

Uncovering and Recovering the Popular Romance Novel

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Shukriya. Merci. Dhanyavad.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Shashikala Kamble and Sambhaji Kamble.

Abstract

Popular romance novels are a twentieth- and twenty-first century literary form defined by a material association with pulp publishing, a conceptual one with courtship narrative, and a brand association with particular author-publisher combinations. The theme of romantic love in romance novels forms the basis of a drama involving the extra-private worlds of the protagonists (financial, civic, and familial). The framework of the romantic relationship allows the genre to study the challenges these spheres face over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A comprehensive look at the genre's history and diversity, as well as its reception in different readership communities, undergirds this analysis of three tropes involving the romance hero—capitalist, soldier, and heterosexual. The analysis proves the genre's struggle with an economic, political, and social ideology that has gathered force over the last hundred years. Though popular as well as academic critiques of the genre disparage its formulaic sexual content or its attachment to the ideology of middle class morality, its very nature as "commodity literature" helps challenge conservative thought on capitalism, national defense strategies, and sexual orientation.

The dissertation also considers the impact of the dust jackets and paperback covers of romance novels on non-romance readers. A survey of this material history suggests that it has contributed to derogatory opinions on the genre; in particular, the genre has been indicted because of the "bodice-ripper" covers that adorn many romance novels rather than the actual content. A look at reader and author discussions on the genre, alongside textual analysis of selected works, proves that romance fiction is not fixated on a clichéd plot and descriptions of sexual intercourse; it involves complex themes that are disguised as stereotypical genre elements. Readers' online debates demonstrate how this romance "formula," albeit a function of its commodification, engages them in addressing quandaries related to societal preoccupations. The concluding study of romance reading in India further supports the possibility of multiple, even liberating, readings that can empower romance readers.

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Introduction

[I]n order to be consequent, the will to read literary or cultural texts as symbolic acts must necessarily grasp them as resolutions of determinate contradictions [...] The type of interpretation here proposed is more satisfactorily grasped as the rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuring of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*, it being always understood that that "subtext" is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals, but rather must itself always be reconstructed after the fact. (Jameson 80)

Romance fiction has become an increasingly visible object of academic analysis in the last three decades, from Tania Modleski's *The Disappearing Act: A Study of Harlequin Romances* (1980) to Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) and the recently published *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003) by Pamela Regis. While Modleski understands the term to mean short novels published by the firm Harlequin, Radway does not actually define the genre, except to say that the "ideal romance" focuses "on a single, developing relationship between heroine and hero"; in practice, her analysis discusses one subset of romance fiction called the historical romance (Modleski 435, Radway 122). Regis conceptualizes a romance novel more broadly as "a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines" (14). My dissertation understands popular romance novels to be a

form that originated in the twentieth-century and is defined by a material association with pulp publishing, a conceptual one with courtship narrative, and a brand association with particular author-publisher combinations.¹ Romance novels make up a genre in which the familiar narrative impulse of relating a courtship and marriage completely permeates the form it has assumed and becomes the source for regaining the lost Lukàcsian “immanence” or “totality of being” in a bourgeois universe (17).² In other words, the genre comprises prose narratives in which the move from the fragmented self to a unified one is achieved primarily through the establishment of a relationship between a man and a woman. In both its hardcover and mass market paperback format, genre romance incorporates and develops the myth of romantic attachment—as sexual and emotional fulfillment—to address the destabilizing influences of modernity and post-modernity.

This is a rare genre, however, in that it is known more for what it allegedly is, rather than for itself; in this sense, it actually exists as a kind of metafiction in the public imagination. In academic critiques, for better or worse, romance novels are formulaic love stories; in popular critiques (television, movies, newspapers) they are silly tales of sexual misbehavior. While the latter has little in common with the actuality of the genre, even the former only touches on one dimension. In either case, what is lost in the gap between the metafictional romance novel and the real one is a thematic complexity through which this commodity literature distills what Gramsci calls “the philosophy of the age” (348). Though the metafictional romance is never seen as being concerned with anything but romantic marriage plots, if that, the genre actually uses them as a foundation on which to stage economic and socio-political dramas of immediate relevance to readers. In these conflicts, genre romance dramatizes what Jameson might term

“heterogeneous” narratives about capitalism, state-sponsored aggression, and heteronormativity.³ In fact, the genre is in the thick of twentieth century counter-hegemonic movements, from ones contesting capitalism and its wars to ones advocating gay rights. Romance critiques have failed to understand that the genre offers a glimpse of the reality of existing in the twentieth century under (and in conflict with) the spread of capitalism and the intensification of bourgeois social mores.

Romance fiction’s documentation of the more widespread perceptions of social reality makes it possible to treat the genre as a barometer of the ethos of its times. This role that romances adopt becomes visible in the conversations that occur amongst the expanding romance community. These conversations show the genre to be engaged in assessing contemporaneous political, social, and economic concerns. For this reason, though it may first appear antithetical to invoke Mikhail Bakhtin’s understanding of the novel (as the form that defies all generic conventions) in reference to romance fiction, these novels may be called truly plastic.⁴ Their representations of ideological conflicts when it comes to post-industrial capitalism’s widening reach, patriotic warfare’s shaky ethics, and heteronormativity’s hollow claims demonstrate a changing social ethos more vividly than most other forms of fiction. In calling attention to this function of the genre as a sociological record, my analysis of romance fiction also bases itself on Antonio Gramsci’s reminder that “even commercial literature must not be disregarded in the history of culture” (348). Despite his misgivings about a popular literature that may be too invested in reproducing the technical elements of a formula, Gramsci avers that a society’s true relationship to its time may be found in this fiction, a fact that is decisively demonstrated when one starts to demythologize romance novels.⁵

Surveying developments in romance fiction alongside selected historical changes in political and economic policy and in social norms in the West broadens the critique of the genre, which has so far been limited to feminist analyses. This is a new political interpretation of romance fiction, which neither denies the current relevance of romances to gender struggle nor overlooks the historical developments that have shaped its “formula.” My contention is that the framework of the romantic plot results from the demands of various historical moments and opens the form to extra-private issues rather than limiting it to sexualized romantic fantasy. In effect, the genre uses the romantic relationship to tackle the apprehension produced by economic liberalization and political neo-conservatism and critique it. This is not to say that romances are not preoccupied with love and marriage. But I contend that the development of romance publishing—from the British Mills and Boon to the Canadian Harlequin and American imprints—has allowed the influx of intriguing new concerns into the supposedly formulaic novels. The increasing “Americanization” of the genre has brought the themes of sexuality, but also capitalism and war to the forefront, and for much of the century, it reflects popular belief on the controversy surrounding them. In this sense, the genre may be regarded as a participant in the historiography of twentieth-century public policy and its reception.

I propose to illustrate these thematic threads in romance novels through an analysis of a variety of works, both ones that fall under the “serial romance” category (see next section) and ones by major authors, including J.D. Robb (a.k.a Nora Roberts), Judith McNaught, Sherrilyn Kenyon, Gaelen Foley, and Linda Howard. Through a review of some of these works, I explore the genre’s paradoxical attitudes toward sexual and romantic relationships—paradoxes that represent how readers’ consciousness is

impacted by the determinate contradictions posed by competing economic systems in the twentieth and twenty-first century, as well as the competing ideologies on domestic and international armed conflict and the legislation of sexual orientation.

As a register of popular feeling, genre romance encapsulates the responses that economic and political policies have evoked in the British and American public. It is crucial here to keep in mind that romance novels are by no means objective registers. After all, they are commodities that are being manufactured in order to contribute to, and echo, mainstream convictions—for the purposes of my dissertation, the conviction in capitalism, in wars fought in the name of democracy, and in heterosexuality. But the very texts that appear to glamorize global capitalism, justify war, and align themselves with heteronormative fantasy contain reservations about these ideologies. More specifically, it is the portrayal of the romance hero that often serves to denaturalize them and shows the genre's discomfort in endorsing them. It becomes inevitable here that one recall Adorno and Horkheimer's contention that such variations are part of the culture industry's control of its product (128). But the validity of this understanding of popular culture weakens when it comes to romance fiction because the genre's basis in the novel form predisposes it to contain heterogeneous narratives that cannot be limited even under the dictates of uniformity prescribed by the industry. In order to fully understand romance fiction's role in this capacity, it is crucial to briefly trace the genre's development from its pre-World War I days to the present moment.

Genesis and Diversification: Romance Publishing Imprints and Sub-Genres

As Pamela Regis has observed, critiques of romance fiction have often examined the genre in a somewhat synecdochic fashion (6). Most studies have tried to base their argument on selective texts within the genre, without fully acknowledging the limited nature of this focus. In “Pornography for Women is Different,” Ann Barr-Snitow discusses the “typical” Harlequin and its formulaic plots. Using a few novels published around 1978-79, Snitow argues that romance novels present a couple-centered universe divorced from all familial, religious, and work concerns. She points to the constant sexualization of the heroine’s body and actions, and her sensitivity to the sexual desire that the otherwise boorish hero is able to incite. While a study of genre must of necessity use inductive reasoning, such approaches have left lacunae in the representation of the variety that makes up the genre and overlooked the implications of that variety. (See “The Look of the Book” for a possible cause of this flawed reasoning.) In order to avoid treating the entire genre as static and monolithic, it is valuable to note the fact that romance fiction has been an novelistic genre, diversifying itself with every decade.

The beginnings of genre romance lie in the last century in the British publishing house of Mills and Boon. Joseph McAleer and Jay Dixon have recounted the firm’s growth in *Passion’s Fortune: The Story of Mills and Boon* and *The Romantic Fiction of Mills & Boon, 1909-1990s*, respectively. Mills and Boon began with a diverse list, publishing a variety of fiction as well as non-fiction titles, ranging from the novels of Jack London to school textbooks. Over the first three decades of its existence, the house narrowed down its output to fiction titles, eventually concentrating on novels about romantic love; this focus led to the identification of the firm with romance fiction so that

in many parts of the world, the phrase “Mills and Boon” is used interchangeably for short novels about courtship and marriage (McAlear 2).

In the post-World War II years, Mills and Boon created, and indeed became synonymous with, the genre of popular romance. The Mills and Boon house style was accompanied by a system of numbering individual titles (a practice that would eventually lead these works to be identified as “series romances”). Harlequin, Mills and Boon’s Canadian associate since 1957, adopted the serial numbering as well. (Harlequin took over its partner in 1971, consolidating the two firms’ dominance of romance publishing (McAlear 139).) The serialization conferred—to some extent, quite accurately—the connotations of formulaism and interchangeability on the genre’s titles. (Usually novels in a series are a standard length and while each novel has its unique plot, editorial guidelines exercise a strong influence, leading to similar narratives.) But over the seventies, especially in the United States, the genre began to expand beyond serial novels. This development divided popular romance into two structurally different sub-genres, with unnumbered novels—far more flexible in their storytelling—being identified in the trade as “single-title” romances; the latter’s readership rests on author recognition (as it does for most non-genre fiction) rather than an association with a series imprint.

Besides the structural division, genre romance also broadened in terms of setting. Series romances had begun as narratives of contemporary life in the British Isles (or colonies) but were also beginning to include a few historical novels, especially plots set in eighteenth- or nineteenth-century England. Romances that involved this particular confluence of time period and social structures began to be categorized under the sub-

genre “Harlequin Regency.” (The Regency and Victorian novels of authors Georgette Heyer and Barbara Cartland may have influenced this development in the genre.)⁶

Similarly, settings for single-title romances also divided them into one of two categories: contemporary love stories and ones set in the past. The latter have proved to be a major force in American publishing. American genre romance—novels usually written and published in the U.S.—began with the sub-genre identified as the Gothic (in imitation of novels like *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*) and hit its stride with the publication of Kathleen Woodiwiss’s *The Flame and the Flower* (1972). The seventies and eighties saw the historical romances of authors like Rosemary Rogers, Jude Deveraux, and Johanna Lindsey (set in the eighteenth or nineteenth century) finding a large audience. These authors also participated in developing single-title romances called “medievals” that are set in the Middle Ages in England or other European countries. Most other historical novels were set in America and included sub-genres based on the setting (e.g. Western) or the ethnicity of one of the protagonists (e.g. Native American). Publishers like Avon and Bantam spearheaded this growth of American romance fiction. While they began their foray into the genre with the historical romance, many also published series titles that were contemporary romances, such as Bantam’s Loveswept imprint.

The most successful series romance publisher in the United States, however, was a small firm called Silhouette, which was eventually bought out by Harlequin in 1984.⁷ Mills and Boon-Harlequin thus continues to be the largest publisher of series romances in the world and has continued to expand its list of in-house sub-categories, each with a different thematic grafted onto the love story. For instance, Harlequin *Intrigue* is a line in which a mystery is key narrative element. In the last decade, Harlequin has also

developed an electronic presence, with e-books that can be read on-line. It has also ventured into new formats such as graphic novels, a move that is being mimicked by other romance publishers. Romance fiction has also expanded into sub-genres like paranormal romances (involving vampires, shape-shifters, and other supernatural elements), erotic romances (with sexual encounters preceding a romantic attachment instead of vice-versa), inspirational romances (Christian love stories), and African-American romances.

This broadening of the genre testifies to the fact that romance publishing is a multi-billion dollar industry today. Consequently, the influence of the profit-motive on the content of romance fiction cannot be overestimated. It is, however, equally crucial to recognize that the industry is involved in the distribution of novels that are being reshaped continually by its writers and its readers, often in ways that resist standardization. The fantasy at the core of the genre romance appears to be conservative, invested in preserving a bourgeois social structure that supports consumer capitalism. But the romantic plot does not equate to a monolithic politics; instead, it treats as legitimate the voices that are suspicious of accepted wisdom on globalization, preemptive military strikes and espionage, and the traditional family. While mass culture critiques (such as Lazarsfeld and Merton, Adorno), have often found this polyvalent nature to be a proof of mass culture's role as ideology that keeps in place the conditions that are necessary for the continued existence of capitalism, such a perspective is an injustice to the genre.⁸ As Herbert Marcuse has argued in *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, the tendency to treat cultural production as dangerous if it is not directly working to overthrow advanced capitalism and its instruments denies the value of the

negating impulses in such art. Romance fiction may not be directly revolutionary but my reading suggests that in many instances, its “strong affirmative tendencies toward reconciliation with the established reality coexist with the rebellious ones” (10). The genre utilizes the plasticity of the novel form to keep alive the “rebellious tendencies” of an audience in a post-industrial, post-feminist, post-World War era.

From The Novel to romance novels

The impulse to trace the ancestors of the popular romance is evident in studies such as Regis’s, with Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) often being considered the earliest one and Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) the most influential. Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1848) may also be placed in this genealogy. The obvious similarity between these novels, now considered classics, and genre romance, their present-day stepchild, is that the texts are preoccupied with courtship. The heroine’s journey of self-discovery and social fulfillment in many of the above novels makes an appearance repeatedly in the popular romance as well but goes beyond reflecting the economic changes in Europe and North America. As the waves of feminism ripple across the twentieth century, the twin pulls of feminism and femininity find their way into the courtship-marriage story, challenging the traditional conception of female identity, and aligning erratically with a narrative on class struggle. Not only do these novels perform the function of creating a female identity through the familiar romance trope (such as the woman who starts out as an employee and achieves wifehood) but also through new tropes (such as a female homicide detective who contests the middle class fantasy of marriage).

There is another key thematic connection between classic and contemporary romance beyond the established ones of courtship and the female Bildungsroman, that of the novels' relation to their changing economic milieu. This commonality might be explored while remaining conscious of the fact that the genre is also distinguished from the above classics by its entry into mass production. My interest in treating romance novels as symbolic acts that both interpret and concretize the impact of capitalism stems from Fredric Jameson's analysis of Emily Brontë's classic romance novel, *Wuthering Heights*. Written in 1847, the novel emphasizes the eclipse of the feudal economy by the capitalist one. As Jameson notes, Heathcliff, disguised as the protagonist/hero who disrupts the narrative with his sexual passion, in fact represents capitalist energy crashing into an agrarian world, heralding the new economic order (127-28). There is in the treatment of Heathcliff a fear of the rise of capitalist energy against the feudal system of land ownership and power. Initially, the gypsy orphan Heathcliff departs from the narrative, his penury having forestalled his courtship of Catherine Earnshaw (who opts for Edgar Linton—the country squire.) But he returns, mysteriously wealthy, and becomes a threat to the traditional order that has been established through Catherine and Edgar's marriage.

Catherine's inability to love her husband passionately symbolizes the novel's withdrawal from the economic system that Edgar represents, and though it does not permit Heathcliff and her to marry, she does get to declare her love for the nouveau riche Heathcliff before she dies. In other words, *Wuthering Heights* is not quite able to break away from the model in which the romantic hero is part of the landed gentry, but it

nevertheless upsets his earlier unquestioned primacy by presenting Squire Linton with a powerful rival whose wealth comes from unknown origins, i.e., with a proto-capitalist.

My own reading of romance novels as scribes of the impact of advanced capitalism models itself on Jameson's analysis of *Wuthering Heights*. This is an attempt to correct the traditional neglect of romance fiction's role in reflecting the sociological ramifications of the growth of imperial and global capitalism. In the first half of the century, my study finds, Mills and Boon begins by publishing novels in which both protagonists in the romance play out what it means to be powerless under the crushing force of the new economics. Soon, however, the novels seek to engage the change more deliberately by casting the hero (the traditional figure of subjecthood) as the wielder of bourgeois power and dramatize its repercussions on the life of the working class heroine, the stand-in for her traditionally powerless sex as well as for the increasingly passive laborer under capitalism.⁹

Following the possibility that romance fiction can be examined as a documentation of class struggle, of the political unconscious, leads to a search for elements of the social unconscious that may be extracted from the genre. The possibility impels my study of the form of the romance novel, particularly the element of the romance hero, who represents the determinate contradiction in two other significant twentieth century imperatives in the West—democratic war and heterosexuality. Through his actions and the way others respond to them, the hero provides a way to see the genre's "restructuration" of this sub-text in the genre. In understanding the genre through the romance hero, I draw on Bakhtin's work on the novel as the form that attempts to deal with the explosion of meaning facing a society encountering a new world—meaning that

it can only process through a protagonist with several identities. Bakhtin posits that the mask-wearing by the novel's protagonist is a result of its constant awareness of the demands of the changing present, of the shifting forces of new circumstances that dramatically alter a society's understanding of the world. This excess of reality has to be gathered up by the novel hero's multiple masks (unlike the static epic hero who only deals with a fixed unalterable past) (36). The romance hero in his place amidst the twentieth/twenty-first century selectively wears the mask of the capitalist, the soldier, the heterosexual.

Moreover, since my reading of the genre cannot on its own challenge the existing conviction that romance readers have poor taste and little discernment, I have added to the study the voices of romance readers. While the first look at readers is meant to showcase analytical moments unfolding in reader conversations online, the last chapter on Indian readership, based on a small ethnographic sample, is an attempt to bring my personal history as an Indian reader to bear on this study. I do not claim that my survey and the subsequent analysis of the heterogeneous and negating potential of romance fiction holds true for all Indian readers of the genre; the effort is to demonstrate this potential via my own tactical reading of the genre, not just as an academic but also as someone who comes to the genre with an ethos that is shared by the average Indian romance reader. In this process, I hope to demonstrate that my reading of the fractures in the affirmative text of the romance novel formula is not an anomaly caused by my status as a trained critic.

Thus, this is a two-fold project, attempting on the one hand to demonstrate the negating role of romance fiction, and on the other, destabilizing the one-dimensional

view of romance readers as passive consumers. In order to answer why such an enterprise has become necessary (i.e., to reveal how this particular distinction between, on the one hand, high art/good taste, and on the other, low art/consumption is established) I return to Barthes's conceptualization of social myth, applying it to the packaging of romance novels and the sexuality and intellectual vapidness that it often projects. Moreover, I discuss how this myth has been supplemented by a misapplication of the theory of commodity aesthetics. In particular, I suggest the limits of Wolfgang Haug's study of mass production and marketing in which he suggests that the mass market whittles down not just the appearance of the uses of a commodity to one brand image, but also molds consumers' desires to that one use.

Chapter 1: Capitalism

While the romance hero has been scrutinized by critics like Snitow and Radway in terms of his place in the popular discourse on gender, his role in the economic worldview of the novels—his “mask” of the capitalist—has yet to be mapped. But several novels can testify to the extent to which the hero's association with the profits of free enterprise has played an increasingly larger role in formulating the romantic plot over the century in which the genre has developed.

When Mills and Boon started publishing in the first half of the twentieth century, its novels differed from both the realist novel's struggle to reconcile itself to the inevitable spread of imperial capital and the increasing loss of subjectivity it imposed on the common worker, as well as from the modernist novel's attempt to distance itself from what it saw as the encroachment of commerce on the human spirit. In this nascent stage

of Mills and Boon's fiction list, both heroes and heroines were usually petit bourgeois. In these early works, there was little engagement with the advent of a new phase of capitalism or its extant form. These narratives of a British working class or professional existence dealt with capitalism's effects on the public at large by divorcing them from their cause.¹⁰ By mid-century, though, the fact of capitalism's inevitable march was undeniable and the genre responded by reclaiming the structure of the courtship narrative to stage the reality of contemporary class struggle as acted out by the capitalist hero and petit-bourgeois heroine. Since the 1960s, numerous Mills and Boon novels have aligned the hero's professional life and financial worth with corporate capitalism, emphasizing it further through the novel's setting.

The genre's decided bent for this mask since then is a testament to the impact that the shift from Keynesian economics to the free market in the U.K. (and in other economies) had on its readers' lives. The genre that had begun as romantic fantasy involving white-collar employees morphed into the bourgeois fairy-tale in which romance neutralizes the threat of the all-powerful capitalist. On the one hand, the hero's corporate wealth provides the foundation for the romance, and the approval he garners through his status as the hero of the romance—good-looking, virile, determined, and clever—both relies, and rubs off on, the economic system that he embodies. On the other hand, he not only symbolizes a threat to the heroine's heart and sexual life, he also poses a threat to her life as a professional and to the local or national organization she represents. Though the manifest narrative is about the hero's sexual aggressiveness, within it lies the one about his rapacious business instincts. The heroine's resistance

toward the hero is thus more than a struggle about gender or romance—it is an awareness of the power of global capital and a symbolic attempt to neutralize it.

Such seemingly contradictory reactions to the influence of capitalist wealth and commodity culture appear in the genre outside the U.K. as well, especially in the U.S., as is visible in an analysis of the heroes in the longer novels of popular authors like J.D. Robb (a.k.a. Nora Roberts). As in the Mills and Boon-Harlequin romances, the assurance of the hero's love for the heroine defuses concerns about him in these novels, but the wariness toward multi-national capitalism stays alive through lingering traces of his ruthlessness—and through the knowledge that he is the exception to the rule that corporate capital has no conscience or heart. The happy end to the courtship becomes the symbolic resolution to this determinate contradiction posed by the notion of companionate marriage, which emerged alongside industrial capitalism, and the critique of bourgeois ideology that has followed this economic system and its morphing into advanced capitalism.

Chapter 2: War

This study also begins the examination of the trope of the warrior, which reflects a preoccupation with armed conflict and its consequences. In the genre romance, this male protagonist is in some way tied to the rhetoric of democracy and patriotism. The genre is less critical of this alignment in the early decades of its existence as it recounts stories of the imperial soldier or of the one involved in the World Wars. It treats war as problematic but portrays the romance hero as one of the good guys and his side of the war as the right one. But after Vietnam and the Falklands war, the British warrior hero

fades out as romance novels coming out of England and Canada change under a popular refusal to consider the state stance on war defensible. Jay Dixon, who does mention the handful of post World War II Mills and Boon-Harlequin romances that use a war hero, also admits that these are an exception to the main trend. She offers a different interpretation of the decline in Vietnam romances published by Mills and Boon-Harlequin, relating it to a disinterest in American national ideology.

In Britain, the First World War is remembered as a war of slaughter and sacrifice, in which a whole British generation—the “flower of British youth”—was lost; the Second World War is thought of as a “just war” against the evils of Hitler in which the whole nation was involved, civilians as well as service personnel, and is called “the people’s war”. But Vietnam, with which America is still trying to come to terms, is seen as a shameful waste of youth. (99)

Her reading of war romances relies on this difference in national myth, but does not explain the drop in war novels starring Englishmen except to say that Mills and Boon novels are not really able to face the actuality of battle (104). It is in fact the British myth of the righteous war that gets eroded from this moment on, leaving little room for glorifying the warrior hero.

This character does persist, however, in American romances, though he cannot offer a wholesale justification of the neo-imperial project. The soldier is completely aligned with the capitalist, democratic nation and his devotion to his country (or some symbol of it) becomes the marker of his moral strength. Moreover, the popular romance treats his patriotic zeal as inseparable from his virile masculinity and his sexualization

reflects a veneration of a capitalist nationalism. For instance, Linda Howard's strongly phallogentric storylines are often also spy novels or murder mysteries, the heroes combining patriotism, sexual potency, and justifiable homicide. Along similar lines, Cherry Adair's *T-FLAC* novels call on such heroes as well; one in particular depends on the protagonists (including a female hero) hunting down "terrorists," the term itself apparently enough to propel the narrative and justify the aggressive actions. But this mask also embroils the hero in larger questions about the logic of his work or the consequences of it on him and his immediate world.

The chapter looks at examples of these heroes from the eighties on, highlighting the conflicts in these texts that echo the anti-war conversations rising in the U.S. and England. Using heroes that range from Vietnam vets to warriors in fantasy romances whose plots allegorize America's latest armed conflict, many novels in these decades teeter between employing some version of the "support our troops" rhetoric and agonizing over the price extracted by combat in the form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and weakening morality. They also function as ways to process both Right and Left critiques of the current political atmosphere in Western democracies. In other words, not only does romance fiction contain a sociological history of the spread of post-industrial capitalism, it also offers a look at the global conflict that accompanies that spread. Once again, this study of the warrior romance is crucial because it broadens the understanding of romance fiction as cultural artifact, taking it beyond the important but somewhat familiar conversation about the genre's place in the current discourse about patriarchy and women's roles in it. This chapter thus argues that in addition to dealing

with changing gender roles and expectations, romances are providing readers with ways to deal with the “terrorist” threat.

The warrior is thus another mask that romance novel heroes may don and is evidence of the form’s inordinate sensitivity to contemporary reality. The hero becomes the warrior as romance novels attempt to comprehend the spikes in a jingoistic nationalism as voiced by the state—and almost on the heels of it, to challenge the monolithic alignment of armed aggression with democracy and capitalism that has become staple in the U.S. and even in the U.K. As often as romance novels now venerate the hero who fights in the name of the country and of democracy, they also negate such a construct, warning against his rampant zeal that may cost the nation its soldier’s life and the man his conscience.

Chapter 3: Sexual Orientation

The romance hero is typically mentioned in the context of the sexual politics of the genre, mainly as an element reflecting the internalization of the phallogentrism of patriarchal society. But this hero is also wearing a mask that involves him in a conversation with different stakes—the maintenance of heteronormativity. While the capitalist and the warrior stage mainstream ideology in their selves as a way to deal with the power and threat of that ideology, the Heterosexual hero shows himself to be a mechanism countering the threat presented by the challenges posed to an ideology. This mask therefore speaks to the conflict over, and gradual acceptance of, homosexual orientation. The hyper-masculine, hyper-sexual character in popular romance is often read as a projection of some women’s desire to be forced into sexual intercourse and

loved into accepting a subservient position in the family; in other words, as the protagonist of a disguised rape fantasy. Radway reads the figure as an embodiment of women's desire to be nurtured and cosseted by a husband who forces one to receive physical and emotional support (14).

My first intervention in this debate is to assert that this hero was confined to genre romance published in the 1970s and 80s. I further demonstrate that the appearance of this "alpha male" was related to the increasing visibility of male homosexuality in Britain and in America. The aggressive romance hero was a reactionary mechanism, created to cope with fears of a threat to the available pool of heterosexual males—hence the stereotype of a man who declares his desire for women in everything he does and says. This hero is quite unlike the one from the early half of the century, who was mild mannered in his courtship and nondescript for the most part. In this restructuring—a new hero whose desire and longing for the heroine is uncontrollable—the genre reveals a social concern over the emergence of the gay male. The development of this romance hero, in fact, can be seen as passing through three stages between World War II and the present:

1. 1945-1980s: The social upheaval during the war and subsequent research studies on sexual behavior resulted in successive waves of gay rights activism. As the gay community became conscious of itself and began to demand greater legal protection there appeared a visible transformation in the romance hero. Though Mills and Boon-Harlequin romances showed no overt awareness of homosexuality over the sixties and seventies, when the gay rights movement was strong, the hero's mask changed from the relaxed masculinity found in most of the pre-World War II romances to emphatic heterosexual machismo.

This trait would define the iconic Mills and Boon-Harlequin alpha male hero for decades, betraying through this mask an anxiety over gay sexuality.

That these novels are participating in battling homosexual worries through this hero is also evident in the presence of another element that functions to preserve heteronormativity, namely, the exotic hero. The character becomes a way to introduce heteronormativity into the narrative by invoking a popular assumption that societies that are more patriarchal are also completely heterosexual. Like the capitalist, he exists as a paradox, threatening in his sexual advances, but attractive as well. This is a different determinate contradiction, one involving sexual orientation, and the symbolic resolution to it is the slight softening of the phallic figure at the end of the novel, which makes him lovable without damaging his heterosexuality. Radway has interpreted this transformation without realizing the broader social history, treating it solely the genre's faux solution to the "problem of how to teach men to be gentle who have developed within a set of family relationships that systematically repress the boy's capacity to nurture and, then, in an act of overdetermination, reinforces that destruction by branding tenderness in a man a sign of weakness" (129). Snitow, too, only understands this transformation within the parameters of heteronormativity:

The underlying structure of the sexual story goes something like this:

1. The man is hard (a walking phallus).
2. The woman likes this hardness.

3. But, at the outset, this hardness is too hard. The man has an ideology that is anti-romantic, anti-marriage. In other words, he will not stay around long enough for her to come, too.

4. Her final release of sexual feeling depends on his changing his mind, *but not too much*. He must become softer (safer, less likely to leave altogether) but not too soft. For good sex, he must be hard, *but his hardness must be at the service of the woman*. (260)

I find both readings incomplete, however, since Snitow and Radway's analyses cannot explain the hero of the late eighties and early nineties, who is Heterosexual but never this one-dimensional. The "hard" hero is in fact part of the myth that keeps out the history of the repression and legislation of different sexual orientations. The non-mythic hero, on the other hand, interacts with homosexuals and shows traits that were once solely associated with effeminacy. This change in the form of the hero is one of the ways romance novels participate in voicing the sub-text of homoerotic desire and the growing effort to challenge social opposition to it.

2. 1990s: By the end of the eighties in the U.K. and the U.S., gay rights activism subsides as the community focuses on battling AIDS. This reduction in the visibility of the gay community (especially in terms of its demands for equal rights) results in the decline of homoanxiety—an uneasiness about homosexuality rather than a hatred toward it—and appears in romance novels as a decline in the hero's insistent heterosexuality. Several novels now acknowledge homoerotic desire in passing by including plots that involve a

cross-dressing heroine and a hero who finds himself mysteriously attracted to this “man.” The proof of the lessening of homoanxiety is also visible in the new “beta male” hero, who is more nurturing and less heterosexist than his ancestors (though he often retains the power and sexual attractiveness of the earlier alpha male). Neither his “feminine” persona nor the acknowledgement of homoerotic desire threatens his masculinity.

His appearance in nineties’ series romances, as well as the gradual inclusion of homosexual romantic sub-plots, is the way the genre reflects the slight acceptance granted to homosexuality in this society. The acceptance results from, to paraphrase Suzanna Danuta Walters, the mainstream rhetoric that homosexuals are “just like us” (221). Against this backdrop, where suspicions about homosexuality are not as rampant, the romance hero is once more allowed male friendships.

3. Today: Gay rights movements have made inroads in Europe but while American society seems somewhat accepting of homosexuality in its public discourse, a majority of it is not in favor of granting equal rights to homosexuals. As the demand for these rights grows, so does anti-gay sentiment. This move is also reflected in the increase in anti-gay legislation, such as constitutional amendments prohibiting gay marriage. Unsurprisingly, this renewed battle over “normal” or “good” sexual orientation means that the romance hero is once more donning the mask of the Alpha male. The chapter ends with conjecture on whether the current marriage debate will result in a resurrection of the “caveman” in the romance. The efforts to redefine the

institution will, I suspect, lead to a resurgence of the repressed fears of homosexual “contamination,” which will find expression in the romance through a new crop of the earlier forceful, avowedly heterosexual heroes.

Chapter 4: The Look of the Book

A great deal of romance criticism overlooks the dueling ideological impulses reflected in the genre because of the overwhelming presence of the “bodice-ripper” romance. In other words, since the appearance of the Fabio-style cover image, the “bodice-ripper” has become a phrase synonymous with the popular romance, and any novel that appears to share this identity by virtue of a similar cover (whether expressing sexuality or sentimentality) risks being a target of disapproval or jokes. The merest hint of sexual desire marks the genre as pornography while the addition of sentimentality gets it treated as farce. This attitude, which is religiously cultivated by the media, is at the root of both popular and scholarly critiques. In addition, the paperback format that dominates romance publishing draws to the genre the contempt that has been directed at paperback novels in general.

The tradition of disdaining certain kinds of materiality has a long history that goes back to the spread of the book since the seventeenth century. Novel materiality therefore, almost more than the seemingly reactionary nature of the genre, has had an influence on romance criticism. Where the genre is concerned, an existing unease with emotion and eroticism (which both the Right and Left see as dangerous) is ratcheted up by the rise of the paperback romance, since this cheaper format supposedly spreads these ideas to large sections of the populace. Romance publishing’s greater use of the paperback, a format

that has been regarded as the vehicle for unoriginal fiction, also augments popular belief in the genre's formulaic nature.

That literary critique is often also an unconscious material critique may be proved by the fact that the genre has a pre-paperback past in which its novels merited praise or were at least not targets of adverse criticism. Over the century, this format changed and the material transformations contributed to the kind of critiques that emerged over this time as well.

1. 1909-1957: Mills and Boon publishes its romances as hard cover novels with dust jackets, resisting paperbacking. The illustrations are particularized to the narratives and often show the novels to be aware of the historical moment. During this time, despite the fact that most of the novels are romances, Mills and Boon enjoyed a reputation of publishing quality fiction. (Romantic stories published in magazines and other pulp formats, however, started to be mocked for allegedly light, formulaic content.) Over the fifties, paperbacks incited great controversy in England and the United States, especially as the covers took on the pulp look of magazines. Around this time, news articles that identified these covers with romantic novels (especially gothics) began to appear. Sexuality, romance fiction, and the paperback format were thus fused into an unholy trinity in the public eye.
2. 1957-1990s: Mills and Boon gradually changes its format to paperback after its association with Harlequin. As the imprint narrows down in terms of content, so do the cover images. This first generation of paperback romance novels (both Mills and Boon and its reprints by Harlequin in North America) start to

refrain from including elements that show the text's individuality and its discussions of contemporary social issues. The most prominent elements of the "formula," such as ritzy locales, intimidating men, and demure women grace the covers for decades, i.e., become signifiers for the sign of recycled love. The covers are standardized to the extent that the images sometimes did not match the actual descriptions of the characters. At this time, academics who become interested in the genre started to talk about its sexism, but only scrutinized a small sample of novels; that they treated this sample as representative of the genre is at least partly due to the influence of the cover images.

3. 1972-1990: American romance publishing made its mark in the seventies with the historical romance genre, a departure from the shorter, serialized fiction of Mills and Boon-Harlequin. These longer texts were initially graced by simple cover art that retained the image of a couple found on serialized novels. But the content of these novels became far more sexual and introduced the motif of rape, often perpetrated by the hero. The change added to the perception that romance fiction is sado-masochistic erotica. This judgment then became associated with the covers, with their distinctive fonts and printing techniques. The correspondence between text and content was solidified further when paperback covers in the eighties started to evoke the idea of sexual inequality and female helplessness through images of bared bodies in poses that show female sexual subservience; the "bodice-ripper" permanently became the genre's marker.

Unsurprisingly, contemporary popular critiques of the genre became increasingly harsh, though the texts did not sustain these plots of chauvinism and abuse for long. Even as the novels themselves were moving away from idealizing an unequal gender dynamic, the bodice-ripper became an indelible brand marker of the genre, fortifying the belief that all romances are one standardized product. The disapproval of the perceived weakness of a few novels was thus extended to all romance novels, the expansiveness of this critical move aided by the rise of more romance series that added to the generic image of romance fiction (for example, Bantam's romance imprint, Loveswept). Moreover, Harlequin starts to use "tag lines" on its covers, which indicate a formulaic plot, reinforcing the perception that each text is an assembly-line product. So strong is the flood of adverse opinion that even when individual romance novelists started to become known for their particular body of work—a development that should have changed the belief that all romance novels are the same—the media persists with its generic fault-finding habits.

4. 1990-present: Romance fiction has expanded into different sub-genres, with variations that have only a slight similarity to the "formula" of the Mills and Boon-Harlequin romance. But these developments are overlooked because the series covers maintain their generic identity and the bodice-ripper covers still grace a fair number of romances. Correspondingly, popular critiques of romance fiction maintain the original critical view of the genre as a mildly pornographic or farcical body of writing that is usually inclined to affirm existing socio-political structures. In fact, these stereotypes about romance

fiction are so deeply inscribed in popular discourse that they are regularly referenced by the entertainment media, such as television shows and movies, for comic effect. In every case, romance novels are portrayed as titillating fantasies written and read by oversexed or undersexed women. Romance readers often also come across in these electronic media as possessing little intelligence and discernment and as being incapable of separating themselves from the text. In most cases, these media are popular texts themselves and ridicule the romance genre as a way to elevate their own status by contrast and detract from their own formulae. As a consequence, the genre's metafictional identity as farcical pornography is reinforced in the minds of millions of television and movie viewers.

Readers themselves typically deny the influence of covers as a persuasive marketing technique; in fact, in some cases, the packaging is so cli(n)chéd that readers refuse to purchase the novel in question. The behavior testifies to the genre's existence as a metafictional form, whose readers are always conscious of its real and perceived faults; for this reason, while a few of them admire the classic clinch covers, most favor covers that do not participate in aligning the genre with pornography or farce. This preference has possibly brought about a new wave in cover art in the last decade of romance publishing. The common thread in many of the new illustrations is the disappearance of the human body or the erosion of its integrity. These covers are the result of reader consensus that images of the body are the source of negative judgments passed on the genre. The new artwork thus reflects an

attempt to conceal or de-humorize the body and could actually offer a new way to understand how scopophilia and desire works in the genre.

Chapter 5: The Reading Public and Public Reading

I observed the working of online groups of romance readers as a complement to my “rewriting of the literary text” that is the romance novel. The conversations that I culled from the electronic extension of the romance community, particularly on bulletin boards and blogs, challenge the mythology that romance reading is a solitary and uncritical practice involving stories of narrow narrative scope. This long-standing assumption has meant that though the genre has been the object of analysis, the novels have paradoxically been treated as lacking enough substance to sustain cultural analyses other than gender and mass culture arguments. In other words, while it has become commonplace to concede that nearly all cultural objects have some access to the social unconscious and can be studied for that purpose, romance novels have rarely received even this status, being largely regarded as unmoored narratives that have little engagement with the world. But the reader forums establish how closely the genre mirrors social reality and popular feeling by documenting that readers understand their socio-economic and political conditions via their so-called “escapist” reading.

The glimpse into reading practices is vital to disrupt a long-standing belief in the flawed character of women’s novel-reading. Before the novel form gained legitimacy in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, it was almost exclusively associated with women authors and readers. Its fictions (usually tales of romantic pursuits) were looked at with suspicion, regarded as lies that encouraged readers to abandon the real world and their

duties in it in favor of tales of seduction. At the root of this disapproval lay the concern that reading the novel in the privacy of one's bedroom was a masturbatory act. Critics of the novel thus not only condemned its immoral characters and frivolous content but implied that women reading about them in private were experiencing sexual pleasure and learning dangerous models for female behavior. The novel was therefore treated as the genre that involved private reading with no moral or ethical use value—only sexual titillation and auto-eroticism (Warner 140-41).

William Warner relates that over the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the novel began to be repositioned as a significant literary form—the Novel—with concerns that extended beyond the narrow confines of romantic dalliances to addressing the world outside the home (19-25). The Novel, as opposed to its predecessors, also had fewer associations of a solitary reading practice. Indeed, it was read aloud in families and other groups, even broadcast in newspapers. Its reading became a public act and played a role in its acceptance as a respectable form of literature. Interestingly, this was also the time that male novelists appeared on the scene, a change that instituted a new hierarchy of legitimacy in the genre. Venerating cultural objects associated with men is a recurring phenomenon, one that Andreas Huyssen highlights. He contends in his discussion on the high versus low culture divide in the twentieth century that it was based on a gendering of creative works so that that which was produced by the enterprising male was elevated to the status of art:

[W]hen the 19th and early 20th centuries conjured up the threat of the masses “rattling at the gate,” to quote Hall, and lamented the concomitant decline of culture and civilization (which mass culture was invariably

accused of causing), there was yet another hidden subject. In the age of nascent socialism *and* the first major women's movement in Europe, the masses knocking at the gate were also women, knocking at the gate of a male-dominated culture. It is indeed striking to observe how the political, psychological, and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities. (47)

Huysen's analysis of how male art forms have been coded as "good" due to a concern with public issues and those by or for women as "bad" because of their alleged interest in sensuality and frivolity applies to romance fiction. Ever since romance novels appeared on the academic radar, critiques of them have rested on the premise that they are written by scribbling women and other women consume them indiscriminately in solitude in order to experience sexual arousal and have one's existing understanding of the world reconfirmed (Douglas 1980, Snitow 1983). This alleged mode of romance reading is a fiction; romance novels may describe private sexual behavior but romance reading is often a communal act and one involving critical apprehension. The public mode of discussing romance novels started in the typical fan correspondence between readers and authors (channeled through the publisher) but today, the fact that the genre is read critically and communally can be clearly seen in on-line forums devoted to romance novels. In the last decade, blogs and message boards have conferred greater visibility on the process that is romance *reading*, proving that it is not simply romance *consumption*.

Unlike the somewhat one-sided or time-delayed conversations in traditional fan mail, the on-line discussions show a reading practice that thrives on constant critiques and exchange. It is in these dynamic conversations—“multilogs” as I term them—that the real extent of romance reading as a public practice becomes evident. This is not exclusively solitary reading; it is increasingly a critical reading about private behavior and public concerns in a very public arena. The conversations that happen on-line suggest that romance fiction involves social fantasies that stage the pressures of modernity and globalization on both the readers and the publishing industry. They also suggest how realism, not a term non-readers associate with the genre, is actually the fundamental mode of romance fiction narrative. Finally, through demonstrating the working of this community and of the non-reader community it encounters, these conversations show the operation of social taste when it comes to a hierarchy of literary class.

In these online exchanges, readers discuss plot elements, distinguish between the real and the fantastic, question the authenticity of research, and so forth, none of which has been treated as valuable in any commentary on the genre. Critics have either seen this data as inorganically lumped on the formulaic plot to confer value on it or as catering to those readers who want to pretend they don't like pornography; even further, there is an implicit belief that no one really reads these passages, only skims them on the way to the sexual episodes (Snitow 254). Even Radway—who notes that readers insist that romances have educational value because they teach them about historical events or trends in music and clothing—does not give the socio-political scaffolding of the romantic plot much importance. In fact, implicit in her recounting of readers' repeated references to the educational use of the genre is the judgment that these claims are a way for women to

justify reading something that they sense has no real literary significance (107). It thus seems that even if there are non-sexual elements in romance fiction, they lose worth because they appear in novels that are unabashedly about love and marriage. But the assumption that this material is fluff is challenged by the seriousness with which it is treated in readers' discussions and by the effort devoted to writing it.

This chapter therefore undertakes a study of the extensions of the genre on the Internet. I contend that author websites, as well as the bulletin boards where readers question authors about their narratives, and e-groups and e-mail lists where romances are evaluated and analyzed as closely as in academic discourse, reveal the working of social groups and social taste and the particular mode of realism that sustains these novels. The chapter will assess this cyber talk, examining whether it is a blunted pseudo-analysis created by clever marketing or if it is actually an analysis that undercuts that very industrialization of literature.

The diversity of the readers that is revealed in these forums also challenges the perception of romance readers as a homogeneous community lacking perspicacity. Through their discussions on the formula of popular romance and the challenges to it, readers demonstrate that the genre is *novelized* courtship narrative (i.e., responsive to contemporary reality and its duresses). While their exchanges appear fan talk, they testify to a persistent willingness to evaluate the commodity nature of the genre today. Posters on the board, ranging from nurses to college students to academics, practice a public reading of romance fiction that lays bare its dissonant narratives. Authors participate in this process as well, addressing their role in the culture industry/literature divide. I often transcribe these informal critiques rather than just referring to them because this method

allows the reading community's voice to be heard, and shows readers to be more than silent, consuming (and consumptive) masses. Without treating the readers' remarks as any sort of oracular truths, I nevertheless desist from evaluating them as somehow already dupes of the culture industry. Too much commentary on popular culture—even, as I noted above, a sympathetic one such as Radway's—routinely rests on devaluing the faculties of the masses. I therefore depart from an excessive attachment to the hermeneutic of suspicion, which threatens to introduce a problematic elitism that maintains the status of certain groups as the chief arbiters of taste and truth. In this chapter, I seek to offset the effects of such a bias while employing the conversations to support my larger argument about the potential for sociological reading of this literature. In other words, I admit that these conversations are not the full truth regarding the motivations and practice of romance-reading; they do, however, reveal how the genre's reshaping and reception provides access to a synchronic as well as a diachronic history.

This look at readers shows their inquiring nature and their interactions with the romance publishing industry as well as their far from passive or private reading practice. The chapter distills some of their preoccupations and interests, though there are many more that would merit such scrutiny. The conversations serve as a way to supplement the section in which I undertake a reading of the three most pressing thematic preoccupations of the genre. The chapter is key to establishing that the thematic sections are not just another critical reading imposed on the genre that may not hold up as a possible interest/concern for the common reader. The instances of reader-led critiques I document are a reiteration of the genre's potential to be read against the grain by its readers. For instance, when I submit that certain formal elements show the effects of the

institutionalization of a free market economy, democratic war, or heteronormativity, changes crucially relevant to the lives of the readers, it is not a critique that stands in isolation; instead, instances such as the online discussion among readers on how the “Happily Ever After” ending is the cornerstone of the genre because it stands in for the life instinct (a universal desire), suggests that the common reader is also capable of similar interpretive gestures—gestures made possible by the fact that the genre is not monolithic or “closed.”

Chapter 6: Reading Romance in India

Keeping in mind that romances (published by American, Canadian, and British companies) are read in other countries (such as the former British colonies) my dissertation includes a survey of Indian romance readers that I conducted in the city of Pune in 2005. (Indian readers are part of a substantial audience that may not yet have a strong presence in cyberspace.) The survey responses suggested that readers in other cultures make the genre’s representation of a “Western” ethos relevant to their own lives. The respondents contravene the impression about the demographic that reads romance fiction. Further, the meaning-making that these readers might undertake—as I do—lends credence to the feminist readings that Western romance readers have been claiming, in vain, in their own practice (Radway 78). Introducing into the study the potential for a similar analysis for a group that is culturally different from romance fiction’s traditionally known readers also validates the earlier chapters’ claims about the subversive textual possibilities and appeals that lie within the boy-meets-girl formula.

The “resistance” reading that reveals this complexity, challenging the ostensible ideology of the romance genre, can yield clearly feminist narratives in the Indian context. The presence of this reader further denaturalizes the elements regarded as the genre’s “formula,” as indicators of its silly sentimental sexuality, revealing how they could function as a radical critique of accepted social structures. These elements may range from female sexual assertiveness to conversations about gender roles between the hero and heroine, and from affective individualism to a de-shaming of the female body. While romance fiction has often been critiqued for promoting a conservative agenda about the traditional family and gender roles, taking Indian readership into account reveals emancipatory narratives that disrupt the grand narrative of marriage-as-inevitability that is familiar to readers in that social structure; by extension, it also supports my argument that the genre truly has the potential to invite resistance readings of the other ideological voices in the genre (such as benevolent capitalism, democratic war, and heteronormativity).

Chapter One: Capitalism

Romance novels can throw into relief the dominant ideological movements of the twentieth century even as they often serve as exemplars of those ideologies (thus acting as the socially symbolic acts that can provide access to the political unconscious) (Jameson 144). This chapter demonstrates this paradoxical state by highlighting the genre's responsiveness to the most pressing economic imperatives facing its audience, especially after World War II. In particular, this analysis involves examining a trope that is often used in depicting the hero in romance novels in the second half of the twentieth century—that of the businessman.

This is one of the faces that the romance hero must adopt when the genre is faced with new economic and social repercussions in its encounters with the growth of capitalism. (As Bakhtin notes, the hero of the novel, unlike the hero of the epic, is capable of wearing multiple masks. This is a necessity prompted by the fact that the novel embraces contemporaneity, which results in the content of the novel exceeding one protagonist; the excess must be absorbed by new masks (36).) In the mask of the capitalist, the romance hero allows the faults as well as the attractions of capitalism to be represented by the corresponding off-putting or seductive traits of the lover. In staging the lover's strategies and strengths in the courtship narrative, the novels use traits such as cleverness and ruthlessness, characteristics borrowed heavily from the popular understanding of corporation heads. The tack thus dramatizes in the love story a tale of big business and its impact on others. Casting the capitalist as romantic hero performs the function of personalizing the abstract economic force of the free market (almost the lone survivor of the wars between economic systems in the last two hundred years).

As I mention in the introduction, the entwinement of courtship narrative with a narrative about capitalism has been a running theme in the novel since its inception. Raymond Williams touches on its impact in his assessment of British society as it is distilled in the works of Austen:

[Society] is an active complicated sharply speculative process: of inherited wealth and newly enclosing and engrossing estates; of fortunes from trade and colonial and military profit being converted into houses and property and social position; of settled and speculative marriages into estates and incomes. It is indeed that most difficult world to describe, in English social history: an acquisitive high bourgeois society at the point of its most evident interlocking with an agrarian capitalism that is itself mediated by inherited titles and the making of family names. (21)

The romanticizing of the male protagonists in this “long and complicated interaction of landed and trading capital” established a popular model for the romantic hero—one possessing a *capitalist* identity. The genre of twentieth-century popular romance retains both the economic *mise-en-scène* that originated in the late eighteenth century and the masculine ideal of the businessman, though this trope has evolved from one standing in for market capitalism to one representing multinational capitalism.

The preoccupation with men who own land, labor, and capital goods across national boundaries has become increasingly visible in most popular romance novels, from Mills and Boon-Harlequin series titles, to single-title contemporary and historical romances published in the last four decades. It is unsurprising that the romance genre, a highly refined product of consumer capitalism, valorizes the system that produces it. The

genre presents this economic system as the prerequisite for happiness by repeatedly endorsing a relationship between it (in the body of the hero) and the petite bourgeoisie and the proletariat (in the body of the heroine). It is undoubtedly ideological in respect to its fetishistic attraction to the bourgeois tale of courtship and love. But it does not solely validate corporate capitalism. The exposition and climax show the relationship to be combative and reveal fissures in the utopian capitalist universe. But Adorno, discussing television, suggests that such traits are in fact a classic feature of mass culture, allowing and defusing critiques of the system (479). It may be true that all cultural forms are embedded with a systemic failsafe mechanism that perpetuates some form of ideology. But it is, as Jameson suggests, the purpose of the Marxist critic to find the vein that stages the class conflict, the challenge to the ideological strategy. Romance fiction, as seen in the earlier reader discussion on the role of publishing in creating the formula, is rarely read in this light. Its identity as a mass produced cultural form lends itself overwhelmingly to its indictment as a purely propagandist object. It is here that we must recall Marcuse's distinction between the optimism of pure propaganda and the negating tendencies that lie in cultural forms that are not truly propagandist. Were the genre comfortably ensconced in the former category, post-industrial capitalism would be naturalized beyond questioning; the discomfort that the affirmation of capitalism inspires spills out of the narrative, damaging its optimism and forcing the creation of the mask of the capitalist.

The Mills and Boon-Harlequin Romance

Mills and Boon-Harlequin novels provide a stylized image of the men who controlled wealth in the twentieth century. While they focus on the heroine's ambivalence toward her sexual attraction for the hero and thus exonerate her of mercenary ambitions, the novels nevertheless employ wealth as a primary factor in the hero's attractiveness. They ensure the approval of readers towards him through the implicit assertion that his lifestyle will always ensure a future devoid of financial hardship, but more importantly, will create space for an unending courtship even after the wedding.¹¹ The common romance plot device of eventually revealing that the hero's intentions—initially nefarious-seeming—were motivated by love works to garner approval of him and everything he represents. His brand of capitalism—ambitious, go-getting, swift, ruthless—becomes an inalienable part of his worth as a man, a husband, a social being. The Mills and Boon-Harlequin hero's independence from an earned wage is a marker that he is free to resume the role of suitor to his heroine at any time during the marriage without any financial risk to their life together.

Mills and Boon romances have been preoccupied with this economic backdrop, which assured a lifetime of romance, ever since it was first formulated in the fifties. But novels published in earlier decades under the firm's romance fiction list were quite different in terms of the economic status of their protagonists. In the first half of the twentieth century, both Mills and Boon heroes and heroines were usually petit bourgeois, working clerical jobs or making a living as dentists, actors, doctors, or soldiers in the British army.¹² These characters resembled the genre's potential audience—white-collar workers with small disposable incomes. The novels played out a small romantic

development in the lives of the protagonists, one that did not typically cross class boundaries. Unlike the romance novels to come in the post-World War II years, the ones in the earlier period were not inclined to address class conflict, though they were deeply enmeshed in the reality of economic change and hardship that followed in the wake of World War I, especially for the working and professional classes. But the genre's nascent stages dealt with a limited class perspective, appearing also to focus on a nationalist vision that seemed incompatible with discussions of class conflict.¹³ Written during or after the British fervor inspired by World War I and within the existent economic universe (when British economic policies favored state regulation and provided protection to smaller firms), the novels seem disinclined to examine the weaknesses of the existent class structure and content to express just one class sensibility. The situation was imperfect but did not appear to need, or to be threatened by, change. As economic policy moved away from state regulation to free trade after World War II and led to the collapse of less competitive firms and loss of jobs, plots change dramatically. In the new formula, the fantasy becomes one of financial security, which is solely guaranteed by an alliance with the intruding force of free market capitalism. In other words, the novels reenact the dialectical approach to a new form of capitalism that Jameson observes in *Wuthering Heights*.¹⁴ The genre's decided bent for bourgeois money since the fifties confirms the all-pervasive impact of global capitalism and of the shift from Keynesian economics to the free market in Britain on its readers' lives. The novels that had begun as romantic fantasy involving white-collar employees morphed into the bourgeois fairy-tale in which romance neutralizes the threat of the all-powerful capitalist.

Mills and Boon's editorial guidelines began to emphasize the hero's ascension as a corporate capitalist in the fifties and have been followed in innumerable novels since then. For instance, the Mills and Boon-Harlequin website currently describes the ideal submission for a *Modern Romance*—an imprint under the main line—as "...set in *sophisticated, glamorous, international locations*.... [with a] focus on strong, *wealthy, breathtakingly charismatic alpha-heroes*" [emphasis mine] ("Writing Guidelines"). Many of these novels focus almost exclusively on the ambitious businessman who has earned his wealth and success. Descriptions of his world do not just provide a novelized version of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*; they are repeatedly presented as the benefits of the hero's devotion to corporate capitalism. A life of privilege as the dividend earned by capital makes its presence felt in nearly every chapter. Thus, private jets, limousines, and multiple homes are indispensable elements in the Mills and Boon-Harlequin series, and its "Continental hero" sub-genre also contains references to privately owned islands, launches, and yachts, not to mention well-tended gardens and Olympic-sized pools. There is frequent mention of housekeeping and grounds-keeping staff, security personnel, assistants, and personal physicians. All of this underscores the fact that the plots of romance novels not only function on the basis of those monetary advantages but are also inextricably tied to this economy. Rather than validating this system outright, however, the stories endorse it by setting the narrative of love, marriage, and happiness in it exclusively—alternative economic backgrounds or world views are rarely acknowledged.

Nevertheless, the novels never dispense with class conflict. Though the romantic narrative is sustained through the bourgeois wealth that undergirds the love affair, the novels express reservations about the capitalist's ethics by disguising them as concerns

over his conduct in his sexual/romantic life. While the predilection for identifying the romance hero with the businessman begins shortly after World War II, the trope acquires a menacing component during the sixties, one that has persisted into the new millennium. In several Mills and Boon-Harlequin novels published from then on, the hero is a successful industrialist, usually one who heads a conglomerate. In the instances where the hero has an aristocratic title, it has no real economic implications, often only functioning to give him a head start in carving out a position at the top of a capitalist economy. This hero has the Midas touch and in many instances is responsible for hostile takeovers of smaller, local businesses (or family properties), often entering the heroine's life through such a business venture.¹⁵ She is typically the employee or daughter of the owner of the firm/property threatened by the hero and is placed in an antagonistic position to the new boss, frequently having to work for him or associate with him in some capacity. Their courtship involves the ruthless millionaire by turns snubbing the heroine or overriding her conflicted feelings about his sexual advances, thus exercising complete control over their interaction almost until the end of the novel. Eventually the narrative controls the anxiety that the intrusion of this powerful figure produces through a symbolic solution. He declares his love for the heroine and thus assures her that she holds more power over him than he does over her. The plot arc appears to be a classic case of affirmative culture, with its defusing of any critical examination of corporatization.

In such a romance novel, the corporate head hero is in fact a representative of the new British capitalism that is being fostered by the government at this time. This plot line is visible in innumerable novels from the sixties on, including Charlotte Lamb's *Possession* (1979).¹⁶ The heroine of the novel discovers that the family business is facing

bankruptcy and suspects that successful business owner Dan Ryland is poised to take control of it. The only way the company is to stay within the family is if Ryland gets something else in return for saving it, namely her. Her suspicions prove correct as Ryland coerces her into marriage. She vocally expresses her resentment of his insidious tactics throughout the narrative, while he dismisses each remonstrance as insignificant. The novel ends with his confession of love and truly douses the anxiety that he had incited through his style of conducting business.

There is a visible link between the ever-present anxiety in these novels and the shaping of Britain's economic landscape by 10 Downing Street. The editors who played a significant role in directing Mills and Boon's plots at this time were somewhat responsible for creating this link. According to Joseph McAleer, Mills and Boon's editorial division began to encourage the above-mentioned economic disparity between hero and heroine (among other things) at the prompting of the editors of women's magazines that purchased the serial rights for a novel (233). Editors like Winifred Johnson were credited with knowing what the readers wanted and exercised great influence on the genre from the forties on. Johnson herself was very conscious of political change in Britain, advising authors to adapt their works keeping new governments in mind.¹⁷ Novels that continued to be modeled on those editorial directions sold well in the following decades because they showed an awareness of, as Jameson might term it, their social ground. These Mills and Boon-Harlequin romances voiced the fears of Britain's economic decline (following the post-World War II boom), which culminated in the 1979 Thatcher government's far from comforting solution to the crisis—promoting the free market. The latter led to the restructuring of British industry

and significant levels of unemployment.¹⁸ The genre's repeated focus on corporate takeovers (or some version thereof) evinces the results of Tory promotion of laissez-faire economics and later, the Thatcherite strategy to promote competition and force less cut-throat firms out of business. The subsequent loss of jobs and the assault on employees' bargaining capacity is represented in these novels through the heroine's precarious situation in the hero's sphere of influence.

Numerous Mills and Boon-Harlequin novels published during these decades thus dramatize the struggle to reconcile the demands of the bourgeoisie with the needs of the petite bourgeoisie and the working class in the romantic plot. These novels appease the fears they evoke by showing the *salvation* of the *dominated* once they—in this case, the heroines—accept the corporate marauder's hidden benevolence. Thus, the conclusion of the romance attempts to diffuse the worry of the impact of the capitalist on the narrative's original localized economy through the marriage. The union promises monetary stability for the heroine's immediate family and often for the extended one, such as the workplace. It heralds the heroine's move to financial security and happiness, and symbolizes the acceptance of the free market, which had initially been greeted with hostility.

It would be easy to label this narrative tendency as another example of the way mass culture creates false consciousness and encourages readers to accept bourgeois ideology. But the presence of the hostility in these novels leads me to argue that at this time the Mills and Boon-Harlequin series was voicing the *mixed* British response to the gradual dismantling of the welfare state, the privileging of employer interests over those of employees, and the increasing bent toward privatization in the post-War years.¹⁹

Not only do these plots show conflicting class interests as embodied by the hero (bourgeoisie) and the heroine (non-bourgeoisie), but they also represent the gendered nature of those class interests as well. As Jean Gardiner has observed in “Women, Recession, and the Tories” (1983) Thatcherism was particularly detrimental to women in Britain, burdening them with more work for less pay. As the recession worsened, women lost more jobs in the manufacturing sector (though the service sector was not as hard hit), were forced into low-paying, part-time work, and had fewer benefits. The rolling back of social services by the Thatcher government increased the pressure on women to stay home and care for infants and the sick or elderly. The Tory emphasis on the family tried to coerce women to withdraw from the paid workforce but also left them unable to do so since they had fewer tax benefits, and many were from households that needed a second breadwinner. This untenable situation that British women had to deal with, in the workforce and at home, is the concealed narrative in many Mills and Boon-Harlequin romances of the time, though it is cast in a seemingly simplistic formula of the aggressive male faced down by the scrappy female.

The firm of Mills and Boon was also dealing with the effect of changing national economic policy on itself, since it had agreed to be taken over by Harlequin Enterprises, its Canadian associate, in 1971; the latter itself was bought by the Torstar Corporation in 1975, making Mills and Boon part of a conglomerate managed by executives in Toronto. In other words, Tory economic policy’s support of privatization and its detrimental effects on national firms were directly inscribed onto the company. While in England the takeover was labeled a mutually profitable merger, and Mills and Boon’s Alan and John Boon did retain editorial control, larger market forces had compelled the publishing

house to hand over financial control to a larger corporation in the interest of survival. McAleer notes, "As a small firm that had had its share of struggles over the years, Mills and Boon had not made provisions for its employees. The prospects for financial security and pension coverage offered by another company were attractive" (136). McAleer's recounting of this period is also striking in that the various people he quotes repeatedly refer to Mills and Boon as a woman wooed or pursued by male firms, a real life drama that is personified and reenacted in the plots of novels like *Possession*. For instance, he reports that the *Times* quoted John Boon equating the firm's pursuit by buyers to "being the only woman on a Klondike" (137). This feminization of Mills and Boon in the face of overtures by bigger firms is a reminder that the symbolic act of plotting novels in which the heroines (and their families) encounter big business both recounts a predominant economic climate and participates in it. Apart from offering the "female" firm's opinion, McAleer also shares the perspective on the takeover offered by Harlequin Chairman Richard Bonnycastle and makes visible the "masculine" partner's attitude. Bonnycastle termed the merger "a marriage," one that he wanted but which made other shareholders skittish (138). (Such conflicting desires exist concurrently in the Mills and Boon hero as well, appearing as a mix of the attraction and resentment that he feels for the heroine.) In the most telling of these references to a sexual union, when author Olive Norton wrote to Alan Boon to congratulate him on the "merger," she phrased it as "your Harlequin love-affair (or was it rape?)" (140-41). The merger/takeover plot is thus plucked from an immediate social reality in which the little company and its old-fashioned values (hence its casting as female) contemplates financial safety alongside financial dependence; both the latter depend on the new, hyper-competitive, cutting-edge (masculine) corporation

(138). The novels thus represent a socio-economic drama of the way British national firms and the people in the workforce faced Britain's changing economic landscape. The battle of the sexes (reflected in the hostile skirmishes that make up the hero and heroine's relationship) is the familiar cliché that is reinvigorated by its new meaning (class conflict), a meaning provoked by the growth of multinational capitalism. It signals the novels' response to a larger shift in the mode of production in Britain from social democratic welfare economics to liberal political economy and the doctrine of market order. In other words, the alleged formula stems from the genre's awareness of history, its recognition of a society's particular manifestation of class struggle.²⁰ The socialist past in the U.K. possibly leads the novels to maintain their negation capabilities alongside the apparent affirmation of corporate capitalism as an ideal. In Bakhtinian terms, while one government forces onto British society the "new world" of global free trade, traces of the recent national history of supporting small, national businesses remain in the texts, making them conceptually heteroglossic. The conflict lingers even today, though it is perhaps not quite as polarized.

