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Transforming the Fairytale: A Diachronic Study of Utopias of Popular Romance

Deborah A. Jossart

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TRANSFORMING THE FAIRYTALE: A DIACHRONIC STUDY
OF UTOPIAS OF POPULAR ROMANCE

by

Deborah A. Jossart
Bachelor of Arts, University of Maryland, 1999

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

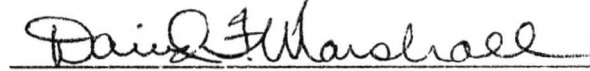
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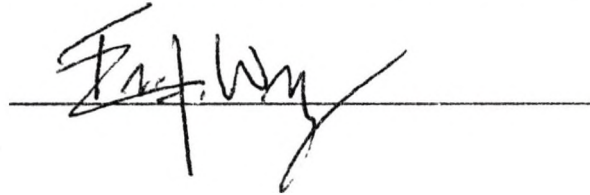
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2004

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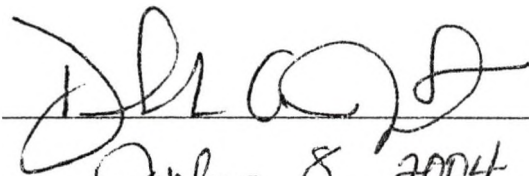
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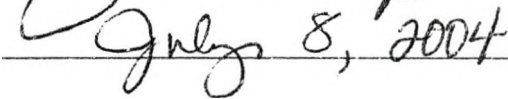
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. L. Anderson', written over a horizontal line.

Date

A handwritten date 'July 8, 2004' in black ink, written over a horizontal line.

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ABSTRACT

Popular romance novels have been examined by a number of critics over the past several decades, but each of these studies has analyzed texts within a fixed, synchronic context. Such analyses, while useful, fail to provide the same depth and breadth of a study of a popular culture genre that combines both synchronic and diachronic approaches. This study evaluates the popular romance novels produced during three distinct historical moments: the early mass-market romance novel, popular during the 1960s and 70s; the contemporary erotic romance novel, produced from the 1980s until currently; and the “chick-lit” sub-genre of popular romance, currently rising in popularity. Examining these three snapshots of the popular romance novel and the ways in which the genre has changed over time generates new theoretical paradigms based on the potential of these novels to perform as transformative texts, either culturally and/or economically. Further, a comparison of the structures within the popular romance to those of fairytale allows us to see how the former performs within our culture in ways similar to the latter, which further illustrates the potential of the popular romance novel to perform as a transformative text within our society. Thus, the utopias produced in popular romance are different for each historical moment, as changing social and economic conditions are not only reflected within these texts, but are perhaps even generated as they provide readers with increasingly nontraditional ways of viewing

gender performance and heterosexual relationships within the traditional dichotomy of heterosexual marriage.

CHAPTER I

POSITIONING THE POPULAR ROMANCE AS A TRANSFORMATIVE TEXT

Introduction

This study, both diachronic and synchronic in nature, examines snapshots of contemporary popular romance novels in specific historical moments, which will reveal sweeping changes that are at least as great as those in feminist theory, and will illustrate a vital and living transformation that continues to show signs of change, if not progression. Popular romance novels are transformative narratives: they contain traditional structures and motifs, like heterosexuality and marriage, but simultaneously and progressively contain a variety of nontraditional, more feminist conventions, as well. The transformative nature of these narratives will demonstrate that there is a rationale for retaining the conventional forms and functions of fairytales in this type of women's utopian fiction over time, as I will argue that the popular romance novel operates in our contemporary society in the same way Vladimir Propp asserts that the fairytale has historically engaged with social mores and ideologies.

According to Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, fairytales are powerful and potentially transformative texts that respond to changing social norms and ideals. Teresa de Lauretis, in *Alice Doesn't*, discusses a little-known essay by Propp entitled "Oedipus in the Light of Folklore" in which, de Lauretis claims, he "combines the synchronic or

'morphological' study of plot types and motifs with their diachronic or historical transformations, which are due, he argues, to the close relationship between a society's folklore production and its modes of material production" (113). Examining the ways in which popular romance novels are influenced by and respond to transformations of social expectations of gender performances and constructions within a specific historical moment, the 'modes of material production' in which these expectations are constructed, and the political implications of the utopia that is depicted, is the goal of this study.

In effect, the deep structure of the popular romance novel emerges from social conflicts in relation to changes in gender roles and expectations that have occurred over the past three decades. Propp states:

Whenever historical change creates new forms of life, new economic conquests, new forms of social relations, and all of these filter down into folklore, what is old does not die out, nor is it always replaced by what is new. The old continues to exist with the new, either parallel to it or combining with it to bring forth several associations of a hybrid nature which are neither possible in nature or history. (qtd. in de Lauretis 114)

It is within the deep structure of the contemporary popular romance novel that the old and the new come together in a "hybrid" or transformative genre: transformative because they inspire readers to view gender constructions and heterosexual relationships in previously unconsidered ways, and hybrid because they attempt to straddle two worlds: the traditional heterosexual construction of relationships within the patriarchy, and a new utopia that attempts to combine the apparently opposing notions of androgyny and

cultural feminism. In fact I will argue, the contemporary popular romance novel has itself performed as an agent of change, and a didactic is created in these novels in which the average woman, existing in the trenches of patriarchy, is introduced to and influenced by less restrictive ideas about gender performances, even while paradoxically celebrating her own biological sex and the alleged superiority of the female over the male.

According to Anne Cranny-Francis in *Feminist Fiction*, these types of paradoxes are customary in utopian fiction; she describes Edward Bellamy's novel, *Looking Backward*, as "condemned as both capitalist and communist, futuristic and retrogressive; it expressed a consciousness aware of the injustices of the capitalist state. but was not prepared to reject that state" (112). The popular romance novel similarly "expresses a consciousness" that is aware of "the injustices" of the patriarchal construction of heterosexual marriage, and yet is obviously "not prepared to reject" it. Cranny-Francis asserts, however, that in utopian texts, "Another world, the utopian figure, is constructed in the text and the reader, in the process of (re)constructing this figure, is positioned to see her/his own society from a different perspective" (110). She contends that the reader is positioned in such a way as to compare his or her own society to that of the utopia, and states, "In this way a detailed (re)vision of the reader's society is constructed within the text—and this is the focus and function of the utopian text" (111). Under this paradigm, the popular romance novel would thus operate as a utopian text that provides women readers with alternate conceptions of gender performances and heterosexual relations, and would position them to question existing social constraints and expectations, even

while it conforms to the traditional convention of heterosexual marriage. As Cranny-Francis states:

The reader is [...] positioned to question the mechanisms of his/her own society, because another social structure with apparent advantages over her/his own, but also many similarities, is shown operating simultaneously. In other words, the sense of inevitability, of naturalness, about the contemporary social order is challenged; the reader is positioned to see contemporary society differently. (111)

This, I will argue, is the primary function of the contemporary popular romance novel: its performance, as Cranny-Francis refers to it, as a “bourgeois fairytale,” allows it to politicize gender and heterosexual norms and create an alternate reality that appears to somehow represent our world, but which actually describes a utopia in which women manage to have it all: love, sex, respect, power, recognition, and success. Exposure to this utopian ideal problematizes and complicates the romance reader’s existence within a reality that does not actually offer what the utopia does, which generates discontent with the status quo and positions her to question and challenge the actual limitations placed upon her by society. The utopia of the popular romance novel confronts these limitations and injustices, albeit in a sometimes incongruous fashion, as a continuing dialogue with the romance reader that both articulates her discontent and expresses her desire for something better. Thus, the utopia of the popular romance novel responds to the same issues that it problematizes, creating a cyclical effect that responds to discontent with experimental, utopian solutions, and which has progressively evolved with social

revisions of accepted gender performances and heterosexual relations in our contemporary society.

This cycle is dramatically different from the “narcotic effect” described by Tania Modleski in *Loving With a Vengeance*, in which she argues that popular romance novels, “in presenting a heroine who has escaped psychic conflicts, inevitably increase the reader’s own conflicts, thus creating an even greater dependency on the literature” (57). Instead of creating a ‘narcotic effect,’ which, Modleski argues, numbs the romance reader and generally prevents her from pursuing more active forms of protest, popular romance novels articulate women’s discontent, and also continue to respond to that discontent, by producing an alternate utopian version of heterosexuality and marriage that positions the reader to challenge her own social reality, and even to expect or demand changes in her own environment that would bring her closer to that utopian ideal in her own relationships. So instead of ‘numbing’ the reader, as Modleski suggests, the utopia depicted in romance novels actually makes the reader more aware of the limitations of her own reality, and more likely to challenge those limitations; Modleski’s argument is apparently based on Frederick Engel’s assertion that, in Cranny-Francis’ analysis, utopian texts like Bellamy’s “might divert readers from active intervention in the class struggle into wish-fulfillment fantasies and so effectively abandon the political arena” (108).

However, Cranny-Francis declares that more recent theorists contend:

the utopian figure is viewed as part of a textual strategy aimed at politicizing readers through the deconstruction of dominant ideologies and the positioning of the reader as active subject. The notion of the utopian

figure as blueprint is simply not relevant to their work and in fact constitutes a serious misreading of any but the most naïve utopian texts.

(109)

Of course, Radway, too, discusses the utopia created by popular romance novels, asserting, “the women who seek out ideal novels in order to construct such a [utopian] vision again and again are reading not out of contentment but out of dissatisfaction, longing, and protest” (215). She goes on to argue, however, that “despite the utopian force of the romance’s projection, that projection actually leaves unchallenged the very system of social relations whose faults and imperfections gave rise to the romance and which the romance is trying to perfect” (215). On the other hand, as Carol Thurston points out in *The Romance Revolution*, “to suggest that heterosexual bonding is in itself inherently conservative and inimical to women, [...] is to deny both human needs and turn a blind eye to where grass roots social change is taking place” (111). As Thurston illustrates, romance readers are the primary instigators of change in popular romance novels; therefore, the sweeping changes in gender characterizations and heterosexual power relations that have occurred in these novels over the past three to four decades can be attributed directly to the readers themselves and are evidence of the popular romance novel’s transformative nature. She states:

If a large dose of autonomy, equality, cooperation, and compromise, as well as love and respect, are now integrated into the ideal male-female relationships portrayed in these stories, it is largely because readers have

demanded it. And even if some or all of that is still a fantasy in their own lives rather than a reality, it is indicative of their aspirations. (111)

Therefore, although the romance reader has been specifically targeted as a consumer by publishing conglomerates like Harlequin Enterprises, she has also been empowered by her consumerism to demand changes in both narrative and characterization in the popular romance novel, which has enabled her to become part of a larger social transformation.

This genre continues to be powerfully controlled by its 'modes of material production'—as Harlequin's readership ages and the corporate giant seeks to broaden its market base, it has not only modified the formula for the popular romance novel, but has begun to add sub-genres that are specifically targeted towards younger readers, and which are based on shifts in contemporary readers' demands and expectations.

Further, according to the paradigm developed by Frederic Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*, it is these 'modes of material production,' combined with the romance novel's 'Utopian harmony,' that reflects its positioning at the heart of the conflict between patriarchy or capitalism and a matriarchal-influenced utopia. Jameson asserts that the utopia is derived from a text that is engaged in a transitional moment, or a moment when "two distinct modes of production, or moments of socioeconomic development, coexist" (148). These two 'modes of production' are represented in the text as the binary forces of good and evil, and the purpose of the text is to take part in the battle that is being waged between the two (Jameson 148). Of course, just as is true in the fairytale, good always defeats evil in the end, and a utopian ideal is created. In effect, then, the popular romance novel exists as a form of protest against patriarchy and

capitalism, against those forces of 'evil' in the world that demand adherence to norms and mores that are limiting and unjust. It offers up, in its place, a utopian world in which heterosexuality exists as something definitively different than what it is in our contemporary society, a place where justice, equality, love, desire, and peace are the objective of men and women alike.

Defining the Romance

The many sub-genres of contemporary popular romance novels, including categories ranging from mystery or intrigue to historical romance novels and novels containing paranormal elements, are too numerous to mention, and each has at least minor differences in formula guidelines, making it nearly impossible to apply the conclusions of this or any previous study as wholly valid for all types of romance novels. However, contemporary erotic romance novels, which can be defined as mass-market romance novels that have plots designed around characters within a contemporary social setting, and which include explicit erotic scenes, also have certain conventions that are generally accepted for practically all genres of popular romance, and these standard conventions will be the primary focus of this study.

Romance Writers of America (RWA), an organization comprised of nearly 9,000 aspiring and current romance writers, "has outlined two elements—a central love story and an emotionally satisfying ending—as the crux of their association's official definition of a romance novel" (RWA website). Jennifer Crusie, "a best-selling romance author and member of the RWA committee that wrote the official definition, says the central-love-story aspect of the definition means 'the main plot of the romance must concern two

people falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work” (RWA website).

On the RWA website, Crusie further determines:

Romance novels end in a way that makes the reader feel good, [...and] 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. In a romance, the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love.

(April 6, 2004)

These three elements, then: “a central love story,” “an emotionally satisfying ending,” and “the notion that good people in the world are rewarded and evil people are punished” will be the standard of measurement, or “arc of justice,” used in this study to differentiate between popular romance and other women’s fiction. Many of the novels I analyze in this study are written by Nora Roberts, an enormously popular *New York Times* best-selling author and the first writer inducted into the Romance Writers of America’s Hall of Fame, who is considered by many to be one of the best popular or mass market romance writers in the contemporary history of the genre, and who has also consistently published within this industry throughout the three decades or so that this study encompasses.

I will examine three representative historical snapshots of the contemporary popular romance novel—the early mass-market romance, the contemporary erotic (category or single-title) romance, and the up-and-coming, so-called “chick-lit.” What all of these historical representations of the contemporary popular romance novel have in common is (1) a heroine who, in various ways that are reflected in each particular stage,

and who is influenced by a particular historical moment, is portrayed as superior to the hero; (2) a happy or satisfying ending—an ending in a utopian ideal that resolves the conflicts and contradictions present in the historical moment of which they are, or were, a part; (3) a recognition and celebration of female desire; and (4) a sense of a collective identity, or a community of readers and writers who share similar ideas about the performance of gender within a social construct of heterosexuality. On the other hand, there are a number of differences between the three, as well, especially in portrayals of gender performances and narrative point of view, with changing constructions of each based on the historical moment of which it is a part.

Early Mass-Market Romance Novels

Romance novels popularized during the 1970s and 1980s by Harlequin Enterprises were constructed according to a formula that was fairly narrow. They nearly always contained a hero who was, according to Maggie Humm, “more knowledgeable and better educated than the correspondingly younger, less experienced, heroine” (7). Nora Roberts, in an interview with Kay Mussell, the editor of *Paradoxa* and author of several books and articles on the subject of popular romance, describes the typical early mass-market romance novel as including:

the virginal heroine, often orphaned and usually in a typically feminine job—rarely career. The hero is older, more experienced, usually wealthy and often, very often emotionally domineering. The books during this period were always written from the heroine’s point of view so that the

reader was in the same quandary as the heroine. What is this guy thinking, what are his motivations? (*Paradoxa* 157)

These novels were published during the era of the studies produced by Modleski, Radway, and many of their contemporaries, who generally criticized the popular romance novel of this time period as contributing to the perpetuation of patriarchal customs through its suggestion of heterosexual marriage as the most desirable option available for women.

These novels basically performed as a coming-of-age narrative or bildungsroman, depicting a young, childlike, poor, and often 'rebellious' young heroine who meets and falls in love with an older, experienced, rich, and powerful hero. The heroine, throughout the course of the novel, learns that in order to have what she desires—the love and approval of the hero—she must, in a similar fashion to the main character of Jane Austen's *Emma*—reject her childish behaviors and forfeit her pride (Modleski 37). With parallels to *Jane Eyre*, which appears to work almost as a early template for these later texts, the heroine is often portrayed as naïve, unaware of her own often spectacular beauty, and incapable of cunning or guile. The hero, conversely, is often cold, mocking, and distant, noticeably lacking in emotional warmth, and quite often brutal in his treatment of the heroine. She is frequently confused by his 'hateful' actions; the reader, however, who is knowledgeable of the formula, understands that the hero's cruel behavior is only the outward manifestation of his overwhelming love and desire for the heroine (Modleski, *Loving With A Vengeance* 41).

The early mass-market romance novel, in a manner reminiscent of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, also often includes a character depicted as the other woman—a competitor for the hero's attentions who is usually older and more experienced (and thus capable of cunning and guile). This character may be in the form of the hero's mother or sister, or an ex-girlfriend or ex-wife. The heroine is often dependent upon the hero for her financial support, whether because he is her boss or supervisor or because he is her legal guardian, and she is quite often unable to leave the situation, and thus must learn to cope with her fractured feelings. She is rewarded for her maturation with the hero's love and approval, and at the conclusion of the novel, with a betrothal or marriage to the man she loves, while the hero is rewarded for his ability to finally overcome his affective deficiencies with the love and acceptance of the heroine.

These early novels were marketed *en masse* (as opposed to individually) and by the publisher name, Harlequin, through television commercials and widespread marketing campaigns focused, according to Janice Radway, in supermarkets and drugstores where middle-class housewives shopped (34). They even developed advertising campaigns in which they gave away free samples in boxes of laundry detergent (Modleski, *Loving With A Vengeance* 35, Radway 41). This mass-market commodities approach paid off, as the popularity of the romance novel soared, and in 2002, the popular romance novel represented approximately 53.3 percent of the paperback industry in North America (Romance Writers of America website).

Contemporary Erotic Romance Novels

The diegesis of the romance novel, today, however, while retaining some of the forms of earlier examples, differs greatly from the early mass-market romance novel. Contemporary erotic romance novels have increasingly shifted from offering the heroine's point of view exclusively to a narrative that incorporates the hero's perspective, until both points of view are equally established. They have also shifted from strict, formulaic codes governing heroine and hero to more flexible character forms and functions. The heroine has become progressively sexually mature, experienced, and aware of her own needs and desires; both the heroine and the hero have moved from performing stereotypical and binary roles to increasingly individualized and androgynous characterizations, and contemporary erotic romances now often have a double protagonist, or hero(ine), in which both the hero and heroine perform the narrative functions of the hero, as well as often carrying out other, additional functions.

These novels still end in betrothal or marriage, but unlike early mass-market romance novels, the heroine usually has a career that she plans to continue to pursue after marriage, she is almost always financially independent and usually successful, and she is no longer depicted as childish or rebellious towards the hero. Instead, the heroine is portrayed as an independent individual with a variety of goals and belief systems, much as she would be in any other work of popular fiction. She is often shown as successfully managing career, family, friends, children, and her love life in a manner reminiscent of the recent trend of working mothers becoming superwomen within our contemporary

culture. She is much older than the early heroine, typically in her late twenties to early thirties.

