Literary approaches

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Chapter 13

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Consider the following passage from Sherry Thomas's historical romance *My Beautiful Enemy* (2014), which comes when the novel's half-Chinese, half-English heroine, Catherine Blade (AKA Bai Ying-Hua, AKA Ying-Ying, AKA "The Kazakh"), finds the jade tablet that she has been sent to England to recover.

> When she had pulled aside the protective tissue paper, nestled inside was the exact object she sought. At its center was a goddess, her eyes half closed in joy, her pliant back arched, and the ribbons on her flowing robe dancing all about her, as if lifted by a gentle breath. To her left and right were the famous words of the *Heart Sutra*. *Form is no other than emptiness; emptiness is no other than form. Form is exactly emptiness; emptiness is exactly form*. (107)

In terms of the novel's adventure plot, the only significant part of this passage comes in the opening sentence: here, at last, is the "object she sought." Likewise, its love plot hinges only on the fact of discovery, since the search for the tablet has brought Catherine, a Chinese spy, back into contact (and back at odds) with British spy Leighton Atwood. In what "plot," however—what system, what pattern, what design, what compositional logic—does it matter that the tablet is "nestled," and not simply wrapped, in the paper? That the eyes of the goddess on the tablet are "half closed in joy," her back "pliant" and "arched" while her robe is "dancing" (she's not stern

or placid, sitting up straight or standing tall)? That this goddess is framed by a quote from the *Heart Sutra* (not the *Diamond* or *Lotus* or some other sutra), and that the quoted passage is those "famous words" about form and emptiness rather than, say, the sutra's equally famous closing mantra, *Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi svaha*?

To ask such questions of a popular romance novel is to assume, however provisionally, that the book is an aesthetic object: one whose "deep individuality" (Cappella and Wormser 15) rewards our attention; one whose particularities *signify*. This is not now, nor has it ever been, the dominant practice in romance reading, at least not in scholarly circles. As recently as 2018 an Australian research team investigating the "genre world" of popular romance observed that even when the close textual study of romance novels has occurred—still a rare phenomenon, though growing—it has "almost without exception" been in the service of ideological analysis rather than focused on anything related to poetics, aesthetics, or artistry (Fletcher, Driscoll, Wilkins 1000). This chapter will survey the exceptions: the contrapuntal strain in popular romance scholarship that takes what we might call "literary approaches" to the genre.

By "literary approaches" I do not mean simply "the way that literature is treated." Literature is treated many ways, and post-New Critical versions of "close reading" share a departmental hallway with sharply contrasting modes of inquiry, including ideological and philosophical investigations, material histories of the book, and computer-assisted analyses of vast digitized corpora.[1] Rather, this chapter will focus on approaches to popular romance that are "literary" in the sense that they emphasize what are still generally thought of as literary qualities or attributes of texts, no matter their genre or medium: telling details; compositional patterns and choices; references to and engagements with the history of the genre; formal decisions that can be said to act out or comment on content; adept variations on established conventions;

metafictional winks and intertextual nods; in sum, all of the ironies, insights, and complexities, global and local, that make up a romance novel's "unlikeness" from others in its genre or subgenre (Rushdie 426). To paraphrase a famous quip from Terry Eagleton, the scholarship explored in this chapter either argues, or simply assumes, that some popular romance novels have been "born literary," that some may yet "achieve literariness," and that more than a few will reward the effort to "thrust literariness" upon them (7).[2] None *prima facie* belongs to a "subliterature of love" (Anderson).

Some Doxa and Their Discontents

Laura Vivanco dedicates *For Love and Money: the Literary Art of the Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance* (2011) to "every Harlequin Mills & Boon author who has ever been asked, 'When are you going to write a *real* novel?'" (5). (Like Vivanco, I will shorten the publisher's name to HMB.) In the classroom, this epigraph can be used to tease out doxa—received ideas, social truths, assumptions which *go without saying*—about what, precisely, constitutes a "real" novel, how a romance might be different, and why it might seem so endlessly necessary to mark out the contrasts between them.[3] As those discussions often reveal, and as Vivanco's Introduction makes clear, much of that urgency springs from anxieties about class and social distinction. Sometimes the subtext is obvious, as when a writer for the *Yorkshire Post* sniffs that "to call them novels is to raise them far above their station" (Freeman 2008; qtd. Vivanco 15). More subtly and pervasively, however, the brand name "Mills & Boon" (or Harlequin, in the US and Canada) gets invoked metonymically for the genre in general as, in Ann Curthoys' and John Docker's words, "a negative icon, what not, what never to be" (qtd. Vivanco 15). What these

Australian cultural historians observed in 1990 about much of the twentieth century has remained true in the early twenty-first:

> Newspaper critics in reviews, journalists in their columns, good professional-middle-class people in their conversation, would casually snap at a book or passage by saying things like 'it unfortunately smacks of Mills and Boon', or, 'in certain parts of the novel it lapses into pure Mills and Boon'. 'Mills and Boon' was a roaming, punitive signifier, a terrier running around and around the boundary that separates serious writing from the low, from sub-literature, para-literature, trash, schlock (Curthoys and Docker, 1990; qtd. Vivanco 15).[4]

Since the category of "serious writing" or "Literature" depends, in no small part, on its communally-recognized opposition to something *else* (see Fish 14-15; 171-172; Eagleton 14; Gelder 11-17), the shorthand signifiers "Mills & Boon," "Harlequin romance," "bodice-ripper" and so on do deeply needed cultural work, standing for any needed instance of the trivial, hackneyed, or "always already familiar" (Silliman). If such a term did not exist, it would be necessary to invent one.

To witness this boundary marking in action, one need look no further than the review of Vivanco's study by literary historian Kate MacDonald, who describes herself as the author of "tiny, hand-crafted essays on why she really likes a book" (MacDonald). Alas, she did not like this one. Unpersuaded by Vivanco's arguments, MacDonald declares herself "appalled" by the prose of HMB novels; she describes them as "manufactured to a carefully worked out formula"; she calls the publishing house a "prison" where books are "policed rather than edited"; and she contrasts HMB books, all "clones of the same hive mind," to the individualized voices and visions of books in science fiction. Although she allows that romance novels might be of interest

from a socio-historical perspective, she scoffs at Vivanco's claims about the aesthetic self-consciousness of one HMB text she discusses. Observing that the line this romance quotes from a seventeenth-century poet is, in fact, just a cliché, and that the poet quoted "is not obscure, but regularly anthologised and taught," MacDonald takes pains to highlight her superior cultural capital: explicitly superior to the novel's heroine, who gets the quote wrong (the hero corrects her) and implicitly superior to Vivanco, who reads the protagonists' allusive dialogue—which includes complaints about being "written off" and unfairly "labeled"—as a metafictional "response to those who would be astonished to discover a quotation from Richard Lovelace in one of the novels they consider to be 'factory-produced hackwork'" (116). Clichés do not allusions make, MacDonald implies, nor echoes, metatexts; or, to switch poets, we might say that to find value in such a passage is to confess a critical heart too soon made glad, too easily impressed, leaving literature and the subliterary "all one!" (Browning 199).

