

COWBOYS AND SCHOOLTEACHERS: GENDER IN ROMANCE NOVELS, SECULAR AND CHRISTIAN

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ABSTRACT: *This article uses content analysis of 120 novels to consider romance novels as evidence for a particular culture of gender and the family, and as a means of comparing cultural representations of secular and Christian masculinity, femininity, and families. It finds that, although on the surface the texts are most obviously differentiated by religion, gender differences within the religious categories are greater than overall differences between those categories themselves. The most interesting and significant difference between secular and Christian romances emerges in the male hero. Specifically, this analysis finds that secular men are depicted as overwhelmingly strong, economically and physically, but that this strength is frequently overcome by the emotional strength of the heroine, who tames them. Christian heroes, on the other hand, are less overpowering figures at the beginning of the texts but are more dominant within the relationship, subject instead to the will of God.*

In recent years, much has been made by both academic and popular commentators of a perceived conflict between evangelical Christians (and other conservative Protestants) and a more secular culture over the appropriate composition of the family and of gender roles. The recent growth of a Christian popular culture industry, with products parallel to products of secular popular culture, provides an excellent opportunity to compare cultural forms produced for roughly equivalent populations of Christian and secular people and to examine the values they imply or espouse. This article examines how romance novels differently construct gender and family roles for Christian and secular readerships, and finds that the most striking differences between the books lie in the heroes. Although the heroes of secular romances are more stereotypically masculine in a number of ways, they are also more likely to be in some way changed or “tamed” by the heroine. Christian heroes, by contrast, are never as hyper-masculine, but their masculine authority is ultimately more stable, vulnerable to taming only by God.

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Romances are an excellent form of evidence because they have a large and dedicated readership (41 million readers in 1998, 51.1 million in 2002) of, in many ways, statistically average American women (RWA 2002; see Methods, below, for further discussion of this point). Romances or their readers have been the subject of many previous studies, but this analysis is most clearly differentiated from these other studies (see Modleski 1982; Mussell 1984; Radway 1984; and Thurston 1987) not only by the inclusion of Christian romances but also by giving equal consideration to both hero and heroine, where other studies have focused mainly on the heroine, and by focusing exclusively on the text rather than on the reader. Blodgett (1997) and Christopherson (1999) have focused on Christian texts, but while Blodgett looked at sixty books overall, only eight were contemporary romances, and those were published between 1983 and 1993. Christopherson's analysis, though more in-depth than Blodgett's, addresses only sixteen texts, and those are in the teen fiction genre rather than romances. Using romances as evidence about gender in secular and Christian culture, two types of comparisons are made throughout this article: between heroes and heroines, and between Christian and secular romances.

Romance novels are a significant form of popular culture, accounting for more than a third of all popular fiction sales and over half of all paperback fiction sales (RWA 2002). Their market dominance has not led to substantial academic attention, however; although they outsell other genres such as mysteries and science fiction/fantasy (which constitute 26.6 percent and 6.6 percent of the popular fiction market, respectively), romances are less studied. The studies that have been done on romances have focused on why women read them, very often implying that romance readers are victims of false consciousness, rather than focusing on what can be learned from their content about readers' consciousness, false or otherwise. Studies of advice literature use prescriptive writing as evidence about how people think about, for instance, motherhood (Hays 1996) or Christian marriage (Bartkowski 1997, 2001a, 2001b). Although romances are not intentionally prescriptive, their dedicated readers "recognize, interpret, sort through, and respond" (Hays 1996:72) to their portrayals in ways that echo the readers of advice literature.

Indeed, romance novels are a particularly interesting form of popular culture to consider as evidence of their consumers' fantasies because of the romance industry's assiduous efforts to chart and respond to reader preferences. Although Radway (1984) found that readers use romances in ways that do not always match up with the literal content, as the industry has developed from the relatively early point at which she encountered it, it has learned to adapt rapidly. Today, according to scholar and romance author Lee Tobin McClain (2003:B20), "more than any other type of writing, romance reflects its readers' cultures and expressed desires."

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Scholars of gender argue that much of what is taken as given about gender—a tight linkage between sex and gender, oppositions between male and female, masculinity and femininity as natural or essential—must be problematized, and

examined for what these assumptions tell us about gender ideology (Scott 1988; West and Fenstermaker 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987). Romance novels are ideal for examining gender ideology, since they take masculinity and femininity as a central focus and treat as natural the opposition between the two. The question, then, is how they do it, and, more, how secular and Christian romances do it differently. Since the romance genre is bound by several strong conventions, the ways that Christian romances differ from the secular books they mimic are mostly attributable to their intended Christian audience (Blodgett 1997:51).¹

Previous studies of romance novels have made significant contributions, but their aim and focus are very different from my own. Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) is the most important study of the genre, but its central questions focus on readers and reading habits, with attention to the texts only a corollary—her concern with content is solely in terms of the experience it provides her informants. Thurston (1987) focuses on content but limits the focus to novel heroines, omitting heroes almost entirely. Additionally, as noted above, the genre has changed significantly since Radway's study and even since Thurston's 1987 work.

