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The Self-Possessed Girl in Golden Age Girls' Books

Abstract: This article explores the meanings of girls' silence in three popular late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century novels: Susan Coolidge's What Katy Did (1872), Johanna Spyri's Heidi Lehr- und Wanderjahre (Heidi, 1880), and L.M. Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables (1908). These three classics of girls' fiction are international bestsellers; all three novels are available in Nordic languages as well as their original English or German. Often read as taming narratives in which wild girls are forcibly shaped into compliant young women, these texts allow us to see how the girls' book has struggled with conformity and agency since its beginnings. As influential early girls' books, these novels help us disentangle the patterns early examples of the genre offer us as twenty-first-century readers and critics. Though a girl's silence can indicate trauma and social repression (as we see in What Katy Did and Heidi), withholding speech can be a voluntary decision that girls make for themselves (as in Anne of Green Gables). In this article, we draw on disability theory to propose a model for thinking about the distinction between silence and silencing. While silence can be a form of repression, paralyzing the thoughts as physical injury paralyzes the body, it is also linked to prayer and the concept of self-possession. Silence is not always a marker of the loss of voice or physical autonomy; by appealing to the idea of self-possession, we can move beyond a dichotomy of speech as positive and silence as negative.

Keywords: speech; agency; prayer; disability theology; literary criticism; adolescence; girls' fiction, girlhood

What do Anne of Green Gables and Pippi Longstocking have in common?¹ Both are talkative girls, engaged in imaginative worlds that set them apart from others in their lives. Both are asked to learn to behave better, to fit the norms of their communities. But while Anne appears to accommodate the gendered structures that ask her to restrain her body and her voice, Pippi remains exuberant and verbally free. It would be easy to assume that Pippi represents the progressive voice of the enlightened girl, that she serves as both an icon of Swedish exceptionalism and as a model of the liberated girl. Pippi's physical strength – she can lift her horse off the porch and pick up two policemen simultaneously – is matched by her voice. She does not hesitate to question the teacher's methods the one day she attends school; she plays verbal games and flirts with the line between fiction and reality. But as critic Mia Österlund points out, citing Elina Oinas and Anna Collander's concept of "pippi-feminism," "Pippi has become the paradigm for the emancipated girl, but at the same time this focus on a lonely, rich, super strong girl has overshadowed a variety of girlhoods less provocative but possibly as emancipated as the Pippi figure" (36). Pippi resonates with a twenty-first-century ideology that implies that autonomy and speech are linked, that girls are most powerful when their loud voices are heard. We suggest emancipation is not linked only to verbal assertion; silence is not always a marker of the loss of voice or physical autonomy. By reading early girls' books through the lens of Christian disability theology, we move beyond a dichotomy of speech as positive and silence as negative.

This article looks at three popular late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century novels: Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (1872), Johanna Spyri's *Heidis Lehr- und Wanderjahre* (*Heidi*, 1880), and L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908). It traces a pattern of silence in girls' fiction from Katy's physical trauma, which teaches her to modulate her voice, to Heidi's emotional trauma and silencing, which suggest that society requires girls to give up agency, to Anne's appropriation of silence as a form of self-possession. All three classics of girls' fiction are international bestsellers; all are available in Nordic languages as well as their original English or German (Voipio). (In fact, the first foreign-language translation of *Anne of Green Gables* was the Swedish *Anne på Grönkulla* in 1909.) These novels allow us to see how the girls' book has struggled with conformity and agency since its beginnings.

