

## What Do Critics Owe the Romance? Keynote Address at the Second Annual Conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance

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**Response: “Matricide in Romance Scholarship? Response to Pamela Regis’s Keynote Address at the Second Annual Conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance” by An Goris**

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**Abstract:** A rhetorical analysis of criticism of popular romance fiction chosen from both the early, influential instances of such criticism as well as from more recent critical work reveals patterns of ethical lapses therein. The special topoi of the literary critical discourse community identified by Laura Wilder provide the coordinates by which to map a better way forward for future romance criticism. An Goris’s response to this argument supplies an alternate, less partisan view.

**About the Author:** Pamela Regis, Professor of English at McDaniel College in Westminster, Maryland, is author of *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) and of a number of articles on the genre.

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As my contribution to the central concern of [this conference](#)—theorizing romance—I will examine not romance novels, the particular form of popular romance that I study, but *criticism* of popular romance fiction (hereafter designated “romance”). In this examination I wish to answer an important question: have we as critics, in our exploration of these

novels, been fair to them? My aim is not to pick a winning theoretical approach from among the ethnographers, psychoanalytic critics, post-modernists, Marxists, and the rest. Instead, I wish to see what values lie behind the assorted, and in many cases competing, theoretical assumptions that structure various critical statements about romance. What assumptions about texts, the role of critics, and the world lie behind influential statements about the romance novel, and can we from these refine an ethics of romance criticism to help us chart the way forward? In short, what, if anything, do we as critics owe the romance?

The most influential critics of the popular romance novel have examined the late twentieth-century popular romance novel written in English and published in America, the UK, and Canada. For this cumbersome phrase, i.e., “the late twentieth-century popular romance novel written in English and published in America, the UK, and Canada,” I will use the term “romance novel.” I realize, of course, that many romance novels are older and others are newer than this body of texts, that many are written in languages other than English, and many are published in places other than the US, the UK, and Canada. However, claims made about this body of texts have been widely applied to romances that are not novels at all, and to romances that originate in various non-Anglo cultures. In other words, the work of these critics lives on in current criticism. Their subject matter might once have had chronological and geographic boundaries, but their pronouncements inform the contemporary, international view of romance writ large. Hence, their relevance to all of us, and my analysis of them here.

From a list of thirty-nine important critical works on this body of romance novels, most of them one-author monographs, I have chosen eight study texts.<sup>[1]</sup> The four texts in the first group (see Table 1), published in the five-year period from 1979 to 1984, analyze novels written during the beginning of the boom in romance writing and reading that began to make itself felt in response to the publication, and explosive sales, of Kathleen Woodiwiss’s *The Flame and the Flower* in 1972.

**Table 1. The First Wave of Romance Criticism: or, the Four Horsewomen of the Romance Apocalypse**

Author / year	Title	Critic begins with / critic concludes with	Complexity topoi: are romances complex?	Contemptus mundi and/or social justice topoi: one or both present?
Ann Barr Snitow 1979	“Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different”	Formula: “the novels have no plot in the usual sense” (309) / <b>pornography for women</b>	<b>No</b> “easy to read pabulum” (309)	<b>Contemptus mundi affirmed:</b> Harlequins “reveal and pander to [ . . . an] impossible fantasy life” (320)
Tania Modleski 1982	<i>Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women</i>	“Mass-produced” texts and psychoanalytical identification of reader’s “repetition	<b>No</b> “rigid” (32)	<b>Contemptus mundi affirmed:</b> “Harlequin romances’ [ . . . ] insistent denial of the reality of male hostility toward

		compulsion” / <b>addiction</b>		women point[s] to” profound “ideological conflicts” (111)
Kay Mussell  1984	<i>Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Fantasies of Women’s Romance Fiction</i>	Formula / <b>fantasy</b>	<b>No</b> “romances are adolescent dramas that mirror the infantilism of women in a patriarchal culture” (184)	<b>Contemptus mundi affirmed:</b> “Romances’ [ . . . ] failure” as narratives “belongs [ . . . ] to [ . . . . ] patriarchy’s denial of women’s right to explicate their own lives” (185)
Janice A. Radway  1984	<i>Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature</i>	Smithton readers and their romances / <b>romance as patriarchy’s tool, readers as patriarchy’s dupes</b>	<b>No</b> “superficial plot development” (133)	<b>Contemptus mundi affirmed:</b> romances “give the reader a strategy for making her present situation more comfortable [ . . . . ] rather than a comprehensive program for reorganizing her life” (215)