The hero, usually no longer the brooding, distant, emotionally unavailable male, is now frequently portrayed, like the heroine, as an independent character with a unique cultural background and perspective. He is more nurturing, relational, and self-aware than many of the alpha male heroes depicted in early mass-market romance novels, and always shows respect for the heroine. While erotic scenes in early mass-market romances often bordered on rape, similar scenes in the contemporary romance are described from both points of view and are frequently instigated by the heroines; the brute force used by early heroes is conspicuously absent.

These novels are often sold as series or category romances, either under the Harlequin or Silhouette trademarks, but also include mainstream single-title romance novels by publishers such as Avon or Jove, and together they represent the preferred sub genre of over half of all romance readers in North America (RWA website). The primary difference between the two is length and packaging—the mainstream titles tend to be longer and are packaged individually rather than marketed as part of a series (RWA website).

“Chick Lit”

The official RWA definition of the romance novel, appears, however, to be currently in transition: the most recent addition (2001) to the lineup of Harlequin Enterprises is *Red Dress Ink*, a sub-genre introduced on their website as “women's fiction that is fresh and irreverent and depicts young, single, mostly city-dwelling women coping

with the sometimes difficult aspects of modern life,” and which still has, of course, “a happy ending, but it doesn't necessarily involve a man” (Harlequin website). These novels are much like the popular HBO series *Sex and the City*, and therefore, are a sign of interactions among the mass media—television, movies, and popular novels. These novels, according to an interview on eHarlequin with Red Dress Ink editor Margaret Marbury, “will focus on the heroine, as opposed to a specific relationship between a heroine and a hero. Many of the stories may have a strong romantic component but it will not be the focus. The heroine will become a little more self-aware and experienced by the end of the novel” (June 2, 2004). Popularly known as “chick-lit” (a take-off of the term ‘chick flick’), the novels that are published under these guidelines reflect some of the most recent transformations in the romance genre, and like earlier and contemporary romances and fairy tales, they are transformative—chick-lit has incorporated new elements, such as the shift in focus from romantic love to self-awareness and personal growth, and from heterosexual marriage to career, friendships, and relationships, but it still retains some of the conventional functions, as well, especially in its adherence to a happy or satisfying ending and its focus on affective relationships as an issue relevant primarily to women. It’s important to emphasize, of course, that chick-lit isn’t currently replacing romance—it is simply branching off into a new direction as a sub-genre of women’s romantic fiction. However, the fact that Harlequin, the most powerful and influential romance publisher in the world—and who, until now, has published exclusively romance novels—is joining this particular fray is notable; with the age of the average romance reader rapidly increasing, and the quickly spreading popularity of

'chick-lit', many in the industry are wondering whether 'chick-lit' is the future of popular romance.

History of Criticism

The popular romance novel has a history rich with conflict and criticism. Traced back to the tremendous success of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* in the eighteenth century, and through the novels of Jane Austen and the Brontes in the nineteenth century, the popular romance novel today continues to be disparaged by most critics, and indeed, by our society in general. Some view it negatively because it is considered a formulaic genre, others because it is perceived as contributing to women's continued participation in patriarchal traditions, and some argue that much of its criticism stems from the fact that the genre is primarily written and read by women, and thus is deserving of scorn (Regis xii).

Northrop Frye, for instance, outlines a basic hierarchy of literature, pointing to "serious literary artists" who "tell us something about the life of their times, and about human nature as it appears in that context" (*The Secular Scripture* 41) as existing at the top of that structure. These writers, he contends, are not the same as the "romancer," who is "considered to have compromised too far with popular literature" (41). Since the "romancer," according to Frye, is somewhat "below" the "serious literary artist" in the literary hierarchy, it's safe to assume that within the context of popular literature, the romance novel is, to use Frye's colorful expression, "in the doghouse" (41). Most previous criticism of the popular romance novel would reflect its lowly status; although critics have discovered a few apparently redeeming qualities, it has been established by a

number of scholars as primarily perpetuating women's passivity within a conventional social structure. Joanne Hollows, in *Feminism, Femininity, and Popular Culture*, notes, "It has become part of contemporary 'common-sense' that romantic fiction is a 'formulaic' 'trivial' 'escapist' form read by 'addicted' women" (70).

Analysts and critics of the popular romance novel have devised a number of social, literary, and psychological theories in response to this genre, but nearly all of their approaches have been synchronic: fixed studies of individual popular romance texts in a given historical moment. While these studies may be valid responses to any number of theoretical questions, they are also limited by their myopia. Hollows asserts, "There is still little known about historical variations within the genre as too often romance is treated as a monolithic ideology rather than as open to transformation" (85). Further, Pamela Regis, author of *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, persuasively argues that a number of critics have focused their studies too narrowly, drawing generalized conclusions about the entire genre without seriously contemplating the multitude of sub genres that fall under popular romance, limiting their theoretical applications (6). Thus, to fully analyze this particular genre of popular culture, it is necessary to step back and view it both synchronically and diachronically, to examine the transformations it has undergone over the past three decades, and to evaluate its transformative nature.

There have been a number of critical studies of the popular romance genre, including major works completed by Janice Radway, Tania Modleski, Carol Thurston, and Janet Cohn, as well as responses to these critics from best-selling romance authors like Jayne Ann Krentz. While many attempt to be sympathetic to the romance reader,

most of these critics generally put forward the notion that the romance novel perpetuates and reinforces the passivity of women through the creation of passive or ineffective heroines; through a revenge model, in which the heroine brings the hero to his knees in the conclusion of the novel, which ultimately undermines feminism; and/or by reinforcing the traditional patriarchal gender roles due to its emphasis on heterosexual marriage. Radway, whose study, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture*, was published in 1984, has perhaps written the most in-depth research study on the dynamics of reading the popular romance, presenting the only example of a major ethnographic study of the contemporary romance novel. The majority of the criticism of the genre is centered around the time of Radway's study, although an anthology of responses to these criticisms by romance writers was published in 1992, and an edition of *Paradoxa*, which includes a collection of scholarly analyses and interviews with romance authors, was published in 1997.

Radway, in one of the most sympathetic and comprehensive studies of popular romance to date, developed an ethnographic study of a small group of romance readers and combined it with a textual analysis of several historical romance novels as she developed theories about what rewards women gain from reading the romance and the pleasure they obtain from the act of reading novels that were dismissed by outsiders—men, academics, and feminists—as 'silly' or 'trash'. She also examined the industry as a whole, evaluating the way in which major publishers like Harlequin essentially designed a product to fit a particular consumer and then marketed their product accordingly (43-44). She concludes that "the domination [of the romance over the paperback book

industry] is the consequence of a calculated strategy to make the largest profit possible by appealing to the single most important segment of the book-buying public,” (45) and contends that this cannot be ignored when evaluating the popularity of the romance novel. Further, according to Hollows, “For Radway’s readers, the ideal romance offers the opportunity to escape from a world characterized by the excesses of male power and into a utopian world in which heterosexual relationships can work” (79). Radway’s theories, according to Hollows, are centered around ‘escape’: the readers identify with the heroine and ‘escape’ into her fictional life, ‘vicariously’ experiencing her pleasure; and simultaneously the readers ‘escape’ from their own lives, stealing precious hours away from the demands of their own full and complex lifestyles. Radway, however, concludes from her study:

Because the romance finally leaves unchallenged the male right to the public spheres of work, politics, and power, because it refurbishes the institution of marriage by suggesting how it might be viewed continuously as a courtship, because it represents real female needs within the story and then depicts their satisfaction by traditional heterosexual relations, the romance avoids questioning the institutionalized basis of patriarchal control over women even as it serves as a locus of protest against some of its emotional consequences. (217)

Hollows argues that Radway “constantly undercuts the pleasure that the readers gain from their reading by calling it “vicarious,” even though they experience it as “real” (79). She further contends that this “distinction between real and vicarious pleasure [is]

highly questionable,” and that “Radway feels compelled to judge the readers for their lack of feminist values” (80). Hollows asserts as well that in the process of arguing that romances “insulate” the readers from male abuse (Radway 151), Radway “presents ‘feminism...as the superior solution to all women’s problems as if feminism automatically possessed the relevant and effective formulas for all women to change their lives and acquire happiness’” (quoting Ang 81). Finally, Hollows warns us that “Radway’s readers are not necessarily typical of *all* romance readers: the differences between women might produce different engagements with romantic fiction” (82). She maintains, “The problem with generalizing from Radway’s readers to all ‘ordinary women’ is that they quickly lose their specificity and can easily ‘join that generalized other to feminism, the housewife’” (quoting Brunsdon 82).

Another difficulty with Radway’s study is that she evaluates a selection of texts from a sub genre, historical romances, and applies the results of her study to all mass market or popular romance novels. Because many of the formula elements for early mass-market romances, whether single-title or category in nature, were distinctly different from those for historical novels during the 1970s and 80s when Radway completed her study, it is problematical to apply her theoretical conclusions to the entire popular romance genre. Historical romance novels, because they are fiction based in an earlier era, tend to reproduce the mores and social ideology of the time period in which they are set, while contemporary romance novels—whether early mass-market or contemporary erotic—tend to reflect and engage with contemporary versions of those social conventions. Thus, to conclude that gender power relations that are portrayed in

historical romance novels are analogous to gender power relations depicted in contemporary romance novels would be erroneous.

Tania Modleski, in *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-produced fantasies for women*, on the other hand, approaches the romance novel from the psychoanalytic perspective, essentially arguing that the romance novel is a 'hysterical text', a text that "leads further and further away from the self becoming the basis for gratification and experience into a sense of emptiness, experiential deficiency, and a wish to regress back into the dependency of early childhood as a haven" (quoting Wollowitz 57). She also alleges that the formulaic popular romance novel works in much the same way that a narcotic substance does. She states:

Harlequins, in presenting a heroine who has escaped psychic conflicts, inevitably increase the reader's own psychic conflicts, thus creating an even greater dependency on the literature. This lends credence to the other commonly accepted theory of popular art as narcotic. As medical researchers are now discovering, certain tranquilizers taken to relieve anxiety are, though temporarily helpful, ultimately anxiety-producing. The user must constantly increase the dosage of the drug in order to alleviate problems aggravated by the drug itself. (*Loving With A Vengeance* 57)

Modleski argues that romance novels have the same sedative effect; the reader has to repeatedly consume the texts to 'get her fix'. She does acknowledge, however, that "the very fact that romance novels must go to such extremes to neutralize women's anger and

to make masculine hostility bearable testifies to the depths of women's discontent" (*Loving With A Vengeance* 58). She also conceives the 'revenge theory'; in it, she claims, the heroine brings the 'alpha male' hero, apparently superior to her in every conceivable way, to his knees by the conclusion of the novel. She maintains, however, that although romance novels express women's anger and resistance to a patriarchal ideology, they do so in such a way that they alleviate, and therefore allay, in a fantasy world, women's will to resist in reality. This quality in particular, Modleski contends, undermines the feminist movement as a whole.

Hollows, however, while approving of Modleski's "attempt to treat the romance reader seriously" (77), insists, "real readers may not read the romance in the same way as the implied reader of Modleski's argument" (77), and also criticizes Modleski's "dependence on abstract psychological theory to explain how and why women read romances" (77); to do so, she argues, "simultaneously annihilates social and cultural differences between women readers" (77) and implies that all women's fantasies are identical. Carol Thurston also criticizes Modleski's use of the psychoanalytic approach, citing Lawrence Stone's argument that "Clinical Freudianism, with its stress on penis envy, early incestuous experiences (real or imagined), and the Oedipus complex, looks increasingly like the product of a Victorian, central European, middle-class, male chauvinist society" (6).

Further, the basis for Modleski's arguments is the formula of the early mass-market romance novel itself: a novel written entirely from the heroine's perspective, possessing a rich, powerful, and older hero, and a young, inexperienced and childlike

heroine. Each of these elements, she argues, contributes to the overall effect of readers perceiving the heroine, and indeed the 'ideal' woman, as innocent and artless, a state of being that the romance novel precludes the reader from attaining because of its use of a consistent formula that allows her to be aware in advance of what is going to happen (*Loving With A Vengeance* 56-57). The reader's simultaneous identification with the innocent heroine and her awareness of how the novel will eventually conclude turns, according to Modleski, "innocence" into "guile," and "selflessness" into "self-absorption," causing the reader to "reemerge—feeling more visible—and hence more guilty—than ever" (*Loving With A Vengeance* 56). None of these qualities, however, are still elements in today's popular romance novels, although the industry has steadily grown and prospered, which seriously undermines her theory as a whole. Heroines today, for instance, are older, independent, and usually sexually experienced, and heroes are increasingly nurturing and affective, while the point of view in contemporary popular romances has transferred from exclusively the heroine's perspective to a blend between the hero's and heroine's viewpoints. If romance readers depended upon the formulaic features of the "artless," virginal early mass-market heroine and the macho early mass-market hero to enable them to extract meaning and gratification from the romance novel, it would seem as if these elements of the formula would have remained unchanged, but that is simply not the case.

Carol Thurston, who defines her study as an attempt to show that "under certain conditions popular culture acts in concert with other social forces as a powerful agent of change, especially during periods of social and political turbulence, precisely because of

its power to legitimize,” (6) argues that the contemporary erotic romance novel is in fact a “social phenomenon” that helps “shape the way we live—and love—with each other” (218). She protests that other critics, such as Radway and Modleski, have ignored the evolving nature of the romance novel and instead view it as stagnant and “fundamentally unchanged [...] even after a quarter of a century of rapid and dramatic social change” (6). Her analysis, conducted in 1987—shortly after Radway’s and Modleski’s—is an insightful reproach of other scholars, who she believes underestimate the potential social impact of the contemporary erotic romance novel and its readers. Using extensive demographic and statistical data, she proves that the romance reader is not the passive housewife that many critics had previously presumed her to be (116) and further illustrates how a large number of women actually use these texts in ways not previously conceived: as a nascent source of “feminist erotica” (162). She concludes:

Evidence in change in women is widespread in American society, yet the commonly projected image of the romance heroine and reader has remained static, defying everything we know about the successful marketing of commercial products and its consumers. In order to accept that the romance is still the same old story, we must first accept that the social forces at work in society and women in the mass have not changed either—and that clearly is not the case! (217)

Jan Cohn, on the other hand, in her study, *Romance and the Erotics of Property*, argues that popular romance novels really are the same old story—that they essentially imitate novels such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Gone With the Wind* in at

least one important way: they use 'codes' that conceal their engagement with the primary issues of power and property. Her argument depends heavily on the wealthy and powerful hero who often doubles as villain; heroes like Rochester, Rhett Butler, and similar heroes depicted in early mass-market romance novels, she contends, represent power to the heroine and female romance reader. She states:

The rewards of love in popular romance [...] are not precisely marriage, per se, although matrimony is always included as a benefit; the real reward is acquisition of the hero. The hero, moreover, is well worth acquiring because he carries with him all the power and authority of the patriarchy.

(5)

The only way for the heroine to obtain any power, according to Cohn, is to obtain the love and devotion of the powerful hero (5). However, similar to Modleski's, Cohn's analysis depends heavily on the existence of the alpha male as hero in the popular romance novel, and this formulaic element, even to a large extent in the historical romance novels analyzed by Radway, has changed. The "New Hero," according to Thurston,

exhibits many traits traditionally assigned to females—openness, flexibility, sensitivity, softness and vulnerability—transforming him from invincible superman to fallible human being. [...] Androgyny has burst full bloom in the erotic series romance, in characters who 'combine both masculine and feminine virtues—who combine both rationality and

intuitiveness, humility and self-assertion, depending on the demands of the situation.’ (quoting Warren 99)

Within this paradigm, it is difficult to see how Cohn’s analysis could continue to be valid; if both the hero and heroine start out possessing at least equal amounts of power and wealth in the utopia of the contemporary romance novel; the heroine’s desire for the hero wouldn’t logically be based on his ability to provide her, however vicariously, with the power she could acquire through marriage to him. Today’s contemporary heroine no longer needs to acquire the hero’s power through marriage; she has plenty of power of her own. Her motives for desiring the hero, then, must be attributed to other causes.

Jayne Ann Krentz, a best-selling romance author since 1979, admits that romance writers resisted the transformation of the hero, and in fact maintained as late as 1992 that the alpha male was critical to the spirit of the contemporary romance novel. Her argument is based on the concept that the romance hero plays the role of villain in the romance, as well as that of the hero, and that his dual characterization in the story is what creates the necessary conflict between him and the heroine (“Trying to Tame the Romance” 108-109). She states, “The flat truth is that you don’t get much of a challenge for a heroine from a sensitive, understanding, right-thinking ‘modern’ man, who is part therapist, part best-friend, and thoroughly tamed from the start (109). On the other hand, the novels have changed, and the contemporary hero is often “sensitive, understanding” and “right-thinking”—a feature that undermines all of the critical analyses that depend on the hero’s performance as villain. Further, the hero doesn’t actually need to be seen as the villain in the early mass-market romance, only, perhaps, as

“dangerous”: dangerous to know, and dangerous to love. Through her association with the dangerous male, the female protagonist in these early novels begins to live dangerously, or in other words, to really live, for the first time, an adventure that transforms her.

While each of these theoretical approaches may have given rise to reasonable conclusions before the subsequent transformations of these narratives, these changes require a deeper examination of the popular romance novel as a potentially transformative text that interacts with and responds to social forces in any given historical moment. Many of these studies were done in the 1980s—early in the development of the contemporary romance novel—and were thus, to some extent, misconceived; there has been no real notion, besides early assertions by Thurston, that a conventional text like the romance, which I will argue has been based to a large extent on the fairy tale, could also be a feminist text that engendered social transformations in how women viewed and perceived their social roles by providing readers with new, progressive ways of seeing gender and heterosexuality.

On the other hand, it may be that instead (or perhaps even simultaneously) these texts are helping to generate transformations within the capitalist superstructure as the reader is in fact being “trained” to occupy a different subject position within a capitalist patriarchy. The woman’s social role within our capitalist society has changed over the past decades from one that previously emphasized her role in the home, a dichotomy that created more jobs for men after they returned home from World War II and Vietnam, to her current role in the workplace, a dichotomy that moves more workers into the

workforce as new jobs are created through strides in technology, and during a time when the cost of living almost requires that a family has two incomes. Thus, the transformation of the heroine, hero, and their relationship within the popular romance novel could provoke changes in how women view themselves and their roles within our contemporary society.

The Role of the Fairytale

I will argue that popular romance novels in general have been based on the fairy tale, especially those novels published in the 1970s and 80s when the genre was popularized by Harlequin Enterprises; further, I will show how each progressive synchronic, historical moment, or snapshot, of the popular romance novel will reflect an increasing shift from this fairy tale dynamic to that of fantasy fiction.

