“Where Is the Boy?: The Pleasures of Postponement in the Anne of Green Gables Series

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In her ominously entitled article, “The Decline of Anne: Matron vs. Child,” Gillian Thomas argues that the sequels to L. M. Montgomery’s popular Anne of Green Gables (1908) prove “progressively unsatisfactory” due to Anne’s gradual transformation from an unconventional, spirited child to a cautious, conservative matron (23). Objecting in particular to the adult Anne’s habit of playing matchmaker, Thomas claims that “[t]he idea that some marriages can be unfulfilling or destructive is scarcely allowed to intrude into Anne’s world” (28). Similarly, T. D. MacLulich notes that even as Montgomery’s characters protest against the narrow view that “unmarried [women] are simply those who have failed to get a man,” Montgomery as author “can imagine in her fiction only one resolution of this situation: the unhappy woman must finally acquire a man of her own” (90). Initially compelling, these readings ultimately fail to do justice to the extraordinary extent to which the Anne series dramatizes the effort its female characters must make to conform their unruly desires to the dictates of heterosexual romance, to close the gap between what they want and what they are supposed to want. Through her portrayal of numerous “dilatory courtship[s]”—including the romance that finally flowers between Anne and Gilbert—and her ingenious manipulation of the series format, Montgomery demonstrates the enormous expenditure of time and effort necessary to bring about “The End” embodied by heterosexual union (Chronicles of Avonlea 2). At the same time, she indicates that these lengthy delays make room for passionate relationships between women that prove far more romantic than traditional marriages. Anne would have no call to engage in such frantic matchmaking were
it not for the fact that so many of the characters surrounding her perform acts of spectacular hesitation, postponing their marriages for up to thirty years after their introduction—or even engagement—to a potential partner. The paradigmatic case occurs in Chronicles of Avonlea when Anne “hurr[ies] up” the courtship of Theodora Dix and the ironically named Ludovic Speed, which has been stalled at the flirting phase for fifteen years due to Ludovic’s indecisiveness and Theodora’s shyness. Nearly every sequel to Anne of Green Gables includes one such “dilatory courtship”; for example, Anne of Avonlea (1909), the second book in the series, features the reconciliation of no less than three couples who have been separated for years as a result of various kinds of quarrels and problems—Sarah Copp and Luther Wallace, Mr. James A. Harrison and his wife Emily, and Lavendar Lewis and her old beau Stephen Irving. Like the long delay that holds up the marriage of Janet Sweet and John Douglas in Anne of the Island (1915), the Copp/Wallace match is hindered by a family member’s stern decree and a lack of resolve on the part of the lovers themselves. More often, however, Montgomery focuses on how pride overrules love; the two other temporally-challenged couples in Anne of Avonlea part ways after bitter quarrels after which no one wants to be the first to make up.

Yet these disagreements are invariably depicted as essentially petty; twenty-five years after the fact, Lavendar Lewis cannot even remember the cause of the argument that broke up her engagement to Stephen Irving. Nor does Montgomery mention the grounds of the quarrel that divides Ellen West from Norman Douglas for twenty years before they reconcile themselves to marriage in the seventh book of the series, Rainbow Valley (1919). As for Emily Harrison, she leaves her husband because he has untidy habits, an embarrassingly profane parrot, and poor grammar skills; while Nancy Rogerson in Chronicles of Avonlea (1912) follows suit by splitting with Peter Wright over his bad syntax. The marriage of Cornelia Bryant and Marshall Elliott, announced at the end of Anne’s House of Dreams (1917), is postponed for two decades for a similarly small reason; the groom-to-be refuses to get a shave and a haircut. A famously stubborn man, Marshall vows never to groom himself until his political party comes back into power, and Miss Cornelia declines to become his bride until he cleans himself up. When the Grits finally beat the Conservatives, she announces her wedding, explaining to Anne and Gilbert, “‘I could have had him any time these twenty years if I’d lifted my finger. But do you suppose I was going to walk into church beside a perambulating haystack like that?’” (House of Dreams 209).
Can the power of love be so great when such trifles can successfully stand in the way for so long? Anne herself offers up the rather lame explanation that "the little things in life often make more trouble than the big things," but the remarkable ease with which many of these women tolerate such lengthy delays suggests, pace Thomas and MacLulich, that Montgomery does not deem marriage obligatory for a cheerful existence (Anne of Avonlea 195). By postponing romantic engagements until the last few pages of her narratives or deferring their depiction to a subsequent installment, Montgomery presents an immense number of confirmed spinsters for whom marriage itself serves as an unconvincing sequel to a long, happy life lived alone or in the company of other women. Miss Cornelia provides a prime example; still single at a relatively advanced age, she confides to Anne, "'I have had a real placid, comfortable life, dearie, and it's just because I never cared a cent what the men thought'" (House of Dreams 48). Tired of depending on the services of unreliable hired men, Miss Cornelia finally agrees to wed Marshall Elliot; but Montgomery's characterization of her as a tart-tongued, kind-hearted spinster proves so skillful and engaging that this marriage utterly fails to alter her—distinctly singular—character. As her neighbors acknowledge, Miss Cornelia's lifestyle changes not a whit after the wedding, nor does her habit of "running down the men"; Marshall remains a shadowy background figure, whose relative insignificance is attested to by the fact that even after thirteen years of wedded life, "more people referred to [his wife] as Miss Cornelia than as Mrs. Elliott" (House of Dreams 129, Rainbow Valley 1).

In A Life and Its Mirrors: A Feminist Reading of L. M. Montgomery's Fiction, Gabriella Åhmansson suggests that Miss Cornelia "is modelled on the traditional figure, the manhating 'sour grapes' spinster" (152). Yet Montgomery immediately emphasizes that this unique character revises rather than conforms to this stereotype. Certainly, Miss Cornelia criticizes men constantly, but as her old friend Captain Jim explains, her exasperated refrain—"Isn't that like a man?'—'[i]sn't sour grapes . . . Cornelia could have had her pick when she was young. Even now she's only to say the word to see the old widowers jump!" (House of Dreams 30). Rather than arising out of any personal bitterness or disappointment, Miss Cornelia's humorous disparagement of men clearly stems from her positive sense of solidarity with women and children; during her first appearance in the series, she busies herself sewing baby clothes for the Proctor family's unwanted eighth child, and she later tells Anne, "'I always take the ground that us women ought to stand by each other'" (House of Dreams 70). Introducing this appealing character, Montgom-
ery conspicuously comments that, “She did not look in the least like the traditional old maid, and there was something in her expression which won Anne instantly” (House of Dreams 43).

