Read What You Know: Nostalgia and the Discovery of Self through L.M. Montgomery's Emily of New Moon

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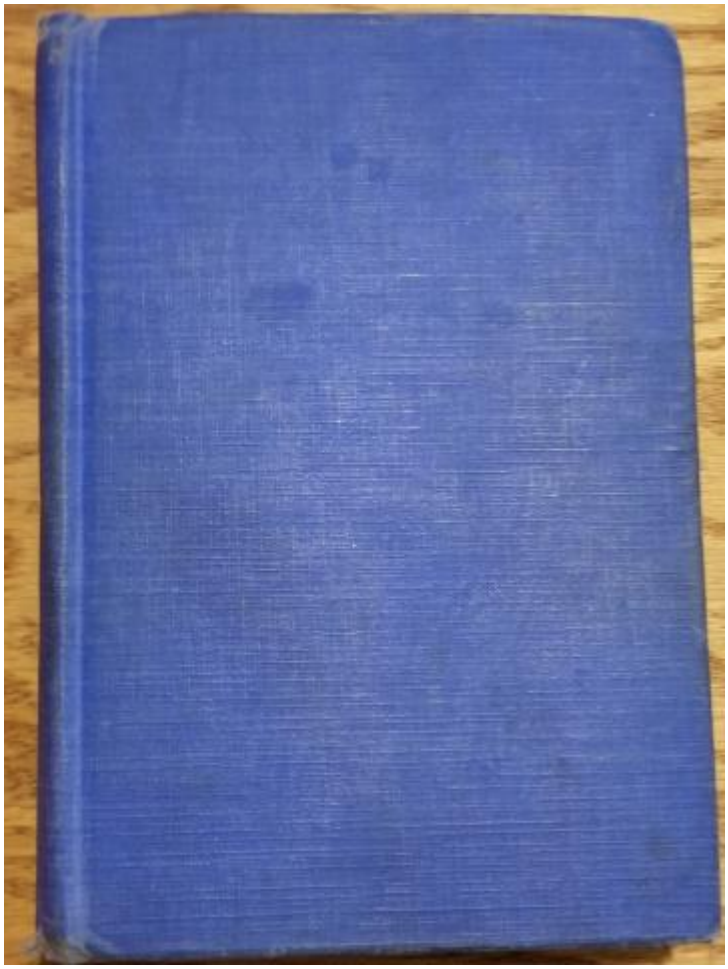
This paper explores L.M. Montgomery's *Emily of New Moon* through the critical lens of nostalgia, with an extension into the more intimate realms of family connection and personal identity. It additionally engages the broader reader response to Montgomery's personal and literary descriptions of the natural setting of Prince Edward Island.

From the time I was six until my mid-teen years, my mother and I regularly drove the hour-and-a-half from our home in Austin, Texas, to San Antonio, the city where I was born and where my grandmother lived. Every Saturday my aunts would gather at Grandmother's house; my busy mom would join them when she could, and I would join them on many of those occasions. One particular trip, however, was different. By some terrible mischance, by the time we arrived at Grandmother's house I had already finished the book I had brought along. This left me facing a long, boring afternoon of watching the older generations play Scrabble, not to mention the terrible trial of listening to incredibly dull news radio on the way home. The prospects were grim.

However, all was not lost: Grandmother, as grandmothers do, saved the day. Upon hearing my plight, she disappeared into the attic and returned with an unremarkable-looking book: It had a plain blue cover, no jacket, and a title so faded I couldn't even read it.



Front cover of L.M. Montgomery's *Emily of New Moon*. First edition, 1923. Frederick A. Stokes Company.

"Oh no," I thought. "An OLD book." Still, an old book was better than no book, so I stretched out under Grandmother's large, round dining room table and opened L.M. Montgomery's *Emily of New Moon*. And nothing has ever been the same.

Reading and rereading (and re-re-rereading) Montgomery's *Emily of New Moon*, the book of my heart, has taught me the value of an adapted adage: Read what you know. From my first reading, the book spoke to me in a deep and fundamental way: I *knew* Emily, and I empathized with her love for father, home, and cats; I felt her losses as she experienced them. I admired her courage at starting over in a new place with people who might be family but were strangers nonetheless. I admired her sense of purpose and was awed by her self-confidence. She wanted to be a writer, and I wanted to be her reader. The more I delved into Emily's life, the more tools I had to delve into my own.

