



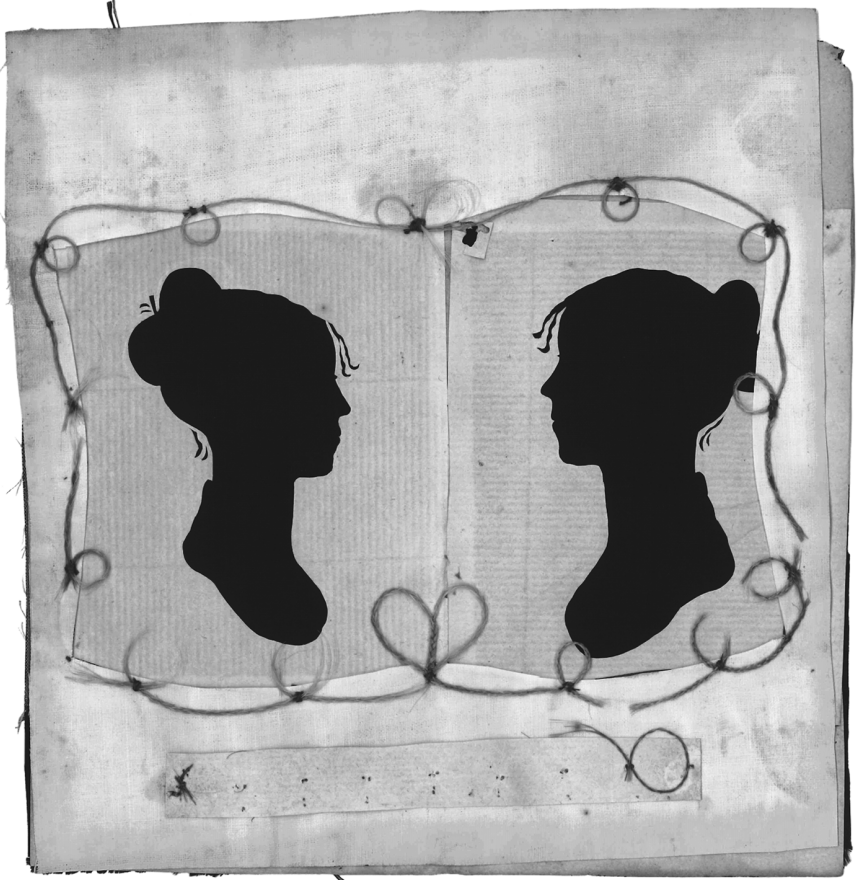
Charity & Sylvia

A SAME-SEX MARRIAGE IN EARLY AMERICA



RACHEL HOPE CLEVES

CHARITY AND SYLVIA



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Frontispiece: Silhouettes of Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake, framed in their braided hair. *Courtesy of the Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History, Middlebury, Vermont.*

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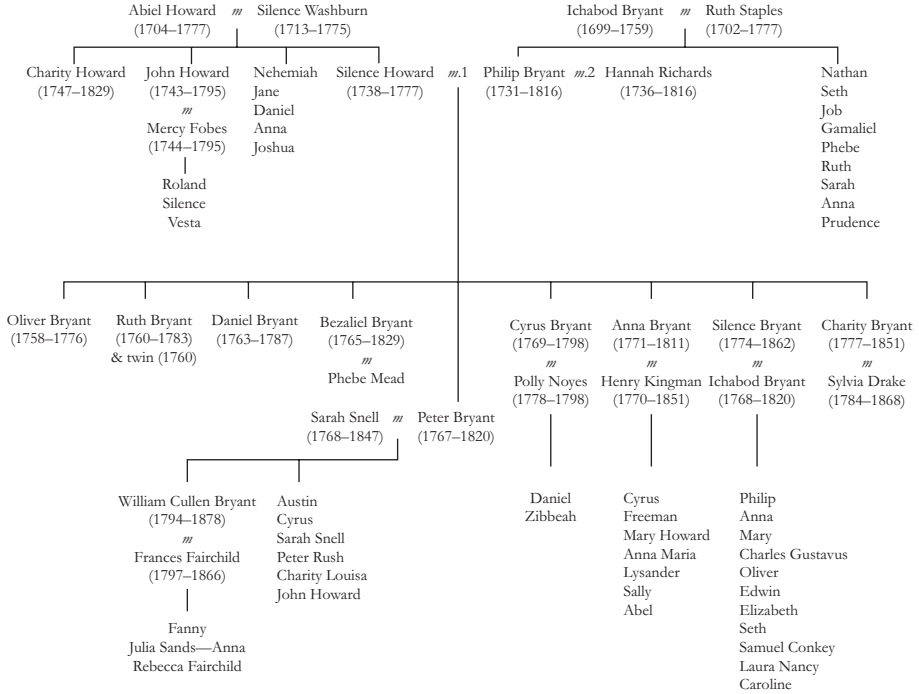
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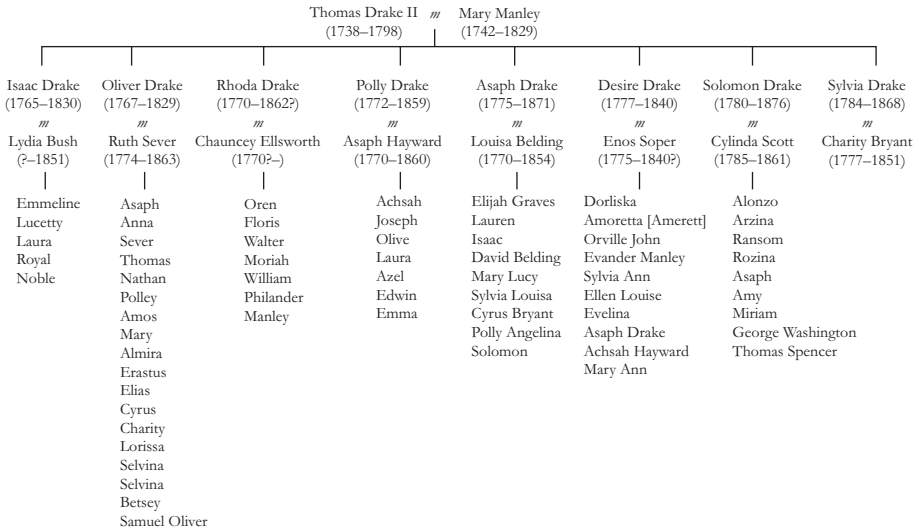
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Bryant Family



Note: The names of Charity's cousins and grandnieces/nephews have been included selectively, focusing on relations mentioned in the book.