As this description suggests, one way the Anne series dramatizes the pleasures of single life is by rewriting and even eroticizing the figure of the old maid. For example, “Sweet Miss Lavendar”—another woman whose belated marriage never changes her designation as “Miss”—effortlessly revises the stereotype of the grim spinster; as she tells Anne, “People say I’m odd; but it’s just because I follow my own way of being an old maid and refuse to copy the traditional pattern” (Anne of Avonlea 201). When Anne and her best friend Diana lose their way in the woods and happen upon Echo Lodge, Miss Lavendar’s home, they expect to meet a typical old maid, “a rather angular personage, with prim gray hair and spectacles” (Anne of Avonlea 184, 186). But Montgomery quickly emphasizes that “[n]othing more unlike Miss Lavendar could possibly be imagined,” explaining,

She was a little old lady with snow-white hair beautifully wavy and thick, and carefully arranged in becoming puffs and coils. Beneath it was an almost girlish face, pink-cheeked and sweet lipped, with big soft brown eyes and dimples . . . actually dimples. She wore a very dainty gown of cream muslin with pale-hued roses on it. (Anne of Avonlea 186)

By treating Miss Lavendar to a series of sentimental compliments, Anne in particular aids Montgomery in rendering the old maid romantic; after confiding to Diana that their hostess “looks just as sweet as music sounds,” Anne admiringly tells Miss Lavendar that “if every old maid were like you they would come into the fashion” (Anne of Avonlea 188, 201).

The close friendship that develops between these three women forms a joyous interlude in the second Anne novel, and it is not coincidental that their meeting occurs as a result of straying from the beaten path, a move Anne “afterward [calls] the most fortunate mistake of her life” (Anne of Avonlea 183). Just as Miss Lavender wanders away—intentionally or not—from the traditional marriage plot, Anne and Diana “[a]ke the wrong path” and, in doing so, happen upon a far more enjoyable experience than the one waiting for them at their intended destination (Anne of Avonlea 187). By extension, the lengthy postponement of Miss Lavendar’s romance takes on the quality of a fortuitous detour, rather than a tragic loss of time; Mrs. Lynde, the biggest gossip in Avonlea, remarks that Miss Lavendar has “been as queer as possible ever since” she quarreled with her prospective husband, but Montgomery empha-
sizes that this unconventional old maid’s oddness not only serves as the source of her attractiveness, it also finds an answering echo in Anne’s own character (Anne of Avonlea 8). A deep kinship flowers between the two, tellingly based on their shared love of imagining other options in life; “Oh, do you imagine things too?” exclaims Anne at their first meeting, thus “reveal[ing] a kindred spirit to Miss Lavendar” (Anne of Avonlea 187).

This shared propensity for “pretend[ing] things” enables Anne and Miss Lavendar to enjoy exploring avenues unconnected to the traditional marriage plot; even as Anne finds herself swept away by the “scope for imagination” Miss Lavendar’s charming personality, appealing home, and fascinating situation offer, she spends Anne of Avonlea steadily refusing to entertain sentimental feelings for Gilbert. Stubbornly insisting that their relationship remain platonic, Anne disheartens Gilbert and causes a disappointed Diana to inquire, “Don’t you mean ever to be married, Anne?” (Anne of Avonlea 235). As Diana’s italics emphasize, by embracing a romantic attachment to Miss Lavendar, Anne symbolically succumbs to the allure of postponement. Thus, when her new friend finally marries her old beau, Anne “dreamily” marvels at “how they have come together again after all the years of separation and misunderstanding” (Anne of Avonlea 275). In contrast, an impatient Gilbert points out,

“Yes, it’s beautiful . . . but wouldn’t it have been more beautiful still, Anne, if there had been no separation or misunderstanding? . . . If they had come hand in hand all the way through life, with no memories behind them but those which belonged to each other?” (Anne of Avonlea 275–76)

“For a moment” Anne’s heart flutters strangely at this suggestive remark, but ultimately her answer—and Montgomery’s—is no; neither author nor heroine can bring herself to believe in the appeal of commencing with this kind of relationship immediately. The pleasures of hesitation, on the other hand, exert an inexorable pull, causing Montgomery to inform her readers that “Gilbert wisely said nothing more,” and to wind up this second Anne book with an image of a happy home on hold: describing the empty Echo Lodge, she concludes, “meanwhile, it could wait . . . the echoes bided their time” (Anne of Avonlea 276).

Building up to her argument that the Anne sequels “essentially repea[t] the pattern of popular sentimental fiction that centers around the theme of courtship with marriage as the inevitable happy ending,” Genevieve Wiggins suggests that Anne of Avonlea concludes with “the conventional ‘happily ever after’ ending, but the romance is Miss Lavendar’s rather
than Anne’s” (53, 48). Yet Miss Lavendar’s wedding itself serves as a means of postponement, allowing Montgomery to delay the depiction of Anne’s marriage. In *Anne of Avonlea*, Montgomery provides readers with the ceremony they desire but substitutes a markedly more mature heroine in place of her ambitious Anne. Furthermore, since the married life of Miss Lavendar and Stephen Irving only begins after the narrative ends, their union remains ostensible rather than fully realized; as in the case of the unconvincing combination of Marshall Elliott and Miss Cornelia, this marriage fails to transform the man into a character or the woman into a wife. It cannot be disputed, in other words, that most of Montgomery’s old maids ultimately embrace marriage, but the perfunctory nature of these unions, coupled with the author’s habit of stretching out the careers of her single women over decades, seems to indicate a strong desire to make room for the formation of more unconventional lives, relationships, and households.