First, it's important to define the term fairytale as it will be used in this study. Often in literary analysis, it's common for the definitions of fairytale, myth, folktale, and fantasy frequently to overlap, but there are distinctions between them, though some of these distinctions can be somewhat ambiguous, depending on the purpose of the analysis. I will focus on the distinctions between fairytale and fantasy, as those are the two terms I will be using to show the relationship between modern romance novels and archaic texts, as well as the relationships between popular romance novels in different historical moments. For my purposes, the definitions and distinctions delineated by Maria Nikolajeva in "Fairy Tale and Fantasy: from archaic to postmodern" (*Marvels and Tales* April 2003) will be utilized to show the transformative nature of these texts and the

transitional nature of their relationships with other texts within both synchronic and diachronic contexts.

In order to make these distinctions, Nikolajeva evaluates and contrasts various elements of fantasy and fairy tale from “ontological, structural, and epistemological” perspectives. She first notes, “Traditional fairy tales generally strive to preserve the story as close to the original version as possible, even though individual storytellers may convey a personal touch, and each version reflects its own time and society” (*Marvels and Tales* April 2003). Fantasy texts, in contrast, she argues, are “conscious creation[s], where authors choose the form that suits them best for their particular purposes. The purposes may be instructive, religious, philosophical, social, satirical [etc...] however, fantasy has distinctly lost the initial sacral purpose of traditional fairy tales” (*Marvels and Tales* April 2003). Through an analysis of various fairy tales and fantasy works, she outlines one important point where the two genres diverge, and asserts:

Most fantasy novels have many similarities to fairy tales. They have inherited the fairy-tale system of characters, set up by Vladimir Propp and his followers: hero/subject, princess/object, helper, giver, antagonist (Propp; Greimas). The essential difference between the fairy-tale hero and the fantasy protagonist is that the latter often lacks heroic features, can be scared and even reluctant to perform the task, and can sometimes fail. Fantasy rarely ends in marriage and enthronement; in contemporary philosophical and ethical fantasy it is usually a matter of spiritual

maturation. Fantasy also allows much freedom and experimentation with gender transgression. (*Marvels and Tales* April 2003)

She further argues that differences in space and time, and whether or not the text is anchored in reality, are factors, noting “The eternity of the fairy tale time, expressed in the final formula ‘lived happily ever after,’ is alien to fantasy,” and that in the fantasy novel, as opposed to the fairy tale, “Good and evil change places easily and every concept, every belief, is relative” (*Marvels and Tales* April 2003). She states, “Fairy tales know no nuances; its characters are either thoroughly good or thoroughly evil; they are not allowed doubts or hesitation, or in general any ethical choices” (*Marvels and Tales* April 2003). She maintains that in fairy tales, “First person narrative is traditionally uncommon,” and that “the roles of supporting characters are clearly determined: they are either helpers or opponents” (*Marvels and Tales* April 2003).¹

Finally, Nikolajeva contends:

the most profound difference between fantasy and fairy tales is [...] the position of the reader/listener toward what is narrated [...] Vladimir Propp maintains that the addressee of a fairy tale knows that the story is not true [...] This is also [...] the basic difference between myth and fairy tale: for the bearer of a myth, the events described are true; myth is based on belief. (*Marvels and Tales* April 2003)

However, a reader can become engaged in a fantasy world within a text even if that text does not fit Nikolajeva’s somewhat narrow definition of fantasy literature. To fantasize,

¹ Propp, however, actually asserts that characters are able to perform in various roles simultaneously (*Morphology of the Folktale* 84-85).

after all, is to escape reality—and whether the utopia the reader enters is a fairytale utopia or a fantasy (e.g. science fiction) utopia, the utopias produced in these texts must fall into the larger category of fantasy literature, which, on a more general level, subsumes all utopian texts. There are vast differences, for example, between Joanna Russ' work and Nora Roberts'—Russ' science fiction-based literature is fantasy according to Nikolajeva's definition, while Roberts' contemporary erotic romance novels fit much more easily into her definition of fairytale. However, both texts would fit under the larger category of fantasy fiction, despite the fact that one is more widely considered literary, and the other, popular. This distinction is important, because it illustrates that the term fantasy may have multiple meanings, even within the confines of this study. Thus, determining whether a novel can be defined more or less as a fantasy text is separate from its positioning in the category of fantasy fiction.

However, the distinction noted above by Nikolajeva—the idea that the reader knows the romance novel is not true because it is defined as fairytale instead of fantasy—is thus an operating principle for this study, for it simultaneously helps to establish the popular romance novel as a utopian text and as a fairytale, which undermines previous critical approaches that have implied that women who read romance novels may become confused about the intentions of the real men in their own lives. Instead, under this paradigm, the popular romance novel performs as a transformative narrative utopia in which female romance readers can experiment with gender constructions and heterosexual performances that may be negatively viewed within her reality.

Jameson implies a justification of the approach utilized in this study when he states:

Structural analysis should thus finally open out onto [...] ‘the logic of content’: the semantic raw materials of social life and language, the constraints of determinate social contradictions, the conjunctures of social class, the historicity of structures of feeling and perception and ultimately of bodily experience, the constitution of the psyche or subject, and the dynamics and specific temporal rhythms of historicity. (147)

Although he criticizes Propp’s structural approach to the fairytale based partially on the idea that he “project[ed] later categories of the individual subject back anachronistically onto narrative forms which precede[d] the subject’s emergence” (124), the “projections” of this study actually operate in reverse, examining contemporary categories based on the structures of early narratives (like fairytales) and engaging in a discourse that considers the relationship between the diverse public, or rational, spheres and private, or emotional, spheres in the narrative’s larger scheme. The “semantic raw materials of social life and language,” after all, must naturally include, for the purposes of this study, the public and private impacts of the women’s movement and feminism, and how changing conceptualizations of gender performances have transformed the way women, and specifically romance readers, view themselves within these texts. The changes in how romance readers view gender constructions, which are in the process of shifting due to social events, may cause narrative and structural transformations within the popular romance novel, which in turn provoke further social change through the creation of a

utopian reality where experimentation with even more radical gender performances and interactions can take place. It is also conceivable, however, that these narrative and structural transformations are triggered by the changing needs of capitalism instead, creating a capitalist utopia of sorts, in which women are introduced to new social roles and performances that are designed to further capitalist aims. Thus, incorporating the various “materials” that Jameson refers to above is a primary goal of this study.

Further, as mentioned earlier, de Lauretis contends that in at least one untranslated essay, Propp implicates conflicting social ideologies and existing modes of production as responsible for narrative transformations in the fairytale, particularly in a historical moment in which two opposing social forces, such as patriarchy and matriarchy, coexist. Jameson similarly concludes, “Our principle experience of [...] transitional moments is evidently that of an organic social order in the process of penetration and subversion, reorganization and rationalization, by nascent capitalism, yet still, for another long moment, coexisting with [a nostalgic or Utopian harmony]” (148).

It is thus in a particular moment, I will argue, at a historical crossroads when the alleged ‘evil’ force of patriarchal traditions and capitalist modes of production meets and grapples with the supposed ‘good’ force of a matriarchal-influenced utopia of social equality, or a utopia that attempts to assert equality while contradictorily clinging to the idea that female is superior to male because of her recognition of the need for such an equality, that transformations, feminist or capitalist in nature, occur in the popular romance novel—because it performs, both structurally and historically, as a ‘bourgeois fairytale.’

Feminist Influences

Judith Lowder Newton, in "Power and the 'Woman's Sphere'," states:

works of women's fiction might be read in several contexts—in relation to the changing material conditions of women's lives, to the ideological representations and distortions of those conditions, to an author's particular biographical experience of these, and to the ideological content and shaping force of such conventions in women's fiction as the quest and marriage plot. (887)

She asserts, "To understand the significance of a text's relation of ideology one must also examine the material conditions, the real relations, the contradictions out of which that ideology emerged" (888). In this vein, it is important to discuss the role of shifting social ideologies relating to feminism and gender studies in the evolution of the popular romance novel.

The principles of cultural feminism were produced during the period of second wave feminism, that period from the early 1960s to the mid 1980s during which many women fought for greater equality by proposing new laws and changes in the social arena, and which resulted in a larger awareness of issues such as pay differentials between men and women, of the need for child care and family leave for working mothers, and of reproductive rights, to name a few. The economy was relatively strong, and new social programs were made available by the government during this era. Many parts of society viewed second wave feminists in a negative light, as they challenged the status quo and demanded an end to the institutionalized oppression of women. The

concepts embraced by cultural feminists were developed during this period, and are based on the premise that there are essential differences between men and women, whether biologically or culturally imposed, and that each sex thus experiences the world in distinctly different ways. Cultural feminism seeks to appreciate certain socially accepted or alleged features of femininity that our society has historically devalued. This approach to feminism is evident in any number of contemporary erotic romance titles, and especially in the works of those established writers, like Nora Roberts, who have been writing since the 1970s and 80s, when second-wave feminism was at its height.

In Robert's novels, for instance, as we will see, the concept of "sisterhood" is closely tied with the practice of witchcraft, goddess worship, and unique women's experiences, such as motherhood. There is an underlying impression of women's emotional superiority in many of the novels, although in others, Roberts emphasizes the affective maturity of the hero and the contrasting lack of that maturity in the heroine. In the case of the latter, however, there is evidence that Roberts has shifted the gender roles—those heroines who are emotionally immature are also depicted as possessing characteristics and rationales that our culture has traditionally determined as masculine. One heroine, for instance, is a mechanic who seems to experience some gender confusion throughout the novel (*Catherine and Amanda: The Calhoun Women*, 1998), while another is a deputy sheriff who avoids all emotional entanglements, engages in casual sex, and symbolically resists the internal 'power' she possesses and thus simultaneously resists her membership in the "sisterhood" (*Three Sisters Island Trilogy: Heaven and Earth*, 2001).

This phenomenon as a whole makes it evident that elements of feminism and changing social constructions of gender are finding their ways into the popular romance genre, despite criticism that it still, in many ways, participates in patriarchal customs and belief systems. This is true even for the most recent addition to the genre, “chick-lit,” as its acceptance of social equality for men and women as a matter of course indicates the recent trend towards a feminism, often called third wave feminism, that purports to be more inclusive and less based on the victimization of women by men, and because it includes an ending in a utopian reality that explicitly does not include heterosexual marriage. I would argue, however, that not only have feminist elements been adopted by romance novels as a reflection of changing gender constructions in our society, but that romance novels have actually participated in these social transformations by offering women readers a utopian alternative to their unsatisfying realities.

What is also interesting, however, is how some of these characterizations attempt to blend two contradictory ideological and theoretical approaches to gender performance. The creation of heroes and heroines who perform in unconventional ways that are traditionally attributed in our social system to the opposite sex generates an impression of androgyny, especially since the shift in point of view has allowed authors to experiment with androgynous narratives as well. However, the continued adherence to major concepts of cultural feminism, including goddess worship and the unique experiences of women, is in direct opposition to a theory of androgyny. Thus, a paradoxical merger of essentialism and androgyny is forged in a confusing reflection of and engagement with the ‘material conditions’ of the women’s movement and social expectations of gender

performances as they have altered over the past several decades. It is almost as if ‘scraps’ of feminist ideologies litter the texts in a hodgepodge of interpretations of gender performance that may actually be an example of the “hybrid” narrative that Propp describes earlier—in which “The old continues to exist with the new, either parallel to it or combining with it to bring forth several associations of a hybrid nature which are neither possible in nature or history” (qtd. in de Lauretis 114). This “hybrid” text, with its many contradictions in ideology, may very well characterize the confusion of many women because of the multiplicities evident in the notion of feminism itself, and its own difficulties in settling on an ideology that is able to incorporate the diverse experiences and needs of women of different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds.

A Community of Readers

This final ingredient in the romance industry, a community of readers, has become increasingly influential over the past three decades; Radway noted in 1984, “through romance reading the Smithton women are providing themselves with another kind of female community capable of rendering the so desperately needed affective support” (96). She goes on to add that although “this community seems not to operate on an immediate local level [...] there are signs, both in Smithton and nationally, that romance readers are learning the pleasures of regular discussions of books with other women” (96). Today, the *Romantic Times Bookclub Magazine* and its accompanying website, geared primarily towards romance readers, help to meet this need and include industry gossip, book reviews, biographical information about favorite authors, and a yearly convention; eHarlequin, a website established by the publisher of the same name,

is similarly designed and promoted. A large number of web communities, including chat rooms and web rings like www.likesbooks.com, have been established to bring romance readers and writers together. Finally, the RWA is an organization for current and would-be authors of romance novels. Touting a membership of over 9,000, the organization publishes a monthly magazine as well as provides a framework for a network of smaller regional communities that all gather once a year at a single major conference.

I was forcibly reminded of the community aspect of the popular romance recently when I began the research for this study. When I visited the library on the University of North Dakota campus to do research, the reference librarian who assisted me, upon learning of my topic, became quite animated and proved to be very knowledgeable on the subject. She confessed that she was a member of RWA and had been published within the popular romance genre, and she has since proven to be a valuable resource and a close friend. A few weeks later, while searching for novels written by Nora Roberts at another local library, the librarian excitedly informed me that a Nora Roberts reading group was being formed in my community and invited me to participate. Each time I have subsequently visited the library, she has had new titles ready for me to check out and has also proved to be a valuable resource throughout my work on this topic.

CHAPTER II

A MODERN DAY FAIRYTALE: EARLY MASS-MARKET ROMANCE NOVELS

Introduction

The narrow formula of the early mass-market romance novel lends itself to a great deal of varied criticisms. The close relationship it shares with its earlier, more literary counterparts like novels from Samuel Richardson, Jane Austen, and the Bronte sisters, as well as with the Gothic novels of the nineteenth century, invites a number of comparisons—in which, of course, the popular romance novel tends to come off badly. Like many of its literary predecessors, the formulaic structure of these novels is fairly predictable: young, poor, and heartbreakingly beautiful heroine meets older, rich, powerful, and handsome hero; she is incredibly naïve and childishly rebellious, he is startlingly brutal; she, over time, begins to regard his obduracy as strength, and he falls in love with her simplicity; in the end, he is—quite often literally—brought to his knees by his love for her, and she, in her newfound maturity and basking in the light of her feminine power, gives up her job, her life, her goals for something infinitely better—marriage to the hero. In a transformation that one might imagine would be similar to a hero's metamorphosis from the likeness of Charlotte Bronte's Heathcliff to that of the crippled Rochester at the conclusion of *Jane Eyre*, the hero swings from behaving like an 'insufferable brute' in the beginning of the novel to acting like a love-struck calf in the

end. All of those nasty things he said and all of those times he forced himself upon the heroine, he explains in the end, were due to his overwhelming—crippling, even—love for the heroine.

It is thus the formula in particular that has drawn the most significant criticism of these novels: scholars have explored the heroine's positioning within the early mass-market romance novel's particular structure, comparing it to the social norms of patriarchy, and have therefore criticized the hero's obvious position of power over the heroine, evidenced by his status, wealth, and sexual experience and her corresponding lack thereof. His verbal and sometimes physical abuse of the heroine, the latter of which is often expressed in terms of sexual assault, has drawn the attention of numerous scholars as they explore the possible definitions and implications of rape and brutality within these texts.

However, as mentioned previously, popular romance critics have also pinpointed specific elements of these early novels that show evidence of resistance to the same patriarchal attitudes and conditions that the formula appears to embrace—most significantly, the revenge theory, developed most fully by Tania Modleski, which analyzes the manner in which the alpha male hero is brought to his knees by the most innocent and naïve of heroines, but additionally, the theory introduced by Janice Radway that explores the added resistance that female romance readers express through the very act of reading—both because such an act absents her from the home and family and because her choice of reading materials is disparaged by men and society in general—and yet, she still reads.

However, it is precisely the formula of the early mass-market romance novel, as further analysis will show, that illustrates its fairytale-like structure; the “good” heroine represents innocence, virtue, emotional naiveté, and justice, while the “evil” hero—who also performs as the villain in these novels—represents knowledge, experience, the rational or instrumental, and the abuse of power. The ensuing battle between the two results in a compromise of sorts—a utopia that incorporates her emotionality and his power, as is reflected in the hero’s eventual admission that his love for the heroine has become the most powerful force in his life and, through his offer of marriage, the hero tacitly agrees that his future use of power will be tempered with an awareness of the superior value of the affective. If the heroine must give up her independence to achieve this utopia, it is simply part of the compromise.

The battle between the two that is articulated throughout the text is a response to the very real conflict within the historical moment in which these novels were produced, but also the manner in which they were marketed and consumed. As mentioned previously, Harlequin targeted a very specific audience and then, after a deep and thorough market analysis, produced the text and formula of the early mass-market romance novel. It was potential readers, therefore, who designed this text, and as subsequent reader impact on the genre has shown, it is the romance reader who continues to determine the formulaic elements of the contemporary erotic romance novel, as well.

Thus, the resistance articulated in these novels is the reader’s own as is the contradictory conformity to conventional social norms. The existence of these divergent ideologies in a text that ends so predictably and that communicates so clearly a utopian

desire for a better life is evidence of its potential performance as a transformative text; one that, according to both Vladimir Propp's and Frederic Jameson's theoretical analyses, demonstrates the existence of two opposing forces clashing and grappling with one another in a specific moment in history.

According to Propp's paradigm, as mentioned previously, these texts contain "hybrid" concepts or ideas in which the old and new co-exist, especially when the two social forms, such as matriarchy and patriarchy, contradict one another. At a specific historical moment, and reflected in the texts produced during that moment, a "hybrid" form exists that may appear impossible; it embraces both contradictory ideas simultaneously: "The old continues to exist with the new, either parallel to it or combining with it to bring forth several associations of a hybrid nature which are neither possible in nature or history" (qtd. in de Lauretis 114). Thus, the text performs as a dialogue of sorts between two warring ideologies, producing utopias for the reader that attempt to assimilate these two contradictions into a cohesive whole.

This attempt at assimilation is very similar to the compromise described by Jameson as evident in the utopian ideal produced in a text when two "modes of production" meet in a discordant historical moment; he asserts, "the resolution of the narrative [...] cannot dramatize the triumph of either force over the other one [...] but must produce a compromise in which everything finds its proper place again" (149). Thus, the formula of the early mass-market romance novel is fraught with forms and functions that beg for a deeper analysis, especially from a diachronic perspective. By re-examining these texts through the lens of a particular moment within a greater historical

context, we can examine the social contradictions evident at that time, and thus the ways in which social constructions of that particular era influenced popular romance narratives, as well as the ways these narratives participated in the evolving social ideas and gender performances of that time.

Abuse or Erotica?

One element of popular romance texts written during the 1970s and 80s that many critics found disturbing, for instance, are the images of the erotic and sexuality in the early romance, in which “male sexuality is presented [...] as compelling, often brutal, violent, and certainly dark” (Humm 7). Modleski explores this concept in depth and concludes that the heroes are “asserting their masculine superiority in the same ways men often do in real life: they treat the woman as a joke, appraise her as an object, and give her less attention than they give their automobiles” (*Loving With A Vengeance* 40). She further postulates, “Male brutality comes to be seen as a manifestation not of contempt, but of love” (*Loving With A Vengeance* 41). Janice Radway, in her study, *Reading the Romance: Women, patriarchy, and popular culture*, concurs, arguing that this characterization of male brutality as an expression of love can give readers an unrealistic idea that they “know how to read male behavior correctly,” and that the reader can therefore assume that “her spouse, like the hero, actually loves her deeply, though he may not express it as she might wish” (215).

