

Falling out of the Haystack: L.M. Montgomery and Lesbian Desire

• Gavin White •

Résumé: Lors du Congrès des sociétés savantes de 2000, la communication de Laura M. Robinson intitulée "Les amies de coeur: le désir lesbien dans les oeuvres de L.M. Montgomery" a soulevé beaucoup d'intérêt dans les journaux canadiens. À la lumière de l'histoire des mentalités, Gavin White analyse cette thèse du lesbianisme sublimé. S'il concède que le caractère exclusif et passionnel de l'"amitié romanesque" du dix-neuvième siècle, d'inspiration néoplatonicienne, ne peut être ignoré, il doute cependant que cette "amitié de coeur" puisse être interprétée comme une manifestation de lesbianisme.

Summary: During and after the 2000 Learned Conventions, Laura M. Robinson's paper called "Bosom Friends: Lesbian Desire in L. M. Montgomery's Anne Books" received a great deal of attention in the media across Canada. Gavin White summarizes the main point in her unpublished but much discussed paper ("Montgomery concocts a surprising array of alternatives to heterosexuality") and, after discussing several important scholarly studies of women's history, he recontextualizes Robinson's paper within the shifting attitudes towards women's friendships in the early twentieth century and the general confusion over the meaning of the term "lesbian." Discussing nineteenth century terms such as "romantic friendships," "kindred spirits," and "bosom friends," which he locates in neo-Platonic thought, he argues that Robinson is correct in saying that Montgomery's detailed accounts of girls' and women's friendships with other females cannot be ignored, but disagrees that this is what the world would call "lesbian."

In the spring of 2000 a paper by Laura M. Robinson, an academic on the staff of Royal Military College of Canada, was read at the annual Canadian Learned Societies meetings. The title was "Bosom Friends: Lesbian Desire in L.M. Montgomery's Anne Books," and it caused some stir. Laura Robinson released a preliminary copy of the paper to the press on May 25, 2000, before reading it at the Learned Convention. The first paragraph of the version

given the press stated:

While L.M. Montgomery's Anne has charmed innumerable readers since 1908 with her naïve pranks and her ability to gain acceptance from those around her, she also signifies a lack of acceptance, an unacceptability. Not only in *Anne of Green Gables* but also in the sequels, Anne repeatedly expresses lesbian desires, particularly for Diana Barry, Katherine Brooke, and Leslie Moore. Montgomery's texts subtly challenge compulsory heterosexuality by drawing attention to the unfulfilled and unacceptable nature of women's love for women. Because Anne's various expressions of lesbian desires emerge but are not engaged, they draw attention to what is excluded, what cannot be said to be, in Anne's world. However, even though they remain dormant, the desires are encoded in the novels; therefore, they continuously disrupt the patriarchal, heterosexual status quo by pointing out the possibilities of other (unacceptable) ways of being, alongside Anne's dutiful performance as 'Mrs. Doctor,' complacent Canadian housewife and mother.

Her argument is that, particularly in the Anne novels, L.M. Montgomery concocts a surprising array of alternatives to heterosexuality. Robinson lists the unmarried in the Anne novels ("Miss Stacy, Miss Josephine Barry, the women she lives with at Redmond, Miss Cornelia, Miss Katherine Brooke, and Rebecca Dew to mention but a few"), and she argues that the books show that women can "turn to other women for support as Marilla and Rachel do." The paper ends with the words,

Even though Anne's desires are not overtly fulfilled in any textual way, their inclusion disrupts the patriarchal, heterosexual status quo by always gesturing to possibilities beyond the norm. And that is after all, Anne's legacy of her inevitable and often inadvertent ability to ruffle the feathers of complacency.

What are we to make of this? In the first place, Robinson argues that the evidence for lesbian desires, if there is any, is not found *in* the text but *behind* the text; it is dormant or encoded. If there is a key to the code, the reader might expect to find it in the journals of L.M. Montgomery, which are very revealing about the mind and outlook of the author, but which are not mentioned in the Robinson paper. Instead, the justification for this theory of Anne's "lesbian desires" is based on the theories of modern writers on women's issues, notably Lillian Faderman's. Faderman argued convincingly that until the 1920s women's friendship and intimacy were culturally accepted; after this, sexologists and psychologists pathologized it, whether it was sexual or not, making it unacceptable and threatening. Robinson also quotes Adrienne Rich who uses the term in much the same way. In short, the word "lesbian" is being used in ways unfamiliar to those with no background

reading these writers. I will argue that I think it unlikely that either of these other scholars would have interpreted the Anne books, with their strong drives towards heterosexual marriage, as “lesbian” in either the specialized or the traditional ordinary use of the term. But, aside from this, I will agree with Robinson that Montgomery’s detailed accounts of Anne’s devotion to various women cannot be ignored, and there is clearly something here even if it is not quite what the world would commonly call “lesbianism.”

