

Fletcher, Lisa. *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008. 186 pages. \$99.95 print; \$89.96 online.

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Romance criticism often conveys the impression that it was written by a scholar on holiday, as it were, from more important work on worthier fiction. Interesting things may be said about the genre, but the formalities of intellectual rigor and theoretical sophistication have often been shrugged off, as though they were not really expected, let alone required, in this more casual context. What happens in romance criticism stays in romance criticism, this attitude suggests. No shoes, no Sedgwick, no problem.

Lisa Fletcher, by contrast, takes her project quite seriously. As she explains near the start of her important new study, *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity*, “this book charts one of the many ways in which romantic love is persistently and aggressively heterosexualized in Western culture and begins to consider the extent to which this campaign of normalization and exclusion is endlessly covered over” (15). By examining the statement “I love you” as it appears in historical romance fiction, Fletcher arrives at a new definition of this genre; with this definition in hand, she proceeds to analyze a number of historical romances, considering both “popular” and “literary” texts (the distinction is Fletcher’s). The range of novels she addresses is refreshing, although their distribution in the study suggests something about her sense of their interest as individual works of art: the book ends with two chapters on John Fowles’s *French Lieutenant’s Woman* and one to A.S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance*, while the “popular” section devotes one chapter to a trio of Georgette Heyer’s novels (*These Old Shades*, *The Masqueraders*, and *The Corinthian*), and one to an assortment of novels by a dozen romance authors who published between 1980 and 2005 (Margaret McPhee, Norah Hess, Mona Gedney, Pam Rosenthal, Patricia Potter, Rita Mae Brown, Jude Deveraux, Kathleen A. Woodiwiss, Virginia Henley, Catherine Coulter, Laura Kinsale, and Johanna Lindsey).

Despite its price, *Historical Romance Fiction* is essential for anyone working on Heyer, and important for anyone interested in the popular romance more generally. In particular, Fletcher's efforts to define the genre will be of particular interest to students of popular romance fiction, if only because they offer points of departure or models to dispute. It is these broadly applicable, deliberately provocative aspects of her work that I wish to concentrate on in this review.

Fletcher's Definition

In order to define the historical romance, Fletcher sets out into the thickets of postmodern theory, employing the ideas of, among others, J.L. Austin, Frederic Jameson, Linda Hutcheon, Judith Butler, Andrew Parker, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Diane Elam, Shoshana Felman, Michael Foucault, Roland Barthes, D.A. Miller, and Umberto Eco. She seems at home in this environment: as in so many of these critics and thinkers, the compression of her exposition and professional specialization of her vocabulary make few concessions to the reader's comfort. The determined reader, however, will be led to reexamine the idea of romance itself, and to consider the genre's larger meanings. Certainly that was my own experience—although as the author of *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, I am more than an interested bystander in the effort to define the popular romance. Fletcher's thinking and mine intersect in our nomination of "I love you" as a key element of that definition.

In my definition of the romance novel, "I love you" is the most common expression of one essential element of the romance novel (I identify eight such elements)—the declaration (*A Natural History of the Romance Novel* 34-5). For me, the phrase itself is less important than its structural function in the text; another phrase might also be employed for the declaration to occur. For Fletcher, however, this *particular* sentence is crucial. "I love you" is, for her, "the romantic speech act": a performative utterance characteristic of the historical romance and revelatory of its function (25). "[R]omance is a fictional mode which depends on the force and familiarity of the speech act 'I love you,'" she explains (7). To call something a "speech act," in J.L. Austin's terms, means that someone's saying or writing it *makes something happen*: an event or condition is actually brought about by the utterance, rather than simply described by it. Statements that begin "I promise....," "I bet....," and "I apologize..." are all examples of speech acts. Rejecting the idea that "I love you" is simply a reliable report of its speaker's emotional state, Fletcher focuses instead on what the sentence does—and, by extension, on what the genre defined by "I love you" also does, as though the entire genre were also a speech act, a performative utterance, in its own right.