As Thomas J. Roberts observes in *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, "the conventions for talk about the popular arts are more restrictive by far than the conventions for the stories themselves" (124), and MacDonald's review is a conventional, even formulaic piece. As such, however, it reveals what Lynne Pearce calls the "'deep structures … conventions, and clichés" of its genre, the critical dismissal of popular romance (521). Three structuring concepts stand out: first, that romance novels are badly written, both in their "appalling" prose and in their thoughtless, trivial deployment of allusions and other literary gestures; second, that romance novels are subject to corporate control and commodity standardization, such that they lack the individuating "unlikeness" that characterizes both high art fiction and other popular genres; and, finally, as a corollary of the other two, that popular romance fiction will only really be interesting when approached from a socio-historical framework, read as a "register of popular feeling" and a

"barometer of the ethos of its times" (Kamblé, *Making Meaning* 23). Literary scholarship on popular romance has addressed each of these structuring concepts, whether to document how these doxa developed or to dispute them, and in the remainder of this chapter I will use them as a framework to organize an overview of this scholarly record.

Bad Writing and Other Shibboleths

It is a truth, as they say, universally acknowledged that romance novels are badly written. This badness is fractal, appearing from the global levels of story, character, and theme down to sentence level issues of syntax, imagery, and word-choice. "Romance writers are often criticized for the lack of originality of our plots (which are regarded as contrived and formulaic) and the excessive lushness or lack of subtlety of our language," Linda Barlow and Jayne Ann Krentz explain in "Beneath the Surface: The Hidden Codes of Romance," the first extended response by romance authors to this charge against the genre (18-19). This criticism sometimes takes a public, ritual form. "Descriptive passages are regularly culled from romance novels and read aloud with great glee and mockery by everybody from college professors to talk show hosts" (24), and the fact that romance authors persist in deploying "rich, evocative diction that is heavy-laden with familiar symbols, images, metaphors, paradoxes, and allusions" (18) might well lead one to wonder whether these authors are "woefully derivative and unoriginal," whether "our editors force us to write this way," whether a lack of education or training has left them "incapable of expressing ourselves in any other manner," and so on (25). Any critic or scholar interested in taking a literary approach to popular romance fiction will need to disarm these objections—and, with them, the genre's reputation as either unworthy of, or unresponsive to, close reading.

One scholarly approach to this doxa has been to treat the ostensible maladroitness of romance as, itself, a subject for investigation. In *Love and the Novel: The Poetics and Politics of Romantic Fiction* (1998), George Paizis nods to the notion that "the literary style of the novels is neither complex nor surprising" (33) but goes on to investigate that style from a variety of formal, theoretical, and other viewpoints, including Kitsch theory, a Proppian functional analysis, rhetorical and game-analogy perspectives derived from Umberto Eco's analysis of James Bond novels, and a brief but extraordinarily useful excursion into literary history. "Rather than being a reaction against 'literary style,' Paizis explains,

> the romance borrows heavily from its most worn clichés to gain its effects. […] Archaic elements litter its pages, both in style and in the images of society it employs. It is these which make the fantasy potential of the stories so powerful because they evoke the deep-seated and internalized codes of signification picked up at school. (36)

Like Barlow and Krentz, Paizis finds that both the plots and the prose of romance depend on "collectively recognized elements, deep-seated messages and encouragements, fears and aspirations" (34). In the authors' words, romance readers have a "keyed-in response to certain words and phrases" (Barlow and Krentz 25): "stock figures" (25) which draw forth what one might well assume to be stock responses.

To speak of stock figures and stock responses is, of course, to conjure a forbidding figure from the dawn of modern literary criticism: Q. D. Leavis. In *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), Leavis condemns the "consistent use of clichés (stock phrases to evoke stock responses)" that distinguishes popular fiction from real art (194). Authors of popular fiction deploy "the key words of the emotional vocabulary which provoke the vague warm surges of feeling associated with religion and religion substitutes—e.g. life, death, love , good, evil, sin, home, mother,

noble, gallant, purity, honour," she writes, warning that "these responses can be touched off with a dangerous ease," so that "every self-aware person finds that he has to train himself from adolescence in withstanding them" (64-5). The mockery of popular romance that Barlow and Krentz describe marks a ritual exorcism, or at least an attempt to demonstrate that we (the mockers) are the "self-aware" people who have learned to withstand the allure of romance fiction's key words and stock figures, whether of gender, of heteronormativity, of sexual experience, or of what constitutes romantic love. Likewise, the precision tools of close reading that Q. D. Leavis and her husband F. R. Leavis advocated from the 1930s onward can be read not simply as ways to appreciate and analyze "good writing," but as a set of counter-spells designed to break the dangerous hold of "bad writing" over our collectively socialized, and thus manipulatable, psyches.

The first pages of my essay "How to Read a Romance Novel (and Fall in Love with Popular Romance)" touch on Leavis and her legacy. As I argue there, when romance historian jay Dixon insists that "to enter the world of the romance, the method of analyzing literature which is taught in schools must be abandoned" (Dixon, 10), this is because the "method" she has in mind "was designed, in no small part, to debunk, disarm, and dismiss" the rhetorical appeals and reading strategies with which popular romance is generally associated, including by its authors (Selinger 35). A longer, more elaborate consideration can be found in Laura Frost's essay "The Romance of Cliché: E. M. Hull, D. H. Lawrence, and Interwar Erotic Fiction" (2006) and her monograph *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and Its Discontents* (2013). Frost adds Lionel Trilling's essay "The Fate of Pleasure" as a second critical context for understanding when and why the pleasures offered by popular romance came to be seen as shameful, indeed "the essence of philistinism" (Trilling 435). Much more work, however, needs to be done on the

implicit *rebuttal* to Leavis and Trilling offered by the Barlow / Krentz essay and seconded by Paizis: that is, that the overt, even over-the-top deployment of stock figures in romance also invites an active, specifically *intellectual* engagement with the text.

> "The [emotional] experience can be quite intense," the authors explain, yet, at the same time, the codes that evoke the dramatic illusion also maintain it *as* illusion (not delusion—romance readers do not confuse fantasy with reality). […] Because the language of romance is more lushly symbolic and metaphorical than ordinary discourse, the reader is stimulated not only to feel, but also to analyze, interpret, and understand." (Paizis 25-26)[5]

This collective "sharing of the fiction *as illusion*" (Paizis 34; my emphasis) makes the act of romance reading complex, not simplistic; alert, not languid or passive; and rather than naïve or naively sincere, it is fundamentally *ironic*, at least in the sense developed by Michael Saler in his discussion of the "ironic imagination," "as-if" perspective, and "double consciousness" employed by readers of detective fiction, horror, and fantasy: readers who are likewise "enchanted, not deluded" by what they read (22). One finds here, then, the foundations of a much-needed comparative analysis of popular romance *among* the genres, and more scholarship is sorely needed on popular romance novels as novels of ideas, whether along the lines laid out by Saler's *As If* or those articulated by the many scholars of science fiction and detective / mystery fiction who have approached their genres as the sites of readerly and authorial thinking and communal debate.[6]

If Paizis illustrates the power of a historicist response to the doxa of "bad writing," Vivanco's *For Love and Money* shows the effectiveness of rejecting the premise behind it. Trained as a Hispanomedievalist, Vivanco recalls the comparable disparagement of late-

medieval *cancionero* poetry as "vacuous and insipid" and the efforts of scholars, notably Keith Whinnom, to demonstrate the "exacting" aesthetics of the form and the "expertise" of its poets (qtd. 16). Citing Northrop Frye's reminder that "Value-judgements are subjective […]," and that "when they are fashionable or generally accepted, they look objective, but that is all" (20), Vivanco ably articulates her own subjective sense that many romance novels "are well-written, skillfully crafted works which can and do engage the minds as well as the emotions of their readers, and a few are small masterpieces" (15). Two of Vivanco's four chapters draw on Frye's terminology—one discussing the deployment of Myth, Romance, and the High-Mimetic, Low-Mimetic, and Ironic modes in romance novels; the other the rewriting and adaptation of pre-existing story archetypes, which Frye calls "mythoi"—while the remaining pair offer extended discussions of romance as metafiction and the genre's deployment of overarching metaphors (Building a Romance, the Flowering of Romance, The Hunt of Love, and Love as a Journey) as a way for romance novels to propose, elaborate, and think through the nature of romantic partner love.[7]

