

***Blood on the Sheets: Lesbian History and Identity in the Life and Theatre  
of Amy Redpath Roddick.***

In “Spoiled Identity,” Heather Love sets up an opposition between two kinds of history: one is redemptive or affirmative and “shore[s] up identity in the present . . . by searching for moments of pride or resistance in the past;” the other is curative and undercuts the problems or limits of identity that Love associates with redemptive history. Foucaultian in its conception and posed as queer in its approach, curative history “seeks out the ‘discontinuities’ in the past in order to disrupt the stability or taken-for-granted quality of the present,” a quality that underpins heteronormativity (523).<sup>1</sup> Unlike Love, I think both approaches to history are valuable and need not be treated as mutually exclusive or oppositional: indeed, a curative approach can be enlisted precisely to redeem the possibility of lesbians and gays having access to figures in the past with whom they can identify *or* queers having access to prior lifestyles that illustrate the multiform paths that desire, sexuality and gender can take -- and this true even if such historical figures never identified as lesbian or gay or consciously pursued “queer” experience. The case in point on which I will focus is Amy Redpath Roddick and her play *Romance of a Princess*, which when coupled with her biography and poetry, facilitate readings with which lesbian feminists might identify or that are “queer” or “gender-queer” in the sexual transgressions that both Roddick and her female hero enact. Moreover, because there is little to no early Canadian theatre history recovered that either affirms lesbian identity or elicits depictions of female queerness, both projects retain value for contemporary lesbians and queers alike. To this end, I read Roddick and her play text as opening onto

the possibility of a history with which lesbians can identify *and* in which queers can observe liberated, not limited and determined, genders and desires.

There is no “blood on the sheets,” no ocular proof that Roddick, the wealthy granddaughter of two of Montreal’s most influential nineteenth-century patriarchs, and Mary Rose Shallow, her Newfoundland housekeeper, were having a sexual affair. There is, however, innuendo, rumour, and poetic palimpsests that can elicit a queer feeling (ie., affects) or lesbian meaning in Roddick’s life and works. For instance, more than 50 years after Amy Roddick’s death, her grand niece, Linda Roddick, admitted of a family story that Amy took Rose to bed on her wedding night instead of her husband, Dr. Thomas Roddick. Although this story is apocryphal, there is real circumstantial evidence that Amy and Rose had a profoundly intimacy that, to my mind, was very like that of lovers: Rose did accompany the Roddick’s on their extended honeymoon and on many if not most of the couple’s subsequent journeys thereafter (interview, L. Redpath), often summering with them in Europe and in latter years wintering in Florida.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, when Doctor Thomas Roddick, 22 years his wife’s senior, died in 1923, Amy continued to live with Rose in her Sherbrooke street mansion for another 20 years, until Shallow’s death in 1943. Amy also made lasting provisions for Rose in a will she drew up in the winter of 1925, after Rose suffered a bout of illness.<sup>2</sup> Amy provided for Rose \$1200.00 annually and the appearance if not the purse of the class status she had come to enjoy by bequeathing her all of her clothes (“Last Will” 1925). As fate would have it, however, Rose died first. And it is in facts surrounding Rose’s death that the platform for lesbian identification or the queer feeling is most robust: a year after burying her in Côte-des-

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<sup>1</sup> Ridley contends that “they were on the continent “before the outbreak of hostilities in 1914 and only with great difficulty were able to get back to Canada.

Neige Catholic Cemetery, Amy had Rose's body exhumed and reinterred in the Redpath family plot (with Thomas Roddick) in Mount Royal Cemetery. On the reverse side of her husband's headstone she inscribed "Mary Rose Shallow 1870-1943 beloved companion of Lady Roddick." That she would go to such lengths to lie beside Rose in death suggests to me she was likely to have done so in life.