If Fletcher's attention to "I love you" as a speech act draws on J. L. Austin and Roland Barthes (notably the latter's *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*), she draws on other theorists, notably Judith Butler, to explore the relationships between the performative utterance of "I love you" and the cultural institution of heterosexuality. This brief passage from her second chapter gives a sense of how she adopts and extends Butler's ideas into the study of historical romance—and not just Butler's ideas, but also some of her tropes:

[T]his book takes “I love you” as a synecdoche of heterosexuality’s insistent and compulsory repetition. “I love you” is uttered as the clarifying conclusion in the paradigmatic narrative of sexual intelligibility which ties a line of causality through the points of sex, gender, and sexuality (a male who is masculine desires a female who is feminine and vice versa.) To this extent heterosexual romance fictions can be read performatively as an incessant rendition of heterosexuality’s promised but never fully achieved absolute intelligibility. (34)

Note Fletcher’s adoption of Judith Butler’s personification of heterosexuality—the ideology (heterosexuality) “is...in the process of,” it “suspects,” it imitates, and it repeats itself:

As Butler explains, “heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself—and failing.” ... Because it suspects its tenuous position, heterosexuality—“as an incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealization” ... is propelled into an endless repetition of itself. (34)

This personification does not simply make a very strong claim for heterosexuality’s force in the culture, but also allows Fletcher (like Butler before her) to sketch a sort of psychological profile of heterosexuality as a character, wracked by inner conflicts and anxieties. For Fletcher, “heterosexuality” is in a Butlerian state of unintelligibility—which I take to mean that its status as an adequate, complete account of human sexuality is never quite coherent, or “intelligible.” As a result, heterosexuality must endlessly repeat itself to reassert its as-yet unachieved (and never-to-be achieved because unachievable) state of coherence.

To read the utterance “I love you” as a performative, for Fletcher, means to accept the idea that “I love you” is less a report of the utterer’s feelings (indeed, the statement may be so devalued through repetition as to be incapable of making such a report) than it is as an assertion of heterosexuality’s rightness or “intelligibility.” In this performative interpretation, “I love you” recurs in any number of situations, including historical romance fictions, because no previous utterance of the words was—or could be—adequate to the task of making heterosexuality coherent, and thus of clinching heterosexuality’s status as both intelligible and hegemonic: a condition at once dominant, normal, and ideal.

Thus far, Fletcher’s argument might apply as well to a contemporary novel (or, for that matter, a film or popular song) as it does to the narrower case of historical romance fiction. Her turn to this particular genre comes through a discussion of the relationship between “I love you” and “history.” “Broadly speaking,” Fletcher writes, “the performative force of the romantic speech act (and of romance) depends on both a denial of its historicity, of the fact that it has always already been said before,” and on the fact that only this historicity and previous use allows it to possess such deep “familiarity and sense” (15). The phrase “I love you” thus “invokes a kind of continuous present,” but it is a present marked by a denial of any difference between that present and any other time: “‘I love you’ is always said anew, but over and over again these texts insist that whenever and wherever it is said it means the same thing” (15). But if the performative effect of this utterance does

not change with time, it cannot either reflect or be a distinctive part of the chronological setting of the novel, because its effect is always asserted in the now (“continuous present”). Read performatively, the “I love you” of a historical romance novel in fact *believes* history as it “interpellates” an ahistorical, hegemonic heterosexuality. The familiar, citational quality of “I love you,” especially in a historical romance, at once masks and (to the critical reader) reveals the anxiety with which this hegemony cites only itself, interrupting or precluding or taking up the space of (choose your metaphor) alternate possibilities in order to assert itself as an ideal. As Fletcher sums up the case, “[h]istorical fictions of heterosexual love are performative to the extent that they participate in the establishment and maintenance of prevailing ideas about the links between sex, gender, and sexuality” (15).

Romance and Claims of Heteronormativity

Fletcher’s claim is a serious one. For her, fictional texts are intimate participants in the production and reproduction of the logical (and often, illogical) systems and matrices through which we are defined and define ourselves. Moreover, the importance and value of generic texts reside not just in their capacity to bear meaning, but also in the role that entire genres play in the ongoing construction of the systems by which we both make sense of and create ourselves and our world. The system that most concerns Fletcher is heteronormativity: that part of our culture’s ideology that assumes that heterosexuality is the default or preferred condition of sexual orientation, and that any other is not just contrary to the reigning ideology, but not even an option: not on the cognitive map, as it were, of members of that culture. Heteronormativity precludes anything other, and historical romance is a vehicle of heteronormativity’s quiet interpellation—its incursion or reinstallation—into the minds of readers, authors, and the broader culture. The opportunity that this genre might provide to imagine another, better situation is precluded by heteronormativity’s hegemony—its definition of, occupation of, and dominance over the situation.