More recently, Christopherson (1999) analyzed a small comparative sample of sixteen teen novels, eight Christian and eight secular. Focusing on family structure and gender roles as pertaining to heroines, he suggests that Christian teen fiction differs from secular teen fiction in its portrayal of nontraditional families: "In the evangelical books, there were *no* positive, or even neutral, characterizations of non-traditional families" (p. 447). The books therefore stress the importance of traditional family structures in the lives of teenage girls; at the same time, boyfriends are de-emphasized relative to secular novels, perhaps because God and the family are depicted as more important sources of strength and support, or perhaps out of a concern for sexual purity (pp. 450–51). Though the readers of teen fiction and adult romances presumably are at different places in their life courses, with a different relationship to family and romantic relationships, Christopherson's analysis points to some fundamental values shared by the two genres.

Christopherson notwithstanding, treatment of the family is one topic that has received little attention in studies of romance novels. Although romance protagonists are typically (though not always) unmarried and the novels end with the romantic relationship resolving into a "happily ever after" scenario, the novels nonetheless often include visions of the family that will emerge. Many characters have their own children or are responsible for orphaned children, caregiving arrangements that foreshadow marital arrangements as do distributions of other forms of household labor performed even by unmarried people.

Many scholars have shown that there are marked differences between Christian and secular views of gendered authority in the family; however, the reality of lived families, studies suggest, differs much less. A number of ethnographic case studies address tensions between the promotion of wifely submission and the day-to-day difficulties of such submission, between unhappy marriages and disapproval of divorce, and between the ideal that women should stay home as wives and mothers and the economic necessity that leads many evangelical women to take jobs outside the home (Ammerman 1987; Griffith 1997; Stacey 1991).

Analyses of prescriptive works for and interviews with individual married evangelicals and with evangelical couples reveal considerable conflict over issues of male headship versus mutual submission (Bartkowski 2001b; Gallagher 2003; Gallagher and Smith 1999; Manning 1999). Although male headship remains a powerful, perhaps dominant, school of thought in evangelical family and gender discourse, biblical feminism and mutual submission have also gained currency, affecting how male headship is understood. Overall, the picture that emerges is of considerable confusion and ambivalence. In the interviews contained in these studies, interviewees repeatedly veer between a rhetoric of male headship and a lived reality in which decisions are shared.

Another reason to question how gender will be depicted in Christian romances lies in a recent trend in the form of *masculinity* promoted by evangelical writings. As Bartkowski (1997) suggests, the existence of an ethic of mutual submission requires a vision of masculinity that allows for such submission. Recent studies of the Promise Keepers movement support this idea, finding that in both Promise Keepers literature and local accountability groups a more expressive version of masculinity is being promoted (Bartkowski 2001a; Bloch 2001). Studies of secular romance have often commented on the instrumental version of masculinity characteristic of heroes. Christian romances may therefore follow their secular counterparts in figuring the ideal hero as an instrumentally masculine "alpha male," or they may follow the recent trend in evangelical writings and define masculine strength in more expressive, relational ways.

One crucial issue in how gender roles and gendered power are lived within families is that professions are gendered in important ways, and "in postindustrial society, work has become a 'master status' defining a person's overall position and his or her sense of identity" (Hodson and Sullivan 1990:28). Work is thus an important component of power, and a substantial body of research shows that the division of labor both in the paid workforce and in the home is highly gendered (Hochschild 1989; Lorber 1994; Risman 1998). Even fictionalized depictions can communicate what assumptions about gender, work, and power readers are expected to hold.

Sexuality is another important aspect of how gender is done. Men are assumed to conquer, and women to resist being conquered; men to seek sex and women to hope to turn men's desire for sex into lasting love. The literature on sexuality (see Lorber 1994; Ussher 1997) therefore suggests that male characters will have sexual experience in significantly larger proportions. Characters in Christian romances, given biblical injunctions against sex outside of marriage and the recent evangelical trend toward courtship, will be less likely to be sexually experienced than characters in secular romances, but this expectation is counterbalanced somewhat for male characters. Although the evangelical ideal calls for men to be as chaste prior to marriage as women, in popular culture and perhaps particularly in romances this notion conflicts with the association of men with sexual knowledge.

These differing components of masculinity and femininity—gendered division of labor within the family, headship and submission, work, and sexuality—and the differences between how these themes are presented in Christian and secular popular culture are the focus of this article.

METHODS

Romance novels are a dominant force in U.S. fiction sales. In 2002, romance novels were 35.8 percent of all popular fiction sold and 54.5 percent of all mass-market paperback fiction sold (RWA 2002). Their readers are overwhelmingly women and, in many respects demographically similar to the American female population. Unfortunately, data on reader income and occupations are not available, but for race, marital status, and years of education the numbers of romance readers are proportionately very close to those of the total population. Women aged twenty-five to fifty-four are somewhat overrepresented among romance readers, in part because very few teenagers and preteens read adult fiction. The South is underrepresented, and the Midwest overrepresented, a fact for which I have no explanation. Although there is some information missing and some areas in which romance readers differ proportionally from the overall population, in many key ways they are broadly representative. The novels they consume in such large numbers therefore represent valuable insights into idealized gender arrangements and romantic scenarios.