I returned to New Moon and Emily again and again, even before Grandmother allowed me to handle the much more fragile *Emily* sequels she had carefully preserved for her daughters' and granddaughters' reading. I felt perfectly at home at New Moon—wandering through the orchards, walking the gardens, hiding in the garret—even though my late-twentieth-century, urban-Texas life was nothing like the idyllic PEI landscapes Montgomery so carefully crafted. Over my first several readings of the novel, I recall wondering how the abstraction I understood vaguely as "the author" understood me so well. How did "L.M.," a grown man, know what it felt like to be lost and alone, to relish the beauty of the natural world, to feel more comfortable with cats and books than with people, to cultivate a sly and subtle wit? When I finally thought to ask someone—probably my mother, fount of all useful knowledge—and learned that "L.M." was actually "Lucy Maud," I was so

relieved! Of course she understood!

When I was a teenager, I finally realized that the sense of loss I felt every time I finished this book was *homesickness*. But this made no sense! How could I be homesick for a place I had never been, a place I hadn't even known was real until my fourth or fifth rereading? This homesickness stemmed from a deep sense of kinship with Montgomery's world that started, but didn't stop, with Emily herself. Every time I finished the first book, I missed her; I missed Ilse and Teddy and Cousin Jimmy, and I missed New Moon: the house, the land, the orchards … I missed the whole of Prince Edward Island.

Many years later, after I had embarked upon an academic career in children's literature, I discovered Elizabeth Epperly's discussion of nostalgic yearning in *Through Lover's Lane*. Epperly adroitly describes Montgomery's ability to use her own sense of memory and nostalgia to "creat[e] among readers a special yearning—very like homesickness—for places they have never been and times in which they have not lived."[1] Montgomery reframed her personal tragedies in *Emily of New Moon*, giving her hero some of her own challenges, but also giving Emily happier resolutions.[2] Perhaps this sense of nostalgic familiarity seems stronger with Emily than other Montgomery characters simply because the author gave to Emily more of her own self. Epperly cites Emily's visual imagination as an inheritance from her creator,[3] but they share also mothers lost before memory could capture them, beloved fathers who left them too soon, and a passion to capture, in just the right words, their experiences of the world in all its incarnations, its beauty as well as its cruelty. Montgomery's nostalgic and thus idealized re-visioning of her childhood allows her to revise her own story in Emily's life. For instance, Douglas Starr left his daughter only when death forced him to—he refused to give her up after his wife's death, unlike Hugh Montgomery, Maud's father, whose wandering life could not accommodate a small daughter.[4] Emily finds love and affection in her new home—even Aunt Elizabeth ceases to regard her as a "duty"—but while Montgomery loved her grandparents, and was loved by them, her childhood lacked overt affection, and she never felt that they understood her sensitive nature and passionate ambitions. New Moon becomes a true home for Emily; she quickly comes to love the house, appropriating nooks and crannies before inheriting her mother's old room and making it her own. Mercifully, readers never learn what happens to New Moon after her (male) cousin, Andrew Murray, with his "proprietary airs" inherits.[5] We do know that Montgomery's beloved Cavendish home was never lived in after her grandmother's death,[6] and that, after years of neglect, the house was torn down.



The cellar and foundation of L.M. Montgomery's childhood home in Cavendish, Prince Edward Island. The original kitchen, which had been elsewhere, was returned to the site in late 2018. Photo by Caroline Jones, 2018.

The lack or loss of home is a prominent and recurring theme in Montgomery's work,[7] and throughout the *Emily* series, the author develops this motif through both loss and fulfillment. Homemaking preoccupied much of Montgomery's energy throughout her life: She carefully arranged and decorated her room at her grandparents' home (a photograph of it recurs frequently in her journals), lamented her grandmother's resistance to any change around the old home, and put enormous care into the making of the three homes she shared with her husband and sons.[8] The author's personal preoccupation with belonging informs her depictions of houses and homes as well as her characters' relationships with those houses and homes—most of her novels, including *Emily of New Moon* , firmly situate her protagonist within a home. And this loving attention to detail results in homes and landscapes that many readers recognize and make their own. Montgomery thoroughly details the house and the grounds of New Moon, in the seventh chapter, "The Book of Yesterday." This chapter deftly connects Emily's Murray pedigree and family history with the house whose "charm" she has already "responded to."[9] Cousin Jimmy tells Emily the Murray family history through story as she explores the family graveyard. In the process of learning about New Moon, Emily learns about not only the Murray "tradishuns" but also the Murray pride, some elements of which she recognizes in herself. The lore, the traditions, and, most significantly, the characteristics she shares with the Murrays help Emily find a sense of homecoming and belonging.

