

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 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 outsell 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*⁴ lying about, your daughter may never read Cartland or Heyer with any credulity.

⁴ Rey Anthony, *The Housewives' Handbook on Selective Promiscuity* (Tucson, 1960, and New York, 1962).

Marghanita Laski, "The Appeal of Georgette Heyer" (in "Books," *The Times* [London], 1 October 1970, p. 16):

Charity Girl. By Georgette Heyer (Bodley Head, 30s).

Ever since the serious novel deprived itself of the pleasure of the shapely story satisfactorily resolved, serious but compulsive novel readers who need the shapely story as a drug have had to turn, for this part of their need, to the popular novel. Often it is easy to see why such books appeal to both non-intellectual and to intellectual: the gratifications to be gained from many thrillers, detective stories, science fictions and, of course, from Hornblower, are easy to discern.

The Regency novels of Georgette Heyer constitute another and more difficult case. Their appeal to simple females of all ages is readily comprehensible. But why, alone among popular novels hardly read except by women, have these become something of a cult for many well-educated middle-aged women who read serious novels too?

For men, a brief description may be helpful. Among other books, including detective stories, Georgette Heyer has for some 40 years been producing novels set in a kind of Zinkeisen-Regency England of which the latest, *Charity Girl*, is published today. They are entirely concerned with love and marriage among an upper class that ranges from wealthy dukes to wealthy squirearchy. The heroes, usually demoniac but occasionally gentle, are invariably dandies. The heroines may be spirited and sophisticated, spirited and naive, or, increasingly of recent years, common-sensible. By miscomprehension and misadventure, hero and heroine fail to achieve mutual understanding until the end.

Since nothing but the Regency element distinguishes these books from the best of the many thousands that used to fill the "B" shelves in Boots' Booklovers Library, it must be this element that gives the stories their special appeal, and this element is very odd indeed, for Miss Heyer's Regency England is not much like anything one infers about that time and place from more reliable writings, whether fiction or fact.

That Miss Heyer has done a lot of work in the period is obvious. Any of her characters may talk more "Regency English" in a paragraph than is

spoken in Jane Austen's entire corpus. Real people often appear, such as Beau Brummel [sic] and Lord Alvaney and, of course, Lady Jersey, since whether or not the heroine will be admitted to Almack's is often a grave crux—she always is. Any individual Heyer novel can be an extremely enjoyable pastime, but the more Heyer novels one reads the more one recognizes the same limited props, slightly rearranged on the stage. Smart chairs are covered in straw-coloured satin, smart gloves of York tan are negligently pulled on, buttered lobsters are toyed with at elegant meals. Hardly a hero but has a multi-caped coat tailored by Weston, is envied by young cubs for his mastery of the neckcloth. Hardly a dashing heroine but takes the ribbons of a phaeton. Hardly a novel but introduces a Tiger or Game Chicken to exemplify the language of the Fancy in which Miss Heyer is especially deft.

But those aspects of life on which Miss Heyer is so dependent for her creation of atmosphere are just those which Jane Austen (and other novelists for years to come) referred to only when she wanted to show that a character was vulgar or ridiculous. Food, clothes, furnishings, transport—it is because those matters engrossed a Lydia Bennet, a John Thorpe, a Mrs. Elton, that we know them to be morally and socially worthless. Though Jane Austen's letters show how greatly clothes and furnishings, at least, interested her personally, it would obviously be entirely improper for them to interest her in relation to commendable characters. It is possible, even probable, that Fitzwilliam Darcy wore a many-caped coat built by Weston; it is unthinkable that we should know that he did.

It is not, then, in respect of decorum that Jane Austen has influenced Georgette Heyer but the influence is there, at least in the early books, in some balance and turn of sentences: "We talked of all manner of things until I was comfortable again, and I do not think there was never anyone more good-natured."—There is certainly an echo of Harriet Smith here. But "her characters was no *use!* They was only just like people you run across every day," as Kipling's soldier said of Jane Austen; they are several social steps below Miss Heyer's chosen ambience, and infinitely less glamorous. A model nearer in feeling and event would be Fanny Burney's much earlier Evelina.

But not there, or in Jane Austen or Maria Edgeworth [sic] or even Harriet Wilson does one find Miss Heyer's extraordinary dandified heroes. There *were* dandies, but they were jokes, not heroes. Is it the shade of Sir Percy Blakeney that knocks at Miss Heyer's door? If so, his shadow is the only one that falls on this pseudo-Regency in which there is almost no dirt, no poverty, no religion, no politics (a short step to silence in books for women). I have still got no nearer to discovering why Miss Heyer's books appeal to so many educated women, but I know what lack of shadow it is that makes them of only limited appeal for me. It is because they have no sex in them.