Data for this article were collected using detailed content analysis of 120 romance novels—sixty of which were secular and sixty Christian.² All the books included in my analysis feature contemporary settings and either take place in the United States or feature American protagonists who have left the country for a finite period of time. Almost all of the protagonists are white.

The Romance Writers of America, the leading professional association of romance writers, has defined the romance genre as containing two main elements: a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending.³ These requirements lay out the framework to which a book must adhere to be considered a romance. The romances discussed in this study are category, rather than single-title, books. Category romances are issued in “lines,” which are essentially brand names distinguished from each other by the amount of sex depicted and the type of plot (some lines have a mystery plot, for instance). The author’s name is secondary in importance to the line in category romance. Although only 18 percent of romance readers exclusively read series books (compared with the 37 percent of romance readers who exclusively read single-title books and the 45 percent that read both types of book; RWA 2002), series books are ideal subjects because, as products of a brand rather than a particular author, they are relatively standardized. They are also relatively short and are released so constantly that publishers and authors have the opportunity and the incentive to respond quickly to reader preferences.

Thirty of the Christian novels included in this study were published by Heartsong Presents, the imprint of an Ohio-based Christian publisher, Barbour & Company. The remaining thirty Christian books were produced by Steeple Hill Love Inspired, an imprint of Harlequin, which, along with Silhouette, is owned by Torstar. I chose Heartsong Presents and Love Inspired because drawing on some romances published by an exclusively Christian press and some published by a corporation with many media outlets captures some variation. The Heartsong books are less professional in their presentation (cover art and binding quality)

and are more unevenly written; more significantly, their protagonists and content are also less standardized. The few African American protagonists in my sample were all in Heartsong books, and one Heartsong book's heroine is a doctor who runs an anti-abortion counseling and prenatal care clinic. They therefore capture less softened versions of Christianity than Torstar's books offer.

The secular books were drawn in equal numbers from Silhouette Romance, a line in which characters are never depicted having premarital sex, Harlequin American Romance, in which premarital sex is at the author's discretion, and Silhouette Desire, in which characters are always depicted having sex, usually before marriage. Therefore, if other characteristics, such as the likelihood that a character will have a child or give up a job at the end of the book, are connected to sexual content, the sample reflects that relationship. Harlequin and Silhouette are the most prominent, iconic romance lines, accounting for my decision to draw from them rather than other available brands.

The most recent possible sample was chosen for books in all lines, given book availability. The final set of books is a convenience sample obtained through eBay and used bookstores for all the lines but Heartsong, which had a web site selling copies of recent books. All books were issued between 1998 and 2000. Eighty-three authors wrote the 120 books of the sample, providing substantial representation of authors successful enough to have multiple books issued in a short period of time, without allowing any one author or few authors to overwhelm the data.

To code the books, I created a questionnaire containing eighty-six primary questions—many with follow-up secondary questions—on a range of issues including professions, family status and childcare roles, appearance and sexuality, household labor, and leisure activities, as well as on aspects of the romantic relationship, including economic exchanges. I then recorded answers to every question for every book in the sample, focusing only on the male and female protagonists (the hero and heroine) and ignoring secondary characters. All questions that applied to a character (such as whether she or he is self-employed) rather than to the relationship (such as whether the couple breaks up during the course of the book) were coded identically for male and female characters. Questions applying to the relationship asked both whether something happened and who initiated it. The coding was all done by the author. Recoding of one randomly chosen text from each line of books (five in all) by a colleague produced intercoder reliability of .915.

The series of questions most central to the theme of taming measures not the personal characteristics of the protagonists but rather the course of their relationship. These questions include how the couple meets (they may know each other before the beginning of the narrative, meet while one or the other is working, meet in a public or social situation, or be introduced by friends or family); whether either is in a relationship at the beginning of the narrative; who initiates the relationship, whether by initiating sexual contact or through other means; whether they are depicted arguing or breaking up and, if so, who initiates it; whether they have sex; whether they have children at the beginning of the book or the heroine becomes pregnant during the book; who pays the first time they go

out regardless of whether the occasion is a formal date; and whether and on what type of occasions (formal gift-giving occasions such as birthdays or Christmas, spontaneously, or to mark a significant moment in the relationship such as engagement or marriage) they give each other gifts.

A large number of other variables establish the gender context of the relationship, determining the initial power differentials created by characteristics like occupation, wealth, child care, and household labor. For instance, occupational issues are measured not only by whether characters are employed and the nature of their jobs but also by whether their jobs are mentioned in the title or back cover copy; whether they meet while one character is acting in a professional capacity, such as when a heroine is the schoolteacher of the hero's child; and whether characters are shown working in the prologue, body of the book, or epilogue (each coded separately). Questions on whether characters were the primary caregivers to any children were coded based on whether the character spends more time with the children and attends to more of their routines and necessities of life (cooking and/or feeding, changing diapers of infants, providing affection, disciplining if necessary, putting to bed, etc.) than any other adult.

