

# The Warrior Woman in Contemporary Romance Fiction

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## ABSTRACT

The warrior woman is a recurring figure in myth and history. She could be seen as an ambiguous character as she challenges patriarchal assumptions about gender roles with her capability for masculine aggression while being recognisably female and “feminine”. In the new millennium, she has reappeared as the action heroine in films, televisions, comics and video games and she has also infiltrated romance fiction, a genre often considered one of the most conservative genres in terms of gender roles and equality.

The Silhouette Bombshell line was created by the multinational publisher Harlequin to capitalise on the popularity of “action heroines” in popular culture. The romance genre, perhaps the most derided of all scorned literature, is often accused, particularly by feminist critics, of reinforcing the patriarchal structure of society. This thesis examines how this character type in romance fiction can provide a means to question and even subvert traditional or patriarchal gender expectations. It will undertake the close examination of the first six books of the Athena Force series, which were published in 2004-2005 as part of the Silhouette Bombshell line. Both the warrior woman and the romance genre are defined and historically reviewed, together with an outline of the workings of the contemporary romance industry with regard to category, genre and publishing guidelines. There follows a detailed analysis of the warrior woman character as she appears in the Athena Force series with regard to agency, violence, sisterhood, professional career, performance of femininity and romantic relationships. This study of the warrior woman in romance fiction challenges many critical and social preconceptions about the romance genre in general, and its treatment of gender roles in particular.

'Statement of authorship'

Except where explicit reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma. No other person's work has been relied upon or used without due acknowledgment in the main text and bibliography of the thesis.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "A.F. Lewis".

Date: 23 June 2014

## *TABLE OF CONTENTS*

Table of Figures.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Chapter One: Who is the Warrior Woman? .....	6
1. History and Myth.....	9
2. Popular Culture and Audiovisual Media.....	12
3. Concepts of Gender .....	17
4. Warrior Women in Romance .....	19
Chapter Two: The Romance Genre .....	22
1. A Brief History of Romance.....	22
2. Romance Novels – Critics and Defenders.....	28
3. Feminism and Romance .....	33
Chapter Three: The Romance Industry .....	43
1. Romance: A Profitable Industry.....	43
2. Romance Publishing Categories and Terminology .....	47
3. Sub-genres .....	50
4. Silhouette Bombshell – The Line .....	54
5. Athena Force Novels.....	56
6. Marketing .....	59
1. Covers.....	59
2. The Athena Force and Bombshell Cover Design .....	67
3. Titles .....	75
4. Blurbs.....	75
7. The Athena Force Continues .....	76
Chapter Four: The Warrior Woman As Hero.....	80
1. Heroic Qualities .....	80
Chapter Five: Femininity, Romance and Sisterhood.....	88
1. Femininity and the Warrior Woman.....	90
2. Passion: Romantic Relationships .....	96
3. Sisterhood .....	108
Chapter Six: Power.....	113

1. Agency and Independence .....	113
2. The Gentler Sex? .....	121
3. Careers.....	131
Conclusion .....	142
Appendices.....	145
Appendix 1: Definitions of Romance Novels in the Publishing Industry.....	145
Appendix 2: Athena Force Plot Summaries .....	147
Appendix 3: The Athena Force Series .....	150
Appendix 4: Silhouette Bombshell Guidelines for Authors.....	152
Appendix 5: Harlequin Romantic Suspense Guidelines for Authors.....	153
Works Cited.....	154
Athena Force Novels.....	163
Works Consulted.....	164

## TABLE OF FIGURES

<b>Figure 1:</b> Woodiwiss, Kathleen. <i>The Flame and the Flower</i> . NY: Avon, 1972. Print.....	63
<b>Figure 2:</b> Lindsey, Johanna. <i>Tender is the Storm</i> . NY: Avon, 1985. Print.....	63
<b>Figure 3:</b> MacGregor, Kinley. <i>Master of Desire</i> . NY: St Martin's Press, 2011. Print.....	63
<b>Figure 4:</b> 1914.....	64
<b>Figure 5:</b> 1945.....	64
<b>Figure 6:</b> 1978.....	65
<b>Figure 7:</b> 1999.....	65
<b>Figure 8:</b> A sample of clinch covers published by Harlequin Mills & Boon in 2004.....	66
<b>Figure 9:</b> Object covers.....	66
<b>Figure 10:</b> Buildings and landscape cover example.....	66
<b>Figure 11:</b> Silhouette Bombshell cover example.....	66
<b>Figure 12:</b> Davis, Justine. <i>Proof</i> . N.Y.: Harlequin Books, 2004. Print.....	71
<b>Figure 13:</b> Fetzer, Amy J. <i>Alias</i> . N.Y.: Harlequin Books, 2004. Print.....	71
<b>Figure 14:</b> Garbera, Katherine. <i>Exposed</i> . N.Y.: Harlequin Books, 2004. Print.....	72
<b>Figure 15:</b> Fletcher, Meredith. <i>Double-Cross</i> . N.Y.: Harlequin Books, 2004. Print.....	72
<b>Figure 16:</b> Mann, Catherine. <i>Pursued</i> . N.Y.: Harlequin Books, 2004. Print.....	73
<b>Figure 17:</b> Webb, Debra. <i>Justice</i> . N.Y.: Harlequin Books, 2004. Print.....	73
<b>Figure 18:</b> Examples of later Athena Force covers:.....	74
Leon, Judith. <i>The Good Thief</i> . N.Y.: Harlequin Books, 2007. Print.	
May, Lori. <i>Moving Target</i> N.Y.: Harlequin Books, 2008. Print.	
McClellan, Sharron. <i>Breathless</i> . N.Y.: Harlequin Books, 2008. Print.	

## INTRODUCTION

The warrior woman and popular romance do not, at first, seem congruent but the rise of the action heroine – a contemporary term for the warrior woman in film and television – and the increasing scholarship applied to the “sub-literary” genre of romance fiction may be seen to have a great deal in common. Both may be perceived ambiguously, equally reinforcing gender roles within a patriarchal society and also as subverting them by breaching the conventional binary oppositions between male and female, active and passive, hard and soft, and so on. The warrior women of the Athena Force, a series within the Silhouette Bombshell line provide a means of examining the warrior woman character and her emergence as a new kind of heroine in the romance genre.

In order to understand the warrior woman in popular romance some definitions and history must be explored. Chapter One provides a definition and account of the warrior woman in myth and history and how her very existence calls patriarchal gender roles into question. Chapter Two will examine the romance novel, its history, critics and defenders and the growing interest in studying romance, amidst other popular genres. Chapter Three considers the industry of romance publishing and the marketing of the books looking at covers, title and blurbs. Also, where the Athena Force novels fit within the subgenre of romantic suspense and action adventure. Chapter Four compares the heroic qualities of warrior women with those of more conventional romantic heroines. A closer examination of the Athena Force series is provided in Chapters Five and Six, looking in detail at how the characters’ attributes as warrior women conform to, or contradict, expectations of the female role in popular romance. The conclusion will provide a summation, a comparison of how the warrior woman’s romance differs from other

popular romances and an answer to questions about whether and how the warrior woman subverts patriarchal values in, and along with, romance fiction.

## CHAPTER ONE: WHO IS THE WARRIOR WOMAN?

Throughout history warrior women have been a persistent feature of factual and fictional stories. From the Greek fascination with the Amazons, across almost all civilizations, European, North American, African, Asian, and Middle-Eastern, women involved in combat have played a part in myth and legend. Names such as Athena, Brynhild and the Valkyries, evoke the mythic warrior woman, while Boudicca, Joan of Arc, and women involved in guerrilla warfare and resistance movements are now part of history. Robin Cross and Rosalind Miles observe in their introduction to *Warrior Women: 3000 Years of Courage and Heroism* that “the problem was not who to include, but who to leave out: for every warrior woman we chose there are countless more” (7). Today, warrior women are a reality in contemporary society where they may be found in the military, law enforcement, intelligence and national security, and they are represented in novels such as the Athena Force series published by Harlequin.

Many scholarly texts have been written about action heroines or warrior women in visual media but little scholarship has focused on those represented in literature. Studies have been centred on the archetype character of the warrior and its application to female characters, the strong women of Gothic literature and historical figures such as Boudicca and Mulan. However, in regards to scholarly examinations of the literary, warrior woman are rarely featured and the action heroine of popular romance only appears in discussions in reader and author online forums (*Romantic Times, Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*).

As this thesis deals with popular literature, a definition of the warrior woman will be drawn from the popular visual media of comics, films, television and video games as well as from literary criticism. Like many of these visual texts, the Athena Force novels are market-

driven popular entertainment and narrative forms often influence each other as intertextuality can be clearly seen in cross-references between media. Indeed, the warrior woman in the twenty-first century is as much a product of screen culture as of literary forebears. Jeffrey A. Brown defines the genre expectations of the action heroine, or woman warrior, as follows: “She commands the narrative and controls her destiny, makes her own decisions, and fights her own battles. She is inquisitive and intelligent, physically and emotionally strong, and is clearly portrayed as a heroic ideal with which audience members identify” (7). This definition has been used as a base for my own definition of the warrior woman of contemporary romance fiction aimed at women and referring to the real world of the reader: The warrior woman drives the story; she makes her own decisions and fights her own battles. She also knows the value of reciprocal relationships that allow her to ask for help and to assist others. She is intelligent and enquiring, physically and emotionally strong but with enough faults to portray her as a heroic ideal with which readers may identify.

The Athena Force female characters, in the novels that are the focus of this thesis, naturally fit with this definition of the physical and psychological traits of a woman warrior. The warrior women of the Athena Force have been trained for their warrior roles at the Athena Academy for the Advancement of Women, and the Academy is strongly represented in the stories. It is implicit that these characters are women – not girls or babes. They are adults, young women whose ages range from 26 to almost 30 years of age.

Masculinity and femininity in Western culture are both tied to the social system of patriarchy. Alan Johnson grapples with this in *Gender Knot*, arguing that patriarchy “calls for a vision of male adulthood based on a social, psychological, spiritual, and physical territory that men can identify with and defend as exclusively male” (84). Johnson asserts that the only way to

accomplish this feat is by gendering basic human qualities, such as courage and heroism, pretending that they define manhood rather than a human maturing to adulthood. The gendering of “such qualities distinguishes and elevates men in relation to women” (84) and helps to perpetuate the gender binary by seeing men as possessing these valued adult qualities while women need men to protect them. Johnson argues,

When we gender what are inherently human qualities, we lock ourselves in a web of lies whose main consequence is to keep patriarchy going, for if society is to remain male dominated, male identified, and male centered, women and men must be seen as fundamentally different so that men can control women as ‘other’ (85).

The warrior woman’s appropriation of the usually male, highly valued, warrior role illustrates that these differences in courage and heroism are not as fundamental as patriarchy avers and her challenging of gendered roles and their perceived qualities makes her a subversive character that endangers the status quo.

To identify and understand the woman warrior further, a brief synopsis of the established historical context of the women warriors who keep appearing in myth, legend and anthropological discoveries is in order. There follows a brief overview of the evolution of the woman warrior in popular media, primarily audiovisual media, which leads up to the creation of the Silhouette Bombshell line. Gender performance and the ambivalent role of the warrior woman in these novels are situated in relation to the theories of Judith Butler. An introduction to the romance genre and its relationship to popular culture and feminism provides further contexts in which the significance of these warrior women can be understood.

## 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

In Greek myth the Amazons were a race of unnatural women who were to be feared, although they could be defeated. Greek women, however, had no place in combat. This could be read as reflecting male fear of the power of the female or Other. Indeed, the war historian Martin Van Creveld takes the view that mythic warrior goddesses were created by male imaginations (48). The Greek goddess, Athena, would appear to be the model for this concept with her “birth” from the head of her father, Zeus. This mythical tradition is alluded to explicitly in the Athena Force novels in that the Athena Academy is named after the goddess and reflects the goddess Athena’s areas of interest: wisdom and war. The exclusively female students undergo military training to prepare them to handle almost any given situation.

Athena was a fierce virgin goddess similar to Artemis, but Athena did not avoid men and was associated with the city of Athens. She was an active goddess involving herself in the affairs of men guiding and helping her favourites, heroes such as Jason, Perseus, Odysseus and Heracles. Situated as the goddess is within the patriarchy it is worth noting Ann Shearer’s observation, in *Athene: Image and Energy*, that the Athene archetype provides an opportunity “to muse on the nature of a ‘feminine’ energy that is intrinsically battling, scraping and fierce, as well as intrinsically skilful and wise” (5). This feminine energy is apparent within the popularly identified women’s genre of romance.

Another mythical allusion is that the six stories examined in this thesis concern a group of Athena Women called the Cassandras after the prophetess who was doomed to prophesy the truth but never to be believed. Cassandra’s association with Athena came when Troy fell and she sought sanctuary in Athena’s temple where she was raped (Cotterell and Storm 27). Athena

punished this sacrilege by slaying many of the Greek warriors during their voyage home from the war. Athena therefore protected members of her own sex as do the women of the Athena Academy. In the first book of the series, for example, the reader is told that Alex, “as any Athenan, would protect what she loved. Whatever it took” (Davis 50).

Women who fight appear in more than one culture, for example the myths of the Vikings and Celts. Indeed, many men received their weapons and training from women, such as Cúchulainn and Medb. Shannon French, a military ethicist, states that “in addition to encouraging their men to embrace and uphold warrior values, women in the Viking and Celtic sagas also have the option of becoming warriors themselves” (108). French also notes that the Vikings and Celts were intensely committed to family unlike the Homeric Greek tradition (109). In contemporary patriarchal terms, family is often seen as of paramount importance to women, certainly to those of the Athena Force. This reflection of the combination of myths and legends that have all fed into modern narrative can be seen in the importance of community to these graduates of the fictional Athena Academy.

Although the Athena Force novels provide fictional representations of warrior women such female characters do have a basis in fact, as many legends do. The archaeologist, Jeannine Davis-Kimball, points to evidence of warrior women found in burial sites. Cultural anthropologist, David E. Jones, uncovers a clear pattern of real women as warriors in his book on the history of such women. He demonstrates that the idea of women in combat is not as unusual as many may think and that females have long been soldiers and military leaders. However, Jones’ argument would seem to be at odds with the views of Martin van Creveld, as van Creveld points out that women who ruled or commanded did not necessarily fight (67), just as their male counterparts in command were often safely at the rear. Nevertheless, Joshua Goldstein in *War*

*and Gender*, argues that women have been, and still are, fairly common in guerrilla warfare. History also shows that during war, women have performed traditionally male work while the men are away. They are allowed to occupy a male space only for the time required. Goldstein makes an interesting observation on this, putting forward the hypothesis that “patriarchy rests on the exploitation of women’s labour, with wartime intensifying the need for this exploitation. Women cannot generally become warriors because their work (which is never done!) [sic] keeps the war machine running” (380). Once the war is over women are expected to return to domestic duties as if they had never been involved, whether in keeping the economy running or in the war itself.

Anna Froula, a feminist and historian, claims that women have fought in every war on United States soil and every war in which the US has been involved overseas in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries yet are historically absent in the annals of war, a phenomenon she refers to as “cultural amnesia” (153). She also argues that women warriors “have been written out of history by popular movies and television shows” (154). Froula draws attention to a gendered double standard, in which women are expected to represent both the vulnerable home front and to hold it together with “Amazonian strength” with the result that “women must remain mythically unreal when national masculinity is at stake” (154).

Martin van Creveld’s history, *Men, Women & War*, examines the male-dominated activity of war and argues that women tend only to be mobilised for war when societies are in a state of total war, such as World Wars I and II. However, he does state that “a few [women] participate in combat, proving themselves in a few exceptional cases to be capable warriors” (205). Although women warriors have existed throughout history few have been recognised for their achievements in this area. Nevertheless their significance is considerable.

## 2. POPULAR CULTURE AND AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA

Feminist film scholar, Rikee Schubart argues that it was not until the 1990s that feminist film theory finally acknowledged the female action hero (13). Since then a wealth of material has appeared about the warrior woman in film and television. However, little has been written about warrior women in popular literature, such as the Silhouette Bombshell line published by Harlequin Mills and Boon at the turn of the third millennium. This thesis addresses the sparse scholarly analysis of female warriors in popular fiction by focusing on these novels.

Studies undertaken in film have centred on types such as the “female action hero”, “tough girls”, “action babes”, and “superbitches”. Yvonne Tasker in *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema* coined the term “musculinity” (3) to describe the toned and impressive bodies of women in films who develop their strength for combat. Examples are Sarah Connor in the *Terminator* movies (1984, 1991, 2003, 2009), Ripley in the *Alien* series (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997), and Jordan O’Neill in *G.I. Jane* (1997). Sarah Connor, for instance, develops from a traditionally feminine role as a waitress to an action hero in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, in which she is depicted exercising in her cell and wearing singlets that show the development of her arm muscles. In this film, she is also seen handling weapons with a casualness that denotes familiarity and a willingness to utilise them. Similarly, *G.I. Jane* places emphasis on rigorous exertion by featuring scenes of Jordan working out and enduring physical and mental torture. All this “musculinity” reveals that a warrior whether female or male has to be physically and mentally tough which demands training and discipline. Such focus and control on the part of women goes against the patriarchal gender binaries when it becomes evident that women are capable of displaying traits usually coded as masculine.

In visual media these women may be muscular but many of their female features are also overtly emphasised – consider Xena’s and Wonder Woman’s minimal costumes, exposing legs and cleavage. Lara Croft’s clothes cling to and emphasise her body. Buffy and Nikita are shown delivering fatal blows while dressed in short skirts. One wonders how some characters could possibly be physically active in clothes which seem to barely hold together and offer no protection from fists and weapons. The female warrior women of the Athena Force series are not fetishized as there is not the usual detail devoted to what the female protagonist is wearing that often occurs in other popular romances. These warrior women generally wear what is practical for their activity at the time just as a male character would and their attire is discussed in more detail in Chapters Three and Five.

Sherrie Inness also focuses on female muscularity when she describes “the tough woman in action-adventure narratives is likely to be muscular but not too muscular, and she is also apt to be independent, not requiring any support. The tough woman is typically not as tough as the males around her” (12). However, Inness argues that these tough women could be role models to their female audience by showing that:

They can challenge generations-old stereotypes about what it means to be a woman...the media’s tough women are teaching real women dramatically different ideas about what it means to be female. For example, being aggressive is desirable, and women should not wait for men to save them. Such changing celluloid notions about what it means to be a woman are affecting real life (15).

The extent to which such changes are happening in real life is beyond the scope of this thesis but the argument can be made that when such behaviour is shown, supported and becomes familiar to a culture it is more likely to be accepted. In Australia this can be seen in the

increasing roles for tough females in law enforcement shows such as *City Homicide* (2007-2011) where the character of Ally is depicted as being tougher than most of the male officers when she chases and restrains criminals. Another television series, *Sea Patrol* (2007-2011), featured a female character who, as second in command of a navy patrol vessel, has a nickname, “XO,” (reflective of her rank as executive officer) and has the respect and obedience of the crew due to her rank and professionalism. Equally, current reality television shows such as *The Force* and *Border Patrol* show women in roles that involve law enforcement and using physical force to restrain suspects. These examples of women’s roles in contemporary popular culture reflect the increasing prevalence of the view that women are capable and should be able to have careers in these fields. The women of the Athena Force such as Kayla, a police lieutenant in *Justice*, and Josie, an air force test pilot, in *Pursued*, form part of a cultural environment in which women are able to choose to work in traditionally male occupations in both reality and on the page and screen.

Warrior women have continued to appear in recent popular fiction, film, television and video games. Amanda Lotz has focused on representations of women in television including the growing number of women in police and detective series while Jennifer Stuller examines the female warrior as she is represented in comics and films. These critics explore the development of the action heroine, her appeal and the problems associated with characters that violate the binary code and undermine gender stereotypes. This thesis examines portrayals of women in contemporary romance fiction whose occupation involves developing and exerting physical force, the “active, aggressive, independent female hero” (Schubart 6). Here the focus is on women who actively fight, and who display “precise and controlled aggressiveness” (Henriksen 195). A warrior does not know only when or how to fight – the ones who survive also know

when not to fight. The protagonist of *Proof*, Alexandra Forsythe, displays this aspect in the novels when she reflects that the Athena Academy had not only taught her fighting skills but also “the self control to choose her battles” (Davis 246).

Schubart argues that in films about female military personnel and war “where the military force a new identity onto and into the male soldier, it frees a repressed identity in the female soldier who was not allowed to express herself fully before” (254). Schubart continues her argument stating that in the motion picture “when women enter the military, they come fully equipped with “adult” personalities. Military training may transform their bodies but not their characters” (253). This argument may be seen to be at odds with those feminist scholars, who believe there are essential differences between men and women, such as Jean Bethke Elshtain who believes women care more about peace than war and Cynthia Enloe who argues that Western society is militarized and both sexes are shaped by its requirements. However, the women of the Athena Force have been trained from adolescence to fully develop their potential in all areas, including their character, without losing their feminine nature. This thesis examines the extent to which this level of skill and training can be considered to provide more options than the traditional gender roles.

Michael Ventura, in addressing the popularity of warrior women in 1990s film and television, makes some interesting observations on the heroes of these works. Considering television shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), Ventura writes that “What Buffy and Nikita have most in common is that they are warriors” (61), dating back to the real and mythical warrior women of the past who inform stories such as the television series *Xena, Warrior Princess* (1995-2001). Ventura believes that “far from softening the shows, these warrior women make the nightmarish visions all the more stark. Male heroes just aren’t flexible

enough to handle the conditions that Buffy, Nikita and Xena deal with” (61). He argues that the 1990s were a time of shifting values and that, in this context, the ambivalence and ambiguity of the warrior woman enables her to adapt. Whereas “the old dramatic conception of the male hero depends upon strong boundaries and clear choices”, writes Ventura, “In a world increasingly without boundaries” (61) the traditional male hero is lost. By contrast, the ambiguity of a woman within a normally male role is valuable in changing times and such female characters “can not only tolerate but learn to relish ambivalence” (61). The rise of the flexible female in 1990s film and television is echoed in the Athena Force novels.

Schubart asserts that: “Today’s active, aggressive, and independent female hero is clearly a child of feminism. But to read her as an answer to or even as the end of feminism would be a mistake” (6). Stephanie Genz goes on to consider the action heroine as “either portrayed as a semi-tough pretender to male power who is ultimately too feminine to be as effectual as her male counterpart; or depicted as a de-feminized male impersonator, reinforcing the link between masculinity and toughness” (154). The action heroine is created by a masculine film culture and is often seen as maintaining the status quo, harking back to van Creveld’s argument earlier that the mythic heroines were created by men. The action heroine is a cause of unease as she can both problematize and reiterate some of the most basic tenets of traditional representations of gender difference. Or she can be seen as representing female agency.

Women’s involvement in armed conflict is not originally or exclusively a feminist phenomenon. Feminist academics argue that it is only recently that women’s roles in these conflicts have been recorded, highlighting Froula’s “cultural amnesia” (153). The action narratives of warrior women may highlight this facet of being female and also prepared and equipped to fight. The Athena women are situated as a vanguard in their training and their

placement in traditionally male careers. These plot developments are linked explicitly to gender when we are told that Alex in *Proof*, “knew that many of the very places Athena was training women to become part of were run by those who felt threatened by the idea of capable, trained, strong women moving in” (Davis 92). Warrior women here can be viewed as a threat to patriarchy, subversive and not supportive of it.

### 3. CONCEPTS OF GENDER

The warrior woman represents both female and male traits, according to traditional patriarchal terms, and she creates ambivalence within the reader because she does not fit within binary gender norms. Jeffrey Brown argues that the action heroine’s “ambiguous nature means she can represent many different things to many different people. The action heroine is a lightning rod for public debate because she is such an in-your-face challenge to basic cultural assumptions about gender roles in real life and in fantasy” (6). The traditional binary model of males and females as opposites, for example, male – aggressive, female – passive, can be found in most cultures but especially patriarchal societies where masculine behaviours are valued more than feminine behaviours as discussed earlier by Johnson. In rupturing the binary view of gender, the Athena Force novels display a type of pluralism where diverse traits are valued. Captain Josephine Lockworth, in *Pursued*, by the end of her story has “an understanding of what her mother meant about the importance of being soft as well as strong” (Mann 293). The warrior woman is not restricted by the either/or of the binary model but instead draws on the full spectrum of traits both masculine and feminine as needed.

In the essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” Judith Butler asserts that “gender is in no way a stable identity of locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts* [original emphasis]” (in McCann 419). The warrior woman defies the expectations of a gender norm as Butler defines it in *Undoing Gender*, “if gender is a norm, it is not the same as a model that individuals seek to approximate. On the contrary, it is a form of social power that produces the intelligible field of subjects, and an apparatus by which the gender binary is instituted” (48). The binary oppositions of male/female, active/passive that underpin Western culture serve to define behaviours that are considered acceptable for a male or female according to their biological recognition of which sex they belong to. The confining aspects of this binary have been a focus of significant interest amongst feminists.

Judith Butler questions the need to fit within these norms, asking why one can’t present both aspects: “even if we accept the descriptive viability of terms such as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, who among us has identifications with just one? And is it even possible to identify with one without at the same time establishing an identificatory relation to the other?” (*Undoing Gender* 24). Butler argues that “gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized” (42). A central premise of feminists and queer theory is that sex is biological and gender is culturally defined. In this context, the warrior woman’s ambivalence and refusal to stay within the performance of one accepted gender allows what Butler calls, “the possibilities of gender transformation... to be found in the arbitrary relations between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (in McCann 419). The warrior woman can perform both

“male” aggression and “female” nurturing. To find such behaviour within the context of popular romance novels, moreover, will be shown to be subversive not only of binary understanding of gender roles but also of traditional conventions of the romance genre. In the Athena Force novels, the warrior heroine drives the story, undertakes an action quest of her own and relegates the male to a supporting role. The female character is not there only as decoration, but is actively engaged in driving the story forward. She subversively reiterates and creates new performative acts and gender constitution.

#### 4. WARRIOR WOMEN IN ROMANCE

The blurb on the back of each of these books sets up the premise of this continuity series:<sup>1</sup> “Athena Force: chosen for their talents. Trained to be the best. The women of Athena Academy shared an unbreakable bond...until one of them was murdered.” Where popular romance commonly features the alpha or strong, dominant hero to the apparently submissive heroine, (though this is seen as subject to debate in Chapter Two) these warrior women are depicted as female equivalents through their talent, training and specialist skills in careers as diverse as forensic scientist, police lieutenant, air-force test pilot, CIA agent, television reporter and make-up artist. The female characters of these novels are a select few chosen for inherent talents and offered the opportunity to train to maximise those talents.

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<sup>1</sup> A continuity is a series of novels written by different authors but with the same characters. Each individual character features in their own story and all are connected by an overall storyline.

The focus of this thesis on popular romance is prompted by several factors. The romance genre encompasses at least 50% of the paperback market in the United States. Whilst its popularity endures, the genre also adapts in response to changing social mores. For instance, the Silhouette Bombshell line under which the Athena Force continuity series appeared was created in response to the popularity of television shows such as *Xena, Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and marketed at young women in the new millennium (Yamashita 15). As such, these novels are examples of market-driven popular culture, at which romance publishers and authors excel. This section of the publishing industry is overtly driven by market research and is highly responsive to its readers and will be further explored in Chapter Three. The introduction of warrior women into the romance genre may be seen as innovative with its juxtaposition of romance featuring female action heroines in contrast to the traditional romance that features the male warrior. However, these stories feature both male and female warriors learning to build and maintain loving relationships.

This thesis argues that despite the fact that the warrior woman has appeared in historical and mythological records throughout history, the appearance and celebration of the female action heroine or “kick-ass babe” in the 1990s and the new millennium is a response to both the theoretical challenges of feminism and the social changes brought about by feminism. The romance publishing industry applied its market research and found that the warrior woman appealed to the young women brought up after an expansion of feminism and a questioning of the gender binary within an overarching patriarchal Western culture.

The next chapter will look at the evolution of the romance genre and how it is labelled a women’s genre and is the last of the fiction genres to attract serious scholarly attention by a group of scholars rather than individuals. This growing recognition of the value of scholarly

study of popular fiction, and romance in particular, supports my research of the warrior woman in contemporary romance fiction. Chapter Two will also investigate the critics and defenders of the romance genre and how feminism has reacted to romance fiction and how it is portrayed within this predominantly female genre.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE ROMANCE GENRE

In the 1980s the number of academics studying the romance genre began to increase. Like many other female-dominated areas, romance has been largely dismissed as, and along with, “women’s fiction” as mere entertainment. Romance is a “scorned” literature, along with other popular genres. Lydia Cushman Schurman and Deidre Johnson define such literature as “print-based, mass-produced fictionalized narrative” (xi). The idea that so many people read popular fiction that is written primarily to entertain and to “sell” – detective, horror, science fiction, and romance genres – previously appeared to preclude such literature from serious study, yet a “growing number of scholars have discovered the rich potential of an examination of these [works]” (Schurman & Johnson xi). This chapter provides a short history of the genre and an examination of critical feminist and academic approaches to possibly the most scorned literature of all, the romance novel. It has been observed that “the women who savoured Harlequin romances and were accused of tacitly supporting patriarchal values” (Schurman & Johnson xiv). However, scorned texts can also offer a threat “to established societal or cultural values with respect to gender roles” (Schurman & Johnson xv) as popular fiction can provide a space to present alternative gender roles and social mores.

### 1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF ROMANCE

The history of the romance novel contains influences from other literature types and there are different theories as to how far back this genre’s roots extend. Some, such as Gillian Beer in *The Romance*, investigate the development of romance from medieval beginnings of chivalric tales with images of courtly love, challenging quests and the idea of romantic love. Sally Goade

asserts that romance stories hail back even further to the time of Greek theatre, an argument supported by Jean Radford in *The Progress of Romance*. Goade also makes a case for the influence of Shakespearian comedies and the tradition of fairy and folk tales featuring the “happy ever after” ending. Romances in the literary sense may go back millennia but Pamela Regis traces the development of the modern romance novel from 1740 (xi) with Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*.

