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WGSS 032

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### Intellect as a Language of Love

For Annie Beecher Scoville and Katharine Lee Bates, love found its voice in common threads of interest and interwoven desires. These women met in the 1880s at Wellesley College where Katharine was a professor and Annie a student. The nature of their relationship was irresistibly intriguing to me, as its roots were in academic discourse yet their written interactions were layered with far more. I believe love spoke to these women subtly but surely between the lines of their early intellectual banter and then was made manifest in intellect itself. Careful analysis of Katharine Lee Bates' early letters to Annie Beecher Scoville reveals a breed of love that reached the hearts of these women through intellect, cultivating correspondences laced with passion and intimacy.

The earliest of correspondences between these women are laced with lexicon that both enforces a student-teacher dynamic and introduces elements of passionate desire. Katherine from the very beginning does not hesitate to propagate her role as teacher into their conversations. In one of her earliest notes to Annie, Katherine wrote: "This is only a small note to tell my own little friend that she is never forgotten. By K.L.B., her loving teacher."<sup>1</sup> This sweet sentiment presented an amicable student-teacher relationship but was juxtaposed by a far more emotional

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<sup>1</sup> Katharine Lee Bates to Annie Beecher Scoville, April 9th 1884, Box 19, Folder 782

comment in a letter sent just five days prior: “I slept in your bed last night and dreamed of Nannie, but I might have done that in my own.”<sup>2</sup> This sentence blurs the line between platonic and passionate, introducing an affectionate pet name as well as some less-than-subtle hints at desire. Katherine not only admitted to sleeping in Annie’s bed, but also to dreaming of her even in her own bed. As evidenced by these two snippets of their earliest exchanges. What intrigued me most was the consistent interaction of these two moods of correspondence. Annie and Katharine’s relationship did not transition from that of a student and teacher to that of lovers at any point. Rather, the language they used with each other and the way in which they expressed their admiration of each other seamlessly tapped into both facets of their relationship.

A particularly salient excerpt which highlights the fluidity of their interactions is from a letter to Annie in 1884 in which Katharine gushes about the things they’ll do when Annie visits. She endearingly wrote of birdnesting, hiking, and running off together, and then remarked that she’d been having trouble sleeping even though she had “a large airy room and a wide bed.” Concluding the note, she added, “But when I have a nice sleepy little Nannie to nestle up against me I shall stop wondering and go to sleep too. With anxiety and love, Teacher.”<sup>3</sup> The comfort with which Katharine was able to assume both identities, even if not unconsciously, leads me to believe that both roles, those of teacher and student and those of intensely devoted and affectionate companions, were of great importance to the women. Aside from the persistent use of “Teach” and “Teacher” as signatures, Katharine also addressed Annie as her “pupil,” “student,” “little girl,” “chicken,” and, my personal favorite, “Kittenpillar.” This unique

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<sup>2</sup> Katharine Lee Bates to Annie Beecher Scoville, April 4th 1884, Box 19, Folder 782

<sup>3</sup> Katharine Lee Bates to Annie Beecher Scoville, July 12th 1884, Box 19, Folder 782

interaction of emotionality and admiration created a unique language of love in which Katherine and Annie quickly became fluent.

Though the women became closer and closer with every correspondence, they treasured the academic foundation of their relationship, frequently slipping into discourse on literature and their lives as Victorian women pursuing higher education. Their studies and love of learning were often the focus of their letters. One correspondence, in particular, featured playful teasing and mock-offense from Katharine in response to something Annie had said about the writing of Charles Dickens. Katharine wrote defensively of his work saying “Dickens is always my mental nurse” but concluded with: “But you are a dear, dear Nannie, whatever you don’t like, as long as you like me, -- and longer, it must be.”<sup>4</sup> Again, the pair exhibits a keenness to utilize affectionate and intellectual discourse at once, but this time more clearly than others, it appeared to me that the expression of affection unfolded in writing as a result of the academic banter; as if, the intellect itself sparked those feelings of loving admiration.