Of Vivanco's four key concepts, the most influential has been the idea of metafiction, perhaps because it has allowed scholars to highlight how frequently and effectively romance novels defend, explore, and theorize the genre. I will return to metafiction in the final section of this chapter, since it illustrates one strong alternative to socio-historical readings of romance; her chapters on mythoi and extended metaphors will be addressed there as well. In addressing the doxa of "bad writing," however, the chapter on "Mimetic Modes" may be most applicable. Vivanco reviews Frye's taxonomy of literary modes, from myth, romance, and high mimesis down to irony, and also his notion of "modal counterpoint" as an aesthetic strategy: that is, the juxtaposition of various modes to produce literary effects (Frye 51; qtd. Vivanco 66). As she

shows, the lush, evocative diction that characterizes "higher" modes such as myth or romance does not pervade romance novels, nor does it crop up at random; rather, such passages are, or can be, set in dynamic tension with crisper diction, everyday imagery, and other features of "lower" modes. A sense of modal counterpoint enables the nuanced perception and appreciation of popular romance styles—not just the purple passages, but the khaki, charcoal, royal blue, and emerald ones as well—and of one of the ways in which repetition and variation function within single-story and multi-narrative romance novels. As Vivanco shows, the different Frygian "modes" of parallel scenes can capture, in prose style, a character's emotional arc, a relationship's development, or the differences (thematic, emotional, ideological, etc.) between multiple relationships within a single text.

The focus on individual novels implied by Vivanco's approach marks a clear division between her work and that of Paizis, who is quite forthright in admitting that his study will not attend to "the particular internal dynamic, the aesthetic significance of the rhythms of individual narratives" (7). Such internal dynamics and rhythms are of necessity one of the topics that arise in the popular romance classroom, and Vivanco's terminology has proven helpful in pedagogical contexts (see Selinger, "Teaching with *For Love and Money*"). It would reward further development—both practical and theoretical—by future researchers, especially given Vivanco's brief but provocative association of modal counterpoint with the psychology of romantic idealization, a topic of considerable research in the field of relationship science (69).

Depending on the rhetorical or research situation, it may be more helpful to deploy either Paizis's historicist or Vivanco's formalist insights into popular romance aesthetics. In an off-the-cuff context, however—when answering an advisor's objection, a student's challenge, a friend's

bewilderment—the simplest move may be to invoke Sturgeon's Revelation, often called Sturgeon's Law. As SF author Theodore Sturgeon explained in a 1957 book review,

> Sturgeon's Revelation … was wrung out of me after twenty years of wearying defense of science fiction against attacks of people who used the worst examples of the field for ammunition, and whose conclusion was that ninety percent of SF is crud. Using the same standards that categorize 90% of science fiction as trash, crud, or crap, it can be argued that 90% of film, literature, consumer goods, etc. is crap. In other words, the claim (or fact) that 90% of science fiction is crap is ultimately uninformative, because science fiction conforms to the same trends of quality as all other artforms. (78)

Invoking Sturgeon's Law allows the would-be literary scholar of romance to sidestep the question of quality in the genre *overall* and focus instead on the task of making claims on behalf of this or that *individual* romance novel. One can ignore the questions of whether a particular novel is "representative" of the genre (it need not be) and whether it was embraced by the romance readership (a niche-published text or market failure might be an artistic success), and one can let the novel at hand dictate the terms of critical engagement and the topics to be explored.

What does such scholarship look like in practice, and what are its critical methods? The first of these is easier to answer: since the early 1990s, a cluster of instances has accrued around the works of Georgette Heyer, whom A. S. Byatt singled out as "a superlatively good writer of honourable escape" (Byatt 233). In deftly descriptive evaluative gestures Byatt goes on, as such readings will, to "distinguish between her books" (234), and essays have followed on individual Heyer novels (see, for example, Barr, Bell, Fletcher, Gillis, Vivancom and Westman); more recently conferences have been devoted to her work, and a literary biography has been published.

All of this effort is premised on the idea that *this* romance author differs from others, whether because of the "*precise* balance she achieves between romance and reality, fantastic plot and real detail" (Byatt 239), because of her "desire to transcend the type of historical romance formula(s) she invented and practically patented" (Barr 2), or some other cause. The grounds of distinction vary, but the *gesture* of distinction is the same, and the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* special issue on Jennifer Crusie makes a series of comparable gestures towards distinguishing, if not canonizing, this American romance novelist of the 1990s. Each of its six essays claims, on behalf of Crusie, some distinctive artistry or insight into the genre: its history, its impact on the reader, its relationships to gossip, lies, and con-artistry, and more (see Baldus, Kramer, Moore and Selinger, Valeo, Vivanco, Zakreski, and the Editor's Introduction).

In addition to these author-focused instances, and as a model of novel-specific scholarly methods, I would point to my essay in praise of Laura Kinsale's historical romance *Flowers from the Storm* ("How to Read a Romance Novel"). The method, here, was to start with a pair of nonce but nagging details in the text and to search out the thematic and compositional logic that would allow the novel's oddly specific references to non-Euclidean geometry and the cottage where Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* to fit into some overarching compositional and intellectual design. Treating these references as though they had occurred in a high-art text, the essay works its way from detail to design, finding in the process not only multiple geometric patterns—chiasmus, parallel lines that meet (it's a non-Euclidean textual universe), etc.—but an assortment of other allusions to *Paradise Lost* and other texts and developments from the "love revolution" of the seventeenth century which the novel links to its Regency setting and to its own late-20th century contexts of "the death of Eros" (Alan Bloom) and "the end of the novel of love" (Vivian Gornick) (38-43).

In effect, my "How to Read" essay applies to a popular romance novel some of the principles of "aesthetic criticism" articulated by poetry scholar and famed close reader Helen Vendler: first, "that no significant component can be left out of consideration," second, that "the significant components are known as such by interacting with each other in a way that seems coherent, not haphazard" (3), and finally that criticism should "investigate *how* and *why* the art work is as it is, using its propositions and values as a bridge to its individual manner, its texture, its temperament, the experience and knowledge it makes possible, and its relation to other art works" (5).[8] Stanley Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness*, a philosophical reading of 1930s Hollywood comedies of remarriage, also underpins this essay's project: in particular, in Cavell's insistence that he is not merely demonstrating "our capacity for bringing our wild intelligence to bear on just about anything," but rather "the intelligence that a film," or in this case a romance novel, "has *already* brought to bear in its making" (10).