The American Romance

The United States experienced similar economic changes and policy shifts after World War II, mostly involving inflation in the seventies, and culminating in the Reagan administration's tax cuts for the wealthiest income brackets and budget cuts to social programs. It is debatable whether Reagan era policies helped the country recover or made matters worse but unemployment and inflation were high when he entered office and a recession set in around 1981. Despite the later economic boom, Reagan's campaign

promise of a return to the free market and deregulation may also have contributed to the Savings and Loan Crisis in this decade and the 1987 Stock Market Crash.²¹ The economic uncertainties on this side of the Atlantic are visible in the genre's contentious relationship with capitalism, though the relationship is enacted slightly differently. As noted earlier, American romance publishing grew into a huge phenomenon after Harlequin began reprinting Mills and Boon novels in North America in 1957. These plots did serve as the first models for romance publishing in the United States and the emphasis on the rich man/working woman dynamic has been a prominent feature of American romance publishing. American contemporary romance in lines such as Silhouette, Candlelight, and Loveswept thus directly explored the contemporary economic reality of the U.S. as well.

Avon and other imprints did, however, diverge from Mills and Boon-Harlequin contemporary romances and created the historical romance sub-genre as it exists today. In fact, American popular romance took off in the seventies with Avon's historical romance line and has been defined more by the historical romance genre (typically composed of single titles) than the contemporary series romances modeled on Mills and Boon-Harlequin. (See Introduction for a detailed history.) For this reason, this section now shifts focus to the historical sub-genre in order to explore what it has to say about the romance fiction's consistent involvement in confronting America's march toward globalization and corporate capitalism's growth. The sub-genre includes novels set in or before the nineteenth century in England or the United States, though these too depend on wealthy heroes. Historical accuracy and the popularity of *Pride and Prejudice* often seem to dictate that the wealthy heroes in historical novels set in England or the Continent must

be aristocrats or gentry. At first glance, this choice may suggest that the American “British” historical romance is indifferent to the kind of confrontation with contemporary economic policy that Mills and Boon-Harlequin romances undertake. Historical fiction, however, is not just a fantasy of the past in some cases; it is deployed in order to observe one’s own time historically. Raymond Williams says this of the English novelists’ imitation of historical writers like Balzac, who went back

to the decisive origin of his own epoch...He learned in this way, in the search for origins, how to go on to write the continuing history of his time....And it was in these ways that novelists learned to look, historically, at the crises of their own immediate time.... (14)

The historical romance sub-genre certainly bears out this process, starting with the fact that its heroes are in actuality capitalists in aristocrats’ clothing. Hence, any study of romance fiction’s understanding of corporate capitalism must consider this sub-genre alongside late twentieth century economics in the United States.

Of the historical romances, the Regency romance sub-genre employs the aristocrat hero archetype more prominently, often telling the tale of a wealthy duke/earl/viscount matched with a low-ranked or commoner heroine. As noted above, these romances tend to imitate Jane Austen’s novels, especially *Pride and Prejudice*, recreating the world of the British aristocracy, untitled gentry, and gentleman farmers, with its abiding interest in the business of marriage. These works are the most tangentially linked to my argument about capitalism’s shadow on the genre. But they are useful as a way to approach the more directly involved texts since their heroes are faux-aristocrats and their romantic narratives are not devoid of the language of the business

world. For instance, Loretta Chase's *Lord of Scoundrels* (1995) features a romance involving a dissipated marquis, Sebastian Dain, and a sensible gentlewoman, Jessica Trent. This pattern diverges from the tendency to show heroes who are actively capitalist. But there is a parallel to the kind of wealth and monetary security that the heroes of Mills and Boon-Harlequin promise as husbands, testifying to the genre's immersion in, and suspicion of, business-speak and the ethos of late capitalism. The plot shows a commercial transaction being enacted within the romantic relationship, with the wealthy hero explicitly providing the heroine with monetary assurances before the wedding.

In fact, the detailed discussion of the wealth that will pass from man to wife after their nuptials is distilled in a legal contract drawn up by the heroine's lawyer. It reads like a take-over bid and a response that is analogous to maneuvers meant to safeguard the interests of the smaller negotiator and its workers. The contract is initially a result of Sebastian and Jessica's public quarrel, which has damaged Jessica's reputation. As her lawyer explains to Sebastian,

[your actions and words] destroyed my client's social and financial credit. You have made it impossible for her to wed or earn a respectable independent livelihood. You have made her an outcast from the society to which she was bred and properly belongs. She will be obliged, therefore, to live in exile from her friends and loved ones. She must build a new life.
(137)

The damages suit asks Sebastian to "[s]ettle all of her brother's debts, amounting to six thousand pounds [and] support her to the tune of two thousand per annum and ... [secure] and [maintain] a place of residence" for her (137-8). Sebastian grudgingly

concedes that he must pay Jessica for damaging her prospects. But since he could have her arrested for shooting him, they compromise and decide to marry, resulting in the defamation suit changing to a pre-nuptial agreement. Both characters repeatedly invoke the monetary exchange they are negotiating, but in the idiom of the corporate takeover, with its characteristic demands and counteroffers of dividends and stock options. Sebastian sneeringly refers to the process as a purchase that will give him “exclusive ownership and breeding rights” and Jessica responds that her lawyer “will see that I am well provided for in the mercenary sense” (144). She concludes the negotiations by telling her lawyer, “I shall expect a king’s ransom in pin money. My own carriages and cattle. Ample portion to issue, female as well as male [...] If he does not roar and stomp about like an outraged elephant, you may be certain you are not demanding enough” (147). Thus, though the couple’s mutual attraction is made obvious from their first meeting, the marriage is accompanied by financial considerations as well. The bargains in novels like this one allow the hero’s bounty to benefit the heroine—and the disadvantaged group she represents or fights for. The American Regency romance thus contains similar economic concerns as the novels discussed earlier, particularly when it comes to those whose avenues of earning a living seem to be threatened.

The Duke (2000), the first of Gaelen Foley’s Knight novels, also invokes the rich-hero/poor-heroine coupling but is of particular interest to our discussion because it highlights the similarity of marriage and mergers (as did Mills and Boon-Harlequin novels). Set in Regency England, the novel begins with the story of Bel, the daughter of a penurious scholar, who is left homeless and then raped after her father goes to debtor’s prison. She decides that she will have more power over her life if she becomes a

courtesan who can choose her protector. She subsequently attracts the attention of Robert Knight, Duke Hawkscliffe, who is looking for an accomplice in a revenge scheme. He first offers Bel a business contract—to pose as his mistress for the time it will take for his plan to succeed; his offer and its acceptance shows his commodification of her. But he later finds himself drawn to her and can neither let her go nor marry her because he has marked her as having exchange value. When Bel backs out of their existing contract, unwilling to continue the business arrangement because she has fallen in love with him, he proposes to actually make her his mistress. But she refuses his offer of *carte blanche*, essentially a takeover bid offering to pay all her past debts and future expenses. She also withdraws from the courtesan life itself, taking herself off the market as a commodity, indeed refusing to recognize the market at all. Robert finally realizes that he cannot have her in his life through any other way but marriage; he proposes in a public venue and wins her hand.

It is in the interim period between their break-up and the marriage proposal that the novel shows the startling similarity between the situations resulting from the two long-term offers Robert makes. As in *Lord of Scoundrels*, *The Duke* uses the language of the business world in close enough proximity to that of romantic marriage to invite comparisons between the two and gestures toward the contractual nature of romantic happy endings in this and other such novels. Bel's need for a wedding ring serves to highlight the fact that but for social acceptability, there is not much to differentiate her life as Robert's wife from life as his mistress by contract—not even love, since both feel that emotion prior to the marriage as well. Even more importantly, the wedding results in the same monetary changes for Bel as the contract of *carte blanche* would have. This is

not to say that romance novels show marriage to be a system of commoditization and exchange but rather that they demonstrate how deeply our worldview is marked by the sense that the machinery of industrial and post-industrial capitalism always threatens one with annexation and loss of autonomy.

Apart from these *Pride and Prejudice*-inspired novels, in which the hero's money comes from ancestral wealth, there are novels in this sub-genre that are more intriguing because even though they contain aristocrat heroes, these men are distinguished from others in their class who do not *apply* themselves to create wealth. This overwriting of one romantic archetype with another, of associating these heroes with early capitalists who worked for their wealth, is part of a growing phenomenon in the genre that revises capitalism's history, fusing it with the feudal order more standard to historical romances. The move is a sign of the system's all-pervasive presence. Just as Heathcliff, written at the advent of capitalism, is a figure that disrupts the feudal world of *Wuthering Heights* (and of Bronte), these romance heroes, written during the present phase of multi-national capitalism, are presented as forces that transform an older economic order by spearheading a new model. These aristocrat heroes are characterized by their apparently unusual interest in new businesses and money-making. Not only do they have ancestral land, but they have diversified their holdings to include new factories, railway lines, shipping and mining operations, and so on and are generating profits from these sources. Their acumen persuades them to invest in the nascent stock markets, while others of their class marvel at or resent their ability to have fluidly transitioned from a dying system to one that is clearly more profitable. The note of valorization is unmistakable, testifying to the far more militant acceptance of capitalism in the U.S. than in the U.K. There is,

however, a more pervasive sense of unease here, a questioning of the hero's very nature through the portrayal of his emotions as identical to his economics—an unnerving equivalence.

Judith McNaught's Regencies, especially *Whitney, My Love* (1985) and *Until You* (1994) (the stories of two brothers) emphasize their aristocratic heroes' acumen in the stock market; they also, however, show signs of concern about those very traits when they influence the romantic relationship. Clayton Westmoreland in *Whitney* is a duke who is credited with multiplying his family's wealth through investments, while his brother Stephen, Earl Langford is also a financial wizard. In both novels, this money (and the heroines' lack of it) is discussed explicitly in order to raise the hero's worth but also to cast doubts on it. Clayton actually pays his future father-in-law for heroine Whitney's hand, clearing off the man's debts and replenishing his dismal finances in exchange for his daughter. In essence, he and the father agree to the takeover, with Whitney as the major asset. Whitney's indignation at Clayton's highhandedness and her spurning of his attentions echoes Elizabeth Bennet's reaction to Darcy; Clayton responds to her resistance to his takeover bid with a crushing blow, raping her out of jealousy. In *Until You* Stephen falls in love with governess Sheridan Bromleigh, mistakenly believing her to be an American heiress. The discovery of her true status breeds further misunderstanding about her true feelings toward him—love or greed—and reawakens Stephen's belief that all relationships are a matter of sexual demand and supply and monetary price.

In this way, money makes its way via a capitalist sensibility into these novels, and though the sensibility is finally judged immaterial in the face of love, its potential for

disastrous repercussions lingers. The happy end succeeds in relieving the oppression this causes the heroine, but it is evident that while the men may have changed as lovers, they are unchanged in other ways. In sum, capitalist wealth and its acquisition is associated with something ominous in the nature of its owners—dangerous competitiveness, aggression, and a tendency to treat relationships as mercantile exchanges. In other words, as a popular culture form under advanced capitalism, these historical romance novels do not condemn the economic structure in which they function; they are not propaganda or blind affirmation, however, voicing through the romantic plot and the figure of the hero a terror of the capitalist Weltanschauung. The formulaic happy end versus the attractive yet fear-invoking hero are examples of what Jameson suggests to be formal elements representing different sign systems, which in turn stem from different modes of production. Understanding the “determinate contradiction” posed by the non-synchronous coexistence of these systems forms a critical part in restructuring the text as a “force field” rather than a monolithic object.²² Romance fiction, at the present historical moment, finds itself in world in which advanced capitalism lies across from/in argument with/in denial of/in alleged triumph over oppositional modes of production, most significantly socialism and communism. This state of affairs, this “determinate contradiction,” leads to the above novels’ multi-message form.

In a somewhat different vein, the works of Lisa Kleypas (who usually writes single-title romances set in early- and mid-nineteenth century England) show an active defense of the capitalist hero through an explicit rejection of his critics, going beyond the standard rich-weds-poor plot of the above historical romances. Kleypas’s Regency/Victorian novels often narrate the rise of the bourgeoisie through the

development of industrialization and free-market capitalism. Kleypas's heroes usually have plebeian ancestry and have pulled themselves up by their bootstraps: Derek Craven in *Dreaming of You* (1994) is a Cockney hustler/prostitute/grave-robber turned casino and real estate mogul; Zach Bronson in *Where Dreams Begin* (2000) is a former boxer turned industrialist; *Suddenly You's* (2001) Jack Devlin, born to an Irish servant girl, is a publishing magnate; Simon Hunt in *Secrets of a Summer Night* (2005) is a butcher's son turned factory owner; and so forth.²³ Unlike most of the aristocrats in the novels' universe, these heroes are in the thick of the industrial environment and unashamed of their work ethic. Their ability to defeat the odds in risky ventures is a recurring theme, and heroines praise their aversion to aristocratic decadence. While that aversion in no way detracts from their sensual nature, it is offered to the reader as proof of their controlled and goal-oriented personalities. The novels repeatedly point out that these men have created their empires from almost nothing, while those who inherited wealth have lost it through a refusal or inability to diversify and multiply their holdings.

This deflation of the aristocratic lifestyle allows the contempt and anger that British aristocrats in the novels exhibit toward business ventures ("ungentlemanly" practices) to be dismissed as snobbery and sloth. Their opinion that the heroes' business practices are questionable can then be discounted, allowing those practices to be treated as clever foresight. Further, Regency novels make passing references to the hero's overseas investments, but by lauding his vision and risk-taking in such ventures, they end up validating the colonial foundations of capitalism. It must be noted, however, that though the romance genre participates in the heroization of capitalism, the presence of the critiques indicates the genre's negation tendency—it is unable to endorse capitalism fully

either. A good example is Eloisa James's Regency novel *Much Ado About You* (2005). The novel's hero, Lucius Felton, is a gentleman who has entered the world of commerce to rebuild his family's fortunes, but instead of being grateful, his aristocrat mother and weak father ostracize him for dirtying his hands. The persistent awareness that capitalism is not a natural state of affairs, expressed here in the disdain aristocratic characters exhibit toward it, is crucial because this is how the critique of capitalism (arising out of Marxist and post-colonial studies and anti-globalization rhetoric in the media) makes its way into the genre.

In Kleypas's *Where Dreams Begin*, for instance, we encounter hero Zach Bronson, whose captain-of-industry forcefulness is expressed in terms both appealing and intimidating. One of the first things we learn about Zach is his holdings in America and India and "the massive quantity of goods he produced and imported," which added to his fortune (30-1). We are also told that "Zachary Bronson was called a merchant prince in many circles, and this term was not intended as flattery..." that he is a man "who happily outwitted and destroyed competitors in the manner of a lion set among the Christians," one whose "toughness and shrewd manipulations had either bankrupted his competitors or caused them to merge with him" (30).

Zach's manner of conducting business thus yields him profits and makes him an attractive hero. But his methods are clearly unscrupulous and only slightly excused by the fact that his detractors themselves are rich, pompous ne'er-do-wells. There is a rapacious quality to his style of wealth-building—a judgment that is never fully retracted. That the novel is preoccupied with his nature as a capitalist shows in the romantic plot as well. (Zach carries out his courtship of Lady Holly in the same fashion that he does business,

either coercing her into his life or using their sexual attraction to his advantage.) The genre usually copes with the divergent pulls to praise and blame such a figure by first introducing the ruthless side of the hero (through the eyes of sneering aristocrats such as Lord Avery who calls Zach “dangerous,” a man who “has no honor, no good blood and...the bare minimum of education”) and then allowing the heroine to become acquainted with him as a man capable of good (31).

With the growing realization of multi-national capitalism’s downside, however, some novels in the genre have begun to voice a more damning judgment toward it. The worry over its overarching presence increasingly manifests itself as a nagging apprehension of the capitalist’s dark side, ranging from the suspicion of his underhanded business deals to fears of his propensity for violence and crime. A seminal case in point is best-selling author Nora Roberts’ *In Death* series, written under the androgynous pseudonym J.D. Robb. It is marketed as “romantic suspense” and actually grafts the murder mystery and science fiction genres onto a romance plot. It is worth noting that here that as a new sub-genre, *In Death* is an obvious departure from the historical romances discussed so far. It is, however, in other ways, engaged in a similar historicization of the present moment—and of its immediate future as well. Just as Mills and Boon-Harlequin novels from the sixties, seventies, and eighties make visible the impact of Britain’s economic changes by personifying the new economics in the romantic relationship, romances like this series express reservations about the spread of multi-national capitalism.

An overview of the series reveals that its ostensible crime and romance plot actually involves an attraction to, and wariness of, economic globalization. Corporate

wealth cushions the manifest narrative in all the novels, but at the same time, its presence is directly addressed as a problematic, even criminal economic mode. *In Death* chronicles the professional and personal life of Lieutenant Eve Dallas, a homicide detective in the New York Police and Security Department (NYPD) in the year 2058. Each novel recounts a murder investigation and reveals more about the workaholic, thirty-one-year-old police officer. But Eve's relationship with Roarke, a corporate mogul she met in the first novel and married at the end of the third, drives the narrative. On its twenty-sixth installment, the series is tied together by this passionate marriage, which provides most of the novels' humor, sensuality, and Roberts' trademark repartee. Several novels have seen the pair chasing suspects across the city, the Atlantic, and across planets, and bailing each other out of tight spots. The pleasure of reading their on-going romance stems as much from this "buddy" relationship of a marriage—in which the female partner's narrative takes center stage, bringing the male along for the ride—as from the more traditional episodes in which Roarke woos Eve. The blend of science fiction, crime thriller, and romance has been a winning combination, as the presence of each new novel on the *New York Times* bestseller list indicates.

The single-mindedness with which Eve discharges her professional duties, even after she takes on the new role of wife, distinguishes the series from other romance fiction and is primarily responsible for its appeal. From the beginning, Roarke is the one who enters her world as a partner rather than requiring her to play the part of corporate wife. Eve is unwilling and unable to don the latter mantle and Roarke accepts the segueing of his narrative into hers.²⁴ A hero who is willing to let the woman steer their life rather than vice-versa, Roarke not only understands that he is second on her list of

priorities but takes pride in her dedication to her job, only stepping in to stop her if she is on the verge of collapse. But in most cases he doesn't question her primary role, even setting aside corporate commitments to join her in her investigations instead.

This fast-paced narrative with its non-stop action involving a hardworking police officer also dwells, however, on Roarke, a larger-than-life symbol of global capitalism. A boy who grew up on the streets of Dublin, Roarke is now, in essence, the King of the World. It is established in *Naked in Death* that as owner and CEO of Roarke Industries, he runs “approximately twenty-eight percent of the world, and its satellites” (54). He lives in a huge mansion on landscaped grounds in New York, owns a fleet of cars, bikes, and aircraft, and employs a butler. A hustler as a teenager, he now owns apartment buildings, wineries, manufacturing plants, research laboratories, hotels, and so on. We are given to understand that he has managed to acquire such a vast empire at age thirty-five because he is something of a genius, with a skill for sales and marketing, gauging people, and buying and selling stock—as well as for being ruthless when needed.

The series juxtaposes this representative of corporate success with Eve, who has an indifferent, sometimes disdainful, attitude toward such wheeling and dealing. She is therefore wary of Roarke's attentions at the onset of their relationship, preferring to keep it strictly sexual. She declines his invitation to move into his home and is puzzled and annoyed by the expensive gifts he wants to give her.²⁵ After they are married, she often wonders at all the “numbers”—stock reports—Roarke watches on TV/computer screens at breakfast, uncomprehending of this world. She despises shopping and also resents the fact that her card identifies her as Roarke's wife, entitling her to free goods in most stores, finding such opportunity for consumerism obscene. She regularly mutters about

him “owning every damn thing”—especially when his property or companies are involved in one of her investigations—and only participates in corporate socializing when it is unavoidable. Sneering at haute cuisine, she usually snacks on junk food, choosing to work late into the night in the home office. Her complete aversion to prettying herself—bordering on phobia—has become a running joke, resulting in situations where Roarke and her friends have to con, blackmail, or sedate her into spa treatments. Thus the series emphasizes *her* disinterest in using his wealth for personal comfort.

Nevertheless, it employs that money and power repeatedly for both her personal and professional benefit. In Roarke’s mansion, virtual reality holograms allow the overworked couple to relax on the beach or in Paris, while a swimming pool, fitness center, and mechanized sparring partners help both stay in peak condition. Eve’s vacations (ones she has to be bullied into) are also courtesy of Roarke’s holiday homes and beachfront properties. Summerset, his major-domo and Eve’s nemesis, runs the household with near-military efficiency. The home contains automated equipment that only needs his supervision to ensure that the problems of everyday existence are ironed out. Eve, who has no liking or patience for housework, is relieved of all such responsibilities, often contributing to a mess instead of cleaning up in the hopes of annoying Summerset. Even during his infrequent absences, pre-programmed machines do the cooking. Eve only attempts household chores when consciously trying to be “wifely”—situations that evoke astonishment or indulgent laughter from Roarke.

Moreover, despite her antipathy to being a pampered rich wife and her dogged focus on her work, it is evident that the latter is made easier by her status as the partner of

a twenty-first century Croesus. Though she resents his interference in her investigations, Eve is nevertheless forced to use Roarke's resources at various stages because they are superior to the NYPSD's databases and equipment. His sophisticated computer network is frequently employed in carrying out intensive data searches and breaking into secure systems during her investigation. As the series progresses, Eve has begun to be resigned to, even welcoming of, Roarke's tendency to join her team and intermittently deputizes him as an "expert consultant." Not only does he routinely unearth necessary information, but he accompanies Eve on her pursuits of criminals, often in one of his top-of-the-line cars, planes, or helicopters, his wealth and contacts—not to mention nimble fingers—granting Eve access to locked files, apartments, businesses, and reluctant witnesses. Her dashes across the continents and Roarke's freedom to accompany her undeniably rest on his independence of a time clock, and on the assurance of comforts on the journey as well as the protection and upkeep of the home in their absence. Some of the more memorable instances where Roarke's money aids Eve include the time when she needs a half-million-dollar bribe (which he informs her can be paid from the five million dollar account he set up for her) or the occasions when she offers his private box at a sports arena to colleagues or snitches in exchange for information. More interestingly, in the last couple of books, Eve is grudgingly accepting the benefits of being married to the richest man in the world, even arranging matters so that she can travel in comfort and suggesting holidays—but only indirectly. The change nevertheless suggests a gradual lessening in her reservations towards the perks of a corporate life.

These are some of the many indications that this universe of the female professional, which is marked by an amusing contempt for the bourgeois lifestyle,

functions chiefly through the monetary infusion from Roarke's many holdings. Eve can help reconcile two opposing needs in the American reader—for bourgeois prosperity, and for staying true to one's working class background (since in the U.S. the latter usually seems to demand a repudiation of the former.) This maneuver shows the working of what Bourdieu has observed about the social aspirations of the petite bourgeoisie to imitate the bourgeois world (though done here in a manner that is acceptable to an audience conscious of the flaws of the bourgeoisie as well) (326-27).

Even as Eve's eye-rolling at her husband's corporate assets makes a regular appearance, the novels also laud wheeling and dealing by associating Roarke's sexual attractiveness and charitable works with his business savvy. A generous contributor to hospitals and to a shelter for battered women, Roarke also supports the arts, arranges for food and homes for orphans, and assists friends. His love for Eve and his good works serve to justify why her response to his money changes from suspicion to annoyance and then to grudging acceptance. The progression also exonerates her—and the reader—of unquestioning submission to capitalism.

One must, however, note that the novels legitimize free-market capitalism (as it benefits Eve and her goals) on the one hand, and continually interrogate it on the other. This is the other end of the spectrum of contradictory attitudes that the figure of the capitalist invokes in the genre. At one end lie novels like the Mills and Boon-Harlequin series and *Whitney, My Love*, with their reservations about the hero's personal life; the critique of his nature serves as an oblique critique of his capitalist inclinations since the two personas are connected. Though the link is not explicit, the hero is as ruthless in his romantic overtures as he is in the free market. In the middle of the spectrum lie works

that only stage arguments about the hero's business ethics (through characters who are either his supporters or his opponents). And finally, there are novels like Robb's series, which explicitly address the hero's personal life and his business ethics and find both disturbing—and disturbingly linked. While the heroizing of the capitalist is a nod to the predominant economic disposition of the late twentieth century, these novels retain doubts about it being an *ideal* system. In other words, while the genre is unable to posit an alternative to the capitalist universe, it is also unable to dismiss the knowledge that its working contains flaws.

It thus evinces subversive narratives, pointing out the unethical, almost murderous side of capitalism via the hero. For instance, the questionable sources of his wealth make Roarke the prime suspect in *Naked in Death* (1995), the first novel in the series, which also reveals that his empire began with smuggling and grifting, mixed in with a little violence. There is still a hint of illegality attached to some of his current businesses, and the series contains recurring reminders of Roarke's murky past, keeping alive the threat that he represents. Eve is told, for instance, that her chances of promotion are seriously hampered by her marriage to a man widely suspected of being involved in illegal enterprises. Moreover, his dangerous side—which comes to the fore if Eve is threatened—is frequently evident, and the sixth novel, *Vengeance in Death* (1997), actually brings to light the fact that he has tortured and murdered people to avenge a foster sister's killing. The implication that this precise brutality helped his climb to the top lingers throughout the series; in effect, he emblemizes a capitalism that is loyal, yet calculating, humanitarian, yet mercenary, romantic, yet dangerous.

A darker version of the tycoon-hero is present in contemporary single-title romances such as Judith McNaught's *Someone to Watch Over Me* (2003). In this, as in many others of McNaught's novels, the hero has acquired his fortune through grit and chutzpah, overcoming his working-class background or other adverse circumstances.²⁶ But the sexual wariness that heroines display towards men in series romances like Mills and Boon-Harlequin is magnified in every McNaught novel with a CEO hero into a suspicion that the hero is not only an unscrupulous corporate shark but also a criminal. *Someone's* Michael Valente is introduced as a billionaire venture capitalist who is never invited into polite company, having served a prison term for killing his best friend. Leigh Kendall, the heroine, dislikes him from their first meeting at a party in her home. She views him with contempt and disgust, convinced that he is only a hoodlum in designer clothing, one who has always managed to wriggle out of the clutches of the police. His interest in Leigh, who is married at the beginning of the novel, makes him the obvious suspect in her husband's subsequent murder. Michael is eventually discovered to be "Falco," a former store-clerk that she knew when she was young and this revelation relieves most of her anxieties. But his current financial strength, which he too employs to ensure her comfort, is both a help and a cause for concern. We learn that the Police Commissioner, who is determined to bring him to justice, has hampered a number of his projects, and routinely files charges against him; Michael, in turn, has used a battery of lawyers to demolish the prosecution and destroy the counsels' careers. By the end of the novel, the fear that Michael is actually a mafia boss is defused by revelations of police corruption and vendettas, sanctioning Leigh's love for him—but not before one

possibility has been raised repeatedly: that capitalism's alter-ego is composed of equal parts of robbery, deception, and homicide.

Like Roarke's past, Michael Valente's criminal youth and the threat he poses to the heroine are dramatized and function as an allegory of the worries he incites as a representative of big business. Midway through the novel, after Leigh has been widowed but before she learns of her old association with Michael, is a crucial scene that contains all these contradictory attitudes regarding the capitalist hero. Michael, still almost a stranger, has brought her a pizza and insists that she eat something, and while she is at the kitchen counter, he describes what he knows to be her personality traits and lists some of her food preferences. Leigh, a famous Broadway actress, panics on hearing this dangerous stranger's intimate knowledge of her habits and becomes convinced that he is her phone stalker, and possibly her husband's killer. She grabs a knife and attempts to attack him, hurling accusations, and only his quick recounting of their past association calms her down. Once she realizes that she did know him (though he was just as seemingly dangerous then as now) and remembers that he saved her from a mugging in the past, she abandons her wariness. From here on, Michael's character begins to be separated from the shady billionaire he was thought to be—or as others see him. His pursuit of Leigh begins to shift from seeming like a threatening takeover to one that appears to have traces of the rhetoric of the mutually beneficial merger.

The scene appears to show that capitalism and its associations with problematic or threatening actions become easier to dismiss if its agent assumes a familiar face, or links itself to working class roots—especially in the United States. The myth of American capitalism in novels such as this one involves evacuating the scary meaning of the

capitalist figure—solely profit-driven (even illegal) business practice—and filling the newly emptied form of the capitalist hero with the content of a “working class” capitalism (mixed with a romantic masculinity) to lead to the final signification: a reassuring protectionist economic system. The capitalist who is potentially ruthless is thus shown to be a good ally to have on one’s side. Love and marriage create this alliance, personalizing the capitalist figure, and giving respectability to his once reviled name. This shift is encapsulated in the conclusion of the novel, when Leigh and Michael stop by the theater that is being readied for her new play and see the words “Leigh *Valente*” (italics mine) on the flashing marquee on Broadway. Thus, the name that was derided for being that of a corporate mafioso ends up as an artist’s new *nom de theatre*; this association with high culture is another move that awards respectability to the man (and, by extension, the economic system that he represents and embodies.)

It appears undeniable that these novels (Kleypas’s historicals, Roberts/Robb’s futuristic thrillers, and McNaught’s contemporary sagas) are both repeating the Horatio Alger myth—central to the foundation of American socio-economic nationhood—and voicing reservations about capitalism. The mythology of free-market capitalism helps American readers reassure themselves about the rightness of this economic system, which supposedly allows all hardworking, motivated, ambitious people to achieve their potential irrespective of their backgrounds (unlike the system in those other “undemocratic”—read non-capitalist— countries). But in order to appear true, the myth has to incorporate a great deal of self-justification—usually in the form of capitalism’s beneficent actions—which reveals the genre’s own doubts about the myth. While these gestures may seem no more than an internalization of corporate PR about the social conscience of big business,

the novels never offer these acts of generosity as commonplace behavior by all capitalists. The heroes are not the norm but the exception—the social good they do sets them apart from other wealthy men (capitalist or aristocrat). Thus, as observed earlier about Robb's *In Death* series, Roarke donates to charity, and helps to punish crime, keep social order, safeguard the lives of New Yorkers, and so on; in effect, his bountiful but crime-linked capitalism—made visible in the reiteration of the similarity between him and the criminals pursued by Eve—is acceptable only because it mobilizes itself for noble causes.

Similarly, many romances mention the enormous charitable donations the heroes regularly make in secret, uninterested in being lauded for their generosity. These novels often also link the capitalist with a liberal politics, arguing that in his social and political life, as in his economic one, the hero does not bow to tradition and orthodoxy.²⁷ He is shown to support socio-economic reforms, officially and otherwise, and this becomes evidence of capitalism's pro-working class stance. Kleypas's historical novels furnish several such examples: Derek Craven in *Dreaming of You* is committed to funding legislation banning the use of little boys as chimney sweeps and provides free room and board—benefits, if you will—to the prostitutes who use his gambling club to ply their trade (without taking any share of their earnings); at the end of the novel, he is involved in building a hospital; Jack Devlin, a publishing magnate in *Suddenly You*, finds employment for old friends from the orphanage where he grew up and helps all his employees and authors when they need something; Zach Bronson in *Where Dreams Begin* funds a Working Man's college, has created pension plans for employees, and is supporting a Parliamentary bill to prevent forced employment of orphans in factories; and

Simon Hunt in *Secrets of a Summer Night* has established minimum wage and safe working conditions in his steel plant.

The heroines take offense at the fact that in spite of the men's monetary assistance to social development, their modesty and refusal to take credit for their charitable deeds allows the media to vilify their business practices and overlook their good deeds. For instance, in *Where Dreams Begin* Zach's wife, Holly, frets over newspaper reports that portray him as a threat to good society when he is trying to help the poor. Again, the capitalist hero's secretly magnanimous nature—as discovered by the heroine—reassures readers of capitalism's potential for benevolence. Even in novels where the hero displays no such altruistic interests or zeal for social improvement, the heroines are often social reformers. Eve Dallas, the dogged cop, is of course, a prime example, as are Lydia Grenville in *The Last Hellion* (1998), who works to improve the lot of women, Sara Fielding in *Dreaming of You*, who speaks and writes about ways to improve the situation of the poor, and Lady Holly in *Where Dreams Begin*, who is part of a women's group against child labor.²⁸ This characteristic of the heroines works to augment the belief that one can model philanthropy and infuse capitalism with it; just as an intractable hero can be made a loving husband by a good woman, the calculating capitalist can be made socially responsible by conscientious individuals.

The heroines' reformist pursuits and their indifference toward what capitalist wealth can buy perhaps make it easier for the reader to accept the consumerism that permeates their lives. Thus, heroines in the novels under consideration (social reformers or otherwise) are usually uninterested in money, but often find themselves neck-deep in expensive clothing and accessories. In *Glory in Death* Roarke gifts Eve with—among

other things—a diamond “as long and wide as the first joint of a man’s thumb” (63). Sarah in *Dreaming of You* is awash in gowns when Derek buys her a whole new wardrobe after they are married (as well as financing a new house, a carriage, and servants for her parents). Lady Holly enters Zach Bronson’s home to find that he has bought an entire toy store for her daughter (and later, several ball gowns for her.) In McNaught’s Regency-set *Whitney*, *My Love* and *Until You*, the wedding gowns are encrusted with precious stones.²⁹ The pleasure and justification of this bounty of capitalist enterprise comes from the fact that heroines do not actively participate in this consumerism.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this chapter, the discussion of Mills and Boon novels initiated the review of the overt presence of capitalist wealth in the genre. The same is visible, as I’ve just noted, in other series and single titles, both contemporaries and historicals. The former have fast cars and private jets, while the latter mention prize cattle and plush coaches. The *mise-en-scène* of all the novels includes palatial homes, expensive furnishings, luxurious decor, and landscaped gardens. Though the *nouveau riche* heroes in Kleypas are laughingly said to lack taste, they own valuables: Zach Bronson’s home is a vulgar temple to wealth, choc-a-bloc with gilt and priceless art. Derek Craven’s gambling club houses sweeping staircases, plush carpets, and Ionic columns. Similarly, the protagonists’ lifestyle emphatically declares its economic foundation in the contemporary romances as well. *In Death*’s detailed descriptions of Roarke’s lavish world have already been recounted. Michael Valente in *Someone to Watch Over Me* has a

private helicopter and shows Leigh a huge penthouse that he would like to make their home. The wealth born of industrial and post-industrial enterprises makes a repeated appearance in the whole fabric of these novels.

Thus, whether it is novels in the Mills and Boon-Harlequin series or more recent historicals or contemporaries, a significant portion of twentieth century popular romances are firmly set in Capital-land; the romance novel increasingly appears to find the capitalist prince indispensable. But since capitalist figures control wealth in this century, it is then perhaps natural for all current romantic genres to model heroes after them. The matter is not, however, this simplistic. It is true that the marriage fantasy has always involved economic security, and since finances have typically been controlled by men, the hero of the marriage fantasy has usually been relatively wealthier than the heroine. But the majority of the romance genre's heroes have changed over the course of the century from the deferential and straightforward men (typically professionals or artists) of the first three decades of Mills and Boon's publishing to men who are calculating and ambitious (and often successful entrepreneurs). The concurrence of that second personality with bourgeois status is no coincidence. In adopting this type, the genre has partially internalized the rhetoric that idealizes capitalistic individualism and accumulation of private property as well as the consumer capitalist ability to create and manipulate desire. The capitalist hero actually uses the same set of skills to acquire a wife as he does money, a fact that is made to appear desirable—but never wholeheartedly so. Despite the apparent stamp of approval, the genre expresses a continuous tension toward the figure. In other words, it sideswipes its own veneration of him through the heroine's (and others') concern of the traits he exhibits as a romantic partner—and as an alarming

economic figure. The shadow of capitalism's potential to do harm thus dogs the genre, and while the conclusions of many romances dispel the fear of the man, the effort is not always successful when it comes to his public face and his economic allegiance. The near omnipotence of multi-national capitalism evokes a longing for the genuineness of its utopian promises and a terror of its inhumanity.

There is indeed, then, a formula at work in the genre romance, but its elements are not conjured on a whim; each apparently corny motif is a symbolic act in which lies a statement and an imprint of the social ground of the genre. In the next chapter, we look at another major trope for the romantic hero that shows a similar critique of twentieth century views on war—the soldier (in and out of uniform).

Chapter Two: War

If the hero as capitalist allows the genre romance to demonstrate the working of the free market and multi-national capitalism, the hero as warrior introduces the arguments on the wars that these economies fight under the banner of democracy. The trope includes men who are career soldiers, mercenaries, or even espionage agents, people engaged in the mission of defending freedom and safeguarding the democratic nation's security. Through this figure, romance novels show the impact of the intrusion of international conflict into its readers' consciousness. In other words, in this face of the romance hero, the genre carries an awareness of the particular economic and military nexus of the late-twentieth century. This History—the absent cause that Jameson insists must inform any textual analysis—and its social reception can be retrieved through a close look at this hero.

The presence of the warrior hero is perhaps not surprising. The construct that democratic polity is inextricably entwined with a capitalist economy has been created by the ideology of the free market, especially since the Cold War; it is then inevitable that if the romance genre is tied to that economy (albeit with some reservations), it would also echo current public rhetoric that calls for a defense of democracy by means of war—on and off the battlefield. Of more significance, however, is the fact that the genre also encapsulates the non-mainstream responses that defense policies (resting on the implicit espousal of capitalism) have evoked in the British and American public.

The threatening quality that is glimpsed in the first trope of the capitalist, and often repressed or re-read as a lover's reserve, becomes integral to the second one of the warrior. A few novels actually combine the two types of heroes, showing the connection

between capitalism and armed aggression; more often than not, novels that employ the second trope typically feature a figure with petit bourgeois or working class affiliations.³⁰ The trope is significant because it not only demonstrates the working of the mythology of patriotic heroism in the last century but it also participates in an analysis of the actions of soldiers, at home and abroad. While an unquestioning allegiance to nationalistic heroism is visible more frequently in the early years of the genre, the last few decades have witnessed more complicated narratives, with newer voices disrupting that monolithic mythology as embodied by the hero.

Mills and Boon romances published in the first half of the twentieth century often relate stories of the imperial soldier, suffering hardships in the effort to establish and sustain the British Empire.³¹ The series also turns to men in uniform during the Second World War, usually pairing them with heroines who are themselves contributing to the war effort.³² As the genre has evolved, it has acquired a greater heteroglossic bent, signaling a break with the wholehearted faith in wars fought by western democracies; the break probably resulted from the greater media coverage of Vietnam or the Falklands War and their impact on the foreign populaces and on soldiers as well. Since Mills and Boon-Harlequin romances now do not appear to employ a British war hero at all (in itself a mark of the break) this chapter continues the scrutiny of the genre by focusing on American romance publishing.

Series like Silhouette and other stand-alone imprints have regularly included novels where the heroes are soldiers or spies and laud such characters for their selflessness. While novels from the seventies, eighties, and even the nineties approached the warrior hero through Cold War ideology, the American genre since the First Gulf

War and 9/11 reflects the polarization in the attitudes of the American public toward the issue of the country's military actions in foreign countries and their impact on civil liberties there and at home. It is in sifting through these competing voices the genre contains, through the "rifts and discontinuities within the work," that the warrior hero romance can be revealed to be a "heterogeneous and [...] schizophrenic text" (Jameson 56).

Though few romances question the validity of the fight to "free" beleaguered populations and bring them democracy, many are inclined to take a less jingoistic view. Typically, these novels adopt one of two tacks: taking a compassionate look at the soldier who undergoes emotional and physical damage in the line of duty, or motioning toward the unscrupulousness that jingoistic policy breeds in its enforcers; the latter has always been present but has become more evident since the "War on Terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq. The former process, a humanist critique of war, draws support from the recently legitimized and highly publicized medical condition that affects individuals in severely strained situations: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.³³ In this critique, the depiction of the soldier-hero is usually sympathetic and commendatory, and the narrative questions war in terms of the toll it take on his physical self, his psyche, and his emotional relationships. The rejection of the war machine is thus personalized rather than expanding to include the ideology behind war itself. The novels decry American offense policy in a back-handed fashion by reviewing its human cost even as they praise the individuals who must enforce it since their lives are affected by it directly. Unable to fully reject the notion of going to war (since political rhetoric in America has fused American offensives with notions of democracy and freedom), yet facing its daily fallout, the texts adopt the

solution of saving the American soldier for a happy marriage. Through such a narration of political history these romances become “[the] ideological act [...] with the function of inventing imaginary or ‘formal’ solutions to unresolvable social contradictions” (Jameson 79). This section surveys some key examples of how romance novels, whose heroes *are* American heroes in and out of uniform, grapple with the patriotism that has developed around American post-industrial capitalism, and the competing draw of humanism as well as psychological valuation (the first containing some traces of Marxism and the second of high bourgeois social science).

Many Silhouette romances published during the eighties and early nineties tell the stories of former soldiers, especially Vietnam vets, and criticize the system that used them as cannon fodder. Some of them, like Lindsay McKenna’s *Off Limits* (1992) and *Return of a Hero* (1989) function as fictionalized documentaries of the horrors that American boys had to endure because of the Communist Viet Cong—and because of their own government.³⁴ McKenna’s Vietnam romances offer a way to historicize the present, placing under scrutiny the contemporary moment via the conflicts of the recent Cold War past. In the above novels, aggressive governmental policy is seen as problematic to the soldier on the ground. While the romances treat individual soldiers with sympathy, commending their devotion to the humanitarian mission of saving people from non-democratic governments, they take a jaundiced view of the higher echelons of American military command. The dual narratives, like the dual impulses toward capitalism, are less a direct challenge to American defense policy and more an inchoate suspicion of its weaknesses.

In *Off Limits*, Jim McKenzie, a country boy from Missouri, rescues Alexandra Vance, a congressman's daughter, when her helicopter crashes behind enemy lines in Vietnam. Jim is a recon marine (a soldier who spies on the movements of the enemy) but one who has decided to go AWOL because he cannot stand being a soldier anymore. The history behind his change of heart emerges midway through the novel after several incidents in which he reiterates his unwillingness to return to the U.S. base. Jim explains to Alexandra that his troop had befriended a Vietnamese village and that after the Viet Cong discovered the alliance, they used a girl in the village as a human bomb against the Americans. Jim shot her to save his men, but cannot bear to pick up a gun again, haunted by the incident and his role. As the brave soldier who is too scarred to believe that his side is doing the right thing, he is the embodiment of the "determinate contradiction" that has arisen in post-Vietnam America. Alexandra tries to absolve him of his guilt by pointing out that the Viet Cong are the ones who are really responsible for Kim's death, that they *forced* Jim to kill the girl—who would have died anyway. Her logic helps Jim to forgive himself but does not change his mind about rejoining the army. He and Alex fall in love during the trek to the base and her father, a hawk, is outraged when he hears that his daughter is involved with a deserter. Jim is arrested and imprisoned for his beliefs and physically and psychologically harassed by his fellow Marines for his alleged cowardice. But he is eventually released, and once he is cleared of the charge of desertion and treason, his dishonorable discharge is struck off. Though Alex's father disowns her, her brothers (soldiers symbolic of a younger, more reasonable army) allow Jim to tell his story and understand his decision to be a conscientious objector.

The novel's central critique of the war is fused with its defense of the humanity of the soldier. Jim's haunted psyche is used to depict how American involvement in Vietnam damaged the noble young men who only wanted to protect the weak and innocent. Novels such as this one make the claim that these soldiers should be viewed as the vanguard of a new enlightened generation that realized that war was not the answer, rather than monsters who abused foreign populations. The novel supports the hero's withdrawal from conflict and acknowledges that his pacifism is clearly the right course of action in this case. It also ensures reader identification with Jim's unusual stance by portraying the Marine Corps as secretive, sadistic, and vengeful.

Off Limits' dramatization of the way the Vietnam War divided American families and traumatized an entire generation of men is an indictment of the war and the U.S. war machine, albeit in less than revolutionary fashion. The novel does not explore how Cold War rhetoric deliberately conflated capitalism and democracy, nor does it question the need for an American presence in other nations. Alexandra's stance exonerates Jim of monstrosity while preserving the sanctity of the anti-Communist mission. But *Off Limits'* opposition of hawkish tendencies (as embodied in Alex's father, an old-money congressman from Virginia) to Jim's country boy morality also makes visible that the two arguments related to the war correspond roughly to two different class positions. Even though the text is deeply immured in democratic-capitalist ideology, it is not able to reconcile those antagonistic class demands and reveals the weaknesses of the ideology's claim of being nationally mandated. At the end of the novel, Alex's brother, a navy pilot, is flying missions and helping nuns care for a Vietnamese orphanage; suffering and succor are thus dispensed by the same hands, the latter possibly an attempt to make up for

the former. Jim, however, decides to go to school and become a psychologist so he can help others deal with mental trauma while Alex pursues her nursing career at a VA hospital. Both thus show a commitment to dealing with the fallout of American military actions rather than participating in them (irrespective of the motivations behind them).

McKenna's *Return of the Hero* challenges the link between patriotism and war by directly questioning the military and political nexus. Also related to Vietnam, *Return*, the third novel in a series about the Trayhern family, narrates the story of veteran Morgan Trayhern. (The first two books relate the romances of his siblings—soldiers themselves—and the humiliation heaped on them by the military as well as the anti-war press for Morgan's alleged treachery in Vietnam.) In the course of the development of his romance with writer and military researcher Laura Bennett, Morgan reveals that he was the captain of a team that was killed due to a bad command decision. But the higher-ups who were responsible falsely blamed him, declared him a traitor to cover up their mistakes, and forced him into hiding to protect his family. Laura urges Morgan to defend himself, and begins looking through the Pentagon archives for facts that can exonerate him. He finally agrees to fight back, persuaded by Laura's argument that the men who framed him do not represent the nation and that their claim that "sometimes one good man had to be sacrificed for a dedicated group of military officers" is a convenient platitude (107). After decades of living as an outcast from family and country (like many Vietnam vets), Morgan finally receives apology and acceptance at the end of the novel. As in *Off Limits*, *Return* works to problematize war and American policy while vindicating the maligned soldier. The novel thus shows a greater interest in holding accountable the policymakers and enforcers who give good American soldiers a bad name. But even in this novel,

capitalism and its defense remains an unquestioned good; the established belief that capitalism is coterminous with democracy while communism is tyrannical is not scrutinized—the negation coexists with affirmation.

A variation of this pattern of heroizing soldiers and spies (working for the military or alone) is visible in some of Linda Howard's romantic-suspense thrillers but the critique of war here shows itself as a concern over what such men are being asked to sacrifice in the line of duty (typically, companionate marriage and affective individualism). Novels like these show a fundamental struggle between different wheels of the mechanism of power instituted by the bourgeoisie—between allegiance to the capitalist state and allegiance to the nuclear family. For instance, *Diamond Bay* (1987), introduces a protagonist who places himself on the line for America's safety in a silent nonstop war. The story of a soldier (though not in uniform), the plot is a fictionalized representation of Cold War rhetoric, venerating espionage as a legitimate defensive strategy. But there is a counter-narrative to this flag waving in the novel, which stems from the conviction that this ideology is incompatible with marriage and family life and is therefore undesirable. Rachel Jones rescues Kell Sabin, a Vietnam vet and high-ranking CIA administrator, after he is nearly killed in an ambush by terrorists (who are decidedly East European). But the plot involves more than staying alive and killing the enemy; it is highly invested in promoting the hero's right to romantic attachments. The latter need injects an aberrant note in the text's seemingly univocal belief in America's dual mission: to defend itself and save the world. Kell falls in love with Rachel but believes that national security, and the safety of his loved ones, must take precedence over his personal happiness; he therefore rejects Rachel's overtures, threatening the

romance arc of the novel. In this case, the devotion to the nation runs counter to the genre's formal imperative of a happy ending, as is visible in Kell's internal struggle:

He wanted to take [Rachel] with him and go home to her every night, but he couldn't turn his back on his job and his country. Security was critical, now more than ever, and his services were invaluable. It was something he had to do; endangering Rachel was something he couldn't do. (184)

The novel admits that the hero's devotion to duty is commendable, but the emphasis the narrative places on the toll that this duty takes on the characters' lives shows a weakening conviction in the primacy of the patriotic mission. Kell leaves the woman he loves in obedience to the ideology that national defense is the primary good (though its exact enemies are unclear and only identified by terms like "terrorist.") But the pull the heroine exerts and the promise of family soon outweigh that master narrative, and Kell eventually gives in to his personal needs and returns to marry Rachel. By the end of the novel, he has distanced himself from active conflict, choosing to focus on marriage and parenthood. It is this narrative, the *raison d'être* of romance novels, which finally destabilizes the one about saving the nation at any cost. The novel is thus conservative in terms of its conviction in the wedded state as the highest good, but its allegiance to the genre actually overrides the claims of the patriotic imperative and thus makes it politically subversive. In this instance, it appears that the genre is more willing to cleave to cultural rather than political bourgeois myth.

Some historical romances combine the two concerns seen so far, discussing the effects of combat on soldiers' psyches and the threat they pose to the traditional family. The historical setting itself, as in *Off Limits*, is a chronotope for embattled spaces and

memories of them.³⁵ It affords distance from the present, which helps the genre tolerate the strain of the contradictory positions on current defense policy that it finds itself having to acknowledge. But the distance does not override the novels' contact with present circumstances. Whether set in Europe (particularly during the Napoleonic wars) or in America (during its various pre-twentieth century conflicts) the novels are permeated with contemporary debates on espionage and military confrontations. These debates, as mentioned earlier, ranged from the clash with Communism (in novels published in the seventies and eighties) to Gulf War rhetoric about rescuing other nations from an individual's tyranny but at great cost to the American psyche and morality (in the nineties). Since 9/11, the focus has been on trying to determine the "enemy" and on distinguishing between war, paranoia, revenge, and racism.

Bakhtin has identified this acute consciousness of the present, even when the past is being referenced, as one of the defining traits of the novel form, and the romance genre provides ample evidence of it. In the Gaelen Foley *Knight* series, two novels involve heroes at the frontline (or in enemy territory) in the Napoleonic Wars. The setting lends itself to being read as an allegory, with England standing in for the U.S., Napoleon for America's enemies, the liberal Whig party for the less jingoistic Democrats, and the Tories for the Republicans. These historical referents are recounted using rhetoric that echoes current American policy about the "Enemy" who must be destroyed in order to protect the U.S. and other nations. For instance, Lord Damien Knight in *Lord of Ice* (2002), an army captain and a patriotic Tory, dislikes the Whig party because "[it] had protested the expense and duration of the war—as though England could realistically have ignored what was happening just a few miles across the Channel, Napoleon

swallowing the Continent whole” (207). This hero is an actant, staging arguments reminiscent of Cold War fears of the Red Scare as well as more recent versions of American war ideology (and its dismissal of objections voiced within the country to America’s aggression abroad).³⁶ As far as this hero is concerned, the only things commendable about the erroneously thrifty—read “anti-war” —Whigs are “their efforts toward humanitarian reform, educating the children of the poor, and so forth...” (207). Damien’s alignment with the patriotic cause (as defined by current rhetoric in the support of America’s “War on Terror”) is unmistakable.

At the same time, irrespective of the hero’s avowed position, the depiction of his actions and psyche bears evidence of the counter-movement that persistently resists the claims of the holy war of democracy. Damien, a decorated veteran against Napoleon’s armies, has not survived unscathed. He suffers from severe mental distress (that we know to be PTSD), having lost several of his soldiers to enemy fire and seen his horse ripped open before him. Tormented by flashbacks, he withdraws from his family, afraid that he is capable of murder at these moments, and the fear that he has brought the savagery of war home with him haunts him for much of the novel. In the following excerpt, he recalls how the sound of fireworks was enough to bring back his time in battle:

For a full five or six minutes, he had lost track of reality, a
horrifying state of affairs for a man so highly trained to kill.

When he thought of how easily he could have hurt someone, it
made his blood run cold. (18)

Further descriptions of his mental state highlight his trauma:

He did not want to admit it, but the ghastly dreams of blood and destruction were even more frequent now, as though his addled brain could not unburden itself of its poisons fast enough. The rage in him was a frozen river like the ice-encrusted Thames that wrapped around his property. He knew it was there, but the strangest thing was he could not quite...feel it. He could not feel much of anything. Six years of combat—of ignoring terror, horror, and heartbreak—had that effect on a man, he supposed. (18)

It is no coincidence that PTSD has such a key place in the novel, the condition having really taken hold of the cultural imagination after the First Gulf War led to several reports on it. While Damien's torment gestures toward flaws in the grand narrative of patriotic war and salvationist warfare, it is Miranda, the ludic heroine, who throws into relief the one-sided ideology with which Damien has aligned himself. Through her affection and comic deflation of his high-mindedness, Damien finally acknowledges the flaws in his political choices, even refusing to fight when Napoleon's escape from Elba threatens his dreams of a peaceful married life. (Here, as in Howard's novels, the critique of war rests on its infringing on soldiers' family lives and upsetting their emotional balance.) Damien changes his decision almost immediately, and Miranda reacts to his conviction with anger and disbelief, reminding him of the psychological abyss that the last combat pushed him into.

“Damien, I can't let you do this,” she said with forced calm, though her voice trembled. “I cannot lose you. It took all of your strength and my love to find your way out of darkness the last time. I almost lost

you to it. If you go back and expose yourself to all that violence and bloodshed again, it might happen all over again, and this time I may not be able to save you.”

“It is my duty.”

“I am your duty! I am your wife! You are my husband, and I need you here!” (386)

Her arguments contest his dogged, even self-destructive, devotion to the nation. He insists that he must set aside his bride, his plans for a bucolic existence, and risk his own life for England’s safety (and that of the Continent), explaining, “I have to finish this [...] I fought too hard, sacrificed too much to see that Corsican monster once more on his throne” (386). The assertion presages the pro-war rhetoric that dominates the American media today, showing its build-up even prior to 9/11. For instance, we can see how the sentiments Damien expresses belong to a groundswell of feeling that is eventually voiced by President George W. Bush at the White House in 2005:

I’m also proud to stand with those whose achievements we commemorate today, the military veterans of World War II. [...] Once again, we face determined enemies who follow a ruthless ideology that despises everything America stands for. Once again, America and our allies are waging a global campaign with forces deployed on virtually every continent. And once again, we will not rest until victory is America’s and our freedom is secure. (“President Commemorates 60th Anniversary of V-J Day”)

Knowing that subscribing to this narrative means a return to trauma, the novel offers love as the antidote to Damien's PTSD, an antidote that enables him to go back to the battlefield; but even devoted aficionados of the genre must doubt the power of love to overcome his memory of a line of infantry men getting decapitated by cannon or of executing his own soldiers for raping and pillaging the fallen enemy.³⁷ In including these bleak and shameful incidents, the novel remains ambivalent about its own espousal of noble causes, and only marginally convincing in the claim that Damien's wife (and the children she bears him) can erase his trauma. In fact, Miranda's presence is a reminder of the voices that do not accede to the hegemonic drama of the "good" war.

The second narrative of the warrior romance novel's "contact with the inconclusive present and future" of United States defense policy lies in the inclusion of heroes who display contradictory characteristics (Bakhtin 37). While possessed of significant courage, loyalty, and uprightness, they employ questionable methods for maintaining domestic security and policing international politics. These heroes act in charming ways that conceal exploitative tactics, all prompted by their commitment to protecting the country. It is through such a hero that Linda Howard's *Loving Evangeline* (1994) exhibits an awareness of the problematic manner in which the U.S. operates its security agencies. On one level, the novel bears a resemblance to the capitalist-working girl model studied in the preceding chapter. But the narrative is driven by CEO Robert Cannon's suspicion that the software that his company developed for NASA is being sold illegally to another country's affiliates by marina-owner Evie Shaw. Robert is a blend of the capitalist trope and the spy-soldier, a rare departure from the genre's more common practice of separating the economic and political spheres. The antagonism Robert feels

for Evie is partially fuelled by his belief that she is a member of the sly, avaricious working class. Looking at a photo of her, he muses that

[...] it was difficult to tell much about her, other than she had blondish, untidy hair and seemed to be rather hefty. No Mata Hari there, he thought, his fastidious taste offended by her poor choice of clothes and her general hayseed appearance. She looked more like a female mud wrestler, a coarse hick who was selling out her country for greed. (17)

The clash between the apparently contradictory attitudes toward national loyalty therefore also houses a clash of antagonistic class positions (as in McKenna's *Off Limits*).

The acuity Robert shows in his business dealings is seen to be doubly fierce when he directs it toward discovering the saboteur of the political system that he is invested in shoring up. The novel further aligns the capitalist with the soldier-spy by hinting at Robert's past collaborations with federal agencies in intelligence operations, dramatizing the integral connection between the defense of the American way of life and the defense of capitalistic structures. Even more interestingly, Robert is given free rein to plan and execute his sting operation, his authority exceeding that of the FBI. The narrative thus demonstrates that the military-industrial complex supersedes any judicial mechanism in place in this system.

Robert enters Evie's world intent on proving her guilt in international espionage, and when he finds himself attracted to her, he just adds seduction as a side benefit. In the course of the novel, he inserts himself into her life as her lover while also working on ways to drain her finances so she'll be forced to make another sale and get caught in the act. A reader's resistance to such a romance hero is undermined by the third-person

narrative that documents his deepening feelings for her, as well as by the implicit argument that protecting the country requires drastic measures:

It was obvious that she was trying to raise money by any means available, and he wanted to put his arms around her and tell her it would be all right. But his instinct to protect his own had to be stifled, at least for now. Despite his decision that she was largely innocent in Mercer's espionage dealings, the small chance that he was wrong about her wouldn't let him relent. (181)

In other words, both the cultural myth of romance and the political one of patriotism are deployed to make his actions tolerable. When the two finally learn the truth about each other, Robert appears puzzled by Evie's firm rejection of him. He wonders why she won't forgive him even though she understands that national security takes precedence over everything, including the loss of her home:

It wasn't the house. As much as that had hurt her, she had understood his explanation; he had seen that in her eyes. Balanced against national security, her house was nothing... (234)

It would seem that even unethical acts are acceptable under the ideology to which Robert subscribes, as long as they are undertaken due to the needs of national security. Evie seems to toe this line as well because her refusal to forgive him is not based on the fact that he is responsible for sabotaging her home and car, foreclosing on her mortgage, and believing that she is a traitor—it is based on Robert's emotional remoteness and inability to declare his love. In light of the very real damage Robert does to her life, Evie's anger at feeling unloved feels jarring and disproportionate, even in a genre that is concerned

with love. That she feels no anger at being treated as inconsequential in the face of national security—with its subtext of subservience to the ideology of American defense—is so hard to swallow that it actually highlights the problematic nature of Robert’s behavior, which Silhouette marketed as that of “an American Hero.”³⁸ Evie’s unexpected reaction to Robert’s revelation is a fissure in the text, the contradiction that works to bring the wrongdoing to the fore and undermines the novel’s primary stance. Evie’s acceptance of the legitimacy of the motivation behind his Machiavellian strategy, as well as his own lack of repentance, draw attention to the magnitude of his scheming and call into question any ideology that breeds such callousness.³⁹

In a way, love and mendacity function as codes for patriotism in novels like *Evangeline*, and while the narrative of love serves to excuse the patriotic cause (by shifting the focus from the latter’s problematic working onto itself), the one of mendacity makes that patriotism difficult to accept. Though the romance genre by definition must allow the hero and heroine’s reconciliation and happy ending, it is far from clear in novels like *Evangeline* if the civilian affected by the actions of the political system (via the hero) has actually acquitted it of wrongdoing. Thus though the novel does not confront the whitewashing of actions done in the name of protecting the country, it contains potential critiques of the actant; the disgust and anger one may feel at his professional ethics is present, albeit displaced onto the stock romance hero (who is emotionally dangerous). Such a narrative tactic in this and other similar novels permits this popular culture form to be read as a counter to the larger strategy of pro-national security rhetoric that rose during the Cold War and has come to dominate the airwaves today. Even if this tactic is not a consciously subversive stance, it is a critical indication

of the fact that even seemingly conservative cultural forms are sensitive to the weaknesses of prevalent ideologies.

Gaelen Foley's *Lord of Fire* (2002) (the story of Damien Knight's twin) extends and voices—or ventriloquizes—the challenge to the “ends justify the means” motto, which can be faintly detected in *Evangeline*. Despite its dominant story (a plea for supporting the soldier or spy who destroys himself in the honorable discharge of duty), *Lord of Fire* carries an oppositional narrative of the hero's behavior and its ethical weaknesses. Even as it narrates the hardships that he goes through in performing his tasks as one of the nation's defenders, the novel cannot hold back the condemnation of those actions, condemnation expressed by the heroine herself. It is for this reason that Lord Lucien Knight's story of redemption through the woman he falls in love with is intriguingly prejudiced against its own hero. The novel begins with Alice Montague visiting Lucien's country estate to retrieve her wayward sister-in-law and finding him hosting an orgy. He catches her and subjects her to a prison-style pat-down, then forces her to stay with him in exchange for setting her sister-in-law free and eventually seduces her. She leaves him at the end of the agreed-upon period because Lucien refuses to give up his “debauchery,” but he is already in love with her and later explains that the parties are a front for spying on Napoleon's sympathizers and planning counteroffensives. He swears that he is not the licentious ne'er-do-well that she and others believe him to be. Agonizing over the things he has abandoned in the line of duty (such as morality), he weeps over the loss of his good name and his status as a gentleman in the service of the nation.

He felt himself crumbling, finally, unable to avoid or ignore for one second longer the view down into his shattered soul.

He cast about inwardly for his Machiavellian control but it was nowhere to be found. By God, if she had agreed to wed Damien, so be it. He fought himself, teetering on the edge of despair. *Don't cry in front of her. Don't cry in front of Alice. For God's sake, for once in your life, don't be a little fucking weakling—*

But when she lifted his chin with a gentle touch, there were tears of anguish burning in his eyes. "I'm sorry," he choked out, startled. "I'm sorry I'm weak. I'm sorry I'm a failure. I'm sorry I'm not as good as—" (355-56)

This portrait of a patriotic figure whose unorthodox methods have earned him the contempt of the very people he is trying to protect does invite reader sympathy while also encouraging faith in American soldiers and defense policy.

