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Rereading the Romance

Juliet Flesch, *From Australia with Love: A History of Modern Australian Popular Romance Novels*. Fremantle, Australia: Curtin University Books, 2004. 320 pp. \$22.95 paper.

Sally Goade, ed., *Empowerment versus Oppression: Twenty-First Century Views of Popular Romance Novels*. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Scholars, 2007. 289 pp. \$79.99; £39.99.

Deborah Lutz, *The Dangerous Lover: Gothic Villains, Byronism, and the Nineteenth-Century Seduction Narrative*. Ohio State UP, 2006. xii + 117 pp. \$37.95

Lynn S. Neal, *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006. xii + 245 pp. \$45.00; \$18.95 paper.

Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2003. xiii + 225 pp. \$24.95; \$14.95 paper.

*Shall I whisper it to you under the memory of the last rose of summer . . . I am very fond of romances! . . . Have you in you any surviving innocence of this sort? Or do you call it idiocy?—If you do, I will forgive you, only smiling to myself, I give you notice, with a smile of superior—pleasure!*

Elizabeth Barrett to Robert Browning, Thursday, March 20, 1845

**B**lame it on my innocence or my idiocy, as you please. Like Elizabeth Barrett, I am “very fond of romances,” and for the past few years have read them with increasing (not to say “superior”) pleasure. A muffled burst of laughter introduced me to the genre. It came, I recall, on a snowy night in my senior seminar on *Possession: A Romance*, as we threaded A. S. Byatt’s postmodern quadrille with Anne Carson’s *Eros the Bittersweet* as our

dancing master. A moment before, Carson had proposed that we "superimpose on the question 'What does the lover want from love'" two new questions: "'What does the reader want from reading? What is the writer's desire?'" The answer, she hazards, to my enduring dismay as a poetry scholar, is "novels." As evidence, she points to the origins of prose fiction in the *erōtika pathēmata*, or tales of the sufferings of desire, that blossomed in the third century B.C.E. In these love stories, Carson explains,

[t]he novelists play out as dilemmas of plot and character all those facets of erotic contradiction and difficulty that were first brought to light in lyric poetry. Rival lovers appear around every corner of the plot. Pretexts for pursuit and flight ramify from page to page. Obstacles to romantic union materialize in tireless variety. The lovers themselves devote considerable energy to obstructing their own desire—should interfering parents, cruel pirates, bungling doctors, dogged graverobbers, dull slaves, mindless divinities and the whims of chance not suffice.<sup>1</sup>

At which point one student, Diotima in Doc Martens, chortled, "Oh, my God! That sounds just like the plot of *Skye O'Malley*!"

Only a handful of *Contemporary Literature*'s readers will know this extravagant early work by Bertrice Small, one of the first novels to give an explicitly feminist cast to the much-maligned erotic historical romance of the 1970s and 1980s, the so-called bodice ripper. Fewer still will see this particular lacuna as a problem. Alas, disdain for popular romance fiction remains a way to demonstrate one's intelligence, political bona fides, and demanding aesthetic sensibility, even in circles where resistance to such orthodoxies is the norm. (Thus, for example, Ron Silliman has dismissed the poetry establishment's "School of Quietude" as "the verse equivalent of the Harlequin novel." I study both; if only this were true!)<sup>2</sup> That romance novels can, themselves, display intelligence, worthy politics, and aesthetic

1. Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986; Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1998) 78–79.

2. To be fair, Silliman's blog links to that of Pam Rosenthal, one of the most erudite, adventurous, and intellectually playful authors of erotic historical romance. When he says "Harlequin," he may mean quite specifically *Harlequin*, as opposed to, say, Avon, Signet Eclipse, or Berkley Sensation. Silliman also makes this comparison in the context of a well-developed argument: both genres aspire, he asserts, to the status of the "always already familiar" (<<http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2003/06/so-what-do-poets->

accomplishment remains one of the best-kept secrets in literary study, however easy to find and read the books themselves may be.

Where shall we place the blame for this occlusion? "The Romance Genre Blues, or Why We Don't Get No Respect," by novelist Candice Proctor, opens Sally Goade's anthology *Empowerment versus Oppression: Twenty-First Century Views of Popular Romance Novels* with one melancholy answer. Rejecting the assumptions that "it's patriarchy's fault" and that "what we have here is simply an image problem based on blind prejudice," Proctor argues that "we [romance writers] did it to ourselves" through overproduction, through a willingness to go along with publishers' desire to milk plot trends long past their time (undead Highlander chick lit, anyone?), and especially through the way the genre markets itself:

Like it or not things like pink feather boas, life-sized, cardboard cutouts of the Topaz man, and ridiculously clichéd titles taint the image of the entire genre. All those red garters and hint o' dick covers may help boost individual print runs, but at what price? As long as the industry indulges in this kind of nonsense and encourages quantity over quality, respect will remain elusive. We can either change that, or embrace it and just quit whining.

