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Vindicating the Historical Romance

All you have to do is walk through the aisles of any bookstore to note the profusion of romances. Depending on the bookstore, hundreds of romance novels are available for the taking, and there's something to suit anyone's fancy (or fantasy). Romance novels are beloved by book club members who trade their favorite romances with each other, and the number of romance readers' conferences continues to increase every year.¹ The popularity of this genre, which made \$1.368 billion in sales last year,² is not lost on publishers. Yet, despite its avid readers and its impressive profit margin, it is all too common to dismiss the genre as "trash," "smut," "bodice-ripper," and the new buzz word, "mommy porn." Some of the harshest criticism of the genre

¹ Romance readers' conferences are conferences where romance readers get to interact with each other and various romance writers. Events at these conferences can range from panels, discussions, and book signings, to more informal activities such as brunch, happy hour, and dinner parties. Romance readers' conferences take place in various cities throughout the United States. Romance Writers of America and its chapters host many of the conferences, and RomCon is one of the largest romance conferences in America.

² Statistic provided by Romance Writers of America, *About the Romance Genre*, 2012. Web. 9 December 2012. RWA stipulates that they get their figures from *Business of Consumer Book Publishing 2012*. Sales on the RWA's website do not include used and trade bookstore revenues, which, if included, would undoubtedly raise the amount of revenue generated by romance novels.

comes from feminist scholars like Kay Mussell and Tania Modleski. Mussell contends that “as an art, [romances] are profoundly unsatisfying and profoundly derivative, for they represent a pathetic attempt to make dramatic a story that seems to lack resonance” (189). Though Modleski concedes “not all female longings and desires expressed in Harlequins are regressive” (*Loving* 49), eleven years later she asserts “romances provide women with a common fantasy structure to ensure their continued psychic investment in their oppression” (*Feminism* 344). Though both women make points that could be valid, their statements rest on the research of Harlequin novels only. This begs the question: is the research of one subgenre applicable to the romance genre as a whole? Moreover, if Mussell and Modleski are correct in their assumptions, what is the power of the romance? The romance is a genre over which women have almost total control.

According to Pamela Regis, “for the most part, romances are stories written by women and read by women” (207). Women control both what is written and what is read in romance, and thus dictate the changes in the market, which means *women* are primarily responsible for last year’s \$1.368 billion profit in the competitive industry of publishing. Though there is power in this impressive figure, the real power of the romance, specifically the historical romance, does not rest merely in numbers.

The real power of the historical romance resides in its representation of the empowered heroines who subvert traditional expectations of women’s roles in their society, thus challenging readers to re-evaluate modern day society’s expectations of beauty, love, and a woman’s role in marriage. Even though these books are not set in our time period, the ideology against which their protagonists struggle is still both powerful and relevant. By looking at the past through the lens of the present, we can see that these novels provoke a re-evaluation of society’s expectations in three ways: one, by giving women an identity, two, by making women realize that they are

unique and beautiful just as they are, and three, by encouraging the idea that women should view marriage as a choice — not just a societal expectation.

Historical romance novels provoke a re-evaluation of society's expectations for women because these novels give women an identity. A woman's lack of identity in literature is an idea presented by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their highly regarded book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Though published in 1979, Gilbert and Gubar's criticisms are still insightful and applicable to understanding the development of the woman writer. Gilbert and Gubar insist that for centuries, "women have not only been excluded from authorship but in addition they have been subject to (and subjects of) male authority" (11). Women have always been under the "thumb" and "pen" of patriarchic authors, men who dictate how women are perceived and how they should behave in society. Male writers have always had the power to create any image of woman that they desire. Gilbert and Gubar explain that due to women's lack of identity in literature, "women have historically hesitated to attempt the pen" (15). Becoming a writer is especially daunting to women because men dominate the profession.

The pen is a powerful tool that can be used to give women an identity. Novels written by women, for women can help to "associat[e] female creativity from male domination" (Gilbert and Gubar 82). One of the ways women can gain independence and establish a new place in society is to pick up the pen and write. This can be challenging, particularly if we believe Gilbert and Gubar's claim that the pen is a metaphor for the penis. If this claim is true, then a man's "pen's power, like his penis power, is not just the ability to generate life but the power to create a posterity to which he lays claim" (6). In creating stories, an author helps reinforce, and sometimes creates, societal conventions, and "because he is an author, a 'man of letters' is

simultaneously, like his divine counterpart, a father, a master or ruler, and an owner: the spiritual type of patriarch, as we understand in Western society” (7). In the past, male writers used the pen as a means to subjugate women and ensure that women fulfilled certain societal conventions. Some still do so today.