Summarizing Faderman’s and Smith-Rosenberg’s historical research into the nineteenth and earlier centuries, Robinson writes in her paper that

Women in ‘romantic friendships’ were devoted to each other in ways society now views with some trepidation: they wrote love letters to each other; they pledged undying love; they spent their lifetimes ‘in love’ with each other, even when they married men; they slept together and caressed and fondled; some women even lived together their whole lives. No one thought any of this intensely homosocial, even passionate, behaviour was problematic. However, in the 1920s for multiple converging reasons, the love between women became threatening, pathological, unacceptable.” Further citing Faderman, Robinson explains that ‘After the 1920s,... people felt that ‘love between women, coupled with their emerging freedom, might conceivably bring about the overthrow of heterosexuality’ (Faderman 411)

Robinson cites critic and poet Adrienne Rich who decries “compulsory heterosexuality” and uses the term “lesbian” to describe a close and supportive relationship between women which does not necessarily encompass “genital sexual experience” or sexual desire for each other. Instead, as Rich writes: “lesbianism” describes “a range through each woman’s life and throughout the history of women-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman” (Rich 239). Robinson also quotes Faderman’s definition which likewise holds that

Lesbian describes a relationship in which two women’s strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may be part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent. By preference the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other...[The term] ‘Romantic friendships’ described a similar relationship. (Faderman 17-18)

In *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women From the Renaissance to the Present*, Faderman explains how she set out to do a limited study of Emily Dickinson’s romantic letters to her sister-in-law, but ended up expanding her research enormously when she discovered

that earlier centuries did not necessarily stigmatize females who felt “romantic friendships” towards other women. (She covers non-accepted female relationships which were outlawed, too, sometimes with the penalty of death.) Of the accepted kind, for instance, in the eighteenth century it was common for refined literate women to write each other letters of love full of sentimental language. In the nineteenth century, Faderman discusses the “common terms” used to “describe love relationships between women, such as ‘the love of kindred spirits,’ ‘Boston marriage,’ and ‘sentimental friends’” (16). In the early twentieth century, even sexologists like Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud initially used the term “lesbian” to designate “Victorian and post-Victorian women whose love relationships were nongenital” (Faderman 17). Finally, she traces the pathologizing of women’s close friendships in the twentieth century.

Because Robinson’s paper used the word “lesbian” in a way that could only confuse readers with no background in the academic thought of Faderman, Smith-Rosenberg, or Rich, it got a great deal of attention. One Learned Society organizer was prompted to complain that major papers on less sensational (and more important) topics were ignored by the press. The shifting definition of the word “lesbian” at least partly explains the media hoopla which followed: newspapers interviewed literary and other specialists for their opinions on whether “Anne” or other women in Montgomery’s writing are “lesbian.” Robinson’s paper, as summarized and written about by journalists and members of the public, became a hot topic of public conversation outside the media. The Robinson paper circulated some through the internet after she released it to the media, but those who discussed it mostly did so on the basis of newspaper accounts of its contents.¹ The headlines that ensued across Canada variously sensationalized or made playful sport of the subject through witty or attention-grabbing headlines: “‘Outrageously sexual’ [:] Anne was a lesbian, scholar insists”; “Green Gables a hotbed of lesbian sex?”; “Was it Anne of Green Gay-bles?” To the best of my knowledge, Robinson’s paper was never itself made available to the general public or published in a scholarly journal. The rest of this paper will address some of the issues that were raised in both direct and oblique ways through the public discussion of the Robinson paper.

Adrienne Rich is a respected poet and writer on women’s issues; the references in the Robinson paper are drawn from an article, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Identity,” which was first published in 1980 and reappeared in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* of 1993. As the editors of this reader say, “By naming all women-identified women as lesbian, Rich unhinged lesbianism from a solely sexual definition” (Abelove 227). The editors of this reader said of Rich: her essay “offered a new vision of personal and political bonding among women, one that could mend ... rifts that had begun to divide the women’s movement” and that it served to “unite women

—heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian — in a mutual woman-focused vision (Abelove 227). And that is the problem: perhaps lesbianism should be unhinged from a solely sexual definition, but this is not the same thing as naming all 'women-identified women' (women whose primary identification is that of being women) as lesbian.

In fact there are more categories in this field than any one writer could possibly catalogue. And Adrienne Rich was and is a far more subtle thinker than her editors have suggested. Rich wanted "some bridge over the gap between lesbian and feminist" which was reasonable enough, and admitted that there was a gap. The main thrust of her article was to decry "compulsory heterosexuality" being imposed on women whether they were heterosexual or not, which, once again, was reasonable enough. But she never did say that all women who stood up for their rights were "lesbian." And, in another work, her moving book on motherhood, *Of Women Born*, she sought a term for the woman freed from male oversight and found none of them adequate. She writes: "Neither is 'lesbian' a satisfactory term here; not all self-identified women would call themselves lesbians; and, moreover, numberless lesbians are mothers of children" (Rich 207). Things are not as simple as they seem when one starts looking for words to serve as labels.

