



Love's Laborers Lost: Radway, Romance Writers, and Recuperating Our Past

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Once upon a time, a group of romance novelists in America banded together and formed a professional organization. (That time was, to be more exact, 1980.) And once upon more or less the same time, several scholars began writing about popular romance. I think it's fairly safe to say that Janice Radway and the other scholars exploring this area at the time did not see themselves as "scholars of popular romance," but rather as scholars examining romance to learn other things, such as, in Radway's case, how the meaning of a text might be constituted by a reading community. Nonetheless, there was suddenly a critical mass of women—some authors, some scholars—working industriously on and around the area of popular romance and, for worse rather than for better, they were operating in ignorance of each other's efforts. Their eventual discovery of each other's work was not a happy surprise. Instead, it was a fairly destructive collision that would effectively derail the possibility of popular romance scholarship as a field for several decades. Even now in 2014, after much hard work towards rapprochement on the part of IASPR, the RWA, and many good-willed individuals, residual effects of the distrust and acrimony of the 1980s and '90s linger, and sometimes even reproduce themselves.

What on earth happened? That's the question I asked myself when, in the mid-2000s, a research project sent me back towards scholarship on popular romance and I started to piece together the detritus of a destructive conflict, years after it had taken place.

I remembered *Reading the Romance* quite fondly, from my time in the English M.A. program at Georgetown University, where I had also completed my undergraduate degree. GU was not exactly a forerunner of progressive thought at the time. Studying a work written by a woman was still pretty unconventional in the English Department, where I took a course on satire whose syllabus included *not a single work* by a female author. (When asked, the professor explained that women didn't write satire. It never occurred to me that he could be wrong about this, so I spent the semester convinced that I was incapable of understanding the definition of satire.) The brave professors who worked in Women's Studies, meanwhile, frequently found themselves targeted by conservative students and alumni and unsupported by the administration. Indeed, Women's Studies faculty would occasionally find offensive publications and caricatures shoved under their

office doors when they got to campus. But these women taught us exciting, revolutionary things.

I can remember reading a friend's paper that applied some of Radway's ideas to M.M. Kaye's *The Far Pavilions* and feeling intellectual exhilaration—we could write about works written by women! We could write about non-canonical texts! We could write about popular culture! We could even . . . wait for it . . . write about non-canonical popular texts *written by women*! And Radway's book—like Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance*, which we also read—gave us a way to do this work, because it was obviously a very academic book, full of theory and research and authority. I have never, before or since, had such an experience of being at the center of something so important and so enlightening, where every day unveiled new discoveries. In some ways, I can blame my decision to pursue a Ph.D. on Radway and Tania Modleski; I even chose Modleski's alma mater for my doctoral work.

After the master's degree, the fun part of graduate work was over. I wrote about Ebola and other hemorrhagic fevers. I spent years tracking down British sailors' accounts of cannibalism, and big-game hunters' reminiscences of killing tigers. And I didn't keep up on anything happening in the world of popular romance. You can imagine my surprise and dismay, all those years later, to discover that, at the same time I had been reading about hunters' practice of waiting for a tiger's wounds to "stiffen," my scholar heroines had been tarred as villains by some popular romance novelists and scholars. In fact, the 1990s for our field look a bit like a particularly thorny series of peace talks, in which one volume's promising efforts towards reconciliation are undermined almost immediately by another volume's renewed hostilities. Krentz's 1992 collection, *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, was a high point here, and the book's attempt to speak across the divide is emphasized by a back cover blurb from Radway calling for "feminist literary and media critics" to read the book. By contrast, two issues of *Paradoxa* from the late 1990s could serve as a case study on what *not* to do in conflict resolution. The journal's 1997 special issue on romance included a piece by Tania Modleski, "My Life as a Romance Reader," alongside work by junior scholars and romance authors. (Some contributors straddled the great divide, like Jennifer Crusie Smith.) Taken aback by what she later called the "insane optimism" of the issue overall, and by the "vitriol" directed at Radway, Ann Barr Snitow, and other foundational scholars—including herself—Modleski wrote an unhappy follow-up essay, "My Life as a Romance Writer," which drew an equally unhappy response from the special issue's editor, Kay Mussell: a missed opportunity for real exchange that the field is still trying to make up.