Scholars have long speculated about what quality of Montgomery's work provokes homesickness and nostalgia in her readers. The answers to that question are doubtless myriad and deeply personal for each reader. However, in 1992, Mary Rubio asked something similar: "what gives [Montgomery's] books such far-ranging and powerful appeal?" She explores her own question—and mine—throughout the essay, considering Montgomery's work in its own place and time and in the newly opening scholarly doors of the late-twentieth century. Rubio notes that Montgomery "[retains her] readers throughout a full life cycle: when her young readers grow up, many keep re-reading her books, often finding new levels of meaning at different stages of their lives."[10] For Epperly, however, it is Montgomery's "gift for imagery" that through "descriptions make[s] Prince Edward Island a home for beauty and lovers of beauty" and that leads to her "novels function[ing] as invitations to all those who yearn for what 'home' ideally (and variously) connotes."[11] Readers make the instinctual connection to the

setting of the novels as home, a space of beauty; thus, when the novel is finished and the covers are closed, readers miss that time and place.

While the only volume of poetry Montgomery published in her lifetime had underwhelming success, Epperly notes, “the repeated images and allusions that failed [Montgomery] in poetry helped to create atmosphere, enrich character, and generally modulate the tone of her prose.”12 Holly Pike, in “(Re)Producing Canadian Literature: L.M. Montgomery’s Emily Novels,” further describes Montgomery’s sense of “the poet [as] one who searches for beauty and attempts to share that beauty with others, and who has a peculiar sensitivity to beauty.”13 This poet’s sensibility and instinct draw readers into Montgomery’s prose, knitting them closely with both Montgomery’s settings, particularly her natural landscapes, and the characters who inhabit them. Because both Emily and Cousin Jimmy are poets, Montgomery has infused the novels with snippets of poetry as well as poetic prose. Most of these verses rhapsodize on the beauty of the natural world. Montgomery’s description of the spruce barrens near the Maywood “house in the hollow”—the first time that readers share Emily’s experience of “the flash”—illustrates the poet’s sensibility that Pike identifies: “the evening was bathed in a wonderful silence—and there was a sudden rift in the curdled clouds westward, and a lovely, pale, pinky-green lake of sky with a new moon in it. … [T]he tips of the trees came out like fine black lace across the edge of the pinky-green sky.”14 This description—pastoral, elaborate, and mysterious all at once—encapsulates Montgomery’s gift for multisensory description. *Emily of New Moon* sets a high bar for the actual landscape of PEI, but the reality easily meets that bar.



Landscape exemplifying the colours and beauty of Prince Edward Island. Photo by Caroline Jones, 2010.



North Shore beach. Photo by Caroline Jones, 2018.

Montgomery's idealization of the natural world so deeply infuses her fiction that certain of her readers (I among them) internalize her deep connection to place, first the place of New Moon (or Green Gables or Silver Bush), then the place of Prince Edward Island, without ever setting foot on the island. Sarah Gothie is exploring the emotional impact of Montgomery literary tourism on the "pilgrims" themselves in her in-progress "Pages to Pilgrimages" project, citing "years—even decades—of longing" that culminate in a reader's journey to Prince Edward Island. Gothie's project, which she plans to archive at the University of Prince Edward Island's Robertson Library, is designed to collect stories from around the world of literary pilgrimages made to the places Montgomery lived, stayed, or depicted. These stories, told by ordinary people in their own words, bring together a diverse chorus of voices united in their passion for Montgomery's work.15 Of course, those passions arise from and connect with different elements of Montgomery's corpus: For many, it is undoubtedly Montgomery's vivid descriptions of nature. Janice Fiamengo, in her essay exploring Montgomery's transformation of the landscape of Cavendish into fiction, notes that "the ecstatic response of the sympathetic viewer meant that Avonlea, unlike Cavendish, became a portable landscape, one whose enchanting details could be adapted to

many regions of the world."16 Montgomery offers her fictional worlds to her readers; many of her readers internalize and absorb those worlds and then carry them wherever they go, whether they have a book with them or not.

