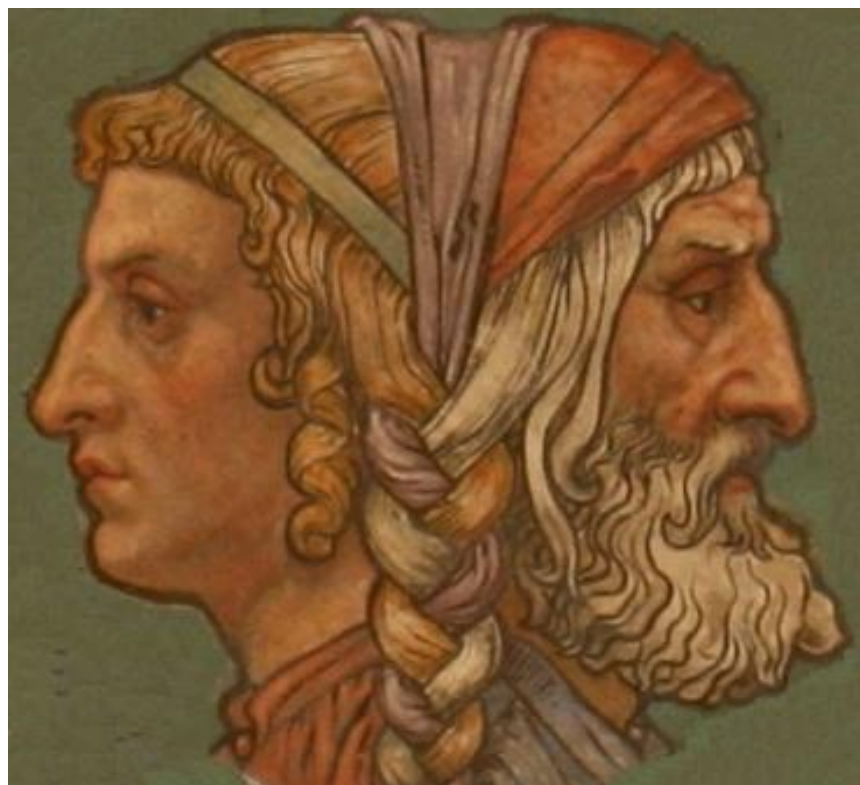


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Table of Contents

The Importance of Balance: Quentin Metsys' The Moneylender and His Wife — Kendalyn Korth	3
Lesbian Newsletters, Pulps, and Manuals: A Primary Source Analysis — Holland Schmitz	11

**The Importance of Balance: Quentin Metsys' *The Moneylender and His Wife*
By Kendalyn Korth**

L.P. Hartley once wrote, “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” This is often how people feel when they look at literature and art from the past—like they are missing some essential cultural knowledge that will make everything crystal clear. That is undoubtedly the feeling Quentin Metsys’ (1466-1530) 16th-century Flemish painting, *The Moneylender and his Wife* (1514), leaves behind. Currently located at the Louvre in Paris, France, Metsys’ work is a vibrant oil-on-panel painting depicting a moneylender diligently focusing on his trade while surrounded by objects of his craft, with his wife sitting beside him reading a devotional book. Within the artwork, the wife is looking away from her reading and fixating on what her husband is doing, which is handling various pieces of golden coins and currency and using a balance to determine their worth. What is often confusing to the viewer about this painting is when they try to figure out its meaning or intention. Because the wife is looking away from her book of hours, most viewers believe that the painting is a satire, that the wife’s “distraction” displays the evil power of wealth and material goods to draw one’s devotion away from religion and spiritual faith. This is not entirely outside the realm of possibility because the Flemish painter was well-known for his satires, as well as his religious paintings and portraits. However, when one inspects Metsys’ other satirical paintings, such as *The Ugly Duchess* (1513) or *Ill Matched Lovers* (1525), this interpretation of the *Moneylender and His Wife* becomes dubious. Comparing the paintings, one can see a marked difference in style between these satirical paintings and *The Moneylender and His Wife*, where the satirical figures are grotesque and display vulgar features and attributes, and the figures in *The Moneylender and His Wife* are softer, more pleasant looking, and more respectable in appearance.

Indeed, the figures of the moneylender and his wife are much more likened to Metsys’ portraits, such as the *Portrait of Pieter Gillis* (1517) and the *Portrait of Cornelia Sandrien* (c. 1514). Moreover, there is also the fact that *The Moneylender and his Wife* was a wedding gift for Metsys’ friend, Pieter Gillis, likely commissioned by their shared acquaintance, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, the influential Dutch Humanist. This factor, along with the highly unique social and economic climate of early 1500s Antwerp, which was taking over as the commercial capital in Flanders as well as the rest of Europe, offers a different and perhaps more time and culturally appropriate interpretation of the work: that *The Moneylender and his Wife* is not a satire condemning wealth, but is instead a commentary on the ideal of the *balance* between wealth and religion. The iconography in the painting allows for a more cynical “wealth is evil” view, that is only if one is looking *exclusively* at the religious symbolism and not also considering the intended recipient of the work, the occasion it was commissioned for, and the culture and context of the world that it was created in. While the painting does have solid religious symbolism, when interpreted with the other symbols in the work, it becomes evident that the icons in the painting provide a more positive, rather than negative, narrative. To better understand this argument—and indeed, the artwork itself—one must first examine the symbolism in the painting, which consists of secular, religious icons, and combinations of both, to deduce the intention trying to be delivered. Next, it is essential to look at the occasion that determined the painting’s creation to see how that and the identity of whom it was commissioned (Pieter Gillis) informs the artwork. Lastly, it is necessary to examine the time and place in which the work was made to understand why a balanced message would be appropriate and accepted in a traditional Catholic culture, which usually condemns wealth as the root of all sin.

