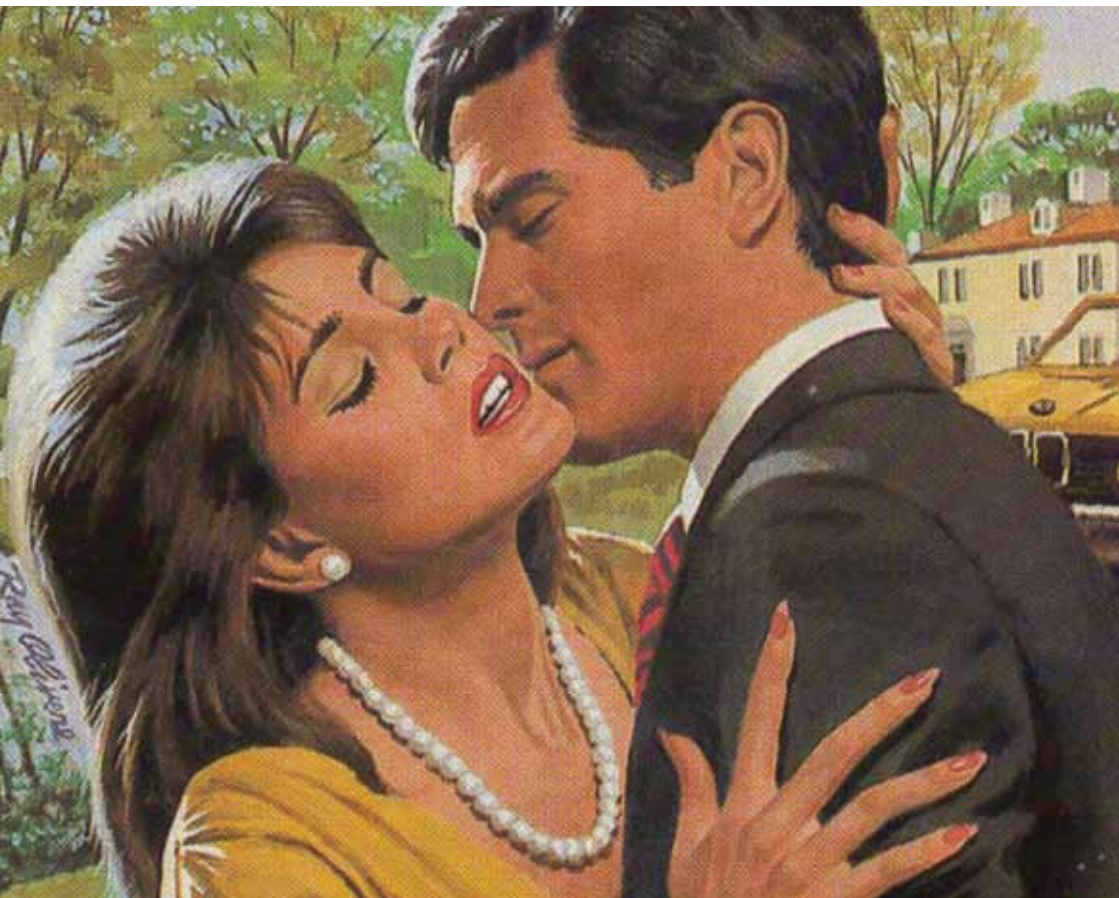


Why Read Mills & Boon Romances?

BY VAL DERBYSHIRE,
SCHOOL OF ENGLISH





So why do you read Harlequin Mills & Boons?

Let me explain...

I read my first Harlequin Mills & Boon romantic novel as a teenager. There wasn't a lot of romance growing up in Manchester and Harlequin Mills & Boon have a reputation for offering their readership escapism and romance.

Yet these novels have a terrible reputation in literature. Why would I waste my time on this trash?

Here is what journalist Sarah Freeman has to say about Mills & Boon romantic novels: 'In the literary world, Mills & Boon has long been the black sheep. It's books – to call them novels would be to raise them far above their station – are lightweight, the plots recycled and the endings predictable and to read them is a waste of precious life.' (Freeman, cited in Laura Vivanco, *For Love and Money* (Penrith: Humanities e-books, 2011)).

Jean Radford asserts: '[it] is [...] possible to give some weight to the claim that romance is one of the oldest and most enduring of literary modes which survives today.' (Radford, cited in Vivanco, *For Love and Money*).