The first of our texts, the American *What Katy Did*, describes the development of Katy Carr, a young tomboy who learns domesticity

after a fall and injury that leave her confined to bed for four years. The Swiss *Heidi* takes as its subject a younger girl who fits naturally into the world of the Swiss Alps; when she is taken to Frankfurt to serve as companion to a wealthy girl, she feels out of place and mourns her lost freedom. Her return to the Alps allows her to heal herself and others. Our third text is the Canadian *Anne of Green Gables*, a novel that begins with trauma in the form of a young orphan girl whose neglect and abuse have not stifled her imagination or voice. *Anne of Green Gables* is particularly relevant to a Nordic context because of Montgomery's popularity in Sweden and other Nordic countries (see Leden; Warnqvist). In this novel, Anne learns to fit into the constraints of her society and earns the love of her foster parents, Matthew and Marilla, and her community. In contrast to the later *Pippi Longstocking* by Astrid Lindgren (1945), where Pippi has the physical strength and financial resources to live independently of adult supervision, these early female protagonists must accommodate the adults in their lives, and they must learn to function within the social norms of their communities.

Critics on Silence in Girls' Books

All three novels appear to fit the shift from "vibrancy" to silence that Anne Scott MacLeod sees as a key element of Golden Age girls' books. MacLeod writes in *American Childhood: Essays on Children's Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1994) that classic girls' novels both expose the idea that a good woman is a quiet woman and that they respond with "outrage" and "something like mourning" to this silencing (28). Later critics build on this perspective. Jenny Robinson describes her own sense of betrayal at the injury that transforms Katy from adventurous girl to domestic woman: "Katy had not, in the 'end' been allowed her self-willed, self-defined identity as a lively, creative rebel; she was not to be allowed a destiny in which she independently, actively 'did' what she chose to do" (101). Elizabeth Epperly argues that "having won her right to speak, Anne gives up passionate articulation in favour of a conventional, maidenly dreaminess and reserve" (18). Roberta Seelinger Trites similarly sees Anne's maturity as loss, as "growing up means learning to silence herself" (4). More recently, Amanda L. Anderson claims, "Anne's new, quiet nature exposes her conformity to community and gender norms" (72). Maria Nikolajeva lays out a contrast between characters like Heidi and Anne, who are "suppressed and silenced by society," and those like Pippi, who have "complete freedom of speech" (73).

We suggest a third category: the self-possessed girl. As Myry Voipio points out, “not only the wild and witty girl characters whom we encounter in later girls’ literature transcend boundaries” (41). We begin the article by briefly introducing our theoretical grounding in Christian disability theology. Next, we discuss examples from *What Katy Did*, *Heidi*, and *Anne of Green Gables* to lay out a pattern of narrative repression that supports the critical concern that maturation for girls means loss of voice. While this pattern can be found in all three books, our analysis unearths a contrast between *What Katy Did* and *Heidi*, on the one hand, and *Anne of Green Gables*, on the other. *Anne of Green Gables* calls into question the simple binary that volubility equals unrestrained freedom and quietude equals enforced repression. Silence and reserve are framed positively and differently in *Anne of Green Gables* in the link between the beauty of nature that invokes silence and in the notion of voluntarily withholding speech as a tool that yields personal growth, including self-awareness, connection with oneself, and connection with God. By not speaking, girls like Anne protect themselves from social control: when girls keep their thoughts to themselves, authority figures no longer have access to the self they might want to discipline. A deeper exploration of Anne’s maturation and subsequent vocal restraint reveals a girl who finds strength in her ability to choose when and when not to speak, a girl who discovers the power of quietness as a form of self-possession and agency.

Disability Studies, Silence, and Silencing

Disability studies scholars disrupt cultural and societal conceptions of normalcy and reframe negative representations of physical lack or loss as a fertile site for celebrating human variation. For example, Robert McRuer articulates “crip theory,” which draws on Adrienne Rich’s conception of compulsory heterosexuality, and argues that compulsory able-bodiedness, like compulsory heterosexuality, is asserted as the unquestioned cultural norm, thus rendering it the non-identity against which all non-normative identities are measured. McRuer further argues that many of our social and cultural institutions are sites for establishing, repeating, and reinforcing non-identities, to the detriment of bodies that do not, will not, or cannot conform to said non-identity. In a similar vein, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson offers the critical word “misfit” as a way of destabilizing definitions of disability and argues that to fit or misfit depends on the encounter between flesh and the material environ-

