

excuse for what she meant to do." (p. 180)

For awhile, the reader is convinced still that the murder, though it was of course a drastic step, was the right thing to do, and will help straighten out the lives of all the characters. But the results of the murder gradually seem more terrible to the murderess than the original, seemingly unbearable, situation with Penhallow. She is horrified that everyone believes Raymond, the son, to be a murderer—but despite her guilt, cannot bring herself to tell the truth, especially after his suicide, when it would do no good anyway.

She had thought that in hastening Penhallow's end she would be bringing peace to his whole family. Instead of this. . .the consequences of her action were as appalling as they had been unforeseen. . .When she saw that Raymond was being harried by the Inspector. . .when she realized that Clara and Bart had loved Penhallow, and bitterly mourned him. . . when she saw the growing suspicion of one another in the faces of her stepsons, she regretted her mad deed as she had never thought it possible that she could. If she could have called Penhallow back to life, she would have done it. . . (p. 265)

The after-taste of the book reminds one of the statement of Sir Ronald Howe, Deputy Commissioner at Scotland Yard, in 1955, when he was asked to write "A Personal Reaction" for the detective fiction section of *The Times Literary Supplement*. He said: "I wish that the creators were not so preoccupied with murder. . . All murders are sad, sordid affairs, and to one in the detective trade a good thumping fraud is far more interesting and full of excitement."¹⁷

¹⁷ Sir Ronald Howe, Deputy Commissioner of Scotland Yard, "A Personal Reaction," *The Times Literary Supplement*, Detective Fiction section, February 25, 1955.

We certainly don't want every book to be a *Penhallow*—in fact, we don't want any others to. As Dr. George Dove said when he had just finished reading *Penhallow*, ". . . thank goodness this one never became a convention. There must be hundreds of stories in which the murderer commits suicide, but to have an innocent person do so and thus seem to 'solve' the mystery would not be very good for business."¹⁸

Perhaps that is the "magical function" of *Penhallow*: we are associated with the murderer more than in virtually all other mysteries, and we come out chilled with that identification, and the reminder that the "never-never-land" of detective fiction is precisely that. But we don't need more than one book to do that for us, do we?

Lillian S. Robinson, "On Reading Trash" (in her *Sex, Class, and Culture* [Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press, 1978], pp. 202, 207-222):

. . . What is unusual about my own literary education is that I encountered the male literary tradition against a background filled with trashy popular fiction by, for, and about women. The result is a rather different perspective than I am supposed to have on the two parallel traditions of English literature. Most of this essay will be focused on a contrast between the works of Jane Austen and those of Georgette Heyer. The pairing is honestly come by, in my own history, but I believe it has larger implications as well; the concentration on women as they appear in both high and popular fiction makes possible some useful distinctions between the two and forces a reconsideration of such categories as literature, entertainment, and propaganda. Once the absurd incongruity of any connections between the two writers is duly acknowledged and assigned its proper weight, it has much to tell us about female literary experience. . . .

If the drugstore Gothic can trace its origin back through modern

¹⁸ Personal letter of Dr. George N. Dove, East Tennessee State University, September 2, 1975.

revivals of the Brontës to the romantic fiction that flourished in eighteenth-century circulating libraries, its counterpart among historical romances claims a similarly elevated lineage. Around 1966 Georgette Heyer's novels were issued in paperback for what I believe was their first mass distribution in the American market. The cover of each novel proclaimed it—and Heyer's Regency fiction generally—to be in the tradition of Jane Austen. Subsequent novelists who treat the Regency period have been described by their publishers as following in the romantic tradition of Georgette Heyer. Like the Gothics, then, these novels are products whose peddlers stress their resemblance to others of the kind, by the same author or by other established specialists in the genre, rather than emphasize the innovative uniqueness of each product. The appeal is to familiarity and success, assured by reference to places, customs, and ideas well known from earlier productions of the same type. Georgette Heyer is the acknowledged Queen of the Regency romance (later paperback editions make some such peculiar claim), and it is a clear selling point to say that the book you are touting is just like "a" Georgette Heyer, has the same Regency background, and affords (therefore) the same "delight." But for Heyer herself there can be only one predecessor sufficiently glamorous, and sufficiently connected in the public mind with the Regency period and that is Jane Austen herself, whose heroines, her own contemporaries, did, unquestionably, live out their personal dramas during the years that the future George IV reigned in the place of his mad father.

