

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.

Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970, pp. 167-85, 342-3):

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>1</sup> Georgette Heyer, *Regency Buck*, (London, 1968), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

round gown of French cambric, frilled around the neck with scalloped lace; and a close mantle of twilled sarsenet. A poke bonnet of basket willow with a striped velvet ribbon. . ."<sup>3</sup>—and most compromisingly placed shaking a pebble out of her sandal, and so having to hide her stockinged foot in her skirts, sweeps her up into his arms and hurls her into his curricule (for at this point neither of them knows their relationship) where he "took the sandal from her resistless grasp, and calmly held it ready to fit on her foot." Then to provoke her charming indignation still further he kisses her. At such a rate of conquest the novel would be merely twenty pages long, if it were not that as her guardian Worth is too much of a man of principle to pay his addresses to her. She becomes, with his help, given sternly and diffidently, the belle of the season, wooed by all but loving none (but him). She has eighty thousand pounds a year, which is the motive for one sort of suitor; lustful desire for her is the motive of the rest, the most remarkable being the Prince of Wales, whose advances are so repugnant that she faints dead away, to be brought around and carried home by her masterful father-lover, who alone loves her without greed or self-interest (being fabulously wealthy, steadfast and strong). He protects her all the time, even though most of the time she is unaware of it, until her majority when, after a moment of looking down into her face, he sweeps her into his arms. Georgette Heyer has a streak of discretion, or perhaps prudery, which prevents her from exploiting the sexual climaxes in the writing: Barbara Cartland, on the other hand, overwrites the imagery of embracements and thereby reveals much more of the essential romantic preoccupations. In *The Wings of Love* she [Cartland] divides the love interest in two with Lord Ravenscar the forty-year-old lecher who covets tiny Amanda's lovely body. . . .

Miss Cartland's taste for titillation as far exceeds Heyer's as Heyer's researches into historical color exceed her own. . . .

Both these books I bought for three and sixpence in a supermarket, but it could not claim to have been a random choice, because I remembered those names, Heyer and Cartland, from my fantasy-ridden

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

teens. . . .

This is the hero that women have chosen for themselves. The traits invented for him have been invented by women cherishing the chains of their bondage. . . .

Although romance is essentially vicarious the potency of the fantasy distorts actual behavior. The strength of the belief that a man should be stronger and older than his woman can hardly be exaggerated. . . . Ballroom dancing is an extraordinary capitulation on the part of society to the myth of female submissiveness; the women travel backwards, swept along in a chaste embrace, their faces close to the men's but not actually touching. Such dancing, which is only as old as Heyer's *Regency Buck*, may be seen as the expression of middle-class manners, for the aristocratic modes of dancing were formal while the lower orders allowed an independent part to the woman, involving greater or lesser exertion. There is no folk dance or native dance that I have ever heard of in which the man takes over the automotion of the woman. . . .

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

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

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

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

If female liberation is to happen, if the reservoir of real female love is to be tapped, this sterile self-deception must be counteracted. The only literary form which could outsell romantic trash on the female market is hard-core pornography. The titillating mush of Cartland and her ilk is supplying an imaginative need but their hypocrisy limits the gratification to that which can be gained from innuendo: by-pass the innuendo and you short-circuit the whole process. I and my little friends swapped *True Confessions* back and forth because we were randy and curious. If you leave the *Housewives' Handbook*<sup>4</sup> lying about, your daughter may never read Cartland or Heyer with any credulity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GEORGETTE HEYER:  
A Critical Retrospective

Mary Fahnestock-Thomas

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