Drake Family



Miss Bryant and Miss Drake were married to each other.

—DIARY OF HIRAM HARVEY HURLBURT JR. (1897)

Preface

THEY POSE GAZING at each other: two silhouettes, eyes level, chins uplifted, elegant. The portraits are cut from two thick cream mats set against a black cloth background and framed by a window of fine paper, pinkened at the edges. Around the paired images a thin braid of blonde hair loops and curls, coming together in a little heart nestled between their twinned bosoms. The woman on the right is slightly larger, her neck is thicker, and she has the slightest trace of a double chin. The woman on the left seems petite in comparison. Her jaw protrudes a little; her gaze is cast slightly downward. Both women have sharp pointed noses. They wear identical buns, perhaps the trademark of the cutter. Two twists of hair perch atop their foreheads and two wisps curl down the napes of their necks. They are mirror images, striking in their similarity, but the more you look the more their distinctions emerge. Their sameness is misleading, a misapprehension that obscures their differences from each other, and their difference as a pair from others at the time.¹

The silhouettes are labeled Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake, although no indication remains of which profile matches which name. It seems likely that the figure on the right with the beginning of a double chin is Charity, the older of the two. Born in 1777 in North Bridgewater, Massachusetts, south of Boston, Charity was nearly thirty when she met Sylvia, her companion in the portrait and in life. Her first three decades had included a great many painful experiences, mixed with brief interludes of joy. She lost her mother and five of her nine siblings to early deaths, suffered the rejection of her father and stepmother, experienced lengthy bouts of ill health, and

endured vicious rumors about her character. Yet in the midst of these misfortunes she traveled throughout Massachusetts, fell repeatedly in love, wrote sheaves of poetry, and became expert in the valuable trade of tailoring. To Sylvia, seven years her younger, Charity appeared worldly and accomplished. Twenty-two when they met, Sylvia had little knowledge or experience of the world. She was born in Easton, Massachusetts, a town on North Bridgewater's western border, but insolvency drove Sylvia's family to resettle a decade later in remote Addison County, Vermont. Sylvia came of age in rural isolation, dissatisfied with her circumscribed opportunities and searching for a path to satisfy her spiritual inclinations.

Charity opened the door to a different life. She struck an astonishing contrast to the women in Sylvia's family, who were all mothers to large and growing families. Sylvia ultimately had sixty-four nieces and nephews; one sister-in-law gave birth to eighteen children, ten by the time Sylvia and Charity met. Sylvia's female relatives were tied to their homes by the constant labor of making food, nursing children, and keeping house. Charity had no house; she lived with family members, or at times paid for her board, earning her way by teaching school. She had pledged at age twenty-three to never get married. Instead, she pursued passionate romantic relationships with women, who found her masculine independence and authority attractive. Charity poured her creative energies into writing verses, not birthing children. Charity's singularity and singlehood were intoxicating to Sylvia, who had very little interest in marriage herself. Sylvia dismissed the men who courted her without consideration. The Drakes could not make sense of Sylvia's aversion. But in Charity, Sylvia finally found a kindred soul.

What an irony that these two marriage-averse women ended up forming such a remarkable union. They met in 1807, when Charity traveled to Weybridge, Vermont, to pay a visit to her friend Polly, Sylvia's older sister. Charity intended to visit Vermont for only a few months, but meeting Sylvia changed her plans. Once Sylvia and Charity found each other, they were never willing to be parted. Charity described their encounter as "providence." After a lifetime of troubles, God had given her a "help-meet."² A few months after they met, Charity rented a room in Weybridge, and on July 3, 1807, Sylvia came to join her. For the rest of their lives, the two women would celebrate this date as the beginning of their union. Over the next forty-four years they remained mutually devoted to each other through the tribulations of ill health, overwork, and spiritual doubt. To all who knew them, it seemed they passed their time together happily.³

Although Sylvia and Charity lived a quiet life, far from the bustle and commotion of the nineteenth century's growing cities, they did not live in secret. Everyone who knew them understood that they were a couple and viewed their relationship as a marriage or something like it. One man from a neighboring village, Hiram Harvey

Hurlburt Jr., recalled in his memoir that in town he always heard “it mentioned as if Miss Bryant and Miss Drake were married to each other.”⁴ His words offer the plainest statement that Charity and Sylvia’s relationship was viewed as a marriage. Charity’s nephew, the poet William Cullen Bryant, came close when he described the relationship as “no less sacred to them than the tie of marriage.”⁵

One reason people viewed Charity and Sylvia’s relationship as marital was that the women divided their domestic and public roles according to the familiar pattern of husband and wife. Throughout their lives together Charity always served as head of the household. Her name came first in public documents, such as tax records and census records. She handled the money and took the leading role in all of their business. Sylvia performed the wifely work of cooking and keeping house. In some ways, she did not live all that differently from her sisters after all. She even cared for the children who frequently visited the house, nurturing her many nieces and nephews as well as the young assistants who lived with the women. As Hiram Hurlburt explained in his memoir, “Miss Bryant was the man” in the marriage. And Sylvia, according to William Cullen Bryant, was a “fond wife” to her “husband.”⁶

Charity and Sylvia also seem to have viewed their relationship in these terms. Charity portrayed herself as a husband when she called Sylvia her “help-meet”—a common early American synonym for wife, adopted from the Bible, Genesis 2:18. Sylvia fantasized about taking Charity’s name for her own. On an archived scrap of paper, in Sylvia’s handwriting, there survives a list of names that looks like practice toward a signature, with big loops on the capitals and flourishes on the final letters. The list begins with the name “Bryant,” followed by “Bryant Charity,” then plunges into the sequence “Bryant Sylvia Bryant Sylvia Bryant Charity Bryant Sylvia.” Excluded from the legal form of marriage, it appears that Sylvia, in a romantic gesture, once inscribed her desire to become a wife in name as well as practice.⁷