Within *The Moneylender and his Wife*, Metsys portrays various symbols ranging from the secular to the religious and those balancing in between. Only when one looks at these icons can a more precise interpretation of the artwork be formulated. First, however, it is important to look at the different categories of symbols, starting with the secular. While the most obvious, the secular symbols and icons within *The Moneylender and His Wife* are also the most confusing. They are the cause for scholars coming to the previous conclusions mentioned, but they can also support this new interpretation. As indicated by the title of Metsys' work, this painting is set firmly in a secular setting—a moneylender's office. Around the man are many secular objects that pertain to the moneylender's trade, such as the coins and gems he is valuing and exchanging, as well as papers, books, and other business implements. In this category of secular iconography, some symbols point towards (secular) wealth, including the rings that the moneylender and his wife are wearing and the ones on a roll in front of him. Additionally, the wife's vibrant red dress was usually considered a "wealth" object, but there are other connotations. The most interesting secular symbol, however, is the two men who can be seen conversing through the crack of the open door behind the moneylender and his wife. This scene is drawn from a work called *Parabolae* by Erasmus of Rotterdam,¹ the patron of *The Moneylender and His Wife*, and an associate of Metsys and Pieter Gillis. The illustrated quote is, "...I have brought forth precious stones from the inner treasure house of the Muses. The barber's shop, *the tawdry conversation of the marketplace*, are no source for the attention..." (italics added).² Interestingly, *Parabolae* also includes a dedicatory letter to Gillis, and the mention of gems or "precious stones" is significant because Erasmus, in this dedicatory letter, often uses gem terminology to speak of Pieter Gillis. This is likely a play on his name, Pieter, which derives from the Greek and Latin word for rock or stone.³ The meaning of gemstones is then elevated within artwork from just a symbol of wealth to one of Pieter Gillis' personal identity. Furthermore, this reference to Erasmus' work fundamentally links Erasmus of Rotterdam and Pieter Gillis.

The next category of symbols is the religious ones. Despite the secular title of the painting, there is much religious iconography within the work, which often leads people to believe it is a satire. Some such symbols include an apple, a snuffed candle, a glass rosary, a religious book, a cross, and a carafe of water. The most obvious religious object in the painting is the devotional book that the wife is handling. The book is also clearly a luxury item for how it is made, but its defining feature is its illustration of the Virgin and Child. Next, the apple and the snuffed candle both represent original sin.⁴ The cross needs no explanation as the universal symbol of Christianity—though the icon itself does need to be pointed out because it is easily lost within the painting, hiding in plain sight in the tiny convex mirror on the table. In the background of the painting, on the shelves behind the moneylender, lie the last two religious symbols—the glass paternoster rosary and the carafe of water, which both symbolize purity in the Catholic-Christian faith.⁵

However, the most fascinating icons in the painting are the ones that have both religious and secular significance—the convex mirror, the rock crystal flacon, pearls, the wife's red dress, and the scales and balance. Surely, the convex mirror is quite intriguing within *The Moneylender and his Wife*; according to Joanna Woodall, "Such mirrors were by no means unusual in offices

¹ Desiderius Erasmus, "Parabolae" in *Literary and Educational Writings*. Ed. Craig R Thompson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 128-278.

² Erasmus, "Parabolae," 131.

³ Joanna Woodall, "De Wisselaer: Quentin Metsys's Man Weighing Gold Coins and His Wife, 1514," 47.

⁴ Mike McKiernan, "Quentin Massys, the Moneychanger 1514," 252.

⁵ McKiernan, "Quentin Massys, the Moneychanger," 252.

and studies,” which explains its secular purpose for being there.⁶ Yet, the mirror displays the aforementioned cross and a man kneeling in prayer. So, the mirror is a secular object displaying a religious scene—its nature is quite evenly balanced between the sacred and the profane. Next, there is the rock crystal flacon, which would have been a very costly item at the time but also alludes to something that Jacobus de Voragine, a 13th-century Archbishop, said in one of his sermons: “As the sun permeates glass without violating it, so Mary became a mother without losing her virginity.”⁷ This is further enforced by Metsys placing the light source in this corner of the painting, filtering all of the light through the crystal to illuminate the rest of the work—another careful balance between spiritual and secular wealth. Likewise, the pearls that sit near the flacon have similar significance. Pearls, as jewels, were rare and valuable in the late medieval/early Renaissance period and could signify wealth. However, pearls have also always carried the meaning of purity and innocence.⁸ That is, after all, why Queen Elizabeth I of England chose them as her iconic symbol. Next, there is the wife’s red dress. In the 16th century, red was one of the most expensive dyes on the market, which is why it is often associated with royalty and the Catholic Church, for they were the only ones wealthy enough to afford it.⁹ However, there is also a tradition in European art of the Virgin Mary wearing a red dress beneath her iconic blue cloak, as seen in artworks such as Tommaso Masaccio’s *Madonna Cassini* (1427), Raphael’s *Madonna on the Meadow* (1506), and Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Virgin and Child* (c.1511), to name but a few examples. At first glance, one might say that the woman’s dress symbolizes her indulgences, but that quickly becomes unlikely when considered along with all of the other positive Marian associations. Also, sitting beside her, the husband is garbed in traditional Marian blue, cloaking the pair in the Virgin Mother’s purity. Therefore, this is another symbol that is carefully balanced between wealth and faith. Lastly, there are the scales and balances, which are secular in their role as tools of the moneylender’s trade (indeed, he could not do his job without them) but also religious in the context that scales are often used to symbolize the weighing and balancing of one’s eternal soul.¹⁰ All in all, the iconography in *The Moneylender and His Wife* is very evenly balanced between these three categories, with just as many secular symbols as religious and an equal amount that display both at once. And even then, the secular symbols often point positively towards the religious ones. While original sin is represented, the overall connotations of these symbols are positive, with even the objects of wealth indicating virtuous moral integrity. However, the iconography of *The Moneylender and his Wife* is one aspect of this interpretation of balance. To truly understand the balance these symbols allude to, one must take a closer look at the patron and recipient of the painting, Erasmus of Rotterdam and Pieter Gillis, who influence and shape the painting’s intention greatly.