(19)

As a man who remembers when science fiction wrestled with comparable questions—*ubi sunt* the Spock ears, BEMs (Bug-Eyed Monsters), and Boris Vallejo covers of my Barsoomian youth?—I sympathize with Proctor's diagnosis. As an academic, however, I suspect that the initial scholarly reception of romance has hindered, as much as fostered, subsequent interest in the genre. As Pamela Regis and Juliet Flesch demonstrate in the opening chapters of *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* and *From Australia with Love: A History of Modern Australian Popular Romance Novels*, the first twenty years of serious analysis of romance fiction treated it and its readers with ambivalence at best, and often with undisguised

from-school-of.html>). Romance authors are well aware of how their genre's aesthetic of familiarity can be perceived, and the best of them give as good as they get. See, for example, the distinctions made between two Italian restaurants, the "always already familiar" Emilio's and Serafino's, where the chef attempts to "make it [chicken marsala] new," with disastrous results, in Jennifer Crusie's *Bet Me*.

contempt. Germaine Greer, in 1970, dubbed romance writers "women cherishing the chains of their bondage" and their readers "supermenial"; more than twenty years later, Jeanne Dubino announced that romance novels "condition women for subservience," returning their readers "refreshed or drugged to their housework" (qtd. in Flesch 14, 21). A little Gramsci is a dangerous thing; as they debunked the ideology of these novels, hoping to break their hegemonic spell, such critics often reduced the genre to—as another Australian, Hsu-Ming Teo, nicely puts it—"the opiate of the missus" (qtd. in Flesch 108).

This edge of resistance marks, and mars, even such foundational studies as Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982) and Janice A. Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984; rpt. 1991), which famously huffs that the "romance-reading process" fails to supply the reader with "a comprehensive program for reorganizing her life in such a way that all needs might be met" (215).<sup>3</sup> (Neither, one notes, do the processes of reading *Invisible Man*, *The Dream of a Common Language*, or *Angels in America*. As a rule, comprehensive programs for reorganizing life are the stuff of self-help books, theology, and political manifestos, rather than literature.) The aspiring young romance scholar who turns to these works first will be misled. They give skittish, partial, condescending, and profoundly dated accounts of the genre, which has long since evolved and diversified, not least in response to feminist critiques.<sup>4</sup> *Reading the Romance*, in particular, has provoked witty and artful ripostes within romance novels themselves, as authors adopt and contest Radway's three-part thesis: (1) female readers use romance fiction to carve out a space of relief from their daily round of caring for

3. Deeply divided, still, about the genre, Modleski has returned to it in several subsequent essays, notably in "My Life as a Romance Reader" (1997) and "My Life as a Romance Writer" (1998), both of which are collected in her *Old Wives' Tales and Other Women's Stories* (I. B. Taurus, 1999).

4. "Romance is continually being updated as tastes within the wider culture change," observes Glen Thomas in *Empowerment versus Oppression*, and since "these updates are largely consumer driven, rather than producer driven," the "creative industry" of romance fiction has proven itself "fully flexible and adaptable in the face of wider social change, rather than a static producer of formulaic narratives" (30).

others; (2) they find this relief, which is lamentably vicarious and temporary, by identifying with the romance heroine and then watching the romance hero nurture her, as no one nurtures them in their own real lives; and (3) this hero is therefore not *really* attractive to readers as a man, but rather as a figure for the reader's (and, by extension, the heroine's) caring, preoedipal mother. The first two assertions are now topoi in seduction scenes, most memorably on the lips of Mayor Phin Tucker in Jennifer Crusie's *Welcome to Temptation*. (Tolle, lege: Crusie discovered romance fiction as a graduate student researching narrative structures in women's fiction and has since become one of the genre's most sophisticated authors and advocates.) The last, for its part, has lent itself to pathos, horror, and sly humor. One spots it, for example, peeping out from the arras in Emma Holly's *Hunting Midnight*, when a bloodsucking bite from Ulric, the shape-shifting hero, yields the heroine, Juliana, first orgasmic pleasure and then a vivid, incongruous memory of kneading bread as a little girl with her long-lost mother.