The erotic scenes in early mass-market romance novels, for example, commonly describe sexually aggressive heroes who “savagely ravage” the innocent and virtuous heroine, who, as a matter of course, initially resists and often capitulates to his seduction

in a whirl of emotions and physical desire that she does not possess the experience or knowledge to understand. Radway, in fact, describes a number of such scenes, the harshest of which—primarily those involving gang rape, lesbian experimentation, or multiple partners—she describes as “failed romances,” due to the aversion of the readers in her study to novels containing scenes of this nature. More acceptable scenes, however, such as those included in a novel written by Nora Roberts in 1983, *Tonight and Always*, follow a pattern that appears to undermine the heroine’s power—both over the hero and herself:

His mouth came to hers. It was not the kiss she had expected from him. It was hungry and possessive and demanded a complete, unquestioned response. For a moment she resisted it. Her mind was set firmly against surrendering. But her body began to heat. She heard herself moan as she drew him closer. (24)

Another scene—essentially a rape scene—in the same novel portrays the hero as more aggressive, even violent, but in ways that were still evidently within the boundaries considered acceptable by romance readers of that era, judging by the novel’s established popularity at the time:

‘Damn you.’ He shook her again, nearly lifting her off her feet. [...]
‘How can I believe anything you say? [...] Look at me.’
He took her hair and pulled her head back. [...]
‘Jordan, you’ve had too much to drink.’ Her voice was amazingly calm now. ‘And you’re hurting me. I want you to go.’

‘You said you loved me.’

Kasey swallowed and straightened. ‘I changed my mind.’ She watched the color drain from his face. [...]

‘Bitch.’ He whispered the word as he dragged her against him. ‘I’ll go when I’m finished. We still have a date.’

‘No.’ She struggled against him in quick panic. ‘No, Jordan.’

‘We’ll finish what you started,’ he told her. ‘Here. Now.’

And his mouth was on hers, cutting off her protest. Kasey pushed against him, wild with fear. Would even this be taken from her—the memories of the joy of loving him, being loved by him? He was dragging her toward the bed, and she fought, but he was strong and senseless with rage. *What are we doing to each other?* Her mind dimmed as he ripped the shirt from her shoulders. His hands were everywhere, pulling, tearing her clothes as she struggled against him. The memory of Beatrice’s calm, cool face floated behind her eyes. *I won’t let you do this to us.* Kasey stopped struggling. Under Jordan’s mouth, hers softened and surrendered. *I can give you this,* she told him silently and felt her panic subside. *One last night.* She hasn’t taken it from us, after all. She stopped thinking and let herself love. (146-147)

Interestingly enough, the heroine, Kasey, does not question the hero’s love for her in spite of his violent attack, and acts in a way that seems to support Modleski’s and Radway’s arguments that these kinds of scenes portray how the heroine, though not

treated in the way she would ostensibly prefer, recognizes the hero's violence as a sign or measure of the depth of his love. The heroine here, in finally submitting to the rape by the hero, appears to view herself as a sort of martyr for the sake of their love—a disturbing precedent, to be sure. She forgives the hero more easily than he forgives himself. Later in the novel, when he professes shame and guilt for his actions, Kasey reassures him:

‘Jordan.’ She waited until he turned to face her again. ‘What happened that night was a long way from rape. I could have stopped you or fought you all the way. You know I didn’t.’ (156)

While the definition of rape in real life may not always be unambiguous, it would of course be absurd to assert that rape isn't rape because the victim doesn't physically struggle against her attacker, because she has previously consented to have sex with her attacker, or because the victim is intimately involved with her attacker.

On the other hand, as I will momentarily establish, readers of early mass-market romance novels recognize that these stories are not true; they are fairy tales. Thus, Radway's and Modleski's criticisms are somewhat misconceived. Joanne Hollows warns, in fact, that one problem with past feminist approaches to these texts is that it isn't always recognized that

the ways in which women read romance texts cannot be deduced from the text alone, nor can the meaning of the activity. [...] This meant that critics failed to understand the importance and pleasures of romance as fantasy. It may be that fiction as fantasy allows 'the explorations and productions

of desires which may be in excess of the socially possible or acceptable.’

(quoting Light 73)

Jayne Ann Krentz, in “Trying to Tame the Romance,” further contends that “aggressive seduction” occurs in multiple genres and that to single out the romance novel is disingenuous (109-110). She states, “It would seem to be more accurate and more honest simply to acknowledge that the fantasy of being aggressively seduced within the safe, controlled environment of a work of fiction is a popular one shared by men and women alike” (110), and further notes that, in romance novels,

this fantasy often takes on a complex and fascinating twist. Through the use of the male viewpoint, a technique often employed either directly or indirectly, the reader is allowed to experience the seduction from the hero’s viewpoint as well as that of the heroine. The reader gets to enjoy the fantasy of being *simultaneously* the one who seduces and the one who is seduced. (110)

Hollows asserts that Michel Foucault’s claim that “sexuality is ‘produced’ through discourse” (74) is applicable here, and points out that “from such a position, discourses of sexuality are not a power which ‘represses’ a ‘natural’ sexuality but instead produce effects of power which organize and produce what sexuality is in specific historical and geographical contexts” (74). Thus, the power dynamics expressed in early mass-market romance novels through these sometimes brutal love scenes reflect a specific historical context by producing a “discourse of sexuality” that is relevant to the power-struggle

romance readers were engaged in at that particular historical moment, but one that is also distinctive for various readers.

Carol Thurston, in *The Romance Revolution*, asserts that romance readers “consciously perceive these novels as erotica and said that they use them for sexual information and ideas, to create a receptive-to-sex state of mind, and even to achieve arousal,” (10) and according to Hollows, the “sexual pleasures of the romance are as much a product of the way in which the text is read as a product of the text itself. [...] Debates [about the various ways erotica is interpreted or decoded by romance readers] are useful because they begin to break down the opposition between romance and sexuality” (85). Therefore, although the readers in Radway’s study denied that romance novels performed as pornography for women, there are other readers who evidently use them in that way.

The Revenge Theory and Resistance

Further, while the early mass-market romance, as Maggie Humm asserts, may not always “overtly question the myth of male superiority or the primacy of heterosexual relationships,” scholars recognize that these romances do contain a subversive element that contradicts the contention that early romance novels are only passive representations of gender relations in a patriarchal society (132). Cohn, for instance, asserts, “Power and gender relations...are clearly addressed in the subtext of romance fictions,” but further clarifies that “authority is challenged only at the deepest levels of romance” (7, 5).

Modleski agrees:

Once it becomes clear how much of women's anger and hostility is reflected in (albeit allayed by) these seemingly simple 'love stories,' all notions about women 'cherishing the chains of their bondage' become untenable. (47)

This subtext is the enactment of a revenge fantasy, in which heroines actually use their positions in the patriarchal structure to conquer the heroes at the end of the novel. Susan Phillips summarizes the revenge fantasy concept when she explains "all his muscle, wealth, and authority are useless against her courage, intelligence, generosity...by the end of the book, the heroine has brought him under her control in a way women can seldom control men in the real world" (57-58). She reasons that the fantasy can only be effective if the hero is a 'domineering' or alpha male, because it creates an even greater image of empowerment—despite the heroine's supposed inferiority in education, physical strength, and granted power, she conquers him completely (56). Modleski hypothesizes that "A great deal of our satisfaction in reading these novels comes [...] from the elements of a revenge fantasy, from our conviction that the woman is bringing the man to his knees and that all the while he is being so hateful, he is internally groveling, groveling, groveling" (45). The conclusion to Roberts' award-winning *Matter of Choice*, published in 1984, clearly supports this theory:

'Damn you, can't you see anything?' Infuriated, he grabbed her shoulders. 'I don't want you.'

'Try again,' she suggested.

He opened his mouth, then relieved his frustration by shaking her.
'You've no right, no right to get inside my head this way. I want you out.
Once and for all I want you out!'

'Slade,' she said quietly, 'why don't you stop hating it so much and give
in? I'm not going anywhere.'

How his hands found their way into her hair, he didn't know. But they
were sunk deep, and so was he. Struggling all the way, he gave in. 'I love
you, damn it. I'd like to choke you for it.' His eyes grew dark and
stormy. 'You worked on me,' he accused as she gazed up at him, calm
and composed. 'Right from the beginning you worked on me until I can't
function without you.' [...] 'I need you.' (346-347)

This scene is a clear example of why there is such impetus behind the revenge theory: the
hero, Slade, is openly reluctant, but is brought to his knees by his overwhelming love for
the heroine and is forced by his own needs to confess it to her while she stands before
him, calm, complacent, and clearly in control. Despite his physical (grabbing her
shoulders, shaking her, thrusting his hands into her hair) and mental resistance, Jessica,
the heroine, 'conquers him completely,' and with little apparent effort.

Real men, however, don't slay dragons, and Phillips' argument that "women
seldom control men in the real world" necessitates the assumption that all or most men
"in the real world" are alpha males similar to the heroes in romance novels, which simply
isn't so. Thus, while the revenge fantasy of conquering the alpha male within the early
mass-market romance is empowering, it doesn't necessarily express a power women do

not already possess to some extent in the real world, and instead perhaps illustrates a radical version of a power women already own within the institution of heterosexual marriage. It would be specious, after all, to assert that women in the real world do not use their positions within the patriarchal structure to wield power over men.

It is thus important to note that Radway, while recognizing the dissatisfaction with patriarchal standards expressed in the revenge theory, also says, “at the same time that the romantic fantasy proclaims a woman’s power to re-create man in a mold she has fashioned, it also covertly establishes her guilt or responsibility for those who remain unchanged” (128). She does not go so far as to acknowledge, however, that if this assertion is true, then the “romantic fantasy” would also apparently “covertly establish” the romance reader’s responsibility for those who do change! The potential to “re-create man in a mold she has fashioned” gives the romance fantasy strong momentum, and to realize that power, even in an imaginary sense within the text itself, produces its own utopia for the reader, especially since, as has already been established by Radway and other critics, it is evident that romance readers of this era were unhappy with the status quo. Radway also concludes from her study, for instance, that the simple act of reading the romance is an expression against patriarchal limitations, because it “can be characterized by the expression of repressed emotions deriving from dissatisfaction with the status quo and a utopian longing for a better life” (221).

Her conclusions are supported by a more recent study conducted by Karen Mitchell and summarized in an article entitled “Ever After: Reading the Women Who Read (and Re-Write) Romances”: “Part of the [reader’s] pleasure lies in the knowledge

that men disapprove of their taste and their defiant assertion of their right to their own pleasure in the face of masculine disapproval” (57). She further concurs with Radway’s assertions by proposing, “readers recognize ‘romance bashing’ by men as a power play and often respond with gleeful defiance” (58). A major element of this defiance is in the act of escapism itself, which Radway calls both ‘combative’ and ‘compensatory’:

It is combative in the sense that it enables them to refuse the other-directed social role prescribed for them by their position within the institution of marriage [...] Their activity is compensatory [...] in that it permits them to focus on themselves and to carve out a solitary space within an arena where their self-interest is usually identified with the interest of others and where they are defined as a public resource to be mined at will by the family. (211)

Diana Palmer, a romance author who was perhaps as popular at her peak as is Nora Roberts today, also agrees with Radway on this point, maintaining that reading the romance allows readers “to escape the normal cares and woes of life by returning in dreams to a time less filled with responsibilities. Romances allow them to experience all this and more without risking what they already have” (156). On the other hand, as mentioned previously, the power to ‘re-create’ others “in a mold she has fashioned” is a potent experience for the romance reader; while she may be “mined [...] by the family” within her reality, she also holds a position of compelling influence, and has the potential power to ‘mold’ or shape the persons they become—thus, the “other-directed social role prescribed for them by their position within the institution of marriage” that Radway

refers to may not be as powerless as she assumes, and the romance fantasy illustrated in these narratives may thus be simultaneously participatory and combative.

During the period when these early, traditional romances were popular, second wave feminism was at its peak, a phase of the feminist movement often characterized by its anger and strong resentment of the socialized and institutionalized oppression of women. The underlying or subverted feminist ideology of the romance novel of that time, then, may have been, in many ways, an expression of that anger and resentment, but instead of deriving directly from the informed perspective of the feminist intellectual, this ideology was a version that was adapted for and by the average woman existing deeply within that patriarchal structure. According to Radway and her contemporaries, therefore, women who read these early mass-market romances were resisting the patriarchy on a certain, deeper level, and were expressing, through their choice of reading material their dissatisfaction with the societal construct in a somewhat obscure reflection of the feminist ideologies of their time. At the same time, to underestimate the position of power that women actually hold within the institution of marriage and the family would be insular, and a study of the magnitude that Jameson describes, which includes “the semantic raw materials of social life and language” and “the historicity of structures of feeling and perception and ultimately of bodily experience” must recognize the authenticity of this power, even if it is covert.

The Fairytale

Both literary romance and popular, formulaic fiction, according to Northrop Frye, have their roots in myth and folktale. Consistent with this line of reasoning, popular

romance novels are based on the simplest structure of all: the fairy tale. In spite of establishing this distinction, however, and as I have noted earlier, throughout this study various critics may refer to the early mass-market romance novel as myth, fairytale, and/or fantasy interchangeably, since, as Maria Nikolajeva points out in “Fairy Tale and Fantasy: from archaic to postmodern,” the three are “often treated together in critical works” (April 2003). Nikolajeva, however, in her quest to establish clear distinctions among the terms, points out that “traditional fairy tales generally strive to preserve the story as close to its original version as possible, even though individual storytellers may convey a personal touch, and each version reflects its own time and society” (April 2003). Early mass-market romance novels or those popularized during the 1960s and 70s by Harlequin Enterprises fit this definition: using a specific fairy tale structure, these novels, although the surface plots might deviate somewhat to maintain the reader’s interest, stay quite close to a single, established, formulaic guideline, here illustrated by Patricia Koski, Lori Holyfield, and Marcella Thompson in “Romance Novels as Women’s Myths”:

1) a central female figure who finds herself falling in love with a 2) male with whom 3) love is forbidden. The heroine finds a way to overcome the obstacles in the path of love and, in so doing, always 4) forces the male to expose and act on his vulnerable emotional side. The two then 5) find a way to live happily ever after. (220)

In contrast, according to Nikolajeva, “fantasy literature is a conscious creation, where authors choose the form that suits them best for their particular purposes” (April 2003).

She does warn, however, “most fantasy novels have many similarities to fairy tales,” as they “have inherited the fairy tale system of characters, delineated by Vladimir Propp and his followers: hero/subject, princess/object, helper, giver, antagonist” (April 2003). Still, she asserts, there are other qualities that help to determine whether a text fits one model or the other: “Fantasy rarely ends in marriage and enthronement; in contemporary philosophical and ethical fantasy it is usually a matter of spiritual maturation” (April 2003). Early mass-market romance novels always, by definition and without exception, end in betrothal or marriage and are often criticized because by doing so, it is argued, they preserve the status quo instead of reflecting and encouraging personal spiritual growth. Maggie Humm notes, for instance, that “second wave feminists would approve a text where closure [...] is not into romance but into independent thinking” (8), implying that early mass-market romance novels do not reflect “spiritual maturation,” but instead, because “closure” is “into romance” in these novels, they help to maintain women’s passivity.

According to Nikolajeva, “fantasy also allows much freedom and experimentation with gender transgression”; it’s well established that early mass-market romance novels do not. In fact, these novels were constructed within a strict formula with guidelines established by the publisher after a vigorous and thorough analysis of the market, and gender roles are definitively established within; the heroes are ‘alpha’ males and are masculinized accordingly, while the heroines are, superficially at least, the passive objects in the text. Further, Nikolajeva argues, “the eternity of the fairy-tale time, expressed in the final formula ‘lived happily ever after,’ is alien to fantasy” (April 2003),

but is understood—even essential—within the context of the early mass-market romance novel.

The final—and most important—element that Nikolajeva uses to distinguish fairy tale from fantasy is “the epistemology of fairy tales and fantasy, the matter of belief and the ‘suspension of belief.’ The most profound difference,” she claims, “is [...] the position of the reader/listener toward what is narrated. In traditional fairy tales, taking place [...] in a clearly detached timespace [e.g. ‘Once upon a time...’], readers are not supposed to believe in the story” (April 2003). Even Vladimir Propp, she asserts, “maintains that the addressee of a fairy tale knows that the story is not true” (April 2003).

In *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, a collection of essays written by romance writers and edited by Jayne Ann Krentz, Doreen Owens-Malek asserts, “We may want a caring, sensitive modern man in our lives, but we want a swaggering rough-hewn, mythic man in our books” (“Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know” 75). In the same anthology, Susan Elizabeth Phillips points out that the typical romance hero “is the sort of guy I would never permit in my real life,” a man who, she argues, “any intelligent woman would throw out the door in ten minutes flat” (56). So early mass-market romance readers may not, as Modleski has alleged, have possessed “ideological confusion about male sexuality and male violence” (*Loving With A Vengeance* 43) or have been taken in by “sexual desire disguised as the intention to dominate and hurt” (*Loving With A Vengeance*, 43); instead, they were aware that the stories were not true and enjoyed these novels because they responded to the contradictions inherent in the cultural conflicts of a specific historical moment. Ironically, in an article written many

years after her study, *Loving With a Vengeance*, Tania Modleski admits that while she had, at one time, been fascinated—her term is “addicted”—by the alpha male hero of the early mass-market romance novel, she confesses, “I was always at some level aware that if a boy said something to me like ‘I won’t be answerable for the consequences,’ I would consider him the biggest creep on earth” (“My Life as a Romance Reader” 19).

Applying Propp’s Structure

Ascertaining the early mass-market romance novel’s performance as a “bourgeois fairytale,” as mentioned earlier in this study, is thus vital to the purpose of recognizing and understanding how it engages with the cultural moment within which it was constructed. Doing so allows us to determine how the texts actually influence social constructions of heterosexual relationships and how female romance readers perceive their own participation in those relationships, as well as how the resulting utopias reflect ways in which the romance reader is actively experimenting with new constructions of those relationships through her consumerism. However, establishing these texts as fairytales is a complex process; it involves not only proving that they function the same way, in a cultural context, as the fairytale but also illustrating how the functions, forms, and *dramatis personae* of the early mass-market romance mimic those of the fairytale.

Thus, the use of Vladimir Propp’s paradigm for “*Dramatis Personae*” in *Morphology of the Folktale* to develop this relationship in greater detail will give the theory greater weight. He describes the “two-fold” quality of the tale as “its amazing multiformity, picturesqueness, and color, and on the other hand, its no less striking uniformity, its repetition,” (21) and establishes a basic system for classifying and

identifying various tales, drawing from Russian fairy tales to illustrate specific functions and conventions. The early mass-market romance novel, with its strict conventions and codes, does contain this “uniformity,” but there is also evidence of multiformity, as well; the existence of multiple sub-genres within the romance industry, including paranormal, gothic, historical, and suspense, among others, allows for a broad readership and a diversity of texts. I have selected one of the early romance novels by Roberts mentioned previously, *A Matter of Choice*, as a sample text, and will analyze the text according to the thirty-one functions designated by Propp as belonging to the fairy tale.