But the hero's mask of manipulative spy leads to extreme distaste, and this excess of meaning (which goes against the primary narrative) has to be coped with by the mask of the seducer. Lucien's impassioned defense of his immoral lifestyle cannot quite erase the uneasiness he arouses through his first appearance at the orgy. Surrounded by naked women worshipping at his feet, he calculates how best to extract information on French intelligence from the attendant revelers. His later use of arm-twisting tactics to seduce the heroine mirrors his professional behavior. In the following excerpt, he has offered Alice an ultimatum that forces her to stay with him, thus giving him time to convince her to be his lover:

He knew exactly how to trap her—through her deathbed promise to her brother, which she had foolishly revealed to him last night, and her devotion to her nephew...[I]f she chose unselfishly, in spite of all the dire possible consequences, at the cost of her reputation and the perilous risk of her virtue, then he would have her here by his side to revere her and learn the secret of her innocence....It was, in fact, the perfect plan, and he was deuced pleased with himself for thinking of it. (105-06)

As I argued in “Capitalism,” the hero’s actions in his romantic life allegorize other ideologies that he supports; if the former is threatening, it is often because it is a stand-in for the threat contained in the latter (in this case, American patriotism).⁴⁰ Consequently, as in *Lord of Ice*, Lucien the secret soldier evokes a dichotomous response—praise and unease; the presence of the latter betrays a disillusionment with the avowed project of keeping America and the world safe for democracy.

Both the Knight twins find some peace through love and marriage but it is evident that the only way for these soldiers to survive is to withdraw from the conflict at some point. It is thus clear that allegiance to the nation’s defense strategy is not sustainable as a long-term project. Admittedly, this tactic is not evidence of a full-scale negation of the defense ideology: the Knight novels do not address the history behind the French Revolution and Napoleon’s rise, treating all of the events as dangerous. Neither do they analyze the concepts of freedom or come up with a moderate response to threats to the nation. On the other hand, Lucien does develop Whiggish tendencies—a turn toward centrist politics—and the oldest Knight brother, Duke Hawkscliff, leaves the right-leaning Tories and becomes an Independent. The new affiliations signal the desire for an

alternative to reactionary politics and to the routine use of violence and subterfuge—even if for no other reason than to save America’s soldiers.

In marked contrast, Cherry Adair’s contemporary romances are less ambivalent about war mongering, indicating the post-9/11 resurgence in jingoism. The magnitude of the attack has certainly fuelled reactionary politics to new heights, replacing debates with thinly disguised racial profiling. The “War on Terror” was still going strong in the first two years post-9/11 and novels like Adair’s *T-FLAC* series testify to the spread of the rhetoric that followed in the aftermath of the collapse of the Twin Towers. Her protagonists are members of a privately funded anti-terrorist squad, and the plots find these American operatives battling drug lords and terrorists, who are thinly veiled substitutes for America’s political adversaries. This is a slightly different mask—the warrior unconstrained by a governmental affiliation. The shift signals a new desire to bypass appropriate channels of dealing with terrorism, to avoid being held to the standards of treaties that govern international military actions.

In *Out of Sight* (2003) we get a female soldier, A. J. Cooper, a sniper in a hit squad trying to execute a man who is identified as the villain of the piece because he is an alleged terrorist. The novel relates very little of the historical grounds for the enemy’s marking, implying that A. J., as hero, has good reason to pursue the mission and that the terrorist label is sufficient to explain the assassination attempt in the opening chapter.

Even without her optics, she’d been able to see the sentries down below, cradling blue-steel Ruger assault rifles as they manned the perimeter of the camp. Raazaq and his lieutenants gathered off to one side, drinking thick coffee and planning God only knew what kind of mayhem.

A.J. had felt a swell of patriotic pride. By doing her job tonight, thousands of future lives would be spared....*I'm here*, she'd thought, jazzed beyond belief, in the field. *For real. For God and country.* (10)

Though it is a requisite of the genre that readers root for the hero, here the plot device of automatic alignment against a character identified as a villain (through the label of “terrorist”) carries a greater significance. Apart from calling on the standard good vs. evil plot structure, the novel gives readers another reason to hope for the villain’s capture and punishment, a reason less innocuous than his functional role as villain in a romance novel—he’s an Arab. His racial identity is suggested by the name Raazaq, while physical description is used to make that identity inherently menacing and mercenary: “Through the rifle’s scope she’d been able to see her target’s face with crystal clarity. Swarthy. Hard features. Cold eyes. Thousand dollar suit” (10). Such use of racial profiling to shore up a narrative is not unprecedented; in this instance the use of an Arabic name as well as the hero’s willingness to kill its bearer assures the reader that the villain’s association with terrorism is not unfounded.

The plot thus rests on the assumption that the reader will not only implicitly understand why A. J. is hunting Raazaq but also sympathize with, and support, the soldier hero. This narrative would have been untenable were it not for the association between race and terrorism manufactured by U.S. policy on the Middle East, especially since 9/11.⁴¹ *Out of Sight*’s unquestioning employment of such attitudes in American policy is, however, in the minority in the genre. Moreover, it also betrays its own discomfort with itself by placing its protagonists in a private militia rather than making them actual U.S. army soldiers; T-FLAC operatives can be ruthless because they are outside organizations

that answer to the public. While this trend of showing soldiers who fight the enemy *outside* government monitoring and control sounds like wish fulfillment, it also suggests that the increasing absence of checks and balances in the deployment of force by the U.S. is not really admirable.

The development of the warrior hero from official soldier to private devotee of the cause of defending freedom appears to mimic and foresee key political developments in the U.S. These developments include the government reasserting its “duty” to make the world safe for democracy (as in the 1991 Gulf War following the invasion of Kuwait) and President Bush authorizing the expansion of the CIA—U.S. defense personnel in civilian clothing—to fight the “War On Terror” after 9/11.⁴² The implication of the new hero seems to be that war must be fought on a more individual, covert scale. This romanticization of the mercenary is a symptom of the contradictory impulses that the narrative cannot reconcile: the inability to directly question the new turn in national policy on America’s role in international politics and an awareness of the popular disenchantment with America’s military actions. The spread of such disenchantment has been brought on by the persistence of the anti-war movement, the failure to locate WMDs in Iraq, the increasing violations of civil liberties in the U.S. and elsewhere under new anti-terrorist legislation, and the heavy losses suffered by the U.S. army since the October 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.⁴³ The notion of a private soldier allows the twin desires to be reconciled to some degree; the narrative can symbolically attain the goal of American security but without facing the potential sacrifice of morality on the part of actual U.S. armed forces, i.e., the nation itself. These two conditions must be achieved in order to appease the anxiety that America is a potential target and the constant fear that the nation

is being protected at the cost of teaching soldiers to adopt the very methods they are publicly fighting against.

The second fear has now strengthened to the degree that some recent romances are starting to reassess the defensive project in new ways. Thus, the theme of an on-going fight to keep the world safe for mankind has also made its way into the fantasy romance sub-genre, particularly Sherrilyn Kenyon's *Dark Hunter* world, but with a twist that alters the monolithic rhetoric that encourages war against the Enemy. Kenyon's novels, which weave together elements of romance, vampire lore, Greek and Roman myth, covert war, and PTSD, are unusual because they propose an attitude toward the enemy that is the opposite of the one in Adair's novels. Instead of being sure of their opponents by giving them labels that never need questioning, Kenyon's heroes are constantly forced to make individual assessments, partly because they themselves were once seen as the "Enemy."

The series' premise is that Apollo created a race of superhuman beings called Appolites and then cursed them so that they can only survive past the age of twenty-seven if they consume human souls. To counter the threat of these "daimons," Artemis has created an army of former mortals who were killed in horrific circumstances and cried out for vengeance as they died. In return for their wish, she bargained with them for their souls, and they are bound to serve her and to protect innocents for eternity. The series is peopled by an enigmatic 11,000 year-old leader, his teenage demon, mythological characters living in present times, and the semi-vampiric Dark Hunters. Each novel not only relates a Dark Hunter's love story but also recounts events from his mortal life. While the series is marked by hilarious moments courtesy of the strange characters, more often than not it is deeply angst-ridden, even melodramatic; the tone

stems from the strain of trying to reconcile the drastically opposed twin narratives of supporting armed conflict and recounting its devastating effects on everyone involved in the fray.

Every book also fleshes out the character of Acheron Parthenopaeus, the leader of the Hunters and the archetypal soldier of the good army, who synthesizes all the warrior stereotypes this chapter has discussed. The first Dark Hunter and the enforcer of the Hunter code, Acheron is the pivotal and most compelling figure in the series. He is capable of great destruction because that is the mission he has been born to fulfill, but is also an eternally tormented figure. In his person we see glimpses of the soldier who may have done harm, or the soldier who may have suffered in order to protect innocent civilians. Engaged in fighting a covert war, he is like the spy, condemned to shadows and under constant threat of double-cross, nearly friendless and without family. He was born a mortal and subsequently abused and spurned by his human relatives. Even after he was killed and resurrected as the first Dark Hunter, his lover Artemis betrayed him. He and the Hunters he oversees are stylized portraits of the American soldier—brave, good, loyal, and misunderstood.

The thematic heart of the series lies in this conceptualization, as well as in its support for the soldier who leads a thankless life and who holds power that can help or harm others even as it makes him suffer, too. This mix of pain and puissance makes Acheron an arresting, albeit dangerous, character. It is his affection for some of his crew that is used to offset the knowledge of his ability to kill. His obvious love for Simi—his adopted demon daughter—also adds to his humanity. The many incidents in which he wipes out dozens of daimons in order to protect those in his care, or in which he loses his

temper and morphs into a cross between a god and demon himself, are juxtaposed against his moments as nurturer to Simi or other children.⁴⁴ Similarly, his blatant sexual appeal and doomed need for love humanize him and mitigate his ability to kill at will. His own romance was published in 2008 but he has functioned as the archetype for the portraits of his crew, his attractiveness inextricably tied to his ability to wreak havoc and to his suffering. His human appeal positions him in the anti-war narrative project while his destructive skills testify to his alignment with the dogged belief in fighting shadowy enemies. Within these binaries that undergird the character's existence, and of the other hunters, lie the divisions in the manifest narrative.

In keeping with the standard mode of humanist critique, glimpses of the tortured pasts of the Hunters—otherwise cocky, endowed with super-human strength, and savage in battle—prompt readers to sympathize with them.⁴⁵ For instance, the Dark Hunter Zarek is first introduced in the novel *Night Embrace* (2003) as a secondary character, an angry, bitter, nearly suicidal warrior. But while this novel contains an outsider's look at this troubled and possibly unhinged soldier, and his own story, *Dance with the Devil* (2003), opens with him being evaluated for punishment, even termination, it eventually shows him in a more sympathetic light. Zarek is often called psychotic even by his self-admittedly strange fellow soldiers, and has been charged for his apparent failure to protect innocent civilians, and possibly, his participation in their slaughter. The idea carries unmistakable traces of the charges of alleged atrocities committed by U.S. marines against civilians in various parts of the world, ranging as far back as Vietnam and as recent as the offensive in Iraq.⁴⁶ A justice nymph named Astrid is assigned to try Zarek's case and mental status. In the course of her assessment, the initial perception of

him as a seemingly ruthless, contemptible killer alters to that of a misunderstood and tortured soldier in need of support and deserving of gratitude. As he gradually reveals the horrors of his past to his blind judge, he is finally seen to be the one more sinned against than sinning. During his human life as a slave in a Roman General's home, Zarek (the bastard son of the master) was used literally as the whipping boy. The novel describes his abuse in graphic detail, along with his despair and hopelessness. Though he was restored to incredible strength and power after death, not only did his wounds continue to lurk under the surface, but he was hurt further because other Hunters ostracized him as a loose cannon, a mindless killer. The final conflict in the book not only establishes his innocence of the first charge leveled against him—failure to protect—but also proves his innocence to his sworn enemy, who had blamed Zarek for his wife's murder. In the end, Astrid acquits him of the charges and they eventually marry. The dominant narrative suggests that once the soldier finds someone who sees and accepts his true self, he will be able to enter matrimony and society. In this version of the political narrative of American defense policy, his ability to hunt and kill is not a criminal tendency but in fact a defensive skill, one needed to fight the good fight.

As is evident, the series is clearly concerned with redeeming the soldier, especially in the eyes of those who condemn all conflict and its perpetrators. As noted above, the anti-war stance it confronts dates back to the sixties when protests against U.S. involvement in Vietnam gained momentum and vets were subjected to hostility and accusations. But the "War on Terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq and the incidents involving prisoner abuse by American soldiers in prisons and detainee camps like Abu Ghraib have renewed the debate on the U.S. war machine. The *Washington Post* news story cited in an

earlier footnote, with its graphic photographs testifying to the horrific treatment of detainees suspected of terrorist acts, raised tough questions in the national and international press about the difference between the U.S. and the enemies of democracy, liberty, and freedom. The questions have manifested themselves in the *Dark Hunter* series' interest in the dubious actions of the soldier. The pattern of making each Hunter the object of vituperation and then proving his good intentions and actions is a distinguishing feature of this series.

Despite this approach that the series takes—one that may invite its dismissal as current militaristic ideology—it is far from an affirmative cultural form. Its significance lies in its constant destabilization of the term “enemy.” Instead of limiting itself to the familiar tendency of showing the heroic soldier’s worthiness to his detractors, the series continually confronts the hero with the necessity of doing the same for the Enemy. In this way, unlike all the other texts examined so far, the series does more than just participate in redeeming the “good guys;” it also frustrates their own understanding of the “bad guy.” While Howard, McKenna, Foley, and Adair (in particular) do not address the larger ideological problem of accepting received wisdom about who represents a threat, the *Dark Hunter* series acknowledges the narrowness of this view. The soldiers in this war are not allowed to remain dissociated from the man behind the enemy soldier. In fact, the narratives constantly force them to reevaluate their fellow warriors on either side. This suggestion that the policy of unilaterally labeling someone an enemy is inadequate, even flawed, is the third and somewhat new approach of recasting the debate on war and American policy in the romance genre.

Though the series does adopt the humanist critique of war seen elsewhere in the exhortation to save the soldier from pain, it expands it to suggest that the soldier on the other side may not be quite as evil as the hero may have been led to believe. This heteroglossic tendency signals a disagreement with how the current White House administration is reshaping itself and molding public perception on how enemies can be mistreated for the greater good. Even as the novels in the series seem to be primarily involved in rescuing the nation's soldiers from being mistaken as monstrous, they often do the same for figures who have originally been marked as some sort of threat. Thus, at different moments, the series introduces a character who the novel's hero first identifies as a villain but is then forced to see as heroic as well. In *Kiss of the Night* (2004), for instance, the perception of the character of Urian undergoes a sharp change. As the son of one of the worst enemies of the Dark Hunters, he has been raised to kill the heroes of the series. But he is shown to be loyal to his own cause (as the heroes are to theirs) and to have suffered great losses himself. Once he is released from his two-dimensional status of "enemy," it becomes difficult for the Hunters to treat him as a thing, an idea—like "terror" perhaps—that must be destroyed. In the same novel, some of the Hunters also happen to meet other Appolites that they think of as potential enemies, but who are not in fact evil; they are revealed to have chosen to die at twenty-seven rather than turn daimon. Every such plot element blurs the Hunter/daimon division, escaping the polarized rhetoric of a war against an abstract notion, which splits the world into America and its enemies. In forcing the warrior hero to rethink his own beliefs, the series calls for a politics that seeks and evaluates evidence of wrongdoing rather than blindly believing in labels.

As seen in the examples above, the popular romance genre acts a resonating membrane that refracts the most vocal ground-swells of popular feeling on the offensive and defensive stances taken by the United States since its establishment as a Superpower—and the quieter challenges to these narratives. In the symbolic act that is each romance text lie conflicting narratives: on one side is a systemic conviction in America’s mission to protect democracy, freedom, human rights, and so on (in a capitalist economy) and on the other, the concern that the enforcement of this policy means using good men as cannon fodder and punishing innocents. In other words, in the conflation of bourgeois support for free enterprise and concepts such as patriotism for a democratic nation lies a discrepancy. It shows itself in the text as the threat of the breakdown of the sanity and moral framework of the individuals that make up the nation’s army (and in the devastation it wreaks on family and the alleged foe). The warrior romance thus contains an unmistakable bent toward affirmative culture, specifically government-inspired propaganda (such as in its endorsement of America’s need to confront the shadowy enemies of abstract noble causes); but it also contains an undercurrent of doubt and despair at the seemingly endless conflict that this engenders. Even as the genre—especially the *Dark Hunter* series—expresses solidarity with the cry of “Support Our Troops,” its utopian longing for a wedding and a family for the soldiers resounds with the desire to “Bring Our Troops Home.”

Chapter Three: Sexual Orientation

As the previous chapters show, the romance genre has both mirrored the shifts in economic and political ideology, particularly through the hero who represents the fractures in them, and developed ways to adapt to them. At this point, it is useful to examine the genre in terms of a hero who is unlike the capitalist or the warrior. The latter two are both desirable and fearsome for what they embody, but the hero to be discussed in this chapter represents not the fear of an ideology but of its antithesis—of the challenge to the sexual norms underlying the bourgeois family. This is a thread of the social unconscious that has gone unnoticed while critics focused on the rise of white feminism and its impact on twentieth century popular romance novels, especially their portrayals of gender. It is unarguable that the genre's development shows a distinct correlation (particularly in the sixties and seventies) between the demand for gender equality and the machismo of romance heroes. This chapter is concerned, however, with the connections between the macho hero and another disruptive social transformation—the mainstreaming of homosexuality.

In the twentieth century, wariness toward same-sex desire, especially desire between men, peaked at the time when the gay community began to assert itself as more than a sub-culture, when it asked that homosexual desire be accepted as non-transgressive—when it asked for legal recognition of its rights. This call for legitimacy proved disruptive to a heteronormative social structure. But after the first knee-jerk antagonism had subsided began a gradual process of social change, a far from all-encompassing one but vital nevertheless, a change that Suzanna Danuta Walters comments on in *All the Rage* (2001). Walters recounts cultural shifts involving gay

visibility and the uneven response—from antagonism to sympathy—that accompanies them, a response that romances record through the hero's own heterosexuality, his relationship with other men, and through an acknowledgment or denial of homoerotic desire.

The potential for homoeroticism has been visible in the popular romance genre since Mills and Boon began publishing, but the extent of this visibility has fluctuated over the last century. Romance novels have variously acknowledged and denied the existence of alternative sexualities, most noticeably via the continuous reshaping of the romance hero through the inclusion or exclusion of markers of heterosexuality. Tracing changes in the romance hero as he dons the mask of the heterosexual, i.e. *becomes* the sexual orientation, this chapter demonstrates how the genre reflects the redefinition of ideal masculinity and “good” sexual orientation undertaken in popular discourse. I examine the romance hero—in novels during the rise of the gay rights movement, the 90s, and the turn of the twenty-first century—as a barometer of the post World War-II debate on sexual orientation in England, Canada, and the United States.

Post-War Years: England and the United States

In order to understand the post-war developments in the genre, it is necessary to review the modern history of sexual legislation in the West. This history can be said to begin with the Labouchère Amendment (Clause 11), a last minute addition to the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885), which criminalized homosexuality. This proscription persisted well into the first half of the twentieth century, and homosexuality remained closeted during these decades. The legal definition of sexual norm was upheld

in Mills and Boon fiction since its establishment in 1909. The romantic arcs in its novels stayed true to the legitimized form of romance and sexuality, albeit with a few exceptions.⁴⁷ By and large, however, the firm's early subscription to heterosexual romanticism eventually became its trademark—and was in fact the twentieth-century myth that it almost single-handedly created.

While the genre is by definition devoted to the romantic fantasy of a woman finding an ideal male partner, it is no coincidence that its effort to enshrine the heterosexual occurs during the same decades that witness the strengthening of the gay rights movement, i.e., the sixties. This development is more threatening than the one outlined in the previous chapter, in which the demands made by the war propaganda of the post-industrial nation were seen to conflict with the family structure demanded by bourgeois ideology. The challenge posed by an alternate sexual desire is so irreconcilable with the heterosexual family that the genre has not acknowledged its representative until recently, i.e., the determinate contradiction has remained in the textual unconscious for much of the twentieth century. For most of that period, romance fiction, a repository for heterosexual myth, deals with the challenge of homosexuality by developing its hero into the antithesis of the gay male (or of the idea of the gay male, at any rate) who is gradually emerging from the closet in the post-war years. In England, and later in the United States, the genre tries to allay its anxiety by adopting this image as the sole representative of masculinity and completely turning away from the idea of homosexuality. The alpha-hero thus becomes a prerequisite in the genre during the fifties (with heterosexual masculinity becoming his defining characteristic in the sixties) and he reigns supreme for over two decades in the genre (irrespective of who is publishing the novels). So naturalized is this

hero that the fact that he is a mask escapes notice. In learning what this alpha-masculinity denies, we can construct the excess narrative of alternative sexual orientation that the mask tries to cope with.

The adoption of the alpha-male hero is concurrent with the erosion of homosexual invisibility that starts in the fifties. Ken Plummer succinctly summarizes this emergence of the homosexual community in England by listing a series of key incidents and legal changes, which were accompanied by the community's demand for equal rights:

[S]ome press scandals and notorious spy and court cases involving homosexuals such as Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, Peter Wildeblood, Lord Montagu of Boileau, and John Gielgud (Hyde 1970); a major government commission recommending (limited) decriminalization of male homosexuality (Wolfenden Report 1957); a campaigning pressure group (the Homosexual Law Reform Society set up in 1958); a law to enact the proposed changes (the 1967 Sexual Offences Act); and a proliferation of gay and lesbian bars (Gray 1992). The year 1970 marked the arrival of ...the much more radical Gay Liberation Front (GLF). This increased gay visibility, as many people came out of their closets, and political debates moved from liberal and apologetic to radical and critical.

(133)

Another significant milestone in twentieth-century queer history in the immediate post-war years was the publication of Alfred Kinsey's research documenting homosexual behavior as a far from rare or deviant act, even for supposedly "heterosexual" people. This 1948 report, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, was greeted with a storm of

controversy, as was *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953). Both were widely discussed in the media in the United States as well as in England. A British tabloid called *The People* even conducted its own survey and claimed that British women were less immoral than American ones (“Kinsey Report”). While the accuracy of Kinsey’s work has been questioned, it did contribute to raising public awareness about human sexuality, which had been treated as monolithically heterosexual and beyond questioning. The early fifties also witnessed, as Plummer notes above, the emergence of the gay rights movement on both sides of the Atlantic. The Mattachine Society, the first homophile organization, was started by Harry Hay, in 1951 in the United States. Mattachine, along with the Daughters of Bilitis, and *One* magazine created the Homophile movement, which soon expanded beyond the United States (Adams, Duyvendak, and Krouwel 35-36).

It was in the midst of this atmosphere during the fifties that Mills and Boon’s novels began to narrow the definition of the hero to the alpha-male figure, largely under the direction of magazine editors who kept their fingers on the social pulse. Joe McAleer has noted the role of these British women editors in shaping Mills and Boon editorial policy. These editors wanted romances to represent the unsettling realities of contemporary life, including the strains of the post-War economy and a social structure in flux, but in ways that they felt their readership needed. As McAleer recounts,

Winifred “Biddy” Johnson, editor of *Woman’s Weekly* and other AP titles, was a demanding editor who often called on Mills and Boon authors for revisions to their serials. Johnson demanded realism and relevance in her

serials, and was known for having a keen knowledge of her middle-class readers. (190)

Editors like Johnson played a significant role in making the heterosexual couple—and the heroine’s journey from the periphery of the hero’s world to its center—the driving concern of the novels. Johnson was a proponent of what is called the Alpha male hero, a coinage that must be read alongside the knowledge that homosexuality was still viewed at the time as a practice that turned a man into the recipient of penetration and therefore resulted in the loss of dominance. Whether Johnson deliberately constructed the doppelganger of that “weak” male may be impossible to say for sure, but it is quite likely. (McAleer does note that though it may have seemed that she had “arbitrary ideas about what her readers—mainly ‘housewives’—wanted... the magazine’s circulation proved she knew what she was talking about” (232).) The hero that emerges as a result of her “arbitrary ideas” and becomes entrenched as a formal element is a man who is physically superior to all men in the novel, never shows a weakness, and is always the dominant partner of the couple. But his emotional aloofness still raises the suspicion that men might be slowly turning away from women, abandoning them. His remoteness, named “glamorous unapproachability,” keeps the heroine in a state of suspense about his feelings almost till the end, when he declares his love (McAleer 233). His arrogance and highhandedness reasserts masculine dominance while the eventual declaration of love sets to rest the fear that he is indifferent to the heroine.

Another of Johnson’s arbitrary ideas that supplemented the genre’s rejection of any threat to the traditional social relationship is the “Marriage in Name Only” plotline in which the couple marries for reasons other than love (McAleer 237). While MINO’s

primary function may have been to permit risqué situations without offending readers who might object to sexual interactions between unmarried couples, it also allowed a secondary pleasure—the reassurance that men will not desert the institution of marriage. In MINO novels, spouses are initially distanced from each other despite their legal and social tie, but the marriage gradually undergoes a transformation into a more traditional romantic relationship. Such plots show the editors’ awareness of the multiple forces pulling at the fabric of the family, including the changing gender roles after World War II. But the genre’s attempt to employ a hero who is an ardent—even sexually threatening—pursuer of the heroine suggests a concern that the visibility and legalization of same-sex partnerships will lead to the breakdown of the traditional family. The Mills and Boon hero is built off the notion that heterosexuality’s true expression is extreme masculinity (unlike homosexuality, which is effeminate and vulnerable to emotion). In other words, the genre betrays the particular suspicion that homosexuality might be more prevalent than previously understood and counters it with a hero whose sexual orientation can never be called into question. Throughout the fifties, sixties, and seventies, Mills and Boon develops and institutionalizes this avowedly heterosexual romance icon whose character is so two-dimensional that he is nearly incomprehensible unless one recoups the social unconscious to which he is a response.

A handsome, affluent, authoritative, and socially influential man, the early alpha-hero is still somewhat unknowable but he does not seem dangerous or sexually overpowering—yet. One catches early glimpses of him in novels such as Jan Tempest’s *Enchanted Valley* (1954), whose Paul Veocke acts less like a potential lover and more like a chiding sibling to the heroine, Marilyn. Marilyn herself is initially enamored with

an older artist and finds Paul, who owns and runs a profitable floral business, “impressive, in a grim, formidable fashion” (23). Any suspicion of the floral enterprise as a sign of effeminacy is thoroughly countered by Paul’s alpha male persona. He is repeatedly presented as the all-powerful patriarch, with its suggestion of sexual ownership, and Marilyn’s attitude toward him serves to highlight his power over his domain. She is resentful of his dictatorial, condescending manner when they first meet but muses that he has “an arrogance which at once exasperated and impressed her” (26). She also worries about his opinion of her, both as a worker and as a woman, and is disconcerted by the fact that he is “so essentially the conquering male” (117). Paul’s own niece says that he is the “monarch of all he surveys and intends to remain so” (63). She also jokingly calls him “the great white chief [who] has come to cheer on his wage slaves” when Marilyn and she are working in the gardens (115).

Despite his sweeping authority, Paul’s sexuality remains restrained (though the trait would change in later novels as soon as the gay rights movement picked up steam). He finds himself attracted to Marilyn but doesn’t act on his desire to “chase and secure” (118). Even when the two finally acknowledge their love, there are no sexual overtures from Paul, who claims that he has no time for courtship except on weekends. Desire is present in *Enchanted Valley*—but it is expressed as displaced activity. The suggestion is enough to guard against any concerns about the genuineness of Paul’s sexual interest in Marilyn. A curious scene at the end of the novel confirms their heterosexual unit. After Paul and Marilyn’s mutual declarations of affection, Paul asks her to help him hammer posts on the farm’s borders. Marilyn is scared since she has never done this before but he reassures her that he won’t hurt her.:

There was a jarring sensation up her arm when he brought the crowbar down with unerring aim, but the slight, tingling pain was curiously pleasant. It seemed to link her with Paul. (187)

The sexual metaphor is unmistakable. For the moment, however, the text focuses on the power wielded by the hero rather than his sexual behavior, a power that becomes fundamental to the romance hero's identity in the Mills and Boon line. Nevertheless, his sexual orientation, though not actualized, is difficult to miss.

Into the Sixties and Beyond: U.K. and Canada

Over the following decades, Mills and Boon novels honed this hero into the alpha-male figure, divesting him of any traits that might hint of effeminacy or homoerotic desire. The change accompanied the rising volume of the public conversations on homosexual identity and experience. The more legislation there occurred in favor of homosexuality as a normal rather than deviant sexual orientation—or claims to this effect by various groups—the stronger the initial social reaction against it.

In the fifties in England, as Plummer notes above, several high profile cases involving public figures caught in homosexual scandals led to the “Report of the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution”. Also called the “Wolfenden Report,” it was published on September 3, 1957 and recommended that “homosexual behavior between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offence.” The Report provoked a vigorous public debate but its recommendations were eventually implemented in the 1967 Sexual Offences Act (though age of consent was set at 21).

The Gay Liberation Front was established in 1970, and its manifesto was published in 1971, to be predictably greeted with opprobrium by church officials and politicians. Even as the National Union for Students Gay Rights Campaign strengthened and the commercial gay scene expanded in the late seventies, 1976 saw the landmark case in which Mary Whitehouse sued the *Gay News* for blasphemous libel (a homophobic crusader's thinly-veiled attempt to destroy the publication). Though the paper lost the case, the movement earned considerable sympathy. The gains made by the movement culminated in the Criminal Justice Bill (1980), which legalized sex between men over 21. Criticism of the gay rights movement versus support for it alternated in a dialectical fashion over this time, each development prompted, respectively, by the movement's victories and losses in the battle for acceptance; it is the reaction to the victories that this section traces in the genre through the medium of the hero.

At this point, it is also important to consider the debate over homosexuality in Canada since Harlequin had begun its association with Mills and Boon in the fifties and was exerting more and more influence over editorial decisions. In *Moral Regulation and the Disintegrating Canadian State*, Barry Adam offers a comprehensive look at post-World War II changes in the Canadian gay rights movement. The arrest of Everett Klippert in 1965 (for confessing to homosexual acts) brought the issue into the public forum and a magazine article created a great deal of sympathy for him. Following the debate that accompanied the arrest, Canada de-criminalized homosexuality in 1967 and Klippert was released in 1971. The same year saw Canada's first Gay Pride march in Ottawa, and the establishment of the gay newspaper *The Body Politic* in Toronto. While the police continued to raid gay bars, such as in the period leading up to the 1976

Olympics, there were more vocal protests against these actions through organizations like the Association pour les Droits des Gai(e)s du Quebec. By the following year, Quebec had become the first province in Canada (and in the world) to ban discrimination against homosexuals in public and private sector companies (“LGBT Rights in Canada”).

These gains notwithstanding, Adam recalls an incident in 1977 when a fourteen-year-old boy was murdered by four men, “reviving public images of gay child molestation” in the media and leading to a prolonged court case against the *Body Politic* for obscenity charges (which the newspaper was finally acquitted of in 1979) (15). In 1978, Canada lifted the ban on homosexuals in the immigration policy, but there were raids on bathhouses in 1981 in an attempt to clear out homosexuals; these and others, however, were met with more strident opposition. Clearly, the changes in the attitudes of homosexuals and in the state’s acknowledgement of their normalcy resulted in considerable friction.

This evolution of legal and social responses to the homosexual community’s new assertiveness was a central influence on the romance novel in the sixties and beyond. The romance hero at this time is not only physically imposing but also emotionally remote and humorless, qualities associated with traditional masculinity. He is socially isolated as well, having no close friendships with men, and his relationships with women are almost completely sexual in nature. In other words, this hero seemed impervious to homoerotic overtures and uninterested in platonic friendships with women—an ideal antidote to the worry that the men that one had always assumed were marriage material might not want a woman at all.

In *Fair Stranger* (1959), Dr. Valentine Bournedon is one such prototype for the alpha hero. Bournedon, who enters Nurse Julia Marne's life as an emissary of her ex-boyfriend Laurie, is resentful of her perceived flirtatiousness from the start. Even though more than one incident reveals the attraction he feels for her, the novel contains conflicting narratives about his true emotions. While at times he says he wants Julia to be a devoted girlfriend to Laurie, at others he actually seems to desire her. He initiates a passionate embrace but remains an unknowable figure. His remarks are often cutting and confusing, leaving Julia bewildered and unsure of whether he wants her or not. When the end of the novel reveals Julia's innocence of all his charges, he apologizes and proposes marriage, a format that is employed in hundreds of later novels.⁴⁸

The full-fledged laconic alpha-hero is constructed almost like a morality figure, solely embodying untempered heterosexual masculinity.⁴⁹ This hero appears to exhibit diametrically opposite behaviors toward the heroine; his attraction to, and rejection of, her supports the possibility that he stands for a repressed anxiety that men are not attracted to women. The character is always present in the novels of Violet Winspear, who perfected the art of creating the cruel yet seductive alpha-male, as in *Dearest Demon* (1975), which pairs young British widow Destine Chard with the arrogant Spaniard Artez Dominquin Y Amador Robles. As the hero's name indicates, the novel deals with the Latin male (a popular model for the Mills and Boon hero), both creating and perpetuating a cultural stereotype about earthy Latin sexuality because of its assumed subscription to heterosexual norms. Though Artez is marked by facial scars and has a hawk-like face, Destine is clearly aware of his sensuality. Encountering a half-dressed Artez the day after her arrival, Destine notices the "tall figure with water-tousled hair, a bare brown chest,

and the rest of him belted into tight black trousers.” The cataloguing of his sexualized body continues in greater detail and includes Destine’s physical response to him, again as a reassurance of their familiar positions in the hetero-romance:

[T]he disc of gold that gleamed against his coppery skin, the chain on which it hung buried in the tangle of dark hair that rose almost to his throat. The taut skin across his shoulders had that burnished look of a body not long from under a cold shower, and for some reason Destine’s breath caught in her throat. She was a nurse, and a widow, but never before had she been so aware of the animal vitality of a male body. (36)

The association of the exotic hero with animality is common to many romances and functions at least partly as a reminder of the supposed naturalness of heterosexuality.⁵⁰ Artez’s behavior evokes this idea repeatedly. For instance, in another incident in which Destine is refuting Artez’s accusations of trying to lure him, he reacts with the predatory fierceness that is the hallmark of this hero: “With a reflex that was animal in its swiftness, his other arm curled around her and he brought her painfully close to his hard warmth of body” (46).

His animal swiftness is used as a contrast to the kinder, less exciting masculinity that Destine has known. Episodes that play out this heterosexual drama, like the one below, attempt to write out oppositional voices, but their very stilted nature becomes the fissure that alludes to another narrative of male indifference to heterosexual desire. Destine describes Artez’s embrace as erasing the memory of her dead English husband’s kiss:

She felt the warm rush of his breath, and then she felt the crush of his lips...she had not been kissed for two years, but this kiss from an angry Spaniard brought back no memories of Matt's tenderness. It was like a flame burning across the barren years...it scorched and destroyed the tender yearnings, and all Destine was aware of was a merciless body locked against hers, and a mouth that didn't care how much it hurt her.

(46)

This animality is also depicted as something that can only be roused and satisfied by a sexual woman. Having experienced Artez's rough brand of true masculinity, Destine wonders if Cosima, his invalid cousin and potential wife, will be able to satisfy his Latin desires if she marries such an obviously sexual man: "A vivid image of that lean and virile body flashed across her mind...he was a man who would ride his horses like an Arab, and make love to a woman with passion in place of tenderness" (53). Images like these (of an alien dominance and savagery) suggest that current British masculinity is somehow inadequate, as is Latin femininity, when it comes to the heterosexual romance. According to this narrative, the ideal coupling (if not the only possible one) is between a man who is the sexual master and the woman who reciprocates his desire.

Even with this evident veneration of heterosexual masculinity, *Dearest Demon* shows a number of conflicting attitudes about men, marriage, sexuality, and women's rights, which to some extent become the more acceptable oppositional voices. In other words, the novel affirms heterosexuality as a norm but it does offer negations of this particular manifestation by narrating the erratic, regressive impulses shown by Artez and occasionally validated by Destine. Artez clearly finds Destine attractive, but he initially

only wants to use “that face, and that slim body” and treats her with extreme disparagement (36). He calls her flirtatious and accuses her of looking for an affair. His aunt tells Destine his attitude is symptomatic of Latin men’s disillusionment with the behavior of fair north-European women. But even as Artez lumps her in with these promiscuous tourists, he also berates her for lacking true passion, making Destine defend British women and the “civilized”—i.e., devoid of true desire—marriage in Britain. Though her intention is to commend feminism’s influence on altering the power dynamic between spouses, her argument actually makes feminism sound detrimental to male-female relationships. She later admits to Artez’s aunt that the women’s liberation movement is bad for both men and women. Aware of the flaw of this feminism—a flaw that creeps in when she is faced with Artez’s rejection of passionless British women—the text then attempts to preserve its feminist identity by placing Destine in opposition to the other women in the novel. Her brand of British semi-feminism is asserted as superior to Latin docility through the contrast with the aunt (who sees nothing wrong with Artez keeping a mistress after marrying her daughter) and her daughter herself, a polio-stricken woman who is still in love with the husband who abandoned her.

The novel thus blames Englishwomen for possessing too much desire and too little passion, even as it implies that they are better mates than the slave-like, sickly Latin women for a real man like Artez, who “when it came to passion [...] would be the absolute master of the woman in his arms and [...] would bring out the devil in her” (73). The fact that Destine—inadvertently—incites Artez’s desire further implies that to attract a real man the ideal woman must mix chastity, assertiveness, and true passion, the last appearing to be defined as a sexual availability stemming from a heartfelt love. The end

of the novel works to reinforce the rightness of this fantasy of marrying Old World masculinity to modern femininity when the paralyzed Cosima decides to give up Artez and die childless so that her family line will end with her. Artez confesses his own love for Destine and they both leave Spain to begin a new life, a conclusion that satisfactorily replaces a diseased femininity with one capable of satisfying the desires of the alpha-male.

Both England and Canada are witnessing an emerging gay rights movement in the seventies, a new culture that opposes established bourgeois notions of sexuality and family. The Mills and Boon-Harlequin hero is an actant for these competing narratives. A man who is strongly attracted to women and is culturally endowed with virility, he poses a contrast, it would seem, to the men in England and Canada who are suspect of a homosexual interest. This virility is a key element in this force field, associated as it is with the biological imperative behind sex, i.e., procreation. Artez's Spanish heritage also contains Moorish influences that are repeatedly invoked despite their ostensible condemnation as regressive. Destine claims he would like a harem, and that he believes women should be in purdah, but the narrative does not dispel her accusations, thus tacitly approving of machismo. Again, as with Jameson's "actant" in *Wuthering Heights*, the characters are less protagonists and more catalysts for allowing the narrative to comprehend the upheaval in an entrenched system—here, correct sexual interaction—through the longing and loathing directed at it.⁵¹

This fear and attraction for a man unaffected by women's lib or the gay rights movement also leads to the popularity of the Arab hero. In other words, Mills and Boon-Harlequin's predilection for heterosexual masculinity expresses itself even more openly

in this trend involving alpha-male heroes that are exotic—men whose ethnic identity evokes a heterosexist cultural heritage. While it is indisputable that homosexuality (as practice and sexual orientation) was and is present in most cultures, the novels rely on a popular assumption that cultures that appear chauvinistic and allied to machismo are also completely heterosexual; hence the emergence of the Latin hero in novels like *Dearest Demon* and later, the Arabic hero. This fantasy of Arabian romance, with the accompanying myth of Arab heterosexuality that succumbs to white femininity, had a precedent: E M. Hull's *The Sheikh* (1921) is the *ur* Arab-hero popular romance, as Joseph McAleer as well as Pamela Regis have pointed out.⁵²

The employment of this character type testifies to the renewed longing for straight masculinity, the sort of masculinity that popular imagination associated with Islamic societies. The novels cultivate and perpetuate a belief in the mythic notion of Arab masculinity as entirely heterosexual by equating it with the stereotype of Arabic culture as patriarchal. But it is vital to understand that the hero is not attractive for his personal dominance or chauvinism itself (in fact, any such sexism introduces a great deal of tension in the text). The chauvinism associated with his culture of origin acts as code for the hero's heterosexuality. Anne Mather's *Sandstorm* (1980), for instance, is a marriage romance relating the troubled relationship of Abbie Gillispie and Prince Rachid of Abarein. Though Abbie has left Rachid at the time the novel begins, flashbacks narrate their past. Abbie, a secretary, meets Rachid, part of the Abareinian diplomatic mission to England, at a party. Rachid's masculinity and his unmistakable sexual potency is repeatedly noted in descriptions of his appearance, his direct pursuit of Abbie, and his

skill as a lover, all of which appear linked to his Arabic roots. Even warnings about the threat Arabs pose to white Englishwomen are framed to contain an element of allure:

[Abbie's boss] said she was a fool, and an innocent if she imagined the Prince Rachid Hasan al Juhami wanted anything more than to satisfy his lust for her body, and that if that didn't trouble her the way Arabs treated their women should. They were just chattels, he maintained, there to satisfy a purpose, but without any rights to take enjoyment from it. (36)

While such cultural prejudice is quite evident in this and many such novels, the presence of this hero does not just function to allow the British reader to experience sexual desire for a racially Othered male vicariously. The racially foreign character—with his potentially reactionary beliefs about women—is invoked because he is assumed to be synonymous with heterosexual identity. The Arab, then, (like the Latin) is the man's man who is a woman's man. His ethnic background represents some form of guarantee against homoerotic desire. This hero is culled from the Orientalist myth of Eastern sexual excess, of one man servicing a harem of wives and concubines, of an inexhaustible masculinity—a myth both repulsive and reassuring because at least this is a man who won't stray from the female sex.

It is due to this version of the heterosexual myth that even though Abbie is apprehensive of the “purpose” of Rachid's interest in her, the mutual pleasure it promises leads to her finding herself in Rachid's bed by their third meeting. The description of the encounter highlights his role of aggressor:

He said her name against her mouth, and a weak sense of inadequacy gripped her. She was no match for his experienced advances, and contrary

to what Brad had told her, Rachid was no amateur in the matter of sensitivity. His whole approach was skillful, measured, and she was helpless against the sensual needs he was deliberately arousing. There was no need for brutality, no need to force her at all. In his hands, with the pulsating heat of his desire thrusting against her, she only wanted to respond, and her moan of submission was as much a plea for possession as a protest at his undoubted expertise. (38)

Despite the sexual compatibility this incident records and the quick marriage that follows it, Abbie leaves Rachid because she is unable to get pregnant and because she believes that he had a child with another woman. In this plot element lies another fear: that men might be abandoning the institution of marriage (and turning to other men) because of the refusal of women to provide progeny.⁵³ In other words, the novel has an undercurrent of apprehensiveness regarding women's responsibility in damaging traditional gender roles through their insistence on female reproductive rights. Though related as Abbie's infertility—her *inability* to bear a child—the plot signals a concern with women's *unwillingness* to get pregnant and the consequent collapse of the institution of marriage. Novels like this one are thus constantly in a diagnostic mode, attempting to understand the cause of male disinterest in the text and in society.

When the novel opens, we see a repeat of their former interaction (a replay of the reassuring pattern of male chasing female) since Rachid has come to England in order to persuade Abbie to return to him. He only consents to a divorce when she rejects all his claims of faithfulness and of not blaming her for their lack of children. Her refusal indicates some suspicion on her part that his commitment is lacking in some way, that he

does not really want her. But a subsequent episode of lovemaking leads to pregnancy and she reluctantly agrees to an extension of the marriage. Interestingly, she is then upset when Rachid maintains his distance after she arrives in Abarein. Her turnaround suggests that the sexual promise is what brought her back to the relationship, when all other verbal reassurances had failed to convince her. When he withdraws from her sexually, she worries that all he wants is the legitimate heir she is carrying—since their agreement is that she will stay married to him till she bears a son—reviving her fears about the sincerity of his attachment. The narrative relieves these fears when Rachid confesses that he feels too strongly about her to be around her if she does not return his feelings—he even swears that he is physically attracted to her. It is at this point that she forgives him for his supposed lapse in the past, once again suggesting that the sexual bond is the one about which she must receive reassurance.

For all his usefulness as a heterosexual symbol, the exotic hero inspires fear and disrupts the seeming large scale affirmation of machismo. Abbie is constantly worried about whether Rachid has converted to Islam, dreading that it will somehow turn him into an Eastern tyrant who will force her into purdah. In a move reminiscent of the plot of *Dearest Demon*, the portrayal of Rachid's family adds to this fear, especially the characters of Abbie's sister-in-law and maid, who both appear to believe that women are chattel. Abbie's boss, as mentioned earlier, also does his best to discourage her relationship with Rachid. This fear also reconfirms my reading of the Arabic hero as a character who is desirable for reasons that have little to do with a masochistic, reactionary longing for a conquering figure (one that feminist critiques have suggested this alpha male represents). His old-fashioned attitude is only acceptable at this historical

moment of gay visibility, acquiring the reassuring cast of heterosexual allegiance in the face of queer desire. In most such novels, the fear of the Arab hero is mitigated by giving him either some European parentage or Christian affiliation and by having him declare and demonstrate his love and loyalty to the young British woman. With this amendment, even if she moves to the Middle East at the end of the novel, his declaration of love serves to symbolically bring him into the British fold—unwavering heterosexuality and all.

In *Sandstorm* this assurance also comes through a brief comment on Abbie and Rachid's son. He is named Khaled Robert, and the narrative reassures us of the continuation of the British line by noting that he was always called Robert. This selective process of assimilation underlines the fact that Rachid, as a virile Arab, is only employed as a bulwark against the storm incited by the visibility of alternative sexual orientation in the west. Calling his son "Robert," apparently with his approval, shows that Abbie's children will be raised as British rather than Arab, reinforcing the idea of the inherent superiority of the former over the latter (in everything except heterosexual conviction). Harlequin reprinted *Sandstorm* in 1998, testifying to the continuing potency of this particular fantasy for a western audience that is increasingly wary of Islam and Arabs.

Mills and Boon novels in the seventies are thus in transition, with the hero's focus shifting from emotional wants to sexual demands—an oblique attempt to allay the worry that women have permanently alienated men from their beds. Once the sexual bond is established, it provides complete reassurance of the woman's desirability. Only then do the verbal declarations of love at the end of the novel ring true (unlike in novels in earlier decades in which the relationship did not have to be consummated because love and

marriage seemed to guarantee reciprocal heterosexual desire).⁵⁴ So the demonstration of the hero's sexual interest is a must for his later avowal of loving the heroine—and wanting the traditional family unit—to be taken seriously.

Jason, the hero of *Bitter Enchantment* (1979), is an example of the acme of the Mills and Boon-Harlequin alpha-hero. He goes beyond Rachid's sexual overtures to direct sexual intimidation but his actions are almost mechanically sexual as he displays an otherwise casual disregard for the heroine, Melanie. The marriage into which he coerces her permits the inclusion of sexual intercourse midway through the narrative and he physically forces the heroine into bed, though the label of rape is avoided by documenting the heroine's feelings of sexual arousal. The consummation of the marriage cements her commitment to the relationship even though there is no sign of any feeling but sexual desire on the hero's part (and a resentful desire at that). The marriage remains vulnerable to collapse because of the hero's remoteness, a situation he directly attributes to the coldness of the heroine. In fact, Jason accuses Melanie of frigidity, of using him for financial security but denying him access to her body in spite of her promise of conjugal privileges.⁵⁵ Just as *Sandstorm* speculates that women's failure/unwillingness to be child-bearers has made them dispensable, *Bitter Enchantment* suggests that men have abandoned women because women have failed to satisfy men's sexual needs; the fear is partially defused by showing the hero's sexual preoccupation with the heroine throughout the narrative.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the Mills and Boon-Harlequin alpha-hero, who had crystallized into a scathing, rigid character that was often more antagonist than hero, shows faint signs of growth through the eighties. The emergence of this

character can be explained through a look at the state of the gay rights movement in this decade. This imminent redefinition of the hero owes something to the fact that in the eighties England saw both anti-gay sentiment as well as activism and legislation favoring gay rights. If the 1980 Sexual Offences Bill decriminalized homosexual acts, the decade also included hostility toward Ken Livingstone's £1.5 million Lesbian and Gay Center. Moreover, there was the Tory party's protest about a children's novel that referred to a gay family, as well as Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988), which banned the "promotion" of homosexuality. On the opposite side was a militant fight for gay rights. Examples of this would be the Stonewall Group and *Outrage's* deployment of "in your face" activism, such as an abseiling incident at the House of Lords in which protestors disrupted its working, or the invasion of the BBC News station by lesbian activists, and the full-page advertisement in the *Independent* signed by prominent citizens protesting Section 28's assault on civil liberties. The eighties was also the time of the emergence of the AIDS epidemic, and while it led to a rise in decrying homosexual acts, Mark Simpson points out an entirely different reaction to these denunciations:

The public's attention was drawn to the details of homosex in such a way that these would-be New Puritans had the effect of 'corrupting' their audience, inuring them to the very 'obscenity' of homosex which they sought to reinforce.... Despite the fact that [gay men's] needs were ignored by the [Safe Sex] campaigns themselves, the public discussion of sex ultimately increased toleration for homosexuals. (268, 270)

In the meanwhile, laws in Canada (the new base of Mills and Boon-Harlequin) had continually awarded more rights to the gay and lesbian populace. In 1982, the Canadian

Charter of Rights and Freedoms conferred equal protection under the law to all Canadians, including homosexuals, albeit somewhat indirectly. In 1995, the Supreme Court made the inclusion explicit, and an Ontario court also allowed gay couples adoption rights. Soon after, the Supreme Court extended the legal rights granted to heterosexual common-law spouses to gay couples, and between 2002 and 2005, various courts across Canada legalized gay marriage. By 2005, same-sex marriage was legal in almost all territories and provinces in the country.⁵⁶

It is against this backdrop that the Mills and Boon alpha male hero starts to acquire more dimensions (though he does not morph into an entirely approachable figure). Unlike his predecessor, who appears to have no real past, the hero now has a history that explains his actions to some extent. Moreover, he rarely acts in ways that are deliberately injurious to the heroine. This change in the texts coincides with the waning of the panic over homosexuality; in other words, the hero does not have to be on guard any more against an emotional display that might be viewed as unmanly, a trait popularly associated with homosexuality. He does, however, stay faithful to some of the alpha male hero's defining characteristics, demonstrating how the original mold retains its shape even when the original purpose ceases to be as relevant. It is crucial to remember this evolution of the mythology of the alpha male so that the form is not read mistakenly or one-sidedly as a regressive symbol against feminism alone. In fact, the conflict is between competing ideologies, but bourgeois structure is faced with *two* challenges: new gender roles *and* newly voiced sexual orientation. In only pursuing the former, one overlooks an entirely different determinate contradiction that the alpha male presents, a

contradiction that alters in response to changes in the force field of legal and social acceptance of alternative, seemingly “unproductive” desire.

In Madeleine Ker’s *Working Relationship* (1984), Seton Chambers, a renowned photojournalist and filmmaker with a reputation for being a ladies’ man, enacts a later version of alpha masculinity where he is no longer doggedly heterosexual or completely stony. The character thus signals a recession in the anxiety over homosexuality and its alleged role in mutating masculinity. Heroine Madge Copleigh who works in his production company initially finds Seton remote and icy. A fan of his work as a teenager, she has since developed a resentment of his ruthless indifference. While other women apparently find him irresistible, Madge wonders how anyone could be drawn to him. Even as proximity makes her wonder if there is more to him than she realized, she reminds herself he is in fact unknowable. This impenetrability is a refrain in a majority of the novels from this decade, signifying a puzzlement with the mystery of the male mind:

As she drove home after their run on Friday night, Madge reflected that Seton Chambers was probably the most remote, inaccessible person she had ever met. [...] He gave nothing away. Nothing. That craggy golden mask concealed every emotion as securely as a mountain conceals the precious ore in its veins. Even his eyes [...] were strangely impenetrable. You didn’t look into them. They looked out at you. Nor did Madge fool herself that his Cheshire-cat smile was anything more than another kind of mask[.] (52)

Madge also tries to cast him in the role of playboy when she is unable to see beyond the mask:

Despite herself, she was fascinated by the thought of his marriage. It was so hard to think of him in any personal relationships, really caring, really showing that he cared. It was far easier to imagine him, like her own father, as a man who enjoyed women's bodies, and simply cast them aside when they began to bore him. (53)

But the playboy label does not gel with reality either, and the text cannot sustain the attempt to use the old mask in which a man could be emotionally absent but at least physically available.

Madge begins to notice that Seton's actions do not support the widespread belief that he sees a lot of women. Unlike the seventies hero, he is never in actual pursuit of any woman. Not only has he snubbed Madge, but when he meets her mother, a famous actress, he shows little of the effusiveness most men display. This is behavior quite unlike the insistently heterosexual attitude of the old alpha-male. Seton is remote, but there appear to be no frantic demonstrations underlining his straightness. The novel does, however, allow Madge to express curiosity about Seton's aversion to her and offers a plausible heteronormative alibi when he tells her later that his troubled marriage has scarred him. He warns Madge that as a consequence of the bitterness in his past, he has vowed to only have affairs with women who understand that he will never commit to them. The avowal affirms his heterosexual orientation and keeps homoanxiety at a manageable level.

Seton Chambers and *Sandstorm's* Rachid resemble their predecessors in their characterization as lady-killers and in their icy passion; despite this remoteness, however, they offer some glimpses of caring and tenderness throughout the narrative, unlike the

alpha-males of the earlier decades. Seton's brusqueness is not the deliberate cruelty demonstrated by the heroes of novels like *Dearest Demon*. His inscrutability is offset by his verbal admission of being hurt by his failed marriage and his attentiveness to Madge when she is ill or injured, i.e., by characteristics typically associated with femininity. At this point in time then, it seems that the Mills and Boon-Harlequin hero no longer needs to come across as a cipher, whose sole feature is traditional masculinity—implicitly defined as heterosexuality.

Thus, despite some continuing hostility toward the gay community in England and Canada, by this time Mills and Boon-Harlequin novels show an attitude in which there is less fear about homosexuality being a contagious form of depravity; resultantly, as *Working Relationship* shows, the heroes can express emotion or refrain from chasing a woman without being suspected of effeminacy or homosexuality. But American romance, though evolving in a similar fashion, is a somewhat different story, and necessitates a review of the alpha-hero's rise and institutionalization in the United States.

The Seventies and Eighties: the United States

The seventies witness the rise of romance publishing in the United States, with several novels displaying some of the features of the genre as developed by Mills and Boon-Harlequin—especially the figure of the sexually and financially powerful hero who controls the narrative and the heroine's destiny. The seventies' American romance hero (in Woodiwiss's *Flame and the Flower* (1972) and other novels) is a sexually demanding figure—often a rapist. The character, as in Mills and Boon-Harlequin novels, takes such a strong hold of the imagination because his proclamation of straight desire can counter the

apprehension that readers might have felt at the expansion and redirection of the gay rights movement in the United States. 1965 marked the beginning of this shift when the Mattachine Group's Washington arm appeared on television asking for equal rights for the gay community. The Stonewall riots in New York in 1969 and the establishment of the more militant Gay Liberation Front further forced the public to acknowledge the existence of homosexuals (though not without encountering hatred or unease). The movement also acquired a distinctive feature in the Gay Pride parades (which swelled in number with every following year) and brought homosexuality out into the open. This was also the moment of the birth of a new activism, which utilized the technique of "zapping" (confronting public officials), and of the 1973 campaign to have the American Psychiatric Association remove homosexuality from its list of illnesses. Unlike in the fifties, the new gay rights movement was unapologetic and refused to be shamed for being gay. It also brought up the notion of bisexuality, strengthening the challenge to the traditional family. The movement spoke of a different social formation, one that escaped the nuclear family based on heterosexual marriage and child-bearing. In a way, it was a new world in the Bakhtinian sense, a world of new affiliations, and it undermined the pre-existing mythology of marriage and sexual activity.

The historical romance sub-genre that develops in Woodiwiss's footsteps in the seventies through the novels of authors like Jude Deveraux, Johanna Lindsey, Rosemary Rogers, and Susan Elizabeth Phillips bears the marks of the apprehension produced in American society by these developments. Much of their early work bears a strong stamp of the alpha-male brand of masculinity, and leaves no space for anything but that one dimension of heterosexual desire, first expressed by the hero, and variously repulsed or

accepted by the heroine. Not surprisingly, there is also a complete absence of homoerotic narrative in the texts. Heterosexuality's entrenchment as the only sexual orientation imaginable—even if as a gross caricature—cements the denial of homoeroticism, even as homosexuals were asserting their identity in the public eye at this time. In fact, many of these novels display a masculinity that expresses its heterosexual identity through the rape of the heroine.

Judith McNaught's *Whitney, My Love* (1985), for instance, shows an über-masculinity in pursuit of a sexually innocent femininity, a masculinity that turns from heterosexual assertiveness into rape. Hero Clayton Westmoreland is an eligible bachelor by virtue of his dukedom and wealth as well as his reputation as a rake.⁵⁷ Clayton's bent for beautiful women is made clear in the repeated references to his opera-singer mistress. He decides to marry Whitney Stone after a few brief encounters, pursuing her and ignoring her obvious preference for the boy from the estate next door. Clayton's courtship of Whitney is marked by his insistent interest, eventually resulting in his rape of her in a jealous rage.

Critics have argued that such episodes tutor readers to think of female subservience as desirable and to mold their reading preferences in favor of this sadism. Though *Whitney's* best-seller status seems to prove that charge, the rape (or the "forced seduction" in some novels) is not attractive in itself; it *is* connected, however, to the popularity of novels that contain such an episode. The timing of the motif's appearance in the eighties, unprecedented in the genre's nearly seventy-year history, suggests that the focus on forceful male desire for a woman is a reaffirmation of heterosexuality. Clayton's masculinity is inextricably tied to his violation of the virgin Whitney—he is the antithesis

of the gay man; his actions underline his attachment to the heroine and reinforce the stability of the traditional love story while the bourgeois family is facing a significant challenge to conventionally accepted sexual bonds.

That the rape is less titillation and more an exorcism of trauma becomes visible in the discomfort of readers who like the novel but still find the rape extremely disturbing. The uneasiness stems from the obvious worry of coming across as someone who likes or approves of rape. While sexuality and violence is not an unusual coupling, these readers suggest that romance fiction is divorced from that pleasure. As will be seen in chapter five, most readers dislike sexual sado-masochism in romances, often addressing it as a problem rather than a preference. As the following excerpt shows, reviewers on Amazon dwell on the issue as well:

This book has gotten very high reviews, and I liked it, but I don't think my feelings were on par with some of the other reviewers [who loved it]....

I also have to agree with a few other reviewers that I really don't like these sex scenes that conjure the word "rape." (Price)

Critics like Radway have observed that these incidents make the novels an exorcism, an evocation and diffusion of the fear of sexual assault that most women always live with (*Reading the Romance* 141). While her assessment is probably accurate, it does not adequately explain why the motif gains such currency at this moment in the genre's development. Its emergence—at the moment of awareness that homosexuality is a widespread practice—prompts my contention that the focus on forceful male desire for a woman is also a reaffirmation of heterosexuality.

Despite the persistence of rigid examples of the single-title first generation American romance (published in the seventies and early eighties), series romances in the United States start to turn away from the threatening hero to one with a well-rounded character during the late eighties. A quick survey of the social context explains that this change reflects a social transformation. The gay rights movement in the eighties in the United States lost some of its focus on public self-assertion, so prominent a feature of the earlier decade. The primary cause was the rise of AIDS and the necessity of combating it. While the AIDS scare incited public feeling against homosexuality and also explains the rise of the coping mechanism that is the alpha-male, the sympathy that the AIDS epidemic created for homosexuals (as in England) and the drop in the visibility of gay rights activism may explain the altered late-eighties version of the alpha-male in several new romance imprints in the United States (such as *Loveswept* and *Silhouette*). Both still include a hero who is far from ordinary, but this man has male friends, and often, a close-knit family, and is as wont to stay at home and take care of children as he is to go to a club. This is the beta-male romance hero, a kinder, gentler version of his immediate predecessor (though still capable of strength when it comes to defending and protecting his family). While he is good-looking and clearly interested only in women, he is not the sexual aggressor or heartless playboy that was his alpha male ancestor.

Joan Elliot Pickart's *Waiting for Prince Charming* (*Loveswept* # 94, 1985) includes one such hero, who willingly participates in the heroine's chaotic life in her family-like neighborhood, while in Peggy Webb's *Private Lives* (*Loveswept* # 216, 1987), the hero is a country-western singer who has fled from fame and adoring fans. Both novels contain comic moments as well as domestic tasks that both hero and heroine

participate in—episodes that are rare in the earlier novels since the alpha-male hero's grimness and wealth make them impossible. Further, in both novels, it is the women who insist on greater sexual intimacy, not the men. Pickart's heroine, Chelsey Star, is a virgin, and hero Mitch Brannon has scruples about having sex with her. In Webb's *Private Lives*, John Riley's life is in turmoil and he worries about hurting Samantha Jones emotionally, so she has to coax him into lovemaking. These men are beta male heroes, strong, protective, yet casual in their heterosexuality.

Though the series romances in which such a hero makes an appearance do not show an awareness of anything but heterosexual desire, they do represent a move away from the caricature of determined heteronormativity and reflect a waning of homoanxiety. It is the moment in which the discourse of the ideal family (in a bourgeois conception of sexuality) does not feel the need to perform the drama between the stern, sexual man and nurturing, receptive woman because the oppositional discourse is by now both less obtrusive and somewhat familiar and non-threatening. In allowing its hero to set aside his mask, to be more nurturing, less aggressively sexually productive, the genre makes a confession; it recognizes that it need not posit itself as completely antithetical to the seemingly "unproductive" or "effeminate" bond of homosexuality.

The Nineties: United States and England

If the genre betrays an awareness of the existence of homoerotic desire by denying it (through the portrayals of the alpha-hero), it does show its heroes to be facing subtle forms of homoerotic desire. In numerous novels in the nineties, heroes find themselves attracted to women disguised as men. Though the text lets the reader know

the true gender of the heroine up-front or very soon into the narrative and thus appears to narrate a heterosexual attraction, as long as the hero and the heroine do not share the secret with each other, the story reads as if it is a romance between two men. Thus, the temporary transvestitism acknowledges the existence of queer desire, even if only to use it for comedic effect or as something fake that can eventually be overcome by straight romance. While some heroes are angst-ridden if they suspect themselves to be homosexually aroused, the ones who are more playful in the situation will be studied here in order to understand this symbolic resolution to the contradiction of hetero and homosexual desire in the nineties.⁵⁸

One of the many novels that employ this plot element is Johanna Lindsey's *Gentle Rogue* (1990), part of Lindsey's extremely popular Regency series about the aristocratic Mallory family. Published under the Avon Romance line, it relates the romance of the black sheep of the clan, former pirate James, Viscount Riding. James is big, muscled, handsome, and a skilled lover but is distinguished by his sense of humor and easy demeanor and is thus somewhat atypical of Lindsey's alpha-heroes. He meets American Georgina Anderson in a pub when she is dressed as a boy and is instantly intrigued when he sees through her disguise. He later recognizes her when she joins his ship pretending to be Georgie, a twelve-year old cabin boy. Strongly attracted to Georgina, James is determined to seduce her into revealing her real identity—her female self—but it is noteworthy that he has not seen her dressed as a woman when he decides this, i.e., he is attracted to someone who looks like a man. With seduction in mind, he insists that she share his cabin. He then manufactures situations in which she is forced into physical contact with him, such as bathing and shaving him or giving him a massage.