Novel-specific romance scholarship need not depend on tracking down or tracing out the implications of allusions, although these are more common—and more pertinent—than casual readers and reviewers generally observe. It will, however, always entail attention to moments of excess, oddly specific details, or puzzles of diction or phrasing—e.g., Piper Huguley's repeated reference to "chains of liberty" being struck from Africans who are being enslaved, and then restored with their liberation (195)—in the hope of articulating some textual logic that explains or compels them. *Pace* jay Dixon, who has claimed that HMB romance novelists of the twentieth century do not "play games with their readers" (10), such investigation treats reading the romance as something quite similar to playing a game or solving a puzzle, with patterns emerging as chains of connection are revealed.[9] In such an approach, it is worth noting, no *general* claim about the romance genre is made, other than the underlying claim (whether spelled

out or implied) that the genre contains individual novels which reward being read "with the same demanding, passionate precision that we bring to any other text" ("How to Read" 44). Popular romance is thus brought in line with other forms of genre fiction, where the singling-out of particular texts and authors has long been a regular feature of book reviews, critical essays, and scholarly works.

To understand why it has taken so long for such disaggregating treatment to be accorded popular romance, we must turn to a second critical doxa: the notion that romance novels are not just "badly written," book by book, but are *standardized* products, and thus quite different not simply from literary fiction, but from books in other mass-market genres.

Standardization; or, the Anxious Othering of Romance

The belief that romance novels are standardized products is a commonplace of what Jayashree Kamblé calls the "media romance": an account of the genre that asserts a *textual* sameness based on sameness of packaging rather than on any actual reading.[10] Yet we cannot dismiss the idea of standardization as simply a matter of judging the books by their covers. Reputable scholars have discussed the impacts of corporate control, genre conventions, and reader expectations on the genre, each of which might well seem at first blush to complicate any treatment of these books as art.[11] Romance authors, too, have written—often in asides, tweets, and other brief or ephemeral forms—about the need to negotiate, resist, or work around such guidelines: not only the explicit ones promulgated by publishers, but also the tacit advice that they are given about (for example) which historical settings will sell, and which should be avoided.[12] That said, from a literary standpoint, any account of the genre as a standardized

product needs to be contested, or at least supplemented, by approaches that investigate the sources of this account and / or call it into question.

To begin, it helps to recall that popular romance is far from the only genre to be dismissed for its sameness. The same has been said at various points about science fiction, the western, and the detective story (Roberts 162); as for epic "sword and sorcery" fantasy, which vies with romance for the title of "most despised sub-genre of paraliterary production" (Delaney 129), the overall charge of uniformity contains a subsidiary litany of romance-like offenses, including puerile content, purple prose, and palpitating readers.[13] No wonder, then, that much of the most useful scholarship to address the doxa of standardization does so by addressing it as an issue related to genre fiction in general, or even to *genre* in general, rather than as a problem peculiar to romance.

In "On Popular Romance, J. R. Ward, and the Limits of Genre Study" (2013), for example, Mary Bly begins by wondering why the very existence of genre norms—whether imposed by a publisher, by a reading public, or by genre tradition—should seem so alarming. As Bly observes, the "perception that romance novels are 'mass produced,' so that like automobiles, it doesn't really matter which factory (or author) produces the text" (62) derives from concerns about the mass production and mechanical reproduction of art raised by thinkers in the 1930s, notably Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno. When Radway refers in passing to romance novels as "factory-produced commodities" (11), Bly explains, she draws indirectly on this critical tradition, and Modleski does so quite explicitly, as when she critiques her own earlier work for thinking that any local variation on or evolution within the romance "formula" was no more than "what the philosopher and culture critic T. W. Adorno called 'pseudo-individualization'" (Modleski, "My Life as a Romance Reader" 57).[14]

Against such approaches, Bly throws down a historicist gauntlet. That great works should be *sui generis* would, she writes, have sounded absurd to a Renaissance artist—as, indeed, it would to any neoclassical or early Romantic one (63). This is, therefore, a peculiarly *modern* anxiety: one with roots in the "crisis of indistinction" surrounding the novel in the middle of the nineteenth century, the period when high-art and mass-market fiction began to diverge in authorship, audience, reputation, and aesthetics (McGurl 4). As Mark McGurl explains in *The Novel Art*, some authors in this period wanted the novel—or, at least, a certain *kind* of novel—to be granted the status of "fine art" and the novelist—or at least a certain *kind* of novelist—the corresponding title of "artist" (3). For this to happen, the art-novel had to be distinguished from mass-market fiction, and a discourse emerged disparaging the latter as not only "worthless for any purpose of intellectual stimulus" but also a mass-produced, fungible product, churned out by an anonymous "process of manufacture" (qtd. McGurl 5). Ken Gelder's account of the period concurs, adding that for a would-be art-novelist such as Henry James "the biggest threat to Literature's future was in fact popular fiction itself, the kind of fiction sold at the time at railway bookstalls, circulated through the commercial lending libraries, advertised in the newspapers and read or 'absorbed'," as the novelist laments, "by those 'millions for whom taste is but an obscure, confused, immediate instinct'" (Gelder 18; for more on James and popular romance fiction, see Chung).[15]

In Gelder's *Popular Fiction: the Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (2004), the split between capital-L "Literature" and popular fiction seems right and just. Each of these literary "fields," as he calls them, has its own aspirations and terms of praise, and although "one is inevitably disposed (for a range of social and cultural reasons, and for better or worse) towards some cultural forms and practices and not others," it is "perfectly possible to enjoy both," albeit

"on different terms and under quite different logics" (19). McGurl, by contrast, presents the relationship as fraught and more complex. Across the 1920s and 1930s, he argues, art-novelists drew, however conflictedly, on popular modes and models: a point developed at length in terms of high modernism and "low modern" popular romance in scholarship (Hipsky, Frost) on D. H. Lawrence and (perhaps more surprisingly) Virginia Woolf.[16] Likewise, (some) popular authors saw in modernist themes and stylistic moves the "opportunity to produce intellectual social distinctions within the 'common' place of mass culture" (175). McGurl's example of the latter is Dashiell Hammett, who declared to his publisher the aspiration to "make 'literature'" (qtd. McGurl, 164) out of pulp detective fiction. As McGurl observes, such fiction was already "marked both as a *masculine* and as an *intellectualist* genre," safely located at a distance from "sticky swamps of 'feminine' sentiment" (McGurl 158): a reputation it retains, and one which helps to account for the respect it receives in academia. Dorothy Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey / Harriet Vane novels from the 1930s, which hybridize mystery and romance, warrant future research along the lines McGurl suggests, as do more recent mystery and noir romances, notably Jennifer Crusie's homage to Hammett, *Fast Women*; comparable work is needed on romance and SF / fantasy.

Unlike McGurl or Gelder, however, Bly reaches back to the Renaissance for her historical contextualization, and this broader perspective leads her to a correspondingly broader, more provocative conclusion. To Bly, the charge of industrial standardization in romance fiction serves to localize, and thus contain, the general anxiety of living "in an age in which mechanical reproduction is not only possible, but ubiquitous and inevitable" (Bly 64). Yet pre-industrial visions of genre persist, routinely deployed in reading works from Bly's primary area of scholarly expertise, Renaissance drama. Although popular romance emerges as a distinct form in

the modern period, she suggests, the genre's aesthetics might more profitably be read in this older, pre-modern way: that is, scholars can treat the ubiquity of genre frameworks as a literary *given*, an unproblematic matter of course, and thus free themselves to look for originality in what Bly, following Adorno, names simply "*parts*": the local compositional decisions, scenes, and details where novelty resides.[17] Indeed, Bly argues, genre frameworks do not constrain local originality so much as they shine a spotlight on it, since whether in a romance novel or Renaissance revenge tragedy, it is precisely the formality and familiarity of the framework which allows for the production (for authors) and the recognition (by readers) of an "unscripted" freshness, either in content or in structure (63-64).

