

Early Canadian Queer Literature, or In and Out of the Fur-Lined Closet

Susan Frances Harrison's *The Forest of Bourg-Marie*

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Volume 42, Number 1, 2017

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl42_1art02

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Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Hulan, S. (2017). Early Canadian Queer Literature, or In and Out of the Fur-Lined Closet: Susan Frances Harrison's *The Forest of Bourg-Marie*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 42(1), 31–49.

Early Canadian Queer Literature,
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SHELLEY HULAN

I

DID NINETEENTH-CENTURY CANADA have a queer literature — that is, did it have a literature that represented romantic and sexual desires that fall outside, and sometimes oppose, a dominant heterosexuality? The answer from Canadian literature critics has been a “yes” so limited that it is closer to “no.” Peter Dickinson and Terry Goldie, the authors of the two first full-length monographs on LGBTQ writing in Canada, find only one literary text that has a level of homoerotic and anti-heteronormative suggestion significant enough to qualify: John Richardson’s 1832 novel *Wacousta*. After *Wacousta*, according to their studies, comes a long fallow period for queer writing that ends in the twentieth century, at around the time when the *oeuvres* of authors known to be homosexual or lesbian (some out, some not) begin to appear. This later efflorescence coincides with the first adjectival uses of “queer” to describe homosexuality in the early 1900s. While some pre-1900 deployments of the term infused it with homoeroticism (Dierkes-Thrun 211) — indeed, the *OED* dates the noun “queer” as denoting homosexuality from 1894 (*n.* 2, def. 2) — the term functioned more often as a synonym for vaguer, capacious concepts such as eccentricity and oddity (“Queer,” *adj.* 1, def. 1a).

Many twenty-first-century definitions take pains to preserve this capaciousness. Take for instance Part B of the definition that Buddies in Bad Times Theatre offers in its 2004 mission statement and that Goldie and Lee Frew quote in their recent chapter on gay and lesbian writing in *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature*: “b. Queer, referring to anything outside of the norm . . . work that is different, outside the mainstream, and challenging in both content and form” (qtd.

in Goldie and Frew 873-74). The Part A preceding this “B” describes “queer” as “referring [specifically] to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered identity” (qtd. in Goldie and Frew 873). While pairing the two definitions links queer art more closely to LGBT community experiences and stories than to any others, the division of the term’s meaning for individuals (Definition A) from its meaning for art (Definition B) stipulates that the major criterion for queer art is opposition to a mainstream, not the naming of specific sexual identities or experiences.¹

This criterion reserves for queer art the greater possibilities of suggestion over outright statement, possibilities that encourage a review of pre-twentieth-century Canadian art as potentially queer art. In particular, it invites new considerations of how queerness may inhabit, and complicate, the nation-building narratives that permeate Confederation writing (c. 1867-1920) with idealized nuclear families and family-minded heroes who wrest Euro-settler homesteads from a vast wilderness (see Agnes Maule Machar’s “A Song for Canada,” Sarah Anne Curzon’s *Laura Secord*, or Ralph Connor’s *Beyond the Marshes*) and tell readers why they should do the same (see Nellie McClung’s *Sowing Seeds in Danny* and *Purple Springs*). If Dickinson is correct that the “counter-normative sexuality” of queerness haunts national discourses (5), then queerness is exactly what one ought to find in the overtly nationalist narratives of this period, for literary queerness in Canada would then have an 1800s history, from at least 1867 if not before, that *Wacousta* alone cannot provide.

The aims of “acknowledg[ing], promot[ing], and support[ing] a heterogeneity of queer identities, past *and* present” (Halperin 16) mitigate the risk of anachronism raised by examining nineteenth-century literary texts through a keyword the connotations of which have undergone significant changes during the past hundred years. Although (or perhaps because) this keyword takes on more positive meanings in the late twentieth century, looking through it at these texts helps illuminate a variety of identities submerged in the dominant narratives and popular genres of earlier periods. This is certainly true in the case of Susan Frances Harrison’s 1898 novel *The Forest of Bourg-Marie*, a Gothic tale set in a remote part of Quebec sometime after Confederation.² In it, the protagonist’s counter-normative sexuality subverts the heteronormativity of the Anglo-nationalist plot. Although the Gothic conventions that

shape this plot offer no place to queer sexuality beyond the cliché of a monstrous incest, the protagonist's desire to return to colonial times creates and reveals spaces for that sexuality, spaces that contend not only against dominant heterosexuality but also against the English-Canadian nationalist discourse allied with it.