This brief recuperation of Roddick's life serves as an affirmative history of a figure with whom lesbian women can identify, learn from, feel empowered by and connect to on-going lesbian and feminist politics and thought in the present. Her life and her work, as we will see, form a piece of lesbian history. At the same time, Roddick's biography and works serve history projects that are queer, because the life she arranged for herself, the passions about which she wrote, transgressed the norms of female gender and sexuality, served the liberation of her passions and desires, and yet not a lesbian identity *per se*.

Roddick and Shallow enjoyed something akin to, but not quite, a 'Boston Marriage'; a Boston marriage is "a long-term monogamous relationship between two otherwise unmarried women." Such marriages, which Lillian Faderman reclaims as lesbian, were generally between two financially independent, progressive thinking, New Women; "they were often involved in culture and in social betterment, and these female values, which they shared with each other, formed a strong basis for their life together" (190). In this sense, Roddick and Shallow's relationship can, in part, be read as lesbian. They lived together for 43 years and were financially independent, Amy through inheritance and Rose through her connection to Amy. While little is known of Rose, Roddick was liberated for her age: she was interested in women's politics, particularly

suffrage, and expressed a desire to vote.<sup>3</sup> She also sought to empower other women, like her nieces' whose independence she attempted to insure when she stipulated in her will that bequests "not enter into any community of property . . . with any husband but . . . held by the legatee as her own property . . . as if she had remained single" (Will 1925). Roddick held membership in a host of organizations including the Montreal branch of the Canadian Author's Association. She also took a particular interest in the welfare of the Caughnawaga First Nations, became an Caughnawag princess and payed to erect their long house. She was, at one time or another, a member of the Women's Canadian Club; honorary member of the McGill Alumnae and the Montreal Art Association; "a patron of the Women's Council of Canada. She was also the author of 9 plays and 5 books of poetry.<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to know to what extent Rose was regarded by Amy as a peer -- she did not write or sit on boards or have membership in associations; or to know how their differing classes, educations, religions and cultural backgrounds played themselves out in their relationship. What we do know is that Rose, who was hired as a housekeeper, became a "beloved companion," which seems to signal an order of equality, a love and partnership and a sense of connection like that of a Boston Marriage.

And yet, Amy's life also serves as an early example of queer practice or a queer style of existence. Her history lends itself to this reading because lesbian identity was not, indeed, could not be her project, although a life stylized to secure personal freedom and passion was something she clearly pursued. While Fadermen intends to recover lesbian histories specifically, one of her observations sheds light on how and why Amy's life speaks to a queer sensibility: for reasons having to do with religion, medicine and respect for individual freedom, same-sex attraction between women in early twentieth

century contexts including in “popular stories,” was often treated “without self-consciousness or awareness that such relationships were ‘unhealthy’ or ‘immoral’” (Faderman 298).<sup>5</sup> In an era when “women were not given the freedom of their sex drive,” generally speaking, people either did not notice or did not believe that sexual relations between women were even possible (313). Perhaps, for this reason Roddick was able to live a queer life, one in which she was surprisingly unconcealed and unselfconscious regarding her affection and desire, for instance in her poetic writing. In “In A Train” (1918), for example, the narrator speaks of a woman “Who clears my thoughts of wintry gloom” and “coax[es] summer flowers to bloom!;” “The Parson’s Daughter,” (1919) is penned to “My little love, my Mary!;” “Her Face,” (1921) opens “You say you do not love, Sweet, then why Those tell-tale blushes? and ends, “You liked me from the first you now confess / Ah Love! ‘twas large writ on your truthful face;” “Where Willows Intertwine” (1919) is about unrequited love in which the speaker laments, “She treats me as a singing bird / That chirrup[s] at her call, / And if with tears my eyes are blurred / She answers not at all.”<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the queer affects Roddick’s poetry conveys also invites lesbian identification with her same-sex desire, especially when one discovers “Sappho in Exile,” a poem whose title is a kind of shorthand for any initiated lesbian.

