

Mind, Body, Love: Nora Roberts and the Evolution of Popular Romance Studies

An Goris

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Abstract: As the study of the popular romance novel enters its fifth decade, a differential approach is slowly but surely replacing the older genre-wide perspectives adopted in earlier studies of the genre. This paper explores the repercussions of this transformation by comparing general claims about popular romance fiction made by Catherine Belsey in 1994 to a recent case study of Nora Roberts' oeuvre. Concretely, the paper investigates whether Belsey's central claim—that romance novels promise to represent romantic love as a force that resolves (post)modern tensions between body and mind but inevitably fail to do so—holds true for Nora Roberts' massively popular oeuvre.

About the Author: An Goris is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Leuven (Belgium), where she received her PhD in 2011 with a dissertation on American romance writer Nora Roberts. Her research focuses primarily on the interactions between genre and authorship in contemporary popular culture, specifically the popular romance novel. She has published papers on romance authorship, romance writing handbooks as a form of constrained writing and romance in translation. She is currently working on a monograph about Nora Roberts for McFarland.

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Introduction

These are exciting times for popular romance scholars.^[1] Over the last few years a number of interconnected developments—including the founding of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance (IASPR) in 2009 and of the peer-reviewed *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* in 2010, the increase of international conferences about popular romance (Brisbane (2009), Brussels (2010), New York (2011), McDaniel (2011),

York (2012), Freemantle (2013)) and the funding of substantial academic grants by Romance Writers of America (RWA) and The Nora Roberts Foundation—have stimulated the increasing institutional establishment and recognition of the field of Popular Romance Studies. As the overall study of the representation of romantic love in popular culture gains academic ground, the scholarly examination of one of the genres at the epicenter of this emerging field—popular romance fiction—is in transition as well. The inclusive, genre-wide and generalizing approach that characterizes many older studies of popular romance fiction, including such foundational works as Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982), Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984), Carol Thurston's *The Romance Revolution* (1987) and even some parts of Pamela Regis' seminal *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003), is slowly being replaced by a more focused and differential approach.

Such a differential approach to the study of popular romance fiction seeks to address not the whole of the genre (as older studies are wont to) but specific subparts of it. These studies are then based on more specified corpora of primary texts. Examples of such studies are recent work on romance subgenres (see e.g. Neal (2006), Fletcher (2008) and Betz (2009)), particular authors (see e.g. Frantz (2009)) and even individual novels (see e.g. Selinger (2012)). The findings and conclusions formulated in these studies are usually less general and wide-ranging than those often formulated in older romance studies. Slowly, the decades-old scholarly tradition of making very general claims about the popular romance genre as a whole is then being replaced by a more specified perspective in which the scholar seeks to address not the similarities of the whole, but the specifics of the parts of the whole. In this setup, the general claims of older studies often serve as a (normative) framework against which individual cases—of particular romance authors or novels, for example—are being tested. As will be illustrated in this paper, such a more differential approach to the study of popular romance leads to analyses that recognize (instead of obscure) the variety that exists within the genre and that are often more refined, nuanced, and sophisticated than before.^[2]

The general claims about popular romance fiction that are taken to task in this paper have to do with the representation of romantic love—and, more particularly, of the mind and the body in love—in popular romance novels. Specifically, the paper investigates Catherine Belsey's claim that popular romance novels offer a particular construction of the mind and the body in love that purports to resolve the (postmodern) tension between the body and the mind—the material and the immaterial—but eventually fails to do so. This recurrent construction, Belsey suggests, explains the massive appeal of the popular romance novel as well as the curious disappointment readers supposedly feel at the end of the happily ending romance tale (21-41). In this paper, Belsey's general(izing) claims about popular romance novels are used as a framework to study the work of Nora Roberts, the single most popular romance author of our time. In particular, the paper analyzes the representation of the body and the mind in Roberts' construction of romantic love on the basis of eight of the author's novels. By investigating if Belsey's claims about the irresolvable tension between body and mind hold true for Roberts' hugely popular work, this paper develops a nuanced understanding of one of the core motifs in Roberts' vast oeuvre that might shed some light on its immense popularity.

The General Claim: Mind, Body and Love in Popular Romance Novels

Catherine Belsey's claims about the popular romance novel appear in the second chapter of *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (1994), the scholar's theoretically sophisticated and wide-ranging study of the representation of desire in Western texts. In line with this work's overall theoretical interests, Belsey turns to critical theory to try to explain the popular romance novel's massive appeal. Her analysis focuses mainly on the representation of romantic love as a phenomenon that impacts both the body and the mind in popular romance novels. This dual conceptualization of love, Belsey notes, is in line with long-standing Western traditions of dual conceptualisations of identity and the self that originated with René Descartes and his colleagues of the Enlightenment. These thinkers put forth conceptualisations of the human subject as internally disjointed and divided along the line of the body and the mind that have held sway in Western culture ever since. Although Belsey notes that such dual conceptualisations have come to seem "natural and inevitable" (23), the notion that the self is internally disjointed remains a deeply unsettling idea in many ways. Popular romance novels, Belsey finds, capitalise upon this anxiety and this is the secret to their extraordinary appeal. In these novels, romantic love offers "a promise to bring mind and body back into perfect unity, to heal the rift of experience which divides individuals from themselves" (23). Such a promise, Belsey posits, strongly appeals to the contemporary reader.

However, Belsey is quick to note, fulfilling this central promise is easier said than done and herein lies the romance genre's problem. Romances attempt to bridge the gap between mind and body by consistently connecting intense sexual sensations to moral and emotional feelings of commitment and love (23). This goal, Belsey elaborates, induces the genre's rather specific representation of sexuality as "elemental, beyond control, majestic, thrilling, dangerous" (27)—a construction that is in part achieved by the stereotypical representation of sexual passion in metaphors of powerful natural phenomena such as a hurricane, a flood, a storm, an earthquake or a wave. While such extremely intense sexual sensations ensure the involvement of the body in the experience of romantic love, physical passion alone is not enough. Indeed, Belsey observes, for this passion to constitute *true love*, not only the body but also the mind has to be engaged: the rational, knowing subject is, in love, "required to speak, to assert his identity as a subject" (29).