Anne’s own romance supports this subversive endeavor by following a parallel trajectory; Montgomery postpones her heroine’s marriage until the fifth installment of the completed eight-part series, despite the fact that Anne accepts Gilbert’s proposal at the end of book three. The string of estrangements Montgomery devises to divide the two lovers allows Anne to develop a series of deep bonds with other women; for example, in both the third and fourth sequels—*Anne of the Island* and *Anne of Windy Poplars*—the deferral of heterosexual romance enables an idyllic, all-female household to form. Thus *Anne of the Island* finds its eponymous heroine rejecting no less than five proposals of marriage, including Gilbert’s first offer, and settling down instead with four other women at Patty’s Place, the charming home of Miss Patty and Miss Maria. These two contented old maids rent out their residence while they travel the globe, enjoying the pleasures of companionship, freedom, and economic independence, and their cozy house offers Anne and her college chums Priscilla, Stella, and Philippa the same privileges. The multiple marriages set to take place after the narrative ends cannot undermine the fact that the story itself opens up some space for extramarital happiness and female community; indeed, as the novel concludes, Montgomery intimates that the girls’ pleasure at the prospect of their upcoming nuptials is mixed with regret. Philippa confides to Anne that she wishes their life at Patty’s Place would “‘go on forever,’” while Anne admits in response, “‘I’m unreasonable enough just now to wish that, too. . . . No matter what deeper joys may come to us later on we’ll never again have just the same delightful, irresponsible existence we’ve had here’” (*Anne of the Island* 222).
Anne of Windy Poplars (1936) likewise depicts the pleasures, as well as the pitfalls, of all-female domestic establishments. In this sequel, which was written fifteen years after the production of the final Anne book, Anne of Ingleside (1921), and which chronologically completes the series, Montgomery chooses to return to the time before Anne’s marriage, describing the three “very happy years” her heroine spends apart from her fiancé prior to their wedding (Windy Poplars 253). During this pleasant delay, Anne serves as principal of the Summerside high school and boards with two charming widows, Aunt Kate and Aunt Chatty, and their inimitable housekeeper Rebecca Dew (Windy Poplars 5). This welcoming residence is one of many all-female households in Summerside. Besides Aunt Kate and Aunt Chatty, who share not only a home but a bed, Montgomery presents Miss Sarah and Miss Ellen, “the two old ladies at Maplehurst [who] boss the tribe” of Pringles, the so-called “Royal Family” of Summerside (Windy Poplars 6). Right next door to Windy Poplars, The Evergreens provides a negative example of female community; this “imposing, gloomy mansion” houses the widow Mrs. Campbell and “her Woman,” as the townspeople dub her maid, Miss Martha Monkman. Between them, these two “grim old lad[ies]” are bringing up Mrs. Campbell’s great-granddaughter, Elizabeth Grayson, whom Anne pities and befriends. Montgomery attributes the spinsters’ stern, cruel treatment of their ward to female/female bonds gone wrong (Windy Poplars 21). Describing Miss Monkman’s love for Elizabeth’s mother, who did not survive her birth, Montgomery explains, “Little Elizabeth did not know that the mother whose life she had cost had been that bitter old woman’s darling and, if she had known, could not have understood what perverted shapes thwarted love can take” (Windy Poplars 245). Nevertheless, Anne’s own experience confirms that the good outweighs the bad in terms of this type of alternative living arrangement; the pleasant years she spends at Patty’s Place and Windy Poplars demonstrate quite clearly that marriage is a gratification best delayed.

Numerous critics have noticed how insistently Montgomery stresses the importance of female community in her novels. Carol Gay, Gabriella Åhmannsson, K. L. Poe, Eve Kornfeld, and Susan Jackson all note Montgomery’s habit of setting up “matriarchal utopia[s]” in place of more traditional family configurations (Åhmannsson 142). Offering, in Philippa’s words, “the fun of homemaking without the bother of a husband,” havens like Patty’s Place fleetingly fulfill Anne’s childhood fantasy that she and her friend Diana “will never marry but be nice old maids and live together forever” (Anne of the Island 117), and the
cheerful aunts, merry widows, and charming spinsters who inhabit Anne’s world serve as role models for other young women interested in the allure of unmarried life (Green Gables 315–16). Of course, Montgomery also offers negative examples of spinsters and widows, women who have grown anxious, pessimistic, or embittered. But for every interfering Aunt Mouser, lugubrious Cousin Ernestine, and tyrannical Widow Gibson, Montgomery provides a positive counterpart: chatty Aunt Chatty, independent-minded Miss Maria, and Stella’s wonderful Aunt Jamesina, who lives at Patty’s Place as a kind of chaperone, providing the girls with a role model built on Miss Lavendar-esque lines: 

Aunt Jamesina was a tiny old woman with a little, softly-triangular face, and large, soft blue eyes that were alight with unquenchable youth, and as full of hopes as a girl’s. She had pink cheeks and snow-white hair which she wore in quaint little puffs over her ears. (Anne of the Island 122)

Far from being an isolated incident, then, Anne’s love for Miss Lavendar constitutes a variation on a common theme: the pleasures of female/female bonds, intergenerational and otherwise. Indeed, the flying leap that lands Anne and Diana in the bed of the crotchety spinster Miss Josephine Barry in Anne of Green Gables can be viewed as a metaphor for Anne’s whole career; as the series opens, she catapults herself into the quiet life of Marilla Cuthbert (and her retiring brother Matthew) and then proceeds to adopt a slew of female mentors, such as Miss Stacy, her sympathetic schoolteacher, and the equally kind Mrs. Allen, the minister’s wife. An impassioned Anne confides to Marilla, “I love Miss Stacy with my whole heart,” and the narrator echoes her enthusiasm in lines like, “With Mrs. Allen Anne fell promptly and whole-heartedly in love” (Green Gables 260, 236). Nevertheless, the ecstatic language employed to describe Anne’s adoration for these women pales in comparison to the intensity of affection she bestows on her “bosom friend” and “kindred spirit,” Diana Barry. And unlike the halting start that characterizes Anne’s rocky acquaintanceship with Gilbert, the first encounter between Anne and Diana constitutes a case of love at first sight.