Almost as important as the content of a painting is the man and occasion for which it was created. In the case of *The Moneylender and his Wife*, the work was commissioned for Pieter Gillis on the occasion of his wedding to his first wife, Cornelia Sandrien. While Pieter Gillis’ name has generally fallen into obscurity today, Gillis was very well known in his day as a humanist and for his many business endeavors in Antwerp. Gillis was a prominent banker, magistrate, and lawyer in Antwerp.¹¹ He was also a book publisher, which was quite profitable because Antwerp was the leading manufacturer and exporter of books at the time, with over sixty

⁶ Woodall, “De Wisselaer,” 42.

⁷ Woodall, “De Wisselaer,” 44.

⁸ D. W. Robertson, “The Pearl As a Symbol.” *Modern Language Notes* 65, no. 3 (1950): 155–56.

⁹ Amy Butler Greenfield, *A Perfect Red: Empire, Espionage, and the Quest for the Color of Desire* (Pymble, NSW: HarperCollins e-books, 2008), 69–86.

¹⁰ McKiernan, “Quentin Massys, the Moneychanger,” 252.

¹¹ Eckhard Bernstein, “Erasmus and Pieter Gillis: The Development of a Friendship,” 131.

printing presses in the city alone.¹² In 1509, Gillis was appointed chief secretary of Antwerp, an appointment that Gillis held for twenty-three years. This was a critical post in a city that was quickly becoming the commercial capital of its country, and the rest of Europe. This put Gillis in a relatively high position of power for someone born with no noble blood and a position that gained him much wealth. And if all that business prowess was not enough to make him a formidable intellectual of the period, Pieter Gillis also wrote Latin poetry. His primary work, *Summae sive argumenta legum diversorum imperatorum ex corpore divi Theodosii*, secured him a paramount spot among Renaissance legal scholars.¹³ As a scholar, Gillis was part of Antwerp's leading humanist circle, which included Quentin Metsys, Erasmus of Rotterdam, and Sir Thomas More (when he was visiting). Certainly, both Erasmus and Thomas More thought very highly of Pieter Gillis because each dedicated several of their works to him.¹⁴ Indeed, the "Peter Giles" that opens Thomas More's *Utopia* is, in fact, Pieter Gillis of Antwerp.¹⁵ More could not be more complementary in *Utopia*, describing Gillis as "a man of great honor," "extraordinarily modest," and "I do not know if there be anywhere to be found a more learned and better bred young man."¹⁶

It was, however, Erasmus of Rotterdam who had the most substantial relationship with Gillis. The two had a decades-long friendship and wrote countless letters to one another, and Gillis even managed Erasmus' financial affairs for a while.¹⁷ As mentioned, Erasmus appears to have commissioned *The Moneylender and his Wife* for Pieter Gillis from their mutual friend, Quentin Metsys. Erasmus also dedicated several other works to Gillis, and wrote a wedding poem for Pieter Gillis and his bride, entitled "The Epithalamium of Petrus Ægidius." In this epithalamium, Erasmus calls Gillis an "angel" and praises his bride as "a fit Match for *Apollo* himself."¹⁸ There can be no doubt, therefore, that Gillis' friendships with these men were genuine and not bought with his wealth, for both men openly sang his praises and described him as a paragon of virtue. With all of this information on Pieter Gillis, it begins to be difficult to believe that Erasmus of Rotterdam would commission a painting that would satirize and scorn his beloved friend's profession—one part of which, as chief secretary, was balancing the scales of justice advising on criminal and civil cases.¹⁹ And despite Gillis being a wealthy, high-ranking businessman in Antwerp, he was better known for his intellectual and moral virtues. Surely, Erasmus would not want to insult his friend by giving him a satirical painting, nor his bride, whom Erasmus also held in very high regard, as indicated in his letters and description in his epithalamium. Moreover, a satire does not make an appropriate gift for a wedding because it casts shadows on the groom and the profession that will support his future family. Based on the collective positive opinion of Pieter Gillis and that it was meant as a gift for his wedding, this, along with the equally balanced symbolism in the painting, should dispel the notion that the artwork is a work of satire but instead a representation of Pieter Gillis himself, who is balanced between wealth and virtue. Yet—there is still the question of how this message would be appropriate in a time and culture that typically considered wealth the root of all sin, which brings us to the climate of 16th-century Antwerp.

¹² Michael Pye, *Europe's Babylon: The Rise and Fall of Antwerp's Golden Age* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2021), 46.

¹³ Bernstein, "Erasmus and Pieter Gillis," 132.

¹⁴ Lorne Campbell et al., "Quentin Metsys, Desiderius Erasmus, Pieter Gillis and Thomas More," 716-24.

¹⁵ Thomas More, *Utopia*. Dover Thrift Editions. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, (1997): 1-3.

¹⁶ More, *Utopia*, 1.

¹⁷ Woodall, "De Wisselaer," 46.

¹⁸ Desiderius Erasmus, "The Epithalamium of Petrus Ægidius." *The Colloquies vol. 1*. (London: Reeves and Turner, 1518), 387.