The first function, “One Of The Members Of A Family Absents Himself From Home,” (26) is performed by the hero, Slade, when he is instructed by the police commissioner to go to Jessica’s home in Connecticut to protect her from whomever is using her antique shop as a cover for a smuggling operation. The second function (“An Interdiction Is Addressed To The Hero”) is understood at that time: to prevent Jessica’s shop from being used as a cover any longer (27). This “Interdiction Is Violated” (27), function three, when a Queen Anne desk is smuggled in under both Jessica’s and Slade’s noses, at which time Jessica takes the desk home with her for her personal use. The fourth function, “The Villain Makes An Attempt At Reconnaissance” (28), occurs when Chambers, one of our villains and a regular customer of Jessica’s, arrives at the shop just after the delivery to locate and purchase the desk. He is foiled, of course, by the fact that the desk is absent and calls Villain #2, Michael, who is Jessica’s buyer, to give him this information; Michael immediately goes to Jessica’s home, where he discovers the desk. Both of these actions perform to fulfill function five, which states, “The Villain Receives

Information About His Victim” (28). Function six, “The Villain Attempts To Deceive His Victim In Order To Take Possession Of Him Or His Belongings” (29), is performed by Michael, who attempts to deceive Jessica about his intentions by attempting to seduce her and proposing marriage. Not only does he gain Jessica’s trust but also greater access to Jessica’s home, where the desk is located, and he uses this right of entry to attempt to go through the desk and retrieve the smuggled diamonds. Jessica, now the victim, “Submits to Deception And Thereby Unwittingly Helps [her] Enemy” (30) when she refuses to believe Slade’s suspicions concerning Michael and instead continues to trust him enough to give him access to both the shop and her home. One of the eighth functions, “One Member Of A Family Either Lacks Something Or Desires To Have Something” (35), is fulfilled by Slade, who lacks the ability to express emotional need coherently or civilly, and who wants, but lacks, a physical and emotional relationship with Jessica, but because they come from different backgrounds—hers wealthy, his poor—he doesn’t believe he has the right to pursue her.

In function nine, a “Misfortune Or Lack Is Made Known” (36), which occurs when Slade recognizes his almost uncontrollable desire for Jessica; the growing attraction between the two of them creates progressively increasing tension between them, especially as Slade, but not Jessica, adamantly works to resist the attraction. Function eleven is cited as “The Hero Leaves Home” (39), and Slade leaves with Jessica, losing the protection of the house for a long walk on the beach. During the walk, they fall into a passionate embrace, which is interrupted when “The Hero Is Tested, Interrogated, Attacked, Etc., Which Prepares The Way For His Receiving Either A Magical Agent Or

Helper” (39) as a sniper takes shots at the couple, resulting in Slade’s decision to use the gun he had previously kept hidden from Jessica. After saving both of their lives with his quick action, Slade “Reacts To The Actions Of The Future Donor” (42) when David, a friend of Jessica’s, unwittingly gives Slade vital information about Michael’s actions and whereabouts. Slade “Acquires The Use of A Magical Agent” (43)—he grabs his gun—and takes off for the antique shop to prevent Michael and his partner from successfully smuggling the diamonds, which helps to fulfill function fifteen, “The Hero Is Transferred, Delivered, Or Led To The Whereabouts Of An Object Of Search” (50). Jessica discovers and confronts Michael, who she finds in her study with the destroyed desk and a hand full of smuggled diamonds. The next function, “The Hero And Villain Join In Direct Combat,” (51) is thus performed by Slade when he engages in combat with Chambers at the antique shop while the latter waits for Michael, who is waylaid by Jessica, to show up with the diamonds. After her confrontation with Michael, Jessica rushes out to the antique shop to find Slade and bumbles headlong into his standoff with Chambers. She subsequently rushes the villain and gets shot for her trouble. Slade uses her distraction to regain control of the situation, and “The Villain Is Defeated” (53).

“The Hero Returns” (55) to New York, despite the fact that Jessica obviously returns his feelings [“The Initial Lack Or Misfortune Is Liquidated” (53)], because he believes that he failed in his quest to adequately protect Jessica and her business from the smugglers. Although they had been captured, Jessica had been shot in the process, and Slade blames himself. He performs the role of the false-hero when he confronts the commissioner with his supposed failure, as function twenty-four states, “The False Hero

Presents Unfounded Claims” (60), and the commissioner responds by performing function twenty-five, in which “A Difficult Task Is Proposed To The Hero” (60) by challenging Slade to return to Connecticut to face Jessica and his feelings for her. “The Task Is Resolved” (62) when Slade confronts Jessica and she convinces him that he had saved her life at least once, was not responsible for her getting shot, and that they belong together in spite of any perceived differences. Thus, “The False Hero [...] is exposed” (62), “The Villain[s] [are] Punished” (63) when Michael and Chambers are sent to prison, and “The Hero Is Married And Ascends The Throne” (63). Slade, an aspiring writer as well as a cop, is rewarded with both Jessica and a publishing contract.

Deeper Structures

The ease in which this text fits Propp’s paradigm is thus undeniably persuasive, but this analysis is only of the most superficial surface structure of the novel. Romance writers and readers have often referred to the “code” of the romance novel, and this “code,” or deep structure, of the early mass-market romance novels fits the paradigm of a fairytale as well, but in a very different way. The deep structure is the story of the relationship—the romantic elements of the novel—and while in the early mass-market romance, the hero may perform the functions of the hero in the surface structure, the heroine performs the functions of the hero at a much deeper level. Koski, et al. illustrate:

In the romance novel, the heroine faces the adventure of falling in love with a seemingly unavailable male. She typically enters this adventure unwillingly. The dark force guarding the entrance to the arena of the adventure is whatever is keeping the man and the woman apart. The

journey through the obstacles in their path leads to their supreme ordeal of having to sort through the issues facing them. This is often a searing confrontation with a moral dilemma. The reward is their romantic joining.
(220)

In *A Matter of Choice*, Slade is the unavailable male; he is resistant and sullen, suspicious of those around him. He immediately assumes everyone has ulterior motives, including Jessica. While she is open and friendly, Jessica is unwilling, as well; the feelings that Slade evokes in her are daunting:

Alone, Jessica allowed herself a long, uneasy breath. That was not a man a woman should lose control with, she warned herself. He wouldn't be gentle, or particularly kind. She placed the flat of her palm on her chest as if to relieve the pressure that lingered there. It's the way he looks at me, Jessica decided, as if he could see what I'm thinking. She ran an unsteady hand through her hair. I don't even know what I'm thinking when he looks at me, so how could he? And yet...and yet her pulse was still racing. (197-98)

The "dark force guarding the entrance to the arena" isn't just about the bad guys who are using Jessica's store for a smuggling operation; the "dark force" is also Slade's inability to open up to Jessica, his fear that he isn't good enough for her because of his background, and his failure to successfully protect her. According to Krentz:

The hero in a romance is the most important challenge the heroine must face and conquer. The hero is her real problem in the book, not whatever

trendy issue or daring adventure is going on in the subplot. [...] The hero must be part villain or else he won't be much of a challenge for a strong woman. (108-109)

The "journey through the obstacles," then, is Slade's gradual recognition of himself as worthy—the publication of his first novel helps in this regard, as does Jessica's love, admiration, and insistence that he is worthy. Faced with the reality of her love and acceptance, he isn't quite strong enough to deny them both happiness, so he 'surrenders' to the affective realm. Jessica conquers the "dark force"—which Koski, et al. would argue is Slade's rational side—and they are rewarded with love. They marry, and of course, live happily ever after...

Happy Endings

The culmination of the romance in marriage is the element of formulaic romance novels that is most vocally condemned by feminist critics; yet this element, along with the concept of the happy ending as a whole, has remained fairly consistent over time and in various categories and sub-categories of the genre. Cohn, for instance, declares, "the heroine of contemporary romance can no longer gain power independently; instead, returning to an older convention, she must acquire wealth and status through marriage" (95). Penelope Williamson, however, a romance writer, perceives the texts differently, asserting that the ending of the romance novel in marriage simply expresses the idea that the heroine, "secure in the knowledge that she could, if she had to, take care of herself, chooses to share her life with a man who is her equal, and who recognizes her as such" (129). It is true that a number of early mass-market romance novels conclude with the

heroine sacrificing her career for marriage and a family; however, a notable number end with the heroine expressing her intention or desire to continue working after marriage, a clear articulation of the growing awareness of feminist ideologies in society as a whole during this era.

The happy endings of these novels, however, can be evaluated in a number of theoretical and complex ways. In the most simplistic, perhaps, Mary Jo Putnam concludes that “gloom and doom are not inherently more realistic than happiness, for all lives cycle through ups and downs, good times and bad. A romance simply chooses to focus on the magic moment when two people are falling in love and the world is a place of infinite possibilities” (104).

Another theory is based on the idea that the hero of the romance novel is not a hero at all, but rather, the masculine part of the fragmented female self, and that the marriage or happy ending is in fact an integration of the inner self, with each novel culminating, essentially, in the romance reader’s reintegration into a whole person (Kinsale 39-40). Laura Kinsale elaborates:

Romances have happy endings and the hero never dies in them because literature as represented by the romance genre expresses integration, not fractionalization, of the self [...] Romance reflects the exploration and reconciliation of male elements within the female reader. (39-40)

Another critic, Linda Barlow, agrees with Kinsale:

The various elements contained in [romance novels] function as internal archetypes within the feminine psyche. This includes the hero, whom I

see not as the masculine object of feminine consciousness but as a significant aspect of feminine consciousness itself. (46)

However, the theory most popularly accepted by most scholars of romantic fiction, including Radway, is that the happy ending, as is true in fairytales, is one of the most essential ingredients of a romance novel because it induces hope for a better future. Radway alleges that romance readers “choose their romances carefully in an attempt to assure themselves of a reading experience that will make them feel happy and hold out the promise of a utopian bliss [...] that they do not want to relinquish as a conceptual possibility” (100). Putnam agrees: “A vital ingredient is the romantic spirit of optimism, a belief that life is improvable [...] The subliminal message is that one’s life can get better, a belief that is one of the bedrocks of American society” (99).

Conclusion

Frederic Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* suggests that such a ‘nostalgic’ or “Utopian harmony” comes from a place or text (like a romance or myth) where “the ideologeme of good and evil [are] felt as magical forces, [...] is to be found in a transitional moment in which two distinct modes of production, or moments of socioeconomic development, coexist” (148). In this case then, the “two distinct modes” were the growing conflict between patriarchal or capitalist traditions, including those of heterosexual marriage and conventional gender roles, and the resistance against them—in the form of the civil rights movement and the rise of second-wave feminism. Propp, too, according to Teresa de Lauretis, emphasizes the source of the fairy tale as a transitional historical moment, in which “plots do not directly ‘reflect’ a given social order, but rather

emerge out of the conflict, the contradictions, of different social orders as they succeed or replace one another" (*Alice Doesn't* 113).

According to this paradigm, the early mass-market romance novel, which casts rationality into the role of "evil" and emotionality into the role of "good," acts out the conflict between the institutionalized sexism of the 1970s and 80s at the very beginning of wider cultural awareness of the feminist movement. Jameson notes that the "antagonism is not yet articulated in terms of the struggle of social classes, so that its resolution can be projected in the form of a nostalgic (or less often, a Utopian) harmony" (148). This would be a viable assumption for the role of the early mass-market romance novel in the lives of those women who existed deeply within the patriarchy and its institutions at the outset of second wave feminism, especially since they were among those to whom the romance novel was specifically targeted, and thus who might have felt divided between their commitments to the traditions and conventions they were conditioned to conform to and their desire for power and recognition as women in the public sphere. Obviously, as Koski and her associates point out, "change cannot be done without trauma, and trauma is often felt at the individual level" (223). This trauma has been highlighted by the women's movement as a whole, and society's resistance to it, and, according to Koski and her colleagues, it is this trauma that generates the power, or resonance, of the romance novel because it is a reflection of that trauma, literally acted out, as the heroine forces the hero to leave the rational and public realm and enter an emotional and private utopia. The rational is associated with patriarchal and capitalist conventions, while the affective is similarly associated with matriarchal power. Thus, the

heroine must conquer the villainous or dangerous aspect of the romance hero because it (he) represents her oppression by capitalist and patriarchal forces. In her bourgeois existence, she is limited by social constraints to the role of helper or donor, but in the utopia of the romance novel, the villain is vanquished and she becomes the heroine—empowered, and in control of her own private, domestic sphere.

The early mass-market romance novels, according to this paradigm, essentially perform as women's fairy tales to reflect a utopian ideal of conventional heterosexual marriage and gender roles, but a potentially revolutionary one, in which the heroes are taught by the heroines to be as capable of emotional commitment and depth as the heroines. Koski and her colleagues elaborate: "The message is not, it is true, that women should become more self-fulfilled without men. However, the message is that men should take on additional responsibilities within the emotional realm—that *men*, not *women*, should change" (227). However, both the heroes and heroines have changed in these texts. The hero has taken on "additional responsibilities within the emotional realm," but the heroine has also become more knowledgeable, experienced, and sexual.

When read in the context of a transitional work, then, the early mass-market romance novel becomes a text that, as a cultural product, was attempting, in a specific social moment, to articulate the ideals of two conflicting ideologies in order to facilitate a compromise of sorts, to create a utopia that expressed hope for a better future by finding a resolution, however unrealistic, to the conflict at hand. Northrop Frye asserts, "If it is true, as the structuralists tell us, that every structural system includes a set of transformations, metamorphoses are the normal transformations of the structure of myth"

(105). This metamorphosis of the heroine from the weak, helpless object of patriarchal norms to the powerful subject of a (albeit still heterosexual) utopia, and of the hero from the authoritative, controlling alpha male to a humbled (but still powerful) male who recognizes the power of the affective realm, is what makes up the deepest structure of the early mass-market romance novel.

CHAPTER III

THE FAIRYTALE IN TRANSITION: CONTEMPORARY EROTIC ROMANCE

Introduction

The diegesis of the contemporary romance novel has much greater flexibility than that of its earlier counterparts. Even as Janice Radway, author of *Reading the Romance: Women, patriarchy, and popular culture*, was concluding her study in 1984, she began to see changes in the way the romance novel was structured, noting that “romances have begun to develop a slightly different, perhaps more ‘feminist’ orientation,” which is “usually most evident in the coding of characters who have become of late even more independent and intelligent in the case of heroines, gentler and more expressive in the case of heroes” (219-220).

This shift in orientation is reflected in nearly every aspect of the romance: the point-of-view has shifted from exclusively the heroine’s to a viewpoint that swings back and forth between the hero’s and heroine’s; the heroine has become less like a fictional character and more like a real woman, having physical blemishes and imperfections as opposed to possessing “smoldering eyes,” “creamy skin,” and “flowing tresses”; the heroine has become increasingly sexually experienced and generally has a healthy attitude towards her body and her desires, unlike many earlier heroines who were confused by their sexuality and who were nearly always portrayed as chaste and naive;

the erotic scenes have become much more explicit and include more heroines who are sexually aggressive instead of performing primarily as inexperienced, virginal objects of the hero's desire; and the heroines usually have careers instead of just a job, and almost always intend to continue working after marriage. The hero and heroine have shifted from stereotypical and binary roles to increasingly androgynous characterizations, creating a double protagonist that performs the functions of both hero and heroine, in addition to often performing other functions, such as donor, victim, princess, etc. It is also in the contemporary erotic romance novel that women's communities begin to play an increasingly important role, both inside and outside of the texts, as a vital part of the utopia romance novels create for their readers.

Creating Androgynous Narratives

The reason for these sweeping changes, according to Carol Thurston in *The Romance Revolution* is actually reader demand: "71% of readers surveyed in 1982 expressed a desire to see 'a well-developed hero point of view,' and by 1985 'mixed heroine-hero point-of-view was at the top of the list of the five most-wanted story attributes" (99). Readers, therefore, some of whom became the next crop of romance writers, began to use their power as consumers to demand a narrative perspective different from the one utilized by authors of the early mass-market romance; they wanted to know what the hero was thinking, feeling, and experiencing, and they evidently wanted his experience, to some extent, to mirror their own, even while he retained some semblance of culturally perceived masculinity. In effect, their desire was to diffuse the patriarchal-produced and widely accepted binaries of strength and knowledge as

masculine, and weakness and ignorance as feminine, perhaps because, as the age and experience of romance readers increased, they became progressively more uncomfortable with depictions they knew to be false. They wanted romance novels, a genre created by women for women, to reflect that knowledge; otherwise, the image of heterosexual love the novels presented was not just unrealistic, it was undesirable. Regardless of sub-genre, today nearly all contemporary romance novels contain the narrative structure of a developed point-of-view for both the hero and heroine.

Best selling romance author Nora Roberts, for instance, has experimented heavily with shifts in point-of-view since the mid 1980s, and her recently released paperback, *Midnight Bayou*, actually contains a hero, Declan, who was a female, Abigail, in a former life, and who must—as a contemporary male—emotionally and bodily re-experience the detailed, traumatic, and exclusively female experience of the birth of Abigail's child, as well as graphically brutal rape and strangulation, in order to posthumously solve her own murder. This plot construction actually enables the reader to shift in narrative point-of-view from Abigail, the first heroine (who is raped and murdered in 1899), to Declan, the hero (who is her contemporary reincarnation), and therefore simultaneously maintain both the hero's and heroine's points-of-view. Roberts sustains this character's multiple viewpoint for much of the novel, only occasionally shifting to the point-of-view of the contemporary heroine, Lena, Declan's love interest—who, interestingly enough, was also Lucian, Abigail's husband, in a previous life—and who re-experiences the feelings of betrayal after his wife's suspicious disappearance and re-enacts the cold rejection of Lucian's and Abigail's infant daughter. This creates a great amount of stress on the

modern-day couple's developing relationship, since Declan (as Abigail) is hurt, offended, and feels betrayed by Lucian's (as Lena) rejection of their child after s/he (Declan/Abigail) had been cruelly raped and murdered by Lucian's brother, Julian. The feelings from the past relationship bleed over into and affect the current relationship, causing a contemporary reversal of the male-as-aggressor/female-as-victim romantic plot structure, at least on one level.

