



TESE DE DOUTORAMENTO

**ANTECEDENTS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE
CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE NOVEL IN
ENGLISH: A STUDY OF THE CONTRIBUTION
TO THE GENRE BY ROSAMUNDE PILCHER
AND LISA KLEYPAS**

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ESCOLA DE DOUTORAMENTO INTERNACIONAL
PROGRAMA DE DOUTORAMENTO EN ESTUDOS INGLESES AVANZADOS:
LINGÜÍSTICA, LITERATURA E CULTURA

SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA
2019





DECLARACIÓN DA AUTORA DA TESE

*Antecedents and Development of the
Contemporary Romance Novel in English:
A Study of the Contribution to the Genre by
Rosamunde Pilcher and Lisa Kleypas*

Dna. INMACULADA PÉREZ CASAL

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Rosamunde Pilcher and Lisa Kleypas*

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Asdo. Patricia Viviana Fra López



*To my mother, Nieves.
Á fin chegamos.*





“A well-read woman is a dangerous creature.”
Lisa Kleypas, A Wallflower Christmas

“Love sought is good, but given unsought is better.”
William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night





Acknowledgements

The genesis of this project can be traced back to an MA thesis defended at the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela in the year 2014. I am indebted to the regional government of Galicia for funding this research, and to my PhD supervisors, Professors Margarita Estévez-Saá and Patricia Fra-López, for the opportunity to develop some of those earlier ideas in the present work. Thank you, Margarita and Patricia, for your continuous guidance and endless support, both of which go beyond the strictly academic. Without your valuable insights and dedication, this project would not have reached completion.

A special thanks to Professor Laura Lojo-Rodríguez for welcoming me into the research group Discourse and Identity, and to my colleagues at the Department of English and German Philology, who made me feel at home. In addition to this, I gratefully acknowledge the advice of Dr. Lynne Pearce and other members at the Department of English and Creative Writing at Lancaster University, where I spent three months as a Visiting Research Student. Also, Dr. Theodore Trost and Dr. Catherine Roach, from the University of Alabama, provided me with words of encouragement when they visited Santiago de Compostela in the summer of 2018.

And last, but definitely not least, I would like to thank my friends and family. To Luis Fernández and Oscar Troncoso, I owe my most sincere gratitude for all those fruitful conversations over coffee. The camaraderie offered by Ana Díaz, Iago Boán, Alba Rozas and Paz Ferreiro, PhD students (if not for much longer), has also been invaluable. Additional and heartfelt thanks go to Fátima Seijo, Sandra Barrientos, Lorena Barreiro and Adrián Cepeda, for their infinite patience and genuine interest, despite not knowing what I was talking about most of the time. Finally, I am enormously indebted to my family, especially to my sister Ana Pérez, for her great involvement in the final stages of this project. Thank you all for your unflinching encouragement and support during this long and arduous period. I am lucky to have you.



Abstract

Inspired by the premises and the methodologies of cultural studies and feminist literary criticism, *Antecedents and Development of the Contemporary Romance Novel in English: A Study of the Contribution to the Genre by Rosamunde Pilcher and Lisa Kleypas* undertakes a diachronic analysis of the romance novel genre, with the aim of illustrating that enjoying (mass-market) romantic narratives does not impede a sincere engagement with the feminist agenda of gender equality.

To accomplish this objective, this dissertation studies the close relationship of the romance novel with feminist theory and activism, by rereading the most relevant past and present critiques of the genre, in conjunction with the major feminist texts of the past five decades. In addition, this research provides an overview of the romance genre that elucidates the different purposes that romantic texts have supported in relation to the feminist cause. Secondly, this journey across the history of the genre illuminates the reasons behind its discredited reputation not only in society, but also in some academic circles. Finally, this dissertation analyses a handful of selected works by two well-known romance writers of our time, the British Rosamunde Pilcher and the American Lisa Kleypas, in order to assess their respective contributions to the formal and thematic development of the modern romance novel. Their romances' focus on (heterosexual) romantic relationships and the psychology of the female protagonists serve the purpose of dramatising and problematising femininity, motherhood, or sorority, among other issues. Thus, this dissertation argues that the romance novel has emerged as a perfectly suitable platform for advancing feminist standpoints. The genre's defence of individualism and freedom of choice can, in fact, become an ally of the feminist cause, even if further changes are needed in relation to certain problematic aspects of these novels.

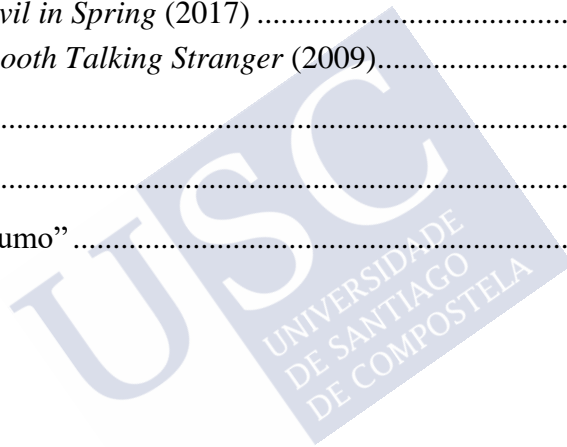
Keywords: romance novel, feminist criticism, third-wave feminism, Rosamunde Pilcher, Lisa Kleypas.



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INTRODUCTION

On February 26th 2018, the Strand Bookstore in New York City organised an encounter between writers and readers of popular romance fiction under the flashy title “Let’s Woman-Splain Romance!”. The following description corresponds to the Facebook event that publicised it:¹

The romance genre has been objectified since its inception, but has *grown into the foremost feminist genre, written for women/by women*. This panel features some of the foremost authors of the genre, and a few of the young, diverse voices actively working to evolve the genre and general public perception, coming together to discuss the appeal, power and strength of Romance to an open-minded (male) moderator. It’s time to turn the tables, and womansplain the appeal and cultural relevance of the most popular commercial genre. (Emphasis added)

Both the title and this brief outline uncover the key role played by feminism in our approach to popular romance fiction. For one, the term “womansplain” firmly situates readers in a twenty-first century feminist context. First recorded in 2008 on an Internet blog, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the neologism “mansplain” as the attempt to “explain (something) needlessly, overbearingly, or condescendingly,

¹ Alternatively, the same text can be found in the Strand Bookstore’s website (“Let’s Woman-Splain”).

esp. (typically when addressing a woman) in a manner thought to reveal a patronizing or chauvinistic attitude ” (“Mansplain, v.”). The term has circulated widely in (feminist) online forums, an indispensable means of communication and organisation in contemporary feminist activism,² and it has made its way into everyday language to describe commonplace sexist situations endured by women in the public sphere. In this particular case, the transition from “man-splain” to “woman-splain” is clearly a deliberate pun that subverts the negative connotations of the term. In the Strand’s advertisement, it describes a power reversal in which women occupy the top position and make themselves, and their preferred literary genre, be heard by society.

More important than the adoption of feminist-based terminology is, perhaps, the content of the text itself. The description above alludes to the long, complex relationship between romance novels and (second-wave) feminisms. By asserting that these novels have become the leading feminist genre, today’s romance novels are presented as a vital ally of the women’s movement, an alternative form of activism that nonetheless pursues the same goals: equality between men and women. Enjoying popular romance novels thus ceases to be a “guilty pleasure” for women because the genre has been updated in accordance with feminist principles.

² See Munro, Cochrane or Chamberlain for more information on the relevance of the Internet in contemporary feminism.

The preoccupation with women's reading habits goes back a long way.³ Feminist thinking has certainly demonstrated a primary and unflinching concern for woman's interest in romantic narratives. Renowned forerunners such as Mary Wollstonecraft already wrote about the potentially negative consequences of reading romances and love stories. In her unfinished novel *Maria: or, the Wrongs of Woman*, published posthumously in 1798, this brilliant intellectual offers a pioneer critique of sensibility, insofar as the heroine, Maria, falls prey to her emotions and her infatuation, first with George Venables, and then with Henry Darnford. As the critic Anne K. Mellor has suggested, Maria's greatest mistake is not her prompt marriage to Venables, but rather "her unquestioned assumption that Darnford, ... is the 'hero' of the romances she has read" (416). Wollstonecraft's novel constitutes an early wake-up call against the romantic fantasy, and reflects a concern with appropriate reading material for women which lives on today. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), for instance, attacked women's magazines for idealising domesticity as opposed to working outside the home (118-9). Instead, Friedan praised earlier magazines which portrayed heroines reaching maturity and fulfilment in both private and public life; in other words, heroines who succeeded in love and in the workplace (85-8). Subsequent second-wave feminist critics repeatedly denounced mass-market romance's indirect complicity with

³ Some famous examples are Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), a satire on the Gothic genre, or James Joyce's Nausicaa episode in *Ulysses* (1922), where the writer mocks the language and style of women's magazines. In both cases, the writers comment on the ways in which these narratives shape a woman's perception of reality for the worse.

women's oppression in their respective studies of this popular literary genre. In one of the most quoted monographs dealing with romantic fiction, Janice Radway suggested that romance reading precluded feminist engagement, namely because women's emotional needs were fulfilled vicariously through the heterosexual relationships depicted in romance novels (*Reading* 213-7). More recently, Sally Goade's 2007 volume, *Empowerment versus Oppression: Twenty First Century Views of Popular Romance Novels*, concluded that "in striking a bargain with the romance narrative, women romance readers are simultaneously bound to a patriarchal system and emboldened by their own choice and creativity within that system" (10).

The Strand's claim that romance fiction has become the chief feminist literary genre of our age would undoubtedly raise the eyebrows of a wide number of these critics. In this respect, the advertisement reproduced above solves the problematic by signalling a breakup with those novels—the infamous bodice rippers—that feminist critics like Radway discussed in the early 1980s. The Strand's text speaks of a renovated romance novel which, in the eyes of many romance writers and readers, has changed immensely in the last decades, to the point where it barely resembles those sensual historicals which dominated the marketplace in the 1970s and early 1980s. This idea of an ongoing evolution is central to this dissertation, whose main objective is to trace the development of the contemporary romance novel in English from the second half of the twentieth century to the present day.

Overall, this project seeks to clarify in what ways the genre and its reputation have changed over time as a result of its continuous dialogue with feminist theory and politics. Admittedly, second-wave critiques of mass-market romance helped to consolidate the genre's bad reputation in society by providing scientific evidence that seemingly backed up those claims. Even so, this dissertation demonstrates that successive efforts to vindicate the value of this literary genre cannot be understood without examining the changing landscape of feminism itself. When writers, readers, and even scholars of popular romance fiction stress the evolution of the romance novel, they often do so at the expense of a uniform and even prejudiced view of feminism. They ignore the multiple strands which, with their similarities and differences, co-exist under the umbrella term "feminism", and in turn they present it as a monolithic, stable political movement. Such claims suggest that the flow of influence between feminism and popular romance literature goes exclusively one way. Consequently, they largely fail to recognise the key role of romantic fiction in the development of feminist thinking, and more importantly, how romantic fiction can prompt a reflection on some patronising attitudes of institutional feminism.

This PhD thesis sheds light on such connections. Chapter One investigates the relationship between feminism and popular romance novels by rereading the most relevant critiques of the genre, past and present, in conjunction with the major feminist texts of the past five decades. The first section illustrates the different standpoints that well-

known second-wave feminist personalities adopted in relation to love and romance. Activists such as Kate Millet and Germaine Greer concurred in decrying the inequalities present in coupledness, and promoted different solutions that ranged from the restructuring of heterosexual relationships, to the embracing of celibacy or lesbianism by the most radical groups. The irruption of feminist criticism and cultural studies into the academia moved mass-market romance fiction to the centre of controversy and scholarly debate.

This chapter goes on to reveal how pioneering studies like Ann Douglas's "Soft-Porn Culture: Punishing the Liberated Woman" (1980) and Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) constructed romance reading as anti-feminist and created, albeit involuntarily, a split in the consciousness of many women readers who had previously considered themselves as feminists. The advent of the 1990s and the emergence of a third wave of feminist activism, exemplified by texts like "Being Real: An Introduction" (1995) by Rebecca Walker, opened up the possibility for romance writers and readers to reclaim their identity as feminists, and to vindicate the egalitarian messages conveyed in modern romance fiction. The last section of this chapter is devoted to the most relevant analyses of the genre since the year 2000. This includes, on the one hand, an evaluation of those theoretical works that largely celebrate the romance novel and its characteristics, and which belong, according to popular romance academics Sarah S. G. Frantz and Eric Selinger, to the "third wave of scholarship" on the

genre (7). On the other hand, this final part pays duly attention to those research pieces that continue to emphasise the romance novel's most problematic aspects. Overall, Chapter One should provide the necessary context to interpret the Strand's claim that romance fiction is "the foremost feminist genre, written for women/by women".

Chapter Two provides a diachronic overview of the romance (novel) genre with the aim of elucidating the different purposes that these novels have served in relation to the feminist cause over time. As will be explained in the introduction to the actual chapter, writing the history of the romance novel is a Herculean task. To its longevity and unfaltering popularity among the readership, one must add the various meanings ascribed to the term "romance" over the centuries. For some, any love story qualifies as a romance novel, but for other fans and specialists, a text must possess certain formal characteristics in order to be considered a true representative of the genre. The Romance Writers of America association, for instance, demands a "satisfying and optimistic" closure ("About the Romance"), a requirement that leaves out texts traditionally labelled as romances (e.g. Mitchell's 1936 classic, *Gone with the Wind*). The RWA is a key organisation in the landscape of mass-market romance literature, inasmuch as it offers guidance to aspiring writers and dictates what *is* and what is *not* a romance. As I will argue in due course, both loose and rigid definitions entail important consequences for the study of the genre, rendering it

unmanageable or, by contrast, impervious to the influences from other literary works.

For the time being, suffice it to say that the second content block in this dissertation favours a broader understanding of romance novels. It discusses texts that push the genre's boundaries and which may not be initially regarded as prototypical examples of the form, as is the case with Maeve Binchy's novels. Likewise, this second chapter tackles both high and popular manifestations of the romance novel, fostering a debate about aesthetics and literary bias. Again, Binchy's books are a good case in point; despite their focus on love and courtship, her novels are held in higher esteem than those penned by Lisa Kleypas, one of our two case studies. In addition, the study of the origins and development of the modern romance novel brings the complex relationship between gender and genre to the fore. Whether for social pressures or for personal reasons, the vast majority of practitioners of the form have been women, and they have put the romance novel to various uses, including didacticism, escape and relaxation, and of course, political struggle.

As this dissertation unfolds, it will become apparent that corpus selection is a contentious process within popular romance studies. In the past, the critics' tendency to extrapolate their conclusions to the whole genre resulted in the consolidation of its negative reputation in society and in academia, a stigma that fans are still battling nowadays. Parallel to this, the romance novel industry enjoys uninterrupted growth and its

sales numbers continue to skyrocket every year. Staying informed about new trends, debates, polemics, award-winning books, etc. requires constant monitoring. With more and more writers entering the scene in the US, the UK and in other Anglophone countries, it is simply impossible to choose the perfect representative, the key novel and author that will answer all our questions and abate our concern with a genre that supposedly embellishes the domestic and family role of woman. From the 2000s onwards, scholars working on the field have taken great care to stress the fragmentary nature of their investigations on individual authors and works.

Acknowledging these problems, the third chapter in this dissertation analyses a handful of selected titles from Rosamunde Pilcher and Lisa Kleypas, two well-known names in Romancelandia during the second half of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first. Their respective chronologies and nationalities — Pilcher was British, Kleypas is American⁴—, in tandem with their sustained popularity among the readership, should be enough to consider them as good representatives of the genre and its historical development, yet there are other equally important reasons that make these writers worthy of critical attention.⁵ Pilcher's and Kleypas's ability to innovate and experiment with the genre's archetypes

⁴ In the same way that the twentieth-century romance novel industry developed in the United Kingdom and then moved to the US, this thesis begins with an analysis of a British writer (Pilcher) and ends with an analysis of an American one (Kleypas).

⁵ Whilst Pilcher and Kleypas have received some critical attention, (e.g. S. Jones; Kamblé *Making Meaning*), their work and their literary trajectories have yet to be studied in a systematic manner.

demonstrates the excellent quality of some of the texts that form present-day romance fiction. Thus, the analysis of their most emblematic works can help to dispel the myth that romance novels are repetitive and poorly written, and highlight their artistry instead. In addition to their creative talent, a further reason why these authors deserve recognition is their commitment, more or less explicit, to use the romance novel form to foster debates about the issues that most women confront in their everyday lives. The seven novels selected for discussion can shed light on the development of the genre as a consequence of its constant dialogue with feminist thinking, from the 1970s to the present day. Pilcher's *The Empty House* (1973), *The Shell Seekers* (1987) and *Winter Solstice* (2000), as well as Kleypas's *Dreaming of You* (1994), *Suddenly You* (2001), *Devil in Spring* (2017) and *Smooth Talking Stranger* (2009), dramatize various types of affective relationships, and speak about social imperatives regarding femininity, motherhood and the workplace, among other issues. Kleypas's case is particularly salient in this regard, because she has contributed to the development of both historical and contemporary romance subgenres. A critical reading of two of her latest works (each belonging to a different subgenre) shows the potential of popular romantic fiction to become a feminist genre and transmit feminist messages to readers. Of course, I am cognizant of the limitations inherent to my research on the romance novel in general, and on

Pilcher's and Kleypas's oeuvre in particular.⁶ However partial the present analysis might be, it constitutes (in my view) a necessary first step in the vindication of two accomplished storytellers, and of the genre in which they have chosen to write and that they have undoubtedly helped to develop and update.

Before beginning, I would like to make one final statement and situate myself in relation to my object of study. Like many of the names I will be mentioning throughout this dissertation, I confess my own enjoyment of romance novels. Lisa Kleypas's *Again the Magic* (2004) was the first book I read, back in my early adolescence, and even though the novel was nicely written and made for a satisfying reading, it did not get me hooked up in the genre. Nora Roberts's *Sea Swept* (1998) did, and for the first time, I realised that there was more to the romance genre than the embarrassing covers and clichéd plots. Not only did *Sea Swept* feature a highly competent, professional woman, who was also sexually satisfied even before her meeting with the hero; the book also talked at length about sexual violence and female sexuality, domestic abuse, the importance of family, not necessarily the nuclear family, the workplace, etc.

As an undergraduate student in English and North American literature I combined more "serious" readings, proposed by my teachers

⁶ Between the two authors, they have penned more than fifty romance novels. The totality is impracticable for research purposes, more so if we take into account that Lisa Kleypas is still active. Still, the novels under consideration cover their respective trajectories, and can be considered as excellent representatives of their personal and creative evolution, as I explain in greater detail in Chapter Three.

at the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, with the reading of Kleypas's novels, Sherrilyn Kenyon's, Julia Quinn's, Christina Dodd's, and many others. As my education geared towards gender studies, I debated with some of my professors about the supposed anti-feminist nature of romance fiction, the genre's lack of literary quality and its absence from course syllabi. Over the years, I have come across romance novels that convey patriarchal ideas about womanhood and a woman's place in society, but I have also found others who deserve our praise for their contribution to advance a feminist agenda that, as authors like Kat Banyard, Catherine Redfern, Kristin Aune and Beatrix Campbell have recently remarked, is still very much needed.⁷ Hopefully, this dissertation will provide enough evidence to support the thesis that enjoying romantic narratives does not preclude a sincere engagement with the feminist project and the equality of the sexes. What is more, it may demonstrate that popular romance novels can, in fact, help to pursue said goal, even if further changes are still needed in relation to the most problematic aspects of these novels.

⁷ While Banyard's, Redfern and Aune's, and Campbell's works address primarily the inequalities still existing in the British social context, all of them possess an unmistakable transnational tone as they argue that feminism is the only tool that can effectively combat different types of discrimination (related to sex, race, class, etc.).

1. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ABOUT THE ROMANCE NOVEL

In their introductory chapter to *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays* (2012), two of the chief scholars working on popular romance studies, Sara S.G. Frantz and Eric M. Selinger divide the large history of academic criticism of mass-market romance novels in three separate “waves”. For those working primarily in the fields of feminist literary criticism and gender studies, the wave metaphor is hardly a new one, and its usefulness has been questioned repeatedly since the 1990s.⁸ More recently, academics working from feminist theoretical positions, in conjunction with feminist activists, are debating the (non-)existence of a fourth feminist wave whose birth was swiftly proclaimed in 2013.⁹ Prudence Chamberlain’s *The Feminist Fourth Wave: Affective Temporality* (2017) discusses at great length the advantages and disadvantages of a periodization into waves. Among the latter, Chamberlain finds that a linear understanding of feminism and the topics covered by the subsequent waves reduces feminism to a list of figureheads and a handful of representative issues. In other words,

⁸ For further information on the advantages and disadvantages of wave periodisation see, among others, Deborah L. Siegel; Hokulani Aikau, et al.; Kathleen A. Laughlin, et al.; Nancy A. Hewitt.