As a selling point the comparison can only prove disappointing, for Heyer's novels concentrate on precisely those minutiae of dress and décor that Austen takes for granted. Not even in *Northanger Abbey*, where Mrs. Allen is satirized as a woman obsessed with her own gowns and trimmings and, for a secondary interest, those of her young charge, Catherine Morland, does Jane Austen bow to the necessity of describing a single garment in any of her novels. A bit of dialogue about fashions may serve to delineate character—as when Mrs. Elton simultaneously fishes for praise of her gown, deprecates the necessity of being so ornately dressed, and plans aloud to add some more trimming to another dress—but they are of scant interest in themselves. Heyer (and, with

even less skill, her sister Regency buffs) tells us about colors, cut, fabric, and trimming, about half-boots, pelisses, and cloaks, not only because the acquisition and display of clothing are more central to the existence of Heyer's heroines than they are to Austen's, but in order to invest the novels with that meretricious quality Henry James would have called "the tone of time."

Similarly, in Jane Austen's novels, the varieties of carriages are used as a social marker (Mr. Collins drives a gig, the Bennets keep a closed carriage but have to use farm horses to pull it when they want to pay a call, and so on). Elsewhere, conversation about horses and vehicles reflects the personality and temperament of various characters (John Thorpe mistreats his horse and gig and boasts about his trading in these matters; Mrs. Elton can never forbear to mention that her rich brother-in-law, Mr. Suckling, keeps two carriages, including a barouche-landauet). In Georgette Heyer's novels, however, the niceties of phaeton and perch-phaeton, of driving to an inch, and of membership (in appropriate and fully described costume) in the Four Horse Club are built directly into the texture of events as they make up the narrative.

Perhaps because she was writing for contemporaries who knew what the world of the Regency period looked like, but more likely because these facts inform her historical sense in a deeper and more thoroughgoing fashion, Austen is able to make a more complex use than her imitators of the aesthetic culture of her own time. The mourning Captain Benwick in *Persuasion* has been reading so much Scott and Byron that Ann Elliott recommends a therapeutic dose of prose; Byronism has affected *Sanditon's* Sir Edward Denham less innocently, as he plots a cut-rate abduction; Fanny Price knows Cowper; and, of course, the young ladies in *Northanger Abbey* read all the "horrid" novels they can get their hands on.

But drawing, music, literature, even amateur theatricals tend to be an organic part of life to the people Jane Austen writes about. Everyone in Bath goes to the theater and the concerts. Catherine Morland's recital of her week's schedule (the Upper Rooms Monday, the theater Tuesday, the concert Wednesday) to an amused Mr. Tilney is no less true because it can be so mechanically evoked. And the musical evenings attract social

climbers like Sir Walter Elliott and his eldest daughter quite as naturally as they do someone like Anne, an able musician herself who can translate Italian songs at sight. Highbury, remote though it may be, shelters not only Jane Fairfax, who is an accomplished pianist, Emma Woodhouse, who would play better if she applied herself, and Mrs. Elton, who is determined to signal her entry into the married state by abandoning her music, but amateur critics like Harriet Smith, who knows she is supposed to throw around terms like "taste" and "execution" although she is unsure just how to recognize these qualities when she is exposed to them. Appreciation of cultural productions, opinions and attitudes about them, thus becomes another attribute of character.

The only remotely comparable cultural attribute in the works of Georgette Heyer is a taste for the fiction of Jane Austen herself. Thus, in *Regency Buck* Judith Taverner is delighted by an ironic passage in the copy of *Sense and Sensibility* she comes upon at a circulating library. Jenny, in *A Civil Contract*, prefers the same Jane Austen novel to the Byronic effusions her friend Julia adores; *Sense and Sensibility*, she believes, is down to earth, deals with real people—precisely the qualities that make Julia feel it is flat and prosaic. After her marriage Jenny tries to read her husband's agricultural manuals, sweetening the task by alternating it with chapters from the newly published *Mansfield Park*. Those of Heyer's heroines who read Jane Austen share some small part of that author's ironic social vision, but once we understand that a taste for those novels signifies humor and good sense—personal traits that Heyer always values—there are no further subtleties to be revealed by her heroines' choice of reading matter.