My first trip to the Island was, appropriately, with my mother. We toured Montgomery's birthplace, "Silver Bush" in Park Corner, and, of course, Green Gables. All were lovely experiences, but, for me, the most powerful of all was the Montgomery homesite in Cavendish. The physical beauty of the place, with its simple signs offering context and explanation, coupled with the proximity to Montgomery—and my knowledge, from the journals, of her deep connection to the home she had there—made this place the most significant—almost sacred—for me. Without my love of the books or knowledge of the author, this spot would still be beautiful, perhaps even poignant. However, the Montgomery tapestry that began with my grandmother and our shared love for *Emily of New Moon* has expanded, becoming inextricably bound not just to my family and the books but also to the author and the place.

After four years' absence from PEI, I confess to having found myself guilty of nostalgically romanticizing its landscape. When I returned in 2022, I realized anew that the landscape is not the pastoral ideal (or not *only* that ideal) I have just described. In seeing it again, I remembered its wildness: the huge trees growing into dense woods, the furious waves pounding the shore, the high, steep cliffs looming over the beaches.



Bedeque woods. Photo by Caroline Jones, 2012.



Gulf of Saint Lawrence. Photo by Caroline Jones, 2010.

And now, after the ravages of hurricanes Dorian in 2019 and Fiona in 2022, this wildness is intensified. Dorian uprooted thousands of trees across the Island, including many at the Montgomery homesite. Fiona downed countless trees and devastated the sand dunes along the North Shore, meaning that beach access and roads across PEI National Park remained closed for several months after Fiona made landfall.[17] Dorian and Fiona—and even less powerful storms—remind us that nature can be not only soothing, healing, peaceful, and pastoral but also powerful, ruthless, and indiscriminately destructive. The Island is not an idyllic, pastoral landscape. It is, like Montgomery, her novels, her characters, and her readers, complex and multi-faceted. An entirely harmless, open landscape would likely never have inspired Montgomery—or Emily—as powerfully as the complex and dynamic landscape of the PEI that Montgomery eventually left, but that Emily, as a young writer, chose not to. Montgomery returned to the Island for renewal and rejuvenation, and we may read beyond the ending of the *Emily* trilogy to presume that Emily, too, will return to the Island to retrieve, through memory, that ineffable sense of place (and home) that nurtured and shaped her developing writerly voice—and will continue to do so.

From the places and settings that we nostalgically romanticize, readers, as Epperly suggests, move into an idealization of past temporal moments.[18] Montgomery's times were no simpler than ours, just different. Montgomery chafed under the social mores and confines of her times, and she allowed her characters to lament the narrowness of their nurturing yet judgmental communities that seem so reluctant to change, even for the better. Longing for the past, especially a past that was never our own, is too often nostalgic escapism that glosses over the realities of those bygone days. Svetlana Boym characterizes nostalgia as "a yearning for a different time" and suggests that "the nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology."[19] A sense of this "collective mythology" often surrounds authors with strong popular followings, including Montgomery. The impulse to romanticize Montgomery's time, place, writing, and life poses a threat: When we allow a nostalgic, idealized image to supplant the reality of a time, place, or person, we risk losing the depth and complexities that make them particular and special—that have made them what or who they are—warts and all. Unchecked, the rose-coloured lens of nostalgia can lessen and undermine the realities that make Montgomery's work so powerful for so many.

These rose-coloured lenses of nostalgia often fail when readers try to apply them to Montgomery's fictional characters. Most of these characters are rich, complex, flawed, funny, maudlin, irritating, unreliable, earnest—many things, but rarely simple, rarely sentimental, and rarely susceptible to nostalgic (or romantic) oversimplification. The character of Emily resonated particularly well with me when I was a young reader and has continued to do so—albeit differently—through myriad rereadings my whole life. Emily faces loss and displacement, experiences I knew well, and on my first readings, those common experiences drew me to the character. As I got a little older and my sense of justice developed, I found myself appreciating Emily's ability to stand up for herself and for fair treatment. And when, after reading Emily's letters to her father, Aunt Elizabeth acknowledges that there is, ultimately, only one standard of fairness,[20] I saw that standing up for what is right can, in fact, create change. As my sense of humour (and my sense of literature) developed, I began to appreciate the narrator's gentle mocking of Emily's earliest literary efforts, recognizing that neither Emily herself nor her writing vocation is being ridiculed; the narrator, like the reader, understands and respects the early work and maturation process of the poet and the storyteller.