He is sure that proximity will make his charms obvious and eventually provoke her into confessing her true sex in order to become his lover; the terms in which he imagines this outcome, however, lend themselves to a homoerotic reading:

He'd envisioned seducing her with his manly form, until she would be so overcome with lust that she would toss off her cap and implore him to take her. A splendid fantasy where he would play the innocent, unsuspecting male attacked by his wanton cabin boy. He would protest. She would beg sweetly for his body. He would then do the gentlemanly thing and give in.
(141)

Due to James's knowledge of Georgie's sex, this desire is ostensibly heterosexual; but the narrative is also conscious of the homoeroticism inherent in the situation (especially the implication of buggery that is inevitable in any such interaction between the older captain and the cabin boy). Queer desire is underlined even by offhand comments such as when James wonders why he is enamored of Georgie though he has not felt strongly attracted to a woman in a long while. While his speculations involve the possibility of wanting to chase the reluctant woman, they also betray his attraction to her disguise:

Women had simply become too easily obtainable. ... The winning of one particular lady simply hadn't mattered when there were so many to choose from. But here was something altogether different, a true challenge, a conquest that mattered. Why it mattered was disconcerting to a man of his jaded experience. For once, just any woman wouldn't do. He wanted *this* one. It could be because he'd lost her once and been more than a little disappointed over it.

Disappointment in itself was unusual for him. It could be simply the mystery she represented. Or it could be no more than that *cute little backside* he remembered so well. (90-1, italics mine)

Georgie's attractiveness is, by the hero's own admission, linked to her unusual disguise and his descriptions of her serve to emphasize her physical resemblance to a boy. In multiple episodes his gaze sexualizes her while she is in her cabin boy outfit:

She really was quite adorable in her lad's togs [...] The woolen cap he remembered still hid all her hair [...] The white tunic was long-sleeved and high-necked, and fell nearly to mid-thigh, which effectively hid her cute derriere. He tried to figure out what she'd done with her breasts and, for that matter, the tiny waist he remembered holding. The tunic wasn't bulky but fit narrowly on her frame, giving her straight lines that a wide belt bore testimony to. If there were bumps to be seen, they remained concealed under the short vest over the tunic. Now that was a piece of ingenious clothing ideal for her purposes. Thick with fleece on one side, hard leather on the other, the vest lay on her like a steel cage, so stiff it wouldn't flap open even in a strong wind. Untied, it showed only about three inches of her tunic down the front, three inches of flat chest and flat belly. The tunic hid the rest until her buff-colored knee breeches began. They ended just below the knee, where thick woolen stockings disguised the slimness of her calves. Being neither too loose nor too tight, they made shapely limbs look like perfectly normal boy's legs instead. (92-3)

Apart from this description, which tugs the narrative away from the primary sexual orientation of the romance, James has to be reminded twice that he must avoid raising suspicion of a homosexual attachment by treating Georgie without favoritism. The first time, James has to remind himself that he cannot intervene if the other sailors get annoyed with Georgie's inability to follow orders, because if he declares that "the boy was under his protection" it would "have the new members of his crew snickering behind his back [and] the old ones looking at the lad more closely" (91-2). At another time, when he forgets his own advice and nearly punches a sailor who has cuffed Georgie, a friend cautions him against showing his "cabin boy" any favor in public. He points out that any protectiveness would make the boat-hands treat Georgie with suspicion:

"How better to show the crew that *Georgie boy* is not to be treated like a cabin boy at all, but as your own personal property? You might as well yank off that silly cap and fetch up a gown. Either way, you'll have the men's interest centered on your little friend until they find out what is so special about him that had you committing murder." (114)

The potential for this secondary queer narrative is frequently realized in other chapters, starting with the fact that James's joking rechristening of Georgina as "George" means he is seen lusting after George's "cute little backside" (90). He also finds himself caught in his own trap, repeatedly aroused by George but worried that any sign of attraction on his part will lead to a misunderstanding about his sexual orientation. When George bathes James, for instance, he has to struggle to hide the evidence of his response to her touch, fearing that she will think he is gay:

He'd meant to have her rinse him, to hand him his towel, to help him into his robe. He meant to see those pretty cheeks blush with color. Instead, he would have been the one with the hot cheeks if he'd stood up at that point. He'd never in his life suffered embarrassment over an honest reaction of his body, and he wouldn't have this time, except that to her mind, his reaction would have been caused by a boy...[And] if she happened to notice [his erection], the darling chit would think he had a fondness for boys, and *that* wouldn't inspire anything in her but disgust. Bloody hell, he'd have her confessing who she was just so he *wouldn't* get any ideas.

(141-42)

In having James ventriloquize Georgina's response to his supposed homosexuality as "disgusting," the novel reveals its disquiet with men whose sexual orientation may disrupt the heterosexual romance. Nevertheless, James's acknowledgment of queer desire sets him miles apart from the seventies hero, for whom it was unspeakable. James finally gets her in bed on the pretext of having her read to him and then seduces her out of her disguise. When she tries to stay in character and protests, shocked at his kissing "George," he shushes her by calling her "darling girl," startling yet reassuring her that he wants her for her real self. His admission of the knowledge of her true sex persuades her to join in the lovemaking, a culmination of the narrative's drive toward the romantic ideal of heterosexuality.

While cross-dressing is employed to heighten the heterosexual seduction and to create comedy, what make these very effects possible are the references to the potential for homoeroticism that the primary narrative is engaged in overcoming. In other words,

heterosexual desire depends on homosexual desire in this novel. More interestingly, James persists in using the name George even after Georgina's true identity is revealed to everyone. Though this practice has a precedent—James calls his niece Regina, Regan—in *Gentle Rogue*, Georgina's renaming is part of a larger pattern of the masculination of the heroine.

The explicit reference to homoerotic desire in *Gentle Rogue* coincides, as I noted briefly above, with a morphing in the portrayal of the alpha-male hero. In other words, the alpha-male version of heteronormativity (i.e., a grim, sexually-focused masculinity) recedes whenever homoeroticism is not being repressed (the latter occurring when the gay rights movement is not in the headlines). Thus, on the face of it, James resembles his fellow alphas. He has had a violent past as a notorious pirate and he is physically the most imposing of the Mallory clan. Georgina describes him as a "brick wall" and he does display a tendency to enter into and win physical confrontations. But the novel has a light-heartedness that is completely absent outside the American series romances, and much of that can be attributed to James's odd sense of humor. He rarely displays a real temper, appearing to take most matters as a joke, and never poses a serious threat to Georgina. Though he is determined to be her lover, he tries to avoid making the advance, hoping he won't have to at all if he makes himself irresistible. And when he realizes he wants to marry Georgina, he does not bully her into a wedding like some of the Mills and Boon-Harlequin heroes discussed earlier. Instead, he provokes her brothers into arranging a shotgun wedding and pretends that their threats have forced him into matrimony. A novel such as this one shows that the change in the alpha-male hero, which began in the American series romances, has extended to the genre at large.

Throughout the nineties, the romance genre continues to revamp its heroes and its voiced awareness of different sexual orientations in tandem with changing trends in the attitudes toward homosexuality. It resorts to the alpha male character whenever there are signs of gains in the movement but turns from him at other moments. In the U.S., 1993 was the landmark year in which the Hawaii Supreme Court opened the door to gay marriage. This in turn set in motion a number of counteractive events that led to the *Defense of Marriage Act* that President Clinton signed into law in 1996. There were likewise contradictory currents in England, which witnessed a Church of England minister performing marriage ceremonies for gay couples, Ian McKellan receiving a Knighthood, and the birth of the Glasgow! Festival in 1993. On the other hand, in 1994, the age of consent for homosexual sex was set at 18 (instead of the 16 for heterosexuals), reinforcing discrimination between the two groups. This mix of acceptance and disapprobation of homosexuality shows up in romance novels as fluctuations in the signs of homo-anxiety.

The new approach even touches the works of authors who had exclusively written the old-fashioned alpha-male hero in the eighties. Linda Howard is known for creating that hero to perfection in several of her novels, both ones published in series form by Silhouette and single titles for imprints such as Pocket Books. *Dream Man* (1994) contains such a hero in Dane Hollister, a police detective who corrals psychic Marlie Keene into bed soon after they meet. He is forceful, determined, and in every way an alpha-male except for two seemingly minor, yet significant, distinctions that make him beta: he plays roles often associated with women, and he has a close male friend. Both traits are a departure from the hero who bore no traces of female characteristics or

homosocial attachments; the change signifies that the homoanxiety that might have propelled that character is declining.

Unlike the earlier texts in which the hero does not adopt the role of emotional caregiver until much later in the novel (though he may be one financially and legally early on in the narrative), novels such as *Dream Man* one show the hero take on this role quite openly in the initial stages of the relationship. Dane moves into Marlie's house to take care of her during the periods she has psychic visions, stepping into the role of loving protector when she is debilitated. Quite demonstrative about his attachment to her from the start, Dane goes to pieces when she is nearly killed at the end. Unlike the stiff-lipped alpha heroes of the previous decades, whose emotional displays were limited to a clenched jaw, Dane shows a stark vulnerability, being completely unable to function until Marlie is on the mend.

Dane's shift to beta male is complete in the last chapter when a pregnant Marlie experiences few symptoms of her condition but Dane undergoes a hilarious sympathetic pregnancy, complete with bouts of morning sickness. He even suffers through labor, delighting the nurses who express a desire to see all fathers experience the event in this manner. He finally needs to be sedated and when he wakes a proud father, declares that the baby will be their only child because labor hurts too much. Despite the character's debt to American alpha male heroes of the previous generation, Dane is clearly written differently to allow a greater expression of a feminized masculinity that is nevertheless macho. His gruffness and aggression are balanced out by his emotional vulnerability and his body's mimicry of female physiology during gestation.

Another change the novel makes to the seventies' and eighties' pattern is to widen the scope of the hero's relationships beyond those he has with women. Dane's closest friend, Detective Tramell, is a strong supporting character in *Dream Man*. Though the novel depicts their bond through the somewhat clichéd "buddy relationship" between partnered cops, it is nevertheless noteworthy for its deviation from the genre's tendency to isolate the hero from other men. Tramell is younger, funnier and more suave than the older detective. He is also a notable clotheshorse with a keen sense of style, seen in the décor of his own home as well as in the fact that Dane entrusts him to redecorate his own house. He also has a low tolerance for alcohol unlike most "manly" men. Despite these traits, the novel permits Dane's friendship with him without any worry that it may be suspected of being a homoerotic attachment.

Dale's alpha-male-in-transition and his friendship with Tramell are indicators of a lessening of the anxiety that the visibility of alternative sexual orientation incited for over two decades. By the early nineties, the genre no longer appears compelled to cater to the rigid heteronormative fantasy of a man driven by biology to mate with a woman almost irrespective of her consent, a fantasy whose undercurrent is the denial of alternative sexuality. The beta male can express his feminine self through same-sex friendships, nurturing acts toward women and children, and artistic pursuits but also retain his heterosexual identity. With this shift, the popular romance novel, which is at its core a heteronormative genre, finally begins to stop defining itself solely as the antithesis of homosexuality. The transformation begins in the eighties with *Loveswept* and *Silhouette* easing back on the alpha male and eliminating the Other Woman and slowly touches all sub-genres of the romance novel.

Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* saga is one of the best examples of the contest between the affirmation and negation of heteronormative romance, reflective of the history of legalizing sexual behavior in the last century. An epic series, which unfolds over two continents and two time periods, its six novels are held together by the love and marriage of Claire Beauchamp and Scottish Highlander James (Jamie) Fraser. Interestingly, the entire series is also preoccupied with the theme of homosexuality, with each novel examining stereotypes about queer desire through the way it affects the lives and attitudes of the heterosexual characters, particularly the hero. In the course of Jamie's life, the series depicts fluctuations in his alignment to the alpha male format, while directly discussing his encounters with different homosexual men. Beginning with a strong dislike of queer desire, one amplified by the attentions of threatening gay men, Jamie eventually develops a less confrontational attitude to homosexuality. His own machismo, similarly, is far stronger in the years he is cast as holding off homosexual persuasion. In the later decades, however, this demonstrated heterosexuality loses its defensive edge as Jamie finds that homosexuality does not mean sadism and rape. In the figure of Jamie (and his wife), the series stages a social confrontation of the heterofamily and its alleged enemy, showing the resolution to lie in prolonged acquaintance between people of either orientation and in the reassessment of the ideal family.

The series is primarily a historical one in the tradition of Walter Scott or Fenimore Cooper, but it also employs science fiction. The first novel thus begins in 1945 when Claire, a British nurse, walks past a group of standing stones in the countryside near Inverness, Scotland, and finds herself 200 hundred years in the past. Though a newlywed in the twentieth century, she is compelled to marry Jamie to protect herself from the

curiosity of a British officer named Jonathan “Black Jack” Randall. This novel, *Outlander* (1991), recounts Claire and Jamie’s deepening love as well as the challenges their marriage faces. Jamie, a handsome, educated clan leader, is younger than Claire and she finds that she already has a rival for him in a young girl named Loaghire. But the bigger threat she faces is “Black Jack” Randall. A ruthless soldier, Jack is raised to near demonic proportions due to his sexual interest in Jamie. In keeping with the argument I have made earlier, this awareness of queer desire brings out a strong heterosexual demonstration. There is at least one episode in this novel in which Jamie physically and sexually overwhelms Claire. His alpha behavior is in line with the connection this chapter has shown between this persona and the wariness about “homosex” (Simpson 262). The conquest of Claire is then an inevitable accompaniment to—and symptom of—the homoanxiety in the series.

The threat Jack poses becomes real when Jamie and Claire are taken prisoner in an ambush. Aware of Jack’s desire for him, Jamie offers to submit himself sexually if Claire is set free. Already battered, he is pinned to a table by a knife through his palm while Jack repeatedly sodomizes him. Then he is forced to perform oral sex on Jack, whose body bears Jamie’s own blood. Even after Claire manages to rescue her husband and repair his broken bones, he struggles with the trauma of the rapes. He recounts the incident in fits and starts, almost against his will, when Claire pushes him to talk about it. The description is horrific and fosters revulsion of homosexual sex, portraying it as perverted, degrading, non-consensual, and violent.⁵⁹

Nightmares plague Jamie for months and he is unable to share a bed with Claire, conjuring up the fear that homosexuality destroys existing heterosexual family.

Depression sets in and he finally confesses his greatest shame—that the bloody seduction was interspersed with moments of gentleness in which he could not help responding to Jack and he is now unable to divorce the horror of that sexual experience from sex with his wife. The scene represents the fear that homosexuals may be able to force straight men away from their women. Jamie even asks Claire to leave him before falling ill with an infection. In this manner, Jack's real or potential effect serves to affirm the wrongness of homosexual desire. This impasse leads to a strategy to revive besieged heterosexuality. Despairing of Jamie's life, Claire decides to recreate the atmosphere of the rape, playing the part of Jack Randall herself. Reliving his nightmare in his delirious state, Jamie is finally able to fight back, nearly throttling Claire/Jack several times during the violent struggle that ensues—and giving her a chance to act out her own rage and symbolically annihilate Jack. They finally end up in an exhausted embrace, having exorcised the demon that is Jack's lust along with the fear that Jamie's malaise represented; the novel ends with heterosexuality's triumph. In *Dragonfly in Amber* (1992), the next book in the series, the confrontation is revived again, testifying to the continuing nature of the argument for determining legitimate sexuality. Jamie comes across his rapist in this novel and is determined to kill him. A pregnant Claire pleads with him not to, afraid of the repercussions—both for Jamie and for history. He relents but is soon compelled to challenge Jack to a duel when he comes upon him forcing a ten-year old street urchin into sex (an episode that feeds into the stereotype of gay men being pedophiles). Jamie emasculates him instead of killing him because of his promise, but the act actually serves to neutralize homoerotic overtures. The stress causes Claire to miscarry her baby, however, thus making Jack a direct threat to the traditional family again.

Jamie and Claire meet Jack again when he visits Claire in Edinburgh and asks her to help his fatally ill brother Alex even as he mocks her with their shared knowledge of Jamie's body. Filled with hate, she nevertheless agrees to his bargain of nursing Alex in exchange for information on the British army's movements. Jamie himself stays silent about her doctoring his worst enemy's brother but when Alex dies, he does find it in himself to be civil to Jack. Claire and Jamie find themselves pregnant again toward the end of the novel, completing the healing process; this development also serves as an acknowledgement that homosexuality is not going to be the deterrent to the traditional family unit as originally feared. (The novel culminates in Jamie and Claire's parting, however, because the pregnant Claire is forced to leave him to fight in the doomed Scottish uprising of 1745 and return to the twentieth century for the sake of the child.)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the series now begins to show an older Jamie's heterosexual mask lose its rigidity. This change accompanies a more positive representation of homoerotic desire in the third novel once the longevity of the heterosexual family is confirmed by Claire's new pregnancy (and its conclusion in a safe birth when she is in the twentieth century). This is the moment in which the series reflects an easing in the social perception of homosexuality as merely an inclination, one that is fundamentally opposed to the family that is in place in the bourgeois universe. *Voyager* (1994) begins with Jamie regaining consciousness on the battlefield of Culloden to find the corpse of Black Jack Randall sprawled over him. The description is notable both for its macabre evocation of a lover's embrace as well as for the symbolic death of the kind of homosexual persona Jack represented. The episode makes way for a new homosexual character, Lord John Grey, who is the polar opposite of Jack Randall. Here, most

affirmative tendencies give over to the negation of the anti-gay discourse. Jamie is forced to evaluate his own beliefs in this period and accept his own prejudice. Separated from Claire, and thus out of the older formal device for demonstrating the heteronorm, he slowly emerges from the old discourse it represented. As a prisoner of the Crown in Ardsmuir prison, Jamie comes in contact with Lord John, a young British officer who is the prison warden. When he and Jamie develop an acquaintance, John finds himself strongly attracted to the handsome, well-read Scot. When he expresses his desire, however, Jamie, scarred by his past, responds with a quietly murderous rejection. Not only does he reject the sexual overture, he goes out of his way to reinscribe their opposing positions (albeit through the more public roles of prisoner and warden). In one notable instance, he falsely claims ownership of a scrap of proscribed Scottish tartan, knowing John will have to have him punished. But the novel challenges the association of homosexuality with sadism (established earlier in the series) when John vomits at the sight of Jamie's bleeding back after the latter is whipped.

Jamie's wariness toward John starts to fade when John intervenes to spare Jamie from transportation to America and instead finds him an indenture on an English estate. Any reservations he has about John dissolve fully when John offers to raise the child that Jamie conceives with the landowner's daughter but cannot claim; grateful, Jamie croaks out an offer to sleep with him in exchange, evoking the earlier bargain with Jack, but John declines. Once again, a gay man is given the power to force a straight man into a homosexual act, and once again, John proves that he is not that unconscionable gay man. Almost convulsing with laughter, he assures Jamie that he would never compel him to have sex no matter how much he loved and desired him. The episode allows some of the

straight hero's prejudices about the gay male to be broken down and also portrays the latter as fit to be a parent.

John and Jamie's friendship becomes cause for concern when Claire reappears, having spent 20 years in twentieth-century Boston with her daughter, Brianna, and husband. Soon after reuniting with Jamie, Claire unexpectedly meets Lord John and learns that he was Jamie's prison warden and friend. When she happens on them in an embrace later, however, she is terrified by the love she spies on John's face and the feeling in Jamie's voice. She finds herself battered by the fear that Jamie's time in prison has overcome his horror of sex with other men—has in fact made him receptive to homosexuality. So while the presence of Jack Randall emblemized the fear of the gay man who will compel straight men into sexual intimacy, this episode actually voices the anxiety that prolonged homosociality will induce homosexuality. Yet the novel has already told us that Jamie is thanking John for raising his son, thus stating that their friendship is possible (with no need of a denial of John's homosexuality or a magnification of Jamie's heterosexuality).

Over the next three novels in the series, *Drums of Autumn* (1997), *The Fiery Cross* (2001), and *A Breath of Snow and Ashes* (2005) (all set in the New World), Claire continues to be suspicious of John, but her attitude resembles the ordinary wariness of a spouse toward any potential third party encroacher on a marriage. Notably, while Jamie continues to be a powerful, charismatic male, there is no repeat of the sexual forcefulness he had once displayed toward Claire. The shift in his character and in representations of homosexuality are the novels' mirroring of the growing tolerance, even acceptance, of alternative sexual orientation in the genre's American and European markets. More

significantly, the intermittent first-person point of view allows readers to participate in the gradual change in Jamie and Claire's changing mindset toward John, thus molding reader attitude toward homosexuality.

Into the Twenty-First Century: the United States and the Continuing Debate

England, Canada, and the United States have progressively awarded gay citizens the same rights that heterosexual ones possess. But the late nineties have witnessed a more polarized debate in the United States on the rights of the gay community. In the early seventies, gay and lesbian rights movements fought and won non-discrimination battles against local and state governments, corporations and churches. The rise of the New Right in the late seventies, however, resulted in the repeal of some of these ordinances (Epstein 41-7). The struggle continued through the eighties and while many American states now offer legal recourse against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation—an edict that has been both the cause and effect of social transformation—the United States continues to be divided on the crucial issue of gay marriage.

Despite the gradual acceptance of gay culture underway in the late eighties and nineties, the demand that gay couples get exactly the same legal rights as straight ones do is provoking a reactionary response based on the claim that the American family is being destroyed. While the Republican opposition to gay marriage may have more to do with the alleged financial benefits it may bestow on gay Americans at the cost of the state, its stance is helping strengthen the real conservative conviction in the moral rightness of opposing gay marriage (Rostow 52). The 1996 *Defense of Marriage Act* was a response to two cases in which states were asked to rule in favor of gay marriage (Arkes 92-3).

Prior to the 2004 Presidential election, the mayor of San Francisco allowed same-sex marriage, but the state Supreme Court invalidated them once the state challenged the city-county. During the election itself, eleven states proposed a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage. Not only did the amendment pass in all states, but it is speculated that the voters who had no preference for any particular election candidate came to the polling station specifically because they did not want states to allow gay marriage, and thus voted for Republican conservatism against Democratic liberalism (*Federal Marriage Amendment and Same-sex Marriage in the United States*).

Even as the legal debate over marriage continues, popular culture forms are attempting to bring gay culture into the mainstream. Sitcoms like *Will and Grace* (1998-2006), though employing gay stereotypes, have played a role in awarding a new visibility to alternative sexuality. But the demands for the marriage amendment to the U.S. constitution and the insistence of the current White House administration's denial of the call to recognize unions between gay couples as marriage make it evident that a significant section of the American populace is still deeply unnerved by what it considers an assault on the traditional family. In a sense, popular culture forms are negating heteronormativity more stridently, the legal system bogged down by the affirmative tendency toward preserving bourgeois social structures.

The full impact of the gay marriage debate on the romance-publishing world is still unclear. But as I've demonstrated, social changes involving sexual orientation show up in the straight romance as anxiety when the change involves legalization. Thus, the awarding of legal rights to gay citizens in the mid-twentieth century led to a spike in social anxiety, which was echoed in the aversion to, or absence of, queer desire in

popular romances at the time. The alpha male hero developed to bolster this coping mechanism, his presence acting as a charm against the growing anxiety over the presence of homosexual desire among men. In the late eighties, the gradual social acceptance of alternative sexualities was accompanied by a weakening of the heterosexist ethos, a fact reflected in the decrease in Othering queer desire in romances, and in the lessening of the heterosexual masculinity of the romance hero.

At the present moment, though, there appears to be a new, hotly contested legal battle involving gay rights that is akin to the first decade of the movement's activism in the late fifties. Just as that first phase resulted in panic or hatred, the current demand for awarding the status of marriage to gay unions can be seen to incite similar anxieties about homosexuality, and a correspondingly exclusionary legal response. Current romance fiction, a popular form, is not divorced from this process. It then follows that the renewed debate on the right of gay individuals to *marry*, and the swing to conservatism among the American populace on this issue, will see the genre bringing back the mechanism of controlling social anxiety.⁶⁰ The trend in the novels so far has been a largely liberal one as I've demonstrated. Recent works such as Johanna Lindsey's *A Loving Scoundrel* (2004) show the light-hearted hero—the son of *Gentle Rogue*'s James Mallory—while Susan Elizabeth Phillips's *Ain't She Sweet* (2004) has a British writer with a metrosexual personality living in small-town Mississippi; both heroes, with their non-conformity to high masculinity (as represented by the alpha male) attest to a less conservative leaning. Mills and Boon-Harlequin has shown a relaxing of the focus on the alpha-male hero as well.⁶¹

More crucially, though mainstream popular romances shy away from an actual romance between gay couples, a few have included such storylines in secondary plots, for instance, Suzanne Brockmann's *Hot Target* (2005) and *Force of Nature* (2007). Both are interesting examples of this dual plot trend, with a homosexual plot being given as much room as the hetero-romance. The two happen to be one of several novels by Brockmann in which gay FBI agent Jules Cassidy makes an appearance. Brockmann claims to have created the character of Jules as a tribute to her son, and many readers have been eager to read his love story. He is in some ways an Abercrombie and Fitch-style gay man, slight, yet muscled, with perfect features and fashion sense. But he is also skilled in using a gun, in coming out on top in firefights and hostage situations—arguably features of the alpha male hero. If reviews on Amazon.com are any indication, most readers were frustrated that *Hot Target* did not fulfill the promise of his romance, sidelining it with the perfunctory heterosexual plot.⁶² But in *Force of Nature*, the romance he was denied came to fruition with his closeted lover, an actor, coming out to the world while asserting Jules's strengths.⁶³

An indication of the new public willingness to treat gay desire as romantic is the recent development of gay romance fiction. In June 2005, the *New York Times Magazine* profiled Scott Pomfret and Scott Whittier, two men who are pioneering the genre through a line called Romentics ("A New Romance"). Though they have been publishing e-books for some time, their first paperback novel, *Hot Sauce*, was published in 2005. How readers react to this trend will become clearer over the next few years. But some responses to the movie *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) can provisionally help to see the conversation about heteronormativity and the expansion of the definition of romance.

Many readers on the Avon romance message board expressed a keen interest in watching the film, which is based on Annie Proulx's bittersweet tale of a love affair between two cowboys in Wyoming. Discussants noted that they considered it a romantic story irrespective of the sex of the two protagonists. Interestingly, a few asked if there were any sex scenes that they should know of before they watched the movie (betraying some discomfort with the visual reminder of the sexual basis of the romance.) Readers who had seen it mentioned that there was some nudity but the episodes of intercourse had been filmed with the suggestion of it rather than an actual depiction. Several readers confessed to crying while watching the tragic and abrupt conclusion of the affair at the end of the movie. For the most part, readers on the board were willing to treat the tale as a romance in the sense that they apply the term to the heterosexual genre they often read and expressed regret at the absence of a happy ending.

While no readers denounced the idea of a homosexual love affair, two did admit that they did not share the sentiments of the majority. While one sheepishly claimed that she did not want anything to disrupt her fantasy in which cowboys were manly men who desire and are desired by women, the second was curt, the posting implying a rejection of *Brokeback Mountain's* sympathetic look at the marginalization of homosexuality.⁶⁴ The three stances conveyed by the above response—elision between gay and straight romance, conditional acceptance of same-sex desire (as long as it is kept separate from straight romance), and finally, outright rejection of reading/viewing the former—is testament to the complexity of the current questioning of heteronormativity in America. It is a living force field for competing sign systems representing the nineteenth century family, with its patriarchal roles, twentieth century masculinity, altered in the wake of

post-industrial capitalism, and late-twentieth/early twenty-first century revisions of sexual orientation, alongside its market value as well as its cachet. For at least a while, this may foment a variety of outright denials and denunciations of alternative sexualities. For instance, theaters in Utah bent to public pressure and refused to screen *Brokeback Mountain*. Even *Hot Target*, mentioned above, received responses that show the divided reactions of readers who consider themselves unprejudiced—but who continue to betray anxieties about homosexuality. In the following review, a reader expresses her frustration at finding a gay man’s love story where she expected a straight romance.

When I pick up a book by Suzanne Brockmann, I expect to be dazzled by a powerful romance between an alpha male and a female with a lively personality. ... Yes, there is the typical male-female romance here, but the book focuses so strongly on male homosexual relationships that it overshadowed that story for me. If I wanted to read about one man wishing for “One last sweet touch of lips, a gentle rasp of tongues” from another man, I'd buy something from a publisher of that genre. (Sara Lucy)

While this reader’s grievance seems to stem from the imperfect narration of the straight hero’s story, which had been promised in earlier novels in this series, the claim that the second narrative overwhelms it is an exaggeration. Jane and Cosmo’s relationship is ultimately the one with the fully developed arc, not Jules’s. Further, the suspicion that the novel tried to con readers who were paying for a different plot stems from homoanxiety alone, since many romances contain several romantic sub-plots, and are often enjoyed by readers because they allow them to experience multiple narratives. It is thus evident that

the criticism of *Hot Target*'s content stems from the fact that the sub-plot is about *gay characters*. Complaints like the one above are couched as the justified outrage over the renegeing of a promised fantasy, but I suspect that the sympathetic treatment of Jules's sexuality is the real cause of the annoyance. The accusation that readers were tricked into reading about same-sex desire is itself unfounded since the back flap of the book clearly indicates the sub-plot's focus:

But [Jane's] stubbornness doesn't make FBI agent Jules Cassidy's job any easier. The fiercely independent filmmaker presents yet another obstacle that Cassidy doesn't need—he's already in the midst of a personal tug-of-war with his ex-lover, and now he's also fighting a growing attraction to Chadwick's brother.

Moreover, the book's dedication to Brockmann's gay son and her acknowledgements page clearly indicate that she is aiming to discuss homosexuality.⁶⁵ The fact that readers differentiate between a gay romance and the expected "real" romance betrays a resentment of homosexuality that they may not realize they harbor. This response is in keeping with the trend in which a majority of Americans support gay rights but only a minority favor same-sex marriage or domestic partnership status; to award legal recognition in the form of marriage to gay couples would be to equate those romantic relationships with the heterosexual bond (Epstein 80). In a sense, the response distills a crisis of history when the affirmative and negative tendency stands in balance.

A variation of this discomfort toward homosexuality is appearing in some novels through the revival of the alpha-male hero. In Susan Elizabeth Phillips's *Match Me If You Can* (2005) macho football agent Heath Champion—nicknamed "python"—hires

matchmaker Annabelle Granger to find him an appropriate wife, a traditional lady. The python displays the same combination of sexual interest and obnoxiousness toward his harried matchmaker throughout the novel that the old alpha-male did. He even seduces her into his bed despite having no intention of giving up his search for the perfect wife—described by Annabelle as “athletic, domestic, gorgeous, brilliant, socially connected, and pathologically submissive” (38). He finally realizes that she is the one he loves and needs as his wife and has to expend considerable energy trying to convince her that he has seen his mistake. While the novel ostensibly teaches him a lesson, one cannot help but feel that the end is but a token triumph for her and a tacit approval of his machismo (true of most of Phillips’ early novels as well as of many sixties’ and seventies’ Mills and Boons). The hostility he directs at the heroine before his turnaround reflects the old worry about male distance from women, the worry that has to be kept under control by the narrative of the hero’s sexual interest.

Match Me’s mores, especially when it comes to gender dynamics, may be tapping into a resurgence of the rejection of non-traditional sexuality in American society. The anxiety is possibly precipitated by the imminent legalization of gay marriage in England, since this may put more pressure on the United States to follow the example set by its parent-ally. Whether this trend continues or whether it is a small bump on the road to an actual redefinition of the genre and of popular feeling remains to be seen. The latter seems to be true, especially with the happy ending for Brockmann’s Jules Cassidy, seen in 2007’s *All Through the Night*. Brockmann took the unprecedented step of publishing this full-fledged gay romance about Jules and Robin’s wedding, with episodes showcasing Jules’s masculine qualities (in a crisis in Afghanistan) and feminine strengths

(in supporting Robin through sobriety and memories of childhood trauma). It is a seminal text, making a strong statement for legalizing gay marriage.

It is evident that the popular romance novel genre has dealt with the excess content of homoerotic desire and the anxiety it creates in the social environment of the genre's audiences through the creation of shifting personas for its hero. During the most visible moments in the history of the gay rights movement—such as new legislation favoring equality for homosexuals—the hero dons the mask of the Heterosexual Alpha Male. It is this excess content that one risks overlooking if one fails to see the novelistic—heteroglossic, extra-generic—nature of romance fiction.

Chapter Four: The Look of the Book

As previous chapters have demonstrated, romance fiction encompasses a startling variety of texts, many engaged in provocative critiques of twentieth-century ideologies relating to family, sexuality, and country. But images of the “bodice-ripper”—embracing couples in various stages of undress, and glittery titles in elaborate cursive—have come to stand in for the genre in the popular imagination. Perceived through the veil of the cover page described above, romance novels are widely regarded as sexual fantasies, or unrealistic, even comical, melodramas. The images, signifiers, can carry implications of tawdriness or banality, and as Bourdieu has observed, the implication of an image can derive from an association of that image with the kind of viewer who appreciates it (31, 161). When it comes to romance, media representations of the bodice-ripper cover as one that invites readers with low brow taste, has tarred the entire genre as devoted to simplistic tales steeped in emotionalism and sex. But the “bodice-ripper” cover is only the marker of the historical romance sub-genre at a particular moment in publishing history. Vestiges of that cover linger on, however, and have branded the genre indelibly. Thus, though romance fiction has morphed and diversified since the bodice-ripper’s heyday, critiques of the genre continue to be influenced by that *image*, leaving less room for the content it frames, i.e., they overlook the genre’s role as a symbolic act that reflects and critiques the social unconscious.

Whether through popular or academic critique, romance fiction thus finds itself locked into a category labeled formulaic, illogical, sentimental, and sexual. This chapter demonstrates that this pigeon-holing owes something to the packaging that the genre has adopted. Due to the visual focus placed on the heterosexual couple in cover design,

alongside simplistic elements that suggests a clichéd setting or sexual promise, romance novels are mistakenly equated with their narrow form. This equivalence can be traced to a marketing phenomenon. In *A Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, Haug credits packaging with being the prime mover of consumer capitalism, and argues that use value has increasingly taken a back seat to the *appearance* of use value in order to allow exchange value to be realized. He admits that this strategy feeds off people's real sensual needs but also believes that it remolds them for future consumption. In other words, Haug suggests that branding begins eliminating the appearance of individual difference, but eventually actually divests an object of its varied uses and simultaneously teaches consumers to desire the one use that the brand has trained them to want from that object. His analysis is accurate when it comes to his example of a brand of laundry detergent or deodorant, but critiques of genre fiction that have unknowingly been influenced by this phenomenon are far more problematic. Though little romance criticism has actually analyzed—or even appeared to be aware of—the packaging of romance novels, the similarities in the appearance of the novels have doubtless undergirded the argument that one of these novels is basically the same as another (which looks like it).

Even critics like Tanya Modleski (1982), Ann Barr Snitow (1983) and Radway (1984), who first began to treat romance novels as worthy of analysis, assumed that the large-scale production of novels (all of which bore a distinct visual resemblance to each other) signified a uniformity of content or use value. Standardized packaging of romance fiction (the application of consumer capitalism's marketing strategy to literary creation) was thus assumed to signal one product—that had one use value—to all consumers (Radway 20, 23, 39). This use value was seen as a combination of sexual pleasure and the

pleasure of conforming to patriarchal ideology. But as my earlier chapters prove, there lie variations within the Formula, stories that interrogate dominant socio-economic and political currents. The critiques of the genre's formulaic nature, however, miss this diversity because it comes to them under the sign of a brand. They thus read the iconic look of the romance genre, namely the bodice ripper and its variant, as evidence of the emptying out of all literary worth, exchange value creating new use value by significantly altering/shaping the needs of the reading public for sexual stimulation.

Apart from the impression of uniformity that the romance cover confers on the novels, the image has become a sign of either farce or pornography, mocked for the alleged bodices that are shed by the heroines or critiqued for the apparent transgressive thrill that it affords its readers in viewing a woman's victimization. A mix of these views is perpetuated by various media, such as newspaper and magazine articles, television shows, and movies. This inability to treat the genre as worth reading is influenced by the voluptuousness of the semi-clothed bodies on the bodice-ripper cover. The campiness of the image—period clothing, windblown hair, photoshopped skin and muscle—is amplified by the dazzling flourish of the title that labels the embrace, often in language that alludes to sexuality and sentiment; in the phrase “bodice-ripper” lies a judgment on both. The public gaze sees the characters of these novels caught in an intimate moment, locked in a continual embrace; it is then assumed that not only the novel they grace, but all romance novels with images of couples on them, are descriptions of the couple's non-stop fornication—and that romance readers want this narrative of pornographic fantasy. When the cover shows a romantic sexuality, the moniker of “bodice-ripper” (either voiced or implied) shows contempt for the genre's lack of modern sexual attitudes and

sophistication. This, coupled on occasion with images that lack verisimilitude (such as kisses that look like they may crack the participants' jaws, or poses that would break an actual person's back) are presented in the media as proof of romance fiction's status as a farcical product.

Further, as observed in the introduction, one of the most striking features of this genre has been its identity as a target of scholarly disapproval. The parodic representation of the genre in the media (stemming from a pre-existing unease toward the emotional and erotic) laid the ground for this attitude. Moreover, the genre came under the critical lens of academia in the eighties, following not just the growth of the feminist movement (with its concerns about women's place in society) but a more material change—the rise of the paperback romance novel. This is a significant event because the format conferred on the genre the long history of its own problematic reception, beginning with the wide adoption of paperback publishing in the early twentieth century. Since the first paperbacks were reprints of works that had already been published in the more expensive hard cover format, all paperbacks were considered to be unoriginal by nature. Furthermore, the larger print runs of paperbacks translated into lower prices and potentially an increased readership, sparking worries about a possible drop in the quality of such works. Thus, the first major scholarship on romance fiction, which encountered the genre in its relatively new paperback format (especially the Harlequin series), was already primed to regard it as consisting of unoriginal fiction. This, perhaps subconscious, judgment was augmented by the fact that romance novels in series like Harlequin bore nearly identical cover illustrations, usually versions of the cover I described above. Consequently, romance fiction began to be treated as a genre with one formula that is reprinted under different

titles. This belief completely overlooked the rich history of twentieth-century popular romance fiction, particularly the diverse plots of Mills and Boon novels, i.e., accepted fully that the brand and its exchange value determined the use value. As the sales of romances grew with the greater availability of paperbacks, academic critics equated these novels possessing the iconic look with the genre in its entirety and proceeded to establish a canon of anti-romance criticism that echoed and fed into the discomfort with sentiment and sexuality visible in the popular press.

Scholarship on the genre has thus failed to notice how it can stage socio-political and economic issues, though, as my previous chapters have shown, romance novels carry out complex thematic analyses through the basic formula of courtship and marriage. This lack, this chapter argues, results from the fact that non-romance readers are strongly influenced by the materiality of romances and the way they are marketed by publishing houses. It thus suggests that scholarly romance criticism may be employing a skewed materialist analysis based on how romances are portrayed in the media. To this end, it surveys the changes that romance novel dust jackets underwent prior to the paperback format and the changes that covers have continued to undergo since the eighties and nineties with the proliferation of romance publishing houses and imprints.

Simultaneously, it considers the yet unrecognized link between outsiders' understanding of the content and the appearance of romance novels (especially paperbacks) through a concerted look at the popular critiques of romance fiction (as a genre devoted to a formula of romanticized sexual desire). The chapter thus attempts to complicate the way the formulaic look of romance novels (which are both literature and commodities) impacts scholars, and the public at large.

When novels first came into print, they were almost immediately matched by an anti-novel discourse, but it focused on their racy content rather than their appearance. As William Warner points out, novels were considered seductive in their offer of pleasure, and their “assembly line entertainment” quality was considered disruptive to an “old print media of knowledge” (135-6). Anti-novelists also condemned them for fostering “absorptive reading practices.” Much of the criticism was also directed at the figure of the female novel reader, seen as the weaker vessel more likely to be corrupted by the immorality of private reading.⁶⁶ But gradually, the novel became the Novel, rescued from its degenerate beginnings by works like Richardson’s *Pamela*, and firmly installed as a respectable literary form in the nineteenth century (Taylor 1943, Warner 1998). The hard cover format in which novels were published at this time was to gradually become associated with the respectability that the novel had garnered.

Fiction in Hard Cover

Hard covers were still standard when Mills and Boon began publishing its romantic novels at the turn of the twentieth century, with the colorful, yet restrained, dust jackets that were typical to the format.

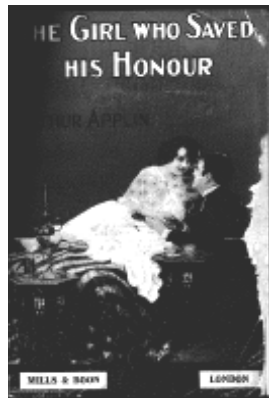


Fig. 1. *The Girl who Saved his Honour* (1914)

Early twentieth century Mills and Boon dust jackets bear only a faint resemblance to the stereotype that was later to become an integral part of the genre. (These novels belong to the first of four stages of romance novel incarnations over the last century: dust jacketed hard covers, first generation mass market paperbacks, “bodice rippers” (long historical paperback romances), and finally, paperbacks with diverging cover styles at the turn of the millennium.⁶⁷) These jackets of the first two decades that Mills and Boon were in print contain some resemblance to their descendants but they are highly individualized. While some of the dust-jacketed hard covers contain recurring images of the lone figure of a woman or a couple, most reflect actual moments from each novel. These images construct in advance the lifestyle and personalities of the novels’ main actors and particularize their story. Moreover, the preeminent position afforded to the title and the name of the author (rather than the publisher) promotes the text’s unique identity. For instance, Denise Robins’s *The Enduring Flame* (1929), which relates a romance involving a young orphan in northern Canada, has a dust jacket that represents an episode in the novel rather than just being a picture of the protagonists. Similarly, *All this for Love* (1935) has a jacket that evokes the seemingly doomed relationship between the two

protagonists and highlights the grief and relatively lower status of the female character (in economic as well as narrative terms).⁶⁸



Fig. 2. *The Enduring Flame* (1929)



Fig. 3. *All this for Love* (1935)

Moreover, though the male and female figures on the early dust jackets are shown in close proximity to each other, the illustrations are not yet as mythic as will be the case in the years to follow. The pre-myth images reflect the fact that despite the successful conclusion to the romance of at least one of the many couples present in each of the above novels, the plots are skeptical of the longevity and sacramental status of the institution of marriage. Both these novels involve some degree of marital infidelity and even the mantle of the romantic hero/heroine continually shifts between two characters in some of these early Mills and Boon novels.⁶⁹ As such, this is romance fiction that carries out a far from formulaic assessment of the desirability of matrimony, the state in which romantic narratives are expected to culminate. The covers, in turn, report the fact that the texts contain no blind attachment to patriarchal structures, no fairy-tale sexuality to validate them (critiques are later aimed at the genre). These are romances that stage an older typified narrative of love and matrimony *along* with the fractures in it that were

made visible by modernity. Romance novels retain this thread of skepticism throughout the century but the extent to which the covers testify to this does vary; at this early stage, however, when the genre is *in statu nascendi*, one is able to catch glimpses of the questioning of the marriage narrative in the novels' content as well as the covers. Even in the absence of such uniqueness, most dust jackets at least testify to the individuality of each Mills and Boon romance novel.

As far as the popular press is concerned, it did not appear to have vilified these Mills and Boon novels when they were published. Though the attitude would soon change, these novels were well received, without a hint of the disapproval that would later mark the same kind of fiction. As Joseph McAleer reports, "Throughout Mills & Boon's first decade, notices of the firm and reviews of its first books and publication list in the press were generally favorable, and in some cases positively ecstatic" (23). The absence of derision at this time, I contend, shows that the popular press is tolerant, if not outright complementary, of novels that are sturdy and do not *look* like each other. (In fact, McAleer cites one notable case in which the covers were singled out for praise (24).) In other words, the contemporary press made no assumptions of Mills and Boon romances being formulaic because they were not—and because they did not present themselves as such.

Money and Morality: The Sins of the Paperback

Meanwhile, paperback publishing was on the rise (though not at Mills and Boon) in the thirties, as was the tide of adverse criticism toward any fiction that appears in that form.⁷⁰ It is in this climate that instances of critiques of romantic stories began to appear

in the thirties, aimed mostly at their manifestations in women's magazines and pulp novels. Both the format and the illustrations that accompanied it were to be stridently denounced by the media, in a conflation of the two elements with allegedly poor content. Much ink was spilled in order to establish the weaknesses of pulp as a low-cost product that necessitated a titillating—and “readerly”—narrative that would appeal to poorer, less discerning readers.⁷¹ This argument was to cast a long shadow over the love stories that appeared in these formats and later, on love stories, period. The process demonstrates the creation of levels of cultural taste as Bourdieu has observed it, whereby any objects/behavior liked by certain groups that are marked as lower in the aristocracy of culture automatically become low culture (327). In the case of romance fiction, the identification of paperback and pulp forms with low-brow taste and of romantic tales with either form condemned the genre as well. This is a process that has been initiated and upheld by the media through newspaper and journal articles, and later in the twentieth century, television shows and movies.

A look at the popular press's treatment of the genre shows how the commentary (calling the genre formulaic and/or sexual) was based on the text's content but was also influenced by its visual markers. In 1937, an article in the *Literary Digest* reviews the workings of the pulp fiction business and emphasizes its devotion to quantity instead of quality. In “Big Business in Pulp Thrillers: Love and Adventure Stories Gross \$25, 000, 000 a year,” the *Digest* staff writer focuses on the profit-driven aspects of pulp. He lists statistics about the rate that pulp writers get paid per word and remarks that most of them routinely churn out nearly 10,000 words each day. He particularly points out that Martin Goodman, a publisher of several successful pulp series, claims that “[f]ans are not

interested in quality.” Though the staff writer admits that Harry Steeger of Popular Publications vehemently contests the notion of a “formula,” he nevertheless proceeds to dwell on it, portraying it as a cookie-cutter method aimed at low production costs and low returns from distributors. This emphasis on pulp’s generic, mercenary quality is to become a visible refrain in critiques of romance fiction throughout the twentieth century.

The article also refers specifically to love stories in the pulp format, mocking their visual elements, as in the following instance:



© Street and Smith, Inc.
Romance illustrations gush suggestively:
“Kit quivered at her rescuer’s nearness.”

Fig. 4. The Pulp Romance

The caption states, “Romance illustrations gush suggestively: “Kit quivered at her rescuer’s nearness.” In this article, the sentiment and sexuality of the romance is already being held up for ridicule—along with, or perhaps because of, its visual representation and its pulp identity. These two factors, here and in later evaluations of romance fiction, become the gateway for critics to make other claims about the genre’s alleged

weaknesses. “Big Business” focuses, for instance, on the prodigious output of pulp romance writers, implying that this fiction is less literary vocation and more a money-making scheme:

Supplying the demand for love-stories, such writers as Jane Little, Peggy Gaddis, Ruby Ayres, Doris Knight and Mazie Gregg stack up well alongside masculine producers. Jane Little, aside from editing two love-story magazines, writes three stories a week. Peggy Gaddis, living in Georgia, is reported to be supporting three families on what she makes; Mazie Gregg, from an extensive country seat in England, mails out 1,000,000 words a year, has completed her thirtieth novel, tho her age is “about thirty.”

Mills and Boon romance novels and authors remain out of the line of fire during this critical trend, possibly because of the novels’ hard binding, and “glamorous, subdued” illustrations tailored to the plots (McKnight-Trontz 14). Moreover, their cover art in the mid-century mirrors the plots, which involve contemporary events, social as well as political. For instance, novels published during World War II are not presented as escapist or purely romantic fantasy. Though images of couples, some in mid-embrace, start to predominate during these years, the jackets also reflect the novels’ acknowledgement of the crisis and England’s response to it.⁷² This is a crucial distinction between the novels of these decades and later works that are targeted as escapist; the latter are also ones whose *covers* fail to express their thematic concerns (or are unable to represent the complexity that the previous three chapters reveal).

Jackets in the post-war years seem to waver between showing passionate scenes and ones that show a distance between the two members of the couple; the dichotomy is an indication of the novels' sensitivity to the mixed feelings that greeted the restructuring of gender roles after demobilization.⁷³ While the jackets that maintained a distance between the couple, albeit as a concession to modesty, also reflected the questioning of old social patterns of love and marriage, those which feature the embraces are the beginning of the iconic look that conceals the fractures in the social reality and its narration. This period also witnessed the creation of the doctor-nurse romance, one of the first steps in the hardening of the Mills and Boon imprint through the standardization of plot lines. The trend is reflected through images of women in neat nursing uniforms, usually paired with well-to-do and competent-looking male doctors.⁷⁴ But the hard cover format and visual references to a profession or other such symbols of a non-romantic preoccupation, still kept Mills and Boon untouched by the harsh criticism that paperback fiction had started to experience across the Atlantic. In sum, while the media had begun to target paperbacks for salacious and formulaic plots (partly due to covers that implied this to be the case), Mills and Boon novels escaped the treatment as long as they did not adopt the format and design of the paperback.

World War II only increased demand for books, especially for soldiers overseas and led to price wars that brought paperbacks into the public eye and resulted in a censorious debate among the intellectual community. Over the second half of the twentieth century, paperbacks found themselves embroiled in legal (and often, extra-legal) battles over the content of the books, which were criticized for sexual and violent material (even if, as in many cases, the works were reprints of hard covers). The

jaundiced attitude toward the paperback industry in the fifties was partially fuelled, explains Kenneth Davis, by the atmosphere of political fear as well as sexual repression that permeated the United States, an atmosphere that saw threats to American society in this widely published medium (228).

It is Davis's argument that it was the *covers* of the paperbacks that most incited the moral brigade's ire that is relevant here. While hard covers rarely employed cover illustrations, paperback publishing, especially in the forties and fifties, resorted to covers that mimicked the sexualized look of the magazines, pulps, and comics that had dominated mass publishing. This facet was heavily opposed by some publishers themselves. Davis cites the warning of *Publishers' Weekly's* Fredric Melcher against a decline into vulgarity:

This reaching out for more readers by following the earlier lead of the pulps as to covers and texts is as unfortunate as would be a trend towards copying the comics in their experiments with the themes of crime and passion. (134-35)

The warning was not unfounded, since paperbacks were marketed to appear scandalous and were greeted in that fashion in the media. Davis notes that paperback illustrations capitalized on sensationalism through a pictorial representation of any passages that even hinted at the forbidden, usually having to do with sex, adding that “[a] book that did not feature a woman in some state of undress—and preferably reclining—was difficult to find” (135). His observation is crucial to this chapter, highlighting as it does how the visuality of the inexpensive novel created a distorted impression for the purpose of sales—an impression of sexual content. All paperback publishing, pulp or mainstream, he

notes, was “guilty of moving in the direction of superrealistic covers emphasizing sex” (138). While paperback publishing did involve “sexy books,” it is crucial to note that even novels that had nothing sexually titillating in their plots were marketed to appear sexual as well. It is in this moment that paperback fiction was indelibly linked to the sexual promise of the covers, i.e., paperbacks became sexual by definition. (This association would soon color the perception of all *romance fiction*, because it was concerned with male-female relationships (which already carried the taint of sexuality).

Once the tie between paperbacks and sex became accepted as innate, it established indignation and contempt as the correct attitude toward this fiction, an attitude propagated in the media. The latter thus turned moral arbiter toward what it saw as its evil twin, and its worries were deemed legitimate by the legal system. As paperback sales rose, there was a book-banning wave across the United States, beginning with the hearings of the House of Representatives Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials in 1952. The Gathings resolutions, as the final report of the committee was called, censured paperbacks for their disregard for moral rectitude. But the committee’s statement of intent—made before the hearings began—also shows that it was the covers as much as the content that drew chastisement. The committee declared its intent to investigate “filthy sex books” with their “lurid and daring illustrations of voluptuous young women on the covers” (Davis 220). While the committee’s recommendations never became laws, censorship plagued the industry in vigilante outbreaks. There were other legal hurdles in some cases, such as in Texas, which imposed fines not only on the authors of supposedly obscene books but on anyone associated with writing advertising copy for them or *designing their covers*.

During these years, newspaper articles continued to address the new wave of publishing as well and played a key role in shaping their readers' opinions of the works that took this form. For instance, in 1967, Bernard Weinraub of the *New York Times* reports on the publishing industry's shift away from typical covers. He surveys the packaging of paperbacks and notes that the clinch cover is one of a small pool of images that grace the covers of most paperbacks at the time. But even as he touches on the fact that romance fiction is not the only genre that is identified with the clinch, he still singles it out for a dig, critiquing it and paperback covers in one shot, remarking, "In the feverish, highly competitive paperback book market, more labor, more care, more anxiety, and more delicious enticements are placed on the cover than in the creation of one of those mystery romances that women adore."

The article ends with a conversation with New American Library's William Gregory and Weinraub's paradoxical observation on gothic romance. He first notes Gregory's claim that covers with "impulse factors—sex, violence—are important only if nothing else is going for the books. In most cases, though, we try to escape from the clichés." At this point, Weinraub interjects to not only label romances as the reading choice of women with empty lives, but also to imply that their content has little but sex and violence, saying, "For publishers, the clichés [cover illustrations suggesting sex or violence] remain strongest in gothic romance novels that appeal so strongly to young girls and middle-aged women"; this, despite the fact that Gregory directly contests the conception of the genre as pornographic. In other words, Weinraub chooses to ignore Gregory's remark that gothic romance is not about sex and violence. He instead chooses to emphasize the fact that the publisher himself treats the gothic as formulaic—and

falsely implies that the formula is that of a young girl's sexual adventure. Even as he includes Gregory's revelation of the gothic's chaste narrative, which makes evident a disjuncture between the fiction and its presentation, he nevertheless identifies the genre with sex.⁷⁵

Articles like Weinraub's participated in equating the contents of paperbacks with the sexy covers; in other words, they believed (or chose to argue) as truth what was in fact marketing strategy. Even when, as in the above case, the publisher revealed that the sensational cover was just false packaging, the press glossed over, and even perpetuated, the lie. Though the marketing strategy was true for all paperback fiction, it would be romance novels, which are by nature about desire—overt or sublimated, erotic or sentimental—that would come to be seen as involving nothing but narratives of the sexualized bodies on their covers. If publishers used cover illustrations to plant the seed of the idea that romance novels provide sexual pleasure to the readers, the mythology was fully embraced by articles like Weinraub's at the cost of overlooking how romances analyze desire and use it to reevaluate contemporary life.

At least some of this stubborn insistence in the media on labeling the genre in this fashion stems from the rise of Harlequin as a series romance publisher, which imitates its British predecessor. Though Mills and Boon continues to maintain its habit of using a variety of images (the style it had established in its hard covers) despite making a shift to paperback in the sixties, the look of the imprint is on its way to being standardized during this decade—a move that lends credence to media propaganda that the books are only about one narrative of romanticized sexuality. The illustration is now an inset on the lower two-thirds of the page rather than a full-bleed, and is clearly separated from the

solid band of color at the top that contains the title and the name of the author below it. The front flap still contains a brief plot summary of the novel while the back flap carries the summary of another Mills and Boon romance. Unlike the back covers of the novels in earlier decades, these jackets do not include author biographies or a list of Mills and Boon's recent publications, just a brief blurb advertising the firm. Both omissions serve to replace individuality with a generic brand identity. The Mills and Boon name is found in two places on the spine, including within the vignette of a rose that is to become the Mills and Boon trademark (replacing the image of Cupid). The rose eventually also appears on the top-right corner of the front cover band—and becomes another way to bring the firm's identifier to potential buyers' attention.

In other words, the Mills and Boon brand name becomes paramount, subsuming most signs of uniqueness. The brand design that is intended to guarantee a desired exchange value creates a commodity that appears to have one use value. Apart from the covers' focus on the couple, which links this commodity with sexuality, they highlight elements such as wealth and an unequal gender dynamic. Both are indeed to be key ideas in this generation of texts, but their familiar presentation accords them a calcified identity—they begin to be perceived and spoken of as stock, inorganically added ingredients of the formula rather than active components in a socio-political drama.

Over the seventies, Mills and Boon novels also reflect new glamorous settings, which share similarities of geographic locale (such as ritzy European destinations) and of the immediate background (usually a luxurious house). For example, Anne Mather's *The Arrogant Duke* (1970) shows a villa in a sunny clime, with the potted plants and the telescope next to the man's chair creating the impression of a world of leisure.

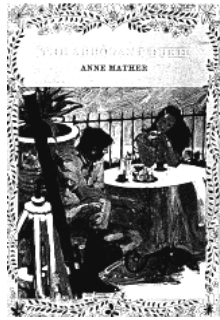


Fig. 5. *The Arrogant Duke* (1970)

Moreover, the man's appearance (with cravat, khakis, and boots) vis-a-vis the woman, who sits with hands demurely folded under her chin, implies the uneven power dynamic between genders, which is making its way into Mills and Boon novels at this time. The repeated use of such images amplifies this element and affords critics the impression that the novels are recycling the same old story that makes readers internalize the genre's sexualized misogyny. Mairi O'Nair's *Torch of Pleasure* (1970) has a similar look, with the woman looking down shyly while a man dressed in a suit and cravat holds her in a one-armed embrace.



Fig. 6. *The Torch of Pleasure* (1970)

During the seventies, the embrace builds in intensity, turning the cover into a sign for sexual desire, often a masochistic desire that eroticizes female subservience. Constance M. Evans's *A Time for Loving* (1974) shows a woman encircled in the arms of a man standing behind her, while Violet Winspear's *Dearest Demon* (1975) is illustrated with a couple exchanging a passionate kiss (with a suggestion of force), the woman's paleness highlighted in contrast to the man's dark presence.

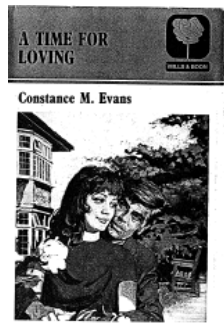


Fig 7. *A Time for Loving* (1974)



Fig. 8. *Dearest Demon* (1975)

The comments of critics like Snitow, who defines the Harlequin hero's behavior as "one hundred and fifty pages of mystification, unreadable looks, "hints of cruelty" and wordless coldness [...]" should be seen in the context of the above signifiers, which make the hero look Satanic, possessive, even abusive (249-50). The character certainly acquired these shades but the iconic image created the impression that this signification was the culmination of romance fiction's development, an impression that narrowed down the critical understanding of the novels. If popular critique erred in thinking romances to be sex romps, it is not improbable that even the judgments of academics like Snitow were colored by the brand image Harlequin Mills and Boon thought saleable.

When Mills and Boon novels begin to be reprinted in paperback form under the Harlequin imprint on the other side of the Atlantic, the appearance of romance novels and

the way they are perceived begin to be increasingly dictated by this parallel process. Novels and cover art that are influenced by these trends that develop in Canada (and later in the United States) become the primary text for much of the genre criticism—academic and popular—that emerges at this time. Even though Canadian Harlequin romances bear a resemblance to the covers of the original British Mills and Boon dust jackets, the actual images are somewhat different. This new cover art, even more than Mills and Boon jackets, is a sign that reinforces the idea that the genre contains one simplistic formula of the couple's sex life. It erases any hint of content that refers to political and social history—such as the economic battles between the couple—that could weaken this perception. Margaret Anne Jensen observes that

[t]he interchangeability of the books and the conceptualization of Harlequins as a consumer product led to the realization that romances could be sold in the same places as other consumer products—the local drug store and supermarket. By setting up racks of romances in these stores, Harlequin brought its product into high traffic areas for women consumers. It increased its exposure to include women who did not usually patronize bookstores and made buying a romance as easy as buying aspirin. (39)

With the influence of the Canadian associate—and later partner—the romance series of Mills and Boon finally becomes the iconic Harlequin, a synonym for generic romance fiction. Take, for instance, *Wolf of Heimra* (1966) a novel that is first printed by Mills and Boon and then republished by Harlequin in 1971; the change completely divests the individualistic quality of the first edition.



Fig. 9. *The Wolf of Heimra* (1966)

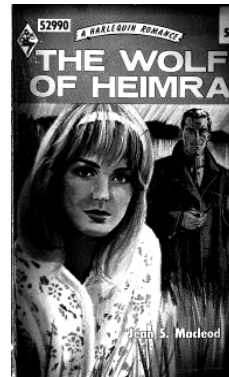


Fig. 10. *The Wolf of Heimra* (1971)

The Mills and Boon original has a bridal scene that indicates the story's Scottish setting and depicts a pivotal event through the characters' clothing. It also includes three figures, reflecting the somewhat complex plot about the problematic marriage of the two figures in the foreground. The third character dominates the narrative, though not as the standard third in a love triangle. In fact, the text raises and frustrates such an expectation almost till the last page. The cover illustration does a fair job of conveying a plot that evokes the novels from the twenties, with their lack of conviction in romantic marriage. But the Harlequin edition features only the female and male figures in the foreground and background respectively, completely eliminating the faux-hero (and the heroine's marriage to him) from the visual. Through such moves, Harlequin concealed any evidence of plots that question or deviate from couple-focused narrative. As a result, the novels appear to be standardized, assembly-line products, starting with their serial numbering, a feature of Mills and Boon novels. More importantly, the author's name lies nearly hidden in the bottom left, across the image (though it is visible on the spine). This claim of the brand and the implication of the relative irrelevance of authorship have

contributed to the impression that romance novels are completely interchangeable.

Admittedly, there were some Harlequins published over the seventies that show a hint of the plot's setting; for instance, *Doctor in India* (1970) shows the close-up of a young, blue-eyed strawberry blonde, against a backdrop of palm trees, workers in paddy fields, and a naked child.

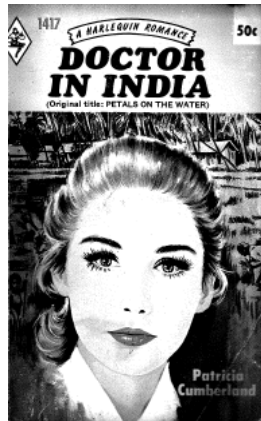


Fig. 11. *Doctor in India* (1970)

The novel narrates the story of a young Englishwoman assisting a compatriot in a village in post-independence India. The cover acknowledges the novel's unique take on the romantic heroine's work instead of subsuming it under images that play up the novel's adherence to the overarching formula. But the signs of textual depth on such covers cannot stem the tide of popular opinion, especially in the face of the increasing uniform look of the imprint.