It is here, Belsey claims, that the crux of the problem lies. Words spoken in the heat of passion are not to be trusted since this passion has explicitly been presented as "bewildering, transporting of consciousness, sweeping away all sense of the self, [which] precisely deflects subjectivity and consequently defers the moment of moral commitment" (29). Only the words that are spoken afterwards, "*independently* [from the bodily experience], once the knowing, willing subject is restored," are the words that really matter (30, emphasis mine). But herein lies also the failure of the romance novel to live up to its promise of unifying mind and body. Inasmuch as the romance project hinges on words spoken in this separate, post-passionate context, it does not bring body and mind together, but rather enforces the distinctions between them. "To the extent that the aim was to dissolve the opposition between mind and body in a story of true love," Belsey concludes, "the project signally fails in these instances" (30). This failure, Belsey finally suggests, explains why "the fantasy [romances] offer is a little disappointing" (31): romance novels

consistently fail to live up to the promise that constitutes (at least in Belsey's eyes) their biggest appeal.

The sense of disappointment Belsey speaks of is not, as such, identified or described by romance readers. To the contrary: in Janice Radway's classic study, to which Belsey repeatedly refers, readers consistently identify positive emotions at the end of the romance reading experience and claim romance reading makes them feel good (60-66). Belsey does not consider these claims to be incompatible with her own conclusions, however. Instead she suggests that the frequent repetition of the romance reading act Radway observed likely confirms her hypothesis:

It emerged that the Smithton women were reading a great many romances. [. . .] Is it conceivable that this avid reading is an indication that the optimism created by romance is more precarious than it is possible to say? Perhaps the next romance is there to compensate for the disappointments engendered by the last? All we can be sure of is that readers of romance tend to crave more romance. A number of the Smithton women acknowledged an anxiety about whether they might be depressed by their reading [. . . w]hat if the anxiety is precisely an effect of their extensive reading experience, a silent recognition of unconscious disappointment that the stories have consistently failed to resolve the divisions they depend on? (34-35)

Although Belsey formulates her ideas as questions, she quite strongly suggests that the repetition of the romance reading act is not, as readers tend to claim, primarily motivated by positive emotions, but rather by a sense of disappointment that readers might not be consciously aware of: a disappointment which is, in Belsey's eyes, very likely a consequence of romance reading itself.

Belsey and the Evolution of Romance Scholarship

Although Belsey's claims have found very little response in subsequent romance criticism, she puts forth a set of interesting, challenging and even provocative ideas. The notion that the popular romance novel's massive appeal—a (seeming) conundrum that has confounded many a critic—has something to do with the texts' complex relation to anxieties about self and identity that are typically associated with the (post)modern condition is a new, intriguing and valuable suggestion that certainly deserves further scrutiny. While Belsey's discussion of the romance reader's lack of awareness of her own negative response comes off as somewhat belittling, the suggestion that romance reading triggers a more complex reaction than straightforward happiness—and that this reaction might have something to do with the desire to read more romance—is fascinating nonetheless. Belsey's study thus offers a number of suggestions that deserve further exploration.

Such further exploration is undertaken in this paper, but in line with the ongoing development in the field of Popular Romance Studies there is an important methodological difference between this study and Belsey's. Notwithstanding the impressive theoretical

suggestions the latter makes, Belsey commits an important methodological *faux pas* in her study by failing to adequately discuss the size, composition and selection of the primary corpus on which her findings are based. Moreover, since in the course of her discussion Belsey refers to no more than six romance texts, the (apparent) size of her corpus seems decidedly too small to warrant the genre-wide scope of her claims. The present study deliberately makes different methodological choices by first, focussing on the oeuvre of a single author and second, selecting novels from that oeuvre according to explicit, clear-cut principles.

Nora Roberts

This paper focuses on American writer Nora Roberts, who is widely considered the most popular and successful romance author of our time. Since her first category romance novel was published in 1981, Roberts has written more than 200 romance novels. A staggering 178 of these have appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list, on which the author's novels have so far spent a total of 932 weeks (or 17 years). As the first (and only triple) inductee in RWA's Hall of Fame and the recipient of a record-breaking twenty-one RITA Awards, Roberts is one of the most distinguished romance authors in RWA's and the romance genre's history. With more than 400 million copies of her books currently in print Roberts is, moreover, not only the top-selling romance writer, but also one of the bestselling authors in the world.

Remarkably, Roberts is also one of the most understudied authors in the world. Whereas the oeuvres of Roberts' fellow bestselling authors such as J.K. Rowling, Stephen King and John Grisham are studied regularly, Roberts' romance oeuvre has hardly drawn the academic gaze.^[3] Barely a handful of studies on her work have been published; a monograph that takes on Roberts' complete oeuvre does not currently exist.^[4] In this regard Roberts does not differ from other contemporary romance authors—the author study remains an important lacuna in scholarship on this genre—but her status as one of the bestselling authors in the world makes the lack of studies on her work especially remarkable.

Perhaps one of the reasons scholars have been reluctant to take on Roberts' oeuvre is its sheer size. Already counting more than 200 novels and increasing by an average of five new novels every year, Roberts' body of work is simply colossal. It is also decidedly too large to subject to the close reading analysis on which this present study is based, so for the purposes of this study a selection had to be made. This selection takes into account a number of the most significant variables present in Roberts' oeuvre—including year of publication, subgenre, part of series or standalone and original publication format—and eventually resulted in eight novels.