ANALYSIS

This analysis is aimed at uncovering the traits associated with secular or Christian romances, or male or female characters. A number of differences are of interest. As a baseline, I ask what are the overall differences, setting aside gender, between secular and Christian romances? Conversely, what are the overall gender differences, setting aside religiosity, in romance novels? The real questions of interest, though, are how the gender differences within and between secular and Christian romances compare; that is, what are the differences between secular male characters and secular female characters? What are the differences between Christian male characters and Christian female characters?

Chi-square tests of significance address these questions as they apply to two conceptions of gender. First, I consider the initial gendered characterizations. Are characters employed, and at what? What are their marital histories? Do they have custody of children? Do they possess gendered skills such as cooking or carpentry? Next, I look at the dynamics of the relationship as it emerges. Do the characters meet because of work, are they shown working, and do they make career changes as part of the entry into the romantic relationship? When they go out together, who pays? Through this part of the analysis, I hope to illuminate the interactional, relational components of gender.

Christian and Secular Books

Overall, differences between Christian and secular books do not create a clear picture of cultural difference, and differences between genders within the Christian and secular categories are much greater than those between categories. A few statistically significant differences do exist, however. Secular books are more likely to feature characters—heroes or heroines—who work in managerial or entrepreneurial

professions. This difference may point to a greater emphasis on worldly success, though without other measures in this area no strong claims can be made. Characters in Christian books are more likely to have both friendships and close kin relationships prior to entering into the romantic relationship; again, this points toward a pattern of removal from a competitive, individualistic culture but is not conclusive.

Findings relating to marital history echo Christopherson's (1999) point that, in evangelical books, "if a non-traditional family structure was present, or mentioned, it was always in a negative light, or as a cause of a problem," whereas "secular books did not seem to display the same emphasis on traditional family structures" (p. 447). Although approximately equal proportions of characters in the two categories have been previously married, Christian characters are significantly more likely to have been widowed and secular characters are more likely to have been divorced (both $p < .001$), abused, or cheated on ($p < .01$). It is more acceptable, in other words, for a secular character to have been divorced or to have had a problematic previous relationship and still remain the hero or heroine.

Results on sexual experience are unremarkable given evangelical Christian emphasis on sexual purity. Secular romances are significantly more likely to have characters with sexual experience, while Christian ones are more likely to refrain from giving any information about their characters' sexual histories ($p < .001$). Secular characters are also more likely to display sexual awareness—noticing each other's bodies or fantasizing about each other—even when not engaging in intercourse.

Finally, secular characters are more likely to be shown arguing with each other ($p < .001$), and although Christian characters are, unsurprisingly, more likely to experience religious conversions or crises of faith, secular characters are more likely to experience a conversion to a belief in love (both $p < .001$). Such a conversion is exemplified in the hero who believes he will never settle down or marry but then meets and falls in love with the heroine. These results suggest that, in line with the greater likelihood of secular characters divorcing or having been betrayed in earlier relationships, conflictual relationships are somewhat more acceptable in secular romances. Given the ambivalence of so many evangelical women—the target readership of Christian romances—over issues of male headship, it is easier to fantasize about relationships in which there is less conflict, and more difficult to have as the narrative climax the taming of the hero through his admission of a life-changing love for the heroine (discussed in greater detail below).

Gender Differences and the Secular Hero

Throughout several types of gender difference emphasized within each of the two categories of books, the most striking difference between Christian and secular romances occurs in the most critical aspect of the romance genre: the hero. In *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* (Krentz 1992), a book of essays on romance written by romance writers, essay after essay points to the centrality of the hero. As Mary Jo Putney writes in that volume, "A romance can survive a bland or even a bitchy heroine, but it cannot succeed with a weak hero" (p. 100).

In a variety of ways, secular heroes stand out as the strongest figure in either category of book. There are more differences between genders in secular books in

characteristics that relate to individualism. Although secular and Christian heroines are very similar in their individualism, secular heroes are more than twice as likely as any other group to work in managerial professions. They are also the most likely to be independently wealthy, self-employed, and physically powerful in some way (Christian, $p < .05$; secular, $p < .001$), and the least likely to be outgoing—they draw other characters' attention and respect without having to try. Secular heroes are remarkable in other ways, relating less obviously to independence or individualism but combining to form a clear picture of a powerful figure, the most powerful of any in this study. Secular heroes are the most likely to be objectively attractive, to have their profession mentioned on the book's exterior, to be identified as a parent in the title, to pay for a first date, to give gifts, even to be employed—these last three characteristics all speaking to self-sufficiency and not only ability but inclination to take the role of economic provider.

This requirement of strong and to a certain extent stereotypical masculinity may be one reason any sustained reading of secular romances points to the cowboy as a significant figure. The cowboy may own his own ranch or farm, train horses, ride bulls, or have a nonagricultural profession (often sheriff) but live on a ranch or farm, but, whatever the specific job description, he is also described as a cowboy, and he appears frequently in secular romances. Based on qualitative impressions gained from coding the books, I suggest that the cowboy figure is one manifestation of a broader individualist bent in secular romances.