One example of how a woman can use the power of the pen is found in the heroine Felicity of Sabrina Jeffries's novel *The Dangerous Lord*. In Jeffries's novel, Felicity is able to provide for her family by posing as the anonymous Lord X and writing a popular gossip column. Her sharp words and salacious gossip ruins the reputation of a powerful man, Ian Lennard, Viscount St. Clair. Ian vows to seek revenge against “Lord X's poison pen” (Jeffries 17), because this pen has created an image of him that is less than favorable, rendering his prospects for a wife slim to none. Much to Ian's surprise, “Lord X” happens to be the feisty Felicity. Since Ian can't very well battle Felicity in a duel, he engages in a different kind of battle — seduction. Ian's seduction of Felicity ends in marriage, and a mutual love for each other develops between the two characters.

After marriage, Ian does not expect, nor does he ask, Felicity to give up her pen (287). In fact, Ian actually gives Felicity a fountain pen as a Christmas gift, a gift symbolic on two levels: one, the pen symbolizes the power Ian is giving to Felicity, and two, the pen gift symbolizes Ian's acceptance and support of Felicity's writing (287 and 301). The gift is thoughtful on Ian's part — he even had Felicity's initials engraved on the pen, another gesture that exhibits her ownership of this powerful instrument (301). Though given other Christmas presents from Ian, Felicity values the pen the most, realizing its significance as his acceptance of her new role in society, a role where she now has a voice and a medium to express herself. It is because of Ian's acceptance that Felicity tells Ian that his pen gift “is the most wonderful thing anyone has ever

given me” (302). This is not just a pen for letters and household accounts; this pen is the pen Felicity will use to express her thoughts in the newspaper. As the wife of a viscount, her new role ceases to be that of the mysterious Lord X, and Felicity can use her real name for her gossip column when she becomes the Viscountess St. Clair (350). Ian’s power as a man of distinction is transferred to Felicity, and she, by extension, becomes powerful as well. Ian’s acceptance of Felicity as a writer precedes society’s acceptance of her as one. Though society’s acceptance of Felicity comes in part due to her new title, the support of her husband helps to pave the way as well. This acceptance would never come to pass if she was not married to a man with a title.

In addition to giving women an identity and the ability to write, historical romance novels promote and encourage women's rights in work and marriage. One of the societal conventions that a woman must fulfill in the nineteenth century is that she stay at home, be the “angel in the house,” a Victorian societal expectation that stipulates woman’s role in marriage is to be quiet, submissive, and loving, all within the confines of the home (Gilbert and Gubar 24-25). The opposite of the “angel in the house” would be the “monster,” a woman more male than female, a shrew possessing “assertiveness, aggressiveness — all characteristic of a male life of ‘significant action’ — are ‘monstrous’ in women precisely because [they are] ‘unfeminine’ and therefore unsuited to a gentle life” (28). Besides being denied the ability to take up space on the page, women are also denied the opportunity to take up space outside of the home. To combat this lack of space, “a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ which male authors have generated for her” (17). By picking up the pen, nineteenth century women “were conceiving fictional worlds in which patriarchal images and conventions were severely, radically revised (44). Where better to subvert modern day traditional societal beliefs about women than in a genre with empowered heroines who did the same in their

own society?

Mary Wollstonecraft picked up the pen and argued for a woman's right to be educated and self-sustaining in her 1792 publication *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. In this work Wollstonecraft emphasizes that women will be better mothers, wives, and citizens if they are educated (180). In addition to this, Wollstonecraft also argues that women need the right to earn their own money, because when they are able to make their own money, "they [will] become free by being enabled to earn their own subsistence, independent of men" (171). For Wollstonecraft, true independence is financial freedom.

There are two strong-willed heroines in Jude Deveraux's *Temptation* and Christina Dodd's *In My Wildest Dreams* that help promote a woman's right to work and be considered a partner in marriage. Temperance, the main character in Deveraux's novel, is a woman's rights advocate who has been sequestered to a remote farm in the Highlands called McCairn. In McCairn she discovers her talent for helping other women use their skills to make money. With Temperance's abilities, the women in the village become more confident and independent. James, the laird and Temperance's love interest, tells her that, after a few months of being in the village, "women in McCairn now earn more than the men" (Deveraux 306-307). With this newfound income, women find the freedom to do as they please and to stand up for themselves. Having no need to rely on men for money, one woman states later in the novel, "no more men for me, thank you. It's much more fun to earn money" (319). In this case, women can achieve independence from men when they are given the opportunity to develop a preexisting talent and use this talent to earn money.