Bly's insistence on the originality to be found in a romance novel's "unscripted" negotiations with, and departures from, the conventions of its genre echoes arguments found in earlier scholarship—albeit ones that did not gain traction or establish a continuing tradition of critical discourse. John Cawelti advanced similar ideas in his foundational essays "The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Literature" (1969) and "Notes Toward an Aesthetic of Popular Culture" (1972) and in his groundbreaking monograph *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (1976), which proposed that all popular genres be seen as "a set of artistic limitations and potentials" and "standard characteristics" that particular texts then vary to achieve literary interest (*Adventure*, 7).[18] Likewise, almost a decade later, Radway's *Reading the Romance* offered not only a thirteen-part Proppian list of the "standard characteristics" of the romances admired by the Smithton readers—a roadmap to what she calls "*The* Narrative Logic of *the* Romance" (my emphasis)—but also an extended discussion of how one novel, Leigh Ellis's *Green Lady* (1981), defies its standardized packaging and treats that narrative logic as "an alterable set of generic conventions rather than a natural and immutable organic form" (152).[19] In

A Natural History of the Romance Novel, published twenty years after Radway's study and nearly ten years before Bly's, Pamela Regis proposed a list of eight narrative elements that define the romance novel as a recognizable form, not in order to lump together or demystify the texts she studies (five literary novels—*Pamela, Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre,* Trollope's *Framley Parsonage*, and E. M. Forster's *A Room With a View*—and multiple works by half a dozen popular romance authors, including Hull, Heyer, Stewart, Krentz, and Roberts), but rather to establish a shared terminology or genre-prosody that each text distinctively varies in terms of when and how each element appears, how many times it appears, and whether its appearance is diagetic or offstage (or implied, or symbolically replaced, or otherwise elided by the narrative).

As my use of the word "prosody" should suggest, the experiences of reading and writing in a genre system resemble those of reading and writing formal verse. Vivanco compares the genre's aesthetics and reception to those of late medieval *cancionero* love poetry (16-17; 149-50); some romance authors, notably Jennifer Cruise, invoke English Renaissance sonnets as an analogy for the genre's interplay between constraint and creativity. ("So, Bill," Crusie imagines a courtier asking: "—when are you going to write a real poem?" ["So, Bill"]). Roberts gives the analogy a temporal dimension. Not only does the existence of a metrical scheme, stanzaic norm, or genre system allow an author to "demonstrate…mastery of that formula" by "ringing changes on it" (166), but every change is potentially "an invitation to further variation in the books that will follow" (167). The essays of An Goris document this principle in action. In her early work, Goris applied the postmodern theoretical model of "constrained writing" generally associated with experimental texts (e.g., the works of OULIPO authors) to popular romance, with particular attention to how handbooks for aspiring romance authors teach them to negotiate the exigencies of convention and innovation (Geest and Goris; Goris, "Loving"); in later work, Goris

documents and theorizes one such innovation: the emergence of a new "narrative space" in series romances, where the achieved romantic couple from one volume returns at length as secondary characters in another. "Analyses of post-HEA scenes reveal the genre is not merely representing a clear-cut, pre-fixed fantasy of a romantic Happy Ever After," Goris concludes, "but actively exploring and negotiating what such a fantasy might look like beyond the climactic yet inevitably formulaic moment of the HEA," with different authors (her examples are Nora Roberts and J. R. Ward) responding to the invitation of the post-HEA in radically different ways ("Happily Ever After").

Although it can be done with nuance and insight (e.g., Paizis's *Love and the Novel*), structuralist scholarship has done a great deal to perpetuate the notion that romance novels are "schematic texts" (Bowman, 69), best read and understood in terms of a few enduring, if not immutable, narrative schemes. From a literary perspective, however, such insights into the "narrative logic" (Radway), "elements" (Regis), or "framework" (Bly) of romance must be the first word in an analysis, not the last—otherwise, they come perilously close to claims about the fundamental sameness of blues guitar solos, Scarlatti sonatas, or, for that matter, sonnets, about which William Carlos Williams scoffed that they all "say the same thing of no importance" (54). In each case, what's being said purports to be something like "to the educated ear these sound the same," but is in fact some ratio of "I lack the genre-specific competence that would let me hear the differences" and "I refuse to be the kind of person who *cares* about such differences, let alone who gives the artist credit for them."[20] More research is needed as to why the notion that "all the stories in [this] genre are effectively the same" (Roberts 162) remains viable in romance contexts when it has faded elsewhere, but such metacritical work on the genre's critical reception[21] is, perhaps, less important for literary studies than other tasks at hand: comparative

work that draws on methodological and theoretical models developed for other, more thoroughly researched genres and artforms (e.g., Freedman's *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*; the accounts of "the cute," "the interesting," and "the zany" by Sianne Ngai; the various "uses of literature" enumerated and articulated by Rita Felski in her manifesto of that name); efforts to disaggregate the genre by testing critical claims about its structures or tropes against the practice of individual novelists (e.g., Goris, "Mind, Body, Love"), of queer romance authors (e.g., Betz on lesbian romance novels), and of ethnically and racially diverse texts (e.g., Weisser on African American romance imprints or Young, "Saving China"). Even fresh, revisionist looks at Adorno might be useful, since the same theorist who critiques industrial "pseudo-individualization" also insists on "the importance of the *tour de force* in art" (qtd. Vendler 5; see Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 106-7; 185), and an interpretive community prepared to imagine that a *tour de force* might exist in popular romance will likely be able to see and describe them.[22]

Beyond the Socio-Political

Of the doxa surrounding popular romance novels, perhaps the most positive—at least at first glance—is the assumption that they will be of most interest to scholars as records of shifting courtship mores, ideas about love, sex, gender, and relationships, public attitudes towards war and economics, and other types of socio-historical change. Indeed, when Bly advocates for scholars to take an interest in the originality of "parts" of romance novels, she does so explicitly in the hope of inspiring a more "historically specific" criticism, rather than a more aesthetically sensitive kind. Such work had already begun nearly a decade before her piece, as the essays gathered in Susan Strehle and Mary Paniccia Carden's *Doubled Plots: Romance and History* (2003) demonstrate[23]; published alongside the Bly essay, Hsu-Ming Teo's "'Bertrice teaches you

about history, and you don't even mind!: History and Revisionist Historiography in Bertrice Small's *The Kadin*" offered a compelling model of how attention to "parts" could be integrated with reception research; and many of the essays gathered in the *Romance Fiction and American Culture*, edited by William Gleason and myself, advance this historicist agenda (see particularly Matelski, Lyons and Selinger, Moody-Freeman, and Barot). In her monograph *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction* Jayashree Kamblé offers a helpful evolutionary metaphor to articulate the assumptions behind this scholarly approach. "What may be acceptable as romantic alters over time," Kamblé explains, "not just in terms of archetypes but in terms of the constructed reality in which the relationship can be apprehended / enjoyed, that is, considered 'romantic'" (21). Because it must be perceivable as "romantic," the romance novel must change; because it is a novel, "a form that promotes evolutionary adaptation, linguistically and structurally," it has the capacity to do so in a radical way that other literary forms (say, the sonnet) may not (21). As a result, these novels are, for Kamblé, "lenses through which economic and sociopolitical dramas of immediate relevance to readers come into focus," offering "a glimpse of existing in the twentieth and twenty-first century under (and in conflict with) the spread of capitalism and the intensification of neo-conservatism" (21).

