

A Parody of Love: the Narrative Uses of Rape in Popular Romance

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Abstract: Discussions of rape in popular romance have most often centered on how these scenes affect or reflect the lives of romance readers. Detractors of the genre have used its presence to support the notion that romance is a patriarchal and repressive literary form, while defenders have often pointed to the presence of the rape scene as a way for women to explore their sexuality. This paper advances an entirely different reading. It asserts that the presence of rape functions as a parodic parallel to the violence of falling in love. Divided into three types, the rape scene occurs as a result of the way the hero perceives the heroine and appropriates her identity. These types are: the Rape of Mistaken Identity, the Rape of Possession, and the Rape of Coercion or "Forced Seduction." Each performs a version of the epistemological and ontological questions that arise from an encounter with the Other.

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The arguments surrounding the use of rape as a device in popular romance, within both reader and scholarly communities, have most often pivoted on the cultural or

psychological significance of such scenes. Defenders and condemners alike are more interested in how and to what extent these scenes affect or reflect the lives of real women, readers of the genre in particular. But it is not the purpose of this paper to dredge up these old debates, primarily because these arguments focus on the effective or affective aspects of the trope, rather than the narrative function of the rape scene.^[1] 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. In fact, these questions have often regarded all instances of the romance genre, and rape within that genre, as a kind of field study of women's sexuality. Problematically, there is an assumption that the representation of rape within romance mirrors directly the social and cultural problems of a patriarchal system. That is to say, rape and romance come to be viewed purely as windows into women's sexual fantasies or as a representation of their complicity within a patriarchal system. Indeed, the inference that the recurrence of the rape trope within popular romance constitutes an instantiation of some fictive collective female consciousness (in which all women operate as a single affective entity, like the Borg) is one of the critical and popular prejudices regarding the genre which this paper seeks to undermine. In persistently talking about the rape trope particularly, and genre romance generally, as a single, unified object, the critical apparatus has systematically derailed the conversation about popular romance in such a way that it never approaches the text as literature. The insistence of early scholarly work in looking at the genre as an unvaried totality without regard to the particular deployment of narrative conventions or the singularity of text puts genre romance into a pink ghetto.^[2] This paper asserts an entirely different analysis; it explores the function of rape and rape scenes as aspects of the narrative structure of romance.

The question explored in this paper is therefore strictly a narratological rather than a sociological one: what is the narrative function of rape in genre romance? When rape is referenced throughout this paper it means the rape of the heroine by the hero as a textual manifestation of a metaphysical and philosophical problem within the narrative.^[3] It is not a reference to rape in general or in real life situations.^[4] This limited usage is necessary to create a theoretical model in which to analyze the significance of the persistent recurrence of rape in popular romance: to show that it does not appear there to promote female submission, fantasy or sexual awakening, nor as a convention of the past—some black mark in romance's history that has been overcome in the years since the publication of Kathleen E. Woodiwiss' *The Flame and the Flower* in 1972. Rather, its continued use has a narrative and structural purpose that can illuminate an understanding of the genre as a whole.

The narrative purpose of rape in popular romance is to serve, simultaneously, as bond and as obstacle, as the barrier and the attraction between hero and heroine. Like the violent piercing of Cupid's arrows, rape serves as the external and fated event that brings the lovers together. Its violent and invasive nature mirrors the violent and invasive nature of love through which the Other is encountered, recognized, named, and known. In *Entre Nous*, Levinas characterizes understanding as a form of violence done to the Other; as a "partial negation" that "denies the independence of beings" (9). That is, the attempt to understand the Other requires the taking on of the signs and symbols of the Other in order to know her. ^[5] This attempt is a violation because understanding appropriates aspects of the Other into the Self. Yet, this very attempt is what characterizes the desire that lies at the

heart of falling in love. Rape in popular romance serves to dramatize the encounter, the recognition, the naming, and understanding of the Other into a pivotal scene within the narrative.

Because it is never fully possible to know the Other, there is always a barrier to understanding, one that frustrates the desire of the lover to know the beloved. The rape enacts the attempt to discover, both ontologically and epistemologically, who and what the Other is and the frustration that follows. Rape in popular romance represents both the violence of love and the violence of understanding that attend the quest to know the Other. In many rape scenes, however, this quest is obstructed by the mistaken assumption that the Other is already known. This occurs because on some level the hero has already appropriated the heroine as an extension of his own desires, rather than having acknowledged her as a separate person. The rape is committed precisely because the hero wrongly believes that his knowledge of the heroine is sufficient and total. His certainty of the absolute authority of his knowledge—of his perception—allows the hero to behave as if the heroine had always already consented to the sex act. The rape reveals the inadequacy of this perception and exposes through its violence and its violation the false underlying assumption that one can know the Other by outward signs, by social role or public name, by the body and its presence, or (most elusive of all) by an access to the interior and singular self through discourse.