What unifies the classical romances of history and Harlequin Mills & Boons is, as Vivanco argues: 'the centrality of the love plot: what drives the plot, what motivates the turning of the pages, is the question of whether and how the two primary characters will achieve or fail to achieve, a lasting union with each other.' (Vivanco, *For Love and Money*).

This is true from twelfth century romances, such as *Tristan and Iseult*, through Jane Austen and *Jane Eyre*, right up to modern times where the hero might be wooing the heroine in any number of contemporary locations.

It's fascinating to examine how these novels have a clear genealogy in classical literature. For example, the metaphors they use...

How many romantic scenes will take place in a garden?

QUITE A FEW



It's very romantic. The garden is also traditionally a female space. As Tim Richardson argues: 'small, enclosed gardens filled with climbing roses were sometimes referred to as *hortus conclusus*' and were traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary. Richardson continues: 'there [were] probably some Islamic precedents for these small, enclosed gardens, which may have been retreats reserved chiefly for women.' (Tim Richardson, 'The Landscapes and Gardens of the English Country House' in *The English Country House from the Archives of Country Life*, ed. by Mary Miers (New York: Rizzoli International Publications Inc., 2009), p. 380).

The implications are clear. Ran is not just seducing Sylvie for 'One Night in His Arms'. He is staking a claim on her forever. This is something which will be sealed by the marriage pact concluding with the traditional confetti.

The most appropriate scene of the romance? The garden, of course.

By situating the romance in the garden, it invokes everything we know about classical romance. We are in the realm of Romeo and Juliet here, or Jane Austen's Mr. Darcy and his gardens at Pemberley.

Within these novels, it's surprising how much of the courtship takes place within a romantic garden. By situating the courtship within this gendered space, it could be argued that the hero is seeking to pluck the flower of the heroine.

For example, consider the following:

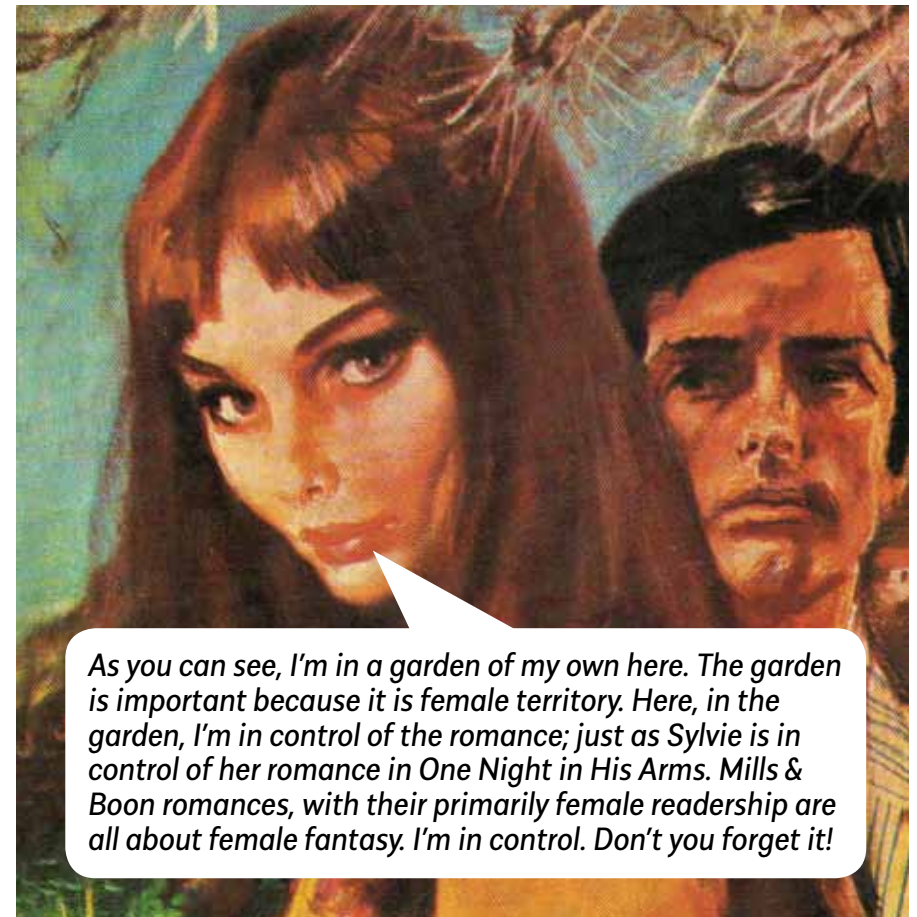
It's 1998 and Sylvie and Ran are about to fall in love in Penny Jordan's *One Night in His Arms*...