Katharine and Annie were not naive to the unique nature and strength of their connection. In her letters, Katharine seldom writes without mentioning once how deeply she treasures Annie and their correspondences. After a lengthy summation of the day’s events and some lines of excitement about her newest Shakespeare volumes, Katharine wrote: “It’s so seldom you have anybody with whom you can talk out of the abundance of the heart,”<sup>5</sup> following the aforementioned pattern of affection after intellect. In another letter, Katharine writes: “I take such comfort in my love for you and rest so completely as your loyal, tender, earnest woman-soul.”<sup>6</sup> So, there is no shortage of acknowledgment and appreciation for their distinct

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<sup>4</sup> Katharine Lee Bates to Annie Beecher Scoville, September 2nd 1884, Box 19, Folder 782

<sup>5</sup> Katharine Lee Bates to Annie Beecher Scoville, August 9th 1885, Box 19, Folder 783

<sup>6</sup> Katharine Lee Bates to Annie Beecher Scoville, March 30th 1885, Box 19, Folder 783

bond. I was captivated by Katharine's use of the term “woman-soul” to describe her relationship with Annie. This ambiguous label was the first I came across that fully did justice to the complexity and ambiguity of their relationship. Existing in some dimension between erotic and platonic, “woman-soul” was Katherine’s way of tying together the elements of their relationship in a meaningful way.

These women put so much value into their educations and their intelligence. Their relationship was one of heart *and* mind, their appreciation for each other facilitated by wits and wisdom. Katharine’s writing reflects her deep love of her profession and unwavering devotion to teaching and learning every day. In their correspondences, Katharine took every opportunity to urge Annie to continue her education, placing great emphasis on the importance of holding on to the lessons she learned in history and literature. In one letter Katharine wrote, “The best teaching pays best, financially an in every other way.”<sup>7</sup> Annie was no exception to this belief of Katharine’s. In one of her letters from 1884, Katharine included a smaller envelope with the following inscribed on it:

“At the hour for going to bed / It enters my teacher-y head /

To write you some Latin instead / That you might be educated / So pen to the paper I wed /

With results that are dire and dread.”<sup>8</sup>

The envelope contained a poem she had written for Annie that was laced with Latin vocabulary and descriptions of the respective declension and conjugation rules. Katharine found great joy in being Annie’s teacher throughout their relationship, even when they were apart.

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<sup>7</sup> Katharine Lee Bates to Annie Beecher Scoville, December 23rdth 1884, Box 19, Folder 783

<sup>8</sup> Katharine Lee Bates to Annie Beecher Scoville, August 10th 1884, Box 19, Folder 783

This pedagogical attitude was always well received by Annie, who would even request that Katharine send her more verses for her perusal, ask for reading suggestions, and seek academic advice. During their most prolific periods of correspondence, Katherine would include “rattles,” or short verse poems for Annie upon request. These rattles were beautiful works with descriptive language and laced with metaphors. The following words are excerpted from a rattle titled “Down a Bleak New England Field”:

“Would my winsome lady mend / footing daintily and slow / and above the sweet ferns  
bend / parting these with hand of snow / Dainty nest shall meet her view / where the faint wild  
roses shine / In the fragrance and the dew, Cherished, lady mine.”<sup>9</sup>

Both women had a profound appreciation of language as an art form. It was their instrument, the spark that lit their flame, and the link that kept them together. Literature was their medium of intellect, and thus it became a part of their language of love.

Katharine Lee Bates and Annie Beecher Scoville’s early correspondences never explicitly reveal their relationship to be erotic or romantic in nature. Because of this, I put great effort into restraining my own personal projections onto their interactions. Yet, there is something undeniably passionate about their discourse. Showing rather than telling, Katharine and Annie used the intellect that brought them together to keep them from growing apart. From poetry to Latin prose, these women found love between the lines, expressing emotion how they knew best.

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<sup>9</sup> Katharine Lee Bates to Annie Beecher Scoville, August 12th 1884, Box 19, Folder 783

Work Cited

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