

Dragonmede, a selection this past spring of the American Literary Guild, is an example. It is peculiarly undistinguished, marked only by a certain imitative crispness. The plot has everything, including insanity, fratricide, and significant, deliberate, plotted coincidences, as well as judicious doses of the "purple heart throbs":

With one swift movement I was off the couch, restoring order to my disarranged skirts, smoothing my hair, turning my back upon him as I drew my torn bodice over my breasts and hid from him the tears which disillusion brought.

It is an ingredient of such novels that the characters, unlike those of Miss Heyer, exist in a vacuum, the subject of the novel being only their own domestic needs and emotions. For one reason or another heroines are often outcasts. Women of good birth forced to earn their living are frequent, governesses obligatory. In *Dragonmede*, this claustrophobic isolation is induced by the social ostracism in which the sub-heroine, Luella Rochdale, mistress of a gambling house and thus outside polite society, exists. The novel concerns her successful efforts to marry off her daughter Eustachia (who narrates), and the events which spring from the consequences of Eustachia's grand marriage.

Sympathy is engaged by the simple disparity between the readers' knowledge and grasp of the web of coincidence on which the plot depends and the knowledge and understanding of Eustachia herself. If we are interested at all, it is to cheer Eustachia feebly on. The motivation of the characters is elementary, basically that of survival without the loss of public esteem. The plot moves from Eustachia's growing comprehension of the cruelty and callousness of her husband, Julian, her understanding of the family she has married into where nothing is as it first seemed to her as a bride, and her further realization of her mother's reasons for engineering the marriage in the first place.

Throughout all this melodrama, the period detail—we are told the novel is set in the mid-1800s—is not at all well done: the novel is really set in no-time. The psychological insights and observations occasionally

muttered by the narrator are totally out of keeping with her supposed station, time and education, although they do add a certain spice to the almost unimaginable blancmange that is the texture of the book.

The real interest of this slight work is in the indisputable fact that it will have so many readers. And this in spite of the fact that unlike the best romantic thrillers or romantic novels *Dragonmede* neither delights us with facts or technical descriptions of specialized groups in society, nor interests us in the development and conflict of characters. Its only virtue is that it is smoothly and grammatically written, seldom a feature of the present-day romantic novel. The lowest common denominators of the genre will interest future social and cultural historians; the authors' assumptions about what women really want to read, at least, are accurate enough. It is Janet and John with sex thrown in, and if the results read as though they were written by committee or computer, it is this which ensures their commercial success. It is only authors of exceptional talent, like Miss Heyer, who can be literate, amusing, witty, as well as romantic—and successful.

A. S. Byatt, "The Ferocious Reticence of Georgette Heyer" (*Sunday Times Magazine* [London], 5 October 1975, pp. 28-38):

Georgette Heyer's last novel, My Lord John, was posthumously published three days ago. Although she is as widely read as any contemporary writer, she had a horror of personal publicity and almost nothing is known about her private life. With the co-operation of Miss Heyer's husband, Ronald Rougier, the novelist A. S. Byatt provides the first biographical portrait of this formidable figure, and a critical appreciation of her work. It is illustrated by photographs from the Rougier family albums. Above: Georgette Heyer as a young woman. Above right: Ronald Rougier, photographed after his wife's death in their London flat by David King.

When Georgette Heyer died last year, aged 71, she had written over 50 books. She was one of the great bestsellers, but refused to give

interviews and was very rarely photographed. Anything anyone needed to know about her, Miss Heyer said, could be found in her books. But part of the charm of the books is that they have the anonymity of good comedy. They tell you as much and as little about their creator as Jeeves or Mr Pickwick. Such reticence, in such an author, seemed admirable and proper. It was also somewhat ferocious. In 1955 she wrote to a prospective interviewer:

As for being photographed At Work, or In my Old World Garden, that is the type of publicity which I find nauseating and quite unnecessary. My private life concerns no-one but myself and my family; and if, on the printed page, I am Miss Heyer, everywhere else I am Mrs Rougier, who makes no public appearances and dislikes few things so much as being confronted by Fans. There seems to be a pathetic belief today in the power of personal publicity over sales. I don't share it, and before you assure me how mistaken I am I beg you will consider the case of the late Ethel M. Dell, about whom the public knew nothing, and whose colossal sales we should all of us be glad to have had. . .