With equal force, Anne excludes Gilbert from her circle of friends and launches herself into Diana’s life. Montgomery explains that “[a]s much as she hated Gilbert, however, did she love Diana, with all the love of her passionate little heart, equally intense in her likes and dislikes” (Green Gables 175). At odds with each other before they are even introduced, Anne and Gilbert quarrel on her first day at school; eager to initiate contact, he picks up a braid of her hair and whispers, “Carrots! Carrots!”, leading Anne to break her slate over his head. In contrast,
Anne and Diana share a rapturous first meeting in the idyllic space of the Barry garden, a “bowery wilderness of flowers. . . . There were rosy bleeding-hearts and great splendid crimson peonies; white fragrant narcissi and thorny, sweet Scotch roses . . . scarlet lightning that shot its fiery lances over prim, white musk-flowers” (Green Gables 138). While Anne obstinately refuses to sample the “strawberry apple” Gilbert leaves on her desk as a peace offering, she eagerly initiates a lover’s compact with Diana in this Edenic garden: after “gazing bashfully at one another,” Anne entreats Diana to swear to be her “bosom friend . . . for ever and ever” (Green Gables 194). The two join hands and repeat vows in a kind of mock wedding service, in which Anne functions as both minister and participant, vowing, “‘I solemnly swear to be faithful to my bosom friend, Diana Barry, as long as the sun and moon shall endure. Now you say it and put my name in’” (Green Gables 140). Diana acquiesces to this rather abrupt initiation into intimacy, following up her “solemn vow and promise” with the words, “‘You’re a queer girl, Anne. I heard before that you were queer. But I believe I’m going to like you real well’” (Green Gables 140).

In Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America, Lillian Faderman describes the prevalence and passion of what she terms “romantic friendships,” intimate relationships between women that remained socially acceptable throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, despite their potentially subversive nature. In many ways, the love that blossoms between Anne and Diana resembles the actual affairs Faderman describes, and their friendship continues to evolve along romantic lines, even living up to Shakespeare’s saying that the course of true love never did run smooth. Diana’s mother quickly assumes the role of the stern parent who stands in the way of the lovers, attempting to separate them, and the grounds of her objection metaphorically indicate the strength of the infatuation shared by Diana and Anne. Mrs. Barry calls Anne “a thoroughly bad, wicked little girl” and refuses to allow Diana to play with her after Anne intoxicates Diana, mistakenly serving her currant wine rather than raspberry cordial (Green Gables 186). In keeping with romantic tradition, Mrs. Barry’s decree only intensifies the bond between the two girls; as they bid each other farewell, Diana sobs, “I couldn’t love anybody as I love you.” Her use of the word “love” thrills Anne and prolongs the scene into a lengthy “romantic parting”:

“Oh, Diana,” cried Anne, clasping her hands, “do you love me?”
. . . “I love you devotedly, Anne,” said Diana stanchly [sic], “and I always will, you may be sure of that.”
“And I will always love thee, Diana,” said Anne solemnly extending her hand. “In the years that come thy memory will shine like a star over my lonely life, as that last story we read together says. Diana, wilt thou give me a lock of thy jet-black tresses in parting to treasure forever more?” (Green Gables 192)

As Anne’s high-flown language and her reference to a shared reading experience demonstrate, she delights in copying the expressive parlance and romantic conventions popular in the sentimental fiction she has read. In general, Montgomery comically deflates her heroine’s reliance on such exalted standards. For example, when Anne attempts to write a story of her own along the same lines, Montgomery emphasizes that her gruff critic Mr. Harrison is correct to advise her to “‘[c]ut out all those flowery passages. . . . There’s one place where [the hero] talks even on for two pages, and never lets the girl get a word in edgewise. If he’d done that in real life she’d have pitched him’” (Anne of the Island 89). Culled from similar literary sources, Anne’s romantic dreams about “Prince Charming” likewise fall victim to the prosaic realities of everyday life. Yet Anne’s fantasies about female friendship largely escape this authorial pruning. Where women are concerned, Anne’s dreams are almost inevitably fulfilled, attesting to Montgomery’s sympathy with her heroine’s desire to find sustenance and excitement in relationships with other girls and women.

To begin with, Anne’s meeting and subsequent friendship with Diana more than live up to her hopes of finding “‘A bosom friend—an intimate friend, you know—a really kindred spirit to whom I can confide my innermost soul. I’ve dreamed of meeting her all my life”’ (Green Gables 105–6). Although Diana occasionally disappoints her fanciful friend by responding to various situations with more common sense than imagination, Anne constantly avers that they have loyally and lovingly kept their early vow. In fact, two of the sequels feature a scene in which Anne and Diana explicitly recall “‘the evening we first met . . . and ’swore’ eternal friendship in [the] garden’” (Anne of Avonlea 237). Each time, Anne affirms that, “‘We’ve kept that ’oath’ . . . we’ve never had a quarrel nor even a coolness’” (Ingleside 12). The fulfillment of this fantasy of perfect companionship at an early age leads Anne to imagine many more scenarios starring herself and Diana. For example, as her friend imbibes the infamous currant wine, Anne describes how she has recently composed

“the loveliest story about you and me, Diana. I thought you were desperately ill with smallpox and everybody deserted you, but I went boldly to your bedside and nursed you back to life; and then I took the
smallpox and died and I was buried under those poplar-trees in the
graveyard and you planted a rose-bush by my grave and watered it with
your tears; and you never, never forgot the friend of your youth who
sacrificed her life for you.” (Green Gables 182)

Minutes after Anne relates this woeful fancy, Diana does indeed become
ill, causing her credulous friend to exclaim, “‘Oh, Diana, do you suppose
that it’s possible you’re really taking the smallpox? If you are I’ll go and
nurse you, you can depend on that’” (Green Gables 185). Of course,
Diana is simply drunk, but a few weeks later Anne’s dream comes true;
Diana’s sister Minnie May falls desperately ill with the croup, and
“everyone,” including her parents and the local doctors, has in fact
“deserted” her, by going to a big political meeting thirty miles away just
before the onset of her illness. In their absence, Anne does indeed “go
boldly to [her] bedside and nurse [her] back to health.” As the doctor tells
Mrs. Barry afterward, “[t]hat little red-headed girl . . . saved that baby’s
life,” thanks to her experience caring for croupy twins in her previous
home (Green Gables 206). Anne does not fall ill herself after this
incident, but her heroism leads to the fulfillment of a happier hope: Mrs.
Barry relents and allows the girls to resume intimate relations.