So much for Adrienne Rich and now for Lillian Faderman. She is an American academic and a thoughtful writer on women's history; the only one of her works used in the Robinson article is *Surpassing the Love of Men*.... This book describes "romantic friendships" at length as "love relationships in every sense except perhaps the genital" (Faderman 16); she says that the women involved might "see their passions as nothing more than the effusions of the spirit" (16). Yet, in some sense, she writes, "romantic friendships were 'lesbian'." Nonetheless, these were accepted from 1850 until 1920, and Faderman asks, "Why were they considered normal then and abnormal now?" (19). She provided endless case histories, and of the eighteenth century she observes, "These women learned from Renaissance writers the ideals of Platonism, in which perfect friendship was preferred to sexual love" (68). This was quite acceptable in those days when a man "would have had little interest in claiming a woman's intense friendship for his own." (72). Faderman expands further:

The height of bliss for these two romantic friends is to share secrets and to open their souls to each other ... this is best done, however ... in the dark on a bed. But since decent women of the eighteenth century could admit to no sexual desires, and decent men would not attribute such desires to them, the sensual aspect of their relationship goes no further in fiction, as it probably would not in life. (111)

Is this "lesbian," we would ask? Faderman continues: "What ro-

mantic friends wanted was to share their lives.... In these ways, surely, there is little to distinguish romantic friendship from lesbianism" (142). In fact, I would argue, there is a good deal to distinguish romantic friendship from lesbianism, if Platonic dualism is part of the package.

It is from Platonic dualism that we take the word "platonic" to describe a relationship that is not sexual. In fact, there is much more to the philosophy than that. As the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Online edition) notes, "the doctrine involves the duplication of reality and the postulation of entities for the existence of which no sufficient evidence or arguments can be stated." In plain English, there are two levels of existence, one that we see and another that we do not, or only see in glimpses, and this is a "spiritual or unintelligible reality that is independent of the world, and is the ultimate origin of both existence or values." Once these preliminaries are grasped, it is easy to see how there could be relationships which were physical and of this world, and relationships which were not physical and were of another world.

To return to Faderman, we next have the concept of "Boston marriage." She quotes Henry James, who explains it as a woman seeking "a friend of her own sex with whom she might have a union of soul" (Faderman 191), a soul mate, instead of, or as well as, a mate. To revert to the Platonic doctrine, a woman might have a mate in this realm, and a soul mate in the other. Nowadays, of course, the term "soul mate" is used much more loosely, and it was used pretty loosely by some writers in the nineteenth century, but it did have a more precise meaning then than it has now. And while on the meaning of words, "kindred spirit" and "soul mate" are much the same thing, if "kindred" means "mate" and "soul" means spirit. But the general toleration of such romantic friendships came to an end at the beginning of the twentieth century, as, on the one hand, medical experts "discovered" that education was "dangerous to a female's health" and, on the other, as psychology developed and the sexologists suggested that all friendships between women must be 'lesbian' – a condition which they latterly defined as entailing sexual attraction and contact, which they believed to be a "pathology" that could easily be transmitted to others. Faberman was at her most enjoyable as she played Lizzie Borden to the solemnities of Kraft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, but she also castigated Freud for arguing that same-sex love was due to a failure to develop along normal lines.

So far, there is nothing in Faderman with which to disagree. But then she notes that most lesbians are not all that interested in sex, and some have no genital contact, and so being lesbian is an essential identity that goes far beyond sex (411). Accordingly, Faderman wishes to use the word 'lesbian' to denote something which is more than sexual, which is understandable, but she can be read to use the word when there is nothing sexual there at all. And she writes of a hybrid creature, the "lesbian-feminist," as if all lesbians were

feminists and all feminists were lesbians, whereas it is fairly obvious that many lesbians are not feminists, and the vast majority of feminists are not lesbians. She gave no hint of the wider picture, in which some lesbians sought close sex-free friendships with men, just as non-lesbian women sought close sex-free friendships with women. There are more varieties of relationships than any of these books can adequately enumerate.

But is it desirable that the word 'lesbian' should be used as Laura M. Robinson has used it, even if she has taken the use from respectable academic sources? Almost certainly not. It is understandable that lesbians want to be known not just for their sex lives but for their whole outlook and attitude, and it is understandable that they want to build bridges with feminists on the matters which both groups have in common. But erasing the difference is dangerous. Until recently it was widely believed, and in some conservative circles it is still widely held, that lesbians are so by choice or by indoctrination, and that society has to be careful lest all women are turned into lesbians, perhaps by hidden lesbian propaganda in girls' literature.