Harlequin began to publish a second imprint titled Harlequin *Presents* in the seventies, consisting of novels that are slightly different in appearance from the main Harlequin line. These novels, which were reprints of Mills and Boon hard covers as well, have a white background, and the image in the lower half of the cover is placed inside a circle, a change that further suggests the escapist quality of the genre. No wonder then

that Ann Barr Snitow criticizes the romance novel’s limited universe, the unfolding of the relationship in a discrete world—the novels are selling that promise (251, 257). The more significant change to the *Presents* line involves the retrieval of the author’s name from the bottom of the front cover to the top, just below the Harlequin logo and imprint, and the relegation of the title to the lower half, above the circle. At this point, Harlequin appeared to be building some author recognition within the larger imprint, cultivating a following for individual renditions of the romance narrative—but still within the brand identity.

In Anne Mather’s *Witchstone* (1975) the illustration and back blurb convey some of the novel’s plot elements (such as the age difference between the protagonist and the role of wealth in the relationship). But little of the plot’s interrogation of class distinctions and heteronormativity is visible in the simplified, cheerful picture. Harlequin appears to deliberately steer away from these themes in its marketing strategy, counting on familiar packaging to move its “product” rather than risking sales by promoting individuality. The result is of course the propagation of Harlequin’s identity as a one-trick pony.



Fig. 12. *Witchstone* (1975)

In the above cover design, a tiny image of a sports car is superimposed at the base of the larger image of a smiling man, which is itself dwarfed by the large close-up of a young blonde woman. This triple image of man, woman, and possession begins to appear in the main line as well, with a house or a car appearing at the base of the two figures; there is no indication, however, that the object in question is part of the conflict in the narrative.⁷⁶ The only signification suggested by the novel cover is that the plot involves a couple. Such images become indistinguishable from each other and feed into the uninitiated watcher's assumption that the book is relating the old boy-meets-girl tale in 180 pages. At the most, the reader is perhaps expected to be drawn to the author and to her particular handling of the stock storyline. The back covers of Harlequins also begin to display blurbs for its two lines, such as, "With genuine pride we make available twelve romantic titles monthly—eight new *Harlequin Romances* and four new *Harlequin Presents*, wherever paperbacks are sold."⁷⁷ Such design additions emphasize the line itself, selling the promise of the imprint at the cost of the individual novels (unlike the early Mills and Boon that included plot summaries of other novels on the back flaps).

The two imprints are increasingly similar by the end of the seventies, with variations of the semi-clinch cover appearing in both, though the title still takes precedence over the author's name in the original Harlequin line. Even worse, the clinch starts to divorce itself from the details of the narrative, adhering to the iconic image rather than representing the text accurately. For example, the Harlequin Romance edition of *The Arrogant Duke* (1979) (unlike the Mills and Boon edition discussed above) shows the couple in an embrace.

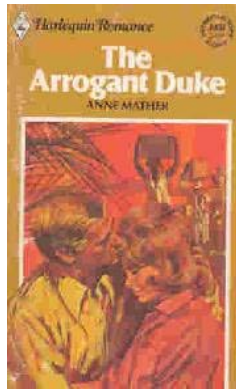


Fig. 13. *The Arrogant Duke* (1979)

While the background is story-specific, the image also contains errors, such as the wrong hair color for the man, indicating further indifference to the particularities of the story. (Readers often complain about these inconsistencies, recognizing that the errors violate the text's integrity as a unique story.)

The news media, functioning as the arbiter of good taste, the populist doppelganger of academia, responds to this commodity packaging predictably. Numerous newspaper articles continue the trend of disparaging romance fiction's apparent formulaic nature and attribute the Harlequin's high sales figures to it. In several accounts, romantic novels are equated with sexuality and their plots are spoken of as a formula that allows for sexual thrills. The contempt for both romantic sexuality and for its market value (as created by the clinch cover) overwhelmingly colors any discussion on romance in most write-ups. For instance, Eric Pace's "Gothic Novels for Women Prove Bonanza for Publishers" begins with the description of an embrace from Jane McIlvaine McClary's novel *A Portion for Foxes* (published by Simon & Schuster in 1972):

Reaching out, he pulled her to him. He saw the stars twinkling beyond her head and smelled the odor of her hair and skin, sweet-smelling and clean, like good soap and new-mown hay... (31)

Though Pace later identifies *Portion* as a family saga novel (a category that is separate from romance fiction), he still uses it to represent “good, salable, romantic writing” and the allegedly sexual gothic romance referred to in the article’s title. Clearly, his intent is to identify the romance genre with sexuality, even if that means using bad evidence. Beyond quoting the above lines, Pace says nothing about *Portion*’s interrogation of the American South during the Civil Rights Movement, convinced as he is that “romantic writing” is worth little analysis. He then goes on to remark that though the genre is far from *Romeo and Juliet*, it is making money for publishing companies. Romance fiction is thus associated solely with the embrace in such articles and not only criticized for lacking the finesse of canonized literature but for its commercial success as well.

The article also shows its susceptibility to Harlequin’s marketing—the conviction that the novels are not unique—in Pace’s analysis of Harlequin’s serial numbering of its novels. He claims that it helps readers “keep track of which books they have read even if they forget the names of the authors,” emphasizing the supposed interchangeability of these mass-produced goods (31). Even though he is informed about the textual diversity behind the uniform look (even quoting editors who point out the feminist impulses in the novels or the fact that they express women’s wants) he is unwilling to accept these interpretations of the texts. The article also contains images of stereotypical covers of Harlequin romances and of a gothic, and ends by noting that gothic covers “always showed a frightened girl, generally in a white negligee, under a lowering sky, in front of a

castle or mansion with a mysterious light in a window.” The images and the conclusion homogenize the women’s fiction he is surveying (and which the article earlier acknowledges contains more “ambitious” works) into one silly horror. Pace equates the Gothic romance (a precursor to mass market romances) with Harlequins and the family saga genre, based on the fact that they have a romantic element and its visual representation in common. The grouping reveals that the critiques of romance fiction rest partly on its actually formulaic appearance and allegedly formulaic character as well as on the devaluation of any narrative that is seen to involve women, love, and sexuality. This is how the media reports on the genre succeed in creating the boundaries of low culture and taste. The easy equation of formulaic image and plot invents the meaning that popular romance is generic (in the sense of being a standardized commodity). Pace makes no attempt to explain what is problematic or inadequate in the stories of Gothics, letting the references to clichéd covers suggest to his readers that the tribulations of the young women in the novels are not worth scrutiny.

Over the years, this belief that romances are formulated to relate narratives of sexuality appears repeatedly, such as in Joyce Maynard’s *New York Times* article “Harlequin Novels: A Romance Between Stories and Readers.” Like Pace, Maynard begins the article with a quote of a couple kissing (from Rozella Lake’s *If Dreams Came True*):

With a murmur she twined her arms around his neck and placed her mouth on his. In her diaphanous costume her body was as transparent as her feelings and Daniel’s hands gently moved her away from him.

She pulled his head on to her breast. "I want you, Daniel. So much that I can't find the right words."

"Don't bother with words. There are other ways." [...] "I'll show you what I mean later tonight," he said huskily, "and tomorrow night and all nights after that."

Heart in her eyes, Briony smiled at him. Daniel was hers and life was wonderful. (44)

The opener serves to categorize the genre as focused on sexuality and sentiment, eclipsing Maynard's later documentation of readers' claims that the novels are attractive because they are "clean," i.e., do not include sex. The article contains other contradictions that play up romance fiction's generic quality and ignore evidence that the texts have their own plots for retelling the base text. Even as Maynard notes that "[m]ost Harlequin readers, questioned about the books, remember the plots and characters' names with amazing clarity, although, to one not initiated, the novels might *appear* very interchangeable," [emphasis mine] she proceeds to dwell on the similarities between novels, saying, "[e]very one is exactly 190 pages long, with the somewhat more sophisticated Harlequin Presents series running a little longer" (44).

Later in the article, Maynard catalogs elements that comprise the Harlequin formula. But between the catalog and the above observation about standardized novel length lies a paragraph that sums up the look of the books, revealing her susceptibility to the text's packaging and betraying the elision she makes between surface similarity and the content of Harlequin romances:

The cover of a Harlequin Romance always shows a young woman, drawn in the style of the 1950s, with a small nose and long eyelashes and a faintly wistful expression. There is usually a strong-jawed man in the background, and often an exotic-looking foreign setting.... Inside, too, the stories vary only within a firmly set formula. (44)

Pace and Maynard's focus on sexual content and their references to covers must be read together. Through their mention of both, they each betray the fact that they only understand the genre by equating the two. While the Gothic's plot involves a female Bildungsroman in a mysterious setting, the family saga novel details the lives and losses of several members of a family across generations. Both these kinds of fiction are distinct from the genre romance of Harlequin, which itself involves different scenarios in which the romantic narrative unfolds; so taken are Pace and Maynard by the recurrence of an image, however, that Pace confuses different kinds of romantic fiction, while Maynard denies the multiple narrative possibilities within the "firmly set formula." These articles participate in creating a genre that only exists in this body of criticism—a "media romance"—at the cost of the actual variety that exists between the cover image and the idea of romantic sexuality.

The Bodice-Ripper Legacy

The conviction in romance fiction's uniformity was strengthened by another development in romance fiction during the seventies—the birth of the historical romance sub-genre. Kenneth Davis identifies this event as one of the two things that countered the larger trend in which the paperback industry was trying to gain respect. (The other was a

wave of takeovers in which large corporations interested in profit alone pushed out old-fashioned family-led publishing companies that had tried to balance quality with commerce.) The rise of the historical romance genre began with Avon Books' printing of the Kathleen Woodiwiss bestseller *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) and Rosemary Rogers' *Sweet Savage Love* (1974) in paperback. The novels spawned a trend in terms of both plot and packaging but the weaknesses of the former became indelibly linked to the latter, making it a sign for reactionary gender politics and soft core pornography. *Flame*, as I mention in "Sexual Orientation," is set in the nineteenth century and tells the story of a young girl who is raped by the hero at the beginning and then has to marry him when she gets pregnant. The narrative relates the development of their relationship into a happy one after they overcome several obstacles, both internal and external. Davis recounts that *Flame* had a dramatic effect on Avon's fortunes. The success of the novel led to the creation of the historical romance genre, which soon found itself facing the ire of academic critics and members of the publishing world because they saw it as the epitome of the weaknesses of pulp novels.

It raised this furor because it described the sexual act at length (albeit in euphemisms). But the novel's content extended beyond sexuality and the writing was not unpolished, thwarting its easy labeling as pornography. The success of this ambiguous novel type brought the genre under close scrutiny and the fact that sex was initially linked to sexual violence in it became the focus of critiques. But as Radway has argued cogently, the inclusion of sexual violence does not indicate approval of it. The episodes function to conjure up a threat that women always live with and the conclusion of a well-written romance novel dispels the threat (133, 169). For romances to speak of sexual

violence at all is a fairly radical move, even if it is qualified by the end of the text and the forgiveness of all wrongs. Moreover, the linking of sexual violence to romantic relationships is not a justification of the former; instead, it betrays the novel's awareness of a problematic social reality that still persists—the conflation of rape and sex and the perception of the rape victim as promiscuous and/or polluted. The novel deals with the problem of speaking of rape without subjecting the victim to those labels in the only way they may have felt this could be done at the time—by associating it with the already legitimized partner. In this way, if the heroine was mistreated by the man who was/would be her husband, the woman would at least be spared the taint of having been sexually active—even though unwillingly—outside socially approved parameters.

While not a radical challenge to the abuse of women, the tack is a combination of feminist impulse and social contingency. But the apparent masochism as well as seeming eroticization of abuse in *Flame* (and suspicions that these ideas would be internalized) resulted in a lot of flack for the genre. Moreover, from here on cover design elements such as the embrace and the appearance and tone of the titles became irrevocably associated with the genre—and with gender inequality.

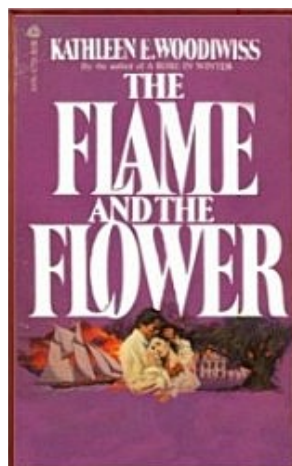


Fig. 14. *The Flame and the Flower* (1972)

The cover of this breakout novel is a demure one, indicating its sub-genre (historical romance) but all the components of the cliché are present. The title dominates the image, overshadowing the author's name, which is found at the top but in smaller print. The illustration of an embracing couple is placed at the bottom, and a plantation and ship in the background represent the heroine's trans-Atlantic journey and the novel's setting in the American South. This cover, designed by Robert McGinnis, led to a flood of illustrations that bore some resemblance to earlier art, but as McKnight-Trontz observes, "the mood was different—more passionate and erotic—with full-fledged embraces. While sentimentality and innuendo had once been an integral part of romance cover art, the new formula consisted of a bare-chested hero forcing a long-haired heroine into a steamy embrace" (23-4). Though rape would not be a long-term element in the bodice-ripper, the first association of it with such a cover created a sign that stood for masochism and pornography. Even when that meaning was eliminated in the second generation of historical romances, its form remained—the covers of the hundreds of historical romances that Avon and others published in the wake of the success of *Flame*. The media focused on the form, confusing it with the earlier sign.

In fact, though Kenneth Davis is aware of the role of materiality in judging literary worth, he participates in this process, too. His descriptions of *Flame* convey some of the contempt the genre garnered, steeped as they are in mocking the alleged stock sexual focus of the genre. He says that "[*Flame*] touched a hidden nerve—or slumbering erogenous zone—in the American heartland." Focusing on the sexual explicitness of novels like it, he distinguishes this historical romance, "a.k.a. the "erotic historical,"

“bodice ripper,” “take-and-rape” or “sweet savage” from the earlier gothic romances, in which no “heaving breast [came] out of hiding” (362). Davis stresses similarities of individual plots in this new genre (and of its variation in Harlequin romances) though he does not provide any examples as evidence. Instead, he sums up the erotic historical with a stream of loaded phrases:

In the new age of romances, the emphasis was on the tempestuous and voluptuous, wickedness, torment, desire, tumult, passion, and the wild fires of lust. The heroine, kept from her true love by wars or indentured servitude, was abducted, betrayed, ravished, brutalized, and raped in a smorgasbord of ingeniously conceived and deliciously meted-out punishments by enough hard, cruel men to fill out a Mongol horde. (362-63)

He treats Harlequin romances similarly, confidently representing all novels under the series as one text:

A Canadian company, Harlequin published demure contemporary romances with exotic scenarios. The Harlequin romance invariably involves a vulnerable young woman, usually in some subservient position, who meets the man of her dreams, usually older and somewhat callous. Their stormy affair is never consummated but always brought to the dangerous borders of passion until the climax (no pun intended) in which the couple marry and the woman gives up her job. (363)

There is good reason to be skeptical of such readings and determine whether they are based on appearance as much as content. While Davis never describes the appearance of

the new historical romance novels beyond mentioning their paperback format, he does show that he is influenced by cover images in his references to Gothics, Harlequin romance, and later, teen romance. In his discussion of the Gothic romance sub-genre that preceded the trend of historical romance, he calls it a triumph of packaging, and proceeds to describe its flaws—but the critique only involves describing the novel covers.

Prior to the rush for historical romances, the paperback rage had been the so-called Gothic romance, which traced its roots to *Jane Eyre*, but the apple had fallen far from Miss Brontë's tree. Without the stylistic sensibility or thematic seriousness of that classic, the Gothic was essentially a packaging phenomenon. Every Gothic romance came in exactly the same format, give or take a few alterations. A terrified young woman in a white nightgown was seen under a gloomy sky, running away from a darkened castle or manor house. And always, repeat *always*, there was a light on in one of the castle's windows. (362)

Davis's critique of Gothics is similar to Pace's, both based largely on the identical covers gracing the novels rather than the content. Much of his argument about Harlequins shows the influence of visual cues as well. He recounts the well-documented history of the company's marketing of its brand rather than its individual novels, a strategy that relied greatly on deliberate visual similarities between those novels. As for teen romance novels (an offshoot of the romance genre) he equates them with their covers, which "were squeaky clean yet carried an oh-so-subtle hint of kiddie-porn sleaze about them" (365); it would not be unreasonable to suspect that Davis's understanding of the historical romance (as he describes it above) is similarly affected more by what he *sees* than what

he has actually *read*.⁷⁸ His disparagement of teen romances suggests that even an academic critic is susceptible to conflating text and packaging.

Despite the fact that much of the argument in *Two-Bit Culture* reveals the connection (if obliquely) between the paperback, its appearance, and the way it was perceived, it is evident that Davis himself commits the same error, failing to realize that genre covers often create a self-perpetuating myth of titillation and uniformity for the purpose of sales. If the censorship committees in the fifties indicted paperbacks for their supposed content based on their appearance, Davis's arguments end up proving how everyone—critic or popular journalist—practices the same act, albeit to various degrees. These judges, surrounded by mass production and sales, and often ignorant of the intricate working of the “formula” of the genre, contribute to the one-sided representation of the genre. Treating the core design and format as instruments of consumer capitalist publishing, i.e., of a debased system, these critiques adopt the vantage point of an allegedly different system that resists commodification. It is thus all the more ironic that they actually demonstrate the effectiveness of brand marketing by failing to look beyond the promoted sign themselves.

If readers of the genre came to believe in the mythology of love and marriage through the covers that portrayed an embrace, critics and detractors understood the novels to be purely sexual; moreover, from the seventies on, they interpreted the covers so as to believe another, equally problematic, mythology—one whose content (rape) emptied over the years but whose form (undressed female body clasped by a looming male figure) started to reflect that old content. In other words, though rape narratives faded out (due to reader dislike), the covers started to look more like that narrative; this increased the

tendency to equate them with that lost meaning. For instance, the covers of several early novels by best-selling author Johanna Lindsey, like those of *Flame* and *Sweet Savage*, used painting-style illustrations of chaste embraces while the plot included incidents of the rape of the heroine by the hero.

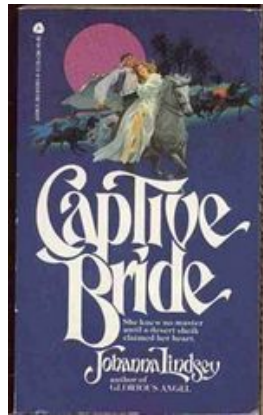


Fig. 15. *Captive Bride* (1977)



Fig. 16. *A Pirate's Love* (1977)

Because of the content, the image of the embrace, the most recognizable signifier of the cover, became identified with sexuality and rape. Later covers soon started to reflect that earlier misperception, changing dramatically in the eighties. They began featuring a woman whose breasts and limbs overflow her clothes, crushed against a partially undressed muscular man. The cover of *Fires of Winter* (1980) seen below reflects the beginning of this trend. The heroine of this novel is abducted and forced into the hero's bed, evoking the plotline of works like *Flame*. The cover suggests this meaning, with the semi-nude woman clasped by a seemingly naked man. The label of “bodice ripper” was coined around this time in reference to these episodes of rape and soon attached itself to all novels that bore such an illustration.



Fig. 17. *Fires of Winter* (1980)

Despite the fact that the incidents of rape in romances declined over the eighties, the later novels, with covers similar to *Fires*, continued to be identified as “bodice-rippers.” With the skyrocketing of the readership and sales of the genre, critics

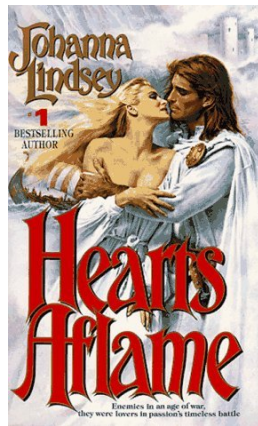


Fig. 18. *Hearts Aflame* (1987)



Fig. 19. *Gentle Rogue* (1990)

interpreted the phenomenon as a growing market for sexual and masochistic texts (though, as my previous chapters show, the formula did not prevent the novels from pursuing other themes and critiquing public policy and uneven social transformation). But few attempts were made in the popular media to engage with individual romance novels, primarily because publishers remained convinced that the old “sex sells” cliché

alone was the impetus for the sales and began marketing new novels using the same premise.

It is possible that this visual representation of sexuality in a familiar setting provided some thrill to the readers as well. But as Radway's study showed (see above), domination in a sexual setting has a limited role in romantic fantasy. It is then probable that bodice-rippers, and the novels that resembled them, did sell due to the sign that was the cover—but not for the concept that non-readers interpreted (sexual violence or mindless sexuality). For the romance reader, the sign stood for the concept of romantic courtship. In fact, readers were critical of novels that actualized the threat of violence. It is probably due to this majority opinion on what makes a good romance that the content of bodice-rippers morphed over the 80s, changing from rape to consensual sexual acts.

In some cases, the heroines initiated sex instead of being victims of impersonal lust. Lindsey's *Hearts Aflame* (see cover above), for instance, is the story of the daughter of the romantic couple from *Fires of Winter*. The narrative begins by imitating *Fires* and its bodice-ripper plot device of the heroine's capture by the hero and the subsequent threat of rape and imprisonment. But the similarity ends there. The hero, Royce, is attracted to heroine Kristen Haardrad, but is unwilling to exercise his *droit de seigneur*. Moreover, unlike the hapless heroines of the past, Kristen is a fleshed out character, with a range of emotions and capabilities and a fair amount of honesty about her own interest in Royce. When the two finally consummate their attraction, the clothes-ripping is mutual. Additionally, the characters actively critique the idea of a man controlling a woman's life, while the plot also involves events other than the sexual consummation. So the actual impulse behind the decadent image of sex that is found on the above covers

and hundreds of others like these over the seventies and eighties—and which forged an erroneous link between the packaging and the content—has little to do with the novels themselves; it lies in the fact that the publishing industry (in which men controlled sales and marketing) thought it would be easier for male salesmen to sell the novels to male booksellers. Thus the covers were designed to catch the male eye; reader preferences were a secondary consideration, and the changing plots or the altered dynamic between the protagonists of the novels did not enter the equation at all. As a result, novels with such covers, especially the paperbacks that were sold in airports and grocery and drug stores and found their way into the public eye. The bodice-ripper thus became the public face of the genre and solidified the belief that the genre was soft core pornography.

Additionally, the establishment of numerous Harlequin-like romance series, such as Candlelight, Silhouette and Loveswept, with illustrations that were less explicit but still included a clinch, only added to the impression that romance novels are copies of each other. These series had contemporary settings and contained fewer incidents comparable to the rapes in the early historical romances, but their resemblance to each other lent support to the popular belief in their identical content—content that was mistakenly assumed to be the same as that of the bodice-ripper, itself perceived monolithically as a narrative of sado-masochistic desire.

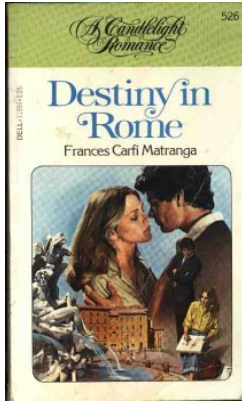


Fig. 20. *Destiny in Rome* (1979)

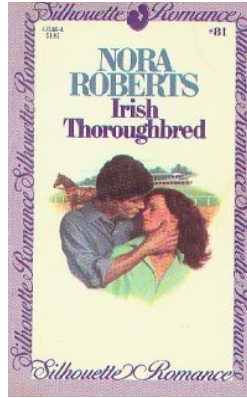


Fig. 21. *Irish Thoroughbred* (1981)



Fig. 22. *No Red Roses* (1984)

The continuing ubiquitous presence of novels from Mills and Boon-Harlequin did little to challenge such critiques, though a few covers did contain references to content. Helen Bianchin's *Savage Pagan* (1984) contains an old template of a woman in the foreground with a man at the back, but the image now emanates a new and strong sense of disquiet.

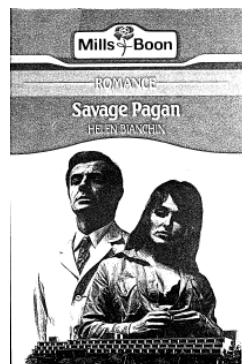


Fig. 23. *Savage Pagan* (1984)

The long concrete structure at the base of the two figures—perhaps an office building—indicates the influence of big business. The man is placed in a position that dwarfs the woman, an effect that is enhanced by his fully-clothed body in contrast to her state of

partial undress and suggests his power over her far more strongly than earlier texts did. The summary on the back informs the reader that the heroine, in order to save her brother from ruin, has been forced to marry a man “who apparently despised her as much as she disliked him;” neither was the marriage “to be merely a marriage of convenience—Rick had made that clear—and so Lisa was forced to be a real wife to him as well.” As I noted in “Capitalism,” novels like these portray a conflicted view of marriage and use it to address the problematic nature of British economic policy in these decades. Despite these signifiers of the genre’s interest in more than romance and sex, the familiar presence of the couple overshadows the new concept.⁷⁹ The distinct look of the Harlequin brand has been established and represents one mythology, though the individual novels, as discussed in the other chapters, use the love story to tackle multiple issues. During the eighties, the news media continued to emphasize Harlequin’s strategy to sell its brand, using this to supplement the argument that the individual texts do not have anything to distinguish them from each other.⁸⁰ In other words, the media perpetuated its own conflation of sign and reality due to its belief that mass production has turned literature into an assembly line product.

Various other reports on the romance publishing and romance authors continued to dwell on sex and sales, portraying it as an industry that has created a product with one use value and is focusing its workers’ efforts on mass producing it. In “Sex Still Sells in the Romance Novels Industry” (1985), which reports on the fifth conference of the Romance Writers of America, Karen Bennett hones in on a workshop titled “Does Sex Still Sell?” and notes what best-selling authors have to say about the desirable level of sexuality in a novel. Though the article observes in an ostensibly objective reportage style

that several authors caution against sexual explicitness, it contains phrases like “characters hop into bed” and “heroines...usually end the last chapter in a blaze of passionate glory with their one true love,” telling its readers to view the genre as overly sexual and corny. In light of the fact that the workshop she describes is debating whether romances should go in the direction of routinely including passionate scenes, Bennett’s choice of such phrases arguably might owe less to the content of most romances in print at the time than to their paraliterature. The slant of the report, however, tells readers to associate the former with sexuality.

Sandra Salmans follows this pattern in the 1988 article “What’s New in Romance: Passionate, Epic Tales That Make for Big Sales” in the *New York Times*. Apart from the mocking title, which connects the genre to sex and money, the rhetoric used in the opening paragraph to talk about the romances of the fictional Delaney family is employed for the same effect. Salmans thus begins by saying, “With a flashing of thighs and a heaving of bosoms, the fabulous Delaneys burst upon the paperback scene two years ago.”⁸¹ Not only does the remark contain references to sex, it uses language that equates the historical setting with an antiquated sensibility. The implication is that readers who prefer this fiction are reactionary or determinedly naïve. While the article ostensibly relates how the genre is changing and diversifying, it does so in terms that suggest the opposite, implying that the changes are a sales gimmick.⁸² At no point does Salmans name even one popular romance novelist, associating all agency with the publishing houses and their specifications of the next big formula, fortifying the public image of the genre as lacking instances of original literature.

In the late eighties, as individual novelists begin to come to prominence, the media finally begins acknowledging their particular body of work. Unfortunately, this is often done with the same sarcasm and the same assumptions that mark coverage of the genre. *Toronto Star*'s Susan Kastner writes on Nora Roberts in the 1988 article "Romance Writer found her own ka-BOOM," adopting the supposedly clichéd terms and nonsensical prose of novels like the ones Roberts writes. The title's cheekiness is borne out in the article's descriptions of romance fiction, which it claims revolves around sex, especially where the novels of Nora Roberts are concerned:

A few short years ago, the gauzy old-time romance novel - a delicate tea-rose kind of thing, quivering with unvoiced desires and unachieved consummations - was considered deader than vaudeville.

Today, they're reading them in prisons and they're reading them on the subways, and they're writing to their favorite romance authors, demanding more, more, more. A penitentiary in Georgia will take all the books one romance publisher, Silhouette Books, will send.

Why, in this liberated, hardboiled world, is the romantic phoenix rising from the ashes?

Have you read a romance novel lately?

Impatient, he pulled off his shirt so he could feel his skin against hers. His torso was hard as iron. ... Passion. She'd wanted it, craved it.... Here it was, wrapped around her, burgeoning inside her. He moaned her name, and she was

dizzy from the sound of it. His lips were on her breast. The muscles in her stomach contracted as he. . .

Let us discreetly close the boudoir door. And meet the woman behind the prose of *The Last Honest Woman*: a woman who creates volumes of prose like this, at the rate of seven volumes a year, the first author to publish 50 Silhouette romances: the woman who calls herself Nora Roberts.

Having panned the content of romances—both the “delicate tea-rose kind of thing” in which the relationship was unconsummated as well as new ones in which it was consummated—Kastner associates it with readers who have little choice of reading matter, or lack intellect, time, and money. She calls attention to Roberts’ suspicious prolificacy and then repeatedly points out that some elements keep resurfacing in Roberts’s work:

[...] the bigger the mountain of misunderstandings at the start, the bigger the ka-BOOM that always took place, after a couple of false starts, around page 155.

This is the extent of Kastner’s content analysis of Roberts’s work. When she chooses to actually talk about texts, she only quotes passages that involve—no surprise—sexual references.

[...] [I]n *All The Possibilities*, Shelby Campbell and Senator Alan MacGregor had striven “flesh against flesh, sigh for sigh, need for need.” Anna and Daniel in *Now And Forever* cleaved “mouth against mouth, flesh to flesh,” Mitch and Hester in *Local Hero* grappled “side by side. .

.flesh against flesh”, while in *Dance To The Piper*, Maddy and Reed fuse
“flesh to flesh, mouth to mouth.”

Despite Roberts’ own admission that writing love scenes in novel after novel can make them seem repetitive, the article abounds with sentences extracted from the love scenes of her novels and even from the works of other writers in order to argue that the writing is formulaic. But at no point does Kastner present such evidence of formulae from the scenes that do not involve sex.⁸³

This tendency of popular critics to use repetitious descriptions of sex as evidence that the whole genre is one recycled plot is possibly related to the fact that in addition to its well-known look, Harlequin began to add tag phrases that identify (and limit) plots to particular combinations of characters, events, and settings, i.e., a formula. The tags appear on the spine as well as the front covers and include phrases like “9 to 5” (romances in an office setting) and “Husband Hunters” (an example of a theme-based series by one author). While the tags actually show the existence of a huge variety of formulas within the genre, they also seem like the promotion bubbles on any mass-produced commodity (e.g. “Whole Grain” “No Trans Fat”) and reinforce the notion of the novels’ interchangeability. Some front covers are also marked by colored bands inscribed with terms like “Passionate,” which function both as a warning and an advertisement of the explicitness of sexual episodes in the story. Novels with these markers of heightened sensuality often also have more passionate images on the cover. All of these additions to the brand design strengthen the media conviction that romance novels have no individual features, let alone merits—that they are a commodity.

The tag-phrase pattern has become even more visible since the end of the nineties. In the Harlequin *Presents* line, these identifiers are balanced out by reducing the space given to the name of the imprint at the top (though it is colored a bright red and “*Presents*” occupies much of that band.)

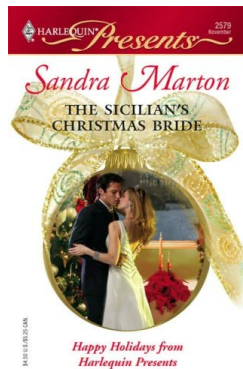


Fig. 24. *The Sicilian's Christmas Bride* (2006)

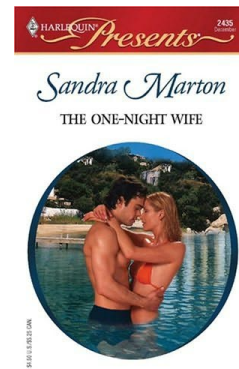


Fig. 25. *The One-Night Wife* (2004)

The spine and the back cover display the brief descriptors, which can indicate the nationality of the hero (“Latin Lovers,” “Greek Tycoons,” “Italian Husbands”), his financial status (“Mistress to a Millionaire,” “Jet Set Wives,” “Millionaire Marriages”), the setting (“Foreign Affairs,” “A Mediterranean Marriage”), character type (“Hot Blooded Husbands”), or particular plot elements (“Red Hot Revenge,” “Expecting,” “In Love With Her Boss,” “Wedlocked”).⁸⁴ These tagged Harlequins with clinch covers are also distinguished by the fact that they show one or both characters divested of some clothing. In many cases, the heroine is dressed in a way that bares some or most of her body, but often, so is the male model. The background is detailed, usually suggesting a place of wealth or romanticized sexuality, such as a bedroom with silken sheets and low lighting in an expensive house or hotel, or a beach. (While this description sounds like the Harlequins from the seventies, these are often photographic images suggestive of

realism, of a People-magazine style elision between the viewer's life and that of the glamorous inhabitants in the frame.) The summary of the novel at the back of these books is also different from earlier back cover blurbs because of the recurrent use of words such as "lover" or "mistress," which are in boldface, and act as eye-catching terms that lend further credence to the belief that the novels adhere to a particular formula.⁸⁵

Despite this house style of the main imprint, there are some indicators of different approaches *within* the Harlequin *Presents* line. Moreover, Harlequin also established entirely new lines in the late nineties. This sub-division of the major brand into multiple imprints has meant that the covers and content of many romance novels outside its primary lines have finally been freed from the primary sign and its mythology. But the promotion of those lines that have more explicit sexual content (and are packaged to convey this) adds to the impression that romances are sex books and reverses the impact of that breakout step. (The meaning of the old sign is thus hard to escape, despite the creation of a new image.) For instance, Harlequin *Blaze*, which is specifically aimed at an audience that is used to reading more sexually explicit romances, has a signature look that declares this bent, with a red spine, a broad red streak across the top of the novels, and photographic images that suggest a sexual encounter. The back cover also includes the tag line "Red-Hot Reads," declaring the line's emphasis quite clearly. The novels are often an exercise in giving the two characters opportunity to initiate sexual contact (though the stories are varied and the sexuality in these novels is firmly enclosed within the bounds of a traditional relationship). Their key difference from the main imprint is that their protagonists may engage in sexual activity for its own sake in the beginning, allowing a romantic relationship to only appear at a later point in the narrative. Many of

the novels are often witty, employing the style of a screwball-comedy. But since the covers aim to project the impression of sex, the elasticity of the formula and its possibilities are lost. Take, for instance, Nancy Warren's *By the Book* (2003).

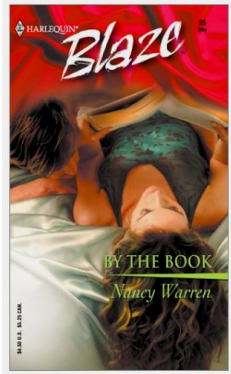


Fig. 26. *By the Book* (2003)

It involves a woman who bumps into a neighbor while he is holding a book titled *Sex for Total Morons* and thus assumes that he needs some coaching. The neighbor, who is in fact the book's author, decides to let her believe that he needs training in sexual etiquette, thus leading to some sexual episodes but also to confusion and humor as well as heartbreak. The cover illustration of a couple in a ruffled bed and the brand image, however, do not adequately convey these nuances, reducing *By the Book* to a sex book.

Single-Title Romance and the Disappearing Embrace

Cover design outside series imprints like Harlequin has continued to evolve as well, often in contradictory ways. The reworking was possibly a result of reader feedback and the negative mythology that has been generated around the genre. The early nineties

saw a trend to conceal the clinch, with many single-title romance novels replacing illustrations of couples with landscapes or objects like jewelry, flowers, etc.

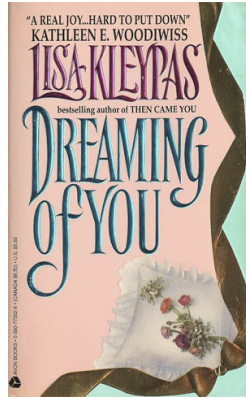


Fig. 27. *Dreaming of You* (1994) Fig. 28. *The Pirate Prince* (1998)

But the image did not disappear completely, in some instances merely migrating to the page behind the cover (a device called the “stepback,”) as seen in the following Avon romance by Julia Quinn.



Fig. 29. *An Offer from a Gentleman* (2001)

Despite the changes, the myth of the romance novel (as “bodice-ripper”) has taken firm hold and the retention of the cursive script that has become associated with the genre, along with text effects like foil (usually a golden or silver patina) and embossing (raised

letters) is sufficient to sustain image retention of the clinch-cover romance in public memory.

Criticism that draws on the stereotypical cover image of the genre and labels it as formulaic has now found a new avenue in electronic news media as well, which is dispersing the notion even more widely. Besides using the covers themselves, the new media coverage resorts to additional visual cues to simulate the alleged clichéd sexuality of the genre, reinforcing the existing sign. In 1995, CNN did a brief story on a model who had posed for the covers of many historical romances. In the story, reporter Jeanne Moos observes the model Cindy Guyer during a photo shoot for one such cover and the preliminary remarks, the voiceover, and the clip itself work to add to the impression of the genre as bubble-headed and raunchy. News anchor Natalie Allen introduces the story with,

Well, when it comes to romance novels, Cindy Guyer is known as “the queen of [the] clinched cover.” CNN's Jeanne Moos reports on a woman whose love life appears to be hot, even steamy, not under the covers but on them. (“Female Fabio”)

Allen’s introduction performs the typical maneuver of belittling the genre by employing monikers that are supposedly universally accepted.

While Guyer is filmed in various poses with male model John DeSalvo, the voiceover gleefully announces that “Cindy Guyer has had her neck nuzzled hundreds of times. She's cavorted with outlaw Vikings. She's been a gypsy dancer. She's been a blonde, a brunette, a redhead.” Stressing the repetitious nature and the faux-sex aspect of Cindy’s work, Moos implies that the stereotypical visual representation of romance

novels is a perfect reflection of the genre's formulaic nature and declares the phoniness of any apparent individuality the novels may claim. The conversation between the photographer and the model that viewers hear includes references to Guyer's lips and breasts, reminding them of the sexuality in the novels. When the photographer tells Guyer not to jut out her chin, Moos jokes "But it wasn't Cindy's chin they wanted jutting out." The clip ends with Moos herself posing for the photographer and as we hear him asking her to loosen her lips, she signs off saying, "If you want to know what happens next, well, you're going to have to read the novel. In her lust for news, [this reporter] stumbles on the hottest story she's ever covered." The clip treats the genre as it is depicted on the bodice-ripper—a bawdy, prostituted form of fiction that one purchases for a fleeting sexual thrill. The genre's individual manifestations, it implies, are merely the reproductions of that single commodity.

By the mid-nineties, the press began to feature articles tracking the expansion of the romance publishing market into post-communist countries, many of which chose to attribute the growth to the appeal of the escapist sexual fantasies the genre is trying to peddle to a downtrodden, fun-deprived people. In "Booked up for Knights of Polish Passion: Harlequin's Eastern Promise" Chrystia Freeland treats romance fiction as if it is an aggressive man who is seducing vulnerable women all over the former Soviet bloc:

Over the past two years, Polish women, like those in Hungary and the Czech Republic, have fallen for the western charms of Harlequin heroes as avidly as their men have taken to the western pornography once banned by communist censors. While the competition to satisfy eastern Europe's appetite for pornography is fierce, over the past three years Harlequin,

which trades in the UK as Mills and Boon, has managed to establish the same market dominance east of the Elbe that it exerts in western Europe and North America.” (19)

Her sweeping pronouncement about the genre, her conviction that romance fiction is just vast numbers of a soft-core porn commodity, shows the unmistakable influence of the novel packaging phenomenon. “Harlequin paperbacks, with their covers of couples locked in romantic embraces, are now a common sight in Polish bookstores,” she observes, using just one brand and its public image to define the entire genre. Along the same lines, in “Russian Readers Swept Away by Steamy Sagas” Angela Charlton of the Associated Press notices the increased visibility of romance novels in Russia and remarks on their seemingly absorptive quality. In her case, the analysis bases itself on outlandish titles, one of the recognizable signifiers of the bodice-ripper:

On Moscow's crowded subway, a woman sits reading intently, locked in "The Never-Ending Embrace." Nearby stands a teen-age girl, swept away in "A Hurricane of Temptation."

These absorbed readers have caught on to Russia's latest, if less than greatest, literary trend: the romance novel.

No record exists of novels with these titles, making the article a stellar example of how the media creates a fictional, farcical version of the genre, one given to emotional and sexual immaturity and dramatics. Charlton refers to the genre as “formulaic, quickly written novels,” and claims that “[w]earied by recent years of economic hardship, Russian readers are snubbing weightier classics and happily abandoning themselves to a world of breathless beauties and cunning Casanovas.” Her analysis appears to be based

on little more than a quote from one romance and references made to a couple of others by some Russian readers. Even as the article quotes readers who insist the novels' draw is not sex but romance, Charlton employs descriptors like "realm of unbridled passions" and "amorous adventures" to reiterate that romance fiction is catering to sexual fantasy. Underlying the article is the implication that the fantasy is escapist and its characters one-dimensional; the irony here is that the report is itself a fabrication to some extent. The stubbornness of this media perception is understandable. Romance publishing created a face that was meant to realize exchange value through the appearance of one use value but while readers used it as the sign of a genre (containing one of many possible concepts), non-readers became convinced of that one use value. Since this understanding of the genre also associates it with poor taste, most critiques make little effort to expose the myth and risk being seen as lacking taste themselves.

The impact of the packaging in sustaining the myth also becomes evident once we examine how that monolithic/iconic romance look crops up as a butt of jokes in other popular culture forms. Television shows, especially sitcoms, often contain references to romance novels, usually derogatory or comic. Like the CNN clip above, the shows attempt to enact the signifiers of that sign in a way that reiterates it as truth. In several episodes on NBC's popular *Friends* (1994-2004), the appearance of a character's famous romance novelist mother (played by voluptuous actress Morgan Fairchild) is the lead-in for a number of jokes about her profession. The actress's body is pointedly used to align her character and her profession with unbridled sexuality. Not only is her career presented as sleazy or risqué, she herself treats it as intellectually undemanding. When asked about her craft, she casually tosses out a "formula" for writing a successful

romance, a clear statement that the genre lacks any creativity and is manufactured like some assembly-line product. The laugh track is used whenever such statements are made, cuing the audience to agree with the show's conviction that this fiction only deserves ridicule.

Another episode of the show identifies romance fiction with illicit sex and seduction. In "The One With Rachel's Novel," the character Joey, who is handsome as well as stupid, finds one of his female roommate's romance novels hidden under her mattress (an unsubtle signal that the text has a masturbatory function). The placement of the novel equates romance with magazines like *Playboy*. The first thing Joey says when he reads a page at random (which just happens to be a love-making scene) is "Rachel's got porn!" resulting in hilarity on the laugh track. Throughout the episode, Joey proceeds to tease Rachel by acting intense and macho (presumably based on what he has read of male characters in her novel) and propositioning her for a roll in the sack. His behavior reinforces the popular belief that romance heroes are absurd characters, written with just one dimension—the lecherous seducer. The disjuncture between Joey's character on the show (a somewhat clueless flirt) and the swaggering Lothario of Rachel's text that he tries to play intensifies the absurdity of that alleged romance hero's actions. Rachel is first confused and then embarrassed when she recognizes some of the dialog he quotes from the novel. (The "quote" is made up by the show's writers and, like in Charlton's article, works to construct a fake romance novel). She immediately goes on the defensive and tries to justify her reading material but it comes out sounding as if she is using the book as a substitute for a boyfriend and a sex-life. (Laughter erupts at this point, cuing viewers at home to be skeptical of her claims, too.)

Towards the end of the episode, Joey continues to tease her by claiming to be role-playing the character of a lecherous vicar in the novel. Rachel finally puts an end to this harassment by donning the role of a nubile maid who wants to seduce the hero (that Joey is pretending to be) and her aggressive sexual advance results in Joey's retreat to the door. When she insists that they have sex, he whimpers, "I don't want to—I'm scared." The episode thus not only represents romances as masturbatory fiction, a literary version of the vibrator for single women, it also portrays the genre as being peopled with sex-starved characters who turn readers into sexual predators to be feared by men.⁸⁶ Even if one is to argue that Rachel's aggressive heroine shows that romances are actually a narrative about the power of women over men in the sexual situation, the genre is predicated on never staging that fantasy in the way the episode does. The seductive woman who aggressively pursues a chaste man is not one of the formulas of the genre. The episode thus constructs a scenario that contradicts the actuality of romance fiction, a scenario that is in fact more similar to a male fantasy genre, for instance "Letter to Penthouse."

A closer look at the role(s) that Joey tries to play in the episode reveals that they are doctored to add to the impression that romances are absurd and inconsistent. While he is the aggressor in the first instance, he is later seen as a victim of lust. This disparity between the two instances is symptomatic of the skewed image of the romance that the sitcom offers. But the show chooses to ignore the unevenness in the roles, making romances appear illogical and poorly plotted. Instead, this move reveals the show's sleight of hand in constructing a stereotype of the genre and erroneously conflating the aggressive hero (who can often be found in romances) with a reserved, sexually chaste

male (a trait found infrequently in the genre and never in the same character). In either case, the scene that is staged carries echoes of the farcical clinch cover.

Furthermore, the implied content of Rachel's novel (in the second instance) includes the seduction of a vicar by his maid, another case of media misrepresentation of romance novels as naughty tales of sexual misdemeanors—the kind that dwell on the transgression of boundaries (moral, and otherwise) that is actually the defining quality of pornography. The episode thus erases any distinction between romance and porn. As a result, it perpetuates the idea that genre romance is devoted to the illicit, titillating sexual antics of random couples and has little in common with good literature.

Movies frequently resort to anti-romance novel discourse as well, again with a half-sarcastic, half-patronizing tone. The true motivation behind this tendency of one kind of entertainment to mock another is that it is a strategy for improving one's stock through the deprecation of a fellow cultural form. If movies (or television shows for that matter) are regarded as the poor cousins of literary fiction, they often attempt to erase some of the stigma of being light-weight narratives by mocking other mass-market forms—even more so if there is a thematic similarity. This critique thus differs from that in the news articles cited earlier in the chapter, which participated in creating the myth of the romance novel because of a belief that they had a duty to uphold cultural standards and keep out the low brow. New media forms, however, hope to show themselves in a better light by using familiar signifiers to disparage the genre. In the 2001 romantic comedy *Kate & Leopold*, starring Meg Ryan and Hugh Jackman, Ryan plays Kate, an advertising executive in New York, who falls in love with a European aristocrat—who happens to be from the nineteenth century and has slipped into the twenty-first through a

“crack in time.” This is a plot that could have been lifted straight from a time-travel romance novel. Despite its evident origins, however, the movie takes pains to mock the very genre from which it originates. Early on in the movie, we see Kate’s secretary reading a novel at her desk, one easily identified as a romance by the clinch cover.



Fig. 30. *Dark Challenge* (2000)

She neglects her work in order to finish the book and is seen sobbing as she reaches the end. Sniffling, she narrates the story of a man who waited on an island for the woman he loved for so long that he lost his leg to gangrene but eventually managed to get the heroine. Both the book and its reader come across as ridiculous. The entire story is an invention of the movie’s scriptwriters, playing off the bodice-ripper inspired cover of the novel and building on what the signifiers of flourished font, unclothed bodies, and a sexualized pose have been said to mean in earlier media reports.

In fact, the actual plot of the novel used in that scene, Christine Feehan’s *Dark Challenge* (2000), is completely different. While the story is a fantasy—the book falls under the “paranormal romance” sub-genre—it bears little resemblance to the melodrama and sentimentality that the movie ascribes to all romances. Instead, it tells the story of two supernatural beings and ends with a battle. The protagonists are nowhere near an island and the hero does not lose a leg. Moreover, the heroine is not the unattainable

Laura-figure that the secretary describes. Her character is fashioned along the lines of a Valkyrie who can hold her own in a physical conflict. As is evident, *Kate & Leopold's* scriptwriters are not even close to the novel's plot, instead choosing to reiterate one stereotype of the genre (the sentimental tearjerker) in order to make its own fantasy-based plot more "real." Due to this move on their part, viewers unfamiliar with the novel leave the movie theater convinced that novels with covers such as the one above have nonsensical plots and that the genre is absurd (though romance readers know that the plot the secretary relates is untrue). The movie perpetuates the re-narrativization/re-inscription of the romance novel as a purely sexual, or ridiculously emotional and unbelievable caricature of "real" human relationships; the retold story is the one that the viewers of the above television shows or movies are left with at the end.

Readers and Commodity Aesthetics

Over the last three decades since the rise of romance paperbacks, various media have believed in the sign that is the clinch cover and reiterated without question that its meaning is a reproducible plot about sex. But this still leaves us with the question of whether the genre's popularity and sales grew through the marketing as well. In other words, do readers return to the genre because they too want the predictable text of sexual conquest and capitulation that the covers promise? Not only do the two chapters on readers prove that they are interested in more than sexual narratives, but so do conversations on numerous on-line groups that critique such covers, not to mention the fact that publishers have begun changing the cover art itself. Publishing houses are designing romance covers to highlight the various sub-genres, i.e., formulas, that make

up the larger category, albeit again primarily in the interest of augmenting sales. Nevertheless, the changes in cover art are thus beginning to reveal the heteroglossic nature of the genre to which non-romance reading critics remained oblivious because they usually only surveyed a few novels from the 1970s and 1980s that looked strikingly uniform.

This section first looks at on-line discussions that center exclusively on the covers of the books, and documents readers' and authors' experiences with them. Apart from offering insight into the role these two groups play in the creation of the front and back cover, the remarks show how they are affected by the process in which television shows, movies, and other media conflate the genre at large with a limited pool of provocative cover images. These conversations usually focus on what individual posters like or disapprove of when it comes to romance covers and how these preferences play a role in the act of purchase, and determine boundaries of reading space. They also invite authors to clarify their own role in the creation of the paraliterature of their novels. Such discussions speak to the readers' interest in the generic quality of romance novels, while simultaneously affording a look at what (for them) distinguishes the texts from each other. Their comments shed light on whether covers play any role at all for the informed reader, i.e., if publishers' strategy to create a brand image or to package literature in a way that narrows down the apparent use value has any impact on the target audience.

The conversations in this chapter come from message boards and blogs on three sites: *Fog City Divas*, *All about Romance (AAR)*, and *Avon Authors (AA)*. (*AAR* is run by romance readers, and *AA* comprises authors who write romances for Avon Books and their readers. *Divas* is hosted by a group of romance writers from the San Francisco Bay

area.) All sites frequently host discussions on covers, bringing up what readers like or dislike about them, or whether they find them irrelevant to the novel-reading experience. This attention to the visual is unusual in most analyses of literature except the actual graphic novel, pointing out that readers are aware of how the illustration and overall book design has become inseparable from the prose text—either as a misread sign or the desirable one. In January 2006, in a blog titled *Dishing With the Divas*, Candice Hern and Barbara Freehy reviewed cover art design and listed the variety of themes that have made an appearance on novel covers and jackets. The major trends that the article identified included clinch covers (most commonly linked to the genre in the popular imagination), “object” covers (trinkets or flowers on a plain background) and landscape covers. It also noted the possible inclusion of the “stepback,” in which the hero and heroine are posed together.⁸⁷

The *Divas* discussion on romance covers pointed out that cover images play a secondary role in purchase for some readers, but the names of authors and the summary on the back blurb is a crucial selling point.⁸⁸ In other words, the sign is demythologized by the initiated readers, and textual elements escape the tyranny of the style in which they were scripted (cursive font, foil printing). Rather than the composite sign spurring purchase of a product, it is the history of authorship, of techniques like plot and character, i.e., a literary tradition, which determines selection for many readers. In other words, they evade the mythology sold under the sign of the florid embrace. As reader Manuelita jokes, “I would buy T[eresa]M[edeiros] L[isa] K[leypas] and J[ulia] Q[uiinn] even if a penguin were on the cover.” In a June 1996 newsletter, Laurie Gold, the editor of *AAR*, also notes that many readers rely on the back blurb to make their selection (“Laurie’s

News and Views”). However, she does not deny that other readers factor in a novel’s appearance during purchase. She cites a reader named Inez who confessed that the book’s design (even the back cover) plays a role in her selection process when she is in a hurry. In other words, some readers treat the novels as commodities when their time is limited, selecting one out of several instances of the product on the basis of packaging. In times of leisure though, the novel is released from the status of pure commodity and commodity aesthetics ceases to be a factor in purchase for readers like Inez. While the process of commodity consumption is automatically associated with romance novels (as seen in numerous examples above), the fact that they are often treated as literature is rarely understood.

Gold herself bypasses the cover entirely and makes novel purchases on the basis of back blurbs, the author’s name, and the title. But she does allow that the front cover may play a significant role at purchase points where the novels are placed face up rather than spine to spine and the illustration can act as a genre identifier. Uncertain of what the buyers at these locations actually feel about clinch covers, Gold concedes that publishers see the covers as worth keeping if they believe these act as code for the genre (by a long-standing, albeit misleading, equivalence). She acknowledges that there are readers who actually like clinch covers, so publishers interested in sales figures will continue the familiar packaging irrespective of the reputation it confers on the genre. But Gold also points out that there are romance readers who actively dislike clinches and who argue that other genres, such as science fiction, were only treated with respect once the cover art toned down to resemble “mainstream” fiction.

In noting some readers' stated preference for the more stereotypical couple cover, Gold mentions a reader named Diane who occasionally picks novels by looking at the cover but also values the covers for their own style. Diane objects to the trend of divesting the genre of its distinctive look in favor of making them appear part of mainstream fiction. In her e-mail to Gold she notes,

It would be a shame to see the end of covers with embraced lovers because some informed people believe that books with 'trashy' covers could not possible [sic] contain serious reading material. A romance without an artwork cover is like walking into a department store without store displays. ("Laurie's News and Views")

Diane's analogy, along with her defense of covers as (in Gold's words) "beautiful artwork," is an appropriation of the publishers' deployment of commodity aesthetics. Diane endows romance novel packaging with artistic merit even as she recognizes it as a sales tool. Gold even references a website that rests on a similar belief in the artistic quality of romance novel covers.

The same newsletter cites author Terry Blain's explanation for clinches, in which she adds to the now known fact that the partially nude figures on covers were meant to catch the eye of male sellers/bookstore owners. Blain emphasizes that sexually provocative covers perform a synecdochical role in fulfilling their exchange value—but usually only when it comes to their purchase by bookstore owners; this is the reason they have persisted despite readers' aversion to them and the slant they give the genre:

[W]hy all the focus on the cover - because that, along with the blurb, is what the publisher uses to sell the book. It's what they have control over.

Can you imagine a salesmen saying, here's a well written book, with all the historical facts accurate, good grammar, well-rounded characters, correct use of point of view and a plot that hangs together?

The remark is telling because it shows Blaine's awareness that genre fiction's literary merits might as well be non-existent in the arena of sales and non-readership. All that counts here is that which is provocative because it yields a high exchange value.

Publishers' tendency to rely on this technique can be extreme, however, and contributes to the clichéd look of romances, as Gold reports in the following instance:

One author remembers meeting a cover artist who said that, for one cover, the only instructions he received from the publisher for a historical cover were to "give us one of those [heroine] upside down poses, where the woman's breast are prominent."

Diva's Hern, who writes historical romances, expresses a dislike of clinch covers such as the ones Avon used for her novels.⁸⁹ She actually uses the epithet "bodice-rippers" for these images, arguing that they are demeaning and counter-productive to attracting new readers. She also adds that authors are given little say on matters of cover design, once again indicating that while individual novels may be discrete and unique in their narration of the romance, publishing companies create the impression of their interchangeability. Hern does admit that some readers apparently like this look and then speculates that publishers introduced the device of the "stepback" in order to please two sets of readers with differing demands—the plain "object" or landscape front for those who thought it an embarrassment to see images of a "couple in various stages of disarray or undress with limbs entined [sic] and hair flowing in the wind," and the stepback/inner

leaf cover for “those readers who need visuals” and “got them, but under wraps, so to speak.” This basic opposition in reader preferences crops up repeatedly in every discussion of romance novel packaging.

In responding to Hern’s article, most readers express a dislike of the clinch cover, blaming it for the negative press the genre receives. In several cases, readers also claimed that clinch covers prompted them to leave the novel on the shelf, an instance of negative packaging, where the implied use value of an item reduced its exchange value in the buyer’s eyes. This appeared to be even more true if the author was unknown:

I can’t recall ever having bought an historical by an unknown (to me) writer because of the cover, but I have often decided not to buy one I was considering because of the cover. I hate the covers that reinforce all the stereotypes of romance novels. (Janga)

Cover types only influence me in that I would avoid clinch covers if the book is by a new-to-me author and I was just browsing through the book store. This is sad because most newbie authors end up with the worst possible clinch covers, the ones that look cheap and tawdry. (Manuelita)

Most readers admit that their aversion to clinch covers arises from a feeling of embarrassment at being seen reading a book that seems to proclaim itself to be nothing more than a sexual fantasy. This pigeon-holing is perhaps why readers insist that every manifestation of the genre be presented to the public with some indication of its uniqueness. Kate Moore, for instance, is critical of publishers’ attempts to build a house style instead of promoting a particular novel’s narrative, i.e., mythologizing the text:

I would argue that the “cover” is a big element in “publishing” a work, so the publisher should aim to make the cover fit and sell the story. That aim would make covers more individual, but publishers seem to be trying to create a “brand” for themselves, a recognizable look. It works for Cheerios, but I wonder how well it works for books?

Other arguments against the stereotypical clinch cover included ones such as the following from a reader named Camy, who writes that her like/dislike of the cover influences her reading pleasure. While she refrains from purchasing novels with clinches because she would prefer not to be seen with them, she adds that the other factor against purchase is that her dislike of those covers colors her enjoyment of the actual content.

The impact of readers’ opinions on novel covers is visible in one of author StefAnn Holm’s experiences, which she related on the *AAR* board (“Cover Controversy”). Holm recalled that after having six of her novels published with clinch covers, her seventh novel was published (against her desires) without a couple on the cover. This novel sold well enough to result in a quicker second print run, prompting her to wonder if the asexual packaging did influence purchase for the better—in direct opposition to the seventies’ and eighties’ publishing belief that the sexy cover sells novels. Holm recalls that her publisher insisted that the clinch was an obstacle to breaking into the “big” book arena and the improvement in her sales after adopting a less generic look appeared to indicate that purchase was affected by cover art. Her publisher had clearly learned that promoting novels on an individualized basis rather than the mythic form appealed to readers far more or at the least, they were apt to shy away from the old sign and its reflection on them as readers.

The causes of this trend also include the new strategy by publishers to draw in non-romance readers to the genre through cover art that resembles or evokes a less generic plot line. But Holm is still ambivalent about the wisdom of completely divesting the novels of the clinches. She claims that she has “asked around and talked with many people” about the covers and the consensus is that stepbacks are the best compromise between the old and new cover trends. The suggestion points to a shift in visualizing romance. The representation of the genre is clearly in flux by the late nineties, with competing demands for retaining past iconic images (where the sign connotes its own meaning to readers), and for stepping away from the sign toward more denotative symbols.

Readers’ aversion to buying romances that look like “bodice-rippers” or have a clinch also stems from the feeling that explicit covers seem inappropriate for the public spaces even within the home. The sign of the romance is only fit for the point at which its exchange value may be realized, i.e., at the store. Beyond that space, the use value suggested by the sign becomes inappropriate. The very concept that facilitated the sale later acquires new meaning that is incompatible with other public spaces. As reader Daisy said on the *Avon Authors* discussion board,

I love to leave my books out on the end table/coffee table if I don't devour them in one sitting...er, reading. But some of them are not really ones I would want my young nieces or the pastor to see when they walk into my family room.

I'm not ashamed of reading romances, but the covers are a little too sexy even for my book case sometimes. (“Book Covers”)

Her comments point out that the sensational clinch covers appear to have been designed for public sale followed by secluded reading. The sign was created on the assumption that the reader of the “bodice-ripper” was a stay-at-home mom or housewife and would not be affected by this mythologizing. But as more and more readers have begun leaving home to travel to work, the “bodice-ripper” inspired look has become incompatible with their mobility. Another reader agreed with Daisy’s admission, revealing that she appreciated elaborate covers but,

[S]ome of my books with very pretty covers are also very sexy and provocative covers and I feel sometimes when I am reading them at work on a break I tend to be a bit self conscious when the cover is kind of sexy and, well, you know.” (“Book Covers”)

She also adds later that if she happens to buy a romance in hard cover, she leaves the dust jacket at home and takes the bound black novel with her when she goes to work in order to avoid potential embarrassment. Reader georgia_peach described her own actions of concealing her novels outside the house by setting “my purse on my knees to use as a barricade,” while Camilla claimed that she likes clinch covers but she still prefers not to leave the novels where they can be seen by anyone:

I do like a really beautiful and tasteful clinch cover, but if it's going to be left around, no. I am also unashamed to read and write romances (nor do I care about outside opinions), but the clinches tend to feed the reasons for the snickers and asides from the so-called "literary" world. (“Book Covers”)

Readers are constantly aware of the censoring gaze, the one they see in the media and which demeans their genre and them by using the clinch cover as its evidence.

On the AAR board, several more newsletters were devoted to analyzing the covers in great detail. Laurie Gold surveyed recurring cover themes in her collection of romance paperbacks after having determined that they were strikingly different from non-romance novels (hardback or paperback), which rarely use images of people (“Laurie’s News and Views”). It is a key observation, highlighting that the human body is a loaded signifier and that fusing it with literary texts results inevitably in a sign that suggests illicitness and lack of intellectual engagement. Romance paperbacks, she notes, are sometimes devoid of people but more often contains male and female figures in various degrees of intimacy, either on the cover or the stepback. While she, too, expresses a strong dislike of clinch covers “with manly men without any body hair, breasts (of both characters) bountiful and in abundant [sic] display,” she dislikes even more the gender dynamic that such covers imply, showing “women (mostly) in position of supplication.” While admitting that stepbacks stave off the embarrassment brought on by clinch covers, Gold sees the extra cover as an unnecessary expense, arguing that the money would be better spent if the author were paid more. She also dislikes the amount of publicity romance cover models get, holding it responsible for the poor opinion of the genre among the public at large. (As the above CNN news clip shows, she is not far off the mark.) Gold also prefers the non-clinch cover because she says it allows her to imagine the characters herself (instead of having well-known models disturb its fictional reality and detract from the text’s unique plot).

Gold also cites readers who ask that the partially nude figures be replaced by “classy and sophisticated” images that “[bestow] more validation and credibility to the story contained inside.”⁹⁰ This preference partially explains another trend that *Divas*’ Candice Hern notes is competing with clinches: covers with faceless bodies. In one version of this trend, the faces of the two models on some covers are being shadowed or cropped out in an effort to look less corny and more sensual.

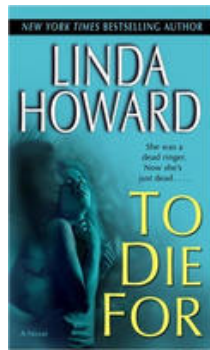


Fig. 31. *To Die For* (2005)



Fig. 32. *The Devil to Pay* (2005)

The on-line discussions on this development also afford some answers about the way desire functions in romance novels. Hern hazards that not only are the faceless image covers an extension of some readers’ wish to see partially concealed figures, i.e., a variation on the stepback, but that they are also indicators of a new kind of erotically charged novel. Her conjecture is somewhat accurate, though this is not always the case. For instance, *To Die For* contains a substantial murder mystery plot and a more humorous tone than the image would suggest. But it is true that more and more romances are including descriptions of oral sex and hinting at sexual acts that did not exist as far as the previous generation of novels was concerned.