Console yourself with the thought that my answers to the sort of questions Fans ask seem to daunt them a bit! Not unnaturally, they expect me to be a Romantic, and I'm nothing of the sort.

Ronald Rougier, Georgette Heyer's husband, has now decided that it is proper that there should be some kind of record of his wife's life and way of work, and very kindly allowed me to see her books and notebooks, as well as talking to me himself and arranging for me to speak to her close friend, Carola Oman, and her publisher for 20 years, A. S. Frere, of Heinemann. I saw also her present publisher, Max Reinhardt of The Bodley Head, and Joyce Weiner, who, as her agent, protected her for many years from fans, journalists, intruders. All these people were very

courteous and helpful; almost all were alarmed, in somewhat similar ways, at the breaking of a way of conduct Miss Heyer had decided upon. I said once to Mr. Rougier: "I don't feel even now that I *know* your wife at all. But then, she wouldn't have liked that." "Well," he said, politely, "shall we say, not too intimately." What follows is a not too intimate account of what I have learned about Georgette Heyer.

She was born, in Wimbledon, on August 16, 1902, the year of Edward VII's coronation. She was the daughter of George Heyer, M.A., MBE, and Miss Sylvia Watkins. On George Heyer's side she was of Russian extraction—her paternal grandfather had, according to Mr Rougier "emerged from Kharkhov," married a Miss Roum, of an old English Norfolk family, and settled on Blackheath. Sylvia Watkins's family had for generations owned the tugs on the Thames, and had indeed been responsible for the transport and installation of Cleopatra's needle on the Embankment. Mrs. Heyer studied at the Royal College of Music and was a talented cellist, one of the three outstanding pupils of her year. There were two younger brothers, one four and one nine years younger than Georgette, both with one English and one Russian name, George Boris, and Frank Dmitri. George Heyer, the father, read Classics at Cambridge and was brought up to be a gentleman: later, when the family suffered financial reverses he became a schoolmaster, and came to teach at King's College, Wimbledon. Georgette Heyer seems to have been deeply attached to him, and he to her. When she started telling the story of *The Black Moth* to her elder brother, when she was 17 and the brother was recovering from a serious illness, it was her father who encouraged her to prepare it for publication.

George Heyer fought in the First World War (Georgette was in Paris in 1914 and claimed to have heard Big Bertha) and died, suddenly, in June 1925, after playing tennis with Ronald Rougier, one month after his daughter's engagement, and two before her marriage. In 1958 Georgette Heyer, writing to Mrs Frere about the relationships between parents and children, wrote roundly that it was nonsense to imagine that a daughter pined for sympathy from her Mama. "Frere may tell me that I don't know because I haven't *got* a daughter (and a lucky break for that daughter that is!) but he forgets that I have *been* a daughter. Boys tell

GEORGETTE HEYER:

their Mothers, and Girls tell their Fathers." With her mother her relations were less enthusiastic and cordial. "A love-hate relationship," Mr Rougier called it, and said that for obscure reasons Mrs. Heyer had been very hostile to her daughter's writing in its early days, although very proud of her later. Mrs Heyer was a widow for 49 years, living in various Kensington hotels, and devotedly cared for by her daughter, who also made over to her the American rights to her novels during her lifetime.

Photos: Georgette Heyer with her mother and brother; her father, a few hours before his death; Ronald Rougier, shortly after his marriage to Georgette Heyer, in Tanganyika; Georgette Heyer, Ronald Rougier, their son Richard, his wife, the latter's family; a late snapshot of Georgette Heyer taken by her husband while on a Scottish holiday; Georgette Heyer's favorite photograph of herself; on a rare public appearance, with the writer Kay Dick at a literary party; Mr. and Mrs. Rougier in Venice—an unusual holiday—she much preferred the North; Mr. and Mrs. Rougier playing a game of bridge with their son Richard and a friend.

Ronald Rougier, like his wife, was of Russian descent. He was born in Odessa, and his family, who were in business, later moved to Northumberland. The Rougiers met at the Bushey Hall Hotel where both families had gone for Christmas. Ronald Rougier was at that stage a mining engineer and it is clear that he was fascinated by George Heyer as well as by his daughter. He described him as a born teacher, whatever he was brought up to be, a man given to explaining history, recommending books, quoting the *Iliad*, offering information, lines for further thought on things "in which my own family weren't really interested." Mr. Rougier became Georgette Heyer's official dancing partner. After five years' acquaintance they became engaged and then married. Two months later he went abroad, prospecting on the Caucasus, where his Russian was useful. He was back in the summer of 1926 and in the autumn went out to Tanganyika. In spring 1927 Georgette Heyer went out to join him. She was then 24, and had already published *The Black*

A CRITICAL RETROSPECTIVE

Moth, Powder and Patch and *These Old Shades*, as well as *Simon the Coldhearted* [sic] and *The Great Roxhithe* [sic], which she later suppressed.