Similarly, although Marilla is highly amused when she discovers Anne
sobbing as she envisions Diana’s eventual wedding day, this schoolgirl
fantasy comes to pass. On the day of Diana’s marriage, Anne remarks,
“‘It’s all pretty much as I used to imagine it long ago, when I wept over
your inevitable marriage and our consequent parting. . . . You are the
bride of my dreams, Diana’” (Anne of the Island 179). As the wording of
this final line suggests, Anne clings to her cherished fancy for Diana
rather than embracing the idea of becoming Gilbert’s bride. Shedding a
few more “big, painful tears” before the wedding, Anne ponders, “‘how
horrible it is that people have to grow up—and marry—and change!’”
(Anne of the Island 179). Growing up seems particularly grim to Anne at
this moment because her romantic fantasies about men have been
shattered one by one. In the course of this particular sequel, Anne of the
Island, our heroine suffers through a series of disillusionments in regard
to the opposite sex, as various inappropriate men rudely desecrate her
sentimental notions about the nature of love and marriage. Ultimately,
the romance of Anne’s last-minute engagement to Gilbert cannot quite
overcome the flood of awkward, ridiculous moments that precede it,
such as the disappointing reality of Anne’s first proposal: plodding Jane
Andrews shocks Anne by popping the question on behalf of her slow-
witted brother, “round-faced, stupid, perpetually smiling, good-natured
Billy Andrews,” at whom Anne has never looked twice (*Anne of the Island* 58).

After a horrified Anne refuses this offer “by proxy,” the narrator sympathetically explains that her heroine

had had her secret dreams of the first time some one should ask her the great question. And it had, in those dreams, always been very romantic and beautiful: and the “some one” was to be very handsome and dark-eyed and distinguished-looking and eloquent. . . . And now, this thrilling experience had turned out to be merely grotesque. (*Anne of the Island* 61)

These dreams have indeed been kept “secret”; although Anne never demonstrates any shyness about sharing her imaginative flights of fancy on any other subject with the many “kindred spirits” that she meets, she reveals this romantic fantasy about courtship only when it fails to come true. This unusual silence on Anne’s part could be read as mere maidenly modesty, but as the series progresses, Anne’s success at keeping this kind of love a secret even from herself begins to seem both odd and unlikely. Hundreds of pages go by before the garrulous, typically self-aware Anne can bring herself to say or believe that she harbors any romantic feelings for Gilbert, despite the many hints dropped by other characters (and the narrator) that indicate quite clearly what her feelings should be.4

Thus the third book of the series finds Anne petulantly inquiring, “‘I wonder why everybody seems to think I ought to marry Gilbert Blythe,’” to which Miss Lavendar responds, “‘[b]ecause you were made and meant for each other, Anne’” (*Anne of the Island* 155). Thwarting her destiny, Anne repeatedly snubs any expression of sentiment on Gilbert’s part and flatly refuses his first proposal, telling him, “‘I do care a great deal for you as a friend. But I don’t love you Gilbert’” (*Anne of the Island* 141). Clearly, Montgomery means to marry the two off, yet she cannot seem to bring herself—or Anne—to give in, a difficulty reminiscent of Anne’s own troubles directing the romantic life of her own fictional creation, Averil. Unimpressed by the dull lover Anne chooses for her heroine, Mr. Harrison and Diana criticize the ending of the tale, while Anne herself mourns, “‘Averil is such an unmanageable heroine. She will do and say things I never meant her to do’” (*Anne of the Island* 88). In Montgomery’s case, however, her journal reveals that her intention to marry Anne off arose more as a result of increasing pressure from readers than out of her own wishes for her heroine. While writing *Anne of the Island*, she privately noted, “I must at least engage Anne for I’ll never be given any rest until I do” (Qtd. in Wiggins 53). Accordingly, Anne and Gilbert get engaged, but this reconciliation does not take place until the final few
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pages of the novel, after multiple misunderstandings have kept the two apart for months.

And although Anne eventually submits to her fate and admits to loving Gilbert, the circumstances surrounding this last-second acknowledgment shed doubt on its happiness as an ending. To begin with, before she agrees to marry Gilbert, Anne discovers that even her ultimate fantasy man cannot excite her emotions, much less entice her into accepting a proposal. Roy Gardner arrives on the scene in a chapter entitled “Enter Prince Charming” and lives up to Anne’s specifications to the letter:

Tall and handsome and distinguished-looking—dark, melancholy, inscrutable eyes—melting, musical, sympathetic voice—yes, the very hero of her dreams stood before her in the flesh. He could not have more closely resembled her ideal if he had been made to order. (Anne of the Island 163)

Of course, Montgomery has fashioned Roy specifically in order to convince Anne that her “ideal” suitor does not truly possess the qualities she wants and needs in a husband. Yet this scenario inevitably suggests that Anne’s acceptance of Gilbert is predicated on the disillusionment rather than the fulfillment of her romantic hopes. In keeping with this focus on the negative impetus behind Anne’s choice of partner, our heroine refuses Roy not because she realizes she loves Gilbert, but simply as a result of painful indifference, a lack of feeling of any kind. Listening to Roy’s romantic proposal, “Anne felt that she ought to be thrilling from head to foot. But she wasn’t; she was horribly cool” (Anne of the Island 224). Unlike some of Anne’s more importunate suitors (including Gilbert), Roy emulates Anne’s imaginary hero, whom she envisions “going away . . . assuring her of his unalterable, life-long devotion”; Roy lives up to this model by tragically declaring to Anne, “‘You are the only woman I can ever love’” (Anne of the Island 61, 224).

This “ideal” response ironically underlines the fact that the only proposal that lives up to Anne’s expectations is the one she most emphatically rejects.