Of course all rapes do not operate precisely this way within individual texts. Different books depict different kinds of rape. But, broadly speaking, romance rapes can be divided into three types: the Rape of Mistaken Identity, the Rape of Possession, and the Rape of Coercion or “Forced Seduction.” These rapes are distinguished from one another primarily by how the hero perceives the heroine. Each of the three types of rape demonstrates that all of these signs fail to fully reveal the heroine to the hero.

The Rape of Mistaken Identity

In Rapes of Mistaken Identity, the hero is under the false perception that the heroine is actually someone else. This impression is usually rendered believable through the context in which the hero meets the heroine. In *The Flame and the Flower* (1972), Brandon mistakes Heather for a prostitute because his men find her wandering alone in a bad area of London, dressed like a high class courtesan. Signs that could be read as evidence of her true identity are betrayed by other indicators: her upper-class accent is belied by the signs of physical labor on her hands, and even her virginity is misread as her being a novice whore. Brandon rapes her despite her repeated resistance because he adduces her consent not from her words, but from her social role. Who she is, is entirely determined by her social context. Thus, because Heather is seen as a prostitute, Brandon presumes her *a priori* consent to the sex act.

A similar presumption occurs in Carolyn Jewel’s *Lord Ruin* (2002), where the heroine Anne stumbles on a staircase during a house party, turns her ankle badly, and for the duration of her recovery is forced to take the room usually occupied by Lord Cynssyr. Dosed with laudanum for the pain, Anne is unable either to give or refuse consent when Cynssyr appears late that night and assumes the woman in his bed to be a whore. Cynssyr’s

misperception is based on the fact that he does not recognize Anne, that this is not the first time a whore has been provided to him by his host, and that there are no signs that a lady of quality is a guest in the room (the wardrobe has his clothes in it, not hers, there is no lady's maid present, no chaperone, nor any of the objects a lady would have had in the room had it been assigned to another guest). Cynssyr assumes by these signs that the woman in his bed can be there for one purpose only. Anne, though not entirely unconscious, is so heavily dosed with laudanum that she is unable to give any true consent to the sex act. Her ready acquiescence and drugged actions further support Cynssyr's assumptions that she is a whore.

Since Rapes of Mistaken Identity occur out of ignorance or misunderstanding, they are usually resolved fairly quickly in the plot. The heroine's true identity and true role within the social order is often revealed during the sex act itself when the hero discovers that the person he thought she was—a prostitute—was in fact a virgin. However, in both *The Flame and the Flower* and *Lord Ruin*, the revelation of the heroine's true identity comes with the presence or appearance of her family, who confirm her real social standing. In *The Flame and the Flower*, Heather becomes pregnant by Brandon and her family tracks him down and forces him to marry her. In *Lord Ruin*, Anne's sister checks in on her only to discover Anne and Lord Cynssyr *in flagrante delicto*. It is the sudden intrusion of the family that re-contextualizes the heroine's identity and re-establishes her social standing.

The Rape of Mistaken Identity nearly always occurs at the outset of the narrative to reveal that the social role taken alone is a false measure of the Other's identity. Though it seems these scenarios justify rape when it happens to a prostitute, but not to a lady or a virgin, this is not true. Rather, they function to expose the mistake the hero makes in thinking that social role may serve as consent and point to the more profound notion that any prostitute may be a lady worthy of love and that any lady worthy of love may also be a prostitute. Thus, these rape scenes argue that one's social role cannot serve as a sign of the interior self by which one may know and understand the Other. For this reason the Rape of Mistaken Identity must occur between strangers, rendering them unable to recognize one another in bed. It is a lack of recognition that makes this type of rape a "bed-trick"—an ancient and curiously enduring literary motif that illustrates the deceptive nature of appearance and what one scholar observes is "an argument *against* the visual: it demonstrates that we are wrong to judge by appearances. When two people look alike, we are forced to distinguish between them by searching for more subtle, more profound, signs of identity" (Doniger 337). Neither the bed-trick nor the Rape of Mistaken Identity is based on an intentional deception by either the hero or the heroine but rather on the hero's assumptions about the heroine's identity. Like the love potion in the story of Tristan and Isolde or the exchange of brides in folktales, the Rape of Mistaken Identity is a device intended to create an immediate intimacy and bond between the two protagonists while simultaneously placing an obstacle in the path of any future relationship between them. The heroine cannot but distrust and even hate the hero for his actions, while the hero cannot but distrust his own reliance on appearances. The moment of recognition or anagnorisis reveals not only the true social identity of the heroine, but also the inadequacy of the hero's reliance on the signs by which he thought he could know another.