Gillian Beer declares that even the serious literary romance, “however lofty its literary and moral qualities, is written primarily to entertain” (3). The world of the romance takes the reader beyond everyday life into a realm that is otherwise unreachable. It invites the reader to suspend disbelief and to expand the everyday world beyond its normal boundaries by creating larger-than-life characters out of certain human characteristics. The romance not only entertains but provides a happy ending. As Diana Holmes observes, “where the popular and the literary differ is in the degree of resolution they provide” (129). The reader of the romance who is familiar with the genre is assured all will end well, whereas literary novel readers may discover an unexpected or, possibly, no resolution to the story. Popular fiction differs from literary fiction in its commercial aspect: books are marketed to sell and the most profitable stories are the ones that are published, unlike literary fiction which is more likely to receive recognition through awards rather than money.

In order to sell well, all popular fiction genres such as fantasy, science fiction and romance need to meet the readers’ expectations. Candice Proctor, a romance author, argues that “while many people do not like to admit it, the fact remains that all genre writing is about satisfying readers’ fantasies” (14). The satisfaction and the entertainment come from fulfilling these fantasies with an engaging story. Jane Austen is famously known for poking fun at the

romance tale. However, as Frye observes, “while Austen critiques the romance narrative (and helps to transform it), she is also very careful that the right heroine ends up with the right hero in the end, satisfying the romance reader even as the reader feels herself a little above the typical narrative (39-40)” (qtd in Goade 3). Even the novels of Jane Austen ensure that the romance has its all-important happy ending and the expectations of the genre are fulfilled.

The literary romance, as Beer asserts, re-uses well known stories, “whose familiarity reassures, and permits a subtly allusive presentation. Its remote sources are domesticated and brought close to present experience peopled with figures whose motions and relationships are directly registered and described with profuse sensuous detail” (2). Popular contemporary romance also uses this familiarity by retelling fairy tales. For instance, Linda Barlow and Jayne Ann Krentz consider the use of archetypes in romance arguing that the language of romance novels is full of coded information: “The novels are full of allusions and resonances that are unrecognizable to outsiders” (Krentz 6). Romance writers use figurative language, “rich, evocative diction that is heavy-laden with familiar symbols, images, metaphors, paradoxes, and allusions to the great mythical traditions” (Barlow and Krentz, 16). This encoding, or inside information, is one of the main reasons given by Barlow and Krentz to explain why those critics who denigrate popular romance may fail to see the appeal of romance or fully understand the genre.

Although Beer considers sexual love as one of the great themes of the literary romance, it is not as pervasive as is commonly assumed. The adventure part of the literary romance can not only run parallel with the love story but can also overtake it as in *The Hobbit* (Beer 3). Here is another divergence between popular romance and literary romance as the love, both sexual and

emotional, is all-important to the romance genre and is the point at which this thesis will leave the literary romance and concentrate upon the popular.

As we shall see in the industry overview in the next chapter, some sub-genres of the contemporary romance, such as the Intrigue and Bombshell lines, have elements of both adventure and romance. Romance author Stella Cameron argues that, “in romance novels love is portrayed as an adventure embarked upon by free, bold women who know that their true power lies in their own heroic qualities” (144). The popular romance presents a type of intimacy that combines both sex and love as the ultimate relationship model. Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan observe, “romance capitalizes on the idea that both men *and* women need emotional connections to truly enjoy sex” [original emphasis] (154). Sex may feature largely in many romances but it is only meaningful and satisfying when emotions are involved.

George Paizis traces the popular or sensational romance back to the Victorian age and observes that “the spirituality of the romantic conflict of the Victorian era was succeeded by a marked materialism during the Edwardian” (29). He then goes on to state that “during the 1920s and 1930s, the heroine became less self-sacrificing, more socially sophisticated and the question of her domination by the man showed signs of becoming more problematic” (Paizis 29). Scott McCracken provides a brief overview of the subjects covered by romances from the 1930s:

In the 1930s, while the economic context for most readers was the Depression, Mills & Boon fictions told tales of high society. In the 1940s, the context of the war led to a breaking down of class barriers and to more realism. The 1950s saw a shift back to fantasy worlds of international travel. From the 1960s onwards heroines became more independent and in the 1970s gradually absorbed feminist ideas (78).

It can be seen that romance and its settings respond to the needs and concerns of what is occurring in the social and everyday world. The effects of mass publishing in the creation of a romance industry led to distinct categories of popular and literary fiction and the effective marketing of fiction by genre.

Janice Radway, in her new introduction to *Reading the Romance*, acknowledges that the genre has not been fixed in the 1980s when her pioneering study of a group of women romance readers from an American town called Smithton was conducted. Her conclusion from that study was that for the Smithton readers “romance reading address[ed] needs created in them but not met by patriarchal institutions and engendering practices” (211). More recently she observes that her “book’s argument is a product of a very particular historical moment” (1). It was a particular moment because the style of story in the 1980s is not the style of story in the new millennium and the stories and society have moved on. As Daphne Clair, a romance author, argues, “older books of any genre should be read in the context of their times” (26), the context providing insight into what is in the romance on both the surface and the cultural assumptions underpinning the novel at that point in time.

Ken Gelder observes in *Popular Fiction* that the romance had changed “by the 1980s, its interest not only in the heroine’s romantic dalliances but in her career was also well established, with or without the help of feminism” (51). Feminism was part of the change in culture and social patterns and it is these that Gelder argues change the romance. Carol Thurston, a feminist and academic, in contrast to many feminists, claims that American romances, such as the Harlequins of the 1970s and 1980s actually helped the spread of feminism. As both romance fiction and feminism primarily involve women some influence either way would be seem to be inevitable. Whether feminism directly changed the romance, feminist ideas have been gradually

absorbed into romance fiction, or perhaps a blending of the two, is an argument that will not be explored here but as Tasker and Negra state in *Interrogating Postfeminism* “contemporary popular culture is produced, in part at least, in response to feminism. That is, feminism forms an important part of contemporary culture” (5). The influences of feminism on the wider roles available to women are reflected within their daily lives and the material they may be reading.

Kay Mussell, in *Fantasy and Reconciliation*, considers that “the power of the romance fantasy to move and engage its readers derives from its resilience and from its ability to incorporate and manage cultural change within a rich variety of plots” (191), which offer contemporary variations of plots drawn from sources such as fairy tales and folktales. This highlights the genre’s flexibility and the willingness of romance publishers to follow readers’ interests and lifestyles allowing it to maintain its popularity. The genre allows women to explore, if only vicariously, different lifestyles, careers and physical abilities, especially in the Athena Force novels examined here. Mussell continues to argue that:

Despite their acquiescence to patriarchy, romances strongly reassert the belief that woman’s sphere is more than merely tangential to human life. And in insisting that women also have a part to play in human affairs, romances offer to readers a vicarious drama in which they may be, for once, central to their own stories (191).

Romances allow women to have adventures and to win battles, whether emotional or physical within the confines of the cardboard covers. Such fiction provides a means for the reader to vicariously live like a warrior woman.

## 2. ROMANCE NOVELS – CRITICS AND DEFENDERS

Sarah Frantz and Eric Selinger argue that criticism in academic circles has gone through three waves of approaching critical work on romance, “...the first wave of popular romance criticism crested in the 1980s, [Radway’s seminal work looking at readers of romance and feminist and academics derisory criticisms of the genre] followed in the early 1990s by a second wave – essays by authors, notably those gathered in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*” (7). The third wave providing recognition as a scholarly field they date chronologically to the “1997 special issue of the journal *Paradox*, where romance scholars, authors, and readers first met on a more-or-less equal footing” (7).

Frantz and Selinger also observe that previously “scholars of popular romance fiction worked in isolation, divided by both national and disciplinary boundaries” (8). In the new millennium, popular fiction of all genres has slowly gained enough standing against the literary canon to be studied seriously by academics. Romance fiction scholarship became more cohesive when Frantz “transformed Salinger’s ad-hoc, on-line network into the first professional organization for scholars in the field, the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance (IASPR)” (9). The organisation has approximately 200 members. They see that the kind of romance criticism that Mussell called for in 1997 – the kind that “takes into account the critical practices of feminists and other scholars as well as the creativity of writers and the experience of readers – has not only emerged; it bids fair, at last, to become the normative model for how such reading is done” (10). The genre has become a thriving area of study for academic scholars.

Various criticisms have been made of the approaches by early scholars to studying popular romance. Lynn Coddington, argues that early academic studies did not consider the

variety in romance fiction. A fellow academic said, when Codrington's first romance was published, "I just can't bring myself to read it. I can't get around the fact that romance novels are completely anti-feminist." [Codrington's response was] "Right. And she should know, having never read one" (16). Frantz agrees: "most non-romance-reading feminist critics continue to view the romance novel as deservedly entrenched in the category of scorned literature because they assume that the female empowerment readers claim is a form of false consciousness, a conservative social force" (18). Frantz sees these contradictory readings as rising from the hero as representation of the patriarchy. By contrast, the hero in the Athena Force is less important than traditional romances and the heroine/warrior woman drives the story, not the hero.

Codrington further argues that once critics started to actually read romance novels with a view to studying them, a lot of assumptions were made upon only a small sample of a very large field of material. This is a position with which Pamela Regis, in the article "The Eight Essential Elements of the Romance Novel," agrees, "I found that many critics condemned romance after having read only a handful of them... Their research method had hasty generalization written all over it" (15). Furthermore, Regis argues that "these other critics had not credited – or in some cases even identified – the age, breadth, and depth of the romance novel" (15).

According to Codrington, this "hasty generalization" added to the view that romance supported patriarchy and gender role acceptance:

Those feminist dinosaurs did this [criticize romance] because a handful of academic writers in the 70s and 80s said it was so. Lacking academic voices to the contrary, this created one of the most widely held general beliefs about romance, that it encourages women to accept and maintain negative and oppressive gender roles in society... The tremendous variety in romance is often

ignored or overlooked, and many people seem to have little knowledge about what's actually in our books. We're the experts there (17).

For example, Ann Rosalind Jones studied only sixteen novels in 1986 while a 2012 study by Laura Vivanco used:

A sample of approximately 60 "Modern" and "Presents" novels published between 2000 and mid 2007 (the total output for this period was over 700) and a similar number of "Tender" and "Romance" novels published between 2001 and mid 2007 (the total output for this period was around 500) (1062).

Both were taking feminist approaches to romance novels and the different conclusions reflect the different conditions for women in each time period. The difference between these sample sizes shows that scholars are now prepared to consider samples more reflective of the volume and variety of the genre.

Variety is evident in the number of subgenres within romance as noted by Kay Mussell in "Where's Love Gone? Transformations in Romance Fiction and Scholarship" leading her to modify some of her thinking from her earlier work in *Fantasy and Reconciliation*. Her observations centre on two elements in the evolving romance novel:

The many types that now exist (making one interpretation of romance's effects highly problematic) and the increasingly blurred lines between readers, authors, and critics, showing the influence that each group has on the others and even the ways in which individuals may affect the genre by serving in more than one position (6).

The problem of considering all the many types of romance is the primary reason for this thesis's focus on one particular series in one particular line.

Academic literary studies have been criticized for their scorning of romance as a form of fiction. Regis argues that previous academic studies of romance novels “had explored their sociology, marketing, and place in popular culture: they had researched the psychology of readers and the politics that, they claim, lie beneath all romances...they had missed the most obvious approach to the genre: as works of fiction” (15) which is the approach she takes. “I find romances to be as meaningful and important as any other kind of novel – as meaningful as novels of ideas, novels of manners, novels of education, and as important as the other forms of genre fiction: mystery, science fiction, horror” (Regis 15). The romance writers appear to be calling on the academics to be more focused in their criticism and avoid the sweeping generalisations. Studies such as Vivanco’s and the formation of IASPR illustrate the growth of serious study of the romance genre.

Modleski’s views of the romance novel are often cited yet her sample of about thirty books is too small for the generalisations she confers upon an entire genre. Modleski was one of those who felt that “the reader of romances, contrary to the arguments of many critics of popular literature, is engaged in an intensely active psychological process” (448) and that an understanding of popular romance “should lead one to condemn not the novels but the conditions which have made them necessary” (447-8). I feel Modleski’s was a rather condescending view, as it was based upon such a small sample. The problem was reinforced by the fact that her view changed little in the second edition of her monograph, *Loving with a Vengeance*. The only new information in the book was a chapter on Chick Lit and with a 26-year gap it would have been interesting for her to have revisited her conclusions using examples of contemporary category romances and noting whether there were changes in the stories and whether they affected her former conclusions. Societal expectations have changed and romance publishers and writers are

adept at moving on with and reflecting contemporary views – another reason why they should be studied with consideration to the context of the times, just as the Bombshell line was created in response to the popularity of action heroines or warrior women in film, television and comics. The creation and parameters of the Bombshell line will be discussed further in chapter three.

Romance critics now acknowledge the diversity of gender roles for both male and female characters in romance novels or, as feminist theory has argued, there can be more than one type of heroine. This is especially apparent in the warrior women of the Athena Force, where the usual binary extremes do not apply as these female characters exhibit both male and female traits. The potential elasticity of the binary understanding of gender seems compatible with much feminist thought that has sought to separate sex, the biological, from gender, the cultural identity or product. This relates to Butler's theories on gender as outlined in the last chapter. Butler asks, "Is there a specificity to women's cultures that is independent of their subordination by hegemonic, masculinist cultures?" (*Undoing Gender* 4). Contemporary romance novels such as *Athena Force* series feature heroines who operate within a women's culture created by the Athena Academy and who also operate successfully within the wider patriarchal world.

Heterosexual romance is the central theme in contemporary popular romance but the novels do reflect changes in the wider society's view of what is seen as masculine and what is seen as feminine. Sarah Frantz in "Expressing Herself: The Romance Novel and the Feminine Will to Power" finds a blurring of gender roles that empower women and challenge the sources of men's authority. Some romances do reflect females as helpless and waiting for a man but Vivanco noted in her study [mentioned earlier] that the novels often used the words "friends" and "partners" to describe the central relationships (1078) indicating a relationship of equals. Radway found in her 1984 study that the women readers of *Smithton* wanted happy endings but

also plausible relationships and that their constant emphasis on the importance of mutuality in love makes a lot of sense as the male and female develop a mutual dependence on each other within the relationship. This ideal of romantic equality is demonstrated for the female protagonists of the Athena Academy when Tory, in *Exposed*, “knew she’d finally found a man she could have future with. A man who was her equal and not threatened by her. And an Athena woman would settle for nothing less” (Garbera 295). These female characters can survive without a man, ergo, if they opt to risk a relationship then the man must be worthy of the woman. This mutual dependence works towards making women equally important to men and equally subject to their desires and it has only grown stronger as women fight for equality in the public spheres of life and feminism and romance inevitably meet.

### 3. FEMINISM AND ROMANCE

Radway considers that “romance is now, and has been at least for the last fifteen years, a principal site for the struggle over feminine subjectivity and sexuality and, I would argue, over feminism as well” (in Shiach 395). Although romance and feminism may seem to be at odds, they are both concerned with women’s lives. Romance novels can give examples of possible lifestyles and gender roles which the reader is free to choose or reject just as she chooses or rejects particular novels.

Once feminists and critics turned their attention to romances it appeared that the genre was responsible for women’s expectations of life and love and their inevitable disappointment that life is not a romance novel. “Escapist literature or entertainment, whatever the genre or medium, is not usually charged with the responsibility of providing strategy for life changes”

(Flesch 16). Are other popular genres such as murder mysteries expected to provide such life changing strategies? Juliet Flesch writes further on this,

The point to be recognized is that ‘the romance’ does not, as some scholars appear to believe, offer a single view on the subject of women’s work, aspirations and life chances, either over time or at any particular point in time. In the late 1990s no less than the 1950s, there are romance writers who argue powerfully for women’s right to a life beyond the purely domestic, while others argue with no less conviction for their right to find fulfilment in home and family (161).

Butler, as discussed in Chapter One, contends that there is no universal category of “women” (*Gender Trouble* 9) so one may wonder why the genre of popular romance would be any different.

Romance author Susan Elizabeth Phillips, as a young feminist, along with her friends, read romances and “saw no conflict between our feminist views and the content of the books we were reading” (54). They were not seen as presenting a real-life view, but a happier alternative to reality – a view of the way the world could be if women had more power. Judith Arnold, romance author and an avowed feminist, stresses that “in the romance fiction I write, the *girl* does the meeting, losing and getting. The woman *does*” [original emphasis] (134). These women appear to have no difficulty reconciling feminism and writing and/or reading romance as the writing of the romance allows them to present a world where the female has the adventures and is the active party.

Judith Stanton argues that “romance sex is not male-imagined, male-oriented, male-defined, male-produced, or (unfortunately) male-consumed” (55). The romance is primarily concerned with a female point of view, something that feminists observed was rarely available in mainstream literature or even other popular genres such as science-fiction and mysteries.

When considering the idea of gender roles and performance, although there may be basic, arguable assumptions about women (that they are more caring, nurturing, and less violent for example), there is still room for a range of behaviours and characters in lines such as the Athena Force and Intrigue novels that allow women to be physically aggressive when required.<sup>2</sup> Tania Modleski in a 1980 article, “The Disappearing Act: A Study of Harlequin Romances” stated that “the heroine of the novels can achieve happiness only by undergoing a complex process of self-subversion, *sacrificing her aggressive instincts*, ‘pride’, and – nearly– her life” (435) [added emphasis]. This is clearly not the case with the warrior woman as a character. The female characters in the Athena Force do not sacrifice their aggressive instincts instead they have been trained to use them to their advantage.

As most histories of the popular romance and Mills & Boon show, emphasis upon the sex lives of heroines and heroes is one of the major changes in romance literature. The novels of the 1950s, 1960s and even 1970s all stopped at the bedroom door, some allowing touching above the waist, but never below. The heroines were generally young, virgins, often orphans, and the hero was at least a decade older and socially and financially powerful. The exceptions are the so-called “bodice rippers” of the 1970s and early 1980s. These novels, usually of the historical romance subgenre, were set in different stages of history and are said to have used rape, or coercive sex, as a means to help women explore their sexuality. Bodice rippers are also seen to have, strangely, provided a way for the heroine to tame the hero, the phenomenon that Modleski,

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<sup>2</sup> The Harlequin website shows sixteen different categories of romance with different guidelines as to whether the stories should focus upon the heroine or the hero or both, whether there is family involved, children, intrigue, fantasy, the list goes on.

in *Loving with a Vengeance*, sees as the revenge element of romances. Although the rapes were painful for the women, the hero had to be attractive and a viable mate, and also had to be reformed through his association with his victim. As Wendell and Tan say, “The eventual taming of a sexually dangerous and aggressive hero thus allowed women a safe space to explore – and invert – the power relationships in a rape. Romance novel rape ultimately placed women in control” (145). This taming is also reiterated by Phillips who asks whether the critics are reading the same books she is, when they say the women in romances are submissive and oppressed. She asks, and answers, “What is the ultimate fate of the most arrogant, domineering, ruthless macho hero any romance writer can create? He is *tamed* [original emphasis]” (58). In the new millennium a romance where the hero rapes the heroine has become unacceptable<sup>3</sup> – something the reader cannot get past in order to enjoy the rest of the story. Conversely, the contemporary romance genre may allow the female protagonist to be a victim of rape and provide her with a chance to heal and move past the trauma, providing a means of empowerment.<sup>4</sup>

Bodice-rippers had both empowerment and oppression but they were definitely a case of empowerment following, or resulting, from oppression as the heroine became stronger and her needs had to be considered by the hero, providing a shift in the balance of power. Diana Holmes reiterates this: “the heroine is the active agent of the narrative: it is her quest that structures the story, and this quest involves the negotiation of her needs and if necessary the transformation of the hero to meet these” (122). Ann Johnson’s critical reading of 1980s romances agreed that

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<sup>3</sup> An exception is in an erotic novel where the ‘rape’ may be considered as role playing and acknowledged as such by both parties.

<sup>4</sup>For example, in *Her Road Home* by Laura Drake ( Harlequin Mills& Boon 2013), the heroine was a victim of a paedophile and the hero helps her to seek counselling to help her move on with her life.

“the heroine is not fulfilled through his cruelty but through his transformation...the turning point of the novel is often a moment of collapse through which power relations are reversed” (Johnson 200). Empowerment and oppression may both be present in the romance genre and the reader may be the one who ultimately decides which concept they prefer.

Lynn Coddington writes that the feminist view is “that reading romance novels that temporarily numb them to the grim realities of patriarchal culture” (16) and argues that “to view feminism and romance in terms of opposition obscures the many instances of shared purposes, vision and ideals that exist between them” (18). Feminism and romance are both fields of importance and interest to large numbers of women. The romance genre is sufficiently diverse as to enable readers to find variously in the novels empowerment or oppression or a blend of both. In *The Romance Fiction of Mills & Boon, 1909 - 1990s* Jay [sic] Dixon argues that romance and feminism are both dissatisfied with women’s lives but,

It is in the area of the balance of power between the sexes that the novels most obviously undermine the dominant ideology, and come closest to feminist ideology. Patriarchy demands the complete subordination of the woman to the man in a heterosexual marriage. Feminism challenges this, and so do these novels, though not by direct confrontation, as feminism does, but by suggestion (190-1).

The differences between these two groups as Dixon points out may be visible in their methods of dealing with that dissatisfaction by working within or without existing systems.

Articles such as Coddington’s and Regis’s in the *Romance Writers’ Report* show that there are a diverse range of views on romance among writers, readers and scholars.

Coddington’s article was “meant to provide a foundation for serious discussion and debate around the widespread perception of romance as anti-feminist” (16) especially the basic feminist

argument, as Coddington sees it, “that romances lure women readers into a type of dysfunctional literary practice wherein they are too stupid to know that these books are bad for them” (16).

Yet, there are feminists such as Margaret Ann Jensen who argue that “Harlequins’ insights into the manifestations of sexism in our society offer readers a glimpse of feminist theories that more fully describe that sexism” (126). There seem to be as many criticisms of romance fiction as there are subgenres and I concur with Jensen’s observation that “it seems as if romances serve as a Rorschach test to analysts; everyone sees what they want to see, depending upon their political perspective” (29).

Charlotte Lamb, a long time Mills & Boon author, “believes that Mills & Boon novels are feminist”, as does fellow author, Daphne Clair: “I certainly believe that they are feminist and always have been” (Dixon 194). Dixon, like Coddington, claims that romance and feminism have more in common than may first be assumed: “Mills & Boon romances and feminism have differing political frameworks, but it may just be that under the skin they are sisters. Feminism has many faces. Perhaps romance fiction is one of them” (Dixon 195). This view of feminism and romance is one that many romance authors, some critics, and I, feel comfortable to concur with.

Fiction can serve as a means for women to explore cultural change. Imelda Whelehan finds fiction “can take opposing sides and study conflicted opinions and ambiguity, and is therefore far more likely to chime with the uncertainties of women attracted to feminism but confused by the mess of emotions generated by their own personal lives” (12). Feminists did not appear to identify “the ways popular fiction might be a useful medium of communication because of the contradictions involved in concealing a feminist message within a formula that was necessarily deemed conservative” (Whelehan 3). The two were seen as opposite but this

opposition does not always exist as popular fiction, including romance fiction, works within and reflects the popular culture of the time. Fiction allows a space where alternatives such as feminism, and new ways of thinking can be freely and safely explored.

In the new millennium not only feminism but also postfeminism has influenced popular culture and the authors and readers of romance. “Postfeminism broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the ‘pastness’ of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated” (Tasker & Negra 1). Further to the differences between the two, Tasker and Negra, state that “feminism challenges us to critique relations of power, to imagine the world as other than it is, to conceive of different patterns of work, life and leisure. Postfeminist culture enacts fantasies of regeneration and transformation that also speak to a desire for change” (20). The desire for change would appear to be a unifying element of the different waves of feminism; however, the means of enacting such change creates an area of contestability. Questions of power and fantasies of change are readily found within romance novels including the Athena Force series as well as in the action films examined by Tasker and Negra, who consider “the figure of the active, or action heroine, an emblematic and problematic icon of female empowerment within postfeminist culture” (20). Stephanie Genz also considers the action heroine a powerful tool for change and argues that: “The action heroine thus epitomizes the multiple subject and agency positions that become available to women in a twenty-first century context. The concepts of subject and object, man and woman (among others) are deconstructed and reinterpreted” (154). Relationships between these action heroines and feminists and postfeminists are as ambivalent and ambiguous as the warrior woman character herself, yet her recurrence in literature and

legend, and her continuing popularity, alludes to a continual need to question gender roles and behaviours.

One example of the warrior woman's continued appeal as a source for study and her relationship to feminism is shown in a recent thesis which focuses on the relationship between third-wave feminism and "woman warrior" television dramas broadcast in the 1990s and 2000s. Whitney argues "that the rhetoric of militancy has become increasingly central both to third-wave feminist thinking and to the portrayal of onscreen heroines" (Whitney iii). Tasker & Negra argue that "it is our contention that part of the significance of postfeminist culture lies in its pervasive presence not just in film, television and popular literature but in advertising, magazines, music and political discourse" (11). The influence of social change and its pervasiveness is also noted by Paizis: "The relationship between the genre or, for that matter, written popular fiction of any kind and television or cinema, is one of symbiotic cross-fertilisation rather than antagonistic competition (32). There are intertextual relationships between all these elements of popular culture, warrior women, romance and feminism when discussing any era of feminism.

Although romances are now seen as a genre worth studying, the debate remains open as to whether they empower women or oppress them. Janice Radway, among the first to consider the genre of romance seriously, said that "romances can be termed compensatory fiction" (113), but she also notes the notion of guilty pleasure in the reading of romances (105). The romances compensate women for the mundane lives they lead and the money spent on, and time taken to read, the romances provide the guilty pleasure of escaping the everyday. Romance author, Candice Proctor, proposes, "what romances really have to teach are emotional lessons about love...Unfortunately, the inescapable reality is that emotions are not valued very highly in our

society, probably because they are of more interest to women than men” (13). Romances are particularly of interest to females and if this is a major reason why they are undervalued then one may wonder why feminists find them so problematic as they can be seen as an attempt by women to make sense of the world they live in, or to escape from its reality.

Alison Light finds that “reading romance fiction means participating in a kind of subculture, one which underlines a collective identity as women around the issue of women’s pleasure and which can be found outside a political movement” (in Shiach 391). Romance has the ability to unite a large number of women as readers and it can portray many potential lifestyles for them as well. It is a dynamic and responsive genre that shares an almost symbiotic relationship with author, reader, critic and publisher. This responsiveness has led to a change from the traditional romance that catered to more defined gender roles for male and female. Romance writers, readers and feminists are all involved in the dissatisfaction with current lives and the construction of new models of gender/character and coping mechanisms for change/plot and the satisfaction of desire. Indeed, Dixon argues that

Mills & Boon novels, far from being against change, are in some areas ahead of society in their demand for a shift in public opinion. Although they accept that society is ordered so as to give men the advantage, they do not accept that this is inevitable. Not do they preach that women are subordinate to men (183).

Instead these novels create a world where the narrative gives women the cultural authority in a legitimate way that men have in the real world.

This chapter provides a brief history of the romance genre, how it has developed and flourished despite its treatment as scorned literature. The differing views of the genre by

feminists, literary critics and romance authors and readers have been noted and explored and the growing interest in the romance genre as a site of scholarly examination has been shown. It is evident that romance is a dynamic, evolving genre that enjoys a symbiotic relationship between its readers, writers and publishers independent of literary and scholarly criticism as a predominantly women's literature allowing that gender a place to explore alternative ways of ordering the world.

The next chapter will consider romance publishing as an industry and how that influences the novels created. The role of sub-genres in providing the means to cater to cultural change will also be explored. The marketing and presentation of romance novels are discussed, especially striking noticeable differences between standard romance covers and the Silhouette Bombshell covers of the Athena Force series.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE ROMANCE INDUSTRY

In Chapter One the warrior woman character was defined and placed within mythology, legend and history. In Chapter Two the romance genre, its critics and its ambivalent relationship with feminism were discussed. Here in Chapter Three the place of the warrior woman within the romance genre will be contextualized by considering the publishing conditions of contemporary romance fiction. The romance genre is so huge and the money generated by it in the millions of dollars means the romance publishing industry is worthy of discussion as market forces impact on popular fiction, and especially romance, more so than literary fiction. The Athena Force novels under examination arose from the marketing and publishing processes of the romance industry. The romance publishing industry is one which has a symbiotic relationship between author, readers and publishers as all affect and have an effect on each other.

### 1. ROMANCE: A PROFITABLE INDUSTRY

Romance is, indeed, an industry; and as it beckons its readers to ‘escape’ into its various realms (the historical, the paranormal, the erotic, etc.) it precisely acts out the conventional sense of the term, ‘*entertainment* industry’. [original emphasis] On the other hand, its phenomenal sales suggest that it also continues to speak to its readers, closely, intimately (Gelder 51).

Romance novels generate a healthy income for publishers like Harlequin Mills & Boon. According to the Romance Writers of America website ([www.rwa.org](http://www.rwa.org)) “romance fiction revenue actually increased from \$1.355 billion in 2010 to \$1.368 billion in 2011, and it remains the largest share of the consumer market at 14.3 per cent.” Romance publishers were also amongst the first to see the potential of the digital age and e-books are popular in this genre: indeed, the

Athena Force novels have been re-released and are now available in electronic format from the Harlequin website ([www.harlequin.com](http://www.harlequin.com)).<sup>5</sup>

The development of the ability to mass print publications in the nineteenth century, along with the increasing literacy and leisure time among the working class, led to the rise of cheap, “sensational” publications. The penny dreadfuls were the beginning of popular pulp fiction and the proliferation of genres. Publishers such as Harmondsworth and Mills & Boon began publishing romance in the early twentieth century along with mysteries and other popular genres. The financial power of the romance novel may be seen in the expansive growth of the industry from the small English publishing house of Mills & Boon to the global Harlequin Mills & Boon of today that has recently been bought out by Harper Collins.

By the 1960s Mills & Boon were well established and able to test social boundaries by publishing bolder books in the English market first and “then offer [them] to the magazines or to Canada” (McAler 254). Mary Bonnycastle, wife of Richard Bonnycastle, a publishing executive of the small publishing firm of Harlequin Enterprises, first proposed the idea of focusing on the popular genre of romance and by the 1970s Mills & Boon titles were regularly republished in Canada. Joseph McAler states that “effective from 1 October 1971, Harlequin acquired Mills & Boon Limited (although the deal was not made public until December)... Legally, the deal was not a ‘merger’, as the UK press release stated, but a ‘takeover’, as the Canadian release reported” (139) and in 1975 a controlling interest was sold to Torstar Corporation (McAler 284). The publisher continued to grow by buying up competitors and “in

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<sup>5</sup> The use of ebooks means many authors who retained their rights are able to re-publish their own books as ebooks and may spell the end of the ‘pulp’ books that had such a short shelf life and were rarely collected and kept for future reference.