If not with Radway or Modleski, then, where should a novice begin? For many years, the answer lay in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, edited by Jayne Ann Krentz (1992), which gathered defenses of romance fiction by romance authors; in a special issue of the journal *Paradoxa* titled *Where's Love Gone? Transformations in the Romance Genre* (1997); and in the radically inconsistent *Romantic Conventions* (1998), edited by Anne K. Kaler and Rosemary E. Johnson-Kurek. But these resources, while of enduring use, offer neither a broad history nor a comprehensive theory of the genre as a whole. (The Krentz anthology also risks the charge of special pleading, although why this should be more problematic in romance fiction than it is in the writings of poet-critics I will leave for others to decide.) It comes as a relief, therefore, to discover Pamela Regis's *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, a book which answers the need for an expansive, theoretically grounded account of the genre and bids fair to be the standard introductory text for romance-fiction study in the coming decade.<sup>5</sup>

5. As of last year, an important Web-based resource has emerged for romance scholarship: a collaborative wiki bibliography of essays, books, dissertations, and other criticism in a variety of languages. See <[http://www.romancewiki.com/Romance\\_Scholarship](http://www.romancewiki.com/Romance_Scholarship)>.

As its title suggests, Regis's study of "the most popular, least respected literary genre" (xi) takes a precise, even Linnaean approach to its subject. Treating the romance novel as "a subgenre of comedy" (16), Regis returns to first principles—or at least to Northrop Frye—to place the genre in a broader and deeper literary history than has been previously offered (she starts with *Pamela*), to define it, and to outline the eight "narrative elements" essential to the form. "The romance novel," she writes, "is a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines" (14).<sup>6</sup> By its works, or its plot twists, we know it:

All romance novels contain eight narrative elements: a *definition of society*, always corrupt, that the romance novel will reform; the *meeting* between the heroine and hero; an account of their *attraction* for each other; the *barrier* between them; the *point of ritual death* [a moment at which, she subsequently explains, "no happy resolution of the narrative seems possible" (the term is Frye's)]; the *recognition* that fells the barrier; the *declaration* of heroine and hero that they love each other; and their *betrothal*.

(14)

The instantiation of each element will vary from novel to novel, and the elements themselves can "appear in any order," happen multiple times, at any length, either on stage or off, and be "doubled and even tripled in the same scene or action," as when a proposal follows immediately on a declaration of love (30). The art of any given novel will thus lie, in part, in the author's skill with these required elements—a neoclassical aesthetic, in some sense, or one comparable to the play within conventions that one finds in court poetries from various periods. British scholar Laura Vivanco, a Hispano-medievalist by training, thus notes a resemblance between popular romance fiction and fifteenth-century *cancionero* literature, with its

6. The Romance Writers of America has recently offered its own definition of the genre, which can be found on the organization's Web site. Its explanation that romance novels "are based on the idea of an innate emotional justice—the notion that good people in the world are rewarded and evil people are punished" bears a striking resemblance to Miss Prism's definition of fiction more generally in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. For a fascinating account of the organization's internal debates over how romance fiction should be defined, see Jennifer Crusie's essay "I Know What It Is When I Read It: Defining the Romance Genre" (*Romance Writers' Report*, March 2000; <<http://www.jennycrusie.com/essays/definingromancegenre.php>>).

strict limitations on form and content. (For the record, Vivanco contributes to an academic romance blog on which I also post: <http://teachmetonight.blogspot.com>.)

Regis is not the first to list a set of narrative elements in romance fiction. As she points out, Radway's *Reading the Romance* offered thirteen structuralist "functions" to be found in "the ideal romance," although these were derived primarily from her interviews with a small sample of readers who liked only one subgenre of romance (historicals) and within that subgenre focused on a single text, Kathleen E. Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower*. The list in Regis is more precise, more elegant, and far more useful, not least because it enables one to read romance novels individually, with attention to their discrete tonal and thematic emphases and (at last!) to their artistry. Romance novels have rarely, if ever, been treated by scholars as *aesthetic* objects, but rather as fungible, even standardized products. It may overstate matters to call Regis the Helen Vendler of romance-fiction studies, but she reminds one of Vendler in her desire to treat the ideas in the novels she studies as "functional parts (rather than as ideological determinants) of the work," and to "describe [the novel] in such a way that it cannot be confused with any other art work," rather than "conflate it with other works sharing its values."<sup>7</sup> How different, following Regis's lead, seem the parsimonious structure of Julia Quinn's *The Viscount Who Loved Me* and the proliferating, rococo embellishments of Eloisa James's *Pleasure for Pleasure*, despite their similarity as comic, Regency-era romances. Critics have neglected such distinctions but have no reason (or excuse) to do so in the future.