ment. As such, all bodies – not just disabled bodies – move in and out of fitting and misfitting in social and cultural contexts, and unsettle fixed notions of what it means to be disabled or able-bodied. Alison Kafer proposes an alternative to the prevailing medical and social models of disability and offers the political/relational model of disability, suggesting that coalition building and social activism are important tools for dismantling oppressive structures and celebrating embodied difference. These, and other, disability studies scholars insist on questioning conventional oppressive social constructions of concepts, such as silence, and opening new pathways for imagining how they may be liberating.

Christian disability theology, as an outgrowth of the field of disability studies, challenges theological constructions of what is normal and what is sinful. It draws our attention to prayer as a form of contemplative practice and reminds us of the positive connotations of silence. As our discussion of *Anne of Green Gables* will show, in the midst of sometimes hostile situations, Anne uses silent prayer and contemplation to express grief and to align herself with nature and God. While silence can be a form of repression, paralyzing the thoughts as physical injury paralyzes the body, it is also linked to prayer and the concept of self-possession. In particular, we use the work of disability theologian Jana Bennett, who highlights the concept of “Deaf Gain” to argue that silence can be beneficial for human flourishing, and the work of Lennard J. Davis, who helps us see that normalcy is a modern invention.

The Natural Child as Diseased Girl

Katy, Heidi, and Anne are all introduced as natural children, unhampered by social restriction. The novels begin by celebrating excess – the wild physicality of a young girl who enjoys her body and feels confident in her environment. But as Davis notes, for nineteenth-century cultures: “Disease involved excess, excitability, noise, attention, irritation, stimulation” (*Bending* 111). Thus, excess in these girls is redefined by their communities as disease, and the focus of each novel is the need to train the natural child into an obedient member of the community.

We are introduced to Katy as a child who delights in her physicality; she climbs ladders and ridge poles, scales over fences, and transforms her school room into a site of chaos. Similarly, when we meet the child Heidi on the mountain, she strips off her clothing and tells her grandfather she wants to be as free as the goats. Anne climbs a

ridge pole on a dare; her fall restricts her to bed but does not stop her verbal self-expression. All these children are marked by a lack of self-consciousness or inhibition. Katy makes up stories and talks to strangers; Heidi speaks freely to her grandfather and to her friend, Peter, and trusts that those around her will respond to her speech; early in the novel, Anne is defined by her “chatter,” and Marilla tells her, “it seems impossible for you to stop talking if you’ve got anybody that will listen to you” (Montgomery 34, 108). But these girls who run, tumble, and create chaos with their enthusiasm and ebullience do not conform to the physical, moral, or social standards and expectations of their communities for what “good” women should be. As their stories progress, they must learn to defer to the expectations of their communities by giving up their loud, unmodulated voices.

At a dramatic moment in *What Katy Did*, Katy, luxuriating in the physical abandonment of sailing through the air on the new swing in her barn, falls and injures her spine. She will spend the next four years confined to her bedroom, her active, rambunctious body disabled and a source of pain rather than pleasure. Her injury is linked to her disobedience and framed as a logical punishment; she was told not to use the swing and now must learn to better accommodate herself to the norms of her society, to follow the rules without demanding explanation. She will learn from her mentor, Cousin Helen, to hide her pain from those around her – to smooth away the lines from her forehead, to speak in ways that make others comfortable. Through her loss of mobility and the “School of Pain” that accompanies it, Katy learns to be the “heart of the house” (Coolidge 158, 168). Her body and free expression are sacrificed in the interest of the successful performance of domestic femininity. The narrator tells us, “Katy’s long year of schooling had taught her self-control, and, as a general thing, her discomforts were borne patiently” (200). She also learns to protect the feelings of others – in her new maternal role, she has learned “tact in advising the others, without seeming to advise” (249). Her “old, impetuous tone” is gone; her voice is “pleasant” rather than rough (249). Katy’s willingness to accept physical limitation and guard her speech leads to her being loved better. As her sister, Clover, says, enjoying Katy’s new sweetness: “Sometimes I think I shall really be sorry if she ever gets well” (236). This early example of the need to curb the girl child so that she can grow into a good woman relies on a model of natural consequences; readers are encouraged to see Katy’s injury as a punishment for her norm-breaking behavior. Katy’s physical excess – swinging high in the air after she has been