1984 Harlequin acquired its main rival, Silhouette Books of New York, whose titles had been distributed in Britain by Hodder & Stoughton” (McAleer 286).

The size of the industry allowed new approaches as “for the first time...the marketing potential of romantic novels was explored and developed, with novels distributed in non-traditional ways and outlets (given away in boxes of feminine napkins, for example)” (McAleer 284). The industry took on a new global persona and dominated the market on a worldwide scale. Yet, the trusted names and brands are often kept for marketing purposes. McAleer observes that presently “in the UK and certain foreign markets (including Australia), the novels are still sold under the Mills & Boon brand name, while the rest of the world reads ‘Harlequin Romances’” (285). Harlequin’s global command was demonstrated:

[I]n 1989 when, to mark the company’s fortieth anniversary, every one of Harlequin’s 100 foreign markets published the same title on the same date: *A Reason for Being* by Penny Jordan, the firm’s most popular author. The bravura act demonstrated that Harlequin could manage translation and distribution around the world (McAleer 285).

As the popularity of the novels grew, Americans and Canadians started to write their own romances from the mid-1970s. In the 1970s and 1980s heroines began to embark on careers, as noted by Gelder in Chapter Two, and there was a noticeable difference between the English and North American romances for at least a decade. The North American input led to a change in the heroes of romance novels. The heroes began to explain their behaviour toward the heroine, (previously the mostly British or European heroes’ behaviour was often cruel and baffling to the heroines as they did not talk about their feelings and there was no point of view from the hero). Gender roles became less rigid especially with the influence of feminism and more women

entering the workforce but the heterosexual romance was still the most important factor in romantic fiction.

Australian authors, such as Margaret Way, did very well as Australia was seen as exotic to those in the northern hemisphere. Other romances were often set in Europe, the Middle East and various exotic locales with a consideration of local customs and mores as well as the scenery. Romances are also translated into over twenty different languages<sup>6</sup> and are very popular in Europe and Asia. The translations have been known to modify the story to suit local customs and culture, but the market for romance appears to be global even though most of the stories originate from western culture authors, although this is changing with the lines such as the recent Desi love stories available in India (Uparkar).

Another change resulting from the introduction, around 1972, of more sexually explicit books to a North American audience was the marketing of such titles under a special banner (McAleer 286). In turn, this led to the categories and identification of subgenres that so clearly define the romance genre of today:

To differentiate the type of storyline – and thereby satisfy the readers who demanded ‘stronger’ fiction, as well as those who required it ‘softer’ – Harlequin Mills & Boon launched series publishing. Rather than one ‘Mills & Boon Romance’ banner for all types of novels, now there were several: romance, doctor/nurse, historical, ‘Temptation’ (the sexiest), and best-seller reprints, soon joined by the (generally stronger) Silhouette titles (McAleer 287).

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<sup>6</sup> Australian Author, Valerie Parv, has had her work translated into “more than 22 languages as diverse as Icelandic, Bulgarian, Chinese and Korean (Parv 33).

Once Harlequin and Mills & Boon merged, becoming the major romance publisher and exerting strong influences on both the readers and the writers. This created a need for knowledge and representation within the romance publishing industry, leading to the organization of romance writers as a group. The Romance Writers of America (RWA) was chartered in 1981 to provide a non-profit trade association for romance writers. In 2014 it has more than 10,000 members worldwide (primarily in the US and Canada) and 1,885 RWA members are published in book length romance fiction. There was, until 2004, an Australian Chapter of the Romance Writers of America of which I was Vice-President/Treasurer from 1999 – 2004. There is a Romance Writers of New Zealand and also a thriving Romance Writers of Australia, incorporated in 1991, which has a membership in the hundreds and holds competitions and an annual national conference. Membership is open to all aspiring and published romance writers and provides information on romance fiction writing and publishing.

## 2. ROMANCE PUBLISHING CATEGORIES AND TERMINOLOGY

In common with many industries romance publishing has its own particular terms concerning publishing the novels, along with the characters and plots of the stories. Some of the more common terms, and pivotal to the placing of the Athena Force novels within the genre, concern the size of the novel, its marketing and the type of reading experience expected, specific to the romance industry. These are “category” (called “series” in America) and “single title” romances. These categories, or series, are marketed with different names in different countries (see Appendix 1).

**Category** romances are the type of books most frequently identified as romances by the general public; Mills & Boon, Harlequin and Silhouette are all category publishers. These novels are published in uniform packaging and usually range from 50,000 words (Mills & Boon Sweet and Sexy) up to 100,000 words for some lines such as Harlequin Historicals. These are sold in department stores and supermarkets on the premise that their availability generates impulse buys in places where women regularly visit unlike bookshops, though romances are also available in some bookshops. Within category romance there are various lines that are regularly published and the novels in each line feature specific types of romance stories. Category novels are usually recognisable by their distinctive designs and colours of covers, for example, Intrigues or Sexys, (see fig 8). The number of novels published in a given line, such as Silhouette Special Edition or the Silhouette Bombshells, which are the subject of this thesis, can vary in response to reader demand and sales figures.

**Single title** (ST), or mainstream romances, are individual novels similar to category romance but longer, more complex and published by a larger number of publishers. Avon, St Martin's Press, Tor and Dorchester are known for single title romance but others such as Random House and Hale also publish single title romance along with other genres. MIRA and HQN are Harlequin's lines aimed at the single title market. Anne Gracie, on the Romance Writers of Australia website, further defines these terms: “‘single title’ and ‘mainstream’ can mean pretty much the same thing in Australia, but in the US, ‘mainstream’ is used as a definition for women's fiction, which can have romantic elements or not” (see Appendix 1). Mainstream focuses on the woman's story rather than the romance between a woman and a man. Authors such as Danielle Steel and Barbara Taylor Bradford are considered to be mainstream women's fiction authors.

Anne Gracie explains further: “single title is all about one man-one woman – just like category, but the voice is usually different, and STs have a longer word count, can include more subplots, more secondary characters and profanity.” Kristin Hardy puts it even more succinctly: “single-title books have more depth and more details than category” (32-3). The difference is not just in the length but in the capacity of single titles to feature secondary characters in more depth and to develop other elements of the plot, alongside the romance. Category romances are short, easy reads which entertain and meet the reader’s expectations of the hero and heroine declaring their love for each other and moving forward as a couple. They are read because the happy ending is assured, they provide escapist entertainment, and the stories are not read for the destination, which is known, but for the journey.

This is one reason why, although Bombshell is a line, the novels are longer category romances. The Bombshell stories are not a straight or traditional romance that concentrates only on the hero and heroine and their courtship and betrothal. Publishers often use a percentage to evaluate how much of the story is romance and how much another category such as suspense or historical. Hybrid romances such as the Bombshells are described as fifty per cent romance/fifty per cent action, etc. They are also marketed differently to category as will become clear in the next section on marketing.

In regard to the appearance and marketing of romance novels, author Daphne Clair explains, “both Mills & Boon and Harlequin recognized that women had fewer dollars to spend on their own pleasure than men. Hence the uniform appearance, the lower grade paper, and standard ‘word length’” (24). Joanna Bowring and Margaret O’Brien observe that by “the 1930s Mills & Boon had established itself as a publisher of romantic fiction with a recognisable house style. Packaging and production were standardised for cost reasons and to promote the brand...

[covers] could be daring or romantic, sometimes echoing the style of Hollywood film posters”

(16). This uniform appearance allows instant identification and expectations but also provides grounds for criticism which will be discussed in the section on marketing, covers, titles and blurbs.

### 3. SUB-GENRES

There are two principal styles of romance identified by the publishing industry and the organisations of the Romance Writers of America and the Romance Writers of Australia:

- *Romance*: Novels where the love story is the main focus of the novel and the end of the book is emotionally satisfying and optimistic.
- *Romantic elements*: Novels in which a romance plays a significant part in the story, though it is not necessarily the central plot.

A further explanation is provided on the Harlequin website ([www.harlequin.com](http://www.harlequin.com)) in the guidelines for Harlequin Romance “the main focus of each story is the romance itself – the story is the romance.” In regards to the second style of a novel featuring romantic elements: Pamela Regis in her article, lists some of the romances that feature other elements such as history, mystery and suspense: “If it spends significant amounts of time on other things, but includes a courtship and betrothal of a heroine or heroines, then it’s a hybrid of the romance novel and another form, such as the mystery (16). According to these definitions the Athena Force novels and the Bombshell line would be seen as hybrid, not simply romance but as action and suspense with romantic elements – a *romantic suspense* novel.

The “romance elements” style of romance has enabled the creation of a large number of sub-genres. These may be connected to the romance genre’s capacity to maintain its popularity by keeping pace with women’s current interests and by clever consumer market research. Krentz, in an article in the *Romance Writers Report*, observes that “thousands of romance titles have gone into the marketplace in recent years [2003] and the result has been a seemingly unlimited number of sub-genres and storylines” (33). As Ken Gelder observes; “to give an idea of the scale of popular fictional production, there are probably well over 100 writers currently producing Regency Romance alone, just one subgenre amongst many others of romance fiction” (4). That huge variety within the romance genre also makes the borders of the genre and the hybrid romances that Regis refers to hard to define. As Krentz asks, “Where do you separate a romance that incorporates a strong element of suspense from a suspense novel that incorporates a strong element of romance?” (RWR 33) Harlequin’s guidelines for the Silhouette Bombshell line state that the mystery and the romance are equally important, commonly referred to percentage wise as fifty/fifty.

At a Romance Writers of Australia conference at Fremantle in August 2013, Sheila Hodgson, Senior Editor for Harlequin, said that the company currently features nineteen regular lines. Some examples of subgenres are romantic suspense, paranormal romance, Regency romance, medical, and more. The genre also includes a diverse range of heroines in a variety of situations, times and realms. However, across the genre and subgenres, there is a common expectation of the story focusing on the heroine’s experiences and featuring at least one hero or possibly more for the heroine to choose.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> One point that editors and authors often emphasise, at all the romance writers conferences and workshops I’ve attended, is that an aspiring author needs to write the story that they need to tell then find the genre that best fits.

Table 1 features a sample of subgenres I have gathered to illustrate that some of the subgenres can be category only, like medicals, or both single title (where there is a tick) and category.

**Table 1: An example of subgenres in Single Title and Category romance fiction.**

Sub-genre	Elements	Single Title	Category	Author
Medical	Doctors, nurses, specialists set in hospitals and clinics.		Medical	Marion Lennox Fiona MacArthur
Erotica	Sexually explicit story which focuses on the emotional as well as the sexual.	√	Blaze	Cassie Alexander E.L. James
Romantic Suspense	Danger, heroines in jeopardy	√	Intrigue Bombshell	Mary Stewart Vicki Hinze
Regency	Historical set in England in the Regency era (1811-1820)	√	Regency	Georgette Heyer Anne Gracie
Paranormal	Vampires, shapeshifters, etc.	√	Nocturne	Maggie Shayne Kerri Arthur

The Bombshell line has a place within the larger sub-genre of romantic suspense mentioned earlier as a hybrid romance or a suspense novel with romantic elements. Regis considers that this sub-genre originated with popular female authors such as Mary Stewart, whose novels *The Moonspinners*, *Nine Coaches Waiting* and many more, feature both mystery and romance. Modleski identifies these Mary Stewart novels, along with Victoria Holt's, as Gothic (*Loving with 12*) yet they also qualify as romantic suspense. Other authors in more recent

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This recommendation challenges the idea of a formula for these stories, an interesting concept that cannot be fully discussed in this thesis. There are genre expectations that must be met but editors are always looking for fresh voices and original angles.

times include Jayne Ann Krentz, Vicki Hinze and Tami Hoag. Novels in the romantic suspense sub-genre, and the romance genre generally, can be set in the past, the present, the future or the fantastical. The majority, like the Bombshell line, are contemporary stories. Kristin Ramsdell in her guide to *Romance Fiction* has observed a change in the heroine and noted the rise of the warrior woman like those in the Athena Force: “Today’s Romantic Suspense heroine is just as likely to be a lethal karate black belt tracking down drug lords or a military special ops agent infiltrating terrorist cells as she is to be a small town school teacher stalked by a serial killer” (137).

A Bombshell novel, *A.K.A. Goddess* was the winner of a 2005 RITA Award for Best Novel with Strong Romantic Elements. The RITA<sup>8</sup> Awards are issued annually by the RWA. The purpose of the RITA Award is to promote excellence in the romance genre by recognizing outstanding published romance novels and novellas. The categories in these awards can change and sometimes no award is made if there are not enough quality works available. Awards are important for recognition and development of authors and aid publishers in promotion and sales of authors and lines. The number of awards illustrates the variety of subgenres and the value of each to readers, authors and publishers. Some, though not all, of the other categories in these awards are as follows:

**Table 2: RITA Award Categories RWA**

Best Short Contemporary Series [Category]	Best Long Contemporary Series [Category]
Best Contemporary Single Title Romance	Best Traditional Romance
Best Inspirational Romance	Best Paranormal Romance

<sup>8</sup> The RITA® award was formerly known as the “Golden Medallion” (it was a gold pendant). The award was renamed and redesigned in 1990 for RWA’s tenth anniversary, resulting in a golden statuette named after RWA’s co-founder and first president, Rita Clay Estrada.

Best Short Historical Romance	Best Long Historical Romance
Best Regency Romance	Best Romantic Suspense

#### 4. SILHOUETTE BOMBSHELL – THE LINE

The creation of the Athena Force series within the new Silhouette Bombshell line was a new direction for Harlequin. Targeted at 18-34 year olds who were watching *Buffy*, *Xena*, *Warrior Princess* and *Alias*, this line aimed at providing excitement and entertainment featuring, as Brianna Yamashita reporting for *Publishers Weekly* refers to the line as, “high-stakes, estrogen-fueled adventures” (15). Instead of the alpha male<sup>9</sup> who featured strongly in almost all romance novels throughout the fifties and sixties, the alpha female began appearing in numbers in the Bombshell line of the new millennium. Although, Charles and Mosley, in an article in *Booklist*, argue that “tough heroines have always been a part of the romance genre...strong women who know what they want and how to get it” (226), they were rarely trained for the physical role of warrior women at an institution such as the Athena Academy. This new line was launched in the United States in the summer of 2004 and made its appearance in Australia in January 2005. “Our promise to the reader is that this will be the heroine’s story,” said Silhouette associate editor Natashya Wilson when interviewed about the new Bombshell line, “There will be a satisfying romantic subplot, but that’s not the focus of the book” (Yamashita 15).

Glen Thomas, a romance scholar, considered the Bombshell line to be “an obvious and contemporary example of how Harlequin will adapt its lines to fit current popular culture” (26). Harlequin already had the Intrigue line in romantic suspense, but the Bombshell line, and especially the Athena Force, did something new with the introduction of the warrior woman not

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<sup>9</sup> The alpha male refers to a strong male character who is better at action than discussing his emotions.

afraid to take on traditionally male careers such as pilots, police officers and government agents. Thomas observes that there was a “key difference” between the two lines: “the women in Intrigue novels tend to be involved in danger through accident or coincidence, whereas the Bombshells women actively seek danger and trouble” (26). The heroines of the Bombshell line, including the Athena Force, are not fated to be passive female characters; things do not just happen to them. On the contrary, they often attract trouble through their own actions in investigating their mentor’s fatal “accident”. Whatever trouble finds them they are trained and capable of discovering a way out that will also provide justice. As Wilson says in a promotional interview with Yamashita, what sets this line apart is that the stories “are heroine-led, plot-driven, action-adventure stories, not traditional romances. Every Bombshell has a strong and recognisable romantic element. The high-stakes situation that the heroine faces drives the story forward, not her relationship with a hero” (15). The stories are varied (see Appendix 2 for plot summaries of the six Athena novels) but all feature a “strong, sexy, savvy, heroine who has what it takes to save the day and get her man, good or bad” (Yamashita 15).

The writing guidelines for the Bombshell line (see Appendix 4) state that the story should be told primarily from the heroine’s view point whether written in first or third person. Elements that the guidelines say each story should contain include: a likeable heroine with a strong and emotionally complex character who either already possesses, or finds out she has, a particular skill or ability; a situation or element of high risk that the heroine must overcome and a compelling subplot of romance that finishes in a satisfying way. There is more emphasis on the heroine in the Bombshell line (to compare with Romantic Suspense guidelines see Appendix 5). Further, the guidelines say that these stories do not all have to end in marriage but should end with the characters making a commitment to take the relationship to the next level. This may

entail a first kiss, an emotional and sensual encounter or marriage. In the *Athena Force* novels there is a first kiss in the first and third novels, sexual encounters in the other four novels, and by the final novel, one couple is moving in together but only one is contemplating marriage. The *Athena Force* series meets the guidelines and the spirit of the Bombshell line as these female characters pursue a common goal of solving a mystery involving their alma mater, the Athena Academy, while dealing with individual problems. By the end of the continuity each of the Cassandras has a desirable man in her life with the possibility of a lifetime commitment in the future.

## 5. ATHENA FORCE NOVELS

Written by a number of different authors, the *Athena Force* is a series of romantic suspense novels with a higher degree of action adventure included that provides an opportunity for the warrior woman to appear. The stories are about graduates of the Athena Academy for the Advancement of Women, an elite school for exceptional girls, who are trained in military skills as well as academic subjects. An ongoing mystery unfolds from book to book throughout the first continuity series, as these elite graduates as modern warrior women combat kidnappers, terrorists and the forces of evil. *Athena Force* was originally a 12-book miniseries which ran from July 2004 through June 2005 with the first continuity series of six books, discussed here, allowing each character to have her individual story as outlined in the plot summaries in Appendix 2. At the same time the characters are all linked together by being in a group, the Cassandras, formed during their time at the Athena Academy. Their mentor (an older girl at the school, Lorraine Miller Carrington, known as Rainy) invokes the Cassandra Promise to call all the members of the group together but before they can all meet up she is killed in a car accident.

The gathering eventually takes place at Rainy's funeral. The members of the group do not believe it was an accident but, like the original Cassandra of classical mythology, find that the authorities do not take their concerns seriously. Over the course of the continuity series they take it upon themselves to follow up several leads until eventually one of them is forced to kill the man who engineered Rainy's death. The plot line of this series is resolved in *Justice*, as Rainy's killer is found and killed, and a conspiracy involving egg harvesting and surrogate pregnancy is revealed. A full plot summary of the six novels is available in Appendix 2.

The egg harvesting conspiracy provides the basis for the next series published in 2005 which features the three daughters resulting from Rainy's eggs and a Navy SEAL's stolen sperm, and revelations on the mysterious Lab 33. The Athena Academy itself is still under suspicion of possible hidden agendas by the government. The last three books in this miniseries of the Athena Force deal with some of the characters from the first continuity, for example, Josie's sister, Diana Lockworth from *Pursued*. The Athena Force returned in April 2006 with five more books revisiting some of the original characters: Alex and Justin from *Proof*, Tory and Ben from *Exposed*, and Sam's twin sister, Elle, whose existence was discovered in *Double-Cross*, featuring in her own story. For the final (aka "Arachne") continuity, the Athena Force series moved to another line, Silhouette Special Releases, after the Bombshell imprint was shut down by Harlequin Enterprises in January 2007. This continuity was about a threat to the Athena Academy. (For a full list and publishing timeline see Appendix 3.) The Athena Force, in one form or another, thus outlasted the Bombshell line. This thesis focuses on the first continuity of six novels.

As defined earlier, the romance is an important part of the plot but it runs alongside the mystery and adventure. Unlike a traditional category romance, the relationship between the heroine and hero does not provide the impetus or the major conflict for the story which is provided by the adventure and suspense elements. For example, Darcy's (*Alias*) attempts to prove her suspicions of her husband's involvement in a murder as way to free herself of him once and for all, as well as her investigation on behalf of the Cassandras to find the surrogate mothers are what drive the plot forward. Darcy's actions release her to live life her way and with a new man. However, it is a telling point that she calls the Cassandras for back-up in the final confrontation. Darcy is the main driver of the action and not the hero, Jack, her love interest. Jack provides support – the role usually attributed to the female protagonist in action-adventure stories – a plot point that can be seen as subversive of the usually male driven action-adventure stories.

The story, however, is only part of the publisher's brief, as the Athena Force series was marketed with a focus on the "kick-ass" heroine or warrior woman. The marketing of the romance is an important component in the romance industry and, as Candice Proctor observes, "much of the public's perception of our industry comes from the titles, the covers, the prose, the way we promote ourselves, the things we write about and the way we write about them" (19). Proctor asks whether these distinctive titles, covers and prose should be changed to give popular romance a new identity or if all the participants – readers, authors, bookstores– even want to. She seems to doubt that such a change would be possible. Did a new sub-genre such as the Bombshell line provide an opportunity to apply a new and different style to important marketing tools such as covers and titles?

## 6. MARKETING

The Bombshell line was aimed at a younger audience that was presumed to have already been exposed to feminism and the covers reflect the attempt to appeal to this target audience. The books are all clearly labelled as “An Athena Force Adventure” (see figs. 12-17). The covers feature more information than usually appears on a romance or even other Bombshells in the form of visual clues to the story, the Academy and the heroine’s occupation. The other six books in the remainder of the original Athena Force series were also published with these particular covers making them easy to recognise on a shelf in a bookstore or supermarket. All the work on the design included the titles and blurbs as part of the overall packaging and promotion of the line.

### 1. COVERS

Proctor’s earlier quote noted that the book covers of romance novels are an important part of how the genre is perceived by the public. Even keen romance readers find covers problematic as Wendell and Tan, observe in the chapter, “The Covers, and the Reasons to Snark Them”:

It’s not hard to abjectly dismiss a genre when much of it is adorned with mullet-sporting heroes grasping buxom, open-mouthed heroines, both of whom appear to be caught in a wind storm...It’s frankly difficult sometimes to defend a love of romance novels when those novels are wrapped up in the visual assault that is some cover art (168).

Examples of single title covers, that is, books published separately as romance fiction rather than marketed in supermarkets as category romance (see figs 1-3). Although *The Flame*

*and the Flower* (see fig 1) was released in 1972<sup>10</sup> and *Tender is the Storm* (see fig 2) in 1985 the cover on the right from 2011 (see fig 3) seems only an updated version of the early “clinch” covers, the clinch being a man and woman embracing or closely touching with or without lips meeting. Sally Goade sees it as “various versions of Fabio embracing heroines with low-cut bodices” (207). The content of today’s romance novels may vary from the 1970s but the style of marketing used in previous decades is still evident today. These clinch covers may be considered a female equivalent of the scantily-clad females who feature in men’s fiction.

The fact that authors often have little or no control over their covers – or even their titles – suggests this area is commonly the domain of marketers. Moreover, publishers are not averse to reusing cover illustrations, especially in category romance. The healthy sales for books displaying these covers means that such covers will continue for particular lines as long as the clinch cover art keeps selling – a circular defence for the publishers. Perhaps the appeal, as Goade perceives it, is that “the novels’ clinch covers... promise readers particular fantasies and pleasures unique to women’s fiction” (207). This product differentiation makes it easy for the reader to find their genre on the shelf, leading to more purchases.

For their fiftieth anniversary in 1999, Harlequin released a book of 30 postcards reproducing a range of their covers from the last century. The introduction to the collection claims that:

Harlequin books can be judged by their covers, though the hairstyles and fashions are not as telling as the assumptions behind how the people relate to each other. Each illustration is a

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<sup>10</sup> Kathleen Woodiwiss is one of the authors credited with reviving the romance industry and freely addressing women’s sexuality though problematically now through what came to be known as “bodice-rippers”.

portrait of the book, the women who read it and the issues and attitudes that shape their worlds. The stories are always about two people falling in love – but how they meet, who they are and what they do all reflect the times... Sweet or provocative, funny or intense, there is a Harlequin story for every kind of woman – and every kind of woman has appeared on its covers. (Zinberg 2).

The claim that every type of woman has appeared on their covers may not be completely true as they would not feature a disfigured, ugly, old or lesbian woman however, they have had a variety of professions and a few of warrior women, past and future. The Bombshell line reflected the growing number of women in traditionally male protection roles of police and military personnel.

The covers in this collection date back to 1914 Mills & Boon covers as the company was bought out by Harlequin Enterprises. Mills & Boon published not only romance but a wide variety of popular fiction. There are some covers featuring a woman by herself but all reflect the period of their publication, not just fashion but also social mores. The oldest cover in the collection (see fig 4) written by a man features a woman who rescues her man. There are covers showing women keeping the home front going during the war (see fig 5) and then women in the 1950s continuing employment out of the home. The covers of the 1970s, (see fig 6) depict women travelling more widely to exotic locales and those of the 1990s (see fig 7) show blended families resulting from divorce and single parenting.<sup>11</sup>

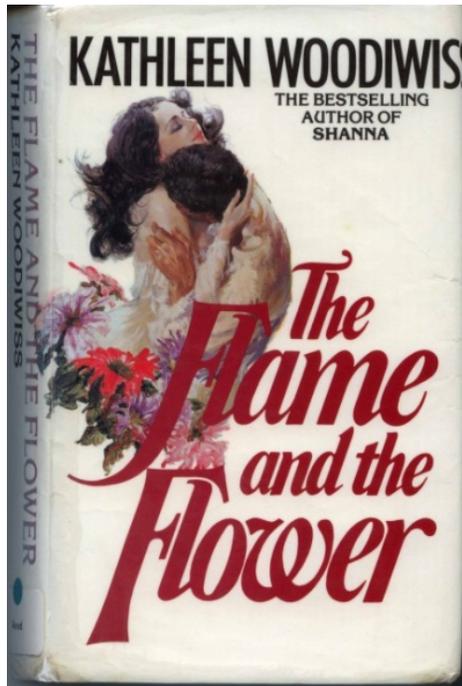
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<sup>11</sup> For even more covers, Bowring and O'Brien's book *The Art of Romance: Mills & Boon® and Harlequin® Cover Designs* features a comprehensive collection.

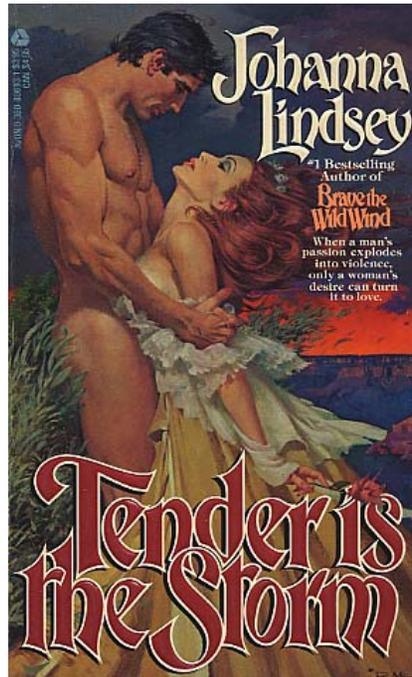
Harlequin's claim of appealing to every woman would indicate that the warrior woman character is bound to appear in a romance at least once. Indeed, warrior women have appeared in many lines such as Nocturne, LUNA and the contemporary lines of Bombshell and Intrigue. A lot of these warrior women have supernatural aspects or are seen in the context of historical warrior nations such as the Celts or in futuristic fiction where women have more equality than they experience in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Intrigue novels have often featured women who can protect themselves where necessary but as discussed earlier the female protagonists in that line do not set out to fight and the males will more often play the role of protector and take action to resolve the problem.

These images (see fig 8) include examples of some of the other lines and sub-genres published by Harlequin at the time the Bombshell line was launched in 2004. They include many clinch covers in which the male and female are kissing, about to kiss or otherwise involved in amorous pursuits. The male features equally with the female because these are stories about the relationship between two protagonists. These are the more traditional or popular romance. Another marketing tool, mainly used by single title publishers, is images of objects such as flowers, fans or shoes, particularly for historical romance fiction (see fig 9). Like the images of houses and landscapes which have become more numerous in the new millennium aimed at the more mainstream women's stories romance novels (see fig 10) – such covers are supposed to save the reader embarrassment while reading romance fiction on public transport.

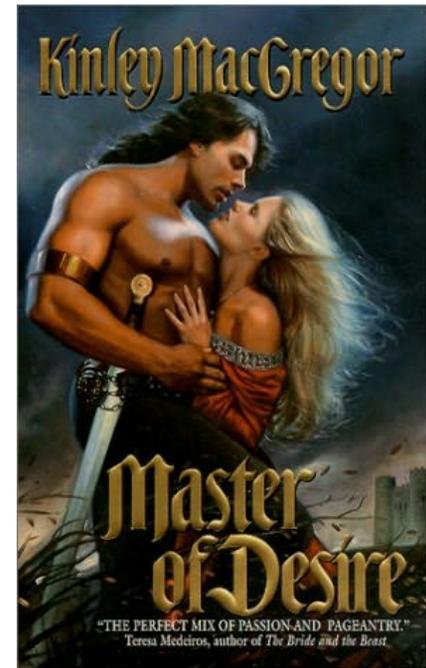
The covers of the Bombshell line mark a significant departure from many of these conventions as the cover (see fig 11) features a prominent figure of a lone and not particularly glamorous, female. The warrior woman's contemporary appearance in romantic fiction was the result of a planned appeal to a younger demographic and the covers reflected this.