⁹ Ealasaïd Munro’s and Kira Cochrane’s 2013 newspaper articles are often considered as the foundational texts of the fourth feminist wave.

the traditional arrangement into waves imposes on each of them a specific homogeneous personality, which does not reflect the wide variety of critical standpoints existing within:

... ironing feminism into a linear understanding of time helps to efface the diversity and multiplicity of the politics. Furthermore, it forces theorists to approach each wave as embodying a specific identity, one that fixes it within a historical position, while ensuring that some aspects of feminism remain locked in the past. While we might learn about them, and pay tribute to them, their way of doing things has become dated and useless. (69)

Chamberlain's reasoning about feminism and the problematics of the wave metaphor can be safely applied to popular romance studies. While appreciative in their approach to the first academic analyses of mass-market romance, Frantz and Selinger inevitably put themselves in a superior position as members of the so-called "third wave of scholarship" (7). They offer a chronological review of the development of the field, an account where the present surpasses the past either by refining the methodological apparatus (e.g. corpus selection), by opening up new lines of research, or by improving communication and feedback between scholars, writers and readers of popular romance (8-9). Similarly, Pamela Regis in her "What Do Critics Owe the Romance?" (2011), labels the first-wave of romance critics, typified by Ann Barr Snitow, Tania Modleski, Kay Mussell and Janice Radway, as the "Four Horsewomen of the Romance Apocalypse [sic]" (par. 6). The negative connotations of this expression already hint at Regis's own

position in relation to previous scholarship on romance novels, a position she had already discussed in greater depth in her seminal *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003).

The majority of scholars working on the field of popular romance nowadays took no part in the criticism of the romance genre in the 1970s and 80s, not even in the early 1990s. In the same way that contemporary feminists often perceive previous methodologies as “dated and useless” (Chamberlain 69), contemporary romance critics run the risk of falling into the same trap. As another member of the “third wave” of romance scholarship, An Goris, stated in her response to Pamela Regis, this “ritual matricide”, while necessary for the development of the field, can be problematic:

Although critical accounts such as the one by Pamela Regis can then be placed within a positive broader dynamic that stimulates the further development, maturation, and improvement of the field, prudence is called for in such endeavours because they run the risk of overstating or exaggerating the problematic aspects of older studies. (par. 10)

Towards the end of her paper, Goris advocates for a continued dialogue between different theoretical approaches, old and new, affirming that only through these “meetings and conversations” the field of popular romance studies will be “brighter than ever before” (par. 11). In a context where romance novels are being presented as “the foremost feminist genre”, it is imperative that its critics continue to deploy a feminist perspective in their investigations.

Thus, the present project contends that feminist criticism, in spite of (or thanks to) its long relationship with romance fiction, still offers very valuable insights into this important literary genre. More to the point, this thesis argues that the modern romance novel cannot be fully understood without a thorough assessment of its relationship with past and present feminist activism and politics. My working hypothesis is that mass-market romance not only incorporates feminist debates and disseminates them to a wider audience, but that it significantly adds to the ongoing dialogue between feminist activism and theory, and between women from different backgrounds and with different interests.

The present chapter frames the academic study of romance novels within the fields of feminism/gender studies and cultural studies. The first section contextualises the academic interest in popular romance fiction as an object of study. Part 1.2 reviews the most relevant critical works about romance novels in the 1980s and early 1990s, paying special attention to the areas of sexuality, marriage, motherhood and the workplace. This section ends with an introduction to third-wave feminism and links it with the changes produced at the heart of popular romance criticism during the late 1990s. Finally, the last part of this chapter discusses some of the latest and most relevant scholarly works on romance fiction, so as to clarify in what ways the genre is seen as advancing the feminist agenda.

1.1. THE CONTEXT

The general consensus is that the works of Ann Barr Snitow, Kay Mussell, Tania Modleski and Janice Radway in the 1980s laid the foundations of popular romance studies. Despite their acknowledged relevance, current scholarship has demonstrated an ambivalent attitude towards these foundational critical texts, a direct consequence of their negative impact on the genre's reputation in the academic world. A brief assessment of the wider landscape of feminist literary criticism, as well as of feminist criticism on the discourse of romantic love and romance, can illuminate these critics' theories about romantic fiction. Additionally, this may help to reconcile past and present-day scholars, the majority of whom are self-proclaimed aca-fans.¹⁰

As was noted earlier in the Introduction, love and romance have been a recurrent hot topic in Western feminism(s). Mary Wollstonecraft was indeed one of the pioneering voices who questioned women's heightened sensibility. In her works she highlighted the importance of a suitable education for girls, and discussed the negative impact of romance on women's personal development. Over the course of the nineteenth century, when first-wave feminism began its journey and women's inequality was interrogated in both private and public spaces,

¹⁰ Catherine Roach ("Going Native"; *Happily*) has commented on the fine line separating critics and fans of popular culture texts. Roach uses the term "aca-fan" to better describe the academic who is also a fan of his/her object of study. The majority of critics researching the romance novel are regular readers and many have been so for years, myself included.

activists also took on love and romance to some extent.¹¹ As love became the chief reason for marriage, and the ideal of companionate marriage consolidated in Western countries, many feminists pushed for a renewal in the formulation of couple relationships.¹² Marriage became a battleground as wives' legal status was attacked vehemently around the globe. Campaigners pressed for women's economic independence through access to quality employment, as well as changes in legislation that ended coverture and permitted wives to own property. The right to divorce, as well as birth control, were also key points in the feminist agenda over the course of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. As will be discussed in Chapter Two, these issues were very much present in the literary fiction of the period, particularly in novels dealing with romantic affairs where heterosexual relationships were minutely portrayed. The New Woman novel, for instance, depicts many women opting for spinsterhood in light of these circumstances.

Yet, in many cases, the demand for equal rights collided with women's desire to enter partnerships with men. In the US, where first-wave feminism developed alongside the abolitionist movement, this tension between committed activism and marriage became all the more evident. The question of whether romantic love and marriage can be

¹¹ Critics like Carmen Blanco or Margaret Walters have explained how the fight for suffrage often obscures other equally pressing feminist demands in the public eye. Contrary to the widespread idea that first-wave feminists did not look for the source of woman's subordination, Walters points out that nineteenth-century activists were knowledgeable about the arguments used to justify women's secondary role in society, including motherhood, sexuality and, of course, love.

¹² Emma Goldman's *The Traffic in Women and Other Essays* (1910) is a good, well-known example.

reformulated according to feminist principles remains to this day one of the most controversial, complex and enduring issues affecting older and younger women's rights activists. In the interwar period, for instance, when feminist activism is often considered dormant, Simone de Beauvoir reflected upon love and personal relationships in *The Second Sex* (1949); at the same time, Beauvoir was living her life-long romantic affair with Jean-Paul Sartre.

In *Love and Liberation: Second-Wave Feminisms and the Problem of Romantic Love* (2010), Robin Payne examines the importance of romantic love in the wider landscape of second-wave feminist thinking. Linking Beauvoir's theories with the famous second-wave feminist motto "the personal is political", Payne argues that the renewed preoccupation with romantic love in the 1960s and 70s was part of the widespread efforts to locate and dismantle the roots of woman's oppression. According to the author, primarily radical feminists encouraged women to inspect their own lives and everyday habits, to think critically about their own personal experiences, and then to join other women in the debate in local consciousness-raising groups (16-7).¹³ In this context, the dynamics of intimate relationships were of major interest and put under the spotlight. The fact that romance novels

¹³ Colour feminists and lesbian feminists later denounced the biased nature of these groups, claiming that some experiences (i.e. those of the white, middle-class heterosexual women) were often prioritised. Similarly, members of the third feminist wave would point at the different, often colliding, interests that women have in relation to class, race, age, or sexuality, and theorise about them and what their implications are for the development of feminism. These processes of critical self-reflection are largely responsible for the fact that "feminisms", in plural, is nowadays preferred to the prototypical, singular term.

were many women's favourite leisure activity, one of those daily habits that women were encouraged to analyse, explains in part the increasing interest in the genre.

Payne's account discusses alternative forms of love and intimate attachment envisioned by second wavers. By studying the public and private writings of landmark feminist personalities such as Betty Friedan, Ti-Grace Anderson or Gloria Steinem, this author distinguishes various approaches to the challenge posed by romantic love. These range from the advocacy of celibacy, spinsterhood, or (political) lesbianism as a means to confront the tyranny of heterosexual relationships, to more moderate standpoints which permitted feminists to be involved in the movement and simultaneously pursue intimate relationships with men. All different approaches share a preoccupation with women's identity, and with how the ideology of romantic love effaces a woman's sense of self by making it dependant on the man.¹⁴ The problem of "male-identification", as Gloria Steinem phrased it (qtd. in Payne 265), helps to explain much of the feminist hostility to popular romance fiction. In the next section we will see how many romance critics focused on the construction of the heroine's identity, only to conclude that she is led to find personal fulfilment exclusively in her status as wife, mother and mistress of the house.

¹⁴ A key element in the discourse of romantic love is the incompleteness of the lover. One feels complete *only* when s/he has found his/her other half. Women's cultural association with love renders them more vulnerable, since they are told they can only find fulfilment in (hetero)sexual relationships.

Payne's study also examines feminists' divided conscience; that is, the need to reconcile their hopes for freedom and equality with their own affective needs. It reveals that many feminist militants did not put their own recommendations into practice, or found it difficult to do so. Payne recalls how Dana Densmore, an active member of the radical feminist group Cell 16 and a fierce champion of celibacy, most certainly had romantic liaisons during her militant years (43). Many advocates of political lesbianism simultaneously dated men, provoking tensions with lesbians (Payne 91). Betty Friedan, an icon of second-wave feminism, had a hard time balancing work and family in her own private life, and she finally divorced her husband less than a decade after the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 (Payne 154-5). As for Gloria Steinem, another media personality, she was often criticised for having various affairs with men (Payne 267). For some feminists, the inability to reconcile theory and practice caused conflicting feelings and a certain sense of guilt.¹⁵ For others, feminism was simply a tool that allowed women to reassess their own personal expectations about relationships. When describing feminist writer Erica Jong's personal and professional take on the topic of romantic love, for instance, Payne concludes that:

¹⁵ Tania Modleski, who wrote one of the most convincing criticisms on popular romance fiction, was an avid reader of romantic stories before pursuing a career in academia. Modleski's writings "My Life as a Romance Reader" (1997) and "My Life as a Romance Writer" (1998) reveal that her past enjoyment of these type of narratives was a problematic issue for her, a really embarrassing pleasure that was hard to accommodate into her feminist agenda.

Jong believed that it was not her prerogative as a feminist writer to offer a doctrinaire solution for what women should do about the difficulties love posed for liberation, but rather that she should speak truth to an issue that conflicted many self-identified feminists. (250-1)

Despite Jong's great public presence and influence, much second-wave rhetoric on the topic of romantic love seems prescriptive, more so if one looks at the radical factions which permeated academic feminism. Kate Millet's ground-breaking *Sexual Politics* (1969) argued that romantic love, with its links to marriage and family, contributed to woman's subjection because it regulated female sexuality: "[It] affords a means of emotional manipulation which the male is free to exploit, since love is the only circumstance in which the female is (ideologically) pardoned for sexual activity" (37). Millet's conclusions were decisive and demolishing. She called romantic love a "reparation to allow the subordinate female certain means of saving face" (Millet 37), and they anticipated some of the arguments that later feminist critics of romance would reproduce in their own work. Similarly, Shulamith Firestone stated that love was "the pivot of women's oppression today" (119), but her approach was slightly more refined. She contended that "it is not the process of love itself that is at fault, but its *political*, i.e. unequal *power* context" which makes women more liable to the "false idealization" of the beloved (122, italics in the original). For Firestone, love between equals was a positive thing. Gloria Steinem's impact on academia was minor, but she shared Firestone's idea that love could be an enriching experience when it

happened between two independent and self-fulfilled people; that is, between two people possessing an identity of their own (Payne 311-3). By contrast, romance, according to Steinem, appealed to women “because a lack of self-esteem prompted them to seek what they thought was missing in themselves in someone else” (qtd. in Payne 311).

While *Love and Liberation* shows that feminists had diverse, sometimes antagonistic, opinions on how women should conduct themselves in their personal relationships, their opposition to romance appears to be largely unanimous and firm. One of the most influential critiques of romance and, more to the point, of romantic stories, appears in Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970). The book partakes in the widespread feminist tradition of creating knowledge based on lived experience that characterises texts like Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* (1976) or Rosalind Coward’s *Female Desire* (1984). Greer dissected her own life in a critical manner, with an eye to diagnosing the origins of women’s inferiority/dependence (*Eunuch* 16). Unsurprisingly, the topic of romance surfaces amidst a larger discussion about love, which for women is nothing but “a search for security, if not for her offspring then for her crippled and fearful self” (Greer, *Eunuch* 160). Like Firestone or Steinem, Greer also distinguishes between good love and bad, corrupted love. The latter is responsible for women’s self-sacrifice, jealousy and obsession, elements that can be found in many romantic stories:

...the sickening obsession which thrills the nervous frames of the heroines of great love-affairs whether in cheap 'romance' comic-papers or in hardback novels of passionate wooing is just that [an example of corrupted love]. Women must recognize in the cheap ideology of *being in love* the essential persuasion to take an irrational and self-destructive step. (*Eunuch* 191, italics in the original)

In the Foreword to the twenty-first anniversary edition of *The Female Eunuch*, Greer emphasised the key arguments of the book: a woman's "right to express her own sexuality" and the rejection that a woman's sexual desire is "merely responsive" to man's (*Eunuch* 10-1). As in Millet's case, sexuality is key to Greer's conception of the liberated, empowered woman, and many of her writings explore alternative ways of experiencing physical and emotional intimacy.¹⁶ In Greer's view, romance stands in the way of developing an autonomous female sexuality that is free from patriarchal norms: the romance fantasy is so captivating that it "distorts actual behaviour" (*Eunuch* 203). The archetypal "father-lover" hero and the "utter ineffectual" heroine (*Eunuch* 198-9), in tandem with other elements such as flowers

¹⁶ One of the most popular articles is "The Politics of Female Sexuality", published in the magazine *Oz* in 1970. In this thought-provoking piece, Greer explains how women's sexuality came to be understood as merely passive thanks to the triumph of middle-class, white Protestant ideology. Dismantling these preconceptions about female sexuality is a mandatory step towards gaining humanity ("Female Sexuality" 10), Greer encourages women to explore their own desires and sexual fantasies, to talk about the female body openly and positively, and to transmit this knowledge to her partners (men or women). Her emphasis on women "taking on" the responsibility for their own orgasm, symbolised by the woman-on-top sex position, has endured substantial criticism because it puts women in charge, exclusively. Greer's idea clashes with the opinions of romance writers like Lisa Kleypas, for whom the primary appeal of the romance fantasy is that woman's sexual satisfaction is one of the hero's responsibilities (Kleypas "Historical Romance Legend").

or the chaste and/or passionate kiss, provide a script which shapes women's idea of what man-woman relationships should look like (*Eunuch* 204-5). Greer contends that the rules which prevent the romance heroine from assuming an active role (both in sex and in life), also limit the readers of these stories, mostly young girls and women. In addition to this, the romance hero presents a series of characteristics that render him a perfect example of dominant, aggressive masculinity. Indeed, one of Greer's most controversial statements is that in which she condemns women's complicity with the patriarchal system, claiming that "[t]he traits invented for [the romance hero] have been invented by women cherishing the chains of their bondage" (*Eunuch* 202).

Central to *The Female Eunuch's* argument is that heterosexual relationships ought to be reformulated in egalitarian terms, instead of being completely ruled out as some radical feminists had proposed throughout the 1960s. Taking into account all of the above, the book largely suggests that romantic stories impede said renovation, and therefore allegedly make romance and the woman's movement irreconcilable. Greer's stance is very clear: "If women's liberation movements are to accomplish anything at all, they will have to cope with phenomena like the million-dollar Cartland industry" (*Eunuch* 200). In the final pages, she encourages all women, but especially housewives and secretaries (romance publishers' main target audience, according to Peter Mann's 1969 study), to revise their consumerist

practices as a mandatory first step towards self-knowledge and independence.¹⁷

Greer's animadversion to the romance novel genre is well-known among scholars of popular romance fiction, and much contemporary criticism is directed to refute her claims.¹⁸ Doubtless, what made her writing so compelling, even relatable, was Greer's own past as a romance reader. At one point, she admits that:

I cannot claim to be fully emancipated from the dream that some enormous man, say six foot six, heavily shouldered and so forth to match, will crush me to his tweeds, look down into my eyes and leave the taste of heaven or the scorch of his passion on my waiting lips. For three weeks I was married to him. (*Eunuch* 203)

In her analysis, Greer often quotes passages from the romance novels she randomly purchased in local shops, but she also discusses other books and magazines she used to read as a young girl. Her corpus comprises best-selling writers like Barbara Cartland and Georgette Heyer in the historical romance subgenre, and "trash weeklies" (*Eunuch* 195) such as *Mirabelle*, *Valentine* or *Jackie*, all of which included love stories directed at a younger female audience in the 60s. Generally

¹⁷ Unlike other radical feminist texts, however, Greer's does not perceive feminism and capitalism as complete opposites. Cosmetics, appliances, and other similar goods are a source of pleasure for many women, and are positive only when they are used freely, without external coercion. In essence, this "pleasure principle" as Greer names it (*Eunuch* 366), is the same one that third-wave feminists have embraced in the 1990s and 2000s. Contemporary feminists like Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards have argued that a conscious display of femininity can be empowering if done deliberately (136). Other feminists have contended that the issue is not that simple.

¹⁸ Regis's *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003) is a good case in point.

speaking, it seems that Greer's preoccupation with the impact that romance narratives have on women's lives stems from her own disappointing experiences in romantic liaisons; for some, this seriously undermines the objectivity of her conclusions.¹⁹ To be fair, Greer brings all these texts together under the same umbrella, overlooking the differences in format, content, or ideal readership. In the case of Barbara Cartland, for instance, Greer ignores the tensions which marred her relationship with other romance writers (e.g. Heyer accused Cartland of plagiarism), or Cartland's personal understanding of the genre (e.g. she did not like Jackie Collins's sexually active heroines).

The Female Eunuch was primarily addressed to the general public, despite Greer's academic background.²⁰ Furthermore, her discussion of romantic fiction was only a sporadic foray, a small part in a larger project, and her evaluation of the genre's tropes was, albeit problematic by today's standards, pioneering. Greer's prominence in the field of popular romance studies owes to the influence she exerted over subsequent (feminist) critics of romance. Snitow's study, in particular, is indebted to Greer's theories about romance and female sexuality. By contrast, Tania Modleski found fault with Greer's "flippant kind of mockery", and in *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982) she struggled to adopt a less derisive tone (*Loving* 14). Still, *The Female Eunuch* inaugurated one of the most fruitful approaches to popular romance

¹⁹ The same happens with Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982).

²⁰ Greer received her PhD in 1968 for her study of love and marriage in Shakespeare's comedies.

fiction, the self-reflexive exercise, which can be found in texts as disparate as Jayne Ann Krentz's *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* (1992), or more recently in Catherine Roach's *Happily Ever After* (2016).

More formal attempts to investigate the world of popular romance novels took place in the 1970s, once feminist literary criticism and cultural studies had entered the academia.²¹ For their part, cultural studies emerged in the convoluted aftermath of World War II. When New Left movements were sweeping across Europe, intellectual voices such as Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams pressed for a greater democratization of higher education, plus a real understanding of "social history" and the "culture of the people" (Johnson 75). After the establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham in the 60s, many scholars occupied themselves with the interdisciplinary study of subcultures and other institutionally marginalised groups. Previously stigmatised art forms, too, were subjected to close examination in the hands of these cultural critics. In the case that occupies us, the first critical work to incorporate a cultural studies' methodology to the analysis of romance was John Cawelti's 1976 *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. It must be noted, however, that he devoted

²¹ Tania Modleski, in *Loving with a Vengeance*, and Janice Radway, in *Reading the Romance*, offer a brilliant contextualisation of their own work on popular romantic fiction, alluding precisely to the developing fields of mass-culture studies and feminist literary criticism.

more space to the adventure and mystery genres than he did to romance.²²

The creation of women studies' programs brought about further changes to the study of literature. Well-versed in the tenets of second-wave feminism, practitioners of feminist literary criticism began to investigate the representation of women in literature as soon as they arrived into what Elaine Showalter has described as the "ivory tower" (*Faculty 2*), in the late 1960s.²³ In the 70s, Gynocritics broadened the scope of research by investigating women's role as creators and offering new insights into literary history. Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) or Nina Baym's *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and About Women in America, 1820-70* (1978) exemplify the efforts to recover the long-lost tradition of British and American authoresses, and explain why their contribution to literature was absent from the canon of English literature. Simultaneously, critics also addressed the specific characteristics of women's writing in texts like "The Laugh of the

²² The lack of a gender perspective in the field of cultural studies accounts for Cawelti's omission. As Elizabeth Long explains in "Feminism and Cultural Studies" (1996), the convergence of both disciplines evinced the gender bias in the study of popular culture, by which the so-called "female" genres were largely undervalued. Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance* begins precisely with a critique of this double standard in the study of mass culture. Frantz and Selinger, too, lament that Cawelti did not take on the romance more seriously, as this would have hastened the creation of popular romance studies (6).