'Through a doorway in the yew hedge, Ran guided her into a small secluded garden which was entirely planted with white roses, so many of them that their scent made Sylvie feel light-headed.'

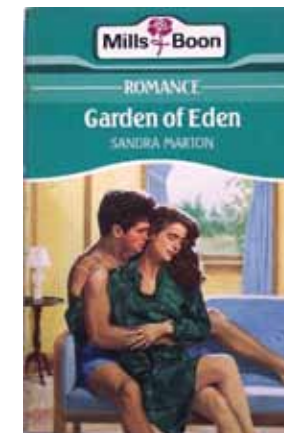
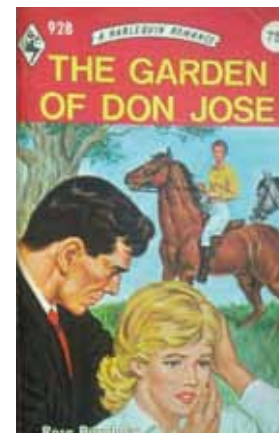
(P. 180)

As he takes her in his arms and kisses her, 'white petals from the roses drifted down onto them both.'

(Pp. 181-2)



*As you can see, I'm in a garden of my own here. The garden is important because it is female territory. Here, in the garden, I'm in control of the romance; just as Sylvie is in control of her romance in *One Night in His Arms*. Mills & Boon romances, with their primarily female readership are all about female fantasy. I'm in control. Don't you forget it!*



You can see how prevalent the garden motif is within Harlequin Mills & Boon romances by looking at the number of times they crop up in the titles, not to mention the action of the romance.

Female Readership

ESCAPIST FANTASIES



Mills & Boon is over 100 years old and has an established reputation for supplying these escapist fantasies for its predominantly female readership.

It was during the 1930s, when the popularity of cinema-going was on the rise, that Mills & Boon began to focus entirely on the publication of romantic novels. Knowing that their target audience preferred escapism, romance and spectacle in cinemas, they drew their readers in with covers featuring male heroes who looked a little like the most popular film stars of the time. This continues right up to the current day.



Gothic Tropes

RESCUE ME!



To return to the romances of the eighteenth century discussed earlier, many of those romances utilised gothic themes and tropes in order to render the heroine helpless and reliant upon a dashing hero for rescue.

Mills & Boon romances repeatedly use similar tropes to ensure the heroine is in a position to need that 'rescue' by the hero, thus facilitating the romance.

My favourite author for Harlequin Mills & Boon, Penny Jordan, repeatedly uses these gothic tropes to render her heroines helpless and alone and at the mercy of the hero.

In *Blackmail* by Penny Jordan from 1982, the heroine (Lee) is a thoroughly modern woman. She has a good job as a wine-buyer for a large supermarket. Everything is going fine in her life until she visits the Château de la Comte Gilles on a wine purchasing expedition. It's just the sort of expedition she's done hundreds of times. Nothing can go wrong, right?

Wrong. The Château is like no place Lee has ever visited before:

'Lee lost count of the number of bedrooms the château possessed. Many were closed up, their furniture under covers,..'

(Penny Jordan, *Blackmail*, chapter 4).

And the Comte Gilles is like no man she has met before. It's almost as if she's been transported into Ann Radcliffe's classic gothic romance of 1794, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

The Comte is harsh and critical. Before long he's blackmailed her into marrying him and is virtually holding her prisoner in his castle.

The Comte even speaks to her like a Radcliffean villain. When she argues with him, he shouts:

'Silence! You go too far! Do you goad me because I refuse to join you in the gutter? Be careful that I do not teach you the real meaning of degradation?'

(Chapter 3)

Lee is trapped by the man she can only think of as 'her enemy and tormentor' (chapter 3)

He even has a black horse affectionately named "Satan"

It's hard to know just why Lee falls in love with the Comte so easily. But it's a Mills & Boon romance, so of course she does.

What Jordan's novel illustrates, however, is the timelessness of the romance genre. Romance has used these tropes for centuries in order to ensure that love finds a way.