**Figure 1:** Woodiwiss, Kathleen.  
*The Flame and the Flower*. NY:  
Avon, 1972. Print.



**Figure 2:** Lindsey, Johanna.  
*Tender is the Storm*. NY: Avon,  
1985. Print.



**Figure 3:** MacGregor, Kinley.  
*Master of Desire*. NY: St  
Martin's Press, 2011. Print.

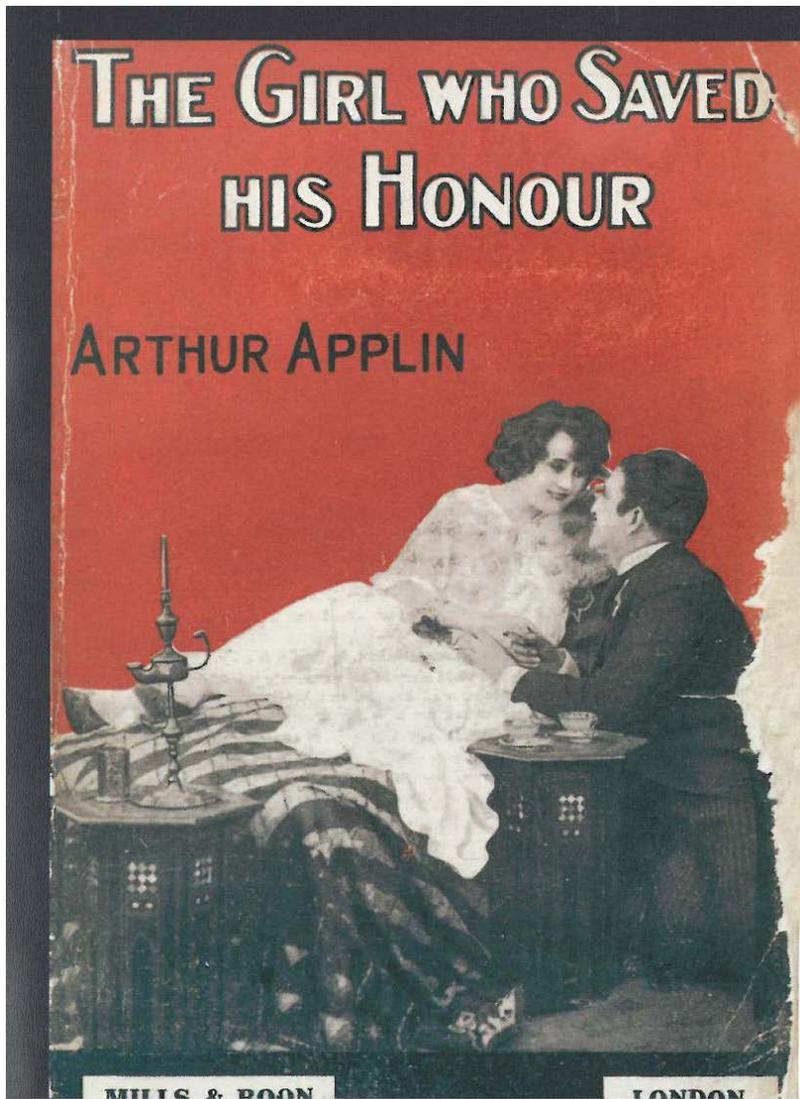


Figure 4: 1914

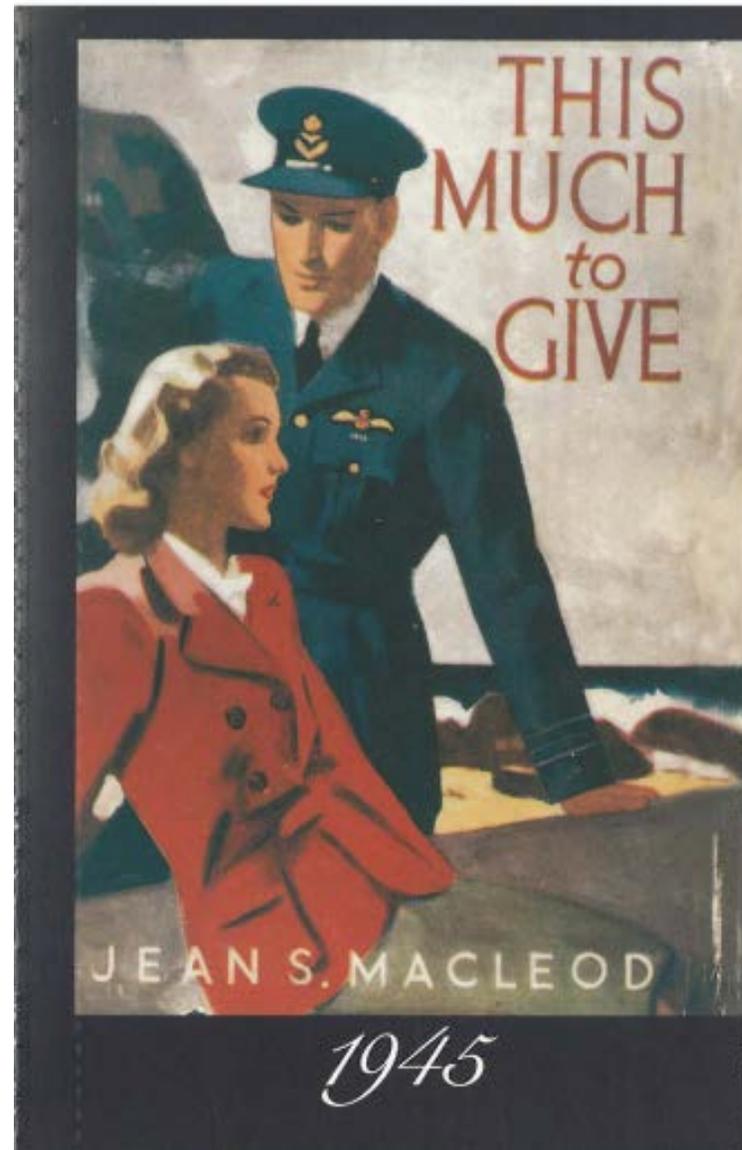


Figure 5: 1945

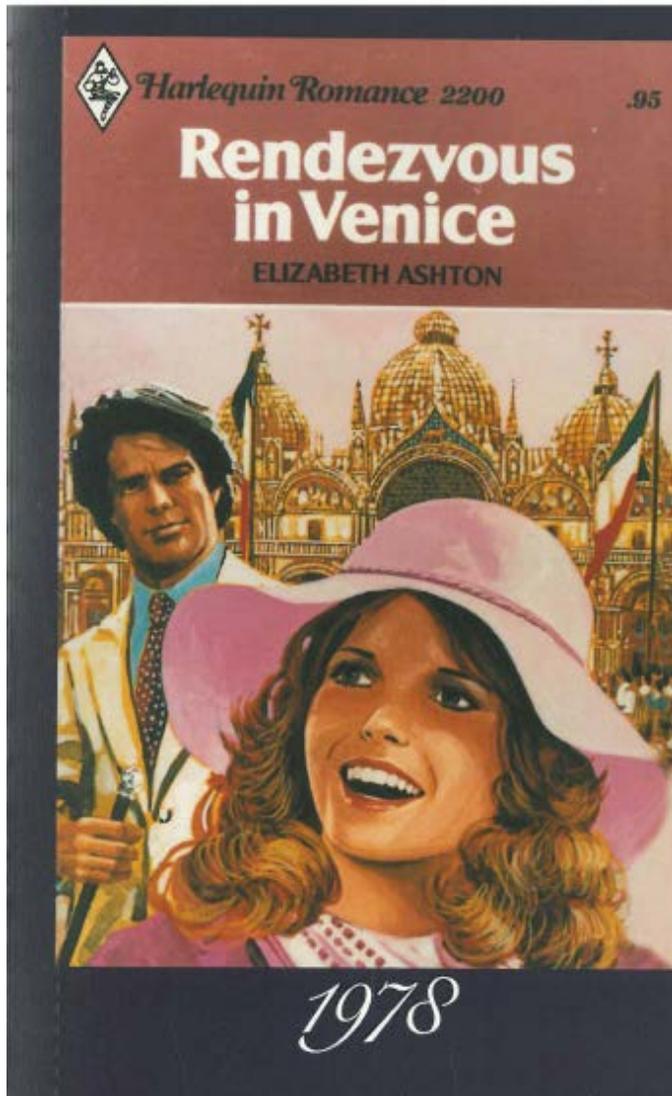


Figure 6: 1978

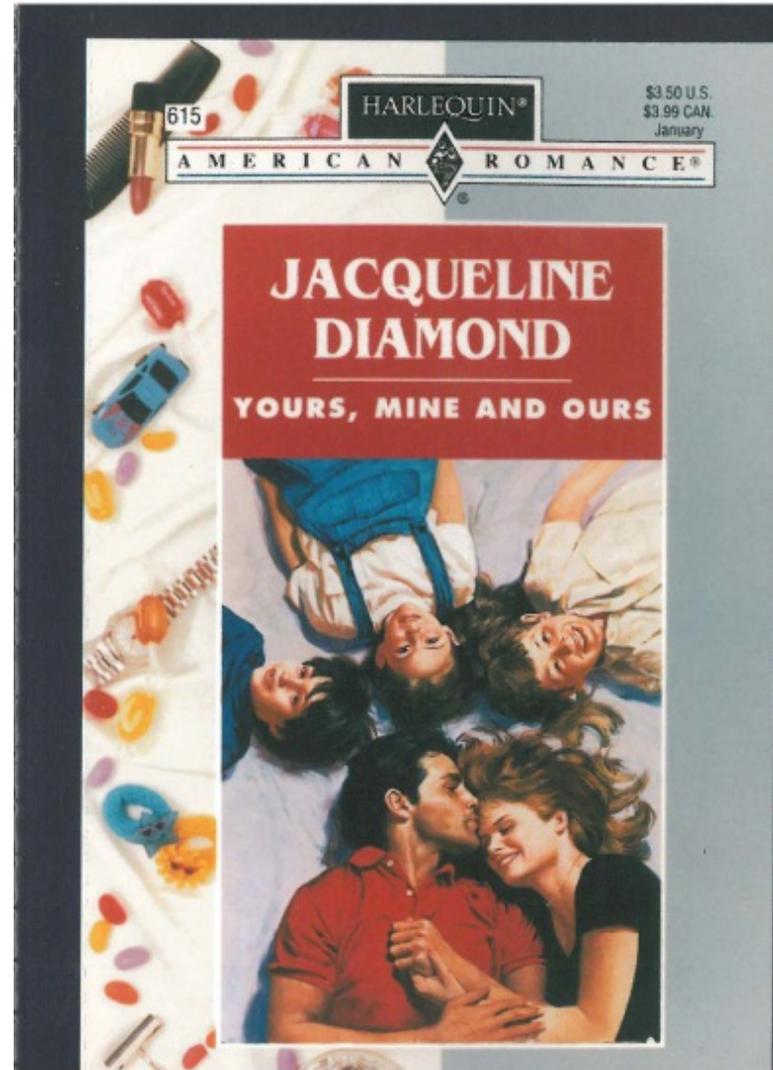
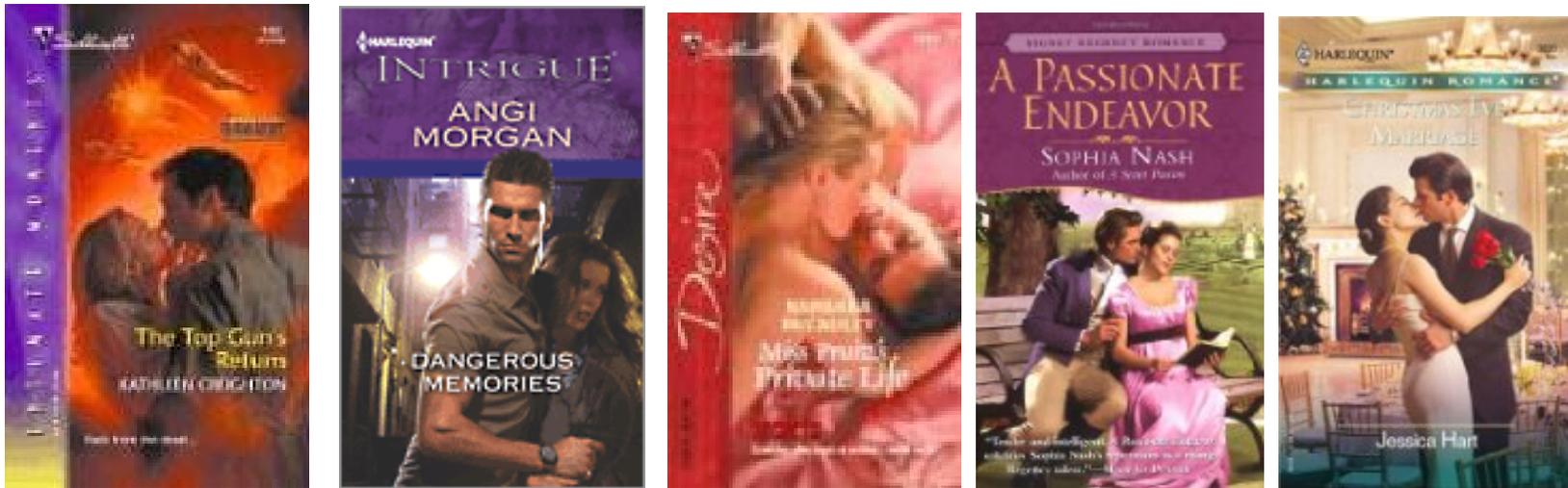
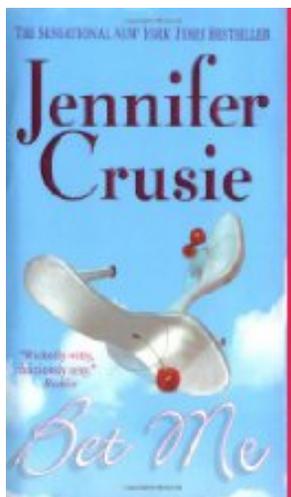


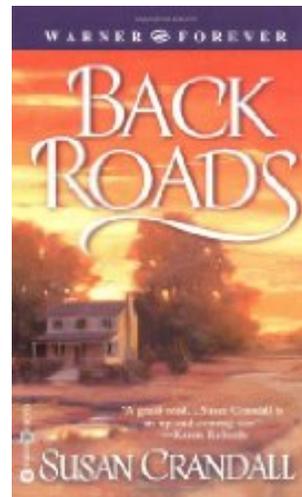
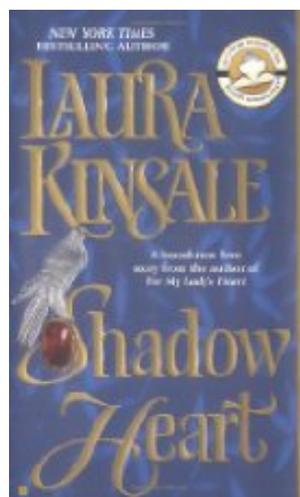
Figure 7: 1999



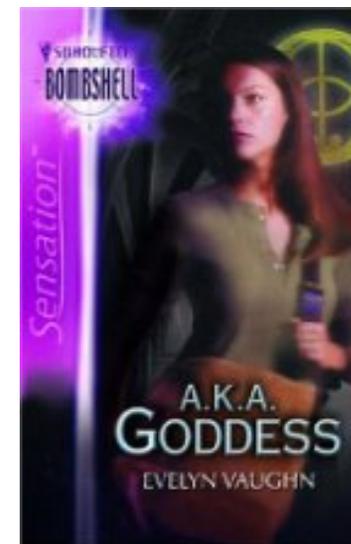
**Figure 8:** A sample of clinch covers published by Harlequin Mills & Boon in 2004.



**Figure 9:** Object covers



**Figure 10:** Buildings and landscape cover example.



**Figure 11:** Silhouette Bombshell cover example.

## 2. THE ATHENA FORCE AND BOMBSHELL COVER DESIGN

The Bombshell covers all feature the heroine front and centre. No clinch covers here as romance is not the primary focus, mystery and suspense are equally, if not more, important. The cover in fig 8, *Dangerous Memories*, is an example of a romantic suspense novel in the Intrigue line. It is significant that the Intrigue cover places the male to the fore protecting the female making her appear weaker, not a warrior. By contrast, Silhouette associate senior editor, Natashya Wilson points out that “the Bombshell covers are very high concept and heroine focused. We use a lot of treated photography to make them realistic” (Yamashita 15). As contemporary novels, realism is more relevant than in a story set in a different time period. In line with their development from warrior women of film and television along with the influence of advertising and market forces, Wilson describes the covers as very high concept meaning they comprise “the look, the hook, and the book” (Wyatt 22), a complete package. The marketing was targeted at a younger audience who would find high concept promotions more appealing and familiar from the cinematic versions. However, unlike the warrior women of film and comics who often appear scantily clad, for example, Xena and Wonder Woman, these characters are portrayed as serious professionals. The heroines’ clothes are sensible and in keeping with their occupations. The covers all follow a similar design brief and are distinctive in their identification of a Bombshell novel and more particularly, an Athena Force Adventure.

The *Athena Force* novels diverge markedly from the usual romance covers (see fig 12-17) by positioning the male characters only as silhouettes or small pictures as part of a target design which includes a stately building that may be assumed to represent the Athena Academy. The Academy building appears on all but one of the covers. The arrows on the design all point

towards the female at the centre of the design emphasizing that it is her story which is central while the male characters, even the love interests, are on the periphery.

Unlike conventional romance covers, which generally emphasize the feminine by using skirts, dresses, décolletage or long flowing hair, these covers show the female characters in clothes which emphasize their professional roles while also allowing the freedom of movement necessary for a physically active character such as the warrior woman. These covers feature no wind-blown hair, as in the clinch covers shown earlier, unless the characters are portrayed as moving, such as Alex on the cover of *Proof*, (see fig 12) or standing on an airfield, as on the cover of *Pursued* (see fig 16). The women are all sensibly dressed for their occupations – no low-cut bodices in sight. There is a microscope featured on the front cover of *Proof* which points to Alex's career as a forensic scientist with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), as does the crime scene tape featured on the right hand side of the same cover. Justin is featured in a head shot with a gun that is aimed at the female, Alex, which identifies him as a fellow FBI agent and the love interest of the story. There is also a repeating feature of binary code such as that used by a computer. The light is fully on Alex as her figure is throwing a shadow, an element that is commonly associated with figures of male action heroes, such as James Bond. The shadows cast in most of the covers give a darker, edgier feel to the art work.

*Alias* (see fig 13) also features a shadow from the spotlight shining on the character of Darcy. This is the only cover featuring a swathe of pink on it (the others all have purple on the spine). Darcy is a make-up artist, and the two love-interests are given a more prominent place on this cover, whereas her husband is nowhere in sight. Kel is identified by his camera and Jack by his leather jacket. Jack's picture is larger, thereby pointing to him as the more important love interest. The Athena Academy does not feature on this cover. There is, instead, a desert scene

pointing to Darcy's current residence in Nevada or, perhaps, to Arizona where the Athena Academy is situated. Her son is not featured on the cover (neither is Kayla's daughter on *Justice*) which is quite the opposite of the category romances (for example fig 7) where children and especially babies on the cover are a popular marketing device. Darcy is the only character depicted not standing. Darcy holds the most feminine occupation as a make-up artist and hair stylist; she is also the only married character and a mother. At first glance she may seem to be the most traditional of the six females yet she is shown to be just as much of a warrior as the others through her actions.

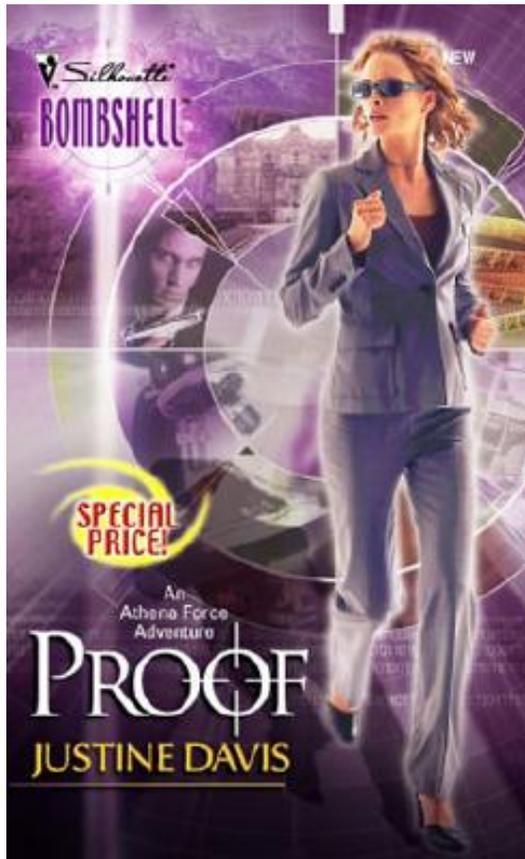
Like other Athena Force covers, *Exposed* (see fig 14) features the main female character, Victoria Patton (Tory) in the spotlight looking professional in a pantsuit and with a press pass attached to her pocket. A masthead for the news she presents also features strongly defining her role as an investigative reporter. The link to the Athena Academy through the Cassandra investigation is represented as a file marked "Confidential" in the top right hand corner, referring to both her use of confidential files in all her investigations and in the Rainy case. Two of the male characters in her story are on the cover – the smaller picture with the male looking through a viewer could be her producer, also her current lover, or it could be her cameraman. The larger picture could be her new love interest, Bennington Forsythe.

*Double-Cross* shows two females as the heroine, Sam, discovers she has a twin sister, Elle (see fig 15). There are two buildings shown on this cover: the Athena Academy and a Russian building reflecting the backgrounds of each twin as Elle works for the Russian equivalent of Sam's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Sam also has a file marked "Confidential" at the top of the cover, as did *Exposed*. The male in a suit would be Riley, the male protagonist. The girls both throw a shadow, as they are in the spotlight and Sam's story has

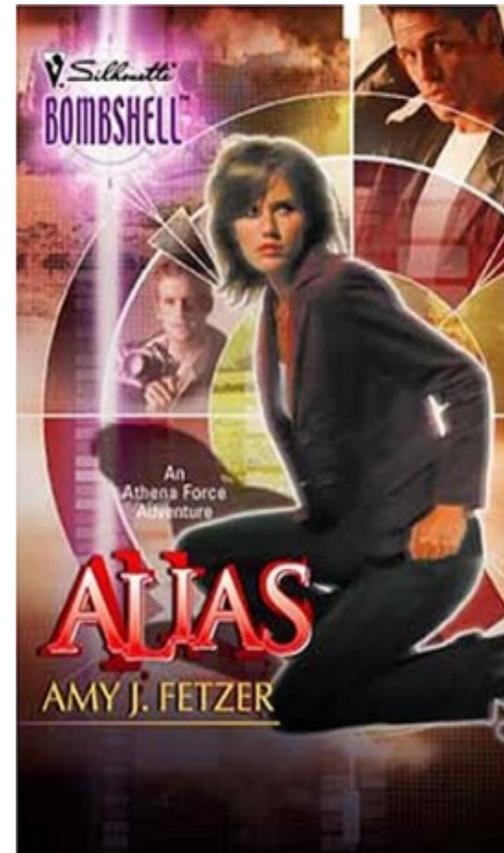
two equally important developing relationships – one with her newly found sister and one with the male protagonist, Riley.

The fifth novel, *Pursued*, (see fig 16) has many elements in common with the previous covers except for the lack of an image of Diego Morel, the love interest of Josie, even though he figures more prominently in this story than do the other male love interests. Josie Lockwood's air force dress uniform has a skirt, and she wears it for a funeral, but the cover shows Josie in her more common attire of a flight uniform with her helmet under her arm, ready for action. The figures of dog-tags and a jet point to her occupation as an air force test pilot. The Athena Academy appears to the left and she also throws a shadow. Although in a rather shapeless uniform she is still obviously female with enough hair for it to look wind-swept and her lips look as though she could be wearing lipstick – she favours orange tryst lip gloss (Mann 42).

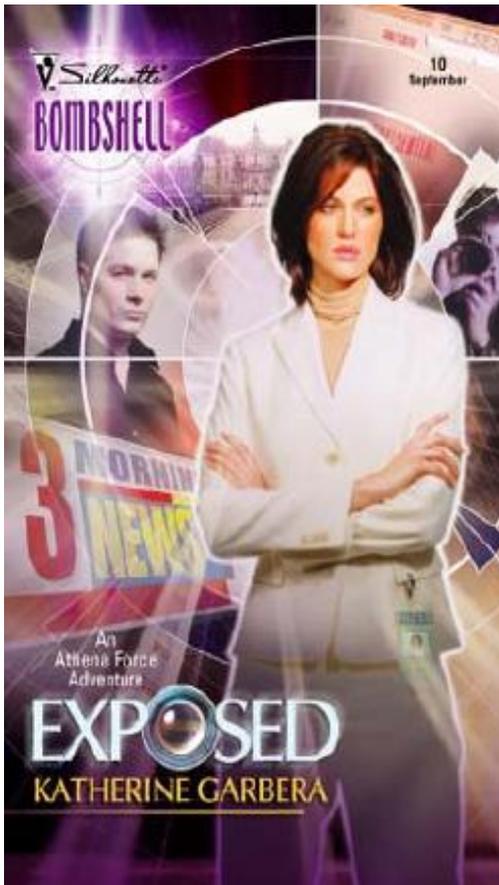
Only the final book, *Justice*, (see fig 17) shows a female armed with an obvious weapon. As Kayla never goes anywhere without her gun – even her daughter, Jazz, has to ask her politely not to wear her gun to dinner when she is going to meet her father for the first time – this detail may be read as representative of that character. The gun in question is also held facing skyward, a definite phallic object and her finger is on the trigger – a warrior woman ready for battle. This cover also features a pair of handcuffs and Kayla appears to be in uniform. There is a shadowy male figure, making the male love interest indistinct and not the main concern of the story. Kayla has the spotlight on her from the opposite side of the cover, her body is partly in shadow and she is looking directly at the reader showing she is not afraid to face whatever appears.



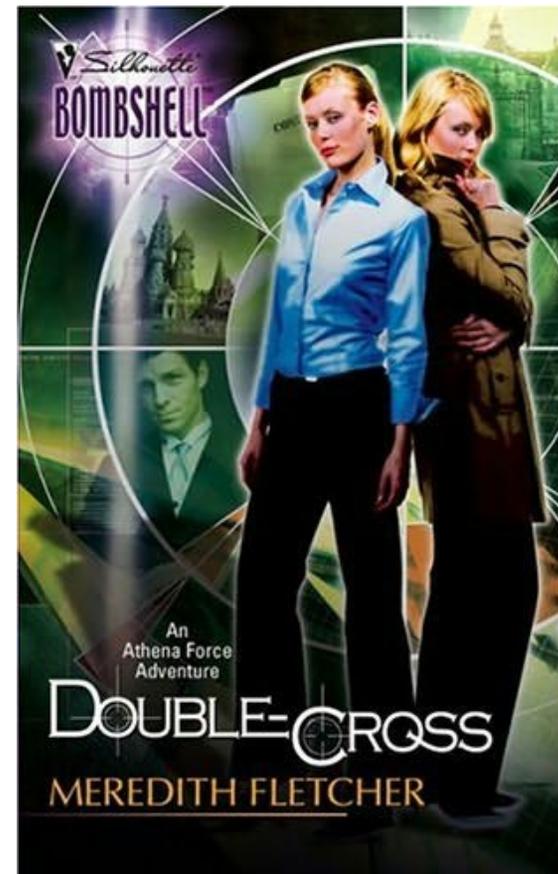
**Figure 12:** Davis, Justine. *Proof*.  
N.Y.: Harlequin Books, 2004. Print.



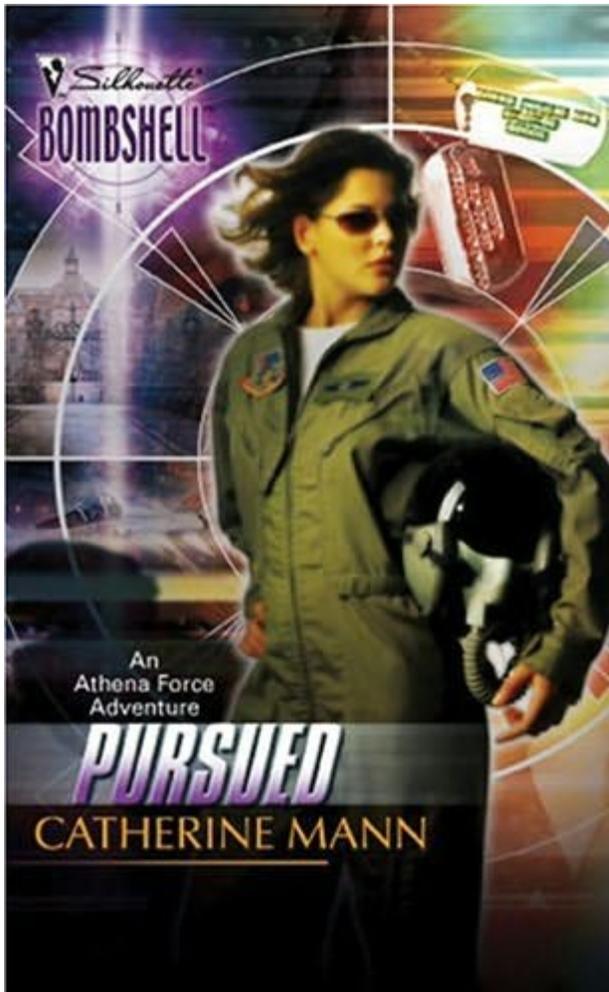
**Figure 13:** Fetzer, Amy J. *Alias*.  
N.Y.: Harlequin Books, 2004. Print.



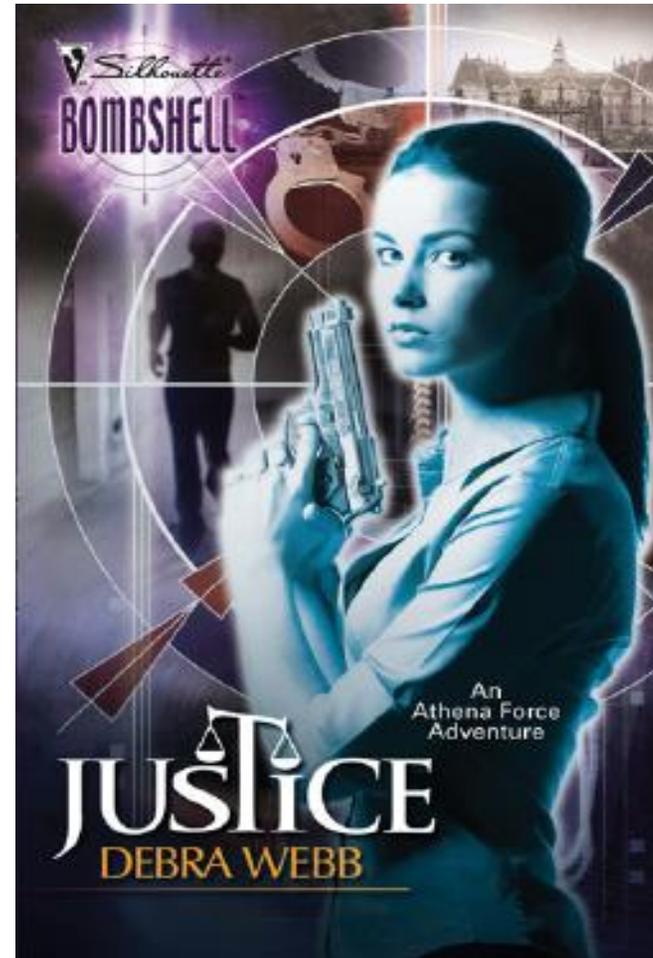
**Figure 14:** Garbera, Katherine.  
*Exposed*. N.Y.: Harlequin Books,  
2004. Print.