	Publication	Subgenre	Series / stand alone	Original format
<i>Irish Thoroughbred</i>	1981	Contemporary	Irish Hearts series	Category
<i>One Man's Art</i>	1985	Contemporary	MacGregor series	Category
<i>Suzanna's Surrender</i>	1991	Contemporary/ Suspense	Calhoun series	Category

<i>Montana Sky</i>	1996	Western/ Suspense	Stand alone	Single title (hardcover)
<i>Morrigan's Cross</i>	2006	Paranormal	Circle Trilogy (1)	Single title (paperback)
<i>Dance of the Gods</i>	2006	Paranormal	Circle Trilogy (2)	Single title (paperback)
<i>Valley of Silence</i>	2006	Paranormal	Circle Trilogy (3)	Single title (paperback)
<i>High Noon</i>	2007	Suspense	Stand alone	Single title (hardcover)

Although this collection of eight novels does not represent the full range of Roberts' oeuvre—Roberts' alter ego J.D. Robb is missing and the decade between 1996 and 2006 is underrepresented, to name its two most important shortcomings—the corpus is nonetheless fairly well-balanced and compatible with the practical constraints of a study like this one.

The Integration of Body and Mind in Nora Roberts' Romance Fiction

Catherine Belsey's claims about the pivotal importance of the representation of the body and the mind to the immense appeal of the popular romance genre open up interesting avenues of inquiry for the study of Nora Roberts' work. As Belsey's observations imply, the complex relation between body and mind plays a central role in Roberts' representation of romantic love, which is indeed conceptualized as a dual force that impacts the body as well as the mind. While to a large extent Roberts' romance novels follow the patterns of the genre insightfully uncovered in Belsey's study, in one crucial regard Roberts' novels deviate from this pattern. Whereas Belsey claims that popular romance novels consistently fail to realize the bridging of the gap between body and mind their conventional representation of romantic love promises, the analyses in this paper reveal that in Roberts' romance fiction the unification of body and mind is always represented as successful. The potential implications of this observation for our understanding of Roberts' popularity are addressed in the conclusion to this paper after the pattern that achieves this unification is described in more detail.

Divided Selves During the First Meeting

In Roberts' romances, the process that ends with the complete and successful integration of the lover-subject's body and mind starts with their explicit separation. Indeed, at the beginning of Roberts' stories the division between the lover's body and mind is repeatedly stressed in the narration. All first meeting scenes analyzed in this study emphasize the protagonists' double, diverging response to each other: strong and immediate physical attraction is combined with a form of conscious dislike, irritation, or

anger. Although this representation differs slightly from the pattern observed by Belsey—who finds that the division between mind and body is mainly situated in the heroine's emphatic bewilderment over, lack of understanding of, or even full-out distrust of her body's uncontrollable, explicitly sexual response to the hero (24-26)—the first meeting scenes in Roberts' romances nonetheless systematically introduce, and emphatically stage, the basic dichotomy between body and mind around which the rest of the romance narrative essentially revolves.

The first meeting scene between hero Grant Campbell and heroine Gennie Grandeau in Roberts' 1985 category romance *One Man's Art* is an example of this construction. Hero Grant is severely "annoyed" (264) when heroine Gennie shows up at his doorstep during a stormy night, disrupting his much-valued solitude and privacy. Roberts quickly adopts the hero's point of view to emphasize that barely seconds after letting the heroine in he already "wished fervently he'd never opened the door" (263). Gennie, put out by Grant's "unfriendly, scowling face" and rude and unwelcoming behavior, adopts an "icy tone" and remains "distantly polite, [. . .] frigid and haughty" (264), but privately "seriously consider[s] heaving her purse at him" (265). The narration of this immediate dislike and annoyance is instantly complemented with the narration of their physical attraction. Grant is "thrown" by Gennie's "sea green, huge and faintly slanted" eyes (264) and "when the sight of her [. . . goes] straight to his gut" he realizes she is "too beautiful for his peace of mind" (267). The unambiguous statement that Grant is "furiously annoyed by the flare of unwelcome desire" (268) makes the opposition between his mental and physical response textually explicit. Gennie is portrayed as equally attracted, experiencing a physical "stir" and "a thrill [of . . .] anticipation" (269). Again, the body's response is explicitly opposed to the mind: she is depicted as "catching herself" and internally lecturing that "even her imagination ha[s] no business sneaking off in that direction" (269). The division between body and mind, staged continuously throughout this first meeting scene, is once more explicitly narrated in the scene's closing paragraphs:

He wondered what she would do if he simply got up, hauled her to her feet and dragged her up into his bed. He wondered what in the hell was getting into him. They stared at each other, each battered by feelings neither of them wanted while the rain and the wind beat against the walls, separating them from everything civilized. (270)

The parallel syntactic construction of the first two sentences ("He wondered . . . He wondered") discursively reinforces the notion—made explicit in the narration—that within one person, one self, two opposing reactions are simultaneously ongoing; the physical, sexual response is represented as a force separate from the conscious self—indeed, Grant experiences it as "getting into him." The opposition between mind and body is again stressed in the statement that both Gennie and Grant are "battered" by physical "feelings neither of them want." The subsequent sketch of the violent natural setting in which these "feelings" occur explicitly underlines the distinction: the "civilized" mind is "separated" from the unruly, feeling body.

The Body As Marker of Sincerity

A fundamental aspect of Roberts' representation of the divided self at the beginning of her romance novels is the emphasis on the mind's inability to control the body in these instances. Roberts' narrations consistently stress the passive, powerless position of the mental self who undergoes the sexual attraction, the invasive physical impact of the romantic other, but who emphatically lacks power over these bodily reactions and cannot stop them. This uncontrollability not only stresses the schism between body and mind that exists within the lover's self at this early stage of the romance narrative, but is also an essential aspect of Roberts' construction of the body as a site of (emotional) truth. In Roberts' fictional universes the body consistently functions as a marker and display of (emotional) truth. Profound, heart-felt, sincere emotions instantly manifest bodily: faces pale in shock, fingers tremble from sadness, hands jerk in surprise, voices shake from anger and eyes are bruised, battered or smudged from emotional pain. Time and again, Roberts' narrations stress that the mind—the conscious, thinking self—has no control over these physical manifestations.