Unlike *The Flame and the Flower*, *Lord Ruin* asserts more emphatically the inability of the hero to see the heroine beyond her social role. Its hero, Cynssyr, has met Anne prior to the rape. Yet, he cannot remember her, despite his attempt to do so in an earlier scene

when discussing her with her brother-in-law and their friend, Devon: "A faint memory tickled at the back of his mind. He tapped his temple. 'You mean the spinster, don't you, Devon? The eldest. The one with the spectacles.' 'Blond hair, gray-blue eyes. Yay tall,' Benjamin repeated. 'What was her name?' . . . 'Gad. I still don't remember her. Except for the spectacles'" (7-8). Cynssyr only remembers the spectacles; he does not recognize her without them when he encounters Anne, laid up in his bed with her badly twisted ankle. Though Cynssyr and Anne have met before, the meeting functions only to show that Cynssyr is utterly disinterested in Anne as a person or even as an object of his lust. He simply cannot remember her. Love at first sight is not possible in this context for Cynssyr sees, but does not recognize. He observes only outward signs: spectacles, plain face, the spinsterhood of an elder sister. Cynssyr is blind to Anne as a person and sees only the confines of her established position within the social order. He cannot suspect that he is destined to love her.

In popular romance, the moment of anagnorisis in these rape scenes, as in Greek New Comedy or in Shakespeare's Romances, comes with the recognition of the heroine as worthy. However, in popular romance narrative, the anagnorisis is not part of the denouement, but rather serves as the catalyst that sets the plot in motion. Thus, the rape is the event with which the hero and the heroine will spend the rest of the plot coming to terms. It is only at the end of *Lord Ruin*, that Anne and Cynssyr are able to see one another:

"After all I've done to you? God, don't answer that." He touched her cheek.
"You have my heart, Anne," he said softly. "You know you are my heart."
"And you are mine." Her finger traced along his lower lip. "I do love you"
(342)

Thus, the true moment of recognition comes when the hero and the heroine acknowledge their love for one another, usually by uttering the phrase I-love-you, for it is only by that act that they are able to see beyond the deceptive nature of appearances.[\[6\]](#)

The Rape of Possession

The Rape of Possession occurs when the hero, overwhelmed by desire and, oftentimes, an unacknowledged love for the heroine, attempts to possess her by force. Here, the hero's fundamental mistake is not confusion of identities or conflation of personhood with social role, but confounding possession of the flesh with love; he assumes that the heroine's body will satisfy his need for her reciprocal desire. Rapes of Possession are often fueled by jealousy and the hero's conviction that the heroine is unfaithful or about to leave him. He rapes her physically because he cannot discern between the body and the will. He mistakenly assumes that the body is the essential person.

The Rape of Possession usually occurs between a hero and heroine who are already acquainted. They are not involved in a bed-trick or an act of mistaken identity. The misperception that accompanies this type of rape is based upon a material absolutism: the body, and by extension the physical world, is all that exists. Transcendence, even a transcendence as mundane as romantic affection,[\[7\]](#) is considered by the hero to be an

illusion, an idealistic fantasy. These heroes cannot or dare not imagine a world beyond the flesh, because that would be tantamount to admitting that they are in some way lacking—that they, too, desire love and happiness. For example, in Anna Campbell's *Claiming the Courtesan* (2007), the hero, Justin, sees his mistress as a toy, an object that offers succor and happiness, but never as a person. When Verity leaves him, he plots to get her back. Finally, after kidnapping her to a remote part of Scotland, he rapes her. But in the aftermath, he begins to understand what he has done: "Tumbling his mistress had always left him with an inner peace nothing else in life offered. When she'd gone, she had snatched away his only source of happiness. He'd been desperate to get it back, like a child who had lost his favorite toy and cried until it was restored. Well, he had his favorite toy back and he still felt like crying" (132). In this moment Justin begins to recognize that his desire is not only childish, but that his objectification of Verity is ultimately unsatisfying and can never bring him comfort.

Bloggers Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan outline in their book *Beyond Heaving Bosoms* several of the most common explanations readers of romance give for the occurrence of romance rape scenes, among which is: "The fact that the hero Loses His Shit every time he's around the heroine is an indicator of True Lurve instead of a True Need for a Restraining Order" (144). Although the Rape of Possession can signal the hero's love for heroine, these rapes function primarily to demonstrate to the hero that physical and sexual power cannot make the heroine love him, even if they can make her body respond orgasmically. The Rape of Possession is about an exchange that requires the hero to acknowledge the heroine as her own person, to meet her on her own terms, to confess his wrongdoing—often in scenes of groveling apology—in order to allow the heroine to choose or to deny him as her lover.

In *Claiming the Courtesan*, Justin is not confused about Verity's identity when he rapes her, even though he has until recently known her only by her courtesan's name, Soraya. Rather, he perpetrates the rape assuming that by possessing and pleasuring her body, he can also possess her will. Knowledge of the Other here is based upon a false notion of ownership. Justin understands his relationship with Verity as a contractual one—literally, for they drew up a legal contract before he engaged her services as his mistress. Under that contract, he has ownership of Verity's person for a set amount of time. When she leaves him at the end of that period, he becomes infuriated, believing that she has violated the spirit of the agreement by taking back possession of herself. The hero's epistemological problem, then, stems not from a confusion of social role with personhood, but rather from a confusion of bodily possession with mutual desire.