Although evangelical Christianity does emphasize the individual's relationship with Christ, in that sense promoting a broader individualism, this idea is only one tendency in Christianity and exists in tension with other strains of thought. In fact, the masculinity of secular heroes may be so much more pronounced than that of Christian heroes precisely because of the gender essentialism that is a common strain in evangelical thought (Bartkowski 2001b:39–43). The Christian hero occupies the categorically dominant position of maleness, so he does not need to be a drop-dead, gorgeous, multimillionaire cowboy doctor.

Paid Labor, Economic Independence, and Household Labor

Jessica frowned. "You'll keep the job after you're married? Mel, Spence has plenty of money. You won't have to work."

"I pay my own way. I've saved up for a long time for my business. But until it's up and running, I need some income. I quit my job at the drugstore so I could work in my shop, but I'll be free at night." (*Surprise—You're a Daddy!* Christenberry, 1999:163)

Almost all the characters, both male and female, Christian and secular, are employed (see Table 1). The male-female difference is *not* significant in Christian romances (a 5 percent difference) but is significant in secular romances (with men 13 percent more likely to be employed, $p < .05$). Because romances do not follow through to show life after the couple marries or after the existing marriage is stabilized, relatively few characters leave paid employment at the end of the narrative. Other indicators therefore become more important means of assessing the gender role patterns that promote women's exit from the paid labor force. Within

TABLE 1
Intra-Religious Gender Differences: Employment and Wealth

	Christian Men	Christian Women	χ^2 Test of Difference	Secular Men	Secular Women	χ^2 Test of Difference
Employed	95.00	90.00	3.0811	98.33	85.00	6.9818**
Profession on cover	48.33	43.33	0.3021	53.33	25.00	10.1078***
Self-employed	30.00	15.00	3.9101	38.33	26.67	4.8819 ⁺
Manager	25.00	3.33	11.5820***	51.67	23.33	10.2756***
Independently wealthy	21.67	15.00	1.0983	40.00	13.33	11.8000**

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; ⁺ $p < .10$.

both Christian and secular romances, heroes are significantly more likely than heroines to have managerial professions. Compared across categories, however, secular women are almost as likely (23 percent) as Christian men (25 percent) to have managerial professions, whereas secular men do so at far higher rates (52 percent, a 29 percent secular gender difference, $p < .001$).

Another indicator of the centrality of a character's employment is whether the profession is mentioned in the title, such as *The Doctor Wore Spurs* (Banks 2000) or *The Librarian's Secret Wish* (Grace 2000), or in the back cover copy. In secular romances, but not in Christian ones, there is a statistically significant difference. There is a substantial difference, as well, with regard to independent wealth. Secular men differ from all other groups: 40 percent of them are independently wealthy, compared to only 13 percent of secular women (a 27 percent difference, $p < .001$), 15 percent of Christian women, and 22 percent of Christian men (difference between Christian characters not significant). Therefore, although the gender differences within categories operate in the same direction, the lesser orientation of Christian romances toward work begins to emerge when contrasted with the worldly individualism and masculine dominance of the secular hero, as well as the relative career success of the secular heroine suggesting that work is meaningful in her life.

The division of household labor has broad implications for women's ability to devote energy to their careers, as well as for the health of their marriages (Hochschild 1989). In both Christian and secular romances, gender differences operate in the expected direction, with secular heroines a little less oriented toward the home and particularly to the routinized, unskilled labor of cleaning (in contrast to the more creative, skilled task of cooking), while despite their apparent lesser success in the paid workforce, Christian heroes do slightly less housework than do secular ones (see Table 2). Household labor speaks to the gender roles of the heroines more so than to those of the heroes in both categories; it also implies something about the gendered division of labor within relationships, with secular characters sharing household labor to a greater degree than Christian ones.

Sexuality

We would expect Christian romances to include less total mention of explicit sexuality, and that is the case (see Table 3). Some novels explicitly inform readers

TABLE 2
Intra-Religious Gender Differences: Household Labor and Caregiving

	<i>Christian Men</i>	<i>Christian Women</i>	χ^2 Test of Difference	<i>Secular Men</i>	<i>Secular Women</i>	χ^2 Test of Difference
Primary caregiver Identified as parent on cover	8.33	30.00	9.0901**	13.33	21.67	1.4430
Cooking	6.67	5.00	0.1517	11.67	1.67	4.8214*
Housework	28.33	71.67	22.5333***	36.67	68.33	12.0635***
Carpentry or mechanics	21.67	55.00	14.1011***	31.67	45.00	2.2562
Teaching	25.00	10.00	4.6753*	23.33	6.67	6.5359*
	0.00	13.33	8.5714**	0.00	15.00	9.7297**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

that, even at the beginning of the novel, one or more characters have had sexual experiences; others inform readers that characters do *not* have such experience; and still other novels do not mention the topic. In Christian romances, both men (45 percent) and women (40 percent) are less likely to be noted as having any sexual experience than men (97 percent) and women (60 percent) in secular romances; the male-female difference is not significant in Christian romances but is significant ($p < .001$) in secular romances. Once again, the secular hero is posed as the dominant figure, in many cases introducing the heroine to sexual intercourse, his great experience and attractiveness highlighted as he serves in a teaching role. His sexual experience, almost always gained through relationships with many women (though rarely posed as promiscuity), highlights the heroine's conquest when she, alone among the many women in his history, moves him to choose marriage. Importantly, a greater number of secular heroines have sexual fantasies about the hero upon first meeting him than have sexual experience; this positions these heroines as sexual subjects rather than mere objects, giving readers more to identify with, and again underscores the hero as a sexually magnetic, attractive man.