My sense of humour—and my literary sensibilities—developed further, and I began to see the mastery of Montgomery's subversions of popular conventions and powerful characters—Aunt Ruth, for instance, or Miss Brownell. I embraced Aunt Ruth's pejorative description of Emily as "deep and sly,"[21] seeing it as a compliment and particularly apt for a child as self-aware and as nimble of mind and wit as Emily is. As a justice-seeking child, I recognized that Emily is not at all underhanded; she is merely three steps ahead of everybody else—or five steps ahead of Aunt Ruth.

A constant for me in my readings of the *Emily* series is that, like all of Montgomery's protagonists, Emily loves deeply and passionately and has a soul that demands expression and understanding. This depth of character, in Emily and all her literary sisters, defies nostalgic romanticization. That is to say, the characters resist nostalgic ideals of their own lives, and Montgomery's thorough, thoughtful, and realistic depictions discourage readers from simplifying or essentializing them into nostalgic or romantic ideals. While young Emily can be extraordinarily romantic in her poetry and stories (Father Cassidy identifies three of "the seven original plots in the world" in her epic, *The Child of the Sea*),[22] she never romanticizes her subject positions of orphan, Starr, Murray, or even poet. Her letters to her father chronicle the ordinary as well as the sublime: Emily writes about bringing in the cows, her often-turbulent friendships, and stressful school examinations just as she does the injustices of baby aprons and sunbonnets. She shares with her father humorous stories (Mr. Dare sitting on Saucy Sal) and shameful anecdotes (reddening her cheeks before a party), and, of course, her supreme moments: "*I can write poetry*."[23] She appreciates the romance of her life, as in the boiling of the pigs' potatoes, but she never manufactures it—except in her writing.

Despite her characters' resistance to the lens of nostalgia, many readers still develop a sense of kinship with Montgomery's fictional worlds to an extraordinary degree. Elsewhere, I argue that among the many reasons Montgomery's work still finds audiences well into the twenty-first century is the author's ability to vividly recall and depict—and, I will add, enhance—the experience of childhood.[24] Emily's childhood is somehow idealized and yet still beautifully imperfect: She makes mistakes, and she is treated unfairly, but when she is wrongly accused, she is vindicated, and she experiences enough moments of grace to restore readers' faith in both human nature and karma. Montgomery's characters ring true for readers experiencing or recalling their own painful, awkward, and beautiful childhood experiences, and that truth draws us in and brings us back—back to our own past and back to the books themselves.

Lying under my grandmother's table in the mid-1970s, I was finding not just a friend and kindred spirit but a part of myself. Emily was familiar not because I *knew* someone like her but because I *was* someone like her. Our life experiences were very different, but that didn't matter—my heart and mind and soul recognized hers and saw therein a reflection of all my own possibilities. I immediately felt at home with her. And her home, so

beautifully depicted throughout the novels, welcomed me in. Emily showed me that words are powerful, whether spoken or heard, written or read. She validated the depths of my responses to words, the world, and the people around me. Through Emily, I found the courage to explore my own ideas through writing.

When I close Montgomery's books, I feel as if I have left part of myself inside. This sense of homecoming happened the first time I read *Emily of New Moon* that day at Grandmother's and has continued to happen every single time I read Montgomery's work, whether her life-writing or her fiction. Her characters and landscapes never cease to excite or soothe or comfort me; whatever I feel or need, I find it in Montgomery's words. By the time she wrote the *Emily* books, Montgomery had left Prince Edward Island, but even after her move to Ontario, her work continued to satisfy readers with depictions of childhoods spent in the natural beauty and small communities of her Island. Montgomery's gift for building characters, as well as her wryly humorous voice and vivid descriptions, provoke a sense of kinship, nostalgia, and re-seeing in her readers, who have often internalized a deep connection to her characters and their places, fulfilling Montgomery's own re-vision of her world. This may be why so many who visit the Island having discovered Montgomery's world—pilgrims, perhaps—feel as if they have finally come home.