However superficial this use of taste to illuminate character, it remains the only reference to contemporary culture that serves any purpose beyond historical decoration. When Lady Serena, in *Bath Tangle*, reads Lady Caroline Lamb's *Glenarvon* and delights in identifying the models for that roman à clef, the incident serves simply to "place" her and her mismatched fiancé, in their respective social and moral spheres. Reading Byron becomes the mode in several novels, but it really is a fashion like those concerning dress and has rather less influence over what actually happens than the vogue for a certain shade

of blue or the choice of a gentleman's tailor. Literature, which is pressed into service rather frequently as the source of historical color, and the theater and fine arts, which are referred to somewhat less often, furnish detail rather than depth, and a kind of detail, moreover, that tends to support the general picture of women's lives that emerges from these novels.

The niceties of social behavior, like the references to artistic production, serve quite different purposes in the historical romance than they do in the novel of manners. Jane Austen could assume that her readers knew the rules of polite social intercourse. When an impromptu dance is held at *Mansfield Park*, Maria Bertram knows it would be incorrect to dance only with her foolish betrothed, Mr. Rushworth, and uses that knowledge to claim her share of Henry Crawford's attentions. Mrs. Norris and Mrs. Rushworth chat about the proprieties of the matter, but the real tension subsists in the rivalry of the two Miss Bertrams, in Maria's impatience with Rushworth and her hopes of Crawford, and in Fanny Price's feelings as she watches the action. Who dances with whom—at Mansfield, Netherfield, Highbury, or Bath—is always of greater significance than the way a Regency gentleman craves the honor of a dance or the fact that partners are invariably paired off for two dances at a time.

Not only are such regulations and breaches thereof more central to the action in Georgette Heyer's novels, but there are more of them. The reader of Heyer and of her Regency sisters rapidly learns that the coveted vouchers to Almacks could be obtained only from one of the aristocratic patronesses (and she learns those ladies' identities, habits, and crotchets); and also that, once accepted, gentlemen must wear knee breeches, not pantaloons, there; that alcoholic beverages are not served; and that a young lady may not waltz until her doing so has been approved by one of the patronesses. All this comes under the heading of what I would characterize as pseudoinformation not because it is untrue (repetition, at least, would suggest that what these books have taught me about Almacks is accurate) but because, ultimately, it reveals nothing about the society that fostered an institution like Almacks as its elite marriage market. Yet the pages of Georgette Heyer's works are full of passages in

which character is defined through young men's boredom at a club where the card room stakes are so low and the refreshments so mild, and entire plots turn on their being refused admission for being improperly dressed or arriving after 11:00 p.m.¹⁹

One result of this passion for the specific fact without concern for its significance occurs in the matter of sexual morality, precisely the area of life that the social proprieties are intended to regulate and define. Georgette Heyer's high life is a great deal higher than Jane Austen's, embracing those segments of aristocracy and fashion that in fact represented an extravagant and dissolute threat to the sort of country families with whom Jane Austen is most at home. Gentlemen in Heyer's universe are expected to have experience with loose women at various levels of society, but however daring her ladies may be, they never actually breach the double standard. Indeed, in their innocence, they have the rare gift—albeit commonplace in women's fiction—of being able to captivate and hold on to the most experienced and worldly males. Her gentlemen are considered morally acceptable because they are candid and generous with their mistresses. The heroines who eventually enchant them are daring in their wit and, sometimes, in their knowledge of the existence of sexual misbehavior. But they kiss passionately only at the end of the book when love has terminated in betrothal, and they are revolted by sexual advances made on the mistaken assumption that they are of the class that is assumed to be universally available to gentlemen.