¹⁹ Woodall, "De Wisselaer," 46

The early 16th century is a pivotal point in history because the medieval era crossed into the Renaissance, so previously accepted ideas from the Middle Ages were circulating. Still, these ideas were also at war with newer ones, each fighting to stand the test of time. The Low Countries, including Flanders, held a certain amount of economic clout and prestige throughout the medieval period, mostly from Ghent and Bruges, as cloth manufacturing centers. Until the turn of the 16th century, Ghent was the commercial capital of Flanders. However, once into the 1500s, Antwerp was on the rise and was not only taking over from Ghent as the commercial capital of Flanders—but for the rest of Europe as well. Indeed, it was Antwerp’s time to prevail on a global scale, and for the first three-quarters of the 16th century, Antwerp was not only the commercial capital but also the financial metropolis of all of Europe.²⁰ Antwerp had easy access to the sea through the Scheidt River, which was strategic and profitable in the city’s mercantile endeavors. It was one of the largest cities in Europe at the time, making it a prime destination for mercantile trade and an epicenter for intellectual and religious thoughts.²¹ Merchants came from all over Europe to buy and sell their wares, selling pretty much anything under the sun, from food items, cloth, fine metals such as gold and silver, jewels, artwork, and much more.²² This also meant a burst of production within Antwerp, including manufacturing the previously mentioned items, particularly books. This surge of economic traffic led to a burgeoning middle class—of which Pieter Gillis was very much a part. Many scholars say that Antwerp was where capitalism was invented—it certainly flourished there.²³ And because there was so much global trade going through the city, the job of a moneylender or moneychanger was not only a necessary evil, but vital to society. Currency constantly changed in the 15th and 16th centuries. A coin could be worth something one day and much more or less the next. Then, there was the added complication of foreign money that had to be valued properly in order to make business and financial transactions. This meticulous and precise job was one of the foundations and primary purposes of Antwerp’s Exchange.²⁴ That made Pieter Gillis, as a moneylender, a significant man in the city and a wealthy one. However, Antwerp was more than just a commercial city. Yes, it drew in merchants and tradespeople, but it was also a place of religious tolerance and an intellectual hub for scholarly men such as Erasmus of Rotterdam and Sir Thomas More.

Traditionally, Flanders was a Catholic country, and it continued to be after the rise of Protestantism, even with its neighbor, Holland, making the conversion. Nevertheless, Flanders was no longer entirely aligned with all of Catholicism’s ideals, particularly regarding religious tolerance and ideas about wealth. According to Michael Pye, Antwerp practiced a “pragmatic kind of tolerance. Its business depended on foreign traders, so it had no interest in abolishing the heresies to which so many of those traders were attached.”²⁵ Along with that religious tolerance and wealth influx came new ideas and opinions about money. Traditionally, the Catholic faith held that “money was the root of all sin.” However, when the city was on the rise and its inhabitants’ fortunes with it, this was no longer an eagerly accepted belief. Therefore, the people of Antwerp needed to find a way to reconcile their newfound wealth with their religious faith. Here is where Protestant influence can be seen infiltrating the public mindset. In cities such as Antwerp, where trade and commerce played just as big of a role in one’s life as religion, it is easy to see how tensions between money and faith could have started boiling, and how Protestant

²⁰ Katsumi Nakazawa, “Antwerp, Emporium of the European Economy in the Sixteenth Century.” *The Mediterranean Studies Group Hitotsubashi University* (1992), 43.

²¹ Kristine K. Forney, “16th-Century Antwerp,” 361.

²² Nakazawa, “Antwerp, Emporium Sixteenth Century,” 43-44.

²³ Pye, “Europe’s Babylon,” 1-12.

²⁴ Pye, “Europe’s Babylon,” 117.

²⁵ Pye, “Europe’s Babylon,” 5.

ideas—such as that wealth brought one closer to God—had their appeal and starting point. This was certainly the case, even though Martin Luther’s 95 Theses and the Protestant Reformation would not happen for another several years. After all, faith and wealth together would not be able to continue in Antwerp if one held the idea that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.”²⁶ Henceforth, ideas about wealth had to change regarding faith, removing the negative connotations of money. With a better understanding of the economic and religious climate in 16th century Antwerp, it becomes harder and harder to view *The Moneylender and his Wife* as a satire against wealth—not when wealth was accepted as a virtue in Flanders and the occupation of moneylender was a needed, valued, and *respected* societal position. As subject and recipient, the moneylender represented in Metsys’ work is not demonized but instead highlighted and honored for the harrowing and detailed tasks necessary to the community. This, in conjunction with the iconography, the recipient, and the occasion of *The Moneylender and his Wife*, paints a very different image, one that is far from satire and instead displays a balance between one’s wealth and spirituality and the ability to possess both without jeopardizing the other.

While many spectators and scholars alike believe this painting to be a satire commenting on the sinfulness of wealth, several facets discourage this interpretation. Firstly, within Quentin Metsys’ *The Moneylender and his Wife* (1514), the symbolism is roughly equally divided between secular, religious, and compound secular-religious symbolism, all of which point to positive religious associations and display the balance between wealth and faith, religion and money. Secondly, Pieter Gillis, for whom Erasmus of Rotterdam commissioned the painting, was a wealthy and high-ranking official in Antwerp when the painting was made. Pieces of his identity can be seen within the work, such as the connection to gems, Gillis’ occupation, and that it depicts man and wife when *The Moneylender and his Wife* was made for Gillis’ wedding to Cornelia Sandrien in 1514. And thirdly, the economic and religious climate of Antwerp shifts the intention of the painting. It allows one to look at the work differently than what was typically believed in the rest of Europe. After all, Antwerp was no typical city in 16th-century Europe—it was an international hub of commerce, intellectualism, and progressive religious belief, which makes the interpretation that the painting’s intention is the balance between wealth and religion appropriate for the time because of the economic context of the work. As previously mentioned, there is also the occasion of the painting to consider—Pieter Gillis’ wedding. Indeed, a satire does not seem like an appropriate gift for a marriage, especially if it insults the groom and his bride. It is simply not a fitting gift within the context of the occasion. Furthermore, a satire is also an unlikely commission coming from Erasmus because Erasmus held his friend Pieter Gillis in very high regard and would not have thought him worthy or in need of censorship. What’s more, Sir Thomas More called Gillis “extraordinarily modest”—surely such a modest man does not require a satire on the dangers of money? There is also the aesthetic of Metsys’ satires versus his portraits, with *The Moneylender and his Wife* being more in tune with the latter. Therefore, *The Moneylender and his Wife* should not be seen as a satire but instead as depicting the balance between wealth and spiritual faith, which was undoubtedly the original intention, for, according to Sarah Carr-Gomm, the frame of the painting was once inscribed with “Let the balance be just, and the weights be equal.”²⁷ These words might guide a man in Pieter Gillis’s position to take care and be circumspect with his business and moral dealings. Howbeit, all of this is said to a

²⁶ Mark 10:25 KJV.