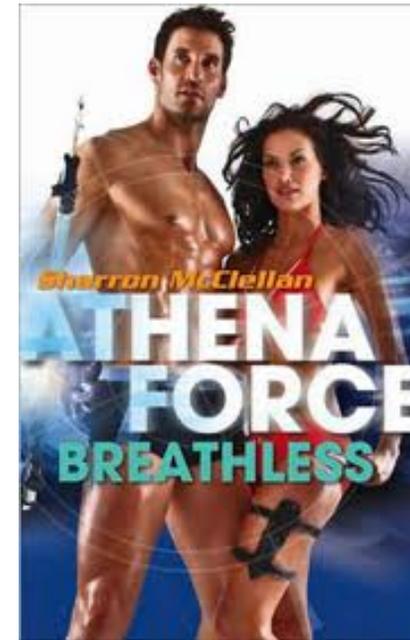
**Figure 15:** Fletcher, Meredith.  
*Double-Cross*. N.Y.: Harlequin  
Books, 2004. Print.



**Figure 16:** Mann, Catherine. *Pursued*. N.Y.: Harlequin Books, 2004. Print.



**Figure 17:** Webb, Debra. *Justice*. N.Y.: Harlequin Books, 2004. Print.



**Figure 18:** Examples of later Athena Force covers:

Leon, Judith. *The Good Thief*. N.Y.: Harlequin Books, 2007. Print.

May, Lori. *Moving Target*. N.Y.: Harlequin Books, 2008. Print.

McClellan, Sharron. *Breathless*. N.Y.: Harlequin Books, 2008. Print.

### 3. TITLES

The titles for this series are incorporated into, and integral to, the overall design. The titles are a single word pertaining to the series central plot – beginning with *Proof* and ending with *Justice*. The cover designers have also made the title part of the design so that *Proof* has a target in the O; *Exposed* has a camera lens in the O as is appropriate for a TV reporter. The O and C in *Double-Cross* feature the cross hairs of a sight for a gun. *Alias* shows running make-up on the letters of the title, or it could represent blood as the letters are red in colour. *Pursued* gives the illusion of the text moving through the slanting letters, suggesting movement and speed (she is a jet pilot). *Justice* has a set of scales worked into the “T” visually connecting the conclusion of this first continuity series of the Athena Force with the administration of justice. The next six books of the Athena Force Adventures also have one word titles, using the same style. Unlike other romantic suspense titles (see fig 8) these titles provide a visual as well as textual clue to the contents of the books.

### 4. BLURBS

The titles and covers may hint at the story but the blurbs on the back of the book have to make the story sound interesting enough to want to take it home to read. The blurb for each of these novels sets up the premise of this continuity series. “Athena Force: chosen for their talents. Trained to be the best. The women of Athena Academy shared an unbreakable bond...until one of them was murdered.”

On each cover, there is a short outline of the story to engage the reader’s curiosity with attention grabbing questions and phrases (teasers) such as:

“Would the truth set her free – or get her killed?” (*Exposed*)

“Whatever happened to Darcy Steele?” (*Alias*).

“Under the gun” (*Pursued*).

Above the Bombshell web address is a sales pitch for the Silhouette Bombshell line, “More than meets the eye” giving the impression that these are women who are professional and capable of stepping outside accepted gender roles, while also suggesting an element of mystery and that these female characters may have unexpected qualities.

## 7. THE ATHENA FORCE CONTINUES

It can be seen that the marketing of the Bombshell line was aimed at readers interested in an action adventure with a touch of romance. The necessary male love interests are important but they do not dominate the warrior woman or action heroine’s life. The female characters are not hyper feminized or overly masculinized either and as in other romance novels there is no hint of lesbian attraction between the Athena Academy alumni, only strong sisterly bonds, examined in more detail in the section on sisterhood. Sisterhood is both biological (as only the *Double-Cross* cover illustrates) and social and emotional development through shared experiences at the Athena Academy. In the first series, at least, this was reflected in the design of the covers; the male love interest is presented as part of a larger picture of her life and does not have the all-encompassing role that he plays in the traditional romance.

In a Silhouette news release in mid-August of 2006 there was bad news for the Bombshell line: “Unfortunately, Silhouette Bombshell has not been able find a broad-based readership, and after reviewing the past, present and projected performance of the series, we’re sorry to announce that January 2007 will be the final publication month for Bombshell” (Wendell & Tan *Smart Bitches Trashy Books*). The online romance community including

the blog of Bombshell author, Vicky Hinze's *On Writing*, buzzed with heated discussions on the reason for the demise of this line. It was not the first line to be discontinued but there was much conjecture as to why its ending came about.

Hinze along with many others concluded that the line had been:

[M]arketed as not being romance novels but were shelved [in bookstores] with category romance, where reader expectations are that the books will be category romance. Being the first action/adventure line of books for women and being shelved with category romance sent conflicting messages to those in the process from publisher to reader and created a marketing challenge. Category romance readers expected category romance. And action/adventure for women readers (a la Lara Croft) didn't look for or expect to find action/adventure for women in the category romance section on book shelves (Hinze).

As with all discussions, there were differences of opinion: some said the heroines were not "kick-ass" enough or too "kick-ass" as there is no romance when the heroine doesn't need the hero to do anything for her as she can accomplish everything on her own. Many of the comments on Wendell and Tan's webpage agreed that the placing of the Bombshells in category romance led to a disruption in reader expectation and the line may have been better published as single title and shelved with action-adventure stories rather than category romance. This mismatch meant the books did not reach their target audience and that a different approach to marketing may have been more successful.

However, the end of the Bombshell line was not the end for the Athena Force as another twelve books based around other graduates of the Athena Academy and an ongoing story line subsequently appeared in a third continuity series published by Silhouette as a Special Release and all twelve books had their own branding as Silhouette Athena Force.

The move to Silhouette Special Releases for the next twelve books meant the covers of later Athena Force novels (see fig 18) were markedly different although they still show the female in an active pose and sometimes armed with a weapon. However, they were less of a departure from the “clinch” covers of popular romance than the distinctive photo-realistic and graphically designed style of the first twelve covers in the Athena Force novels. These later covers show the male posed with equal prominence to the female and sometimes blocking part of the heroine with his body in a protective position. This is similar to the Intrigue covers shown earlier (see fig 8) as the male and female poses convey that the romance is the main focus of the story rather than the sub-plot. These later covers are more sexually charged with upraised weapons with possible phallic connotations and the males dominating to the point where one almost eclipses the heroine on the cover of *The Good Thief*.<sup>12</sup> Yet these are still Athena Force stories about strong women, warrior women graduates from the Athena Academy and the plots of these novels are still half-adventure, half-romance. The only indication that these are adventure stories is the large Athena Force logo on the covers and the fact that the women’s clothing is still practical for the characters’ employment. The change in cover art confirms that the marketing of the Bombshell line had been a striking departure from conventional romance covers and a key issue in the Bombshell line’s demise.

The warrior woman character in romantic suspense fiction did not disappear even though the Bombshell line did not continue. Kristin Ramsdell asserts, “this active, physically fit heroine, capable of taking care of herself and sometimes the hero, as well, is a new, additional model for the subgenre, and despite the short-lived success of the Silhouette Bombshell line in the mid-2000s, she seems to be here to stay” (137). The Bombshell line

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<sup>12</sup> He is actually her bodyguard (hired by her father) so that provides one explanation. The heroine previously always worked alone.

was in the vanguard of warrior women in popular romance and the departure of the covers from the accepted romance artwork may have been too great a change for the genre at that point in time or, as many argued, it should have been marketed outside of category romance.

The next chapter examines how the woman warrior is represented within the Athena Force novels' first continuity series focusing on the female characters' place as heroes in their story and their challenge to patriarchal order by their identification as heroes.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE WARRIOR WOMAN AS HERO

The next three chapters are an exploration of how the ideas about warrior women, already discussed, are presented in the novels themselves. Many of the qualities of a hero are in fact qualities the warrior woman shares with the romance heroine. Indeed, as we shall see, she may be considered a logical extension of the feistier heroines of romance novels. However, the violence and physical aspects of the warrior woman's character and training are distinctive and could pose problems for her as a romance heroine if they were seen as unfeminine by the hero and the reader. The focus is on the female characters' place as heroes in the story, in society, agency, and how they express both their femininity and warrior traits. Also, their relationships with lovers, family and the sisterhood developed through their formative years spent at the Athena Academy will be explored. All are examined in the light of binary gender expectations and whether or not their actions conform or disrupt the patriarchal order commonly regarded as being reinforced by commercial or popular romance fiction.

### 1. HEROIC QUALITIES

The romance genre has always allowed both female and male romantic protagonists heroic qualities. Sometimes this genre undermines the patriarchy through stories that show women acting in heroic ways. Johnson, as discussed in Chapter One, questions why heroism is gendered, "as an essential element of manhood even though men are no more heroic than women?" (84) His answer is that it allows patriarchy to flourish by providing men with a symbolic piece of valuable territory. The warrior woman as a romantic protagonist appears even more heroic as she is capable of also fulfilling the traditionally male role of defending her loved ones and attacking the enemy. It is acceptable, indeed even expected, for mothers

to defend their children, but only two of the warrior women in these novels are mothers. Although the warrior woman's martial skills are not visibly apparent to the spectator, she cannot be dismissed as a weak, soft female, when she can be regarded as an equal in a fight and in a relationship.

Brittany Young, a romance author, argues that:

The heroine in a traditional romance is a study in feminism. She values herself most for qualities that have nothing to do with her sexuality – qualities such as integrity, loyalty, courage, intelligence, generosity of spirit, and often, a sense of humour. No man will be worthy of her until he recognizes those qualities and until he, himself, values her for them (122-3).

Young is discussing contemporary romance, reflecting a late twentieth century view of women post-feminism. The Athena Force series has a contemporary setting and there is less emphasis on the way the female characters dress or how they look than upon what they do. These warrior women have standards of their own and when it comes to the question of whether or how they develop a romantic relationship or find a “mate” the novels show that there is a need for mutual respect of those heroic aspects (which do not always call for fighting skills) in both partners.

The warrior woman may have an extra weapon at her disposal, compared to the traditional romance heroine, because of her ability to equal or better a male in a physical contest, but her intelligence is also a vital component of the overall character. That these female characters are intelligent is emphasized by their having graduated from the Athena Academy. “Students who attended the Athena Academy were special: scholastically and physically superior” (Fletcher 60). Alex, in *Proof*, states that she is grateful that she and her friends were able to attend the Academy with all the opportunities it offered. The skills the

graduates exhibit in the novels reflect the Academy's cultivation of intelligent female assertion. This may contrast with earlier romances where the female although intelligent may downplay it if is considered "unattractive" to men.

The Academy is, however, an exclusive institution, as "attendance at Athena Academy was by invitation only. No amount of money...no amount of power and influence got a girl through those doors. Only the best...only the ones considered special were invited" (Webb 48). The premise of the series would lead the reader to regard the graduates of Athena Academy as an elite group with skills and abilities above the ordinary female. They also identify as a smaller group within the Academy, the Cassandras, with Rainy as the mentor who had brought them together as "a cohesive unit of smart, capable, skilled women who could handle anything thrown their way" (Davis 30), including an investigation into the murder of their mentor. As an elite group their heroic qualities are to be expected, yet without the training received at the Academy many of their skills may never have had an opportunity to be developed.

All of the heroines in these novels are described as smart and intelligent and their careers, as discussed further on, reflect this. *Alias's* Darcy, "had a sharp mind" (Fetzer 25). Josie in *Pursued*, "She was smart. A fact. And a truly smart person knew when to recognize times others knew more" (Mann 93-4). The heroine's intelligence is intrinsic to her personality, especially Sam, as she was selected for the Athena Academy at the age of nine as a child genius – she had hacked into a pentagon computer because she was bored. Riley observes, "Sam's sharp and she's a quick study" (Fletcher 241). Alex considers the pay the members of the Cassandras may earn. Not knowing the CIA's rates of pay she concludes, "if they paid by the IQ, Sam should be making more than the director" (Davis 282). Sam's expertise is in languages and computers. The definition in Chapter One specifies that this

intelligence and enquiring nature are vital to the success of the warrior woman. Each character applies her intelligence to her career and to her life.

As these are romantic suspense stories there are mysteries to be solved and intelligence is a useful component in making connections and solving the puzzles presented in each novel. Each character plays a part in adding the pieces of Rainy's murder together throughout this first continuity series until the conclusion in the final novel, *Justice*. Each of the characters is assigned a specific task, for example, Alex discovers Rainy's eggs had been harvested, Darcy is assigned the task of finding the surrogate mothers, Tory tracks down the sperm donor used (without his knowledge), Sam finds the assassin responsible for Rainy's murder, Josie and her sister start finding information of Lab 33, Kayla finds Rainy's husband and marriage were not exactly as the Cassandras had assumed. She also searches for, and is found by, one of Rainy's "daughters." All of the characters use their intelligence and skills to solve the riddle of how and why Rainy was killed.

Some of the members of the Cassandras also use their mental skills for espionage. The Athena Academy alumni website provides a courier service to the intelligence community through AA.gov, an institution introduced to the reader in *Exposed*. "Tory did some work for them because her job provided really good cover. She had a legit reason to be in many of the world's hot spots" (Garbera 21). Courier drops were usually arranged by email and direct contact was avoided. Josie's sister, Diana Lockworth, works in army intelligence. She is another able female with impressive computer skills whose story is told in a later novel titled *Target*. This other type of intelligence work is part of the training at the Athena Academy and intelligence gathering is one of the tools available to the warrior woman.

Courage is a necessity for the warrior woman who possesses it in abundance when encountering a physical foe. However, courage is also needed to face unwelcome truths, for example, partners that are not best suited. A clue is given early on in the story, *Proof*, as Athena Academy principal, Christine Evans, implies “that Emerson and a woman of strong spirit and will were a questionable match” (Davis 37). Recognising a situation requires courage but courage is also needed to act on that information as Alex does when she calls off the engagement with her fiancé, Emerson, thereby disappointing her mother’s expectations once again. Darcy has to have the courage to leave her husband. Kayla, in *Justice*, needs courage to face a teenage pregnancy, a situation Alex considers unintelligent on Kayla’s part as “even Athena Academy can’t break all of women’s stupid habits” (Davis 24). Yet, Kayla has the courage to raise the child by herself, with family support, and still achieve her dream career within the police force. These female characters face similar emotional battles requiring courage that all romance heroines face with the addition of physical battles and their aftermath.

Integrity, or honour, is another essential quality for the warrior woman to function as a romantic heroine. For example, Sam is happy to learn that her double was undercover and working to expose and shut down some gun runners, but Sam was also, unfortunately, “left to bear the consequences of her double’s integrity” (Fletcher 274). The female characters all show integrity in working to expose Rainy’s murder and trying to preserve the reputation of the Athena Academy itself as more evidence appears about Lab 33 and the harvesting of Rainy’s eggs. Josie is a particularly strong example of integrity as “her innate sense of justice, which had once earned her the label ‘Josephine, the Tattletale Queen’, really balked at letting an injustice go unavenged” (Mann 14). The reader may be assured that these female characters are capable of recognizing the “right thing to do” and then actually doing it.

Loyalty is a trait that is infused with a high value in the novels, as evidenced in the Cassandras' loyalty to their mentor and to each other, a reference to the reciprocal relationships valued by the warrior woman. Alex's and Kayla's break in their friendship over Kayla's pregnancy may be construed as a lack of loyalty on Alex's part but their devotion to Rainy helps them to rediscover that friendship. The warrior woman is not only loyal to her friends and family, as Alex observes in the first novel, "and she, as any Athenan, would protect what she loved. Whatever it took" (Davis 50). Note here that she would protect what she *loved*, as love is a powerful motivator for a romance heroine and, often, a warrior woman. These action heroines are also loyal to the Athena Academy even though that loyalty is tested by what they discover in the course of their investigations. "Athena Academy grads watched each other's backs. Nobody messed with their friends and got away with it" (Mann 40). The influence of American values is evident in their patriotism, especially among the members in the military and government agencies where their loyalty extends to their country.

Discipline, especially self-discipline, is fundamental to the warrior heroine and hero also. This is not a quality that is highlighted for a romance heroine, but it is a necessity for a warrior. Capable as the warrior woman is of physically harming others, she requires the discipline to use such measures only when absolutely necessary. Alex ponders what will happen next in the investigation near the end of her story, "and in between she'd give her work here her focused attention, using the mental discipline she'd learned at Athena" (Davis 285). Discipline can also be physical: "she closed her eyes for a minute, finding the quiet strength she'd always known was deep inside her" (Garbera 74).

Self-control, both mental and physical, is an important part of discipline and there is evidence in all the novels of the need these heroines feel to be in control of their own actions and reactions. Tory "could never tolerate being out of control" (Garbera 123). Alex and the

others all owe that discipline to the Athena Academy, “something else Athena had given her – the self-control to choose her battles” (Davis 246). Although warriors, they are not loose cannons likely to explode at the least provocation but measured professionals who weigh the consequences of any engagement and proceed to carry out any action necessary to achieve their goals. “Because while Athena had taught her patience, it had also taught her about the benefits of taking action, striking first, of bringing the game to your own court and on your own terms” (Davis 45). The Academy clearly has a military objective in the training of its graduates and provided the female equivalent of the male military academy including the aspects of discipline and control.

The warrior woman also learns to trust her instincts just as many a romantic heroine does. This female character may differ from a romance heroine in her martial knowledge and skills, but her story features strong romantic elements and shares an affinity with other romance fiction. Darcy trusts her instincts “and so far they hadn’t steered wrong” (Fetzer 244). This trust in self is particularly subversive as women may often be seen as daughter, mother, wife, but the warrior woman has learned, like the romance heroine, to value herself, to know what is best for her. This self-reliance is important to all of them but especially Sam and Darcy, for whom “it was instinct to stop and look, to watch her own back” (Fetzer 183). Sam, from her childhood in the foster system is particularly self-oriented as she could often only count on herself, “quietly, just as she had when she’d been a little girl in all those strange and unfriendly houses, she drew into herself, and walled the world away” (Fletcher 162). Sam has learnt when to withdraw from the world and when to engage and the Athena Academy is especially important to her as, up until now, it has been her only family. The Academy has given them all the confidence to listen to their instincts and to use them along with their other gifts of brains, muscles and knowledge, both external and internal.

Warrior women have values and expectations equal to the traditional male warrior placed upon them as well as the traditional female expectations of nurturing. The formidable male makes a worthy opponent for the heroine because a basic ingredient at the start of a romance is conflict.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, Elizabeth Lowell explains, “is why romance heroes often are not only capable of violence, they are specifically trained for it. They are warriors, the paradigm of the formidable male” (92). In the traditional romance, the heroine heals him and tames him, but the warrior woman meets him as an equal from the beginning. She is also capable of violence but neither of them is intent on destroying all before them. “The warrior-as-hero accepts the discipline of the larger society. He has made the fundamental choice to use his skills to protect others rather than merely for his own enrichment. He has voted on the side of construction rather than destruction. He is an honorable man” (Lowell 92) and equally the warrior-as-heroine is an honourable woman. The Athena Force women work to make a situation better, they use their skills, brains and muscles for the right reasons. However, the warrior woman may be as wary of romantic commitment as the male warrior, an idea which will be explored further in the section on Romantic Relationships.

Krentz considers romance novels to be subversive as “the books also defy the masculine conventions of other forms of literature because they portray women as heroes” (5). As the hero of her story the woman possesses the necessary heroic qualities which allow her to be the victor. In the next section the feminine power of the women of the Athena Force, their need for equality in relationships and the strength of their sisterhood will be examined.

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<sup>13</sup> There is no story to be told if the hero and heroine fall into each other’s arms on page twenty. There needs to be either external conflict – a situation keeping them apart – or internal conflict, one or both of them have problems in accepting the relationship – either bad previous relationships, trust issues, the need to develop acceptance of self and others. The conflict and its resolution are what creates the difference in the story when the ending is known.

## CHAPTER FIVE: FEMININITY, ROMANCE AND SISTERHOOD

This chapter examines how being a warrior affects the characters' representations as women, or more specifically, how does it affect the "femininity" of the characters? Because these novels operate within the genre expectations of heterosexual romance, they do not tend to present the heroines as hyper-masculine females; they must retain some feminine attributes. Some of the characters may conform to accepted traditional feminine qualities in the attention paid to the characters' emotions and acknowledgement and use of their femininity in nurturing, appearance and relationships. I will be taking individual characters as examples of particular attributes, using them to highlight aspects of the warrior woman type that may be assumed to be shared by all the Cassandras as a result of their training at the Athena Academy.

To aid understanding of these stories there follows a summary of the female characters' diverse backgrounds, with their only common ground being the Athena Academy. They provide a type of microcosm of the variety of romance heroine. (For a summary of the stories see Appendix 2).

- Alexandra Forsythe, *Proof*, a forensic scientist for the FBI. Her grandfather was one of the founders of the Athena Academy and a retired CIA director who still serves on the board. Alex comes from a privileged and wealthy background. Alex is also the oldest member of the group as she had resisted attending the academy when she went through a rebellious phase in her early teens.
- Darcy Allen Steele, *Alias*, had a poverty-stricken childhood; her mother was a single parent who descended into alcoholism. "She pushed herself to make good grades, as if that would win her mother's love and make her stop drinking. Of course, it hadn't. When she was invited to attend Athena Academy, all expenses

paid by the school, she'd thought she'd been granted asylum in a foreign country.

Athena made her see her own potential” (Fetzer 53-4).

- Victoria Patton, *Exposed*, had a relatively normal family background on a ranch near a small town in Florida. She has a brother in the DEA, and keeps in touch with her parents who are still together.
- Samantha St John, *Double-Cross*, was an orphan, in and out of foster care until she attended the Athena Academy at the early age of 9 after she had, as a child genius of 8, hacked into a pentagon computer because she was curious (Fletcher 73). Athena and the Cassandras are her family. Rainy had been her mentor and guide and Darcy had mothered her. She finds out about her family in her story and that she has a twin sister, Elle Petrenko.
- Josephine Lockworth, *Pursued*. Joseph Lockworth, Josie's grandfather, is a former CIA director and one of the founders of the Academy. Her parents were both in the military. Her mother had a mental breakdown on the death of one of her pilots in her stealth plane research. Josie has continued that research in order to clear her mother's name. She has a sister, Diana, who also attended the Academy and the sisters chose sides, Josie identifying with her mother and Diana with her father. Even though their parents are together the sisters have trouble communicating until Josie's investigation on Rainy's behalf leads to a strengthening of sisterly bonds.
- Kayla Ryan, in *Justice*, has the only non-white background, coming from a Navajo Indian family with very strong ties and a sister, Mary, who helps her look after her daughter, Jasmine (Jazz). Her parents also are together and have a strong marriage.

## 1. FEMININITY AND THE WARRIOR WOMAN

The warrior woman of audiovisual media, explored earlier in the definition of a warrior woman, can sometimes be presented as overtly sexualized, for example, *Xena*, or *Lara Croft*, or as overtly masculine either by wearing male attire or having developed musculature to the point of Tasker's "musculinity" discussed in Chapter Two, for example, Ripley from *Alien*. In contrast to these depictions, the women of the Athena Force are not portrayed at either extreme. Although the women are described as attractive, the fact that romance novels are literary printed texts means there is not as much emphasis upon appearance as in the more visual media of films, comic books, graphic novels and video games, but the characters in romance are rarely depicted as ugly. The characters in romance fiction and especially in this Athena Force series are portrayed as ordinary women who have had the chance to develop their particular talents and acquire skills that enable them to access their masculine side without losing sight of their femininity. They are radical and noteworthy to the extent that they are presented as seemingly ordinary females who are capable of conventionally male acts of aggression and violence.

These female characters have warrior skills learnt at the Academy and may have added to their skills in their careers in the military, law enforcement and government agencies. Yet, even as these characters know how to be warriors they also know themselves as women – their identity is two-fold in that they are capable of showing masculine aggression but they also have a feminine side which enables them to use whichever personality traits they need depending on the situation in which they find themselves. These characters have the potential to portray more realistic women, not stereotypes or two-dimensional comic book characters.

The covers of these novels, as discussed in Chapter Three, portray the women in practical dress for their occupations or their action heroine role. The women in the photographs are certainly not ugly but neither could they be considered glamorous or beautiful like some of their visual media counterparts. Their bodies are important to carry out their chosen careers and they keep fit and relieve stress by exercising, for example Josie, in *Pursued*, “needed to work off some tension, punch something or somebody. Or at least run a few miles” (Mann 179). Two of the female characters, Josie and Kayla, in *Justice*, are required to wear uniforms for their work and there would be expectations that the television reporter, Tory, in *Exposed*, due to her work in a visual medium would have to maintain a professional look. Their appearance is more strongly affected by their work requirements than fashion.

Nevertheless, these characters are not unaware of the role that clothes and appearance can play in affirming their femininity. Femininity is used here in the sense of their cultural identification as females. These novels do not focus as much on the detailed description of clothes, hair and shoes as Jensen noted in her study: “almost every Harlequin pays close attention to dress, hair, accessories and make-up in passages that both glamourize and instruct” (110). On the occasion of Tory attending a high society charity ball it is Alex and Ben’s mother, Veronica Forsythe, who chooses “Tory’s dress, a sexy black Gaultier gown. The black sheath hugged her tight across the breasts and had a simple black strap over one shoulder” (Garbera 270). The characters’ physical appearances may not be radically different from most females but rather clothes are chosen for practicality or for a particular purpose – even if that purpose is to showcase their femininity, just because they enjoy it or as another tool in their warrior kit. Indeed as Tanya Huff observes, “women warriors are still women and appreciate a change of wardrobe now and then” (107). Later at the party, Ben is captured and Tory prepares to rescue him. “In the back of the car Tory quickly changed from her party

dress into a pair of dark slacks, a sweater and her leather jacket... she slipped it [her hunting knife] into the ankle sheath and climbed out of the car” (Garbera 281). Their femininity can also be used as a weapon as, Elle, Sam’s sister, in *Double-Cross*, gets the better of a young navy SEAL who “hadn’t been disarmed by her smiling approach so much as he had by her delicate appearance” (Fletcher 220). Femininity is also used as deception and role playing, as illustrated by Darcy’s use of disguises.

These female characters are also able to enjoy their femininity, as Josie’s character does when she “defiantly swiped on a coating of lip gloss. She’d wear orange tryst if she wanted” (Mann 42). It can be argued that the restrictions of the uniform drive Josie to add small touches of femininity to remind her that she is both woman and warrior without becoming masculine in the process – she works within the patriarchal military culture subverting it through small acts of the feminine. For instance, she also has painted toenails: “He wouldn’t have pegged her for pink polish, but the splash of soft color somehow enhanced her strength and allure all the more” (Mann 183). Here the touch of the feminine reveals both her softness and adds to her strength for the male character, Diego Morel, and helps her to fill the dual role of warrior and woman. This is similar to the character of Kayla who is contemplating a relationship with Peter Hadden who presents her with a necklace of a butterfly and likens Kayla to capturing a butterfly, “So delicate yet so strong and determined to be free” (Webb 284). This image also encapsulates the duality of the warrior woman as Butler argues “even if we accept the descriptive viability of terms such as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, who among us has identifications with just one?” (*Undoing Gender* 24).

As professional women, the graduates of the Athena Academy do not have the soft, cosseted appearance of the majority of traditional romance heroines. Sam has calluses on her palms and her hands are not soft and manicured, as “these were the hands of a woman not afraid to get her hands dirty. Riley’s mother was like that...Riley respected women like that.

He'd grown up around them" (Fletcher 82). These calluses can be seen as marking them as women who deserve respect for their achievements and not only for their appearance. Even though they may opt for feminine touches, like lip gloss and nail polish, where they can, these warrior women accept the marks on their bodies from the work they engage in or from battles they have fought.

All of the Athena women and Darcy, especially, are aware of disguises, the ability to mask their true appearance in order to observe, evade or escape. Alex uses a simple disguise at the Academy (Davis 46), unlike Darcy who not only uses clothes, head coverings and mannerisms to disguise but has the added ability to create masks to change her facial features. Darcy keeps her husband under surveillance as a bag lady in the morning. Then she sets out to get information out of Maurice's driver: "she'd used everything at her disposal to do what she needed, and right now she had it all displayed in a slim hip skirt with a matching top, cut low and fitted to accent her waistline" (Fetzer 73-4). Through the range of characters Darcy portrays she explores a range of roles available to women, just as fiction may allow the reader to explore a range of roles, among them the warrior woman. These characters know how to present themselves to achieve their goals whether they are everyday ones or playing a role. They also know how to use their femininity, often against unsuspecting males who have preconceived or patriarchal notions of how women can be expected to behave from their appearance or demeanour.

Conventional feminine qualities such as modesty and beauty can be a hindrance to the warrior woman. For example, Sam, in *Double-Cross*, when running for her life, "dressed in the tattered remains of the gown and her underwear. When survival was on the line, modesty came in a distant second" (Fletcher 35). Aspects of their appearance emphasized for femininity can also make them recognizable, hence the use of disguises and camouflage. For example, Alex who has "intractable red-gold spiral curls...She'd come to appreciate the

uniqueness of both the colour and the curls. But tonight her distinctive hair was a nuisance” leading to her disguising it by pulling said curls “into a tight knot at the crown of her head” (Davis 9). As good warriors these women know the value of camouflage and knowledge of how to stand out or fade into the background are all tools to be used.

These female warriors are also aware of their weaknesses; all experience fear, loneliness and vulnerability to greater and lesser extents over the course of their stories. Darcy may want a man in her life as “hunger flushed through her body, begging for a man’s touch, to be a woman and not someone else’s savior when she couldn’t even be her own” (Fetzer 28). Yet, as a romance, only a particular man will do and the characters all have a measure of self-respect that prevents them from settling for any relationship that could inhibit them from utilizing the skills and the values taught at the Academy.