According to English common-law tradition, wives assumed their husbands’ names because marriage transformed spouses into a single person. Genesis 2:24 states that “a man shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” The idea that a husband and wife became one person, in spirit, body, and law, lay at the heart of early American ideas of marriage. The eighteenth-century English jurist William Blackstone described husbands and wives as *one person* in the law.⁸ Charity shared Sylvia’s evident wish for marital oneness. “May we pass our whole life,” Charity serenaded Sylvia in an 1810 poem, “and our minds be united in one.”⁹ Her language echoed an early nineteenth-century English treatise, which defined husbands and wives as “*united in one* body out of two by God.”¹⁰

Many friends and relations believed that Charity and Sylvia achieved this marital status. Charity’s sister-in-law, and good friend, Sally Snell Bryant, wrote to the women in 1843, “I consider you both one as man and wife are one.”¹¹ Sylvia’s brother

Asaph, who was also close to both women, told Charity that “I consider you and My Sister Sylvia Happely one.”¹² Charity’s former lover Lydia Richards, a lifelong friend to both women, saw Sylvia and Charity as so powerfully united that it was impossible to divide them. She wrote that “you are indeed in many respects so much one that a separation can scarcely be made.”¹³ When the women finally were divided by Charity’s death in 1851, many of their friends and relations found it impossible to imagine Sylvia continuing on alone. Seventeen years later, after Sylvia’s death, her relations erected a common headstone over the two women’s mortal remains in the graveyard on Weybridge Hill. They were buried together like any other married couple.

Yet everyone recognized that Charity and Sylvia’s marriage was not like every other. They were “nerely one” according to friend Anna Hayden, they were “almost as one,” but they also remained separate.¹⁴ Sylvia never did take Charity’s last name. Both women kept their identities as single women in name and law. Both their names appeared in the tax records, and Charity’s name did not cover Sylvia’s, as a husband’s would according to the laws of coverture that governed spousal property in the nineteenth century. Charity and Sylvia did not want it that way. They believed that they each deserved equal claim to the wealth produced by their shared labor.¹⁵ Charity and Sylvia forged a union that was like a marriage but that was also unlike a marriage in fundamental ways related to their sex. By binding herself to another woman, rather than to a man, each woman enjoyed a degree of independence that she could not have otherwise maintained.

But by forming a marriage of two women, both Charity and Sylvia also risked reprobation they would not have otherwise received. Early Americans defined marriage as a sexual institution, and sexual relations between people of the same sex were both legally and socially proscribed in early American society. How did Charity and Sylvia manage their reputation as “husband” and “wife” without sparking the condemnation of their families, friends, and neighbors? Like queer people in many times and places, Charity and Sylvia preserved their reputations by persuading their community to treat the matter of their sexuality as an open secret. Although it is commonly assumed that the “closet” is an opaque space, meaning that people who are in the closet keep others in total ignorance about their sexuality, often the closet is really an open secret. The ignorance that defines the closet is as likely to be a carefully constructed edifice as it is to be a total absence of knowledge. The closet depends on people strategically choosing to remain ignorant of inconvenient facts. In this light, Charity and Sylvia’s acceptance within their town should be understood as the result of their success in persuading others to choose ignorance by not asking questions about their sexuality. No matter what the answer, the very act of being questioned would have damaged the women’s respectability.¹⁶

The open closet is an especially critical strategy in small towns, where every person serves a role, and which would cease to function if all moral transgressors were ostracized. Small communities can maintain the fiction of ignorance in order to preserve social arrangements that work for the general benefit. Queer history has often focused on the modern city as the most potent site of gay liberation, since its anonymity and living arrangements for single people permitted same-sex-desiring men and women to form innovative communities. More recognition needs to be given to the distinctive opportunities that rural towns allowed for the expression of same-sex sexuality. For early American women in particular, the rural landscape rather than the city served as a critical milieu for establishing same-sex unions. Women of Charity and Sylvia's generation spoke far more often of their desire to retire together to a little cottage in the countryside, than of their urge to move together to the city.¹⁷

Charity and Sylvia gave a lot to their family, faith, and neighbors, which encouraged the community to keep their open secret. Sylvia's brother Asaph captured this delicate balance in his brief handwritten memoir. Likening the women's relationship to a marriage while simultaneously maintaining its distinctiveness, Asaph explained that "my sister Sylvia has not Married," having instead spent her life "in company with Miss Charity Bryant." Asaph's relationship with Charity and Sylvia was rocky at times, but for many years he paid frequent visits to their house and accepted them into his own. His children spent countless days and nights with their aunts; he named Charity as godmother for one of his sons. Asaph accommodated the women's relationship, which sometimes troubled him, because he saw both Charity and Sylvia as moral buttresses who upheld the community. "To say the least," he observed approvingly, they "have done as much to build up and keep society to gather considering thier means as aney other two individuals."¹⁸

Charity and Sylvia gained the toleration of their relatives and community not by hiding away but by being public-minded. "Be useful where thou livest, that they may both want + wish thy pleasing presence still," Sylvia began her diary for 1835. She copied the words from George Herbert, a seventeenth-century minister famous for his devotion to his parishioners.¹⁹ Herbert's words captured the combination of faith and practicality that inspired Sylvia and Charity's service. During their long lives together in Weybridge they taught Sunday school, cleaned the church, organized charities, supported their nieces' and nephews' educations, hired local women to work in the tailor shop they ran, and wrote epitaphs for the village graveyard. They became "Aunt Charity" and "Aunt Sylvia" to the whole community. When a former worker asked Charity to take on her younger sister as an apprentice, she explained that it was "the union which exists between Miss Drake and yourself" that made their home such a desirable situation for the young girl.²⁰ Charity and Sylvia's

relationship, far from hidden, was widely known and respected. In fact, the absence of a man in their household allowed the women's marriage less privacy than traditional unions received. In a male-dominated world, two women could not claim the same freedom from public interference that a man could for his home.