II

Central to both *The Forest of Bourg-Marie's* Anglo-nationalist narrative and the counter-narrative that undermines it is Mikel Caron, the hereditary seigneur of the Yamachiche district, whose nostalgia catalyzes a doomed effort to restore his forefathers' seigneurie and with it a conservative feudal order resurrected from the earliest days of New France. In a secret chamber of his ancestral Manoir, Mikel hides the riches he accumulates as an expert trapper, the "numerous skins of various furbearing animals . . . cover[ing] every point of floor, walls, and ceiling" so deeply that they muffle sound and hamper movement (49). With the profit from these furs, he plans one day to repair the Manoir and acquire a seat in the provincial Legislature for his sole grandchild Magloire. The perfidious Magloire later burgles the chamber and absconds to the United States, and so Mikel's hopes fail, as they must in a Gothic narrative; his longed-for lost past disturbs his present but never overtakes it, and his colonial dream succumbs finally to the new national reality.

A heroic French character who epitomizes the virtues of the vanished regime, Mikel provides his creator Harrison with a means of celebrating some elements of an old French culture in North America while justifying the demise of New France, thus "contribut[ing] to a growing [and majority anglophone] national identity" (Sugars, *Canadian Gothic* 96). The survival of such French figures at the end of late nineteenth-century Gothic narratives about the former colony (Amélie de Repentigny in William Kirby's *The Golden Dog* is another) promises that their laudable traits will bless the country's transition to an Anglocentric political and social order, validating the new national governance system while welcoming the francophone minority as a subordinate and tributary (Sugars, "Afterword" 232). From an English-Canadian nationalist perspective, Mikel's determination and industry simply need to be, and can be, redirected from the pursuit of a colonial restoration to the service of the nation that has supplanted the colony.

As the scion of an aristocratic French family that has made its own

way for centuries in the New World, Mikel pays little attention to Canada beyond despising what he incorrectly perceives as his grandson's imitation of English-Canadian mannerisms (28). His longing for the vanished seigneurial system is easily read in the context of Confederation as the predictable lament of the once-powerful, which comes before an equally predictable defeat of efforts to restore that system. A description of the overgrown formal gardens around the Manoir foreshadows as much from the beginning. The gardens share the flaws of the uninhabited house, an inferior construction "far from satisfactory in the matter of duly quarrying, laying, cementing and piling the stone, and in details of measurement, allowance for shrinkage, and proportion" (47). Even before the first Seigneur Caron had the gardens installed, an uncongenial climate and limited local supplies undercut its designer's efforts to replicate "the fair country seats of France" (46). It is an overgrown ruin where "dreams had been lived down" long before Mikel inherited it (47). Mikel continues to sweep the courtyard and tidy the plants despite their obvious disarray, cherishing the ruins as evidence of the hierocracy over which his family once reigned as managers of a household comprising family, retainers, and servants.

In a later chapter, the narrator enumerates the heteropatriarchal components of the seigneurie in detail, beginning with a description of the seigneur of old as the manager of the productive cultivation of land by a stable settler workforce: "a venerable and important figure, . . . the father and counsellor of old and young, the friend of rich and poor, ignorant and wise, cultured and simple" (210-11). The seigneur's guidance secures "the fertile valley, teeming with corn-bright meadows, emerald pastures, tinkling with cattle and sheep-bells, farmed by the willing tenants that acknowledged him as lord and master" (211). Mikel's understanding of this top-down social and economic structure as an expression of Christian hierarchy makes the seigneur figuratively the father of all in this agricultural Arcadia (211), where life depends on human procreation (to ensure the stable workforce) and agricultural reproduction, and where the patriarch's male descendants provide continuity of leadership. The remnants of the Manoir gardens aestheticize the same view of land cultivation as an expression of this feudal order. Just as the agricultural labour of tenant farmers subordinates nature to the managed reproduction required in an agrarian economy, the orna-

mental gardens monumentalize the seigneur's superior power over, and right to reshape, the wilderness as he chooses.

But if the decrepit state of the Manoir gardens anticipates the defeat of Mikel's colonial longing, his vision of a restored seigneurie also reveals some noteworthy affinities with the Canadian nation he ignores. Admittedly, Mikel believes that the only way to achieve the ultra-conservative heteropatriarchy of his dreams is by resurrecting it from a bygone New France. Since men in his own time have too thoroughly "forgotten how to suffer" and "how to serve" (142) their superiors to conceive of such an authoritarian system in the present, he must try to import it from a lost past. This desire to restore seigneurialism makes him an anachronism; however, his idealization of gendered labour divisions and heterosexual reproduction also resembles the veneration of these two phenomena in late nineteenth-century nationalist narratives of English Canada such as Isabella Valancy Crawford's *Malcolm's Katie*, in which procreation and gendered labour underwrite the happy prospects that young British immigrants enjoy:

in the glow
 Paus'd men and women when the day was done.
 There the lean weaver ground anew his axe,
 Nor backward look'd upon the vanish'd loom,
 But forward to the ploughing of his fields,
 And to the rose of Plenty in the cheeks
 Of wife and children — nor heeded much the pangs
 Of the rous'd muscles tuning to new work. (II, 214-19)