I chose these four because the conclusions these critics reached about the romance novel have, indeed, entered the public consciousness as descriptors of not just the romance novels that they studied—the ones written in English in the late 1970s and early 1980s—but as characteristics of the romance novel, period. Ann Barr Snitow’s “Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different” has branded romance with the dismissive label of porn. Tania Modleski’s *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* asserted that reading romance is an addiction. Kay Mussell’s *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Fantasies of Women’s Romance Fiction* attached the term “fantasy” to romance—“fantasy,” in her view, is a bad alternative to “reality.” Finally, Janice A. Radway in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* has cemented in the public mind, apparently for all time, the notion that romance is patriarchy’s tool, and its readers patriarchy’s dupes. I must emphasize that the full arguments of these critics provide considerably more nuance and, on close examination, their claims are considerably narrower than these portable labels for the romance would imply.

Snitow, in her article-length study, cites five Harlequin romances published between 1977 and 1978—that is, just five novels published during just two years—and then goes on to describe the “underlying structure of the sexual story” that she identifies as the point of

Harlequins (319). Modleski cites just nine Harlequins, all from one year, 1976, in her chapter on Harlequins, and then conjures Roland Barthes, Wolfgang Iser, Karl Marx, Jonathan Culler, and others in her pursuit of a psychoanalytic explanation for the “increase” in “the reader’s . . . psychic conflicts” and “dependency” on these novels, which she likens to a “narcotic” (57). Although Mussell has a wider reading list—more than 80 romances including such “originals” as *Pamela*, most of her study texts were published from 1955 through 1982. She pursues the insights that these “escape fantasies” provide into women’s lives (4). Radway’s ethnographic study of the “Smithton” readers—40 or so Midwestern U.S. fans of long, sensual historicals—concludes with her now-world famous claims about patriarchy’s power as revealed in these novels.

Outliving both the study texts that their conclusions were based on as well as their specific origins in the 1970s and early 1980s, the shorthand labels furnished by these critics have made them the Four Horsewomen of the Romance Apocalypse—Porn, Addiction, Fantasy, and Patriarchy’s Dupes. Like the original four horsemen—pestilence, war, famine and death—they have assumed a dark immortality.[\[2\]](#)

To understand what has and has not changed about critical practice between then and now, I will contrast the work of the Four Horsewomen with four Millennial critics, all of whom published after the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Millennial Romance Criticism**

Author / year	Title	Critic begins with / critic concludes with	<b>Complexity topos:</b> are romances complex?	<b>Contemptus mundi and/or social justice topoi:</b> one or both present?
Pamela Regis 2003	<i>A Natural History of the Romance Novel</i>	Texts both canonical and popular as literature, their structure as genre (not formula) / <b>joy and freedom</b>	<b>Yes</b> romances can be “complex, formally accomplished, vital” and “the form is neither moribund nor corrupt” (45)	<b>Social justice advanced:</b> The ending of a romance is “joyful in its celebration of freedom” (207)
Lynne Pearce 2007	<i>Romance Writing</i>	Love $x+y \rightarrow x'+y'$ and many, many romances of all types / <b><math>x+y &gt; x' (-y)</math> in Mills &amp; Boon type romances</b> (141)	<b>No</b> present “glamour / kudos” of women’s lifestyles “rather than meaningful observation on women’s liberation” (182)	<b>Contemptus mundi affirmed:</b> The very existence of such “degenerate” works—i.e., romances—indicates a less than desirable state of society.