²³ The aforementioned *Sexual Politics* is a well-known case in point. Showalter writes about "ivory tower[s]" in *Faculty Towers* (2005), a book in which she traces the evolution of academic novels from the 1950s up to new millennium. According to the author, the Academy in the 1950s has "its own rules and traditions, cut off from the outside world, a snug, womblike, and, for some, suffocating world" (14). This expression has long been incorporated into the feminist vocabulary to describe the resistance and opposition that feminist academics encountered upon entering university.

Medusa” (1976), by the French feminist Hélène Cixous. These different yet complementary ways of approaching literature clarify why popular romantic fiction, a feminised genre written and read primarily by women, became an object of academic investigation in this particular period.

This section has shown how second-wave feminism exhorted women to challenge their subordinate status in the social order. Inevitably, this entailed a revision of everyday behaviour and forms of internalised oppression. More specifically, women were actively encouraged to reflect upon their intimate relationships in accordance with the famous dogma “the personal is political”. Likewise, feminists debated the (dis)advantages of women’s role as consumers of feminine products, including fashion, cosmetics, or romantic fiction, which the more radical groups regarded as key elements in sustaining women’s oppression. This socially critical panorama, in tandem with the creation of cultural studies on the one hand, and the flourishing of feminist criticism on the other, precedes the formation of popular romance studies. The following pages review the most influential literature dealing with popular romance novels in the 80s and early 90s, in an attempt to establish the origins of contemporary debates around romantic fiction and its (in)compatibility with a feminist political stance.

1.2. BUILDING POPULAR ROMANCE STUDIES: THE 80S AND 90S

In “What Do Critics Owe the Romance?”, Pamela Regis provides a chronology of critical works about romance fiction. Beginning with Peter Mann’s study of the readership of Harlequin Mills & Boon romances, commissioned by the publisher in 1969, and ending in 2009 in the midst of the “third wave of scholarship” (Frantz and Selinger 7), Regis’s list is clearly a summary of the most influential texts although not a comprehensive record. Still, it evinces a growing interest in the genre which would eventually unite scholars from multiple disciplines, not only feminist and cultural studies theorists. My aim in the following pages is not to review every single volume, but rather pinpoint those who have had the greatest impact on the field, for better or for worse.

Frantz and Selinger situate the first wave of scholarship on romance novels in the 1980s (7). If anything, this period was dominated by academics working primarily in the fields of feminist (literary) criticism and cultural studies. In accordance with the political nature of both disciplines, these earlier works are characterised by their commitment to the feminist political project and all share a common purpose. Firstly, Snitow, Modleski and others took it upon themselves to clarify the ways in which paperback romantic stories bolstered notions of patriarchal femininity. Secondly, their efforts were directed at explaining the enduring appeal of romance for women, considering that women’s options had been significantly broadened after two decades of political mobilisations. Whereas Frantz and Selinger, Regis

(“What Do Critics”; *Natural History*), and others have criticised the rebuking nature of these earlier studies and their conclusions, it is fair to say that these questions have never been totally abandoned. In fact, these two issues run athwart the majority of critical works deploying a feminist theoretical perspective, including the present study of Rosamunde Pilcher’s and Lisa Kleypas’s novels.

“Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different” was published in 1979 in *Radical History Review*, a well-known academic journal that combines “scholarship” with “active political engagement” (“About the Journal”).²⁴ In response to the two central questions guiding her research, i.e. the enigma of the genre’s appeal and the connection between romance and women’s oppression, Snitow offers very complex answers. In essence, she determines that romance novels “are too pallid to shape consciousness but they feed certain regressive elements in the female experience” (143). Her feminist militant profile leads Snitow to pay greater attention to those conservative elements and to dissect what she names the Harlequin “formula”, being the most notorious the characterisation of the heroine as an “everywoman” (145), the revalorization of feminine daily routines, and the trope of male violence. Despite her initial reticence to take a stand —her purpose is “diagnostic” (149)—, in the end the balance seemingly tips towards the negative.

²⁴ The journal, published by Duke University Press, defines itself in the following terms: “For more than thirty-five years, *Radical History Review* has stood at the point where rigorous historical scholarship and active political engagement converge” (“About the Journal”).

One of Snitow's main objections is that the romance genre supports the centrality of romance in women's lives:

Harlequins fill a vacuum created by social conditions. When women try to picture excitement, the society offers them one vision, romance. When women try to imagine companionship, the society offers them one vision, male, sexual companionship. When women try to fantasize about success, mastery, the society offers them one vision, the power to attract a man. When women try to fantasize about sex, the society offers them taboos on most of its imaginable expressions except those that deal directly with arousing and satisfying men. (149)

On the one hand, these novels insist on coupledness and on considering men as women's only source of pleasure at a time when women's role in society is being redefined (148-50). On the other hand, sex and sexual desire are still circumscribed to marriage. The female protagonist "can only enjoy it after the love promise has finally been made and the ring is on her finger" (151). Building on another critic's ideas about Harlequins and pornography, Snitow is inclined to think that romance novels provide women readers with "sexual release" (151). The final ending in marriage saves face because marriage is the one context where female sexuality is socially sanctioned. For this reason, the romance heroine exists in a constant state of "passive receptivity" (153) and "readiness" (157) that culminates when the hero ceases to be a threat to her and she is convinced of his deep feelings for her.

Therefore, it is difficult to perceive an “affirmation of female sexuality” (152-3) in the way that feminism conceives it. Snitow makes it clear that “without spontaneity and aggression, a whole set of sexual possibilities are lost to her [the heroine]” (160), and by extension, to the woman reader. Even so, the genre’s commercial success attests to its appeal. For Snitow, the explanation resides in the contradictory fantasy presented in these novels, where sex happens in a woman’s terms and thus permits readers to make amends with their subordinate status in society. These books combine:

the desire to be blindly ravished, to melt, and the desire to be spiritually adored saved from the humiliation of dependence and sexual passivity by the agency of a protective male who will somehow make reparation to the woman he loves for her powerlessness. (159)

This is not to say, however, that Harlequins are beyond redemption. Many critical reviews fail to mention that Snitow esteems the books’ efforts to vindicate the importance of feeling in sexual relationships: “a strength of the books is that they insist that good sex for women requires an emotional and social context that frees them from constraint” (160). Similarly, our attempts to dissociate romance from pornography may lead us to simplify Snitow’s use of the term. Amidst her discussion, she makes it clear that pornography *per se* is not negative. In fact, she argues that referring to “the joys of passivity, of helpless abandonment, of response without responsibility” simply as a “masochistic” fantasy is the same as denying a part of our nature (153).

However, in a 1979 context where pornography acts mainly as “exploitation” and as an “escape valve for hostility towards women,” Snitow tells us that women’s pornography is positively different. For women, “sex is bathed in romance, diffused, always implied rather than enacted at all!” (154). As was noted above, though, the genre’s demand for emotional intimacy is not wholly rejected.

Snitow’s piece is considered one of the most pervasive critical accounts on romantic fiction. Because she calls these stories “unrealistic, distorted and flat” (143), she is often blamed for endorsing the view that romance novels possess no literary quality whatsoever. Also, her study comparing romance and pornography has further tarnished the genre’s reputation. Yet it must be noted that Snitow’s piece was written at a time when the sexual revolution and its after-effects were being questioned. Roughly around the same time as “Mass Market Romance”, the feminist scholar Ann Douglas wrote a short article in which she attacked the anti-feminist content of many popular entertainment forms, including Hollywood cinema and Harlequin romances, as opposed to the higher art of Doris Lessing or Margaret Atwood. Other momentous texts from this period were Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975) and Andrea Dworkin’s *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981), which consolidated the foundations of anti-pornography feminism.²⁵ By

²⁵ Brownmiller examined rape and victim shaming. Dworkin, in tandem with the fellow radical feminist Catharine MacKinnon, would elaborate on the relationship between sex, pornography, violence and women’s oppression throughout the 1980s. Pornography’s

contrast, in 1979 Angela Carter published *The Sadeian Woman*, a provocative essay in which she argued in favour of the liberating potential of pornographic literature.²⁶ Snitow clearly participated in these debates, but unlike Douglas, she accurately pinpointed that romance novels were “closer to describing women’s hopes for love than the work of fine women novelists” (160). She saw the importance of tackling women’s fascination with romance (stories) as an integral part of the feminist renovation of society.

Tania Modleski’s commitment to the feminist political agenda has proven equally strong.²⁷ Even so, there are substantial variations in the way she approached popular romance fiction in “The Disappearing Act: A Study of Harlequin Romances” (1980), and then in the groundbreaking monograph *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982). Both works make a strong case against previous feminist and cultural studies critics who either ridiculed or

definition (as oppressive) appeared in MacKinnon’s *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (1987).

²⁶ Carter believes the French writer Sade to be an example of ‘moral pornographer’, “an artist who uses pornographic material as part of the acceptance of the logic of a world of absolute sexual license for all the genders, and projects a model of the way such a world might work” (22). Carter’s opinions on sex, women and empowerment have earned her a controversial reputation in some feminist circles.

²⁷ Modleski stands out for her contribution to the development of academic feminism. In *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982) and *Old Wives’ Tales: Feminist Re-visions of Film and Other Fictions* (1999), she vindicates the importance of studying female popular art forms to engage the average woman in the fight for equality. In addition, Modleski has commented on the perceived backlash against feminist theory and activism in *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a “Postfeminist” Age* (1991). The latter covers various topics including male feminism and the need for intersectional thinking, and names the challenges that feminist scholarship would encounter in subsequent decades. This preoccupation with the future of feminist criticism also pervades the Introduction she wrote for the second edition of *Loving with a Vengeance* in 2008.

disregarded women's popular art forms.²⁸ Modleski's argument is that female genres such as soap operas, Gothic novels and mass-market romances are a source of information on women, their expectations and anxieties. She attributes their success among readers to the fact that "they speak to very real problems and tensions in women's lives" (*Loving* 14). Modleski's analysis is remarkable insofar as it aims to take the genre seriously, without bias. She studies both the texts' characteristics, and the ways in which readers internalise the messages encoded in the love story plotline.

Loving with a Vengeance builds on Fredric Jameson's and Louis Althusser's ideas about mass culture and ideology, as well as psychoanalytic theory, to contend that "[t]he reader of popular romances ... is engaged in an intensely active psychological process" (*Loving* 58). Modleski attributes this to the two central "enigmas" driving romance plotlines: the hero's hostile behaviour, and the process whereby he realises that the heroine is *unlike* any woman he has ever met. On the one hand, the third person narration that characterises Harlequins forges a strong bond between the female reader and the female protagonist of the story, leaving "hardly any critical distance" between them (*Loving* 55). On the other hand, the reader is always superior in knowledge to the heroine; she is familiar with the romance formula, and therefore knows what the future has in store for the lovers.

²⁸ See section 1.1, where Modleski's opinion on Greer's text was mentioned.

This “mixture of detachment and identification creates special problems for the reader” (*Loving* 41).

In Modleski’s view, Harlequins depict “girls ‘outgrowing’ their resentment of the male” and “form[ing] instead an erotic attachment to him” (*Loving* 45). The female reader internalises that the hero’s cruelty is rooted in his secret-but-deep love for the heroine, and thus excuses and ultimately forgives his behaviour. But while Modleski fears that “romances to some extent ‘inoculate’ against the major evils of sexist society” (*Loving* 43), she also notes that the genre demands that the hero suffer and be tamed at the end of the story. Romance novels are partially seen as examples of female revenge fantasies where “elements of protest and resistance [exist] underneath highly ‘orthodox’ plots” (*Loving* 25). For Modleski, the “disappearing act” —a phrase she borrows from a Harlequin’s commercial advertisement— is indicative of the heroine’s (and the reader’s) deep frustration over the limits imposed on her by a patriarchal system (*Loving* 25-6). In the end, Modleski is moderately optimistic about these novels, because they show a generalised discontent that may bring the average woman closer to feminism.

Years later, this feminist critic would complain about the treatment given to her work, and even to her own person, by subsequent romance scholarship. In the various essays she has written on the topic of romance since the 1980s, Modleski takes great care to emphasise that she is neither in favour nor completely against romance novels,

precisely because her role as a (feminist) critic is to approach the genre in all its complexity, commenting on the positive and negative aspects of these stories. Modleski addressed these issues in two interrelated pieces “My Life as a Romance Reader” (1997) and “My Life as a Romance Writer” (1998). In the first essay, she revises her personal attraction to romantic narratives, and explains in detail the “dilemma” that she faced when writing *Loving with a Vengeance*:

On the one hand, my purpose had been to show how the novels reinforce conservative notions of women’s place; but, on the other hand, I had wanted to redeem the readers from critical opprobrium, to challenge the sexual double standard that reigned in popular culture criticism, and to demonstrate that romances not only spoke meaningfully to women’s fears, desires and hopes, but also contained elements of protest against female subjugation. (Modleski, “Romance Reader” 56)

In “My Life as a Romance Reader”, Modleski still finds problematic aspects such as the ongoing erotization of dominance, but in accordance with other contributors on the *Paradoxa* special issue, she concedes that some writers are pushing the genre’s limits and transforming some of its landmark tropes (e.g. the heroine’s virginity is no longer a requirement in the late 1990s). In contrast, in “My Life as a Romance Writer” Modleski assumes a more critical stance which seeks to counteract the overoptimism which pervades criticism on popular romance in the late 1990s. Modleski’s refusal to add significant changes to the revised edition of *Loving with a Vengeance* in 2008 adheres to a similar principle. In the Introduction to this second edition, she writes:

“I believe that in many ways the book continues to be relevant, notwithstanding all that we are told about living in ‘postfeminist’ times” (xxxii). In this chapter, Modleski reaffirms the importance of a textual approach to mass-market romance, at the same time she validates the feminist political agenda driving her 1982 analysis. In order to better understand Modleski’s vindications, however, it is necessary first to revise other key texts in the analysis of popular romance fiction from the 1980s, and the directions in which the field has evolved since then.

Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women’s Romance Fiction (1984) is another classic in popular romance scholarship. Like those before her, Kay Mussell defines herself as a feminist in approach, who wonders about the success of the genre at a time when more and more women are “casting off old roles and values” (*Fantasy* xii-xiv). For Mussell, the answer to this question lies partly in the feminist movement itself: while many women saw their horizons and expectations expanded as a result of feminism, this critic acutely observes that for others this was far from being the case. For some women, the movement was actually “a threat, for it promises to call into question the very basis of decisions made years ago that are difficult to revoke” (*Fantasy* xv). Thus, in Mussell’s view romance novels offer women readers a validation of the feminine roles that the vast majority of them continue to perform (i.e. wives and mothers). To this explanation, Mussell adds the socialisation of women. Western culture constructs a woman’s identity in terms of her interpersonal

relationships: daughter of, wife of, mother of. Therefore, this critic thinks it natural that younger readers pay attention to texts that offer some guidance through these roles, by concentrating on one of the most important decisions in a woman's life: the choice of a partner (*Fantasy* 118).

Mussell adopts a sympathetic attitude towards the readers of these stories. She declares herself unable to pass judgement on them, or look at them with contempt, because as she states, “[romance] heroines face dilemmas in fiction that all women confront, consciously or unconsciously, in daily life” (*Fantasy* xv). As a woman, Mussell must face those same issues as well: “most of us belong to families while we try to work out destinies as individuals” (*Fantasy* xv). As a feminist, however, she chooses to follow a different path from that which is socially prescribed. While Mussell's harsher comments are directed at the texts, implicitly she creates a gap between feminism and the readers of these stories, denying the latter the possibility of participating in the movement.

This incompatibility between romance and feminism arises from three interrelated factors. On the one hand, the domestic test, which all romance heroines must pass at the end of the story, glamorises traditional feminine virtues such as self-sacrifice, nurturing and domesticity. When the heroine proves herself a good wife, mother and homemaker, then she “is chosen” by the hero (*Fantasy* 117). Those female characters who do not possess these qualities assume the role of

antagonists to the heroine (the “other woman”) and are invariably punished for their misbehaviour (*Fantasy* 105-6). On the other hand, the romance hero is “mysterious, experienced, strong, usually but not always dark, and described in implicitly sexual terms. ... [he is] so threatening that he must be domesticated to be a genuine hero” (*Fantasy* 123). Another remarkable trait is his emotional distance. The hero is always “circumspect about emotional matters”, at least until the heroine shows him the importance of love (*Fantasy* 125, 133-4). In return, he plays the part of father-husband: he protects and teaches the heroine, and initiates her into her sexuality and adulthood. In other words, he is the authority who bestows identity status on the heroine, to the point where “the loss of the hero’s represents a simultaneous loss of self” (*Fantasy* 112-4). “Even in an age of feminism, changing lifestyles, and more permissive sexuality,” Mussell states, “romance heroines continue to perform the domestic test for [the hero]” (*Fantasy* 114). Finally, Mussell’s analysis determines that romance novels are inimical to feminism because they conceal the most problematic aspects inherent to the domestic role: an endless routine, lack of personal objectives, dissatisfaction and frustration, etc. These books focus exclusively on the events leading to marriage, and the heroine’s transition from daughter to wife, “ignor[ing] the adult issues of women’s lives by obsessively repeating the fairy tale that has for so long informed fiction by and about women in culture” (*Fantasy* 119).

All things considered, *Fantasy and Reconciliation* resolves that:

The unstable and often unsatisfying nature of women's lives within restricted social roles can be ameliorated by repeated vicarious fictional experiences. The adventure aspect of some romances, providing an exciting fantasy of women in active, competent and instrumental roles, represents an *escape from* powerlessness, *from* meaninglessness, and *from* lack of self-esteem and identity, giving temporary relief from the exigencies of women's dilemmas. But what readers *escape to* undercuts the vicarious excitement of the adventure, for romances simultaneously reconcile readers to the social myths from which they are trying to obtain relief by reinforcing the cultural message that such roles [i.e. wife, mother, homemaker] have meaning and value. (164, italics in the original)

For Mussell, the books “represent one method of working through culturally induced problems—a somewhat self-defeating method, to be sure” (*Fantasy* 165). Accordingly, the romance genre is defined as “retrogressive” because it fails to “promote genuine change or individual growth” in the lives of its readers (*Fantasy* 172).

While these remarks are, in essence, a repetition of previous scholarship, Mussell's analysis is worth discussing for three different reasons. Firstly, it is momentarily concerned with the corpus selection process. Greer, Snitow and Modleski assumed that all romances were the same and thus chose random titles, believing them to be perfect representatives of the genre. By contrast, Mussell contends that “a detailed reading of a few of the most important or influential novels can elucidate the mass of books beneath the surface” (*Fantasy* xiii). That is, she opts for studying the most popular types of romance formulas (i.e. series romances, erotic romances, Gothic romances and romantic

suspense, romantic biographies and historical romances), as deployed in the works by key authors in each of those formulas. The fact that she comes up with a criterion to justify her choice of sources indicates that Mussell is aware of the methodological problems (i.e. homogenisation) that cultural studies critics were encountering as the field progressed and expanded, and which would have an enormous impact on the development of popular romance studies over the next decades.

Secondly, the results presented in *Fantasy and Reconciliation* come mainly from a textual analysis of certain selected works. On occasion, however, Mussell speculates about the readers' interpretations, acknowledging the possibility that readers may approach romance fiction for different reasons (*Fantasy* 152). At one point she concedes that readers possess critical thinking and distinguish reality from fantasy: "romances do not necessarily represent the aspirations of readers, nor should we assume that readers actually desire to experience the fictional world, for readers do not normally confuse the boundaries of their own world with those of the fiction they read" (*Fantasy* 168).²⁹

The third reason why Mussell's analysis is worth quoting is because she pays attention to the gap existing between "serious" and "popular" women's literature. Mussell observes that more prestigious

²⁹ This idea has special relevance when dealing with criticism by romance writers, and in Lisa Kleypas's personal understanding of romance fiction. Kleypas has traditionally defended that the content of these novels (the alpha hero, sexual fantasies, etc.) are not representative of women's actual desires for real life. Instead, they are simply fantasies and should be interpreted as such ("Conversation").

fiction does not necessarily avoid retelling the courtship story and the formation of a woman's adult identity. It is only that these writers (e.g. Doris Lessing, Tillie Olsen, etc.) focus on the negative aspects, on what comes afterwards: loss of individuality, unhappiness, etc. In the end, Mussell finds fault with both serious and popular writers alike, since neither group can conceive of a woman protagonist who does not face a similar identity crisis related to the feminine role (*Fantasy* 183-4).

