room, which means nothing to our listeners.

I: But bigger than this blanket fort

H: Yes

A: But significantly bigger than this humid blanket fort. And it doubled as a workroom and the shop out of which they ran their business. They slept in this room, they worked in this room, they cooked in this room.

I: I hope they went for walks sometimes.

A: I hope they did too, but I don't know if they ever had time. Both of them jointly owned the house, which was something that they specifically emphasised. They were very proud of that. But on the census and the tax record and the land records of the time Charity's name appears and not Syylvia's. And traditionally the man's name would appear and not the woman's. And, um, in a lot of ways Charity does take on the traditional role of a husband and Sylvia does take on the traditional role of a wife. And a local man, Hiram Harvey Hurlbut Jr.

H: Wow

[Laughter]

A: I love that name. My favourite part is Jr. because his dad was also called Hiram Harvey Hurlbut. He wrote in his memoirs "Ms. Bryant was the man." Explicitly that. So that was how that relationship was seen. And in a lot of ways that probably helped them to be accepted by their community, 'cos people could look at them and go "Yeah, it's a bit weird that they're both women, but, like, this fits a normal paradigm. One of them does the cooking and the housekeeping, one of them keeps the accounts and, you know, goes out to dinner and talks politics with the men."

H: Was that a thing? Was she, like, actively involved in the being a good citizen part of the...

A: Yeah, so she would go to dinners at the local college with the men and talk about things men talk about at college dinners and she would go out and when people had debts she would go 'round to their houses and say, "Look, you need to pay me money." She was doing things that weren't traditionally female. She was fulfilling the role that would traditionally be filled by a man.

H: Okay.

A: And even when Sylvia's relatives would write letters to the house they would write them to Charity because traditionally you addressed all letters to the man.

H: Huh

I: So what's happening here is that Sylvia is just Mrs Charity Bryant

A: Yeah! And actually in Sylvia's papers there is a sheet of paper where she's just written Sylvia Bryant, Sylvia Bryant, Sylvia Bryant

H: Aww

A: Like practicing her signature.

H: Just on the front of your copybook in school

A: Yeah

I: Aww

A: It's cute. Yeah, and as well as this there was this idea around at the time that was strangely common of a female husband. It appeared in novels, it appeared in porn, it appeared in newspapers. They were usually stories about women dressing in men's clothing and often passing as men and then marrying other women. It was common enough that in 1819 there's this joke story in a newspaper in Maine where a woman goes to court with a summons against her husband and the judge says "Oh, what is it. Is this another female husband?" And she says "No, no, it's bigamy this time!"

[Laughter]

H: Okay

A: So yeah, this was a surprisingly common paradigm. And although Charity didn't fit this paradigm because she never. Yeah, she never presented herself as a man. She wore dresses, she, um, always lived as a woman. People kind of understood this fluidity of gender and were familiar with this idea that two women could live together with one being the husband and one being the wife.

I: Is still a woman. So it's kind of like "It's okay, it's still, like, heteronormative lesbians."

A: Yeah, yeah. And I think that's a lot of the reason that they were able to have this relationship and be so accepted is because they were heteronormative lesbians. In these stories about female husbands sex was a pretty accepted part of these stories. It was either implied through euphemism, or it was explicitly stated. Not like "Yeah, they're having sex." But like "Oh, no. There is no sex. Why would there be sex?" in a way of saying "There's totally sex." But yeah, so, people understood this paradigm and probably understood that there was sex involved. That isn't to say that everyone was fine with it. While Charity's family was quite okay, but also quite far away which I think helped them to be quite okay, and Sylvia's sister Polly and her husband Asaph were frequent visitors to the house and got along really well with and good friends with Sylvia and Charity, Sylvia's relationships with several of her brothers and her mother were definitely harmed by this relationship. Her brothers wouldn't visit her because there was no man in the house to visit, and although she often wrote to her mother asking her to come and stay it was six years of Sylvia and Charity living in the house before Sylvia's mother finally came and visited. And Sylvia writes in her diary that although she was happy that she came to visit it was very awkward and tense and they would sit in awkward silence most of the time. And after her mother left she writes to her saying:

"My mother, I have not anything to write which I might not have said, but since I neglected to say anything that I ought to have said and am incapable of writing what I wish to convey, on this account the great object for which we meet..."