told not to use the swing – is matched with her verbal excess. When she can no longer move, she also learns to modulate her voice.

In *Heidi*, the carefree child of the Swiss mountains is taken unwillingly to Frankfurt, where she is called “Adelheid” and curbed physically and emotionally. Her quirks – speaking freely to the servants, bringing home kittens, wearing her old familiar clothes – are critiqued by the governess, Fräulein Rottenmeier, who sees Heidi as triply inferior – her gender, age, and class all conspire to make her unworthy of expressing herself. While Fräulein Rottenmeier is a negative model in this novel, she does represent the perspective that self-expression is dangerous for girls. She tells Heidi that free movement will result in further restraint:

zum Lernen sitzt man still auf seinem Sessel und gibt Acht. Kannst du das nicht selbst fertig bringen, so muss ich dich an deinen Stuhl festbinden. (Spyri 127)

(To study you must sit quietly on your chair and pay attention. If you can't manage this, I will have to tie you to your chair.)²

Heidi is further convinced by Fräulein Rottenmeier that to tell anyone she wants to go home will make her seem ungrateful. Caught between her own desire – to go home – and the desire to please those around her, Heidi “saß [...] regungslos, sein brennendes Heimweh lautlos niederkämpfend” (sat motionless, silently fighting down her burning homesickness, Spyri 201). The result of this conflict is that Heidi loses control over her body and becomes a sleepwalker, wandering through the house at night, and even opening the front door to the house. Her unconscious movement is a sign of her own loss of power (over her body and situation) and her illness is clearly caused by societal constraints. In this novel, a girl's inability to speak further traumatizes her and causes distress and anxiety. For Heidi to be restored to health, she must be removed from the oppression of Fräulein Rottenmeier and the social structures that see her gender, age, and class as justifications for silencing her.

Anne, like Heidi, is marked by her precarious social status. We meet Anne, an orphan who is dependent on the good will of strangers or relatives, in transit to a new home. In early scenes, Anne's exuberant curiosity bombards the reader through her unceasing questioning of Marilla's brother, Matthew. One might imagine that a young orphan girl in this situation would approach her new caretak-

ers with some trepidation and caution, but Anne barrages Matthew with her ebullient inquisitiveness. By the end of the novel, Anne, like Katy and Heidi, appears to have redefined herself as a quieter, less active, more community-oriented individual.

Silence as Self-Effacement

It is exactly the reshaping from boisterous girl to reserved adolescent that leaves critics from MacLeod to Anderson disappointed and with the sense that lively girls are silenced by a patriarchal narrative that links female maturation with self-effacement. In these novels with third-person narrators, intimacy between the reader and protagonist is possible because of the girl's loquaciousness. We get to know Katy, Heidi, and Anne because of what they tell others about themselves; we delight in their lack of self-consciousness. In this way, the more reserved protagonist may seem to be less available to the reader.

The girls' silence is further disturbing to readers because of its link to physical restriction. Girl protagonists are taught that their bodies are not their own – they lose control of their limbs, are moved without their permission to new homes, and are enclosed in confining clothing. They learn to live in the parlor and kitchen rather than the woods; they learn to speak in low voices or not at all. Their exteriority is often disconcerting to adult characters because these girls live in communities in which female maturity is linked to self-restraint. The distress and disapproval expressed by the adult characters in these novels regarding the girls' unruly behavior is not simply a matter of personal preference; it is rooted in long-held community standards in which female maturity is linked to self-control. These girls are taught to mind their limbs and their voices, to take up less space both physically and verbally. When growing up is marked by an increasing quietude and physical constraint, it looks like silencing is a violent act performed on girls.