The main difference between Crawford's portrait of young Canada and Mikel's vision of the vanished seigneurial system is the presence of a seigneur. The absence of that figure draws Crawford's tableau of young Canada's national life near to the village of Bourg-Marie, where the existing social order strongly resembles the long-gone order that Mikel glorifies except that it, too, has no seigneur; villagers recognize Mikel as the hereditary holder of the title in name only. Agriculture employs village inhabitants just as it does Crawford's settlers. Several of these, such as the Prévosts and the Lagardère-Lemaitres, are identified by the large size of their families. In one form or another, reproduction dominates village life. Since many of the locals raise crops and livestock,

the village of Bourg-Marie is already organized around the cultivation Mikel pictures in his vision of tenants' cornfields and green pastures.

Both locally and nationally, in other words, the heteronormative object of Mikel's nostalgia already exists in Mikel's own present. Its existence suggests Mikel's potential as a bridging figure between colony and nation, since the latter, too, consists of much the same organization and economy — minus the seigneur — that he believes he needs to reconstruct. And if Mikel's wish to reconstruct seigneurialism is out of step with the reality of a new Canadian nation, the priority he places on an authoritative patriarchy is less outmoded in that nation than one might assume, for that priority aligns the seigneurial system to the same vigorous masculinity that William Douw Lighthall identifies with Europeans' settlement of Canada in his 1889 anthology *Songs of the Great Dominion*. In the introduction to the volume, Lighthall proclaims that the tone of Canadian poetry is "*courage*; — for to hunt, to fight, to hew out a farm, one must be a man!" (xxi). Mikel, too, sees the activities Lighthall lists as the preserve of men. Like Lighthall, he defines manhood as particular kinds of physical and sexual mobility. His cruel remarks to a disabled villager he finds lurking in the forest of Bourg-Marie establish his criteria for masculinity. As far as Mikel is concerned, the villainous "cripple" Pacifique has no business in the forest because he cannot engage in the hunting and trapping that give men a reason to be there: "You are made to stay at home, do quiet work — women's work, if you will" (104). In Mikel's eyes, the only appropriate labour for this youth is servitude to a widower of the parish such as himself, a head of a household that has lost its primary domestic labourer (104). The beliefs that inform Mikel's statement — that Pacifique cannot marry, will never procreate, and therefore must serve men by taking on a wife's chores — make heteronormativity synonymous with the manhood that helps give Mikel authority in the forest and over Pacifique. That authority derives from being a vigorous heterosexual man, a grandfather as well as an active trapper, facts of which he reminds Pacifique as he marches the younger man out of the forest.

Across the British Empire, its colonies, and the nations such as Canada that evolved from them, potent European masculinity symbolized political power; "the virile male body legitimated [its owner's] political and cultural supremacy" in imperial outposts (Chari 283)³ and, through such popular literary figures as the muscular Christian, became

inseparable in Canada from the concept of civil society (Coleman 129-30). In its insistence on the supreme worth of an absolute, able-bodied, heteropatriarchal authority, Mikel's nostalgia for seigneurialism draws attention not to a significant difference between a vanished colonial system and the new nation, but to a point of similarity that the two share. Heterosexual manhood is the prerequisite for power in both, and Mikel, the rugged woodsman expertly traversing the wilderness, is too valuable a *national* subject for Harrison or her English-Canadian readers to abandon to a colonial fantasy. Though *The Forest of Bourg-Marie* chronicles the defeat of Mikel's nostalgic dream, his survival at the end of the novel will bequeath his admirable qualities to the nation.

Indeed, Mikel's determination to achieve his dream ultimately leads to the establishment of a patriarchal line of succession between colonial New France and English Canada via his repudiation of the traitor Magloire. Magloire's dissembling, his preference for speaking English, and most of all his use of an English alias demonstrate to the trapper that his grandson denies his French heritage and identity. Mikel disowns him: "Let him stay as long as he may, I will not seek him, and should he seek me, I will receive him as a stranger, *en vérité* as Mr. Murr-r-r-ay Carson [Magloire's English alias]. . . . When I die, it will be seen that what I own is not for him" (136; emphasis in original). Having thus dispatched the problem of how to dispose of his property in the absence of a blood heir, he turns to another: how to pass forward the intangible patrimony of his family's values, which include the independence and integrity that define his own behaviour. A solution readily presents itself in Nicolas Laurière, his "pupil" in the trapping life (134), who shares these values and will carry them into the next generation.