Which was to sort out --

I: Yes

A: This issue that had come between them:

"I fear will ever remain unaccomplished."



Basically it was very hard for them to reconcile because they couldn't talk about the problem. She couldn't say "Mum, I'm a lesbian. You have to accept it." Because she could never say "I'm a lesbian, I'm having sex with another woman." And her mother could never say "This is my problem." So her relationship with her mother is always strained from this point onwards. Charity and Sylvia both always struggled themselves with coming to terms with their sexuality. They were both members of the puritan church, which not only teaches against people of the same gender having sex but also generally teaches that sex is sinful. All sex. Even in your marriage sex is still sinful. They kind of acknowledge that it's gonna happen and that it's better in marriage than out, but sex is just bad according to puritans.

I: I mean, I don't know if that's better or not than only heterosexual sex being okay? Like, if everyone's sex is equally bad.

A: Oh no, same gender sex is way worse.

I: Okay

H: How did -- How did this -- How did this sect carry on?

[Laughter]

A: They did -- so --

I: By having eight children, somehow.

A: Yeah, they thought -- they thought that sex was sinful but they knew you were going to have sex and they very much acknowledged, "Look, this going to happen." So they said "Have sex within your marriage. So I looked up what the basis of this puritan attitude to sex is and more generally what the basis of a lot of the um, Christian attitudes to sex are that teach that sex is a sin. So, in the year 300, we're going back a bit.

H: Okay

A: So yeah, in the year 300 St Augustine of Hippo, who lived in North Africa

I: I'm imagining him riding on a hippo to be honest

A: Mmm, no.

[Laughter]

A: He wrote that, basically, before they ate the fruit in the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve probably weren't having sex or weren't having lustful sex.

H: How do you have non-lustful sex?

A: You can't have non-lustful sex any more because Adam and Eve ate the fruit in the garden of Eden.

H: Right

I: You used to just have, like, pleasant, gentle platonic sex.

A: Well, he even talks about how, um --

H: Slightly bored, distracted sex?

I: Imagine it more like somebody giving you a shoulder massage

A: He talks about it as being –

I: A pleasant physical experience that isn't lustful.

H: Okay, yeah.

A: He talks about it as being a non-lustful thing, a thing you just kind of do 'cos you have to do it. He talks about how now men get erections when they don't want to and it's out of their control, whereas in the past before they ate the fruit they could control that and they could be just like "Time for sex. Sex. We're done here."

H: And it was so much better when sex was like taxes.

A: Yeah, sex was like taxes. So, um, yeah. After Adam and Eve ate the fruit, then they started having lustful sex and we know that sex is bad because they only started having lustful sex that we have because they ate the fruit.

I: But how did Augustus know this? Augustine? What was his name?

A: Augustine. I've got no answer for you. I didn't do very deep reading into this. The other thing that definitely comes up and which is definitely relevant to the puritan attitudes is that if you're having sex with someone you're much more focussed on them than you are on God and that's not appropriate.

H: Okay

A: So the thing

I: How did these people raise children? That takes a lot of focus that could be going to God.

A: They take them to church. So puritans teach that sex is sinful and that homosexual sex is even more sinful

H: Extra double sinful

A: Double sin. Sylvia writes in her diary about her struggles with sins of the first magnitude. So sins of the first magnitude are mostly those banned in the ten commandments, so no murder, no adultery, no theft.

I: Weirdly the ten commandments never mentions queer sex.

A: No, but queer sex is one of the sins of the first magnitude. And chances are that Sylvia's not killed a man. She can't commit adultery unless she first acknowledges that she's married and she's probably not committing theft because she's working super hard. If she was committing theft then she wouldn't be working as hard.

H: She may be dishonouring her mother and father

I: Or coveting her neighbour's ass

A: She's talking about -- almost definitely about lesbian sex. So that's pretty clear evidence that they are having lesbian sex and also worth noting that lesbian sex is up there with murder.

I: My two favourite hobbies

[Laughter]

A: Hooray! Um, so, like I said before both Sylvia and Charity are often sick. Sylvia talks about her ulcers in her mouth being caused by sin. She writes in her diary at one point "I have a headache, on account of sin." So it's quite explicitly "God has visited these illnesses upon us because we're sinning and we're living in sin."