Given both the quantity and the quality of these historical / sociopolitical inquiries, some literary scholars have felt obliged to set such ends explicitly aside. "Questions regarding the cultural, psychological, and sociological resonance of rape scenes, while interesting and important, do not allot to the trope a literary significance beyond the purely mimetic," Angela Toscano observes near the start of "A Parody of Love: the Narrative Uses of Rape in Popular Romance," which attempts to take a more purely "narratological" approach to the topic. Toscano distinguishes three varieties of rape in popular romance—"the Rape of Mistaken Identity, the

Rape of Possession, and the Rape of Coercion or "Forced Seduction"—but her argument is ultimately not structuralist but epistemological and ethical, framed in terms drawn from Emmanuel Levinas, Roland Barthes, and Georges Bataille. A comparable itch to "anatomize" a recurring feature of popular romance marks Jonathan Allan's "Theorizing Male Virginity in Popular Romance Novels," where representations of male virginity (and its loss) are seen as narrative tropes rather than as barometers of social sentiment; Toscano's deployment of philosophy, meanwhile, resonates with Deborah Lutz's earlier monograph *The Dangerous Lover*, where "through the theories of time, being, and selfhood of Heidegger and others we see how the outcast hero and the attraction to him represent ontology itself" (88).

Although they differ in topic and critical idiom, Toscano, Allan, and Lutz share a desire to reframe "sociopolitical dramas" (Kamblé 21) in aesthetic and / or philosophical terms. Rather than an object of inquiry to be thought *about*—one which reveals the contours of readers' desires or a historical moment's discourses surrounding some issue or concern—the romance novel becomes something to think *with*, the occasion for engaging with ideas that have already been engaged by the author and / or woven into the text's compositional fabric.[24] Often these are ideas about love: as Vivanco shows in *For Love and Money*, romance novels routinely propose and elaborate extended metaphors for what love is or is like (a hunt, a journey, a garden's cultivation, building a home) (151-198); they engage the "conundrum" of romantic love as "an ambiguous—and sometimes dangerous—practice of freedom *and* bondage (Roach, 120); and they foreground the complex relationship between love and repetition, which is for Lynne Pearce "the seemingly inexhaustible, yet infinitely exhausting, life-blood of romance, regardless of whether the story in question is bound for tragedy (where death is invoked to vouchsafe love's non-repeatability) or a 'happy ending' (where past relationships, as well as new ones glimmering darkly on the horizon,

are temporarily dazzled and silenced by an all-consuming present)" (Pearce, "Romance and Repetition"). Yet as Kecia Ali demonstrates in *Human in Death: Morality and Mortality in J. D. Robb's Novels*, love is far from the only topic explored in, and explorable through, a close and thoughtful reading of popular romance novels. Ali's chapters explore intimacy, friendship, vocation, violence, and the dangerous allure of perfection, whether individual or social, as represented in the series' fictive future world; her study is the first monograph to treat a romance author (Nora Roberts, writing under a separate, series-specific nom de plume) as a novelist of ideas, and offers a useful model for future work along those lines.

The In Death series by J. D. Robb stands at the crossroads of multiple genres: police procedural, science fiction, and romance. Scholarship on the relationships between other genres and romance—and between romance and more canonical literature, and romance and the non-verbal arts (music, painting, etc.)—has offered a range of alternatives to socio-historical readings of the genre. Vivanco's chapter on "Mythoi" builds on her discussion of Frygian "narrative modes" to explore high mimetic, low mimetic, ironic, and other retellings of canonical narratives (e.g., the Pygmalion mythos, Sir Gawain and the Loathly Lady, Odysseus and Circe) and fairy tales, with ample notes to earlier scholarship on the latter as it bears on popular romance (e.g., Bettelheim; Crusie, "Not Your Mother's Cinderella"; Lee). Using a theoretical model informed by Judith Butler, Lisa Fletcher reads popular, middlebrow, and high-art instances of historical romance fiction side by side in *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity*; her subsequent *Island Genres, Genre Islands*, co-written with Ralph Crane, shows how an expansive, "Island Studies" framework allows one to read island-set romance novels, crime fiction, thrillers, and fantasy novels as co-equal branches of popular fiction, each with its own characteristic set of geographies and spatial logics. In "When I Paint My Masterpiece: Bob

Dylan, Ekphrasis, and the Artistry of Susan Elizabeth Phillips" I attend to the significant narrative presences in Phillips's *Natural Born Charmer* of Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* and of elaborately described paintings by the novel's heroine. Phillips uses these artforms, I argue, to reflect on the pleasures and complexities that are possible in popular romance, ably demonstrating that it (like the heroine's paintings) cannot be brushed off as "sentimental bullshit" (Phillips 307).

More research is needed on how romance authors use references to other media (film, TV) and to texts by canonical authors (Austen, Shakespeare, Flaubert, any number of poets) to defend the romance genre, to analogize and theorize its practices, and to think through generic differences (e.g., how lyric poetry and narrative romance depict romantic love).[25] As Vivanco's chapter on Metafiction in *For Love and Money* demonstrates, such gestures are far from rare (110-150). They align romance with other forms of popular culture, which often offers "pointed commentary on, and even pastiche or parody of, its status as cultural item" (Polan 175; qtd. Vivanco 110), and as with other metafiction, these gestures readily blossom into more elaborate investigations of the relationships between fiction and reality and any number of comparable pairings (the romantic and the real, the worlds of desire and experience, the world imagined and the world as suffered, etc.) (112). Romance novels also use metafictional gestures to consider the genre's unsettling status as both art and commodity, not least in plots that involve other products positioned between mass-produced and handmade status: artisanal chocolates, craft / micro-brewery beers, popular music, etc. No significant work has been done on this topic, yet many such novels exist, and they would reward investigation along both literary and historicist lines.

Conclusion: Of Criteria, Canons, and Classrooms

Debate has long since ended over the existence of "real novels" in detective fiction, science fiction, fantasy, and other popular genres. Reviews extol these exceptional cases; essays and monographs explore them; and publishers mark their merit through paratextual gestures. Pick up the handsome hardcover anthology *The Best of Gene Wolfe: A Definitive Retrospective of His Finest Short Fiction*, for example, and you'll find this breathless back cover blurb from the *Washington Post Book World*: "If any writer from within genre fiction ever merited the designation Great Author, it is surely Wolfe," a novelist who "reads like Dickens, Proust, Kipling, Chesterton, Borges, and Nabokov rolled into one" (Gevers). No matter how humble its origins—an Ace paperback with a lurid cover; a pulp magazine like *Black Mask, Weird Tales,* or *Fantasy Fan*—a work in any popular genre *other* than romance might well aspire to be enshrined, or perhaps entombed, in an authoritative edition that certifies its value.[26]