Roddick did not identify as lesbian or even as a marginalized subject, but she was transgressive in the confidence she expressed in resisting the otherwise heteronormative demands imposed on her as a “woman,” including heterosexuality, a timely marriage, and children. It is true she enjoyed access to liberties not afforded most women for reasons having to do with her patrician class, her position as head of the household, and the death

of both of her parents and two of her three brothers (her only living brother having moved out West). But plenty of women with similar opportunities did not abandon their gender roles in the ways that Roddick did: and her gender is yet another factor in rendering her a lesbian touchstone and a source of queer feeling. Between 1897, when she was almost 30 years old, and 1926, three years after the death of her husband, Roddick kept diaries that give a fairly detailed account of her social life. Rich, handsome, well-schooled in literature, conversant in four languages, and an observant Christian, by any standards she would have made a suitable match for a contemporary man of means. Yet, in her diaries there is not a single mention of romantic feeling, not a date, a crush, or a flutter of the heart. And while Roddick likely intended to maintain the *appearance* of heterosexuality and the gender roles expected of a woman of her class, her attempts to do so were decidedly unusual. This is evident in her 1906 marriage, at the advanced age of 38, to her doctor, the family friend and physician throughout her childhood: Thomas Roddick (1846-1923) was 22 years her senior, the Dean of the McGill Medical School (1901-08), and a conservative MP to the Dominion Parliament who was later “knighted by King George V” when he introduced antiseptic methods into Canadian hospitals. As a result, at 46, Amy became Lady Roddick and acquired a social pedigree independent of her birth, which placed her choices and behaviour further above suspicion.

Read another way, Roddick challenges contemporary notions of lesbian identity in the present. She marries a man, not a peer in age, as one might expect, but a father figure and very likely the physician who brought her into the world: there is also a strong likelihood that this arrangement was initiated by Amy and that she paid Thomas Roddick’s debts as a condition for his doing so. Moreover, Roddick risks exposing her

erotic life, because she publishes all of her works, including her poetry, exclusively with her uncle's firm, John Dougall and Son, editors of the influential Protestant daily newspaper *The Montreal Witness* which should have condemned her sentiments as blasphemous. These transgressions with respect to the social expectations of gender, rooted in her female sex, together with her female lover, one who is of a lower-class, uneducated, Catholic, and from a wildly different culture (Newfoundland), as well as the exhumation and burial of Rose's body in the family plot, and the "beloved" epitaph, are all non-normative acts that, arguably, constitute her life as a historical moment that is as open to lesbian identification as it is to a queer modes of being.

On the surface, Roddick's 1922 verse drama *Romance of a Princess* is recoverable as neither lesbian or queer; yet it leaves the reader with a queer feeling, especially when it is considered in light of the life and poetry I have just discussed. It bequeaths a Canadian theatrical history to lesbians and queer women when it is read as a displacement of Roddick's feelings respecting her real and illicit affair with Shallow onto an equally forbidden heterosexual romance between two ninth century lovers.

Inspired to some extent by *La Chanson de Roland*, a twelfth century poem, in this play Emma, the King's daughter, is in love with Eginhardt, her father's closest advisor.<sup>7</sup> When their love is exposed, the King separately banishes them. Somehow they find each other and with remarkable confidence and conviction they enact a secret and make-shift wedding. As the fourth act opens, we are to imagine that six years has elapsed, Emma and Eginhardt are in their log hut, poor, but happy and independent, when their young son brings home a man he has met by chance in the woods who turns out to be the

repentant King: strangely contrite and apologetic, the King invites the couple to return home in spite of their sexual transgressions.