Furthermore, Montgomery associates Anne’s admission of love for Gilbert with trauma and death, presenting it as a concession wrung out of her heroine in the most extreme circumstances imaginable. Anne acknowledges that she cares for Gilbert only after finding out that he has fallen dangerously ill with typhoid fever. As a result, the realization of this love constitutes an “agonized vigil through the hours of storm and darkness,” a “bitter night” that brings Anne “her hour of supreme agony” (Anne of the Island 236). By depicting this ostensibly happy choice as tortuous trial, Montgomery associates heterosexual romance more with
endings than with happiness. Rather than portraying Anne’s love for Gilbert as an unforced, natural flowering of feeling, Montgomery characterizes their relationship as the hard-won product of an extremely painful process. Even their engagement does not complete the job: at the end of *Anne of the Island*, Gilbert informs Anne that their wedding must be delayed until he finishes a three year medical course. By concentrating on the fact that “many years of work must be completed before [Anne and Gilbert] can marry,” the final moments of *Anne of the Island* hint at the sheer effort involved in bringing about this kind of union (Poe 26). Similarly, Anne’s incessant matchmaking reveals the ridiculous amount of behind-the-scenes machinations required to engineer most marriages.

Perhaps Montgomery’s own unhappy marriage, which she entered into relatively late in life, partly explains her reluctance to dilate on the joys of matrimony. In any case, the scene of heterosexual romance is invariably relegated to and associated with the finales of these novels. Each of the first four books delays a reunion between Anne and Gilbert until the last few pages of the narrative. In *Anne of Green Gables*, for example, Anne refuses to accept Gilbert’s apologies and friendship until the very last scene. Incapable of holding a grudge in general, Anne hardens her heart against Gilbert for an inordinate amount of time, given the fact that his sole offense—the schoolroom taunt mentioned above—occurred at a tender age, in a single mischievous moment. Montgomery thus links Anne’s love for Gilbert to the cessation of the pleasures of narrative, while simultaneously connecting her relationship with Diana with openings, the realm of endless possibility. No less than three of the sequels—including the two that most closely chronicle Anne’s married life—begin with scenes in which Anne and Diana meet and renew the “old unforgotten love burning in their hearts” (*Ingleside* 13). For example, although *Anne of Ingleside* (1939) focuses on Anne’s role as a matronly mother of six, the narrative opens with Anne and Diana alone together, sharing “a perfect ramble” through their “old haunts” in the woods (*Ingleside* 4, 7). Montgomery then proceeds to document the various adventures of Anne and Gilbert’s children, sideling any exploration of the nature of their marriage until the last three chapters.

These final pages further undermine the centrality and credibility of marriage by calling into question whether this conventional bond really represents a stable, comforting kind of ending. Even as Montgomery portrays Anne and Diana’s mutual affection as a constant source of pleasure and support, she depicts Anne and Gilbert’s love for each other as fragile and fraught with anxiety. As *Anne of Ingleside* draws to a close, Anne laments Gilbert’s absent treatment of herself and the children,
worries that the return of his old flame, Christine Stuart, will rekindle his former feelings for her, and fumes over the fact that her husband has apparently forgotten their wedding anniversary. The narrator’s description of her state of mind indicates the extent of her misery:

Everything annoyed her these days. . . . She was sick-and-tired of never-ending, monotonous duties. . . . sick-and-tired of catering to her family’s whims. . . . She felt all the time like a creature in a nightmare, trying to overtake someone with fettered feet. (Ingleside 254–55)

Gillian Thomas has argued that the fears and doubts raised in this part of the novel, as well as the dark mood generated by Anne’s earlier recollection of the disturbing story of Peter Kirk, an abusive husband, are ultimately “undercut” by the narrative. She claims that “the darkness [of the final section] is quickly dispelled with the explanation that Gilbert’s abstraction has been caused by his concern over a seriously ill patient” (27). But can these upsetting incidents ever be completely cancelled out? The answer to this question depends on how much importance we attach to the resolution of the plot, as opposed to the events that precede and—when multiple sequels are involved—follow it. Since the series as a genre destabilizes the concept of a singular, conclusive ending, it is perhaps unwise to focus solely on the message sent by the ending. As I have argued above, the tardy marriages of Miss Cornelia and Miss Lavendar fail to erase their identity as spinsters; similarly, no last-second explanation or assertion of marital bliss can wholly invalidate the anxiety simmering under the surface of the novels that chronicle Anne’s marriage.

Indeed, Thomas herself admits that the concluding affirmation of family life in Anne of Ingleside “remains curiously unconvincing,” even as she notes that, “curiously enough,” Anne’s House of Dreams and Anne of Ingleside “touch on much darker themes than the previous Anne novels” (25). But the somber scenes Thomas dismisses as “very odd episodes” cease to seem “curious” or “strange” when we acknowledge that they are not singular aberrations, but rather part of a larger pattern; they all involve unsatisfactory and even damaging marriages. For example, the story of Peter Kirk’s funeral in Anne of Ingleside and the depiction of Leslie Moore’s marriage in Anne’s House of Dreams both focus our attention on the plight of women chained to cruel, abusive husbands. In the case of Peter Kirk, the sister of his first wife stands up at his funeral and denounces the dead man as “a tyrant and a bully”; bitterly, Clara Wilcox recounts his many crimes against her sister, concluding with terrible disclosure that “[h]e smiled when he told her
after her little baby was born dead that she might as well have died, too, if she couldn’t have anything but dead brats” (Ingleside 21). The casual disclosure one bystander makes afterwards—that Clara had loved Peter Kirk herself and had been jilted by him in favor of her sister—cannot undercut the power of this haunting portrayal of two women scarred by a cruel husband’s abuse.  