Justin recognizes that despite a year together he knows nothing at all about Verity as a person: "Now, futilely, he wished he'd taken the time to find out more. But he had been so lost to his physical passion that he'd never paused to explore more than her body" (22). Yet, this recognition does not negate his assumption that he owns Verity. Justin does not recognize or acknowledge Verity's personhood. He refuses to accept that Verity sees Soraya not as an aspect of herself, or even as a different person, but primarily as a defense mechanism to protect her true self from the indignities of her profession as a prostitute. By kidnapping and raping her, by refusing to distinguish between Verity and Soraya because they occupy the same body, Justin attempts to reinforce his false assumption that bodily knowledge of Soraya constitutes psychological or emotional knowledge of Verity and that his contractual possession of Soraya authorizes his contractual possession of Verity.

The confusion between Verity's body and person mirrors Justin's confusion regarding his own desires. He has conflated love with sex, desire for the body with desire for reciprocal love. Just as he fails to recognize and name Verity, so does Justin fail to recognize and name his own motivation: that what he desires is to be loved in return. It is his belief that love can be reduced to a contract (either as a written document or as a marriage) as well as his belief that possession can satisfy the desire to be loved, that renders him unprepared for Soraya's departure and Verity's resistance. Justin cannot see that in denying her former name and reclaiming her true one, Verity is claiming an identity that exists beyond the contractual bonds of their prior relationship. "Once more, the troubling idea snagged in his mind that she wasn't the same woman she'd been then. And for the first time, he thought of her as Verity before he thought of her as Soraya" (87). Only when Justin acknowledges Verity, not Soraya, as the woman he loves, can he make amends for his violation.

Catherine Coulter's 1994 version of *Rebel Bride* is a slight variation of this type of rape. Unlike Justin, the hero of this novel, Julien St. Clair, is fully able to acknowledge that he loves the heroine. In fact, he confesses this to himself quite early on by the standards of the romance genre. "It struck him forcibly that he wanted Katharine Brandon not simply as a summer idyll, to end with the coming of fall. No, he wanted her, all of her . . . He wanted her by his side until he cocked up his toes" (59). The misperception, then, comes not because Julien cannot acknowledge his own feelings, but because he is not able to acknowledge Katharine's feelings. His refusal to see Katharine's feelings as distinct from his own is manifested in the exposition by a persistent and problematic use of the conditional mood. When Julien thinks about Katharine, he uses the conditional to graft onto Katharine thoughts and feelings she has never expressed verbally. He uses the conditional mood to read her body like a text. The conditional enables him to interpret her actions as confirmation of his knowledge of her. It allows him to make the assumption that he can know what she feels for him through the signs of her body. "He was quite certain that when he entered the drawing room that morning that her eyes lit up at the sight of him, but he could not be sure that her obvious joy denoted a more serious sign of affection" (93).

At this point in the narrative, Julien is still capable of doubting his own reading of Katharine. However, when she responds to his kiss only paragraphs later, her physical response solidifies his interpretation of her body; it allows Julien to conflate Katharine's body with her will. This in turn enables him to affirm what he has long wished to believe about her: that Katharine loves him back. However, this reading of the kiss ignores as many signs as it testifies to. Julien dismisses Katharine's strange behavior just prior to the kiss as well as her sudden withdrawal from their embrace as unimportant and unconnected. As these actions do not fit into the interpretation of Katharine that best benefits Julien's own desires and longings, he chooses to ignore them:

But his buoyant spirits wouldn't let him long dwell upon the unusual incident. In all truth the experience paled beside her response to him when he'd kissed her. As her husband, he would, of course, have her trust and her confidence. She would willingly tell him whatever he wished to know. She would be his wife. She would be his, all of her (97)

It is the “of course” in conjunction with the “she would” that eventually results in the rape. Julien assumes that he knows Katharine’s feelings better than she knows them herself. What he has yet to discover about her, Julien assumes will be “of course” revealed through marriage to her; he assumes that marriage will give him final and complete access to Katharine’s interior self. This assumption is predicated upon the same underlying misperception as Justin’s rape of Verity: it presumes that to possess the woman is to know the woman. The “of course” also explains the dramatic change in Julien’s behavior once Katharine rejects his suit. He cannot admit that he read her wrong, that he privileged her body as the total sign of her personhood. He sees only what he wants to see, and this sight blinds him to other aspects of Katharine’s self. He characterizes her as a shrew, taking for his model Shakespeare’s Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* and consequently behaves as if he were Petruchio. As such, Julien rapes Katharine because he is determined to prove to her that his original reading of her was correct despite the fact that she has told him it was not. Yet the rape fails to prove his original reading. Rather, it reveals to him the sheer inadequacy of his knowledge. He not only has utterly misperceived Katharine, but he inadvertently discovers that Katharine herself was not fully privy to her own history and person. This revelation is made when Katharine flashes back to a childhood memory of being gang raped, a memory which she has totally repressed. The sudden knowledge this event brings rewrites all of Julien and Katharine’s prior interactions. It forces Julien to take responsibility not only for his rape of Katharine, but for how he has erased her personhood in his insistence on the body as the absolute measure of her identity.