				(138) <b>Social justice blocked:</b> A completed love, one that results in $x+y \rightarrow x'+y'$ , does not result
Lisa Fletcher 2008	<i>Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity</i>	Speech act “I love you” as definer of historical romance fiction. Butlerian post-modernism / <b>historical romance defined, occupied, and dominated by heteronormativity</b>	<b>No</b> Historical romance’s “I love you” is an “incessant rendition of heterosexuality’s promised but never fully achieved absolute intelligibility” (34)	<b>Contemptus mundi affirmed:</b> Hegemony of heteronormativity is lamentable  <b>Social justice blocked:</b> Romances preclude the depiction of something better than heteronormativity
Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan 2009	<i>Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches’ Guide to Romance Novels</i>	Practical criticism (reviewing) and love for the romance / <b>acknowledge the “ludicrous” (1) but assert the overall “good” (128) of romances</b>	<b>Yes</b> “[R]omance novels . . . share a structure but diverge wildly based on subgenre and the innovation and creativity of each author” (122)	<b>Contemptus mundi rejected:</b> Romances provide a social good: happiness

As these critics are less known, more eclectic, and wider ranging than the Four Horsewomen, a more detailed overview of their work is in order. Regis—I—begins *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* with the view (which I hope that I demonstrate) that popular romance novels are literature, that they are representatives of a genre that includes canonical works. I offer a definition of “the romance novel,” namely, that it is “a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more protagonists” (19)[3] and I identify eight essential elements to use as analytical categories in understanding the romance novel. The earliest of my study texts is William Congreve’s *Incognita*, published in 1692 before he made his name writing for the stage. I conclude that romance delivers joy and demonstrates the protagonist’s, especially the heroine’s, freedom.

Lynne Pearce begins *Romance Writing* with an algebraic expression of love's transformation of lovers:  $x+y \rightarrow x'+y'$ , in which  $x$  and  $y$  are individuals, transformed by love (+) into new versions of themselves—into  $x$ -prime and  $y$ -prime.<sup>[4]</sup> Her chronological sweep is long. She begins as early as Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur* (1470). She ranges across media as well, with film in addition to print receiving due attention. Her look at popular romance in this volume concludes with what she herself calls an "ungenerous" typification of texts of the "Ur-Mills & Boon romance" type:  $x+y > x' (-y)$ , where  $x$ -prime is the superficially self-fulfilled heroine and minus- $y$  the "disposable" hero (141). For Pearce, the end of love in a mass-market, Mills & Boon romance is the "story-line of personal triumph" that the heroine pursues, which she gains at the hero's expense (140).

Lisa Fletcher, in pursuit of a definition for the historical romance, identifies in the beginning chapter of *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity* the words "I love you" as a speech act, and, via an impressive list of theorists, the most important of whom is Judith Butler, she defines the historical romance by this very phrase, claiming that these three words are repeated in romance novel after romance novel because the statement cannot once and for all manage to do what it always tries to do, which is to install heteronormativity as an unchallenged ideal in our society's ideology, specifically, our sexual ideology.

In *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels*, Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan begin with their own love for the romance as a genre, and using edgy humor and over-the-top, often profane language, they produce astute descriptions of the plots, the characters, the covers, the conventions, and the stigma attached to reading romance novels, concluding—after having acknowledged the "ludicrous" in romance novels (1)—by asserting the overall "good" (128) of the genre. They claim "anything written for an audience of mostly women by a community of mostly women is subversive, reflective of the[ir] current sexual, emotional, and political status, and actively embraces and undermines that status simultaneously. [. . . ] Emo may be chic. Angst is undoubtedly chic. Happiness is definitely not chic. But happiness is *good*" (128). On their website, *Smart Bitches Trashy Books*, where one of their stated aims is to raise the bar on what qualifies as a romance that deserves high marks, Wendell and Tan have reviewed hundreds of romance novels.

Because studying the ethics of argument is the traditional province of rhetoricians, my approach to these eight works of criticism will be rhetorical. Three rhetoricians have, indeed, studied literary critics as a discourse community. In "'The Rhetoric of Literary Criticism' Revisited: Mistaken Critics, Complex Contexts, and Social Justice," Laura Wilder, extending an earlier study by J. Fahenstock and M. Secor, pinpoints our discipline's values. Fahenstock and Secor had analyzed criticism published between 1978 and 1982, the era in which the Four Horsewomen researched and published their findings. Laura Wilder extended and enlarged this earlier study when she examined criticism published between 1999 and 2001, the period out of which the Millennials' criticism grew. All three rhetoricians analyzed articles from the very best, peer-reviewed literary critical journals such as *PMLA*, *diacritics*, and *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*. They identified and analyzed the "special topoi" that the critics writing in those journals employed. A "topos," (the plural is "topoi"), is a common theme or topic in argument, and at least since the Greeks topoi have been the subject of rhetorical study. "Special" topoi are those specific to a given group of arguers. Wilder explains that these special topoi "invoke the shared