Emotional risks involving relationships reveal a feminine strength which is significant in the majority of romance novels I have read. Emotional risk is not valued within the patriarchy; however, as Johnson argues, “far from being identified as courageous, emotional risk taking is more often defined as a sign of weakness, as if making ourselves emotionally vulnerable entails no risk” (89). Physical risks warrior women are trained to cope with but emotional ones involve more, as Josie says: “Words hurt. More than punches as far as she was concerned” (Mann 160). Physical wounds heal but emotional scars can remain as Darcy knows, having hidden in fear for three years: “She wanted to tell the Cassandras the whole truth about her marriage and wash away the shame of her weakness. She deserved better. Charlie deserved better” (Fetzer 30). Darcy’s vulnerability is not only a physical one – she took an emotional risk on her husband and it turned out badly. Likewise, Kayla ended up a pregnant teenager with the male responsible only providing for his daughter financially. Women will take risks with their emotions; even though Kayla and Darcy paid a price for their decisions resulting in children that they will love and protect. The physical strength and

ability of the warrior may not be available to all women but the fantasy of physical empowerment is appealing and the fantasy of emotional empowerment holds an even stronger fascination and may appear attainable.

The female characters of the Athena Force have strong motivation for their actions. They do not see their love of children, family and friends as a weakness. Rather it is the source of their strength and a significant reason for their battles as they fight to find out what happened to their mentor, to protect their loved ones and to free themselves. These stories of romantic suspense stress, as Erica Orloff posits that “as much action as writers give their heroine, there had better be emotional drama, or else it risks being a comic book” (in Jump 41). Clearly, these novels are meant to have well developed characters; as Orloff states, there is action but, these are warrior women and their stories also feature emotion involving love interests, family and work. In these novels emotional development is similar to that found in most romance fiction. Cherry Adair, another romance writer, feels that these new heroines are “just a twist on an old favorite of strong women...At her core, the action heroine is just like her sisters – though she does get to beat people up more regularly” (Jump 40). Warrior women are more physical than the usual romance heroines.

These are romances that are reflective of the times. An illegitimate child such as Kayla’s *Jazz* would have been forbidden in romances of the fifties<sup>14</sup> so these novels reveal the social mores of the new millennium. In this way they provide a snapshot of the modern woman of the new millennium and her expectations of herself and the culture she lives within. Television shows like *Buffy*, *Vampire Slayer* although fantastic, provided young women with the concept of a strong, feminine hero, and the Bombshell line was developed

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<sup>14</sup> However, heroes or heroines who were born out of wedlock were not unusual.

following the popularity of characters like Buffy. The characters in the Athena Force also allow women, not just girls, to visualize a warrior who is instantly recognizable as a woman. She can be identifiably female without wearing minimal costumes which display her body but are impractical for her role as warrior. The action heroine of the Athena Force can be both warrior and woman and does not have to sacrifice her femininity to be an effective warrior.

The warrior woman of the romance novel does not have to sacrifice her emotional life to be an effective warrior either. As a heroic, feminine and martially skilled character, are her relationships with the hero different from the conventions of the romance genre or is this one area where the character does conform to the conventions? The next section will consider how the action romance compares with romantic relationships in traditional romances, especially on the issue of equality within the relationship.

## 2. PASSION: ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

The Athena Force series belongs to the romantic suspense sub-genre (discussed earlier in Chapter Three) and is, unlike the category romance, fifty per cent romance and fifty per cent suspense in accordance with Harlequin's guidelines for writers of the Bombshell line. Each of the women has a serious love interest by the end of her story, but the level of involvement varies from a single kiss to an invitation to lunch to a full commitment to a relationship. Only one of the titles, *Alias*, hints that marriage is a possibility. The betrothal that Pamela Regis, in Chapter Three, identifies as a central convention of a category romance is less well defined in the Bombshell line as the guidelines dictate only that there needs to be a sizable advancement in the relationship "to the next level", whether a date, moving in together or marriage.

Sally Goade asserts that the myth of romantic love “is considered oppressive to women because it teaches that a woman’s ultimate success is always couched within her relationship to a lover/husband and her care of a domestic space where that relationship can flourish” (209). In contrast to the traditional romances, the domestic sphere is not an area that features strongly in these novels or even in many of these characters’ lives. These female characters are more often shown in a work situation than a domestic one and in those domestic situations they are not always competent. Interestingly, the wealthiest member, Alex, who can afford domestic help, is one of the few characters shown cooking in the kitchen with her grandfather as they used to do when she was a child (Davis 274). In the only instance in which Sam is seen in the kitchen, of a jet, her efforts are limited to making a sandwich for herself (Fletcher 211). Josie’s best effort in the domestic sphere is macaroni and cheese and she chooses not to highlight that “her single claim to culinary brilliance could be attributed to peeling off a plastic wrapper” (Mann 48). The two mothers in the group may be expected to have some domestic skills. However, Kayla reflects that all the Ryans cook when they get nervous, “except Kayla. She somehow missed out on that genetic trait” (Webb 255). Some modern romances feature the male character doing some, if not all of the cooking<sup>15</sup> and the female does not cook or they share the domestic chores equally, a reflection of feminist ideas as these domesticated males began to appear in the 1970s and 1980s when Second Wave feminism aspired to liberating women from the kitchen to pursue other activities.

Diana Holmes purports that:

Romance proposes an ideal of relationship that is inseparably physical and emotional, sexual and moral, and that accepts the Other in their difference as well as in their close affinity with

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<sup>15</sup> The hero of *Her Road Home*, Nick, loves to cook and built himself “a huge kitchen” (Drake 98).

the self. In more everyday terms, romance is a genre that aspires to the reconciliation of individual freedom with a capacity for emotional attention to the other person, and with commitment (141).

Such an ideal romantic relationship is one sought by all romantic heroines including the warrior woman.

Candice Proctor contends that romances can teach the reader “how to tell a good man from a bad one, the importance of honesty in a relationship, the value of trust” (13). This is evident in the romance elements of these stories when Alex, Darcy and Tory have to choose between a good man and a bad one. However, these novels suggest that the man is not necessarily bad, as in harmful, but rather an inappropriate choice for that particular female character. For example in the first story, *Proof*, Emerson Howland is Alex’s fiancé. He wants her to find a more “suitable” position than forensic scientist once they have children (Davis 116). Alex realizes she cannot be the type of wife he wants and he is not the husband she wants. Alex becomes aware that Emerson lacks passion, something that Justin Cohen, the dark angel of her Academy days and now her colleague in the FBI, has in abundance (Davis 268). Justin is also on a quest to discover the events leading up to his sister’s death while giving birth to one of the children genetically designed using Rainy’s eggs. Alex realizes that although Emerson may be considered a good man as he is a heart surgeon who saves lives; his expectations of married life have more in common with her mother’s ideals than with Alex’s. Darcy’s husband, Maurice, on the other hand is portrayed as a villain who is guilty not only of domestic abuse but also murder. Mike Bridges, the father of Kayla’s child, Jazz, is far from perfect but is given a chance to mature and redeem himself. There are a range of males featured in these stories and the experienced romance reader knows what sort of qualities the hero needs to make him worthy of the heroine’s love and respect.

The importance of honesty in a relationship, as stated by Proctor, is evident in the final romance with Kayla and Detective Peter Hadden when Kayla asks herself, after all this time alone bringing up her daughter, if Peter was too good to be true. “But he was definitely worth the risk” (Webb 284). For these female characters, loving is a risk; Darcy’s time as an abused wife is evidence of this. So, having decided to take that emotional risk of beginning a relationship Kayla sits him down and tells him all about what they have found investigating Rainy’s murder. “Because if she was taking this chance, she was going to do it right. No secrets. No hidden agendas. Nothing but the truth” (Webb 285). This need to start a romantic relationship with everything revealed is a classic example of how romance novels represent the importance of honesty in a romantic relationship.

Through their adventures the hero and heroine learn to trust each other, often in life-and-death situations. The issue of trust is seen as vitally important in both the love relationship and in a warrior relationship when the warrior woman has to trust her companions to be with her in battle and as comrades in arms to be watching each other’s backs. Jack is Darcy’s backup when she rescues abused women (Fetzer 14) and Tory has Ben’s back when she kills a man to save Ben’s life (Garbera 118).

The warrior woman holds appeal as a woman who is physically and emotionally self-reliant and able to defend those she loves, a power that may elude many women. As romance author Teresa Medeiros comments, “Warrior women embody the ultimate fantasy of female empowerment. They also make our heroes look good, because who can resist a man who adores a woman not only for her softness, but also for her strength?” These female characters insist on equality in a relationship, and the challenge adds to their attraction to each other. Tory’s relationship with Ben reflects this: “A shiver of pure excitement ran down her spine. Going toe-to-toe with him like this...she craved it” (Garbera 217). A similar recognition is referred to often in Josie and Morel’s courtship: “Equal, without giving ground. A man who,

even if she inched ahead, wouldn't diminish but would instead applaud her. And challenge her all over again" (Mann 106). These characters clearly see and appreciate themselves and their mates as warriors. Josie observes Morel, "Leather and muscle. Her warrior spirit recognized his" (Mann 107). The inherent challenge between two strong characters also adds to the sexual tension: "Ultimately, the thrilling power play would stretch the pleasure tighter for both of them" (Mann 188).

The warrior in the female character attracts and reacts to the warrior in the male character. Judith Arnold considers that "real men aren't afraid of strong women" (137). These male characters, all warriors in their own right, are comfortable in their masculinity and find strong women exciting. Jack says, "God, I love a woman who takes charge" (Fetzer 204). Morel says, "I like a woman who knows what she wants" (Mann 186). Women with physical, emotional and psychological strength may satisfy both romantic and feminist ideals. Katherine Garbera, author of *Exposed*, said in an interview that the male lead needs to be tough, too. "They have to be equal to the heroine in strength and need to be strong enough in themselves to let her rescue herself and to rescue him without letting ego get in the way" (Jump 42). The hero and heroine in the Bombshell line cannot just react to each other as male and female but also recognise and respect the warrior in each other, especially when the male is rescued by the female as Tory rescues Ben<sup>16</sup>.

The concept of equality is a central theme of the romance. Equality is vital to maintaining the balance of power in an intimate relationship. Laura Vivanco notes this in her research about Mills & Boon novels of the new millennium where the words "friends" and "partners" are often used to describe the central relationships (1078). The importance of

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<sup>16</sup> In other Bombshell stories the male is not also a warrior but he still possesses the heroic qualities of trust, integrity, intelligence, courage and honesty even if she is better at martial arts than he is, for example, Stefan in *Line of Sight*.

equality to the warrior woman is stated outright in *Exposed*: “Tory knew she’d finally found a man she could have future with. A man who was her equal and not threatened by her. And an Athena woman would settle for nothing less” (Garbera 295). Graduates of the Academy know their worth and the novels emphasize that they expect their intimate relationships to be on an equal basis. Relationships between warrior men and women may be seen as an example of genuine equality in that they manifest the fantasy of female empowerment and male acceptance of a female for all that she is and in return she accepts his total character. The reader may hope for a true equality and not the usual double standard (for example, where both are working but the woman still does the bulk of the housework) but one where each partner is free to be themselves regardless of gender expectations – if he likes to cook and she likes to fix cars, both are entitled to do what they excel at and enjoy. Conversely these novels suggest that the jobs neither takes pleasure in are divided evenly and do not end up with the woman, for example, housework.

The Athena Force women are not afraid to argue with their men, for example, Tory, mentioned earlier, is prepared to “go toe to toe” with Ben as are the other Cassandras with their love interests. The hero does not always get his own way in a modern romance and definitely not with the women of the Athena Force in contrast to Rita Hubbard’s conclusion, published in 1983, that romance novels exhibited “heroines who challenge male authority in progressively stronger ways but who stop short of an attempt at real equality because they are incapable of it. Harlequin Romances cast the heroine as so inferior to the hero that her incapacities limit her challenge” (177). Heroes and heroines have evolved with society and the time period of any romantic criticism must be taken into account when commenting on romance fiction. In contrast to Hubbard, Margaret Ann Jensen’s study of Harlequin novels published only a year later in 1984 states that Harlequin romances have “progressed towards valuing more equal and realistic relationships that free both women and men from the

impossible expectations traditionally associated with romantic marriage” (130). Equality is now seen as an achievable goal in a love relationship in the romance novel. The warrior woman shares the romance heroine’s qualities in her ability to make her point, albeit more forcefully than usual and to reach a satisfactory conclusion.

Equality and the ideal of the relationship that Holmes referred to earlier is in the acceptance of the Other and the allowance of individual freedom permitting the characters to perform in a way that is not restricted by accepted gender roles. In *Pursued*, Morel is aware that “Josie wasn’t the kind he could wrap in a cotton cocoon and he wouldn’t change a damn thing about her” (Mann 278). After her test pilot’s death, Morel says “You’re strong. You’ll make it through this and come out even stronger. And he was right. She knew it. She was just relieved he knew it, too” (Mann 197). In *Double-Cross* Riley acknowledges that Sam is better than he at martial arts and much more self-contained (Fletcher 96). It is this acceptance of each other and all their qualities that is central to the romance novel. The relationship also helps the female characters to accept and reconcile many of the individual aspects of their selves. This is especially important for the warrior woman who is not completely feminine or overtly masculine but able to call on both sides of her nature as needed. This is most clearly shown when Josephine reflects at the end of *Pursued* that “she loved this wild man who’d roared into her life and demanded she be Josie, Josephine, P.C., Buttercup, all worthy parts of herself” (Mann 297). In a romance not only must the romance develop throughout the story but the characters need to develop alongside the relationship.

The males in these stories are prepared to fight for their relationships as well. Morel forces Josie into a tough conversation about their relationship. “He tempted her and scared the spit out of her all at once. God, this man cut her no slack. But then hadn’t she done the same with him?” (Mann 253). “Diego gave as good as he got and she respected that in him” (Mann 222). The males in these novels do not allow for so-called feminine weaknesses –

they expect the females in these stories to rise to the challenge, or, as Paizis contends, “Equality between the heroine and the hero means not only mutual esteem, but also a balance of power in the final contract” (136). In the romantic suspense, love is, at first, inconvenient for both the female and the male, especially when in the middle of an investigation. Battles are fought with the enemy but also with the hero who is prepared to challenge his potential mate and make her aware that a relationship exists between them.

As warrior women these characters are also willing to not only fight with their men but for their men and their relationships. Tory goes in to save Ben’s life (Garbera 284) and is injured in the process (Garbera 286). Darcy has to fight her husband in order to free herself and her son so that she can further develop her relationship with Jack. Josie had to leave a note for Diego and warn him not to walk into Quincy’s trap: “She couldn’t even allow herself to consider him [Morel] being hurt – or worse” (Mann 270). The warrior woman’s drive to protect extends to the hero.

In common with many romantic heroines, love finds these characters in the course of their quest; they are not consciously seeking it. The warrior women in this continuity series are on a quest to find out what happened to their mentor while still managing to juggle careers and family commitments whether parents, siblings or sometimes children. Some exploration of family relationships is possible due to the longer length of the novels in the line. The inclusion of such factors may make the characters more rounded and “realistic” to the reader. Romantic relationships would not be easy for such strong women either, as Josie reflects, “Even if this guy didn’t have a problem with women who flew jets and shot the big guns like other men she’d seen outside the workplace, she didn’t have time for a relationship. Hell, she barely had time to do her laundry” (Mann 18). Kayla is equally busy when Peter Hadden broaches their mutual attraction, Kayla considers she has way too much going on in her life, “too many obstacles to overcome” (Webb 101). Their quest and their lives are

complicated by external and internal factors and conflicts but they ultimately win. Vivanco posits that “[s]ome romances, then, can be interpreted as depictions of society in microcosm, with the heroine’s final triumph representing a victory against the patriarchal oppression of women” (1068). These characters succeed in the quest they set themselves and in creating and solidifying relationships throughout their stories.

Establishing and maintaining sexual tension is a vital element in the writing of a romance and is evident in these novels. It is developed slowly in the attraction between Alex and Justin. Although their romantic relationship does not really begin until the end of the novel, after she has broken her engagement to Emerson, the awareness of the other leads the reader to anticipate that Alex and Justin’s relationship will progress. The reader’s expectations are met when Alex finally receives a kiss from Justin, who, as befits a romance hero, is a dangerous man: “she’d thought then that whoever he was, he was a threat to someone or something she held dear. She never would have guessed it was she herself he would threaten, and that he’d do it with a single kiss that would about knock her socks off” (Davis 295). He also says he is a patient man and their relationship continues through the series and although long-distance is stronger by the end of this continuity series.<sup>17</sup>

Sexual tension is also explored when the male point of view is a part of the story. Josie’s story in *Pursued* is one of the few in this continuity series that features a male narrative point of view. As she looks at Morel he also looks back at her and enjoys it: “Of course she transformed even runway boots into runway model material. Yeah, he sure enjoyed looking at her” (Mann 99). The only other novel that features some insight into the male point of view is *Double-Cross* where the reader is occasionally privy to Riley’s view of

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<sup>17</sup> Alex and Justin’s story continues in a later novel, *Flashback*, where her grandfather approves of him as a potential member of the family.

Sam. Here, Riley is protective in that although she is under surveillance he makes sure that he is the one in charge of the cameras when she has her shower (Fletcher 97). He also made sure a female agent was on watch so that the male agent could not ogle Sam, though Riley cannot resist looking himself. In the romance genre, the female is just as ready to visually desire the male as this quote from *Alias* demonstrates, “his T-shirt stretched tight across those massive shoulders and bulging muscles and Darcy almost lost her train of thought just looking at him. He arched an eyebrow, the look saying he caught her staring” (Fetzer 62-3). The physical attraction is important and the sexual tension is apparent in the constant awareness of the potential partner as seen when Tory feels that Ben disturbs her on many levels (Garbera 200) and Sam finds that “there was something about Riley McLane that just kept her on edge” (Fletcher 294). There has to be mutual desire in a romance and this is reflected in the text, especially where both the male and female point of view are present.

Romance fiction since the 1980s have featured an increasing amount of male point of view to the point where it is often expected in the new millennium. However the male point of view is absent in four of these novels and may indicate that these novels are not traditional romances as the action and mystery share an equal importance with the romance. The mystery of whether the male is a hero or a villain would not be as suspenseful if the reader had access to the male’s point of view as it may indicate whether he is a help or a hindrance to the warrior woman character. The guidelines for the Bombshell line also state that “the entire book should be told primarily from the heroine's view point” (Appendix 4) so that the authors were not obliged to include a male point of view.

Kayla’s character is perhaps the character that is aware that her life is lacking something and her circumstances of a teenage pregnancy and eleven years virtually raising Jazz alone finds her crying herself to sleep from loneliness. She wants a man like Hadden but

she falls asleep before she can chastise herself for her weakness (Webb 119). Later in the story she considers:

[t]he part of her that suffered with loneliness and wished she had a physical relationship in her life. Why was it a woman didn't feel complete without a man in her life? Was this God's sense of humor at work? Or maybe it simply boiled down to basic biology. That's all she really needed wasn't it? Some good sex to stave off depressing nights like tonight? (Webb 191).

That Kayla considers it a vulnerability to want a relationship with a man is reflective of some feminist values of independence but also reveals a need for an intimate connection. Although Kayla could be considered emotionally strong, the need for a close relationship with a member of the opposite sex reflects the heterosexual expectations of the romance element of this sub-genre. Sam takes a different view on this: "You're getting weak. She chided herself. But she consoled herself with the fact that if she could recognize her weakness, she wasn't really weak" (Fletcher 102). Knowing what it is they need and what to look for can make the characters stronger.

In the romance novel where love is the goal there must be more involved than physical attraction as the heroic qualities of both heroine and hero mentioned earlier will testify. Tory may have been able to keep her emotions in check and have a mainly physical relationship with Perry but these female characters are more worried about the males in their lives when they actually like them. Ben says he likes Tory. She likes him too and she considers that a problem (Garbera 108). Josie was starting to like Morel, "and yes, like was far more dangerous than lust" (Mann 71). Lust can flare and decline but "like" can lead to stronger emotions. Liking means the person possesses more of those heroic qualities. Liking a male is important in a romance in allowing the relationship to stretch beyond the physical,

developing into companionship, caring or emotional attention and finally the staple emotion of the romance, love, in addition to the commitment involved in a long-term relationship.

Lust and like are not enough, however. There is also a need for respect for the true character of the warrior woman or warrior. The women of the *Cassandras* all end up in relationships where the men acknowledge their strengths and accept them. Male and female partners are equally willing to work on a relationship and commit to it. The importance of trust, honesty and the emotions conveyed in the romance are all to be found in this first continuity series which is a microcosm of contemporary romances that feature a virgin, career women, single parenthood and a failed marriage with a second chance at love. The romantic ideal of heterosexual love is presented and developed along with the mystery and action elements to present a satisfying conclusion to the novels.

The female characters of these six novels are all concerned that they exhibit no visible weakness: warriors present a strong façade. Caring can interfere with their task, a trait shared with the male warrior, so they learn to compartmentalize. Josie finds just imagining Morel hurt “would bring debilitating fears, emotions she couldn’t risk” (Mann 270). Sam due to her past has doubts about showing anyone her vulnerable side and getting hurt (Fletcher 205). Josie is careful with relationships; she has only been involved with two other men (Mann 111). Kayla feels vulnerable with Peter Hadden (Webb 83). Tory also considers caring for Ben will reveal her weakness, “It scared her to realize she was already beginning to care about Ben. Scared her because it could make her weak” (Garbera 145). Tory was afraid that everyone would see how weak and fearful she was, and that her persona as a tough reporter was a façade. She was careful to keep “from having any personal relationships that were too demanding or too close” (Garbera 145). Tory likes to compartmentalize her relationships. Ben would complicate her life – “she liked everyone to fit in the nice, neat little corners, she

assigned them. Her family and the Cassandras fell into an emotional place” (Garbera 198). However, that may have been the way she ordered her relationships in the past, especially when she considers her previous relationship with Perry: “what did it say about her that she’d been involved with him for four years? Was she incapable of the kind of depth of feelings that were needed for a real relationship?” (Garbera 294). Her caring for Ben makes her realize that she was able to “compartmentalize” her relationships previously because her heart and deeper emotions were not really involved. The romantic relationships are further established when trust, honesty and integrity are emphasized once the female characters allow the males to become involved in their search for Rainy’s killer, effectively making them honorary members of the sisterhood of the Cassandras of the Athena Academy.

### 3. SISTERHOOD

The female characters in this continuity series are aware of the importance of sisterhood.

Jennifer Stuller observes that:

Collaboration with friends, family or community is common to the female hero – not because she is incapable of succeeding on her own, but because she is more successful when she recognizes, encourages, and utilizes the talents of others. This support system is essential to the evolution of her spirit – which will ultimately make her a better warrior. (92).

Stuller uses examples from television shows such as *Buffy* and *Xena*; as the Bombshell line was developed to ride on the popularity of such visual warriors it seems only fitting that they display similar characteristics. The warrior women of the Athena Force have this support system that is essential to their success as individuals and a band of warriors to achieve their goals and win their battles.

Stuller then asks, “Where are depictions of women mentoring women?” (107). In the wake of second wave feminism should there not be more healthy female relationships featured in comics and films? Women supporting women may be considered a feminist ideal and is a feature that is alive and well in the romance novel. The Athena Academy originated with the late Arizona senator Marion Gracelyn, and it had evolved from her initial idea of a military-type academy (Davis 29). She provides a role model for the students. Principal, Christine Evans, ex-army, retired after losing an eye in an accident was “the heart and soul of Athena for over two decades” (Davis 33), and another valuable role model. There is also the group’s mentor, Lorraine (Rainy) Carrington Miller whose sudden death has reunited the group.

Josie tells Shannon (the only girl to be expelled from the Academy) that “Athena Academy women do stick together...Support and friendship helps you get ahead a helluva [sic] lot faster than going it alone” (Webb 150). This argument sums up the concept of this continuity series and the importance of reciprocal relationships. Each story features a heroine but they are all joined by their commitment to the group called the Cassandras, by their mentor, Rainy, and their investigations into her death. The strong sisterhood in addition to the military emphasis of the Academy invites a similarity to the brothers-in-arms mentality of the military.

The Cassandras, consisting of six girls from different backgrounds, thrown together to form a group did not instantly become a cohesive unit. Rainy had to resort to trickery to assemble them into a working unit. This is detailed in the final book as Kayla remembers the beginnings of the group. “Talk about adolescent egos” (Webb 111). Rainy took them into the mountains and pretended to be both lost and injured (a sprained ankle) in a bid to make the group work together as a team. Rainy confesses to her group and when they ask why, she answers, “Because I needed you to look past your differences and to see each other for who

you really are...We're a team. Like sisters...Nothing can pull us apart or divide us as long as we stick together" (Webb 114-5). Kayla remembers them all feeling united as "sisters...there for each other...forever" (Webb 115). The bonds of this sisterhood are proven strong in their fight for Rainy but it did not always function smoothly.

Kayla and Alex, once the closest of friends, had a falling out as Alex had not approved of Kayla's falling in love and her consequent teenage pregnancy. "Alex felt a moment of the old irritation at the fact that this estrangement was over, of all things, a man" (Davis 23). Over the course of the investigation the two friends overcome their differences and rediscover common ground.

The Cassandra Promise "to come if any of them needed help – no questions asked" (Webb 20) serves to unify the group and reinforce their core values of honour and loyalty. This promise served to consolidate the bond between them:

Alex had made the Cassandra promise with all the zeal of a passionate young woman, but her dedication to what it meant had never wavered as time passed. She would do what had to be done, whatever the cost. They all would, every one of the remaining Cassandras. They would keep their word. It was what the graduates of the Athena Academy for the Advancement of Women did. (Davis 8).

The promise had been invoked by Rainy but she dies before the group finds out why she had called them together. The ties of this sisterhood are strong enough for the members to risk their careers and even their lives to find the answer to their mentor's death. Alex addresses the unknown murderer of Rainy: "Hurt one Cassandra, hurt us all...Use one of us, and all of us will exact payment. Whoever you are, whatever your goal, you will regret it" (Davis 67). These female characters are warrior women prepared to find the truth and seek justice for Rainy's death.

The Athena Academy's influence on its graduates is evident in its varied and unusual curriculum and its lack of gender expectations. Tory reflects that "maybe the reason that all of her close friends were from her Athena Academy days was due to the fact that she'd made the kind of bonds with them that weren't easily forged elsewhere (Garbera 265). Josie also says, "the whole Athena Academy experience taught me more than I would have learned anywhere else, opened doors and gave me lifelong friends who'll never let me down" (Mann 196).

An example of the support the group provided to each other is found when Rainy helped Darcy to escape her abusive husband. Darcy eventually tells the Cassandras all about her unhappy marriage and what she is planning to do and they all offer to help her (Fetzer 242) but she does not call in the Cassandra Promise until near the end when she has Josie help her mother, son and herself escape by helicopter. Tory (Fetzer 286) provides the press coverage relating the story of Maurice's culpability of murder and fraud.

These female characters do not exist in a vacuum; like most women they have many roles and these involve emotional ties. These bonds are not one-sided either. This can be seen when Kayla is speaking to Sam at the end of Sam's story, "You need to remember that you don't have to do that alone now. When you get things cleared there, after you've had a chance to visit with your sister, come back home for little while." She paused. "And it's not just for you, Sam. It's for us, too. We need you" (Fletcher 293). These warrior women already know about nurturing because they have nurtured each other through their time at the Athena Academy unlike the warrior-as-hero who needs a woman to teach him how to love (Lowell 92). The romance for the warrior woman can be a matter of her deciding what, or who, she really wants.

This continuity series ends as it begins with the Cassandra promise, “Not one of those present would ever forget what the Cassandra promise stood for. They would always be there for each other, wherever life took them. Just a phone call away” (Webb 295). The whole series is based upon the strength of sisterhood and may be compared to the camaraderie that is experienced by warriors who battle a common foe, sharing similar experiences and emotions. These warrior women have powerful emotional ties and the males in their lives accept this. This is a subversive idea that does not afford the patriarchy power. In the final scene, even though they talk about their love interests, the men are not physically present. It is the women on their own and their relationship that has equal importance with lovers and family.

The next chapter examines the warrior woman in her most powerful roles involving power, violence and her career stepping into traditionally male territory and making it her own through her capability as both woman and warrior.

## CHAPTER SIX: POWER

### 1. AGENCY AND INDEPENDENCE

A key fact about the earlier definition of a warrior woman is that she “drives the story.” Her ability to chart her own course and make her own decisions can be seen to give her a measure of power. She may partner with a man in her work and her private life but she is not at his mercy – and neither is he at hers. Here the extent to which the female characters in the Athena Force have real power and agency will be considered, the ways in which their powers differ from traditional romance heroines.

Dixon believes that romance novels help to empower women and in her history finds that “Mills & Boon books argue for a change in the way society is organized, from male-oriented to female-oriented. Mills & Boon books give women power” (9). If one accepts the hypothesis that romance novels enable the reader to envisage a world that women have the power to order, in a manner suitable to them, then romance novels can be seen as empowering. The heroine drives the novel: it is her quest and her needs and desires that are being met and when they are not being met she finds a way out of a situation which does not work for her. An example of this in the Athena Force novels is Darcy, in *Alias*, who finds herself married to an abusive husband and facilitates her escape from his oppression; however, he still holds power as she has been in hiding for years in “a prison without walls. She was still locked in hers” (Fetzer 20). Now she wants her life back; she is intelligent and determined enough to find a way to do it. Not only does she help herself, she also uses her abilities to effectively plan and carry out escapes for women in similar situations who do not have the skills or the strength to get themselves safely away from the abusive males in their lives. Sometimes Darcy has to use her warrior skills to affect the escapes (Fetzer 12-14).

Darcy not only empowers herself but aids other females in learning to take back their own power. Arguing the case for romances subverting the power of the patriarchy, Dixon states:

It is in the area of the balance of power between the sexes that the novels most obviously undermine the dominant ideology, and come closest to feminist ideology. Patriarchy demands complete subordination of the woman to the man in a heterosexual marriage. Feminism challenges this, and so do these novels, though not by direct confrontation, as feminism does, but by suggestion (191).

Perhaps some feminists do not recognize the switch in the balance of power because it is done by suggestion, subtly and subversively and not in a direct confrontation such as may be expected from a warrior woman. However, as has been shown earlier in this thesis, a warrior, whether male or female, will use any and all weapons available. Although the warrior woman may be aggressive in a male fashion she is also able to show her feminine side – the side consistent with the romance genre – as Josie realizes at the end of her story when she realizes she can be both warrior and woman and finally understands her mother’s emphasis “about the importance of being soft as well as strong” (Mann 293). An understanding of strength and softness also applies to the hero in romance fiction. In order for the relationship to be equal gender roles need to be reworked. Although these female characters may be able to meet men on their own terms, they are also aware of the power of the feminine.

