

Ten Years After *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*: Thinking Back, Looking Forward

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A Natural History of the Romance Novel was published ten years ago. At the kind invitation of the PCA Romance Area co-chairs, Drs. Eric Selinger and An Goris, I welcomed the opportunity to revisit a bit of the history of that text, which I do in Part I, and to explain the goals and ideas concerning romance criticism that guide my current project: a history of the American romance novel from 1803 to the present. This I do in Part II.

Part I. Thinking Back, A Tale of Three Conferences

At the March 1991 PCA Annual Conference in San Antonio, where I presented a paper titled "Jane Austen as a Romance Writer," there were perhaps a dozen people in attendance at the romance session, if you include the presenters. My piece, an extremely early version of the analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* in *A Natural History*, was not very well argued and even less well received. Some feminists handed me my head. One stayed after the session ended to speak to me, making sure that my head was well and truly severed.

“Everything is political,” she informed me. A Marxist accused me of false consciousness. Others nodded.

I left the session and visited the Alamo to commune with the ghost of Davy Crockett. No worries, though. This being literary criticism and not an actual battle for political and national causes, unlike Davy I left the Alamo—quite alive—and visited the Riverwalk, where there were margaritas to be had.

Enter my Fairy Godmother, in the person of Patricia Smith, who, by the time I met her, had left her editing job with Silhouette Books to become a humanities editor at the University of Pennsylvania Press. Having read the program for the romance section of that same PCA, she emailed me and asked me to write a book on the romance novel. I said yes. Her request exactly echoed the advice that LeRoy Panek, one of the members of the committee that hired me at McDaniel College, had given me. LeRoy taught Shakespeare and Renaissance lit at McDaniel. Now retired, he is working on his twelfth or thirteenth monograph on detective and mystery fiction.

So, what I had, I now realize, was a remarkable institutional context: a major university press and an English department both being willing to sponsor and support the writing of the book that became *A Natural History*. The University of Pennsylvania Press printed it. McDaniel would switch my term appointment to tenure track and count this book as worthy scholarship.

A dozen years later, just after the book was published, at the SW/TX PCA/ACA Conference in February 2003, I gave two 40-minute presentations: “An Overview of the Heroine in Romance” and “*A Natural History of the Romance Novel: A Discussion with Pamela Regis*.” Nobody handed me my head, perhaps because there were so few people there. If you added the two audiences together, perhaps a dozen people were in attendance. “So, that’s that,” I thought. I walked away from popular romance to return to the study of Jane Austen, presenting at the Annual General Meetings of the Jane Austen Society of North America, of which I am a life member. I published articles on the point of ritual death in *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*.

Not long after, in 2004, I began to realize that the study of popular romance was not really dead when I met Sarah Frantz at the annual Austen confab. Sarah would go on to found the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance and to serve as that organization’s first president. At the speakers’ breakfast she sat down next to me, introduced herself, and said something like, “I like your book.” I imagine I looked at her with wild surmise. I know I thought, “Holy cow, somebody read my book!”

Which brings us to now, the PCA Annual Convention, March 2013, at which more than fifty scholars of romance are presenting their work at fourteen sessions over three days. This growth is gratifying, to say the least. Others can comment on the contribution my book may have made to the field of popular romance studies. I’ll simply say that I am still surprised, and delighted, when I hear myself cited.

Part II. Looking Forward

I would like to spend the rest of my time talking a bit about the issues that I currently grapple with when I think about writing romance scholarship. My current project

is a history of the American romance from 1803 to the present. As context, my departmental bailiwick is early American literature, where I am engaged in something of an argument with the canon of the American novel. (For example, I ask of *Moby-Dick*, “Really, Herman?”)

I think a fair amount about the ethics of literary criticism, and I actually believe what might be called “Regis’s First Principle of Literary Critical Ethics”: The most modest work of fiction, including romance fiction, is a greater accomplishment than the finest work of literary criticism.