Happily, it is now generally accepted that lesbianism (in the sexual sense) is an innate condition, and not one chosen, and that very few people are on the borderline enough to be influenced one way or another. Thus those who are lesbians have to live their lives accordingly, and they are no longer seen as a danger to others who do not want to be lesbians. But if the word "lesbian" is to be redefined as it has been by Rich and Faderman, however understandable their reasons and however careful their qualifications, we may find ourselves back in the era of witch-hunts, with special camps to straighten out teenagers who seem to be insufficiently masculine or feminine.

But these matters aside, there is a relationship between the romantic friendships described by Faderman and what occurs in the writings of L.M. Montgomery, though the latter do not fit the picture exactly. First, L.M. Montgomery's writings are shot through with Platonic dualism, and not just with regard to friendships between women. In most of her books there is an humdrum world in which her heroines live, and a marvelous world which they occasionally glimpse. But L.M. Montgomery, just to get these matters out of the way, was certainly no lesbian in either the physical or the social sense of the word. She would not have been so described by either Rich or Faderman. In fact, she knew so little on the subject early in her career that she could not have written an encoded lesbian meaning into her books even if she had wished to do so. (Her journals show how she began informing herself about "lesbianism" after "Isobel" began pursuing her in the 1930s.) Montgomery's journals are very frank about her own sexuality, and there is abundant evidence of her being heterosexual. Nor are her heroines lesbian in the ordinary sense of the word. They are heterosexual on the one hand, and blessed with a gift for forming romantic friendships with girls on the other. To consider

them as anything else shows a lack of understanding just as, Faberman tells us, nineteenth-century romantic friendships were mistaken for lesbian ones by twentieth century observers who saw everything in terms of sex.

But it is now necessary to show the evidence for these statements, and particularly for Platonic influence. L.M. Montgomery held such doctrines, but how did she come by them? It is not enough to suggest that she read them, or had them from lectures at Prince of Wales College or Dalhousie, though her terminology suggests that at some point she latched onto the academic versions of the doctrine. It seems that she was an adherent of Platonism long before she could read or write. She wrote in her autobiography, *The Alpine Path*:

It has always seemed to me ever since early childhood, that, amid all the commonplaces of life, I was very near to a kingdom of ideal beauty. Between it and me hung only a thin veil. I could never draw it quite aside, but sometimes the wind fluttered it and I caught a glimpse of the enchanting realm beyond — only a glimpse — but those glimpses have always made life worth while. (48)

Montgomery's "kingdom of ideal beauty" is pure Platonism, but the experience she describes having as a child pre-dates her exposure to academic philosophy. Unless we suppose that she inserted whole fictions into the texts of her journals, we must accept that this dualism was a basic part of her being.

And there is something of another reality in her friendship with her imaginary "Katie Maurice," the imaginary child who lived, with the imaginary "Lucy Gray," in the oval glass at either end of her grandparents' bookcase. And lest it be imagined that Platonic doctrines cannot be acquired outside the lecture hall, they may be innate, and Plato may have been describing something that is in every human being, which in turn finds its ways into most religious belief structures. There is a clear parallel with the Happy Hunting Ground of the Algonquin Indians, or the Summer Isles of Celtic peoples. Furthermore, Montgomery was selective in what she took from Platonism, or neo-Platonism, which is a more technical term for the developed Platonism of Plotinus. Nowhere in the writings of L.M. Montgomery is there a hint of the developed neo-Platonic belief that souls once lived in heaven before being imprisoned in an evil world, and that the flashes of beauty are distant memories of that ideal existence. L.M. Montgomery loved the world and saw her flashes in its beauty (*SJ I* 28, 57).

The heroines of L.M. Montgomery are forever breaking through that veil into the kingdom of ideal beauty. Anne's experiences are well-known, but Emily of *New Moon* is a clearer case. "And then the flash came," Montgomery writes of Emily, " — she had seen, with other eyes than those of

sense, the wonderful world behind the veil" (ENM 38). "Courage and hope flooded her cold little soul like a wave of rosy light" (ENM 38). And much later, after other such exposures to the world behind the veil, Emily effuses: "I think God is just like my flash, only it lasts only a second and He lasts always" (176). Then the minister speaks of beautiful things, "But they are just a part of God, Emily — every beautiful thing is" (204). And L.M. Montgomery herself has such an experience, in 1925, looking at a hayfield, and describing it in her journals: "Wave after wave of sinuous, glistening, wave-shadows were going over it. I have not seen just that exact effect for years. A flood of ecstasy washed through my soul. The mystic curtain fluttered and I caught the glimpse of Eternal and Infinite beauty which 'Emily' called her 'flash'. I fairly trembled with the wonder and loveliness of that supernal moment. Only a moment. But worth years of ordinary existence" (SJ III 241). It is a nice reversal of roles for an author to identify her own experience by reference to that of a character she has created, but we know what she meant. On the other hand, L.M. Montgomery could bring into existence an alternate world which she knew was purely of her own imagining, "I was tired out and only avoided tears by taking refuge in a new and vivid dream life.... Oh, it has been fun" (SJ III 244).