And, of course, love does find a way in Jordan's novel. By page 186, Lee and the Comte have admitted their undying love for each other.

'You're never going to wake up anywhere except in my arms.' Gilles promises Lee, as they pledge their devotion to each other.

(Chapter 10)

Of course, considering his past behaviour, this could just as easily be construed as a threat.



Paul Allport

Literature of protest!



Many eighteenth-century writers of romance used their works as a literature of protest, using their romantic novels as vehicles to raise issues which concerned them and highlight these to their (primarily female) readers.

This is Charlotte Turner Smith (1749-1806). She wrote ten romances. As Loraine Fletcher observes,

'...Her art [was] highly ambitious, analysing England's economic and political ills in the sugar-coating of romantic fiction,...'

Fletcher, Loraine, "Introduction" in *Celestina*, Charlotte Smith, ed. by Loraine Fletcher (Plymouth: Broadview Press, 2004), p. 44

Harlequin Mills & Boon authors also use their romantic fiction as forums to discuss contemporary concerns and, in some cases, as a literature of protest. Consider the following...



Time Fuse from 1985. In this one, the heroine, Selina is the illegitimate daughter of a well to do QC who does not know she exists. When Selina's mother dies, Selina is raised in foster care and despite having ambitions of her own to qualify as a barrister, she just can't afford it and admits that it's not a pathway open for children brought up in care. Not in 1985 anyway.

Instead, she gets a job as a secretary working for her father, the QC and his nephew, Piers.

However, there's a bit more to this novel than your usual romance. It's interesting to note that the one legal case Selina watches Piers work as the barrister for the defence is a rape one.

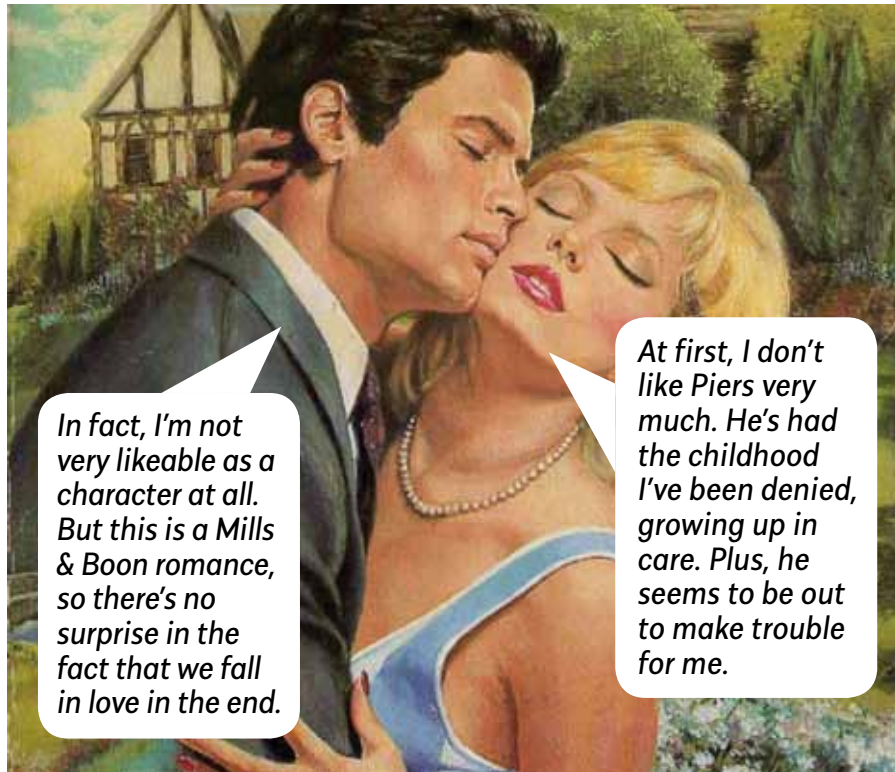
A fragile-looking fifteen year old girl with a swollen belly is alleging rape against a family friend of her parents.

Piers decimates her in the court room, using the girl's history of sexual activity as his defence. He labels the victim as promiscuous and the accused gets away with it.

It's probably a sad fact of life that a lot of rape cases were handled in this way during the '80s. It probably accounts for the reason why so many women were reluctant to take their cases to court in the first place.

Selina is understandably very angry with Piers (as is the reader) and demands to know why he did this. His excuse: he knew that the alleged perpetrator was innocent.