assumptions” of their group (84). In our case, these special topoi both reveal our assumptions as literary scholars, and simultaneously, create our scholarly community. We identify ourselves as members of the literary critical community in part by our use of shared special topoi. Wilder describes these topoi as the “unstated premises that seek to connect [a work of criticism] with an audience’s hierarchy of values” (84). They are, therefore, morally charged; indeed, taken together they constitute a sort of ethics of critical practice, present despite the diverse works, periods, and genres from which the critics draw the literature that they analyze, and despite the diverse theoretical approaches that the critics use in creating their arguments. Thus everyone from unrehabilitated formalists to cutting-edge postmodernists deploys the same special topoi. The presence of a given special topos, then, is a sort of ethical litmus paper. A critic’s participation in the discourse community is signaled by these special topoi, which align the writer with the values of the community while passing judgment on the literature under scrutiny. In a discourse community whose measure of accomplishment is the publication of peer-reviewed written argument, the special topoi signal not only our membership but also our belief in the correctness of the values that each of these topoi embodies.

The first pair of rhetoricians, Fahenstock and Secor, identified five shared special topoi: appearance/reality, paradigm, ubiquity, paradox, and *contemptus mundi* (see Table 3). Wilder, in updating the Fahenstock and Secor foundational study, added four more topoi to the original five: complexity, mistaken critic, context, and social justice.

**Table 3. Special Topoi of Literary Critics**

Appearance/reality\*  
Paradigm\*  
Ubiquity\*  
Paradox\*  
**Complexity\*\***  
***Contemptus Mundi*\***  
**Social Justice \*\***  
Mistaken Critic\*\*  
Context\*\*

\*Identified by Fahenstock and Secor, 1991

\*\*Identified by Wilder, 2005

Although analyzing our critics’ deployment of any of these special topoi would reveal the ethical values in their criticism, three topoi—complexity, *contemptus mundi*, and social justice—provide the most fruitful categories for the examination of the ethical stance we find in the Four Horsewomen and the Millennials.[\[5\]](#)

## **Complexity and the Romance Critic’s Values**

Wilder found that the special topos she calls “complexity” is an overarching value in all critical work from whatever era. Literary critics—we—all believe “that literature is

complex and that to understand it requires patient unraveling, translating, decoding, interpretation, analyzing" (105). Indeed, for some of the critics she examined, simplicity, the opposite of complexity, was nothing less than a "much-maligned state" (110). So fundamental is the idea of complexity, that either by direct statement or by implication, each of us answers the question, "Are romance novels complex?" I think our answer to this question matters a great deal. Look at Table 1, at the column labeled "Complexity topos: are romances complex?" which summarizes relevant evidence for the Four Horsewomen. Snitow calls romances "easy to read pabulum" (309), Modleski calls them "rigid" (32), Mussell labels them "adolescent" (184), and Radway, "superficial" (133). Our most influential early critics, the ones who have proven to have staying power, each viewed the romance novel as simple.

The Millennials offer some contrast, as the complexity column in Table 2 shows. Regis—I—claims complexity for the romance, saying, in as many words, that it is "complex, formally accomplished, vital, neither moribund nor corrupt" (45). Wendell and Tan agree that despite their shared structure, romance novels "diverge wildly based on the creativity of each author" (122), wild divergence being a form of complexity. Two of the Millennials do not agree. Pearce, in her consideration of the romance of the Mills & Boon type, finds superficiality—surely the enemy of complexity—in the Mills & Boon romance's depiction of "glamorous" lifestyles rather than "liberation" (182), while Fletcher views "I love you," which is for her the romance's defining speech act, as a constantly-repeated-because-never-adequate assertion of heterosexuality's attempt to assert its "absolute intelligibility"; an "intelligibility," of course, that is not intelligible at all (32). Reducing the romance to a monotonous, repeated, and impotent sentence also tars the genre with the suspect brush of simplicity.

This, then, is the situation: our discipline values complexity in its study texts. This is, Wilder tells us, the "central, highly flexible value of [. . . our] disciplinary discourse community" (110). But many of us depict the romance, in our criticism, as not complex at all. Yet we study it—and we write about it—anyway. From this conflict between our assessment of the romance as simple and the insistence of our discipline on the value of complexity several answers suggest themselves to the question in my essay's title: "What do critics owe the romance?"