Importantly, this emphatic lack of mental control implies an inability to consciously manipulate the body—in Roberts' fictional worlds, when true love is involved, the body cannot lie. The uncontrolled body thus necessarily and certainly displays true, sincere, authentic emotion—and to say that the body *displays* these emotions means, in effect, that in Roberts' romance fiction the body becomes a text that can be read in order to gain insight into one's true emotional state, even when the novel at hand does not explicitly deploy textual metaphors. This "reading" of the body is undertaken by both the characters within the fictional world and the novels' readers outside of it. Indeed, in an interesting doubling act, the novels' characters, like the novels' readers, become readers and interpreters who turn to the body-text to gain insight into their own or another character's true emotions.

Roberts' deployment of the body-text as a marker of sincere emotion is exemplified in a scene from the 1996 single title Western romance *Montana Sky*. The scene depicts the story's heroine, Willa Mercy, in a state of profound emotional distress. She has just discovered the murdered and mutilated body of her long-time employee Pickles and faces the loss of her home, ranch and livelihood due to the murder. While throughout the novel Willa is usually characterized as an exceptionally strong and decisive woman, this is a point in the narrative where she reaches emotional rock bottom. In the following excerpt she is confronted with her two half-sisters, with whom she has a strained relationship, and experiences a range of conflicting emotions. Willa's complex emotions—which include grief over Pickles, horror over the image of the mutilated body, guilt because she had words with the victim mere hours before his death, bone-deep fear of losing her home and livelihood and eventual extreme relief when she realizes the ranch is safe—impact her body, which instantaneously displays them.

Willa came into the kitchen, stopped short when she saw the women at the table. Her face was still pale, her movements still jerky. [. . .] She slipped her hands into her pockets as she stepped toward the table. Her fingers still tended to shake. [Her sister confirms the ranch is safe. . . .] Because wine

seemed like a fine idea, Willa crossed to the cupboards and took out a tumbler. Then she just stood there, unable to move, barely able to think. She hadn't been able to fully consider the loss of the ranch. [. . .] But it wasn't until now, until she knew [it was safe], that it hit her. And it hit her hard. Giving in, she rested her head against the cupboard door and closed her eyes. Pickles. Dear God, would she see him for the rest of her life, what had been done to him, what had been left of him? [. . .] But the ranch, for now, was safe. "Oh God, oh God, oh God." She didn't realize she'd moaned it out loud until Lily laid a tentative hand on her shoulder. (110)

In this scene, Willa's body clearly functions as a text displaying her emotions as both the characters within the fictional world and the novel's reader outside of it interpret Willa's emotional state of mind via the physical signs displayed by her body. Her pale face, jerky movements, shaking fingers, closed eyes and unconscious moaning are conventional physical signs of emotional upheaval. The pronounced contrast between her purposeful, controlled physical actions—"cross[ing] to the cupboards and tak[ing] out a tumbler"—and the purposeless, uncontrolled ones—"just [standing] there, unable to move, [. . .] rest[ing] her head [. . .] clos[ing] her eyes"—constructs and reinforces the interpretation of the latter as manifestations of and responses to profound emotions.

The character's lack of conscious control over her body's display is stressed multiple times in this short scene and ensures the sincerity of these emotions. It is clear that the characters in this fictional world are aware of their bodies' truth-revealing and communicative potential: Willa attempts to hide her shaking fingers, knowing those bodily manifestations would reveal a depth of emotional turmoil she is uncomfortable displaying in front of her sisters. Lily's supportive "hand on [Willa's] shoulder" indicates, reversely, that not only grief but also support and comfort can be communicated solely by the body. The marked absence of language—dialogue—in this scene adds to its emotional impact as it constructs this world as one in which emotional truth can be read directly from and conveyed by the body-text, making emotional deceit and insincerity virtually impossible.

Sex: So Much More Than Just Sex

Roberts' construction of the body as a marker of emotional truth—which is pervasive in her texts and an important conceptual pillar on which her fictional worlds rest—implies that the body uncontrolled by the mind displays emotional truth. This notion puts another perspective on the function of sex in the representation of romantic love. Roberts' texts emphasize the physical, natural, powerful and non-rational aspects of sex and sexual desire, which are represented as ultimate acts of the body as opposed to the mind. In the experience of sexual sensations "the body rule[s] the moment" (*High Noon* 222) and the thinking, rational, controlling self is temporarily suspended as the natural impulses of the body take over. This representation is frequently based on the association of sex with powerful natural phenomena and a lack of rationality and control on the part of the mental, conscious self. As Belsey notes, metaphors of powerful natural phenomena and disasters are often used to describe sexual sensations in popular romance novels, and

Roberts indeed tends to depict sex in rather unimaginative and very conventional—even clichéd—metaphors. Sexual sensations are like a “flame [. . . and] fire, in the blood, in the bone” (*Valley of Silence* 62), “long, liquid waves” (*High Noon* 312), “turbulence,” “a tidal wave” (*Irish Thoroughbred* 195; 129), “a rage” (*Montana Sky* 134), “a fever” (*Suzanna’s Surrender* 389), “a full-scale explosion” (*One Man’s Art* 306) and “liquid flames” (*Dance of the Gods* 96). Via these metaphors Roberts not only emphasizes the powerful, uncontrollable force of the sexual experiences—sex is literally and metaphorically depicted as a force of nature—but of course also inscribes the texts in the conventions of the romance genre.

The rational subject’s lack of control in the physical sexual experience is further emphasized in Roberts’ narration by her representation of sexual desire and sensations as a near-violent force that seems to attack the body. Descriptions such as “desire [. . .] pierced through him” (*Morrigan’s Cross* 43, emphasis mine), “each separate scent slammed into his system, pumping through his blood, roaring through his head,” “dozens of sensations knifed into him, all sharp and deadly” (*Suzanna’s Surrender* 389; 429, emphasis mine), “the stab of desire [. . .] left a nagging ache,” “it rocket through him, fierce and fast,” and is “an assault on the system” (*One Man’s Art* 304-5, emphasis mine) systematically invoke the semantic field of violence and thereby stress the uncontrollable nature of this desire.^[5] These descriptions also serve to represent the subject’s experience of sexual desire as an external phenomenon which does not seem to originate within the (conscious) self. The gap between body and mind seems wider than ever in these passages.