As I have learned in the classroom, to ask students, "What does Crusie do with the 'betrothal' element in *Crazy for You*?" or "Where does Mary Stewart displace the element of 'attraction' in *Madam, Will You Talk*?" enables a rather more focused and deliberate discussion of the novels than the question they want to start with, "Why do women read these things?" Even those primarily or exclusively interested in ideological, psychological, and philosophical approaches to romance fiction will want to have Regis's precision tools in their kit.

7. I quote from Vendler's introduction to *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics* (Harvard UP, 1988) 4, 2.

They will also want to draw on her other long-overdue contribution to the field: a fleshed-out canon, however initial, of authors and texts. The second half of *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* is divided between readings of older texts that Regis persuasively claims for the genre—*Pamela* (1740–41), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Framley Parsonage* (1860), by Anthony Trollope, and E. M. Forster's *A Room With a View* (1908)—and chapters on the twentieth-century popular romance novel, with particular attention to E. M. Hull's *The Sheik* (1919) and to the work of five particularly influential authors (Georgette Heyer, Mary Stewart, Janet Daily, Jayne Ann Krentz, and Nora Roberts), each of whom “innovated or perfected one or more of the primary subgenres of romance” (108).<sup>8</sup> Previous histories of the genre have focused primarily on the romance publishing industry or on the evolution of sex scenes in it.<sup>9</sup> The “natural history” in Regis may mention both, but it is essentially a *literary* history. One may quarrel with her readings of particular texts, one's mileage may vary, as they say, with particular authors. But anyone who wishes to write a romance syllabus or simply school herself (or himself) systematically in the genre will find this book a judicious, articulate guide.

The “primary subgenres of romance” that Regis explores include the Regency romance, romantic suspense, Western romance, “futuristics,” and American-set contemporaries. Arguably older than any of these, Christian inspirational romance receives book-length attention from Lynn S. Neal—or, rather, the appeal, aesthetics, and cultural work of such romances receive her attention, since *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction* attends

8. The logic of this division lies partly in history: until the passage of the 1870 Married Women's Property Act in England, Regis reminds us, “[t]he almost absolute dependence of the wife on the husband for the roof over her head, food to eat, clothes to wear, medical attention, and support for their children” made marrying the right man “the crucial decision for most women” (58). Lucy Honeychurch, who will be financially independent when she comes of age, marks a new start for the romance heroine, even as Forster's ambivalence about his own novel's happy ending marks, for Regis, the point at which the literary canon turns its back on the “HEA” (happily ever after) and consigns such endings to the realm of popular fiction (104).

9. See, for example, Jay Dixon's *The Romantic Fiction of Mills & Boon, 1909–1995* (New York: Routledge, 1999) and Carol Thurston's *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (U of Illinois P, 1987).

primarily to readers and reading practices rather than to texts. “As I first imagined it,” Neal explains in the opening pages, “this project would be about the novels' plots and prescriptions. . . . However, as I began to sketch out the parameters of this research, the imagined woman shopping for evangelical romances at her local Barnes and Noble or Family Christian Store demanded my attention. Why did she read evangelical romance novels? How did she understand her reading practice and its relationship to her religious life?” (6–7).

Like Radway's *Reading the Romance*, then, *Romancing God* is a work of literary ethnography, and like the best moments in Radway, it is less concerned with rehearsing “simple dichotomies of liberation and oppression or reductionist theories of delusion and repression” than with exploring how readers *use* the romances they enjoy. But while Radway cannot hold back an occasional sigh at her subjects' taste in books, Neal stays scrupulously neutral. “Rather than lament how these women's lives would be better if only they would read and believe differently,” she writes, “I analyze how my consultants maintain their religious commitments through evangelical romance reading” (10). When Neal says that evangelical romances embody an aesthetic of “mediocrity, predictability, utility, and sentimentality” (190), she takes pains to explain that each of these terms is simply descriptive; “mediocrity,” for example, she uses in its etymological sense of “being intermediate between two extremes” (97), as when “[e]vangelical romance novels occupy this in-between position, which reconciles women and ministry, faith and fun, escapism and engagement, as well as ordinary life and divine presence” (191). When she cites critics of this aesthetic, who scoff at it as kitsch, she cites *evangelical* critics, and she places their criticism in a history of struggle within evangelical culture to negotiate the competing claims of art, entertainment, and theology (95–104).