²⁷ Sarah Carr-Gomm, *The Secret Language of Art: The Illustrated Decoder of Symbols and Figures in Western Painting*. (London: Duncan Baird, 2008), 230.

man already known for his outstanding virtue and humility—a man who knows the importance of balance.

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Lesbian Newsletters, Pulps, and Manuals: A Primary Source Analysis

By Holland Schmitz

Lesbian women were not always able to hold their girlfriend's hand or watch queer films in public. They used to attend invite only gatherings, and get married to men for economic freedom and societal comfort. Most importantly, they used to write and write and write. Writing was the lesbian outlet for their feelings not allowed to be said aloud. From lesbian pulps to lesbian newsletters, it is clear the community was tight-knit in America in the 1940s and 1950s, even if their communication could only be on paper. In all four publications reviewed, the queer community had a sense of humor about their status in American society, and took the secrecy they needed to maintain very seriously. Lesbians presented themselves to the world as fiercely opinionated, funny, respectful, resilient, and academically inclined, and this is seen in the stories they wrote, media they reviewed, and how they protected themselves and their community in these publications. The values seen in all of these lesbian publications were safety both for the individual and for the community, how to spend your time focused on homosexuality both in person and through your media, and how important it was to get the queer community more widely accepted for women, as the acceptance for gay men was growing.

Many scholars have discussed how the publications from the homophile movement in American queer history shaped an open forum for the community to discuss topics that could not be brought up in public.²⁸ The publications were written and often circulated by hand rather than by mail, so the information would only reach the intended audience, homosexuals other homosexuals knew they could trust. Elizabeth Coretto argues in their thesis that the development of lesbian publications widened the diversity of the male-dominated homophile publication scene.²⁹ JD Doyle published all editions of *Vice Versa*, the first known lesbian publication in the United States with his own commentary. Doyle includes his correspondence with the first editor of *Vice Versa*, Lisa Ben, and defends his belief that Ben and her publication shaped the way lesbian women were discussed in queer media.³⁰ Ben is praised by Doyle for her work of gay parodies, and how her publication was just the beginning of the activism she would go on to engage in. It's been explained by scholars of queer studies that the lesbian publications were inspired by gay men's newsletters like *ONE* and the *Mattachine Review*.³¹ This paper argues that while the lesbian publications may have been *modeled* from the gay men's newsletters, their inspiration is purely their own, sharing book reviews, poems, and advice solely for lesbian women. The lesbian publications and organizations collaborated with gay men's groups, and flew below the heterosexual radar like the gay men's groups, but their publications were purely their own, sending out presentations of their lesbian selves to the community the way they wanted to.

The publications did everything necessary to stay afloat. The authors and editors knew their work was crucial for the morale of the community, so they wanted to continue sending out newsletters as long as possible. They asked for donations and began charging for the newsletters once they were popular, but more than just money was needed. The publications required a lot of

²⁸ "Research Guides: LGBTQIA+ Studies: A Resource Guide: Before Stonewall: The Homophile Movement," n.d. <https://guides.loc.gov/lgbtq-studies/before-stonewall>.

²⁹ Elizabeth Coretto, "'The Fountain Pen and the Typewriter': The Rise of the Homophile Press in the 1950s and 1960s," *Undergraduate Research Commons*, 2017. <https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors/214/>.

³⁰ J.D. Doyle, "Correspondence With Lisa Ben," *Queer Music Heritage*. Accessed May 1, 2024. <https://queermusicheritage.com/viceversa1b.html>.

³¹ Catherine Halley, "ONE: The First Gay Magazine in the United States," *JSTOR Daily*, July 15, 2020. <https://daily.jstor.org/one-the-first-gay-magazine-in-the-united-states/>.

material if they were going to churn out one edition a month. The Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the first lesbian rights organization in the United States, originated in San Francisco, California in 1955. Their publication, *The Ladder*, debuted a year later in 1956, and was the first lesbian newsletter to be distributed across the United States. *Vice Versa*, the first lesbian newsletter ever, was published by Lisa Ben in 1947 and 1948, but it was only circulated locally to where Ben worked, Los Angeles, California. Both of these publications practically begged their readers to contribute, whether it be stories, poems, book reviews, questions, or just ideas for the editors to write about. *Vice Versa* volume one number one, told readers that this was their magazine and they should contribute whatever they'd like to read about. The editor, Lisa Ben, then asked in every edition after, for people to send in material, even asking, "how do you know you can't write if you haven't tried?"³² *The Ladder* had many more pages in each edition and ran for a longer time, but that was because they had a much larger audience from sending their publication across the country. The editors often placed a small section towards the end saying that people should contribute because it was a magazine by lesbians for lesbians.

The lesbian authors wrote under pseudonyms to protect themselves, their publishers, and the people reading. Some lesbian pulps were even published under male names because it was considered shameful a woman could ever write such erotic and homosexual content. Authors for *The Ladder* all wrote under pseudonyms in the beginning, some would later switch to their real names as the newsletter continued. One pseudonym already mentioned was Lisa Ben, which is a personified version of the word "lesbian." The real Lisa Ben was Edythe Eyde, a woman who moved to Los Angeles to get away from her parents and find other women who liked women.³³ Eyde was told to "look busy" in her office even when she finished her work at RKO Studios, so this was the perfect opportunity for her to write the magazine.³⁴ She could not use her real name for fear of being fired or her parents finding out, but publishing this newsletter was an exciting project for her. Another piece studied for this project was an informational lesbian pulp titled *We Walk Alone*, written by Ann Aldrich, which was the pseudonym for Marijane Meaker. Meaker wrote as Ann Aldrich for her lesbian pulps, as Vin Packer for her thriller novels, and as M. E. Kerr for her young adult novels.³⁵ *The Price of Salt*, a fictional lesbian pulp written by Patricia Highsmith under the pseudonym Claire Morgan debuted in 1952. Highsmith had already written one novel, *Strangers on a Train*, that featured homosexual love, so to avoid being labeled as a "lesbian author" she published the second book under a pseudonym.³⁶ It was not until 1991 that Highsmith published *The Price of Salt* under her own name. Pseudonyms were used by all editors, authors, and contributors of *The Ladder*, *Vice Versa*, *We Walk Alone*, and *The Price of Salt*, allowing for these necessary lesbian narratives to reach the community even if others opposed their publication.