The absence of the traditional clinch, Hern claims, indicates that suggestion works better—or so publishers have begun to believe. This trend will perpetuate the

sexual reputation of the genre but since these images do not have the unrealistic look of the clinch, they confer a kind of verisimilious and arty quality on it. Hern also wonders if the popularity of these covers stems from the fact that the impersonal bodies allow readers to read themselves into the text. There may be some truth to her speculation that the use of faceless bodies promotes reader identification. The last decade has seen the increasing adoption of a shifting point of view in the narrative; the faceless figures on novels like the ones Hern cites may further promote reader identification with both heroine and hero.

Some novels go a step further with this new people cover, only including close-ups of parts of a body, often leaving out the head entirely. This move, like the faceless covers, possibly helps reconcile two contradictory impulses that readers feel: a reluctance to be seen reading a novel bearing the well-recognized full body clinch, and the persistence of the embrace as an object of fantasy. In addition to this, the fantasy is complicated by both the public shame directed at sexuality and the private fear of the primal scene; this explains the admission of a puzzled reader named Dorothy who says, "... I like the headless bodies best. I, too, dislike the full clinch cover, but I like the close-in look at partial bodies. Go figure." Reader Manuelita's response to the "decapitated heads" cover is even more complex than Dorothy's because she admits that she did not react favorably toward them at the beginning: "I originally didn't like the decapitated heads, but I think I've gotten used to them. I used to think they were weird, but now I think many of them are very sexy." This shift in her reaction leads one to speculate whether it is only after foregrounding the usually seamless process of narcissism involved in a scopophilic act that the faceless/headless covers allow greater reader identification.

But the appeal of the headless image might also lie in the fact that the absence of the face depersonalizes the characters and makes it easier to read about the greater degree of sexual intimacy in these novels; in other words, it takes away the threat of the primal scene.

If some novels have erased the faces of couples, others have erased one half of the couple as well. In numerous cases, a man or woman appears alone on the cover; in fact, even some stepbacks contain images of solitary figures.

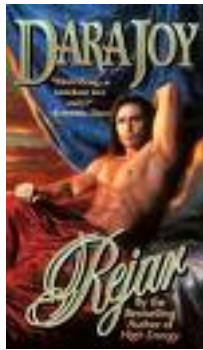


Fig. 33. *Rejar* (1999)



Fig. 34. *Dark Legend* (2002)

As Hern has noted, this trend of showing a single model has combined with the “decapitated heads” style, displaying lone bodies evacuated of personalized identities.

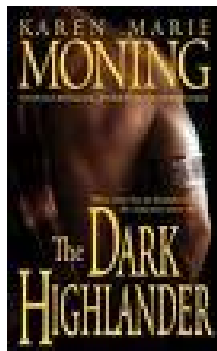


Fig. 35. *The Dark Highlander* (2002)



Fig. 36. *Mr. Impossible* (2005)

While eliminating the problem of famous models who affect the suspension of disbelief, and offering the reader a safe distance, these images perform their function of representing the setting and the particular type a character plays in the novel. *Dark Highlander*, for instance, shows its Scottish warrior hero, and *Mr. Impossible* its Regency aristocrat, i.e., the cover acts as code for the novel's particular "formula." Novel covers like the ones above, which only include male images, are also significant because they indicate that the genre is tied to the need to understand Man by making him the object of the gaze/narrative. Such covers contain the promise that the novels can fulfill that need. The omission of the female model/character suggests to readers that they can identify completely with the female protagonist.

In a 1999 article titled "Covers Covered by Carol" on AAR, Carol Irvin has also addressed the objectification of the body in reference to the fact that readers had written in overwhelmingly in favor of keeping male figures on the covers. Some qualified the demand by lobbying for a fully-clothed portrait of the hero, and others actively challenged the presence of the heroine on the cover. It is undeniable that this preference for viewing the male body is vital in its insistence on female subjecthood in the dynamic of the gaze. Irvin thus agrees with women who object to clinches (especially ones which show the heroine in a submissive pose) as well as with these readers' argument that if "one is going to put a sexual fantasy on the book, at least make it a woman's sexual fantasy, not a man's, since it is primarily a woman's genre." But Irvin poses a more significant question about the trend of portraying lone male figures on covers, asking whether this is any better than objectifying women.⁹¹

Even if one were to argue that the appearance of lone men or muscular bare chests on covers in the late twentieth-century is an acknowledgment that the genre is a seminal locus for female heterosexual desire—making men the object of the gaze—and the realization of a women’s fantasy, one has to deal with a parallel trend that places female bodies in similar faceless poses. Unlike responders to Irvin’s article, posters on the *Divas* site spoke mainly in favor of covers with headless female bodies (seen from the neck down). Camy, who disliked clinches or male chests, preferred people covers if they were of “headless female back[s],” finding them “very feminine and sexy.” On the Avon board, a reader expressed her dislike for bare male chest covers with,

I actually don't like it when the cover has a big picture of a gorgeous strapping man on the front outside cover (unless it's smaller and maybe also with a woman-but when the man is shirtless that kind of bugs me-it's nice-they look good, but, kind of bugs me too). Does that sound strange? I prefer that on the inside or back cover.

Author Carol, who also dislikes clinches, mentions a preference for a sub-set of the headless covers, one that involves close-ups of body parts: “I don't mind the cover with the half-clothed headless woman if it's tastefully done. My two single title contemporaries were both all sexy legs and now they're doing chopped off heads for my books at Silhouette and I like them!”



Fig. 37. *Two Little Lies* (2006)

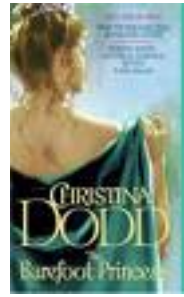


Fig. 38. *The Barefoot Princess* (2006)

This second preference can be explained by the fact that as members of a phallogocentric society, which encourages women to exist as the object of the gaze, Camy (or similar readers) find female objectification less disconcerting than being the female subject looking at an impersonal, sexualized male body. Moreover, as much as the clinch cover gets mocked, it has the advantage of conforming more to the acceptable image of male subject-female object positions than the picture of the lone male, which would be an outright statement of female sexual agency. This challenge to the traditional expectations about the subject of the gaze would make readers the target of even more criticism, labeling them conclusively as consumers of pornography. The preference for female covers is thus a retreat into the most classic (and safe) image of western art—the woman as object of the desiring gaze. But there are readers who are discomfited by the trend of impersonal, partially clothed female bodies as well, because they are forced to confront this objectification. Such covers recall an older generation of romances in which, as Snitow argues, women do in fact behave as the object of the gaze (248-49). The narratives of present-day romances, however, have broken away from that tradition; they are dismantling female objectification from within the patriarchal romantic fantasy. The lone woman on these new covers—a faceless object—harks back to that antiquated

position that carries no current reference and unnerves the reader with its implications. Dorothy (cited above), for instance, thought the cover of the Debra Mullins novel *Scandal of the Black Rose* (of a woman's back bared nearly to her hips) "just a bit too much" and even felt that it came across as the cover of "erotica" fiction.

Such a fragmentation of the male or female body tones down the blowzy sexuality of bodice-ripper covers but replaces them with a fetishized anatomy—a discomfiting move, irrespective of the model's gender. This is possibly why Irwin admits that though the romance hero is still a desirable image (a fact that publishing has slowly acknowledged), Avon's contemporary covers—with their "modern," i.e., unpeopled look—are appreciated. She reports that the adoption of this style is welcome since readers "are just thrilled to be treated as if they are readers of intelligence and wit for a change." Her comment reveals her belief that the general populace perceives cover art without human figures as an indicator of the higher intellectual capacity of the readership. Moreover, her appreciation of these people-less covers stems from her complaint that category/series romance covers only show couples in romanticized moments though the novels in fact contain extremely controversial topics. While my previous chapters offer a glimpse into some of these contentious issues, Irwin mentions that series romances also touch on abortion, single parenthood, elderly care, etc., which their covers do not acknowledge. She claims that the serial covers instead evoke "late adolescent" fiction, with its presumably more light-hearted narrative, a move that perpetuates the idea that series romance is frivolous. Nevertheless, Irwin admits that several romances covers with the couple in a clinch are not misleading, noting that some novels have little else but sexual episodes loosely strung together. However, she also writes, though most romance

novels explore emotional involvement, few covers contain “a close-up of a human face showing a specific emotion.” She thus points out that the well-known face of the genre is a distortion of its full identity and suggests that the missing face of emotion plays a key role in the popular conflation of romance with farce or pornography.

Chapter Five: The Reading Public and Public Reading

From its emergence as a popular form in the eighteenth century, the novel was gendered as feminine, as linked to women, solitude, and secretive pleasure. Reading a novel was regarded as a private act, a withdrawal from public duties and a submersion of the (female) reader's consciousness into the world of fiction (Warner 140). Despite the gradual legitimation of the novel over the nineteenth century, the shadow of that dangerous solitary reading continues to hang over popular fiction, especially on one of its twentieth-century incarnations: romance fiction. This history, and popular romance fiction's focus on the marriage narrative and the female perspective, codes it as a female pleasure. The label keeps alive visions of it as a residue of that earlier furtive literary form that was regarded as more carnal than cerebral (or at the very least, devoid of intellectual merit). Through an examination of the public dimension of romance reading, made particularly visible by the growth of the Internet, this chapter demonstrates that the labeling of it as a private act (involving sensory experience alone) is flawed.

That romance novel reading is a completely internal and private act is a misconception that rests on the conflation of that reading with the genre's descriptions of private sexual behavior. In fact several developments over the last century have encouraged vocal and communal readership. The publishing house of Mills and Boon recognized the importance of establishing close contact with its readers quite early on in the company's life, albeit for sales purposes. Its customer database was created as a mailing list, through which readers were told of new releases (fiction and non-fiction) and encouraged to ask libraries to stock the company's novels. Readers were soon corresponding with authors via the publishing house and communicating their approval

or criticism of the novels they had read. In *Passion's Fortune: The Story of Mills and Boon* (2000), Joe McAleer cites several letters that Mills and Boon received from readers and distributors across the world commenting on the quality of its novels. The company continued its courting of readers, and the subsequent expansion of the database on them aided marketing. But it also increased readers' involvement with novels and their creators and made room for the voices of readers, ensuring that novel writing and reading were part of a continuum. After its takeover of Mills and Boon, Harlequin continued the practice and expanded the customer base even further and other publishers adopted the practice. Similarly Avon Romance also established its customer base through correspondence with readers and consolidated it throughout the eighties and nineties. The 1981 establishment of Kathryn Falk's *Romantic Times Magazine*, which functions as a journal unaffiliated with any romance-publishing house, provided an alternate platform for interaction between writers and readers. It began reviewing new novels and contributed to personalizing the authors and de-privatizing novel reading—giving both the writers and readers of romances visibility and voice.

The Internet expanded this arena of conversation into a dynamic venue. Harlequin, Avon, and *Romantic Times*, and many other organizations and individuals interested in romance found a new home in cyberspace in the nineties and have websites devoted to disseminating information about authors and romances but also to inviting reader interaction. Though critics like Q. D. Leavis have condemned the apparent supply-side novel writing that such a development encourages, it is in fact critical to establishing mass genre fiction as a truly popular form reflective of popular desire and anxiety.⁹² Buffeted by the new currents of modernism and globalization (new worlds, as Bakhtin

might call them) audiences of romances question contemporary reality and its transformation.⁹³ They undertake this analysis in a public reading practice that keeps the text alive after the initial reading is done. Through their letters and on-line posts, a tangled complexity of their attitudes towards the socio-economic and political zones they inhabit imprints and directs genre romance. Their arguments contesting, or vouching for, different works often show a compliance with predominant ideologies but may also serve as a demonstration of the tactical opposition to those trends. These competing realities are repeatedly hashed out in reader discussions of texts, if not in a purposefully critical manner, then in one that strongly suggests that the novels are absorbing these very incongruent narratives.

The locus of this cyberpresence is the on-line message boards (also called bulletin boards or BBs) on sites like *eHarlequin*, *Avon Authors*, *Romantic Times*, *All About Romance (AAR)*, and so forth. In the last few years, authors with a significant following have also added message boards on their sites, sometimes (though not always) with the aim of calling readers' attention to the author's writing process and latest work. Nora Roberts, arguably the most widely read romance writer today, has a large reader-focused site called *adwoff.com*, which consists of multiple bulletin boards that enable readers to discuss her work as well as that of other authors. Sherrilyn Kenyon's *Dark Hunter* site is similarly a draw for readers who follow the several sub-genres in which she writes. Eloisa James, who has recently risen to fame, also hosts a bulletin board on her extensive website. A variant of these boards can be found in other electronic platforms such as listservs and e-groups that update readers about an author's latest work or offer chapters that will not be published in the actual novels. Readers were, and continue to be, marketed to,

polled, and molded to some extent through these avenues. But the availability of these forums has created a reader community that is self-aware and participates in authoring/directing the development of the genre. Furthermore, it examines the attitudes of non-romance readers towards its reading while studying its own practices—a key shift, separating fandom and critical assessment. In this manner, these readers may be distinguished from the readers in Q.D. Leavis’s study of early twentieth-century best-sellers (*Fiction and the Reading Public*).⁹⁴

Though on-line message boards related to romance fiction are the central locus of a large reader community from across the world, they do not encompass it all. But since romances are translated into twenty or more languages, some portions of the conversation between readers (and authors) are of necessity beyond the purview of this chapter; it therefore limits itself to the section of this community that is primarily based in N. America, Europe, and Australia, and employs English as its primary language. While the added element of a non-Anglophone interaction may introduce some challenges to the analysis that I undertake here, it does not preclude the validity of the observations and inferences that emerge from this study. In an effort to widen the scope of the analysis, however, the last chapter includes a multi-cultural approach—albeit still Anglophone—by beginning a discussion on romance readership in India. The addition of this readership shows how earlier critiques of the genre have fallen short of grasping its tactical potential because they have neglected its readers and consequently denied its dialogic identity.

The Working of the On-Line Community

Readers on the boards that are hosted by authors or are known to be accessed by authors often write in to establish contact with a favorite writer. These posted messages tend to function as traditional fan mail and are often, if not always, complementary. The comments usually aim to identify the message writer to authors and be recognized as part of their following. Unlike traditional fan mail, however, the exchange is witnessed by anyone with access to the board. It usually results in one or more responses from the witnesses seconding the original posting and a thank-you from the author (though the last may vary). These posts can also invite recommendations about other works in the author's backlist or other authors whose style or sub-genre specialization resembles the work of the poster's favorite writer. These threads—interlinked responses resulting from one post—make up the daily working of this community. There is a spike in fan posts or “recommendation” posts when a new novel is released, but posts from readers who have stumbled on an old novel or a new author, or are new to that particular message board do appear throughout the month. The responses are similar and appear to be part of a reaffirmation of readers' allegiance to the genre or some particular aspect of it. Readers may also ask for news about an author's current project and request previews of it or the next novel to be released. Such posts are usually spearheads for a chorus of similar demands.

Authors initiate postings as part of a novel's pre-release publicity or an on-going marketing campaign as well. These posts remind readers of the upcoming novel and encourage them to enter into drawings or contests for free books or autographed copies of backlist titles. Authors also post links to “spoilers” that give away some of the plot, or to excerpts comprising of one or more chapters. Often, these spoilers are for novels that are

independent stories but also fall into a longer series, so readers are already acquainted with one or more of the characters. This knowledge heightens the communal excitement of waiting for their romance narratives (resembling the reception of nineteenth-century serialized novels). (This interest in the new work also testifies that readers see individual romance novels as distinctive, each unique in its way of relating the story of love fulfilled; contrary to the implication of the term “formula,” romance novels are not all the same.)

But readership forums involve more than fandom and marketing new novels. The message boards, even in their basic function as marketing tools meant to expand the customer base, demonstrate that labeling of the genre as “formulaic” is erroneous. The attraction for the novelty of the text exists in a tension with the pleasure of its “formula” and as the multilogs on the boards will show, texts are deconstructed and rebuilt in an unceasing dialectic of old expectations and new demands. Romance novels are thus proven to permit this morphing by making room for new narrative impulses in the overarching genre framework.

The frequent recurrence of discussions on the genre itself serves as the first indicator of romance fiction’s elastic nature and how it negates the affirmative tendency of profit-driven formulae. Usually initiated and sustained by readers (though authors may often participate), these cyber chats involve various facets of the genre, past and present, or discuss public perception of romance fiction and romance readers. In these recurrent multilogs, readers examine and interrogate the genre in terms of its form as well as its reception. Through their conversations with fellow readers and authors, participants of on-line boards are part of a continuous process of evaluating the texts in their conflicted

identity as commodities and literature. Even if many threads conclude with an approving consensus over the genre, the fact that the topics are resurrected every few weeks demonstrates the unfinished nature of the conversation and highlights a desire to understand the genre.

On-line conversations often stretch across various loci as readers read and post messages on similar topics on different boards. This chapter follows some of these multilogs as they unfold, relying on the voices of the reader-posters to document their ideas and experiences. The multiplicity of experiences and opinions that this community displays challenges the notion that romance readers share one habitus (as Bridget Fowler's study implies) or have a psychological lack (as Radway claims).⁹⁵ Neither does the genre speak solely to mythical structures (as Pamela Regis suggests) nor is it a pure commodity that soothes anxieties and preserves the status quo (as mass culture theory claims of popular forms). Instead, the readers' conversations distill what Gramsci calls the "various masses of feeling" that may exist simultaneously at any point in time (348). The conversations throw light on the constant struggle between these "masses of feelings" and demonstrate that the romance novel, even constrained by its commodity status, fulfils its role as the true expression of contemporary reality.

The Making of the Genre: Literary Commodity

Readers and authors debate the divided identity of romance novels (as consumer product or literature) with intriguing regularity. The idea is pursued in an *All About Romance* board debate on the possible decline in the quality of historical romance novels over the last few years; this discussion resulted in an extended exchange on the *Avon*

Authors' board in 2005. With readers actively engaging fellow posters in the debate instead of just responding to the initial post, this conversation is an ideal example of a multilog. Kylie M., who states that she herself is happy with the quality of historical romances, asks if readers on this board believe that current historical romances are not as good as their predecessors (“Quality of Romances”). Even as two readers (known only as Rose and Dick) summarize and explicate the *AAR* board’s critical assessment of currently published historicals, Kylie’s opener generates several arguments that express partial agreement with the *AAR* critique. Rose first notes that *AAR* posters resent the token adoption of a nineteenth-century setting in several novels, and a lack of the research that had once informed all texts in the genre and enriched the plot. Dick clarifies the *AAR* conversation further and enumerates the two kinds of critiques it leveled at historical romances—they have too many editing errors and are allowing “fluffy” plots to abound. He also speculates on whether the alleged decline is a result of readers’ impatience and their constant clamor for new novels. In the thread (and even in these recaps by Rose and Dick) there is a clear awareness of the press of commodification at the cost of the literary integrity of the texts that might be brought on by the actions of the readers themselves.

Posters respond to these criticisms with some objectivity, attempting to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the historical romance sub-genre. For instance, though Shay is happy with the quality of recent Regency romances, she admits that the sub-genre could benefit from more diversity (in terms of the time periods). But she also ventures that the lack of diversity in the historical romance sub-genre is less an indication of its weaknesses and more a symptom of a current cultural preference for the familiar.⁹⁶ In other words, her post implies that the dominance of one kind of historical romance (the

Regency) reflects the present-day societal inclination toward uniformity. Shay's post thus tries to articulate that the genre is implicated in commodity culture at large. She does not excuse the genre's weaknesses here but does attribute some of the trends in it to a more systemic tendency.

Best-selling author Teresa Medeiros also agrees with the charge that the historical romance genre has drifted toward homogeneity and needs to change. Others like Rose T. find the *AAR* critique inadequate and argue that the genre is growing more diverse, with more believable characters and, more importantly, greater humor. (The last is mentioned in Shay's post as well and suggests that the genre is getting more "novelized" in the sense of learning to be parodic.) Rose T.'s post also posits a different definition of "diversity," treating it as multiple approaches to one "time-space" or chronotope (e.g. Regency-set romance) and its component features, rather than the *AAR* notion of it as the availability of multiple time-space settings for the plots. (The themes explored in the preceding chapters speak to why certain chronotopes appear or persist.) Charina finds the *AAR* critique faulty because she claims that it is based on readers' desire for politically correct historical romances; she criticizes this requirement, arguing that it imposes current values on historical fiction (in which the characters may not conform to contemporary mores) and damages its authenticity. Her defense poses a resistance to the insistence of readers who want contemporary reality to permeate romances set in the past. In this post we can therefore observe a direct clash of ideologies regarding what makes a good romance—one that preserves a past of relative conservatism or one that chooses to contest it through the perspective of the present. It is also a reminder of Bakhtin's observation that the novel never lets the past be closed away (as the epic does); for Charina to protest the intrusion

of the present on the period romance proves that romance novels do, or can, have that tendency.

The most striking feature of the whole thread, however, is the treatment of the romance novel as a product. This awareness reveals itself in the interplay of author and reader voices, which represent two key territories respectively: creative production and receptive production (as well as the constraints on both). Each arena, as its representatives argue, is circumscribed by the other because of a third key player—the publishing house and its interest in profit maximization. This interplay between the actions of author, reader, and publisher is revealed in the arm of the thread that writer Shana Galen initiates in direct response to Kylie M.’s initial post. In it, Galen avers that if the historical romance sub-genre does indeed seem to confine itself to the Regency era (i.e., to one successful formula), it is because readers’ purchasing patterns determine what will see the light of print. As she puts it, “You vote with your purchasing dollars for what you like. Money speaks to publishers, and they wouldn’t keep putting out Regency-set stories if they didn’t sell. Really, readers have a lot more say than you realize.” Galen, the author, clearly holds readers and publishers largely responsible for the straight jacketing of creative production. Her contention is that readers confine their expenditure to romances that are set in one time period; as a result, publishers pressure writers to limit themselves to what readers seem to want to buy. The claim brings to mind Adorno and Horkheimer’s warning that the culture industry makes up standards that it then claims “were based in the first place on consumer’s needs.... The result is the circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows even stronger” (121). Rose senses this manipulation and refuses to accept that receptive production

precedes, and determines, creative production. She contests Galen's argument that reader-demand determines publishing trends, employing an elaborate metaphor to explain the reasons behind readers' purchasing habits:

Say you like jelly doughnuts, but all the stores only sell lemon jelly doughnuts. You like lemon jelly doughnuts, but they aren't your absolute favorite. But because you like them you continue to buy them because you only like eating jelly doughnuts.

If one likes historical romances to the exclusivity [of] any other sub-genre of the romance genre, and all that's being published are Regency Historicals, of course that reader is going to buy what's out there because they only read historical romances, therefore giving the illusion that readers only want to read Regency Historicals.

I for one still enjoy my favorite Regency Historical authors, but I find myself browsing my UBS [Used Book Store] more often than not to find historical romances set in other settings and eras, not to mention branching out into other genres (historical fiction, chick-lit, fantasy.) And as the months go by, I find my list of anticipated historical romances growing smaller as a result of not seeing a variety of reading selections. ("Not Really")

Rose's rebuttal equating romance novels with doughnuts and historical romances with one kind of doughnut inscribes the genre as a product that is consumed, but it also reverses the theory of market-driven creative production that Galen submits. Rose suggests that readers, even in a genre market, have a variety of interests and require or

look for texts that relate different narratives within the larger romance arc. Publishers limit their choices, however, and then defend the strategy by pointing to sales; in other words, they use genre similarity to create sales for particular kinds of romances. Rose's claim, therefore, is that big business publishing is forcing out readers' catholic interests. A reader identified as SJ agrees with Rose's metaphor but also concedes the dialectical nature of romance publishing and some reader culpability in some of the clichéd structures of romance novels, adding,

It seems like the only time settings that we (or should I say, *the authors & publishers*) find romantic are mainly the Regency/Highlander historical novels. I can't believe that those were the only romantic times in history! But, if it sells, then it sells. In order to get something different, I believe that we, *the readers*, will have to give new authors w/new ideas a chance. And, I guess, it has to be in demand!" [emphasis mine] ("Not Really")

While SJ's post acknowledges the force of the market, her use of the first person plural is curious. The first time she uses "we" she clearly separates readers from the process of creative production and places responsibility for its content on writers and publishers. It would seem that even in the process of drafting the post she finds it necessary to distinguish receptive production from the initial stages of the narrative process, only turning to readers' roles a bit later; the linguistic move reflects her argument that romance publishing begins with creative production and the collaboration of writers and publishers and only permits readers to impact the cycle later. She does, however, exhort readers to take greater risks during the stage of receptive production and add momentum to the next

round of creative production, an admission of the conservative reading practice that feeds on familiar plots and characters.

The responses of both Rose and SJ prompt Galen to reassert the validity of her initial emphasis on reader activity and how it limits authorial freedom. She even relates an instance from her own career to provide evidence of this fact:

A few people want to read books set in China or France, but the majority of readers still want to read books set in England in the 1800s. The book I'm revising now had part of the setting in France, and my editor "suggested" I change that. Why? Readers don't like France. Not all readers, but the majority. I'm talking about those people who just pick up a book while browsing and give it a try and never post on this board or AAR. These readers who've never heard of RT [*Romantic Times*] or AAR or would even think of emailing their favorite author.

I can totally appreciate you wanting to read something different. I do, too, and I'd like to write something different, but I can write all the different stuff I want and if it doesn't sell, then no one ever sees it. ("Not Really")

Galen thus distinguishes between readers who are vocal about wanting variety and the ones she says are the silent majority, whose purchase dollars play a large role in deciding the primary identity of the genre at a moment in time. Her post, which admits that romance novels are part of the culture industry, elicits similar responses from two more authors. Sara Bennett writes, "I've had the same experience myself. The publishers are fully aware of what will sell and what won't and they don't like taking risks. I've heard

lots of complaints about Regencies being the only Historicals out there but they are still hitting the Number 1 spots on the bestseller lists!” (“Not Really”) Kimberly Logan adds,

I have to agree with Shana [Galen] on this one. Unfortunately, the few historicals with different locations and time periods that are making it through the cracks are not selling well enough for the publishers to take note. I’m afraid that until enough people start putting their money down on the authors who are trying something different, nothing is going to change.” (“Not Really”)

As earlier chapters show, the competing desires readers express for the familiar text and the anomalous or contradictory one reveal a classic operation of novelistic heteroglossia (brought on by the new shocks of global social change) in the genre. They demonstrate that what lies behind the draw of particular sub-genres is a drama of the rebellious tendency competing with the comforting, affirmative one.

The authors’ contribution to this debate places the impetus for the cycle of romance publishing on receptive production and its translation into market value. Under the circumstances, the temptation to label their creative production as alienation of labor is nearly unavoidable. But none of the authors express a dislike of the sub-genre they often write in, only a challenge to the accusation that they are unimaginative slackers. This does, however, raise the question of authorial integrity, of the claim to being writers of literature. Reader Elle’s warning to Galen against ever revealing the extent to which publishers control their writing choices illustrates the point: “...Shana, **never** say that you switched **anything** about your story at an editor’s suggestion on the AAR board. You will be savaged by the mob for choosing “commercial success” over your “artistic

vision” (believe it or not!)” (“Quality of Romances”). Elle’s caution against revealing the subordination of both authorial and reader production to industrial profit projections comes at an odd moment, preceded as it has been by a long discussion on precisely this power of the publisher. The post’s portrayal of reader demand and criticism reveals the position of the genre in the gray area between mass product and creative output. The multilog speaks to romance fiction’s struggle to be original while narrowing the permutations of narrative possibility to one that pleases a diverse group. In this manner, unlike the (mythical) pure form of disinterested pre-industrial creative writing but also unlike a true assembly-line product, the genre of romance fiction exists between the voices of author, publisher, and reader. Far from being weakened by their demands, it thrives on, and is shaped by, this very contentiousness. The bulletin boards are making visible this contentiousness as it feeds into the novels’ heteroglossia and resists the possibility of it receding into rigidity away from the influences of changing reality.

In fact, another *AAR* message board discussion on the term “literature” and whether the romance genre falls in that category shows the on-going preoccupation with assessing the quality of romance novels. Fair begins the exchange by titling her message, “Can romances be literature?” and proceeds to answer the question herself. Her post makes it evident that she believes that only those works that strictly employ verisimilitude, especially harsh reality, are called “literature.” She then argues that even if the conclusions of romances are always happy, they do not shy away from depicting grim reality nor are their plots (about finding love) outside the realm of possibility; she therefore claims that romance fiction qualifies as “literature.”⁹⁷ Marianne responds by instead asserting the place of all genre fiction as literature. She dismisses critical

disapproval of genre fiction and reminds Fair that classics like *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice* were not critical successes initially either. From here on, the discussion takes a turn into the arena of the critical perception of romance fiction, showing the romance community's sensitivity to external judgment and censure, a preoccupation that is the hallmark of the genre as a marginal literary form. In this sense, romance fiction certainly exists as an oppositional form, aware of its status as the annoying Other to different groups at different times.⁹⁸ Laura V. and Robin, however, add that readers might be mistaken in believing that academia is the group that is most dismissive of romance novels. Robin, in fact, recalls that the friend who introduced her to the genre during her years at grad school is now an academic. She contends that, "it's the ones who have the least intellectual (aka college professor) inclination who are the biggest snobs when it comes to Romance. In fact, their attitude toward my reading Romance is one born of tolerance rather than true understanding, I think" ("Can Romances"). Robin's remark introduces a slightly different take on what has traditionally been seen as the source of the censoring critical gaze. In a reminder of Pierre Bourdieu's categories of those who are seen as certified arbiters of taste and those who are not, she makes a distinction between real and pseudo-critics and suggests ignoring the latter.⁹⁹

Dick contributes several remarks in response to Fair, beginning with distinguishing between "literature" and "Literature." He argues that Literature questions and adds ambiguity and that romance fiction, by its very attachment to re-telling one fantasy, is divorced from ambiguity. For this reason, he suggests that the fascination that romance novels exercise, as well as the way to critique them, is (or should be) entirely different from that associated with Literature. While Literature incites debate about

fundamental issues, he explains, the romance genre closes it off: “Great literature, [in my opinion], creates an itch in the mind that no amount of scratching will appease. Not so with romance fiction; the H[appy] E[ver] A[fter] ending anesthetizes whatever itch the relationship aroused” (“Even Within the Canon”). His post seeks to separate the genre from literary fiction on the basis of to the disparate effects the two have, treating the former as Roland Barthes’s closed or “readerly” form and the latter as the open or “writerly” one; in other words, he classifies them as middle-brow and high-brow art respectively.¹⁰⁰ (The academic training that Dick (a former professor) possesses is evident in this distinction, echoing as it does the analysis done by scholars like Q.D. Leavis.) Katherine is skeptical of this notion that the “anaesthetizing” effect is a corollary of all romance novels, questioning the equating of happy endings with a deadening of critical faculties. Her post refutes the idea that the genre’s closed structure limits its ability to generate discussion. She insists that genre fiction is denied the stamp of “literature” due to a widespread prejudice against genre writing and the financial obligations faced by genre writers, which critics see as affecting the quality of their work.

While Katherine’s post challenges Dick’s categories, there are readers who prefer the closed text and do not entertain the notion of analyzing romance fiction.¹⁰¹ Dick expresses concern over such readers’ repeated resorting to terms like “escapism” when there is an effort made to critique the genre. He cautions against a stance that regards all attempts to understand the romance reading process as elitism or attack, noting that this attitude actually betrays the supposed defenders’ contempt for the genre. He tries to unpack the true content of arguments that rate entertainment above every other

consideration and thus reduce romance novels to the very limited genre that non-readers think it to be:

To me, the statement “it’s just a romance” whenever readers begin to discuss and “deconstruct” their reading causes me to believe that as much as readers and writers of the romance genre clamor for respect from the non-romance world, they lack respect for their reading themselves. Lots [of] stats concerning the general education of the romance genre’s readers and writers are tossed around, and yet when a discussion with a more academic bent is begun, the discussion is soon dampened by a faction of readers, as though discussing a romance in terms one may be forced to look up in the dictionary or encyclopedia is unwelcome, arrogant and presumptuous.... For readers (and writers at times) to remain content with the status quo, to stubbornly hold their stance that they read romance for the (IMO ambiguous) terms of “fantasy” and “escapism”, as well as expressing outright mulishness at the thought of “real life” or “history” intruding upon their entertainment gives pause to the true issues lying beneath the phrase “it’s just a romance”. It causes me to continue to wonder why the general view claiming to crave respect for the romance genre exists when it appears that a number of readers seem to personally, perhaps subconsciously, hold it in contempt. (“Even Within the Canon”)

Dick’s post is significant in that it does point to a section of romance readers who shy away from examining their reading too deeply, preferring to use the terms he cites to defend their choice of fiction and the goal of reading it. Here, one is reminded of Herbert

Marcuse's caution against allowing the negating potential of art to be overcome by the reassurance offered by affirmative culture. But as this chapter will show, there are many readers who don't fall into that category, who are trying to explicate the genre and their reading practices to themselves and to others.

Bulletin boards show a range of discussions about romance fiction that fall in between the extremes of the rejection of critical analysis and the acuteness of academic cross-examination. Typically, the former applies to the spectrum of the readership that cannot summon critical energy at the end of the workday, while the latter is representative of a group divorced from what Bourdieu calls necessity (55). To some extent, then, romance readership divides along the lines of livelihood. The contrast between Dick's emphasis on analysis and the nurse who only wants to "escape" indicates a romance readership made up of very disparate classes, which facilitate the different readings. Readers who belong to a class that is very close to necessity ask for escapism by immersing themselves so deeply in the narratives that the fantasy solutions it offers symbolically (and briefly) keep necessity at bay; this is the stereotype of the romance reader as undiscerning consumer. But there is also a group that advocates discernment and is able to do so because it is distanced from necessity. Also, in a demonstration of Bourdieu's observation that the economically secure class avoids the possibility of necessity infringing on it by reifying cultural objects, this section of readers participates in textual analysis, treating the romance novel as literary art (55). In other words, the multilog proves that romance readership has a critical bent, though not across the board—the genre permits the clash of both bourgeois and non-bourgeois demands.

Happily Ever After...

The most fundamental element of the genre, which readers discuss often, and which reflects the genre's relation to a different sort of necessity, is the "happily-ever-after" (HEA) ending. Readers identify it as the definitive marker of a romance novel and often critique novels that purport to be romances but cannot manage a recognizable HEA or an adequate one. Discussions around this topic range from the unsatisfactory briefness of some HEA episodes to the relative degree of suspension of disbelief that this ending might demand. As observed earlier, the genre's attachment to the happy conclusion has contributed to its dismissal as an immature form of fiction. The HEA is deemed to be feeding into the unrealistic fantasies of its readership. But a closer look at what the readers betray in their opinions on this element of the genre reveals that the HEA represents what Freud identifies as the life instinct in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Herbert Marcuse has suggested that this life instinct or Eros exists in art as the desire for continuation and has usually been linked to the affirmative tendency (16). But in a slight diversion from the Marxist critical trend of dismissing all art with an affirmative tendency because it allegedly clings to established reality, Marcuse argues that the presence of the life instinct does not mean affirmation. It is the catharsis, and whether it thus keeps alive the indictment of existent structures, Marcuse claims, that makes authentic art; the challenge faced by Eros from Thanatos is the preoccupation of all art and is a universal struggle that should not be expected to dissolve into class struggle alone (24). Authentic art can express its longing for continuity without losing its awareness of the problems—the negation—that may have found expression during the course of the narrative.

A bulletin board discussion on HEA demonstrates his argument, revealing that the romance novel's end is not a convenient erosion of the discomfiting facts—such as unstable families and gender struggle—hinted in the primary narrative. On an *Avon Authors* bulletin board discussion titled “Books You Know Would End Quite Sadly...?” readers expressed their attitude to HEA with reference to one novel in particular, Stephanie Laurens's *The Promise in a Kiss* (2001). The novel is part of Laurens's popular Cynster series, which relates the lives and loves of the members of an aristocratic family in Regency-era England. In this novel Laurens took the somewhat unusual step of going up the family tree instead of down to the next generation, and described the courtship and marriage of the parents of the heroes of two previous novels. But by the time readers were given this prequel romance of Sebastian, Duke of St. Ives, and Helena, they knew that the younger of their two sons was in fact born of a brief affair between the married duke and another woman. As a result of this knowledge of Sebastian's infidelity, the novel of his romance with Helena felt somewhat compromised from the start to many readers. Moreover, readers also experienced a sense of sadness while reading *Promise* since in the previously published Cynster novels Sebastian is already dead and Helena is a widow.¹⁰² As reader Joanne said,

[S]omewhat, no matter that my mind KNEW that it was well written and the characterisation seemed good, I just couldn't quite get into it... i realised that part of the reason why i couldn't really fall in love with the characters in the story was because i knew what happened after[:] that Sebastian dies, perhaps not young, but too young for one's concept of

“happily ever after”, and that he has a child [Richard “Scandal” Cynster] with another woman besides Helena. (somehow that seems sad to me.)

Reader Alexielle shares this feeling, relating her experience of first coming across *Promise* and enjoying the reading and then having that pleasure leached away by learning of the post-marriage incident:

I did read *The Promise In A Kiss*, but it was my first Stephanie Laurens book....I absolutely loved it, but when I went to her website to find out more information on the Cynster series, and found out what happened to them, I was totally shocked. Scandal didn't help either, especially since I wasn't sure exactly what had happened. I haven't been able to bring myself to read it again... which is a pity, it is a wonderful story.

Many readers on the *Avon* board appear to share this aversion and their comments shed light on what prompts the desire for this element of the genre. In the farcical words of Audrey, what is desirable is “Not just HEA, but long term HEA with both partners dying simultaneously in their sleep and I refuse to think anything else (hands over ears, lalalalalala).” But Audrey makes it clear that this aversion does not mean she and others have a deluded view of reality. She claims that the HEA is not just an empty gesture to her:

The story doesn't just end for me when they mutually admit they love each other, I have to feel their conflict must be able to be resolved on a long term basis.... I know there's going to be some sadness down the road - I've been married for thirty years - but I do picture the couple as at least growing old together.

There are other clues that prove that the desire for HEA is not escapism, despite the half-defiant claim of reader georgia_peach, who says “I read to escape”; the true draw of the HEA lies in the concluding sentence of her post: “I don't want to read about the reality of death.” Similarly, reader Rose B effectively summarizes the affirmation of life that HEAs embody by referring to Johanna Lindsey’s *The Present*, a prequel like Laurens’s *Promise*: “I did read [*The Present*] by Johanna Lindsey about the beginning of the Malory family but that one didn't bother me because as far as I know [the hero and heroine] lived long and healthy lives.”¹⁰³

The responses of all readers in this discussion (even the ones that only posted refusals to read novels without HEAs) reveal the real function of the genre’s attachment to the much disparaged “unrealistic” HEA: combating the fear of death and any challenge to marriage (the most prevalent social structure of human propagation, i.e., of immortality). In other words, these discussions are revealing the HEA to be an enactment of the life versus death instinct. As Freud explains, the former drives us toward pleasure and procreation, while the latter opposes or counters it; romance novels may be regarded as part of a cultural form that participates in the first (*The Pleasure Principle* (1920)). In this sense, the knowledge of Sebastian Cynster’s infidelity and death shows itself to be a definite threat to the HEA claimed in *Promise*—along with being a departure from the so-called formula—because it represents the withdrawal of Eros or the “life instinct.” For Sebastian to veer from his wife, who is unable to bear any more children (indeed for any hero to do so in fact or by implication) is thus unacceptable to the romance; the proscription exists not because the genre is simplistic and reductive but because HEA’s purpose is to reassure the reader of the lasting triumph of Eros over Thanatos.

While on the surface the HEA may thus appear to be a childish preference or an inorganic element imposed by mass market publishing, reader commentary reveals that this genre convention serves to diffuse a deep-rooted fear. Short HEAs (as in some Harlequin Mills and Boon novels) or ones that are diminished by later events are disturbing because they damage the genre's purpose of achieving a symbolic organic unity or wholeness. The purpose may have risen in response to the advent of modernity in the early twentieth century (with its increasing sense of the failure of the human in the face of the mechanized); in other words, the HEA became a fixture in response to the realization of the weakening of the life instinct. In the previous chapters, I have explored some of these forces of modernity and globalization that have extended across the century and led to the necessity of the HEA beyond World War II and into the new millennium. If the continual reader desire for the palliative HEA is read as a sign of the working of ideology that dulls the revolutionary instincts of the masses, the fact that some novels incite this discussion thread shows that the genre does escape from such a propagandist role. Not only in instances where the HEA is perilous but in its thematic interests, romance fiction holds the potential to voice the negations of advanced capitalism's reality.

1. Sex

The depiction of sexuality in romance novels has often led to the vilification of the genre and is another topic that is of particular interest to both readers and authors. In a long, dynamic multilog on the *All About Romance* board in 1997, readers both critiqued and defended the developments in the depiction of sexual desire in romances. The

discussion arose in response to a blog entry in which Laurie Gold, the publisher and editor of the site, had touched upon the varying degrees of sexual explicitness in romance novels and speculated on readers' preferences for more or fewer sex scenes. She also asked for reactions to descriptions of rough sexual encounters and opinions on monogamy in the romance—or lack thereof. Readers divulged their opinions on romance sexuality on the board over several days and their posts reveal a strong note of self-analysis. The flood of responses this blog entry elicited was eventually divided into a six-part multilog titled “Readers Rant About Sexuality.”

For the most part, readers who responded are not opposed to the trend of sexual explicitness that has accompanied the development of the genre. With a few notable exceptions, however, sexual desire is considered acceptable only in its role as one subordinate component of the romance narrative. A related refrain in the posts is that sexually explicit scenes—sometimes also labeled “graphic,” implying that they discuss the characters' anatomies and sexual interaction in great detail—make for acceptable, even enjoyable, reading only if the novel as a whole is well written. These remarks show a bent toward organic narrative and coherence, seen also in readers' frequent requirement of a “well-developed plot.” In other words, most of the *AAR* respondents consider sexual desire an integral element of a romance novel as long as it contains the primary components of good prose narrative—an elegant style, a substantial plot, and well-developed characters. This model shows the persistence of the realist novel template and the bourgeois narrative fusing sex and marriage. Like the HEA, sexuality that is an organic part of a marriage romance is critical for the genre's affirmation of the life instinct. Therefore a majority of readers require or appear to favor relationships that

protect the narrative of wholeness through an admission of romantic sexual behavior tied to monogamy.

Readers repeatedly do object to certain kinds of language use in passages that involve sex, especially language that employs geographic metaphors for body parts or for sex itself. Some insist that sex be described in non-euphemistic terms, arguing that figurative descriptions invite ridicule. Others do not mind characters having rough sexual interactions as long as they do not employ derogatory language toward each other; these readers make distinctions such as “raunchy” versus “sensual” depictions of sex scenes (the former being more denotative). Though a few readers seem to prefer language that is suggestive of sexual intimacy rather than transparent and upfront (finding implication more romantic) most of them speak in favor of earthy sexuality instead of an antiseptic or flowery version.

Readers in this discussion reserve their strongest criticism for the sexual encounters in author Bertrice Small’s works, novels that many consider as failing to have even the semblance of a plot. Reader Penny Oliverio, for instance, says that “Bertrice Small and Thea Devine books are like porno flicks, lots of kinky sex strung together with a thin plot and bad acting/dialogue.” In the discussion on writers like these, readers voice a sharp dislike of novels that are counter to their expectations of the basic conception of a romance (to wit, the gradual development of a man and woman’s mutual emotional attachment, and the inclusion of a wedding or the promise of it). Readers here consign Small and her ilk to the heap of authors who substitute descriptions of sex between virtual strangers for that romance narrative with only a token effort to ascribe any of the characters’ actions to emotions.

Readers insist that in the absence of an emotional relationship between the hero and heroine (voiced, or revealed by textual gestures) a vivid portrayal of their sex life is uninteresting, even pornographic. Penny Oliverio thinks of these sexual episodes (in which readers usually identify with the heroine) as nothing more than a reversal of the gaze, with the man being cast as the sex object, and recognizes the persistence of the binary as a continuation of the old problem of pornography and degradation. Readers repeatedly identify emotional attachment as a requisite for a good romance—and for making a graphic sex scene acceptable. The same logic often comes up in discussions on rough sex. Cindy Rudd, expanding on the idea of graphic sexuality (often initiated by the hero), even argues that a more sexually dominant hero is acceptable when it is clear that the heroine, though sexually submissive, has the emotional upper-hand. If readers find aggressive sexual intercourse permissible as long as there are strong emotional ties between hero and heroine, many readers also claim that they only find graphic sexual intimacy *believable* if the author has already established a strong chemistry between the protagonists.

It is worth looking closely at the many other qualifications that are added on to the statement that rough sexual behavior is permissible in the novels because these qualifications reveal the distinction readers make between fantasy and reality. While all readers acknowledge that rough sex has the potential for abuse, they argue that it is erroneous logic to equate fictional sexual activity with that in actual life, as well as the power dynamic inside the bedroom to one across all behavior between the sexes. They are fighting an old stereotype of novel readers, typically women, as people who are highly susceptible to the seductions of novel narratives and easily identify with and

imitate the characters they read about (see Warner, Taylor). The readers of this discussion are so familiar with the notion because it has become a commonplace, perhaps having gathered new currency under Marxist critiques of mass culture and feminist critiques of patriarchy. In any case, the idea is hotly contested. The discussion is entirely a dialectic, with some readers expressing their preference for a physically volatile sex scene even as they tacitly acknowledge that such episodes could be (and have been in the past) a site for staging a violent, misogynistic drama of female subjugation.

Some readers, however, are unwilling to accept that fantasy and reality are discrete. One reader who is a rape victim voices her aversion to any scene involving forcible sex and she is representative of others who are unable to accept it even in fantasy. Blythe Barnhill finds these sex scenes especially unpalatable if the hero and heroine are cast in master-servant roles (possibly prompted by a distaste of the historical existence of such a dynamic, or even the contemporary reality of unequal economic power between the sexes). Such a reader looks for novels that do not undertake the uncomfortable conflation of sex and power.

The two kinds of readers present a paradox—the ones that favor graphic sexuality stand to risk the charge that they have internalized violence while the latter may be accused of an unwillingness to face reality. The ideal ground then, may lie in between the stances, a reminder once again of the affirmative and negating tendencies of this genre. Some readers do admit that they prefer that grey area. Heavenlea, for example, expresses a more complicated attraction to the staging of a power differential in the sexual arena when she reveals her preference for sex scenes in which the hero represents a threat that is not actualized at any point during intercourse. Conversely, Melissa writes that she does

not enjoy even the fantasy of male domination; nevertheless, she does appreciate that not all readers would feel offended or threatened by it, that the fantasy of sex with a forceful partner can be desirable precisely because it is a fantasy. Meanwhile, Wylinda Ashley distinguishes between acceptable “graphic” sex and repulsive “sadistic” sex, with the latter implying demeaning sexual power play involving crude language. Readers also find sex scenes with a forceful hero acceptable as long as there is evidence of some tenderness after the act, if the hero shows regret for his demands, if the heroine is a novice in sexual matters, or if the couple gets “carried away.” (Grace) These remarks indicate an awareness of the distinction between sexual fantasy and reality, even as they appear somewhat conscious of the potential of the former to open the door to similar ideas in real life situations. The hedging represents readers’ awareness of sexual possibilities in a world where feminism denaturalized the abuse of women, but the media re-appropriated it as entertainment, resulting in the current moment when different ideologies try to claim female sexuality and sexual desire for their own agendas.

Contrary to this trend, with its multiple qualifications and apologia for the emphasis placed on sexuality by the new sub-genre of erotic romance, a few readers are defiant about liking the detailed sex scenes in novels in the past—especially seventies’ historical romances with an alpha-male hero—and now. Reader Tonyia Gray asserts her preference for the phallic hero who is a sexual aggressor, and is critical of a muted version of him, characterizing it as a concession to an excessive paranoia about the potential for sexual abuse. Her remarks are essentialist in nature, drawing on conventional notions of a dominant masculinity and a physically weaker, but intellectually and sexually powerful femininity that can control the former. But Tonyia’s

preference for the erotic charge of a sexual interaction that presupposes different strengths for men and women is not a condonance of the abuse of the heroine. In this sense, her assertive post has an underlying similarity to the posts of readers who qualified their approval of rough sex by claiming that they would retaliate if their male partners behaved like abusive heroes.¹⁰⁴ Though different in their overt stances, both kinds of posts demonstrate how clearly readers distinguish between fiction and reality and the extent to which they are willing to allow fantasy to encroach on their own lives. These multilog on sex in romances can be useful to approach the study of the multiple narratives that exist in the area of “realist” fantasy. Whether the realist impulse represents a conservative ideology while the fantasy holds a competing one or vice-versa, it is clear that sexual desire may seem like a mechanically included element of the romance formula but it actually speaks to a wider social concern about acceptable gender interaction.

Thus, while parts of the multilog on sex confirm the conservative bent of preserving the genre’s affinity for monogamy, heterosexual marriage, traditional sexual politics and sexual activity, it also contains evidence of the dissenting voices and the antithetical trend. While readers require fidelity within a romance, they are less stringent about equating romantic fidelity with marriage. This is quite a dramatic change from the mid-century romances, which located all good desire and affection within that social structure. Romances of authors like Robin Schone or Susan Johnson are shifting these parameters so that narratives that would have once qualified as pornography because they addressed desire outside the legal bond are also being accepted into, and radically reshaping, the traditional mass-market romance novel.

2. Realism

The extrospection on romantic sexual fantasy brings us to another related recurrent idea on romance boards: realism. As seen above, readers accept certain kinds of sexuality in romances if they appear “realistic.” Readers frequently employ this term in other contexts as well, but often with a varying definition. For instance, Tonyia argues that historical romances that portray a relationship in which the man is the ostensible dominant and the woman is the clever submissive who can manage him should not be condemned as regressive because they portray a historical reality of gender inequality. This “realism” is not to be confused with Ian Watt’s notion of realism in *The Rise of the Novel* as the documentation of individual experience, coming closer instead to Georg Lukàcs’s understanding of realism as the literary mode that can effectively convey objective relations under capitalism through the subjective experience (*Realism in the Balance*). Tonyia claims that the gender dynamic in such romances, which has been condemned as sexist ideology by critics, is an accurate depiction of pre-twentieth century society and must not be judged by contemporary feminist paradigms. She offers realism as an adequate explanation for the plots of the seventies’ historical romances, implying that episodes in which heroes often sexually overpower the heroine reflect a society that has gender inequality. Other likeminded readers decry the trend of “modernicals”—romances that transpose a feminist mindset on a historical period and create “G.I. Jane” heroines—calling it a violation of realism for the sake of political correctness.¹⁰⁵

Several other discussions, often on historical romances, contain this deployment of the notion of social realism as well. Readers who accept the portrayal of rough sex initiated by a man on condition that he exhibits tenderness or expresses remorse are less

critical of the inclusion of the act in the novel because they believe such episodes to be “realistic,” i.e., historically accurate. Their argument is that all men dominated women to a large degree before the feminist movement, and historical romances with sexually dominant heroes are only depicting historical truth, not encouraging this dynamic at the present moment. The notion could be viewed as the internalization of women’s objectification and subjugation but it also suggests a disinclination to follow the Enlightenment notion that literature is a learning tool—something readers internalize. Realistic fiction, these remarks say, owes allegiance to truth before it does to an educational improvement project. The equation supports my argument that romance fiction is a key literary form that refracts the social reality of its narrative moment (as well as that of the characters if the novel is set in a different historical moment).

This reliance on realism as a natural and proper mode for romance fiction is visible in a number of similar discussions on the historical romance. For instance, in one thread on the *Avon Authors* board, readers voiced their feelings about the inclusion of a female rival in romances, specifically a mistress, a social reality in certain classes (“Mistress”). All readers deploy the notion of realism as an appropriate narrative mode for historical romance novels, irrespective of whether they are for and against the idea of the mistress figure. They are more interested in debating their personal preferences for a novel’s inclusion of this particular “realistic” practice of men keeping mistresses. While some show a complete dislike of the “kept woman” character—in the above *AAR* discussion on HEA, readers note that infidelity is one of the biggest obstacles to enjoying a romance—others argue that her presence is a necessary nod to realism. They feel that the hero who is most typical of historical romances (moneyed, aristocratic, handsome)

would likely have had a mistress. These readers have an interest in preserving this “realistic” trait and argue that it does not mean a tacit approval of male promiscuity in our time.¹⁰⁶

Realism as a desirable mode shows even in readers’ insistence on straightforward rather than purple prose. Viewing florid prose as unrealistic, and as one cause of the disrespect meted out to the romance genre, readers are increasingly favoring a style that they identify as more true to life—a “realist” prose devoid of metaphors. *AAR* respondents are often dismayed by attempts to mystify and obscure the descriptions of sexual intercourse and their arguments rest on the untrained but astute awareness of the mythological nature of some romance prose. As Randa Simpson explains, “The more graphic [denotative] language is appropriate in an explicit love scene. (Somehow I can’t envision a man who would refer to his “manroot” or other such nonsense.) I certainly do not think of my breasts as “snowy mounds” or “rosy peaks”. I would prefer less purple prose and more straightforward references.” In a similar vein, Grace asserts that, “I do hate the scenes where indeed sex [is] the waves crashing on the beach and the thunder shaking the ground” (“Readers Rant”). “Snowy mounds” or “waves” are terms that come loaded with the meaning of an immature or farcical sexuality. The desire for realism in language rests on the readers’ understanding that purple prose depictions of sexual encounters foster an unnecessarily obscurantist style; the style perpetuates an image of the genre as farcical.¹⁰⁷ In perhaps a significant challenge to Radway’s observation that romance readers see language as transparent, these readers demonstrate a resistance to its mythologizing, though the resistance is based on their preference for realism (189). This paradoxical behavior of desiring realism in content while recognizing the equivocal

nature of language (which tries to pass itself off as real) is just one more instance in which readers of romances demonstrate a divided allegiance to realism.

That the argument for realism is a selective one is evident in the comments of other readers in the *AAR* discussion as well. Reader Blythe Barnhill, for instance, finds passages such as the following one in a Virginia Henley novel unnecessary because they not only show the sex lives of relatively unimportant characters but also dwell on bodily functions that she considers far too “real” for the genre:

[The novel] contained a sex scene involving the Prince Regent and his mistress. He was telling her about various exotic perfumes that made bodily gaseous waste smell like violets. Not only did I not want to read a detailed account of the sex between two peripheral characters, I was thoroughly disgusted by the subject matter. I put the book down right then and never picked it up again. (“Readers Rant”)

For some readers then, realism is confined to the lives of a few characters—if not just the hero and heroine—and it does not extend to a physiological reality apart from the one in a sexual context. Other readers object to a different sort of realistic detail; for example, Marilyn Grall, feels that sexual episodes that mention prophylactics damage the romantic fantasy. Even as she acknowledges that venereal disease was, and continues to be a health concern, she argues against addressing it, claiming that such realism is a subjective imposition of an unpleasant statistical fact onto the romance:

I know about AIDS, but must we always assume that heterosexual non-drug using adults are carrying diseases? I certainly hope not. On the other hand, if the hero has been having relations with every woman in town

before he meets the [heroine] I certainly want him to use a condom during those times.

But Grall resorts to realism to make a case for leaving safe-sex practices out of the scene as well. She suggests that pre-marital pregnancy is now a socially acceptable practice so it would be realistic to leave out any mention of condoms; pregnancy, she implies, may be a viable, perhaps desirable, choice for contemporary heroines. In contrast, readers like Blythe Barnhill scoff at the lack of realism in romances, pointing out examples such as the eroticization or glamorization of pregnancy, or ones in which a heroine reaches orgasm during her first sexual encounter, or a couple experiences simultaneous orgasms. But Grall, among others, offers her own life experiences as the reality paradigm to which some of these episodes are aligned:

I'm no sexual expert, but my husband and I seem to have no problems having simultaneous orgasms. Considering the fact that we are middle-aged and less than perfect physically, I think we're probably quite normal. Is the rest of the world really having that much trouble obtaining mutual satisfaction? I'm a writer, and I almost always have my lovers find their joy together. To me, the scene just feels right that way, and that's how I like to read them, too.

Romance realism as seen in these posts is thus a self-referential narrative mode, bearing only a surface resemblance to its namesake outside the genre. As these various commentaries on fidelity, violence, sexual mechanics, sex talk, and gender representation demonstrate, readers on the *AAR* and the *Avon Authors* board subscribe to a shifting code of realism. Prompted somewhat by personal preferences of ideal romantic fantasy,

readers nevertheless voice strong opinions on what kind of realistic detail is and is not palatable in a romance novel; the former tends to include descriptions of emotion and sex, while the latter extends to physiology or the current reality of sexually transmitted disease.

It would be useful here to review an article by author Robin Schone that is notable for its own deployment of realism. Schone's novels are known for their unconventional, even shocking, depictions of sexual and romantic ties. Marked by lengthy passages of detailed sexual activity, the novels nonetheless fall into the category of romance by virtue of their focus on the emotional causes and effects of sexual behavior.¹⁰⁸ She wrote the article as an addendum to the *AAR* board's "Rant About Sexuality," expounding on her own writing style and its non-conformity to formerly accepted notions of romance novels ("Masturbation"). In her article, Schone argues that her novels challenge the established notions of acceptable sexuality in the genre but are in fact more real than their predecessors. She points out that while female sexuality has often been portrayed in the genre as dependant on male partners for fulfillment, women are capable of self-gratification and thus her romances acknowledge individual sexual desire before moving to sexual desire between individuals. Critiquing historical romances that avoid the reality of female auto-erotism, she argues for a more honest—realistic—depiction of it (and of male-female interaction) that includes ways to extend the boundaries of textual sexuality. Schone's emphasis thus appears to be on moving beyond the limits of current romantic sexuality in the name of realism. Her emphasis actually places her realism closer to the realistic novel as Lukacs speaks of it, stepping through subjective experience into a true glimpse of the "objective totality" that is often obscured by immanent bourgeois

ideology. Schone acknowledges intra-individual distance and shows individuals attempting to bridge the gap in her romances but does not suggest that the love story automatically promises an organic unity.

Laurie Gold, the moderator of the board also cites a news item that seems to support Schone's claim of writing realistic novels, especially the one published soon after this article was posted, "[whose plot featured] a woman asking to be trained in the arts of love after her own husband proves adulterous." The concept is far outside the conventional romance novel but Gold finds a real-world equivalent to it:

[What is] ironic about its premise is that I recently read an article in *Allure Magazine* by a wealthy woman who had gone to a courtesan in Paris upon discovering her husband had cheated on her. She asked the courtesan to "train her" in the arts of love. Robin's upcoming release, therefore, is not at all stranger than fiction. ("Laurie's News and Views")

Unlike the realism of historical authenticity discussed by most readers, Schone's realism is then one that affirms "dissonance," the fragmented nature of reality, rather than denying it. The romantic plot that forces the characters together can then be seen as a tool deployed to understand that fragmentation, not erase it (Jameson 56). In this sense, Schone's realism can be regarded as a mode for acknowledging and grappling with a postindustrial society's sense of dislocation. (It is this realism that makes possible the genre's approach to the dissonance introduced by advanced capitalism, global warfare, and the gradual legitimation of previously marginalized sexual orientation.)

3. Encountering and Countering the Critique

Readers' concern over the quality of recent romances, as seen in the earlier multilogs, is also visible in the conversations about the public perception of the genre. The most frequently resurrected conversation involves discussing how the public regards the genre. There is in these threads a constant awareness of romance fiction being a form that does not fulfill some criteria of literary taste in the present historical moment. The anxiety they display is one that Bourdieu has identified as the marker of classes that find themselves on the lower rungs of the aristocracy of culture by virtue of their choices—choices that are pre-marked as middle-brow because of their association with the dispositions of the petite bourgeoisie and the working class (41, 57-8). Further, while readers show themselves to be a mix of genders, with different educational levels and professions, the censoring gaze they claim to be under belongs to various agents of bourgeois tastefulness. These censoring communities are primarily autodidactic, consisting of family members, co-workers, fellow shoppers, or sellers; their judgments, however, appear to be based on critiques voiced by other social groups certified to be arbiters of good taste, such as academics and journalists.

Possibly due to this ubiquitous critique, every few weeks see the beginning of a thread in which readers—and authors—discuss the attitudes of their friends, co-workers, family members, and others toward romance novels. The posts range from exasperation to resentment and from resignation to belligerence. These multilogs reflect readers' experiences with the social perception of romance novels and provide participants communal reassurance about reading them. Q. D. Leavis, among others, disdains such communities, identifying them with a pseudo-literary reading practice, which eradicates literature that requires rigorous apprehension (33-4). This understanding of the teeming

masses is quite unlike Marcuse's, who finds the communal to be of value, offering that "[s]olidarity and community do not mean absorption of the individual. They rather originate in autonomous individual decision; they unite freely associated individuals, not masses" (39). In the case of online romance groups, one may thus argue, the reading community is not an amorphous lump but often a gathering of readers who have made "autonomous individual decisions." In most of these threads, the first post typically recounts an incident or a pattern of behavior that the reader encounters in reaction to romance reading. In response, other posters recall their own experience with the general contempt that greets readers of the genre. The readers are often joined by authors' voices as they respond to this affirmation of solidarity for the romance community. This solidarity is also based on a sense of alienation, primarily due to the members' choice of genre but supplemented by their common gender and, in the case of the authors, profession. Postings frequently also include examples of what readers identify as valuable in romance novels (as a counter to the adverse reactions of non-readers) and suggest tactical moves to combat the societal strategy of mocking the genre.

In "Defenders of Romance Novels...step forth!" a post on the *Avon* board that resembled a call to arms, reader Michelle initiated a long multilog on the generic nature of public views on the romance, which led to other readers chiming in on how they deal with similar situations. Michelle's post expressed indignation at a television show that was snide about romance novels and their readers:

I was flipping through the channels when something caught my eye. Can't remember what station it was on, but it was talking about men who pose for romance novels. They were not complimentary to romance

novels, and especially not to the readers of such books...aka ALL OF US Writers, and readers! [...]I was so angry and upset when one person who was being interviewed referred to romance novels as “Female PORN!!!!” What the....???

Well, I can guarantee you that they haven't actually read one in their whole life! It isn't just about the love scenes, let's face it, anyone with any intelligence will know that to make the love scene believable, you have to CARE, and FEEL for the characters before they hop into bed! If you didn't care, you'd be reading some seedy magazine that's sold behind the counter in most bookstores!

People like this drive me crazy! It's about the whole story, not just one asset of it! It's telling the tale of how the H/H meet, go through their journey, fall in love...what could be sweeter, or more heart-warming?