Jane Austen's people do not giggle over "crim. con." stories; their

world is superficially a great deal more straitlaced. In her fiction, however, the facts of life—the real ones, free of rakes who can be instantly reformed by refreshing virgins and of the knowing virgins themselves—are never far below the surface. Seduction, elopement, illegitimacy, divorce, living in sin are not alluded to in every chapter of a Jane Austen novel. Nonetheless, *Northanger Abbey*, which began, after all, as a youthful burlesque, is the only one of her books that does not include a major incident or character touched by one of these breaches of the sexual code. Sexual misconduct, moreover, is not limited to the unknown "bits of muslin" or the discarded aristocratic mistresses who populate Georgette Heyer's pages, but involves people—although never heroines, of course—whom the reader has come to know as characters. One does not like Maria Bertram, Lydia Bennet, or Mrs. Clay, but all are fully developed persons, not symbols, and their motives and emotions are no less complex than those of any of the other women Jane Austen depicts. Not even Mrs. Clay, who is announced as "designing" before she makes her first appearance in *Persuasion*, is reduced to the purely sexual component of her misdeeds. The social distance between a sexually virtuous woman and one who has "fallen" is much more palpable in the novels of Jane Austen than any twentieth-century novelist writing about Austen's period can adequately imagine. The gulf, however, the difference between one kind of person and another, is a great deal easier to bridge when we are reading the real thing than in any modern imitation.

In Georgette Heyer's fiction, the public events of the day—economic, political, or military—are very much to the fore, although Heyer necessarily betrays a far more shallow sense of their significance than does Jane Austen, who barely mentions them. Thus, for example, Viscount Linton, the hero of Heyer's *A Civil Contract*, an aristocratic ex-officer with heavily mortgaged ancestral acres, turns to scientific farming. Against the advice of his bourgeois father-in-law, he adds to his shares in government bonds at the moment when it looks as if Wellington may have lost at Waterloo. He thus lays the foundation for a renewed family fortune based on the old values (loyalty to his country, his party, and his former commander), shoring up the new (the land is still

¹⁹ Unlike the true historical novelist (even one writing for women), the *Regency romanière* does little research. (Some of the hastier books seem, indeed, to have been based on reading exclusively in other novels about the period.) Even Heyer, the best of the lot, relies on a fixed repertoire of historical facts and characters on which she rings (eventually predictable) changes. Thus, when Beau Brummell appears—as he does extensively in *Regency Buck*, for instance—all conversation that is not directed to one of the fictional characters comes directly from the four or five best-known anecdotes about the man, precisely the ones retailed in Virginia Woolf's brief essay on him.

mortgaged and its owner is introducing modern agricultural methods, with their attendant destruction of a way of life and a livelihood for the rural population). Some historical "color" is provided by references to Tull's drill, Coke of Norfolk and his experiments in farming, the effect on the stock market of defeatist military rumors, and the Corn Law riots. Similarly, the plot of *The Toll Gate* [sic] revolves around the theft of some cases of newly minted (and not yet circulated) gold sovereigns; the characters in several novels (*The Unknown Ajax*, *The Talisman Ring*, and *The Reluctant Widow* come immediately to mind) have dealings with French brandy smugglers; and the Bow Street Runners, the new national police, figure in these four novels, as well as in several others. But in all this there is no hint of how deeply the events reflected by the specific details influenced and altered the entire fabric of the society in which they occurred.

In Jane Austen's novels, the details are always basic to our understanding of characters or plot, for she is aware that new social forces do encroach on the way of life—prosperous, decorous, and cultivated—that is the common heritage of Mansfield, Pemberly [sic], Hartfield, Kellynch, Norland, and Northanger. These places and the style of living they simultaneously shelter and reflect are menaced by political-economic developments external to the English country house and its usual surroundings. Sir Thomas Bertram, for instance, must see to his Caribbean property (who works his plantations, what do they produce, and just what was he saying about the slave trade that interested Fanny Price far more than it did his own daughters?). John Dashwood's first action at Norland, after dispensing with his stepmother and half-sisters, is to apply capitalist values and methods to his inheritance, enclosing Norland Common and adding to his holdings by engrossment. At Kellynch, it is Sir Walter Elliott's own extravagance, which might be interpreted as an inability to make the rents from an inherited estate cover all the temptations of modern life, that necessitates the family's removal to Bath and their rental of the house to a retired admiral made prosperous by England's naval wars. Questions of taste and manners, which are, at the deepest level, questions of class, are always dependent, in Jane Austen's works, on the material situation created when the gentry are

placed in relation—and very often in confrontation—with the conditions of insurgent capitalism.