The female characters of the Athena Force novels do not see all power as lying with the male, or indeed the patriarchy, as stated in the first story, *Proof*, where “too many men would march in and start giving orders. Nothing was more guaranteed to get a Cassandra’s back up than that” (Davis 291). These characters recognise those with power and authority, but they also have the power of free will and are prepared to undermine power when it is wrongfully used, for example the power Darcy’s husband wielded over her and her family. Even in romantic situations, as was discussed in the section on Romantic Relationships, these

females are hardly submissive to the male. The hero is not always the one in command, even sexually, but this does not mean that the female character wants to dominate the male either. The issues and desires in the story are driven by the female characters more often than the male characters and as Mia Zachary, *Blaze* author, says “there is great appeal in the message that ‘you don’t need a man to rescue you; you can take care of yourself or even rescue him’” (Jump 39). These characters have the power to not only rescue themselves but their men and the control to acknowledge when they also may need help, usually going to their fellow Cassandra members before asking a male.

Dixon believes that “Mills & Boon novels create a space where women’s defiance is articulated” (183) and the warrior woman is a defiant character. The Athena Academy itself is an articulation of defiance as it is “an institution dedicated to helping women take their rightful place in a world that was still very much run by men” (Davis 29). The patriarchy is thus acknowledged and defied, but romance is more inclined to take the idea of working within the system for change rather than trying to force it. These female characters are “aware that changes like this took not years, but decades, generations” (Davis 39). They are looking at a long-term plan to change the world but for now they look for equality in power in their most intimate relationships.

Judith Hand, romance author, states that warrior, or “kick-ass” women are one result of women gaining real power, in real life, albeit one centimetre at a time:

Each generation of women has put social pressure and voting power behind more laws to give their daughters and granddaughters rights equal to men,” she said. “So, the first factor in this trend toward ‘kick-ass’ women is that young women now do have real, genuine power. They can acquire both education and money and pretty much do whatever they have the guts and stamina to dream. They know they don’t need to take guff from anyone (Jump 39).

The resurgence of the warrior woman Hand posits is due to more women (though certainly not all) gaining power economically and educationally. The underlying premise of the Athena Academy is that it can provide such educational and economic power to young women so they may take their place in the modern, western world.

However, the Athena Academy is not a completely autonomous body. It could not be within the parameters of contemporary culture in which the series is set, “the government held a great deal of power over Athena Academy” (Webb 220). Perhaps in reflection of the goddess Athena’s actual birth being credited to her father, the Academy is also indebted to males to establish and raise funds for the school. The grandfathers of Alex, the female protagonist of *Proof*, and Josie, in *Pursued*, as retired heads of the CIA and FBI respectively, were instrumental in the establishment of the school.

A lot of the funding for the Academy is sourced from the government and the legislation allowing it to function. The female characters have to question whether the Athena Academy was set up to provide eggs for Lab 33 after finding out what happened when they all thought Rainy’s appendix had been removed not her eggs taken instead. This makes the question of power and agency problematic, not just for the female characters, but also the male. Yet the government which is patriarchal may be seen as “male” in its ruthlessness and disregard for individuals and it has a vital role in maintaining the status quo in the interests of self-preservation.

Holmes contends that “the heroine [of the contemporary romance novel] is the active agent of the narrative: it is her quest that structures the story, and this quest involves the negotiation of her needs and if necessary the transformation of the hero to meet these” (122). The heroes in these novels do not undergo such a transformation, probably because the romance is not the main plot line. The heroes of these stories are attracted to these heroines

because they are strong and capable women and they are secure enough in their masculinity to cope with a woman who can take part in armed and unarmed combat. Heterosexual romance places equal importance upon the male and the female and maintaining the balance of power between the two so that either the male or female may need to find the strength to change aspects of themselves if necessary.

Samantha St John, in *Double-Cross*, as an orphan who has been through foster care, is a female character who may appear to lack agency. She is imprisoned when she is mistaken for a twin sister she did not even know she had. Unable to exert power over much of her environment Sam is aware of the authority she has over herself, “she liked being in control of herself...control was a big part of her life and her career” (Fletcher 73). Sam is put in solitary confinement for almost two months and has the fortitude to successfully cope with the testing conditions. She considers that her whole life had been lived in some form of seclusion (Fletcher 33) having been in foster care from the age of two. Her first remembered experiences of companionship are from her time spent at the Athena Academy. “God, she hated feeling helpless. She’d had to feel that way so much of her life” (Fletcher 121). Yet Sam is the female character who is the perhaps the most warrior-like of all the six heroines in this continuity series. She kills three people in the course of her tale, she fights physically (with a range of weapons, one a rocket launcher) and emotionally, she is also prepared to break her thumb to escape from a set of handcuffs (Fletcher 280) and has the strength to continue on. Riley knows what she has been through, “and yet, she still seemed somehow indomitable” (Fletcher 286). In a way, the heroine overcomes incredible odds because she is seen as having her power taken away and yet she can still fight and win regaining that power through a belief in herself.

Tory, in *Exposed*, finds “the quiet strength she’d always known was deep inside her” (Garbera 74). Like Sam and Tory, for many female characters the source of their power

exists within them and it is up to them to tap into it and to use it. However, this does not prevent these characters from using any other influence that is available to them. For example, Tory has the power of the press to work with and uses that to expose injustices and counteract the bad press her rival Shannon Connor is giving the Athena Academy and its graduates. Ben also says of her, “You’re a tough character, Tory Patton...You intimidate everyone you meet. I think you know it and like it” (Garbera 229). Tory has personal power that she is prepared to use to achieve her goals.

Josie may be seen as a part of the patriarchy by virtue of her career in the military which affords her dominance over those under her command, but she is also answerable to those in the hierarchy above her. After the funeral of her friend and fellow test pilot on her project, Josie finds “her control frayed by the second. How odd to feel so numb yet fragile all at once – an alien emotion for a woman used to fighting the world head-on” (Mann 173). Josie finds that feeling of fragility alien because she has been responsible for her own destiny most of her life, but things can change. When she is detained by the military, facing court martial over manufactured charges and seemingly powerless, “she hated the helplessness most of all” (Mann 276). Josie learns what it is to feel completely powerless and she neither enjoys nor accepts it. This provides her with the motivation to seek every avenue to gain that power back.

Josie’s situation is brought about by a false charge of sexual harassment against her even though she has been subject to it herself. Johnson makes the point that “what *does* promote sexual harassment are the gendered inequalities of power inherent in such situations and how power, sexuality, and a sense of male entitlement are linked together under patriarchy” (92). Although Bridges sexually harasses her, he is the one who accuses her of sexually harassing him – if the warrior woman is equal she can equally be accused of what may often be considered a patriarchal crime. That this issue features in this novel is

indicative of the way current women's concerns can be reflected and examined in romance fiction. In this way the Athena Force novels can be seen to indicate wider social developments, in which the growing number of women in traditionally male employment has fuelled awareness of issues such as sexual harassment. Consistent within this framework is the novel's positioning of the woman ultimately as victor rather than the victim.

Kayla as an unmarried mother could have been seen to lack power, yet she raises her daughter and also achieves her goal of a career in law enforcement, gaining authority and command as a police lieutenant. "She might be off duty but she never went anywhere, not even to bed, without her weapon" (Webb 9). The gun is a visible symbol of that authority, as are the badge and the uniform. She also knows how to wield that power in her professional capacity as "she prided herself on doing her job with the least excessive force possible" (Webb 17). As a mother she may be seen to have control over her child but someone like the child's father may challenge that power when Bridges suddenly wants to build a relationship with his daughter. The villain, Bradford, in Kayla's story uses the power of her love for her child to take her child away demonstrating his control over her. Yet, Kayla does not really see it that way as "she was going to kill this man. Whatever it took, he was dead" (Webb 233). She feels she still has the agency to mete out justice for his misuse of authority. However, another character, Dawn, rather than Kayla ends up killing him. Either way the females are the winners in that particular skirmish and ultimately the ones with the power of life and death.

Alex, in *Proof*, may appear to be the least physical of the warrior women but she has the training and the willingness to use her warrior powers. Alex also has the advantage of background, breeding and money: "she was a Forsythe and had the Forsythe millions behind her" (Davis 70). This privilege that she was born with she uses carefully as she has been

raised by her grandfather to be aware that power also brings responsibility. “She only brought out the blueblood accent she’d grown up with on occasions when she was feeling personally threatened” (Davis 289). Alex uses that particular authority when required – especially when putting pesky reporters like Shannon Conner in their place (Davis 145-7). The agency of these female characters comes in many different forms, whether they are born with it or develop it, but the use of their power is apparent in each story and it is not just physical.

These novels, as popular romance, feature heterosexual relationships and argue for the power as women in those relationships. For example, “Darcy felt the power of being a woman” (Fetzer 204). Josie also feels her sexuality as a woman when she realises Morel is really asking whether she is involved with Bridges, and “a swell of feminine power smoked through her” (Mann 96). Other romance stories may not have the warrior woman character but still highlight the power a woman has to change herself, her circumstances and hold her own with her male partner. Diana Holmes argues that even in the traditional romances of “Harlequin...where female stories have only one form of truly happy ending, the genre demands some degree of affirmation of female subjectivity and agency” (141). This form of power or agency is often only acknowledged or discussed within the pages of popular romance.

The romance genre features love as a source of power; not just sexual love but also family, friends and communities. Love is a driving force for the characters in this series as it is their love for their mentor that motivates them to seek out answers about her murder. Love motivates them to protect the ones they care about and love is seen as providing the strength needed to fight their battles and complete the tasks assigned to them or that they assign to themselves. Warrior women are aware of and able to wield a considerable amount of power,

but these female characters are also aware of the responsibility that such authority entails and use it accordingly.

## 2. THE GENTLER SEX?

From page twelve of the first Athena Force Adventure, *Proof*, the reader knows the female characters in this series are capable of using physical violence to achieve their aims. This first instance is a violent scuffle, with Alex using martial arts on a taller male opponent and managing to drive him off. In *Alias*, Darcy tangles with a large, drunk abusive male (Fetzer 11) and in *Double-Cross* (Fletcher 28) Sam is dodging bullets. In *Pursued* on the first page Josie is flying a jet plane and endeavouring to induce air sickness in a rival (Mann 7-12), and in the first pages of *Justice*, Kayla shoots a criminal in the leg (Webb 14). As Vicki Hinze observes, “none of the stories of this type I’ve heard about have gratuitous violence. But my heroine isn’t afraid to use any skills, including physical skills, to stop the enemy from harming others” (Jump 41-2). This observation is applicable to all six novels of the Athena Force series in which violence, unarmed, armed and fatal serves to move the story forward and reveal aspects of the female characters’ skills and personalities, in many cases from the onset of the story.

*Double-Cross* not only has a violent start involving Sam’s first kill (Fletcher 40) but it is the most violent of the six stories; the most active and violent heroine characters are Sam and her previously unknown twin sister, Elle Petrenko, an even more ruthless agent for the Russian equivalent of the CIA. The video of Elle which leads to Sam’s imprisonment as a traitor features an abundance of guns, assault rifles and dead bodies (Fletcher 115-7). Samantha St John, once released from prison and on the hunt for Rainy’s assassin, is a determined and deadly warrior woman.

Sam has to break her thumb to escape the handcuffs (Fletcher 280) that have her trapped in a cargo ship that the evil perpetrators, the Cipher and Ivanovich, intend to steer towards a fictitious Middle Eastern port and explode it, thereby causing major damage and an international incident. On her way out of the ship Sam arms herself with guns and sets explosives so she can detonate the ship before it reaches the target (281). After having escaped as the villain left her to be blown up with the ship, Sam is out for revenge and thinks, “You’re going to wish you’d killed me” (281). She proceeds to blow up the wheelhouse with a disposable rocket launcher then aims the next rocket attack at a motor sailer the Cipher and Ivanovich use to leave the fated-to-be-blown-up cargo ship (282-3). Sam then makes her second kill, again in self-defence, and detonates the explosives on the cargo ship away from the port itself (283) thereby preventing the major damage and political fallout that would have ensued from the Cipher’s original plan. Sam proves an effective warrior woman despite her not holding the position of field agent, due in part to her CIA training but largely because of skills acquired while attending the Athena Academy.

“Giving up wasn’t something he believed was in her nature. She was a fighter. A warrior to the last” (Fletcher 80). Riley is aware of Sam’s abilities and her strengths and she is clearly identified as a warrior but Riley also sees her as a woman. At first he thinks she’s had too little experience in CIA operations but near the end he can say “she’s a professional” (Fletcher 256). Sam is able to put personal issues aside, such as a previously unknown twin sister, and concentrate on, and complete, her mission.

Sam is rescued by Riley and Elle, who is piloting the rescue boat, as both are providing armed cover for Sam. Riley knows what she has been through, “losing a close friend, being locked up for two months, and having to hit the ground running on an operation that had turned bloody within hours” (Fletcher 286). It is clear that this warrior woman does not consider her work finished until the job is done, a clear indication of the personal

attributes of this character and her training at the academy. Sam is the quintessential warrior woman when she says, “stepping into potentially hostile situations where I can’t count on anyone but myself? ... that’s what I’ve been doing all my life...I’m back where I belong, not trusting anyone and suspicious of everyone I come in contact with” (Fletcher 233). Here she may compare to the more common lone male warrior, but the reader knows the Cassandras and others are there for her when she needs them. She is not completely alone, though due to her experiences in foster care she is wary of intimate relationships.

Once Sam escapes the cargo ship she is picked up by Elle who is piloting a power boat. Elle crashes the power boat onto shore chasing an assassin known as the CIPHER. Sam kills for a third time (Fletcher 288). Even though she wants to find out who contracted the CIPHER to arrange Rainy’s death, she is forced to kill the CIPHER to save her just-discovered twin sister. “Sam put three bullets through the CIPHER’s head. His features destroyed and the back of his head blown away, the man dropped to his knees, then fell face forward” (290). This is undoubtedly the novel with the most violence and blood, involving martial arts, guns, assault rifles, rocket launchers and plastic explosive. The body count is highest here and on a par with many male action adventure stories.

Sam doesn’t think she could kill in cold blood – only in defence and she felt guilt about the man in Munich (Fletcher 260). The subsequent kills are not discussed so the reader may be left to conclude that she regrets them but would not do anything differently. For the warrior woman any qualms about killing are ethical ones rather than gendered. Sam ends up killing four people, even though she is employed by the CIA as a translator and computer expert receiving only basic training in field operations.

Only one other Cassandra of the protagonists, (Tory, in *Exposed*) kills in these novels and then only once. This is done in defence of her friend Alex’s brother, Ben, and Tory’s

future lover, on the “volatile island country of Puerto Isla in Central America” (Garbera 9). “When the leader raised his gun and pointed it at Ben’s head, she drew back her arm and let her blade fly with deadly accuracy.” (Garbera 118). Like Sam, Tory also feels the effects of killing, “she closed her eyes but all she could see was the fallen man. She’d taken a life. Another person’s life. Something she’d never been prepared to do” (Garbera 119-20). The Athena Academy may train them to fight but to kill is a final step that must impact on any character with a conscience. Tory felt like being sick and hoped her voice was steady as the need to escape in one piece took over the shock of taking a life. She hoped it wouldn’t be necessary again but she knew “she’d do what needed to be done” (Garbera 121). She later refers to working on theories why someone is after them as part of her work and “it distracts me from remembering the guy I killed” (Garbera 136). The supposition is that these women can kill, but only when necessary in defence of themselves or others.

The other four warrior women characters are spared the decision of taking a life but because of their shared experiences and education the reader may assume that they would be able to kill under similar circumstances. “Darcy knew her limits. She wasn’t a killer” (Fetzer 105), yet she is capable of stabbing her husband in the thigh and shooting him in the shoulder. Darcy is very tempted to kill him but Jack tells her Maurice is not worth shooting. Darcy agrees and tells Maurice “You’re not going to die, Maurice. That’s too easy. You’re going to live in the same hell you put me in” (Fetzer 289). She then asks for a divorce. Darcy’s actions show that she would kill Maurice to protect her son but she can also listen to logic and be prevented from taking her revenge in a manner that would ultimately complicate and not improve her life.

Violence may be necessary to achieve their goals; these female characters will not hesitate to use whatever weapons are available but killing is kept for extreme situations of defence of self or others. Alex does not kill in the novel, and neither do Josie and Kayla

(only because Dawn beats her to it) but it does not mean they have not in other situations, especially in the case of Josie, an air force pilot and a “seasoned combat vet” (Mann 22). Police lieutenant, Kayla, has shot and may have killed previously in the course of her duties, although she usually aimed to avoid excessive force (Webb 17). She will shoot to injure if necessary and easily says, “If I’d wanted him dead I would have aimed a few feet higher” (Webb 59). The key to the violence in these stories is that it is controlled – these warrior women are in control of themselves and are able to keep their wits about them and not let their emotions have full rein while they have a job to do. This trait is not traditionally associated with female behaviour as the patriarchal argument is that women are more often emotional than rational in a crisis. In this instance these female characters do not differ from the male warrior as they are functioning as warriors regardless of gender.

As female characters they are also unconstrained by social mores and willing to mete out violence to other women. A short bout takes place between Josie and Shannon Conner, in which “Josie slammed Shannon onto her stomach, kned her in the back and twisted her arm behind her” (Mann 151). Shannon seems easily defeated but then she was the only student expelled from the Athena Academy. Sam with Elle, her sister, has a long drawn-out fight involving jumping over rooftops (Fletcher 225-27). A similarly equal match takes place between Kayla and Dawn O’Shaughnessy, one of Rainy’s daughters, their skirmish ending with Dawn getting the better of Kayla (Webb 226-8). Dawn is full of surprises and leads Kayla quite a chase, but in the end decides to depart rather than harm her. As Kayla realises, Dawn “was prepared to die if necessary. Kayla didn’t doubt for a second she was just as prepared to kill” (Webb 224). These warrior women are prepared to take on all comers and the preparation is for the next continuity series to be even more warrior-like as Dawn has been trained as an assassin by the Cipher (Dawn was told he was her uncle). He was the

assassin contracted to kill her biological mother, Rainy, and after hearing the Cassandras' side of the story Dawn has many questions about Lab 33, a place she knows well.

Violence perpetrated by females on males is often unexpected as when Elle flattens “the young SEAL...He hadn't been disarmed by her smiling approach so much as he had by her delicate appearance” (Fletcher 220). The smallest women are some of the deadliest, as evidenced by Sam and her sister at five foot three inches. Tory is only five foot two, and Darcy is also small. Josie and Kayla are medium height and Alex is the tallest of the group. Many of the characters make use of the assumption that as females they are not a threat to a man. For example, Darcy comes up against two males who were “not seeing her as a threat. When he got close, Darcy executed a high double kick that connected with his jaw, the first snapping his head back, the second dropping the blonde babe to the ground” (Fetzer 154). In defiance of widely-held social expectations of women, the more petite the woman the less likely males are to see her as dangerous, yet the killers in these novels are the smallest females.

These warrior women characters are all physically active and can use movement, even violence, as a release for tension. As Alex observes, “she realized she was pacing, already eager to start, take some action. Any action. Mental puzzles were all well and good, but sometimes she just needed to do something (Davis 186). Martial arts skills and practice, acquired in their time at the Academy, may be seen as an extension of their physicality. Practice also helps them to focus and in Sam's case while incarcerated for two months in solitary confinement physical movement not only kept her fit, it helped to keep her calm and centred (Fletcher 96).

When dealing in violence, not just the opposition get physically hurt. At the very least these female characters collect bruises, broken bones and Tory even gets shot, twice

(Garbera 286). Josie's sister, Diana, is also shot in the shoulder (Mann 267). Josie goes for the throat of the man who shot her sister (Mann 269). These warrior women are more likely to be emotional and willing to fight for the people and ideals they care about, including the Athena Academy. That training at the Academy helps them to keep the emotion to one side and deal with the job at hand in a professional manner as Sam does on learning she has a sibling. Although these warrior women are prepared to cope with bruises, broken bones and bullets, they learnt while at the Academy that the best way to collect fewer bruises is to be faster and more accurate than their opponents.

Whether practising or fighting for their lives these warrior women do not hesitate to use all their skills and they are wise enough to know when to fight and when to retreat in order to fight another day. Two thugs break into Josie's house while Morel and Diana are there. However, both female characters are aware that "being almost certain they could kick their attackers' butts didn't stop a healthy respect for the lethal power of a gun. Any or all of them could have died so easily" (Mann 236). These characters also know what the ultimate price of such violence may be and like any good warriors, are prepared to pay. Fear of the consequences does not stop them seeking the answers for Rainy's murder even if it leads to questioning those in positions of power.

From these examples it can be seen that the violent warrior woman who is also prepared to take on the risks of a love relationship (outlined in the section on Romantic Relationships) can be placed in popular romance fiction, in fact, she may be seen as a logical extension of the strong, feisty heroine of romance fiction. Unlike the historical examples where it is argued of the action heroine that "even when she was clad in armor and holding weapons she was not a warrior but a symbol" (Schubart 263) the modern warrior woman in popular romance is portrayed realistically as a woman capable of violence in defence of those in need of protection or in the interests of the nation. The violence has a clear and moral

rationale providing justifiable motivation. It is not violence for violence's sake. The violence is juxtaposed with the characters' everyday lives, their own problems and the need to find out why their friend was targeted. It is not symbolic of patriarchal aspirations of male dominance but of women being able to access all human traits irrespective of gender.

The first story in the next series centring on the "daughters" of Rainy, features Dawn O'Shaughnessy, following her appearance in the last novel of this continuity series. She functions as a lead in to the next three connected books. Kayla reflects that Dawn "was beautiful, extremely intelligent and capable. But where were the emotions?" (Webb 267). Dawn was raised to be an assassin and has no problem killing in cold blood, unlike the female characters in the first continuity series that all need a reason for killing.

Schubart argues in regard to representations of warrior women in popular cinema that "our culture finds it difficult to visualize women as warriors, and in our cultural and mythological imagination women remain where they have always been: at home" (262). A similar argument made about popular romance is that it supports the sanctity of the domestic sphere. This does not apply within this series, especially as the novel *Alias* considers violence within the domestic sphere, while in *Double-Cross* the most domestic activity that Sam is seen to do is make a sandwich for herself on the jet (Fletcher 211). Their violence is inflicted only on the enemy and, it could be argued, those who threaten the domestic realm whether it is on the individual or national home front, the operative term being "home". All of these characters know how to behave in a domestic situation but it does not stop them from being dangerous.

Modleski wrote in "The Disappearing Act" that romance "novels perpetuate ideological confusion about male sexuality and male violence, while insisting that there is no problem (they are 'very different')...sexual desire disguised as the intention to dominate and

hurt” (440). Modleski’s observation was made in 1980 and does not directly refer to the “bodice rippers” discussed in Chapter Two, but they were probably some of the best examples of sexual desire as domination. Some critics still refer to Modleski’s work, now three decades on, as if popular romance has not progressed deducing that such a scenario still applies today. This is certainly not the case in these novels. Josie, in *Pursued*, may have been attracted to her immediate superior Major Mike Bridges, but she will not get involved with him because he is her boss (Mann 21). When he forces himself on her in a parking lot: “He had her back to the wall, professionally and personally” (Mann 136) and being her superior it was unfair that she couldn’t fight him (Mann 140). Darcy, in *Alias*, is a victim of domestic violence and her husband is clearly no longer her hero. When a male forces himself upon a female it is seen as an act of violence; the heroes in these stories may physically fight with their warrior woman but would never force sex upon her. As discussed in Chapter Two, the nexus between sex and violence has changed. Jensen’s study found that it did not even apply to all the novels in the 1980s as there was “a new hero who realizes his love does not make his behaviour magically acceptable and that love does not excuse brutality” (138). This illustrates that Modleski’s argument in the 1980s did not always apply in that period and the brutal lover no longer applies for the majority of contemporary romance novels.

Krentz observes that in popular romance, the heroine “civilizes the hero by teaching him to combine his warrior qualities with the protective, nurturing aspects of his nature” (6). The warrior woman would appear to have achieved this already – she has both sides of her nature at her command – she incorporates both sides of the binary model by being able to be both violent and nurturing<sup>18</sup> as the situation demands. Indeed, she undermines the binary by unifying two into one. She is subversive in that she shows a woman capable of defending

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<sup>18</sup> The warrior woman can be nurturing without being a domestic goddess.

herself and of protecting others. In an interview on the new “kick-ass” heroines of romance fiction, Cherry Adair considers that these new books are “just a twist on an old favorite of strong women” (Jump 40). Indeed, strong women are not new to romance; there have been female characters, from the genre’s beginnings, willing to dish out some violence to protect themselves or others, especially in romantic suspense where life and death situations are often featured. Evelyn Vaughn, an author of other titles in the Bombshell line, considers that “the action heroine is also trained to protect herself, to resist, to conquer. She makes a powerful archetype toward which I aspire. I’m glad her time has come, and that I’m here to see it” (Jump 42). The warrior woman’s time has come and although the Bombshell line has disappeared the warrior woman, or action heroine, still appears in non-traditional roles such as police, military, and fire-fighters within romance fiction.

As warriors these female characters share many traits with the male warriors of romances in all time settings of the past, present and future. Elizabeth Lowell’s view of the warrior’s violence fits equally well with the warrior woman: “The classic romance warrior-heroes *do not enjoy destruction*. [Author’s emphasis] Ultimately they use their strength, their intelligence, and their discipline to defend rather than exploit those who are weaker than they” (92). At the core these warriors are decent men and women and violence is just a means to an end.

Lucinda J. Peach observes that in the real world, “ideological identifications of the military – and the armed violence that is the state-authorized province of the military to wage – as masculine makes males the standard by which females are assessed – and found wanting” (65). In the fictional world of the popular romance, in a female-imagined space, the women are not found wanting at all – they are found to be capable as warriors in their own right but not too proud to accept help from their friends or other males. They can function as lone warriors as Sam did earlier but these characters also know when to use the might of the

military. They are not afraid to use violence as a tool to achieve their ends if that is the only course open to them. These two sections have revealed the warrior aspects of the warrior woman in her use of agency, independence and violence as a means of breaching binary patriarchal gender expectations. These expectations are also challenged by the warrior woman's choice of career.

### 3. CAREERS

“As she has done since the beginning, the romantic heroine demands that her hero sees her as an autonomous individual, with her own needs and desires, whose job is a necessary part of her life” (Dixon 34).

The women of the Athena Force all have not just employment but careers, even Kayla who went through a teenage pregnancy. In an article titled “Independent Women”, Dixon argues that women in romance have always worked. Referring to her book, Dixon shows that from the first romance in 1910, women had jobs. Women have always worked both within and without the home. Even in historical novels where the upper class heroine may not be required to work and rarely had a career she often had intellectual hobbies, painted or ran the domestic side of vast estates. In contemporary times women are expected to financially support themselves and often their families. Holmes argues that “to win the heroine's love they [heroes] must respect her right to a degree of independence, often in the form of work” (121). For the women of the Athena Force having a career, not just a job, is a certainty in the romance genre.

Mills & Boon novels have not only argued for women's right to work but “additionally they have had a more radical subtext – that of changing the workplace to suit women's needs... this means engaging their heroes in battle” (Dixon 132). The Mills & Boon romances of the late 1970s and into the 1980s began this trend by showing women

working from home, addressing childcare concerns, and the female characters successfully encouraging the heroes in making home life a priority equal to their work. This domestication of the work space is much clearer when motherhood is combined with a career as Darcy, in *Alias*, clearly domesticates some of her work spaces in her beauty salon, The Chop Shop, which has a play area for her child and others. Kayla, in *Justice*, freely acknowledges the need to prioritize work and child rearing as, keen as she is to find what happened to Rainy's possible children, she "did have a job and a daughter, both of which had to come first" (Webb 61). Children and work necessitate such domestication and it may be seen partly as a convention of the romance genre, but not all romance novels feature children so the domestication comes in the form of prioritizing home life as a couple.

Women's careers initially were only those that were historically considered as socially acceptable and thus came to be dominated by women. This led to a plethora of nurses, governesses, secretaries and teachers in the early romances of the 1940-60s. Originally a woman's employment was a job until she married and only single women really made careers out of their employment. The first wave of feminism in the early twentieth century involving the suffragettes has been featured in some historical fiction. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, the second wave of feminism broke with the arrival of the Women's Liberation movement and was reflected in romances beginning to feature women in non-traditional employment such as pilots, engineers, and in previously male-oriented workplaces such as oil rigs and mines. Indeed, Jensen noted that: "Harlequins positively reinforce women or girls who break out of traditional sex-role limitations" (127).

The careers of the graduates of the Athena Academy encompass this freedom of choice in female employment. Although all the characters are aware of feminism and the rights females have gained, learnt while at the academy, only one of them, Josie, in *Pursued*,

can be seen as overtly feminist. The authors of the novels do not make an outright stand for feminism, but many feminist principles can be seen in the expectations of the characters in a woman's ability to manage a career and her life. Dixon ends her article with the observation that "feminism has many faces. Perhaps romantic fiction is one of them" (34). Feminism in the romance novel and especially these six novels may not be overt, but it is nonetheless there in the independence of the heroines and their ability to not only work but succeed at their chosen careers and in any opposition they encounter from upholders of tradition.

The Athena Force novels can be seen to actively promote female employment in traditionally male roles. Paizis envisions the development of women's abilities just as the Athena Academy does as "the next step was the exploration of new possibilities, the further breakup of the doctrine of spheres, the colonisation of new jobs traditionally seen as male preserves" (139). The Athena Academy has been established for this purpose, a "prestigious all-girls prep school designed to empower women, many of them going on to government security jobs" (Mann 13). Kayla, in *Justice*, knows that wider opportunities would be open to her daughter when she receives Jazz's invitation to attend the Athena Academy. Kayla ponders, "would Jazz go into law enforcement like her mother. "Or maybe the legal side of things. Or even forensics. There was investigative reporting, the military or even private investigations. All Athena graduates have their choice of futures" (Webb 169). All those careers listed in above are ones her friends are involved in as proof that there are such opportunities for Athena graduates.