Like so many texts already recovered for an affirmative, American gay and lesbian history, Roddick's play is premised on the idea that "each soul has got some stain, some hidden mystery." It recounts the scorn and disappointment of the father and the shame, rejection, and banishment of the forbidden lovers. But unlike the vast majority of early texts with illicit sex or characters who are lesbian, gay, or gender-queers, one's that the author murders so that the story may be told at all, *Romance of a Princess* redeems its heroine-lover.<sup>8</sup>

Despite Emma's disobedience to her father and her love of a man beneath her social class, she is virtuous and principled and understands her affection as "a sacred seal," impossible to break. Like the protagonist of *Chanson de Roland*, she is protected and abetted by the relics of saints, in this case sacred silks given to her by her father, because "none but her is pure enough to shelter them" (6). And even as she could, like her mother before her, use magic to bend her father to her will, Emma will not "defile her soul" in this manner. Cast out by the King, she is an oddity *as* a woman in her *absolute* refusal to feel ignominy for who she is and who she loves; with almost uncanny confidence, she rejects the King's assertion that morality lies in her (gendered) obedience and passivity exclaiming, "I'll take...this silk, 'twas given me last night to guard and am I different? My place in life may be; but not myself" (22). As the inheritor of the sacred relics, Emma is protected by God, even after she leaves the security of the castle for the dangers of the forest.

But if Emma's queer confidence, at odds with her sex, has not yet convinced you Roddick's play is worth taking up as a lesbian *or* queer play, consider that in both her essay on *Roland* and in the play itself, she argues that it is not who one loves, but loyalty within their union that distinguishes the virtuous; thus, when the charcoal-burner's wife implores Eginhardt to break free from Emma he refuses because he and she believe that immorality is not the result of an unsanctioned union, but the denial of genuinely held passions.<sup>9</sup> To prove the moral righteousness of the lovers and their forbidden love, it is the King who wanders the land for six years in search of the couple and who begs their forgiveness, whereas Emma and Eginhardt neither repent nor regret their affair and elopement. To demonstrate to the King God's sanction, Emma presents him with the holy silk, exclaiming, "See Father, I have guarded it – no harm has come to us in this old pagan grove" (78). The play ends with the King's pronouncement that within their forest home he sees the germ of "the City of God on earth, an Empire as St. Augustine once visioned," St. Augustine appropriately the most sexual of Saints (79).

Emma disrupts normative notions of sexuality, in other words, because she embodies a gender that is antithetical to her sex.<sup>10</sup> When her lover is trapped in the palace, it is she who saves him from being discovered by carrying him on her back across the palace courtyard to prevent any evidence of his footprints. Despite her six-year separation from kith and kin she repents nothing and in the end, she does not conform to the demands of society but society, in the figure of the King who conforms to her. She is accepted on her own terms, with her lover and new family. In her time, she is an obvious gender-queer, which has implications for a transgressively active female sexuality, because even as the object of Emma's desire is male, Eginhardt, fails at stereotypical

masculinity. Heteronormativity demands that feminine females desire masculine males, whereas the female that desires the feminine or the male that desires the masculine, albeit in the opposite sex, intimates at least something which is queer *and/or* lesbian or gay.

Redemptive history, as it is used here, is premised upon a notion of a coherent lesbian identity that is transhistorical, transcultural, and rooted in a beguiling essence that begins in Sappho and courses through to today. It is not just a beautiful fiction. It is a political act to restore, repair, and regenerate a lonely, isolated, and illegitimate group for a contemporary culture. In it lies the promise, which is not and need not necessarily a surety, of community and of a consciousness of oneself as part of that community. But, it is the surety of a heritage, mythologies, and traditions that inspire no less than they heal those who have suffered from erasure, regardless of whether they are lesbian or queer. It is an arsenal of stories with which one can resist the silence and the heteronormative status quo.