Jane Austen, like Heyer, focuses on getting her heroines married for love to suitors whose fortune and character are both adequate. The historical context in which the eventual marriages are achieved, however, has a far more profound significance for her than it ever could for Heyer. Heyer's characters may marry for money, as in the case of Adam Linton; or marry for love and find great wealth as well, as with the majority of her heroines; or marry, as happens in *April Lady*, *The Convenient Marriage*, and *Friday's Child*, for immediate material motives and find love through the marriage; or be frankly pursued for their own fortunes, as in *Regency Buck* or *The Quiet Gentleman*; but any understanding of why some groups are poor or rich—even when they are newly so—has no place in her kind of fiction. By contrast, Austen's novels are rooted in an understanding of the fact that cataclysmic social changes were affecting not only relative wealth and poverty, but also class definitions and class relations, sources and amounts of income, and the cultural life informed by these forces. Austen could hardly share the modern reader's knowledge about the eventual direction and meaning of these changes, but she has and communicates a far more vivid sense than we can attain to of the daily reality that the new conditions demanded.

After Sir Walter Elliott's financial difficulties necessitate his renting the family estate to a retired admiral, we are privileged to overhear the baronet's fatuous strictures on a profession that enables men who merely have uncommon abilities—rather than gentle birth—to rise above "their betters." Sir Walter's porings over the Baronetage are far less rewarding in human qualities than the roster of naval officers that Jane Austen brings to our attention. But although the author does not join her character in deploring the fact that England should have fallen into the hands of men of intelligence, courage, good will, and enterprise, she is nonetheless aware of the larger social and economic changes behind this shift. Her doubts about the new culture are embodied in the Miss Musgroves, the refined descendants of honest country squires. She sees the generations of the Musgrove family, in fact, as representatives of the old England and the new, reflecting that the ancestors whose portraits

hang in the parlor must be surprised to witness the goings-on of the young generation. The chief difference is that the two Miss Musgroves have been away to school and learned accomplishments. Those accomplishments sit lightly on them, to be sure, but the result is, in fact, that they can live "to be fashionable, happy, and merry." They have leisure, whereas the older generations of Musgrove ladies, gentlewomen though they were, were also mistresses of their rural households, with real work to do.

The fine articulations of class society are important to both authors, although this concern reflects quite different views of what a social order is and what purposes it serves. Georgette Heyer's preferred milieu is what her characters would call "the first circles" of English society (and, in the novels with eighteenth-century settings, of French society as well). All of her heroes belong to this class; most of them are earls, although there is at least one baron, one viscount, and one marquis among them, as well as several dukes, some baronets, and a few younger sons of the nobility. The heroines are not quite so uniformly placed: if they are from equally aristocratic backgrounds—or even the country gentry—their families are poor; if heiresses, they are not usually from the very highest levels of society. In almost no case is the Cinderella theme entirely absent, and it is frequently the central device of Georgette Heyer's plots.

The emphasis on "the first circles" implies, of course, the existence of other circles. Heyer concerns herself principally with those just beneath the tier occupied by her main characters. Thus, in addition to Almacks, there is the Pantheon Ballroom, an inferior and unexclusive establishment more often referred to—as a kind of negative social touchstone—than visited. When a heroine takes part in a masked ball there, as at least two do, she is stared at and accosted by rude, vulgar "cits," the same fate, indeed, that attends a well-born lady in Heyer's works whenever she is in a situation where she may meet men of the middle classes.

Men of the bourgeoisie and below are usually unmistakable in their crudity even when they are not drunkenly pawing the heroine. When Heyer portrays characters who lack polite manners and an elite education she can never resist making them stupid as well. Thus, Jenny's father in

A Civil Contract, who we are supposed to believe is a brilliant and shrewd financier, one of the new self-made capitalists, is by turns short-tempered, irascible, babyish, foolish, and awkwardly falling all over himself with whatever emotion is dominant at the moment. Middle-class women are either unshakably practical, of-the-earth earthy, or deficient in judgment, their poor grammar being only the outward sign of an inward vacuity that not infrequently fades off into viciousness.