An assistant professor of religion, Neal spends less time on particular Christian romance novels as novels than an English professor might wish. Her “case study” of Francine Rivers's classic *Redeeming Love*, for example, which retells the Biblical book of Hosea as a Gold Rush-era Western romance, leaves one curious about what a reader steeped in the theory and practice of midrash would make of the book. Likewise, Neal's observation that Christian romance novels transform both personal and world history “from a series of

random events into a carefully ordered design that demonstrates God's romance with humanity" (184) reminds one vividly of Frye's description of romance as the genre in which "pure literary design" is visible. "The introduction of an omen or portent, or the device of making a whole story the fulfillment of a prophecy given at the beginning," writes Frye, "suggests, in its existential projection, a conception of ineluctable fate or hidden omnipotent will. Actually, it is a piece of pure literary design, giving the beginning some symmetrical relationship with the end, and the only ineluctable will involved is that of the author."<sup>10</sup> Is Christian romance, then, merely a name for those texts in which the author's "ineluctable will" and the reader's longing for a shapely story go by the name of Christ rather than kismet, coincidence, good luck, or "the fairy tale"? If romance in the broadest sense is a "secular scripture" (Frye), is *all* romance fiction finally "inspirational"? Neal's work cannot answer such questions, but it does raise them, and they deserve to be raised.

If Regis's freshly literary approach to popular romance fiction allows one to explore the artistry of individual novels, and if Neal brings a new, dispassionate aplomb to the ethnographic analysis of readers, other important new work on the genre views it through postcolonial, queer-theoretical, and other freshly polished, designer-framed lenses. Some of these pieces need a bit of tracking down: "What 'Race' Is the Sheik? Rereading a Desert Romance," Susan L. Blake's superb new historical reading of the E. M. Hull best seller in light of the debates over race and divorce in the 1910s and 1920s, appears in an anthology on "romance and history" (*Doubled Plots* [2003], edited by Susan Strehle and Mary Panicia Carden) that scatters three pieces on romance novels among multiple essays on utterly different sorts of "romance." (The other relevant pieces, both groundbreaking, are Charles H. Hinnant's economically focused "Desire and the Marketplace: A Reading of Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower*" and the delightful "What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Book Like This?" an exploration of "homoerotic reading and popular romance" by Stephanie Burley.) In *Scorned Literature* (2002), an anthology of essays on the full range of

10. Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957; Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1971) 139.

"popular mass-produced fiction in America," Sarah S. G. Frantz draws on Michel Foucault and Hélène Cixous for an inquiry into romance and the "feminine will to power." Her analysis of romance novel scenes in which the hero breast-feeds from a nursing heroine is as vivid and counterintuitive as the scenes themselves, and through old-fashioned close reading of such scenes, she demonstrates the subtlety with which authors have invited readers to identify across boundaries of both gender and power.

What we might broadly think of as a "cultural studies" approach to popular romance marks several of the best essays in Goade's *Empowerment versus Oppression*, the most recent collection of essays devoted exclusively to popular romance fiction. Here, for example, Guy Mark Foster takes up "black women romance novelists and the taboo of interracial desire," arguing that "no other literary form has thus far attempted to take up the vexed question of interracial sex as it relates to black women" with "the commitment and purpose" of popular romance (133). Similarly, Emily Haddad looks at how the enduring subgenre of "Arab abduction romances" changed in the years just before and after 9/11. I was eager to read Amy Lee's "Forming a Local Identity: Romance Novels in Hong Kong," and the xenophile in me is truly glad to have been introduced to such novels as *Goodbye Rodent* and *Three Women of Cup Size A*, but I do wish the piece had addressed, even tentatively, why the definition of "romance novel" in Hong Kong should lie so far from its accepted parameters in the English-speaking world. (The novels she studies lack happy endings, to cite the most telling contrast.)

The most memorable of these pieces is "Female Enfranchisement and the Popular Romance: Employing an Indian Perspective," by Jayashree Kamble, which reports on the ways the Indian readers whom Kamble surveyed in 2005 both perceive and use the genre.<sup>11</sup> "When viewed through the lens of a culture that has never experienced a feminist movement," Kamble writes, romance clearly

11. Kamble's research supplements and updates earlier work by Jyoti Puri ("Reading Romance Novels in Postcolonial India," *Gender & Society* 11 [1997]: 434-52) and Radhika Parameswaran ("Western Romance Fiction as English-Language Media in Postcolonial India," *Journal of Communication* 49.3 [1999]: 84-105, and "Reading Fictions of Romance: Gender, Sexuality, and Nationalism in Postcolonial India," *Journal of Communication* 52 [2002]: 832-51).