Now this may be, but there's a big question over this strand to the storyline in the text, which relates to the "hero"'s morals. Just a few pages later, we reach the stage in the text where Piers attempts to force himself upon Selina:



In fact, I'm not very likeable as a character at all. But this is a Mills & Boon romance, so there's no surprise in the fact that we fall in love in the end.

At first, I don't like Piers very much. He's had the childhood I've been denied, growing up in care. Plus, he seems to be out to make trouble for me.

'She didn't want to; she wanted to resist the force of his contemptuous anger and withstand it, but his strength was the greater, his threat to pick her up and carry her forcing her to accede to his demand. When he eventually stopped outside the room she knew to be his she panicked, fighting against him with all her strength, gasping with pain as he shouldered open the door and pulled her inside with little regard for the bruises he was inflicting on her tender skin.'

(p. 130)

Piers clearly isn't any better than the rapist he was defending, and I couldn't help but wonder if Jordan had done this on purpose. Has she consciously made the darkly forbidding hero her readers demand just one step away from a perpetrator of violent crime? The hero in this book treads a fine line between what is acceptable and what is not. It makes for an interesting read as it opens questions (and not necessarily ones which can be easily answered) about why Jordan would make him so objectionable..

It's a matter which really intrigued me. It wasn't just the question of why Selina can't qualify as a barrister just because she was a child raised in care (which rankled enough), but the treatment of rape victims in the book is really problematic. Rape is always a sensitive issue and needs careful handling and the fact that this is a book which is being written for a primarily female readership renders it even more challenging as it is handled in this text.

Part of me was thinking that perhaps what Jordan was attempting to achieve was a didactic function – many romantic novels attempt to instruct their readers how to live their lives properly – and Jordan is not exempt from this.

However, part of me couldn't help but think that *Time Fuse* was some kind of literature of protest on Jordan's part – raising issues which we all know to be wrong – such as the treatment of rape cases in previous decades and the limited options of children raised in care – and addressing them the only way she knew – through her romantic novels.

Patriarchal

OR FEMINIST?



It has been argued that these romances are patriarchal in nature and an insult against womankind – but why would a publishing company with as much business acumen as Mills & Boon set out to insult its target audience? Indeed, Laura Vivanco has done some convincing research in this area which argues that these texts are actually feminist texts.

In these books, no matter how much posturing the alpha male hero does, the

'heroine always finds herself enriched with social status [and] also ... The hero [is] forced to acknowledge his own sexism and change his behaviour.'

Laura Vivanco, 'Feminism and Early Twenty-First Century Harlequin Mills & Boon Romances', *The Journal of Popular Culture*. 45.5 (2012), p. 1068

Here's an example from another Penny Jordan novel to illustrate my point: *The Reluctant Surrender* from 2010.

Giselle is the vulnerable heroine who meets the "hero", Saul Parenti whilst parking her car.

Well, okay, she pinches the car parking space he has been patiently waiting for because she's in a hurry.