These careful distinctions among the first, the second, and the third ranks and among the overlapping layers in the first are really where the action is. The poor are people, of course, but no sense is conveyed of what their poverty means or how it interlocks with the lives of the very rich as this fiction depicts them. A few characters, to be sure—Arabella in the novel named for her, Sir Waldo Hawkridge, the Nonesuch for whom another novel is titled—engagé in philanthropic ventures, but a hero or heroine need not spare a thought for the sufferings of the masses in order to be considered wholly admirable. There are chimney sweeps and children working in mines and factories, but such matters are alluded to only if an aristocrat, in the course of advancing the real plot, rescues one or two of them from that fate. There are also country folk, innkeepers, and, of course, servants by the score, because they are required for the support of a lavish style of life, and there are a few lumpen characters who live in alleys and swill gin, but they have neither identity nor brains. Low status (whether the possessor is a Bow Street Runner or Leaky Peg, a kindhearted backstreet girl), is invariably accompanied by low intelligence.

Georgette Heyer introduces us to characters who speak of fashions and fashionables as being "of the first stare" or "highly select" and she can bring in figures who are indeed at the very peak of the social order. In *Regency Buck*, Judith Taverner receives the marriage proposals of the Duke of Clarence; Heyer's fictional creation thus has the opportunity to become the morganatic Queen of England. As long as she does not tamper with history to the extent of bringing about such a marriage, the twentieth-century novelist can place an actual historical figure in the picture, put all manner of foolish speeches into his mouth, and have him rejected by Miss Taverner. Jane Austen could hardly take the same

liberties with a royal duke who was her contemporary—not simply because decorum forbade them, but because her sense of both fictional and social order would have made it inconceivable *and unnecessary* to do so.

Yet the same issues that are so important to Georgette Heyer—the size of dowries and the income of estates, the pretensions of the newly rich, and the impact of conflicting class styles on the marriage market—are also important to Jane Austen. The difference resides not only in the less elevated social and economic level that Jane Austen's characters occupy, but also in the reasons why social distinctions are so much to the fore. Fundamentally, Jane Austen shows us snobs and social climbers, but she is not one herself. Indeed, no character whom the reader is expected to admire has aspirations to associate with anyone above her own station, and it is a sign of vulgarity to be overly concerned with adding to or demonstrating one's own social importance. Not even the interests of an advantageous marriage can move Jane Austen's heroines to seek company above their own rank and, again, ardent pursuit of an eligible *parti* is one of the chief touchstones of poor breeding and defective character in any young woman.

Heyer's heroines are at once more pragmatic and less realistic. They take part in the London "Season" in full knowledge that it is their *job* as well as their role to find a husband through the process of social mating that is one function of the brilliant assemblies they attend. Her novels are about love, successful, lasting love, but Heyer and her heroines are well aware that, for Regency society in general, love is only incidental to the functions of the institutions of courtship and marriage. With the energy they devote to the social round, however, and the passionate detail with which Heyer describes the events and the costumes that so absorb them, a completely artificial world of balls and parties comes into being. Heyer's novels introduce the modern reader to a Who's Who of Regency high life where fashion is elevated to the position of a major social force. Her heroines want love; some of them even read books and want also the more esoteric pleasures of rational intercourse and virtuous conduct. But in the novels there is no other measure of success for an individual, a party, or a custom, than to be accepted by those who are identified as

leading, making, or following the mode.

The problem is that Heyer realizes how important this sort of success is for the kind of heroine she chooses and almost mass-produces. Yet on some essential level she does not know what to do with that understanding, because she does not know what a society is. Thus, she shows a society articulated by class and one in which class feeling, especially snobbery and ambition, runs high, without conveying any sense that class is something other and more than style. Jane Austen's world is less fashionable, though by no means less class-conscious, than that of the Regency romance; there is no possibility, however, of her readers' confusing class itself with its most superficial expressions, because the novels make it clear that everything they are about—ethics, manners, attitudes, sentiments, distinctions—has its basis in class. Understood in this way, class in Jane Austen's novels becomes, as it is in actual human history, the defining and motivating force of society itself.