This claim about the heteronormativity of romance may sound familiar. It delivers us to a place already mapped by Janice A. Radway more than two decades ago in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984; 2nd ed. 1991). Although the speech-act theory that Fletcher employs is very different from Radway’s ethnographic methodology, both critics arrive at the conclusion that romance as a genre is based on and disseminates an all-but-irresistible ideology. Radway blames patriarchy for the imposition of ideology on the readers she studied:

[W]hile the act of romance reading is used by women as a means of partial protest against the role prescribed for them by the culture [heterosexual union and maintenance of the domestic sphere], the discourse itself [i.e., the romance] actively insists on the desirability, naturalness, and benefits of that role by portraying it not as the imposed necessity that it is, but as a freely designed, personally controlled, individual choice. (208)

Both Radway and Fletcher regard this ideology as problematic, not least because it prevents our even imagining alternatives.

What, though, shall one make of the fact that romance novelists—both historical and contemporary—have also repeatedly imagined alternatives to heterosexuality that carry through to the end of the novel? The world of gay, lesbian, and other non-hetero romance fiction includes texts as generically and tonally diverse as *Maurice* by E.M. Forster (written 1913-14; published 1971) which depicts the betrothal of two heroes, *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith (1952) which depicts the betrothal of two heroines, and *Phyllida and the Brotherhood of Philander* by Ann Herendeen (2005), a Regency-era historical romance novel which depicts the betrothal of two heroes and a heroine. Each novel includes a declaration—everyone says “I love you.” Indeed, f/f, m/m, ménage, and other non-hetero unions are increasingly widespread in the romance genre. At the very least, the existence of these books points to a serious, unanswered challenge to Fletcher’s claims about the heteronormative significance of the “I love you” speech act and the genre it defines. True, Fletcher briefly warns us about the limitations of her study:

[M]y interest here is to draw attention to “I love you” as a heteronormative call to order; to expose the instability of this call in and of itself. While this approach forecloses the possibility of detailed consideration of gay or lesbian utterances of “I love you” in this book, hopefully my work suggests the need for and importance of such a study. (41-2)

This brief nod to the existence of other utterances of “I love you” hardly seems sufficient, however. Fletcher argues that the heteronormative hegemony of historical romance fiction precludes imagining alternative sexualities and structures of love, but now is it the critic herself who “forecloses the possibility”—and, in the process, sharply limits both the scope of her study and the persuasive force of her argument.

To be fair, I can imagine an argument about non-hetero romance novels that would view the very employment of the romance form, including “I love you”—the element that I call the “declaration” and that Fletcher recognizes as a “speech act”—as a capitulation to the reigning hegemony, and thus an unconscious endorsement of it. What seems at first as a departure from the dominant form would, from this perspective, succeed only in pointing out that form’s enduring power. In effect, simply by being a romance novel the non-heteromonogamous romance would thus mark the desperate surrender of some always unidentified but never specified “better” version of love and relationship in return for the comfort of returning to the comfortable forms of the hegemonic culture.

On the other hand, the existence of m/m, f/f, and ménage romances—including historical romances—could just as easily be said to weaken any claim about the heteronormative ideology inherent in the form, opening an imaginative space between heterosexuality (which is no longer interpellated as compulsory or inevitable) and romantic love. From this perspective, non-hetero romance would be seen as employing the form to *validate* and even *celebrate* alternatives to heterosexual hegemony. Indeed, Suzanne Juhasz has found that lesbian romance leads to a disruption—not a reinscription—of heteronormativity:

The happy ending in lesbian romance fiction is that girl gets girl. For the happy ending to be satisfying, it has to be believable; to be believable, it has to be realistic; to be realistic, there has to be a plot and a concomitant development of character that make possible and probable what, in the world outside the novel, is more usually suppressed and/or repressed. The very literalness of the writing, the very linearity of the narrative support the fantasy or wished-for elements that this plot introduces. Yet in this fashion the romance also disrupts rather than maintains dominant social structures: specifically, heterosexuality and phallocentrism. (289).

This argument may lack the elegant unveilings and reversals of my thought experiment a moment ago, in which resistance turns out to be capitulation, and victory, surrender. It may, however, ring truer to the texts, to the lived experiences of readers, and ultimately to the historicity of romantic culture, which continues to evolve in ways that Fletcher's study does not acknowledge or address.