Parenting and Caregiving

Family variables measure not only whether characters are or have been married and whether they have children but also whether they are primary caregivers to any children they do have (see Table 2). We would expect parenting, and care-

TABLE 3
Intra-Religious Gender Differences: Sexuality

	<i>Christian Men</i>	<i>Christian Women</i>	χ^2 Test of Difference	<i>Secular Men</i>	<i>Secular Women</i>	χ^2 Test of Difference
Sexually experienced	45.00	40.00	0.3069	96.67	60.00	23.7643***
Object of fantasy	0.00	0.00	—	21.67	36.67	3.2672 ⁺

*** $p < .001$; ⁺ $p < .10$.

giving more generally, to be more important in Christian than in secular romances. Ammerman, for instance, identifies a large group she labels “Golden Rule Christians” and argues that “most important to Golden Rule Christians is care for relationships, doing good deeds, and looking for opportunities to provide care and comfort for people in need” (1997:203).

Just as Christian heroines cook and clean at higher rates than any other group, they are also sole primary caregivers of children at higher rates. Despite the emphasis on the importance of family to Christians in prescriptive writings and empirical studies, Christian heroes are less likely than their secular counterparts to participate in most caregiving activities. In Christian romances, women are significantly more likely than men to be primary caregivers to children ($p < .05$, a 22 percent difference); in secular romances this difference is not significant (an 8 percent difference). Despite this, the man is somewhat more likely than the woman to be identified as a parent in titles, such as *A Father's Promise* (Perry 1998) and *Cowboy Dad* (Nicholas 1998), a difference that is statistically significant for secular romances (a 10 percent difference, $p < .05$) but not for Christian romances (a 2 percent difference).

In none of these romances, Christian or secular, is any hero a teacher—a profession dedicated to children and, in these books, typically figured as a caregiving profession—but some heroines are (13 percent of Christian romances, 15 percent of secular, both $p < .01$). While heroines are somewhat more likely to engage in caregiving, personally or professionally, the contributions of secular heroes, at least, are symbolically more potent. He is not only the center of attention for the heroine but also for children (whether or not they are his biological offspring).

Economic Power and Moral Authority

Power in relationships is manifested in part through economic exchange. Economic exchange shows gender differences in the expected direction, with men demonstrating economic power by paying for outings and giving gifts (see Table 4). In both Christian and secular romances, about a third of the time the man is shown paying for the first date ($p < .001$), and in both a substantial number of men and a much smaller number of women are shown giving gifts (the male-

TABLE 4
Intra-Religious Relationship Differences: Power within the Relationship

	<i>Christian Men</i>	<i>Christian Women</i>	<i>χ² Test of Difference</i>	<i>Secular Men</i>	<i>Secular Women</i>	<i>χ² Test of Difference</i>
Treats on date	33.33	0.00	24.000***	35.00	0.00	25.4545***
Gives a gift	30.00	8.33	9.0901***	45.00	1.67	31.4907***
Breaks up	10.00	16.67	1.1538	3.33	33.33	18.0334***
Religious conversion	10.83	10.83	—	0.00	0.00	—
Emotional conversion	0.00	1.67	1.0084	35.00	11.67	9.1304**

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

female difference in Christian romances is 22 percent; in secular romances, it is 43 percent; both are significant at $p < .001$).

Christian heroes are often, by the standards of secular romance, weak. That is to say, they are not as extraordinary as secular heroes in quantitatively measurable ways. The worldly measures by which secular heroes are extraordinary—wealth, job success, appearance, sexual prowess—are less relevant to the heroism of the Christian romance hero. Rather, the Christian's moral and religious strength are at issue—his ability to lead, not the world, but a family.

"Don't you see?" he continued, softly pleading. "I can give Sammy a name. I can give him security. I can be a good male role model for him. And most of all, I can point him to his Heavenly Father by being a good father on Earth." (*Daddy's Home*, Kastner 1999:145)

"A career lady," he said sadly. "I would want my wife to stay at home."

She stacked the pictures together and placed them on the end table. "Mother did that. She's been content with nothing more."

"And you want more?"

"I've never understood how she could be happy with no profession of her own. I want my independence. Money in the bank. A chance to make my own decisions."