displays "the potential to provide women in other cultures with tactics to recognize and contest patriarchy—as it exists in their own contexts" (162). That a woman might choose her own marriage partner, declining all others; that a woman might "lock verbal horns with the hero" (164), with conversation as a crucial "screening ritual" that establishes whether couples are truly on an equal footing; that the female body can be frankly acknowledged; and that sex can be between equals who "care about the partner's pleasure as much as their own" (177)—for Indian women these remain, according to Kamble, revolutionary ideas, not to be dismissed. A comparable argument emerges from Azar Nafisi's meditations on *Pride and Prejudice* in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003). In the world of romance-novel studies, Regis pleads the same pragmatic case on behalf of the genre, but without the appeals to both ethos and pathos. (Kamble offers herself, throughout the piece, as a representative Indian reader whose life was changed for the better by romance fiction.)

The most fully developed exploration of romance from a comparative perspective, at least so far, is Juliet Flesch's *From Australia with Love*, a crisp historical inquiry into "whether there is such a thing as 'Australian romance'" (5). Against the assumption that romance publishing is an international, corporate, and therefore homogeneous enterprise, Flesch details the ways in which romance authors in Australia have used the genre for a variety of explicitly nationalist ends ("I use the love situation as a framework to write about the outback, just as Arthur Upfield used the detective story," one author explains [251]), and to weigh in on local issues of race among white, Asian, and Aboriginal Australians. Indeed, the very internationalism of the romance publishing industry allows one to draw a bead on enduring local differences. French translations of Australian and other English-language romance fiction, Flesch shows, systematically replace sexual frankness with euphemisms: "In English it's too detailed, it's awful," she quotes one francophone reader from 1997 (264). More subtly, they also recast witty, independent heroines as timid, threatened, and even victimized by heroes who, in the original, were laid-back, good-humored blokes.

Flesch has a splendid ear for differences in tone and style from author to author and text to text, as well as from language to language,

and her own prose displays a welcome, bone-dry humor. "To read a newspaper report of a romance writers' conference," she remarks, "is to be convinced that writing about human relationships is intrinsically amusing" (96). Or this, about the "punishing" kisses that heroes so often bestow: "Why the heroine is being punished in this way and for what transgression (except that of arousing the hero's lust) is rarely made explicit" (197). Given these strengths, I was sorry to see Flesch fret over whether certain romance heroines were good "role models" for readers, and she worries more than she might over the widespread claim that older romance novels featured an "apparent endorsement of brutality" (178). The rape scenes in *The Sheik*, *The Flame and the Flower*, and even Rosemary Rogers's infamous *Sweet Savage Love* (1974) do not "endorse" the hero's brutality, however they may describe it; and if the heroines eventually discover sexual pleasure with those very heroes, the novels insist that this comes after the relationship, and frequently the hero himself, has been transformed. Whatever one feels about this plotline, surely it represents a fantasy of "the triumph of the heroines over their violation," as Deborah Kaye Chappel argues (Flesch 182; emphasis added), rather than a fantasy about some secret pleasure in it—a small but important distinction.

That I pick this bone with Flesch suggests how easily one gets drawn into the debate that has shaped and, arguably, hemmed in romance-novel studies for the past thirty years: are these novels good or bad for their readers? Put plain, the question is either empirical, and yet to be properly answered, or absurdly moralistic, although in either case it suggests a dandy parlor game. Page for page, which has done more to mess up impressionable lives: *The Wolf and the Dove*, *On the Road*, or *The Sorrows of Young Werther*? From whom would you rather have your son or daughter take lessons in love: D. H. Lawrence, Georgette Heyer, or Dante Alighieri? (How many years did I waste, as a lad, living *la vita nuova*?) Perhaps, as a man, I find it too easy to be flip—I suspect, at least, that gender is to blame for my bristling at the final essay in Goade's anthology, "Becoming Both Poet and Poem: Feminist Critics Repossess the Romance." For this essay, thirteen female critics responded to an invitation to rewrite the plots, endings, and other crucial scenes from canonical and popular romance novels. Mary Beth Tegan, author of the invitation and analysis, does a splendid job of pointing out the differences among



these revisions: which flattens out a heroine's inner life, which fairly sizzles with anachronistic, intertextual exuberance, and so on. Like Mark Darcy in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), however, I like my romance novels just as they are. I would rather be troubled, mystified, or infuriated by the texts at hand than have a critic, even in fantasy, fix their flaws or set them right.<sup>12</sup>