The women's union was so public that even in their own time they appeared as subjects in print. Charity's nephew Cullen published the first account of their remarkable marriage in his newspaper, the *New-York Evening Post*, in 1843, and later included that account in an 1850 book of letters.²¹ Cullen had a deep affection for his aunt Charity, who lived with his family on several occasions during his childhood. Charity supported Cullen's poetic talent from the time he was young. She copied out poems he wrote as a child that are now the only extant manuscript versions of those works.²² Once grown up, Cullen remained a loyal nephew to Aunt Charity and Aunt Sylvia. He wrote them letters and even paid them several visits.

His published account of their marriage began with praise for the edenic beauty of the landscape where they lived. Traveling across the Champlain Canal from upstate New York to the Vermont border one summer, Cullen passed by "fields heavy with grass almost ready for the scythe, and thick-leaved groves of the sugar-maple and the birch." He rode through meadows luxuriant with white-flowered clover, which filled the soft summer air with a sweet perfume, before arriving at their cottage door. Copying the sequence of the popular marriage ceremony from the *Book of Common Prayer*, Cullen's paean to his aunts continued:

If I were permitted to draw aside the veil of private life, I would briefly give you the singular, and to me 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, and watched over each other tenderly in sickness; for sickness has made long and frequent visits to their dwelling. 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. I would tell you of their dwelling, encircled with roses, which now in the days of their broken health, bloom wild without their tendance, and I would speak of the friendly attentions which their neighbors, people of kind hearts and simple manners,

seem to take pleasure in bestowing upon them, but I have already said more than I fear they will forgive me for, if this should ever meet their eyes, and I must leave the subject.²³

Far from feeling offended by Cullen's disclosures, Charity and Sylvia treasured his poetic description of their marriage. When Sylvia died, her will directed that a copy of Cullen's 1850 book of letters be left to a favorite niece.²⁴

The poet's account won the favor of his aunts because, although evocative, it avoided giving the women's names. This was a matter of great importance to Charity, whose early life was marred by vicious rumors about her character. Unfortunately for the historian, such concerns led Charity to seek the destruction of her own most personal writings, including her diary and letters, to protect them from prying eyes. Over the course of her life, Charity probably wrote more than fifteen hundred letters. She wrote two hundred letters to her friend Lydia alone, in a correspondence that lasted from 1799 to 1846. According to a letter record that she kept in a ledger, Charity continued to write nearly twenty letters a year up until the end of her life.²⁵ And yet only thirty-six of her letters in total still remain.²⁶ The rest were, presumably, turned to ashes. Traces of those burnings remain. For example, Lydia's sister Sally wrote to Charity, after Lydia's death, promising to destroy her half-century's correspondence if so directed:

The trunk containing your letters was given to me before my sisters death with the request to keep it unopened until I had order from you which request has been strictly complied with notwithstanding it would be highly gratifying to me and my daughters to peruse them It would be hard for me to commit them to the flames even if you should desire it. But they are yours and your wish respecting them shall be granted if it is in my power.²⁷

The fact that Charity's reply is missing offers strong proof that she instructed Sally to burn all the pages. Exchanges with other friends tell a similar story. When her correspondents died she worked diligently to ensure that her letters to them were destroyed. She even got into a quarrel with one sister's widower after he refused to confirm the destruction of her letters.²⁸

After her own death, however, Charity lost the power over the disposition of her property. Sylvia, who took control of the papers that the women had accumulated throughout their lifetimes, did not wish to see them all destroyed. Gossip had never blighted her early years. Although the women did encounter some negative reactions from hostile family members and neighbors, overall Sylvia derived a positive reputation from her union with Charity. Being connected to this brilliant and charismatic

figure elevated Sylvia from the anonymous station into which she was born, the youngest daughter of a bankrupt living on the provincial frontier. The last thing that Sylvia wished was to eliminate the evidence of her lifelong companion.

Instead, Sylvia preserved the poems her partner wrote, as well as many years from her own diary, their business papers, the correspondence they received, and countless little scraps that had once been deemed important enough not to throw into the fire (including the page where she practiced signing Sylvia Bryant). She kept the papers in a trunk and left them to posterity. Sylvia had many years following Charity's death to weed through the papers and remove anything she deemed too private. Many papers are missing. Although both women appear to have kept journals throughout their lives, only a few years of Sylvia's diary remain and none of Charity's do.²⁹ Very few letters written by Sylvia survive, only fifteen mostly archived among the papers of her relations. Following some lost logic, Sylvia preserved the papers that she saw as the most fit memorial to her and Charity's lives. Her desire to have the relationship publicly acknowledged in her own lifetime, and memorialized after her death, has made this book possible. After Sylvia's death, her family gave the trunk to a local history collector; the papers are now archived at his namesake museum, the Henry Sheldon, in Middlebury, Vermont. These writings provide the most significant sources for this book.

Charity and Sylvia would not have been shocked by readers' interest in their story. Before their deaths, Cullen's account had already demonstrated that curiosity about their lives extended beyond their circle of immediate acquaintances. However, they could hardly have expected anyone to study their marriage in the fashion that follows—our culture and preoccupations have been revolutionized since their lifetimes. Sylvia's sensibility would have been offended by the brazen indiscretion of this book. While Cullen felt a certain modesty about drawing aside "the veil of private life," I do not share his restraint. Historians, unlike poets, are not content with evocative imagery. We have a ravenous appetite for the factual. This book investigates all the details of Sylvia and Charity's relationship, even asking the question that they worked so hard to forestall: did the women share a sexual relationship? Many other questions also drive the pages of this narrative. How did their childhoods prepare the women to fashion such a divergent life path? What sorts of relationships did Charity form with the women she met before Sylvia? What resistance did she encounter? How did Charity and Sylvia persuade their traditional, rural, nineteenth-century community to accept them as a married couple? How did they reconcile their romantic relationship with their religious faith? How did Sylvia's family relate to Charity, and vice versa? How did the women earn a living? And how were they remembered after their deaths?