The warrior woman is seen taking part in a male occupation in a way which challenges the notion that some jobs are innately unsuitable for women. This is shown most strongly in *Pursued* where Josie is one of the few females in the predominantly masculine field of the military. This is also the area most relevant to the warrior woman and reflects current trends in research about the military where women not only fight the enemy of their

country but also the enemy within – those members of the military who consider that women have no place on the field of combat but should be kept behind the lines (Goldstein, Holm). The novels reflect this tension by having the characters show their awareness of such concerns; Alex, in *Proof*, “knew that many of the very places Athena was training women to become part of were run by those who felt threatened by the idea of capable, trained, strong women moving in” (Davis 92). Such resistance here is referring to covert enemies of the Athena Academy, and what it stands for, a stance which is also compatible with the warrior woman who sees that her gender should be no barrier to the course she wants to take with her career, her life or, in the case of romance, her love. This view is consistent with the whole Athena Force series and, according to the guidelines outlined earlier, the entire Bombshell line.

The wider social issue of sexual harassment in the military is explored in the novel, *Pursued*. The line between sexual attraction and career is evident, “She [Josie] knew her boss was attracted to her – not that he’d ever made an overt move – and she wasn’t stupid enough to cross that line, either. No hoo-hah was worth risking her career, and apparently he concurred” (Mann 21). Josie’s career is more important to her than pursuing a relationship on those terms. However, Major Bridges later makes a pass at her as discussed earlier in *Agency and Independence* and the outcome is resolved by her sister, Diana, and Morel, her prospective lover, who manage to find enough evidence on the Major – who is accusing Josie of sexually harassing him – to make him withdraw the charges. Such cases mirror the real questions of power in forging a career in male dominated fields, especially the military. Ironically, the development of the plot reveals that she needs both a male and female to extricate her from this threat to her career.

Kayla, however, does not seem to have the issues that plague Josie. She appears to be a respected member of her law enforcement team even though she has a tendency to do too much on her own, as shown in the opening scene of *Justice* (Webb 9). She has a reliance on

her weapon which may serve to show that she is never really off-duty and that her career is as important to her as her daughter.

Many of these heroines not only enter traditionally male fields but also excel in their careers. These female characters are ambitious and on “the fast track to success”<sup>19</sup>. Alex is up for promotion. Kayla completed her training and qualifications after Jazz, her daughter, turned one, she loved her job as a cop (Webb 45) and she intended to work her way up to county investigator (Webb 52). By the end of the book she is being offered the sheriff’s position – a step up on Kayla’s career path and worthy of a graduate of the Athena Academy. The first novel in the series, *Proof*, introduced the Academy and its establishment as “an institution dedicated to helping women take their rightful place in a world that was still very much run by men” (Davis 29). The irony is that for such an institution to be established, it seems men, members of the patriarchy, had to help found it. Alex’s and Josie’s grandfathers were instrumental in providing funding, serving on the board and paving the way for government recognition for the Academy. In this way and due to the patriarchal society they are working within, the males provided the training for the females and facilitated the means for the females to become equal in ability and skill.

These heroines are ambitious and capable. For example, Tory, in *Exposed*, was “young to be considered for the job that her boss, Tyson Bedders, had just offered her – an exclusive interview with Commander Thomas King, a navy SEAL... [on the] volatile island country of Puerto Isla in Central America” (Garbera 9). She is a rising star in her chosen field and it is more than a job; “for Tory, it [her job] was to always be a voice for those without one. To uncover the stories that had to be told” (Garbera 18). She tells Ben to keep

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<sup>19</sup> Modern language and often, shortened colloquial terms are frequently used in contemporary romance writing, especially short category stories. An example of the type of shorthand employed by the genre.

his distance when she meets an informant: “She’d never needed a man to do her job in the past and she didn’t want to start needing Ben now” (Garbera 212). Tory and the others are seen as professionals in their chosen careers. These examples emphasize the importance of the warrior women’s careers to their identity and contribution to the wider society.

As heroines these female characters succeed in their work and their relationships. At the end of her story Tory has her dream job and a man who holds her in high regard. Yet, she was quite happy to be in a relationship with an older man, a television producer, and to learn a lot from him. Although she has affection for him she does not love him and when she catches him cheating on her with her arch enemy and rival reporter, Shannon Connor, she ends their relationship. Later, when he asks if he could produce her new show she decides “Perry was a good producer and in the end she couldn’t hold their failed relationship against him” (Garbera 294), so she tells him she will think about it. Tory and the others have been trained to think analytically and not to put their emotions ahead of their career path. In other words, Tory, although dissatisfied with Perry personally, may not be so upset she can’t see that he may be the best producer for her new show. She knows she will recover emotionally but her career may not if she makes a decision based only on the way she feels at this point in time. Tory takes a rational approach in this situation that is designed to benefit her career.

Romances, especially the warrior women’s, do not follow the traditional expectation that the female will forgo her career and move for the sake of her husband. This is a growing aspect in the romance genre when discussing the importance of careers for both female and male partners, as it cannot be assumed that the male’s career will take precedence. Women have careers and families, just as Darcy and Kayla do in these novels. If a woman makes her career as homemaker that choice is also valued in most romance novels as Jensen notes:

Harlequins no longer assume that a woman will automatically give up her job upon marriage. If a heroine does abandon that labour force, an explanation is necessary, an explanation usually couched in terms of love for her husband and children or for freedom. In these cases, it is clear that she *chooses* not to participate in the labour force; she is not forced out by the failure to make it on her own [original emphasis] (129).

The argument here is that the woman has the choice and although she may compromise – just as the male will be expected to – she will not give up something she holds dear, especially a career. Few of the heroines compromise on their careers in these novels. However, it would be interesting to know how the long-distance romance of Alex (Washington, DC) and Justin (Arizona) will work. It would be easier for Justin, who has no family ties, to seek a transfer to Alex’s area – in which case a resolution calls for the male to remove himself from his present location which is an event that can happen in a romance. None of these female characters is giving up their career for a romance. They expect to work alongside their men when they work together or to continue to pursue their own careers. Darcy and “Jack Turner, the man in her life, were working on a partnership in a P.I./bounty hunting business. Darcy thought they might move to California for a brand new start” (Webb 288). Both Darcy and Jack are looking at making their careers and relationship work. Romances can have heroes compromising for the sake of the relationship and moving home and employment, if his job is easier to relocate or he is happy to change careers.

Traditional expectations of the female role led to Alex’s engagement to surgeon, Emerson Howland, who takes a conservative approach to her career and one which Alex, as a graduate of the Athena Academy, cannot sanction. Emerson fully expects her to give up her career as a forensic scientist with the FBI when they have children (Davis 115). Alex does not agree with him. She is from a wealthy family and does not need to pursue a career but she has, and she values it as part of her identity. Yet her fiancé feels her work is “certainly no

job for a mother to have” (Davis 115). He is not necessarily against her working, but he wants her to do work he finds acceptable: “Whatever you wish, of course. If you feel you have to stay with the Bureau, surely you could transfer to a different part of the agency? Something...tidier?” (Davis 116). Her work as a forensic scientist, although gruesome, Alex sees as bringing order out of chaos (Davis 116) and she has put in a considerable amount of time and training. Such issues often arise in a contemporary romance, yet the heroine does not give up her job for anyone unless she wants a career change herself. For Alex, Emerson’s position on her career justifies her concerns about their viability as a couple.

The danger in allowing a man to dominate her life, and her work, are evident in the case of Darcy, whose career as a movie make-up artist and her acting training are not needed by her husband, Maurice, who wants her dependent on him even to choosing what she wears, and who she sees. However, Darcy rallies and has the child her husband did not want, then kidnaps her son and escapes a situation that she finds untenable. All this takes place before Darcy’s part in the continuity series begins. Darcy uses her talents and skills to make a living for her small family. She changes her status from victim to champion and finds two careers in the process as salon owner and rescuer of abused women.

Kayla as a single mother has been supported in raising her child and pursuing her career by her close-knit Navajo family. Raising a child and having a career are difficult to do without support. She has been able to make decisions by herself not only about her career but also her child and finds letting the child’s father into her daughter’s life challenging as she has had the sole responsibility for Jazz for eleven years as he provided only financial support. However, Kayla gradually accepts that Jazz’s father, Mike, is in her daughter’s life as shown after he pre-empted her Christmas present of a lap top with a better brand and model she gives both her daughter and Mike cameras for the computers so that “she and her dad could do the video-calling thing” (Webb 280). These characters show that when it comes to

what is important in their lives be it child, family or careers they have the ability to see what works best for all concerned and to take the necessary steps to ensure that these are carried out efficiently without regard to gender expectations.

As the one in the most traditional role for a female, Darcy is also the only one who is self-employed in her day job as hair and make-up artist. However, she also has a less traditional self-appointed role, and one in keeping with her warrior persona, in helping women victims to escape their abusive partners; “she’d helped a hundred women in the last three years, from women who drove Mercedes to ones who’d never seen the inside of a hospital before and would be scarred for life” (Fetzer 17). She was an expert at evasion and deception, her background as a Hollywood special effects make-up artist enabling her to use “disguises at every leg of a rescue... [to protect] the women’s lives, as well as hers” (Fetzer 17). Darcy may be seen to have the most subversive career as she is not as openly non-traditional as Josie, an air force pilot, or Kayla as a police lieutenant. Although Darcy may appear to reinforce current societal expectations in her usual employment running a salon, making women beautiful for themselves and their men, yet, her other self-imposed task is rescuing women from some of the worst aspects of a society largely ruled by men – men who use and abuse women. She may appear to conform to the patriarchy in her role of providing females with hair styling and makeup, but she is truly subversive in her role as rescuer of victims of patriarchy. Yes, she can physically fight and often needs to in order to rescue these women, but her safest means of getting them away is by what may be seen as the more feminine talent of deception – her make-up serves a dual purpose and like the Bombshell slogan, “more than meets the eye” many of her rescued victims owe their escape to her mastery of visual deception.

The Bombshell slogan, or catch cry, “more than meets the eye” may be seen to reflect the idea that these women appear to be ordinary, everyday females – the novel covers clearly

support this supposition – however, they are capable of defending themselves and others, of flying aircraft, and more. They are truly warrior women, yet they are not visually portrayed as warrior women; they are capable of physically demanding jobs but not overly muscular and are seen wearing disguises more often than Kevlar, preferring camouflage to armour. There is a paradox in their appearance and their capabilities that provides entertainment value to the reader, and also a possibility of what real women may be capable of given the requisite skills and training, without the need to visually broadcast what they can do.

This continuity series almost seems to follow a path from the traditional to the more unconventional careers. The female characters that seem more overtly to be warriors appear towards the end of series. All the Athena Force women are shown as being capable as warriors, yet they are much harder to recognise than those with careers in the military and law enforcement. There is an interesting development with the progression in the characters' careers from forensic scientist → make-up artist → television reporter → CIA agent, mainly linguistics and computers → air force test-pilot → police lieutenant. Battles and weapons used escalate from the beginning stories to the middle two as Tory and Sam are required to kill to protect themselves and their loved ones, and onto the final two Josie and Kayla who could be expected to use weapons and kill in their course of their occupations as pilot and police officer. Their expansion into traditionally male territory brings other potential problems which are highlighted in *Pursued*, yet the final novel *Justice* features a woman from a Native American family, raising a child resulting from a teenage pregnancy and progressing in her career in law enforcement as a true warrior woman.

For the female characters of the Athena Force their careers are important, not only for employment but also to define them as people, and are an integral part of the identities they present to themselves and others. These novels are reflective of the importance that a woman's work holds in the romance genre, especially since the 1980s, and how choice of

career should rarely be restricted by gender if the person has the skills and knowledge to perform their chosen occupation correctly. Problems in the workplace provide plot points for the stories as well as entertainment and possible solutions for the reader.

This section of the thesis provides a close examination of the Athena Force first continuity series in regards to the warrior woman character and her place in the romance genre. It has been shown that this character is prepared to challenge traditional masculine occupations and roles proving that women with the same amount of training and opportunity can succeed in law enforcement, the military and private investigations. They maintain a feminine appearance but are not overly concerned with fashion or domesticity. In romantic relationships and emotional ties such as family, friends, sisterhood and the community of the Athena Academy these female characters are both warriors and women.

## CONCLUSION

The fictional representation of the warrior woman in the popular romance, especially the subgenre of romantic suspense, represents an evolution of the genre. The character of the warrior woman shares the heroic qualities of the romance heroine and the Athena Academy “an institution dedicated to helping women take their rightful place in a world that was still very much run by men” (Davis 29). The character of Principal Christine Evans considers that “We’re changing the world, Alex. Slowly, but with each graduating class, we’re showing humankind just how much women are capable of, given the same training and opportunities men have” (Davis 38). The Athena Academy itself presents a subversive idea as it places power in the hands of women and provides them with the tools to meet men on their own ground. It is evident that these female characters are aware of the patriarchy and seek to change the system in subtle and subversive ways from within, one step at a time. The same could be said of the genre itself.

The supposition that female readers are being duped by romance fiction and that it “oppresses” women is a criticism based on hasty generalizations of the romance genre. Regis argues against the idea that romances perpetuate patriarchy:

Form<sup>20</sup> shapes reading. It creates a certain set of expectations in a reader who is in tune with the form. But because readers are free, form cannot compel the aesthetic, intellectual, or psychological belief in those expectations. Thus, the strongest version of the claim that these books are powerful enough to relegate women to patriarchy and marriage is simply not true (11).

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<sup>20</sup> Regis uses the term “form” for the romance genre here.

Romance fiction may suggest ideas but so do other genres that are not held accountable for how they may affect the reader's life. Credit should be given to female readers for being capable of cogitation.

The warrior women studied here, who are as heterosexual as the popular romance they appear in, may counteract some of the expectations about "masculine" women. There is no suggestion in the romance as in other genres that the warrior woman is really just a man "in drag," butch or lesbian (as in Russell Whitfield's *Gladiator* or Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Warrior Woman*). Nor does the fictional romance heroine have to pay the price some warrior women do in popular culture, by dying like *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* or *Xena, Warrior Princess*, or disappearing (a ritual death) like *Nikita*. The warrior woman of romance fiction, befitting the expectations of the genre, is allowed to have a happy ending and go on to lead a productive and meaningful life.

Dixon postulates that romance fiction seeks "change in the way society is organized, from male-oriented to female-oriented" (9). This genre is often undervalued because it concerns "women's business" such as emotions, family, love and caring, and has always positioned the woman as driving the narrative. The stories are female-oriented. It is the woman who is on a quest, often unrelated to seeking a life partner, but he will often just happen to appear along the journey as part of her reward. "Romance writers defy masculine convention by showing the woman as hero" (Parv 38). In the romance the woman always wins. In a world ruled by men, a genre that empowers women is inherently subversive. Allowing the heroine to assume a more openly powerful role takes this a step further.

The character of the warrior woman is even more subversive than the usual romance heroine. While the majority of men are still physically stronger and larger than the majority of women, a woman who is able to physically match a man in combat is a character that

subverts the patriarchy through meeting men on their terms and winning. She subverts the gender expectations placed upon her by society by appearing to perform her feminine role and yet is capable of violence and aggression and willing to protect those she cares about, living up to the Bombshell catchphrase of “more than meets the eye”.

Holmes proposes that “Harlequin romances maintain the traditional function of romance as a fictional space where women can address fears and anxieties raised by the conditions of their lives, and define positive values by imagining pleasurable solutions” (120). There is empowerment in the woman always winning in romances and the provision of a space for women to consider a world where intimate relationships are equal. The possibilities of an alternative female-oriented world can provide a place for the character of the warrior woman who is not constrained by traditional gender role expectations, but who also enjoys the challenges and pleasures of romance. The restrictions of patriarchal gender roles are less oppressive when these narratives provide women with a place to explore the many options that may be available to them.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: DEFINITIONS OF ROMANCE NOVELS IN THE PUBLISHING INDUSTRY

An explanation of the differences between category, series, single title, mainstream and different names for lines in different countries in question and answer format.

**Q:** What does 'single title', 'mainstream', 'category' and 'series' mean? I've heard writers talk about them but I'm not sure of the definitions.

**A:** Let's tackle category first. In the US, they are called 'series' romance - books released in order and by month, with a number on the spine and with a series title on the cover e.g. Harlequin Temptation. They have a limited shelf life, there are a number of titles in each line published every month and they have specific word counts ranging from 50,000 (Mills & Boon Sweet and Sexy) up to 100,000 (Harlequin Historical). Harlequin, Silhouette and Mills & Boon are all category publishers.

By definition, a single title is a title (or book) that is not a category novel., i.e. they stand by themselves and have a one-man-one-woman relationship in the forefront e.g. Sara Bennett, Lynne Wilding and Holly Cook are all single title authors. The term 'single title' and 'mainstream' can mean pretty much the same thing in Australia, but in the US, 'mainstream' is used as a definition for women's fiction, which can have romantic elements or not. A lot of the time, mainstream is more about the woman's story than 'the man and woman falling in love' story. In the Romantic Times, the mainstream fiction reviews consist of chick/lad lit, women's fiction, contemporary and young adult, with authors such as Barbara Samuel and Deborah Smith. They also have a "Mainstream Romance" section which reviews single title books with that 'one-man-one-woman' thread - romantic comedy, fantasy, suspense, including authors such as JD Robb, Jennifer Crusie and Susan Elizabeth Phillips.

Single title is all about one man-one woman- just like category. But the voice is usually different, and STs have a longer word count, can include more subplots, more secondary characters and profanity. Whereas category novels have strict guidelines regarding word count, time periods and (sometimes) settings, the requirements for ST depends what you're writing, what publisher you're aiming for, your voice etc. Word counts begin at 80,000, and

can go up to 150,000. Generally, they're around 90-110,000. Again, publishers' guidelines should be a guide. The market are houses like Avon, Berkley/Jove/Ivy, St. Martin's Press, Harper Monogram, Leisure, Kensington and others. MIRA is Harlequin's foray into the ST world, as is HQN.

**Q:** I'm confused. What's the difference between a Harlequin Mills & Boon Sexy and Harlequin Presents?

**A:** Nothing. Ha! Now you're even more confused, right? Don't be! Basically, all Harlequin, Silhouette and Mills & Boon category lines are marketed in Australia under "Harlequin Mills & Boon" and then the line e.g. Temptation. Australia doesn't get all the lines: many Silhouette Romance, for example, are released here as HM&B Sweet. In the US, HM&B Sexy are called "Harlequin Presents" (M&B Modern in the UK) and Sweet are "Harlequin Romance" (Tender in the UK). The now-defunct Duets line were first released locally as Temptation with the "romantic comedy" flash on the cover, then changed to the comic US covers, then (because marketing indicated the comic covers didn't sell as well), went back to the classic man-woman Temptation cover.

Stuart MacDonald, Sales and Marketing Director of Harlequin's Sydney office, says "These days the trend is very much towards maintaining the integrity of each of our series by drawing content from just one source [i.e. line] if we can, and by replicating the original North American (or UK) series name unless there's a strong marketing reason not to. But because precedents have been set in the past, there are exceptions to this – Australia's 'Sexy' and 'Sweet' are what I'd call "happy hybrids". They are trailblazing series for us, in that they are highly successful, profitable series which bring in more new readers to Harlequin Mills & Boon than any other series, so we're entirely happy with what they contribute to our overall portfolio, although each of them does draw content from two or three different sources."

Stuart also says there are a few new overseas series in different stages of development (with Bombshell the first to see our shores) but there are no plans to change their names for the Australian market. But, he admits, words and names do have different connotations in different parts of the globe (e.g. Desire are marketed in the UK as M&B Sensual, and Intimate Moments as M&B Sensation) and if the original name isn't going to give maximum benefit in Australia and New Zealand, then they'd be prepared to come up with a better one.

*Anne Gracie (May 2004 HT)* <http://www.romanceaustralia.com/faq.html#definitions>

## APPENDIX 2: ATHENA FORCE PLOT SUMMARIES

The *Athena Force* is a series of adventure novels about graduates of the Athena Academy, an elite school for girls with special talents, as they combat kidnappers, terrorists, and the forces of evil. It was originally a 12-book miniseries which ran from July 2004 through June 2005.

The first continuity series of six books allows each character to have her own story (each written by different authors) yet they are all held together by being in a group formed during their time at the Athena Academy for the Advancement of Women.

Their mentor (an older girl at the school, Lorraine Miller Carrington (known as Rainy) invokes the Cassandra Promise to call all the members of the group (known as the Cassandras) together but before they can all meet up she is killed in a car accident. The gathering eventually takes place at Rainy's funeral and like the original Cassandra of classical mythology the members of the group do not believe it was an accident and have trouble in getting the authorities to take their concerns seriously so, they take it upon themselves to follow up the lead and each contributes to the solution of the mystery which unfolds in stages.

The books, in order, are:

1. *Proof*. Alexandra Forsythe, a forensic scientist for the FBI returns to Athena, and the Athena Academy to find proof that her best friend, Rainy's death was not an accident. As she sets out to find the truth she discovers that Rainy's eggs were mined when she supposedly had her appendix out at age 12 while attending the Athena Academy. Her digging provokes retaliation and the attention of a stranger, who turns out to be fellow FBI agent, Justin Cohen who aids her in her investigation and becomes her love interest.
2. *Alias*. Darcy Allen Steele was a successful cinema make-up artist until she married a movie producer, Marcus Steele, who proceeded to control and physically abuse her. She escapes with their son and has been hiding under the alias Piper Daniels for the last three years. Darcy now runs a salon and also rescues abused women with the help of bounty hunter and ex-cop, Jack Turner, who provides the love interest. She

seeks to prove a suspicion that her husband has committed murder so that she can bring him to justice and free herself and her son from hiding.

Darcy discovers advertisements for surrogate mothers and tracks down one of the women, whose life is consequently threatened, along with Darcy's.

3. *Exposed.* Victoria (Tory) Patton is an investigative television reporter with a major network. She encounters Bennington (Ben) Smythe, Alex's brother, while on an assignment to a Central American island to interview a captured Navy SEAL. She uncovers a conspiracy that could implicate the top levels of the White House and faces a fight for her life and Ben before she can televise the story.

Tory investigates fertility clinic records around the time of Rainy's operation and tracks down the unknowing sperm donor for the engineered children, Navy SEAL, Commander Thomas King.

4. *Double-Cross.* Samantha St John, an orphan with an unknown past now works as a CIA operative. She is pursued by her own people and imprisoned when mistaken for a Russian agent who she later finds out is her twin sister, Elle Petrenko who is an agent for Russia. Riley McLane is her superior in the CIA and they both work to find Sam's double and Rainy's killer.

Sam identifies, locates and has to kill Lee Craig, (aka the Cipher, the assassin who organised Rainy's death) to save her sister's life.

5. *Pursued.* Captain Josephine (Josie) Lockworth is an air force test pilot and comes from a long line of patriots. Her mother had had a mental breakdown on the death of one of her pilots in her stealth research project. Josie has continued her research in an attempt to clear her mother's name. She has a sister, Diana, who also attended the Academy and Josie's investigation on Rainy's behalf leads to the strengthening of her relationship with Diana. Major Diego Morel, a medically retired military test pilot is appointed as an inspector on her research project to monitor proceedings. Diego becomes Josie's love interest. When a good friend and fellow pilot is killed on her project she suspects that her work is being sabotaged. Josie discovers, an officer, now a general, who ruined her mother's career is sabotaging Josie's work and threatening her life as well as her sister's and lover's.

Josie's sister, Diana, although playing a minor role in the story is the one actively looking for information on Rainy's possible children. Diana's work in military intelligence provides high level clearance and her ability with computers allows her to track down information on Lab 33. Diana is the main protagonist in *Target*.

6. *Justice*. Police Lieutenant and single mother, Kayla Ryan, has a Navajo Indian family. Kayla became pregnant as a teenager but with the help of her family has still managed to raise her daughter, Jasmine (Jazz) and realise her ambition to enter law enforcement. Her love interest, Detective Peter Hadden is investigating smuggling allegations against Rainy's archaeologist husband, Marshall Carrington. Kayla is determined to find the people who'd sent Rainy's assassin and bring them to justice but exposing this conspiracy threatens her life and all those she loved. Kayla also has to cope with Jazz's father, Major Mike Bridges, suddenly wanting to play a part in his daughter's life.

Kayla checks the medical records at the Academy and their investigations have captured the attention of Bradford and Reagan, two of the men behind the genetic experiments and members of Lab 33. Dawn O'Shaughnessy, one of Rainy's offspring, has been raised and trained to follow in her supposed "uncle's" (Lee Craig, the assassin known as the Cipher) footsteps, was supposed to kill Kayla. Bradford kidnaps Kayla's daughter, Jazz, and Dawn ends up killing Bradford.

The plot line of this series is tied up in *Justice*, as Rainy's killer has been found and killed, the issue of egg harvesting and surrogate pregnancy is revealed and the teaser for the next series is provided in the three surviving "daughters" of Rainy and the sperm donor, and the mysterious Lab 33. The Athena Academy itself is still under a cloud of possible hidden agendas by the government thus allowing scope for a continuing storyline.

## APPENDIX 3: THE ATHENA FORCE SERIES

### *FIRST CONTINUITY – SILHOUETTE BOMBSHELL*

1. Davis, Justine. *Proof*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2004. Print.
2. Fetzer, Amy J. *Alias*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2004. Print.
3. Garbera, Katherine. *Exposed*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2004. Print.
4. Fletcher, Meredith. *Double-Cross*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2004. Print.
5. Mann, Catherine. *Pursued*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2004. Print.
6. Webb, Debra. *Justice*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2004. Print.

#### Series Titles:

1. Cassidy, Carla. *Deceived*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2005. Print
2. Vaughn, Evelyn. *Contact*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2005. Print
3. Allen, Harper. *Payback*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2005. Print
4. Wind, Ruth. *Countdown*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2005. Print
5. Dees, Cindy. *Target*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2005. Print.
6. Durgin, Donna. *Checkmate*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2005. Print.

### *SECOND CONTINUITY*

1. Davis, Justine. *Flashback*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2006. Print.
2. Fletcher, Meredith. *Look-Alike*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2006. Print
3. Garbera, Katherine. *Exclusive*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2006. Print.
4. Cassidy, Carla. *Pawn*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2006. Print.
5. Durgin, Donna. *Comeback*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2006. Print.

### *THIRD CONTINUITY: SILHOUETTE SPECIAL RELEASES*

- 1-3 “The Academy has been breached! Will the Athena alums take down a kidnapper...or fall prey to the darker villain beneath it all?”
- 4- 9 “Will the women of Athena unravel Arachne's powerful web of blackmail and death...or succumb to their enemies' deadly secrets?”
- 10-12 “Arachne’s children have inherited their mother’s evil. The world’s only hope for salvation? The women of Athena Force”

1. Caine, Rachel. *Line of Sight*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2007. Print.

2. Leon, Judith. *The Good Thief*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2007. Print.
3. Donovan, Kate. *Charade*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2007. Print.
4. Fletcher, Meredith. *Vendetta*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2007. Print.
5. Watkins, Terry. *Stacked Deck*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2007. Print.
6. May, Lori. *Moving Target*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2008. Print.
7. McClellan, Sharron. *Breathless*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2008. Print.
8. Moore, Sandra K. *Without A Trace*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2008. Print.
9. Hall, Connie. *Flashpoint*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2008. Print.
10. Fletcher, Meredith. *Beneath The Surface*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2008. Print.
11. Doyle, Stephanie. *Untouchable*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2008. Print.
12. Holder, Nancy. *Disclosure*. New York: Harlequin Books, 2008. Print.

#### APPENDIX 4: SILHOUETTE BOMBSHELL GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

Word Count » 80,000—90,000 words

Point of View » Either first or third person. However, the entire book should be told primarily from the heroine's view point.

Setting & Time Period » Limitless settings within a contemporary or futuristic time frame.

Each book should contain:

- “A strong, likable and emotionally complex heroine who either has (or discovers she has) a unique skill or ability.”
- “A high stakes situation or element of high risk that the heroine must overcome.”
- “A compelling romantic subplot that ends in a satisfying way. Though not every Silhouette Bombshell book needs to end in marriage, there should be some commitment at the story's end to take the relationship to the next level, whether that be a first kiss, a new emotional and/or sensual awareness between the couple, or marriage.”

In her online article, *Your Guide to the Silhouette Bombshell™ Heroine*, Editor Julie Barrett explains that “[b]ecause the Silhouette Bombshell books are meant to have a much more mainstream attitude and feel than category romance, the heroine can curse, spit, play poker, have erotic sex, you name it, as long as female readers can identify with her actions. What makes her tick should be compelling, too.”

As a good rule of thumb, the experts are saying you should base your female lead after such characters as Sidney Bristow in *Alias*, Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*, or even Buffy the Vampire Slayer. She should definitely be someone who is emotionally complex and with whom female readers can identify and empathize with. She should possess some special skill or talent which she must use to get herself (and others) out of a “precarious and often high-stakes situation.”

Ultimately, though, don't forget that the Bombshell books are still romance. There must be an exciting romance subplot where, in the end, the heroine gets her man.

Current listing: <http://www.harlequin.com/store.html?cid=327>

[www.harlequin.com](http://www.harlequin.com) Accessed 10 March, 2010.

## APPENDIX 5: HARLEQUIN ROMANTIC SUSPENSE GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

These novels are romance-focused stories with a suspense element. Powerful romances are at the heart of each story, and the additional elements of excitement, adventure and suspense play out between complex characters.

Harlequin Romantic Suspense Key Elements:

- Harlequin Romantic Suspense novels are fueled by the romance and not the suspense.
- Big, sweeping romances amid dangerous and suspenseful settings
- Word count range of 70,000-75,000 means a wider breadth of story and potential for subplots that speak to the conflicts.
- Strong, compelling romance drives the stories but is matched by dramatic and layered plots.
- Classic themes include revenge, women in jeopardy, espionage, family, Westerns, military and law enforcement.
- Vivid conflicts, and stories can be set throughout the world.
- A range of sensuality from high to low, as well as romantic and sexual tension
- Emotional payoff fits with the larger-than-life stories
- No paranormal elements

Featured in Harlequin Romantic Suspense

Relatable heroines in extraordinary circumstances – swept into the arms of powerful heroes. Harlequin Romantic Suspense concentrates on the developing love story not the suspense. The hero should be a force to contend with, and the heroines are equally complex, strong and smart.

Harlequin Romantic Suspense is...

*Criminal Minds* or *Bones* or *The Good Wife* for their solid levels of story, three-dimensional characters and varying levels of suspense with strong romantic themes, witty dialogue and lives and hearts on the line.

There are 4 new Harlequin Romantic Suspense books available each month.

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