Photographs of her at this time show a tall, slender, elegant woman with a shingled head of dark hair, and an expression at once shy and composed. Carola Oman, a lifelong friend, says she first met her when Georgette Heyer was 17, "in a cloud of hair," and the two of them used to meet in Wimbledon and read their work in progress to each other. I borrowed from Mr. Rougier a novel published by Georgette Heyer in 1929, and set in a suburb called Meldon which was clearly Wimbledon transposed. Bad works by good writers are always very instructive. *Pastel* is concerned with two sisters, one, Evelyn, fashionable, witty, daring, "modern," attractive, given to scarlet and brilliant yellow, the other, Frances, sweet, girlish, shy, pretty, "pastel" indeed, naturally inclined to domesticity and motherhood but without Evelyn's "flair" for a place-setting, a ball dress, driving a sports-car. Evelyn gets the beautiful Viking blond young barrister Frances wanted: Frances "makes do" with Norman who has always been there and never wavered in his devotion. She reflects that reality is better than romance, or at least reliability is, and gives birth to a daughter, reflecting later that Evelyn would no doubt have "a male child," but that she is satisfied. She feels her creator is punishing her, and also punishing Evelyn, the one for living without style and vitality, the other for concentrating on modern trivia, terrible plays about psychic projections, claustrophobic "arty" parties. Neither Meldon domesticity nor Chelsea chic clearly attracted the author of this remorselessly, vehemently lifeless work very much. The novel is informed by a sense of something missing for all its heroine's protests about being satisfied with life as it is. Many of Miss Heyer's heroines complain of lack of adventure, protest against its arrival, and meet it with aplomb.

Tanganyika was certainly not Wimbledon. The Rougiers were there for two years, living in a hut made of elephant grass, in a compound in the bush, prowled round by lions, leopards, and rhinos. There was one other white man in the compound, a "rough, Cornish miner"; the natives had never seen a white woman; the nearest white people, the District

Officer and Game Warden, were 150 miles away. Mr. Rougier went on safari, prospecting for tin. Mrs. Rougier sat in the grass hut, with her books, and wrote *The Masqueraders*. Once she went on safari too, travelling 18 miles one day and 22 the next, over very rough ground, on one water-bottle a day. She did not complain once, of heat or difficulty, but did not go again. *The Masqueraders* turned out to have only one anachronism, despite the circumstances of its writing—White's Club had been made to open a year before it did.

After Africa, in 1929, the Rougiers went to Macedonia, again mining. As usual Mr Rougier preceded his wife; *The Masqueraders* came out while he was in Macedonia and she in England: his telegram on receiving his copy reached her as "Congratulations. Find Mahineroders excellent" [sic].

What scanty press material there already was about Georgette Heyer agreed that it was she who had decided that they settle in England. I asked Mr. Rougier why: he replied that she had said that it was impossible to start a family unless they did. Carola Oman said that Georgette Heyer, although she could put up complete barriers around certain topics which were then never discussed, could be both forceful and outspoken about others, and instanced the decision to have a baby.

Mr Rougier had always wanted to be a barrister; it had simply not been the kind of profession his family had been able to imagine for him. He now began to read for the Bar—supported by his wife, and her earnings—and was called in 1939.

Their only son, Richard, now also a very successful Q.C., was born in 1932. His mother was clearly passionately devoted to him (though there were nannies, and governesses). He went to Marlborough, like his father, and to Cambridge with an Exhibition in Classics. He is a skilled bridge player, also like his father, and played in the Olympic Bridge Trials.

As well as playing cards, the Rougiers were given to playing guessing games with Shakespearean quotations in the evenings. Mr. Rougier says that his wife knew most of Shakespeare by heart—although her son accused her of not understanding tragedy, when she expressed dislike of *Anna Karenina* and scorn for the idiocy of the characters in *Othello*.