To answer these questions I draw on a wide range of materials. In addition to the papers at the Henry Sheldon Museum, I have found primary sources related to Charity's and Sylvia's lives scattered across archives in Massachusetts, New York, Illinois, California, and Washington. At many points in the research I was amazed by the richness of the surviving documentary record about the ordinary women and men who people these pages. I am thankful for the verbosity and historical-mindedness of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New Englanders that gifted me with sources such as the receipt for Sylvia's gravestone, the diary of Charity's sister-in-law, and the memoir of a man who knew Charity and Sylvia when he was a child. The variety of the historical record has allowed for a far more intimate perspective on the lives of my subjects than I ever could have dreamed possible at the project's outset.

Of course, the historical record of Charity and Sylvia's relationship is also notable for its silences. Not only have few of the women's letters survived, the documents that do remain are mostly silent on the subject that first sparked my interest and probably the interest of most readers: the women's sexuality. Some of the strongest evidence for the women's sexual relationships appears in their religious writings, where they struggled with the burden of secret sins that left both women feeling uncertain about their redemption. Romantic letters and poems hint at more positive aspects of the women's physical relationship. In both these sources, references to sexuality take the form of allusions, not direct statements. Respectable nineteenth-century women rarely wrote directly about sex of any sort, but this silence is especially characteristic of the history of same-sex intimacy.³⁰ For many centuries, sex between women or between men was referred to as "the mute sin" or the "crime not fit to be named."³¹ As late as the 1890s, Oscar Wilde's lover Alfred Douglas dubbed their passion "the love that dare not speak its name."³² Such locutions have led historians to argue that what is not said must be an important conceptual tool for writing lesbian and gay history.³³ The research for this book has required me to read the silences in documents where they speak loudly.

Thankfully, I have had the works of other scholars to guide me safely along the shoals of speculation. It would be impossible to write such an intimate portrait of two individuals without the contextual research and theoretical insights provided by generations of scholars. Hundreds of works ranging from nineteenth-century genealogies to twenty-first-century queer studies have helped me to place Charity and Sylvia in their time and to make sense of their lives. The book owes its greatest debt to scholars in early American history who have investigated everything from the development of the tailoring trade in the eighteenth century, to patterns of friendship among young people after the Revolution, to the growing rates of singlehood in the nineteenth century. The end result of my investigations, I hope, will

contribute to this archive of knowledge and support new understandings of the past as well.

Charity and Sylvia's story reveals that there was more opportunity for the expression of erotic love between women in early America than has previously been believed. The earliest inquiries into lesbian and gay history recovered an oppressive record of religious codes, civil laws, and scientific thought directed against people who had sex with members of their own sex. When evidence was first discovered that romantic relationships between women were common in early America, historians believed that nobody could have seen those relationships as sexual. Otherwise, they would have been taboo. Any sex that did take place, it was assumed, must have been shrouded in complete secrecy.³⁴ But Charity's and Sylvia's lives tell a more complicated story, revealing the gap that existed between prescription and practice, the rules that govern society and how societies actually operate. Early Americans did understand the potential for a sexual element within women's friendships. Several of Charity's early intimacies were gossiped about for this reason. More astonishing still, society could also tolerate such sexual possibilities through manufactured ignorance, creating opportunities for same-sex sexuality that should ostensibly have been impossible.

The potential for toleration of same-sex sexuality extended so far that even same-sex marriage did not lie outside the boundaries of possibility in early America. Same-sex marriage is not as new as Americans on both sides of today's debate tend to assume; it is neither the radical break with timeless tradition that conservatives fear nor the unprecedented innovation of a singularly tolerant age that liberals praise. It fits within a long history of marriage diversity in North America that included practices such as polygamy, self-divorce, free love, and interracial unions. Many queer scholars today criticize the mainstream gay rights focus on same-sex marriage for being "homonormative," or an attempt to secure respectability for privileged lesbians or gay men based on their similarity to straight people. But Charity and Sylvia's history reveals how same-sex marriage can challenge society's rules of respectability as well. Through their union, Charity and Sylvia undermined the conventional definitions of womanhood and manhood that ordinary marriages reinforced. They staked out new claims to familial, economic, and spiritual authority that were denied to their conventionally married sisters. It seems reasonable to hope that same-sex marriage has the same potential to reshape acceptable sex roles today.³⁵

Ten years ago I walked in the door of the Henry Sheldon Museum on a sunny summer afternoon. The entrance way was unremarkable, but something in the air set my senses tingling. You know, I said, there are great treasures waiting to be discovered in local museums like this. It was entirely by accident that I stumbled across the story of Charity and Sylvia a year later, and I found out that their papers were archived

at the Sheldon. Putting together the story of Charity and Sylvia's marriage has been like building a jigsaw puzzle, made more difficult by all the missing pieces. But the research process has left me more sure than ever that there are countless pieces remaining to be found, if not from Charity's and Sylvia's lives then from the lives of other lovers who lived outside the norms. Their stories have been hard to see because they confound our expectations. We see each story as one of a kind, defying categorization. Taken together they tell a history we are only beginning to know. The most remarkable element of Charity and Sylvia's life together, in the final assessment, may be how unremarkable it was.

1

A Child of Melancholy

1777

CONFINED TO HER bed, where she had remained since the birth of her daughter Charity a month before, thirty-nine-year-old Silence Bryant lay dying. The weight that disease brought to bear on her chest was compounded by the pressing considerations of the spiritual fate awaiting her and the temporal fate awaiting her children. Silence's strict Congregationalist faith directed that she prepare her soul to meet her maker, but that blessed reunion would leave her children motherless. The survival of her sickly infant hung tenuously. Outside the rectangular windows of the colonial house, the fields of North Bridgewater, Massachusetts, were green with early summer grass. Inside, a gaunt-faced woman, grown old before her time, succumbed to consumption. The infant daughter she left behind never knew her mother and never ceased mourning her death.¹

Silence's life ended amid a scene of destruction. Beyond the sickroom walls, the nation entered the third year of a terrible war for independence. At the front, Washington's continental army pursued Hessian soldiers across central New Jersey, leaving the wool-clad corpses of mercenaries scattered along the roadsides.² Off the coast of New York, captured American sailors lay dying from disease and malnutrition on British prison ships.³ Close to home, in Massachusetts, a smallpox plague raged through private homes, sweeping away whole families.⁴ Silence's death was only one among thousands in June 1777, hardly worthy of notice outside the family circle. Her death was not even the first within the family since the war began.