From this principle I derive a strong suspicion of the ideas of *contemptus mundi* identified by Laura Wilder as one of the topoi that literary critics employ to signal their membership in the discourse community of literary critics (Regis, “What Do Critics”). *Contemptus mundi* (literally, contempt for the world), refers to the literary critics’ shared sense that the world is fallen, in the face of which fact, Wilder tells us, the critic “exhibits an assumption of despair over the condition of society.” Moreover “the critic tends to value works that describe despair, alienation, seediness, anxiety, decay, declining values, and difficulty in living and loving in our society.” Finally, “the critic attempts to point out the unresolvable tensions and shadows in literature that at face value seem optimistic” (85).

If a critic guided by this principle chooses not to study popular romance—that is a win for both the critic and romance. But if a critic guided by this principle chooses to study romance, the critic risks, I believe, overlooking the most important things about romance, and risks demonstrating, once again, that the world is fallen. My response to most arguments that conclude, yet once more, with a finding that the world is fallen: “Well, we knew that. What else ya got?” I would like to illustrate this less enlightening approach to romance criticism with what I hope are more enlightening ones by using *Emily Hamilton* by Sukey Vickery, the first work of early American romance fiction that I will be talking about in my current study.

Consider this passage, which we find late in this epistolary novel, from a letter sent to Mary, one of the courting young people who by this time has reached her happily ever after (her HEA), written by Emily, who is struggling to get over her love for Edward Belmont, our hero, who is already married. His marriage to someone other than the heroine is, as you might imagine, in my terms, a huge part of the barrier.

Emily Hamilton was written 210 years ago, yet this passage is instantly recognizable to any contemporary romance reader:

I [Emily] expressed my surprise to Miranda [Edward’s sister], while we were walking, that Mrs. Belmont [i.e., Clara, Edward’s wife] should wish to be in Boston at this season of the year. “It is natural to us,” she replied, “to wish for the company of those to whom we are most attached.”—“It is indeed,” I replied, “but is Mrs. Belmont more attached to her parents, than to her husband and child?” “No.—But to tell you a little secret, Emily, between ourselves, there is one whom Clara prefers to the whole world, and was forced to surrender by the command of her father, to marry my brother [Edward]. Of this circumstance, Edward was ignorant till nearly a year after his marriage, and even then he came accidentally by his information, but in what manner he would never explain to me.” “You surprise me, Miranda, is it from this, then, that her dejection arises?” “It is, and from the consciousness

that she can only esteem my brother, while his tenderness to her demands a grateful return. Edward is unhappy; the match was made by my father and old Mr. Belknap, the father of Clara. She was commanded by her father to receive and encourage the addresses of Edward—Edward on the other hand was told, that Clara Belknap was the most desirable person in point of fortune, that he could ever have pretensions to, and was desired by my father to consider her as his future bride. In obedience to a parent's wishes, he made her several visits, and as she appeared very amiable, and quite willing to be his, they were hastily married. To common observers, they appear to be a happy couple, but to me, as I am well acquainted with their minds, the appearance is vastly different." (93-94)

Contemptus mundi is easy. It is 1803, and *couverture* exerts its full power over the Massachusetts society in which this contemporary romance is set. Clara Belmont has been a *feme covert*—literally, a covered woman—since her marriage to the hero, Edward. Mary, the recipient of this letter, has with her recent marriage just become a *feme covert*. Emily will become one in her turn. To twenty-first-century Western thinking this is lamentable; it is wrong, in our view, to efface a woman's legal status—including her ability to own property, to keep her earnings should she manage to earn any money, and to make contracts. The little we know about Sukey Vickery includes the fact that she disappeared as poet and novelist very soon after publishing *Emily Hamilton*, presumably as a consequence of her becoming a *feme covert* at the time of her marriage. She gave birth to and oversaw the care and education of nine children. She died at the age of 41. So, there is plenty to be contemptuous of in the world in which Vickery and her characters lived.

But how useful is it to point this out yet once more? Why bother?

I will try to answer the question I posed earlier: "What else ya got?" I do not have the time to talk about three of the approaches to *Emily Hamilton* that I will use in the full-length version of my analysis of this novel. There, I will revisit my use of the term "genre," guided by the work of John Frow—a sort of apology for making everyone's hair stand on end in *A Natural History* by talking about "essential" elements, which I will likely re-label "pragmatic" or "practical." I still think they are essential, and I am still pretty much an essentialist, but I am aware that this is something that puts off people who posit a more constructivist view of genre.