For 10 years the family lived in Sussex, and then moved to the

Albany, where A. S. Frere was also living. For the last 15 years of her life Georgette Heyer was in ill-health and the 70 stone steps to their set of chambers in the Albany became too much. She dispatched her husband to hunt for flats—finally, finding one she did not "spit at the idea of," they eventually settled at Parkside, Knightsbridge.

What was she like, and how did she live? One is hesitant about asking such questions about anyone who so resolutely refused to answer them, and indeed, made it seem an instance of very bad *ton* to ask them. Certain words recurred. She was clearly formidable, she was clearly witty, she was clearly a woman of intense loyalties to her chosen circle of friends and relatives. She was, her former agent, Miss Weiner said, Mr. Rougier himself said, a "recluse." This clearly meant more than that she rejected any kind of publicity. Even in private life, she was a very private person. She "did not like meeting new people." She was, A. S. Frere said, one of those people who are much better hosts than guests, happy on her own ground, in company she knew and had selected, among people who shared her own kind of joke or style of conversation. She was not a snob but, as Joyce Weiner says, her motto might have been "*odi profanum vulgus*" and she clearly did not suffer fools gladly. Towards those whom she did admit to her friendship she was clearly absolutely loyal and extremely generous.

Men tell you that she did not like women. A. S. Frere said that it was a good thing she had a son, not a daughter, as she used to terrify women. Particularly younger women, like her son's girl-friends. Max Reinhardt says she preferred male conversation. Women credit her with "masculine" characteristics—a "masculine mind" Miss Weiner said, "a man's good manners," Mrs. Frere (the literary critic, Pat Wallace) said. "I wouldn't have called them a man's good manners," said her husband, "but you may say so of course." "She liked," A. S. Frere said, ". . . what was that phrase she used in her novels? To depress people's pretensions." "To give a 'masterly set-down,'" I said.

It was clear that many people found her alarming. Her letters to Frere about pushing journalists (characterised as S. Bs for Silly Bitches) run on in a spate of gleeful and half real, half mock—irritable contempt. But the ultimate example of Georgette Heyer's capacity to alarm people is

worthy of one of her own works. Max Reinhardt described how she was invited to lunch at Buckingham Palace. She telephoned him to ask, should she go, would he have lunch afterwards to talk about it? She went, elegant in a very large sloping hat—everyone agrees that she had excellent taste in formidable hats. She came back, charmed by Her Majesty, who had read and enjoyed her books. And was told that the Queen, doing her Christmas shopping a week later in Harrods, had ordered a dozen copies of her latest book and had told the saleswoman: "She came to lunch with me last week and I found her *very* formidable." "Do you think I could terrify *anyone*?" Georgette Heyer asked Max Reinhardt, in, as he put it, "her loud clear voice, terrifying every waiter."

Photo: Georgette Heyer, beneath her own portrait, with her husband and her son.

In her private life, besides her work, she seems to have liked things that required skill, or style, or precision, from jigsaws, to cards, to complicated kitchen gadgets—she collected, Mr Rougier says, a variety of tin-openers, bains-marie, fish-kettles, and rejoiced in a waste-disposal unit; she was interested in her husband's and son's golf and was a passionate watcher of television sport—particularly cricket and show-jumping. She liked to choose clothes and was known to castigate people for wearing topaz with pearls, or patterned fabrics, even by Emilio Pucci. She liked to choose meals, always appropriately with vegetables in season, and carefully thought-out wines. She liked window-shopping and taking her grandsons—two boys from her daughter-in-law's earlier marriage, and her own grandson—to Harrod's. She had—as far as I can see—the true letter-writer's gift of making the loss of a borrowed handkerchief, the re-covering of a screen in gold brocade, into comic and absorbing adventures. If she was a formidable presence, and had a scholarly mind, the writer of the domestic letter is recognisably the same as the one who describes the refurbishing of Arabella's limited wardrobe, or the Reluctant Widow's struggles with decayed furniture and lofts of junk.

Her literary tastes, too, show catholic admiration of precise

competence. She liked Alistair Maclean and Richmal Crompton, G. B. Stern and E. F. Benson, Noel Coward, Raymond Chandler and Ivy Compton-Burnett. All, at least, superb craftsmen, and several creators of idiosyncratic languages.