There are other alternate worlds or "kingdoms of ideal beauty." Valancy in *The Blue Castle* has her Blue Castle, and the thought of it helps her tolerate a miserable existence with a miserable family. Pat of Silver Bush has her Silver Bush, although since she lives there she is idealizing an actual place rather than creating an alternative one. Jane of Lantern Hill has her alternative world in the moon; she gazes at it during her drab existence in Toronto and is relieved later to discover it is still visible, and still a comfort, when she moves to Prince Edward Island. But the author soon forgets this as Jane changes from a shrinking violet to a cross between Boadicea and Lara Croft. And Marigold has "the Hidden Land." Then Marigold climbs a hill and is desolated to discover that, "There was no Hidden Land" (MM 33), but shortly afterwards she sees a glorious sunset and concludes that this is her Hidden Land, which is a complete betrayal of all that Plato taught. If the other reality of ideal beauty was just a slightly more beautiful part of this reality, it would not be another reality at all. Yet the other world of ideal beauty is a fixture in most of the stories, if not in all.

But if the Platonic theme is there, how does L.M. Montgomery fit it into the picture of romantic friendships as described by Faderman? It might be possible to construct a thesis in which she and her cousin Frede Campbell were soul mates in the sense of a spiritual parallel to marriage in this world, but the evidence suggests otherwise. To begin, L.M. Montgomery's very close friendship with Frede is not the only close friendship of her life. Her cousin Bertie McIntyre in Charlottetown was almost as close, and Laura Agnew, her friend from the year in Prince Albert, was another such. The title "kindred

spirits" was used of Laura and of her brother Will: although "soul mate" was used for girls, it could be used for a boy also. But it is now time to look at L.M. Montgomery in some detail to determine where she stood on the various issues mentioned above. And in doing so we are looking at all of her heroines, since they are her creations.

First, feminism. There is a Swedish thesis (and book) by Gabriella Åhmansson which considers all of Montgomery's work from a feminist perspective, and this is convincing as far as she treats the subject. It was held in Montgomery's era that the female person could not use her mind to study without using up her limited life force, thereby risking shriveling her reproductive system and becoming unable to bear healthy children; the books of L.M. Montgomery depict girls striving to break out of such restrictions. Although education was highly valued by the Scots in Prince Edward Island, and particularly by Montgomery's own family, there were other members of the society in which she lived who were unintellectual to a point where culture was considered a waste, and college education at best only a step to a profession, and of no value in itself, whether for a boy or a girl. When L.M. Montgomery went off for her year in Dalhousie she was asked pointedly why she wanted more education — to be a minister? Of course a woman could not be a minister! And no man should study except to overcome the barriers for entrance to a profession, so why should a woman study if she already had a teacher's certificate?

And however rebellious L.M. Montgomery might be on the subject of learning, particularly when her grandfather did not want to fund a higher education for her, she was quite conventional on marriage. In Volume II of her Journals she writes in 1910 that the man her cousin Frede loved married another, "thereby destroying Frede's chances for the highest happiness" (*SJ II 11*). In the following year she herself was married and she tells us she cried before the wedding,

I think I wept a lost dream — a dream that could never be fulfilled — a girl's dream of the lover who should be her perfect mate — to whom she might splendidly give herself with no reservations. We all dream that dream. And when we surrender it unfulfilled we feel that something wild and sweet and unutterable has gone out of life!

Then, at the wedding feast, she wrote that she felt, "Rebellion and despair. I wanted to be free" (*SJ II 66-68*). This is less rebellion against marriage than the recognition that she had not married a man she loved. In 1914 she wrote that "to be in the arms of a man whom I loved with all my heart and to whom I could willingly look up as my master is, after all, every woman's real idea of happiness, if she would be honest enough to admit it" (*SJ II 146*), And later that year she wrote of "some deep instinct in us women that makes

us rejoice when we have brought a man child into the world" (*SJ II* 152). In Volume I she had made it clear why she was marrying: "I wanted a home and companionship; and more than all, to be perfectly candid, I wanted children" (322). As for a man she could deeply love, she says, "The type is uncommon and the chances are a hundred to one against his ever coming into my life" (*SJ I* 322).

Then there was her love of Herman Leard, which she asserts in her journals could never have led to marriage, but that it was worthwhile: "It would have been a sorry thing to go through life and never have known love, even though it was an unhappy and unsatisfied love. I shall never know the fullness of love.... But I have not been cheated out of everything" (*SJ I* 325). These are not the words of a full-fledged feminist as we would define one today. On the other hand, she quotes Frede who is teaching at MacDonald College and has married, as saying: "I wish I could have both the 'job' and the 'husband'" (*SJ II* 274). Montgomery could not foresee a society in which married women were compelled to have jobs to keep the family above water.