More importantly, I will apply to the study texts the insights of "Theory of Mind" and its illumination of what a reader does when she reads a romance novel. I am surprised to find myself talking about readers, although my approach will not be ethnographic, which I believe to be fraught with difficulties. The initial readers of *Emily Hamilton* are, after all, dead. You have no idea what a relief this is to a literary historian who did not read a single living author during her entire undergraduate degree. Theory of Mind, also called mind reading, is the ability of a person to be able to attribute to another person the attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and so forth held by the second person. It turns out that it does not matter if the second person is real or not—he or she can be a character in a novel.

Another goal will be to approach *Emily Hamilton* in such a way that the analysis joins the larger conversation about the American novel, a conversation that gathered momentum about a century ago. I will look at the place of *Emily Hamilton* in American literary history, taking special notice of the novel's vigorous challenge to the "seduction

narrative” genre on which American literary historians hang a political interpretation of the nation’s early novels and around which they array the early American novel, marginalizing the romances.

Today I would like to look a bit harder at a fourth approach—taking Vickery at her word when she claims that her novel is “founded on interesting scenes in real life” (4). I want to recover some of the nitty-gritty detail of that “real life.” What was it like in early nineteenth-century Massachusetts to be in a relationship, and in a marriage, and what might those realities suggest about courtship? How do those realities illuminate barrier and ritual death in Vickery’s novel, two of the greatest repositories of meaning in the romance? How might the lived experiences of actual early Americans have yielded this and other romances that have come down to us from early America?

I wish to look at Vickery’s reference to “real life” in the context of one of the broadest claims I have made about the romance novel: that the removal of the barrier and the subsequent betrothal between the courting young people is a joyful expression of freedom (*A Natural History* 206). And writing in a more specifically American context, I have made the stronger claim that American romance protagonists, including the women, “pursue companionate union that permits them to retain their freedom” (“Female Genre Fiction” 858). I wish to look at Vickery’s heroines in light of this stronger statement as well.

Historians of the law and the family have provided us with accounts of the “real life” in early America that Vickery cared enough about to depict in her first and only novel. Scholars examining the legal record of past centuries accomplish something remarkable: they look at individual cases, preserved in minute detail, of what it was like to be married, what it was like to be in a relationship, what it was like to divorce.

Divisions within the ranks of the historians of the law parallel those within the criticism of the romance. Hendrick Hartog, a legal historian writing in *Man and Wife in America: A History*, has described the two camps that legal scholars fall into, paralleling our familiar romance-is-bad-for-you vs. romance-is-good-for-you dichotomy. Hartog explains that legal scholarship, like romance scholarship, is “shaped by explicit political and normative concerns. One side begins with a demonstration that traditional legal rules, identified with the term ‘couverture,’ were bad, like slavery. . . . The other side glorifies the nineteenth-century ideology of permanent and highly structured marriage for the ethos of care, mutuality, continuity, and support that it produced” (3-4). He sidesteps this dichotomy to look at individual cases, to get at the ways in which couples, but especially women, navigate within *couverture*. Clearly, any happily married early nineteenth-century American woman—or man for that matter—had to navigate his or her way to that happiness within that legal framework.

It seems to me that this is partly what *Emily Hamilton* and other early American romance novels have to be about: a nineteenth-century reader’s interest in watching someone else navigate *couverture*—and the other legal and social conditions surrounding marriage. Close reading via Theory of Mind will back this idea up, by the way. Certainly, all of us live our lives—we navigate—within various laws, and some of these laws are ill advised and in need of repeal or revision. Yet we can still arrive at happiness.

So, how was this navigation accomplished, and how do I relate this accomplishment to the narrative elements of *Emily Hamilton*, which I repeat, is a novel “founded on interesting scenes of real life,” and which is set in eastern Massachusetts just after the turn of the nineteenth century?

Historian Nancy F. Cott has found details that illuminate this navigation in her reading of 229 petitions for divorce brought before Massachusetts courts from 1692-1786. Accounts of happy marriages do not reach the courts, but unhappy marriages must be detailed in order for a divorce to be granted. Vickery was seven years old in 1786, Cott's *terminus ad quem*. Cott explores the society into which Vickery was born. Here is real life without the scare quotes, and without the danger of anachronism, of reading back onto Vickery's society the traditions of our own.

