



Phyllida and the Brotherhood of Philander

By Ann Herendeen
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Introduction

The meddling mothers of the Regency would do anything to wed their daughters to Andrew Carrington, the wealthy, handsome, and athletic heir to an earldom. There is one problem, however. No woman in all England would suit the determined bachelor, for Andrew far prefers the company of men—at his table and in his bedroom.

But with privilege comes responsibility. Andrew must take a bride. And while Phyllida Lewis, the penniless, spirited, and curvaceous author of romantic novels, is not quite what his family had in mind, a marriage to her would enable Andrew to live his life as he pleases. The arrival of Matthew Thornby, the honorable and dashing son of a self-made baronet, into their cozy arrangement makes Andrew's happiness complete.

Yet a shrewd enemy is waiting in the wings, threatening to expose them all—an act that will surely lead to scandal and ruin.

Questions for Discussion

1. The love story at the heart of *Phyllida* involves two men and a woman: Andrew Carrington with his wife, Phyllida, and his boyfriend, Matthew Thornby. Similar groupings are formed by other characters during the course of the novel: Nan, Phyllida's maid, with Kit, the street boy, who also bonds with Andrew's secretary, Philip Turner; Lord David Pierce with George Witherspoon and his half sister, Agatha Gatling; and Marc and Bella Lambert (Lord and Lady Isham), with their "mutual friend," Lord Rupert Archbold. Even Phyllida's novel features an antihero, Lord Iskander, who literally captures the affections of the heroine, Melisande, and her betrothed, Ludovic. In what ways are these "bisexual marriages" similar and in what ways are they different? Why do you think Herendeen repeated this arrangement with so many permutations?
2. The idea of honesty as necessary for true love is central to the story. Andrew insists on being honest about his sexual orientation with his prospective bride from the start. Do you think complete honesty is a good idea in marriage? Are Phyllida and Matthew equally honest with Andrew? With each other? Is Andrew honest about all aspects of his life? If not, do you think any of these lapses are justified?
3. Stephanie Coontz's 2006 book, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, reminds us that for most of the past, marriage was an arrangement between families for the purposes of producing children and inheriting property. Although the idea of marrying for love was becoming accepted by the time of *Phyllida*, many people still married for practical reasons. Read over Phyllida's musings on this subject at the end of chapter 8. Do you think a marriage like Phyllida and Andrew's had a greater chance of success when people's expectations of marriage were less "romantic?" How do you define success in a marriage of this kind?
4. In the Regency, as in most of the past, the ideal was to be a lady or gentleman of leisure—to own property and not have to work at a job. During the Industrial Revolution, men like Matthew's "cotton baron" father, who made a large fortune and bought their way into the gentry, were admired for their enterprise by their peers but scorned as nouveau riche "mushrooms" (overnight successes) by those "to the manner born." Read over Andrew and Matthew's argument in chapter 27 that leads up to their fight. What do you think is Andrew's real objection to Matthew's behavior? Why do you think Matthew continues to work at his father's business?
5. The gradations of class are a constant concern in a hierarchical society that allows a fair amount of mobility. Andrew and the other members of the Brotherhood are at the top, but Phyllida's family is lower on the scale. How does Herendeen indicate the difference in background between Phyllida and her husband? What is distinctive about the way the upper-class characters talk and behave? The middle-class characters, like Philip Turner and Reginald Stevens, the physician? The lower classes and the servants? Where does Kit fit into this hierarchy? Why do you think Herendeen gave him a noticeable Cockney voice while representing the speech of most of the other characters without an accent?
6. *Phyllida* plays on the conventions of the romance novel, giving them a gay or bisexual twist. For example, Andrew, an archetypal rakish hero, has a lover who appears on the stage. But he's a handsome young actor instead of the usual actress. Think of some other typical romance-novel scenes that are subverted or changed. Are they funny? Are they also sexy? Do they make you uncomfortable? All three?
7. Comedies like *Phyllida* try to convey their social commentary casually, without using heavy-handed speeches. Read the scene in chapter 13 where Albert Edwards, the publisher, learns the identity of Phyllida's husband. When Edwards exclaims, "But he's—rich!" are you expecting something else, like a reference to Andrew's sexual orientation? Is it funny that Edwards is more interested in Andrew's wealth than in his being gay? What are some other scenes that go against expectations? (Example: the scene in chapter 11 where the physician, Reginald Stevens, reveals his own orientation and some details about his past.)
8. The perception and enforcement of gender differences was far more pronounced in the past than now, affecting everything from language and clothing to occupations. Look over the scenes in chapters 22 and 23 where Phyllida, Nan, and Agatha Gatling all appear in men's clothes at the Brotherhood. What are the men's reactions? Why do you think they are so extreme? Why do you think Andrew does not at first recognize Phyllida?
9. The connection between gay men and espionage has a long history. In the essay at the end of the book, Herendeen says that the

harsh laws against sodomy were, in effect, a "blackmailers' charter." In the story, Geoffrey Amberson uses the threat of blackmail to coerce men into "volunteering" their services for British intelligence. The details of the espionage subplot involving Amberson and Philip Turner/Tournière are somewhat murky. Do you think this makes the subplot about the *grand chiffre* seem more authentic? In real life, are the facts of such cases ever truly known?

10. Andrew reads Jane Austen's novel **Sense and Sensibility**, published anonymously in 1811, and thinks it's his wife's work. He is both proud of her but also intimidated at being married to such a satirical and intelligent writer. Later, when he learns the truth, he is relieved. Do you think his reaction is typical of men at that time? Of men in general? Of readers in general? What about his reaction to her real work, gothic romance with a homoerotic undercurrent?

About the Author

Ann Herendeen, a lifelong resident of New York City, has worked as a researcher for an urban planning consultant, an advertising media planner, and a librarian. This is her first book.