The judgments that Michelle's post refers to (such as slurs about female porn) are recurrent features of the public stance on the genre at large. Her response—a defense of the genre as a narrative about more than sex—is also typical. She also distinguishes romance novels, which venerate the fusion of the sexual and emotional experience, from “seedy magazine”-style sexually explicit material. In such arguments, readers consistently reject the notion that romance novels are masturbatory. Their defense is understandable since sexuality in literature is often viewed with suspicion. But they also make a vital distinction between non-narrative sexual texts and romance novels which include elaborate narratives that work with the sexual episodes and refrain from the scopophilia that is found in all other genres in which sexuality plays a large role. Crystal

adds that the one time she heard this nomination—romance novels as “porn”—the label was not intended as a derogatory one, but while she appreciates the man’s remark as a rare non-critical gesture, she rejects his equation of visual sexual stimulation and romances:

I have heard the female porn thing before also, but it was said by a man that looks at porn and was not meaning it in a bad way. He tried to explain to me that men react better to the visual, while women are affected more by the emotional. I did not agree with him of course since they are not even close to the same, but that was a man's reasoning for why he called it that. Unfortunately, while he didn't mean it in a bad way, most people do.
 (“Defenders”)

Krissy⁷⁹ agrees, responding to Michelle by a defining pornography as “creative activity (writing or pictures or films etc.) of no literary or artistic value other than to stimulate sexual desire” and argues that romances do not fit this description. Her counter-claim is that they have “literary and artistic value” and reading them is not about experiencing sexual arousal but about escape from routine—a creation of personal time. Sandy Smith seconds the claim that romance fiction is being mislabeled, repeating the argument that the inclusion of love prevents a work from falling into the category of pornography. The argument betrays the internalization of middle class morality about good sexuality being tied to love, monogamy, marriage, and so on. This is, as demonstrated in the earlier section on sex, a classic catch-22 for any defense of the genre, since to speak of sex threatens the genre with the label of “porn” and a defense like Krissy’s makes it seem conservative. Anne reintroduces the idea that it is “guy porn” that is true pornography

and blames the double standard for male disparagement of romances. Her argument implies that criticism of romance novels (by men or women) is based on a hypocritical masculinist morality that is biased against romantic sexuality.

Continuing the theme of sexist critique, a reader named Kolleen relates her experience in a Speech Writing class in college in which a fellow student argued that romances were pornography. She recalls that it was the first time she had encountered this attitude, having grown up seeing her mother read romances and thus thinking them to be an acceptable form of fiction. The student—a man—Kolleen relates, managed to influence her perception of the genre for a long time till she decided that a genre that stirs several emotions could not be porn, which “only serves one purpose” (presumably, sexual gratification). She expresses anger at the man’s dismissal of the creative labor romance authors engage in, and offers that labor as a rebuttal of the charge of “porn” or “smut”; her argument rests on the implicit assumption that writing pornography involves no intellectual effort.

The above assortment of responses is bound together by reader refusal to accept a simplistic, reductive label. But despite readers’ united contestation of such pejoratives, some of their posts reveal that they share a more complex relationship with this critique. One reader, identified as ladydawgfan, admits that after a colleague labeled the genre “just a bunch of trashy smut,” she began to jokingly refer to the romances she reads as “trashy smut novels.” Similarly, Sandy admits that she calls her bookstore owner a “smut broker,” albeit “in good fun.” Such instances raise the question of the ambivalence romance readers feel about the propriety of their reading. Referring to the genre as “smut” could be read as an internalization of romance razzing, as was true for Kolleen.

She had been acquainted with the genre for years before the judgment that romances are pornography intruded on her consciousness. As the incident occurred in an academic setting and involved a male figure (traditionally aligned with authority), Kolleen accepted the term and adopted it; the process exhibits the dispersal of pronouncements on literary taste.¹⁰⁹ In the case of ladydawgfan and Sandy, however, the use of “smut” is potentially an act of appropriation, emptying the word of its bourgeois moral force and gendered disapproval and thus refusing the class-based judgment of its artistic worth (or lack). Their playful appropriation of “smut” also throws into relief the frequent employment of the term as if it has a real critical value; the linguistic poaching suggests that the early scholarly labeling of romances as pornography was not very different from the slur the two women hear—more a knee jerk slighting of sexual content than critical commentary.

While ladydawgfan and Sandy may be challenging the charge of smuttiness without realizing the full import of their appropriation of “porn” or “smut,” several readers write about the more straightforward manner in which they contest the denigration of their reading preference. These readers insist that shame is not part of their reading life or their interaction with others and they act by speaking out for their genre. Silvana’s response to people who inquire about her interest in romance novels exemplifies this attitude: “When somebody asks me why I read romance I simply say ‘because it makes me happy, because it makes me complete, because no other genre can stir so many deep emotions and feelings in me than romance...’ “ She also adds, “I never hide my books (even the “hot” covers... haha) Oh! I even take the books to class at University (Philosophy classes, so go figure!) and I'm never ashamed of them!”¹¹⁰

Readers like Adrian and Lory Rain also say that they defend the genre vocally, which Kelley_s relates her tactic of dealing with insulting co-workers:

[S]ome of the guys at work give me a hard time when they see me reading at lunch, and call [romances] “smut” books. I just tell them I'm researching what a “real man” is suppose (sic) to act like, since I have [no] good examples at work to learn from. That usually shuts them up.

A rejoinder like this one reverses the typical power play involved in snickering at romance readers. If male critics laugh at women readers, remarks like Kelly_s’s turn the tables on men, implying that it is they who are inadequate in fulfilling women’s desires. The move corroborates the belief that romance reading involves fantasizing about an ideal man—by women who are unhappy with their reality—but rejects the shame attached to this belief. Author Christina Dodd relates a similar anecdote involving her daughter:

When my daughter was in high school, she was reading a romance and one of the boys said, “What are you reading that for?”

And she said, “Because the alternative is guys like you.”

Nancy G’s rebuttal, on the other hand, involves a more elaborate approach of genre education. Like fellow reader Buffie, she claims that she gives the critic/skeptic a romance novel to read and notes that the latter usually admits that s/he was wrong about their initial critique. Nancy also has a long list that she uses to tell others why this form of fiction is pleasing to her.¹¹¹ The list is an interesting summary of the many claims readers have made in defense of romance reading, including the genre’s prioritizing of female sexual satisfaction, and its inclusion of house-trained men, financial security, and trivia. It

also points out the popularity of the genre and insists on the inherent superiority of every reading experience. Nancy's list finally attempts to explain how diverse the genre actually is and how it resounds with other fiction, challenging both the monolithic view of the genre and its segregation from other literary works.

There are other action-based responses from readers that show even more agency and assertiveness. For instance, the *AAR* board documents an extended episode in which reader Lauren Sanford experienced a disconcerting incident involving a bookstore employee's patronizing comments about the romance novels she bought ("Letter from Lauren"). As she describes it,

I placed my purchases on the counter and pulled out my checkbook. As typical small talk goes, he very politely asked how I was doing that day. I answered and in kind asked after him. To continue the pleasantries, this man took my small stack of books and began ringing them up for me and said, "Well, this should keep you out of trouble for a couple of days." I replied, "Yes, it should. Only problem is that I used to take a week to read one of these and now I'm practically reading an entire book in an evening. It's beginning to cost me a fortune." He smiled pleasantly and said, "Well, maybe one day, we can get you to read some real fiction." I was so stunned by his remark, I couldn't say a thing.

After some reflection, Lauren decided that she did have something to say and not only wrote a letter of protest to the bookstore but refused to patronize it again. Her letter also informed the manager that she was "not some bored, lonely housewife with nothing better to do with her time than to read fantasy novels" but a "highly paid professional."

Her act represents a new assertion of romance readers as a discerning community, not a stereotyped consumer of mass-produced escapist fiction. It reflects the popular defense readers have begun mounting on what they consider an outdated snideness toward romance fiction. Not only is the privatization of romance reading proving to be a thing of the past (if not a myth), it is being directly eliminated by these acts that readers undertake—acts that require the texts to be spoken of, not consumed in silence.

In response to Lauren's letter, reader Marjorie Kidder related her own moment of critical intervention:

One of the high points in "finding my tongue" at the right moment occurred [sic] when out for a rare evening to visit other bookstores, I overheard a conversation on the other side of the romance shelf.

She: "You know, these are just awful books, I can't imagine anyone who wasn't desperate reading these."

He: "Well, you know it's just a bunch of fat old ladies who buy these and they need all the help they can get."

I couldn't resist, went around the shelf and saw the "young and beautiful" couple. I said, "excuse me, but I overheard your comments and found that they are really quite ill-informed" I proceeded to explain the \$\$\$ of the industry, the wide readership etc. But mostly I started talking romance favorites and how much they can appeal to even the "young and beautiful.["] Well, they ended up buying several. Visited my store a few months later and while they still bought mostly sci-fi became some of my best customers for Time Travel romances.

Marjorie's incident is a variation of Nancy's educational approach and also lists what the reader considers markers of the genre's value (such as its sales and the scope of its readership.)

Such skirmishes with a disapproving public are reported by romance readers even in reference to their family members. The confrontations appear to be gendered, often stemming from the traditional equation of male preferences with good taste. One reader even began a thread titled "Husbands/Boyfriends and Romance Novels" on the *Avon* board in which she polled readers' experiences with the way men in their life treated their romance reading. Her post was prompted by past experiences with male friends who derided romance and she was curious whether most men, especially husbands or boyfriends, behaved similarly. Intriguingly, responses to her post are fairly evenly divided, with many women relating having experienced this pattern and others never having encountered it. Some, like Judy, note that they get into long debates with male friends or get angry at hearing the genre called porn or smut, while others report that their partners are not critical, eliminating the need for defense. Judy says that her friend's boyfriend objects to the sexual content; Shu's boyfriend, on the other hand, apparently liked the romance she made him read, though he laughed at the sex, claiming, "the author writes sex scenes like a virgin would."

The above comments exemplify the tendency of disapproving non-readers of romance to reduce the genre to sexual episodes, which draws the ire of the women on the board. But even the readers whose partners do not put down their reading refer to the sex scenes, demonstrating that the sexual element marks the genre's identity indelibly. For instance, at least three posters chuckle as they mention that spouses will ask if they are at

a “good part” in the novel.¹¹² In this way, it appears that even supportive spouses have a synecdochic approach to the genre, frequently identifying it with its sexual component, eliding over all of its other elements. Nevertheless, readers clearly value this non-judgmental misconception, finding it preferable to either tolerating insults from a partner or hiding one’s reading practices.

Some posts speculate about the specific objection that men have to romance or the causes of their derogatory attitudes. Reader Layla Benning posted a notable incident when a former boyfriend berated her for reading romances:

The first time he saw me reading a romance, for about half an hour he harped on and on and on about it, he was almost yelling! “I can’t believe you read that crap, I thought you had brains, I thought you had class, no that’s it, I thought you had taste, only stupid bitches like that crap” you get the picture, really nasty stuff! I was completely shocked, I have never seen someone so offended by an inanimate object! [I] can only conclude that he was deeply, DEEPLY threatened by them - or was just a nasty misogynistic piece of work.

Layla’s post documents some of the more extreme prejudice the genre’s readers encounter but more significantly, it also contains an attempt to analyze the critic’s motivation instead of accepting blame as readers were once wont to do. (See Kolleen’s remarks above.) These instances are the frontlines in the battle for deciding good taste and the hierarchy that rests on it, and testify to an inquisitive mode of cultural consumption.

The “threat” that Layla touches on is articulated by others like Krissy and Paula, who believe that their partners object not so much to the romance genre as to the act of reading itself, especially when they want women’s time and attention. There is a long history of this suspicion and anger toward women’s choices of entertainment or occupation (see Taylor, Aliaga-Buchenau). Another reader writes that while her husband does not mind her genre of choice, she believes that male disparagement of the genre may stem from the baseless fear that men cannot compete with the heroes of the romances. Readers’ perception of romance critiques as male anxiety—expressed as contempt for a genre that is seen to create desire for an unrealistic masculinity—has been mentioned earlier. (See Kelley-s and Christina Dodd’s posts above.) Sandy Smith, author, agrees with BookLover and refines the idea, suggesting that men’s worry about being unfavorably compared to an *obsolete* standard of ideal masculinity is the root of the gender bias against romance novels; that is to say, the perceived gap between women’s fantasy male (as represented in romances) and the alleged feminist conception of a desirable man leads to male belligerence toward the genre. (Smith suggests that it is for this same reason that men glare at other men who offer women a seat on the bus.) Pam, too, feels that only a man with pre-existing feelings of inadequacy would feel threatened by fictional characters. This discussion suggests that the primary critique concealed under all the other accusations directed at the genre is that romance fiction promotes an old-fashioned chivalry, which is incompatible with the new gender roles prescribed by feminism.

In fact, in a demonstration of that new gender behavior, several readers chime in with variations of Pam’s observation and aver that do not tolerate patronizing or

disapproving men—in textual or actual life.¹¹³ But non-readers believe that romance fiction is the opposite of feminism, marked as it is by female assertiveness and rejection of patriarchal attitudes. They thus resent the contradiction between female desire as allegedly suggested by this literature and the reality of a world touched by feminism. As my later chapters show, romance novels contain conflicting expectations about numerous ideologies, and certainly about desirable male and female behavior. But this incongruence is one way in which the novels reveal fractures in the current understanding of ideal gender behavior. Critics often, however, reduce the contradictory desire that romance fiction expresses on behalf of its readers to a simple one (namely, female need for sexual stimulation) and this allows them to overlook that societal confusion the genre is expressing. “Capitalism,” “War,” and “Sexual Orientation” lay bare some of those dissonances to show how the genre can be a significant site to study social change.

Many readers believe that romance bashers are ignorant, and confine their posts to either dismissing those opinions or expressing anger. Other analyses are a bit more extensive, such as posts that attribute the razzing of the genre to a sexist prejudice against its predominantly female authorship. On the *Defenders of Romance...* thread, author Kim B notes:

[I] wonder if it's because, on the whole, romance novels are written by women, for women? Despite female emancipation, there is little doubt that jobs that have been traditionally seen as the preserve of women (nursing, childcare, infant teachers etc) have always paid less, and been seen as being less important, than traditional male jobs.

And that's why I wonder if a little of this attitude hasn't spilled over into the writing and reading of romance novels. You know 'Oh, it's women's books - they can't possibly have any literary merit!'

Author Shana Galen agrees, adding, "I hate the double standard... if John Grisham writes a sex scene it's no big deal. If Nora Roberts does, it's porn." Even on *AAR*, reader Karen Witkowski, who wrote in following the posting of Lauren Sanford's letter to her bookstore, attributes the romance bashing to gender bias: "It seems like all the disdain stems from the fact that romance is a women's genre - written mostly by women for women. It's basically a lack of respect for women since I don't hear the same "put-downs" about the books for men - action/adventure, etc."

Perhaps this awareness of the devaluation of women's labor prompts the references to money that frequently appear in these multilogs. In many cases, readers defend the romance by citing statistics about the money generated by the romance publishing industry. On the *Avon* board, readers like georgia_peach and Amber Brown note that romances are the highest-selling of all publishing categories. Lauren Sanford's letter (mentioned above) details such statistics and also includes the approximate sum that romance readers usually spend each month on their novel purchases:

[...] according to research by the bookstore Barnes and Noble, romance customers can typically spend up to \$100 per month for books and will read as many as 40 books per month.

More than 90% of all mass market book sales are popular fiction.

Romance accounts for 48.6% of the mass market paperback book sales in

the United States, with sales topping \$885 million in 1992. This information was found on the Romance Reader Website.

After Sanford shared this letter of complaint on *AAR*, she updated readers on the fact that the bookstore to which she had complained eventually shut down. The event made her wonder if the staff had alienated many customers like her and incurred a large financial loss, showing her conviction in the large role of the romance genre in publishing today (and by extension, proving its worth). Readers who write in commending Lauren's actions use similar evidence about the genre's monetary worth. Marjorie Kidder also employed financial statistics when she defended the genre to the couple who she overheard disparaging romances in a bookstore (see above). Penny Oliverio mentions her own romance expenditure and insists that the amount she spends entitles her—and readers like her—to courtesy and professionalism. Readers' references to money contain the argument that romance reading, with its significant economic impact, needs to be acknowledged as more than an undemanding pastime or act of literary sex, as does the work of the writers they patronize. Their willingness to purchase romance novels, these posts imply, is a sign of the literary value they see in these books.

If these conversations can be said to reveal the everyday judgments readers encounter, they are but an extension of formal aesthetic criticism. Before moving on to more complex critiques of the genre and how readers react to them, it is worthwhile to quickly survey the instances on the *Husbands/Boyfriends* multilog in which readers recount the times they did not meet with disdain, even finding support from people who are not regular romance readers. Rose B, for instance, recalls a conversation with a nurse about a novel she was reading. She recalls, "I don't think I swayed him into reading a

romance any time soon, but he was not in the least bit derogatory and asked about the storyline,” he even offered to find her a new romance novel when she finished her current read, showing the existence of a non-judgmental group, albeit a minority.

In other instances, readers acknowledged people (often spouses) who are supportive, or neutral about the genre. These include reader Alyx’s husband who not only gets her bookstore gift certificates but also tells his friends to buy romance novels for their wives.¹¹⁴ Jillian45 says her spouse “is pretty supportive of my romance reading, he knows I love them and doesn’t fuss, and never gets cranky when I want to take a trip to [the] bookstore.” Kimberly echoes the statement as well, and it is perhaps significant that both their spouses are avid readers themselves, the former a fan of crime novels and the latter of fantasy. This fact provides additional support to Krissy and Paula’s belief (mentioned above) that men who are bothered by women’s interest in romances may object to the reading itself, resenting the practice for its perceived exclusionary nature; the culture of denigrating sex and sentiment allows them an alibi to voice that resentment. The alibi gets exposed when it is seen against the attitudes of non-readers of the genre, who are either willing to enter into a conversation about the genre or whose own reading habits forestall the sense of being abandoned by another reader.

The two kinds of reactions to romance reading seen above—support and disdain—have been present in the formalized debates in the media and in academic writing since the 1970s, though there has been an inclination toward treating the genre as poorly written at best and dangerously fantastic at worst. Readers themselves are now responding to these debates, often expressing the same attitudes recounted in the multilogs—that critics are ignorant, biased, misinformed, etc—and occasionally with

greater perspicacity and finesse, reflecting the gradual growth of this reading community's analytical skill.

The new level of critical ability is seen in an *AAR* discussion that followed the publication of a *Time* magazine article titled "Passion on the Pages" by Paul Gray.¹¹⁵ *AAR* moderator Laurie Gold was the first to respond, writing an editorial critiquing Gray's analysis as slanted and poorly researched.¹¹⁶ She points out that his sweeping assessments about the genre, such as their supposed lack of moral ambiguity, unrealistic nature, and formulaic plots, were based on just one novel, Nora Roberts's *Carolina Moon*. She also finds the way in which he deployed the term "moral ambiguity" limiting, since he equated it with the notion of infidelity; he then proceeded to label the genre as lacking in moral ambiguity because it only infrequently includes infidelity in its narratives. Gold contests this critique, arguing that even though many romance novels prize sexual and emotional faithfulness, they often involve characters facing moral choices that are not black and white. "What would Mr. Gray make of Lorraine Heath's *Always to Remember* about a man whose principles did not allow him to fight in the Civil War, who wore his "dishonor" as a badge of silent courage and who was pilloried by his Texas town as a result?" she asks, offering this novel as one of many in which characters struggle with moral dilemmas. Gold also challenges Gray's equation of realism with infidelity and argues that since romance fiction rests on a happy ending, the breakdown of the family, though perhaps a more realistic theme for today's society, would contradict the very essence of the genre; the absence of such a breakdown, however, cannot be automatically regarded as a fault because the genre does not shy away from other kinds of "realistic" truths. Her argument thus challenges the tendency to use realism to find

fault with an element that is the cornerstone of romance fiction. Her assertion shows that the escapism charge that has long been utilized against the genre is based on an artificial construct (realism) that can mean different things to different groups; for Gray, it has to mean changes in the bourgeois family but for Gold, it might mean a significant questioning of patriotic ideology.

Gold also points out that the happy end is the only indispensable element of a romance novel, thereby insisting that Gray's claim of the formulaic nature of romance is exaggerated and inaccurate. She also finds other flaws in his analysis, such as his excerpting a love scene without making any attempt to contextualize it, and blames this move for deliberately setting up the novel (and genre) for ridicule. She also goes on to examine Gray's attempt at objective analysis (where he claims to have looked for, and failed, to find masculine equivalents to women's interest in this form of entertainment fantasy). She exposes the hollowness of his attempt by comparing romance reading to men's attachment to sport and suggests that Gray's inability to see this simple comparison is either deliberate or symptomatic of the social acceptance granted to traditionally male pursuits while women's are treated as inferior. Beyond its flaws as sexist criticism, Gold claims, the article is a failure for never answering its own questions about what pleasure the genre offers, questions she then proceeds to answer herself:

Women read romance novels because they are written for women by women (primarily), who understand that although we all live in the real world where bad things happen to good people, where people lie, steal, cheat, and die, its [sic] nice to visit, for a while, a place where there are happy endings. We read to be entertained (when did that become such a

bad word?) by authors who write stories of love and redemption, action and excitement, tears and laughter, small acts and large deeds, that speak to our hearts, souls, and minds.

Almost a manifesto for romance reading, Gold's article (also sent to the editor of *Time*) inspired a number of readers to voice their concerns about this public pillorying of romance.¹¹⁷ Several readers agree that the article is an example of sexism and shows a fear of women's fantasies. Reader Kris sees Gray's attack a symptom of the worry that women want to "tame" men and an attempt to forestall this alleged fantasy. Reader Vicki also suggests that such critiques are part of a sexist battering of romance writers, pointing out that suspense novelist Tom Clancy, for instance, never gets attacked in the way Paul Gray targeted author Nora Roberts. She even points out that despite Clancy's less than model life—he divorced his wife of 30 years for a young woman—journalists never criticized him; she thus concludes that Roberts is slammed for no other reason but her choice of genre.¹¹⁸

Pat's response also echoes this belief that romance fiction receives sexist write-ups: "...it sounds like [Gray's] using what a friend of mine calls the "Girl Cooties" criticism...that is, romance is read by girls and has all that awful emotion in it, so it couldn't possibly be good, could it?" Sarah chooses to comment on Gray's tone, which seems to her to contain incredulity at the growth of the genre and its supporters. She is scathing about what this bafflement means: "It's almost like Mr. Gray implies that we need to apply some scientific (male?) rationality to the current state of affairs and figure this thing out." In these remarks, both Pat and Sarah have identified the long-standing oppositional binary that men equal good rationality and women equal bad emotionalism.

Vivien suspects that articles like Gray's are responding less to the quality of the romance genre and more to the tacit sexist belief that women's writing is inherently inferior, and she uses Dale Spender's *Mothers of the Novel* (1984) to support her argument.¹¹⁹ She is not the only one who quotes metacriticism on women's writing. Reader Teresa posts critic Robertson Davies's opinion that Harlequin romances were modern versions of oral narrative forms with mass appeal and thus should not to be casually dismissed.¹²⁰ This deployment of a literary critic is a valuable example of the fact that romance readers do not confine their reading to just one kind of fiction, nor are they incapable of understanding and undertaking critical analysis.

Even readers who may not deploy scholarly support (or be familiar with scholarly writing) are firm in the conviction that flaws in critiques such as Gray's must be pointed out. The impulse is part of a new trend of bucking the master narrative of the inadequacies of women's writing when it comes to rational realism. There is an awareness among romance readers that literature is a field for expressing social clashes and readers must engage in its critique as part of that clash. So, while Susan M and Daphne wonder if reacting to criticism or challenging it is a pointless task, those like Vickie believe that counter-critique is a feminist responsibility. Even as she commends AAR's swift response to Gray, she says,

Unfortunately, it seems to me, in the last decade that women have lost their eagerness to defend the rights those before us have fought so hard to gain. Yes, we DO need to respond to Phil [sic] Gray because when articles like this go unchallenged, then our male dominated society remains firmly in control.

Her defense of romance reading is somewhat essentialist, arguing that while women like to read and feel deeply, they also participate in other pastimes and this dual ability must be commended; she then warns against letting a male-dominated society make women feel inadequate for embracing many different aspects of human emotion. Letting propaganda like Gray's go unchallenged, she insists, allows it to continue belittling women and their interests; the belittlement is a strategy to counter the threat posed by women's influence—both in the publishing world and elsewhere. Reader Pat also thinks it imperative for romance readers to take journalists like Gray to task because articles in such widely read journals as *TIME* influence people's opinion. Her comment is a reminder that readers are aware of the poor public opinion of the genre and increasingly believe in challenging this bourgeois, masculinist standard instead of accepting it as some sort of natural truth that the genre fails to achieve. While the reasons may be varied, the rising trend toward breaking the silence on reading romance is unmistakable.

Readers dissect Gray's article with a remarkable degree of astuteness, demonstrating the presence, or perhaps growth, of an analytical bent in these ranks. Apart from utilizing scholarly approaches (seen above), readers like Katie evaluate the terms of Gray's argument in a manner that challenges the traditional critical and popular view of the limited critical faculties of romance readers. (That view implies that they are either inherently less intelligent and are thus drawn to pulp, or that pulp fiction inhibits or retards one's intelligence.) Katie, who begins by stating that she is a "young, professional woman with a four-year college degree," proceeds to demonstrate the sleight-of-hand that Gray employs in his report on the genre. Having established her educational pedigree (an arrogation of status in the Bourdieusian sense) she says,

I have to commend the author on his ability to craft an article that, on the surface, is seemingly a paean to the romance industry, when it is in fact, a slam against the industry and a particular author, Nora Roberts, along with her fans.

She also lambastes his claim that *Carolina Moon*, the one novel he read, was designed as the romance equivalent of a gateway drug, exposing his implication that the romance genre is an insidious narcotic form. Further, addressing Gray's charge that romances are formulaic, she argues that no creative work can be tailor-made to external demand, and the romance is no more formulaic than any other work of literary production:

As to Mr. Gray's pervasive use of the word formula in connection with romance novel structure, doesn't any author have to use a prescribed "formula" of a prescribed word-length, topic, and outline of ideas, ie. introduction, body of facts or story, and satisfactory (to the editor) conclusion of that work, in order to be published in the medium he or she chooses to submit to? One element of Mr. Gray's idea of the romance novel "formula" is "...the spirited heroine must bring the male of her choice to heel" by the end of the book.

As seen here, just as Gold deconstructed Gray's use of moral ambiguity and realism, Katie first redefines the term "formula," and then points out how Gray's employment of the term is limited to what he sees as the taming of a man by a woman. She finds the conclusion to only prove that Gray's article just repeats old prejudices. Katie further challenges Gray's assertion that romance writers are straight-jacketed by genre

conventions by pointing out that several romances published now would have failed to make the grade even five years ago. Her conviction points out the flexible nature of novels, even ones within a genre. Along the same lines, readers LLB and Luthien even mention resources or lists of romance novels which, to borrow Gray's own phrase, "subvert or extend their genre." These novels most strongly exemplify heteroglossic compulsions in the genre and demonstrate the constantly evolving nature of romance novels (despite the apparent limits of the genre structure.) On the other hand, Sarah takes a different tack in addressing Gray's derogatory reference to "formula" and insists that writing that needs to follow some rules is even more praiseworthy, that its authors are greater innovators than non-genre writers:

Our authors write as brilliantly in the genre as any other writes in theirs...perhaps more so because of those pesky conventions you were so keen on highlighting. When I pick up a new romance, that is just what it is...a NEW romance. We are a demanding readership, and our authors know we expect to read a fresh story with original characters facing original conflicts. It takes a great deal of talent to do that repeatedly in any of the subgenres of fiction.

As I noted earlier in the chapter, each romance is a unique work to the readers, as evidenced by the excitement and interest they show for upcoming novels; Sarah's post reinforces this, even as it acknowledges the generic allegiance of each novel. To her, this dual identity can only be successfully achieved by a writer of great skill, one who can keep the centrifugal and centripetal narrative forces in balance. Some of the other notable challenges to Gray's critique also include Paula's post, which suggests forcing romance

critics—the judges of taste—to honestly reveal their own reading preferences. She implies that there is some hypocrisy in the denigration of romance as unrealistic because everyone reads some fiction and all fiction is fantasy to some extent. In that sense, no fiction is any more realistic than romance novels. Her suggestion rests on a belief that public and private tastes may diverge once one acquires the mantle of critic; the further one is from a formal role, the lesser the gap between private and public taste.

Elaine strikes at the most insidious assumption underpinning all critical evaluations of romance readership—that romance readers are an oddity defined solely, and completely, by their romance readership. But, she notes, such a distinction is false, both in terms of genre labels and reader behavior. For instance, many mystery novels (seen as masculine, rational fiction) include a romantic plot and mystery novel readership is made up of both genders. She implies then, that romance criticism in itself has become generic, saying, ““Formulas” are in the eye of the beholder, it seems.” Elaine’s post points to the weakest element of decades of romance critique—treating romance readers as if they exist in isolation from other socio-economic realms. Her post denotes that readers should no longer be treated as if they are a primitive tribe with one eccentric habit, which can be studied by civilized observers without actually listening to what readers themselves say about the practice, because the critics are unwilling to credit those voices with any value. The genre and its readers (as seen on-line) are neither immature nor stunted as criticism, in its formulaic fashion, has made them out to be.

An examination of the soundness of that criticism has already been done in the chapter on the equation of the genre with its low-brow aesthetic appearance. As the first three chapters have shown, the heteroglossia that these multilogs reveal is not a brand-

new phenomenon. These voices supplement that study of the changes in the depiction of those three key ideas in the popular romance genre and how they challenge the perception of it as formulaic. The arguments of readers on the bulletin boards underscore the fact that despite the so-called “formula,” popular romance novels engage with the multiple demands imposed by the social, economic and political forces of the twentieth century—perhaps more than other forms of fiction.

Chapter Six: Reading Romance in India

[Marion Zimmer] Bradley goes on to argue that the bad influence of romance novels is so profound and pernicious that women, raised on “a steady diet of this kind of reading” and incapable of distinguishing between harmful fantasy and true reality, are unfit for the workplace, unfit for motherhood, and unfit for genuine love. In short, the modern romance novel, a meretricious and debased literary form, creates helpless, though willing victims. (Scott 217)

Rape fantasy, escapist literature, trashy novels, masturbatory fiction—the epithets that are used to refer to popular romances are almost always snide, if not completely sexist and puritanical. Condemned as soft porn that encourages women to accept and enjoy their subservient position in a patriarchal culture, romance fiction has been regarded as the epitome of masochistic desire. Germaine Greer referred to romance novels as “escapist literature of love and marriage voraciously consumed by housewives” (214). These novels are thus seen as sugarcoated patriarchal ideology, a hegemonic discourse that its female audience has internalized. Most critiques of the genre reveal two main objections to romances—that they are pornographic and anti-feminist. This chapter contests this view by reexamining some of the assumptions on which it is based. Furthermore, by introducing a sample of the genre’s Indian readers into the discussion, it analyzes romance fiction in the context of a global audience, and presents the alternative subversive readings this audience could create.

The emphasis romance novels place on heterosexual relationships that culminate in marriage appears to be antithetical to some of the principles of second-wave feminism. In fact, Joanne Hollows cites examples of writers who claim that romances are a conspiracy against feminism: “[...] Ann Douglas argues that as the feminist movement grew so did the readership of Harlequin fictions in which “woman’s independence is made horribly unattractive and unrewarding, her dependence presented as synonymous with excitement” (72). Some researchers even claim that romance novels prompt women to tolerate abuse (Kloberdanz 50). Thus, not only are these books seen as a source of dangerously antiquated ideas but also as a discourse that has considerable power to affect the attitudes and behavior of women in the real world—all for the worse.

The first problem with such critiques is that they either came too early in the life of the genre or simply fail to take into account the fact that the genre has evolved rapidly in the last 30 years and that it contains numerous sub-genres. Even when the latter is acknowledged critics choose to focus on the series that validate their arguments. As Alison Scott notes, the variety of romance novels available in the genre is turned aside by the simple expedient of calling them all “harlequins,” treating the most formulaic texts as representative of the genre as a whole—including the works that do not subscribe to a formula beyond the structure mentioned above (214). Much of this criticism also stems from the stream of feminist thought that views this fiction as a part of mass culture and its readers as cultural dupes, weak recipients of the lies told by a patriarchal culture industry. Such an attitude patronizes the ordinary viewers/readers and claims for itself the insight that they supposedly do not have (Hollows 26). It almost appears as if romances are a

convenient punching bag, seen to represent the combined faults of female authorship, pulp fiction, and literature on sex.

Even Janice Radway, who first studied the genre by surveying some of its readers in 1984, appears in her early work to think that the novels extol a conservative ideology that has a detrimental effect on the lives of readers. But not only is her 1984 analysis limited to middle-class American readers, she makes two more assumptions in arriving at this conclusion—that readers use these books as guides for living and that they will probably internalize the genre’s “anti-feminist” moments (216). She and many other academics neither fully concede the potential feminist stance in these works, nor do they really believe that the readers of romances may be taking away a reading that is different from the one that seems obvious to them. The central weakness of this critical conviction is the fact that it rests on second-wave feminism, which assumes that it is making a universal statement for all women, but is in fact limited to the needs and beliefs of white middle-class women. So when a feminist reading of any cultural entity is done on this basis and the text (be it a movie, a book, or a practice) is pronounced as anti-feminist, the reading often overlooks the communities of women (of other social classes, nations, or cultures) who might view the text in an entirely different light.

To begin looking for other readerships and what romance means to them, I undertook a survey in India in 2005 (See Appendix). The survey results not only challenge the existing belief about who is reading romances but also the misconception that they are only read for escapism or sexual gratification. (Bridget Fowler, who does analyze a neglected section of romance fiction readership—working class women in Scotland and England—argues that the readership is comprised of childlike uneducated

women who can never change the facts of their own subjugated existence and resort to these texts purely as if they were a sort of religious salvation fantasy (15).) My survey found that romance readers in India range from homemakers to teenagers in high schools, young college students, and professionals, and their responses also revealed a wide spectrum of reading experiences, challenging the popular notion that romances are consumed indiscriminately by bored housewives. Most of the respondents speak more than two languages; 20 out of 23 respondents have at least one college degree (and seven hold a Master's degree). While three said that they stopped reading romances because they found them monotonous, five considered them "light, easy reading." Both kinds of judgments appear to supplement commonly held beliefs about romance fiction's repetitive, shallow nature, but three readers noticed that the genre has become more realistic over the years, and four believed that romance reading has made them more accepting of others. One respondent claimed to have a new understanding of male-female relationships, and another felt able to relate to the problems experienced by "western" women. Supporting this possibility that romances offer readers some value other than just sexual pleasure is the fact that the responses of at least three readers show a lack of interest in just erotic gratification. These readers felt that the genre had become less emotional and romantic and expressed a desire for less "graphic" descriptions of sex.

Though my survey only represents a fraction of an untapped community of readers, it permits the development of my argument that romance novels are heterogeneous texts; specifically, it allows for the possibility that such groups' reading demonstrates the existence of narratives in the novels that are empowering. One of my survey respondents demonstrated this as much, professing a preference for romances in

which heroines outwit heroes. Romance fiction therefore, I submit, is supporting the impulse for a change in women's social status among its diverse reading public. If the first chapter introduces the possibility that women from the U.S. or the U.K. extract feminist readings from the genre, this chapter conclusively demonstrates that readers—in a non-Western culture—could be influenced by the texts into questioning the social structures that dictate their lives.

John Fiske identifies this manner of reading in his discussion of romance novels as popular culture. Building on Michel de Certeau's ideas of popular resistance, "making do with what the system provides," Fiske argues that there is a "culture of everyday life" in which the juggernaut of dominant ideology is opposed by the audience (25). He submits that the extreme machismo and sadistic desires of romance heroes actually serve to remind readers that in the real world they live in a similar environment that favors men, an environment that they have learned to accept as normal (114). Romances thus denaturalize patriarchy and gender bias through the unpleasant treatment of the heroine at the hands of the hero. According to Fiske, viewers of media culture or readers of popular literature practice a selective style of apprehension, filtering out undesirable dominant ideology and adapting the original or obvious message for something that is more appropriate to their particular reality. He terms this way of reading, which focuses on what is relevant to the reader's circumstances, a resistance to the flood of mass culture. This reading may be especially true in India where readers may find the gender-based power differential that appears in many texts to be a familiar circumstance—one that is not natural and may need to be altered.

The Reader in India

India is a country that mixes conservative traditions with liberalism. Women were awarded the same rights and freedoms as men when the Indian Constitution came into effect in 1950, but there is still social regulation of their actions, thoughts, and feelings. Further, there is a prevailing belief in the superiority of the male sex, in terms of both physical and intellectual capacity. The education of female children is on the rise, yet it is still considered secondary to the education of the males in the family, especially in rural areas. Women's education is often treated more as a means of improving the marketability of daughters in the marriage mart rather than a path to personal development or a career. Meenakshi Gigi Durham illustrates this mix of traditionalism in relation to family structures and the ostensible liberalism of a higher education through her own interactions with fellow Indian women at an exclusive school and college in India in the 70s and 80s: "At both of these institutions, the majority of students were from affluent and orthodox Indian families. They expected to have arranged marriages (most of them, in fact, eventually did)." She further points out that while many of these students dressed to imitate western media images, "...the underlying assumption was always that these fashion experiments were geared to one thing only: finding a place as a housewife and mother, acquiring perfection in the domestic role while having a career, 'if my husband will allow it,' as they said without rancor" (201). To a large extent, Durham's observations still hold true. Most families still consider marriage to be the most suitable occupation for a woman, a marriage that is arranged by the head of the family. Once married, a woman is expected to produce a child within the first year of marriage (or put up with nosy and snide comments from her new family). It is preferable if she gives birth

to at least one boy child because that is imperative for carrying on the family name. It is more economical as well, since daughters have to be married off, and the money spent on raising them (not to mention the unofficial dowries many are given) is a drain on parents' finances. In 2005, the United Nations Population Fund's 2005 *State of the World Population* report expressed the concern that such a social environment is damaging to Indian women and the *Times of India* cited figures from a recent census confirming that the concern was valid ("Is the Window Closing?").

It is evident that even as western feminism argues about female power in relation to significant but abstract concepts (for instance, a masculinized writing practice), there are places in the world where a more concrete struggle, related to the immediate reality of controlling one's daily existence, is still to be undertaken. Much of what western feminism considers a battle won, such as a woman's right to earn a living, live independently, or choose her acquaintances or husband, is not uncontested in a culture like my own. Again, this is not to argue that Indian society or law runs roughshod over women either. But Indian women live something of a double life. On one level, they have social, economic, and political rights in accordance with the highest principles of democracy, but on another level, all rights often become secondary to the imperatives of tradition, a tradition that insists that women are wives and mothers first and must put their own needs and desires last. Consequently, irrespective of what the law dictates, Indian women are often required to exist as relational entities, exercising limited authority over major life decisions. The defense of this strait-jacketing of women is based on an argument about the essential nature of the division of the sexes and on the claim that women do exercise power over their families through their roles as wives and mothers.

While women have to be kept within the bounds of the home and traditional marriage because that is the “natural” way of things, they are also to be enshrined, put on a pedestal for their nurturing capacities and delicate sensibilities. It then follows that women must be restrained from living too “liberal” a lifestyle because this may invite rape. This ideology is immanent in Indian society despite rapid economic and political change and directs the actions of most Indian women and their families.

An Early Stage of Feminism in Romances

While most romance readers in India live in urban areas and experience the pressures noted above somewhat distantly, even educated, urban women rarely escape them completely. To a woman in such a culture, contemporary romance fiction is not just a fantasy; it is the vision of a society in which—irrespective of whether the stories are true to life—writers can imagine a female protagonist who has the biggest say in the course of her own life (Parameswaran 841). It was reading romances as a teenager in the early nineties in India that made me realize that my environment was not conducive to achieving selfhood as a woman, and my initial impression of the feminist sub-text in romances was not overturned even after I discovered the scholarly arguments on the anti-feminist content of these books. (Moreover, as previous chapters have shown, the anti-feminist content has another narrative in it as well.) I read the novels tactically, utilizing an alternative reading practice to combat the sexist nature of some of them.¹²¹ I honed in on, delighted in, and remembered only those aspects of romances that seemed feminist to me and helped me analyze and evaluate my own situation. In doing so, I did and still do make the texts relevant to me. Growing up in a society that has never experienced a

feminist movement, I saw contemporary romance fiction as containing startlingly radical elements. I have thus read the genre (often considered a vehicle for perpetuating gender stereotypes and encouraging bored housewives to stay barefoot, pregnant, and dependant) as one that can provide women in other cultures with tactics to recognize and contest patriarchy—as it exists in their own contexts.

What is it that can be read as feminist in these novels? For one, it is the woman's ability to choose her sexual and emotional partner. A practice that has been in place for a century or more in Europe and the United States, this has not been recognized as a progressive notion in existing romance criticism. Even when arranged marriages were the norm in Western cultures, courtship rituals that were aimed at acquiring a woman's consent were in place. However, women in several cultures, if not actually forced into marriage with a virtual stranger, are brought up to think of such an arrangement as inevitable. Durham notes that her fellow students were "[a]ware that marriage was unquestionably their fate, and that it would be arranged by their parents in the Indian tradition [...]" (201). There has only been a marginal shift in this attitude in India; exceptions to arranged marriages—called "love marriages"—only prove the norm.

Surrounded by such an all-powerful conservatism, an Indian reader who comes across popular romance novels is hard pressed to see these stories, in which women live and work alone when they chose and evaluate potential life partners on their own, as anything but ground-breaking. My initial acquaintance with the romance genre in the nineties included novels from Mills and Boon and Silhouette and would not, however, seem like one that would invite this reading. Some of these romances that were written in the seventies and early eighties employ many of the plot elements that romances are still

trying to live down—such as overbearing heroes and meek, martyr-like heroines forced to marry them for social or economic reasons. Critics like Radway have argued that romances are regressive because this emphasis on marriage ultimately perpetuates conformity to traditional family structure. It is true that the teleology of the novels did not challenge the idea of marriage, which I already thought of as an inescapable social institution. But the fact that the end was reached by different means—by letting the heroines choose love—was an idea that challenged the ideology of female subservience to the family that was familiar to me. As far as I could tell, the claim that a woman could decide *whom* she wished to marry was a step forward, not back. My sustained interest in the genre rests on the fact that it continues to create heroines who make this radical—to a reader like me—choice.

In novels like *King of the Castle* (1978), the heroine evaluates the hero's worthiness as a potential mate and father, only marrying him after careful examination and analysis, testing not only her own feelings but his as well. Romance novels have always allocated space to such introspection on the heroine's part, allowing her to mull over her sexual as well as emotional compatibility with the hero. These passages dwell at length on the rush of feelings—a mix of love and desire—that the man evokes and are often accused of being purple prose. But these dialogues with the self are rich in content, revealing women's ideas about what makes a man attractive as well as capable. Furthermore, the freedom to spend time thinking about these issues also prepares the ground for the freedom to act on these thoughts.

One need not automatically assume that these heroines think a great deal about the men in their lives because women have been indoctrinated to worship the phallus;

their meditations can also be seen as revelatory of control and self-knowledge. Instead of being mere objects of exchange, commodities to be passed from the authority of one man to another, romance heroines demonstrate their right to judge the men around them in these internal debates, as is seen in this excerpt from best-selling writer Nora Roberts's *Cordina's Crown Jewel* (2002). In it the heroine, Princess Camilla, working on a dig with archaeologist Delaney Caine, analyses her growing love for him. Notice that she articulates to herself the causes of her emotional attachment, studying how Delaney's characteristics have prompted her response rather than stopping the rumination at the first paragraph (which acknowledges her love). It is she who decides to make the first overture after she has finished her evaluation of him as a worthy partner:

Why she was in love with him, she thought with surprise. Wasn't that fascinating. Somewhere during this complicated and problematic interlude, she'd slid headlong in love with a bad-tempered, irritable, rough-mannered scientist who was more likely to snarl at her than smile.

He was rude, demanding, easily annoyed, impatient. And brilliant, passionate, reluctantly kind. It was a captivating mix that made him uniquely himself. She wouldn't change a single thing about him. More, she thought, leaning against the wall to watch him. He had one of the most essential traits she wanted in a friend, and in a lover. He had honor.

They were alone here, yet he'd never tried to take advantage of that. In fact, he rarely touched her even in the most casual way. Though he was attracted—she knew she wasn't wrong about that—his personal code wouldn't allow him to exploit the situation.

Her lips twitched in a smile. That made him, under it all, a gentleman. How he would hate to be termed so. So, she was in love with an ill-tempered gentleman who wouldn't allow himself to seduce his temporary assistant. That meant it was going to be up to her to seduce him. (123-24)

A heroine possessing such an interiority would undoubtedly appear path-breaking to readers like the Indian women mentioned earlier by Durham, who accept that their families would choose their husbands, leaving them with minimal decision-making powers. She describes them as young women who

[...] talked of marriage but not of romantic love or sex. Aware that marriage would be arranged by their parents, their discussions of men were pragmatic. "He should be quiet and fair-skinned." "I don't care if he is good looking or not, but he should have a good job." "If he wants to settle abroad, then he should be willing to come back to India every year to visit." (201)

Though some Indian women have now begun to assert their right to have a greater say in selecting a bridegroom, many have been raised to believe that the demand is morally suspect. To such readers, heroines like Camilla are potentially the introduction to a new stage in female enfranchisement within the arena of marriage because they dramatize the internal process of assessing oneself and one's prospective partner; their internal evaluations become a pre-requisite for marriage, i.e., they turn the institution into a desirable *possibility* rather than a given.

Not only do romances allow the heroine moments of rumination to examine what she feels, but they also afford her the opportunity to lock verbal horns with the hero; thus conversation contests dominate all the courtship rituals that are an integral part of the novels. The conversations can be seen as furthering the cause of female choice, too, though I suspect that most critics overlook them because they often confine themselves to the immediate needs of the narrative. Carol Thurston is in the minority in her focus on dialogue in erotic romance. She cites several examples in which heroines declare their need for independence or their disgust at the double standard to the hero (68-9, 76-7). A further understanding of Indian attitudes may illustrate why I regard such repartee as a sign of liberation for women. In Indian culture, interaction between the sexes is carefully regulated, and there is no equivalent to the concept of dating. Young adults do see each other on a social basis, but there is no official social approval of the practice of romantic interaction before marriage. The only way to do so is to hide the fact that one has a boy/girlfriend from one's family. Pre-marital sex is still unacceptable, and live-in relationships are rare. This does not mean men and women do not seek each other out, but society does not sanction any interaction outside wedlock. This puts limits on communication—verbal or otherwise—between the sexes. This situation is illustrated perfectly by some e-mail spam titled “Convert Your Love Marriage into an Arranged One” that I received from an Indian web-based firm a couple of years ago. This firm offers couples a way to con their families into believing that they are complete strangers who have found each other's profiles on-line fake ads created for each of them on matrimonial sites. (These classifieds—personal ads containing profiles of prospective brides and grooms—have become an acceptable addition to more traditional ways of

arranging marriages.) The creation of such a service is a sign of how the current generation of Indians is straddling different social environments.

When marriages are being arranged, the two people involved get only a brief chance to speak with their prospective spouses. Traditionally, relatives or friends of the family recommend a match. Usually the prospective groom's family arrives at the woman's house to get a look at her, ask about her educational background, and her culinary skills. On a few occasions, the couple is given a few minutes to get acquainted, and that is all the time the two get to decide if they will have a successful relationship. If the match is acceptable to both sides on the basis of that meeting, they get engaged. In some "liberal" homes, it is then acceptable for the couple to meet a few times before the actual wedding, but an excessive enthusiasm for these meetings is frowned on. As is evident, the bride and groom are joined in matrimony without having spoken to each other about any but the most superficial things.

Why is this system so firmly entrenched? Quite possibly because it is taken for granted that marriage is a social institution that is in place to perpetuate the family name, and wives are meant to don the role of child-bearer and nurturer in whichever household they are sent. Marriage is less about being in love or passion or even personal fulfillment—it is a means of maintaining the social framework. In this scheme of things, conversations (which could play an important part in testing a couple's mutual compatibility before the wedding) become redundant. Since it is every Indian woman's duty to make all the compromises needed to keep her husband and his family happy, it is considered needless for the bride and groom to talk to each other to decide if they will suit; she *has* to figure out a way for them to coexist. Conversations with a potential

spouse are thus seen as possessing limited usefulness—as are, by extension, all casual conversations between unrelated men and women.

If one is a reader used to this social environment, the conversations between the hero and heroine in romances acquire great significance. Not only do these verbal exchanges presuppose a certain freedom in interacting with the other sex, they portray a social set-up where a woman gets a chance to express who she is and learn more about the man before making a lifelong commitment. Witness this conversation from *Cordina's Crown Jewel*—a debate over the interpretation of findings from an archaeological dig—between Delaney, the archeologist, and Camilla, a budding anthropologist, who begins by challenging his theories of courtship in an ancient culture:

“How do you know a man didn't woo a woman by bringing her wildflowers, or a cup of fresh elderberries?”

“I don't. But I don't know he did, either. No evidence either way.”

“But don't you think there was a ritual of some sort? Isn't there always? Even with animals there's a mating dance, oui? So surely there has to be some courtship procedure.”

“Sure.” He dipped the bread, grinned at her. “Sometimes it just meant picking up a really big rock and beating some poor sap over the head with it. Loser gets the concussion. Winner gets the girl.”

“Only because she either had no choice, or more likely, she understood that the man strong enough, passionate enough to smash his rival over the head to win her would protect her and the children they made together from harm.”

“Exactly.” Pleased with the tidy logic of her mind, he wagged a chunk of bread at her. “Sexual urge to procreation. Procreation to survival.”

“In its own very primitive way, that’s romantic. However, the remains you’ve studied to date don’t show a high enough percentage of violent injury to support the theory that head bashing was this tribe’s usual courtship ritual.”

“That’s good.” Admiring the way she’d spun his example back to prove her point, he gestured with his fork. “And you’re right.” (116-17)

The dialogue establishes the protagonists’ common interest in social anthropology as well as their ability to have an intellectual disagreement. Delaney engages her in the conversation, thus making space for Camilla to express her assessment. She proves her point through a logical argument, and he concedes the validity of her logic rather than being patronizing or dismissive. Passages such as these establish a screening ritual, if you will, that helps the conversers discover mutual interests. They encourage a reader to regard marriage as the culmination of several such moments, not a socially determined developmental stage in one’s physiology when one must get married.

In several romances, such as the one in the above example, the men—not just the hero, but male characters in general—do not automatically assume that conversation implies a sexual invitation. While conversations are sometimes laced with sexual innuendo, they are often attractive because they *aren’t* sexual. I find this appealing because conversations between men and women in my culture are often considered suspect, precisely because society regards every such encounter as unnecessary for its own sake—and thus possessing a dangerous sexual potential; this reinforces the barrier

between the sexes and denies the possibility of any worthwhile platonic exchanges between them. Women especially are thus forced to follow society's dictates and restrict their conversations to other women because to do otherwise is to risk one's "reputation" and jeopardize one's relations with one's family as well as with a prospective or actual husband. To a reader only acquainted with this over-regulation of gender interaction, even a simple conversational gambit by the romance heroine becomes a liberating act.

Not only is this commonplace structural element striking to me for the reasons mentioned above, its actual content is often feminist. Conversations in romances usually follow a pattern. In the initial stages of the narrative, the heroine engages in verbal fencing matches with the hero, the exchanges relying heavily on devices such as mistaken identity and faulty information. In most of these cases, the dialogue plays out the conventional battle of the sexes. While the ghost of 1970s romance paperbacks in which the hero threatens to obliterate the heroine verbally and physically is resurrected, it is also exorcised by the heroine's refusal to collapse under pressure. For example, in Linda Howard's *Dream Man*, police detective Dane Hollister is initially suspicious of Marlie Keene, who is a psychic and their first meeting is far from cordial. He is overtly hostile during the interrogation and she responds in a similar vein to his attack:

She stood and faced him, squaring off with him as if they were two adversaries in the old West about to draw down on each other. Her face had gone calm and curiously remote. "I've told you what happened," she said in a clear, deliberate voice. "You can believe it or not; It doesn't make any difference to me."

"It should," he replied just as deliberately.

She didn't ask why, though he paused for her to do just that. Instead her mouth twitched into a tiny, humorless smile. "I realize that I just became your prime suspect," she murmured. "So why don't I save your time and mine by telling you that my address is 2411 Hazelwood, and my telephone number is 555-9909."

"You know the routine," he said with sarcastic admiration. "I'm not surprised.... Or maybe you're just reading my mind, since you're psychic.... Maybe you can tell me what comes next, unless you need a crystal ball to tell you what I'm thinking."

"Oh, that doesn't take a mind reader, but then you aren't very original...I have no intention of leaving town"... She wasn't backing down, and his stomach muscles knotted again. At first glance she had looked like a drab, a nonentity afraid of making herself more attractive in any way, but the first look into her eyes had forcibly changed that opinion. The woman facing him didn't lack self-confidence, and she wasn't the least bit intimidated by him even though he was almost a foot taller. Something else stole into his awareness. Damn, he could smell her, a sweet, soft scent that had nothing to do with perfume and everything to do with female flesh. His involuntary reaction made him even angrier.

"See that you don't...Is there anything else you see in your crystal ball, anything you want to tell me?"

"Of course," she purred, and the sudden glint in her blue eyes told him that he'd walked right into that one. "Go to hell, Detective." (39)

The first encounter thus places the characters on an equal footing, albeit on seemingly opposing sides. Marlie withstands Dale's accusations of being a murderer, and once the initial misunderstanding is resolved—he receives confirmation that she is psychic and has an alibi—the sexual attraction becomes the driving force of their interaction. In this as well as other novels, the conversations then become verbal foreplay, building up to the moment of sexual intercourse. The liberating nature of this banter is well illustrated by another example from *Cordina's Crown Jewel*, in which Delaney and Camilla disclose why they are drawn to each other:

And she saw desire, the dangerous burn of it in his eyes. Felt it stab inside her like the fired edge of a blade.

“Why is this, do you think?” she murmured.

He didn't pretend to misunderstand. He didn't believe in pretense.

“I haven't got a clue—other than you being a tasty treat for the eyes.”

She nearly smiled at that and turned to rinse the razor again.

“Even attraction should have more. I'm not sure we even like each other very much.”

“I don't have anything against you, particularly.”

“Why, Delaney, you're so smooth.” She laughed because it eased some of the tension inside her. “A woman hasn't a prayer against such poetry, such charm.”

“You want poetry, read a book.”

“I think I do like you.... On some odd level, I enjoy your irascibility.”

“Old men are irascible. I’m young yet, so I’m just rude.”

“Precisely. But you also have an interesting mind, and I find it attractive. I’m intrigued by your work.... And your passion for it. I came looking for passion—not the sexual sort, but for some emotional—some intellectual passion. How strange that I should find it here, and in old bones and broken pots.”

“My field takes more than passion and intellect.”

“Yes. Hard work, sacrifice, sweat, perhaps some blood...If you think I’m a stranger to such things, you’re wrong.” (93)

The sexual repartee simultaneously makes room for Camilla to analyze the contradictory nature of her emotions and verbalize her desires. Moreover, it lets her declare her interest in a career rather than just a man, as is seen in her application of the term “passion” to the former rather than the latter. She is also able to correct Delaney’s misconceptions about her ability to work in the given field. The above example further exemplifies the startling honesty that romance heroines are increasingly displaying in their dealings with men. Thurston notes a similar trend as early as 1981:

When a hero urges a wife or lover to be honest rather than using ‘feminine wiles’ and ‘veiled ploys’ to get him into her bed (Donna Comeaux Zide, *Lost Splendor*, Warner, 1981), we are seeing a change in the traditional meaning of feminine, which once excused all manner of devious behavior on the basis that it was in the nature of the beast—the female. (76)

Camilla’s forthrightness dismantles the stereotype that women are insidious by nature, enticing men in order to gain power. It presages a world that offers greater social

equality, eliminating the need for the traditionally dispossessed figures to resort to underhandedness to get what they want. The apparent simplicity of conversation in romances is thus remarkable because it gives the female protagonist a voice. This element is notable not just because I am employing a different cultural lens in which the honest expression of female desire is a liberating concept but also because it reflects the genre's contribution to the development of the female voice in the western narrative tradition. Vocal women in eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels—for instance, Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*—were often portrayed as childish or selfish. They were rarely afforded the opportunity to converse with a man as his equal and were frequently punished with disgrace and death. In contrast, even the so-called doormat heroines in the romances get numerous chances to participate in a dialogue with male characters, especially the hero.

Critics like Snitow, however, regard conversations in Harlequins as mendacious.

As she puts it:

Harlequin romances alternate between scenes of the hero and heroine together in which she does a lot of *social lying* to save face, pretending to be unaffected by the hero's presence while her body melts and shivers, [and scenes in which the heroine is essentially alone...] [emphasis mine].
(249)

Conversations in which the heroine tries to hold her own against the hero even in the face of her desire or love for him—and in which the power struggle of the first encounter has not developed into the banter of courtship—may at face value signal poor writing, or a reactionary character who either does not know her own mind or cannot stick to her

resolve to keep the man at bay. But the very see-sawing of the heroine's emotions and its effect on her speech is a marker of precisely what feminists hold that women need to be encouraged to do—reevaluate and reassess their notions of whether they need a man to make them happy. In Kim Lawrence's *Pregnant by the Greek Tycoon* (2005), Georgie and Angolos Constantine have met after a two-year separation, and Angolos wants her to give their failed marriage another try. Though angry at his abandonment and harsh treatment, Georgie agrees to return to Greece with him on a "trial basis" for the sake of their son. But the reconciliation is far from smooth, with her torn between memories of the powerlessness she experienced at the hands of the husband she loved, as well as of their sexual compatibility:

Georgie's stomach flipped. Her covert glance at his hard, male, deliciously streamlined body resulted in an adrenaline surge of huge proportions. She inhaled deeply and nearly fell of the wall.

"And you wanted me..." Her heart was hammering so fast she could barely breathe. Her knees had acquired the consistency of cotton wool.

"And you wanted me." He said it again.

A scared sound rasped in her throat and her eyes lifted. "Things change," she croaked defiantly.

Angolos studied her flushed face, lingering on the softness of her trembling lips. "And some things don't."

Silently she shook her head.

He took her chin in his hand and tilted her face up to him. There was anger in the dark eyes that moved hungrily over her delicate features. “Why can’t you admit it?” he rasped.

“Because I don’t want to feel this way...when you...” Without warning she slid off the wall and under his restraining arm. Eyes blazing, her breasts heaving, she stood defiantly glaring at him.

“I’m not an impressionable kid. Getting me into bed won’t change my mind.”

“It might make you feel less frustrated, however.” Georgie was about to respond angrily to this supremely arrogant suggestion, when he added, “I know it would make me feel less frustrated. Where you are concerned I’ve never had any self-control...” He watched her eyes widen with shock and his lips twisted in a self-derisive smile. “You haven’t the faintest idea what it does to me to be this close to you and not touch...” he said thickly.

A surge of heat traveled through her body. “Tell me...” she demanded throatily, then almost immediately started to backtrack as though her life depended on it. “No...no, I didn’t mean that.”

[Here Georgie remembers making love to him and is aroused by the memory. Angolos is pleased by proof of her desire for him, admitting that he was unsure of her feelings in the past.]

“The flame that burns brightest does not always last the longest. You were very young—”

“And stupid,” she cut in angrily. “Yes, a lot of people think that, and it just goes to show that a few more years on the clock don’t necessarily make you any less stupid!” If anything she wanted him more now than she had then.

“So that aspect of being back with me does not fill you with disgust?”

“The sex was always pretty fantastic.” She grunted, avoiding his eyes as though her life depended on it. “It was the other stuff we are terrible at.”

“So, we will work on the ‘other stuff’, and enjoy the sex,” he announced, sounding pleased with himself, which, considering she had just told him she fancied the pants off him, was not surprising. Why did her mouth detach itself from her brain when she was around this man?

“That remains to be seen,” she replied... (108-111)

Throughout this exchange, Georgie appears to exemplify the Harlequin heroine’s tendency toward “social lying”. Though we know she is attracted to Angolos’s “hard, male, deliciously streamlined body,” she rejects his seduction by “[croaking] defiantly.” But her mental chagrin at being sexually susceptible to the hero and her concealment of it through her “grunted” rebuffs is not an attempt at coyness or hypocrisy. Such conversation, which contradict everything we have seen the heroine do to keep the hero at bay (or what we know she feels), are in fact manifestations of a latent feminism. As the excerpt shows, the heroine is in a state where she veers between desire and the awareness of the problematic nature of that desire. The episode represents a struggle with physical

attraction and with the marriage narrative. Such conversations assert that a woman need no longer be content to slide into a relationship purely because a man finds her attractive or even because she is attracted to him. If romances were just making a case for marriage, the novels would end the moment the heroine meets the tall, dark, handsome man. Instead romances are increasingly preserving the appearance of a fairy tale while subverting the marriage narrative and empowering the woman in question. Let's take a conversation from Linda Howard's *Angel Creek* (1991) to illustrate this development. In this novel, set in the American West in the early 1800s, the rugged and powerful hero Lucas Cochran wants Dee Swan's land as much as he wants her because it has a water source. Even after he seduces her, though, her resistance to his demands and his bafflement at it infuse most of their interactions. In this excerpt Dee dismisses Lucas's suspicions about Bellamy, his rival:

“I don't want him here again,” he said flatly, just in case she was in any doubt.

“I didn't invite him in the first place.” She added thoughtfully, “I didn't invite you, either. Isn't it strange? The poor men who could have used a homestead just wanted me for sex; you and Bellamy have plenty of land, but you want more. I'd have to say that Bellamy wants it more than you do, since he offered marriage.”

Lucas tensed, every instinct alert. “Is that what it would take?” he asked, carefully feeling his way. ...Dee didn't look at him, but out across the land.

“Getting married would be even worse than selling out,” she said,
“I’d lose both my land and my independence. Of the two, selling it would
at least let me stay independent.” (173)

The dialogue documents Dee’s refusal to enter the patriarchal economy, even though she has already admitted to herself that she is in love with Lucas. (She only consents to marriage after he decides to sign over his own ranch to her and draw up a contract to ensure that her land remains in her name.) These moments constitute a pattern in which romance heroines constantly remind readers of the problematic nature of the institution that is made to appear attractive through the presence of a loving man, an observation of great import to a reader from a culture that has never questioned patriarchal marriage.

Even dialogue that is less confrontational can play a role beyond establishing the compatibility of a couple. It becomes a negotiation about couplehood, about the workings of marriage (again, confronting the concept of the Indian marriage explained above). In many romances the repartee that is present after the first instance of “emotional intercourse” (as opposed to just sex) often takes on a new air of trust and mutual respect. In several novels the conversations that follow the acknowledgment of mutual affection, and sometimes an agreement of impending nuptials, are even more interesting because they establish the ideal for the interaction that should exist between the couple even after the novels end, i.e., when the romance settles into marriage. In a way the dialogue tells readers that a marriage based on meaningful pre-wedding interaction between the man and woman will assuredly not deteriorate into empty silences but remain as exciting and affectionate as the courtship was, and that the woman will not recede into the anonymity

of wifedom after the initial sexual mystery has been dispensed with. It suggests that the ability to speak and be heard is as much a prerequisite for a marriage of true equals as sexual attraction. Many of Lisa Kleypas's novels are preoccupied with such negotiation, as demonstrated by the concerns that Addie Warner voices to Ben Hunter, her fiancé, in *Give Me Tonight*, a romance set in Texas in the 1880s:

“I want you to listen to me in twenty years the same way you do now. As if my opinions matter to you.”