Signal guns from Lexington and Concord were heard in North Bridgewater, twenty miles south, within hours of the Revolution's opening battles on April 19, 1775. That afternoon, several of Charity's uncles marched north with the minutemen.⁵ They led the way in a parade of local citizens who volunteered to fight throughout the eight-year war. The Bryants' fourteen-year-old neighbor Hezekiah Packard volunteered two months later when the cannon shots from the Battle of Bunker Hill echoed through the village.⁶ North Bridgewater men played a critical role in the Battle of Dorchester Heights, the following March, which enabled the patriots to recapture Boston.⁷ A month later, Silence's oldest son, Oliver, volunteered for Captain Elisha Mitchell's Plymouth County company of the Massachusetts militia.

Oliver's enlistment period was probably shorter than a year, since the patriots were still wary of creating a permanent army at that early stage in the war. But he did not live to finish his term. Exactly how Oliver died is uncertain. Charity was in error when, many decades later, she told her nephew John that her oldest brother had died in June 1776, two months after his enlistment.⁸ The State Library of Massachusetts holds a rations receipt made to Oliver Bryant dated August 9, 1776, in a camp "near New York."⁹ This places him in proximity to the Battle of Long Island, which makes sense since Bryant served in Col. Simeon Cary's regiment that fought there.¹⁰ According to a family genealogy he died in the battle, but his gravestone records his death date as August 24, three days beforehand.¹¹ A camp disease may have taken his life before the fighting broke out.

Silence was already in a weakened state when she heard the news. The birth of Oliver eighteen years before had been the first in a nonstop sequence of pregnancies and parturitions that absorbed her entire adult life. Five months' pregnant when she married Philip Bryant at the age of nineteen, she gave birth to Oliver in March 1758.¹² Ruth and a twin who died followed in 1760. Another son may have been born in 1761 and died in infancy. More surviving children were born in 1763, 1765, 1767, 1769, 1771, and 1774.¹³ At some point in this history, Silence developed consumption. The wasting disease caused severe respiratory distress, fever, exhaustion, and weight loss. Silence was harrowed and spent when, pregnant once again, word of Oliver's death reached her. A bleak season followed, while Silence struggled through the grief of losing her oldest son, the ravages of a terminal illness, and the needs of a household of young children plus one more on the way.

Her difficulties were compounded by the closely concurrent deaths of her parents and her mother-in-law, which deprived Silence of both practical and emotional support when she needed it most. Her father and mother, Abiel and Silence Howard, figured largely in their daughter's and grandchildren's lives. Abiel played an instru-

mental role in orchestrating Silence's marriage to Philip Bryant, who had come to live with the Howard family in order to train as a doctor under Abiel's guidance. In a story common to the eighteenth century, the apprentice fell in love with the master's daughter—or at least made her pregnant. The match, if precipitous, seems to have been welcome. As Silence and Philip's family swiftly grew in the years that followed, the children frequently visited their grandparents who lived nearby. Abiel lent his grandchildren books from his extensive library and encouraged their love of poetry; Silence, a pious woman, nurtured the grandchildren's faith.¹⁴ Silence Howard's death in August 1775 and Abiel Howard's death in January 1777 seem to have come as a surprise. Abiel died intestate, prompting the court to appoint Philip Bryant to administer his estate.¹⁵ Philip's own mother, Ruth Staples Bryant, died two months later, increasing the family's grief.¹⁶

The deaths of so many beloved relations so close in proximity struck a terrible blow to Silence. When spring arrived in North Bridgewater in 1777, the rejuvenation in the fields hardly reflected the spirit within the Bryant household. By the time of Charity's birth, on May 22, 1777, consumption had reduced Silence to a shadow of her former self. It came as no surprise when she passed away a month later. Silence is only a ghost in the records of Charity's life, legible in her absence, which so strongly defined Charity's sense of self. Charity believed her mother's death destined her to become a "child of melancholy," as she titled an 1800 poem recounting her origins. In Charity's retelling, there is no backdrop of war or disease. Her mother's death is a singular irony, intruding on a pastoral scene, bringing grave consequences to her unfortunate daughter:

As the sun rising pleasant in May
Seems to promise new life to the lawn
Even such was my youth's early day
And as fair and serene was its dawn;
But clouds have o'ershadow'd the scene
And tempests continue to blow,
While to think on the days that have been
But serves to embitter my woe.

And say, was I wrong for to dream
That fortune upon me would shine?
When friends to me smiling did seem
And the tend'rest of Mothers was mine
But Heaven too soon of its boon

Repenting, nounc'd it again
 While I am left poor, and alone
 By remembrance to double my pain.¹⁷

Despite Charity's complaint, it is unlikely that she had any "remembrance" to double her pain. Her description of Silence as "the tend'rest of Mothers" is so formulaic as to be almost empty, although Charity did have the memories of her older siblings to draw on when she chose the word *tender*. Her sister Anna Kingman, who was six when their mother died, used the same word to describe Silence in a poem she wrote in 1800 that recounted Charity's infancy. In Anna's words, Charity had been deprived of a "Mother's tender anguish." Silence's death left the baby with "no Mother's care no fond maternal love / No Mother's rising hope or boding sigh."¹⁸ Silence appears in Anna's words, like in Charity's, as a broken promise of love. Of course, Anna remembered their mother dimly if at all.