This dissociation between body and mind is reinforced by the recurring and explicit associations of sex with a lack of rationality; physical sexual sensations are repeatedly represented as causing the mind to “turn off” (*Valley of Silence* 141). Here are two exemplary passages:

He brushed his thumb over her nipple, watched the shock of pleasure flicker over her face. “Turn that busy mind off, Moira.” It was already as if mists clouded it. How could she think when her body was swimming in sensation? [. . . H]er mind misted over again as his hands, his mouth, slid like flaming velvet over her body. [. . .] She was nothing but feelings now, a mass of pleasures beyond any possibility. [. . .] His hands simply ruled her until she was a hostage to this never-ending need. Half-mad she struggled with his shirt. (*Valley of Silence* 141)

But right at the moment, with her back up against the door and his mouth hot on hers, thinking wasn’t part of the equation. [. . .] His hands dove into her hair, skimmed over her shoulders, molded down her body with such purpose and skill that any idea [. . .] went straight out of the window, and kept on flying. [. . .] With her mouth under assault and her blood flashing from comfortably warm to desperately hot, her body ruled the moment. [. . .] The sensations careening inside her flew too fast, too high for [. . .] any hope of sanity. (*High Noon* 221-22)

Physical sexual pleasure is explicitly presented as causing a temporary suspension of the self’s rational capacity: Moira’s mind is “clouded” by “mists” and “misted over” due to the

hero's sexually arousing touches; "thinking [isn't] part of the equation" in these scenes as rational thoughts go "straight out the window and [keep] flying." Again, the sexual body is presented as the opposite of the rational, thinking mind: "how could she *think* when her body was swimming in *sensations*?" During sex the self is then reduced to "nothing but feelings, a mass of pleasures" and the "body rule[s] the moment;" the rational self is temporarily suspended in this act and, the love scenes stress over and over again, overpowered by the natural body that for an instant overtakes and occupies the entire self. This hyperbolic representation of sex—Roberts projects the feelings surrounding the orgasmic moment to all sexual sensations—emphasizes and exaggerates the uncontrollable nature of sex and, by extension, the body.

Whereas Belsey interprets this representation of sexuality as indicative of how body and mind are and remain separated, my reading of Roberts' use of these topoi recasts them as a pre-condition for the authenticity of the true love that is later realized in the complete unification of body and mind. This interpretation builds on Roberts' construction of the body as a marker of emotional truth—an interpretive strategy that constructs sexuality as undeniable physical proof of the authenticity of an as-yet mentally unacknowledged emotion. This interpretation of sex is further supported by other, explicitly non-sexual manifestations of the body. Indeed, the bodies of Roberts' lovers/protagonists do not exclusively respond to the other in a sexual way, but also experience and display strong non-sexualized reactions. These are diverse and range from the small and seemingly unremarkable—an "uneven beat of [the] heart" (*Irish Thoroughbred* 43), hands that naturally "belong" (*One Man's Art* 328) together, a "quick hitch in [the] gut" upon seeing the other cry (*Montana Sky* 65), a throat snapping shut when being "wooed" (*Dance of the Gods* 90), and the natural "fit" of each other's bodies (*Montana Sky* 115)—to more elaborate physical responses.

In the following brief scene from the 1991 category romance *Suzanna's Surrender*, for example, hero Holt's body experiences and displays his strong emotional response to heroine Suzanna at a time in the narrative when he has not yet consciously realized or acknowledged his feelings for her (let alone openly confessed them to her). Holt's body displays as-yet-unspoken feelings of affection and love, but this display is clearly not sexual:

[Holt] rubbed a thumb over the line between [Suzanna's] brows in a gentle gesture that surprised them both. Catching himself, he dropped his hand again. (*Suzanna's Surrender* 421)

Again the conscious self's lack of control over this bodily act ("catching himself") is stressed; the body, disconnected in these acts from the mind, displays and reveals an emotional truth the rational, conscious self has not yet acknowledged. While the overwhelming sexual response then generally dominates the protagonists' physical reaction to one another, such non-sexual physical manifestations confirm what the emphatic uncontrollability of the sexual acts already indicate, namely the existence of an as-yet *linguistically* unacknowledged emotion of which these bodily manifestations are both the physical trace and proof.

The Meaning of the Body

Although these physical manifestations and reactions are an essential part of true love, they do not suffice: as Belsey remarks, for popular romance novels the difference between love and lust lies in the complete involvement of the mental self (28-29). In Roberts' novels as well, true romantic love comes into being when not only the bodily but also the mental self is involved in the phenomenon. This mental involvement consists, as Belsey already indicates, essentially of language: the lover speaks about love, in doing so asserts his/her identity as a subject and involves his/her complete self in the romantic love he/she speaks of. However, whereas Belsey posits that it is in this speaking that the dichotomy between mind and body is reconfirmed and reconstituted—the words have to be spoken “independently” from the body (Belsey 30)—I claim that in Nora Roberts' romances in this speaking of love the gap between body and mind is definitively bridged.

In a fictional world in which the body functions as a text the physical manifestations of love have double significance: they offer the unquestionable physical proof of love's truth by making it tangible, anchoring the immaterial to the material, and they signal and display this truth to be read, interpreted and linguistically realized. Still, Roberts' representations of romantic love consistently make the point that without the active intervention of the conscious, thinking, speaking self this physicality is and remains mute. It is only when the thinking, speaking subject intervenes with the transformative act of interpretation that these otherwise meaningless physical manifestations become significant and meaningful, in the etymological senses of both words. This transformative act, the “making” of meaning and sense, takes place in language; physical reality (the body) is “put into words” and thereby transformed from meaning-less to meaning-full. As long as love is only apparent in the body and remains consciously, rationally and linguistically unacknowledged, it remains without meaning, regardless of how materially real and true the bodily manifestations prove it to be. It is in this transformative process of making the meaningless physical truth meaningful that the gap between body and mind—emphatically staged at the start of the romance—is bridged in Roberts' conceptualisation of true love. This bridging takes place in three successive stages.