I: But we're just going to keep doing it anyway. It seems worth it.

A: Yeah, so they do write about how they try to stop sinning, but they continue to write about this for their entire lives so they don't succeed in stopping sinning. So in spite of all these conflicts that they have with family and internally they're actually able to become a very well respected couple in their community. Their household of two women is seen as a very desirable one for young women because there are no men around.

I: Oh, that's nice.

A: So it's seen as a safe place for young women to work without risk of --

I: Bad things with men

A: Bad things with men. And so they're able to provide jobs and training and support for lots of young women in their area. They're very actively involved in their church; they do a lot of work in their church.

I: They seem incredibly wholesome

A: They're very wholesome people, yeah. They're very wholesome people. Sylvia runs bible group for kids.

I: Aww

A: They're very wholesome. Um, and for a variety of reasons ministers in this church of Weybridge come and go really often and so Charity and Sylvia who stay and always work in the church become respected pillars of their church. They're a constant there in a way that even the minister isn't.

H: Oh, that's great.

A: And the ministers themselves hold them up as religious exemplars and be like "Be like Charity and Sylvia. They're so good."

H: They made some errors.

I: I think God made those errors.

A: Ah, one of the ministers. His name's Eli Moody (Eli told me that I had to point out that this is his name so that we don't forget he exists.) The minister, Eli Moody writes a letter to Charity and Sylvia after he leaves Weybridge and he says to them "Stand fast in one spirit and one mind, striving together for the

faith of the gospel.” And then when he talks about his family and how they’re doing and them and how they’re doing he says, you know, “I hope that God will look after our families” so he puts their family, Charity and Sylvia on a level with his very holy minister family.

H: That’s lovely.

I: So he doesn’t think they’re sinning

A: Well, I don’t know whether he knows they’re having lesbian sex but it is worth noting that he talks about them being in one spirit and in one mind. He definitely sees them as a couple and a family and he thinks that’s okay and he thinks that’s, you know, a good way for them to work together in their faith for the gospel.

I: Yep

H: Good on him

A: He’s pretty on board. So, they were an important part of their church and they supported a lot of young women in their community and it was a very small town so once the church and the young women are relying on them they become a necessary part of the town. The town can’t do without them. So because of that they’re able to have enough respect and standing in their community that they’re able to just continue living as a lesbian couple for the rest of their lives, basically. Um, several parents in the town name their children after Charity or Sylvia

I: Aww

A: And there’s one kid born in 1834 who’s named Charity-Sylvia

H: Oh, that’s wonderful

A: They’re also very close with a lot of their nieces and nephews, a lot of whom are also named after them on both sides. So Sylvia’s nephews are often named after Charity and Charity’s nieces are often named after Sylvia.

H: Hmm

I: Ah, so Sylvia has nephews called Charity?

A: No, Sylvia has nephews called Charles Bryant or Cyrus Bryant

I: Oh, I see

A: So they’re taking Charity Bryant and finding a similar male name and giving Bryant as the middle name.

H: This paradigm of a woman existing in a normative male role strikes me as very similar to the existing tradition of sworn virgins that exists in Eastern Europe where women will take on masculine roles by swearing off their femininity and caring for a household and becoming a [non-figurative] shepherd and so forth and taking up men’s roles and existing very happily in a community as, arguably, queer women or straight men. Um, as long as they -- as long as they conform to existing standards of masculinity.

A: Yeah, and I definitely think that is the case with Charity. People can look at her and go “It’s kind of weird that she’s a woman but she’s basically a man so we get what’s happening here. Because yeah, so generally it was the common practice that you named sons after fathers or uncles and that you name daughters after mothers or aunts. And so they’re seeing Charity as an uncle here. Also the children of Charity’s brother Peter do refer to Sylvia as Uncle Drake.

H: Uncle Drake

A: Drake being her surname.

H: What a good name

I: Sylvia? Sylvia gets to be uncle now?

A: Yeah, it’s definitely in jest.

I: Yeah

A: When they do it it’s obviously joking, probably because they know Charity for their whole lives as being their aunt

I: Yeah

A: So when Charity marries Sylvia’s their uncle and they call her uncle drake.