**We owe it to the romance novel to make overt and to defend our conclusion that the romance is simple, if this is, in fact, our assessment.** Surely, we owe the romance at least an acknowledgment that many readers, writers, and, yes, even some critics do find the romance novel complex, and we further owe it to the genre to make overt the value judgment that is a part of this topos—that simplicity is a "much-maligned state." But more than identifying romance as simple, if that is indeed our view, we should defend this claim—ideally in some detail. I also contend that a critic confronted with a text that she considers simple should be careful of the conclusions that she draws in working on that text. I would argue that in assuming that the texts are simple, we flirt with what to me always seems like a dangerous idea—that it is not just the texts that are simple, but that the readers of the texts must, by extension, be simple, as well, or else why would they read these texts? Consumers—the term "reader" almost seems too sophisticated—of pornographic, rigid, infantile, superficial pabulum must surely be mindless. Even Radway's ethnographic analysis of readers—so carefully constructed, so rich in data—comes to very



dark conclusions about those readers. We should examine our own conclusions about the romance novel's simplicity.

A corollary: **We owe the romance novel a good-faith effort to uncover the complexity that our discipline values so highly.** A skilled literary critic can see the complexity in any apparently simple text. Another corollary: **We owe the romance novel great care in choosing our study texts—more care, not less, than we take in choosing study texts from literary fiction.** In writing our criticism, we are creating not only the critical context for the study of the romance novel, we are also creating the romance novel's canon. Surely identifying and studying the strongest romance novels will benefit the entire critical enterprise and help us avoid making claims about simplicity and other qualities that critics assign to the romance novel based on an unrepresentative set of study texts.

The choice of study texts is vexed, a minefield, but we must accept the difficulty and chart a path. The romance genre is big, and growing all the time. Between publication of the Four Horsewomen's study texts in the 1970s and early 1980s, and the publication of the Millennials' study texts, the number of romances published in North America alone rose from just under 2000 new romances per year in 1998, to the 8090 titles published in 2007 (Romance Writers of America). This means that from 1998 to 2008, more than 39,000 romance titles were published. Think of it this way: a reader reading one romance per day, every day, would take 106 years, 10 months, and 5 days to clear this To Be Read stack. Nonetheless, we should seek out and study the strongest ones.

**We owe it to the romance novel to recognize that the values of its fans are not identical with the values of our discourse community.** If we decide to read and study favorites suggested by romance fans then we may find ourselves confronting prose like this passage: "Somewhere in the world, time no doubt whistled by on taut and widespread wings, but here in the English countryside it plodded slowly, painfully, as if it trod the rutted road that stretched across the moors on blistered feet." That is the first sentence of Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower*, published in 1972. The possible representativeness of this miserable sentence to the rest of Woodiwiss's work, I leave to students of Woodiwiss. We, however, should not assume that this miserable sentence is representative of popular romance novels. It is not. Confronted with bad writing in a study text, we have two good choices—we can choose another book to work on, or we can acknowledge the bad writing and figure out a way to say something interesting—which is to say, figure out a way to invoke the complexity topos—despite the lamentable prose. Fans love books for many reasons, but their values and ours will often be at odds.

**We owe it to the romance novel to recognize that our study texts are probably not representative of "the romance" and to stop committing the logical fallacy known as hasty generalization.**<sup>[6]</sup> This is not to say that all claims of representativeness are wrong—but they must be proven, they must be substantiated and argued for. It is a failure of critical imagination to assume we have seen it all. A corollary: **We owe it to the romance to stay within our evidence when we state conclusions.** So, if we have not demonstrated that our study texts are representative, we must qualify our conclusions, and avoid talk about what "the romance novel" writ large is or does.

For too long, we have accepted the conclusions of the Four Horsewomen (see the third column of Table 1), which are based on romance novels written three decades ago. Recent critics who have also seen simplicity in the romance novel when our discipline values complexity (see the third column of Table 2), have added to the impressive list of

negative conclusions about the romance: in addition to their status as mere pornography for women, as an addiction, as fantasy, and as patriarchy's tool for duping romance readers, romances also extinguish the hero (that's Pearce's "minus-y"), and endlessly reinscribe the destructive falsehood that is heteronormativity (that's Fletcher). Now is the time to stop committing the fallacy of hasty generalization.