“They do. They always will. Anything else?”

“Yes. I don't want to turn into a belonging of yours, an attachment like an extra arm or leg, someone who's expected to agree with everything you say. I won't be silent during the dinner conversations at our table.”

Now that she had started to open up to him, it was much easier to continue. “I need to be respected but not sheltered. I want your honesty, always, about everything, and to be given a chance to show I can do more for you than the cooking, the washing and the sewing. All of that can be done by any woman. I want to have a place in your life no one else can take, and I don't mean a pedestal.”

“I wouldn't try to put you up on one.”

“You wouldn't? You wouldn't want me to change after we're married, and do everything you say, and never argue with you?”

“Hell, no. Why would I change the things that attract me to you the most? Let other men's wives play mindless fools if it pleases them. I'd rather have a woman who has some common sense. And why should I

want you to agree with me all the time? It would bore the hell out of me to be with someone who parroted everything I said. Put your mind at ease, darlin'. I'm not marrying you in order to change you." (262-63)

The conversation is a verbal contract, promising the continuing existence of the woman rather than her erasure by the fact of marriage. It ensures that one of the ways the male will assist in this endeavor is by acknowledging the female's voice. As the novel is set in the 1880s, the above conversation is actually dramatizes the grafting of twentieth century values on the world of the historical romance and highlights the genre's desire to step away from traditional gender roles.¹²² Once again, a reader from a culture dominated by an older patriarchal value system may identify with the Addie of the nineteenth century and her desire for a more progressive social structure, thus employing the text to denaturalize that system. Simultaneously, Indian readers may identify with Ben's acceptance of Addie's demands, even if they are unlike anything he is familiar with in his own reality; in other words, his response models the appropriate response to Addie's demands, showing that even someone who has never experienced a feminist movement should find these demands reasonable,

Along with freedom of speech, romance novels are increasingly giving heroines more control over their own bodies and in doing this, altering representations of female bodies as objects that must conform to some ideal and treating them as living agents of desire that have varying attractiveness. I am inclined to read a feminist assertiveness in this phenomenon, especially in light of my knowledge of the social pressure in India to conform to certain kinds of clothing and a particular body (much greater, or at least differently demanding, than in the U.S. or Europe). For instance, a woman of

marriageable age is regarded as having a better chance of being accepted by a prospective groom's family if she has perfect eyesight and fair skin, and isn't too short/too tall/too thin, and more and more, too chubby. Contact lenses and laser surgery procedures that can correct vision are much in demand because they improve a woman's matrimonial options.

Moreover, clothing is also regulated in India, usually by one's family and neighbors, who act as conduits for the conservative views on the matter. Indian society frowns on clothes that do not cover most of the body, especially where women are concerned. Even when fully dressed, the kind of clothing one wears is marked with different moral undertones. Durham recalls experiencing such marking firsthand when she moved to India from Canada in the seventies. While she opted to wear shirts and jeans as a protest against the demand to conform to an Indian ideal of femininity, the behavior was interpreted as sexually provocative:

I remember one of my friends telling me seriously when I was seventeen or eighteen years old, "You know, Gigi, if you wear jeans all the time like you do, people will think you are not a virgin." (201)

Thus, almost anyone feels free to comment on a woman's attire, either by chastising her for its westernness (translated as skimpiness) or propositioning her for her apparent lack of morals. In other words, one has little say over how one's body is clothed (though this varies according to region and economic conditions). Women in urban areas are adopting non-traditional wear, but this is still not an unmarked act; whether a woman wishes it or not, any deviation from conventional Indian clothing or ideal body type labels her as transgressive or sub-standard. So in myriad little ways, the cultural gaze

exercises a stranglehold on the female appearance, limiting a woman's autonomy over her self.

Conversely, romance novels (especially contemporary romances) often emphasize the casualness of the heroine's clothes. There are undeniable instances when she is described as being dressed in the height of fashion, but the authors also describe occasions when the heroine is all too human in her unmade-up state. Here is an example from Linda Howard's *Loving Evangeline*, in which the hero, Robert Cannon, and the reader see Evie Shaw for the first time:

Evie Shaw, in contrast, [to the women he usually dated] evidently paid no attention to her clothes. She wore an oversize T-shirt that she had knotted at the waist, a pair of jeans so ancient that they were thread-bare and almost colorless, and equally old docksiders. Her hair, a sun-streaked blond that ranged in color from light brown to the palest flax, and included several different shades of gold, was pulled back and confined in an untidy braid that was as thick as his wrist and hung halfway down her back. (24)

The description still objectifies the woman but she is not a perfect object or a fetishized body. Evie's disinterest in adopting a sophisticated dress code is highlighted by the contrast with the glamorous women that heroes like Robert date. She is one of the many heroines who are comfortable with their physical selves even if their bodies and faces do not resemble those of cover girls. They prefer to wear utilitarian clothing and have little time or inclination for elaborate beauty treatments. In Howard's *Mackenzie's Mission* (1992), Caroline Evans is a physicist with strong opinions on women's dressing styles:

She had decided while still in adolescence that men had no idea how uncomfortable women's fashions really were and really didn't care, since they themselves weren't called upon to spend hours standing in tendon-shortening high heels, encased in sweltering hosiery, bound either by bras or dresses tight enough to take over the job of lifting and separating, or pushing together to create cleavage, according to the dictates of the occasion. ...Fashion, in her mind, consisted of equal parts stupidity and lunacy. In a logical world, people would wear functional clothing, like jeans and loafers and sweatshirts. (30-31)

In such passages, I see an increasing trend in the heroines toward being happy with an unglamorous appearance rather than yearning for an unrealistic ideal created by men.

Several romances also go one step further in demystifying the heroine's once mysterious and picture-perfect body. Many of them star heroines with small breasts, large hips, freckled skin, unruly hair, cellulite and stretch marks and offer no apologies for this non-conformity to the media-created standard of beauty. They deal with menstrual cycles and the debilitating effects of a period on a woman's body and temperament. Coming from a culture that considers this topic taboo, I am always intrigued by this matter-of-fact attitude towards female physiology. In my home state of Maharashtra (Western India), women used to be considered impure when they had a period. They were to stay in a separate space in the home and refrain from touching anyone. Such extreme practices are mostly a thing of the past, especially in urban areas, but even today, women in many parts of India are unable to participate in religious rituals or visit temples if they are menstruating, or to even speak of it. In striking contrast to my experience, not only do

women in romances talk about the workings of their bodies with other women, but they also do so with the men in their lives. They grumble over the bodily pains that women were traditionally never supposed to mention and expect their partners to be sensitive to their concerns. Howard, whose work shows a persistent interest in shattering the myth of the two-dimensional woman, tackles this issue with humor in *Heart of Fire*. The novel is an adventure story set in the Amazon, with Jillan Sherwood, an anthropologist, and Ben Drake, her lover, trying to get back to Manaus and avoid being killed by artifact thieves. Jill, consistently keeping the highly sexed Ben in line, bluntly tells him that she won't have sex with him during her period. The conversation is a rejection of fetishism; Jill refuses to have her body just be a sexual entity:

“I'm always really tired and don't feel good on the first day of the period,” she explained, keeping her eyes closed.

The silence was thick. Then Ben said, “I'm learning. You didn't actually say you were having your period. You simply made a statement that you get tired and don't feel good on the first day of your period. You're still punishing me, aren't you?”

“I'm having my period,” she said flatly. “And I don't know any way I could have arranged that to coincide with your many transgressions.”

Ben looked at her again, this time noting the circles under her eyes. She wasn't kidding. He felt a moment's dismay, then concern. “Do you have anything to take? What can I do to make you feel better?”

She did open her eyes then, and smiled at him. A real smile, not the angelic one that made him shudder. “I’m okay. I don’t feel sick, just tired. If you really need me, wake me up. And I promise I’ll be better tomorrow.” [...]

He said, “How long does this usually last?”

“What, my period, or your strange delusion that everything I do is planned specifically to keep you from making love as often as you seem to think you should? My period will last four to five days. I’ve seen no break in your delusion at all.”

He grinned. Ah, he loved it when she talked sweet to him. “I don’t know where you got the idea that having a period prevents making love.”

“From the fact that I don’t feel like it, don’t want to, and won’t let you.”

“I guess that about covers the issue.” (256-57)

In a way, heroines like Jillian are demanding recognition for a three-dimensional female body, one that is accompanied by its own aches and pains but needs to be accepted instead of being hidden behind images of skinny models or, in the case of my culture, behind yards of clothing. Surely this affirmation of the female body’s reality—its de-fetishization—is an undeniable feminist move.

An extension of this concept is the sexual assertiveness of women in these novels, demonstrated by their ability to be an active participant in the sexual act, and to give or deny the hero access to their bodies. The sexual practices of the heroines are counter to

the behavior tacitly expected in Indian gender prescriptions. As I've noted earlier, the institution of marriage in India is often a union between people who are virtually strangers but are expected to have sex for the purpose of having children. The woman should be a virgin but must still allow her husband his conjugal rights as soon as he wishes to exercise them. This is not to imply that all grooms seduce or rape their brides, or that the latter feel no sexual desire, but women are obliged to accept a sexual overture when it is made by the husband. In romance novels, however, a heroine not only has the final say in whom she will marry but she also decides if and when she wants to share her body with the hero (as seen in the above excerpt). Now it is true (as I have shown in the "Sexual Orientation" chapter) that rape was a motif in erotic historical romance, but it sprang from a desire that was unrelated to masochism. Even if it had seeds of the internalization of women's sexual domination, the impulse died soon, with readers unwilling to accept the episodes as anything but sexual assault. While heroines are still occasionally virgins (another thing for which feminists slam romances), their decision to end that state is an indication of a personal freedom that women in some countries still don't have. Also, increasingly more novels contain female protagonists who have had prior sexual relationships, either in or out of wedlock, and do not have to explain their past. Thus, there is a trend toward asserting a woman's autonomy over her own life and her sexuality. These heroines invite readers like me to critique the social regulation of female sexual behavior or the association of female sexual activity with family honor or morality.

Romances are trying to challenge the glorification of phallicism that marks a patriarchal culture—and was evident in novels in the seventies—by making the heroine's

sexual desires the center of the narrative. The novels have rarely been recognized as the sites of the kind of radicalism I am suggesting because they do not separate personal fulfillment from marriage and monogamy. But though it is true that women in recent novels are “conservative” by virtue of obeying the genre’s directive to choose one man and matrimony, they are not silent about what they need from a sexual relationship either. They are active partners and unashamed of enjoying intercourse. They not only participate in sex but also initiate or reject it when they wish, appearing to sense the power dynamic involved in the act. Dee Swan in *Angel Creek* is one such woman:

When they woke up he wanted to make love to her again. He was startled when she tried to squirm away from him. “I don’t want to,” she said fretfully.

“Damn if you aren’t the most contrary woman I’ve ever seen,” he muttered. “Why don’t you want to?”

She shrugged, her mouth sulky. “I just don’t want you holding me down again right now.”

He ran his hand through his hair. God, why had he been surprised? The wonder was that she hadn’t done something about it before now...

“Then you get on top,” he said.

Interest sparked in those green eyes. He could see that she was intrigued by the idea of controlling their lovemaking, and therefore controlling him. (167)

Thus, though *Angel Creek* includes several instances in which Lucas coerces Dee to make love, she retains her selfhood by placing her own conditions on their sexual—and emotional—intimacy.

The ideal sexual act in romances is also presented as an amalgam of verbal as well as physical involvement, with each partner asking the other's needs instead of running for the finish line. The relationship that is portrayed is thus one of equals who care about each other's pleasure. This is a revolutionary concept to a reader from India, where sex is not openly discussed, and women's sexual desire is not acknowledged as natural. This attitude towards women and sex in Indian society was exemplified by the reaction to the 1994 movie, *Bandit Queen*, a bio-pic about a female bandit from a remote region in the heart of the country. While the movie's handling of a key theme—the caste system that haunts rural India—incited strong discussions, what caused as much controversy was a sexual episode in which the female protagonist was shown to be on top of her lover. Various self-appointed guardians of Indian culture insisted that the staging of the scene was a travesty of Indian traditions because an Indian man never allows his female partner to be on top. To an Indian romance reader who is familiar with this mindset, reading about the kind of sex in which the woman not only expects and receives pleasure—often from actively exploring and controlling the male body—can afford a whole new perspective on female liberation in the bedroom.

Much of what western feminist critiques have treated as sexual fantasy or pornography in romances is in fact a veritable database of complex female desire. These novels express the sexual needs that tradition has dictated women do not/should not have. They describe passion using terms that seem exaggerated and unrealistic, but these

passages are indicative of women's unarticulated and unacknowledged needs—emotional and sexual. Witness the conclusion of the love scene quoted above:

[...] She loved it, too. By the time she settled astride him, sinking down to envelope his shaft, his hands were locked on the headboard above him as he strained to control himself. He was gasping, his eyes closed from the pleasure she had wrought. She had seduced him that time, her mouth tender on his mouth and chest, her breasts brushing against his stomach and loins as she swayed over him. He thought of other things he would teach her, but right now he had all he could handle. Of course she loved it; she was enthralled by having him at her mercy, if he could call it that. It was more like torment, delicious, searing torment.

Dee moved slowly, rhythmically, her eyes closing as her own hunger built. This was pure ecstasy, she thought, and she knew she would never regret these moments no matter what happened. It wasn't the physical pleasure that was so precious, but the link between them that was forged by the pleasure. (167-68)

The point of view in the scene shifts from Lucas to Dee. The reader then follows her expression of sexual desire in an almost auto-erotic moment. She is the center of her pleasure, the agent intercourse. Western feminists may scoff at this supposed liberation of female sexuality in romances over the last three decades, pointing to the limits imposed on the heroine's sexual activity through the authority of the hero and deriding her dependence on him. But for an Indian reader, the romance heroine's progress from

someone who has little say in the act of sexual intercourse to one who can explore and control her sexuality is an empowering one.

When one employs an alternative cultural perspective, it thus becomes evident that the romance heroine is no pushover, nor is she exhorting readers to turn into a combination of virgin, whore, enabler, doormat, baby machine, and supermodel. She does fine on her own strength and doesn't need a man to feel fulfilled. She feels no frantic urgency to be the "traditional" woman who must have a boyfriend/husband in order to avoid being labeled unfeminine but neither does she wish to sacrifice her sex life or emotional needs for ascetic individualism. When she does fall in love, it is not with the first available man she has met. The hero is a man who the heroine has thought about, assessed, and chosen as a life-mate. Such a choice strongly argues individual self-knowledge and independence. It showcases an attitude that acknowledges a woman's sovereignty over the most significant aspects of her life. Romances thus posit a fantasy whose conclusion is the first step in fulfilling other demands, such as a woman's right to refuse sex to a previous lover, the right to expect sexual fulfillment and the right to decide if she wants to have a child. What could be more in line with the feminist agenda than this work romances do of laying the basis for non-academics to realize the legitimacy of these demands?

As I have shown here, the reading community of romance fiction is quite diverse and the implications of its changing composition for romance reading need to be examined further. Since the act of reading is not identical everywhere, nor is patriarchy or the means of contesting it, romance criticism must move beyond the claim that all

romance reading behavior betrays a desire to conform to patriarchy and that this universal subconscious fantasy must be eradicated by enlightening the ignorant masses.

The women's liberation movement that began in the West in the sixties did not translate exactly into countries like mine. (For instance, forty years ago, my culture could not have identified with bra burning as a feminist act since it did not associate bras with femininity; the same is true for other "feminist" paradigms.) But the romance fiction genre may be able to take some of feminism's arguments to the thousands of readers who do not—and may never—have access to its scholarship or experience a full-blown feminist movement. My own romance reading made me conscious of the flaws of the Indian marriage mechanism—and of the institution in general—much before I came to academic feminism's more complex deconstruction of it.

While chapters one, two, and three demonstrate some of the non-marital preoccupations in the genre, chapter four suggests why these readings have gone unnoticed, and chapter five shows readings beyond traditional critiques, this chapter has tried to make evident the inherent progressiveness of romance fiction, reading its "reactionary" narratives by assuming the perspective of readers whose social environments are markedly different from the post-feminist West. The genre's attachment to marriage does not preclude its audience from locating in these texts the moments that destabilize the institution (as it exists in its many incarnations). Though the inevitable happy ending has been regarded as a way to indoctrinate readers to accept patriarchal marriage, in actual fact the narrative can work to remind them that the conclusion is unusual, a departure from the norm (this last being the marriages that

people routinely enter into in the mistaken belief that everyone should marry as a matter of course).

To its readers—Indian or others—romance fiction can function as an extended discussion on what circumstances might make the flawed state of marriage into a useful partnership worth considering. While the genre offers romantic love as the only reason to marry someone and is consequently labeled as the ideological sugarcoating for a regressive version of marriage, the love and respect the heroine commands from the hero may act as a means of resistance to the ideology of marriage-as-inevitability. Not only do romances thus contain subversive readings, even their manifest narratives can function to question other problematic grand narratives of marriage and family.

¹ I use the term “romance novels” interchangeably with “genre romance” and “romance fiction.”

² In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukacs suggests that forms of art are now burdened with the task of attempting to deal with the loss of a sense of completeness that results from our fragmented reality (38).

³ Here, I am calling on Jameson’s conception that “heterogeneous narrative paradigms” lie within the text of a novel and often do not have an ideological affinity to each other (144).

⁴ Bakhtin’s conception of the novel as the living form that consistently contests genre distinctions in its effort to show glimpses of fluid reality is central to my approach to romance novels (5).

⁵ Gramsci by no means praises commercial literature. His judgment of serialized novels, for instance, is far from complementary. He does, however, concede that such literature is a useful source for social analysis:

Indeed it has enormous value precisely in this respect because the success of a work of commercial literature indicates (and it is often the only indication available) the ‘philosophy of the age,’ the mass of feelings and conceptions of the world predominant among the ‘silent’ majority. (348)

Also, in demythologizing romance novels, I call on Roland Barthes’s notion of “myth.” In *Mythologies*, Barthes conceptualizes “myth” as that whose meaning is obscured by a deliberate or inadvertent lack of acknowledgement of its historical constitution. In speaking of mythic language and image, he refers to linguistic and social concepts that are often deployed in political struggles by groups that efface their construction and reconfiguration.

⁶ See *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* for an analysis of Heyer’s Regency novels.

⁷ See <http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/Harlequin-Enterprises-Limited-Company-History.html>.

⁸ Lazarsfeld and Merton express reservations about the mass media’s ability to translate into a popular socially productive culture. Instead, they suggest that mass culture has a “narcotizing dysfunction” that leaves people with no time for organized action, an effect desired by “chief power groups” composed of “organized business” (457-64). In Adorno’s discussion on television’s controlling influence, he speaks of multiple messages in cultural objects that work to “ensnare the consumer as completely as possible and ...engage him psychodynamically in the service of premeditated effects.” He uses the example of a television show in which an underpaid character is presented as funny and sympathetic at the same time:

In terms of a set pattern of identification, the script implies: ‘If you are as humorous, good-natured, quick-witted, and charming as she is, do not worry about being paid a starvation wage. You can cope with your frustration in a humorous way; and your superior wit and cleverness put you not only above material privations, but also above the rest of mankind.’ In other words, the script is a shrewd method of promoting adjustment to humiliating conditions by presenting them as objectively comical and by giving a picture of a person who experiences even her own inadequate position as an object of fun apparently free of any resentment. (480-81)

⁹ The last argument is somewhat influenced by Sharon Stockton’s study of the sexual interaction between male and female characters in twentieth century novels as an enactment of the working of advanced capitalism.

¹⁰ See Sophie Cole’s *Wardour Street Idyll* (1910) or *A Plain Woman’s Portrait* (1912).

¹¹ Examples include Patricia Wilson’s *Powerful Stranger* (1993), and Sara Wood’s *The Italian Count’s Command* (2004).

¹² See *Passion’s Fortune: The Story of Mills and Boon* (1999) for a comprehensive history of Mills and Boon, including the editorial policy.

¹³ See my discussion on war for examples of this nationalist perspective.

¹⁴ This chapter does not offer a narrative of how novels in the period between Bronte’s work and these Mills and Boon texts address the evolution of capitalism. But it is probable that the naturalization of industrial capitalism at the turn of the twentieth century dampens the instincts of negation in early decades of Mills and Boon publishing. It is the post-World War II shift toward multi-national capitalism that incites a new apprehensiveness and brings it to the center of the novels’ plots.

¹⁵ An interesting parallel in recent years is the movie *You’ve Got Mail* (1998), which talks about the end of local bookstores once corporate chains start to muscle their way into the market.

¹⁶ See also Margaret Malcolm's *The Head of the House* (1969), Sally Wentworth's *The King of the Castle* (1978), Yvonne Whittall's *Bitter Enchantment* (1979). In fact, one is hard pressed to find a novel that does not at least hint at this worry.

¹⁷ McAleer notes one such instance in which she encouraged author Sara Seale to adopt a more realistic approach, since a new Labour government had come to power in 1945 (190). The impact of this emphasis on political reality on Mills and Boon authors—even when a magazine felt it unnecessary—is visible in a novel like Olive Norton's *Casualty Speaking* (1971) which connects rising crime rates to cutbacks in public spending (271).

¹⁸ See Bob Rowthorn's *The Past Strikes Back* (1983) for an assessment of the actual and projected impact of Thatcherism on British economic growth and unemployment. Rowthorn argues that British capitalism was in decline as early as after the Second World War and the situation deteriorated through the inability of successive Tory and Labour governments to implement state planning of the economy. Labour's efforts to stem the rot involved, among other things, reduction in workers' wages, and Tory policies worsened the already disadvantaged position of employees. Finally, the implementation of Thatcherist economics led to increased unemployment and a fall in production (73-74).

¹⁹ Critics have pointed out the implausibility of the Harlequin romance's quick resolution to the conflict between the hero and heroine. Since Harlequins were reprints of Mills and Boons, the critique applies to the novels under discussion here. The implausibility can now be understood to reflect the untenable nature of the populist unity Thatcherism attempted to create, aligning dominated classes with the dominant. While Stuart Hall points out that this policy exploited the problems of the Labour government's emphasis on state control of industry and persuaded dominated classes to stand with the capitalist against "creeping collectivism"/socialism, popular forms like the Mills and Boon novels seem to have found it difficult to swallow the propaganda (Hall 31). Rowthorn notes that the Thatcher government's policies relied on the joint resentment of the petite bourgeoisie and middle class toward trade unions; but the inherent disparity between bourgeoisie class interest and those of the working class and petite bourgeoisie find voice in the drawn out confrontations between the Mills and Boon hero and heroine, the end of the novel failing to create a happy resolution to their opposed positions—and thus leaving a lingering awareness of Thatcherism's sleight of hand. In this way, the fact that a significant amount of the narrative is invested in combating the hero's reach shows the genre's negatory tendencies, its admission that love can bypass this issue in fiction but not dismiss its actuality.

²⁰ Jameson outlines three markers of a text's awareness of its social ground, starting with political history (a chronological listing of events), society (narrative of class tensions) and history (the sequence of social formations arising out of different modes of production) (76).

²¹ See the Wikipedia "Reaganomics" page for more on American economic policy in the seventies and eighties.

²² Treating a text as an arena in which the sensibilities arising out of different modes of production compete for dominance is useful in this regard:

[W]ithin this final horizon the individual text or cultural artifact...is here restructured as a field of force in which the dynamics of sign systems of several distinct modes of production can be registered and apprehended. These dynamics—the newly constituted "text" of our third horizon—make up what can be termed the ideology of form, that is, the determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by the varied sign systems which coexist in a given artistic process as well as in its general social formation. (Jameson 98-9)

²³ She too occasionally combines the aristocrat and capitalist types, most recently in *It Happened One Autumn* (2005). In this novel Marcus, Lord Westcliff, is an earl who has no patience for a life of leisure. He owns a steel foundry and is also in the process of beginning a business venture with the heroine's father, a wealthy American soap manufacturer.

²⁴ Roarke's money does overtly propel the narrative in some of the novels when his enemies or people seeking his financial backing enter into the picture.

²⁵ See *Glory in Death* (1995) where she refuses a diamond pendant, accusing Roarke of trying to train her to say that she loves him as if she were a pet (64).

²⁶ See *Tender Triumph* (1983) and *Paradise* (1991). Katie Connelly, the heroine of *Tender Triumph*, is always wary of Ramon Galverra, the Puerto Rican worker/farmer who claims to be passionately in love

with her, but who she senses is concealing something important. Katie repeatedly fouls up the plans for their wedding—apparently by mistake—clearly terrified of whatever her fiancé is concealing behind his loving facade. It is worth noting that Ramon’s big secret is that he was once head of a massive corporation and lost it all due to his father’s mismanagement; in other words, a failed capitalism is the truth that he is hiding from Katie. She is happy to go through with the wedding once she learns what happened to him since she doesn’t care about his finances. What Katie fears the most before the revelation is that Ramon may be hiding a cruel personality, just like her ex-husband. A victim of brutal spousal abuse, she confuses Ramon’s suppressed capitalist nature for a potentially sadistic and violent one. Though the third-person narrative lets readers in on his secret and thus reassures us that Ramon is not a threat to her, the novel’s covert alignment of Katie’s nightmare spouse with the industrialist is a symptom of its anxiety over the benign masks capitalism may don.

Paradise is a variation on this theme of fearing and being fascinated by capitalist heroes. In this best-selling novel, Matt Farrell is the son of a factory worker whose short-lived marriage to heiress Meredith Bancroft coincides with the time when he is still working a blue-collar job. He builds his corporate empire after they separate but at various points in the novel he is believed to be immoral and dangerous, a man who manipulates the stock market, and deserted his pregnant wife. Though they are estranged, Meredith finds herself both impressed and concerned by his business strategies when they meet again. At an early point in their renewed acquaintance she betrays her belief that Matt works on the wrong side of the law by voicing the suspicion that his chauffeur, Joe O’Hara, is a mob driver; when Joe assures her of his ability to protect her because he’s “packing a rod,” she accuses Matt of employing a felon. She calls a halt to their reconciliation when she finds out that his corporation is buying up stock in her family’s business, believing that he plans to take it over and punish her father for his role in destroying their earlier relationship. She briefly also wonders if Matt had their old divorce lawyer killed, only rising to his defense when her board of directors asks her to make an official statement against him. But for a significant portion of the narrative, a reader is left feeling uneasy about Matt’s intentions where the covert stock purchase and the lawyer’s death are concerned. And as attractive as his riches appear, and as romantic his desire to use them to make Meredith happy, equally striking is her evident fear that he has profited through illegal means.²⁷ His religious beliefs are alluded to but never explicitly included in the narrative. In most cases religion is divested of a public dimension.

²⁸ Others include Maggie Graham in Shannon Drake’s *When We Touch* (2004), a social reformer engaged in teaching prostitutes about safer sex practices in nineteenth-century London, and Sidonie Saint-Godard in Liz Carlyle’s *Devil to Pay* (2005), a Robin-Hood figure.

²⁹ And even in such “aristocrat romances,” we are repeatedly reminded that the hero has *worked* for his financial success, unlike most of his peers, i.e., all his worldly goods are the bounty of capital investments.

³⁰ There are a few exceptions. See Gaelen Foley’s *His Wicked Kiss* (2006).

³¹ Examples include Joan Sutherland’s *Wynnegate Sahib* (1929) and *Edge of Empire* (1926).

³² See McAleer for a review of Mills and Boons rife with patriotic zeal (174-80).

³³ This condition had been recognized earlier as “shell shock,” “battle fatigue,” and “combat-stress reaction” in relation to soldiers. While the U.S. army refused to recognize Vietnam veterans suffering from PTSD as deserving of economic compensation, the situation has now been changed, thanks in part to the diagnosis of PTSD as a psychiatric disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1980 (“Post Traumatic Stress Disorder”). Widespread references in the media to this psychological state since then have familiarized the public with its causes (mental and physical trauma) and symptoms (shock, nightmares, depression, anxiety, etc).

³⁴ McKenna, a former army employee, and several others specialize in this sub-genre.

³⁵ Bakhtin explains the “chronotope” as a genre technique that can be used to represent historical time and space in a manageable fashion. In other words, a chronotope is not “real” time and space but some discrete elements of it, “those available in a given historical stage of human development.” *Off Limits* discussed America’s conflicts in the Middle East in the early nineties via the moment of the Vietnam War. Regency romances are historical novels whose chronotope is the time of the Napoleonic wars and late Romanticism, which “thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible”; in these novels, the space associated with the British aristocratic and gentrified world, its ballrooms and country estates, “becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (85).

³⁶ In deploying the notion of the “actant” I am borrowing again from Jameson’s analysis of Heathcliff as a “donor who must wear the functional appearance of the protagonist in order to perform his quite different actantial function” which is to be the “mediator or catalyst, designed to restore the fortunes and to rejuvenate the anemic temperament of the two families” (127). An actant here is a character who is nominally a protagonist but allows “an impersonal process, a semic transformation” to occur (127).

³⁷ The latter is a reference to the 1812 storming of Badajoz during the Spanish campaign in the Peninsular Wars. English troops plundered the town for two days before officers brought the rampage under control. Daniel is supposed to be one of these officers.

³⁸ *Loving Evangeline* was first published under the Silhouette Intimate Moments imprint as part of the “American Hero” collection.

³⁹ *All the Queen’s Men* (1999) also contains this theme of combating terrorists at all costs. It involves John Medina and Niema Burdock, CIA operatives who once worked as an anti-terrorist squad in the Middle East, and must now go undercover to break up a weapons-smuggling ring. At one point, John and Niema are searching arms dealer Louis Ronsard’s office when they hear him coming in. To avoid discovery, John makes it look as if he and Niema have been making love—and then actually proceeds to do so to make the act look convincing. A startled Niema is taken aback by his strategy, but she doesn’t really challenge his authority, validating the claim of national security as the greatest good. But it becomes evident that the novel is not fully supportive of the ideology because it feels compelled to defend the action by offering another excuse—that John has been in love with Niema for five years and she has feelings for him, too. Patriotism, eventually, cannot redeem the sexual act—turning it into prostitution in fact. The idea of mutual desire must be brought in to redeem John’s actions, with limited effect. In fact, John’s professionalism is so shocking that it is not possible to overlook it even with the romantic attachment between the two. This extreme nature of John’s actions is startling and reflects the text’s suspicion of rhetoric that urges the overriding call of patriotic duty. John’s methods call attention to his unscrupulousness and disrupt the complacent belief in the justifiability of American actions undertaken in the interest of national security. Even readers who praise the novel remark on this incident: T. Vest, who reviewed the novel on Amazon.com and rated it 4 1/2 stars says, “The rushed office seduction was not very satisfying (and a bit creepy, actually)...” while another reviewer notes, “I’m thinking there are some readers that are going to have a serious problem with a sex scene that in most states would be categorized as rape. (I guess the context of it being ‘in the line of duty’ makes it interesting but definitely puts it squarely on the kinky side of sex.)” (Uqob)

⁴⁰ As I noted in the discussion on *Lord of Ice*, Regency England is an allegory for the United States in these novels, with the Whigs standing for Democrats, Tories for Republicans, and Napoleon for whoever is deemed an enemy of the United States.

⁴¹ In 2005, *Washington Post*’s Dana Priest reported the case of a similar prejudice against a German national named Khaled Masri, arrested for having a “suspicious name.” The detainment shows the widespread belief in this association within intelligence agencies themselves.

⁴² The *Washington Post* article cited in the previous endnote mentions President Bush signing “a top secret presidential finding six days after the 9/11 attacks. It authorized an unprecedented range of covert action, including lethal measures and renditions, disinformation campaigns and cyber attacks against the al Qaeda enemy, according to current and former intelligence officials.” And in 2004, the President authorized an expansion of the CIA (“Executive Order National Counterterrorism Center”).

⁴³ According to the *Casualty Update* report dated Nov. 28, 2008 on the U.S. Department of Defense website, over 4000 American soldiers have died since the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. <<http://www.defenselink.mil/>> And TV shows like the *CBS Evening News* have had a daily segment to commemorate fallen soldiers that is a constant reminder of the mounting fatalities in the “War on Terror.”

⁴⁴ See *Dance With the Devil* (2003) for an example of the first and *Night Embrace* (2003) for the second.

⁴⁵ Kenyon also writes another contemporary series about a shadow organization, the Bureau of American Defense, and several historical romance series under the pseudonym Kinley MacGregor. All of these share the same ethos—the anguish of heroes who battle evil but pay a huge personal price.

⁴⁶ See Scott Higham and Joe Stephens’ 2004 article “New Details of Prison Abuse Emerge: Abu Ghraib Detainees’ Statements Describe Sexual Humiliation And Savage Beatings.” (A01)

⁴⁷ Sophie Cole's *Blue-Grey Magic* (1910) and Joan Sutherland's *Cophetua's Son* (1914) are two texts from Mills and Boon's first decade of publishing that addresses the distinction (real or imagined) between homosexual and homosocial attachments. Cole's novel is notable not only for its parallel narratives that involve a heterosexual and a lesbian relationship but also for its advocacy of the latter over the former. The unusualness of this plot (compared to the ones that will follow) is paralleled by the hero's complete dissimilarity to the hero who will later become the standard for the Mills and Boon imprint—the hero who is aggressive and sexually dominating toward women. *Cophetua's Son* contains a suggestion of homoeroticism as well, and is possibly one of the few texts over the next eighty years to address inter-male attachments that rival heterosexual ones.

⁴⁸ For instance, novels like *Stars of Spring* (1971) and *To Marry a Tiger* (1971) return repeatedly to the hero who looms large over the heroine's world (and body) even as his motives are cloudy and threatening. While Dom Manuel Alvares of *Stars of Spring* is a Portuguese landowner, the "tiger" of the second is an old-fashioned Sicilian nobleman. Dom Manuel blackmails the heroine into an engagement to avoid another entanglement, and the Sicilian railroad Ruth Arnold into marriage, though he is initially interested in seducing her sister. In his own way, each alpha-hero is an unknown quantity, turning to the heroine despite evidence that she is far from his sole interest and raising some doubt about his true intentions. Despite each hero's pursuit and corralling of the heroine, these novels are conscious of his distance and disinterest. The pleasure of his eventual declaration of love is in fact, thus, the pleasure of being relieved of the worry over his indifference.

⁴⁹ In *The Arrogant Duke* (1970), Juliet Lindsay, a twenty-one-year-old runaway heiress, finds her employer Duke Felipe Ricardo de Castro oddly similar to her domineering father but wonders why he excites her. She is somewhat intimidated by his title but admits that the tall, dark duke is easily the most attractive male she has ever met. The novel contains repeated references to Felipe's attractiveness, such as when he is swimming or dressed for horse riding, emphasizing his status as a desirable yet scary male who may or may not really want the heroine. He makes sexual advances toward Juliet, but she continues to doubt his intentions. He alternates between showing his desire for Juliet through kisses and embraces, and berating her for her supposed affair with an older man (who is actually her father). At the end, Juliet finds that Felipe is the ideal she has outlined at the beginning:

She was looking for no knight in shining armor, no gallant paramour to live in a rosy world of romance for the rest of her days. But she did want a man, not some weak-chinned facsimile, who was quite content to allow her father to provide him with every material need in return for marrying his daughter. (8)

Juliet's ideal man, then, is neither the faux-man willing to enter a marriage of convenience nor one content to be a chaste admirer.

Margaret Way's *Man from Bahl-Bahla* (1971) shows a similar dynamic between Kiall Ballantine and Corinne Bryant. The head of a cattle empire, Kiall lets Corinne (his aunt's secretary) know that he thinks she is a society miss playing at work. His cousin Lee tells her of his status as a ladies' man, and Corinne finds herself attracted to him as well. Their relationship is marked with several moments in which Kiall kisses her, "finding her mouth with a passion and savagery that shattered forever her aura of innocence." (98) Despite the "punishing kiss"—a Mills and Boon trademark—and multiple incidents in which Kiall rescues her from danger, he keeps an emotional distance (which he once attributes to his fear that any woman he marries may die on the ranch like his mother did.) Juliet is drawn to him but he responds with scorn, claiming she is too young for him. It is finally his confession that he fell in love with her at first sight that convinces her that he truly wants her. As in *Arrogant Duke*, *Man from Bahl-Bahla* contains the alpha-hero who says little to declare affection but acts to express desire. And unlike *Wichstone*, *Duke* and *Bahl-Bahla* leave no space open for a male rival for the hero's affection. This absence is dundered by the excessive hard-edged masculinity sported by the straight hero.

⁵⁰ Recent research into animal sexuality has, of course, challenged this long-held belief. (Smith A-9)

⁵¹ See note on the actant in "War."

⁵² Historian Hsiu-Ming Teo's current project *Loving the Orient: Representations of Arabs in Western Women's Popular Culture* provides a thorough history of this tradition.

⁵³ This worry possibly stems from the development that finally allowed women to claim control over their fertility—oral contraception. The use of the Birth control pill was approved by the U.S. FDA in 1960 and it

began to be marketed in England two years later (“Birth Control”). The anxiety in *Sandstorm* and other novels like it reflects the social anxiety that this bid for control of the female reproductive system has driven men away.

⁵⁴ One may also consider the example of another Whittall novel, *Man from Amazibu Bay* (1980), which shows a new version of the Mills and Boon hero. Scott Beresford begins to openly pursue Anna Lindsey as soon as they meet, and he marries her mid-way into the novel. But she is skeptical of their commitment to the union, even if somewhat surprised by the fact that she enjoys their sex life. Unlike Jake, Scott does not claim to feel any love for Anna even after they marry, the implication being that he is just a highly sexed man who happens to find her attractive. His ex-girlfriend, Joan, and Anna’s ex-boyfriend are recurring presences and both incite jealousy and threaten to bring about a divorce until the very end when Scott dismisses Joan and declares his love for his wife.

⁵⁵ *Bitter Enchantment* is set in South Africa, but the characters’ nationality does not detract from their Anglo-Saxon identity.

⁵⁶ Time line also adapted “from LGBT Rights in Canada”

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_in_Canada).

⁵⁷ His resemblance to the Mills and Boon-Harlequin heroes who exchange money for rights to the heroine is fully explored in a prior chapter.

⁵⁸ Play, Bakhtin has demonstrated, is a distinguishing feature of novelistic texts. Unlike literary forms that are complete and self-containedly serious, novels contest generic concretization, choosing to incorporate laughter and parody in order to accurately represent incomplete and living reality.

⁵⁹ Lest one suspect that this incident is meant to appeal to the reader’s voyeuristic instincts, it must be noted that it is a recollected event, rather than one directly available to the reader. The second-hand narrative does not permit readers to gaze at the episode uninterrupted.

⁶⁰ Epstein discusses the political shift toward conservatism at some length (72-3).

⁶¹ See Helen Brooks’ *The Irresistible Tycoon* (2002), Kim Lawrence’s *The Playboy’s Mistress* (2002), Carol Marinelli’s *The Italian’s Touch* (2003), and Catherine George’s *Sarah’s Secret* (2004).

⁶² Many readers share the opinion that Jules’s story was the primary plot and making it secondary to the heterosexual one was an error:

My interest was not piqued however by the ostensible main story - the romance between Cosmo and Jane and the suspense of the death threats against Jane. To be honest, those stories were somewhat formulaic, if more than competently done. No, what kept me intrigued was the story I thought was the one Ms. Brockmann truly wanted to tell - the story of Jules and Robin. Those characters, as well as the third point in their triangle - Adam, were well-drawn, realistic, and compelling. ... To me, a good love story is a good love story and I would have gladly read a book about those characters alone, without the ‘necessity’ of the standard heterosexual romance. (Camille)

As a woman with a gay family member, it was so refreshing to read a book where the gay characters were treated no differently than the straight characters, rather than as asexual sidekicks or evil sexual predators! (Barbara T.)

⁶³ Robin’s statement comes on the heels of a long operation in which Jules is trying to stop a terrorist from entering the U.S. Both men are nearly killed during it but manage to stay alive. Robin, who has been worried about the effect that coming out would have on his career as a Hollywood leading man, says in his press conference, “Oh, and for those of you—like my former agent—who think that a gay man can’t play an action hero in a movie? You really need to meet my partner. This past weekend, he helped save the world. Again.” (363)

⁶⁴ <http://www.booktalkauthors.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=1467&highlight=brokeback>

⁶⁵ She ends the acknowledgements as follows:

Last but not least, thank you to PFLAG—Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays—an organization dedicated to changing attitudes and creating an environment of understanding so that gay family members and friends can live with dignity and respect. For more information, go to www.pflag.org. (x)

⁶⁶ Warner notes that Cheryl Turner, in *Living by the Pen*, has overturned this belief, showing that novel readers included both genders and men were as likely to read absorptively as women were to read critically. Misogyny played a significant role in gendering the novel reader in the anti-novel discourse (140-41).

⁶⁷ For the purposes of this chapter, the covers of Mills and Boons hard cover novels will be treated as representative of romance dust jackets before the paperback revolution impacted romance publishing, since the covers of romances put out by other firms like Hodder and Stoughton were quite similar. Unfortunately, little is known about the artists who designed these covers. When it comes to American paperback romances, the early decades showed some influence of pulp design and the erotic look emerged in the seventies but these were variations on the same melody, so to speak. Jennifer McKnight-Trontz emphasizes the commonalities in the romance covers across the work of several illustrators in *The Look of Love: The Art of the Romance Novel* (2002).

⁶⁸ While the cover illustration of *The Girl Who Saved His Honour* (1914) has been taken from a collection of Harlequin Mills and Boon cover postcards, all other illustrations from novels published before 1970 (and a few after as well) are from original research done at the Cambridge University Library. Though Mills and Boon has a substantial archive dating back to the first decade of the company's operation, it was not open to researchers when this writer asked for access in 2005 and the British Library's collection of dust jackets from this era was not cataloged and therefore inaccessible as well.

⁶⁹ See Valerie K. Nelson's *Crystal Clear* (1939).

⁷⁰ Kenneth Davis notes that even though paperbound books had begun to be printed as early as the eighteenth century, the trend only took off with the establishment of Penguin Books in England and Pocket Books in the United States in this decade (32-4). Davis provides a comprehensive look at the controversy surrounding paperbacking and reveals how it contributed to the disapprobation directed at the romance genre as well. Moreover, his own treatment of paperbacks serves to prove my argument that book covers play a role in critical judgments on paperbacks, especially romance novels.

⁷¹ Barthes explicates the concepts of the "writerly" text that calls on the reader's involvement versus the "readerly" text that falls into familiar and easy patterns in *S/Z* (1970).

⁷² Ann Deering's *Journey to Romance* (1947) includes the embrace, while Jean Macleod's *This Much to Give* (1945) is clearly inspired by WW-II.



Fig. 39. *Journey to Romance* (1947)



Fig. 40. *This Much to Give* (1945)

Joseph McAleer includes more wartime dust jackets in *Passion's Fortune*.

⁷³ See Jan Tempest's *Enchanted Valley* (1954) and Valerie K. Nelson's *The Man Between* (1951) and *The Fair Stranger* (1959)

⁷⁴ For instance, *The Fair Stranger* (1959) and *Mr. Arrogant* (1960). The establishment of this sub-genre is doubtless the result of the impact of the war—both in terms of its resultant casualties and the growth of work opportunities for women.

⁷⁵ Weinraub includes this conversation on the gothic:

"In gothic romance books, like high adventure, there's never any sex," says Mr. Gregory. "The girl is always looking longingly. She's always walking up or down a staircase. She's always holding a candle and there's always a room that no one unlocks."

...Mr. Gregory said with a laugh: "There may be a man's hand on her shoulder, but it won't lead to the bedroom."

"Until they get married." said Miss Temple.

"Until they get married." Mr. Gregory repeated.

⁷⁶ Examples abound; see two more examples below:

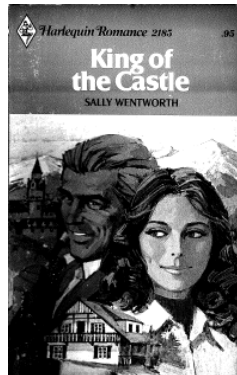


Fig. 41. *King of the Castle* (1978)

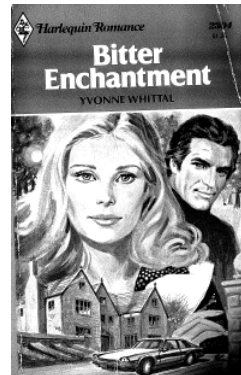


Fig. 42. *Bitter Enchantment* (1979)

⁷⁷ Other examples include

The publishers are proud to present these beautiful love stories in two series—Harlequin Romances and Harlequin Presents—now wherever paperbacks are sold.

Intriguing plots, heartwarming characters, exciting travel, the joy of love—an entertaining combination in what is the first reading choice of women throughout the world.

⁷⁸ Summing up his study with the state of publishing in the eighties, Davis considers the “homogenized output” created by publishers to be an effect of the collapse of the division between hardcover and paperback and the increasing similarity between mass market and trade paperbacks (381). He traces the collapse to an elitist mindset that believes the common people lack the sensibility for better reading material. Insisting that it is faulty logic to argue that if 70% of buyers are women, 70% of the product should cater to their preferences—a move in which he implies that women have poor taste—he indicts bookstore chains of fostering “Fast Food Reading for the Millions” (384-86).

⁷⁹ The sub-genres also begin to be labeled on the covers, such as on Frances Crowne’s *Side Effects of Love* (1987) in which the Mills and Boon name is divided by the rose and appears at the top, followed by two bands of color, one of which contains the identifier “Doctor Nurse Romance.” The actual title and the name of the author appear below this marker. A curved line separates the text from the image, which shows a nurse, arms akimbo, in the foreground and a suited man holding a stethoscope in the background, his eyes focused at her. (*Savage Pagan*, on the other hand, is marked simply as “Romance,” while the 1990 reprint of Carole Mortimer’s *An Unwilling Desire* (1984) is a “Best Seller Romance.”)

⁸⁰ See “Selling Books Like Tide” (Dougherty).

⁸¹ *The Delaneys* was a collection of romance novels about one family published under the Bantam Loveswept imprint. Here is one of the novel covers, which illuminates the root of Salmans’s bias:

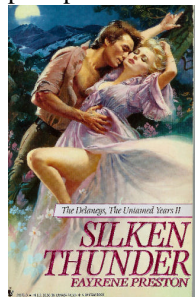


Fig. 43. *Silken Thunder* (1988)

⁸² As Salmans puts it,

[R]omance publishers are scrambling to keep a readership that increasingly is crossing over to romantic but mainstream novelists like Danielle Steele. To compete, some publishers are trying to

establish identities and followings for specific writers - a break with the romance genre tradition of invented and fanciful author names.

They are trying to develop new categories of readers, adding young-adult romances, sci-fi romances, even Christian romances, to the usual Regencies and floral historicals. "It doesn't take long for the market to get saturated, as our readers read so many of the books," said Carol Thurston, a marketing consultant, who published a study of the genre, called "The Romance Revolution," for the University of Illinois Press.

Publishers are also fiddling with the romance formula, introducing divorced or widowed heroines who are dealing with stormy children as well as with lovers.

⁸³ The article ends with a parody of a supposedly typical romance in which Kastner relates how a divorced Roberts fell in love with her carpenter, the man who convinced her, a gun-shy, trembling woman, to marry him.

She had it all: her success, her sons, her California beach house, her haven in the Maryland woods.

But... she gazed out her window at the yearning green forest, green as her youthful dreams of love. But... she was through with love. Through with men.

But... then there was Bruce: tall, gentle, bearded. She had hired him to renovate her bedroom. Bruce built a skylight, flooding all the room's dark hidden corners with light.

But... when the job was done, Bruce wouldn't quit. He began by offering to make dinner. But... now he was talking about marriage. No! No! she fought it with every muscle in her lithe, slim body. Not the M-word! . . .

But... three years ago, Nora and Bruce were married.

You know it's a true story. In a Silhouette romance, you'd never have a hero named Bruce.

The article thus insults both Roberts' life and her novels, presenting both as a series of melodramatic moments that end with a woman's submission to a man.

⁸⁴ Besides tags, Harlequin also added sub-lines within the main imprint, lines such as "Mistress Material" and "Secret Passions," with the line title placed in a secondary band across the top of the book.

⁸⁵ I suspect, however, that the strategy evokes the Mills and Boon myth contained in the term, i.e. "lover" functions as more than titillation—experienced readers would see it and pick up the novel because the term has already been established as code for heroes who are not just sexually adept but eventually show or declare their love without reservation.

⁸⁶ As noted earlier, the anti-novel discourse expressed similar apprehensions. The argument was, as Warner notes, "that the female reader will easily receive the impressions to which she is exposed, and will therefore imitate novels most automatically.... The figure of the woman reader eroticizes reading through the presumption of an automatic relay: if a reader reads erotic novels, she will act out by having sex" (141).

⁸⁷ Hern suspects that the "object" covers are an attempt to give the novels an "upscale" look while the landscape covers mimic the packaging of the "women's fiction" genre and give the impression of "softness," even if it is for a fast-paced or angst-ridden romance. She then lists the trend of showing a partially clothed couple in medium close-up, usually with "cropped pictures of partial bodies, almost always headless, and very sexy," and the related trend of single female figures with exposed backs. These covers are re-employing bodies on the front (without stepbacks) but posing them differently to afford a key-hole perspective. There are also covers that zoom in on other parts of the female anatomy such as hands or feet. Despite the other long trend of displaying the female body on historical romance covers, however, there has also been a new interest in displaying just the male figure, usually a smooth, mostly unclothed chest in medium close-up.

Barbara Freehy adds to Hern's article by discussing the changes in contemporary single title romances. She compares the stylistic changes in the sub-genre from the nineties to this decade, and noted that while the former included novels with houses, beaches, and Adirondack chairs, the newer books had an edgier comic-book style look. Novels that had been printed with soft vistas in the nineties were reprinted with a suspenseful, harder tone and authors whose works had been seen in more somber covers (single color backgrounds, sober fonts) had novels with less bland, more specific evocations. Hern had also noted that authors' names began to dominate the covers during the appearance of landscapes, dwarfing titles and images. It would appear that while the publishers tried house styles in the past, the new trend was to either

raise the visibility of the author or highlight the sub-genre (mystery, comedy, etc). And unlike the series, single-title romances were moving toward a more individualized appearance.

⁸⁸ Author Candice Hern also picks up on the fact that landscape covers are usually matched with very prominent author names, perhaps a visible attempt to distinguish an author's distinctive style from both that of other authors and from the reductive "bodice-ripper" category.

⁸⁹ Take, for instance, the following cover for Hern's *Her Scandalous Affair* (2004):



Fig. 44. *Her Scandalous Affair* (2004)

⁹⁰ In a 1999 AAR discussion, a reader named Pam said that she likes to see a couple on the cover, too, but only if they do not appear to be on the brink of sexual intercourse.

⁹¹ Irvin does grant that there are cases where the male figure alone is acceptable if the cover most accurately represents the particular romance. In her analysis of Laura Kinsale's *Flowers From the Storm* cover, which she claims to have initially disliked, Irvin notes how accurately the artist has depicted the hero, a man with partial facial paralysis. Admiring the play of light and dark (which represents the hero's transformation), and approving of the pose, which is in fact a scene from the conclusion, Irvin argues that it would be a wonderful story-specific cover if the man was not shown wearing the stereotypical billowy unbuttoned shirt.

⁹² Leavis is bitingly critical of the fiction magazines of the 1920s, decrying their editorial policy of publishing stories that will "Give the Public what it wants" (36).

⁹³ These new currents are good examples of the fluid reality that Bakhtin claims is effectively tackled only by the novel form (11-12).

⁹⁴ Leavis argues that little can be gained by talking to readers because they are unreflective:

The relation between novelist and reader can be most successfully studied by interrogating the more conscious of the two: the question, Why do you read X's novels? asked even of many hundreds of readers, yields little (the writer has tried a good deal of mild inquiry of this sort); the fact that they read X's novels and not Y's, that X's novels are doing this and not that, is more reliable evidence... (48)

⁹⁵ In *The Alienated Reader* Fowler postulates that romance readers are women deprived of economic and political autonomy and desire fiction that compensates for a life of hardship while Radway has suggested that all readers use romances to satisfy a longing for a caregiver—the absent mother.

⁹⁶ As she puts it,

I do not think it should qualify as a decline, it is all a matter of taste. There is without a doubt an evolution of romance that means that certain types of books are less in demand than previously or at least not published as much. For instance, I am not sure if readers have as much patience in reading a book as they did even a decade ago... a book can be torched if it is considered "slow" or "long". The pace is faster and hotter now. The expectations of readers are different. Perhaps there is even a polarization in what people want—beautiful fantasy and gritty fantasy. There was less humor in historical romance in bygone days and more now. This is not bad, just different. I like all types of romance novels and enjoy many of the books being released, but I also think there is room for other authors and books too. What I wish was that there was more allowance for greater diversity—I feel there are gaps in what is being published—but this is not necessarily a reflection of historical romance entirely, but perhaps the culture that produces it.
(<http://avonauthors.com/bb/messages/41425.shtml>)

⁹⁷ The idea is a familiar one. Ian Watt, for instance, in his definition of the novel as a path-breaking literary form, treats formal realism as its premier feature:

Formal realism, in fact, is the narrative embodiment of a premise that Defoe and Richardson accepted very literally, but which is implicit in the novel form in general: the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience.... (32)

⁹⁸ The oppositional nature is central to novelistic forms, though it must be acknowledged that Bakhtin links this notion to that of parody and the genre is not fully carnivalesque because it does not employ parody or play consistently. For Bakhtin, parodic forms surge at the moment the novel is in ascendance, mocking traditional literature by deflating it. This parodic nature, this self-conscious use of both common language and humor, defines the novelistic text. Romance fiction as a whole does not always attain this standard but many individual novels contain that oppositional tendency.

⁹⁹ In distinguishing between autodidacts and legitimate holders of cultural capital, Bourdieu says “Because he has not acquired his culture in the legitimate order established by the educational system, the autodidact constantly betrays by his very anxiety about the right classification, the arbitrariness of his classifications and therefore of his knowledge...” (328).

¹⁰⁰ See endnote on the “readerly” and “writerly” text in “The Look of the Book.”

¹⁰¹ Some posters on the Avon board argue that extensive analysis inevitably led to a loss of pleasure in the object under scrutiny and a tendency to focus on flaws.

¹⁰² The oldest son’s romance was *Devil’s Bride* (1998) and the younger’s, *Scandal’s Bride* (1999).

¹⁰³ For over two decades, Lindsey has written stories of various members of the Mallory family, and *The Present* (1998), like *The Promise in a Kiss*, was a relatively late narration of the romance of the couple that established the dynasty.

¹⁰⁴ As TJ put it,

I am turned off when the hero abuses [the] heroine sexually or verbally. And I despise the heroine if she still gets aroused and let him to it. Shouldn't his nasty words leave her cold even when he's stimulating her clitoris, breasts, whatever? If I were her, I would have blown the bastard's brains out. (excuse me for my language) I don't feel degraded. I feel infuriated!” And speaking of wedding-night rapes in some romances, Grace added, “Can you imagine your husband doing that to you (mine would be comatose)?

¹⁰⁵ In fact, this argument reveals some readers’ discomfort with the treatment of the historical period as a chronotope that evokes the gender struggles of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

¹⁰⁶ Some readers also insist that the presence of the mistress is significant because the hero’s move to renounce her functions as a non-verbal gesture of his emotional involvement with the heroine—i.e., the renunciation is a vital moment affirming the strength of the hero’s attachment to the heroine.

¹⁰⁷ See “The Look of the Book” chapter for other causes of this image.

¹⁰⁸ In the AAR discussion, readers listed authors like Susan Johnson, Thea Devine and Bertrice Small as guilty of employing weak plots as alibis for crude sex but did not mention Schone at all. While she was just entering the genre and may not have been as widely known, it may also mean that her particular representation of realistic sexuality was regarded as conforming to the romance standard readers insisted on.

¹⁰⁹ She recalls, “From that point on I would call my books smut books or I believed that my books didn't have the same value as a John Grisham or another “popular” author.”

¹¹⁰ Silvana’s reference to the university holds within it the constant awareness of the academic standard that supposedly always finds the genre lacking. This awareness of formal academic disapproval—real or perceived—is also present at various moments in these multilogs and is addressed below.

¹¹¹ Nancy attempts in the list to justify the genre on its own ground and also to bridge the gap between romance and other kinds of fiction:

1. The heroine is ALWAYS satisfied, 99 times out of a 100, she goes first...
2. In historicals, the men fold and put their clothes up before they come to bed, lol
3. I LIKE reading about people who only have to worry about the servants overhearing; they have nannies and nurses for the children, cooks, maids, washer-women for the clothes...
4. I'm a whiz at trivial pursuit...you don't realize how many facts you pick up subconsciously by “just” reading...
5. the book is ALWAYS better than the movie

6. there's a reason that romances sell better than any other genre out there...A LOT of
 SOMEBODIES are buying these books!!
 I always ask...why aren't YOU reading romance??
 DO YOU.....
 like Stephen King? We have Sherrilyn, Christine Feehan, et al.
 like mysteries & thrillers? We have Nora [Roberts], Catherine Coulter, Linda Howard, etc.
 like short stories? We have anthologies galore
 like Bridget Jones, etc.? We have TONS of chick lit writers! Where do you think Helen Fielding got her fan
 base??
 watch Law & Order/CSI? read a Bombshell
 see Casanova? Pirates of the Caribbean? read an AVON author!!

¹¹² Readers sometimes claim that spouses have “benefited” from the wife’s/girlfriend’s reading of the
 sexual episodes. The recurrent recounting of supportive spouses reaping sexual benefits from their
 wives’/girlfriends’ romance-reading may seem incompatible with readers’ anger at those who refer to
 romance as “porn” (a genre aligned with sexual desire that is devoid of any other consideration). But this
 situation is not completely contradictory to the women’s claims, since their posts reveal that the expression
 of any romance novel-induced desire is confined to the relationship they are in, echoing the ideal romance
 narrative’s morality.

¹¹³ In her 1984 work, Radway has mentioned that readers favored a “spunky” heroine; as this multilog
 shows, in the last two decades readers have adopted that very spunkiness to defend the genre.

¹¹⁴ Authors added to this discussion on the positive attitudes towards the genre, recalling complementary
 letters, as in the case of Sabrina Jeffries: “[I] recently got a fan letter from an army captain stationed in Iraq
 . . . who, when he is on leave, reads them and enjoys them WITH his wife, in front of the fireplace. He says
 they find that reading romances is a fun way to enhance intimacy.” She also notes that her own husband
 “has NEVER once made fun of [my novels], however, in all the years I’ve known him. I guess he knows
 that if he did, I would brain him.” Author Shana Galen, who had elsewhere on the thread mentioned that
 her relatives call her work “porn,” describes her fiancé’s support of her writing: “... he reads all my books
 and loves to talk to me about what I’m working on. When he sees a book or an article by an author I’ve
 mentioned, he tells me about the sighting. He was so excited at the RWA [Romance Writers of America]
 conference in Reno last summer because he was one of the first to spot Nora Roberts in the bar. Now, the
 man has never read a Nora Roberts book in his life, but he’s heard me talk about her and so he gets excited.
 That’s what love is.”

¹¹⁵ While I analyze media commentary on the genre in detail in “The Look of the Book,” I use this article
 here to demonstrate how readers analyze formal critiques (as distinct from the ones they encounter in daily
 interactions with acquaintances).

¹¹⁶ The thread is titled “About that Time Magazine Article.”

¹¹⁷ See “About that Time Magazine Article-Romance Lovers Respond.”

¹¹⁸ As she puts it, “Why didn’t they have some smarmy article about how Clancy finally achieved that long-
 sought goal of masculinity---a billion bucks in the bank and a new young wife?”

¹¹⁹ She excerpts the following sections from Spender:

The deprecation of women’s writing is not based on a close study of the writing; rather the term
 romance is used to indicate that such writing does not warrant close study. Once classified as
 romance, women’s writing can be disqualified from analysis. Which put very simply means that
 you do not have to read them to know they are awful. [...]

You just call them romance and then all persons of proper taste and judgement will know such
 novels are not worth bothering about” . . .

The issue must be that this is nothing other than name calling. That the literary establishment has
 outlawed women writers by giving them and their writing a bad name and by establishing the
 reality that there is no need to read women’s writing, for it can be taken for granted that it is no
 good.

¹²⁰ Teresa cites Davies’s argument as well:

I repeat that I do not see anything new or anything reprehensible with the taste which leans towards Harlequin books. In an earlier day the story teller, or shanachie, at the fireside satisfied the taste for narrative. In our day, when everybody can read, the Harlequin does the same thing and it is dangerous to condemn stories as junk which satisfy the deep hunger of millions of people. These books are not literary art, but a great deal of what is acclaimed as literary art in our time offers no comfort or fulfillment to anybody.

¹²¹ De Certeau opposes the “tactic” to the “strategy,” the latter being the operation of the power structure: The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain impeded on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means to *keep to* itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a maneuver “with the enemy’s field of vision,” as Von Bulow put it, and within enemy territory...It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow.... It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. (36-7)

¹²² *Give Me Tonight* is a historical romance overlaid with a time-travel plot because Addie is actually a nurse from the 1930s who finds herself living the life of another Addie in the 1880s.

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Appendix: Romance Novel Reading Survey

Please write N/A if the question is not applicable to your reading practices. You may add an extra sheet if you need more space for an answer. Please indicate the number for the question and answer clearly. Thank you for your time!

1. What is the highest educational degree you have obtained?

High School (S.S.C., C.B.S.E., I.C.S.E., other state certificate.)

Pre-College Degree level (H.S.C, 12th standard, etc.)

Bachelor's Degree (B.A., B.Sc., B.Com, etc.)

Master's Degree (M.A., M.Sc., M.Com, etc.)

Doctoral Degree (Ph.D.)

2. What was your major or special subject in college?
3. How many languages do you know? Please name them.
4. Which language was the primary medium of instruction in your educational career?
5. What career are you pursuing (or trained for)?
6. Note some of your hobbies and extra-curricular activities.
7. On average, how many books do you read in a month?
8. Do you currently read romance novels?
9. How many romance novels do (did) you read each month? (Mills and Boon, Loveswept, Silhouette, historical or contemporary single titles, etc.)
10. When did you begin reading romance novels? (Note your age.)
11. How were you introduced to the genre? (Family member, friend, library, bookstore, or any other medium.)
12. Where do (did) you obtain romances?
13. How do you pick the next romance novel? (Tick all that apply)

Author (Please name)

Title

Summary on the back

Cover

Series title (such as Mills and Boon, Silhouette, etc. Please name.)

Other: (Explain)

14. How long does it take you to finish reading a romance?
15. Do you discuss your reading with other romance readers?
16. Describe the attitude of people you know to romance novels.
17. Have you noticed any changes in romance novels since the time you began reading them?
18. Are you aware of any particular plot-line or story element that you prefer to read in a romance? Please describe.
19. Is there anything in particular that you dislike or would like to see changed in the romances you read?
20. Do you know if reading romances has affected your attitudes or beliefs—political, social, economic? Please describe.
21. Please describe any other ways romance reading has affected you.
22. If you no longer read romances, can you describe when and why you stopped?