Yet even prior to the discovery of Katharine’s past, Julien’s horror at what he has done underlines the core misperception under which he has been operating. “He’d raped her, Jesus, he hadn’t intended that, no never that, but he had. He’d planned so carefully to teach her pleasure, to force her to realize that she was a woman with a woman’s passions” (252). His assumption has been that because he is her husband and thereby has access to Katharine’s body, he can then “force her to realize” something about herself that she does not know. Ironically, he does indeed force her to realize something about herself that she does not know. But more importantly, the rape forces Julien to realize something he does not know: Katharine. It compels him to acknowledge his misperception, to admit that he read her body as if the thoughts and feelings he grafted onto her were hers and not his own suppositions.

Julien, then, must spend the remainder of the book making amends to Katharine for his appropriation of her body. However, these revelations—of Julien’s rape of Katharine and her past sexual assault—are not enough to atone for the harm Julien has caused through his assumption that he knew Katharine better than she knew herself. Julien is only able to win Katharine’s love when he fully acknowledges Katharine as a separate person, one whose reactions he can neither predict nor manipulate. It is only when Julien accepts that he might never have Katharine and then leaves her alone that she is able to forgive him and finally return his love.

Thus, the anagnorisis in the Rape of Possession comes not in the recognition of a noble or gentle birth, but in the recognition that the body alone can never fulfill the hero’s desire for the heroine; that mere possession of the heroine whether it is through marriage, contract, or rape fails to create reciprocity. Justin must realize “that after all these years of studying Soraya, of hunting her as his grandfather had hunted the glen’s deer, he didn’t understand her at all. And until he knew what made her the way she was, he’d never

completely possess her” (143), whereas Julien must finally acknowledge and act on Katharine’s wishes even when they are contrary to his own desires. It is in seeing, finally, the heroine as a separate and distinct person, as more than a body that can be read and possessed, that the hero is redeemed. Both Rapes of Mistaken Identity and Rapes of Possession require the resolution of the core misperceptions that cause them to occur before the hero and heroine can reach their happily ever after.

The Rape of Coercion, or “Forced Seduction”

However, the third type—the Rape of Coercion or forced seduction—is not predicated upon an epistemological misunderstanding, but is committed in order for the hero to gain knowledge about the identity of the heroine. The violation occurs not from ignorance of the Other or a misconstruction of the Other, but more distressingly from the hero’s desire to know the heroine, ontologically as she is beyond her body, appearance, or social role. In this type of rape, the hero wants a reaction from the heroine, a response from her not just physically but verbally. This desire is encapsulated in the term “forced seduction” which has long been used in genre parlance to euphemistically indicate any rape of the heroine by the hero. However, my restriction of the term to this third and final type of rape rests on the concept of seduction as primarily being a discursive act. The idea that one can force a seduction suggests that there are seductions in which no force is necessary. It implies that seduction is akin to temptation and, therefore, a kind of persuasion. The connotation of this is that both seduction and temptation are actions made through discourse and require the complicity of the person being seduced. Forced seduction, then, is not simply to rape, but to compel an interaction between two speaking persons; to lead the Other aside or astray using persuasive language; to make the Other complicit with her own violation. Seduction is a dialogue between seducer and seducee. In the Rape of Coercion, the hero wants a response from the heroine because it is in her dialogue with him that her identity is revealed. But instead of waiting for her freely to speak to him the hero forces the heroine to respond to his sexual and verbal assault.

Thus the term “forced seduction” refers to the dialogic aspect of this type of rape scene not just as it functions in the plot, but as it functions on a mythic level^[8] as an answer to the epistemological and ontological questions that romance narratives perpetually ask: Who is the Other? And how can I know her? If these questions cannot be addressed in terms of social contexts and their associated performative acts (attire, accessories, or social roles) or in terms of the purely material and physical realm of flesh with its objective proofs (the sexual responsiveness of the body, the likeness of the body to other bodies, etc.), then how are they to be answered? I contend that the questions of identity and being that romance asks can be answered only through the exchange of language, as language is the only means by which the hero can engage the heroine’s identity. Without her articulated response, the hero is trapped in a world of appearances where the only signs of the heroine’s identity are those very misperceptions on whose basis the former two types of rape are committed. She must speak to him so he can know who she is.

In Anne Stuart's contemporary romance *Black Ice*, this exchange of language is manifest both in the physical act of rape and the exploitation of that rape to force a confession of identity from the heroine. In this story the hero, Bastien Toussaint, is a spy. When he encounters the heroine, Chloe, he cannot believe that she truly is as she appears—a totally innocent woman, caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Rather, he believes that she, too, must be a spy and sets out to extract from her a confession of her true self. Bastien does this through sex because "Hurting her would get him nowhere—she'd be trained to withstand pain and she'd give up nothing she didn't want to give up. But there were other, much more pleasurable ways of finding out what he wanted to know" (111). For Bastien, truth is located in the body, but it is not the body. It is a confession of identity gained through the bodily act of sex. Not torture,^[9] but sex serves to break down the barriers between himself and Chloe, rendering her unable to do anything but reveal the truth to him. Bastien rapes Chloe in order to push her past her limits, to force her to tell him the truth. The moment of her sexual climax annihilates her ability to deceive him so he can discover who she really is. The repeated question "Who are you?" (116-118) is central to the rape scene in *Black Ice*, a repetition evidencing that this type of rape is neither about power nor lust, but rather about the desire to know the Other.