What is most startling about the narrative style of this novel, however, is how Roberts manages to blend the thoughts of Declan and Abigail into a seamless narrative, until the reader is unsure who is thinking what:

He dreamed of storms and pain. Of fear and joys. Rain and wind lashed the windows, and the pain that whipped through him erupted in a sobbing scream. Sweat and tears poured down his face—her face. Her face, her body. His pain. The room was gold with the gaslight and the snap and simmer of the fire in the grate. And as that storm raged outside, another spun through her. Through him. Agony viced her belly with the next contraction. She was blind with it. Her cry against it was primal, and burned his throat with its passion. (302)

In this case, the two characters in the scene—Abigail and Declan—become one, as Declan experiences the physical pain and wonder of childbirth as both male and female simultaneously. In another scene, the reader begins with Declan and then realizes, as Lena approaches and interrupts his reverie, that he is actually thinking and acting as Abigail:

The grass was thick under his feet, and the heat of the sun poured over his face, beat down on his head despite the hat he wore as protection. The others were inside, but he'd wanted to look at the pond, at the lilies. He'd wanted to sit in the shade of the willow that danced over the water, and read. He liked the music of the birds, and didn't mind the heat so much. The heat was honest. The air inside the Hall was cold and false. It was heartbreaking to watch the house he loved rotting away from bitterness. He stopped at the edge of the pond, looking down at the green plates of the pads, the creamy white lilies that graced them. He watched a dragonfly whiz by, the sun glinting off of the wings so it was an iridescent blur. He heard the plop of a frog and the call of a cardinal. When he heard his name, he turned. And smiled as his beloved crossed the velvet lawn towards him. As long as they were together, he thought, as long as they loved, the Hall would stand.

'Declan. Declan.'

Alarmed, Lena gripped his arms and shook. [...] His eyes were open but glazed in a way that made her think he was looking through her and seeing something—someone else. (193)

What makes this type of narrative suspense possible, however, is Roberts' ability to create androgynous characters within androgynous narratives; if there were no pronouns to distinguish between male and female narratives, it would be nearly impossible to differentiate between the two throughout the novel, an impressive feat considering that

one is a nineteen-year-old female in 1899, and the other a thirty-five-year-old male in contemporary America.

Creating Androgynous Characters

An illustration of the transformation of characters in the contemporary erotic romance to increasingly androgynous individual, for instance, can be found in another of Roberts' novels, *Catherine and Amanda: The Calhoun Women*, where the gender confusion becomes even more pronounced:

Though the face was grimy and the dark hair cropped boyishly short, the body clad in greasy coveralls was decidedly feminine. Every curvy inch of it. Trent wasn't often thrown for a loss, but now he simply stood, staring as C.C. rose from the creeper and faced him, tapping a wrench against her palm. [...]

'Got a problem?' she asked him. C.C. was well aware that his gaze had drifted down from the neck of her coveralls to the cuffs and back again. She was used to it. But she didn't have to like it. [...]

Letting the breath out between her teeth, she tossed the wrench onto a workbench. 'Your oil and air filter needed to be changed. The timing was off and the carburetor needed some adjusting. You still need a lube job and your radiator should be flushed.'

'Will it run?'

'Yeah, it'll run.' [...]

She led the way through the door at the rear of the garage, into a narrow hallway that angled into a glass-walled office. It was cramped with a cluttered desk, thick parts catalogues, a half-full gumball machine and two wide swivel chairs. C.C. sat and, in the uncanny way of people who had heaps of papers on their desk, put her hand unerringly on her invoices.

(17)

In Roberts' novels, and in contemporary erotic romance novels in general, the characters' internal and external dialogues often shift between characteristics or thought patterns that are generally designated as either particularly masculine or feminine in our contemporary culture, creating a dynamic of androgyny that influences the readers' expectations of what might be considered masculine or feminine. Thurston discusses how in one survey, "Readers [...] perceive heroines and heroes in contemporary series romances as quite minimally sex-typed or sex-differentiated, in the sense that they exhibit similar expressive and instrumental traits" (99). Deborah Chappel, in an analysis of the works of LaVyrle Spencer—one of the pioneers of androgynous narratives and characters in the romance novel—states:

Often the view is the same; [Spencer's] heroes and heroines want the same things, suffer the same fears and inadequacies, and experience the same sensations, thus blurring the categories within which hero, heroine, and reader can move. The most intimate and loving moments between hero and heroine occur when they are able to move freely in and out of male and female roles. (*Paradoxa* 109)

Gradually, the domineering alpha male of the early mass-market romance has become more tender, and according to Radway, more “nurturing” (66). She asserts that even the women in her study in the early 1980s both consciously and unconsciously expressed the idea that “in ideal romances the hero is constructed androgynously” (13). She goes on to explain, “Although the women were clearly taken with his spectacularly masculine phallic power, in their voluntary comments and in their revealed preferences they emphasized equally that his capacity for tenderness and attentive concern was essential as well” (13-14).

This phenomenon has continued to evolve and has become increasingly evident in contemporary erotic romances; not only is the hero more patient, loving, and communicative, but the heroine has become stronger, more assertive, and forceful, both emotionally and sexually. Karen Mitchell, in a study similar to Radway’s that she conducted nearly ten years later, describes how one group of romance readers perceive these changes:

This group of 1990s readers is less interested in the submissive, naïve, younger heroine and dominant, macho hero described by critics in the late 1970s and 1980s (Cawelti, Modleski) and more interested in liberated women seeking sensitive men as equal partners. (54)

She goes on to note that within the group of readers included in her study, all of them expressed a preference for “longer, more detailed romances, with fully developed characters and variations in plot patterns,” which “typically contain specific erotic content and feature independent and sometimes older heroines” (Mitchell 53). In one

personal interview conducted during her study, Mitchell shows specific evidence of gradually developing feminist concepts in the expectations of romance readers: “I don’t like any kind of control of one character over another. Even simple things like grabbing her arm as she tries to walk away. I’ve been known to throw a book across the room”

(55). Thurston asserts:

The New Heroine is experienced, confident, self-sufficient, assertive, even daring—all traits traditionally assigned to men—which means she no longer needs the male guardian, the rake or the sugar daddy. [...] The New Hero [...] exhibits many traits traditionally assigned to females—openness, flexibility, sensitivity, softness, and vulnerability—transforming him from invincible superman into fallible human being. Thus androgyny has burst full bloom into the erotic series romance, in characters who ‘combine both masculine and feminine virtues—who combine both rationality and intuitiveness, humility and self-assertion, depending on the demands of the situation.’ (98-99)

In one of Roberts’ novels, *Heaven and Earth*, for instance, she begins to experiment with the erotic power dynamic of the hero and heroine to the extent of actually reversing the roles of the male/female dyad of early mass-market romance novels. Instead of the heroine “saving” the hero from his emotional desert—a common interpretation of the revenge fantasy concept—in this novel the hero, MacAllister, “saves” the heroine, Ripley, from her fear of emotional commitment. MacAllister is an absent-minded professor who is depicted as warm, nurturing, open, and understanding—a model that is

light-years from the dominant alpha male depicted in most early mass-market romance novels. Ripley, on the other hand, seems particularly determined to avoid what she considers traditional feminine roles and instead embraces qualities that are less often equated with women than with men in our current cultural construction of femininity; she is a brusque, uncommunicative sheriff's deputy who has no interest in a long-term relationship or any kind of relationship at all. She is portrayed as sexually experienced and sexually active instead of virginal, and her erotic experience is not confined to previous long-term relationships. One passage asserts:

No one would have accused her of being pretty. It was too soft a word—and would have insulted her in any case. She preferred knowing it was a strong and sexy face. The kind that could attract men. When she was in the mood for one. (7)

In another passage describing a scene in the gym where Ripley is working out, she first notices the hero, and her reaction further demonstrates both her previous experience and casual approach to sex:

If she was going to have to share the equipment with someone, he might as well be hot, buff, and sweaty. Just the way I like 'em, she thought with delight. She was missing men—at least missing sex. She would just check out Mr. Fitness here and see if he lived up to the advertising. (40)

In another scene, she actually engages in the seduction of the hero:

She walked to the weights, but instead of selecting hers, skimmed a fingertip over his arm. 'Mmm. All slicked up, aren't you? Me, too.' She

shifted closer, brushed bodies. ‘Wouldn’t we just slither and slip all over each other right now?’ (121)

As these passages illustrate, heroines in contemporary erotic romance novels no longer typically fit the formula of the traditionally inexperienced, virginal heroine. Janet Cohn claimed in 1988 that “the heroine of romance believes that sexual consummation belongs properly to the married state” (*Romance and the Erotics of Property* 26), but this is simply no longer the case. Thurston actually stated a year earlier that in one study, “heroines were sexually experienced in 97 percent of the titles,” and that in 90 percent of one Harlequin category examined in 1987, “sexual intercourse takes place between the heroine and hero before marriage” (101). To illustrate the attitude towards sex by many heroines today, in a recent Harlequin category (Flipside) release from Millie Criswell (a *USA Today* best-selling author), one of the heroines asserts, “I don’t want to get married. I just want to get laid. It’s been so long, I’m going to forget how to do it. And don’t tell me it’s like riding a bike. Even bike parts rust” (*Staying Single* 32). This heroine is a long way from the inexperienced virgin of Radway’s study.

New Definitions of Beauty

Radway concludes, based on her study of early mass-market historical romance novels, that the heroines, “although unusually defiant in that they are capable of successfully opposing men, they are also characterized by childlike innocence and inexperience” (186). Her analysis, however, was focused on the trend in early mass-market romance novels to create heroines who were young—usually in their late teens—and virginal, as well as completely unaware of their own often spectacular physical

beauty (Radway 126). This trend was beginning to show signs of change even as Radway completed her study, however, and she admits that “not all romantic heroines are beautiful,” even as she determines that those heroines most preferred by readers included in her study inevitably possessed “glorious tresses and ‘sparkling’ or ‘smoldering’ eyes” (126). If one analyzes romance reader preference today, however—based on the bestseller status of current popular romance authors—this preference, as well, is shifting. Just as the eroticism in the romance novel has evolved, within the past decade or so the heroes and heroines have transformed from possessing “glorious tresses” and “sparkling eyes” to having normal figure flaws, issues with weight, and disabilities such as blindness or other physical deformities. This has been in tandem with the shift in point-of-view, and erotica in contemporary romance novels very often involves narratives from both the heroine’s and hero’s viewpoints, which enable the reader to vicariously experience desire for the heroine’s body as well as the hero’s, in spite of any of the characters’ self-perceived flaws.

Criswell’s heroine in *Staying Single* is again an excellent example. She admires her younger sister’s slim figure while bemoaning her own average size ten: “Lisa ate like a pig and never gained an ounce: Francie thought it was extremely unfair. She had cellulite in places she didn’t want to think about” (27). The hero, Mark, however, has a completely different perception of Francie’s attractiveness: “Gazing into the warmest, most beautiful brown eyes he’d ever seen, Mark’s jaw nearly dropped to his chest. Long lashes, full lips, high cheekbones and a pert little nose made up a very arresting, exotic face. [Francie] was a knockout” (34-35). The message, of course, to those who choose to

read these novels, is that beauty, after all, is in the eye of the beholder. Instead of the stunningly beautiful heroines of Radway's study, today's heroines are real women who the heroes find attractive despite any culturally- or self- perceived flaws in their physical appearances.

It's relevant to establish, moreover, that this heroine is not an exception. Recent romance novels have described a blind heroine (*See No Evil* by Morgan Hayes), a heroine whose body is emaciated and ravaged by leukemia and who is fighting for her life (*Maggie's Dad* by Diana Palmer), a heroine born with only one arm and a hero with dyslexia (*Sisters Found* by Joan Johnston), just to name a few. Themes such as "clinical depression, divorce, adultery, impotence, infertility, incest, child abuse, wife beating, [...] gang rape, alcoholism, prostitution, drug addiction, [...] surrogate motherhood, anorexia, and mastectomy," asserts Daphne Clair in "Sweet Subversions," have recently been addressed in contemporary romance novels (69-70). Even more commonplace is the existence of heroines with stretch marks, surgical scars, signs of aging, and full-figured or voluptuous bodies—it's not uncommon, for instance, for a contemporary heroine to wear a size ten or twelve, the sizes worn by the average American female. The contemporary heroine, therefore—in contrast to the heroines of earlier romances such as those analyzed by Radway—could be almost anyone, any reader, with few exceptions. This increasingly universal quality of the heroine's body, while still disappointingly limited by its predominant focus on women who are white and middle-class (although this, too, shows recent signs of change)—is still evidence of the progressive nature of the contemporary romance novel. At a time when the media and Hollywood are slow on the uptake—after

all, our movie and television heroines are still characteristically a ‘perfect’ size two or four—romance writers are producing heroines who possess more of the qualities that real women possess and doing so in a manner that allows those readers to feel empowered and desirable in their own eyes—obviously the perspective or point-of-view that should be the most significant.

This phenomena extends as well to the careers of the heroines in romance novels, and Leslie Rabine, in “Romance in the Age of Electronics: Harlequin Enterprises,” explains how the heroine’s career transformed from an “unrewarding job” that she left behind upon marriage to the hero to an “unusual and interesting” career, which “both the hero and heroine started taking [...] more seriously” (977). She further argues, “by the early eighties, the heroines’ careers go beyond the wildest dreams of the most ardent National Organization for Women member and often become the selling point that distinguishes one romance from another” (Rabine 978). In a recent issue of *Romance Writers of America*, the quarterly magazine published by the organization of the same name, editors for one major publishing company announced an end to their popular ‘career’ series, claiming that it had become impossible to distinguish it from other lines because practically all contemporary heroines have interesting and viable careers (May 2004). As the feminist movement has gained momentum, the romance novel has become more feminist in nature, a trend that demonstrates the romance novel’s transformative nature.

Nora Roberts' Three Sisters Island Trilogy

An analysis of contemporary romance novels will substantiate this theory, and I will examine three of Nora Roberts' most recent *New York Times* bestsellers to illustrate. I have chosen these three novels, *Dance Upon the Air*, *Heaven and Earth*, and *Face the Fire* because of Roberts' current overwhelming popularity and because each novel contains excellent examples of the phenomena that supports my hypothesis. The novels make up the *Three Sisters Island* trilogy, each published individually during the past couple of years, but marketed as a continuing saga. Each of the novels share many of the same characters, and each additional novel extends the plot of the one published previously, but each focuses on the love story of a different heroine and hero.

In the first novel of the trilogy, *Dance Upon the Air*, the heroine, Nell Channing, escapes from an abusive marriage to a brutal, wealthy, and powerful man, Evan, by faking her own demise. She then changes her name (from Helen to Nell) and begins a journey that crisscrosses the country in an effort to evade discovery and is led by some internal instinct to Three Sisters Island. The Island possesses a mythological history of the three sisters—all witches—who had lived and eventually died a violent death on the Island, and the novel introduces the three heroines of the trilogy—also witches—as the descendants of these three sisters. Nell, in a heroic epic of rebirth and self-discovery, rebuilds her life and her confidence with the support of the other two heroines, Ripley Todd and Mia Devereux. She begins to develop a relationship with Ripley's brother, Zack, and the two eventually fall in love, despite Nell's desire to remain distant, based on her difficult and as yet unresolved relationship with Evan. While Evan continues to

search for her, Nell, unaware, begins to recover from his abuse and learns to respect and value herself and her talents. The novel actually performs as a criticism of the dominance and brutality often found in early romantic plots, and Roberts describes a particularly disturbing scene early in the book:

Evan: 'Did you enjoy yourself, Helen?'

Helen (Nell): 'Yes, it was a lovely party. But a long one. Would you like me to fix you a brandy before we go to bed?'

Evan: 'You enjoyed the music?'

Helen (Nell): 'Very much.' Music? Had she said something inappropriate about the music? She could be so stupid about such things. Barely, she repressed a shudder as he reached out to toy with her hair.

Helen (Nell): 'It was wonderful to be able to dance outside, near the gardens.' She stepped back, hoping to turn towards the stairs, but his hand fisted in her hair, held her in place.

Evan: 'Yes, I noticed how you enjoyed the dancing, especially with Mitchell Rawlings. Flirting with him. Flaunting yourself. Humiliating me in front of my friends, my clients.'

Helen (Nell): 'Evan, I wasn't flirting. I was only—' The backhanded slap sent her sprawling, the bright shock of pain blinding her. When she would have rolled into a protective ball, he dragged her across the marble floor by the hair... (60)

In contemporary erotic romance novels, there is no effort to glamorize or beautify male dominance or brutality; it is ugly and disturbing. While in the early mass-market romance novels, the primary goal of the novel was the heroine's saving of the hero from himself or of reconnecting him with his softer emotions in a manner that made him recognize the heroine's value and worth as an individual, contemporary romance novels focus on the development of an equal, loving relationship.

Today, the romance novel is less about conquering the alpha male and more about feminizing him, making him more sensitive and nurturing, in order to create an ideal in which both partners are equally relevant and powerful. For example, at a later point in the novel, Nell and Zack (the hero) engage in a conversation about Nell's dysfunctional relationship with Evan, with Zack asserting that the abuse Nell experience was not only wrong, but that she was a 'hero' for finding a way out:

Zack: 'Do you know the statistics on spouse abuse?' He pulled open his bottom drawer, took out a file and dropped it on his desk. 'I've put some data together on it. You might want to have a look at it sometime.'

Nell: 'It was different for me.'

Zack: 'It's different for everybody, every time. The fact that you came from a good home and you lived in a big, fancy house doesn't change anything. A lot of people who think it's different for them or that there's nothing they can do to change their situation are going to look at you, hear what you did. Some of them might take a step they might not have taken because of you. That makes you a hero.' (342)

Romance novels continue to be utopian, now more than ever, in describing an ideal world in which women are respected, admired, and valued rather than used, diminished, and discarded. If, as second wave feminists postulate, literature is a major form of socialization, then romance novels have begun socializing women to have higher expectations from the men in their lives and from the greater society in general (Humm 10). The construction of this socialization, however, is itself contradictory.

Turning Contradictions into Communities

I have established that there exists in the contemporary romance novel a growing sense of androgyny for the characters, including gender performances by both the hero and heroine that cross the boundaries of traditional femininity and masculinity. At the same time, however, there also exists a growing emphasis on women's communities, cultural feminism, and a celebration of matriarchy and womanhood, including goddess worship and witchcraft. In Roberts' *Three Sisters Island* trilogy, for instance, all three women are witches who engage in goddess worship. They celebrate the phases of the moon and the earth, and rejoice in the miracle of birth and the rituals and rites of the seasons. The three witches are not biological sisters, but "sisters of the heart." They share one another's thoughts as well as a link that cannot be broken by any mortal—or immortal—man. Only the three sisters, working together, can defeat the villain, who is the exact antithesis of the hero. On the other hand, the heroes in the trilogy, Zack, MacAllister, and Sam, can do little more than stand back and watch. They want to protect the women, but it is the women who possess the magical power, the necessary power, to defeat Evan, who clearly represents the patriarchy. While in the early mass-

market romance, the focus of the heroine remains almost exclusively on the hero and her relationship with him, in the contemporary erotic romance novel, there is often a community of women within the text from which the heroine obtains her strength, wisdom, and understanding; there is a sense of men existing as a necessary—and often mildly amusing—evil. In *Midnight Bayou*, for example, Declan takes his friend, Remy, out for a night on the town for his bachelor party. The following morning, Lena arrives to check on Declan, certain he's nursing a hangover:

‘Go away, go very far away, and take your poison with you.’