Will such editions someday exist of popular romance fiction? Several factors will affect the outcome, each of which needs more scholarship from a literary perspective. The first concerns how differently romance authors and authors from other genres discuss the literariness—potential or extant—of their own work and of their colleagues. Is it, in fact, the case that few romance authors have claimed that they are, in Hammett's phrase, "making 'Literature' of it" (qtd. McGurl 164), even privately (the Hammett quote is from a letter to his publisher)? As I have noted elsewhere, Kathleen Gilles Seidel may note, with justified annoyance, that scholars "seem unable to distinguish one book from another," but the central demand of her essay for the *Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women* anthology, announced in its title, is "Judge Me by the Joy I Bring," not "judge me by my mastery of language, dazzle of imagination, elegance of structure, deftness of allusion, strategic use of symbol, image, and ambiguity, fit between form and theme," and comparable criteria (212). More scholarship is needed on the institutional and epitextual

logics behind this preference for an affective, rather than formalist, mode of advocacy: a preference whose history dates, as Rita Felski has described, to the highly gendered rejection of sentimentality in modernist aesthetics (see Felski, *Gender*). Likewise, a scholarly eye should be kept on whether this preference persists in twenty-first century author statements (the Seidel essay dates from the mid-1990s) and on the terms of praise that are deployed in the emerging corpus of romance reviews in mainstream newspapers and magazines, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Seattle Review of Books*. (It says a great deal about both the cultural status and the assumed readership of SF/Fantasy, for example, that the a reviewer for the *Boston Globe* praises Gene Wolfe's novels for being "filled with arcane language, heavy with double meanings…layered with allusion on top of metaphor on top of symbolism," textual strategies that modernism made the hallmarks of literariness [Bebergal].[27])

A second issue relevant to the genre's literary status concerns the contents, nature, and even existence of a popular romance canon. Writing in *Salon* in 2014, popular culture critic Noah Berlatsky observed that although he had "poked around online to find 'best of' lists or other recommendations," he soon realized that "there wasn't even a provisional consensus on which books were the best or essential romance novels": books which were "clearly central, or respected, or worth reading." Familiar with such discussions from other genres of fiction, comics, popular music, and film, Berlatsky concluded that "the genre is so culturally maligned that there has been no concerted effort to codify it. There is, in short, no romance canon."

To Berlatsky, this claim said more about the institutional occlusion of the genre than it did about romance itself, since it signaled the lack of any "group of experts who considers these works in particular, and the genre or medium in general, to be capable of greatness." Because they believed themselves to belong to precisely such a "group of experts," because they thought

that a romance canon did exist—Berlatsky had been looking for it in all the wrong places—and / or because they saw the lack of such codification as a distinctive, egalitarian attribute of the romance genre world, many readers, reviewers, bloggers, and authors took issue with Berlatsky's essay. So did a handful of scholars (see McAlister). More work needs to be done on whether a popular romance canon does, in fact, exist; whether one is coming into existence as scholarship develops; whether several may be coexisting without competing (academic canons, reader canons, author canons, etc.); and whether the discourse of the romance "genre world" has indeed avoided talk of canonicity (and if so, how and why).

The final issue affecting the literary status of popular romance concerns its place in the classroom. As Roland Barthes mordantly observes, "Literature is what is taught, period" (*Rustle*, 22), and the arrival of college and university literature courses including popular romance novels—or even, sometimes, exclusively focused on them—may bestow "literary" status on the genre, or at least those texts which are repeatedly put on syllabi. Scholarship is needed, therefore, not only on where and how popular romance novels are taught, but also on *which* novels are taught, and why. A few such pieces have already appeared in the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, written by those doing the teaching (Driscoll; Fletcher, Gaby, and Kloester; Dugger; Heiss). That said, the relatively small number of such courses being taught around the world would also make it possible for someone to investigate them from the outside, documenting the emergence and spread of popular romance pedagogy practices and, perhaps, of an academic or teaching canon.

Whether explicitly or implicitly, literary scholarship on popular romance fiction resists and refutes the genre's reputation for being poorly written, standardized, and primarily of interest from a socio-historical perspective. It also resists and refutes, or at least complicates, the way the

genre talks about itself. Romance authors, reviewers, and readers tend, by and large, to reject the scholarly "doxa of difficulty" in which "discomfort, confusion, and hard cognitive labor" (Frost, *Problem*, 6) are terms of praise, and to espouse instead a set of goals that have long since fallen out of academic favor: providing joy, consolation, instruction, and delight to readers, and, for authors, perhaps achieving a measure of fame and fortune in the process.[28] Such scholarship would seem perverse—an obstinate, headstrong practice—were it not for the fact that so many romance *novels*, whatever their authors may say, invite an attitude of "productive attentiveness" to their textual details, intertextual echoes, metafictional reflections, and other signs of artistry (Bialostoky 113). The sheer number of romance novels which have yet to be looked at through a literary lens makes this a promising area for future research. Already, though, it seems clear that although not every romance novel will reward literary investigation, every mode of literary reading can find a suitable text somewhere in popular romance.

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1 For digital humanities scholarship on popular romance fiction, see Jack Elliott's "Patterns and Trends in Harlequin Category Romance," "Vocabulary Decay in Category Romance," and "Whole Genre Sequencing."

[2] By "born literary" Eagleton would seem to mean that some texts are written and disseminated in ways that invite us to talk about the artfulness and insight of the author, the complexity and patterning of the text, the nuance or depth of its characters, the beauty of its language, and so on. A text that "achieves literariness" would be one that was written with some other set of hopes and expectations—to teach, to save souls, to entertain, to shape a debate--but which comes in

time to be treated as literature in some ongoing fashion, not only because of what people say about it, but in terms of who does that saying and where it takes place: in the academy, in publications aimed at educated readers, in the conversation of poets, novelists, playwrights, etc., and in critical and canonical editions, but *not* in entertainment magazines, at church book groups, on Oprah's book club, or in paperback reprints with covers from film adaptations. As for texts' having literariness "thrust upon them," it is perhaps worth recalling the source of Eagleton's allusion. In it, Shakespeare's Malvolio reads with delight about having greatness thrust upon him in a letter purporting to be a declaration of Olivia's love—but which in fact advises him to behave in ways that will incur her displeasure. The scholar who "thrusts literariness" on a romance novel may not, in fact, be doing it a favor, at least if it makes the text appear to be smug, self-important, and cross-gartered (*Twelfth Night* 2:5, 155).

[3]The term "doxa" was popularized in literary studies by Roland Barthes. For a useful introduction to the term, its meanings, and its use in literary and rhetorical studies, see Amossy.

[4] For more on popular romance as a signifier—both in its Mills & Boon and single-title historical varieties—see Jayashree Kamblé's chapter in this volume on the Media Romance.

[5] To be sure, not all romance novels flaunt the lushness of their prose. Jayashree Kamblé notes, for example, the "staccato prose" of Nora Roberts, which "lends her work a spartan charm, an unromantic kind of romantic storytelling" ("What's Love," 23): a quick, qualitative, memorable description that is rare in both the scholarship and reviewing of the genre.

[6] For more on genre fiction as a technology that facilitates "thinking with tired brains" about substantive topics, see Roberts (127-149); for SF as the site of "cognitive estrangement," see Suvin (7-12). The bibliography on mystery / detective fiction and moral issues is extensive; for a good introduction, see Berges.

[7]Vivanco's account of how romance fiction uses these overarching metaphors draws on the scholarship of psychologist Robert Sternberg, whose *Love is a Story: a New Theory of Relationships* explores the range of metaphors through which individuals and couples articulate their expectations and understandings of love. Although this is a volume for the general public, Sternberg's discussion of metaphor as a mode of cognition seems a promising and under-studied resource for Popular Romance Studies.

[8]Vendler distinguishes such "aesthetic criticism," the core of her own practice, from "ideological criticism," which "is not interested in the uniqueness of the work of art, wishing always to conflate it with other works sharing its values" (2). She also notes in passing that, from her perspective, "one cannot write properly, or even meaningfully, on an art work to which one has not responded aesthetically" (5): a useful challenge for the romance scholar to keep in mind.

[9]For a discussion of this reading method as a classroom practice, see Selinger, "Use Heart in Your (Re)Search."