Next, Montgomery's sexual orientation. When an editor asked her if she would write about her love life, she declined: "I smile when I imagine what 'the parties of the second part' would think if they picked up a copy of *Everywoman's World* and read a cold-blooded account of their 'affairs' with me in it. But I do not smile when I imagine what their wives would think!" (*SJ II* 201-2). And she listed those men who had been attracted to her, or to whom she had been attracted. A few examples are convincing. In 1898, living in the Leard household at Belmont, she tells us that she fell in love with Herman Leard, feeling "wholly new and strange emotions" (*SJ I* 204) though she could never have considered marriage with him. Over thirty years later she was driven past the graveyard where Herman Leard was buried, and she wrote, "When the menopause took away from me the impulses and desires of sex, the thought of him ceased to have any physical influence on me" (*SJ IV* 19). But there was still something: "I had the oddest feeling that Herman Leard was reaching out to me from his grave ... it was gruesome and horrible" (*SJ IV* 19). In 1909 she met a certain Oliver MacNeill who was seeking a new wife; she ruled him out as a husband. But, she wrote, he was one of the few who "have the power to kindle in me a devastating flame of the senses," something "shameful, degrading, dangerous," and she speculated on whether the spiritual and sensual could be linked, concluding "My higher self is thankful he is gone; but my lower self is writhing in agony and would leap up with a fierce joy if Oliver were at this instant to appear before me" (*SJ I* 359-60). If L.M. Montgomery embarked on a loveless marriage, to her own disadvantage as it transpired, the friends and relatives whose lives are detailed in her journals seem all too often to have lost the loves of their lives and married for convenience. And there is no suggestion that they did this through "compulsory heterosexuality" but through the social conventions by which

the young courted one another being only partially effective.

But there is one thing in Montgomery's writing which will mislead some modern readers into thinking there is "lesbianism" (in the sexual sense of the term) when there is not, and that is her use of the term "sleeping together." Until about 1900 this was a common practice, and not just because of the shortage of beds or the lack of heat in bedrooms. It represented an opportunity for girls to talk, to exchange secrets, to vow eternal friendship, and in some cases to break through to the spiritual realm. As Faderman said, this was best done "in the dark — on a bed." L.M. Montgomery's close relationship with Frede (described as "more than a sister" [*SJ II* 163]) dated from 1902 when they slept together: "Our friendship seemed to open into full bloom in a single night" (*SJ II* 302). "For some forgotten reason we all three occupied Stella's room," and the two talked till dawn of "love troubles" (*SJ II* 303). And whenever they could in the years remaining to them they slept, or rather, talked, and gave one another support.

But there were other female friendships even though the mutual trust was never as strong as it was with Frede. At Prince Albert in 1891 Montgomery slept with Laura- "We talked and talked and talked. I never met a girl I could confide in as I can in Laura. I can tell her everything — the thoughts of my innermost soul — and she is the same with me. We are twin spirits in every way" (*SJ I* 577-59). "Once we had a glum fit and were squeezing each other and lamenting our approaching separation." There are other occasions, some due to lack of beds, some to friendship, as in 1896 at her residence in Halifax Ladies' College while studying at Dalhousie, "Last Sunday night Edith McLeod came up and slept with me. We both slept in the one bed and as H.L.C. cots are rather narrow it was a work of art to keep in. Nevertheless we had a scrumptious time and a real old-fashioned talk. Monday night I went down and slept with her. I am going to sleep with Isobel Morrison tonight — it is Easter Holidays here now, hence all this sleeping around, which of course is not permissible at other times" (*SJ I* 159).

But times changed. Thanks to the new and sometimes mindless theories of the new professional medical and sex experts after World War I, all intimacies between girls became suspect. The heroines of L.M. Montgomery continue visiting one another, but there is no mention of their sleeping arrangements — except with due circumspection. By the time of the writing of *Emily Climbs*, Emily and Ilse could not be portrayed in a bed together, but it was quite respectable for girls in a rural community to sleep together on a haystack. Here, in the chapter entitled "At the Sign of the Haystack," Emily and Ilse see the aurora borealis, and "She [Emily] was afraid to move or breathe lest she break the current of beauty that was flowing through her" (160). "Oh God, make me worthy of it — oh, make me worthy of it." This may be due to the aurora or it may be due to her relationship with Ilse, or the two together, but that night "had seemed in itself like a year of some soul-growth."