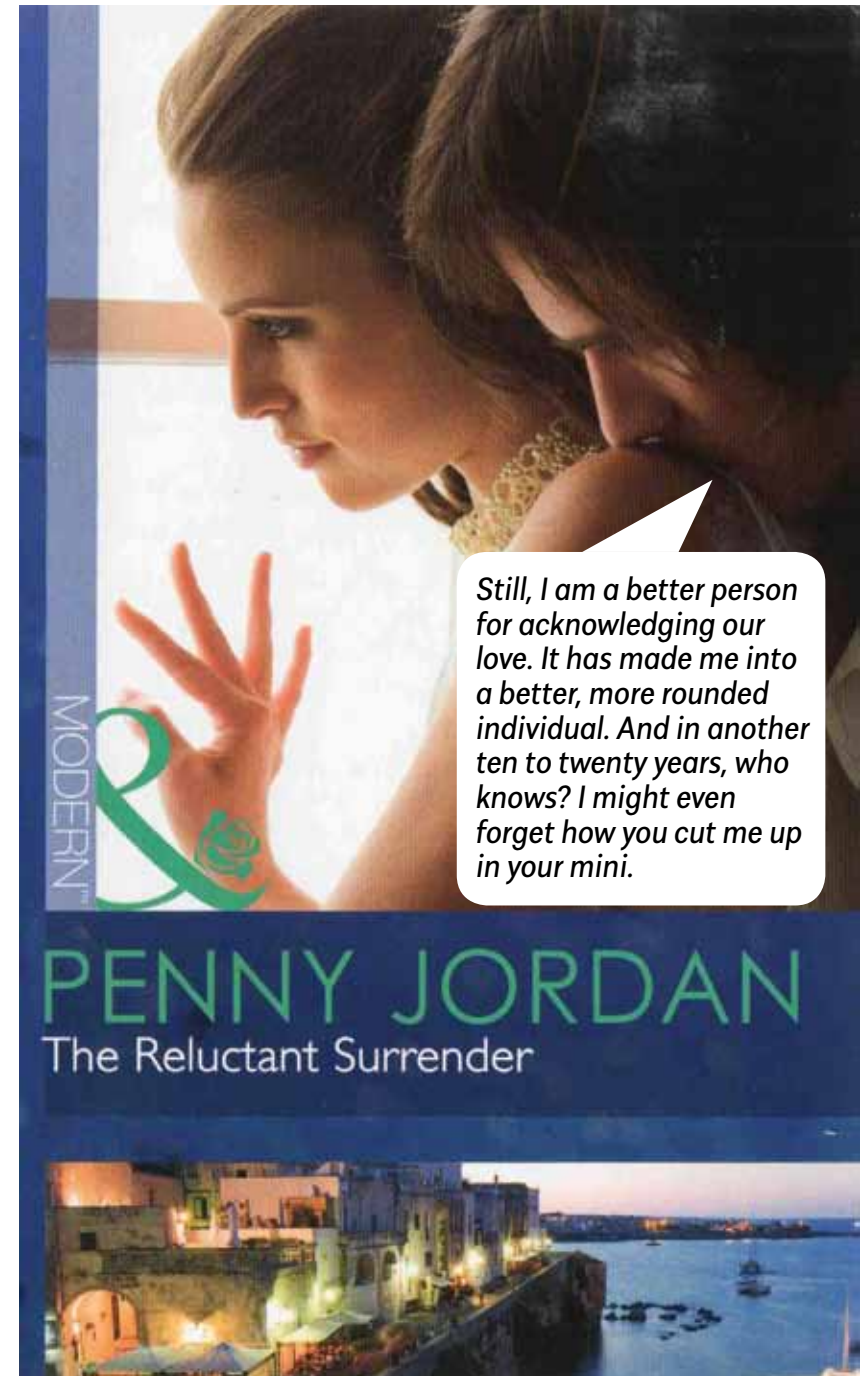
In order to do this she pulls off one of those insane manoeuvres which involves driving the wrong way down a one-way street and cutting Saul up with her own car. I'm sure it's a manoeuvre which is familiar to many of us. (It certainly was to me!)

However, whereas normally you can get away with the odd insane parking manoeuvre when you are in a hurry, Saul refuses to let this one go. He is the alpha male hero after all! He gets out of his car, grabs hold of her before managing to get hold of her spare set of car keys and hiding her car from her.

Yes. At this point in the novel, I was thinking that the hero was less "sexy and brooding" and more "petty and vindictive".

However, as the story progresses, the characters develop quite nicely. Through a working relationship, their romance blossoms as each begins to appreciate the strengths and qualities in the other.

By the end of the novel, Saul has indeed resolved to change his behaviour and become less sexist (although he is still going on about that pinched car parking space on page 178 at the very end of the novel).