Mikel adopts Laurière by declaring aloud a new filial relation to him: "You, Nicolas Laurière, shall be my son, inherit all I have, all I will leave to you" (140). Each act of naming — Mikel addresses his companion as "son" or "*fi*ls" five times during the adoption scene — is a speech act that performs the transfer of Mikel's patrimony to a male heir outside his bloodline. Old but still active and prosperous, Mikel is a man whose exemplary life requires no biological heirs to enrich future generations. His example is his legacy. Mikel's adoption of Laurière asserts (1) that persons without biological ties to the patriarch may inherit something from him, and (2) that those unrelated persons may be more deserving of the patrimony than the blood heir. Both notions are vital to the larger

Anglo-nationalist narrative to which *The Forest of Bourg-Marie* belongs. If Mikel's patrimony is transferrable, then all citizens of Confederation Canada may inherit it by emulating the sober self-reliance that earns the old man so much material wealth. Mikel's nostalgia prompts a radical action — the disowning of a blood relative — that clears the way for a final bestowal of his patrimony upon English Canada, transforming that patrimony into a resource for the new nation's future. While he excludes his own progeny, however, Mikel continues to affirm that cultures survive through a male line. His nostalgia thus confirms heteropatriarchy as the structure of both a defunct seigneurie and a new nation, where bodies such as the provincial Legislature follow the same principle by admitting only male members elected by male voters. Small wonder, then, that Harrison has Mikel name the younger man "son" so frequently in the adoption scene, for the adoption is a crucial plot device in the national allegory of an Anglo-Canadian nationhood rising from a French past.

As Laurière's "adoption" by Mikel reifies Mikel's nostalgic ideal of seigneurialism, it recalls an earlier scene focused on Laurière and heteronormative continuity. The scene centres on the question of whom Laurière might marry. The handsomest young bachelor in the village, Laurière attracts the admiration of its young women, who flirt with him in the vain hope that he will reciprocate (119, 122-23). Another trapper, Joncas, urges Laurière to make the most of his eligibility to gain a lucrative point of entry into farming life. He encourages Laurière to marry "the widow of Noël Duquette, who has the finest farm on the other side of the river, and is handsome still, though over forty. . . . She . . . is looking for a husband. It must be a young man, too, that she will be wanting — someone to help her in maintaining the farm" (127). The link Joncas makes between the taking of a wife and a prosperous life in agriculture spells out once again the heteronormative assumption in the village that an able-bodied man should marry and multiply in every sense of the word. Nor is the prospective bride's age an obvious impediment to starting a family. Mikel's late wife, herself a widow before she wed Mikel, bears a child at forty-one (97, 100).

The terms in which Laurière expresses his determination never to marry — "I should love . . . this wood and road and the river and the trees and the leaves like gems, more than my wife" (129) — express his conviction that life in the forest is incompatible with marriage to

any woman. This idea appears in the narrative well before Laurière makes his declaration, for Mikel's life as a trapper forbids the reproductive activity around which village life and the seigneurial system both revolve. Two untimely deaths dramatize the point. Decades before the events in the narrative take place, Mikel's wife perishes when she sets off in search of Mikel on a winter's night, utterly unprepared to face the fatal cold despite having lived for many years in the isolated Manoir (100). His firstborn son dies from a throat disease contracted en route to his mother's funeral (102). After their deaths, Mikel uses the Manoir exclusively to store his many furs and family valuables. His success grows as he embraces an increasingly solitary life in which he interacts primarily with the few other men who trap and hunt for a living.

As much as Mikel longs for a lost feudal order, then, he follows a completely different order in his daily life. While he reveres "the remaining relics of an age of feudalism, chivalry, and petty state" (51) that he owns, and dreams of the day when the Manoir is populated once more by family and "a neat, orderly, obedient brigade" of servants (142), he lives without offspring or household in a forest world that operates according to laws opposed to those that characterize the feudal society over which he as patriarch would have to preside, and to the continuity that he would be responsible for ensuring via the practice of husbandry in all its forms.