Recall that in the passage from *Emily Hamilton* you have seen, in a letter to Mary from Emily, Emily recounts a conversation she has had with Miranda, the hero's sister. The novel is filled with passages of this sort—friends and acquaintances explaining the private lives of one or more of no fewer than a dozen courting young people—and there is a huge cast of characters. In this particular novel it is mostly the women—all of the letter writers are female—who recount the situations and actions, with a focus on the men.

How is this realistic? Is it not just a fictional convention that we have all of this incessant reporting of other young people's situations, actions, and reputations in order to have a novel at all?

No.

It turns out that the community was instrumental in the conduct of marriage in Vickery's time. Cott tells us, "Members of the local community functioned as overseers, guardians, and conciliators: in their minds the rights of husbands and wives were clearly defined and ready to be imposed on any nonconforming couple for their own and the common benefit. Sometimes a dozen or more persons involved themselves in sorting out a couple's allegations against one another and advising them what to do" ("Eighteenth-Century" 24).

The community even participated in the definition of marriage. Religious solemnization of marriage was far from universal, and civil recognition of marriage could involve no ceremony or written contract at all. Cott notes, "courts were generally satisfied when a couple's cohabitation looked like and was reputed in the community to be marriage." In some cases "pregnancy or childbirth was the signal for a couple to consider themselves married" (*Public Vows* 39, 31).

We see that definition of marriage depended on the community. Community members policed couples, and their statements constituted the finding that a marriage had, indeed, occurred. The nineteenth-century American definition of marriage was far more fluid than our own, in which a public record of a given marriage is how we know that a marriage has, indeed, come into existence.

What Vickery's novel recreates is precisely this oversight community. Vickery's letter writers write primarily to comment on—to oversee—others' courtships, and to monitor their own as well. Thus, the novel realistically reconstructs early nineteenth-century Massachusetts (and, Hartog would add, American) society, providing a detailed account of this oversight.

We find real life in the barriers to marriage depicted in the novel as well. The hero's marriage was made for dynastic purposes, as Miranda explains to Emily, who reports this fact to Mary. Parents arranged it. We contrast this with the barriers to union between Emily and two other young men: one ends up facing a death sentence, and another, a worthy suitor, dies at sea. Emily sidesteps union with both a rake and worthy man she respects but does not love.

We learn the fate of a number of other young women. Three die—one of consumption, Clara of postpartum illness (which clears the barrier preventing Edward's marriage to Emily), and one of suicide. Two navigate to the safety of a companionate marriage.

The suicide realizes that the man whose baby she carries is already married.

Surely this rake—also recognizable to any twentieth-first century romance reader, is a literary convention, right?

No.

Returning to Cott's account of late eighteenth-century divorce petitions, we read, "Caleb Morey acted upon his belief that 'a Man had a right to be concerned with as many Women as he pleased whenever he could have a chance.' Bostonian Adam Air defiantly maintained that 'one Woman was as good to him as another.' Sutton trader Steven Holman acknowledged 'that He Had Rogred [sic] other Woman [sic] [besides his wife] and ment [sic] to Roger Every Likely Woman He Could and as many as would Let Him,' and that 'he had deceived [sic] Many Woman [sic] in Order to get his will of them'" ("Eighteenth-Century" 34).

Here we have actual, real-life rakes who circulated in a culture where transportation was difficult; where news traveled, when it traveled at all, at the speed of a letter; and where a marriage could be initiated and conducted without civil or religious intervention. Men could walk away from a marriage without divorcing—and they did. Bigamy was a widely recognized outcome of this practice (Hartog 19-20). Pregnancy was a dangerous way for a woman to demonstrate that she was, in fact, married—recall that it could be taken as the visual sign that a marriage had taken place—and was sometimes the only such sign. There are two rakes in *Emily Hamilton*. Neither gets a happily ever after. Emily herself identifies and distances herself from one of them, warned by his manner and by news of his perfidy. Mary sidesteps the other one. Had they succumbed, we might have had a *Charlotte Temple*-like narrative, in which a heroine is seduced, abandoned, and dies.