To some extent, this ebb and flow of recrimination still continues today, with newer novelists and scholars running across earlier writing and getting all worked up again. I include myself here; when I recently looked back at the piece I wrote while catching up on this debate, "**The Love Life of a Fact**," I was shocked to see my own anger spilling into the article. Again, this was anger towards people I had never met for saying unfair things about other people I had never met. Years ago.

So, what caused all this anger? One reason, surely, is that the intended audience of early scholarship on popular romance turns out to overlap only partially with the actual audience for this work. Radway herself notes this in the revised 1991 introduction to *Reading the Romance*: "whatever her intentions, no writer can foresee or prescribe the way her book will develop, be taken up, or read" (2). And the key audience neglected

by *Reading the Romance* and its companions was the romance writing community. I think the insult was even bigger: romance novelists, newly organized and proud to see themselves as women whose writing made other women happy, found themselves not only criticized for causing harm, not only pitied as victims of false consciousness, but erased as *novelists*. Gone. Radway wrote of “the romance” as “a fixed myth embodied in other nearly identical ‘novels’” (199). For a romance novelist reading one of these early works on popular romance, the clear impression is that these scholars saw romance novelists as interchangeable cogs in a machine generating undifferentiated and potentially harmful mass culture, not unlike the “pink slime” in fast food hamburgers. It’s not a pleasant picture. From the perspective of the elitist “high culture” definition of literature at the time, Radway was daring to allow that “romances seem to function as novels do” (199), but it seems unlikely that many romance novelist would have read that cautious comparison as a compliment.

Today I doubt that any of us here would feel we had to reserve the term “novel” for literary fiction. In fact, Radway herself would probably not have been putting the term “novel” in scare quotes (as in that reference to “nearly identical ‘novels’”) if she had written the book a decade later. At the time, however, scholarship applying the idea of “mass culture” to popular works had not figured out the limitations of a factory-based metaphor of “mass production,” which obscures the difference between a widget and a genre of fiction.[1] And theory-driven literary scholars knew that the author was dead—Roland Barthes had killed him about fifteen years earlier. Further, almost all of us wrote about the works of authors who were not just theoretically dead but actually dead; a critic did not have to worry about delivering a conference paper on the Brontë sisters and discovering them right there in the audience. All of this would have made it hard to see romance writers, especially before the growth of the RWA helped make them visible. If the rest of us had been young faculty writing scholarly works on romance at the time, would we have seen past all these disciplinary blinkers to celebrate romance novelists? It’s a nice fantasy. Perhaps we would also be the antebellum plantation owner’s widow who manumits all her slaves, operates a station on the Underground Railroad, encourages her family and staff to adopt a healthful, low-fat diet, and, in the later post-war years, fights tirelessly against importing kudzu. In other words, we could only have done it if we were time travellers.

In a new introduction for the 1991 re-release of her book, Janice Radway wrote, “What is needed, I have come to feel, is a recognition that romance writers and readers are themselves struggling with gender definitions and sexual politics on their own terms and that what they may need most from those of us struggling in other arenas is our support rather than our criticism or direction. To find a way to provide such support, however, or alternatively to learn from romance writers and readers is not easy, for we lack the space and channels for integrating our practices with theirs” (18). We now have that space and those channels, and much of that opportunity was created here, by Area Chairs of the PCA Romance section who would go on to create IASPR and JPRS, organizations whose value more than compensates for their horrible acronyms (sorry, but it’s true. Jeepers, what were you people thinking?). Romance scholars and romance novelists sit in the same room and talk to one another; we may not always agree with each other, but at least we listen. Essays attend not just to texts but to their authors, their editors, their readers, their conditions of publication, and even their translators. At long last, romance scholars have a community,

with the concomitant opportunities for cross-pollination and the growth of new knowledge. And I think our HEA with our scholarly predecessors is long past due.

[1] For an extended discussion of the origins and limitations of the “mass-production” metaphor, see “On Popular Romance, J. R. Ward, and the Limits of Genre Study” by Mary Bly.

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