Like Modleski, Kay Mussell would eventually reconsider her judgement in "Where Is Love Gone? Transformations in Romance Fiction and Scholarship", which was included in a special issue of *Paradoxa* that she edited in 1997. Here, she brings feminist romance scholars and romance writers under the same roof, in a conscious attempt to push existing criticism in new directions. Mussell, however, is best remembered in the field of popular romance studies for this particular contribution, and not for her 1984 volume. *Fantasy and Reconciliation* was eclipsed by the publication in the same year of *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*. Janice Radway's innovative methodological approach and her thought-provoking explanations had a greater impact on the public and academic spheres than many of its predecessors. The conclusions it presents make the text one of the most controversial analyses of the romance genre, rivalling with Snitow's or Modleski's.

A feminist as well as a cultural studies critic, Radway begins *Reading the Romance* with a suggestion: that the popularity of romance

novels cannot be explained simply by the convoluted sociopolitical situation of the 70s and 80s, with shifting gender roles and beliefs. Instead, Radway purports to demonstrate that women's desire for romantic stories is magnified by what she calls "the institutional matrix" (*Reading* 19). Taking advantage of the technical improvements in the publishing industry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, she argues that romance publishers such as Harlequin have engineered a nearly perfect system to make easy profits at the less possible cost. Among these strategies, Radway highlights the ubiquitousness of these books in places frequented mostly women, and their affordability (*Reading* 37-39). These two factors make romance novels readily available to the genre's potential consumers, mainly middle-class homemakers (*Reading* 45).

Besides the attention paid to the production, distribution and materiality of romance novels, *Reading the Romance* stands out from its predecessors because of the combination of ethnographic and text-based methodologies. Echoing reader response critics, Radway contends that feminist and cultural studies scholars will never understand the genre's appeal completely, unless they learn to listen to the readers and devise new mechanisms to analyse the ways in which they internalise the books' messages (*Reading* 48-9).³⁰ This critic solves the problem by

³⁰ Here, and also in a latter piece titled "Reading Is Not Eating" (1986), Radway largely presents ethnographic research as the best possible approach to the phenomenon of romantic fiction. However, the introductions Radway wrote in 1987 and in 1991 to *Reading the Romance* reveal that the methodological apparatus that guided her 1984 analysis was perceived as faulty in some aspects, and therefore the conclusions should be treated with

designing questionnaires and interviewing a random sample of female romance readers whom she calls the Smithton women. This group constitutes, according to Radway, an example of an interpretive community: it is formed by readers who share a similar set of values or cultural assumptions, and therefore they are likely to interpret texts similarly, but differently from a literary scholar (*Reading* 8).³¹

To the question “is romance reading a conservative activity or an oppositional one?”, Radway’s answer is largely ambivalent and contrary to what is often said, inconclusive. On the one hand, the act of romance reading is considered combative because her informants were confident that it “enable[d] them to refuse the other-directed social role prescribed for them by their position within the institution of marriage” (*Reading* 211). In other words, romance fiction provided these readers with escape from their roles as mothers and wives. That longing for evasion that Radway fathoms was a consequence of the readers’ dissatisfaction with those same roles. By reading these books, the Smithton women “refuse[d] temporarily their family’s otherwise constant demand that they attend to the wants of others even as they act[ed] deliberately to do something for their own private pleasure” (*Reading* 211).

caution. Consequently, in these two pieces Radway clearly defends the combination of textual analysis and reader questioning as the best possible approach to mass-market romance fiction.

³¹ Radway’s study is founded on the premise that literary critics do not interpret popular texts in the same way readers do. She discusses this particular issue at length in the previously mentioned “Reading Is Not Eating”.

While these signs of protest are very much welcomed, on the other hand Radway finds an unmistakable conservative tone in the genre. *Reading the Romance* includes a Proppian analysis of the Smithton readers' top cherished romances, as well as a discussion of those they rated the lowest.³² Additional attention is paid to the language deployed in these stories, characterised by "cliché[d], simple vocabulary, standard syntax and the most common techniques associated with the nineteenth-century realist novel" (*Reading* 189). This study eventually ascertains that:

Passivity *is* at the heart of the romance experience in the sense that the final goal of each narrative is the creation of that perfect union where the ideal male, who is masculine and strong yet nurturant too, finally recognizes the intrinsic worth of the heroine. ... It is also a figurative journey to a utopian state of total receptiveness where the reader, as a result of her identification with the heroine, feels herself the *object* of someone else's attention and solicitude. (*Reading* 97, italics in the original)

The book goes on to suggest that romance novels reaffirm gender stereotypes through a discourse that "actively insists on the desirability, naturalness, and benefits of that [feminine] role by portraying it ... as a freely designed, personally controlled, individual choice" (*Reading* 208). Like her predecessors, Radway fears that romance reading may be hindering women's actual demand for change in male/female intimate relationships for two different reasons. Firstly, the individualistic,

³² The romance novels analysed in *Reading the Romance* belong to the historical romance subgenre. The limitations of this sample have been used to undermine Radway's conclusions in books such as *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* (1992), by Jayne Ann Krentz.

isolating nature of reading prevents them from coming together as an organised group. “The women”, Radway says, “join forces only symbolically and in a mediated way in the privacy of their individual homes and in the culturally devalued sphere of leisure activity” (*Reading* 212). Secondly, and perhaps more controversial, is her argument that readers remain passive because their yearning for love and attention is adequately met through regular romance reading (*Reading* 212).

Ultimately, however, Radway does not come to a definitive conclusion. Her critics seem to have missed the various occasions on which she mentions the provisional and partial nature of her results.³³ *Reading the Romance* ends with an exhortation to conduct further research on the long-term effects of romance reading, and the various meanings this activity may have for readers with different backgrounds (48-9, 217). Furthermore, Radway comments on the newborn Romance Writers of America association, highlighting its potential to bring more and more women together, which would inevitably lead to significant changes in their lives (*Reading* 218-9). At times, Radway even hints at the possibility that some transformations may be already underway, hence the need to monitor the readers’ progress (*Reading* 213).³⁴

³³ This is not the case of Frantz and Selinger, who quote specific passages from *Reading the Romance* in their 2012 volume.

³⁴ Radway notes that women romance readers consider themselves more assertive after reading these novels. A clear example is Dot Evans, Radway’s chief informant. Dot went from middle-class housewife to an employee in a local bookstore, where she was in charge of providing a personal service to customers. In addition, she wrote a regular newsletter

In reviewing some of the first critical works on mass-market romance fiction, it becomes apparent that Snitow's, Modleski's, Mussell's and Radway's studies already contained many of the topics that present-day romance scholarship continues to deal with. One of the most prominent ones is clearly the choice of the object of study. *Fantasy and Reconciliation* and *Reading the Romance*, in particular, recommend that we analyse only the most popular of these texts, that is, the readers' favourites. By leaving the corpus selection process to chance, these critics argued, the conclusions are faulty from the start. Closely related to this is the question of methodology. Radway's study shows the limitations of textual analysis and advocates instead for a reader-based approach to the romance novel, in which the readers' point of view is essential to understand the genre's success.³⁵

A third relevant aspect discussed in these earlier analyses is the figure of the scholar and of his/her role. The four academics presented here were all self-proclaimed feminists with a marked political agenda: opening women's eyes to the inequalities inherent to heterosexual relationships, all of which mass-market romance fiction is thought to replicate unabashedly. This is most evident in Radway's *Reading the Romance*, when she states that:

reviewing the latest book releases in the romance genre. See Chapter Two of *Reading the Romance* for more information on the particularities of the Smithton readers.

³⁵ In planning the present thesis, for instance, I had to decide whether my study of Pilcher's and Kleypas's selected works would introduce the readers' perspective alongside the literary analysis, or not. Time and space limitations ultimately ruled out that possibility, but the readership's response is mentioned whenever particularly pertinent.

I think *we as feminists might help this change along* by first learning to recognize that romance reading originates in a very real dissatisfaction and embodies a valid, if limited protest. Then *by developing strategies for making that dissatisfaction and its causes consciously available to romance readers and by learning how to encourage that protest* in such a way that it will be delivered in the arena of actual social relations rather than acted out in the imagination, we might join hands with women who are, after all, our sisters and together imagine a world whose subsequent creation would lead to the need for a new fantasy altogether. (220, emphasis added)

In Radway's view, the feminist critic becomes a guide. She is someone who has thrown off the shackles of gender oppression and must now put other women on the right path towards liberation. The same argument can be found, although less explicitly, in the other three studies we have discussed so far. Eventually, these critics would all be accused of sporting an elitist attitude, for Radway and the others are implicitly denying romance readers the status of feminists. As will be explained later on, the very definition of "feminism" and "feminist" would enter a crisis in the 80s and early 1990s, with black women, working-class women and even romance fans struggling to redefine and claim these terms.³⁶

For the time being, it suffices to say that Snitow, Modleski, Mussell and Radway established the main avenues of (feminist)

³⁶ Helen Hazen's *Endless Rapture* (1983) and Jayne Ann Krentz's *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* (1992) illustrate this tension between so-called feminists and non-feminists in popular romance fiction. These books will be mentioned again in future pages of this dissertation.

research on mass-market romance fiction for years to come.³⁷ Jean Radford's *The Progress of Romance* (1986) or Jan Cohn's *Romance and the Erotics of Property* (1988) are very good examples. Radford's collection is built on the idea that a text's meaning is not fixed, but contextual (i.e. it depends on the reader's circumstances), and thus the contributors go on to investigate the ways in which readers have interpreted different forms of romance over the centuries, from seduction novels to Mills & Boon paperbacks. For her part, Cohn follows the same line of thinking that her fellow feminist predecessors did. To explain the popularity of the mass-market romance novel among female readers in an era of greater (personal and professional) opportunities for women, she argues that these books provide a solution to the problems and dilemmas they face in their daily lives. On this occasion, however, Cohn does not understand the romance novel as a revenge fantasy (see Modleski *Loving*) or a fantasy in which women readers experience maternal nurture in heterosexual relationships (see Radway *Reading*). Instead, she contends that romance novels narrate the acquisition of power by a powerless woman, always in a covert manner. That is, they supply a fantasy of (material) triumph in the guise

³⁷ Romance and its pernicious effects on the construction of women's —especially young girls'— identities continued to be researched. To take one example, professors Dorothy Holland and Margaret Eisenhart conducted a long-term study of female university students in the 1980s. Their report revealed the peer pressure exerted over young girls to participate in the "cultural model of romance", and date the worthiest boys (athletes, brilliant students, etc.) at the expense of their own career development. Whereas their study confirmed that women's social prestige still depended largely on their association with men (98-99), it also conceded that some of the girls "actively tried both to avoid the parts of the peer system of romance that they disliked ... and to maneuver [sic] their status within romantic relationships" (8).

of a simple love story (Cohn 5-7). Cohn rereads classical romantic texts such as *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) or *Jane Eyre* (1847) to strengthen her argument, at the same time that she examines the portrayal of the career woman in 1980s romances. The latter clearly responds to the second-wave feminist demand for professional women in the paid workforce, but this character goes against the very essence of the genre: the career woman defies true womanhood, and in many cases, she capitulates and marries the hero.³⁸ Thus, despite the efforts to update the genre to the current social moment and the explicit introduction of feminism in these texts, Cohn proposes that the traditionalism of the “surface story” (i.e. marriage) beats the subversive nature of the “subtext” (i.e. desire for property, power and sexuality) (176-7).

Both pieces —Cohn’s monograph and Anne Rosalind Jones’s chapter, included in Radford’s anthology— considered the romance novel’s growing engagement with feminism. Entering the 1990s, feminist critic Anne Cranny-Francis went one step further and examined the potentiality of the romance novel to turn into a feminist genre.³⁹ In *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* (1990), the answer is unequivocally negative:

³⁸ Ann Rosalind Jones also investigates the conflict between the traditional gender roles imposed by the romantic narrative and the emerging feminist ideology in “Mills & Boon meets Feminism”, one of the essays in Radford’s collection.

³⁹ Cranny-Francis defines feminist generic fiction as “a radical revision of conservative genre texts, which critically evaluates the ideological significance of textual conventions and of fiction as a discursive practice” (9-10). It is not enough, she argues, to replace male characters with female characters and to denounce oppression; writers should call for a revision of the genre’s conventions as well.

The fairy-tale which continues to structure romantic fiction, that goose-girls can marry kings, not only reinforces the patriarchal construction of women solely on terms of gender (as Woman), whose desires, therefore, are fetishised in gender terms as men, sex, love, marriage babies, but also simultaneously constructs women as class-less and (by implication) as race-less, as traitors to their own class and race and so as appropriate scapegoats for male frustration and anger. (188)

Cranny-Francis contends that the mandatory power imbalance which defines the protagonists' romantic relationship (i.e. the hero is stronger, older, richer, sexually experienced; the heroine is the exact opposite) makes it impossible for feminist authors to subvert the genre and adapt it to their own needs (204). Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983) and Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976) are brought up as rare examples of feminist romance, but the author herself wonders whether "any of these texts operate purely as romantic fiction, [and] whether the Mills & Boon/Harlequin readers would find them satisfying reading" (189).

In contrast with those critics like Cohn or Cranny-Francis, who insisted that romance novels still conveyed traditional messages to women readers (regardless of their flirting with feminist tenets), a few others adopted a more nuanced position or outright rejected this hypothesis. Two paramount examples are Carol Thurston's *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (1987) and Mariam Darce Frenier's *Goodbye Heathcliff: Changing Heroes, Heroines, Roles, and Values in Women's Category*

Romances (1988), whose provocative conclusions are worthy of attention in this section. Thurston's text, in particular, anticipates the idea that mass-market romance novels constitute one type of feminist literature.

The Romance Revolution is an ambitious study. It brings together different methodologies in an attempt to provide a thorough, multilevel perspective on the romantic fiction published between 1972 and 1985.⁴⁰ Thurston departs from the premise that popular culture can be an agent of social transformation, to affirm that erotic romance novels mirror "the evolution of the 'liberated' American woman ... reflecting the existing social norms and values of some women at a given moment in time, while acting as an agent of change for others" (7). In her view, the subgenre of erotic romance (from bodice rippers to sensuous contemporaries) aided women's journey towards sexual self-discovery (Thurston 17-31). Evolution occurred thanks to critical feedback by readers, which in turn was made possible by the creation of a communication channel between publishers and the public, as well as editorial guidelines (i.e. tip sheets). Thurston believes that these two elements favoured the formal and thematic development of the genre in these decades, consolidating certain tropes and character types while discarding others (61-65, 92).

The overall result is a "neofeminist romance" in which heroines "attempt to expand the possibilities and opportunities for their own

⁴⁰ Thurston combines a systematic content analysis of romance novels with the readers' assessment of heroes' and heroines' characteristics, plus two reader surveys (conducted in 1982 and 1985), and personal interviews with members of the romance community (namely authors, editors and publishers).

growth, development and fulfilment, and to change the way society perceives them and values them as individuals” (Thurston 92). By 1985, Thurston argues, the heroine’s career brings her “self-definition” and not just economic profits (95); she is also an active participant in lovemaking, responding actively and/or initiating sex (103). For his part, the hero is also transformed. On the one hand, his point of view becomes more and more frequent over the years, showing readers “what and how he thinks, why he responds as he does, what his motivations and problems are, and what he is feeling” (Thurston 99). On the other hand, this new hero is androgynous: he possesses “many traits traditionally assigned to females —openness, flexibility, sensitivity, softness, and vulnerability” (Thurston 98). After a decade of rapid and profound changes, Thurston postulates that in the 80s, romance writers and readers envision egalitarian heterosexual relationships with “large[r] doses of autonomy, equality, cooperation, and compromise, as well as love and respect” (111).

Yet Thurston is aware that some aspects need further changes. She raises the issue of abortion and childbearing to show how the romance industry largely occupies a traditional stance in relation to certain social issues (107-9). At the bottom of this conservative attitude, she finds the readers’ growing demand for realism in romance stories, with protagonists and problems they can identify with. Thurston explains how the limits of this “reality fantasy” are unclear, and how publishers and editors are afraid of overstepping said limit and suffer important

economic losses (110). However, this critic insists, this lingering conservatism should not deter critics from acknowledging the importance of (erotic) romance novels in the construction of female subjectivity throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Her surveys indicate that:

the romance as a form of entertainment and escape encompasses a web of complex motivations and gratifications, serving as a means of exploring new ideas about the changing role and status of women in society — kind of test run or sounding board for a variety of ideas, attitudes and behavior— at the same time that it provides the security of the familiar. It is the formulaic nature of genre fiction that opens the door to the unfamiliar, and through time and repeated exposure converts unusual or new elements into the ordinary and familiar. (Thurston 132)

That is to say, romance novels have the power to give visibility to, and even normalise, particular situations. Thurston is categorical in her final verdict:

To attempt to ban or limit their distribution by labelling them pornography, or even to continue to condemn them in the wholesale fashion most feminists have to date ... is to ignore or castigate what has been one of the most effective channels for communicating feminist ideas to the broad base of women who must be reached if the women's movement is to continue to effect significant social change. Whether stories and fictional characters will continue to move in this direction or at what rate, especially in the face of the increasingly atavistic sociopolitical pressures of the eighties, remains to be seen.⁴¹ (163)

⁴¹ Thurston's data reveal that for the most part, romance readers did not participate in the 80s backlash against feminism (203-4).

This hypothesis that romance novels are instrumental in the transmission of feminist ideas is essentially the same one that present-day romance writers like Maya Rodale or Lisa Kleypas uphold. Thurston's volume, however, is seldom mentioned in popular romance criticism, even though it is one of the most comprehensive accounts of the genre's development in relation to the social transformations of the 1970s and 80s.

Similarly, Frenier's *Good-bye Heathcliff*, published only one year later, remains largely unknown. Frenier also offers a diachronic perspective on the evolution of mass-market romance fiction, attending to the market's development and the challenge that new (American) publishers like Silhouette made to the giant Harlequin.⁴² *Goodbye Heathcliff* illustrates the transition from British romance writers to American ones, and the impact that this process had on the content of the books. Frenier is less optimistic than Thurston, but on the whole, she agrees that feminism has permeated romances in the same way feminism has permeated society:

As did American society, by 1985 romances had grappled with changing expectations of women. Role-reversal was shown as desirable in some areas of daily life; career women were seen as admirable so long as they did not eschew marriage and were willing, unlike their husbands, to temporarily abandon career for early parenthood. Most tellingly, sensitive and nurturant heroes were depicted as

⁴² The battle for supremacy in the romance marketplace, popularly known as the "Romance Wars" in the romance community, is addressed briefly in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

the most desirable of men, even though they were sometimes permitted to retain 1950-era machismo, and though they always remained ultimately dominant in sexual scenes. (90)

Frenier also contends that the feminist backlash of the 80s slipped into romance fiction in some ways, but that heroines would still “have it all” by the end of the book, whereas heroes would continue to be “sensitive and feminist in their behaviors toward heroines while becoming even more terrific in bed” (97).

A reason why Thurston’s and Frenier’s books may have gone unnoticed is Jayne Ann Krentz’s *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance* (1992). As Frantz and Selinger have observed, this book opened up popular romance criticism to educated nonacademics (5). To this, we must add that the contributors to Krentz’s collection present some ideas that are fundamental for understanding the genre’s progress, as well as the scholarly criticism that has accompanied it since the 1990s.

Initially, Krentz argues that *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* is neither a reply to the harsh judgements made by feminist scholars, nor a defence of the genre (2). However, most contributors engage in one way or another with the issues debated by feminists like Modleski, Mussell or Radway, and within its pages we find a systematic explanation of controversial romance tropes (e.g. virginity, the hero’s cruelty) and other formal aspects (e.g. language, style, happy ending). Among these, Laura Kinsale’s essay has had a considerable

impact on popular romance scholarship, as it questions the reader-heroine identification process to argue that it is actually the hero with whom readers relate emotionally: “[Admitting] that within the reader there are masculine elements that can and need to be realized —then reading a romance is far from internally alienating. It is integrating. It is satisfying. It is downright fun, in fact” (Kinsale 39).