Now I realize that the popular romantic novel must be without overt sex, especially if it is to sell in that holy of holies of the trade, Irish convents. But not to say anything nasty is not necessarily the same thing as not to imply that sexual drives exist. In a good popular novel, be it overtly as clean as a whistle, we should never doubt that to put in the dirty bits would be merely to expand it and not to alter it or, as it would be in Miss Heyer's case, to shatter it. We have never doubted the sexual passion that linked Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney throughout their alienation. Stanley Weyman's depressed heroes suffer from real lust, his heroines are in danger of real rape. Even for Charlotte Yonge the sexual relations of her characters were at least implicit (and for what can be achieved within reticence, try her historical novel *Love and Life*). A counterbowdlerizing [sic] expansion could be undertaken on any lastingly worthwhile popular novelist.

But if ever Miss Heyer's heroines lifted their worked muslin skirts, if ever her heroic dandies unbuttoned their daytime pantaloons, underneath would be only sewn-up rag dolls. Her *mariages blancs* could run till doomsday without either partner displaying nervous strain; her heroes can, as in this latest, roam the country with unprotected young girls who need never fear loss of more than a good name. Certainly the odd hero may have had his opera dancer before he enters the heroine's (and our) ken, but not inside these covers. So long as the puppets are out of their box, a universal blandness covers all.

Were we to take Georgette Heyer simply as a novelist for women whose only novel-reading was popular romance, she would deserve the

highest praise. As the genre goes, her books are better than most, and more complicated: it often takes a couple of chapters to guess who will finally marry whom. The Regency element is pleasantly novel and the props, if limited are genuinely period pieces. But the appeal to educated women who read other kinds of novels remains totally mysterious unless—is it?—could it be?—these dandified rakes, these dashing misses, the wealth, the daintiness, the carefree merriment, the classiness, perhaps even the sexlessness, are their dream world too?

Erik Routley, *The Puritan Pleasures of the Detective Story* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1972, pp. 181-82):

... Another author who combined historical fiction with a side-line in detection was Georgette Heyer. Her long series of historical novels has aroused contradictory opinions: it probably depends on what you think history is. If you feel that history is best related by reference to the more articulate and influential sections of society in whatever age is being put under review, then the Heyer novels give a faithful enough record and an adequate impression of their subjects: it is when one seeks a view of history that includes other people besides Regency bucks who were alive in 1815 that impatience begins to rear its head. She is probably better than her enemies suggest, and less admirable than her immense popularity implies. Anyhow, what is interesting from our point of view is what she made of the detective story.

She certainly tells a good story in the small handful she wrote in this form: but she stands with Agatha Christie as an assistant priestess of the cliché. Agatha Christie gets away with it (we have said) because she is such a fiendishly clever and formidably just plot-maker. Georgette Heyer's stories are as countrified and as county as the Poirot situations of 1920, but the detective interest that kept Mrs. Christie running never really gets off the ground in Heyer. For the rest—think of any detective-story cliché, any stock character, and you'll find it in her stories: the not-too-well educated policeman, the country vicar with the neurotic wife, the fast-talking competent sister of a heroine goaded near insanity by her

husband's brutality, the exotic and outrageous Spanish dancer (called, of course, da Silva—Spaniards in thrillers are always that, or Garcia). It's all perilously near what used (until the *Nova* revolution) to be called "women's magazine" style—West End, rustic high life, able young asses who teach the police their job, loads of money, and butlers, butlers, butlers (yes, even a Shot Butler). In one book the characters in order of appearance bear the names Amberley, Brown, Collins, Dawson, Fountain, Gubbins, Harper, Jenkins, Ludlow, Matthews. Some better historian will surely tell me that that's been done before; all I can say is that this is where I first noticed it. And yet Georgette Heyer has a quite remarkable gift for reproducing the brittle and ironic conversation of the upper middle class Englishwoman of that age (immediately before 1940). I am bound to say that Vicky Fanshawe in *No Wind of Blame* (1939) is very nearly the funniest fictional female I have ever met—and it needs exquisite judgement to create a convincingly comical young woman in any kind of novel.

Unattributed, "Vacuum-packed passions" (in *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 August 1974, "Fiction," p. 923 [a review of Rona Randall, *Dragonmede*]):

The late Georgette Heyer was a writer of the highest craft, much underrated by most critics of fiction. To entertain, as she did, with novels of manners of impeccable period accuracy, and which often described individuals of unfashionably strong character or with strong "faults" of character coming to terms with a rigidly hierarchical society, is no casual feat. Her stories were encased, furthermore, in a believable, if pragmatic, moral code. She could even at times risk a realistic story of compromise (as in *A Civil Contract*) rather than the narcissistic finales of perfect happiness demanded in the usual romantic novel. In these respects she had much in common with Daphne du Maurier, another entertainer.

Between them, they have spawned yet another sub-genre of the modern romantic novel, the Gothic romance. Rona Randall's

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