

**Vivanco, Laura. *For Love and Money: The Literary Art of the Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance*. Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks, 2011. £14.95; £9.95 (ebook); \$9.99 (ebook).**

**Review by Maryan Wherry**

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Nearly thirty years ago, Margaret Ann Jensen wrote *Love's Sweet Return: The Harlequin Story* (1984), perhaps the first full-length academic study of category romance fiction. Jensen lamented the status of popular romance, which when not ignored is "vilified as is no other category of popular fiction" (25). It was considered, in short, "trash," and Jensen defended its value, attraction and appeal, specifically from the perspective of its readers (159). In her historical study, *The Romance Fiction of Mills & Boon, 1909-1990s* (1999), Jay Dixon continued to defend the category romance, this time concentrating on the adaptability and diversity of the romance story itself. Both of these foundational texts in popular romance studies present the conclusion that popular romance novels in general, and category romances in particular, are often complex, culturally-informed stories undeserving of the contempt heaped upon them. In *For Love and Money: The Literary Art of the Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance*, Laura Vivanco extends the study of Harlequin Mills & Boon (HMB), moving from readers and publishers into close reading and analysis of the texts of the romances themselves.

John Cawelti, in his seminal study of popular fiction, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, separated mimetic fiction from formulaic popular fiction. "The mimetic element in literature confronts" readers with reality, he argued, while the "formulaic element reflects the construction of an ideal world" (13). Jensen had claimed that readers and critics "measure formula fiction with mimetic standards and find it wanting" (17). Vivanco takes what is denigrated by Cawelti and the Literary World as the most formulaic type of genre fiction and examines its mimetic modes, turning Cawelti's distinction on its head. She deftly shows how HMB romances weave the conventions of the romance formula with threads of mimetic material, displaying all the creative invention and originality of novels that are widely understood to display Literary Merit.

Because of the formulaic structure of category romance, there is a preconception that action and character are ready-made and pre-motivated, so there is little to no room

for radical originality or even individuality. The limitations of the genre formula, therefore, must restrict literary artistry; after all, it is more difficult to create within restrictions. Here, too, Vivanco up ends and disproves such myths with a bit of critical jujitsu. Rather than lament the conventionality of the romance and the rigor of HMB guidelines, she shows the real artistry of HMB writers, who work within and play with these conventions, creating “well-written, skillfully crafted works which can and do engage the minds as well as the emotions” (15). “A few” of these works, she argues, “are small masterpieces,” and her discussion goes on to explore and illustrate the artistry within them (15).

Using Northrop Frye’s rubric of mimetic modes, Vivanco analyzes issues, characters and plots in nearly eighty years of HMB romances. Frye’s five mimetic modes—myth, romance, high mimetic, low mimetic, and irony—appear and operate at various capacities in HMB novels, ranging from larger social concerns to use of vocabulary. Through close textual readings, Vivanco shows how these modes are incorporated and interwoven by authors, not by accident, but as conscious constructions and aesthetics of social and physical context. She offers a virtual tutorial of determining levels of realism regarding setting and details, issues, and the happy ending. The direct derivation of romance “protagonists from mythic and romance modes” gives insight into the types of characters and relationships HMB romance novels contain. The heroes of romance range from the high mimetic knight to low mimetic commoner. Vivanco then traces the foundational plotlines of HMB fiction, examining explicit and implicit influences from Greek mythology, Arthurian legends, and Western fairy tales and showing how these *mythoi* function within various modes. The rich and complex heritage of the romance genre, placing the HMB romance in a long tradition of literature that extends from ancient Greek texts and Medieval poetry to the contemporary period, is clearly established.

Having established the structural components of HMB romance, Vivanco moves to the “metafiction” of “romances which acknowledge or explore their own fictionality, their relationship to other fictions, or their place in popular culture” (109). HMB writers, readers, and novels themselves are clearly aware of the intertextuality of these books, their self-reflexivity both as romances and as popular fiction more generally. Literary allusions to classic writers, Shakespeare, and other popular culture forums appear liberally in HMB romances. Vivanco’s discussion neatly deflates the assumption that romance authors, novels, or readers lack an awareness of the difference between fantasy and reality: to the contrary, she shows that their sense of the relationship between these is thoughtful, subtle, nuanced, and playful.

As with all other literary genres, the romance employs stock allusions, words, and phrases, which function as “codes” to evoke emotion. Such uses of metaphor and symbolism have deep roots in Western Literature and HMB romances are no different from so-called “literary” texts in their use of verbal and visual metaphors, not only to describe love but also to build thematic continuity within a particular text. Whether the metaphors are drawn from building and construction or gardens and flowers, such conscious choice and use of metaphor is very close to a poet’s concentration on the power of a specific word. Vivanco’s argument underscores Angela Toscano’s suggestion that the “romance narrative ritualizes language,” investing crucial metaphors with multiple layers of meaning and purpose (§ 30). It is at this point that the HMB romances are perhaps their most literary, and *For Love and Money* is most revealing.

*For Love and Money* is an ambitious work, rigorously researched and documented

with a daunting wealth of examples. If there is a weakness to this study, it is the author's reliance on long block quotations, which can become distracting to the overall discussion and inhibit readability. The introduction, which flirts with a defensive tone, is also perhaps a bit disappointing, as it suggests that the field of romance criticism hasn't progressed since Jensen's study; certainly it stands at odds with the assertive, upbeat sense of the book as a whole.

Overall, however, Laura Vivanco's analysis of the category romance is both meticulous and inspiring. And while Vivanco limits her examples and discussions to category romances by Harlequin Mills & Boon and the HQN imprint, her application of Frye's mimetic modes begs for expansion to texts and authors across the genre. This piece of literary criticism should serve as a template for romance scholars to move from defending the genre to discussing its values and complexity as a literary art.

## Works Cited

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