H: Uncle Drake sounds like somebody out of an adventure novel.

I: Yes

A: Yeah, it sounds fun. I did also want to say that the name Bryant, um, because of Charity continues in Sylvia’s family at least to great, great nephews.

H: Huh

A: So that was nice. So yeah, even though their families started being like “They’re never going to marry men, how will we support them?” they’re actually able to support their families and their community in a lot of ways. They do provide financial support to a lot of their nieces and nephews. They put one through college, they find them jobs. They give them places -- a place to stay when they don’t have places to stay and, yeah. They’re able to actively participate in their community and it’s very good. Um, in 1851 Charity’s sister Silence comes to visit Charity --

I: Wait, is Charity’s sister called Silence?

A: Yes, charity’s sister is called silence --

I: Is she the heroine of a young adult fantasy novel?

A: No, Sylvia’s mother is called Silence, Sylvia’s grandmother is called Silence, I think Sylvia has another relative, I can’t remember who, called Silence. It’s a very common name at the time

H: That is That is a distressing virtue name

I: Yesp

A: So this is interesting, one of Sylvia's sisters is called silence. Another one of them is called Desire

H: Huh

A: Or maybe it's Charity's...

I: Desire?

A: Anyway, there's another one called desire. So there were virtue names, but there were also, like, warning names.

H: Huh

I: That was definitely a thing, I remember seeing it parodied in Terry Pratchett. There was this one family and all the women's names are, like, virtue names. They're all called Chastity and things like that and all the men's names are, like, sin names and there's this string of men, like, in the family called Bestiality and Adultery.

H: Wow. That -- that's unlucky.

A: So you've probably seen the, um, lists that go 'round the internet occasionally of weirdest puritan names and I googled them while I was researching this episode because they're funny. Ah, I think my favourite was, um, something like If-Christ-Had-Not-Died-for-Thine-Sins-Thou-Wouldst-Be-Damned was their first name.

H: Wow

I: You always just have to put, like, Jones on the end or something so that people understand what this will sound like.

A: If-Christ-Had-Not-Died-for-Thine-Sins-Thou-Wouldst-Be-Damned Jones

I: Do we just call them Damned Jones for short?

A: He went by Nicholas

[Laughter]

I: Okay

A: Which you would

A: So in 1851 Charity's sister silence visited Charity along with her daughter Carry. Carry's short for Caroline, that's actually a very normal name.

H: Mm

I: Yeah, no, Carrie is a real name that I have heard.

A: I pointed that out because it's spelled C, A, Double R, Y and it looked weird

I: And you thought it might be Carry-Thy-Burden-Jesus-Christ or whatever

A: Yeah

H: It sounded a little bit like we'd taken a brief trip to the nineties.

A: It did

I: Yes

A: That was why I specified, because I did look that up being like, "Huh?" But yeah, it's Caroline. Um, and when they left, Carry noted the location of the town cemetery as they went past and she thought

"It might contain at some period the mortal remains of those who are dear to me."

Three weeks later Charity died of heart disease on the sixth of October 1851. She was seventy-four. She lived with Sylvia for over forty years.

H: That's pretty solid.

A,I: Yeah

H: Seventy four

A: No time spent apart except that one month

H: Yeah

A: Yeah

H: Well done, Charity

A: Yeah, seventy four is also pretty solid as, like, she was sickly and she was always sickly throughout her life. So letters pour in to Sylvia from her family and her friends of condolence and they all talk about how lonely she must be, but they all seem to kind of struggle with the awkward wording of "We're sorry your wife has died. You're a widow, that's very hard." Because they can't say either of those things. And one friend does write and say "You know, God looks -- Don't worry, God looks after widows." And then the next sentence is "Obviously you're not a widow, but, you know"

I: God would look after you if you were. Yeah

A: God's going to look after you. But Sylvia wears black for the rest of her life, which is what a widow does and she very much is widowed.