It is not surprising that this shift from verbal self-revelation to social polish has been read with dismay, or that readers lionize the girl protagonists who defy social expectations by talking freely. When volubility and physical freedom are idealized, the restrained adolescent girl appears to have lost her agency. Because readers begin their reading with an attachment to younger, louder, wilder girls, the new authority/delight of older, quieter, more mature girls has not been recognized.

“Blessed Silence”

We turn now to less-commonly addressed examples of silence and reserve in *Anne of Green Gables* to complicate a binary of speech and silence. *Anne of Green Gables* highlights how both the unrestrained girl child and the quiet adolescent girl can be read as powerful female figures. Anne is characterized by her ability to be silent as well as by her speech; from the first chapter of the novel, beauty “seemed to strike the child dumb” (Montgomery 37). The sea inspires “a long, wide-eyed silence” (78), and the much-desired dress with puff sleeves leads to “reverent silence” (342). These early, positive examples of Anne’s silence prepare us for the shift from childish chatter to more selective speech.

At a key moment toward the end of *Anne of Green Gables*, this novel reinforces a positive interpretation of Anne’s quietness. Marilla asks Anne:

“You don’t chatter half as much as you used to, Anne, nor use half as many big words. What has come over you?”

Anne colored and laughed a little, as she dropped her book and looked dreamily out of the window, where big fat red buds were bursting out on the creeper in response to the lure of the spring sunshine.

“I don’t know – I don’t want to talk as much,” she said, denting her chin thoughtfully with her forefinger. “It’s nicer to think dear, pretty thoughts and keep them in one’s heart, like treasures. I don’t like to have them laughed at or wondered over.” (Montgomery 429)

This scene helps us see the tension between the girl child’s free expression, which allows for explicit discipline from those around her, and the young woman’s restraint, which removes her thoughts from public view and thus from critique. Here Anne uses silence as protection against the invasive intervention of social critique. By learning to treasure her own thoughts rather than expose them to the ridicule or delight of her community, Anne establishes a sense of individual identity that is linked to inwardness.

To make sense of this model – which offers an alternative reading to a theory that the girl’s reserve must be the result of submission to the gender regime – we turn to Christian disability theology. As noted previously, the turn inward for Anne has been read as a patriarchal silencing of her thoughts and voice by critics from Anne Scott MacLeod to Amanda L. Anderson. She chatters less to her family and friends. Yet, as Laura M. Robinson points out, Anne “has learned to conform on the surface” (216). This surface masks a process of interi-

ority, which, contrary to the loss of her voice, is actually a new form of conversation and chatter. Anne shifts her outward commentary to an internal conversation with herself and with God – she opens channels of divine communication through prayer.

In her article, “Blessed Silence: Explorations in Christian Contemplation and Hearing Loss” (2017), Jana Bennett explores how the concept of “Deaf Gain” – an idea that asserts that deafness is not a “loss” as traditionally understood, but a “gain for both the individual and society” – may be used to think about Christian theology and disability ethics (138). Bennett argues that religious practices of “silent contemplation” are one way to utilize Deaf Gain for rethinking hearing loss. Bennett notes that understanding Deafness as loss reinforces a medical model of disability, which insists that physical impairment is a lack or flaw in the individual body requiring a fix or “cure.” Deaf Gain, in contrast, aligns with the social model of disability, which suggests that disability is a result of inadequate accommodations, such as ramps, sign language, availability of Braille material, and so on. Bennett observes that for adherents of the medical model, silence, as in the case of hearing loss, is seen as detrimental to human flourishing. Yet, when seen through the frame of Deaf Gain and contemplative Christian traditions, silence is beneficial for human flourishing. From these perspectives, silence and silent contemplation are not only valued vehicles to God, but they are also transformed into powerful tools of self-possession.