No other description of Silence has survived to support Charity's and Anna's poetic renderings. A gravestone bearing her name and the words "wife of Dr. Philip Bryant" stands in an old cemetery in North Bridgewater (renamed Brockton more than a century ago). As a prominent medical man, Philip earned biographical entries in books of local history and an epitaph on his gravestone. But Silence Bryant, like so many women of her generation, was never memorialized. In death she stayed true to her name.¹⁹

The one word in Silence's own voice that she left behind was the name she chose for her infant daughter. She called the girl after her youngest sister, Charity Howard. By choosing this single sister as a namesake Silence pointed her daughter to a model of womanhood that differed significantly from her own.²⁰ Charity Howard, who alone among her sisters never married, earned a reputation during her life as an accomplished seamstress. A set of decorative bed drapes that she stitched before Silence's death, from silk she dyed herself, are so expertly embroidered that portions of the work have been preserved by two different museums.²¹ Charity Howard survived her married sisters by many decades, living well into her eighties.²² She became for her niece an example of both the creative rewards that might derive from a single life and the financial vulnerabilities that long-lived "spinsters" faced.

Whatever dreams Silence held for her daughter's future, there was good cause to worry whether Charity would survive to fulfill them. She was a very sickly baby. The infants of tubercular mothers are often born small and are sometimes infected by the disease. Charity's chances for survival worsened after Silence's death, when she lost the opportunity to nurse. There is no evidence that she was nursed by a surrogate. Her father did hire a caretaker for Charity named Grace Hayward, but she was an unmarried woman in her forties who would not have been able to breastfeed.²³ Instead, she likely fed Charity on a pap mixed of flour, water, cow's milk, and bread,

which would have distressed her immature digestive system. Long after Silence's death, Charity's survival remained uncertain. Even decades later, her infant suffering haunted her older sister Anna's memory:

You drew in trouble with your earliest breath,
And liv'd the long expected prey of Death!
For wasting sickness nipt your infant bloom
And mark'd you out a victim for the tomb.²⁴

One stroke of luck saved Charity from following her mother to an early grave. Grace Hayward came to love her charge. In later writings, Charity celebrated Grace as a "generous" woman of "kind compassions" who "nursed my helpless infancy" and whose "affection, by me, can never be forgotten."²⁵ She looked after Charity, both body and soul. Grace's dedication to nourishing the struggling infant, to easing her discomfort when she cried, and to protecting her from the "unwholesome winds" that doctors of the era blamed for disease restored Charity's physical health from the assault of the "wasting sickness" that had taken her mother's life.²⁶ The "affection" with which she performed her duties also nurtured Charity's heart.

Unfortunately, Grace could not be a constant presence throughout Charity's childhood. Philip Bryant remarried when Charity was two, and his new wife, Hannah Richards Bryant, who was notoriously frugal and unsympathetic to her stepchildren, dismissed Charity's nurse when she got the chance. Still, Grace remained in the Bridgewater area, and she stayed close to the girl whose infancy she had watched over. She returned to work for the family at times when sickness required, which was unfortunately frequent, and she became known to the other siblings in the family as Aunt Grace, but Charity regarded her as an "ever-kind mother."²⁷

The affectionate indulgence of Charity's numerous older brothers and sisters also helped to soften the blow of her early orphanhood. The Bryant siblings were close-knit, united by their common love of poetry and their common dislike for their stepmother. Charity, as the baby, was cosseted by her big brothers and sisters. But this intimacy came at a cost. The Bryants were an unlucky family, shadowed by early death. From watching her older siblings, Charity came to expect death's imminent grip on her own shoulder.

Charity was six when her oldest sister Ruth died from the same wasting disease that had killed their mother, who probably infected her. Consumption frequently passed between family members living in close quarters, devastating entire households. Ruth's sickly appearance was guaranteed to terrify a child Charity's age. The skeletal bodies of consumption victims, and their symptomatic bleeding from the mouth, appeared monstrous to many adults (there are even scholars who connect consumption to myths

about vampires). Ruth's presence in the home during Charity's early years acted as a warning to the sickly child of that painful end that possibly awaited her.²⁸

Ruth's death released Charity from witnessing a terrifying spectacle of suffering, but it cost her sister a great potential ally. Ruth was an extraordinary young woman. When the battles of Lexington and Concord shook the village soon after her fifteenth birthday, she embraced the cause of American independence with a passion. Unable to shoulder a gun like her uncles and older brother, Ruth instead picked up her pen and began writing poems in support of the war. The poems made her family proud—the only surviving copy of her work is copied out in the hand of middle brother Peter. Ruth's voice was valorous, brave, and dedicated. She had an unusual fascination with warfare for a female poet, especially for an unmarried girl. Sometimes her verses assumed the identity of a valiant soldier. These poems, among the first that Charity read, set an example of the risks an unconventional young woman could take on the page.²⁹

Although Ruth's death deprived her youngest sister of her stewardship, Charity fortunately found another protector within the family circle. Her sister Anna was only six years older than Charity, but like many older siblings in difficult conditions, she became her baby sister's caretaker. Anna was "lovely."³⁰ Gentle, kind, and nurturing, she shied away from conflict, having "as great an aversion to strife as ever any body had."³¹ And she loved Charity without judgment or restraint, more than she loved any of her other brothers or sisters. Her "partiality," she explained, was owing to the "peculiarness of [Charity's] situation."³² Deeply compassionate, Anna's soul ached for her unfortunate sister who, she commiserated in a poem, had been unlucky from the beginning:

To be wretched you were surely born
 The sport of fortune + of fools the scorn
 For all your days in one sad tenor run,
 And pass in sorrow as they first begun.³³

As a little girl, Charity counted on Anna to console her in the face of sorrow. Anna became another mother to her little sister, willing to provide the nurturing that Grace, during her absences from the household, could not and that their stepmother, Hannah, despite her presence, would not. Anna, in Charity's words, acted

Kind as a sister, and thy feeling heart
 In all my cares has borne a mother's part
 No grief's distress'd me but thy generous soul
 Gave all her powers my bosom to console³⁴

Requiring from Anna “all her powers” of consolation betrayed a certain selfishness on Charity’s part. Anna too suffered through the grief of early orphanhood, the premature loss of beloved siblings, and the entrance of an unsympathetic adult into the family home. But during childhood, Anna and Charity set a pattern of protector and protected that lasted into adulthood. Anna indulged Charity in a sense of distinctive misfortune that was not entirely accurate.