Similarly, no happy ending can erase the terrifying picture of wedded life Montgomery presents by way of the tragic figure of Mrs. Leslie Moore. Miss Cornelia, who witnesses Leslie’s coerced marriage to Dick Moore, later tells Anne that the bride’s face looked as if she were attending “her own funeral”; “a big, handsome fellow with a little ugly soul,” Dick threatens to have his father foreclose on her mother’s mortgage unless Leslie agrees to become his wife (House of Dreams 73–74). Montgomery sets Anne’s “house of dreams”—her first home with Gilbert—uncomfortably close to Leslie’s nightmarish residence, and the miserable marriage of Anne’s nearest neighbor troubles the otherwise serene picture of our heroine’s marital bliss by illustrating the different degrees of “bitter bondage” some wives must endure (House of Dreams 170). Here again, Montgomery links marriage with loss of life; Leslie first struggles to cope with Dick’s violent, destructive nature, and then—after a barroom brawl destroys his mind and memory—she suffers through eleven years of what two separate characters term “a living death,” fettered to a man who is both a financial and emotional burden (House of Dreams 76, 150). The chain of bizarre coincidences that frees Leslie from this awful life has been widely viewed as a weakness in Montgomery’s text; yet, as Carole Gerson points out, this absurdly contrived happy ending itself dramatizes the extreme improbability of a woman managing to escape from such dire circumstances in any world other than a fictional one (31).  

“[A] tragic appealing figure of thwarted womanhood,” Leslie provides Montgomery with the opportunity to brood on the sacrifice Anne herself makes by marrying Gilbert (House of Dreams 77). Above all, Leslie’s marriage represents a terrible waste of potential. As Miss Cornelia pungently puts it, “She’s tied to that imbecile for life. And after all the dreams and hopes she once had... Leslie was full of ambition and her head was chock full of brains. . . . You can imagine what it has been like for her, Anne, dearie” (House of Dreams 72, 76). In her first three appearances, Anne herself exhibits more than her share of ambition, competing with and often beating Gilbert in the quest for various honors and scholarships. But like Leslie, her early desires are never fully realized. For example, she fails to achieve her dream of becoming a
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successful author. As Gabriella Åhmansson notes, Montgomery does not leave the connection between Anne and Leslie’s unfulfilled potential unacknowledged; when Anne comments, “[t]hat girl was born to be a leader in social and intellectual circles, far away from Four Winds. She’s just wasted here—wasted,” Gilbert teasingly replies, “’some people might think that a Redmond B.A., whom editors were beginning to honour, was ‘wasted’ as the wife of a struggling country doctor in the rural community of Four Winds’” (Åhmansson 163, House of Dreams 87).

Anne cheerfully refuses to entertain the idea that she is “wasted” as Gilbert’s wife, but Montgomery repeatedly returns to the idea of marriage as a kind of death, an ending rather than a beginning. As Marie Campbell has argued in “Wedding Bells and Death Knells: The Writer as Bride in the Emily Trilogy,” Montgomery suggests in her later work that “marriage is . . . tantamount to death for the female ‘artist in words’,” and the Anne series not only seriously entertains this idea, it consistently and covertly recasts it in the less threatening realm of anecdote (137). For example, characters trade not one but two separate stories about wedding ceremonies in which the organist plays the Dead March from Saul in place of the marriage march (Windy Poplars 104, Ingleside 158). Another minor incident that likewise receives double exposure concerns young women who wish to bypass marriage in favor of instant widowhood. Referring to an episode narrated in Anne of Avonlea, a character in Chronicles of Avonlea asks a friend,

“Do you remember that story Anne Shirley used to tell long ago of the pupil who wanted to be a widow because ‘if you were married your husband bossed you and if you weren’t married people called you an old maid?’ Well, that is precisely my opinion. I’d like to be a widow. Then I’d have the freedom of the unmarried, with the kudos of the married. I could eat my cake and have it, too. Oh, to be a widow!” (Chronicles of Avonlea 174–75, Anne of Avonlea 85)

Here and elsewhere, Montgomery suggests that unmarried women could enjoy their single status a great deal, if society did not sour them by treating them as “old maids,” unlucky objects of pity and scorn. As noted above, Anne spends the three years of her engagement to Gilbert surrounded by widows, many of whom are quite merry. By portraying women like Aunt Kate and Aunt Chatty in a positive light, Montgomery emphasizes the appeal of this state; yet, the condition of wanting widowhood inevitably suggests the plight of women who desire the death of their husband, such as Olivia Kirk and other abused wives.
“Mummy, is a widow really a woman whose dreams have come true?” (Ingleside 151). Posed by one of Anne’s children in Anne of Ingleside, the book that ostensibly concentrates most closely on chronicling the bliss of married life, this question resonates with new meaning when we consider the marvelous array of methods by which female characters defer, avoid, or otherwise escape from marriage in the course of the Anne series. Unlike the romantic love shared by Anne and Diana, heterosexual love proves to a large extent unwritable. In Anne of Windy Poplars, for example, Montgomery edits out all the love talk in Anne’s letters to Gilbert, leaving only ellipses. This silence only underscores the fact that in the Anne series, “heteronormative” happiness is precisely what falls through the gaps. After putting off the representation of conventional courtship as long as possible, Montgomery resorts to chronicling it in terms of storybook stereotypes, hauling out the concept of “Prince Charming” and relying on such old chestnuts as the Sleeping Beauty plot. The epigraph that opens Anne of the Island illustrates both of these tendencies; taken from Tennyson’s “The Daydream,” a poem based on the Sleeping Beauty story, this quatrain represents Montgomery’s attempt to account for the lengthy delays that separate her couples. It reads:

All precious things discovered late
To those that seek them issue forth,
For love in sequel works with Fate,
And draws the veil from hidden worth.

