



Charity and Sylvia: A Same-Sex Marriage in Early America

By Rachel Hope Cleves

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Conventional wisdom holds that same-sex marriage is a purely modern innovation, a concept born of an overtly modern lifestyle that was unheard of in nineteenth century America. But as Rachel Hope Cleves demonstrates in this eye-opening book, same-sex marriage is hardly new.

Born in 1777, Charity Bryant was raised in Massachusetts. A brilliant and strong-willed woman with a clear attraction for her own sex, Charity found herself banished from her family home at age twenty. She spent the next decade of her life traveling throughout Massachusetts, working as a teacher, making intimate female friends, and becoming the subject of gossip wherever she lived. At age twenty-nine, still defiantly single, Charity visited friends in Weybridge, Vermont. There she met a pious and studious young woman named Sylvia Drake. The two soon became so inseparable that Charity decided to rent rooms in Weybridge. In 1809, they moved into their own home together, and over the years, came to be recognized, essentially, as a married couple. Revered by their community, Charity and Sylvia operated a tailor shop employing many local women, served as guiding lights within their church, and participated in raising their many nieces and nephews.

Charity and Sylvia is the intimate history of their extraordinary forty-four year union. Drawing on an array of original documents including diaries, letters, and poetry, Cleves traces their lives in sharp detail. Providing an illuminating glimpse into a relationship that turns conventional notions of same-sex marriage on their head, and reveals early America to be a place both more diverse and more accommodating than modern society might imagine, *Charity and Sylvia* is a significant contribution to our limited knowledge of LGBT history in early America.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Rachel Hope Cleves offers a lyrical portrait of a same-sex marriage in this new book. Here completely assembled for the first time is the compelling story of Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake and their forty-four-year (1807-51) domestic, romantic, and sexual union.... Through nineteen short, crisply composed chapters, readers are drawn into the intimate world of Charity and Sylvia.... Scholars of the history of sexuality and the general reading public alike - but especially those engaged in same-sex marriages in the twenty-first century - will appreciate the depth of research and the beautiful prose of this book. Charity and Sylvia would be proud." --*Journal of the History of Sexuality*

"...Rachel Hope Cleves's *Charity and Sylvia* is an important contribution to the field. Finally, a historian has documented a long-term same-sex relationship in the early republic.... *Charity and Sylvia* is a compelling story that fills a long-standing void in the history of sexuality." --*Journal of American History*

"The book is the first to delve deep into the history of an early American same-sex marriage. Cleves sees Drake and Bryant not as an aberration, but as part of a larger history of same-sex partnerships that has yet to be written - one that now exists mainly as clues dropped in family histories and stories told in the archives of local historical societies." --Rebecca Onion, *Boston Globe*

"The moving true story of a same-sex couple who found an honored place in early 19th-century Vermont... Rachel Hope Cleves' new book, *Charity and Sylvia: A Same Sex Marriage in Early America*, is a slim, tender tribute to this marriage-in-all-but-law... Academic histories capable of bringing tears to a reader's eyes are rare, but *Charity and Sylvia* is one of them." --*Salon*

"In a year when same-sex marriages are being recognized, unrecognized and rerecognized in courtrooms around the country, historian Rachel Hope Cleves flies us back in time two centuries to a remarkable couple... Drawing on documents and letters, and occasionally reading between the lines and interpreting silences, Cleves meticulously reconstructs their lives together in *Charity and Sylvia*. She explores fascinating and difficult questions, such as how the two women squared their relationship with their religious community and whether this was a sexual union." --*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

"In telling [the story of Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake], Cleves has written more than a work of recovery of a lesbian past. She offers an intriguing inquiry into the language of letters and poetry. Her close reading uncovers hidden meanings to reveal the private coded words of the same-sex female lovers." --*Journal of Interdisciplinary History*

"Charity and Sylvia is undeniably smart - a devastatingly handsome contribution to our understanding of the history of gender and sexuality in the United States and the history of the early republic and antebellum period generally." --*The New England Quarterly*

"In this beautifully written and utterly absorbing love story, Cleves (*The Reign of Terror in America*) explores the lives of Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake, two ordinary middle-class women who serve as a window on historical constructs of marriage, gender, and sexuality in late 18th-century and early 19th-century America... Meticulously researched and brilliantly argued, Cleves has crafted an important work of history that resonates with one of today's most public debates." --*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"[A] remarkable story of which [Cleves] tells with equal parts rigor and sensitivity... *Charity & Sylvia* is an absorbing and perspective-shifting read in its entirety, chronicling the lives of these two pioneering women, the multitude of challenges, personal and social, they overcame to be together, and the depth and richness of their lifelong love." --*Brainpickings*

"Starting with the birth of the woman on whom author Rachel Hope Cleves focuses most, this book opens with a slice of life during the Revolutionary War. We then move back and forth in narrative, but Cleves never lets us forget the time and space that her subjects inhabited, the social mores, the historical aspects, nor the seemingly-inconsistent attitudes toward romance and sex that our forebears held and that which we've been led to believe they had. I found that deeply fascinating and highly entertaining. I think that if you're a fan of history (LGBT or otherwise), this is something you'll relish. With chaste retelling and its abundant details, *Charity & Sylvia* is your grandmother's book - and yours, too."

--*Washington Blade*

"With *Charity and Sylvia* Cleves has stitched together a coherent, captivating account, one filled with vibrant details, and she offers a provocative conclusion: however astonishing their story, it might not be that uncommon." --*The Gay & Lesbian Review*

"An extraordinary book" -- *The Historian*

About the Author

Rachel Hope Cleves is Associate Professor of History, University of Victoria

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Toni Bays:

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Corey Smith:

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Jack Murray:

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