schoolroom. And because of Georgette Heyer's innocence and lack of prurience we can still retreat into this Paradise of ideal solutions, knowing it for what it is, comforted by its temporary actuality, nostalgically refreshed for coping with the quite different tangle of preconceptions, conventions and social emphases we have to live with. Which is what good escape literature is about.


... Exploiting the sexual success of the Byronic hero in an unusually conscious way, Georgette Heyer created the archetype of the plastic age, Lord Worth, the Regency Buck. He is a fine example of a stereotype which most heroes of romantic fiction resemble more or less, whether they are dashing young men with an undergraduate sense of humor who congratulate the vivacious heroine on her pluck (the most egalitarian in conception) in the adventure stories of the thirties, or King Cophetua and the beggar maid.

He was the epitome of a man of fashion. His beaver hat was set over black locks carefully brushed into a semblance of disorder; his cravat of starched muslin supported his chin in a series of beautiful folds, his driving coat of drab cloth bore no less than fifteen capes, and a double row of silver buttons. Miss Taverner had to own him a very handsome creature, but found no difficulty in detesting the whole cast of his countenance. He had a look of self-consequence; his eyes, ironically surveying her from under world-weary lids, were the hardest she had ever seen, and betrayed no emotion but boredom. His nose was too straight for her taste. His mouth was very well-formed, firm but thin-lipped. She thought he sneered.

Worse than all was his languor. He was uninterested, both in having dexterously averted an accident, and in the gig’s plight. His driving had been magnificent; there must be unexpected strength in those elegantly gloved hands holding the reins in such seeming carelessness, but in the name of God why must he put on such an air of dandified affectation?1

Nothing such a creature would do could ever be corny. With such world-weary lids! With the features and aristocratic contempt which opened the doors of polite society to Childe Harold, and the titillating threat of unexpected strength! Principally, we might notice, he exists through his immaculate dressing—Beau Brummell is one of his friends—but when he confronts this spectacle—

She had rather have had black hair; she thought the fairness of her gold curls insipid. Happily, her brows and lashes were dark, and her eyes which were startlingly blue (in the manner of a wax doll, she once scornfully told her brother) had a directness and fire which gave a great deal of character to her face. At first glance one might write her down a mere Dresden china miss, but a second glance would inevitably discover the intelligence in her eyes, and the decided air of resolution in the curve of her mouth.2

Of course her intelligence and resolution remain happily confined to her eyes and the curve of her mouth, but they provide the excuse for her naughty behavior toward Lord Worth, who turns out to be that most titillating of all titillating relations, her young guardian, by an ingeniously contrived mistake. He, confronting her in this charming dress—“a plain

2 Ibid., p. 5.
round gown of French cambric, frilled around the neck with scolloped lace; and a close mantie of twilled sarsenet. A poke bonnet of basket willow with a striped velvet ribbon. . . . and most compromisingly placed shaking a pebble out of her sandal, and so having to hide her stockinged foot in her skirts, sweeps her up into his arms and hurls her into his curlicue (for at this point neither of them knows their relationship) where he “took the sandal from her resistless grasp, and calmly held it ready to fit on her foot.” Then to provoke her charming indignation still further he kisses her. At such a rate of conquest the novel would be merely twenty pages long, if it were not that

A CRITICAL RETROSPECTIVE

Heyer's Regency Buck, may be seen as the expression of middle-class manners, for the aristocratic modes of dancing were formal while the lower orders allowed an independent part to the woman, involving greater or lesser exertion. There is no folk dance or native dance that I have ever heard of in which the man takes over the automotion of the woman.

The most significant operation of the romance myth, however, is in the courting situation. Boys, unless they are consciously exploiting female susceptibility, have little idea what the kiss means in the romantic canon. For them it is a beginning, a preliminary to intimacy; for the girls it is the crown of love to be staged at climactic points. . . . The impulse to yield militates against the impulse to impose the right form on the circumstances, and most often a girl breathing out her soul on the lips of her callow lover seduces herself with an inflated notion of what is really happening. She offers at one time both more and less than he is asking. The baffling scenes that ensue when boys violate sentimental protocol testify to the fantasy operations of romance. It is such a simple role that more cynical young men fake it deliberately: the veriest tyro soon learns the best line is the suppressed-but-almost-uncontrollable-desire line, which a little heavy breathing and significant glancing can put over. How about the Cartland line, “If I kiss you I won’t be answerable for the consequences”? Such dialogue could be dynamite. For all their prudish insistence on blushing and the excision of any suggestion of less intense and less decorous human contact, Cartland and Heyer are preparing the way for seducers—not lovers, seducers. But while they make the

3 Ibid.
handsome man's job easier they put even more obstacles in the way of the homely male. Although the romantic male is not so invariable a stereotype as the characterless, passive female, he has certain indispensable qualities. He is never gauche, although he might be insolent or even insulting; he is never nervous or uncertain or humble, and he is always good-looking. In the tribal teenage situation there are some boys with whom one does not go out; they are not acceptable, being homely, or corny, or eager. Actual debauchery is less of a disqualification than any of these.

Settings, clothes, objects, all testify to the ritualization of sex which is the essential character of romance. Just as the Holy Communion is not a real meal that satisfies hunger, the Almighty Kiss stands for a communion which cannot actually be enjoyed. 

Women's magazines treat the same story over and over again, changing the setting, inventing more and more curious combinations of circumstances to vary the essential plot; but falling in love, the kiss, the declaration and the imminent wedding are the staples of the plot. Other stories treat ancillary themes, of adulterers, of delusion and disappointment, or nostalgia, but the domestic romantic myth remains the centerpiece of feminine culture.

If female liberation is to happen, if the reservoir of real female love is to be tapped, this sterile self-deception must be counteracted. The only literary form which could oust all romantic trash on the female market is hard-core pornography. The titillating mush of Cartland and her ilk is supplying an imaginative need but their hypocrisy limits the gratification to that which can be gained from innuendo: by-pass the innuendo and you short-circuit the whole process. I and my little friends swapped True Confessions back and forth because we were randy and curious. If you leave the Housewives' Handbook* lying about, your daughter may never read Cartland or Heyer with any credulity.

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GEORGETTE HEYER: A Critical Retrospective

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