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PASSIONS  
OF THE MIND

*Selected Writings*



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## An Honourable Escape: Georgette Heyer

THE ONLY responsible position I ever held at my respectable boarding-school was a place on the Library Committee. I was relieved of it after one term. I assumed that this was because of general incompetence, but discovered later that it was because I had vetoed the purchase of Georgette Heyer's books, which the staff had taken as conclusive proof of intellectual arrogance, narrow-mindedness, the moralism of the Cambridge English school creeping up on me already. The truth was exactly opposite. The sharpness of my veto was a desperate attempt to conform to what I took to be *their* moralism. I had read every word of Georgette Heyer. I was a secret, illegal member of two circulating libraries to get more of her books. I had purloined exercise books to write two Regency romances and half a novel about the amours of Charles II. These were shockingly bad, and their badness led me to realise how difficult good escape literature is to write. Georgette Heyer still seems to me a superlatively good writer of honourable escape. This article is an attempt to exorcise my own past cowardice and hypocrisy by trying to say why.

Escape literature can exist to satisfy people's fantasies—sexual and social—at the expense of probability and “truth.” But there is another kind, which exists less to satisfy hidden desires than to provide simple release from strain—the story with simple streamlined rules of conduct and a guaranteed happy ending. Both kinds like to create other worlds—imaginary lands of

legend and fairy-tale, the past, the future, outer space, Tahiti, the aristocracy, the desert of the sheikhs and the American frontier.

There are various uses of costume drama. Much of it depends on the universal childhood desire to *be* someone else, somewhere else, usually someone more powerful and important. An incredible number of people claim to be reincarnations of Cleopatra, and even more read novels about her. Purely sexual costume drama probably derives from a time when there was more licence to describe sexual activity in other periods than in our own—which produced a spate of watered-down versions of *Fanny Hill* and *Moll Flanders*. A bastard version of these is the pruriently suggestive novel for nice girls, which has it both ways—describes the life of some great whore, courtesan, society lady, with suggestive details but has a moral scheme which ensures that the sex is narrowly avoided (except perhaps once), the tart has a heart of gold and *really* loves her dull, neglected husband all the time. There is straight cloak and dagger, as in Baroness Orczy; there is real curiosity about shifting cultures and beliefs, as in the best of Scott. There is “serious” work “explaining” some glamorous figure of the past in terms of modern psychiatry and sociology. The film *The Lion in Winter*, with its simplified Freudian explanations of Richard I’s homosexuality and the power structure of mediaeval Europe, is one of these. It is bastard Albee—the “family romance,” infantile needs controlling the language and behaviour of big business, the “deals” dictated by terror of incest and sibling rivalry. It diminishes both big business and the Plantagenets in the process.

Which brings me back to the “serious” literary-critical dismissal of escape literature. The Penguin literary history’s *Modern Age* imperceptively lumps Georgette Heyer together with several other historical best-sellers as a “formula” writer who simply dresses up “modern bodies and feelings” in period disguise. It claims that the values and drift of her dialogue are essentially modern, despite the Regency phraseology. This, although true of the ponderously significant *The Lion in Winter*, does not seem to me to apply to Miss Heyer’s lighter fantasies. They satisfy, too, much simpler emotions: the perennial need for a happy ending and, increasingly, a curiosity about historical *facts* of daily life and thought.

It is necessary to distinguish between her books. The earliest seem to be written out of a simple desire to create more of Baroness Orczy’s world of bright colour and danger—rather as my unsuccessful Regency pieces were written out of frustration because I could get no more Heyer. She began by adapting Baroness Orczy’s solid, large English hero, whose lazy good looks and “inanity” hid a keen intelligence and a grip of iron. (Other descendants

of this aristocratic hero are Lord Peter Wimsey and Albert Campion in their version of the streamlined escape world.) The heroes of *The Black Moth* (gentleman turned highwayman) and *The Masqueraders* are of this kind. In *The Masqueraders* the lazy, large gentleman casually unmask the girl, who is disguised, for no very good reason, as a man.

In Miss Heyer's early novels great use is made of the fantasy-fulfilling cliché of sex-changing disguise; later she gets too subtle to need it. Romantic heroines in real life were clearly possessed by the same need to get into the comparative freedom of the man's world: both Mary Queen of Scots and Lady Caroline Lamb were fond of disguising themselves as beautiful page boys.

Another costume-novel cliché which appears in Miss Heyer's early work is the villain with the fascinating sneer, cold thin mouth, complete *sang-froid* and complete ruthlessness—except to his lady. The rather mechanically wicked villain of *The Black Moth* was resuscitated with a new name as Justin Alastair, Lord Avon, or Satanas, in *These Old Shades* and *Devil's Cub*. I imagine that the charm of Justin Alastair and his reckless son, Dominic, accounts for the names of small sons of many of my contemporaries.