The rape in Patricia Gaffney's historical romance *To Have and To Hold* is likewise entwined with language and identity. The heroine, Rachel Wade, released after ten years in prison for murdering her husband, finds herself with nowhere to go and is consequently charged with vagrancy. At her arraignment before the magistrates of Wyckerly County, she meets the hero, Sebastian Verlaine, Viscount D'Aubrey, who makes Rachel his housekeeper to prevent her re-incarceration. This seeming act of charity, however, covers his true intentions, which "might be murky, but one thing was certain: they had nothing to do with kindness or generosity" (26). Rachel is perfectly aware that the price of this charity is sex with Sebastian, a condition to which she neither consents nor objects. Indeed, it is a condition never articulated by either of them. From the moment he brings her home, Sebastian wants to know Rachel, but she is frustratingly silent. Rachel is repeatedly characterized as a "non-entity" (22) as a "blank" (20, 42): "Mrs. Wade has simply erased herself" (24). It is this blankness, this erasure of self that Sebastian finds compelling. From the moment he sees her, he must know her. Once they have returned to his manor, Sebastian begins to question Rachel, to interrogate her about herself and her past. "What?" he demanded softly. "Tell me what you're thinking" (37).

The physical rape functions as an extension of this questioning. When Sebastian finally comes to Rachel's room, the sex itself is a "cool controlled act" (125). What makes it brutal are Sebastian's many attempts to invade Rachel's memories and identity: "What did he do to you?" "Did he hurt you, always?" "Was there never any pleasure for you?" (125). Both in *Black Ice* and *To Have and To Hold*, the rape is inquisitorial. In the latter narrative, Rachel does not respond either physically or verbally, leading Sebastian to realize that she will never answer him. It is the initial failure to garner a response from her through physical rape that leads to a verbal rape. The discursive nature of the Rape of Coercion is what differentiates it from the Rape of Mistaken Identity and the Rape of Possession, in which the rapes reveal to the hero his lack of knowledge about the heroine's identity and, more importantly, his desire to know her. For this reason the first two types leave the heroine's core selfhood inviolable, even while her body is violated. This seeming contradiction occurs because the bodily rape is not of her, but of who she seems to be, thus

allowing the heroine to function as a virgin in the text where virginity is not defined by the heroine's lack of sexual knowledge but by the impenetrability of her identity. The Rape of Coercion, rather, occurs precisely because the hero is aware that appearances are deceptive. Instead, he uses the rape to probe the heroine's identity both physically and verbally.

Thus, Sebastian's physical rape of Rachel does not function in the text as the true rape scene. That scene occurs not through sexual intercourse but through verbal discourse involving the silent Rachel and Sebastian's cruel friends, whom he invites to his manor to interrogate her—an interrogation that leaves him feeling violated. By having to speak to her, by questioning her, he makes himself vulnerable. Her silence exposes his own emptiness. By exposing her to the ruthless questioning of his reprobate acquaintances, he not only pushes Rachel to the limits of her identity, he pushes himself to the limits of his. His friends are able to achieve what Sebastian cannot: "horror after horror, she enumerated for his jaded friends, forced admissions of constant hunger, petrifying monotony and despair" (156). It is only when Sully, the Grand Inquisitor of this little game, asks about her husband that Rachel leaves the room, unable to utter that final horror. Yet, despite the rapacious nature of the conversation, Rachel later confesses to Sebastian that "I hated it but deep down something in me was glad to answer. Glad because I was being made to speak finally" (179).

Sebastian, too, is altered by the inquisition of his friends. He recognizes "his own soft, mocking tone in Sully's despicable cadence" (157). When Rachel flees the room and Sully pursues her, Sebastian "felt the tear down the middle of himself widening and that was wrong; it should have been narrowing. He'd just done a thing to make himself whole again" (198). Sebastian commits the verbal rape by agreeing to have his friends visit, knowing full well that this would be the result. Yet, what it accomplishes is not to shift him back to his old self as he had hoped. Rather, it only acts to shatter Sebastian's former sense of personhood. When Sebastian follows Sully out of the room, they fight. Sebastian is shot, Sully gets his nose broken. He retreats to his bedroom for days, and what follows is Sebastian's descent into an internal hell, like the dark night of the soul in a hagiography. The fight is the culmination of this verbal rape, which has functioned as the point of ritual death in the text. For Sebastian, it is the blood and the shot that serve as a death, just as the inquisitional rape is what acts as a death for Rachel. Death is a necessary prelude to resurrection and when Sebastian tells Rachel, "They sent you to an early grave . . . but I'm going to dig you out of it and resurrect you" (192), he is acknowledging that what he has desired all this time was Rachel, but Rachel transformed from the silence that has characterized her.