‘That’s no way to talk to someone who’s come to tend you on your deathbed.’

He slid back down, dragged a pillow over his face. ‘How’d you know I was dying?’

‘Effie called.’

‘When’s Remy’s funeral?’

‘Fortunately, he’s marrying a woman with a great deal of tolerance, understanding, and humor. How many titty bars did y’all hit last night?’

‘All of them. All the titty bars in the land.’

‘I suppose that explains why you have a pasty on your cheek.’

‘I do not.’ But when he groped under the pillow, he felt the tassel. ‘Oh God. Have some mercy and just kill me.’ [...]

She chuckled all the way downstairs. Laughed harder when she heard a door slam. Bet he’s sorry he did that, she thought. [...]

He'd looked so damn cute, she thought as she hunted up the coffee beans. All pale and male and cross. And with that silly pasty plastered on his cheek. Men just lost half their IQ when they had a look at a naked woman. Put a pack of them together with women willing to strip to music, and they had the common sense of a clump of broccoli. (293-295)

Even in texts that don't include the supernatural, there is often a group of women who perform as a sounding board, where a discourse can occur that expounds on the frustrating behaviors of men and their alleged inability to communicate or their apparent incapacity to see with the depth and wisdom that women do. In Roberts' *Irish Trilogy*, the three heroines often meet to vent their frustrations and provide one another with a shoulder to cry on, friendly advice, or validation. These friendships and communities are gaining increasing emphasis in contemporary romance novels, and real communities of romance readers are springing up all over the country, as well. Online communities, such as eHarlequin and the *Romantic Times Bookclub*, as well as web rings, list serves, and chat rooms that are based around specific sub genres and category lines, are growing rapidly. Local book clubs have sprung up across the US, some of which focus on a specific author, like Nora Roberts, and others which focus on a genre or on women's romantic fiction in general. The *Romantic Times*, geared exclusively towards romance readers, has a yearly conference that is fully booked months in advance. Women meet at these conferences to meet their favorite authors, to chat with one another about their favorite books, to spend a weekend with other women where women's needs and desires are the primary focus. Chocolate fountains, lace doilies, pink roses, and delicate tea sets

accompany murder-mystery displays and informational sessions about knives, guns, poison charts, and include speakers who are formerly of the CIA or FBI. The idea is somehow that women are the same—possessing innate wisdom, insight, and emotional intelligence, and yet different—possessing a variety of interests and strengths that are not limited to the traditionally feminine.

Obviously, there exists a contradiction, an incompatible theoretical positioning, in the blend of cultural feminism, which emphasizes gender differences and androgyny, which emphasizes individual differences, but this contradiction is derived directly from the contradictory and conflicting ideas about gender that exist in our society today. The popular culture that produces discourses of difference (whether culturally or biologically imposed), and yet which increasingly produces images of women as strong and fully capable of competing with men (and winning) on reality television shows like *The Amazing Race* and *Survivor*—send conflicting messages to women, and these conflicts are reproduced and contemplated within the contemporary erotic romance novel.

At the end of *Dance Upon the Air*, when Evan finally tracks Nell down, she stands up to him despite the instinctive, temporary return of her feelings of fear and lack of self-worth. However, it is only through the combined strength of the three sisters—the community of women—that his evil is turned back upon himself, and he is driven insane. As the plot carries into *Heaven and Earth*, Evan manages to find a way to return—in his mind—to Three Sisters Island, by using another traditional male, a greedy, capitalistic reporter, who once again threatens Nell's new sense of peace and well-being. At the end of the second novel, the plot is apparently resolved when Evan is ultimately defeated

through the combined forces of the three women working together, along with the power of true love (that shared by Ripley, our second heroine, and her hero, MacAllister). The images this plot invokes are powerful, especially if we view Evan as representative of the patriarchy itself: the heroine escapes the confines of the patriarchy, begins an heroic quest for independence and self-worth, and in achieving the goals of her quest, she discovers true love based on equality and mutual respect, ultimately destroying the patriarchal prison (Evan) that originally confined her. Linda Barlow describes how

in every woman's journey through the three primary aspects of the goddess—virgin to mother to crone—the romance novel maps out the first segment of the journey. And like any archetypal journey it is filled with threats and dangers against which the heroine must struggle and eventually prevail. (48)

This is the symbolic journey that Nell undertakes, and the one in which she does eventually prevail, and thus the fairytale structure, already established for the early mass-market romance novel, operates as a paradigm for the contemporary erotic romance as well.

However, this paradigm only addresses the structures and forms of the contemporary erotic romance novel that are based on the ideological concepts of cultural feminism, and does not take into account the contradictory, and yet equally powerful, depictions of androgyny within these novels. The fairytale plot undergoes a transformation on this level that results in both the hero and heroine performing simultaneously as hero and princess, donor, helper, victim, etc., moving in and out of

various character forms and functions throughout the text without respect to gender. While this is new to the fairytale structure of the popular romance novel, however, it still fits within Propp's paradigm; he asserts, "One character in a tale is easily replaced by another" (87), noting that "these substitutions have their own, sometimes very complicated, causes. Real life itself creates new, vivid images which supplant tale personages" (87). Real life, in this instance, has produced "new, vivid images" in the popular romance text that are androgynous in nature as a response to changing social constructions of gender within our contemporary society. While traditional feminine and masculine roles were beginning to be questioned during the earlier time frame of second wave feminism when the early mass-market romance novel was produced, gender performances in our society today are much more loosely constructed than they were during that era. Women today, due primarily to the contributions of feminist activists in our society over the past several decades, have more freedom to perform outside of the narrow confines of so-called femininity, as men have to perform outside of the traditional definition of masculinity, and these cultural changes have produced changes within the fairytale structure of the contemporary erotic romance novel, as well.

By the same token, the androgynous portrayals of characters in these novels may also produce changes in the society of which they are a part; through reading these novels and thus mentally experimenting with new constructions of gender in utopias that so closely replicate our own reality, romance readers can imagine new, more radical performances that they may not have otherwise considered. As previously stated, Ann Cranny-Francis, in *Feminist Fiction*, asserts:

The reader is [...] positioned to question the mechanisms of his/her own society, because another social structure with apparent advantages over her/his own, but also many similarities, is shown operating simultaneously. In other words, the sense of inevitability, of naturalness, about the contemporary social order is challenged; the reader is positioned to see contemporary society differently. (111)

There is, however, evidence that the structure of the contemporary erotic romance novel has begun to shift slightly from classic fairytale structure to the more complex fantasy diegesis, although it does continue to retain most of the fairytale elements.

Structural Transformations

As we may recall, for instance, Maria Nikolajeva, in her article, "Fairy Tale and Fantasy: from archaic to postmodern," argues that while there are parallels between fairytales and fantasy, there are crucial differences. Fantasy, for instance, "rarely ends in marriage and enthronement; in contemporary philosophical and ethical fantasy it is usually a matter of spiritual maturation" (*Marvels and Tales* 2003). While the contemporary erotic romance novel does end in marriage, which places it squarely within the genre of fairytale, there is evidence of spiritual maturation as well, which demonstrates how the texts are moving from the basic fairytale structure to a construction that possesses greater complexity. Fantasy, for instance, according to Nikolajeva, "also allows much more freedom and experimentation with gender transgression," which I have established does occur in the contemporary erotic romance (*Marvels and Tales* 2003). On the other hand, Nikolajeva notes that in fairytales, "characters are either

thoroughly good or thoroughly evil,” and this element is still very evident in the contemporary erotic romance novel (*Marvels and Tales* 2003).

In a sense, then, the construction of the contemporary erotic romance novel appears to be produced in a transitional moment; it is shifting from a classic fairytale structure to a hybrid form that bridges fairytale and fantasy, as the terms are defined by Nikolajeva. The contemporary erotic romance novel’s connection with the fairytale, however, is still formidable, as an in-depth analysis will illustrate.

Vladimir Propp, in *Morphology of the Folktale*, breaks down the morphology of the folktale into several distinct functions, including the ‘Dramatis Personae,’ which explains the roles and actions throughout the narrative of the various characters, and especially the heroes and villains. Through a demonstration of how the characters in *Dance Upon the Air* conform to the gestalt of Propp’s morphology, it should not be difficult to distinguish the overwhelming element of fairytale in the contemporary erotic romance novel. It is important to establish to what extent the contemporary erotic romance is derived from the fairytale in order to illustrate the similarities in their transformational powers and thus their analogous impacts within cultural contexts. Where these modern-day versions of the fairytale tend to differ most notably from Propp’s analysis appears to be in the constructions of the hero and heroine. While in Propp’s paradigm, the female typically performs in the role of princess and/or donor and the male in the role of hero, instead of a single female or male protagonist, the role of the actual hero appears to shift back and forth between the two, creating in effect an androgynous hero(ine). The roles are not fixed; the hero may perform as the princess in

the contemporary erotic romance novel, and the heroine may perform as the hero or protagonist and vice versa.

In *Dance Upon the Air*, “One of the Members of a Family Absents Himself From Home” (26) when Evan Remington takes a trip out of town, leaving his battered wife, Helen Remington (later Nell Channing) at home with the “Interdiction” (26) not to leave, or he would track her down and kill her. “The Interdiction is Violated” (27) when Helen fakes her own death in a car accident and runs as far and as fast as she can from Evan. He isn’t convinced Helen is dead, but Evan has no evidence to the contrary until a neighbor comments that she had seen a woman resembling Helen when she had visited Three Sisters Island on a recent vacation. Evan travels to the Island and places a picture of Helen on the nightstand in his hotel room. A hotel maid recognizes the person in the picture as Nell Channing, a woman who lives and works nearby [“The Villain Receives Information About the Victim” (28)]. “The Villain Causes Harm or Injury to A Member of the Family” (30) when he waits for Nell in her new home, catches her by surprise, and then beats her until she loses consciousness. After she revives, Zack, Nell’s new love interest, appears, and Evan catches him off guard as well and stabs him. While Evan is contemplating finishing Zack off, Nell runs out the back door in an altruistic attempt to draw Evan’s attention from Zack before he kills the already injured man [“The Hero Leaves Home” (39)]. Evan gives chase and eventually abducts her.

“One Member of the Family Either Lacks Something Or Desires to Have Something” (35): Nell battles a lack of self-worth and self-esteem, and has begun to rediscover this in her developing relationship with Zack. When Evan shows up, she

immediately reverts to her habitual role in the relationship as the victim and seems to lack the strength to fight him. When Evan eventually catches up to her in the woods, he forces her to her knees and holds a knife to her throat. In the meantime, an injured Zack calls for help, and accompanied by Nell's two friends, Mia and Ripley, he arrives upon the scene. Evan rants and raves about ownership and husbandly rights while both Zack and Ripley, law enforcement officers, have guns trained on him. The test—meant for the group as a whole—is to choose not to kill Evan, to choose life over even more violence and bloodshed, and to instead find an alternative way to defeat him. The test applies particularly to Zack and Ripley, who must choose not to shoot Evan when each has the opportunity, and to Nell, who must help Zack by coming to the realization that her role as victim is aiding the villain in achieving his aim, and thus resist Evan's attack. When she does finally realize the extent of her own role in the drama unfolding in the woods ["The Hero Acquires the Use of a Magical Agent" (43)], she shifts from victim back to hero, and overcome by the power of the goddess (she has only recently discovered that she is a witch), she is able to stand up to face Evan. What follows is "The Hero and Villain Join in Direct Combat," (51) as Nell casts a powerful spell on Evan that turns all of his projected evil back onto him, which results in Evan literally and immediately going insane ["The Villain is Defeated" (53)]. Her own victory over Evan, without substantial help from the others, fills Nell's lack of self-confidence ["The Initial Misfortune or Lack is Liquidated" (53)] and she is recognized as a hero and Evan as a villain in the subsequent news stories that describe her ordeal ["The Hero is Recognized" (62) and "The False Hero or Villain is Exposed" (63)]. She is rewarded with Zack, performing as

the princess, whom she marries as soon as the divorce from Evan is final. She legally changes her name to Nell, and Evan is sent to a psychiatric prison facility [“The Villain is Punished” (63) and “The Hero is Married and Ascends the Throne” (63)].

Conclusion

There are, of course, some dissimilarities between the classic fairytale and the contemporary erotic romance novel, primarily in that both the hero and heroine in the recent versions are often interchangeably—and within the same text—the fairytale ‘hero,’ a representation that would allow the female character to be victim, princess, donor, and heroine and the male character to be the princess, victim, donor, and hero, or any other combination of the various roles within Propp’s paradigm. Neither the hero nor heroine maintain a single role throughout the text as they often did in early mass-market romance novels but instead experiment with ways, even small ones, in which the hero can actually perform as the princess, and the heroine, the hero. Of course, the reality, even within these utopian texts, isn’t quite that simple; the characters, especially the heroines, are often depicted as experiencing confusion and/or frustration due to contradictions between perceived social expectations of gender performance and their own conceptualizations of gender. In the case of a story in which characters change functions like those described in *Heaven and Earth* above, as we may recall, Propp notes social forces play a role in the tale’s transformation:

The epos of neighboring peoples exerts its influence, as does written literature, religion (Christianity for example), and local beliefs. The tale at

its core preserves traces of very ancient paganism, of ancient customs and rituals. The tale gradually undergoes metamorphoses. (87)

Of course, what is also interesting is that in the contemporary erotic romance novel, just as in the early mass-market romance novel, the hero and heroine share the reward in the end, which is usually a betrothal or marriage. While there is some contradiction inherent in the simultaneous emphasis on heterosexual marriage, a patriarchal institution, and on a new heroine who no longer requires rescuing by a hero, it isn't really surprising. As established earlier in this study, it is not unusual for utopian texts to contain paradoxical and contradictory ideologies; in fact, their simultaneous inclusion enables the romance novel to grapple with the conflicts present in a given historical moment. Frederic Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious*, summarizes the rationale for the continued existence of a betrothal or marriage at the conclusion of the contemporary erotic romance novel when he asserts that one side cannot claim victory over the other, but that a compromise between the two must be reached (149). In effect, he argues, "Everything must find its proper place again" (149). Thus, with each of the two protagonists representative of the antithetical patriarchy and a utopian ideal of equality heterosexuality and gender performance, to eliminate the customary ending of the romance novel in marriage would seriously undermine the deeper structures of the romance narrative, which depend on a compromise between the two conflicting forces in the text to create a utopian vision of cooperation and conciliation.

The contemporary erotic romance novel also contains many of the same fairytale elements as the early mass-market romance, but over the decades, these elements—the

dominant hero; the young, virginal heroine; the impulsive, self-involved, and perhaps promiscuous 'other woman' (often set up as the heroine's competition for the hero's attention); and the culmination of the early mass-market romance novel in marriage—have evolved as our culture has evolved. The heroine has become superwoman, a synthesis of the many roles that women in today's society find themselves faced with, instead of simply being portrayed as the princess or the witch as she often was in the early mass-market romance novels or in classic fairytales. The latter, simpler portrayal, Thurston argues, "served not only as a parable or morality tale but also to define womanliness for women themselves. [...] Sexuality for the heroine, by definition the "good" woman, was covert and generally had meaning only in relation to her reproductive function or her capacity to arouse desire in males" (36). The new heroine, however, does possess overt sexuality, is often confident—even occasionally arrogant—and independent. However, like the more traditional early, young, innocent heroine, she remains caring, open-minded, intelligent, and often nurturing as well. These changes reflect the popular romance novel's participation in the shifting discourse in our society vis-à-vis the role of women in heterosexual marriage, in the workplace, and as mothers. The text of the romance novel therefore appears to have interacted with feminist theory in ways mediated with popular culture, and seems to have developed a loosely theoretical approach that has a life of its own. Joanne Hollows warns, "When romantic fiction and feminism meet, [...] the results are often incoherent and produce contradictions" (83). Some of the results, as the heroine's role has evolved, have become untenable. The "superwoman" popularized in our culture in the 1990s has unquestionably become the

utopia for the contemporary erotic romance novel, as most heroines seem to be able to manage it all: an enviable career as a fighter pilot or brain surgeon, for instance, as well as a happy and successful marriage, bright and obedient children, a well-kept home, exciting hobbies, plenty of friends, and a close and loving extended family.

This utopia, however, may actually perform as a device of capitalism under the guise of feminism. As our economy expands and changes due to technological advances in industry and manufacturing and we become an increasingly consumer-based culture, the advent of superwoman in the popular romance novel may very well be a way to encourage women to envision themselves in new roles so that they can become a greater economic resource. In the 1960s and 70s, it may have behooved our capitalist economy to keep women out of the workforce, and romance heroines were thus depicted as leaving their menial jobs upon marriage to the heroes; however, our economic needs have changed over time, and thus the “superwoman” of the popular romance novel may very well be a necessary invention of capitalism to provoke a similar dichotomy in our contemporary society.

Thus, romance novels have been influenced by external social factors such as the changing ideals and more flexible gender roles introduced by the feminist movement and by the changing needs of capitalism, and the evolution of the protagonists is an illustration of those influences. The old and the new come together in a hybrid genre that really does endeavor to encompass two contradictory spheres: the public sphere, in which she is identified as ‘woman,’ and is pressured to conform to certain traditional constructions of femininity (thus, the existence in these novels of cultural feminist

conceptualizations of gender differences) based on changing needs within our capitalist, patriarchal society, and the private sphere, in which she perceives herself as an individual, which is reflected in the androgynous characterizations that are progressively more evident in the contemporary erotic romance novel.

This continual response in popular romance novels to the contradictory social and economic demands on women in our culture can be attributed to Propp's assertion that fairytales, and thus, by extension, romance novels, derive directly from the social conflicts and political constructions of a given historical moment and function as a way of working through these conflicts. While the utopia they produce is of course untenable, like the unlikely and discordant marriage between cultural feminism and androgyny, it is the purpose of the utopia of the contemporary erotic romance novel to engage those opposing forces in a dialogue that will politicize the subject position of the reader in her contemporary social and economic reality.

Thus, while these texts still fit quite neatly into Propp's paradigm of the fairytale, they also enact a fantasy; for while the utopia of the early mass-market romance novel attempted to fantasize a way in which the romance reader could assimilate the conflict produced at the fierce encounter between the feminist movement and patriarchal traditions, in these more recent texts, the romance reader confronts the contradictions between her private, domestic sphere (represented by cultural feminism) and her public sphere (represented by androgynous characterizations) in order to find the compromise previously described by Jameson as necessary. The subsequent utopia is created as a response to the discord of the transitional historical moment in which the text is

produced, whether economic, cultural, or both, and although the public and private spheres are seemingly incompatible and contradictory, the romantic utopia of the contemporary erotic romance attempts to synthesize them into a cohesive whole. Therefore, the metamorphoses that both Northrop Frye and Vladimir Propp assert must exist in every structural system are presented in these texts as the gradual, but progressive, transformation of the overall structure from classic fairytale to fantasy, and the transformation of the traditional fairytale depictions of hero and princess to the increasingly androgynous hero(ine).