Moving with the times

MODERN-DAY HERO



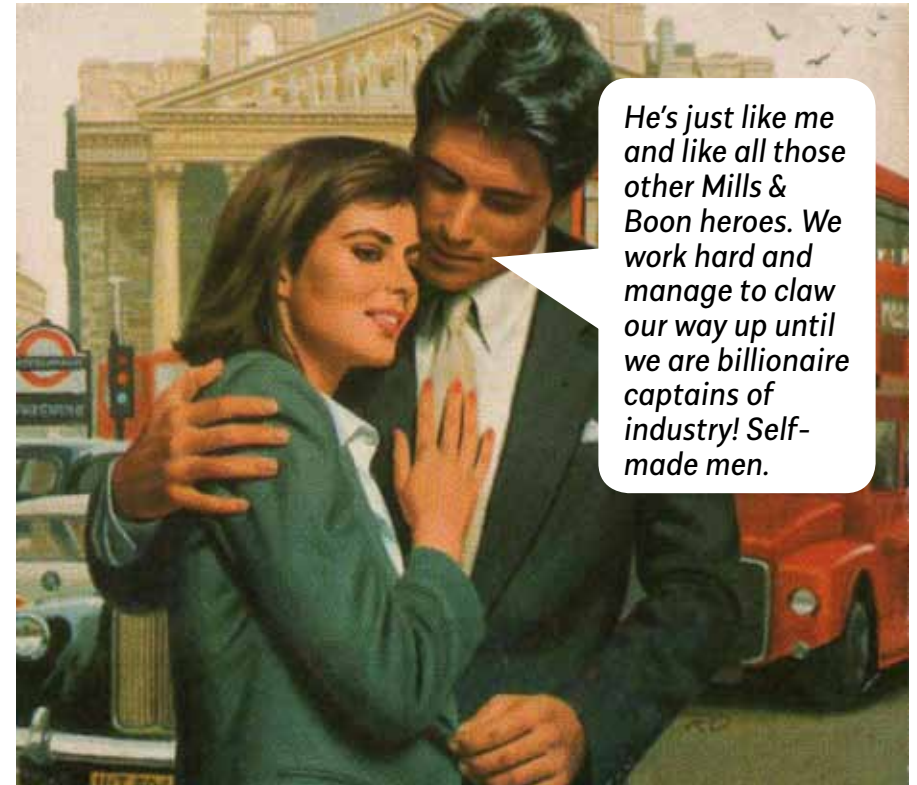
Mills & Boon, more than anything else is a company which moves with the times. Moving away from old-fashioned cover artwork, which some people argue is quite patriarchal in imagery, Mills & Boon now launch competitions to feature on the cover of their next romance. For example, their 'man of the year' competition to feature on the cover of their Valentine's Day special. This year it was won by Courtney Hayles.

By using this competition, with a high profile panel of celebrity judges, plus a facebook marketing campaign to engage social media in the voting process, this illustrates just one of the contemporary marketing strategies the company uses to reach out and engage with readers.

And non-readers, for that matter. (I'm guessing Courtney Hayles hadn't read many Mills & Boons before winning the competition. But I could be wrong about that, I suppose.)

According to the company, Courtney is 'a modern-day hero who is fun, authentic and romantic'. He embodies the fact that even in today's society, the ideal of the romantic hero is not dead.

Courtney, Mills & Boon informs, 'works hard and dreams big, believing with determination and motivation anything is possible.'



Baring the device

DEFAMILIARISATION



Indeed, I did, darling.

Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky coined the term 'defamiliarisation'. Didn't you Viktor?

Here's something else about Mills & Boons which I find really fascinating. They find time in their romances to gently mock the genre they're writing within.

Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky coined the term 'defamiliarisation'. He used this to describe the capacity of art to invest the familiar with strangeness and thereby enhance perception.

'Defamiliarisation' is not simply a question of perception; it is the essence of literariness. Authors who 'bare the device' in literature and expose literature's artificiality, defamiliarise its tropes and render it into 'true art'.

Mills & Boons do this repeatedly in their novels. From the classic novels of Penny Jordan right up to the current time.

In Carole Marinelli's 2014 *Surgeon in a Tux*, for example, the hero admits that he does

the romance bit really well, but just can't ever seem to commit. He doesn't do the inevitable rows which follow.

Which is ironic because, of course, Mills & Boon novels are all about the romance. The action stops as soon as the hero and heroine achieve their romantic resolution; and so these novels themselves never talk about the compromise, and the rows that most married couples will inevitably encounter, if the story was to be continued.

This makes the novel a wonderful example of 'baring the device'. The action and characters in the novel become entirely representative of what a Mills & Boon novel is.

Thus the actual book, comes to represent the whole ethos of the company. It's a stroke of genius.

These have been just a few of the reasons why I love reading Harlequin Mills & Boon romances and why I think they're not the trash that literary critics would have us believe.

There's so much going on in these novels, from tracing their origins in classic romances to analysing what these novelists are striving to convey in their fictions, there's always something new to learn from reading this type of romance.

Val Derbyshire is a WRoCAH supported AHRC Competition student researching the works of Charlotte Turner Smith (1749-1806) under the supervision of Professor Jacqueline Labbe and Professor Angela Wright at the School of English, University of Sheffield. With many thanks to the Festival of the Mind/University of Sheffield for their kind award which enabled this project to take place.



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