Celeste, the heroine of Christina Dodd's *In My Wildest Dreams*, is another example of a strong-willed female figure who gains her independence through financial means. As

Throckmorton, the hero, tells her, she is a woman who “will be whatever you put your mind toward being” (Dodd 163). Celeste decides to take her talents for deciphering languages and use this talent to help Throckmorton, her love interest and a secret spy.

Besides their ability to provide for themselves, Celeste and Temperance also demand equality in a marriage in another way. Both women want a partnership, a relationship with the man they love. Neither woman is docile nor subservient. Both are independent women with minds of their own. In Temperance’s case, she is a woman who refuses to be manipulated. When she discovers that she has been tricked into marrying James, she refuses and runs off to America, where she opens a business for employing women. Celeste will also not be dependant — financially or otherwise — on the man she loves. When she discovers Throckmorton’s scheme to seduce her and buy her off so that she will stay away from his brother, Celeste vows, “I will be independent. I will never rely on a man for my happiness” (Dodd 317). It takes some declarations of love, promises of happiness, and a heartfelt apology by Throckmorton to change her mind. In turn, James needs to do the same to get Temperance back.

Throckmorton and James are proud men, used to getting their way, and quite autocratic in nature. They are great men who must push all of these qualities aside in order to get their love. They must be humbled. James is humbled when Temperance leaves him at the altar and he has to travel to America to tell her that he loves her and he needs her. In his impassioned marriage proposal, James tells Temperance that if she says yes, “we’ll live anywhere you want. Here in New York, so you can run your business” (Deveraux 344). James’s acceptance of Temperance as a woman who does not need him, a woman of financial means, reinforces the idea that he considers her his partner, not a meek woman to be bullied. He even goes so far as to confess, “I need you” (344), hard words for a proud man to admit. The humbling of these two men is

important because their pride gets in the way of not only admitting that they love their respective heroine, but also of accepting her as an equal partner in marriage. It is only when these men are able to step forward and admit they were wrong in attempting to manipulate the woman they love that they are able to be on equal ground with these women. In admitting defeat, they are giving power to Celeste and Temperance. This power is dynamic in the relationship. Not only does each man give the heroine power, but they let their respective “angels” out of the house and agree to follow her wherever she goes.

Just like James, Throckmorton humbles himself when he is trying to win Celeste back. At the end of the novel, he is willing to give everything up to have Celeste as his wife. He tells her, “I would give you everything I own. If you wished, I would even find you occupation as a Russian translator” (Dodd 367). Throckmorton respects Celeste enough to let her work, even to encourage her to work as a translator, because he knows she is good at it. He continues his declarations of love with, “for you [Celeste], I would take up my family and abandon my home and my duty” (368). Throckmorton loves Celeste so much that he is willing to leave everything behind just to be with her. He throws his pride away with such sentiments, and humbles himself before her with these declarations.

Another example of the power of historical romance novels is their celebration of the woman who is unique and beautiful in her own way. People have fixated on beauty for centuries. It is a societal convention that keeps getting stronger, because as Pamela Regis suggests, “American women are told by mass-media symbolism that their very worth as individuals is closely tied to their sexual allure and physical beauty” (105). In the 1991 edition of *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf argues that women in today’s society are no longer the “angel in the house,” but “where women are trapped today, there is no door to slam” (19). Where previous feminist

movements called for movements of space — movements to school, out of the house, into a working environment — today’s current feminist movement is a movement against a mirror, an ideal, a model staring back at you in a magazine. Today’s society is obsessed with beauty, “and every generation since about 1830 has had to fight its own beauty myth” (11). The beauty myth is the belief women need to be beautiful to be worth something, and society’s perpetuation of this myth feeds the idea that a woman’s “beauty [is] evaluated as wealth” (20). As a result of this, beauty translates to power for women. What does this mean then if a woman is not beautiful?

The heroine Amanda in Lisa Kleypas’s novel *Suddenly You* is not considered conventionally beautiful in her time, but she possesses a unique beauty that is appreciated by Jack, the hero. Amanda disparages her physical appearance, believing “she was no beauty. Her attractions were moderate at best, and that was only if one completely discounted the current feminine ideal” (Kleypas 13). She feels herself to be physically inferior because she is not the ideal beautiful woman of her time. Amanda does, however, meet Jack’s expectations for a beautiful woman.