"Tobin," he said patiently, weighing his words, "I respect how far you've gone in your profession. But Angelo is going to need a stay-at-home mom." (*The Wedding Jewel*, Fell 1999:228)

Tobin had come slowly to the decision to limit her work schedule. She had taken on research projects for the university back home, and once a week she still traveled to London, keeping her career alive with a part-time position at the aquarium. (*The Wedding Jewel*, Fell 1999:247–48)

These passages echo Bartkowski's concept of "tandem gender negotiation" as well as the pattern in which the respondents in studies by Bartkowski (2001b) and Gallagher (2003) invoke male headship but report that it is rarely enforced. In most instances in which Christian heroes do invoke that type of authority resemble the passages above, in which the hero pleads, or in which the *heroine* decides to limit her work schedule based on, but not openly ruled by, the hero's stated wishes (although it is worth noting that in the latter passage the child who will need a stay-at-home mom is the hero's adopted son, who he does not live with but leaves with a paid caretaker, changing the context of the hero's desire for the heroine to stay at home with a child she hasn't met). These scenarios mirror the domestic focus of writings on evangelical Christianity as a whole, suggesting that, in women's fantasy of romances as well as the advice literature of the Promise Keepers, expressive masculinity is gaining ground as the appropriate form of masculine Christian leadership.

Conversions and Taming

Blodgett identifies the conversion narrative as a central story line in Christian romances (Blodgett 1997:78); in contrast, only about a fifth of Christian romances

in this sample include one of the protagonists' conversion or a crisis of faith as a major plot device. Religious conversions in Christian romances are equally divided between heroes and heroines, meaning that in this case at least, spiritual strength is not gendered. Both characters are equally subject to God's will, despite a few books that position the man as spiritual leader.⁴

Although secular novels do not feature religious conversions, there are, indeed, different struggles and conversion experiences. Perhaps the most striking single finding is that characters in Christian and secular romances have conversion experiences at approximately the same rates; for secular characters, however, all the conversions are from a lack of belief in the possibility that they can love to an overwhelming belief in love everlasting, and these experiences are more common in heroes (see Table 4). In secular romances, 12 percent of women and 35 percent of men experience such conversions (a 23 percent difference, $p < .01$). These conversions represent a logical extension of the more generalized plot in which a highly desirable man, to whom many women are attracted, finally chooses one after years of evading, if not outright refusing, a committed relationship.

"Don't you understand? I didn't trust what I felt about you. I couldn't trust it. Last time I made the mistake of relying on my instincts, people got hurt. I couldn't allow that to happen again. I had to be sure. I had to go by the book and investigate every possibility. That's what I told myself. But I couldn't stick to it. I kept fouling up at every turn, believing in you because I wanted to." (*The Millionaire Meets His Match*, Seeley 1998:158)

"I want to be with you forever," he said. "You make me want to know how forever feels. Marry me, Jill."

Her head was swimming. "But I thought you didn't want commitment."

"I was so used to saying I didn't want to get married, I couldn't hear myself when I really wanted to," he told her. (*The Doctor Wore Spurs*, Banks 2000:180)

As these passages suggest, the hero's conversion often involves having to make amends with the heroine for his previous insistence that their relationship was not, and would never become, lasting and committed. This action stems in part from the fact that, when couples in secular romances break up during the narrative—which happens in 18.33 percent of cases—the breakups are initiated by the heroine; 33 percent of the women, as opposed to only 3 percent of the men, initiate a breakup during the course of the novel (a 30 percent difference, $p < .001$). In these episodes, the overt masculinity of the male characters—including an unrestrained sexuality that refuses to be limited to one woman and emotional independence that will not permit reliance on a single important relationship—must be restrained somewhat. Since the secular male is the most markedly masculine, he is most in need of such taming, and secular romances deal it out to him on a regular basis, advertising this through titles such as *The Millionaire Meets His Match*.

DISCUSSION

In contrast to the widespread portrait of secular and Christian cultures at war with each other, my analysis finds that the raw differences between heroes and

heroines within each category dwarf overall differences between the categories. Some exceptions to this conclusion do appear, notably in the area of sexuality. The most striking area of difference, however, is an accumulation of more subtle distinctions relating to the secular hero, and specifically to the form of fantasy he represents.

Working mostly through the hero, secular romances develop a portrait of idealized individualism: the secular hero is emotionally independent, that is, he is less likely to be outgoing or to have close relationships with friends or kin prior to the romantic relationship. Although he works, he is likely to be independently wealthy so that, not only is he not reliant upon others for his livelihood, but he also may control the labor of others. By contrast, secular heroines are unlikely to be wealthy, so by marrying the hero, they experience upward mobility—and may become financially dependent on him.

However, in line with the overall more worldly orientation of secular romances, secular heroines are not only more likely to have managerial occupations than Christian heroines, but there is no significant difference between the number of secular heroines and Christian heroes having managerial occupations. The worldly focus of secular romances is mirrored by the domestic focus of Christian ones, with Christian heroines doing more housework than secular ones and Christian heroes doing less housework than secular ones.