The first stage consists of a remarkable discomfort, unease and even fear the protagonists experience over (some of) their physical reactions. *Montana Sky* hero Ben, for example, is “unnerved” (115) by the way Willa fits in his arms, *Irish Thoroughbred*'s Adelia finds her physical “awareness” of Travis “disturbing” (47), Blair, in *Dance of the Gods*, feels “wary” (48) about kissing Larkin, Holt and Suzanna both “resent and fear” (*Suzanna's Surrender* 383) the intensity of their physical attraction, and *Morrigan's Cross*' Hoyt “fears” (82) the intensity of his desire for Glenna. This resentment and fear is all the more remarkable because it is often connected to physical and sexual sensations that are essentially pleasurable (exceptionally so even). The lovers' marked unease then indicates a consciously unarticulated awareness on their part that the intensity of their bodily response is a sign of an otherwise as-yet-unacknowledged emotional truth: they are falling in love. The concept of love—that is, the signifier ‘love’—remains strictly unarticulated by the protagonists in this stage of the story, however.

The second phase in the bridging of the gap between mind and body by making meaningless physical truth meaning-full via interpretation and linguistic actualisation

consists of a rudimentary linguistic acknowledgement of the physically enacted emotional truth. This elementary linguistic acknowledgement takes place in the use of the explicitly vague and generic term “something” (sometimes “it”) to refer to the phenomenon that in a later stage will be acknowledged as true love. Roberts uses this word in this way multiple times in all the novels in this study; a few examples:

[S]he had tapped into something inside him he hadn't known was there—and was still more than a little uncomfortable with. Finding it, feeling it left him as vulnerable as she. (*Suzanna's Surrender* 470)

I feel for you. You stir something in me. Yes, it's difficult, and it's distracting. But it tells me I'm here. (*Morrigan's Cross* 127)

There was longing in him for her, which he thought as natural as breath. But there was something tangled with it, something sharp that he didn't recognize. (*Dance of the Gods* 100)

Still, there was something inside her, something she couldn't quite see clearly, or study, or understand. Whatever it was made her uneasy, even nervy around him. (*Dance of the Gods* 212)

“Something” is an interesting choice of words: on the one hand it signifies a rudimentary linguistic actualisation of the physically manifesting truth, which is at this stage in the story still unnamed and thus unsignified; “something” changes this and brings the uninterpreted, mute physicality into the meaning-full, human world of language. On the other hand, however, “something” is a word that essentially means nothing. It is so vague and generic that in the act of naming it signifies not-naming; even as it puts into words—signifies, linguistically actualises—a physical reality, it refuses to assign it actual, concrete meaning. Still, this use of “something” signals the beginning of the bridging of the gap between mind and body as it starts the mental naming process of a bodily experienced truth. It does not, however, fully bridge the gap; the lack of concrete meaning makes the transformative act of interpretation and signification incomplete.

The gap between body and mind is fully bridged in the third phase: the actual use of the word “love” in naming the physical and emotional phenomenon the protagonists are experiencing. This first conscious naming takes place in the protagonist's initial, introspective realization or acknowledgement that he/she is in “love” with the other. It is one of the most important moments in the romance novel and its representation as an isolated, crystal clear moment poised in time and place reinforces its perceived significance.

Why did he always send her into a flutter? she wondered. Why did her pulses begin to race [. . .] whenever she looked up and met those marvelous, blue eyes? [. . .] She'd lost. She'd lost the battle, and though she fought against it, she was in love with Travis Grant. (*Irish Thoroughbred* 78)

Love. He'd managed to avoid it for so many years, then he had thoughtlessly opened the door. It had barged in on him, Grant reflected, uninvited, unwelcome. Now he was vulnerable, dependent—all the things he had promised himself he'd never be again. (*One Man's Art* 408)

He glanced toward her and felt the punch low in his gut. [. . .] When his palms grew damp on the wheel, he looked away. Not falling in love, he realized. He'd stopped falling and had hit the ground with a fatal smack. (*Suzanna's Surrender* 442)

Love. His heart ached at the word so that he pressed his hand to it. This was love then. The gnawing, the burning. The light and the dark. Not just warm flesh and murmurs in the candlelight, but pain and awareness in the light of day. In the depths of the night. To feel so much for one person, it eclipsed all else. And it was terrifying. (*Morrigan's Cross* 247)[6]

In these scenes, the most crucial step in the bridging of the gap between mind and body is taken: the physical materiality of the body—already rudimentarily signified by “something” but still lacking true meaning and thereby a place in the ordered, comprehensible, signified human world—is transformed into a signified linguistic entity and irrevocably takes on meaning. The gap between mind and body is then completely bridged in these scenes since these words are not spoken independently from the body, as Belsey would have it, but are to the contrary both a linguistic, mental actualisation of the bodily experience which cause further bodily repercussions. Indeed, the use of the word love impacts the body. Body and mind are intimately connected; the self is unified.

From Love to True Love Via “I Love You”

Although in the initial linguistic actualisation of love the gap between the lover's body and mind is bridged, the love that is realized here does not yet qualify as the utopian true love around which popular romance novels conventionally revolve. The discourse that is used in the initial realization scenes tends to signal that something is still amiss. In the examples cited above, for instance, love is considered a “lost battle”, it “aches [. . .] gnaws [. . .] burns,” brings “pain” and uncomfortable “awareness;” and is explicitly “uninvited, unwelcome,” “terrifying,” and “fatal.” The semantic fields of battle and violence which are systematically invoked in thinking about love in this stage of Roberts' romance narratives are discursive traces of an underlying problem: the lover has not yet freely, rationally, actively chosen this love. Instead, this love is a physically proven truth, a *fait accompli*, a material fact the existence of which the lover can no longer ignore or deny, but to which he is at this point essentially subjected. In other words, the lover lacks *agency* in love.