By contrast, the forest is an environment to which he adapts rather than a fiefdom he subordinates to the aims of procreation and cultivation. The deaths of his wife and child warn of disaster to the families of Mikel's prospective tenant farmers and the crops they might grow. Such a community could never succeed in proximity to the Manoir. The tenants Mikel imagines would have to live around the forest, not in it, as the villagers of Bourg-Marie already do. Mikel himself thrives not by re-shaping the landscape with farms or herds or ornamental gardens but by obeying the laws of the wilderness and by that means becoming the region's most successful trapper. While he exploits the forest world for profit, any action he takes in pursuit of his prey involves minimal interventions into a natural order with which he does not interfere beyond setting traps. Put another way, the forest has a non-heteronormative human order that exists side-by-side with the heteronormative one that prevails in the village. Mikel is connected to both orders, living in the first and associating the second with a long-lost feudal Eden.

III

Although Mikel lives alone in the forest, he is sufficiently familiar with the village to recognize all the “types” of villagers in it (28) and thus, in theory, also to see the resemblance between the hierarchical order that continues to organize the village (albeit less strictly than it did in the days of the first seigneurs) and the seigneurial system he longs to revive. That he remains oblivious to the similarities between the two shows how remote his chances of realizing his ambitions truly are. The adoption of Laurière temporarily keeps this dream alive by ensuring a patrilineal line of succession through an heir who shares his beliefs, and by implicitly endorsing heteronormativity in the form of their new father-son bond. The adoption seems to render irrelevant the world of the forest and its non-heteronormative order. While Mikel and Laurière once revelled in a trapper’s life organized on principles very different from those that hold the village together, their new patrilineal affiliation makes them villagers in everything but name. It also makes the later defeat of Mikel’s nostalgic hopes all the easier to interpret as an allegory of triumphant English-Canadian nation-building. When Laurière is injured while investigating some noises he hears in the forest, Mikel moves him to the Manoir to recover, and Magloire’s burglary of the Manoir leads to a struggle that eventually kills Laurière and destroys the Manoir altogether. As the novel closes, Mikel is once more in need of an heir, and while there is no one left in the novel to accept his patrimony of hard work, simplicity, and steadfast adherence to principle, Harrison’s English-Canadian audience can certainly try to do so.

Yet the same adoption that precipitates the defeat of Mikel’s hopes cannot be understood exclusively as the doomed embrace of a father and his new son. The communications between Mikel and Laurière in the scene so crucial to the Anglo-nationalist allegory are not only not heteronormative but positively homoerotic. A quotation in full of the adoption scene illustrates the extent to which its filial vocabulary converges with looks, movements, and speech that convey male-male romantic and sexual desires:

Mikel caught his breath and looked hard at Laurière, a look that gave the latter pain. He turned away his head and rose from his chair.

“It will be better that I say good-evening, Mikel, and leave you. Another time. It is true I had something to say, but it will do another time. You are disturbed, unquiet, distrait; you say things perhaps you do not want me to hear —”

“What things have I said that you might not hear, *quel diantre?* Laurière, *mon enfant* — Laurière, Nicolas, *toi* — listen! Let me only speak — let me only speak, tell these things to some ear beside that of the curé; let me be assured of someone’s friendship, someone’s love. My God! I have said it.”

“Said what?” queried Laurière, his heart bursting with every beat, and a hunger rising in that heart that now could only be appeased one way.

Mikel, rising, looked from his superior height upon Nicolas as upon some favourite child with the counterpart of Nicolas’s hunger in his straining eyes and his faltering voice. He locked Laurière’s hands between his own as tears — rare, rare tears — gathered in his sunken eyes.

“Said that I needed friendship, solace, love — said that my heart was dry for the lack of it, caking like the old brown earth which looks so hard and cold although there is plenty of soft living green underneath that cracking crust. Say, Nicolas, thou too — thou didst have this feeling? Thou wert not satisfied to live alone — thou too, *enfant, mon fils?*”

The force of his passion had swept over Laurière’s already awakened and easily stimulated nature, and he stood trembling before the revelation that came to him in those words.

“I may have been,” he stammered — “yes, I was. And, Mikel, I will do anything for you — to help you, Mikel, or to please you. You have done so much for me.” (137)

While nothing in this passage prevents readers from comprehending it as the moment of Laurière’s adoption by Mikel, it simultaneously develops another, non-filial relationship between the two men. The purple prose of bursting and hungry hearts suits a seduction scene better than an adoption, as do the bodice-ripping references to forceful passion, pain, and stimulation. The springtime fecundity of the sensual metaphor Mikel chooses for his heart, the “soft living green underneath that cracking crust,” tropes vegetable growth, identified elsewhere in the narrative with the agricultural cultivation practiced by a nuclear family-oriented workforce, towards a growth of feeling that another man stimulates in the patriarch. Where this feeling will lead depends

upon Laurière's answers to the questions Mikel puts to him, questions that terminate in the suggestion that the two men might begin to live together. Posing these questions places Mikel in a position very far from the one he occupies as Laurière's adoptive father. Uncertainty replaces the authoritative paternalism of announcements such as "You, Nicolas Laurière, shall be my son'." Mikel's immediate future hinges on his companion's favourable response, not his own will alone.