[10] For accounts of the "Media Romance" see Kamblé's *Making Meaning* (21), "Branding a Genre," and chapter 12 of this volume.

[11] The keynote for this scholarly tradition was struck by Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982), which addresses the issue of standardization briefly, in a clipped, disapproving discussion of the "strict set of rules" that Harlequin novelists must follow, which "even dictates the point of view from which the narrative must be told" (32). In the opening chapter of *Reading the Romance* (1984) Janice Radway seems more impressed, not only by "the effectiveness of commodity packaging and advertising" (20) in this segment of the publishing industry but also by the market research, focus group interviews, and other forms of "consumer testing" that stand behind it (42). If this leads to "authorial initiative and decision-making power

[being] curtailed," Radway writes, this is simply the logical consequence of a shift by publishers from "locating or even creating an audience for an existing manuscript" to "locating or even creating a manuscript for an already-constituted reading public" (43). For more recent work on what romance publishers have told authors and how those guidelines have developed, see John Markert's chapter for this volume.

[12] Madeline Hunter, in a book review, thus describes the "common wisdom" among authors that historical novels set outside the U.K. "don't sell" (Hunter). More research is needed on the impact of self-publishing on where and when romance novels are set in the twenty-first century.

[13] "The popular imagination holds that sword and sorcery is the paradise of arrested male adolescence," Mark Scroggins explains: a genre where "broad-thewed and dim-witted barbarians stride across pseudo-medieval landscapes, fighting wizards and giant snakes, rescuing (and bedding) grateful but sketchily characterized young women—all for the entertainment and titillation of socially maladapted teenaged boys" (23).

[14]Although Bly does not mention her foundational essay "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different," Ann Barr Snitow is another early romance scholar indebted to this critical tradition, as we can see when Snitow avers that "to analyze Harlequin romances is not to make any literary claims for them," because "they are not art but rather what Lillian Robinson has called 'leisure activities that take the place of art'" (142).

[15] Accusations of sameness often enter critical discourse with a whiff of superiority, as though they were trying to establish and defend the primacy of academic training or critical taste over the interest and expertise of those "millions." (In the case of Modleski, who grew up as a romance reader, the distinction is between the younger self, "an addict," and the adult investigating and resisting that addiction ["My Life,"53].) Often, however, a nervous recognition

of the superior knowledge of pleasure readers reasserts itself. Thus, for example, in the very sentence where Radway refers to romance novels as "factory-produced commodities" she offers a contrasting view of these texts: the Smithton readers "understood themselves to be reading particular and individual authors, whose special marks of style they could recount in detail, *rather than* identical, factory-produced commodities" (11; my emphasis).

[16] Scholars adjacent to popular romance studies have persuasively recast much of the romantic fiction of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the same material that Rachel Anderson dismissed as the "subliterature of love"—as a "low modern" literary form. Martin Hipsky reads romantic fiction by Mary Ward, Marie Corelli, Emma Orczy, Florence Barclay, and Elinor Glyn alongside Woolf and Lawrence in order to explore their common interests in love, desire, ecstasy, and "the imperative to loft us [as readers]…into a refashioned symbolic order that would bridge us across the pain of the historical Real" (Hipsky, xxi). Laura Frost's work on "The Romance of Cliché" explores how Lawrence approaches, appropriates, and disavows the depictions of female desire and erotic transcendence espoused in bestselling love stories by female authors, notably E. M. Hull's *The Sheik.*

[17] For a contrasting account of genre as a given of all textuality, see Derrida, "The Law of Genre," especially his assertion that "there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (230).

[18] As Cawelti ruefully noted in the early 1990s, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* supplied extended discussions of exemplary figures from the Western, detective fiction, and social melodrama, but none of the authors discussed was a woman, and despite its title, the book contains "almost nothing about romance" ("Masculine Myths and Feminist Revisions," 123).

[19] Radway presents *Green Lady* as an outlier text, and she distinguishes the authorial team writing as "Leigh Ellis," Anne and Louisa Rudeen, for their university educations (the latter went to Yale, she notes) and for what she sees as their atypical awareness of "literary history and generic conventions" (152). These gestures *ought* to have inspired the scholars who followed her in the 1980s to seek out other, equally savvy authors and novels. That few were, in fact, inspired to do so says a good deal about the academic reputation of popular romance and the hurdles faced by popular romance studies, but many such authors exist, and it is never too late to start.

[20] That genre-incompetence and the *refusal* of such competence are two different issues can be seen in Robyn R. Warhol's discussion of the film *Pretty Woman* in *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms*. Warhol has clear mastery of the genre-systems to which the film belongs, but she confesses herself ashamed of her own pleasurable reaction to the film, and when she notices wit, insight, complexity, intelligence, or nuance in it, she attributes these to the activity of a "perverse" and "self-conscious" viewer, rather than to the film or its makers (67; see Selinger, "When I Paint," 297-299).

[21] For examples of such metacritical research, see Frantz and Selinger ("Introduction"), Regis ("What Do Critics Owe the Romance"), and Goris ("Matricide)

[22] For a discussion of the power of communal expectations to shape interpretive activity, see Stanley Fish's essay "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One" (Fish, 322-327).

[23] Of particular note in *Doubled Plots* are groundbreaking essays on race in romance—pieces on *Miss Numè of Japan by* Onoto Watanna [Winnifred Eaton] (Ouyang), on race in E. M. Hull's *The Sheik* (Blake), and on African American women's historical romances (Dandridge)—on the queerness or queer potential of heterosexual romance (Burley), and on the economic ideology underpinning Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* (Hinnant).

[24] I paraphrase Sumita Chakravaty's essay "Teaching Indian Cinema," which closes with the statement that "a Bollywood film is something to think *with* even more than something to think *about*" (108, emph. Chakravaty's). For more on the notion of aesthetic criticism treating a text's ideas as functional and structural rather than ideological features, see Vendler (4).

[25] For more on Shakespeare in popular romance, see Barr, Osborne (1999, 2000, 2002) and Whyte; for more on Austen and popular romance, see Frantz ("Darcy's Vampiric Descendents"), Gillis ("Manners"), Kroeg, and Tyler. The relationships between poetry and popular romance have yet to be studied in published scholarship.

[26]The Library of America, which "champions our nation's cultural heritage by publishing America's greatest writing," thus includes handsome hardcover editions of Hammett, H. P. Lovecraft, Philip K. Dick, Ursula LeGuin, and an anthology of Crime Novels from the 1930s and 40s ("Library of America")

[27] Despite Paizis's assertion that "the criteria used to judge 'high' literature make little sense when applied to products of mass culture" (35), a review like this one makes it clear that the invocation of those "higher" criteria remains a crucial strategy in claiming literary value for authors and works of popular fiction.

[28]As Lionel Trilling points out in "The Fate of Pleasure," to the young Keats, the chief end of poetry was "to soothe the cares, and lift the thoughts of man" ("Sleep and Poetry"), but since the late 19th century this aspiration has struck critics and sophisticated readers as "the essence of philistinism" (435). For an extended discussion of Trilling's essay and the emergence of "doxa of difficulty" see Frost (*Problem,* 3-12). Andreas Huyssen's account of modernism as "an aesthetic based on the uncompromising repudiation of what Emma Bovary loved to read" is relevant to this history (45), as is John Guillory's discussion of how the foundational New Critics

taught their acolytes to flinch at sentiment, encouragement, emotional identification with characters, and other traits routinely marked as feminine or effeminate (173).