The student who introduced me to romance fiction did not justify her love on either therapeutic or feminist grounds. For her, the books were "merely" a source of pleasure—though as writers and critics have long known, there is nothing "mere" about pleasure, that "grand elementary principle" in which we know and feel and live and move, as Wordsworth has it in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Sadly, although Taiwanese scholar Eva Y. I. Chen claims to explore "forms of pleasure in the reading of popular romance" in her contribution to *Empowerment versus Oppression*, the piece offers little more than cursory sketches of Freud, Lacan, the Frankfurt school, Barthes, and other worthies, with little fresh insight to be found.<sup>13</sup> Goade herself serves up far richer fare in "Understanding the Pleasure: An Undergraduate Romance Reading Community," which lays out the syllabus, assignments, and sequenced discussions that take her own students from their disparate initial stances toward romance fiction—aversion, attraction, recognition, and "embarrassed, skeptical interest" (219)—into ideologically nuanced but still appreciative engagements. Generous, and pedagogically patient, this essay does us a kindness by tracing some actual readers' resistance, negotiation, and ultimate enjoyment of the genre. But the fundamental questions

12. Well, let me make one exception: Tania Modleski's proposed revision of *Nerd in Shining Armor*, by Vicki Lewis Thompson, which restores the "oppositional erotics of the 1970s bodice ripper" and "attempts to reinscribe the formulaic gender roles of romance by reversing the original author's 'nerdification of the hero'" (265–66). Writes Tegan, "Modleski is concerned here far less about shaping the romance for feminism than saving the romance from it" (266)—a fascinating new chapter in Modleski's long love-hate relationship with the genre.

13. It's also a shame, although perhaps harder for her to help, that Chen cites such outdated statistics about the readership of romance fiction. For example, the surveys she uses, from 1969 and 1983, show only a "negligible" percentage of male readers, 1 or 2 percent, and she takes no more than a passing glance at Romance Writers of America data from 2002, which show that figure at 7 percent. In the past five years, the number has shot up to 22 percent, a shift that surely warrants someone's critical attention.

of pleasure at play in romance novels strike me as yet to be posed in a way that is both robustly theorized and practically applicable, able to account for the novels or the experience of reading them in their range, variety, and charm.

Twenty-five years ago, as Modleski published *Loving with a Vengeance* and Radway began her research on romance readers, Stanley Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* gave serious (sometimes lugubrious) philosophical consideration to a suite of romantic comedies. If *Bringing Up Baby* and *The Lady Eve* could invite and sustain such attention, I have often wondered, why not *Crazy for You*, *Devil's Cub*, or *Slightly Dangerous*? Socrates himself confessed that his wisdom consisted of "nothing but a knowledge of 'erotic things,'" or *ta erōtika* (*Symp.* 177d; qtd. in Carson 170); surely someone could read "erotic romance" with that thought in mind, or at least Italo Calvino's observation that "in the explicitly erotic writer we may . . . recognize one who uses the symbols of sex to give voice to *something else*" (66; emphasis added).<sup>14</sup> In *Empowerment versus Oppression*, one author strikes out in this new interpretive direction: Deborah Lutz, whose essay "The Haunted Space of the Mind" meditates on the "revival of the Gothic romance in the twenty-first century."

Once the dominant subgenre of romance fiction, in the 1950s and early 1960s, Gothic has indeed made something of a comeback recently, both on its own (particularly in the smart, generically self-conscious work of Lydia Joyce) and as a brooding undercurrent in many paranormal romance novels. "In an age peculiarly engaged in arduously knowing the self, in uncovering and illuminating all the dark demons," writes Lutz,

the Gothic provides a countermovement. The excessive popularity of the self-help book, the soul-searching memoir, the therapeutic relationship, shows a need in our culture . . . to *know* the mind, to shine a bright light on interiority. The Gothic draws on another desire, one that crosses boundaries of historical periodization, gender, and class—that of peering into darkened rooms, stepping into haunted spaces not merely to expose

14. "Definitions of Territories: Eroticism," Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature*, trans. Patrick Creagh (San Diego: Harcourt, 1986) 65–70.

them and banish all their mystery, but to keep the darkness in play, to fall in love with it even.

(92)

Lutz situates her essay in a "post-feminist" critical tradition and succinctly sketches the differences between the "new Gothic" heroine and her more hesitant, inexperienced foremothers. (She is now likely to be the haunted, Byronic figure, so that "the moments of sexual danger become gender neutral" [95].) Lutz's strongest, most compelling readings, however, come when she sets politics aside to read Gothic texts as culturally contrapuntal, sites of resistance to the demystification (by feminism, not least) of both the outer and inner world.