This evidence suggests that secular romances are more fantasy-based than Christian ones. Where Christian romances feature characters of modest means who are not identified as especially attractive, secular romances feature attractive, wealthy heroes who are captivated by relatively ordinary women. Where the secular hero is the most likely to be objectively attractive, the secular heroine is the least likely to be so and the most likely to voice a self-assessment, usually negative, of her own attractiveness. She is neither overwhelmingly domestic nor as outstanding in the public sphere as he is. The secular romance reader's fantasy about gender thus appears to be that an average-looking, not extraordinarily successful woman can, through sheer force of personality, capture and keep a hitherto untamable, extraordinarily handsome and extraordinarily successful man. The heroine's measurable traits are not the point of this fantasy.⁵ The hero, and her ability to tame him and bind him to her for life, is.

CONCLUSION

Although there are many other avenues to explore with regard to popular culture, gender, family, and religion, my analysis of gender in secular and Christian romance novels shows that, despite the language of conflict frequently used when addressing secular versus Christian culture, gender is in many ways a more significant source of difference than religion in this popular culture form. One significant difference emerges between the categories, however. Christian romances are, as expected, more oriented toward domesticity; somewhat unexpectedly, however, part of this domestic orientation comes from a more expressive, less worldly form of masculinity associated with the Christian hero. Given the finding that Christian romances depict men who are less assertively masculine, while secular romances

have men who are assertively masculine but tamed by women, what is the likely future of romance novels—and what does this mean for research?

If there are real-world implications to be drawn, my results suggest that expressive masculinity is gaining ground among evangelicals, which may further suggest a trend toward more egalitarian relationships and decision-making patterns than had been believed to exist until relatively recently. These and other recent challenges to Christian masculinity and gender suggest a need for research that assesses historical changes in how Christian romance novels and associated genres express gender. For example, the analysis by Gallagher and Wood (2005) of John Eldredge's 2001 evangelical advice book, *Wild at Heart*, suggests that there is pressure for Christian men to be, and to be represented as, more similar to secular men—turning away from this more expressive masculinity. *Wild at Heart* argues against the emotionally expressive, responsibility-oriented masculinity associated with the Promise Keepers and idealized in romances, calling for a masculinity that returns to its essential nature as “wild, dangerous, unfettered, and free” (pp. 135–36).

Gallagher and Wood interviewed conservative Protestant men and women of differing ages, finding that their interpretations of the book and acceptance of its arguments and prescriptions vary from group to group. Using a similar methodology to consider romances could get at similar disagreements and different readings and could uncover differences in the ways secular and Christian romances are read. Additionally, the popularity that Gallagher and Wood report for *Wild at Heart* suggests that further textual analysis of Christian romances released since 2001 might be fruitful to see if the representation of heroic masculinity in fantasies for women has changed in response to this new prescriptive model of real-life masculinity. If this is a cultural trend, then we would expect to see the change in Christian romance novels.

Christian romances' very lack of conflict between the aggressive, worldly, and highly instrumental masculinity and highly expressive femininity found in secular romances, however, may reveal an unwillingness on the part of the authors and publishers of Christian romance to employ plots in which the heroine triumphs over the hero, pushing him to substantially change his outlook on life and, particularly, love. In this way, the fantasy of femininity triumphing over masculinity is dulled in Christian romances, perhaps suggesting a greater unwillingness to show men learning from, let alone being tamed by, women.

Men and male fictional characters are not the only site of recent representational change, however. Recent reports in the *New York Times* cite two somewhat related publishing phenomena that point to changing roles for women in fiction. First, sales of category romances have slumped recently, replaced in part by single-title romances (which increasingly feature mystery or suspense plots alongside the romance, providing more room for active female characters and developed relationships) and by the emergence of the genre called “chick lit,” exemplified by books like *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *The Devil Wears Prada* (Wyatt 2004). Second, Christian publishing has entered the chick lit genre (Kurlantzick 2004).⁶ The chance to study an emerging (and increasingly dominant) genre, and one that is very much involved with careers and urban single life, is a relatively rare and

valuable one. Chick lit may be in the kind of rapid flux that the romance genre experienced at its inception, with its notable successes and failures exposing the range of fantasy and gender portrayals embraced by readers as the Christian and secular publishing industries attempt to capitalize on the popularity of this new genre, especially with the younger, urban readers who have traditionally not read category romances.

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NOTES

1. Although little data on the readership of Christian romances is available, the type of religiosity they display strongly suggests that they are aimed at an evangelical Protestant audience.
2. A complete list of the novels analyzed for this study is available from the author. The reference list to this article includes only those mentioned in the text.
3. Definition available at <https://www.rwanational.org/eweb/DynamicPage.aspx?Site=RWA&WebKey=18bbfbec-455e-43ff-904d-61b1333ab206>. Accessed February 22, 2006.
4. Blodgett, however, describes a book that Heartsong Presents released in which the heroine was a youth pastor. Following strong negative response to this book, the publisher changed its author guidelines to prohibit female pastors (Blodgett 1997:67).
5. Interestingly, however, secular heroines are, of the four groups, the most likely to be outgoing.
6. The headline and opening of this article refer to the genre in question as romance, but closer reading makes it clear that it refers to chick lit.

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