Curative history is set up by Love and others as the opposite: it is anti-identitarian. It looks for the fissures in identity, the schisms in the homogeneous façade of history. It looks for the disruptions, the pauses, the suspensions in identity; the things that don't fit, that don't make sense, that one cannot celebrate, the punitive, in this way agitating the stability of the identity that a redemptive history seeks. Indeed, the cultural critic Aurora Levins Morales describes curative history as “re-creat[ing] the shattered knowledge of our humanity [by] retelling the stories of victimization, recasting our roles from subhuman scapegoats to beings full of dignity and courage” (13). Morales also calls curative history a “radical” or “medicinal history” and claims that it *can* distill “a legacy

of pride, hope and rebellion from ordinary people's lives." And yet, it can do so because it, too, is about rewriting and retelling stories about cultures of inequality which, one must never forget, are wrought from "pain, confusion, alienation, a sense of the unreality of our own experience and that of others, an inability to name the abuses we experience, perpetuate and witness on a daily basis" (13). As a result, history, redemptive or curative as it may be for lesbians and queers, is always about telling stories that give meaning to our lives as either identity or experience. It clears a path for making marginal lives livable.

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<sup>1</sup> Queer = fluid, antiidentitarian, interrupts identity via the pursuit of new experiences, sensations, pleasures, affects, and intensities.

<sup>2</sup> The two were forced to postpone a trip to the Mediterranean

<sup>3</sup> On Feb 28<sup>th</sup> 1918? Roddick writes in her diary that she and Rose "took the cars . . . to the Capitol [Washington] and spent an hour and a half in the gallery of the House of Representatives and half an hour in the gallery of the Senate listening to the debate. We noticed Miss Rankin, of course, the first woman to be a member of the house . . . Then drove to the National Suffrage Headquarters on Rhode Island Avenue. The house is beautiful and most artistic. I just loved seeing Miss Anthony's Room. It makes a fine memorial. See Lady Roddick's Diaries 9. MS 659. "Roddick, Sir Thomas and Amy Repath.

<sup>4</sup> See MS 818 c. 3 File 3.9. She was also a governor of the Montreal General Hospital and president of the Montreal branch of the Labrador Medical Mission ("Lady Amy Redpath Roddick, Poetess, Philanthropist, Dies")

<sup>5</sup> America may have been slower than Europe to be impressed by the taboos against same-sex love for several reason: (1) Without a predominant Catholic mentality the country was less fascinated with "sin" and therefore less obsessed with the potential of sex between women; (2) by virtue of distance, America was not so influenced by the German medical establishment as other countries were, such as France and Italy and, to a lesser extent, England; (3) there was not so much clear-cut hostility, or rather there was more ambivalence to women's freedom in a land which in principle was dedicated to tolerance of individual freedom. Therefore, romantic friendship was possible in America well into the second decade of the twentieth century, and, for those women who were born and raised Victorians and remained impervious to the new attitudes, even beyond it .. In America, it took the phenomenal growth of female autonomy during and after World War I, and the American popularization of the most influential of the European sexologists, Sigmund Freud, to cast the widespread suspicions on love between women that had already been prevalent in Europe (Faderman 298)

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<sup>6</sup> “In a Train” from *the Flag and Other Poems* (1918); “The Parson’s Daughter” and “Where Willows Intertwine” from *Armistice* (1919); “Her Face” from *The Birth of Montreal* (1921);

<sup>7</sup> As Naomi Moses has noted, this play is no doubt inspired by *La Chanson de Roland*, a 12<sup>th</sup> century poem which Roddick read and with which it shares the character of Eginhardt. Roddick studied and wrote on *Roland* and with it shares the character of Eginhardt. It wrestles with themes of transgressive sexuality and class in a medieval Christian society that condemns its illicit lovers to shame, poverty, and banishment only to see them returned to the bosom of the crown wherein, oddly, they are celebrated in a conservative and nationalistic song and sermon. In the play,

<sup>8</sup> The lesbian and gay pulp novels of the 40s, 50s, and 60s are obvious examples.

<sup>9</sup> To prove the holy nature of their love, Emma and Eginhardt make a cross from sticks, drape it with the holy silk, and exchange wedding vows. (38-40). When Emma’s dove appears at the moment of doing so, the couple interprets it as a divine sign that their union has been sanctioned.

<sup>10</sup> For example, she is the play’s hero and as such fails at femininity. She also rejects the King’s assertion that morality lies in obedience and passivity.