Safety of the readers was also a priority for the authors and editors. In *The Ladder* there are several sections throughout their editions that stress that recipient's names are safe and packaging will be discreet. In volume one number one of *The Ladder* there is a segment about how people who join Daughters of Bilitis chapters have nothing to fear. They asked an attorney questions, and shared that DOB is a legally chartered non-profit organization in California, so the members shouldn't have any issues with the law.³⁷ *The Ladder* also ran articles on what to do if

³² Lisa Ben, *Vice Versa*, August 1947, 1.

³³ "Vice Versa at RKO Studios | One Archives," n.d. <https://one.usc.edu/story/vice-versa-rko-studios>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Denyse Rodrigues, "Meaker, Marijane (Vin Packer, Ann Aldrich), The Lesbian Pulp Fiction Collection at Mount Saint Vincent University," n.d., <https://msvulpf.omeka.net/items/show/835>.

³⁶ "Patricia Highsmith and the Price of Salt – UNSUITABLE," n.d., <https://sites.duke.edu/unsuitable/patricia-highsmith/>.

³⁷ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, April 1957, 15.

you get arrested, telling the reader to stay calm, have a lawyer on hand, and to memorize your rights.³⁸ In *We Walk Alone* there was advice on what clubs, movie theatres, restaurants, apartment complexes, and cities were safe to be outwardly homosexual.³⁹ There is a chapter about discretion, recommending the women to date men a few times a month to avoid raising suspicion that they were gay.⁴⁰ In these chapters and articles the authors want to prepare the reader for the worst: the harassment and cruel laws that threaten their way of life. The authors also acknowledged that even though homosexuality was technically illegal, people needed to know how to resist, and understand that their existence as a homosexual human was not a crime. Everyone, readers and authors, knew it was a risk to be involved in homosexual culture both in person and in the media. But if they banded together to protect one another through education and sharing resources, the community would persist.

The lesbian pulps and newsletters also functioned as manuals for how to find other homosexuals. This included what cities and establishments to visit, but also what to look for when meeting new people. *We Walk Alone* was more a book informing people on lesbian practices than a fictional story, and it contained a slew of topics like: how women become lesbians, how to obey and work around the laws, what the party scene was like in cities, and how parents can support their lesbian daughters. Anyone who read this book would have learned something, whether they were lesbian or not. The book explained how women became lesbians out of fear, fear of pregnancy, men, submission, and penetration.⁴¹ In the chapter about stereotypes, Aldrich shared that butch women chose to live in bohemian areas of big cities because it was where they would be most accepted, and fem lesbians were a “caricature of womanness” so they were easier to spot.⁴² Aldrich did not intend for this information to sound rude, she simply wanted lesbians to be able to identify each other, and not have to second guess if a more masculine woman was lesbian or not- she was!

The Ladder encouraged their homosexual audience to meet in person by offering details of so many events and organizations. This newsletter added to the how-to-meet-gays rhetoric that began with social manuals. Because the publication was an offshoot of the Daughters of Bilitis, there were many segments about new DOB chapters opening in different cities, and what each chapter was doing the next month. *The Ladder* shared information about studies on the homosexual community calling for participants, like one for a small group discussion for lesbian mothers to share their experiences.⁴³ In October of 1957, *The Ladder* announced their inaugural research project which was to record case histories of lesbians.⁴⁴ Participants were welcome to volunteer on a rolling basis, and they were interested in hearing from lesbians of all backgrounds. DOB sponsored panels, such as one titled “Are homosexuals a menace?”⁴⁵ Panels were a great way to learn more in depth about the topics of their newsletter articles, but you don’t have to participate- just listen. DOB and their publication also advertised social opportunities to be with other homosexual people. There were DOB sponsored social events in every area where there was a chapter: parties, picnics, and bowling.⁴⁶ The Daughters of Bilitis local chapters and their nationally circulated publication, *The Ladder*, provided their homosexual readers many opportunities to engage with the community in person, and make as many new gay friends as

³⁸ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, December 1956, 2-3.

³⁹ Ann Aldrich, *We Walk Alone* (The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2015).

⁴⁰ Aldrich, *We Walk Alone*, pp. 77-84.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

⁴³ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, January, 1957, 4.

⁴⁴ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, October 1957, 6.

⁴⁵ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, May 1957, 3.

⁴⁶ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, October 1957, 6.

they pleased. *We Walk Alone* and *The Ladder* sharing ways to connect with other homosexuals in person show that the publications by lesbians in the 1940s and 50s wanted the community to focus and promote their queerness together.

What lesbians were interested in was very clear from the writings they published during this time period. The books and articles were written by lesbians, for lesbians, so the information, events, and stories that were chosen were the ones that lesbians wanted to read and share. Storytelling was integral for the lesbians of the 1940s and 50s. Poems, or “lesbian lyrics” as they were referred to in *The Ladder*, were notable parts of both lesbians newsletters. Poems were a way to process the events in an individual's life or in the wider culture, because you can write with metaphors that have a deeper meaning. By using specific slang or phrases, the feelings explained in these poems could not be deciphered by anyone except a lesbian. One example was the poem *Disguise* by Audrey Kern featured in *The Ladder*.⁴⁷ This poem is about feeling like you have something to hide from everyone around you, so you have lost yourself. Another way to process things was writing fiction based on a true story. Changing the names of the characters but keeping the scenarios or descriptions the same was a way to tell people what you were going through without getting in trouble with your family or local community. Authors like Patricia Highsmith did this when writing *The Price of Salt*. This lesbian pulp was based on Highsmith's and her friend's real experiences, but the names needed to be changed so the people would not get harassed. Writing into these newsletters was a great way for lesbians to blow off steam from their lives, especially when they used pseudonyms so their stories were anonymous. Common topics for these poems and short stories were secrecy, feeling alone and isolated, and having to be discreet about their feelings for other women. These themes appearing so frequently in *The Ladder* and *Vice Versa*'s reader contribution sections show how the lesbians of the time needed an outlet for their feelings, and writing anonymously to share with their community was a great strategy.