Lutz's essay, which I read in galleys, made me eager to read her first book, *The Dangerous Lover: Gothic Villains, Byronism, and the Nineteenth-Century Seduction Narrative*, published late last year. As its subtitle suggests, *The Dangerous Lover* focuses primarily on older texts; however, it opens and closes with meditations on the "dangerous" hero of contemporary popular romance fiction, and throughout the slim volume, Lutz refuses to segregate older from newer, "popular" from "canonical," or "theoretical" from more strictly "philosophical" works. On the contrary, she aspires to eavesdrop on "the long-standing but secret dialogue" between "the most difficult and important continental philosophers and the most formulaic of female-coded genres" (x; 88). In her reading, then, the dangerous lover is "a full embodiment of both Heidegger's and Freud's renderings of uncanniness" (xi), a man who "must live the Kantian wound—the rupture between interiority and everything exterior" (x). The novels, poems, and other texts that feature him can all be read, whatever their primary genre, as "allegories for ontology" (87), in which lovers' relationships write small our relationships with the "work-world" and with "authentic being," Heidegger's *Dasein* (21).

This is heady stuff, in every sense of the word, and Lutz clearly delights in the juxtapositions, highbrow to lowbrow, that her project demands. On one page, she will deal out terms from literary history—Ros Ballaster's very useful distinction, for example, between anarchic "amatory" and morally recuperative "didactic" love fiction in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century—and on the next open "the pulpy pages of the fat erotic historical romance novel" to find a pirate, ruthless rancher, or outcast bastard

son of a lord, who then, a page later, is compared to Franz Kafka, as described by Walter Benjamin (2–5). She loses me on that last step. In any case, her point about the seductive power of "world-encompassing" failure survives its illustration, and the author herself admits that "at any moment," "[r]epresentations of the dangerous lover . . . can cross the line into parody" (19). To my taste, her prose sometimes crosses that line as well, sounding less like philosophy than like the turtlenecked *prof de philo* in an Eric Rohmer movie, trying and failing to seduce with his glittering discourse.<sup>15</sup> Plunges of diction suit Lutz better than aspirations to the sublime. "The historical trajectory pursued in the following pages is always and everywhere a history of a women's aesthetic," she thus writes in the introduction, adding "—of what women desire, of what turns women on" (xi). That final appositive phrase is delicious and does more to persuade me that the dangerous lover must be understood through the heroine who longs for him than Lutz's grander gestures elsewhere.

When a sample chapter from *The Dangerous Lover* first appeared on its publisher's Web site, members of the "RomanceScholar" listserv raised an eyebrow at what seemed to them some basic factual errors in its opening history of popular romance fiction. *These Old Shades*, for example, by Georgette Heyer, is not a Regency romance, but set a full generation earlier; Lutz takes it as her guide to the subgenre, explaining in a note that the term "regency" is used "to represent aristocratic, luxuriant dissipation rather than an actual historical period" (97). In my experience, Regency readers, like Heyer herself, are actually sticklers for historical precision and accuracy, and they will take authors to task for getting their details wrong. Perhaps Lutz, her editors, and her peer reviewers move in higher, more forgiving circles of the *ton*. It would be a shame, however, for such stumbles to distract from the gift that Lutz has given

15. Why, for example, should "the unfathomable mystery of existence in the world and the longing it perpetuates—the longing to fully *be*, to be sure what to do with the world that surrounds us" reduce to "the desire to desire; it is desire *per se*" (20)? How on earth does it help us read a romance novel, or *any* book, to be told that "the full presence of love is the love story's meaning; everything in the narrative means this, and this is all it means" (22)? Philosophical reductiveness, like its ideological cousin, collapses the specificities by which art lives into agglutinations of mere "meaning."

future scholars in this book—a radically new way to attend to the genre, and one as needed as the aesthetic turn we find in Regis. How limited, how picayune old quarrels about the effect of romance fiction on its readers seem when compared to Lutz's visions of a heroine who "finds her most authentic self at the heart of what seems at first most foreign and outside her way of being—an arrogant, hateful other," and of romance itself as the genre in which "at the very heart of what appears to be *not* ours comes what we must fully own" (xi). One may well turn back from *The Dangerous Lover* to pursue ethnographic, psychological, aesthetic, or even politically feminist readings of romance novels, but one does so eagerly, with a clearer sense of what the stakes of romance can be.

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