The interest in skill, precision, competence, centred on her own work. Her success was phenomenal, though not immediate—it began, Ronald Rougier says, with the sales of *These Old Shades* in Australia, from where she received a letter saying that she was "a bonzer woman" and that the writer, a librarian, "noticed that all the girls who read the filthiest books like yours." Her sales were enormous, although, as Frere says, she never had a review in a serious paper, and vetoed most publicity. Max Reinhardt says they sell between 65 and 80 thousand copies of her books in hard covers: Frere said he had to decide whether to print 80, or 100, or 120 thousand, and that her runaway best seller was printed in the year of the General Strike with no newspapers, no trains, and no post. Paperbacks sell over half a million at least and The Bodley Head have received their biggest paperback offer ever for the coming *My Lord John*.

She was, apparently, most punctilious to deal with, always presented perfect MSS on the deadline, and never needed any correction. I wonder, reading part of her correspondence with Frere, looking at her card-indexes, her library, her notebooks, whether the very magnitude of her popular success made her doubt the value of her work. She was certainly ferociously derisive of, and angry about, other popular novelists who without her learning cashed in on her success, plagiarised or adapted her plots and period language. But she referred to her own work with a persistent, broadly funny self-mockery which, I feel, hid a sense that it had more real value than was acknowledged. Her contempt for most of the fans, came, I think, from the same knowledge that she was not, as she said she wasn't, a Romantic. Joyce Weiner said that she always answered fan-letters that required historical information. Max Reinhardt qualified this. She answered them "if the question was intelligent enough and rightly put."

Typical of her self-deprecating sharpness is this remark about *Venetia*, addressed to Mrs. Frere: "I dislike the book as much as I disliked *Sophy*, or even more, shouldn't be surprised if the fans do too.

Except that my hero is a Rake, which always gets my silly sex. Of course I don't let him do anything worse than kissing the heroine on sight, and getting mildly tight: all his rakishness lies in the Past, and I've given him a very good reason for going to the Dogs, because however written out I may be I do still know my onions!" Or, of *April Lady*: "Oh, yes, I can explain *April Lady's* success! Almost the Top of the Popular-Appeal Stakes (amongst females) is the Rift in the Married Lute—provided it All Comes Right in the End, and was never serious in the first place." And "Would you believe it? My Mama loved *April Lady!* There, I feel, speaks My Public—also feeble-minded!"

An editor at Heinemann who once mistakenly, in Frere's absence, asked Georgette Heyer to write her own blurb received by return of post a caustic, witty and mocking description of the book as the usual folly. But Max Reinhardt, attempting to offer helpful editorial suggestions about the language of the first of the novels he published, was told roundly that no-one in the country knew more about Regency language than Miss Heyer, and that there was no point in pretending anyone did. No more editorial suggestions were made.

Towards the end of her successful career Georgette Heyer was bedevilled by income tax problems. What she saw as her major work—the trilogy on the life of John, Duke of Bedford, Henry V's younger brother—was constantly being laid aside so that another Regency romance could be produced to satisfy the tax man. Some of these unwilling romances show signs of fatigue—*April Lady*, whose plot is a rehash of the earlier *Convenient Marriage*, is a case in point, and both she and Mr Rougier felt that this was so. She wrote to A. S. Frere in 1955:

I never felt less like writing a gay romance, and am churning out heavy pastry in a slow laborious fashion, and am quite likely to go into strong hysterics if anyone speaks a harsh word to me. Or any other kind of word that I don't happen to want to listen to. I suppose the book [probably *Bath Tangle*, again a tired book] will get itself written in the end. . .

But when I sit and try to think about it, I find, after half an hour, that I have mentally written the whole of Henry V's death-bed scene. Blast everything! When I once again laid John of Lancaster in lavender, I felt as I did when I saw Richard off to his Prep school for the first time.

It was part of Georgette Heyer's sense of style not to appear to take her romances seriously—or herself. She disliked most writers and the public pretensions of writers—Frere said that she was "good company" because she had not the self-absorption, or sense of the paramount importance of her work that almost all of them had. She referred to writers as Inkies—her first letter to Max Reinhardt begins, "So Frere thinks it is a pleasure to deal with me, does he? He must have forgotten how broad a view I've always taken of his duties towards me. My own opinion is that all Inkies are hell, and ought to be incarcerated." Or, to Frere, making a lunch date, she suggests that she could engineer publicity, for him, by appearing with a monstrous wolf-hound, "or shall I just come as Little Ma—really the *simplest* of creatures, happiest when pottering about my kitchen (my books just seem to *come* to me, you know) but just *too* touched and happy for words to think of the pleasure I've given to the Feeble-minded?"