In addition to the lesbian lyrics and short stories, the authors and readers had a lot of recommendations of queer media other readers should check out. People would write book reviews and submit them, sometimes praising and sometimes absolutely bashing the text. In *The Ladder* volume one number three the *Homosexuals Today Handbook* was recommended for being “very well written,” and the editors suggested it be in everyone's personal library.⁴⁸ *The Ladder* also had a segment called Lesbiana which began in volume one number six, where the editors compiled a list of lesbian literature. The list for the first edition was made up of fiction, non-fiction, drama, and poetry. They gave summaries of the texts so that readers could decide if the suggestions were for them. Daughters of Bilitis had a library that was finally available at their San Francisco office in August of 1957.⁴⁹ This library featured many of the books they reviewed and was open to anyone who wanted to borrow books or just have a comforting place to read. *Vice Versa* gave a lot of recommendations as well, the editor Lisa Ben wrote many of them, but when Laurajeane Ermayne began submitting content to the newsletter, the two of them teamed up to deliver recommendations and summaries. *Vice Versa*'s literature review section was called Bookworm's Burrow. The review that stood out the most was on *Trio* from volume one number four. The section begins with a summary, telling the reader this story is about a college professor who struggles with men's affection as she pursues a lesbian relationship with her assistant.⁵⁰ Then it's said that the plot moves too slow and does not capture the audience, and that

⁴⁷ Audrey Kern, *The Ladder*, October 1957, 13.

⁴⁸ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, December 1956, 5.

⁴⁹ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, August 1957, 5.

⁵⁰ Lisa Ben, *Vice Versa*, September 1947, 2.

the characterization of the lesbian is awful.⁵¹ This negative review demonstrates that the lesbian authors and editors did not feel the need to praise every piece of gay media just because it was gay. The lesbian audience had standards for their media, and they were not willing to accept representation just for representation's sake. Some of the reviews serve to encourage the queer audience to check out more queer media, and others serve to remind readers that not all representation would be interesting or of high quality.

Every *Vice Versa* newsletter featured a “whatchama column” where the editor, Lisa Ben, would respond to letters that did not fit into the book review or editor's note sections. This column was crucial to learning what topics interested lesbians at the time, because it was the miscellaneous space of emotion and concern. One conversation that was featured in the column was if the slang terms used to refer to lesbians were lacking dignity or not.⁵² Laurajeane Ermayne wrote in saying that “butch” and “fluff” were not ideal, but yet there was nothing else. Ermayne did not want to use words like “sapphist” or “uranian” because they felt those words were meant for literature.⁵³ Ermayne then suggested referring to butch women as “lescourts” because this was shorthand for lesbian escort, and referring to tomboy lesbians as “clyffe” after Radclyffe, to “honor the matron saint.”⁵⁴ In Ben's response, she assured Ermayne that they are not the first lesbian to express discomfort with labels to the magazine, yet she still liked words like “butch” and “fluff” because they are straight to the point.⁵⁵ Ben agrees these words lack dignity, but it would take widespread education and unanimous support to just switch to new labels, so it's worth it to just reclaim the terms. This discourse displays lesbians' of the 1940s and 50s wish to control their own narrative, especially in the media. Lisa Ben was kind and understanding in her editor's response, but if even a lesbian magazine editor won't switch to new labels, the rest of the country was not going to any time soon. The readers and audience writing in wanted their image to be more than just weak vs masculine; they wanted to be seen as romantic: courting another woman, or a queer Christ figure like in *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall.

Lesbian literary interests expanded past newsletters with lesbian pulps. But many pulps were written by men and were focused on men's happiness, so lesbians longed for pulps that had the lesbian as the heroine rather than the deviant. Enter: *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith, originally published under the pseudonym Claire Morgan was a lesbian pulp novel released in 1952. The novel tells the story of Therese, a young woman working in a department store during the holiday season who falls in love with an older woman, Carol, who comes in to buy a present for her daughter. The two hit it off immediately, and begin spending every second together. They face many issues that were all too familiar for the lesbians of this time: husbands, divorce, having children, having their homosexual activities being tracked. The novel was written from a blend of a few true stories in Highsmith's life. Carol was based on a real woman Highsmith had swooned over while working at a department store, Carol's divorce and struggle for custody of her child was based on Highsmith's lesbian friend's marriage.⁵⁶ This beautiful story hit close to home, representing all lesbians who read it. Even if they had not experienced this exact scenario, they all felt threatened by men or had their homosexual existence questioned at some point. However, *The Price of Salt* features a lesbian-approved happy ending, where Carol and Therese reconnect. Many lesbian pulps written at this time had a heterosexual resolution, where the promiscuous homosexual woman ends up with a man and apologizes for her mistakes. While this

⁵¹ Lisa Ben, *Vice Versa*, September 1947, 3.

⁵² Laurajeane Ermayne, *Vice Versa*, November 1947, 9.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Lisa Ben, *Vice Versa*, November 1947, 10.

⁵⁶ Patricia Highsmith, *Price of Salt*, (Courier Dover Publications, 2015).

was technically lesbian representation, and the lesbians did read these pulps, *The Price of Salt* was valued by the queer community so much more due to its lesbian-affirming ending. In *The Ladder*, one review stated that the ending is different, and this will create a new genre in pulps, long sought-after by the homosexual community.⁵⁷ The existence of this book and how widely it was read demonstrates how lesbians wanted to see happy endings for themselves in their media, not just a few chapters of a woman “going rogue” against her true heterosexuality.

