

THE ROMANCE NOVEL AND WOMEN'S BONDAGE

More than any other literary genre, the romance novel has been misunderstood by mainstream literary culture—book review editors, reviewers themselves, writers and readers of other genres, and, especially, literary critics. Deborah Kaye Chappel has characterized critical response to the romance novel as a “dogged insistence on containment and reduction” (5). Even the most cursory survey of criticism of this genre yields a ringing condemnation of it: critical characterization of the romance novel is overwhelmingly negative. The titles alone of critical works on the genre attest to widely based censure. Romance novels are badly written: consult Rachel Anderson’s *The Purple Heart Throbs: The Sub-literature of Love*. These novels are schlock: Julia Bettinotti and Pascale Noizet title their book *Guimauves et fleurs d’oranger* (Insipid novels and orange blossoms). They are capitalist tools: read Paul Grescoe’s *Merchants of Venus: Inside Harlequin and the Empire of Romance*. While a reader’s rejection of the romance novel merely reflects her taste, a critic’s published rejection is supposed to be the result of analysis based on clear reasoning and sufficient evidence. The critic’s condemnation, especially when it is shared by a number of other critics, stands as a plausible evaluation of the genre unless it is answered.

Critical rejection of the romance novel emanated from the wave of feminism that arose in the 1960s. Germaine Greer, one

of the leaders of that movement, inaugurated the modern criticism of the romance novel in 1970, striking a theme that becomes a commonplace in subsequent criticism—that of the romance novel as an enslaver of women: “The traits invented for [the hero in romance novels] have been invented by women cherishing the chains of their bondage. . . . Such . . . creatures [heroes of this type] do not exist, but very young women in the astigmatism of sexual fantasy are apt to recognize them where they do not exist” (176). Earlier criticism of the romance novel had also found the genre lacking, but fell short of attacking it as an enslaver. In *Pamela’s Daughters*, Robert Palfrey Utter and Gwendolyn Bridges Needham mix objective literary historical research with a dismissive tone as they survey heroines from the eighteenth century to the twentieth. At no point, however, do they accuse the novels of enslaving the reader. Greer is the first to accuse the romance novel of putting the reader in bondage, and her charge echoes through subsequent critical condemnations.

Critics line up to condemn Harlequin Romances, a series of short romance novels issued monthly. Like other novels marketed as easily recognizable brands, they are known as “categories.” Their popularity surged in the 1970s, and they have remained a vigorous part of the market, often serving as a training ground for writers who go on to write longer, more complex books. Of these shorter books, Tania Modleski concluded in her 1982 study, “The heroine of the novels can achieve happiness only by undergoing a complex process of self-subversion, during which she sacrifices her aggressive instincts . . . and—nearly—her life” (*Loving with a Vengeance* 37). For Modleski, the heroine’s bondage (and presumably the reader’s as well) is self-imposed. Leslie W. Rabine claims: “[Harlequins] work to recuperate women’s subversive fantasies into structures of patriarchal power” (188). Here the chains of the reader’s mental bondage are forged by the male-dominated society. Keya Ganguly sees the reader’s bondage as political. For her, certain themes in romance novels “bolster the New Right’s colonizing of ‘family’ values and the reactionary articulation of morality as inhering in monogamy, motherhood and heterosexuality.” Thus these novels reflect the “heterosexist family ideology of our culture” (144). Looking again at Harlequins, Susan Ostrov Weisser sees the bondage operating on an interpersonal level: “The good heroine and her wonderful/terrible rival push or clash against one another but never talk to each other about their situation with anything like interest or curiosity, never work together to accomplish a goal, never imagine for each other the possibility of a female-female relation outside a narrative centered on a man

as the coveted prize” (278). These critics would have it that Harlequins reinforce what Greer called “bondage” on any number of levels.

Other critics, when they shift their sights to romance novels other than Harlequins, still condemn the genre. Kay Mussell finds a reinforcement of the traditional feminine role: “[T]he essential assumptions of romance formulas—belief in the primacy of love in a woman’s life, female passivity in romantic relationships, support for monogamy in marriage, reinforcement of domestic values—have not faded.” For her, these novels fail “to elaborate mature and triumphant models for female life beyond marriage, motherhood, and femininity” (*Fantasy* 189). For Jan Cohn, “[t]he deep flaw of romance fiction . . . lies in the ultimate failure of romance to provide, even in fantasy, a satisfying answer to the problem of women’s powerlessness” (176). For Jeanne Dubino, readers of these books use them to fill an emptiness in their lives: “Not finding what they want in ‘real’ life, millions of women turn to romances in a vicarious attempt to compensate for the lack of attention and validation they get in their own lives” (107). Anne Cranny-Francis, interested in the feminist use of a variety of popular literary forms, explains why the romance novel is the most difficult genre to turn to feminist ends: “Romantic fiction . . . encodes the most coherent inflection of the discourses of gender, class and race constitutive of the contemporary social order; it encodes the bourgeois fairy-tale” (192). In their claims that romance novels are directed at female “passivity” (Mussell) and “powerlessness” (Cohn), that they “compensate” for the deficiencies of real life (Dubino), or that they “encode the bourgeois fairy-tale” (Cranny-Francis), these critics reduce romance readers to a state of child-like helplessness, and the novels themselves to the sort of books that such children read. These critics of the romance novel would have it that Greer’s “bondage” is, for romance heroines and readers, manifested by a (reading) life shaped by infantile fairy tales.