## ***Contemptus Mundi*, Social Justice, and the Romance Critic's Values**

*Contemptus mundi*, literally, contempt for the world, is a second very important topos for us as romance critics. Wilder explains that this term refers to the critic's sense that the world is fallen, in the face of which fact "the critic exhibits an assumption of despair over the condition of society" (85). Moreover "the critic tends to value works that describe despair, alienation, seediness, anxiety, decay, declining values, and difficulty in living and loving in our society" (85). Finally, "the critic attempts to point out the unresolvable tensions and shadows in literature that at face value seems optimistic" (85). Wilder found that, by the turn of the twenty-first century, *contemptus mundi* was replaced by the "social justice" topos. This is the assumption that "literature, regardless of when it was written, speaks to our present condition" and critics deploying this topos seek "in that [...] connection [between literature and life] avenues toward social justice through advocating social change" (98).

The last column of Table 1 records the Four Horsewomen's deployment of the *contemptus mundi* topos. For them, romances offer various versions of a fallen world: a world in which the "fantasy life" represented in the romance is "impossible" (Snitow 320), a world in which the reply to "male hostility toward women" is "denial" (Modleski 111), a world in which women are deprived of the power to "explicate their own lives" (Mussell 185), and, finally, a world in which romance fails to offer the reader a "comprehensive program for reorganizing her life" (Radway 215). These conclusions complement the idea that the texts are simple.

The last column of Table 2 catalogs the Millennials' deployment of these topoi. Regis—I—along with Wendell and Tan, reject *contemptus mundi*, and I, at least, find social justice advanced: the romance delivers and depicts "joy" and "freedom" (16). Wendell and Tan find a clear social good: "happiness" (128). This failure to deploy the *contemptus mundi* or social justice topoi brand Regis as well as Wendell and Tan as outliers, Pollyannas, and as critics remiss in our critical duties. By contrast, Pearce and Fletcher reflect the discipline's usual stance with regard to these topoi in romance. Pearce sees the Mills & Boon type romance as a sign of a degenerate society, and regards as sadly absent the good outcome of a successful romance, one in which the heroine plus the hero yields not only a new improved heroine but also a new, improved hero as well, an outcome often otherwise found in her book-long analysis of a staggeringly impressive range of non-Mills & Boon romance (138, 141). Fletcher has similar observations: heteronormativity as the message of the form itself is certainly a symptom of a fallen world, and the possibility of a better something—social justice—is blocked by the hegemonic, incessant repetition of heteronormativity's omnipresent, but impotent, "I love you" (132). Once again note that the

use of *contemptus mundi* and social justice aligns with a view of the romance's lamentable simplicity.

In light of critics' deployment of the *contemptus mundi* and social justice special topoi, several more answers to my title's question suggest themselves. **We owe the romance a just consideration of its happily-ever-after or happy-for-now ending.** Our views that the world is fallen or that literature should indicate the need for or reveal a path from the current, lamentable state of conditions in the world to a more just world are major impediments to a fair treatment of the romance novel, perhaps even to a complete understanding of it. Think of the sort of romances that we are considering: the late twentieth-century popular romance novel written in English. This body of texts is in some ways misnamed by the term "romance." True, like all romances, these novels are "situated in and speak [ . . . ] of timeless moments" (Saunders 1). However, these novels combine romance with comedy.<sup>[7]</sup> The much-derided happily-ever-after (or even the happy-for-now) is an important marker of comedy, which traces a fictional society's movement from a beginning state of disorder to a final order. This improvement is comparative—society's state at the conclusion is more orderly, more just, compared to society's state at the beginning of the narrative. The new order is rarely (I am tempted to say never) a complete solution to society's ills or a righting of all social injustices. A reader who finds in the text's final action a society essentially unchanged has missed the import of the ending. A reader who dismisses the happily-ever-after without due consideration of its generic import has treated the romance novel unfairly.