Bennett’s analysis highlights two important points relevant to our close reading of Anne’s transition to a quieter girl. First, Bennett rejects the notion that silence is always negative and indicative of loss or repression. Second, in drawing a connection between silent contemplation (prayer, as in Anne’s case) and human flourishing, Bennett creates space for us to reframe the interpretation that the quieter Anne, who increasingly filters her external speech and turns her thoughts inward and toward silent communion with God, is not simply giving in to social repression, but instead leveraging her own agency to decide when and when not to speak. It is the agency to make one’s own decisions that transforms Anne’s silence from an oppressive social construct into a powerful expression of self-possession.

Anne demonstrates how prayer is paired with a growing sense of self-awareness and strength when she reflects on her experience of floating on the sinking barge:

"I was horribly frightened," she told Mrs. Allan the next day, "and it seemed like years while the flat was drifting down to the bridge and the water rising in it every moment. I prayed, Mrs. Allan, most earnestly, but I didn't shut my eyes to pray, for I knew the only way God could save me was to let the flat float close enough to one of the bridge piles for me to climb up on it [...] It was proper to pray, but I had to do my part by watching out and right well I knew it." (Montgomery 379)

Anne knows that she must do her part if she is going to survive, but she finds her inner strength to do what is necessary through conversation with God. We might surmise that in quieting her external chatter, Anne opens space for her internal strength to emerge: "Anne gave one gasping little scream which nobody ever heard; she was white to the lips, but she did not lose her self-possession" (379). Anne does save herself from the sinking barge, she does exhibit the ability to know not only what needs to be done, but also how to do it. Anne resolutely grabs the bridge pole and climbs to safety. Anne's simultaneous attentiveness to God and the world around her provides the inner fortitude to save herself from certain disaster.

Here Anne may appear to follow the tradition of the mid-nineteenth century "dutiful woman," who, as Jane Tompkins argues in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (1986), "merges her own authority with God's" (163). But while the heroine Tompkins describes must "abase herself before the authority she has internalized" (179), Anne develops self-possession. Anne's developing agency is evident in the way her prayers change over the course of the novel from childish vocalized imitation to mature silent communication and as she gains a deeper sense of her own authority. We first witness the younger Anne's style of communicating with God (prayer) as a response to Marilla's instruction and as simple imitation:

"You're old enough to pray for yourself, Anne," she said finally. "Just thank God for your blessings and ask Him humbly for the things you want."

"Well, I'll do my best," promised Anne, burying her face in Marilla's lap. "Gracious heavenly Father - that's the way the ministers say it in church, so I suppose it's all right in private prayer, isn't it?" she interjected, lifting her head for a moment. (Montgomery 94)

Later in the novel, when Anne is alone in her room after recounting the frightening barge experience to Mrs. Allan, Anne prays again.

Unlike her first prayer, this prayer is not a rote imitation of the minister, but a silent, private, and heartfelt expression of Anne's internal thoughts: "That night Anne [...] knelt sweetly by her open window in a great sheen of moonshine and murmured a prayer of gratitude and aspiration that came straight from her heart" (445).

This second prayer is a stark contrast to Anne's first prayer at Green Gables, which sounds like an obedient young girl's letter to God. In the first prayer, Anne is funny and shallow; her prayer is a performance. In the second prayer, Anne is sweet and reverent; her prayer is private silent contemplation. The obedient girl child who does what she is told matures into an older adolescent who talks to God straight from her own heart, on her own terms. None of the other characters in the novel hear Anne's second prayer, as this is private time between Anne and God. Yet, the readers hear Anne's quiet, private voice as she silently speaks with God. The readers witness the self-possessed Anne engaging in "blessed silence."

