

## ***Forever Amber*, Censorship, and Popular Romance Studies**

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It seems as if censorship is back in vogue. Truthfully, it never really left. I am preparing to teach a course called “Censorship and Obscenity,” and while the course is not focused on popular romance, I cannot help but see correspondences. I think here most obviously of attacks on YA literatures, which often themselves have strong affinities to popular romance. Oftentimes, I find myself lost in thought wondering about what the implications of censorship might be for the study of popular romance, but also for the general reader of romance. Will these books be subject to an “age-rating” system that will require “age verification” the way many states are enacting measures for the use of pornographic material? While romance novels may not be pornography, they certainly have been accused of being pornographic (most often by critics who would see them as lacking in aesthetic value). And even if we do not see them as pornography, we must admit they can be graphically sexual, some might even say obscene. My word choice here is intentional; I am returning to *Roth v. United States* 354 U.S. 476 (1953), which established principles that are key to determining if a work is obscene, and therefore worthy of censorship.

*Roth v. United States* is long recognized as a landmark court case in the United States, as it gave way to freer expression, and, some would argue, greater clarity around what is and what is not obscene. In *Roth v. United States*, the Justices set a benchmark that declared: “Obscene material is material which deals with sex in a manner appealing to prurient interest-i.e., material having a tendency to excite lustful thoughts,” and further, “The standard for judging obscenity, adequate to withstand the charge of constitutional infirmity, is whether, to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material, taken as a whole, appeals to prurient interest.” Long after the court’s decision, much of the way obscenity is still evaluated in the contemporary context rests upon these ideas.

Only a few years earlier, the Attorney General of Massachusetts sought to ban Kathleen Winsor’s *Forever Amber* (1944), a nearly one-thousand-page historical romance novel. What is so striking about this, at least today, is that this unfolded alongside controversy surrounding another lengthy tome, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Today, however, when

we think of censorship, we rarely think of *Forever Amber* and instead think of *Ulysses*. In a fascinating article, “Subversive Middlebrow: The Campaigns to Ban Kathleen Winsor’s *Forever Amber* in the U.S. and Canada,” Lise Jaillant explains:

On 10 March 1947, one week after the opening of the trial, Judge Donahue declared *Forever Amber* not obscene. As in the *Ulysses* case, the judge concluded that the novel would not arouse lust in an ordinary reader. “The book by its very repetitions of Amber’s adventures in sex acts like a soporific rather than an aphrodisiac,” he said. “While conducive to sleep, it is not conducive to sleep with a member of the opposite sex” (“Court Sanctions ‘Forever Amber’”). The Library of Congress asked for two copies of the trial memorandum, on the ground that “this case involves important principles and seems likely to be as memorable as the *Ulysses* case of some years ago.” Yet the *Forever Amber* case has now fallen into oblivion, whereas the *Ulysses* trial continues to be scrutinized. This tells us a lot about academia’s distrust of the middlebrow: despite Macmillan’s efforts, very few academics considered *Forever Amber* a serious book, and this initial hostility had a long-standing effect not only on the literary canon but also on the writing of the history of censorship trials. (45–46)

This is an important historical fact for scholars of popular romance because this is an example of a romance novel being censored. Indeed, the Library of Congress imagined, at the time, the impact would be similar to the *Ulysses* trial (cf. *United States v. One Book Called Ulysses*, 5 F. Supp. 182 (S.D.N.Y. 1933), but, alas, such is not the case. Today, we must admit, the novel and the court case are largely forgotten. Indeed, Jordan Carroll’s brilliant overview of “Obscenity Trials and American Literature” does not mention *Forever Amber*. So why has the censorship surrounding *Forever Amber* been mostly forgotten? Perhaps because it is merely “middlebrow fiction” (or perhaps even lowbrow), or perhaps because it was consumed mostly by women readers. In the history of censorship, this book could and perhaps should stand alongside *Tropic of Cancer*, *Ulysses*, and *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. Recently, the novel has been re-released and Elaine Showalter has declared it a “classic” and has encouraged readers to “appreciate Kathleen Winsor’s special brand of feminine genius” (2002).

For popular romance scholars, *Forever Amber* exists in the shadows of *Gone with the Wind* just as it seems to call forth the blockbuster romances that would populate the 1970s, notably, after *Roth v United States* (as well as a host of other censorship cases around obscenity, which culminates in *Miller v. California*). *Forever Amber*, perhaps, also predicts the Bonkbusters to come. What is so striking for me is that here is an example of censorship, and one for romance novels, and few of us seem to remember it, few of us have written on *Forever Amber*, and perhaps few of us have even read the book. But it is an illustrative example of *how* popular romance fiction can become a target of a censorious culture, particularly when concerned about sexuality, desire, and love.

## Works Cited

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