In these two books Miss Heyer comes her nearest to playing with her readers' sexual fantasies. She is so successful because she avoids coming very near. In the first, the young heroine-disguised-as-a-boy, with conventionally flaming hair and huge violet eyes, is rescued, unmasked and finally married to a coldly "wicked" father-figure. This provides the faint *frisson* of danger which appeals to female masochism, and the appeal of achieving the impossible which (psychoanalysts would say) satisfies the Oedipal desires. In *Devil's Cub* Miss Heyer uses one of the stocks-in-trade of the romantic novel: the characters are in close proximity and without a chaperon almost from the beginning. This provides a sense of danger and drama and heightened expectation—the declarations of love, and the bedding, are of course delayed by points of honour and twists of the plot until the end.

Both these novels are successful escape literature—particularly the second—for two reasons. There is the minimum of sexual titillation—only, indeed, the proximity and the romantic appearance of the hero—and there is an increasing clever balance between genuine romance and a saving comic mockery of romance within romance.

*The Convenient Marriage* (1934) and *Friday's Child* (1944) both play with a variant of the delayed bedding trick: this one has been used by romantic novelists from Ethel M. Dell and Marie Corelli onwards. Hero and heroine are married for purely practical reasons at the beginning of the novel, but

declarations of love are postponed to the end. No clue is given as to whether these marriages were consummated, although the reader must clearly be wondering and imagining. In *The Convenient Marriage* I think we are meant to assume that the hero—a gentleman and a Marquis—is waiting with superhuman patience until his schoolgirl wife really trusts him: this trust is delayed by the dastardly plotting of his ex-mistress and one of her beaux.

In *Friday's Child*, a much more successful novel, Georgette Heyer blandly and blatantly ignores the sexual issue until she makes a light joke about it on the very last page. In this novel the hero's ex-mistress is only mentioned when his wife asks at the Opera if *that* is his opera-dancer. Her sexual jealousy is sketched in very lightly indeed—but his rage at her public *faux pas* is crushing. Miss Heyer is beginning to employ the technique of her most successful work—the shifting of attention from the sexual imagination to the details of conventional behaviour and daily life. She employs increasingly less of the props of high passion—highwaymen, Jacobites, duels and disguise. She is playing romantic games with the novel of manners.

Miss Heyer is most successful with the artificial conventions of fashionable Regency society—a world of elegance, good taste, meaningful trifles and the high significance of *manners*. It has been said that in no other period were the ruling classes so secure in wealth, privilege and power. Some were politically active, many were without responsibilities except their estates, which they often left to others to manage. They developed eccentricities and mannerisms to use up their time and wealth. Lord Petersham collected snuff boxes, Lord Alvanley won a bet that he could produce the most expensive dish at a meal (a pie made from three hundred small back pieces of thirteen different birds and costing £108 5s). The Green Man of Brighton dyed his clothes, furniture, carriages, livery and hair bright green. "Romeo" Coates took the Theatre Royal in Bath to play Romeo himself and drove an all-white curricule shaped like a shell. Max Beerbohm described an ordinary day in the life of a rich man:

To spend the early morning with his valet, to saunter round to Whites for ale and tittle-tattle and the making of wagers, to attend 'a drunken *déjeuner*' in honour of 'la belle Rosalie,' to drive far out into the country in his pretty curricule followed by two well-dressed and well-mounted grooms . . . and stop at every tavern on the road . . . to reach St James's in time for a random toilet and so off to dinner . . . dinner done, to scamper off to Ranelagh to dance and sup.



Into this leisured world Beau Brummell introduced the ideal of artfully achieved simplicity. He had clean, starched neckcloths, perfectly cut plain clothes, perfectly shining boots, and, unusually, he *washed*. "No perfume, but clean linen, plenty of it, and country washing." A biographer explains his success as "the perfect art which conceals art, that satisfying spontaneity which can be achieved only by taking intense thought."

The description would, curiously, fit the novels of Brummell's contemporary Jane Austen, who also held up the perfect manners of the perfect gentleman as an aesthetic and moral ideal.

In Jane Austen's world, as in Brummell's, keeping off boredom is a major emotional force—Emma's silliness, Anne Elliot's solitary pensiveness, Darcy's distant pride are functions of boredom. Nobody *need* work; neither men nor women were exhausted by hours of office labour like Dickens's heroes, let alone those career men and women with whose devotion of the major part of their lives to the strife of job and ambition the modern novel, serious or romantic, is singularly incompetent to deal. And in such a world marriage, the rituals of courtship and the subsequent family life were much more real, much more essentially important than they are now.

Georgette Heyer's awareness of this atmosphere—both of the minute details of the social pursuits of the leisured classes and of the emotional structure behind the fiction it produced—is her greatest asset. Her most attractive heroes are lazy, bored men—dandies, Corinthians, entirely in control of their clothes and amusements, enjoying them—but in need of something more. Her heroines are lively, resourceful girls, usually not rich, with natural moral taste combined with a certain unworldly innocence that arouses the masculine protectiveness of the heroes.