And then there is Pat of Silver Bush who sleeps with Bets, though they are both very young, which perhaps makes it unobjectionable: "Then they crept into bed and cuddled down for one of those talks dear to the hearts of small school-girls from time immemorial" (*PSB* 118). And Pat experiences "a strange deep exquisite thrill of delight . . . that went deeper than body or brain and touched some inner sanctum of being of which the child had never been conscious." This may be in the otherworld of Platonic thought, but it is rather vague in its meaning. On the other hand, there is no spiritual or Platonic meaning when Marigold goes to stay with Nancy and "sleep with her two whole nights.... They would talk delicious little secrets" (*MM* 99). And later, with Bernice, Marigold has "the supreme bliss of sleeping together" (244). There is no apparent awareness that this might be misinterpreted. Yet in most of these cases there is something which is more than just friendship, but it is decidedly on the spiritual plane, not what sexologist Havelock Ellis might have it be.

And now to the question of "Isobel" in Montgomery's journals. The facts are set out in the fourth volume of *The Selected Journals of L. M. Montgomery*. In 1929, at Leaskdale, Ontario, where her husband was minister, L.M. Montgomery wrote, "But I am up against something now which is too much for me — and which nauseates me past all telling into the bargain" (*SJ IV* 33). She had become acquainted with a young teacher named Isobel from a nearby village; Montgomery writes "she wanted to sleep with me" (34), "poor Isobel was a pervert. Not to blame for it, I suppose. Born under the curse as another girl might have been born cross-eyed or mentally deficient" (34). She visits Isobel for an overnight, as was customary then with friends, and writes, "I even 'slept' with Isobel. I hate 'sleeping' with strangers but apart from that I had nothing to complain of, and I decided that I had been a nasty-minded idiot to think of Isobel as I had done" (35). Then comes a letter from Isobel telling the 55-year-old Montgomery that she, Isobel, wants "to cover your wee hands, your beautiful throat, and every part of you, with kisses" (35). Montgomery writes in her journals, after reading this letter: "I felt slimy and unclean" (36). But she worries about what Isobel might do if rebuffed. A year later, Isobel was still writing her, wanting to "hold me in her arms for a whole night" (122). Montgomery fumes: "How I loathe her" (122). A year later she spends with Isobel "a day of miserable boredom" (164). And then, Montgomery (who has been reading the new experts on sex because of her uneasiness over Isobel) writes in her journals: "I am not a Lesbian" (*SJ IV* 166).

Montgomery discovers and tells us that Isobel had previously been in love with a man: "Of course I believe she is quite unconscious of her lesbianism — or rather, that it is lesbianism" (*SJ IV* 184). Montgomery writes further of "the horrible craving of the lesbian" (185), using the term in the new sense of a woman who desires physical love-making with another

woman. There is a meeting when Isobel is ill-mannered and sulky. By 1933, fed up with Isobel, Montgomery concludes: "The girl is not sane and I deserve all I have got for being fatuous enough to think I could help her or guide her back to normality" (214). "I told her plainly that her passion for me is lesbian, abhorrent in the eyes of all decent people" (215). Eventually Isobel fades out of the picture.

There is a real possibility, maybe even a probability, that Isobel was not lesbian at all, in either the common or academic sense of the term. It is clear that Isobel was highly manipulative and that she suffered some mental aberration, and for those who lived in an age when to be lesbian was to be under a curse, the two things often went together. (It was hard for anyone living in the 1920s to recognize that lesbians were ordinary people.) It is common for those with clinical depression, in which the emotional system shuts down, to try to jump-start it by creating some crisis so appalling that the signals are forced through the barriers and the numbness is overcome. L.M. Montgomery suffered severe bouts of depression for many years and it may be that when she became engaged to Edwin Simpson in 1897 this was in order to overcome her depression. She certainly was in depression at the time of her engagement: "I have been very nervous lately" (*SJ I* 183); "My health has not been at all good" (187); "I wonder if I shall ever get rested again. I feel so tired all the time" (191). As the days passed she could "merely drag myself through them in a mechanical way" (191). "A veil seems to have dropped between my soul and nature" (191). "I seem to have lost the power of feeling pleasure in anything" (192). But the bout ended and "the tears were a distinct relief" (193). She notes that "Looking back over the last three weeks I wonder how I have lived through them without going mad" (193). She extricated herself from an unwelcome engagement which, fortunately, had never become public. And twenty years later, noting that Edwin and his wife had no children, she wrote, "When I was engaged to Ed I did not know enough of men to realize what was lacking in him, but I know now that there was something lacking and I believe that was why, though I did not understand it, I felt such a mysterious repugnance to him" (*SJ II* 361). We may make of this what we may, but Isobel's failure to relate to people in the usual ways, her expressions of passion towards someone to whom she seems otherwise indifferent, with her having previously been in love with a man, all suggest that she is possibly taking the most shatteringly unacceptable role in order to force her emotions through the barriers. Perhaps she was grasping at any emotional contact which would jump-start her ability to feel emotions and hence relieve her depression.