Some of the charges critics make against the romance novel are based on faulty reasoning. Many critics who conclude that the romance novel enslaves its readers are guilty of hasty generalization. Their evidence is scant given the breadth of the conclusions they offer. Consider three prominent studies of romance novels published in the 1980s. Mariam Darce Frenier in *Good-Bye Heathcliff* read category romances published from 1979 through 1987 to chart the changing power of the romance heroine and to discover what this change might “tell us . . . about white American women’s fear or acceptance of feminism and feminists” (4). Radway in *Reading the Romance*, the single most influential work on the romance novel,

examined a lone group of romance readers who favored one subgenre of the romance novel—the sensual long historical—yet she drew broad conclusions about “the romance-reading process” on that basis alone (215). Modleski in *Loving with a Vengeance* read Harlequins (along with gothics and soap operas) and on that evidence drew sweeping conclusions about what constitutes “narrative pleasure for women” (32).

Each of these three critics examines a narrow segment of the late twentieth-century romance novel market to draw her conclusions. Frenier reads only category romances published during a nine-year period. Radway is widely quoted as the expert on romance novels, yet her book focuses on one narrow segment of the twentieth-century market, the sensual long historical, and then she examines only twenty of those titles identified as “ideal” by the group of readers she chose to study. Modleski’s examination is limited to Harlequins; she cites just nine of them. Yet these critics make conclusions about the romance genre as a whole or about an unacceptably broad section of it. Frenier speaks of the “newer romance” in her conclusion (105). Radway’s conclusion, like her title, specifies “the” romance (215). Although Modleski confines her conclusions to the Harlequins she has read, other critics make the leap to “the romance” as a whole when they use her conclusions. These authors of three of the founding texts in the criticism of the romance novel all generalize hastily.

The error continues, as two more recent articles from the next generation of critics of the romance novel demonstrate. Ganguly, exploring the politics of “resistant readings of hegemonic texts,” cites just seven Harlequins, which she describes as “typical romance novels” and from which she draws sweeping conclusions (143). Weisser, exploring the “bitch” figure in Harlequins, cites only two romances, yet she makes claims about “the plot of *the* Harlequin novel” (278, emphasis added). The practice of these critics reflects the widespread assumption that a very small sample of contemporary works can yield conclusions applicable to a whole range of romance novels. The 1992 reprinting of a chapter from Modleski’s *Loving with a Vengeance* implies, as well, that generalizations made about the older books still apply to recent ones. Hasty generalization has become something of a habit among critics of the romance novel.

Out of this error arises condemnation. Critics mistake the romance novel’s effects because they do not know, precisely, what a romance novel is. They equate the genre as a whole with a formula (a subset of the larger genre) or they identify it in terms of incidental elements, such as the sex scenes (which are widespread but not essential in a romance novel). This

impoverished view of the genre results, in part, from a narrow acquaintance with it: critics misunderstand the extent and significance of the genre’s literary history. They generalize hastily from a small group of texts to the genre as a whole.

In a genre as old, as flexible, and as ill defined as the romance novel, it is, perhaps, understandable that many critics would mistake a few texts as representative of the whole. The repeated commission of this simple logical error is a barometer of critics’ disdain for their subject matter, but the romance is not the first form to be disdained and misunderstood by critics. Indeed, the novel itself suffered this dismissive attitude for most of the two centuries of its popularity.

If this error—hasty generalization—were the only problem with criticism of the romance novel, the corrective would be a more comprehensive examination of carefully chosen representatives of the genre. Indeed, I undertake this examination in Parts III and IV. But the critics make a second mistake: they attack the romance novel for its happy ending in marriage. This claim is not a product of hasty generalization because the happy ending in marriage (or in betrothal, the promise of marriage) is a formal feature of every romance novel. If the genre really deserves the respect of critics, and I think it does, then this attack must be examined and answered.