But, of course, her books did not just come to her. They were worked for, and worked at. She was one of those rare writers who create an idiosyncratic world, recognisably their own, a world with its own laws and language. What I learned from looking at her papers and talking to Mr. Rougier about her working methods was that her life-style, too, was in its way a creation of a world of her own, with its own laws and barriers to the outside world.

She was, of course, very fortunate in having a husband who was truly and deeply interested in what she was doing. With all her detective stories, except the first, he provided the plots, from his legal and other knowledge. I asked him, did he or she invent the characters for those joint works, and he assured me that the people were her work—he called them A, B, C, D, and she would give them flesh and feelings, and then

change his plots, or request alternatives because A or B "could never have behaved like that." But he shared, too, her interest in history, and in the collection of facts. He still has the map they used of the Old English roads when they followed, together, all the movements of Charles II after the battle of Worcester, visiting every inn and priest's hole. And many of the books in Georgette Heyer's collection were happy *trouvailles* of his own—including the monumental *Master of Game* by Edward, Second Duke of York, which plays a part in the language and plot of *My Lord John*.

I had imagined that Georgette Heyer researched in libraries, maybe studying in the British Museum. Miss Weiner assured me that she would not have tolerated such a *public* activity. She had her own idiosyncracics and impressive library of about 1000 historical books among which she sat to write. The OED, the DNB, Lemprière, dictionaries of slang, dialect, Anglo-Saxon, Fowler, Roget, Debrett, Burke, an 1808 dictionary to the House of Lords, proverbs, place-names, foreign phrases. She had standard historical works in both the mediaeval and 18th-century periods, as well as more recondite histories of snuff-boxes, of sign-posts, and coaching. There are several shelves on costume from Planché's two-volume *Cyclopedia of Costume* (1876) to Alison Adburgham on *Shops and Shopping*, from Grand-Cartaret's *Les Élégances de la Toilette* to *The History of Underclothes*. She wrote at a Norwegian oak desk which looks rather like a drinks cabinet, and opens to display two wings of bookshelves, between which she sat, with dictionaries and reference books to hand, and drawers and shelves of paper, glue, pins around her. Another enclosed-world.

Her notebooks are the work, not of a professional scholar, although they are precise, orderly and passionate about accuracy, but of someone interested in two main things—the bringing to life of the matter-of-fact which is the stuff of fiction, and vivid language. The Regency notebooks are indexed collections of words and figures, under headings like Boots and Shoes, Beauty, Colours, Dress, Hats, Household, Prices, Shops. Slang items, or catching similes for fatness, or dishonesty, or folly cover pages of notes. There are careful records of the cost of keeping a carriage—in the country £213 p.a., in London, over £500 p.a. Or of

lights, candles, spermacetti, common oil, lamp oil, cotton for lamps.

The work—the life-work—for the mediaeval novel is more detailed and more extensive. There are large card indexes, containing a biographical card for each of a huge list of characters, embellished with their coats of arms, carefully drawn by Georgette Heyer. There are cards for every year from 1390 to 1495, the year of the death of John of Bedford and the beginning of the fall of the House of Lancaster. On these cards, month by month, she listed the events she read about. There are small notebooks of phrases, as in the Regency period, under headings such as: Forms of Address, Archery, Chivalry, Church, Dress, Drink, Endearments, Exclamations and Expletives, Food and Cookery, Fools, Furs, Furniture, Games, Hawking, Horses, Materials, Measures, Medicine and Sickness, Music, Naval, Proverbs and Sayings. It is not scholarly, in the sense that method and proportion are subordinated to imaginative vitality, but it is dense, detailed and even the lists have a combination of verbal dash and concrete reality, which is one of the merits of her books.

Looking through these papers, remembering *Pastel*, I had a sense that this real other world was what had been missing, and that the very act of research was for Georgette Heyer, the act of recreating a past to inhabit. It was the froth or smoothness of the wish-fulfilment of her plots that she mocked about her work: never the recreation of history, certainly never the prose. She despised, sometimes, their appeal to foolish females, but history she took seriously.