With this in mind, consider ritual death in *Emily Hamilton*. It is foreshadowed in the meeting scene between Emily and her hero, Edward. Recall that the eight elements of the romance novel as set out in *A Natural History* can occur in any order, be doubled or tripled, and more than one element can be manifested in a given scene or bit of action (27-39).

Emily provides an account of the meeting in her courtship in a letter to Mary, thus creating another scene instantly recognizable to a contemporary romance reader: "I tremble even at the thought of past danger, for the moment we reached the bridge, the horse by some means extricated himself from the tackling, and as I still kept the reins [Emily is driving, not being driven] . . . was thrown into the river. . . . I should soon have expired, [this first point of ritual death is visited upon the heroine in this narrative] had not Heaven sent a deliverer." People from a nearby tavern, "ran to our assistance; a gentleman who was with them plunged into the stream, and brought me out. I fainted in the arms of my deliverer" (38-39). Later, Emily and her female traveling companion drink tea with this "new friend," but he "did not express a wish to be acquainted with [their] names" and the women do not ask his name, either (39). In fact, Emily does not learn that this is Edward Belmont, the hero, until he moves into her neighborhood—until, that is, the community around them can confirm his identity, including his marital status, his religious and economic situation, and the propriety of his behavior.

Why is ritual death present in the river scene, which is also the “meeting” element of this particular romance novel courtship? In a well-constructed romance novel, ritual death typically occurs when the barrier is as high as it will ever be. And, indeed, at this point Edward and Emily’s union already is impossible—his marriage is the barrier. In pointedly not trying to learn Emily’s identity, Edward separates himself from the men who move into a new area after having walked away from their marriages, intending to court again. By this point in the novel, Emily has recounted the story of Matilda Capon, who meets a man touring her neighborhood for the salutary country air, who seduces her, and then leaves her with a \$50 bill enclosed in a Dear Jane letter that also contains the news that he is already married. Matilda—pregnant and abandoned—hangs herself (29-30).

So, what we have in *Emily Hamilton* is, indeed, a story founded on “interesting scenes of real life.” Yet it is not a novel that focuses on Matilda. Both Emily and Mary reject the suits of rakes in order to navigate to the safe harbor of marriage to an honorable man, known to them and their community.

I will simply note that the other six elements are as revelatory as barrier and ritual death.

A number of observations follow from this brief glimpse into *Emily Hamilton*. The novel is a contemporary—set in the author’s own time and place. The contemporary romance novel of any given era, it seems to me, offers a very valuable baseline for the study of the various subgenres whose authors build worlds far different from those of the society of their day.

Emily Hamilton is a modest book. At the same time that Vickery was working on *Emily Hamilton*, Jane Austen was working on *First Impressions*, the epistolary first draft of *Pride and Prejudice*. Each of these authors, both Richardsonians—*Pamela* and *Sir Charles Grandison* are the immediate progenitors of their novels—produces a romance novel, but only one is a work of genius. I will state what seems to me to be obvious: It is harder to write something interesting about a modest work than a more accomplished work. It is well to remember, however, that the location of this difficulty is in the critic, not in the work to be analyzed.

Although getting beyond our own assumptions about the past, particularly about romantic partnerships in the past, makes writing about older texts a challenge, I would argue that the same difficulties attend writing about recent texts, those written in the critic’s own era. Assumptions about romantic partnerships can be very difficult to identify. At least with an early nineteenth-century text the critic has a built-in perspective—the two centuries separating her from the text itself.

Despite the gratifying growth of romance criticism over the last few decades, we still know very little about the oceans of romances. As always, our comparative ignorance serves a dual purpose: it is both a caution—and a call to action.

I offer a brief conclusion—addressing the question where does romance criticism, as a field, go from here?

We now have a number of resources and institutional structures in place that we did not have ten years ago when *A Natural History* was published; where will they take us? Examples from my own institution, thanks to the generosity of the Nora Roberts Foundation, include The Nora Roberts Center for the Study of American Romance and The Nora Roberts Collection at McDaniel College’s Hoover Library. Another example is this PCA

area, which has been rejuvenated and repopulated. Still another example is the founding of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance.

I ask you and our panelists: What are the challenges the field faces? What are its tasks? Where do we go from here?

Thank you for studying the romance, and thank you for your attention this morning.

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