Next, there is the question of whether the heroines and a variety of other women in Montgomery's novels postpone marriage because they really do not want it — either because the company of other women is more to their taste, or because they do not want to be subordinate to a less-intelligent

man whom they must "obey." In response to this it can only be observed that making a good story demands making obstacles to be overcome: if "boy meets girl" was automatically followed by an immediate and happy ending, then we would never have heard of Shakespeare, there would be hardly any English literature for professors to teach, and Hollywood might just as well have remained a wilderness.

Finally, there is a high seriousness to academic studies of female friendships, whether "lesbian," Platonic or neo-Platonic, or some hybrid yet unnamed, which would not have been to the taste of L.M. Montgomery, a woman whose sense of the ridiculous was one of her most delightful characteristics. It should always be remembered that when Montgomery's young heroines Emily and Ilse slept together on their haystack, amidst all the current of beauty which flowed through Emily, and her prayer to God that she might be worthy of it, she fell out of the haystack.

Notes

- 1 Some of the readers' comments about the *Ottawa Citizen's* two articles were as follows: "Tom Spears' report on Professor Laura Robinson's thesis left me in a state of shock, not because of outmoded views on homosexuality, but because I believe she is dead wrong ... I ... believe that Professor Robinson entirely misunderstands Montgomery and adolescent girls. What an amazing leap of illogic to assume that jealously intense friendships amongst adolescent girls, which are the norm, indicate suppressed lesbianism. Junior-high school girls love and hate with fervour, and express their feelings grandiosely." Another respondent on the same point: "It is this idea of 'kindred spirits' that Ms. Robinson is misinterpreting as a ... lesbian tendency. Women, and particularly young girls, express their emotions more freely and openly than men. Therefore, they are drawn into closer, spiritual relationships with each other, and their choice of language is frequently dramatic and often leans towards a preoccupation with the subject of love. Sometimes young girls use each other as a dress rehearsal for the future moment when they do fall, physically, in love but it is ... play-acting until the 'real thing' comes along. [And] there are different kinds of love. When Anne or Diana speak of love for each other, they are speaking of a spiritual, highly imaginative, romantic love in the idealist sense, not in the physical sense. ... the term 'bosom friend' is mentioned (and the word 'friend' is the operative word here), it's because the heart, the seat of all friendship, lies in the bosom." Another: "I lead an extremely busy life caring for an ill husband, a house and a garden, and running a freelance editing business. I have no time to suffer fools but ... [this article] about Anne of Green Gables being a lesbian has me gasping in disbelief. For example, her quote about 'shameless orgies of ... lovemaking' is completely out of context. Anne and Leslie's lovemaking and adoration were directed at Anne's loved and adored baby son. Waiting for Gilbert to be 'out of the way' was necessary because the doctor and strict, first-time father would never have agreed or approved of their spoiling the child. Are all we girls who dearly love our girl and women friends assumed to be lesbians? What nonsense." Another: "The article ... angered me to the extreme. In today's society, any display of affection towards member of the same gender is denounced as gay. This only displays the ignorance of much of the populace towards

homosexuality, and the consistent homophobia that is evident today. The article states that 'Anne's friendship with Diana Barry is homoerotic simply because they are 'bosom friends,' a term that the article states 'conjures up a physical as well as spiritual image.' And what physical image does it conjure up? The bosom, the chest, and underneath it, the heart. Anne indicates that Diana's friendship is close to her heart, teaching a lesson many modern people could do with learning — Good friends are as important as family or spouses, and should be cherished." Some readers attacked Professor Robinson, asking if she ever had a close girl-friend when growing up: "To have such a close friend that you feel comfortable with, that you can tell your dreams to, that you can open your very soul to, and that you can share all your hopes and giggles with, this is the stuff that happy memories of growing-up is made from. It doesn't make you a lesbian." A grade nine student wrote: "Anyone who has read the books knows that Anne and Diana were the best of friends and nothing more, and it seems like all of a sudden there's something wrong with that.... Aren't best friends allowed to care about each other? Anne Shirley was a lonely orphan with no friends when the story began, so it's expected she would care about her first true friend more than anything." Papers running articles on the topic were inundated with letters from angry readers, and there was much written on the internet (See listings by Yuka Kajihara yuka@yukazine.com as posted on the LMM-L@LISTSERV.UTORONTO.CA on 12-13 December 2001: Donna Lypchuk, "Secrets of storybookland." <http://www.eye.net/eye/issue/issue_06.08.00/columns/necro.html>; CBC Radio Arts, "Prof suggests Anne of Green Gables was lesbian." <http://www.infoculture.cbc.ca/archives/bookswr/bookswr_05312000profanne.phtml>; "Paper on 'lesbian' Anne of Green Gables causes controversy." <<http://www.canoe.ca/TravelNewsArchives/june1anne.html>>; "Anne of Green Gables Outed." May 27, 2000. <<http://www.groovyannies.com/news2000/press38.html>>; Professor Butt-Head, "Bats in the Belltower." <<http://www.popecenter.org/clarion/2000/may-jun/bats.html>>.)

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