The opposition between masculine and feminine elements in her work is largely misleading. Her letters are feminine, her preference for male company seems to have been very feminine, her depiction of the relations between men and women, feminine. Precision and forcefulness are not exclusively male characteristics, nor, even, is a capacity to delineate a battlefield or describe generalship. Men who don't like her romances do like her military books—*An Infamous Army* is a tour-de-force in its dovetailing of a romantic plot into a detailed depiction of Waterloo, vividly brought to life. But men did like her romances, for their wit, their poise, their historical accuracy.

What *she* did not like, Mr. Rougier said, was female gushing about

her plots (she was nauseated to overhear someone describe *A Sprig of Muslin* [sic] in Truslove and Hanson as "such a sweet, pretty book"). Men who wrote to her asked precise questions, which she answered. She is on record as saying the women in the Middle Ages, with dowers and the management of castles or conduct of sieges, had considerable independence and power. The bad days set in with Queen Victoria's romantic over-dependence on Prince Albert. Law Lords, Mr. Rougier remembers, prized Miss Heyer's work. Lord Justice Somervell bequeathed his Georgette Heyer collection to the library of the Inner Temple Bench. I cannot imagine this happening to most writers for the titillation of the Female Heart. Miss Heyer had a toughness and independence like her more resourceful heroines.

In what sense, then, was it true that she could be found in her books? I think there are various things that the books and their author, so determinedly reticent, had in common, one of which, as I have just suggested, was a liking for the closed, yet lively fictional world of the past. Georgette Heyer liked form and style, both in chivalry and mediaeval courtesy, in the manners and social nuances of the 18th century, in a modern world she felt to be disintegrating into formlessness.

She admired the Queen Mother, and what she stood for: she was sharp about Princess Margaret's attempt to create a modernised, dashing or informal royal image. She knew how a good letter should be written and commented tartly to Frere when his subordinates wrote her a bad one, either over-gushing or over-bold. She disliked, Max Reinhardt says, the modern world, especially "the anxiety with which we want to reach equality." Her tax grumbles included: "I'm getting so *tired* of writing books for the benefit of the Treasury and I can't tell you how utterly I resent the squandering of *my* money on such fatuous things as Education and Making Life Easy and Luxurious for So-Called Workers." Any interest in style, especially style in the past, is a way of fending off the threats or demands of a world which style distances, controls, or makes easy to judge. In that sense, Miss Heyer, and her work, for better or worse, are conniving in escape, and escape literature.

It occurred to me, writing this article, that "escape" literature is too broad a category to be useful. Escape from what? The humdrum, the

tedious, into a bright world of perfect hats and wise, considerate lovers, of money and wit and gaiety? Yes, although the brightness and gaiety have their roots in realities of common sense, plausible conduct, quite unexplored by the real bosom-flutterers of the profession. But there are worse things, from which we all must escape—illness, mourning, horrors. And Georgette Heyer seems to be, as well as a courageous woman, a provider of courage in others. Among her papers are two moving tributes. The first by Lady Ellenborough (Rachel Law) was sent to Ronald Rougier after his wife's death. In this Lady Ellenborough points out that Georgette Heyer remains readable even when one is in hospital beds awaiting drastic surgery. Shakespeare slips away, she says; pornography, at the other end, is no good because "sex is cut down to size when the swish of the scythe sends a draught down the corridors." But Georgette Heyer's comedy, archetypal, external, has a kind of earthy vigour which is sustaining.

This is something I have found to be true myself—she remains tolerable, interesting, gripping when things are so bad that most high literature seems irrelevant and bad entertainment drives one insane. The fan letter she herself kept, and by which she was deeply moved, was a letter from a woman political prisoner in Rumania who had been incarcerated for 12 years with no access to books or visitors, and had kept herself and her fellow-prisoners sane by reciting *Friday's Child* as a kind of endless serial. Good escape literature has subtle relations to what it is measured against; it knows, secretly, what that is. It is interesting that Georgette Heyer, for all her Russian ancestry, was "(I say it defiantly) wholly Allergic to Russian literature, drama, and art . . . I loathe and despise their silly Fatalism. In fact, I am glad to think that I inherited less of my grandfather's Russian temperament than any other of his descendants." She adhered to the English virtues, good taste, unobtrusive courage, the saving joke.

Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor, *A Book of Prefaces to Fifty Classics of Crime Fiction 1900-1950* (New York/London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976, pp. 63-4):

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A Critical Retrospective

Mary Fahnestock-Thomas

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