The losses in the Bryant family did not distinguish Charity or her surviving siblings from many other youths of the era. High mortality rates in the late eighteenth century caused many of those born during the 1770s and 1780s to share Charity’s experience of early orphanhood. In fact, orphanhood can be seen as the archetypal experience of the era. In declaring independence, the colonies enacted metaphorical matricide against Mother Britain and patricide against King George. The Revolution overturned colonial patterns of life and unleashed a series of profound economic, religious, and social transformations. A whole cohort came of age culturally as well as biologically orphaned, forced to find their own way in a new world. This experience, it has been argued, inspired the individualist cast to early national American society.³⁵ Charity’s sense of distinctiveness ironically likened her to many in her generation. It helps explain how she became willing to behave in a manner that challenged traditional expectations. Like the individualistic men of her generation who threw off the old habits of deference to pursue their own self-interest, Charity felt enabled to break from the past and pursue a life more radically dissimilar from her mother’s, or even her aunt’s, than Silence Bryant could ever have imagined.

And yet Charity remained defined by her family background. Charity took no joy in recollecting her childhood, but she would not have traded her family for another. A person’s family explained who she was. When a young boy named Hiram Hurlburt Jr. stepped into Charity and Sylvia’s shop in the fall of 1835, Charity pointed a finger at him and announced, “Your mother was a Bullard, she came from Athol, Mass.”³⁶ That genealogy defined the boy in her eyes. Likewise, the fact that she was a Bryant meant a great deal to Charity and to the people she knew. The family had a cultured reputation that generated respect within New England society. Long after Charity left Massachusetts, she kept careful tabs on the family. And when her nieces and nephews had questions about their family history, they turned to Aunt Charity for answers. Responding to their inquiries was as likely to cause her consternation as give her pleasure. When her nephew John asked for a catalog of the birth and death dates of his grandparents, uncles, and aunts, Charity obligingly replied to his request, but she morosely proclaimed “of almost all it is said that they are dead!”³⁷ She was proud to be a Bryant, but recalling her family history brought her grief.

2

Infantile Days

1784

MARY DRAKE GAVE birth in a house that was not her own, or not for long. It was the last day of October in the year 1784. It had been a fine fall so far, but even a pleasant October in Massachusetts carries a chill.¹ Mary's good health fitted her to hold her new daughter close and shield her from any drafts that filtered in from outside. Unfortunately, Sylvia would receive no further inheritance than the warmth of her mother's love and an affectionate family circle. Like the Bryants, the Drakes were swept up by the winds of war. In one key regard they were set down rather easier—all the members of the family survived; still, the Revolution took a high toll. The financial chaos of the period bankrupted the family and left them homeless.

Mary's husband, Thomas Drake II, was a good patriot. He served on the war-time Committee of Correspondence and Inspection in their town of Easton, on Bridgewater's western border, and also enlisted for repeated brief stints in the local militia.² He spent December 1776 in Rhode Island, guarding against British landings; another five days in August 1778, doing the same; and finally three months in late summer 1780 reinforcing the Continental Army. He survived these enlistments unscathed. As a local historian of Easton put it, the military experience of many men in the town was "limited to frequent trainings and an occasional march to Rhode Island on an 'alarm.' Some of them never saw a Red-coat." Thomas Drake fit that description to a tee. In a great military tradition of

the ages, he spent a good deal of time marching around, battling mosquitoes and boredom.³

His luck extended to the next generation. Sylvia Drake was the youngest of eight siblings. With birthdates beginning seven years after those of the Bryant children, her brothers were just a bit too young to fight in the war. Isaac, the oldest brother, born in March 1765, was only sixteen when the Battle of Yorktown effectively ended the Revolution. By the time he turned eighteen, the Treaty of Paris had been signed. Sylvia's next oldest brother, Oliver, was born in July 1767 and remained a child throughout the war years. Many Drake cousins and uncles joined the fight, marching alongside Thomas to the shores of Rhode Island. But Sylvia's siblings stayed home and passed the war years in physical safety.

The postwar years dealt the Drake family a more treacherous hand. Along with thousands of their countrymen, the Drakes were hit hard when Massachusetts entered a severe depression during the mid-1780s. The severity of this nationwide economic crisis compared in scale to the Great Depression of the 1930s. At the time, many politicians blamed small landholders for their own suffering, accusing farmers of overindulging in luxury goods and acquiring too much debt. The end of the war had reopened trade between America and Europe, and Massachusetts stores were crowded with European imports. Merchants filled the newspapers with advertisements for sumptuous goods, such as pink satin cloaks trimmed with fur and lace, silver-plated shoe and knee buckles, black silk gloves, velvet caps, bolts of Irish linen, squirrel muffs and tippetts, wine glasses, brass candlesticks, pianofortes, German flutes, harpsichords, Japann'd teapots, genteel fans, Turkish figs, and leather-bound multivolume book editions. The appeal of these items after years of sacrifice and penury must have been powerful.⁴

Yet frugal Massachusetts farmers, who learned during two decades of boycotts against England to embrace thrift as a virtue, frequently resisted the allure of such temptations. Many families continued to make do in the mid-1780s with homespun and other domestic manufactures. These ordinary people blamed the economic crisis on wealthy investors who manipulated the state government in order to enrich themselves. Under the influence of securities traders, the Massachusetts state legislature passed a requisition bill in 1785 that forced ordinary farmers to pay high taxes in order to fund the interest on state debts that had been issued during the war years. Initially used to pay ordinary soldiers and farmers for their labor and goods, these securities had suffered deflation and were purchased by speculators at an extreme discount. After the war, the speculators pressured the state government to pay interest on the face value of the deflated securities. To make the full payments to bondholders the state had to raise high taxes on ordinary people, and to compound that injustice, the state demanded that the people pay their taxes in specie (silver and