Tellingly, some collaborators choose to describe not only what they gain from reading romance stories, but also how their penchant for this type of literature does not interfere with their identity as feminists. Best-selling author Susan Elizabeth Phillips, for instance, says that she and her neighbour:

... were two of the most outspoken feminists in our neighborhood. College educated, opinionated and aggressive, we sniffed out male chauvinism in everyday life like ever-zealous bloodhounds. God help any unsuspecting male who called out “Hello, girls!” when we took our evening walks. We worried about women who didn’t take command of their lives. We voted for political candidates who championed women’s rights. ... We saw no conflict between our feminist views and the content of the books we were reading. (Phillips 54)

Phillips points out that romance novels are simply fantasy stories and that (women) readers can distinguish between reality and fiction. The genre holds great interest for her and for other women because it is all about female empowerment. “For me,” she writes, “there was nothing more satisfying than the illusion that I was in command of all the external forces that so frequently frazzled and threatened me in real

life” (Phillips 55). The hero-villain stands for all the obstacles that women encounter in their lives, and therefore he is an integral part of this power fantasy (Phillips 56-7). Another contributor, Daphne Clair, makes a similar case by affirming that romance novels “are, and always have been, the subversive literature of sexual politics” (61). From Aphra Behn to Kathleen Woodiwiss, the romance novel is said to portray brave, self-made women who overcome all the obstacles in their way (Clair 62-9).

The most articulate writer in the feminism *versus* romance debate, however, is Kathleen Gilles Seidel. This author begins her contribution with a discussion of the appeal of fantasies in general, and then proceeds to answer the major criticisms raised by feminist scholars. She clearly prefers the thesis that romance novels are, first and foremost, escapist literature that brings “joy” to its readers, without this being an indication that women’s lives are unsatisfactory (Seidel 174-7). Seidel pays special attention to Modleski’s and Radway’s perceived elitism and rejects it wholeheartedly.⁴³ Her frustration, even anger, with academic feminists is plainly visible in passages such as the following:

⁴³ Already in 1983, Helen Hazen protested against feminists’ derision of romance fiction in *Endless Rapture: Rape, Romance, and the Female Imagination*. She openly condemned the philosophical branch of feminism that attempted to deconstruct femininity: “The way in which women feel passion has not been accepted into the body of intellectual thought. It has been shunted aside as silliness —as much sillier than the wish to be a cowboy— so that in order to gain respect we women now go about proclaiming that we too want to be cowboys. What nonsense!” (162). In a way, Hazen’s words can be read as an example of third-wave feminism, which as we shall explain in the coming pages, defends women’s choice to adopt behaviours and attitudes traditionally associated with femininity.

Feminists talk about sisterhood; I do not know how deeply they feel it. The undercurrent throughout feminist criticism of romances is that these scholars and critics know what is right for other women –and oh my, do they feel the ‘us/them’ distinction acutely. ... however sympathetic the authors hope to be, a strong sense of the reader as Other, as someone less enlightened, less analytic –more likely to wear lavender pantsuit –than the critic. (Seidel 172)

The fact that Seidel’s vindications appear at the end of the collection seems like a deliberate move, and suggests that romance writers (and readers) are tired of being labelled “anti-feminist” simply because they do not fit into the definition proposed by academics like Modleski, Raday and others. In many ways, Seidel’s words are symptomatic of the age in which they were written. They echo the sentiment expressed by many (young) feminists in the 1990s, who argued that ‘feminist’ cannot be understood as a fixed identity. It is precisely this third-wave feminist tenet what allows for today’s interpretation of romance novels as examples of feminist fiction.

* * *

Third-wave feminism took shape in the 1990s in relation to two different factors. Proponents such as Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake linked this new phase in feminist activism with the work of women of colour, lesbians and other similarly excluded factions (Introduction 1). Speaking from the margins of the movement, these groups had been exhorting mainstream feminists to attend to their needs as well, and not focus exclusively on the issues concerning white,

middle-class, heterosexual women.⁴⁴ In addition to this critique of the bias in second-wave feminism, the birth of this new wave is inseparable from the backlash and the rhetoric of postfeminism which, according to Susan Faludi, dominated the 1980s and early 1990s. By 1991, Faludi argues, government institutions, the media and various popular culture forms such as magazines and films eagerly proclaimed the demise of feminism: they asserted that equality of opportunities had been achieved, and that a new postfeminist age had begun (Faludi 9-11). Paradoxically, in this new age where feminism was deemed unnecessary, many voices contended that feminism was making women unhappy, “miserable”, because the increase in opportunities had brought them nothing but sterility and loneliness (Faludi 1-2). In Faludi’s words, these messages aimed at “push[ing] women back into their ‘acceptable’ roles —whether as Daddy’s girl or fluttery romantic, active nester or passive love object” (13).

Against this backdrop, (younger) voices such as Rebecca Walker entered the scene and voiced their discontent.⁴⁵ In “Becoming the Third

⁴⁴ As was noted at the beginning of this chapter, the use of the wave metaphor has important consequences for the periodisation of the feminist movement. It gives the impression of homogeneity where there is none, silencing dissident voices. Already in 1974, for instance, writers Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich and Alice Walker argued that feminism should be plural and open to discuss different types of women and their experiences: “We dedicate this occasion to the struggle for self-determination of all women, of every color, identification, or derived class: the poet, the housewife, the lesbian, the mathematician, the mother, the dishwasher, the pregnant teen-ager, the teacher, the grandmother, the prostitute, the philosopher, the waitress, the women who will understand what we are doing here and those who will not understand yet; the silent women whose voices have been denied us, the articulate women who have given us strength to do our work” (qtd. in L. Martin).

⁴⁵ In an essay titled “‘It’s All About the Benjamins.’ Economic Determinants of Third Wave Feminism in the United States” (2007), the aforementioned Heywood and Drake discuss the

Wave” (1992), a twenty-two year-old Walker declares herself “angry” in the face of the injustices still committed against women and girls, and calls for other young women “to join in sisterhood” to fight against this pervasive inequality (40-1). Walker ends by asserting that “I am not a postfeminist feminist. I am the Third Wave” (“Becoming” 41), in a clear effort to separate her (third-wave) manifesto from the works of the so-called postfeminist writers like Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe, or Rene Denfeld. Elevated by the media, these authors unanimously lashed out against the *excesses* of second-wave feminism, and spoke about the drift of the movement under the leadership of a few “extremists” who had “embarked on a moral and spiritual crusade that would take us back to a time worse than our mother’s day —back to the nineteenth-century values of sexual morality, spiritual purity, and political helplessness” (Denfeld 10). With some differences between them, Wolf, Roiphe and Denfeld demanded an end to the pernicious victimisation of women and the decriminalisation of men and sex in feminist activism. Naomi Wolf, in particular, was keen on celebrating women’s achievements and pushed for what she named “power feminism”, a new conception of feminism that posits assertiveness, agency and individualism as the only valid route towards gender equality:⁴⁶

economic factors shaping the lives of third-wave feminists (e.g. date of birth between 1963-1974; growing up in a context of moderate equality of education and professional opportunities; economic ups and downs; multiculturalism; increasing globalisation and consolidation of image-based industries).

⁴⁶ As Deborah L. Seigel pointed out in 1997, postfeminists like Wolf, Roiphe and Denfeld presented themselves as the champions of “good feminism”, and in doing so, they fell into the same trap as their predecessors. Like the second waver feminists they attacked, these

No overdetermined agendas, no loyalty oaths, just the commitment to get those unmarked “power units” — health, education, the vote— to women, for women to use as adult individuals, with conflicting visions and wills. What women do with those units of potential is up to them. (Wolf 138)

Like Walker, other third wavers also defined themselves against postfeminism. Heywood and Drake considered the triad Roiphe-Wolf-Denfeld “a group of young, conservative feminists”, and in contrast, they conceived the third wave as “a movement that contains elements of second-wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while it also acknowledges and makes use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures” (Introduction 1-3). This idea of contradiction became as much a part of the new third wave as intersectionality. Third-wave practitioners investigated the complex nature of identity as an interplay of various factors (e.g. gender, age, race, sexuality), and consequently acknowledged the existence of multiple systems of oppression. In fact, one of the third wave’s most popular mottos reads: “We know that what oppresses me may not oppress you, that what oppresses you may be something I participate in, and that what oppresses me may be something you participate in” (Heywood and Drake, Introduction 3). To account for their individual experiences, their hybridity, third wavers came up with a new writing style, defined as “an engaged scholarship that combines new

three writers also perpetuated a rigid conception of what feminist means, and excluded anyone who did not subscribe to their opinions (Seigel 62-74).

interdisciplinary methodologies with an autobiographical style” (Heywood and Drake, Introduction 2).

Sexuality and popular culture became two main arenas of action for third-wave feminism. On the one hand, third wavers are sex-positive and demand “the space to produce our own sexually explicit narratives and images of female desire and sensuous engagement” (Segal 19). They vindicate sexuality as a key agent in the construction of identity, and regard it as an empowering form of self-expression.⁴⁷ On the other hand, third-wave feminists do not eschew popular culture. In fact, they are known for “their embracing of popular culture—which young women consume, appropriate and reuse to their own purposes” (Whelehan xviii).⁴⁸ This new generation can relate with pop culture icons such as *Ally McBeal* or *Buffy*, while simultaneously rejecting those aspects they consider problematic. Third wavers contend that women are indeed critical of the images pop culture presents them, and not the dupes that second-wave feminism believed them to be.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Critics such as Ariel Levy, however, have advised against equating female empowerment with the open display of sexuality (5). Levy affirms that we are currently living in a “raunch culture” where women are invited to participate in their own sexual objectification, disguising this as progress. Levy’s book argues that this behaviour has few benefits for the women who practise it.

⁴⁸ For a discussion of the relationship between popular culture and feminism in a post-second-wave context, see Hollows and Moseley’s *Feminism in Popular Culture* (2006). The essays assembled in this collection reflect on various issues such as the representation of women in popular culture, the commodification of feminism and the beauty industry. Similarly, Angela McRobbie’s *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) is another seminal text. In this volume, McRobbie tackles the portrayal of women in pop culture to raise awareness about the neurosis and dependency that often accompanies the images of successful women.

⁴⁹ It goes without saying that romance fans support this thesis wholeheartedly.

In many ways, third-wave feminism advanced a “new” form of feminism that challenged the perceived orthodoxies of the second wave. Rebecca Walker is a good case in point, because she elaborated on the generation gap between herself and her mother, the American novelist, poet and feminist activist Alice Walker. The daughter feared that her personal interest and participation in some of the so-called anti-feminist issues (e.g. pornography, unequal love relationships, femininity, popular culture) would alienate her from the feminist movement represented by her mother. Walker explains how “[t]hat moment of articulating my difference, when I imagined it in my mind, ... was one filled with the guilt of betrayal” (“Being Real” xxx-xxx). In talking to other women, however, she was convinced that her individuality and her feminist views were not mutually exclusive, that “there was no one correct way to be a feminist, no seamless narrative to assume and fit into” (Walker, “Being Real” xxx). In practice, this translates into individual definitions of feminism that may or may not coincide with other women’s understanding of the term. As the title of one of bell hook’s books says, “feminism is for everybody”.

Some feminist thinkers and activists have celebrated this attempt to broaden the meaning of feminism, but they have also shown their preoccupation with the depoliticisation that accompanies this emphasis on individuality. In their Introduction to *Catching a Wave* (2003), Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier wrote:

We think that the third wave impulse to challenge certain perceptions of what feminism is or how it should be performed is valid, as is the impulse to make feminism as inviting as possible to a broad range of people. However, we contend that this invitation to feminism must be politically rigorous; rather than emptying feminism of its political content, we must embrace feminism's potential to transform our lives and our world. (18)

Astrid Henry, too, in her account of the evolution of third-wave feminism, further explains how in “[c]hallenging the perceived dogmatism of second wave feminism, third-wavers have steered clear of prescribing a particular feminist agenda and instead have chosen to stress individuality and individual definitions of feminism” (43). Under this “ideology of individualism”, as she names it, feminism “thus becomes an ideology of individual empowerment to make choices, no matter what those choices are” (Henry 44-5).⁵⁰ Some third wavers, for instance, no longer see traditional feminine behaviours like using cosmetics as one of the pillars of women's oppression. Rather, they consider these to be empowering if the woman *chooses* to deploy them freely in the construction of her identity. As Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards contend, “Girlie” (feminism) “isn't shorthand for ‘we've been duped’,” and, “while it's true that embracing the pink things of stereotypical girlhood isn't a radical gesture ... it can be a confident

⁵⁰ Some critics have demonstrated that individualism can also have positive effects on the way in which women conduct their lives. In *The End of Marriage: Individualism and Intimate Relations* (2001), for instance, Jane Lewis interviews young men and women and shows how individualism may challenge women's traditional self-abnegation in (heterosexual) romantic relationships, encouraging them to seek more balanced relationships in which partners must negotiate household chores and responsibilities, child-rearing, etc.

gesture” (136). Similarly, a woman’s choice to read romance novels in spite of the genre’s anti-feminist reputation may be taken as an empowering action, signifying women writers’ and readers’ willingness to pursue their own pleasure.

As feminist thinking developed into new directions throughout the decade, so did scholarship on romance novels. The 90s saw a change of focus with regards to previous research. Previous pages have shown how Greer, Modleski and Radway targeted romance novels to expose the power imbalance inherent in (heterosexual) romantic relationships. In the 1990s, the question “are romance novels good or bad for women readers?” was still at the heart of many critiques of the genre, such as Linda K. Christian Smith’s *Becoming a Woman Through Romance* (1990) or George Paizis’s *Love and the Novel* (1998). In addition to this question, other feminist scholars such as Lynne Pearce became more interested in the ways in which romance narratives retain its hold over people regardless of decades of adverse feminist criticism on the topic.⁵¹ In both *Romance Revisited* (1995) and *Fatal Attractions* (1998), Pearce, in coalition with other feminist critics, investigates the adaptability of romantic love to postmodern culture, and the “extent” to which it can be subverted to expose “the cultural inscription of all our desires and all our stories of desire” (*Fatal Attractions 2*).

⁵¹ Pearce’s research is part of the larger, ever-present effort made by feminists to investigate the topic and representation of love. Other examples of critical texts written around the same time are Eva Illouz’s *Consuming the Romantic Utopia* (1997), Wendy Langford’s *Revolutions of the Heart* (1999) or Mary Evans’s *Love: An Unromantic Discussion* (2003).

As was noted earlier, however, (feminist) criticism on romance novels during the 1990s also mirrored this transition to third-wave feminism. Not only did romance novelists like the aforementioned Kathleen Gilles Seidel struggle with the narrow and fixed meaning of “feminist”,⁵² but more and more commentators began to pay attention to notions of empowerment and agency, both at the textual level (i.e. female protagonists) and in the real world (i.e. women readers). Suzanne Juhasz’s *Reading from the Heart* (1994) is largely an autobiographical piece, in which this scholar explores her lifelong taste for romantic stories, and how this facilitated her own self-discovery. However, the most obvious example of this change in approach is Jennifer Cruise Smith’s “Romancing Reality: The Power of Romance Fiction to Reinforce and Re-Vision the Real”, included in Kay Mussell’s 1997 special issue of *Paradoxa*. A scholar by training and romance novelist by choice, Crusie recalls her personal encounter with romance fiction, and how, in romance novels, she finally found a picture of women she could relate with:

For the first time, I was reading fiction about women who had sex and then didn’t eat arsenic or throw themselves under trains or swim out to the embrace of the sea, women who won on their own terms (and those terms were pretty varied) and still got the guy in the end without having to apologize or explain that they were still emancipated even

⁵² In the first pages of *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, Jayne Ann Krentz states, quite revealingly, that “[m]ost [contributors] consider themselves feminists, although they recognize that their definition of feminism may not coincide with that of all feminists” (3).

though they were forming permanent pair bonds, women who moved through a world of frustration and detail and small pleasures and large friendship, a world I had authority in. (“Romancing Reality” 82)

To begin with, Crusie’s words are a not-so-subtle reference to well-known female protagonists like Edna Pontellier, from Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), a character that symbolises the deleterious consequences that femininity and romance have on women.⁵³ Also, it can be seen how Crusie champions the romance heroine’s strength of character and her desire to “bond” without compromising her independence. Indeed, for this author, the genre:

reinforces a sense of self-worth in readers ... by demonstrating the idea of women as strong, active human beings; by reinforcing the validity of their preoccupations; and by putting them at the center of their own stories, empowering them by showing heroines who realistically take control of their own lives. (“Romancing Reality” 84)

Crusie’s affirmation suggests that romance novels, like feminism, seek to expand women’s options in a world that does not favour them. Women readers see themselves reflected in the heroines, and thus feel encouraged to become more assertive and independent. The bottom line is that romance fiction does affect readers, but contrary to what had

⁵³ Ignored by her husband and rejected by her younger lover, Kate Chopin’s heroine commits suicide by drowning herself in the sea. Crusie’s critique of Edna Pontellier has two different strands: firstly, she condemns the passivity and inactivity shown by Edna at the moment of her death; and secondly, Cruise criticizes the tragic ending that often accompanies female protagonists in literature. Romance novels, according to this author, are the exact opposite, hence their popularity: the books show strong female protagonists who are rewarded for their efforts with a happy ending.

been argued by Radway and other critics, the effect is positive: these novels invite women to change their lives for the better. Like Thurston, Crusie emphasises the books' positive portrayal of female sexuality, and declares that they should "earn the respect of feminists for the way they re-vision women's sexuality, making her a partner in her own satisfaction instead of an object" ("Romancing Reality" 90).

In their discussion of the different waves in popular romance scholarship, Frantz and Selinger believe that Kay Mussell's *Paradoxa* issue was not enough to initiate the third-wave of scholarship that we are in. Instead, they situate the origins of that third wave in the early 2000s, when two monographs, Pamela Regis's *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* and Juliet Flesch's *From Australia with Love* (2004), were published (7-8). These two volumes, Regis's in particular, were able to challenge previous (feminist) scholarship on romance novels, rekindling academic interest again and developing new methodologies for a more comprehensive and rigorous study of the genre.

Despite the obvious impact that *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* has had on popular romance studies, however, it should be taken into account that changes were already on the way. These changes were prompted, at least partially, by the debates taking place at the heart of feminism. The focus on female agency, empowerment and sexuality that permits writers to call romance novels "feminist" novels is closely linked with the principles of third-wave feminism. And just as third wavers continue to look back to their predecessor to establish their own

separate identity, romance writers continue to look back at earlier critics like Tania Modleski and Anne Snitow. These critics' conclusions have, for better or for worse, conditioned many romance writers and the way in which they create the gender politics of romantic fiction.

This section has discussed some of the major critiques of romance novels in the 1980s and 1990s, and the following pages will look at some of the most relevant and recent scholarship on the genre, paying especial attention to those works that tackle the relationship between romance and feminism.

1.3. THE 2000s: ROMANCE FICTION AS FEMINIST FICTION

Second-wave feminists displayed an overt interest in heterosexual love and romance as part of their project to reform society and the relationships between women and men. The previous section has shown how feminist critics such as Tania Modleski and Janice Radway cast their eyes on mass-market romance novels, and why they saw in these books an element of protest that was nevertheless subdued. The heroine's marriage to the often-cruel hero was unanimously interpreted as a reinforcement of patriarchal femininity and a glorification of the roles of wife and mother. While there were dissenting voices, the widespread consensus was that romance reading was inimical to an authentic feminist identity. According to Frantz and Selinger, a second wave emerged during the 1990s in popular romance studies, characterised by authors taking the floor and answering back the

accusations levied by academic (feminist) critics, including that of “un-feminist” attitudes (7). This coincided in time with the proclamation of a third wave of feminist activism which, despite its recognition of second wavers’ achievements, pushed for new directions and challenged a monolithic understanding of feminism. This new generation —as they see themselves— combines the denunciation of sexism with an emphasis on the empowerment of women in individual terms. This emphasis on self-empowerment and individual agency at the expense of a common identity and collective action are perceived by many critics as bordering on postfeminism, a discourse which, influenced by neoliberalism, largely demonises (second-wave) feminism.

The entrance in the new millennium has brought about a reconsideration of the romance novel in both political and aesthetic terms, and in fact the present thesis aims at contributing to this project. Certainly, essays such as Jayeeta Bagchi’s “Looking for Reality in Romance” (2000) continued to foster a negative image of mass-market romance as a thematically conservative genre in which, regardless of the readers’ discontent with the institution, “[t]he whole point is to look forward to a happy, domesticated nuclear family” (31). This view has not been totally abandoned, but it coexists with a more positive interpretation of the genre. Critics like Jayashree Kamblé, for example, have proposed that romance novels offer empowering fantasies to women readers. Interestingly, both Bagchi and Kamblé discuss the

reading of Western romance fiction in an Indian context, but in her self-evaluating piece, Kamblé claims that the genre “is helping the impulse for a change in women’s social status to emerge in different parts of the world” and “allow[ing] women in a different culture to reassess the social structures that dictate their lives” (“Female Enfranchisement” 150).

Kamblé’s text appeared a few years after Bagchi’s, as one of the chapters in Sally Goade’s anthology *Empowerment Versus Oppression: Twenty First Century Views of Popular Romance Novels* (2007). As its very title suggests, Goade’s book addresses the question that “haunts” scholars working on popular romance, and resolves that “in striking a bargain with the romance narrative, women romance readers are simultaneously bound to a patriarchal system and emboldened by their own choice and creativity within that system” (30). This volume aimed at studying the genre’s thematic and formal innovations without diminishing the importance or dismissing the valuable insights given by previous (feminist) scholarship. The book comprises chapters with multiple focuses, including reader response and content analyses, or the study of the industry’s development, all of which attest to the increasingly varied approaches deployed in the study of this popular art form.