Mikel's questions stem from Laurière's initial query to him, a noteworthy one considering the dialogue in which it appears. By the time Laurière's "Said what?" asks Mikel to explain what he means by "My God! I have said it," nothing remains to be clarified about the adoption. The many other nonverbal forms of communication that surround the question and its replies, however, explain why Laurière asks it. Mikel is attempting to convey an important message unrelated to the adoption: his intense gaze upon his guest, his tears, and his handclasp plead with Laurière to recognize an attraction for which neither has words. They acknowledge that attraction in their movements and facial expressions, Mikel's "straining eyes and faltering voice" replicated in Laurière's demeanour towards the older man. Mikel's subsequent characterization of their exchange as a courtship — "I knew your worth, yet because of your youth [and my jealousy] I refused to court you [until this moment]" (138) — amplifies the scene's romantic and sexual overtones.

Mikel's admission of his desire to court Laurière reveals that he wished to pursue the young trapper long before the adoption scene. Attentive readers may recollect an inconvenient journey that Laurière makes to Mikel's distant cabin at the start of the novel so as to carry important news to him from the village. Mikel's cryptic remark on hearing the purpose of his guest's visit, "There is nothing else that need bring you, eh, Laurière?" (10), intimates that Laurière may have other reasons for wanting to see Mikel, or that Mikel hopes he does. This introductory conversation takes place just before Mikel's first visit to the Manoir, where the description of the ruined gardens foreshadows the future disappointment of Mikel's ambition to restore his seigneurie. Queer desire, then, accompanies Mikel's nostalgic dream of a heteronormative feudalism from the first chapter.

The adoption scene reiterates this earlier entwinement of counter-normative desire and the conservative nostalgic vision thoroughly opposed to it. Subsequent events continue to weave the two together

when, shortly after the adoption, Mikel removes an injured Laurière to the Manoir in order to care for him during his convalescence. Ensnaring the younger man on a bed of furs in the secret chamber stockpiled with them, Mikel slips a diamond ring onto his sleeping companion's finger. Had Mikel given Laurière this ring in his cabin when he declared Laurière his son, it might have signified Laurière's new position as heir to Mikel's enormous wealth. When he gives it silently to the reclining Laurière inside a room that for decades has been unknown to, and un-entered by, anyone except him, his act seems to turn the space into a textbook example of the closet as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines it, a place where a homosexual identity emerges in silence, through gestures that take their meaning from the words that frame but never name them (3). After the verbal and nonverbal communications that have passed between the two men during the adoption scene, the diamond looks more like an engagement ring than the seal of a father-son tie.

When the ring goes onto Laurière's finger, the chamber space where Mikel has hoarded the resources that will allow him to convert his nostalgic vision of seigneurialism into a reality becomes, in addition, the space where he confirms a desire that is thoroughly antithetical to the reproductive principles that define the seigneurialism he would revive. Indeed, since the last human occupants of the Manoir aside from Mikel were Mikel's late wife Madeleine and their two children, one might say that Mikel's queer desire invades a stronghold of heteronormative principles, reconfiguring what was once the domestic space of a nuclear family as the domestic space of Mikel and Laurière's prospective conjugal bliss, and recasting the convergence of Mikel's heteronormative and non-heteronormative desires in this hidden room more precisely as a tension between heterosexuality and homosexuality.

But the "closet" space where this tension emerges is not the only space in the narrative where non-heteronormative principles are present, since non-heteronormativity already characterizes a way of life in the forest that differs from the way of life in the village. Mikel's movement with Laurière into the Manoir's secret chamber, a room in a house deep within that forest, merely highlights the ironic discrepancy between life as Mikel already lives it in a men-only environment and his wish to revive a feudal system arranged around the heterosexual nuclear family. The development of a romantic and potentially sexual relationship with Laurière does not so much contest that ambition as emphasize the long-

standing existence of a very different life in the forest, one that has operated in tandem with life in the village that embodies so much of what Mikel wants to recreate in his seigneurie.