A useful model for understanding Anne's use of silence is Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847), with its fraught relationship with patriarchal religion. Jane resists the authority of the controlling men in her life by asking for divine assistance rather than obeying human authority. In this way, Jane defies patriarchal authority by accessing spiritual authority. In a reversal of the apparent order of things – where a patriarchal God participates in the oppressive repression and silencing of women – prayer, and by extension God provides an avenue for Jane to discover, understand, and express her authority and power. We suggest that *Anne of Green Gables* follows a similar model. Prayer redefines speech as self-possession rather than performance; it allows protagonists to leverage outward quietude as a means of inward strength.

When Anne tells Marilla, "It's nicer to think dear, pretty thoughts and keep them in one's heart, like treasures. I don't like to have them laughed at or wondered over" (Montgomery 429), she is both acknowledging the restrictions of a world in which she is patronized, "laughed at," or marked as an outsider to her community and defining a solution: to decide for herself the value of her thoughts and to protect them within an interior space. Anne reframes silencing as interiority; she adapts her childhood tendency toward extroversion as a way of cherishing her own ideas.

Through prayer, Anne reflects a model of spirituality that links maturity with interiority; she reframes silence as personal gain instead of loss. It points to a process where reflection can be understood as evidence of a powerful form of self-knowledge and understand-

ing. Anne holds her “dear, pretty thoughts” inside as she matures, not because she is oppressed or repressed, but because she is finding her inner voice and strength.

Anne’s interiority thus becomes a powerful example of resistance to established societal and cultural gender norms. This helps us understand why young readers of *Anne of Green Gables* typically do not recall Anne as passive or meek, but as a vivacious, self-possessed girl. As Catherine Sheldrick Ross and Åsa Warnqvist discover in their research on Canadian (Ross) and Swedish (Warnqvist) readers, Anne’s world is perceived as a place of safety and comfort. Readers re-read Montgomery’s work to “make sense of intense personal experience” (Ross and Warnqvist). Similarly, Vappu Kannas finds that Finnish readers respond to Montgomery’s work with love “for the act of reading” (118). Kannas writes, “it is not so much that Montgomery’s books are emotional or sentimental [...] but that her readers have such a close relationship with them that reading becomes an emotional experience” (124).

Anne’s model of interiority also offers an extension of Angela Hubler’s idea of “liberatory reading” (270). Hubler argues that readers can love these books because they mis-remember their plots. Hubler’s research on girls as readers finds that many girl readers simply do not remember the moments of restriction that appear in girls’ books; they make the girl protagonist’s story accommodate their own desires. For Hubler, “liberatory reading” requires *misreading* and forgetting certain elements of the story; girls can be inspired by sexist novels only if they forget the moments when protagonists are shaped by violence and patriarchal discourse. In contrast, we suggest that girl readers can find books like *Anne of Green Gables* liberatory by re-imagining what it means for a girl to hold her tongue.

Re-imagining Normalcy: The Self-Possessed Girl

We turn now to the disability studies’ critique of “normalcy” to further complicate the binary in early girls’ books that equates verbosity with self-possession and quietness with oppression. In analyzing how cultural ideas about disabled and “normal” (read non-disabled) bodies are reproduced, Lennard J. Davis argues compellingly that novels often reflect the prejudices of society regarding people with disabilities; the “very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normativity encourages us to identify with him or her” (“Constructing Normalcy” 21). The power of this iden-

tification, Davis suggests, is that readers absorb the “semiologically normative signs” advanced through novels and learn to locate those normative signs beyond the text and in the broader world (“Constructing Normalcy” 21). Davis challenges the construction of normalcy in novels (and elsewhere), noting that the symbolic creation of a norm also creates the “abnormal,” and firmly establishes it as the inferior other. Davis’s insights about the construction of normalcy encourage other disability studies scholars such as Sarah E. Chinn and Ellen Samuels to claim that “DS [...] positions you in relation to normativity in a totally different way [...] it’s always in your mind about how are bodies represented, how are bodies functioning, how is functionality represented, what does it mean to be normal?” (148).