Don't misunderstand: I am not proposing that we owe the romance novel our approval, or that our reaction to it requires a positive view of any kind. Awareness of our critical assumptions is what I am recommending, and care in stating conclusions. Overstatements and other inaccuracies in criticism written about canonical, much-analyzed texts will be taken care of by the "mistaken critic" topos. Romance criticism is too thin on the ground—the canon not established, the mass of romance texts too unexplored—to provide this corrective. Individual critics need to be extra mindful of their participation in or rejection of the pervasive topoi of the discipline, and the values that they represent.

I close with an observation from one of my critical forebears in my current research project, which is writing a literary history of the romance in America beginning in 1742 when Benjamin Franklin printed the first novel in America, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. In speaking of the traditionally devalued novels of early American writers, a devaluation that she has in large part reversed, literary historian Cathy N. Davidson reminds us, "Artifacts [including novels] are always labeled by virtue of a whole history of past labeling; they carry their archaeology in their name" (69). **We owe the popular romance a recognition of the archaeology carried in its name, an archeology written, in large part, by the critical assessments of the Four Horsewomen, and not yet rewritten by the critics who have followed.** We cannot escape that archaeology, but we can be aware of it. Awareness is all. The romance calls upon us to be imaginative, careful, considered thinkers and writers, more so than the critics of other, more thoroughly studied, genres. There is so much we do not know, so many texts we have not read, so many approaches we have not considered.

We have to imagine what might be out there—what texts there might be—in that sea of unanalyzed and unread romance novels. Moreover, we have to imagine what may have been overlooked in the romances that have already been used as study texts in earlier

criticism. When I return to Kathleen E. Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower*, and return to it I must because that novel is a landmark in the history of the American romance, I will not begin with its lamentable prose, but with the heroine's journey from poverty and servitude in England to freedom in Charleston, South Carolina, in the newly created United States of America. I will find its complexity, and locate this novel in the long line of American romances that stretches from 1742 to yesterday. I will search for what has been overlooked in earlier criticism.

Imagining what might be out there and looking again at what has been dismissed lie at the heart of the ethical issues involved in criticizing romance. We can, thereby, improve the practice of romance criticism. Moreover, this effort of imagination and reexamination, like the undertaking of all good actions, will also improve the human beings who perform these good acts—this effort of imagination will improve us, the critics, ourselves.

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- [1] 1969 Mann, Peter H. *The Romantic Novel: A Survey of Reading Habits*. London: Mills & Boon.
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[2] Partial evidence of these texts' staying power may be found in Corinne Saunders's recent *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary* (2007), where Modleski, Mussell, and Radway all appear in the index and are cited approvingly throughout the various chapters. For Snitow's "romances are porn" label, one need only look at the comments section of the blog post at *Marginal Revolution* reporting the strength of romance ebook sales despite the economic downturn. Economics professor and blogger Tyler Cowen speculated about the affinity of romance buying and the ebook format. This elicited the "romance is porn" response over and over again in the comments section. *Marginal Revolution's* readers and commenters are ordinarily evidence-loving, balanced thinkers.

[3] "Protagonists" replaces "heroines" in my original definition, to include m/m, f/f, and ménage romance novels.

[4] She explores many permutations of this basic formula of love.

[5] To briefly define the remaining topoi: A critic's use of the appearance/reality topos is evidence for that critic's belief in the value of searching below the surface and beyond the obvious; the "paradigm" topos reveals the critic's desire to discover templates—patterns—to place over the details of a text, or to find within a text templates that apply to ever-larger portions of the text; "ubiquity" bespeaks the critic's belief that uncovering or identifying patterns of repetition is valuable; the presence of the "paradox" topos demonstrates the critic's belief in the value of bringing together in "a single startling dualism" apparently irreconcilable opposites (making this, perhaps, the most New Critical of these topoi identified just at the high water mark of this critical school). "Mistaken critic" enters the critical arena when late twentieth-century critics pointed out that "previous critics who treated the literary work under discussion did not see some aspect of the text correctly"; and "context" refers to the process of bringing "historical details to bear on the interpretation of literary texts," which opens up the hermetically sealed text of the New Critics to a consideration of influences from outside that text (Wilder 101, 103).

[6] This trend has plagued romance criticism since the beginning. See Jennifer Crusie Smith, who derides critics with a "mindset that refuses to see romance novels not only as a valuable genre but also as a varied one" (82).

[7] See Northrop Frye: "Comedy blends insensibly into romance" (162).

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