Mikel's apparent failure to perceive the coexistence of heteronormative and non-heteronormative orders in Bourg-Marie dovetails very well with the novel's English-Canadian nationalist aims, for it offers yet another ill omen to Mikel's plans to reconstruct an earlier colonial and non-English system of governance. Those plans are ruined once and for all when Magloire and Pacifique ransack the Manoir in search of Mikel's hidden treasure. Laurière dies as a result of the invasion, Magloire steals as many of Mikel's possessions as he can carry, and a fire destroys the rest. The ruin signals the end of Mikel's nostalgic hopes (210), and Laurière's death effectively turns Mikel's patrimony over to Harrison's English-Canadian audience. In accepting it, that audience can accept a legacy that is as heteropatriarchal as the world Mikel would have restored if he could, for Gothic convention supplies a means of dismissing the romance between Mikel and Laurière as just one more harbinger of French-Canadian defeat. Mikel's adoption of Laurière turns their attraction to each other into incest, their betrothal a blasphemy not only because it is between men but because it is between a father and his son. If, by the end of the eighteenth century, "romantic marital relations" in the Gothic novel had displaced "the older system of feudal alliance, including primogeniture and the patrilineal transmission of inherited property and wealth" (Townshend 14), those marital relations were always prescriptively heterosexual; only the love match of a man and a woman could turn inherited wealth into a guarantee of future domestic stability for the couple and their offspring.

Mikel and Laurière's prospective conjugality inside the secret chamber condemns Mikel's hopes of realizing that same stability through the rigidly heteropatriarchal colonial society he would resurrect using the wealth he has hoarded, his liaison with Laurière rendered doubly monstrous as an incestuous perversion of the heterosexual wedlock on which that society would depend. Mikel and Laurière's homosexual desires thus disrupt the hegemony in which they (and Harrison's readers) live. When the revelation of those desires provides a "glimps[e] of the permeability of borders that permit the passage from one category to another" (Edwards xxiv) — specifically, of the permeable border between Mikel's identities as heterosexual patriarch and potential gay

lover — the conventional Gothic trope of incest allows readers to block that passage. What happens in the Manoir closet can stay in the closet.

In short, reading the chamber scenes as incest invites dismissal of the homoerotic relations between Mikel and Laurière as aberrant and temporary, a familiar plot device in a conventional Gothic novel. The fire that subsequently destroys the Manoir consumes it along with Mikel's material possessions, simultaneously finishing off the couple's counter-normative sexuality and the riches that symbolize Mikel's plan to reconstruct its heteronormative opposite. Of the two, only Mikel's seigneurial dream is later redeemed — for Canada rather than for New France — when his “strength, his keenness, and his trapper's wit” (220) enable him, in the years following the Manoir fire, to continue trapping at a catch rate that will permit him to replace his material losses; his hunting prowess, and his other laudable qualities, are preserved for the English-Canadian patriarchy that may now absorb them. Not so the love between Mikel and Laurière, to which Laurière's death brings an untimely end.

This interpretation of events in the secret chamber, however, treats the chamber as concealing homoerotic and anti-heteronormative relations that it never truly conceals. When Mikel shelters the man he loves inside the chamber, he does so in order to care for him during his recovery, not to hide him away; it's the chamber's *other* contents, the furs and precious materials, that motivate him to keep the place out of would-be thieves' covetous sight. Far from the revelatory site of a hidden homoerotic longing, the chamber only underscores the ways in which the narrative has already adumbrated counter-normative relationships and even a counter-normative social order in the world *outside* the chamber, where those relationships have coexisted with their heterosexual counterparts throughout the narrative. Outside as well as inside the fur-lined “closet,” Mikel and Laurière develop connections sharply at odds with the heterosexual norms that define life in other parts of Bourg-Marie. Although the catastrophic end of Mikel's nostalgic dream validates a nationalist narrative that hinges on the absorption of the former French colony into a single Anglo-dominated entity, his survival and prosperity at the end of the novel signify more than the triumph of the nation that will continue to benefit from his hard work: they queer the nation's heteronormative basis by juxtaposing heteronormativity with an alternative that takes up just as much space in the novel.

IV

In her study “‘A queer sort of interest’: Vernon Lee’s Homoerotic Allusion to John Singer Sargent and John Addington Symonds,” Catherine Maxwell argues that the fin-de-siècle British writer Vernon Lee deployed literary representations of homoerotic desire between her male characters to reinterpret historical events on which better-known male authors had attempted to impose a single authoritative meaning. Homoerotic desire in *The Forest of Bourg-Marie* functions in much the same way. In a narrative that insists upon the integration of French culture into a larger English-settler nation, the expression of queer sexual and romantic attraction suggests that at least two social orders, operating on principles fundamentally opposed to each other, may exist side by side. If they do, then the dominance of any one social or political system cannot be absolute. This is quite a critique of the nation to produce in the patriotic afterglow of 1867, and it is one that another Confederation-era female writer in Canada, Marjorie Pickthall, also put forward by obliquely narrating a romance between two male characters in her novel *Little Hearts* (1915).