However valuable Goade’s volume is, the most renowned study on popular romance novels during the early 2000s continues to be Pamela Regis’s *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003), and as such it

deserves some commentary. Regis approaches the genre from a formal point of view, delimiting the term romance novel and defining it as a “work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (*Natural History* 14) that must rigorously possess eight essential narrative elements (*Natural History* 30-8).⁵⁴ Regis’s effort to outline what a romance novel *is* and what it is not is inseparable from her enthusiastic defence of the genre’s literary quality. This critic revisits acclaimed literary works such as Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* or E. M. Forster’s *A Room with a View* (1908) as examples of romance novels, with an eye to dispel the accusations of formulaic and repetitive literature and vindicate instead the genre’s artistry.⁵⁵

A Natural History of the Romance Novel also devotes several pages to dismantle the arguments about the romance novel’s alleged complicity in maintaining the status quo of patriarchal gender roles.

⁵⁴ Very briefly, the eight elements listed by Regis are: 1) a flawed society that oppresses the couple; 2) the meeting between hero and heroine; 3) the barrier that delays the happy ending and 4) the attraction that nonetheless brings the protagonists together; 5) a point of ritual death where the happy ending seems highly improbable; 6) a recognition scene where the barrier is overcome; 7) a moment where hero and heroine declare their mutual love and 8) a betrothal scene, which does not necessarily require a wedding ceremony, only an affirmation of the protagonists’ mutual commitment. These elements may appear explicitly or implicitly in the novel, but they are a condition *sine qua non* for a given text to be considered a romance (*Natural History* 27). The limitations of Regis’s taxonomy will be discussed in subsequent chapters of the present thesis.

⁵⁵ Another fairly recent reappraisal of the romance novel and of its artistic worth is Laura Vivanco’s *For Love and Money: The Literary Art of Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance* (2011). Regis largely discusses well-known examples of romance novels that have made their way into the literary canon, and Vivanco, in turn, vindicates the literary quality of Harlequin Mills & Boon texts, arguably the most formulaic of all modern romances for being subjected to editorial guidelines and author tip sheets. Other scholarly works that look at the romance novel’s literary quality are Eric M. Selinger’s “Rereading the Romance” (2007) and “How to Read a Romance Novel (and Fall in Love with Popular Romance)” (2012).

Regis denounces that romance novels are held to a higher standard than other popular literary genres, and she objects to earlier critiques for their methodological errors, particularly their corpus selection criteria (or rather, the lack thereof). She also talks about the marked ideology behind Modleski's or Radway's works. To Radway's assertion that romance novels can be blamed for failing to provide women readers with alternatives beyond the roles of wife and mother, Regis replies that literary forms do not have the power to restructure readers' lives: "Readers are free to ignore, skip, stop, disbelieve, dislike, reject, and otherwise read quite independently of the form" (*Natural History* 13). However, while she regards the transformative side of literature with scepticism, Regis sets out to demonstrate how the genre actually depicts the triumph of the heroine over economic and social adversities. Insofar as it centres on the heroine's pursuit of property/economic independence, affective individualism (i.e. self-fulfilment) and companionate marriage (i.e. intimate relationships based on love and mutual support), the romance novel portrays empowered women (*Natural History* 55-61). Regis's persuasive arguments in defence of the romance novel have made her a favourite with many popular romance scholars and romance writers and readers, to the point that her manual has become an essential reading for anyone approaching romance fiction.

Glinda Hall's 2009 *The Creators of Women's Popular Romance Fiction: The Authors Who Gave to Women a Genre of Their Own* is an

equally strong apologia of the genre, its writers and readers. Hall builds on Carol Thurston's and Jennifer Crusie Smith's research, among others, to contend that romance novels, as gendered narratives written and read almost exclusively by women, harbour subversive messages that destabilise traditional gender roles:

women writers have created and established a gendered genre where their storytelling enables them to pass on heritage, create and nourish communities, as well as expose and debunk cultural constructs stereotypes, and myths surrounding their lives, such as gender roles, sexuality, power dynamics within relationships, and such issues that women face in their daily lives – demands of professional careers, family pressures, and even political and economic aspects. (175-6)

Hall's thesis rests on the assumption that romance encodes a secret language, narrative and ideology which are recognisable by anyone partaking in the romance community, an idea which was already present in Krentz's *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* discussed in the previous section.

From a critical point of view, one of the most valuable aspects of this study is precisely this interest in addressing the uncharted territory of romance writers and their motivations for taking up such a disdained activity. Conducting an ethnographic research in which she infiltrates one of the local chapters of the Romance Writers of America association, the most important organisation representing consolidated and aspiring romance authors in the US, Hall exposes the writers' unanimous desire to communicate, to tell stories and more specifically,

romance stories (188). According to this scholar, this transferring of knowledge “offers a mode of empowerment” that should not be underestimated (7). Authors and readers form a friendly and supportive community that shares a common language and provides a safe space—the novels—where hegemonic discourses on gender and sexuality are debated and even countered, all under the appearance of complicity with those same discourses. Hall, referring to Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), attributes this potential for subversiveness to the romance novel’s marginal status (69-71).

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, which essentially determines that gender identity is constructed through repetitions of gendered acts, also allows Hall to re-examine some of the most controversial romance novels in the twentieth century and present them in a positive light. She explains how in both Kathleen Woodiwiss’s *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) and Rosemary Rogers’s *Sweet Savage Love* (1974), the male and female protagonists are most unhappy when they act according to the socially prescribed gender roles of dominant (hero) and submissive (heroine), especially during sexual intercourse scenes (99-103).⁵⁶ Therefore, Hall argues, the books can be read as a veiled critique of those same roles: “by beginning with traditional views of gender, sexuality and marriage, these authors [Woodiwiss and

⁵⁶ Scenes where the hero rapes the heroine are partly responsible for the genre’s ill reputation among feminist critics, because in these novels the heroines usually come to love the perpetrator. Like Thurston and other critics before her, Hall offers a much more positive reading of these encounters. She contends that these rape scenes are metaphorical representations of the unsuitability and danger inherent to patriarchal gender roles.

Rogers] create a new dialogue and vocabulary encoded for the communities of romance readers and writers where their heroines and heroes are re-educated and refined” (118). In addition, the shifting points of view that characterise more modern novels, especially in those passages describing the sexual act, confirm the intrinsic feminist nature of the genre. With both hero and heroine presented as subjects and objects of desire, the playing field is levelled between them (86-7).

While her analysis of romance novels as inherently feminist texts is highly suggestive, Hall risks the charge of being deemed overoptimistic in some respects. She advocates, for instance, that all romance novels contain elements of protest, whether this was the writer’s intention or not.⁵⁷ Those readers who are unfamiliar with the secret codes of romance only need to read between the lines to find the revolutionary messages hidden underneath seemingly conventional plots. In a way, Hall may be accused of generalising just in the same way that Modleski and Radway did in the 1980s. The difference is that, on this occasion, Hall praises rather than condemns the genre.

These attempts to rehabilitate mass-market romance fiction in the public eye do not come exclusively from academics. Romance writers and readers have produced substantial commentary on the genre’s formal and thematic features, on its development in relation to changing social mores, and also on its positive impact on the lives of women readers. *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches’ Guide to*

⁵⁷ Hall herself notes that not all romance writers introduce feminist demands in their texts in a conscious way (203).

Romance Novels (2009), co-written by Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan from the influential *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books* blog, is conceived as “a party for the genre—to celebrate its soaring success as well as its appalling excesses” (1). The book could be considered as just another amateur defence of romance novels and their readers, except that the writers themselves acknowledge the complexity inherent to the genre. One of their premises, for instance, is that there are good and bad romances, and that denying the genre’s variable quality is actually detrimental; for the genre to be taken seriously, they say, romance novels should be subjected to rigorous literary examination, just like any other form of genre fiction (Wendell and Tan 7-8). Wendell and Tan also comment on the readers’ contradictory attitudes in relation to clichéd plot devices or characterisation, taking great care to highlight the readers’ critical thinking.⁵⁸

Beyond Heaving Bosoms discusses the reasons behind the genre’s reviled reputation. Wendell and Tan explain how the accusations of formulaic literature are simply not true, because there is enormous creativity in the portrayal of the couple’s journey to their happy ending (122-3). In addition, they propose that another reason why the genre is ridiculed is because our culture systematically devalues the feminine or anything that is female-related. The romance genre thus becomes an

⁵⁸ Wendell’s and Tan’s discussion of narrative point of view and of the reader-heroine identification process shows the variety and complexity of women’s approach to romance. Readers may identify with hero, heroine, or remain neutral, but in all three cases, they are always very critical with the characters, because they bring their own set of expectations into the text. See “Chapter Corset” in *Beyond Heaving Bosoms* for a full consideration of this matter.

easy target: it is written and read almost exclusively by women, and the books revolve around feminine concerns (“sex, emotions, happiness and relationships”) which are perceived as trivial and therefore inferior (Wendell and Tan 123). Wendell and Tan take the defence of women’s reading material very seriously and repudiate the stereotype that often describes the romance readership as a duped, uncritical mass: “We love romance novels. We’re smart women with sharp intellects and a love for discussion and debate. And one does not cancel the other. Romance novels do not make you stupid, we promise” (127).

To the accusations that romance novels are nothing but porn, the authors unmask the double-standard behind such affirmations. In comparing society’s acceptance of men’s entertainment magazines such as *Playboy* on the one hand, and the public derision of romance novels on the other, they conclude that “[w]omen’s sexual pleasure and the education of women on the means to that end are simply not accepted or even celebrated” (Wendell and Tan 134). Sardonicly, they reflect on how those “written explorations of sexual autonomy and self-actualization for women and establishment of equal sexual status with a willing and satisfying partner within the confines of mutual commitment ... that’s porn” (Wendell and Tan 133). This phrasing reveals what Wendell and Tan believe to be behind the genre’s success among women readers: a positive, unabashed portrayal of female sexuality and of woman’s entitlement to enjoy sex on her own terms.

In 2011, Sarah Wendell published *Everything I Know About Love I Learned from Romance Novels*, a shorter book in which she delved into the positive consequences that romance has on women's lives. Wendell lets the readers of the blog speak for themselves, as they lay out what romance novels have done for them. One such reader, for instance, declares that romance reading infused her with a sense of entitlement with regards to her sexuality:

... romance novels taught me that I could own my sexuality in my own terms, that I could respect myself enough to wait to find the right person to do all the romantic and naughty things I'd ever read about, and finally, they gave me the hope to know that, no matter how many failed relationships came before, when I found the right guy it would by no means be easy, but it would be magical. (qtd. in Wendell, *Everything I Know* 125)

The genre, therefore, is seeing as “offer[ing] safe spaces of sexual exploration and, to be honest, research on what it means to be intimate” (Wendell, *Everything I Know* 116). Wendell further contends that romance novels offer healthy role models that “teach women to be confident in our strengths” and “being happy with who you are” (*Everything I Know* 52-3). Yet above all else, by virtue of the readers' critical abilities, romance can help women in the process of “[i]dentifying their own likes, desires, and senses of worth—and of being worth the effort so they don't feel the need to settle for less than what they want” (Wendell, *Everything I Know* 53). For all these reasons, romance novels are perceived as a powerful driving force for change,

encouraging women to think and act in their own best interests. The genre, therefore, boosts individual action in pursuit of a happier, more fulfilling life.

Even so, many voices have continued to warn against the conservative elements present in romance fiction, regardless of the genre's evolution or the writers' and readers' interpretations of the messages proffered by these narratives. Susan Ostrov Weisser has argued that romance acts as "a kind of defense, a bulwark for contemporary women against the old fear of being sexually objectified and exploited", hence its ever-increasing popularity (208). Acknowledging the importance that the discourse of romantic love has for so many women, Weisser denounces its most "insidious" features. She challenges, for example, the notion that "love equalizes gender", that is, that both partners receive as much they give. Weisser states the obvious when she rightly points out that women, as the primary consumers of romance, are usually the ones who invest more emotional energy in maintaining romantic relationships (210-11). Along the same lines, other critics like Lynne Pearce and the fairly recent Feminist Love Studies Network have remarked on the historical and cultural specificity of romantic love, as well as researched the reasons why women still engage in asymmetrical heterosexual relationships.⁵⁹

On a different but equally important note, Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff asseverate that romantic narratives exhibit a

⁵⁹ For more information on these issues, see Pearce *Romance Writing*; Gunnarsson; García-Andrade et al.

postfeminist sensibility based on self-regulation and personal empowerment. In analysing several chick lit titles, a genre which they believe is the modern equivalent of Harlequin and Mills & Boon romances, these critics find that these novels take some feminist premises as a given (e.g. career opportunities outside the home, economic self-sufficiency, more sexual freedom). At the same time, the books present the woman's pursuit of a partner as a personal choice, silencing real social pressures that still urge women to be feminine, pair up and return to the (glorified) domestic sphere (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 499). Furthermore, heroines in chick lit stories "still frequently require 'rescuing' at regular intervals", whereas heroes continue to be superior, "knowing better about what women want and who they are than women themselves" (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 498). For these critics, romance still fails to provide readers with alternative versions of heterosexual relationships, or alternatives for constructing female subjectivity independently from men.

More recent critiques corroborate Gill's and Herdieckerhoff's reading of mass-market romance novels as postfeminist rhetoric. Eirini Arvanitaki's "Postmillennial Femininities in the Popular Romance Novel" (2017) contends that "by making a choice about her life, the heroine is represented as a neoliberal and self-governing individual" (23). She looks at three Harlequin Mills & Boon romances in which the heroines initially espouse mainstream (feminist) values like economic and emotional autonomy and agency. Upon meeting the hero, however,

a “pattern” emerges: heroines change their minds and forsake their cherished independence to embrace the heroes’ goals at the expense of their own individual fulfilment. Arvanitaki argues that heroines make this decision willingly on the basis of love. Thus, she concludes, romance novels convey the message that “individualism, the rejection of traditional social norms or expectations and personal agency may initially set one free but this will oppress them [women] through confinement to a solitary life. These novels suggest that happiness cannot co-exist with feminist beliefs” (Arvanitaki 25).⁶⁰

Nattie Golubov, in *El Amor en Tiempos Neoliberales: Apuntes Críticos sobre la Novela Rosa Contemporánea* (2017), also thinks that the female protagonist of romance personifies “successful femininity”, a concept which feminist critics like Shelley Budgeon associate with postfeminist and neoliberal discourses. According to Golubov, heroines are portrayed as highly individualised subjects who participate voluntarily in the politics and practices of consumer society, i.e. freedom of choice in all aspects, including a certain “lifestyle, body-type, sexuality, career, partner, family” (ch. 7, my translation).⁶¹ Despite their apparent adherence to feminist principles, this emphasis on choice and individual agency conceals “the existence of structural

⁶⁰ It must be noted, however, that Arvanitaki analyses a very limited and random sample of contemporary romance novels, a fact that questions the validity of her conclusions if we take into account the staggering number of romance novels published monthly, only in the US.

⁶¹ Golubov’s original quote says: “La libertad de elección aparece en las novelas [rosas] no como un derecho colectivo en el contexto de una política emancipadora, sino como la libertad para elegir propia de una sociedad de consumo en la que predomina la ilusión de que irrestrictamente se pueden seleccionar un estilo de vida, un tipo de corporalidad, un tipo de sexualidad, una profesión, una pareja, una familia” (ch. 7).

(economic, social) obstacles hindering [women's] self-fulfilment and career success. ... so that the protagonists' failure or triumph lies in their ability to make the right or wrong decisions" (ch. 7, my translation).⁶² Golubov reiterates Radway's idea that romance novels cannot be considered truly revolutionary unless they demonstrate that women are complete individuals, with "the right to be alone and to be happy on their own, or in partnership with someone who is not a sexual partner" (ch. 8, my translation).⁶³ Echoing Radway, too, this critic affirms that the liberating aspect of romance fiction may only be found in the act of fantasising, not in the actual fantasy (ch. 8).⁶⁴

The above mentioned studies are only some examples of the current academic debate dealing with romance novels from a feminist point of view.⁶⁵ It must be noted, however, that none of these critics

⁶² "[H]oy día los principales obstáculos a la relación [son] psicológicos y ... en ningún momento se sugier[e] que exist[a]n impedimentos estructurales (económicos, sociales) a la realización personal y el éxito laboral [de la mujer]. ... El ocultamiento de las influencias externas en la formación individual conlleva un desconocimiento de las causas de la desventaja social que explicarían la desigualdad, de tal manera que el fracaso o éxito de las protagonistas reside en su habilidad para implementar buenas o malas elecciones" (Golubov ch. 7).

⁶³ "[L]a única manera de conseguir que la novela rosa sea realmente subversiva sería que postulara positivamente la radical idea de que 'las mujeres no necesitan a un hombre para establecer su subjetividad o ser felices, que podrían ser capaces de operar en el mundo público solas como lo hacen los hombres' (Radway, 1984: 18), incluso reclamando que tenemos el derecho a estar solas e incluso a ser felices a solas también, o como parte de una sociedad de convivencia con uno/a otro/a que no necesariamente es una pareja sexual" (Golubov ch.8).

⁶⁴ "Es el acto mismo de fantasear el que es placentero y potencialmente liberador, no el contenido de la fantasía" (Golubov ch. 8).

⁶⁵ Other examples would be Struve's, Burnett's and, more recently, Brouillette's works. In all cases, the writers advance very similar ideas: firstly, the most subversive aspect of romance novels is the community of women that supports it (see Struve; Burnett); and secondly, that the novels reconcile women's longing for personal empowerment with the social pressure to enter romantic relationships (see Brouillette).

make their personal positioning explicit; in other words, we do not know whether they are or have been regular readers. While this may look like superfluous information, in the case of romantic fiction it is a matter of great importance. As the feminist critic/romance reader/romance writer Catherine Roach observes, an overly detached scholar does not necessarily translate into a more rigorous analysis of romance fiction, nor does s/he provide more objective conclusions:

A reader who is too academic may be left unmoved by the storylines and characters, miss the beating heart of the genre, lack a sensibility for its poignancy or emotional draw, just ‘not get it’ in terms of why or how the genre is so popular, and may thus treat the genre with a certain distrust or disdain. (*Happily* 37)

Roach defines herself as an “aca-fan”, a term which designates readers who are also fans of their objects of study,⁶⁶ and her work on popular romance novels may be seen to occupy the middle ground between the antagonistic standpoints of Arvanitaki and Golubov, and the much more utopian interpretations of Regis, Wendell and Hall discussed at the beginning of this section. Roach acutely locates those aspects of romance fiction which hold the greatest potential for women’s emancipation, while simultaneously pinpointing those that remain too traditional.

⁶⁶ Catherine Roach is Professor of Cultural Studies and Gender Studies at New College, University of Alabama. In her most recent book, *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture* (2016), Roach admits reading romance novels from an early age. Also, in this volume, she narrates her entrance into the romance publishing industry as Catherine LaRoche, author. My own interest in mass-market romance fiction can be considered an example of aca-fan research, since I have been a regular reader of the genre for more than a decade.

As is customary, the genre's portrayal of the heroine's sexuality is regarded as both liberating and constraining. "[R]omance fiction," Roach writes, "offers a way of reading and writing about female sexuality that is women-centered, sex-positive, and cliterate: informed about the particularities of female sexual pleasure" (*Happily* 96). This claim is very similar to Wendell's and Tan's definition of romance novels as "written explorations of [female] sexual autonomy", quoted earlier (Wendell and Tan 133). Unlike the two bloggers, however, Roach admits that there is room for greater improvement, because the genre "continues false master narratives wherein the heroines easily reach climax through penis-in-vagina sex, including, rather improbably, the genre's legions of untried virgins" (*Happily* 98).

Another way in which romance novels can foster women's liberation is, according to Roach, by virtue of their emphasis on "good" love as defined by the feminist critic bell hooks.⁶⁷ Romance fiction educates readers on what makes a healthy romantic relationship:

The genre teaches, in other words, what a good man looks like. ... illustrat[ing] quite splendidly hooks' practice of

⁶⁷ bell hooks is the penname of Gloria Watkins, a feminist writer and social activist whose work largely focuses on the intersections between gender, race and class. For this reason, she is considered a referent for many third-wave feminists, including Heywood and Drake (Introduction 9). hooks has also written extensively about love and its role in contemporary society in books like *All About Love* (2000) and *Communion* (2002). hooks defines love as a combination of "care, respect, knowledge and responsibility" (*All About Love* 178), and "true love" as "a different story. When it happens, individuals usually feel in touch with each other's core identity. Embarking on such a relationship is frightening precisely because we feel there is no place to hide. We are known" (*All About Love* 183). In hooks's vision, however, the individual must possess a deep understanding of him/herself before true love can happen (*Communion* 241-242).

love: actions of will that nurture the beloved's growth through open and honest expressions of care, respect, trust, and commitment. (Roach, *Happily* 138)

Romance novels “always end with good women getting what they want”, and in the process, Roach argues, the books prompt reflections on a wide variety of issues pertaining to women, the reader's own self, and society as a whole (*Happily* 193-4). The genre has proven an excellent meeting point for women, irrespective of their social class or political affiliation. Roach recalls once more the idea of a “safe, permissive space ... made by and for women” to stress the genre's cultural work where women readers are concerned (*Happily* 108).