That the lover's agency and volition, his free and active choice to accept and embrace love, is crucial to Roberts' conceptualisation of true love is something that is established repeatedly in the narratives in this study. Roberts' lovers tend to make a clear distinction, for example, between the physical manifestation of sexual desire and other

bodily signals of love on the one hand and the choice to accept and want those desires and manifestation—to want, in other words, romantic love—on the other. *Morrigan's Cross*' heroine Glenna Ward pointedly formulates the central dilemma Roberts' lovers/protagonists face in this regard when after her first, fiercely passionate kiss with reluctant hero Hoyt, she muses: "He wanted her, there was no question of that. But he didn't choose to want her. Glenna preferred to be chosen" (*Morrigan's Cross*, 83). The signifier "want," here a reference to sexual desire, and "choice," here a reference to the innately human capacity of free will, explicitly differentiate between the desires of the body and the mind in play in this scene and the entire romance. The heroine's explicit assertion that she "prefer[s] to be chosen" indicates the importance of the lover's conscious volition in the matter of true love. In deliberately choosing to accept and actively embrace love—a love that has been constructed as both physically and emotionally overwhelming—the lover takes on agency in the experience and finally completes the realization of true love.

Lovers in Roberts' popular romance novels take on the necessary agency in the declaration of love, which is constituted by uttering the deceptively simple words "I love you." The communicative nature of the declaration of love distinguishes it from the earlier, interior linguistic realization of love. In uttering the words "I love you," the lover openly declares his love *to* the other and transforms the status of his love from private to public. As love becomes a shared knowledge between the lover and the beloved, it also becomes part of the world outside the self and, consequently, requires a place within that exterior world. The successful declaration of love signals the lover's free will to assign love that place in the world, to freely and completely accept the potentially overwhelming experience and give it a meaningful place in his reality, as we can see in this example of a successful declaration scene:

I love you. [. . .] You're my breath, and my pulse, my heart, my voice. [. . .] I'll love you even when all of them stop. I'll love you, and only you, until all the worlds are ended. So you'll marry me, Blair. And I'll go where you go, and fight beside you. We'll live together, and love together, and make a family.
(*Dance of the Gods* 313)

The lover first re-establishes the truth of the love-phrase by explicitly referencing the body and then places his declared love in the meaningful, recognizable socio-economic and cultural order of the world by tying it to the culturally conventional institutions of marriage and family. In this way the lover takes on agency in the experience of love as he performs the choice to accept and embrace the potentially overpowering natural phenomenon and places it in the meaningful world of culture. The subject's cultural placing of love in the conventional entities of marriage, home and family checks love's natural, potentially uncontrollable power and transforms it into a steady and strong basis for the protagonists' lives together.

Although the successful declaration of love that completes the realization of true love is always constituted, in Roberts' popular romances, by the phrase "I love you," the words alone are not enough. "I love you" is *only* successful as a declaration of love when it performs the lover's volition to place love in the cultural order and to make romantic love into the foundation of the culturally conventional entities of marriage (a lifetime spent together), home and family.^[7] That simply speaking the words "I love you" does not

constitute the successful declaration of love becomes clear when we look more closely at one of the few unsuccessful declarations the corpus of this study includes. In *One Man's Art*, for example, the protagonists declare their love to one another for the first time about halfway through the novel, but these declarations are ultimately unsuccessful (the relationship still falls apart afterwards). A closer reading of the scene reveals the problem:

[Hero Grant:] "I feel like someone's just given me a solid right straight to the gut. [. . .] So now I'm in love with you, and I can tell you, I'm not crazy about the idea." [. . .]

[Heroine Gennie]: "If you're in love with me, that's your problem. I have one of my own because I'm in love with you." [. . .]

[Grant] "We both would have been better off if you'd waited out that storm in a ditch instead of coming here. [. . .] I'm in love with you, and damn it, I don't like it. [. . .] I love you [. . .] I don't like it, I may never get used to it, but I love you. [. . .] You make my head swim." (405-7)

Although both hero and heroine speak the conventional words of love—words which are, moreover, explicitly connected to the body, so the material truth of this love is not in doubt—the characters do not perform the free choice to accept that love. Grant's repeated assertion that he "does not like" being in love with Gennie signals his lack of agency in the experience. The love he speaks of is the one over which he has no control and in which he makes no choice; it is the powerful, dangerous, potentially overwhelming kind of love which has not yet been brought into the cultural system—love without a place in the conventional cultural order. This unplaced love, though physically real and linguistically declared, is a "problem" to which neither character, in this stage of the story, has the solution. This problem is solved in the final scene of the novel when the protagonists' declarations of love lead to a marriage proposal and, implicitly, the perspective on a shared home and family (492-98).

As a successful declaration of love, the phrase "I love you" then works in a very particular way in Roberts' romance novels. Declared under the appropriate circumstances and conveying a particular set of meanings, the declaration *realises*—actualises, makes real—true love and thereby literally changes reality. Indeed, it is precisely *in saying the words* that true love is realised: the declaration "I love you" performs true love. "I love you" functions as a performative speech act in all of Roberts' romance novels, but this functioning is especially clearly illustrated in the paranormal romance *Morrigan's Cross*, in which the story's paranormal setting is used to explicitly depict the reality-changing impact of the declaration of love.

"I love you." She saw his eyes change. "Those are the strongest words in any magic. I love you. With that incantation, I already belong to you."

"Once I speak it, it's alive. Nothing can ever kill it. [. . .] I love you." A single beam of light shot out of the sky, washed over them, centred them in a circle of white. (249-50)

“I love you” is considered an “incantation,” “strong [. . .] magic[al]” words which perform the belonging to each other that romantic love implies. This scene emphasizes the power the spoken love-word has in Roberts’ romances: once love is spoken, it is “alive. Nothing can ever kill it.” The words, moreover, not only have an immediate effect on the body (“his eyes change”), but also literally change reality (“A single beam [. . .] white”).