Many other fin-de-siècle women writers in the wider English-speaking world advanced similar arguments about the heteronormative limits of empire and nation in stories about love and desire between men, a phenomenon that Tracy Olverson speculates may stem from the fact that sex between men, but not between women, was prohibited by law in nineteenth-century Britain (63). Consequently, male-male sexual activity was seen as explicitly transgressive of the social norms that sustained political order in the English-speaking world; in Canada, “gross indecency” legislation outlawed male-male sexual activity from 1892 (Backhouse). Depictions of male-male homoerotic and romantic interactions, that is, provided a direct means of questioning social norms in the nation and of suggesting alternatives to them. In the case of *The Forest of Bourg-Marie*, the suggestion is that those alternatives already characterize the nation as a supplement and a challenge to national discourse.

Women writers’ representations of male homoerotic desire in Canada have received no critical attention, a lacuna in scholarship left open, in part, by the choice among the first researchers of queer literature in Canada to focus on canonical texts.⁴ The Confederation period has been misshaped by the canon-making activities of literary critics active

during and between the World Wars. Their contempt for the late nineteenth century's most popular and respected writers resulted in women authors' near excision from numerous mid-twentieth-century anthologies, as Peggy Lynn Kelly's survey shows (139-40). It has taken thirty years of feminist recuperative scholarship to restore these authors to the place that the admiration of their peers and the size of their audience argue they deserve "as important contributors to the growing promise of a strong cultural identity to accompany Canada's political destiny" (Gerson 193). A strong cultural identity is also a more complex identity, one that may be ill served by a tendency in some queer literary criticism to define queer Canadian literature as literature that expresses the author's personal sexuality.⁵ This definition of queer literature is virtually impossible to mobilize with respect to early Canadian writers owing to the paucity of archival records that might disclose the necessary biographical information regarding a writer's sexual orientation(s). More importantly, auto/biographical approaches to literature that treat authors' work as explorations of their own lives inevitably privilege analyses of queerness among the fictional characters whose biological sex is the same as their creator's. Where queerness takes the form of desire among members of the biological sex the author does *not* share, the auto/biographical approach may obscure representations of queer desire. In *The Forest of Bourg-Marie*, male-male desire as a female author imagines it makes available capacious possibilities not only in the bedroom, or the closet, but in the nation at a time in the nineteenth century when a powerful hetero-settler mythopoesis had developed to restrict ideas of what and who Canadians might be, one that influences Canadian national discourse to this day.⁶

NOTES

¹ Two other examples of this very broad contemporary conception of "queer" are Tracy Olverson's discussion of Michael Field as queer "to the extent that their collaboration, their multiple artistic identities, and their intimate, perhaps sexual, relationship challenged heteronormative Victorian conventions" (57) and John C. Hawley's description of "queer" as an "arguably more amorphous" term than "postcolonial" (quoting Annamarie Jagose): "queer" is "a description of 'those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire'" (3).

² Details scattered throughout the narrative, such as a reference to the electric lighting in Magloire's hometown Milwaukee (unknown in that city before the 1880s), show that the events in the novel take place after Confederation. See Wisconsin Historical Society.

³ See also Sinha.

⁴ Dickinson suggests that examining canonical narratives, at least those published in the 1940s, as queer narratives is unsafe because it “leave[s] the contemporary critic (like Goldie and myself) open to charges of ahistoricism” (17), but he accepts the risk. Goldie’s *Pink Snow: Homotextual Possibilities in Canadian Fiction* devotes chapters to, among others, *Wacousta*, Sinclair Ross’s *As For Me and My House*, W.O. Mitchell’s *Who Has Seen the Wind*, Ernest Buckler’s *The Mountain and the Valley*, and Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*, all staples of the New Canadian Library and Canadian literature courses. Laura Robinson’s excellent “Bosom Friends: Lesbian Desire in L.M. Montgomery’s Anne Books” (2004) continues the canonical focus of queer Canadian literary criticism; it is difficult to find a more canonical Canadian author than Montgomery.

⁵ For an argument that defends this approach, see Goldie’s introduction to *Pink Snow*, especially pp. 12-15.

⁶ Margery Fee demonstrates as much in her analysis of the Canadian media and federal government responses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008-15) on Canada’s residential schools. She points out that these responses continue to assume that Euro-settlers must lead the reconciliation process because they alone can provide the “graciously civilizing” influence that, as “the time-worn narrative of white settler Canadians” goes, Indigenous peoples require in order to survive in a modern world (221).

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