I: People do, yeah

A: And the one person who does acknowledge this is Charity. Before she died the last poem we have that she wrote to Sylvia, is an acrostic poem which was a quite common poetic form, not just a thing you do in primary school at the time. She writes an acrostic poem on "Sylvia Drake W" the W is for widow. And the poem talks about the inevitability of death and how eventually they are going to be parted and how Sylvia will have to deal with this. So, um, Sylvia lives for another sixteen years. Part of that time --

I: She must be quite old

A: Yeah, she is quite old. She eventually stops the tailoring business; she goes and stays with her brother Asaph.

I: Who must also be quite old being her brother, her older brother.

A: Yeah, she ostensibly goes to stay with him to nurse him because he's old, but she also stays with his family and they help look after her. And she eventually dies on the thirteenth of February in 1868 and they're buried together under the one headstone in Weybridge cemetery. At the time most of the headstones are engraved and theirs is embossed, which is much more expensive, which shows, you know, how respected and loved they were by their family and their community. They paid for a fancy headstone for them to be buried together.

I: So basically the moral for this story is, like, a lack of period typical homophobia?

A: Yeah!

I: How weird and uplifting

A: Yeah, I was reading this and kind of just waiting for them to get lynched or something and I just came to the end being like, "Oh, they just lived a long life together. I did not see this coming."

I want to finish by talking about a quote from an article written in 1843, so eight years before Charity's death, by her nephew William Cullen Bryant who is quite a well-known writer from the time. I'd never heard of him but apparently he's a big deal in America and he writes:

"If I were permitted to draw aside the veil of private life, I would briefly give you the singular, and to me the most interesting history of two maiden ladies who dwell in this valley. I would tell you how, in their youthful days, they took each other as companions for life, and how this union, no less sacred to them than the tie of marriage, has subsisted, in uninterrupted harmony, for forty years, during which they have shared each other's occupations and pleasures and works of charity while in health

I: Pleasures

H: And works of charity

A: And works of charity

H: Charity

A: Okay

"and watched over each other tenderly in sickness. I could tell you how they slept on the same pillow and had a common purse, and adopted each other's relations, and how one of them, more enterprising and spirited in her temper than the other, might be said to represent the male head of the family, and took upon herself their transactions with the world without, until at length her health failed, and she was tended by her gentle companion, as a fond wife attends her invalid husband."

And what I really like about this quote and a few other pieces of writing that have been done about them since their death but before this biography that has now been published is that it really plays up, rather than playing down their relationship and how much it was like a marriage. Hiram Harvey Hurlbut Jr. writes in his memoir that "Everyone regarded them as if Miss Bryant and Miss Drake were married to each other." And he emphasises how well they got along with each other, with their neighbours and how important they were to their community. William Cullen Bryant's son in law, who writes William Cullen Bryant's memoir, writes (historically inaccurately) about the, about Charity and Sylvia. He says



when they met they were both in their early twenties and he says that they died not long after each other. So, although he is wrong he erases the bits of their lives that were spent apart from each other and essentially makes their lives their relationship with each other.

H: And does the thing that people do with folk heroes where they make the – they trim the story up a little bit at the edges to fit.

A: Yeah, to make it more romantic.

H: Mm

A: So yeah, I went into this expecting a story where they had to be secretly lesbians and nonce could know and they were, you know, always hiding and at risk of being kicked out of their community. But --

I: They were just lesbians and it was cool.

A: They were just lesbians and not only were they lesbians they were pretty openly lesbians and people were not only like, eh, yeah, okay, but “This couple is a really good role model.” It’s romantic. And when in 1953, which is much later so not quite as relevant, a schoolteacher in the area published another article about them all their descendants were really proud to discover that these women were in their family and everyone in the town now is very proud of them and now they talk about them as the lesbian founding mothers of their town

I: Aww

A: So yeah, it was just really good and I was really pleased.

H: That is a very pleasant surprise.

A: Thank you very much for listening. Once again I’m Alice

H: I’m Hamish

I: I’m Irene

A: And we are Queer as Fact. You can find us on Facebook as Queer as Fact, on Tumblr as Queer as Fact or on Twitter as Queer as Fact and if you want to email us directly we’re at [queerasfact@gmail.com](mailto:queerasfact@gmail.com) We would love to hear from you if you have any feedback or any people or periods of history that you would really like to hear about

H: We’ll also take fan art, and speculation about what you think we look like

[Snickering]

H: We’ll see you next time.

[Music plays]