I return to Fletcher's description of her definition of historical romance fiction as "broadly inclusive." It is significantly less inclusive than she claims. Fletcher's sophisticated identification of heteronormative ideology in the historical romance novel is weakened by her exclusion from her analysis of the very texts that overtly—and if readers such as Juhasz are to be believed, successfully—employ the romance genre to depict non-hetero relationships. We are left with a much-reduced, albeit still-useful claim about the enforcement of heteronormativity in a narrow range of historical romance novels, if not in the subgenre as a whole.

Fletcher on Heyer and on the Late-Twentieth Century Popular Historical Romance Novel

In her chapter on Georgette Heyer, Fletcher identifies the author's famous concentration on period dress as a key element of the novels' way of making meaning. The critic sees "enormous symbolic and narrative importance" in "the dressing, undressing, and redressing of characters as feminine, masculine, or foppish" (58). Far from mere costume dramas, Heyer's novels "are ambivalent, contradictory, and fascinating stories about the 'tangle of preconceptions, conventions, and social emphases' [the phrase is that of Heyer fan A. S. Byatt] which construct the heterosexual romantic subject" (53). Fletcher concentrates on three novels in which the heroine dresses as a boy, and uses close analysis of such passages as the opening description of the hero's dress in *These Old Shades*—"He walked mincingly, for the red high heels of his shoes were very high"—to discern possible meanings of the hero's foppery, the heroine's masculinity, and the hero's attraction to the boy that the heroine is pretending to be. Fletcher concludes that, in Heyer "[h]omosexual desire is both abnormal ... and always already heterosexual (the boy is really a girl). Indeed ... homosexual desire precedes and enables heterosexual desire. Homosexuality is imagined and pictured as a developmental stage towards, or infantile form of, heterosexuality" (67). Fletcher's reading of the clothing in Heyer pushes beyond the usual critical claim on behalf

of her concern for authentic period detail to uncover the gender and sexuality issues encoded by dress. It is a significant contribution to the study of this author.

The same cannot be said, unfortunately, of Fletcher's analysis of a shelf-full of cross-dressing romances in "Performativity and Heterosexuality: Judith Butler and the Cross-Dressed Heroine 1980-2005," a second chapter on the popular historical romance. As its title indicates, the chapter treats historical romances written over a twenty-five-year span, but Fletcher does not take into sufficient account the changes to this subgenre during this period, nor does she seem to have confronted, in any serious way, the methodological issues involved in choosing texts to study. All of Fletcher's other texts—those by Fowles, Byatt, and Heyer—have attracted, and withstood, the scrutiny of earlier critics. They are on their way to being canonical romances; in fact, I would argue that Heyer is already canonical. When she turns to the "categorically unwieldy" world of less-studied popular romance novels, however—novels which are, as Fletcher explains in a footnote "too numerous and too fast-moving for scholarly researchers who are not themselves fans" to deal with—Fletcher has no canon to work with. How, then, did she choose her corpus? The note explains that she appealed via the web to those "fans" themselves, believing that "fans' memories might be the best resource" for making the selection of study texts (73, n.1). But fans love novels for a variety of reasons, and are willing to ignore issues that Fletcher cannot set aside, including the quality of the writing, the presence of such moments in the plot as the heroine's rape, and other material she finds "truly offensive" (90). One feels a bit wary of this chapter's conclusions about Heyer's heirs in the cross-dressing historical subgenre, or at least about the critic's general statements about that subgenre, given the unconscious biases that may be at work in the selection process. Indeed, Fletcher herself seems to feel this unease, noting at the start of the chapter her sense that "projects such as my own are defied by the genre they attempt to classify" (73, n.1).

Conclusion

Fletcher's difficulty in choosing study texts for this chapter illustrates a widespread and enduring problem in romance criticism. Statements about the historical romance—or any other genre—should be based on a representative sample of the range and quality of the genre. I readily agree with Fletcher, that finding such representative texts, among the "millions" of romances that only "kiss the retail shelf for a brief moment" is one of the difficulties of writing romance criticism (73, n.1). The sheer number of texts may be staggering, but perhaps that simply means that we romance critics have no choice but to set aside the dream of comprehensive, genre-wide analysis, and instead search out and study the most accomplished, most diverse selection of romances we can. The alternative, this study suggests, is to do with romance what Fletcher says that "I love you" does with human sexuality: to reassert, endlessly, a narrow account of what is natural or inevitable for the genre, one based on an incomplete notion of what romance has been in the past, and what it is right now.

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