If we extend disability studies’ critique of what is deemed “normal” to include not just the body but also the social and moral worlds of the novel, we can understand Anne’s choice to “keep [her thoughts] in [her] heart, like treasures” as challenging both “normal” judgements about female maturation as a process of silencing and assumptions that there was only one way to be a “normal” girl or woman in the nineteenth century. For example, Anne actively chooses silence for herself, rather than being silenced by others. Hence, her external silence is *not* the result of social coercion or discipline, but rather a sign of self-possession and self-agency. Through Anne, we see that a girl’s or woman’s choice to be quiet can be empowering. In the twenty-first century, speech is typically understood as both “normal” and empowering for girls. This dominant norm excludes other ways of being. Specifically, it positions people who lack verbal communication abilities, as well as people who simply choose not to talk much, as non-normal and deficient. By reading these older novels, young readers today can learn that there are many valid, even “normal,” ways to be a powerful girl or woman.

Anne of Green Gables helps us reframe our understanding of the words girls do not speak, to see her change as a taking on of agency and self-possession rather than a forcible shaping. Speaking less does not necessarily mean a loss of power; it can be deliberately chosen. If we place *Anne of Green Gables* in a tradition of spirituality that celebrates silent contemplation as a powerful tool of agency, if we embrace a more capacious view of “normal,” if we allow ourselves to look beyond the delight of unfettered expression, we can see why a character like Anne is so attractive to readers despite her quietness and self-control, why her social shaping is not the only story.

It is tempting to privilege the girl child as the “normal” female and then see maturity as disabling. In a way, this is reasonable – the

gender regime certainly celebrates ways of performing femininity that feel restrictive to many female-identifying persons. But there is a risk in saying that the talkative girl child is the ideal of femininity in the same way that glorifying the silent woman is restrictive. In both cases, there is a model of what it means to perform femininity correctly, and it is a limiting model.

Silence and Twenty-First-Century Readers

Growth in the girls' novel is not always about loss; becoming a woman is not just about silencing a girl child. There is another approach to the changing, diverse experience of girlhood and womanhood that focuses on inwardness and on an embodied awareness of the self. The chattering child is most responsive to external authority. The introspective adolescent may appear externally to take up less space, but that is in part because she is directing her energy inward and empowering herself.

Novels, with their reliance on the reader's access to the interior life of characters, thus provide opportunities to reframe the girl's silence. While the girl character may become less physically active and less verbal in her own community, the reader continues to have access to her interior experience through the text itself. And because the girl's thoughts are shared only with the reader and a few of the girl's trusted confidants, those within the world of the novel who would pronounce the girl abnormal and attempt to re-shape her no longer have access to the self they might want to discipline.

How might a celebration of privacy and quietude sound to twenty-first-century girls who are inundated with messages linking speech and personal agency, and who have constant access to methods for making their voices heard through social media outlets? In the era of Instagram, Snapchat, and Tiktok, where girls can broadcast their thoughts, opinions, and even bodies from the confines of their bedrooms with a click or swipe, and when the "loud" girl is valorized as powerful, models of self-possessed, quiet girls are not only rare but are often disparaged. As Bennett observes, "Learning about silence's benefits might be especially important in a technocratic culture like ours, where noise and distractions are default experiences for hearing and deaf people alike" (146). *Anne of Green Gables* opens space for the quieter girl who values and protects her privacy to recognize these qualities as signs of self-possession and agency. Anne's interiority invites a more inclusive feminism that welcomes diverse personalities and bodies. We celebrate the fact that twenty-first-

century girls can grow up reading books about confident protagonists who speak their minds and become successful leaders. Twenty-first-century girls also need to read about more introverted heroines who are equally powerful.

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Notes

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2 English translations of *Heidis Lehr- und Wanderjahre* are our own.

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