Even so, there is a tricky side to these positive elements that Roach does not hesitate to identify. The novels' happy ending, for instance, guarantees that the heroine will be unharmed by patriarchy, but it does not extend this favour to other women: “The reader fantasy here is that patriarchy ends [with the hero learning to love], yet patriarchy continues” (Roach, *Happily* 187-8). Moreover, romance writers and readers talk about “chang[ing] the male boor into the romance hero but they primarily do it on the page”, with little impact in real life (Roach, *Happily* 115). Finally, Roach does not see a problem with romance novels *per se* or with their message about love and coupledness, but she is cognizant that romance works as a “cultural narrative” in Western societies and guides many people's conduct. Romance, she affirms, can be dangerous when it becomes “imperative” (Roach, *Happily* 59),

“when it portrays romantic love as the only or the best pathway to soul-binding, to the happy and well-rounded life” (Roach, *Happily* 63).

All things considered, the different parts of Romancelandia believe in the genre’s transformative power,⁶⁸ even if they concede there is still work to do in some areas.⁶⁹ Change takes place firstly at an individual level, when the (woman) reader does something for her own pleasure and invests time and money in a romance novel. The reader approaches the story with a critical eye, and she may agree or not with the messages conveyed by the text. She may find the heroine’s self-affirmation inspiring, which may act as a catalyst for change. Secondly, this inner transformation may be directed outwards because romance reading is

⁶⁸ Romancelandia is a polysemous term that originated in the romance fandom. My use of the word partly coincides with Roach’s definition of it as “the physical community of authors, readers, and publishing professionals who engage with the genre and [also] to their lively online discussions on reviewers websites, blogs, and Twitter” (*Happily* 198). Arguably, scholarly criticism on popular romance novels is also a part of this community, since the boundaries between academia and fandom have become increasingly blurred in recent years with the appearance of the previously mentioned aca-fans.

⁶⁹ Heteronormativity and whiteness would be two problematic areas. As Jennifer Cruise Smith explains, the sexual orientation of the protagonists of romance novels was taken into account when elaborating the RWA’s definition of the genre in the year 2000, in order to be as inclusive as possible (“I Know What It Is”). As for the genre’s overwhelming whiteness, that is certainly a hot topic nowadays. Not only are the protagonists of romance fiction assumed to be white, but also mainstream romance writers. In 2019, the Ripped Bodice bookstore in the United States released *The State of Racial Diversity in Romance Publishing Report*, which showed that “for every 100 books published by the leading romance publishers in 2018, only 7.7 were written by people of color. That compares to 6.2% in 2017 and 7.8% in 2016” (Koch and Koch 4). These figures neatly cast a racist shadow over the romance publishing industry, one which publishers, writers and readers are trying to rectify. Rosamunde Pilcher’s romances present white, Anglo-Saxon characters. In contrast, Lisa Kleypas’s novels sometimes feature heroes that are racially and/or ethnically different, and their negotiation of said Otherness occupies a central position in the books’ plotline. Whilst race is not a central concern of this dissertation, I have paid attention to Kleypas’s recurrent interest in portraying the romance hero as different in “‘There’s Something Charming About a Man with an Accent, Isn’t There?’ The Representation of Otherness in Three Novels by Lisa Kleypas”, in order to obtain a more complete picture of this author’s profile and oeuvre.

also a collective activity. Readers post reviews and comments in online websites, forums and blogs, some of which display a marked feminist tone, as is the case of *Romance Novels for Feminists* or the above-mentioned *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*. Readers, writers and publishers interact in these “safe places”, providing feedback to one another, and thus the genre remains acutely sensitive to ever-changing social mores.⁷⁰ When viewed from this perspective, engaging with romance novels has much in common with a third-wave feminist form of activism.

The feminist academic and romance novel reader Jenni Simon has recently vindicated the role that romance novels can play in the “trench warfare” that is nowadays taking place in the US (and I would add, in many other parts of the world). At a time when women’s basic rights are under attack, with more restrictive laws on abortion, cuts on health and social services, sexual harassment scandals, etc., Simon believes that it is time for the different branches of feminism to come together and fight, and that includes romance novels and their subtle liberal feminist messages: “Successful activism will be a collective charge where each arm of the movement—liberal, collectivist/Marxist, radical, postmodern, ecological, etc.—work side by side to address today’s exigencies” (6).

⁷⁰ Both Carol Thurston and Glen Thomas have suggested that changes in the romance industry are largely consumer-driven. In this respect, I would like to point out that romance writers are very often readers as well, and therefore, we cannot make a clear-cut distinction between producer and consumer.

In Simon's eyes, romance fiction occupies a privileged position. It can help disseminate feminist messages to an ever-increasing public, because it is present in different mediums (Simon 6-7). This is especially true of the Internet, which some believe to be the central locus of the contemporary (fourth wave) feminist activism (e.g. Munro; Cochrane; Chamberlain). Readers' discussions usually take place online, and readers also gather around the social media profiles of their favourite authors. Besides, Simon describes romance writers as "organic intellectuals", a concept she borrows from the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, and which essentially signifies mediator, i.e. someone who is "leading the subordinate class in demanding social change while simultaneously persuading the dominant bloc toward acceptance" (Simon 56). Simon accepts romance writers' feminist identity, and goes on to say that inasmuch as the romance novel brings two women together to speak about women's issues and gender equality, there is "a possibility for persuasion" and ultimately, transformation (60).

The present project builds on Simon's belief that romance fiction can do its small part in the fight for women's rights. To do so, the next chapter undertakes a review of the development of the romance over the centuries, emphasising the contribution of those writers who have used the genre to foreground women's issues. This review is not exhaustive, nor is that the intention. My goal is to shed some light on the ways in which the romance stories have been put to political uses in the past,

before tackling the current feminist nature of the genre by means of two case studies. The analysis of selected works by Rosamunde Pilcher and Lisa Kleypas in Chapter Three shows how romance fiction and feminist activism may work hand in hand towards the same goal: improving and enriching women's lives.



2. A REVIEW OF THE MOST IMPORTANT WRITERS OF ROMANCE NOVELS IN THE ANGLO-SAXON WORLD

The overall purpose of this chapter is to study the origins and evolution of the romance novel in English. More specifically, my aim is, on the one hand, to identify those authors who have contributed to the genre's formal and thematic development over the years; on the other hand, the following pages seek to clarify in what ways the romance novel has been used to introduce, discuss and spread feminist demands such as economic independence for women or egalitarian heterosexual relationships. In a way, I will be writing my own history of the romance novel, investigating the connection between genre and gender that lies at the heart of this project. This endeavour, however, is fraught with limitations that would be better identified now.

The first obstacle surfaces when one tries to delimit the area of study. In the previous chapter, it was mentioned that the popular romance critic Pamela Regis defines the romance novel as a “work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (*Natural History* 14). In Regis's taxonomy, all romance novels possess eight mandatory narrative elements: a “corrupt” society that serves as a backdrop to the courtship story; a “meeting” between

the protagonists, as well as an account of their “attraction” and the “barrier” standing between them; a “point of ritual” death where the happy ending is jeopardised; the “recognition” that overcomes the barrier; a mutual love “declaration” between hero and heroine, and their “betrothal” (*Natural History* 14). Less rigorous and academic, yet equally influential, is the definition provided by the Romance Writers of America association, the most important organisation supporting the careers of both consolidated and aspiring romance novelists in the US. According to the RWA, romance novels possess “a central love story” and “an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending” (“About the Romance”), the same two criteria employed by the Romance Writers of Australia to define the genre. By contrast, the British counterpart to the RWA, the Romantic Novelists’ Association, leans towards a broader understanding of the term, “[f]rom stories that focus entirely on the developing relationship between two people, to fiction that shows a budding romance as one part of the hero or heroine’s journey, and into books that focus on long-standing relationships weathering storms” (“About Romantic Fiction”). These different descriptions of the romance novel co-exist at the same time, challenging the apparent simplicity and formulaic nature of this mass culture product.⁷¹

Both broad and narrow definitions entail consequences. As Catherine Roach has observed, when romance novels are understood in

⁷¹ The Romance Writers of Australia webpage offers an even more nuanced answer, by distinguishing between “romance”, “romantic” and “love story”, terms which are often used interchangeably (“About Romance”).

a wider sense, the genre's roots go back to different sources, ranging from biblical passages to Shakespearean comedy, Arthurian literature and Eliza Heywood's fiction (*Happily* 6). Doubtless, the rich polysemy of the term "romance" links contemporary romance novels to a myriad of texts, from the classics to more contemporary literature. Similarly, the distinction between highbrow/canonical romance, and its more "degenerate forms", as Saunders calls Mills & Boon novels (qtd. in Pearce, "Popular Romance" 521), makes it difficult to draw a comprehensive history of the genre's development.

Notwithstanding, refining the definition of romance novel as Regis does obscures the contact points between romance fiction and other genres, which partly explain the genre's diachronic evolution as well as its present diversification into multiple subgenres. Selinger and Gleason have noted this problematic, and cite Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* (1990) as an example (8-9). Despite being awarded the RITA for "Best Romance" a year after its publication,⁷² Gabaldon has publicly hesitated to describe the book as such because it does not "fit the standard conventions of the modern romance at all" (FAQ). As another critic has pointed out, however, "romance readers are reading them [the *Outlander* book series] as such" (McAlister 95), and Claire's and Jamie's serialised adventures have had a lasting impact on the romance

⁷² A RITA is the highest recognition a romance writer may receive. It is conferred by the Romance Writers of America association in a multitudinous award ceremony.

novel and its formal development.⁷³ In addition, many romance novels nowadays can be considered hybrids, borrowing elements from other popular genres such as mystery or fantasy (which result into fantasy romance and romantic suspense, respectively). Finally, some romance stories have also been adapted to other media.⁷⁴

Besides the question of genre, i.e. what *counts* and what *does not* count as a romance novel, one must face another obstacle when tracing the antecedents and development of this literary form. As the present chapter unfolds, it will become clear that romance novels have received little critical attention despite their long history. Romance fiction has not escaped the biased assumptions about what is (un)worthy of study, even within cultural studies. Romance novels, largely perceived as a feminine form of literature, are also subjected to the unconscious misogyny that directs the study of people's real culture.⁷⁵ This situation is changing thanks to the consolidation of Popular Romance Studies and the creation, a decade ago, of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance (IASPR) and the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies (JPRS)*. Change, however, comes slowly, and the

⁷³ McAllister, for instance, has suggested that the *Outlander* series may be partly responsible for the increasing serialization in mass-market romance fiction (100). Romance readers have also embraced the series' adaptation to TV format by the American cable network STARZ. *Outlander* (2014—) has been instrumental in challenging some of the prejudices surrounding mass-market romance fiction. For more information on this topic, see Pérez Casal's "Mass-Market Romance and the Question of Genre: N. Sparks, E. L. James and D. Gabaldon" (2018).

⁷⁴ In *Romance Fiction: A Guide to the Genre* (2012), for instance, Kristin Ramsdell introduces Sherrilyn Kenyon's experiments with manga and interactive websites, which serve to advance the content of her romance novels (18).

⁷⁵ See Long's chapter for a discussion of the role played out by feminism in the development of cultural studies.

modern romance novel and its antecedents remain marginal subjects in the academia.

The continuous expansion of mass-market romance is another issue. Due to socio-economic changes as well as changes produced at the heart of the publishing industry, the already high numbers of romance writers have increased dramatically since the 1970s. This escalation in publication rates makes it extremely difficult to trace all the works and authors that have come out, their characteristics, and the particularities that might transform some of them into outstanding representatives of the genre. As was explained in Chapter One in relation to the first academic studies of romance fiction, there is a tendency to talk about the genre as a single whole. Generalisations are perhaps inevitable when dealing with such a broad genre, but as critics we must try to avoid simplification. For this reason precisely, this thesis concentrates on two authors with a solid career behind them, acknowledging that despite their representativeness, what may be true in Pilcher's and Kleypas's cases may not apply to other romance writers and their works.

Taking these issues into consideration, the present chapter contributes modestly to write the history of the romance novel in English. It adds up to other equally partial accounts, such as Rachel Anderson's pioneering *The Purple Heart Throbs: The Sub-literature of Love* (1974). Other historiographies of the genre are Jean Radford's *The Progress of Romance* (1986) and *A Natural History of the Romance*

Novel (2003) by Pamela Regis, both of which were mentioned in Chapter One of this study. Jay [sic] Dixon's *The Romance Fiction of Mills and Boon, 1909-1990s* (1998) and John Market's *Publishing Romance: The History of An Industry, 1940s to the Present* (2016) are two other chronicles of the genre, even if they are more restrictive in scope (they record the development of the romance publishing industry from the early twentieth century to the present day). Outside the boundaries of academia, Kristin Ramsdell's two editions of *Romance Fiction: A Guide to the Genre* sketch the evolution of romance fiction and its subgenres over the centuries, with the single purpose of guiding editors and librarians —her primary addressees— through this expanding market.

This chapter's unifying thematic thread, and what distinguishes it from previous histories as the ones mentioned, is the focus on the romance (novel's) history as a vehicle used by (women) writers to debate issues pertaining to women. Throughout the following pages, I will be weaving together the canonical and the popular, exposing the long and complex relationship between feminist ideals, romance and the romance novel. This chapter is divided into eight main sections. The first one provides an overview of romance before the emergence of the novel, before addressing the romance/novel dichotomy and some pioneering romance writers in section two. Part three offers an analysis of Maria S. Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854), a protofeminist romance novel. Part four studies those qualities in Jane Austen's and

the Brontës' fiction which render them canonical romance writers. Sections five and six comment on Victorian romances and the emergence of mass-market literature, and, tackling the concept of middle-brow literature, I consider the romance novels penned by Maeve Binchy in the twentieth century. Part seven deals with the boom of American popular romance fiction in the 1970s and reflects on the figure of Kathleen Woodiwiss, the mother of modern romance. Finally, section eight analyses some case studies from the 1990s to the present day, in order to show the evolution of the genre in the last decades.

2.1. ANTECEDENTS: WOMEN AND ROMANCE BEFORE THE NOVEL

Romance appears as far back as ancient Greece and Rome.⁷⁶ In *Romance* (2004), Barbara Fuchs defines romance as “a literary strategy that appears in a variety of genres” (10), and accordingly, she discusses its relationship with other classical texts such as Homer's *Odyssey*. Similarly, Pamela Regis has found in the Greek New Comedy a plotline akin to contemporary mass-market novels (*Natural History* 28-9). However, and even though some of the most prominent characteristics of the romance novel are already present in these texts (e.g. the quest/adventure, the delayed happy ending and the notion of love triumphant), there is a crucial issue to consider: the figure of the heroine.

⁷⁶ Northrop Frye's studies *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) and *The Secular Scripture* (1976) laid the foundations for the study of romance as a literary mode. In the latter, Frye goes as far as stating that romance “is the structural core of all fiction”, which “brings us closer to ... man's vision of his own life as a quest” (*Secular* 15).

Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) presents the heroine as part of the hero's reward and as symbol of his achieving his final goals. In other words, the Princess is a "prize" to be won. In Western literature, the *Odyssey's* Penelope is one of the best examples: she puts off her suitors while she awaits Ulysses's return in Ithaca. Her actions, weaving and unweaving, are directed to preserving the status quo until her husband's arrival. Along the same lines, Menander's comedies portray the follies and problems of the ordinary man, and the Greek dramatist finishes his plays with a happily-ever-after union between the male protagonist and some woman. In these texts, the heroine is given a passive role and becomes the token of and the prize for the hero's self-fulfilment. By contrast, more modern romance novels regard the heroine as the female equivalent of the hero: *she* embarks on a journey of her own, and *her* quest moves the story forward. The polemical happy ending, which brings the heroine and her love interest together, is understood as a symbol of *her* final triumph over the obstacles.⁷⁷ In Greek prose romances like Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*, Fuchs asserts that the "female protagonists are often markedly more active and resourceful than their male partners" (23), thus linking the female with agency. Significantly though, Fuchs calls them "female protagonists" and *not* heroines, thus implying that a distinction should

⁷⁷ See, among others, Krentz's *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* (1992) for a discussion of the various interpretations that romance writers make about the figure of the heroine.

be made between a “heroine” in the likes of Homer's Penelope, and a “female protagonist” like Heliodorus's Charicleia.

The terms “hero” and “heroine” may lead to confusion, since the archetype of the heroine *cannot*, by definition, go on an adventure of her own. Referring to the female protagonist of romance as “heroine” connotes a legacy of female powerlessness and undervalues her prospects.⁷⁸ In consonance with archetypal theory, in which women are inevitably placed in the role of prize-object, critics have often reduced the level of agency that a heroine (i.e. female hero) may possess. In sentimental fiction, for instance, where the protagonist is chiefly a woman, “heroine” becomes a derogatory term that oversimplifies and aligns her with the classical referents. “Heroine” is perceived as secondary to the hero, and scholarship often judges those works with a heroine-protagonist as reductive *and* patriarchal when analysed from a feminist perspective.

For this reason, some voices have opted for a new language that responds to the specificities of the romance novel. The term “hera”, proposed by Anne K. Kaler, refers precisely to the female hero of romance, to the “heroine” that takes up the role of the traditional (male) “hero”. Attempts such as this one have been largely unsuccessful, and to this day, the majority of romance critics continue to talk about “heroine” as the female equivalent to the archetypal hero.

⁷⁸ Meredith A. Powers makes a similar argument in *The Heroine in Western Literature* (1991), where she analyses female characters and agency across different texts, from Greek myths to the Bible.

The shift from hero-protagonist to heroine-protagonist (as in “female hero”) was gradual and was completed in the eighteenth century.⁷⁹ Until then, romance remained indisputably a male genre: on a textual level, the plotline revolved around a male protagonist, and as a result of being the educated sex, men were in all likelihood the authors/readers of these texts. The epitome of this tradition may be found in the popular medieval romances of the French court, the Matter of Britain, or the Arthurian legends. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, these chivalric romances offered a type of romance based on “an idealized code of civilized behaviour that combines loyalty, honour, and courtly love” (“Chivalric Romance”). Courtly love literature adheres to this male-oriented paradigm: the lyric (male) “I” endures the pains of unrequited love, and the Lady whom he privately addresses remains indifferent to his true feelings. In other words, the man *writes*, the man *loves*, and the man *decides*. The hagiographies of women saints that Barbara Fuchs mentions (59-61) are important exceptions to this rule, as is the case of the Galician-Portuguese tradition of *Cantigas de Amigo*, in which the poetic voice is clearly female. Even so, while these texts place female characters at the centre, authorship remains the province of men. Furthermore, these texts foster an image of women as martyrs that writers like Samuel Richardson or Charlotte Turner Smith would reproduce a few centuries later.

⁷⁹ Both forms coexist even nowadays. However, where the male romance often conveys adventure, the female romance is invariably linked with love and emotions.

The Elizabethan period gave birth to the pervasive idea that romance fits best with women. In *Writing for Women: The Example of Woman as Reader in Elizabethan Romance* (1989), Carol Lucas observes that an increasing female audience favoured texts written specifically for them (5). Lori Humphrey Newcomb also shows that Elizabethan prose romances were addressing women in titles, prefaces, and even characters in increasing numbers, but this critic also cautions that "the ladies' text convention ... over-represents women readers' numbers and influence in the literary marketplace, and under-represents men's interest in romance" (123). Newcomb's explanation enables us to connect medieval romance, as it appears in the Matter of Britain, with the romance produced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Newcomb believes the Renaissance to be a turning point in the gendering of prose romance, as this period saw the birth of the distinction between reading for profit, on the one hand, and reading for pleasure on the other. According to Newcomb, men do not read for pleasure but for profit, giving rise to the (male) contempt for romance and for the (female) audience that devours them ravenously. This critic suggests that the increasing debasement of romance as a female form of literature served to highlight the (male) authors' genius; this way, they could pretend to be "prodigals wasting their talents on women readers",

and simultaneously “compensat[ing] for male authors’ shame at needing to publish their works” (127).⁸⁰

Both Lucas and Newcomb attribute women readers a certain degree of agency. For them, romance reading constituted an act of rebelliousness against patriarchal authority (Lucas 18) that actually gave women “the profit of reflecting on gender constraints” (Newcomb 129). From this period onwards, then, romance becomes a double-edged sword that either enslaves (women) readers, or helps to free them from (patriarchal) oppression.