The rape, then, forces Rachel to speak, but it also breaks Sebastian's own sense of selfhood. In the romance text, the Rape of Coercion reveals that love is a version of death. In "The Solar Anus," Bataille discusses love and violence as connected, possibly inseparable concepts. As such, the violating hero cannot remain untouched by his violence and, like the heroine, suffers a kind of death by his assault upon her. When Bataille says: "I want to have my throat slashed while violating the girl who I will have been able to say: you are the night" (9), he is expressing that falling in love with the Other is an imitation or mimicry of violence. For Bataille, the world is parodic: language is a parody of desire, and desire is a parody of crime. Love is not structured as an elevated experience outside of the material world; but rather love descends into the body, where it becomes part of the material world,

neither separate from the body nor accessed through the body, but entwined with the corporal world and subject to its degradations. In the moment of violating Rachel via language, Sebastian himself suffers a ritual death along with her. The crime and debasement Bataille associates with love serves to transform identity. Sebastian's crime against and debasement of Rachel also enacts his own violation—"slashing his own throat"—thus transforming both his former self and Rachel's blankness.

The rapist of coercion, the forcing seducer, wants his victim to tell him, "I am here with you, I want you, I love you." The Rape of Coercion then serves in the text as the "point of ritual death," but I use this term in a slightly different way than either Northrop Frye (who coins the phrase in *Anatomy of Criticism*) or Pamela Regis (who uses it in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*). Here, the point of ritual death is physically manifested in a corporeal rape of the heroine that is concomitant with the death of identity through the corporal body of both heroine and hero. The forced seduction, then, is not simply the moment at which the story seems to be veering towards tragedy or the separation of the lovers, but rather the rape, both physical and verbal, becomes the ritual through which the identities of both heroine and hero die in order to be reborn. The rape or "forced" seduction functions not as partial negation, but as total negation, not just of the Other, but of the Self. The rape's interrogative aspect reveals the desire both for the annihilation of the Other and the annihilation of the former Self.

Sebastian's desire to push Rachel to her limits is not a desire to *possess* her but to break her down, to bring her to a threshold beyond which there is something other than a blank and silent woman. He wants to make her fully present through language. As Terry Eagleton elucidates, the self that is born through language signifies a simultaneous death of the physical and a refiguring of identity: "If the sign is the death of the thing, that death is nevertheless redemptive: through its troubling blankness the body is resurrected into a presence more radiantly authentic than the unrisen flesh" (45). Without language, Rachel's body has neither identity nor subjectivity. Rachel's words are what hold Sebastian's interest. Thus language, confession, and revelation become the locus of the rape, whether physical or discursive; it is a forced intercourse in the other sense of that word. The Rape of Coercion is a ritual death of the heroine's identity and the hero's own subject position, one that invokes ritual sacrifice. However, ritual cannot rely solely on language. It must also be enacted and manifested physically through a performance. Ritual does something through and to its participants. It has a purpose that goes beyond mere event; it has a communal meaning that can be used to assuage guilt, to seek divine favor, to allow the community to cohere or rally against a common enemy. In the case of the Rape of Coercion, ritual is performed to solidify individual identity as well as to bind the couple together. It serves as a sometimes violent fortunate fall—a fall out of isolation (as represented by Rachel's imprisonment) and alienation (as represented in Sebastian's libertinism).

In the Rape of Coercion, the underlying question of romance narrative transforms from "How do I know the Other?" to "Who are you?" The only answer to this question is "I am." In other words, it is only possible to gain an answer to the question of identity through the verbal response of the Other confirming her presence. If rape functions within romance narrative as the means by which the hero interrogates the heroine's identity, then the response to this physical and verbal assault is not found in the heroine's sexual climax but in the progress of their dialogue, culminating in the declaration of love. This is manifested in the I-love-you uttered at the end of these novels.[\[10\]](#) I-love-you declares not just an

emotional state held by the “I” but an existential one. When the hero tells the heroine he loves her, he is making himself fully present to her while concurrently querying for her presence. The earlier violence that defined his interrogation of the heroine is no more. Rather, in uttering I-love-you the hero calls to the heroine, awaiting her response as both a declaration of her personhood and as an expression of her emotion. The phrase thus serves as an answer to both the question of identity posed in the encounter with the Other and as an answer to the violence of intercourse, enacted in the verbal and physical rape of the heroine. It does this because I-love-you recognizes in its structure the need for the Other’s presence, ontologically (being) but not epistemologically (knowing). Barthes observes that, “the subject and the object come to the word [to love] even as it is uttered, and *I-love-you* must be understood” as a single word-phrase (147); that is, the Self and the Other are united by the narrative arc into a single, uttered phrase where both “I” and “you” are present. Subject and object are joined by the verb, to love, yet maintain their distinct positions within the sentence. This parallels the structure of the plot in which the hero and heroine are joined by love over the course of the story, yet remain distinct persons united by mutual choice. More significantly, the hero and the heroine exchange places as they exchange the phrase I-love-you, each occupying both the subject (“I”) and object (“you”) position. The hero becomes the object in the heroine’s utterance, as she becomes the subject of her own speech, and vice versa. “*I-love-you . . . is the metaphor for nothing else*” (Barthes, 148) or nothing outside of the phrase because in it both the Other and the Self are fully present as simultaneously speaking persons. There is no outside referent. I-love-you marries not only the Self and the Other, but also the body and the soul, the tongue and the speech, the concrete and the abstract.