This performative speech act, which can only be realized by a lover whose body and mind are harmoniously unified within the self, completes the lover’s journey and often heralds the beginning of the romance novel’s (in)famous happily-ever-after ending. The unification between body and mind—between the order of the material and of the immaterial—that is ultimately achieved in the experience of true love in Roberts’ romance novels turns these happily-ever-afters into epistemologically very appealing fictional universes. In these implied fictional worlds the radical insecurities that are part and parcel of the (post)modern condition are overcome and replaced by epistemological certitudes. These are worlds in which the self is unified, the body displays truth and the truth can be spoken. In these worlds true love not only exists, but becomes the epistemological, emotional, cultural, and economic foundation on which all else rests. These are, in short, the massively appealing fictional worlds that Belsey claims the popular romance novel promises but fails to deliver.

Conclusion

If Nora Roberts succeeds where, at least according to Belsey, other romance authors fail, is this success then the secret to Roberts’ unprecedented popularity? According to the terms set by Belsey’s older study, this would be the logical conclusion indeed. If Belsey is right in claiming that the massive appeal of popular romance fiction lies in its promise to unite mind and body and if Nora Roberts is the only author to actually consistently achieve this fictional unification, the logical outcome would be that it is Roberts’ mastery of this particular construction of romantic love that underlies her exceptional popular success.^[8] This suggestion is certainly intriguing and deserves further scrutiny in future work. But for the moment methodological rigor—of a kind that is characteristic of the further maturation of the field of Popular Romance Studies discussed in the introduction to this paper—urges caution in an attempt to avoid hasty conclusions.

A number of questions in fact remain open. While it is, for example, clear that this construction of romantic love recurs in Roberts’ romance novels, it remains unclear whether it is *specific* to Roberts’ work. Comparative analyses of other authorial romance oeuvres are necessary to determine the wider occurrence of this pattern. If the construction turns out to be specific to Roberts, further sociological or anthropological study of the reception of these novels is necessary to substantiate Belsey’s theory-based claim that it is precisely this particular representation of romantic love that determines the massive appeal of Roberts’ oeuvre. If the construction is not specific to Roberts’ oeuvre, it is possible that this study points towards an important wider historical shift in the romance genre. It is imaginable, for example, that the representation of the body and the mind as it was recorded by Belsey is a textual reflection of a particular cultural moment of anxiety about female sexuality. In the more than two decades that have passed since the

publication of the novels used in Belsey's study, this cultural anxiety surrounding female sexuality has lessened. Roberts' representation of romantic love might in fact be a textual trace of this wider socio-cultural evolution. Further study is necessary to substantiate such speculations.

As the scholarly study of popular romance fiction enters its fifth decade, transformations in the practice of this scholarship are in full swing. While these transformations necessarily imply a certain degree of distancing or separation between older and younger generations of romance scholars, the discussions in this paper illustrate the continued relevance of older studies to the present generation of popular romance scholars. Although we might be inclined to reject many of these older studies because of their (over)generalizing approach to the genre (see e.g. Selinger (2007)), this paper has shown how such general claims continue to be valuable as they provoke new and interesting analyses of the genre. The future of the study of popular romance fiction lies neither in the outright rejection of older claims nor in the uncritical acceptance thereof, but in our ability to use the powerful tools we find in earlier work to further our growing understanding of this complex and evolving genre.

[1] This paper could not have been realized without the help and support I received from Professor Eric Selinger; I thank him most cordially for his feedback. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers who reviewed earlier versions of this piece and provided many valuable suggestions.

[2] For a more extensive discussion of the development of the study of popular romance fiction and the relation between older and more recent studies of the genre see Regis (2011) and Goris (2011).

[3] That vastly less scholarly attention is paid to Roberts than to other contemporary bestselling author of genre fiction is indicated, for example, by data in the academic databank JSTOR which stores bibliographical information about scholarly articles. Several sample searches of JSTOR in September 2010 and September 2012 resulted in 599/800 hits for the search term "Rowling" ("Harry Potter" gave 607/1064), 1158/1449 for "Stephen King", 213/264 for "John Grisham", but barely 11/17 for "Nora Roberts" (three of these articles are about a different Nora (Ruth) Roberts and none of them are actual studies of the romance author).

[4] The most important academic discussions of Roberts' oeuvre are by Pamela Regis ("Complicating Romances" and *Natural History* 183-204), John Lennard (2007), Séverine Olivier (2008) and Chris Valeo (2012). A first academic monograph on Roberts is currently being prepared by the author of the present paper and is expected to be published by McFarland in 2014.

[5] Given the popular romance genre's infamous history with rape, an important distinction has to be pointed out here: while Roberts unabashedly emphasizes the violent force of the desire within the self, this violence does not translate into any kind of forced sexual interaction. Choice and free will are of paramount importance in Roberts' romance fiction and the texts never leave any doubt that the protagonists fully consent to all sexual interaction they have. There is, arguably, one exception in Roberts' entire oeuvre: in

Tonight and Always (1983) the hero comes very close to raping the heroine. Although she eventually “stop[s] struggling ... soften[s] and surrender[s]” (142) to him, it can be debated if this is consensual sex or so-called “forced seduction.”

[6] For similar scenes in these and other novels in this study, see: *One Man’s Art* 348, *Susanna’s Surrender* 431, *Montana Sky* 426, *Dance of the Gods* 228 and *High Noon* 282.

[7] The idea that “I love you” functions as a performative speech act in popular romance novels has been developed and discussed much more extensively by Lisa Fletcher in her ground-breaking study *Historical Romance Fiction*; see in particular pp. 25-48.

[8] The keen reader notes a logical inconsistency here because Belsey in fact suggests that the disappointment readers supposedly feel over the failed unification of mind and body drives the desire to read more romance. From this perspective, Roberts’ exceptional success is inexplicable according to the terms set out by Belsey.

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