Jack tells Amanda that he thinks she is beautiful, and her most beautiful quality is her mind (227). This type of thinking circumvents the beauty myth, because minds are made beautiful through study and reflection, not through an obsession with one’s outward appearance, which society encouraged in nineteenth century women. A beautiful mind is dangerous because a woman who thinks is a woman who has character, and “when women in culture show character, they are not desirable” (Wolf 59). Though it takes some convincing, Jack is finally able to convince Amanda that she is beautiful through his love for her. At the end of the novel he forces her to tell herself that she is beautiful, giving power to the words, because “the woman wins who

calls herself beautiful” (290). Amanda is able to acquire a new found confidence and belief in her beauty as a result of Jack’s appreciation for her.

Emmaline, the heroine of Elizabeth Boyle’s novel *Something About Emmaline*, is a powerful heroine because she has a beautiful personality. *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches’ Guide to Romance Novels*, a celebration and defense of the genre, explains that typically, heroines fall under ten different categories (30). Regardless of the category, romance heroines are multi-faceted, and must be in order to captivate the hero and the reader. As historical romance writer Cathy Maxwell explains, “we [authors] don’t write about the everyday guy. We’re talking about the guy who has a purpose to his life, the woman who has a purpose to her life” (“Historicals”). Though Emmaline is a conventional beauty, she is also an opportunistic heroine; she takes advantage of the opportunity to help herself financially. Emmaline is a card sharp posing to be the imaginary wife of Alex. She was hired by his grandmother to play the part, and in exchange is the take of a lifetime, money to get her in a card game that will change her finances forever. Somewhere along the way though, she fell in love.

Not only is Emmaline in love with Alex, but he is also in love with her. Emmaline has a vivacious personality, “and her vivacity was infectious, a fever of life” (Boyle 53). Besides being beautiful, she has a bullet wound on her forehead, sleeps with a gun in her bed, and gambles. Alex finds her fascinating, and the more time he is in her company, the deeper in love he falls. Emmaline returns this love, and the two, though they initially fight their attraction for each other, eventually work things out and their “fake marriage” turns out to be a “happily ever after” for them both.

The “happily ever after” ending is one of the greatest criticisms of the romance genre. Critics argue that this type of ending is not only predictable, but also gives women unrealistic

expectations for men. The “happily ever after” ending, in romance, is either in marriage or the promise of marriage. Jan Cohn believes that “in romance, marriage, like sex, conventionally valorizes a condition of permanent female dependency” (16). If what Cohn claims is true, then the “happily ever after” ending does the opposite of empowering women. Susan Elizabeth Phillips disagrees with this when she writes “for the time that a reader is absorbed in a love story, she is not only safe from harm but empowered to rise above every limitation, every obstacle, every worry that confronts her” (58). The empowerment of the “happily ever after” ending is in its consistency. This ending is an old and traditional romantic convention, and Modleski argues that “conventions of romance hold powerful sway.... These conventions are, then, part of our cultural heritage as women” (*Feminism* 343). Regis affirms that “the happy ending in marriage (or in betrothal, the promise of marriage) is a formal feature of every romance genre” (7), but she also explains that it is a necessary function of the romance that serves to free the heroine (16). There are elements of a romance novel that establish expectations for the content of the novel, and these elements provide comfort to the reader in their continuity. For example, every romance reader knows that there will be a hero and a heroine who will fall in love and get married, though not before overcoming an obstacle or two along the way. Though these elements will not necessarily occur in said order, novelist Suzanne Simmons Guntrum celebrates that “in a romance novel we know that, whatever the odds against them, the hero and heroine will come together in the end and live happily ever after” (153).

A romance is not a romance without “the happy ending” but, as Cathy Maxwell stresses, “we’re not reading for the happy ending, we’re reading for the commitment, if they [the hero and heroine] deserve to be together” (“Historicals”). The happy ending is wonderful, expected, required even of a historical romance, but that is not what keeps readers turning page after page.