I can imagine no greater waste of energy than an elaborate demonstration that Jane Austen is a better writer than Georgette Heyer. In drawing so extensive a comparison between the two, my intention has not been to belabor the obvious points about what makes a great writer great, but rather to approach the question of women's light reading from a perspective that avoids the pat formulas about "escape" and "vicarious experience." That there is some overlap between the present-day audience for both kinds of work is reflected not only in the early advertising of Heyer's books but also in the marketing of Jane Austen's works. Two unfinished Austen novels, *Sanditon* and *The Watsons*, have been completed by twentieth-century authors and are now available in mass-market paperbacks, with cover illustrations and (grossly exaggerated) plot descriptions that seek to render them indistinguishable from their presumed pop-fiction successors. And they are displayed side by side with romances by Heyer and her imitators. I wonder what happens to a reader who picks up one of these books—both, admittedly, containing a rather denatured product—instead of one of its shelf-mates? (Say, the novel called something like *Bath Cotillion* by one of the Heyer epigones that I bought at the Indianapolis Airport and, having finished, left on the plane and that made so slight an imprint on my consciousness

that less than two weeks later, I almost bought it again at Hengerers department store in Buffalo.) Does the reader who relished *Bath Cotillion* find that the issues and problems Jane Austen raises stand in the way of her story? Does the more elegant style interfere as well? Or do the superfluous elements of superior character, incident, and analysis simply go unnoticed? If this last is the case, as it must be for one segment of Jane Austen's modern readers, then it becomes somewhat more challenging to examine both the Regency romance itself and the sources of its appeal.²⁰

If it is possible to read Jane Austen for the same reasons one reads Georgette Heyer, then coming to understand what makes it possible suggests some conclusions about what women read and why. In both its high and its popular avatars, this sort of novel centers on the private concerns of women, domestic, marital, and personal. For Heyer, these concerns must be bolstered by a mass of sartorial and decorative detail that Austen readily dispenses with in order to underscore the true ethical context in which the action unfolds. Both novelists, however, are saying that the personal *matters*, and those twentieth-century novelists who choose an historical period when great public events were in the making seem to be saying it with particular force. Historical incidents become the backdrop for that message, and exalted social position serves to enhance the argument itself.

At the same time, the import of historical fiction for women is to reinforce the notion that the public world, however much its vicissitudes may influence women's lives, is always at one remove from women. And, conversely, women remain at one remove from it. Larger political considerations may affect what happens to a woman, but her participation in history, as chambermaid, queen, or the Cinderella who is transformed from one to the other, consists in being a female, dressed—always—in appropriate period costume. It is not so much that this kind of fiction

²⁰ The problem is becoming acute, moreover. I recently saw a vending machine called a Convenience Center in the lobby of a Holiday Inn. It dispensed such items as body lotion, hair spray, tampons, deodorant, and copies of *Pride and Prejudice*!

“tells” or “teaches” women something about their nature, role, and sphere. Rather, it repeats what direct experience and dominant ideology have already succeeded in communicating. In this sense, it would appear that female readers do not seek out trashy novels in order to escape or to experience life vicariously, but rather to receive confirmation, and, eventually, affirmation, that love really is what motivates and justifies a woman's life. At best, it is much too slight a compensation for the weight of stiff velvet and the chill insubstantiality of sprig-muslin into which our historical imaginations have been laced.

Nancy Wingate, “Getting Away With Murder” (in *Journal of Popular Culture* 12, 4 [Spring 1979], pp. 590-1):

In this book [Anthony Berkeley's *Trial and Error* (1937)] . . . we are satisfied with the “murder as problem-solver” ethic, since life improves for everyone after the murder, and quite believably too. Georgette Heyer's *Penhallow* (1942) takes the same concept and provides a far more realistic resolution. A long-suffering wife has killed her husband, a selfish, trouble-making old tyrant, to free her children from his constant meddling in their lives. The reader is at first lulled into sharing her conviction that the murder will solve all the family's problems, but both the murderess and the reader are unpleasantly surprised: the children are grieved over the loss of their father and suspect each other of murder. The mother is even more horrified when her innocent stepson commits a timely but unrelated suicide and is marked as the murderer. She had expected the death to be put down to accident and is heartsick that he is considered guilty, even though he's dead and can only suffer in his family's recollection. Heyer counters the notion of the efficacy of “murder as problem-solver” with the traditional argument that the end cannot justify the means because we can never predict the consequences of our actions and so never know if our desired end will be reached.

Heyer offers a new reason for the difficulty of finding out the truth: the sheer weight of the prejudices human beings bring to the investigation of crime, as they bring them to anything else. Because of

GEORGETTE HEYER:
A Critical Retrospective

Mary Fahnestock-Thomas

2001
PrinnyWorld Press
Saraland, AL