In these novels, besides the leisurely, decorous good-temper of the plots, it is the details of life which are satisfying. It has been said that Miss Heyer's slang—boxing cant, thieves' slang, the fashionable adjectives of the *ton*—is right to the year in which her book is set. Her clothes are certainly right—anyone leafing through the contemporary periodicals *La Belle Assemblée*, *The Lady's Magazine*, the *Beau Monde* after reading her novels will discover, as I did, a world of details of tissues, trimmings and cosmetic hints, already familiar turns of phrase, twists of the language I had always known through her novels. She can do shops and entertainments—fashionable milliners, the Pantheon Bazaar, Astley's theatre. The mechanical genius's interests in *Frederica* are fully documented. He wants to see a pneumatic lift in Soho and Trevithick's steam-locomotive—not the Puffing Devil, which burnt itself

out on the road, but the one that was exhibited on its own track near Fitzroy Square.

W. H. Auden said that Jane Austen was good at describing "the amatory effects of brass." Miss Heyer is good at money and the lack of it, too. In *Black Sheep* there is an excellent portrait of a gentleman Nabob from India, who has made his fortune and is prepared to throw over certain conventions. In *Frederica* and *Arabella* there is a wealth of fascinating detail about how to contrive ball dresses on a tiny budget. And she is aware of, and knowledgeable about, the ways in which men of birth used up their energy when not devoted to leisure or politics, the army and agriculture. She knows all about sheep-breeding, the "new" crops of turnips, swedes and mangel-wurzels, about Coke of Norfolk, Tull's Drill, manures and rotation of crops. Her two most realistic novels deal with the army and with finance. These are the early *An Infamous Army* and the fairly recent *A Civil Contract*.

*An Infamous Army* is a skilful reconstruction of the battle of Waterloo—included in the bibliography of Lady Longford's new biography of Wellington. It is meticulously researched and documented: the Iron Duke, Miss Heyer tells us, says nothing in the novel that he did not, in fact, say at some point of his life.

*A Civil Contract* comes nearest of Miss Heyer's novels to abandoning the streamlined escape world for real emotion and real causation. It deliberately reverses the romantic bed-trick of *The Convenient Marriage*. Adam inherits his father's title, estates and very heavy debts. He marries Jenny, the daughter of a rich Cit, despite his love for the beautiful Juliana, to save his estates. Jenny's father wants the title for Jenny; Jenny, who loves Adam, can only aspire rather bleakly to "make him comfortable" and give him an heir—both of which she does. She never becomes beautiful; although slightly improved by contact with Adam's family she remains essentially tasteless about clothes and flashy horses, although the crimp in her hair, the number of her jewels and her plumes are reduced. Adam copes with her generous, blundering, vulgar father with his own innate moral taste: he suffers because he is taking everything and really giving nothing—and since he does not come to love Jenny, only to settle with her, this problem has no easy solution. Sex enters this book more than any other, but on the same practical, flat, anti-romantic note. The couple are seen, apprehensive and nervously polite, heading towards a purposeful but unromantic honeymoon. There is no kiss, no sudden tension as in the novel of delayed romantic recognition—but Jenny's pregnancy, a sickly one, is documented

in detail with appropriate medical regimens and errors, and Adam's protectiveness comes out. In this novel the denouement is provided not by love but by economics. Adam, a military man, is warned by his father-in-law to sell government stock in the panic before Waterloo; instead, gambling on his own professional skill and knowledge of Wellington, he *buys*, and repairs his fortune. I know of no other romantic novel in which the high tension is supplied by the Stock Exchange. And throughout the book attention is concentrated on daily life, family life, financial repairs, domesticity and agriculture.

Romantic love of Jane Austen's kind, if not of Caroline Lamb's, is an ideal image of a society which often had to make do with marriages of this kind. Miss Heyer knows about the relationship between the ideal and the actual; Jenny knows what she has got, and does not deny the reality of what she has not got.

Marghanita Laski has said that Georgette Heyer is a genius and defies description. I am painfully conscious that my description of her world leaves out the sparkle and comfort of the flesh and blood for the sake of largely irrelevant literary-critical bones. Why is she so good? Partly because she has good taste—her stories are deliberately innocent, not because she does not know about the seamier side of Regency life, but because she chooses to hint mockingly at it or ignore it.

Partly because she is neither prurient nor working out fantasies—her own or the reader's—and by deflecting attention from the passions to the daily life of her romantic characters, she manages to create an escape world of super-sanity in her fantasy. I think the clue to her success is somewhere here—in the *precise* balance she achieves between romance and reality, fantastic plot and real detail. Her good taste, her knowledge and the literary and social conventions of the time she is writing about all contribute to a romanticised anti-romanticism: an impossibly desirable world of prettiness, silliness and ultimate good sense where men and women really *talk* to each other, know what is going on between them and plan to spend the rest of their lives together developing the relationship. In her romantic novels, as in Jane Austen's, it is love the people are looking for, and love they give each other, guaranteed by the cushions, bonnets, and dances at Almack's and by the absence of sex-in-the-head. It is a myth and an idealisation, but it is one we were brought up to believe whether or not we really had Jane Austen in our 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.

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