Regardless of type, rape scenes in popular romance serve to unify language and sexuality. They insist upon the acknowledgment of an identity or personhood that is more than flesh, more than body and yet one that is materialized through flesh and body. In these scenes, copulation is not just sex, but also the copulation of linguistic terms where the ineffable is made manifest through physical and verbal intercourse. That is, the rape forces the revelation of the Other to the Self. In the words of Bataille, the result is that “the copula of terms is no less irritating than the copulation of bodies. And when I scream I AM THE SUN an integral erection results, because the verb *to be* is the vehicle of amorous frenzy” (5). Identity—to be—is at the root of desire. It is in the copulation of linguistic terms, as it is in the copulation of physical bodies, that the violence required for the transformation of the hero and heroine’s identities is found. Language is violent; it yokes together contradictions; it splits action and existence. And in romance it serves as the vehicle of metamorphosis from the isolation of asceticism and hedonism—two opposite, complementary representations of very different fallen selves, each trapped in an identity at odds with itself, one that has been shattered into disparate and scattered pieces. Language, but specifically interrogative language, deals the final, breaking blow to the Self and the Other. And it is, again, through language—“the vehicle of amorous frenzy”—that these identities are re-integrated. It is in the semiotic and somatic copulation of terms, the violent joining together hero and heroine in the rape, that these identities become whole. The climax literally comes when, in the amorous frenzy, the full self is revealed in response to the question of “who are you?” But language—spoken or written—is not the goal. The goal is the revelation of the Other as the beloved; what is desired is the “unconditionally

singular covenant, the mad love between” the One and the Other (Derrida 156) which is finally fulfilled in the declaratory phrase, I-love-you.

The appearance in popular romance texts of any of the three types of rape reveals that the true violation is not the rape at all, but the act of falling in love. In these rape scenes, it is not that “[c]oitus is the parody of crime” (Bataille 5), but rather that crime—rape—is the parody of love. It is the revelation that there is violation in every act of falling in love. For love itself requires that one’s personhood be invaded by the presence of another. Rape in romance is the physical manifestation of what all love is about: the intrusion of the Other into the Self and the death that must precede their harmonious unification.

[1] With every publication of a new romance novel in which such scenes of a “forced seduction” appear, debates about the trope are renewed. For an earlier perspective on these issues, Helen Hazen’s *Endless Rapture* (1983) explores several different aspects of the debate. Current discussions of the issue are primarily held at online communities such as *Dear Author* < <http://dearauthor.com/features/letters-of-opinion/sexual-force-and-reader-consent-in-romance>>and *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books* < http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/talking_about_the_r_word/>.

[2] See most famously Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance: women, patriarchy and popular literature* (1984); Tania Modeleski’s *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982); and Krentz’s *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* (1992). However, the discourse on the genre has begun to shift to different theoretical approaches since the late 1990s as exemplified by Pamela Regis’ 2003 *A Natural History of the Romance*, and Lisa Fletcher’s 2008 *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity*.

[3] Although the opposite rape, by the heroine of the hero, does occur as well. See Susan Elizabeth Phillips’ *This Heart of Mine*, for example.

[4] The necessity of this clarification is due to the fact that unlike other genres of literature, popular romance scholarship has, in the past, often made the mistake of implying a cause and effect relationship between the plots of the novels and the lives lived by readers themselves. This is the case in Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance*.

[5] Despite romance being a genre written by women for women, I presume that the Other is still female. This is because romance operates within the larger Western tradition where the Self or *I* is by default male. The narrative struggles with the question of how to create and maintain female subjectivity within the patriarchal order. And it is in this order that the hero has placed and identified himself when he encounters the heroine. In short, he sees her as the Other. It is in this context that the rape can occur.

[6] In her book *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity*, Lisa Fletcher discusses the phrase I-love-you as a performative speech act whose repetition is a sign of historical romance’s failure to stabilize its terms. I take an opposite position to Fletcher, seeing the repetition of I-love-you not as a failure to stabilize its terms but rather as a kind of ritual language whose utterance is transformative because of its repetition.

However, the differences between these interpretations are beyond the scope of this present paper.

[7] It is my assumption that all romance, whether of the Greek, medieval, or paperback variety, is inherently a genre of transcendence. I am influenced in this view by the work of Northrop Frye and Mikhail Bahktin.

[8] In this reading of the mythic structure of romance, I am primarily influenced by Northrop Frye's work in *The Secular Scripture*.

[9] See the discussion about *Black Ice* on *Read, React, Review* <<http://www.readreactreview.com/2009/10/25/book-discussion-anne-stuarts-black-ice>> for further commentary on the body as the locus of truth.

[10] See note 6, above.

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