CHAPTER IV

FROM FAIRYTALE TO FANTASY: PROJECTING A NEW UTOPIA

Connections

From the evidence presented in this study, it is clear that the popular romance novel is indeed a transformative text. Its performance over the past several decades as a bourgeois fairytale that not only represents but engages in the cultural discourses concerning heterosexuality and gender relations within a specific historical moment certainly supports this conclusion, especially in light of the theoretical assertions of both Frederic Jameson and Vladimir Propp that transformative narratives such as these occur when two opposing ideas collide with one another within a given culture.

In the early mass-market romance novel, for instance, the utopia produced at the conclusion of the novels very clearly responds to the two opposing conceptions of gender that existed from the late 1960s to the early 80s. In an especially conflicted cultural era, during which civil rights and social movements were colliding with more conservative views of race and gender, the early mass-market romance provided readers with a utopia that bridged the two worlds, creating an imaginary place where they could begin to envision new models of gender relations, albeit within the traditional structures of heterosexual relations under patriarchy. The resistance noted in the novels at several levels by earlier critics supports the idea that within these texts, there was a battle being

waged between good and evil or safety and danger, between the binaries of the affective and the instrumental, the emotional and the rational, which resulted in a utopian compromise in a manner similar to that described by Jameson (148). The heroine, representing the feminine affective realm, gives up her independence in exchange for the surrender of the hero, who represents the patriarchal instrumental realm, and as each side makes concessions, a utopia is produced in which a balance is depicted: he recognizes the affective as superior when he admits that he cannot live without her, but she tacitly recognizes the value of the instrumental when she agrees to become his wife in the patriarchal tradition.

A second, but equally significant, compromise is just as easily observed in the utopia of the contemporary erotic romance novel where contradictory feminist ideologies crash headlong into conventional patriarchal customs like heterosexual marriage. As opposing concepts such as androgyny and cultural feminism exist side-by-side within the same text, and, in an uneasy alliance, duel with patriarchal versions of gender deep within the structure of that text in a contemporary reenactment of the age-old battle of good versus evil, romance readers are invited into a utopian reality where they can experiment with new ways of perceiving gender and heterosexual relationships that may encourage them to question the social limitations of their own cultures. Such utopias, as previously established, may be an articulation of the discontent felt by romance readers as they strain against the social parameters placed upon them by the cultural moment of which they are a part. In this case, it is the increasing emphasis on individuality within our contemporary society, a phenomenon that creates a conflict in an aging readership

between the public self, forced into traditional feminine roles and represented in these texts by a version of cultural feminism, and the private self, represented by a version of androgyny that promotes a greater sense of individuality. These social limitations are different from those discussed as present during the production of the early mass-market romance novel in that the latter focused on the conflicts produced when the patriarchy collided with feminism and the civil rights movement, while these more recent texts focus on the conflicts produced at a much more personal level: when the private meets the public in ways that complicate social expectations of gender performance. Janice Radway, in an article published several years after *Reading the Romance: Women, patriarchy, and popular literature*, asserts that recent popular romance texts

suggest that women are not limited to dreaming what they have dreamed before, [...] but are, in their fantasies, attempting to move even more freely back and forth between the subject positions of the desiring subject and the desired object and, even more radically, exploring the possibility of coding those positions not solely complementarily but equivalently and alternatively as potentially masculine and feminine. This move seems not insignificant to me. In fact its effects could be cumulative, perhaps even transformative in the long run. (“Romance and the Work of Fantasy” 412)

In other words, to not only investigate the positions of masculine and feminine so that the hero's and heroine's gender performances within the text compliment one another's, but to imagine masculine and feminine as “equivalent,” and even further, to potentially envision the “desiring subject” as feminine and the “desired object” as masculine is how

Radway interprets more recent romance texts as dealing with heterosexual gender performances and desire. An opportunity to invert the dichotomy of female as object and male as subject could be immensely valuable, as it directly contradicts the way desire is often conceptualized within the arena of popular culture. Patriarchal norms are reinforced in subversive and far-reaching ways and tend to support the female as “desired object” instead of “desiring subject”; television advertisements, characterizations of women in mainstream films and fiction, and political maneuverings that attempt to prevent changes to patriarchal institutions like heterosexual marriage all position the feminine as object. However, gender constructions of heroines in popular romance texts have certainly evolved far beyond comparable characterizations typically produced in contemporary mainstream films turned out by Hollywood, and an in-depth comparison between the characterizations and gender performances produced in contemporary erotic romance novels and those currently depicted in “chick-flicks” would be an area for further study that might reveal these differences in even greater contrast.

Both in Hollywood and in the popular romance industry, however, more changes are afoot. As we have seen, even the fundamental structures of the popular romance novel have undergone as many major transformations in the past few decades as feminism has, and the classic fairytale formula of the early mass-market romance novel has gradually evolved into the transitional narrative of the contemporary erotic romance. The latter, while retaining most of the fairytale elements, according to Marie Nikolajeva’s paradigm, has begun to shift into the broader arena of fantasy fiction, and new novels

published within the industry are continuing to expand the formula of romance until, in some cases, it has become almost unrecognizable.

“Chick-Lit”

In fact, the most recent addition to the popular romance genre, “chick lit,” has swung so far from the fairytale romance of the 1970s that many bookstores don’t know quite where to shelve it: placing it with contemporary erotic romance novels, which still follow the popular romance formula, seems inaccurate, but the fact that it is published by traditionally exclusive popular romance publishers like Harlequin, as well as the startling and immediate appeal of these texts to women readers of all ages, makes it incomparable to any genre besides romance.

As the fastest-growing sub genre in the romance industry today, chick-lit has begun to attract attention from readers outside of the traditional romance readership and appears to be especially appealing to young, educated women in their 20s and 30s (Harlequin website). With characters suggestive of those from the popular television sitcom, *Friends*, or even more reminiscent of the characters from the recent trendy HBO series, *Sex and the City*, these texts explore the dating scene from the perspective of young, city-dwelling women who are trying to build a career, maintain their friendships, and find “Mr. Right.” The difference between chick-lit and contemporary erotic romance novels, according to Harlequin Red Dress Ink editor Margaret Marbury, is that while these texts “may have a strong romantic component, [...] it will not be the focus” (Harlequin website). Indeed, often the protagonists in these first-person narratives explore a variety of relationships with different men, some of which may be long-term

relationships leading to some sort of commitment and others that may involve a single, passionate encounter with a mysterious stranger. The heroine may or may not end up with a man at the conclusion of the novel (but often does), and generally, according to Marbury, she “will become a little more self-aware and experienced” (Harlequin website). One website devoted to the genre, *Chick Lit USA*, asserts:

Gone are the exotic locations and the dashing, but brooding, tycoon that whisks the ever-so-genteel heroine into the sunset. The location is often replaced by a shared flat (apartment) outside of London with real, true-to-life characters & loads of boyfriend angst. In fact, the love interest is more likely to not be the wealthy & very single heir to a fortune, but rather a tyrant boss who happens to be very married. The heroine of these books can be rude, shallow, overly compulsive, neurotic, insecure, bold, ambitious, witty or surprisingly, all of the above – but we love them anyway! (June 2004)

Thus, while these novels still fall under the umbrella of women’s romantic fiction, and although the same romance publishers produce them, they obviously contain very different approaches to the idea of love, romance, and sexuality than the early mass-market or contemporary erotic romance novels. The heroines in these texts are willing to violate the standards and conventions of patriarchal norms to an even greater degree than the corresponding heroines of contemporary erotic romance texts. The implications, of course, are that new utopias are being created to respond to new contradictions in our culture, such as the progressive movement in our society towards individualism and

separateness, a shift towards social atomization and away from social responsibility and a sense of community. There is, of course, a continually evolving response to the same primary oppositions that popular romance novels have responded to in the past: the conflicts between man/woman, hero/heroine, rational/emotional, danger/safety, instrumental/affective, and patriarchy/matriarchy. However, similar to the popular romance texts discussed thus far, in the chick-lit novel these binaries are often inverted, with female, matriarchy, affective, and emotional validated as absolutely necessary and good, and man, hero, rational, instrumental, and patriarchy are exposed as at the least, limited and incomplete, the heroine now living dangerously, the hero tending toward safety. In these texts, however, there are fewer concessions made to the patriarchy in the pursuit of a balanced utopia, which is significant. In the compromise effected by the utopia of the chick-lit novel, heterosexual marriage plays a smaller part than ever, and often none at all. Such a phenomenon suggests a greater emphasis on personal development versus social; instead of seeking a commitment of love and marriage that integrates both the public and private spheres, chick-lit heroines are more self-indulgent, seeking both personal pleasure and personal growth within the private sphere.

The Politics of Packaging

Another interesting phenomenon within the chick-lit industry is a fast-growing interest—in readers, writers, and publishers—in what is casually referred to as “mom-lit” and “hen-lit.” “Mom-lit” is often a first-person ironic look at the frustrations and emotions generally experienced by most mothers during the years while their children are small, often with a bit of comedy and tragedy thrown in for good measure. The

challenges she faces in balancing career and motherhood, as well as sexuality and romance, are often depicted within these texts as well. “Hen-lit” refers to a group of texts that are written from the perspective of an older protagonist, typically in her late 30s to 50ish, who is dealing with the experiences of menopause, empty-nest, and perhaps even has been thrust into a new career or the dating world at this stage in her life. (Yahoo Chick Lit Group)

The implications of chick-lit branching off into sub categories so early in its conception are intriguing, to say the least. When the early mass-market romance novel was born, especially in the form of series and category romance novels offered by Harlequin, sub genres began to quickly sprout up: intrigues, religious-themed romances, western romances, time-travel or futuristic romances, historical romances...the list goes on. While at least half of today’s popular romance readers apparently prefer the contemporary erotic series or single-title romance novels, many of the sub genres enjoy quite a bit of success as well. The historical and intrigue sub genres, in particular, have considerable and faithful followings. However, neither of the two, despite their popularity, has really expanded much beyond the level of sub genre in the popular romance field.

The nearly instant conception of multiple sub genres for the chick-lit category, therefore, is worthy of note. As the readership of the popular romance genre ages, the publishing industry has sought ways to gain even more profits from the economically thriving field of women’s fiction—enter the best-selling *Bridget Jones’ Diary* by Helen Fielding and *The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing* by Melissa Banks. Both of these

novels, published in the mid-1990s, gained widespread popularity and have triggered an eruption of imitations that captured more than a \$71 million share of the entire US publishing industry in 2002 (Cabot). While many critics have dismissed chick-lit as a passing trend, its continued growth implies the existence of a market that no one had predicted (Cabot). Instead of fizzling out, it is branching out, in what critics variously have labeled as “post-feminist” and “anti-feminist” fiction that is “expanding into topics that move beyond single life” (Cabot) and into the ‘real’ experiences of women in today’s industrialized societies (Razdan). In a sense, these texts seem to embrace the recent trend in feminism, often referred to as the third wave, which claims to be more inclusive than previous feminisms, and less focused on the victimization of women at the hands of the patriarchy and capitalism. This approach, for example, as it is reproduced within these particular texts, seems to depict behaviors like sexual harassment in the workplace as a predictable occurrence, and further, as more of a personal problem than a social issue. The offender, rather than being depicted as part of a larger social problem, is likely to instead be portrayed individually as a ‘creep’, and the situation thus remains entirely within the private sphere. Thus the role of late capitalism in the increased fractionalization of our contemporary society plays a part in the trend in these novels to emphasize individual experience over social action, which means the transformative aspect of these novels may very well be capitalist, instead of simply feminist, in nature; an increasingly individualized, consumer-based culture may be at the root of increasing depictions of women within this genre as career- rather than family-oriented to provoke a change in the ways women view their roles within our economic system.

Of course, Janice Radway asserted in the early 1980s that it was impossible to overlook the role of capitalism in the development of the popular romance genre, and economics also play a major role in the creation and marketing of chick-lit. Early mass-market romances, as we have established, were intentionally designed to look similar to one another to signal to readers that the text was a Harlequin romance—a designation that Harlequin used as a mass-marketing ploy to avoid promoting single titles or authors and thus save advertising dollars. Sporting a very distinctive look—covers in pastel pinks, greens, and blues decorated in martini-glasses, 1920s-inspired art, and designer purses—chick-lit novels, unlike the early mass-market romance novels, do not have a standardized formula or recipe for publication. Instead, as some critics claim, much of recent women’s fiction is being summarily dumped into this single category in order to encourage sales: one critic asks, “So what would happen if a young woman did write a sharp, brilliant new novel—a portrait of the artist as a young woman in the city?” (Razdan) She answers her own question, asserting, “Its publishers would wrap it in pink, slap a martini glass on the cover, and get Anna Maxted to blurb it” (Razdan). She goes on to argue, “Chick lit is a deliberately condescending term,” and claims that by labeling such a broad group of women’s fiction with that designation for marketing purposes, we as a society risk losing respect and recognition for serious literary works within the women’s fiction genre (Razdan). Since the sub genre of chick-lit appears to be garnering no more literary respect than the popular romance genre has managed to collect in its decades of existence, this warning may have real merit. While contemporary women search for fiction that is humorous, inspiring, and contains issues they believe are

relevant to their lives, publishers, in the true spirit of late capitalism, are pumping out countless mass-produced texts to meet the growing demand with a constant supply, regardless of differences in quality or content.

Conclusion

It is important to emphasize, however, that chick-lit, rather than replacing popular romance, appears to currently be existing alongside it in an uneasy alliance under the umbrella of women's romantic fiction. I refer to their alliance as uneasy because already there is evidence of a rift developing between the two, despite a great number of popular romance authors who publish in both categories, despite the recent addition of Red Dress Ink as a new chick-lit category within Harlequin's publishing empire, and despite the existence of a new chick-lit chapter in the Romance Writers of America organization. Chick-lit writers and readers have already—although quietly—begun to express some criticism of the contemporary erotic romance sub genre, and there is often an implied comparison, like the one in the earlier quote from the *Chick Lit USA* website, that chick-lit is less formulaic and thus superior in some way to popular romance (Yahoo! Chick Lit Group).

It certainly wouldn't be an outrageous prediction that the two may very well part ways at some point in the near or distant future, although there is the sense of a camaraderie that exists between them, based on the understanding that both are fiction produced by women for women and are both similarly denigrated by the larger culture as a whole. On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore the aging readership of Harlequin's popular romantic category fiction and the publisher's inability to draw substantial

numbers of younger readers to the popular romance genre before adding the Red Dress Ink line (Jacobson). Elizabeth W. Witzman of the *New York Daily News* quotes one Harlequin editor as stating, “These women tend to look at traditional mass-market romances as their mothers’ books. So we really wanted to target them with stories that were more in touch with popular culture” (January 2004).

If it is true, then, that the readership of the popular romance novel is aging as some critics imply (Jacobson), and if the new chick-lit trend continues to draw young readers, it is conceivable that the contemporary erotic romance novel may gradually disappear. The utopia offered to readers by the contemporary erotic romance novel, after all, is a response to, and a discourse within, our specific cultural moment and articulates the conflicts experienced by a particular generation of women; as one generation leaves off and the next begins to take its place, the previous utopias must be replaced with new ones that engage with our constantly changing social norms and values, and even with the changing needs of capitalism in an increasingly consumer-based culture. Thus, it is plausible to suggest that the utopias invented in the new chick-lit novels to respond to the conflicts, contradictions, and oppositions of a new generation of women may eventually take the place of the utopias of the popular romance novel within our culture. These utopias transform, in a feminist fashion, the ways that women view themselves within an increasingly fractionalized society. The early mass-market romance novel, after all, so popular at its peak during second wave feminism, was gradually replaced with the contemporary erotic romance novel as existing constructions of gender expectations evolved, and as our society changed. The fact that the chick-lit sub genre is branching

out to include protagonists of various ages who are going through similar experiences in very different stages of life testifies to this new category's ability to appeal to overlapping generations, a phenomenon that suggests that the current fractionalization and atomization of our society is not limited to a single group, and traditional conventions of heterosexual dichotomies are being challenged by multiple generations in our present historical moment as a spirit of individualism replaces the concept of a greater social identity.

However, these implications also force us to question the ways in which we view mass-produced texts within popular culture as well. Rather than examining them singularly within a synchronic cultural context, it is vital to examine the entire genre diachronically, mapping the changes in formula, structure, and characterizations that occur over time and in response to specific cultural events, in order to get a complete picture of how the texts are actually interacting with the culture in which they are produced. Determining whether the changes produced in popular romance texts over the period of time examined within this study are ultimately positive or negative is the goal of another project altogether. My purpose is to show simply that these texts, functioning in the same manner Propp asserts of the fairytale, help to create the culture that produces them, and that the changes in the diegesis of the popular romance novel both echo and produce similar changes in the lives of the women who read them by offering them utopian alternatives to the constraints they are bound by within their own reality. According to Jameson's analysis, these novels "can be read as symbolic acts," (145) as he asserts that "neither the manifest text, nor the deep structure tangibly mapped out before

us [...], the third variable in [a complete structural] analysis is necessarily history itself, as an absent cause” (146). Thus, to ignore the “semantic raw materials” (147) evident within each of these three historical moments would prevent us from developing a comprehensive analysis of the extent of the influence of the popular romance novel, just as it would if we ignored the texts themselves.

The implications of such a conclusion are potentially far-reaching: recognizing ways in which apparently passive, mass-produced, formulaic texts like the popular romance are interacting and participating with greater social forces on a deeper, structural level may allow scholars to chart changing ideas about cultural norms within larger, more diverse groups than are typically included within the discourse of the academy. Further, evaluating the contradictory ways in which these mass-produced texts simultaneously participate in capitalism and/or the patriarchy—even if only through their production as a consumer product, but perhaps even as an actual instrument of capitalism—and the ways these texts oppose the conventions of the patriarchy by creating utopias in which readers can test new social constructions, relationships, and dichotomies will enable us and our students to observe in what ways we unconsciously participate in our own oppression and will allow us to imagine a world in which a better life, perhaps, does indeed exist.

Jameson asserts, “the novel is then not so much an organic unity as a symbolic act that must reunite or harmonize heterogeneous narrative paradigms which have their own specific and contradictory ideological meaning,” (144) and is also the “systematic interweaving of these two distinct generic modes, [which] in later society [...] will be definitively sundered from each other in the sealed compartments of the private and the

public, the psychological and the social” (144). Such a division is increasingly evident in the utopias of the popular romance novel, but in the sense that the private, or the psychological, appears to be replacing the public, or the social, as these utopias become progressively more focused on individual growth and less on developing a social conscience or community. Evaluating the power of these kinds of texts to alter the way readers think about gender constructions and heterosexual “norms,” then, will allow us to explore the role of the utopian text in effecting social transformations in the real world.

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