What keeps readers reading the romance novel is an issue that was explored by Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance*. Radway's 1984 publication *Reading the Romance* was a case study of a small group of women in the town of Smithton. In it, Radway attempts to understand why women read romance. Radway makes many discoveries in her case study, and her research on the Smithton women led to the discovery “that their reading was a way of temporarily refusing the demands associated with their social role as wives and mothers. As they observed, it functioned as a ‘declaration of independence,’ as a way of securing privacy while the same time providing companionship and conversation” (11). In addition to this, Radway notes “romance reading...provides vicarious emotional nurturance by prompting identification between the reader and a fictional heroine whose identity as a woman is always confirmed by the romantic and sexual attentions of an ideal male” (113). Romance also “fills a woman’s mental world with the varied details of simulated travel and permits her to converse imaginatively with adults from a broad spectrum of social space” (113). Radway’s studies are very objective in nature; she is concerned with social issues rather than a more intricate study of the romance genre. In lieu of dissecting the romance novel, Radway studies why women read the romance, and her conjectures are based on the study of a select group of women. Though there is some merit to Radway’s findings, we must also take into consideration what Mary Bly wrote, that “a scholar who moves from study of a few romance novels to wholesale claims about the genre, and from there to analysis of the personal conduct and the erotic choices of all romance readers, impoverishes her own argument” (60). Another strength of the historical romance is its portrayal of strong heroines who demand a love match — not a marriage of convenience. Laura Lee Guhrke’s *Secret Desires of a Gentleman* and Cathy Maxwell’s *Lyon's Bride* both have strong-willed women as heroines who want equal partners in marriage. They want to marry for love, or

not marry at all. Maria, the heroine of *Secret Desires of a Gentleman*, tells her love interest Phillip, “I believe people who marry should have mutual respect and affection” (Guhrke 258). A retelling of Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Guhrke’s novel explores how love can break down any barriers, if you let it. Phillip is a stubborn bully, much like Austen’s Darcy, but Maria insists on getting her way on this issue, declaring, “marriage is a partnership, Phillip, not a feudal kingdom. Until you can accept that I have the right to dictate the course of my own life, I will not marry you” (336). After three marriage proposals, declarations of love, and a public apology later, Phillip not only understands what Maria means, but he also agrees to a partnership between the two of them.

Maxwell’s Thea stands out as an example of the self-sufficient woman. A widow with two young boys, Thea relies on her matchmaking skills to secure her funds. Thea confesses “after one taste of marriage, it is not for me. I prefer to raise my sons alone so that I do not have to answer to anyone” (Maxwell 128). She tells her client and childhood friend Neal, “marriage is more than having children. It has to be” (191). Thea is an independent woman who values her freedom too much to exchange it even for the security marriage has to offer. A passionate encounter and quality time spent with Lord Lyon changes her mind, however. Thea realizes that she loves Lyon (246), and eventually, Lyon admits he feels the same.

Much has been said of the negative and positive effects of reading romance. Romance writers and readers will say they are about “enhancing life, not limiting it” (Maxwell and Krentz 350). In an effort to “enhance life,” there has been a rise in several trends in the historical romance genre in the twenty-first century. The most notable one is that of the working girl who must have a job to support herself. One thing all of the heroines in this paper have in common is that they work: some out of necessity, others for pleasure, and a few for both reasons. Most of

these women keep their jobs after they marry, not out of financial need, but because working gives them pleasure, and their husbands love and respect them enough to encourage their work. This “working girl trend” is most likely popular today because the working girl is a heroine who resonates with women in our society. Cathy Maxwell explains in the 2012 *Readers and ‘ritas* romance convention that “I think it becomes a cliché about romances, when the women don’t do anything” (“Historicals”). Perhaps the working girls in today’s historical romance novels help thwart this cliché, making them more relatable to the modern woman.

Today’s woman can also relate to the working girl’s struggles, and this identification allows women to hope: to hope that she too, like the heroine, can find freedom from the beauty myth, financial freedom, and freedom to be appreciated and loved by a man worthy of her. This makes us respect the genre more because of the powerful ideologies inherent in them. Though there will always be people who express views similar to *New York Times* writer Edward Wyatt, people who look at the cover of a historical romance novel and see, “traditional romance novels, those formulaic bodice-rippers stocked with hunky heroes and love-conquers-all endings” (Wyatt), there will also be readers who, as writer Judith Arnold explains, “read romance fiction...to confront the strength of women, the variety of their experience, and the validity of their aspirations and accomplishments” (139). The representation of the empowered heroines in the novels discussed in this paper challenges modern day society’s expectations of women in regards to beauty, love, and a woman’s role in marriage.

Though in the end all the heroines of these novels do adhere to society’s expectations because they become lovers, wives, and mothers, they do it on their own terms and with a man of their choosing who respects and loves them. This choice makes the heroine happy, because “romance heroines make their own decisions, make their own livings, and choose their own

husbands” (Regis 207). The men in these novels love them, and encourage them to make their own decisions. What we are to take from the genre is this: if historical romance heroines can accept themselves as beautiful, intelligent women who marry because they want to — not because society says they should — then modern women should do the same.

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