“[L]ove in sequel works with Fate”: these words indicate that Fate in some sense precedes love and dictates its terms, just as the “precious things” mentioned in line one only materialize after they are distinguished as such and sought out. With this choice of epigraph, then, Montgomery further associates her characters’ “dilatory courtship[s]” with fate and fatality, the inevitability of “The End.” Yet each successive Anne book highlights the fact that finality is never truly final since the series as a genre invites almost endless additions. Even as the multiple volume format stresses continuity, it invariably creates gaps, interstices between installments, and Montgomery dramatizes this empty space internally via postponements and delays, as well as by incorporating—and returning to fill in—actual gaps in the narrative. Although marriage inevitably caps the halting progress of Montgomery’s heroines, it stands revealed as a desultory move, a tacked-on storybook convention that cannot adequately conclude the life stories of these singular characters, many of whom are repeatedly described as “queer.”
As this choice of expression indicates, characters in the Anne books find romance not in the process of heterosexual courtship, but in other, odder places. Indeed, it could be argued that the real romance in this series develops between young people and grown-ups who are not their parents, since the Sleeping Beauty metaphor enters the text explicitly in reference to Anne’s relationship with her elderly guardians, an “old maid” (Marilla) and an “old bachelor” (Matthew). Commenting on the latter’s transformation after the advent of Anne, Mrs. Lynde remarks, “‘[T]hat man is waking up after being asleep for over sixty years’” (Green Gables 270). Similarly, although Marilla chides her brother for becoming “bewitched” and “infatuated” by their new ward, she herself is transfigured by the girl’s presence; at the touch of Anne’s kiss, a “sudden sensation of startling sweetness thrill[s] her,” and magical moments like this one gradually mellow her into a new and more affectionate person (Green Gables 73, 143–44). This application of the Sleeping Beauty plot aids Montgomery in her project of eroticizing (and feminizing) the unmarried; at the same time, as Margaret Doody points out, it places a female child in the role of prince (22). Then, in what could be called the primal scene of the series, Prince Charming almost gets turned away at the door because he is the wrong sex. Seeing Anne for the first time, Marilla demands,

“Where is the boy?”
“‘There wasn’t any boy,’” said Matthew wretchedly. “There was only her.”
... “No boy! But there must have been a boy,” insisted Marilla. ...
“You don’t want me!” [Anne] cried. “You don’t want me because I’m not a boy!” (65)

Like the lucky error that leads Anne and Diana to Miss Lavendar, this “queer mistake” ultimately results in a great deal of unexpected pleasure (Green Gables 91). Just as inappropriate ambivalence and equally inappropriate desires draw out, and in some sense generate, the serial gratification of the Anne saga, this gender confusion proves extremely productive. Whatever the endings of the Anne novels tell us—and they invariably refuse to offer anything conclusive—the beginning of the series asserts in no uncertain terms that only a misguided fool would dismiss a potential prince simply because he’s a girl.

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Notes

1 Montgomery refers back to this incident many times in the course of the Anne series; for example, in Anne of the Island, Anne’s young friend Davy prattles, “‘Ludovic Speed and Theodora Dix live in Middle Grafton and Mrs. Rachel says he has been courting her for a hundred years. Won’t they soon be too old to get married, Anne? I hope Gilbert won’t court you that long’” (AI 132).

2 It is important to acknowledge here that the series was not written in chronological order. Anne’s marriage takes place at the beginning of Anne’s House of Dreams (1917), which is—strictly speaking—the fourth novel Montgomery wrote about Anne. However, in terms of the chronology of the series, it is the fifth book since the events that occur in Anne of Windy Poplars (1939) precede it. Throughout this essay, the books are referred to in terms of their place in the completed chronology, both for the sake of convenience, as that is how the publisher numbers them, and because I choose to view the series as an imaginative whole.

3 In “Sisterhood is Fearful: Female Friendship in L. M. Montgomery,” Temma F. Berg brings up the possibility that “the friendship between Anne and Diana might not be as perfect as it seem[s],” an idea she attributes to Mary Rubio, a Montgomery scholar and biographer (41). However, Berg ultimately concludes that the series presents an extremely idealistic, optimistic picture of female/female friendship. And she goes on to argue that Montgomery’s fellow Canadian Margaret Atwood revises and undermines this idyllic vision of girlhood bonding in her disturbing novel Cat’s Eye.

4 Anne is not the only Montgomery heroine who proves “annoyingly slow in realizing what Montgomery makes glaringly obvious to the reader”; T. D. MacLulich uses these words to describe how the eponymous heroine of Montgomery’s Emily trilogy refuses to recognize that her childhood companion Teddy Kent “is her destined soul-mate” (97). Like Anne, Emily postpones romantic involvement as long as possible, preferring to keep her relationships with men platonic. Furthermore, as Marie Campbell points out, the Emily series refuses to bathe “the institution of marriage . . . in the traditional glow of romance and idealism”; like the Anne books, the trilogy is “peopled by virgin spinsters, bachelors, and the widowed,” and Emily’s engagement to Teddy comes about only after a string of improbable and traumatic episodes (138). Indeed, as Campbell notes, Montgomery “must resort to a supernatural event in order to bring Teddy and Emily together” (143).

5 Jennie Rubio offers a powerful reading of this incident in her article “Strewn with Dead Bodies: Women and Gossip in Anne of Ingleside.” Focusing on the discourse of the “Ladies’ Aid” quilters who introduce the topic of Peter Kirk into the novel, Rubio argues that while “Anne of Ingleside is loosely structured as a
domestic romance with a sentimental ending . . . its central metaphors and internal logic deny the possibility of women’s experience ever being contained in this kind of fiction” (171). In her influential work on Montgomery, Mary Henley Rubio also elaborates on the ingenious way in which Montgomery’s fiction subverts the conventions and institutions that it appears to condone.

6 In her essay “‘Queer Children’: L. M. Montgomery’s Heroines,” Muriel A. Whitaker highlights Montgomery’s use of this expression, noting that

It is the queerness of Anne Shirley, both in physical appearance (bright red hair, with flowers in her hat) and character (garrulity, imagination) that catches the eye and ear of Avonlea and of the reader. The orphaned Emily Starr [in Montgomery’s Emily trilogy] is told that her Murray relatives won’t like her because “you’re queer, and folks don’t care for queer children.” (12–13)

Whitaker attaches no unusual importance to the choice of the word “queer”; she simply argues that Montgomery portrays the oddness of these children in a positive light, thus offering an implicit criticism of the concept of the Puritan child, whose inability to adhere to adult belief systems and conventions requires stern punishment and guidance.

7 In her introduction to The Annotated Anne of Green Gables, Margaret Doody offers a less general version of this idea when she points out that “the real ‘love story’ of the novel as a whole remains the difficult, evolving love between Anne and Marilla” (21). Later in her argument, she contends that Avonlea itself represents the Sleeping Beauty that Anne must awaken (22).

Works Cited


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