A large portion of the media in American lesbian culture in the 1940s and 50s interacted with each other, which is another way the lesbian authors expressed the themes they wanted to see in lesbian writings. Some authors and editors worked for multiple newsletters, so they took what they learned to improve a new publication. Lisa Ben, the editor and creator of *Vice Versa*, went on to work for *The Ladder* after she was fired from her job at RKO studios and could no longer produce her own magazine.⁵⁸ *The Ladder* had recommended *Vice Versa* in previous editions of their newsletter, so DOB and the newsletter’s editors knew *Vice Versa* was a reputable publication, and they could trust the work Lisa Ben put out.⁵⁹ *The Ladder* also published great summaries with positive reviews for books like *The Well of Loneliness* and *The Price of Salt* that came out relatively recently compared to the publication of the newsletter.⁶⁰ They also published summaries and reviews of older books with lesbian themes like *Carmilla* by Sheridan le Fanu that debuted in 1872.⁶¹ This book is about a sad young woman named Laura who falls in love with Carmilla, who is later revealed to be a lesbian vampire. This book is praised by *The Ladder* editors who share that lesbianism has always been around, and even discuss the popular metaphor of monsters representing homosexuality. By hiring editors from other appreciated lesbian magazines and writing reviews of any and all lesbian literature so people can learn what all was available, *The Ladder* positioned itself inside of lesbian culture, sharing whatever they could to as many people as possible.

While some newsletters loved other publications, novels, and authors, some newsletters had great disdain for works of lesbian literature that they did not think was up to par. *Vice Versa* contained strong opinions in their “bookworm’s burrow” but none of their takes were ever as controversial as *The Ladder*’s review of Ann Aldrich’s *We Walk Alone*. The review begins by saying Ann Aldrich’s good intentions were not enough to achieve balance and properly represent the lesbian community.⁶² The author of the review, Del Martin, points out that Aldrich contradicts herself when she says lesbians are multifaceted and can not be categorized, but in other chapters places lesbians into stereotypes.⁶³ Martin finishes by saying that Aldrich’s contribution is valid and accepted by the community but only because there is so little lesbian literature. Martin would prefer that next time Aldrich be more clear with her messages and ask lesbians about their lives herself rather than write about lesbians based on studies.⁶⁴ This review took Aldrich by surprise, and she responded by making fun of *The Ladder* in her books.⁶⁵ DOB did not back down though, and continued to write about how her book had shortcomings, even calling Aldrich’s work self-hating.⁶⁶ This response to *We Walk Alone* causes historians today to

⁵⁷ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, May 1957, 11.

⁵⁸ “Lisa Ben & Vice Versa,” n.d., <https://queermusicheritage.com/viceversa.html>.

⁵⁹ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, December 1956, 5.

⁶⁰ For review of *The Well of Loneliness* check: Anonymous, *The Ladder*, March 1957, 12; For review of *The Price of Salt* check: Anonymous, *The Ladder*, May 1957, 11.

⁶¹ Anonymous, *The Ladder*, July 1957, 19.

⁶² Del Martin, *The Ladder*, June 1957, 16.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Del Martin, *The Ladder*, June 1957, 19.

⁶⁵ June Thomas, “Marijane Meaker: The Most Important Lesbian Writer You’ve Never Heard of,” *Advocate.Com*, March 11, 2016, <https://www.advocate.com/current-issue/2016/3/10/most-important-lesbian-writer-never-heard#toggle-gdpr>.

⁶⁶ Stephanie Foote, “Afterword,” in *We Walk Alone* (The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2015), 180.

wonder how the book got so popular if its contents was not approved by many lesbians, and further research is needed to discover if all of the book's claims were fully factual.

The authors and editors of the newsletters, pulps, and manuals collaborating and feuding demonstrates that the lesbian media at the time was widely known in the community. The publications knew about each other, and had very strong opinions on who was representing lesbians the best in the media they produced. All in all, the editions of the newsletters and the pulps and manuals all gave similar advice and had similar understandings. They each demonstrated that the stereotypes, slang, and cultural norms for lesbians were pretty universal for those who had access to these resources, likely white middle class lesbians. Even when the publications disagreed with each other, they attempted to remain civil for the good of the community, and they pushed that safety was the most important thing for the readers. The similarities between all of these publications shows that they had a similar mission of acknowledging the flaws in the lesbian culture, but still promoting the beautiful aspects and supporting themselves as good humans, authors, and lovers.

Vice Versa, *The Ladder*, *We Walk Alone*, and *The Price of Salt* were all published in the 1940s and 50s by American lesbian authors who hoped their writing would reach a wider lesbian audience and unite a community. Though events and norms differed from city to city, lesbian newsletters, pulps, and events run by the Daughters of Bilitis chapters kept the whole lesbian community connected across the country. Many of the connections between the lesbian community at the time had to be done on paper for fear of being caught and labeled as a lesbian. Writing into local newsletters like *Vice Versa*, or across-country publications like *The Ladder* provided an outlet for lesbian women to share their opinions, advice, sorrows, and successes with each other. All authors and editors covered in this paper wrote under a pseudonym, sometimes multiple, to further promote their own safety and the safety of the readers. Particularly writing under a male or gender neutral name really got rid of any suspicions because it was accepted when men wrote about promiscuous women like lesbians. The lesbians authors wrote about what they wanted to see in their media: happy endings for the lesbian couple, relationships without gender roles, acknowledgement that you are not alone, and messages to assure people they are not sinful for feeling homosexual attraction. They were therefore very opinionated on lesbian media that did not represent them properly, and wrote about it to share with the community to not support this piece of writing for being inaccurate or uncomfortable. These writings that promoted community, safety, and honesty made the representation of lesbians in the 1940s and 50s be very diverse: funny, fierce, protective, and powerful. These works of lesbian literature were set out to change the way lesbianism was viewed, for the better.

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