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Banner Image: Photo by Caroline Jones

- 1 Epperly, *Through Lover's Lane* 23–24.
- 2 The autobiographical elements of the *Emily* trilogy have been well explored in Montgomery scholarship. See particularly Mary Rubio's *Lucy Maud Montgomery: The Gift of Wings* (Doubleday Canada, 2008) and Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston's introduction to *The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery, Volume 3, 1921–1929*, pp. x–xxv.
- 3 Epperly, *Through Lover's Lane* 127.
- 4 Heidi Lawrence develops the connection between Hugh John Montgomery's repeated abandonment of his daughter, Maud Montgomery's repeated revision of that abandonment in her journals, and the author's reconstruction of her father as idealized characters in her fiction. Lawrence gives particular attention to Douglas Starr's dual roles as nurturing father and supportive critic and mentor to his daughter. "Absent Fathers: Conversations between L.M. Montgomery and Madeleine L'Engle," in *Children and Childhoods in L.M. Montgomery: Continuing Conversations*, edited by Rita Bode et al., McGill-Queen's UP, 2022, 182–200.
- 5 Montgomery, *EQ* 150.
- 6 Montgomery, *CJ* 1 (8 Apr. 1898): 410. Alexander Macneill left the house to his son, John Macneill, on condition that Lucy Macneill be allowed to stay in the home until her death.

- 7 See, among others, Elizabeth R. Epperly, *The Fragrance of Sweet-Grass: L.M. Montgomery's Heroines and the Pursuit of Romance* (U of Toronto P, 1992), 211–27; Margaret Steffler, "Anne in a 'Globalized' World: Nation, Nostalgia, and Postcolonial Perspectives of Home," in *Anne's World: A New Century of Anne of Green Gables*, edited by Irene Gammel and Benjamin Lefebvre (U of Toronto P, 2010), 150–65; Catherine Sheldrick Ross, "Readers Reading L.M. Montgomery" and Laura Higgins, "Snapshot Portraits: Finding L.M. Montgomery in Her 'Dear Den,'" in *Harvesting Thistles: The Textual Garden of L.M. Montgomery*, edited by Mary Henley Rubio (Canadian Children's P, 1994), 23–35, 101–12.
- 8 See Montgomery's journal entries centred on her settling process: *CJ* 3 (28 Jan. 1912): 46–56; *CJ* 6 (28 Feb. 1926): 26–38; *SJ* 5 (24 Apr. 1935): 5–9. See also my discussion of Montgomery's homemaking in "The New Mother at Home: L.M. Montgomery's Literary Explorations of Motherhood," in *L.M. Montgomery's Rainbow Valleys: The Ontario Years, 1911–1942*, edited by Rita Bode and Lesley D. Clement (McGill-Queen's UP, 2015), 91–109.
- 9 Montgomery, *ENM* 61.
- 10 Rubio, "Subverting the Trite" 12.
- 11 Epperly, *Through Lover's Lane* 7.
- 12 Epperly, "L.M. Montgomery's *Anne's House of Dreams*" 40.
- 13 Pike, "(Re)Producing Canadian Literature" 68.
- 14 Montgomery, *ENM* 6–7.
- 15 Gothie, "Pages to Pilgrimages."
- 16 Fiamengo, "Towards a Theory" 226–7. For further discussion of Montgomery's work being "adapted" in other parts of the world, see Steffler's "Anne in a 'Globalized' World" (referenced in note 7).
- 17 See "A Drone's Eye View of Fiona Damage at P.E.I. National Park," CBC News, 29 Sept. 2022; "Hurricane Fiona Recovery," Parks Canada, 15 Dec. 2022, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-fiona-national-….
- 18 Epperly, *Through Lover's Lane* 24.
- 19 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* xv.
- 20 Montgomery, *ENM* 309–15.
- 21 Montgomery, *EC* 102, 238.
- 22 Montgomery, *ENM* 199.
- 23 Montgomery, *ENM* 80.
- 24 Jones, "Idylls of Play" 121.

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