The supposed preference for romance on the female reader’s part contrasts deeply with the absence of women writers in this period. Men continued to be the main writers of romance, and the genre’s reputation as both an idle, unproductive activity, and as an incredibly didactic genre, was continuously reinforced in the works of Philip Sydney and his contemporaries (Newcomb 131). This is intimately connected to the female empowerment/oppression dichotomy described above, and even within the scope of our understanding of mass-market romance.

Finally, the seventeenth century introduced a further distinction when “cheap printed romance” was “left to the maidservant” (Newcomb 134). Good romance was separated from bad romance, implying that shorter, mass-produced, “printed” texts were of inferior quality and literary taste (Newcomb 134). The Ladies’ preference for

⁸⁰ It must be noted, nevertheless, that romance has never been entirely devoid of profit. Newcomb writes that “male writers and readers used the genre to treat war and love, to test questions of politics, class, nation, gender and representation” (131), as was indeed the case with previous Arthurian romances, hagiographies, fables, etc.

“good” romances was censored due to their triviality, but these texts were partly exonerated on the grounds of their artistic value. By contrast, the lower class enjoyed fast reading, and was more prone to succumb to fantasies depicted in these romances (Newcomb 134-5).

Therefore, over the course of the seventeenth century, romance was transformed into a female literary genre, and to some extent, into the favourite pastime of the lower, less educated classes.⁸¹ The next section tackles the apparent death of romance in the 1700s, and shows how, in reality, the genre’s defining elements were adapted to and adopted by the new form, the novel. The romance novel as we know it today emerged in this period, and it did not take long for practitioners like Frances Burney or Charlotte Smith to take advantage of the genre to express their political opinions about a woman’s subordinated status in society.

2.2. ROMANCES AND NOVELS

Influential scholars on the novel like Ian Watt, and more recently, Terry Eagleton, have stated that novels were born in opposition to romances and eventually substituted them as the most popular literary genre. In spite of some attempts to question the validity of these claims, the prevailing opinion is that romance was attacked as a means to validate the novel and upgrade its status.⁸² In *The English Novel: An*

⁸¹ A similar analogy was to be made in more recent times, with dime novel romances, Harlequins and Mills & Boon romance novels being equated with the uncultured woman.

⁸² As Dieter Schulz points out in the article “‘Novel’, ‘Romance’ and Popular Fiction in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century” (1973), the distinction between “novel” and “romance” is far more complex. Schulz contends that Samuel Richardson and his peers used

Introduction (2005), Eagleton affirms that the novel's emphasis on everyday reality made it more understandable to a larger audience of uneducated people (8). Leaving aside the relationship between the novel and realism,⁸³ Eagleton couples women and novel, noting the ways in which female readers could benefit from this emerging literary form. However, the “specialist erudition” and the “expensive classical education” that Eagleton associates with romance (20) had not deterred women readers in the past, and consequently fails to justify women’s increasing involvement with the novel.

Eagleton interprets the novel as “a product of modernity” and as the quintessential middle-class literary genre (5). As such, it “fostered a resistance to authority at the very time that it was becoming a resourceful medium of middle-class cultural power” (Eagleton 20). The novel helped to spread middle-class ideology in society, but as a novelty, the new form struggled to legitimise itself in the eyes of readers *via* prologues and author’s notes. In part, respectability was accomplished thanks to what Eagleton names a “satire of romance”, but also through the appropriation of some of its most-defining elements (“heroes, villains, wish-fulfilment

both terms interchangeably and in a pejorative sense, due to the “*rapprochement*” between these two concepts in the hands of Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, and above all, Eliza Haywood. Fielding, Richardson and Defoe saw themselves as “an alternative to a subliterate hybrid of novella and heroic romance, which was the most popular type of fiction when they started their careers as novelists” (Schulz 91).

⁸³ Some critics have argued that the novel’s claim to realism is deceptive, since it helps to standardise reality rather than represent it as it is (Armstrong 11-3). Early critics of the novel such as Clara Reeve, however, rely on this claim to differentiate between “romance” and “novel”: “The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things.—The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it was written” (qtd. in Spencer 182).

and fairy-tale endings” [2-3]), suggesting, as Barbara Fuchs does, that romance is made of transferable elements.

Fiction was at odds with middle-class views, particularly for Protestants and other reformist groups. Many authors expressed their concern about the dangers derived from reading for pleasure and/or escapism. As Eagleton succinctly puts it, a Protestant on the likes of Samuel Richardson could only approve of fiction if it conveyed “a moral truth. Otherwise it is idle, even sinful fantasy” (12).⁸⁴ Attempts were made to regulate forms of private leisure and women, whose capacities were considered naturally inferior and in need of guidance, became the primary target. As was explained in the previous section, romance had been linked to idleness during the Renaissance, and women had become culturally associated with romance around the same period. As a result, conduct books flourished during the eighteenth century and beyond with the sole purpose of educating girls and women readers. The “domestic woman”, a term coined by Nancy Armstrong, began to appear in literary and non-literary texts of the period as the epitome of good manners and true womanhood, and this ambivalent figure, deployed by writers like Samuel Richardson, came to represent bourgeois ideal of femininity in its purest form.

Jane Spencer, in *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (1986), situates the domestic woman within the

⁸⁴ Amatory fiction works like those by Eliza Heywood, for instance, were openly condemned due to their great eroticism, but also, due to the female protagonist’s surrender to sinful behaviours, namely extramarital sex.

larger tradition of conformity in women's writing. For Spencer, the origins of these didactic novels are found in the late seventeenth century, when women novelists became increasingly accepted as agents in literary creation. As Spencer writes, though, this approval came at a high prize:

When women writers were accepted it was on the basis of their femininity; ... [a]s the eighteenth century advanced the 'feminine' qualities of delicacy and propriety became more generally important to bourgeois society. Women writers, because they could be taken as representatives of these central values, became more acceptable, but also more restricted. (75)

These restrictions were, according to Spencer, "nature, morality and modesty", and only those women writers who abided by these rules were considered successful in the eyes of their (male) peers (77-81). Thus, early women novelists proclaimed woman's association with the domestic and the private, irrespective of the fact that their own writing contradicted said association. This apparent acquiescence with the prescribed feminine role is not a synonym with patriarchal complicity because as will be discussed later in relation to Frances Burney and Charlotte Smith, there is evidence of feminist values encoded within these novels. For the time being, though, it suffices to say that the number of women novelists grew steadily throughout the eighteenth century thanks to their participation in this (socially acceptable) tradition of conformity.

As Virginia Woolf noted in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), in the eighteenth century “the middle-class woman began to write” (ch. 4). Spencer attributes the rise of women writers in this period to two interconnected factors: the greater demand for literature, provoked by increasing literacy rates, and women’s changing circumstances during the second half of the seventeenth century (12-4). On the one hand, the reconceptualization of femininity brought about by middle-class ideology meant that women were only offered lesser, ill-paid jobs. On the other hand, women also had fewer opportunities to marry due to a demographic shortage of men (Spencer 14-5). Consequently, women in this period wrote out of necessity, in order to make a living, and Spencer presents Eliza Heywood, Charlotte Smith or Jane Austen as paradigmatic examples.

The romance novel appears in this period in the guise of sentimental fiction. Traces of romance can be detected in these narratives, particularly in those concerned with courtship, in which the quest for love is interrupted by a series of unlikely obstacles before the advent of the happy ending. Samuel Richardson was one of its first practitioners, and his novel *Pamela* (1740), with its emphasis on domesticity, became a model for many women novelists whose writings had been restricted to this precise topic. The next sections briefly review the characteristics of Richardson’s novel, before comparing them to Burney’s *Evelina* (1778) and Smith’s *Emmeline* (1788).

2.2.1. The Romance Novel and Samuel Richardson

Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) is, according to Pamela Regis, the first best-selling romance novel (*Natural History* 63). Unlike his peers Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding, Richardson's popularity declined over the course of centuries. For Janet Todd, the reason for this neglect is the nature of contemporary literary criticism, who privileges self-detachment, the ironic and the self-reflexive at the expense of sentimentalism and educational value (*Sensibility* 142).⁸⁵

Richardson's contribution to the romance novel lies somewhere between Regis's enthusiastic defence of his text as an early example of female empowerment, and Eagleton's view of *Pamela* as a blatant portrayal of bourgeois/patriarchal ideology. Regis focuses exclusively on the gender politics of the text. This way, Pamela is mainly a woman struggling to take control of her life. She refuses Mr. B's attentions because doing so would contradict her own moral principles, and only accepts him after he has been reformed. By the novel's end, Pamela is rewarded for staying true to herself, and has her affective and economic needs covered by her marriage to her former master: "In love with B, [Pamela] chose to return, and within the oppression of English property laws as they applied to women, he secured both her and her parents' future" (Regis, *Natural History* 72-3).

⁸⁵ Todd's hypothesis is also applicable to the majority of women writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who have been elided from the literary canon despite their success.

Nevertheless, Eagleton rightly identifies the conservative ideology that permeates Richardson's fiction. On a superficial level, *Pamela* and *Clarissa* (1748) are concerned with what happens to a woman if she accepts or rejects the mores prescribed by her contemporary society. On the one hand, Pamela remains true to middle-class principles and is finally rewarded for that. On the other hand, Clarissa falls prey to Lovelace's schemes and ends up paying the highest price for her disobedience: death. Both characters embody the ideal domestic woman described in previous pages, and provide at the same time “an alternative form of political power without appearing to contest the distribution of power that it represented as historically given” (Armstrong 29). In other words, by transforming a class conflict — middle class *versus* aristocracy— into an innocuous battle of the sexes —woman *versus* man—, Richardson was in fact challenging the established order, and replacing it with his own bourgeois ideology.

Therefore, a novel like *Pamela* served a twofold purpose: firstly, it legitimised middle-class authority by means of its happy-ever-after ending; secondly, it was also useful to instruct (women) readers on the qualities of the ideal womanhood. In Armstrong's opinion, the domestic woman represented “a form of social control” (21) based on the principle of “self-regulation” (81), by which a woman was transformed into the “bearer of moral norms and the socializer of men” (89). As Pamela Regis, Terry Eagleton and others point out, both *Pamela* and *Clarissa* were incredibly successful, but some of Richardson's

contemporaries received *Pamela* in quite negative/mocking terms,⁸⁶ preferring Clarissa's tragic end over Pamela's triumph.

Unquestionably, Richardson played an important part in the evolution of the romance novel, establishing some of the formal aspects of the genre. In addition to this, we should not overlook his role in the establishment of a female readership first, and a female tradition of sentimental writers later on, including Frances Burney or Charlotte Smith.

2.2.2. The Romance Novel in the Hands of Frances Burney and Charlotte Smith

Janet Todd proposes that women began to write their own stories to counter the pessimistic and damaging representation of woman in literature.⁸⁷ Through the appropriation of the woman "of feeling" developed by Richardson, Todd contends that women writers of sentimental fiction depicted the heroine's success, while maintaining "the social power that only Clarissa's death delivered to her in a world of male sexual economy" (*Sensibility* 113). For this critic, popular writers like Frances Burney and Charlotte Smith provided their female protagonists with a happy ending in which they triumph over adversities and showed in the process the moral superiority of the female mind. In a way, the heroines in novels like *Evelina, or the History of a Young*

⁸⁶ Henry Fielding wrote his satire *Shamela* (1741) in response to Richardson's text.

⁸⁷ In books like Richardson's *Clarissa*, readers were confronted with a picture where women could only safeguard their virtue through suffering and death.

Lady's Entrance into the World (1778) and *Emmeline, the Orphan of the Castle* (1788) anticipate the heroines in contemporary romance fiction, because their success is described, as we have seen in Chapter One, in very similar terms.

Needless to say, many critics are sceptical of this apparent feminist subtext. Jane Spencer acutely points out that “women’s writing is not the same thing as women’s rights” (xi),⁸⁸ and the heroine’s happy ending does not guarantee her freedom from patriarchal order. Admittedly, though, Spencer credits members of the conformist tradition like Burney and Smith with some degree of feminist consciousness: since heroines must embody the nature, morality and modesty prescribed by the dominant patriarchal ideology, dissent was expressed in alternative ways. Spencer locates the source of these writers’ protest in the hero’s persona, and the qualities attributed to him.

Joan Forbes and more recently, Aida Díaz Bild, have investigated the novels’ engagement with feminist ideals. Following Spencer’s train of thought, a key argument is the transformation of patriarchal, threatening heroes like *Pamela*’s Mr. B into “feminized” men. Building on Forbes’ work, Díaz Bild observes that heroes like Lord Orville in *Evelina* and Godolphin in *Emmeline* represent the safest choice for women, in so far as they are the opposite of the conventional hero in most romantic discourses (*Charlotte Smith* 45). Furthermore, Díaz Bild

⁸⁸ Feminist critic Rosalind Coward had made a similar argument in her article “‘This Novel Changes Lives’: Are Women’s Novels Feminist Novels? A Response to Rebecca O’Rourke’s Article ‘Summer Reading’” (1980).

contends that in these renovated sentimental novels, it is the heroine's privilege to assess the hero's conduct ("Del Héroé" 57), thus granting her some degree of agency and empowerment.

This transformation entails the desexualisation of male heroes, and implicitly agrees with the bourgeois ideology that women are naturally chaste and virtuous. This assumption explains Spencer's reticence (and that of many other feminist critics) to consider these writers as properly feminist. In reviewing *Camilla, a Picture of Youth* (1796), for instance, Spencer concludes that "its attitude to woman's position is more resigned gloom than protest" (164). These novels, through the central love story and the romance elements (quest, happy ending, etc.) that can be found in them, do not engage with feminist debates in the same way that Mary Wollstonecraft's or Maria Edgeworth's works do. Nevertheless, like the popular Gothic novels of the end of the century, the writers in this conformist tradition do present some resistance to patriarchal ideology, and they should be recognised as having contributed, even in a small way, to denounce the precarious condition of women in society.

2.3. THE ROMANCE NOVEL IN AMERICA. CASE STUDY: MARIA S. CUMMINS'S *THE LAMPLIGHTER* (1854)

It is often argued that the sentimental vogue in English literature lasted until the final years of the eighteenth century, its demise a consequence of the French Revolution. The atrocities committed by the revolutionaries were seen as the consequence of too much

sentimentalism, and authors who had previously looked to a new, brighter future became mostly disappointed. Literature, too, moved towards the more austere, sober, rational style. As a prototypical example to consider we have the case of Jane Austen, who eschews the sentimentalism of her predecessors Burney and Smith in novels like *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Northanger Abbey* (1817), despite the obvious influence that both authors had on her own writing.

This ubiquitous story about the literary scene at the end of the eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries needs some nuance. Sentimental fiction, with its emphasis on emotion, did not disappear altogether from the literary marketplace. On the one hand, the ensuing Romantic tradition borrowed some of its characteristics, including the exploration of emotions, innocence as an ideal state, or the power of feelings and intuition. On the other hand, the sentimental novel did not die out but developed into other genres. Again, Jane Austen is known for writing novels of manners, realistic stories about the customs and social norms of the time. The similarities between a novel like *Emma* (1815) and *Evelina*, for instance, are self-evident, with both titles paying attention to social minutiae and a heroine that must navigate the social world. Other ramifications are silver fork novels, an incredibly popular genre in the 1820s and 1830s, and defined by Cheryl A. Wilson as “a type of conduct book, offering guidance for socially-aspirant members of the middle-class who longed to peer behind the façade of fashion into the world of the *ton* and, perhaps, even gain access to that

world” (1, italics in the original). These texts incorporate some elements from sentimental novels (e.g. the combination of didacticism and entertainment), and if Edward Copeland is right, they owe much to writers like Maria Edgeworth and Frances Burney (40).

Sentimental fiction was also a very popular genre in the United States, where it laid the foundations for the domestic novels that dominated the incipient literary marketplace during much of the nineteenth century. The excess of sensibility might have been counter-productive in the context of European politics, but it certainly was not so in the American one, where the Revolution had triumphed. Sharing as they did (and still do) the same cultural and literary background, examples of English sentimental fiction could be read in the United States, even after the genre went “out of fashion” in the United Kingdom. Domestic fiction emerged as a genre in its own right with the publication in 1822 of *A New-England Tale*, by Catharine Sedgwick, and continued to thrive until the late 1860s. According to Nina Baym’s description, these novels portray:

the story of a young girl who is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world ... [This] failure of the world to satisfy either reasonable or unreasonable expectations awakens the heroine to inner possibilities. By the novel's end she has developed a strong conviction of her own worth as a result of which she does ask much of herself. She can meet her own demands, and, inevitably, the change in herself has changed the world's attitude toward her, so much that was formerly denied her now comes unsought." (qtd. in D. Campbell par. 2)

A heroine struggling in a hostile world is hardly an original story. Like their predecessors in the sentimental novels of Burney and Smith did, these domestic heroines also triumph over the obstacles and finally marry a man that either proves worthy of their elevated moral principles, or is transformed by their good influence into a better man, like *Pamela's* Mr. B. These novels also share Samuel Richardson's emphasis on religion and a woman's unfaltering faith. As a novelty, though, American domestic fiction began to gradually introduce American settings, and some examples of the genre such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe would play a significant part in the development of American literature and even in the country's history.⁸⁹

As was the case with their English predecessors, these (women) writers have been largely undervalued and forgotten. The words written by feminist scholar Jane Tompkins back in 1985, remain highly accurate even today:

In reaction against [sentimental novels and] their world view, and perhaps even more against their success, twentieth-century critics have taught generations of students to equate popularity with debasement, emotionality with ineffectiveness, religiosity with fakery, domesticity with triviality, and all of these, implicitly, with womanly inferiority. (123)

⁸⁹ Stowe's novel described the horrors of slavery, and is generally understood as a turning point in the development of anti-slavery conscience and the emergence of abolitionist campaigns throughout the nation.

Like modern mass-market romance fiction, the domestic novel in nineteenth-century America was immensely popular among readers, and it was also written primarily by women. In her analysis, Tompkins addresses these novels' commitment to the politics of their time. Her reasoning is that "the popular domestic novel of the nineteenth century represents a monumental effort to reorganise culture from women's point of view (Tompkins 124). Furthermore, "in certain cases, it offers a critique of American society far more devastating than any delivered by better-known critics" (Tompkins 124).⁹⁰ Tompkins is not only vindicating the worth of literature written by women, but also pointing at the fact that domestic fiction was a crucial tool for women to engage in debates concerning social issues, a thesis that I also uphold in relation to some contemporary popular romance novels.

This period is particularly interesting when it comes to the definition of "romance", and the relationship between women's writing and the literary canon. Perceived nowadays as one of the best writers in North American literature, Nathaniel Hawthorne lived, like many of his contemporaries, in the shadow of women writers like Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner or Maria S. Cummins. The latter, in particular, with her novel *The Lamplighter* (1854), was the object of Hawthorne's contempt and envy when he wrote about the "damned mob of scribbling women" and their popularity among readers (qtd. in Tompkins 217). Interestingly,

⁹⁰ Tompkins even goes as far as to consider these women writers as "the other American Renaissance", in opposition to that of Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, or Herman Melville.

by attacking a novel like *The Lamplighter*, Hawthorne was also debasing the antecedents of today's romance novels. Paradoxically, Hawthorne described himself as a writer of "romance" in the Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), and his most celebrated novel, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) initially bore the subtitle "A Romance". Admittedly, Hawthorne's definition of romance does not contemplate notions of love, but he insists on the genre's difference with the novel by identifying some basic characteristics: a romance is a work of art, not necessarily committed to reality or to the probable, and possesses a moral purpose (Hawthorne Preface). Hawthorne does not write realistically, but his stories are nowadays interpreted as allegorical political discussions, and hardly ever referred to as romances. In sharp contrast, writers like Cummins are stigmatised because they wrote about the domestic, and their stories had fantastic elements associated with the romance form.

The following pages analyse Maria S. Cummins's *The Lamplighter* with the aim of demonstrating the political nature of domestic fiction, and examining the genre as an antecedent of the contemporary romance novel. Very briefly, *The Lamplighter* tells the life story of Gerty, an orphan who is rescued from her relatives' abuse by Trueman Flint, the lamplighter of the title. After Flint's death, Gerty is taken under the wing of the Grahams, a wealthy family in town. The novel combines the girl's maturing process with a love plot in which she falls for her childhood friend, Willie Sullivan. In addition to these two storylines, the book has many subplots and other secondary courtship stories.

The first half of the novel is primarily concerned with Gerty's education, her transformation from an aggressive child, made so by the circumstances in which she was born, into a morally flawless woman. After some struggle, the heroine "achieved the greatest of earth's victories, a victory over herself. ... [T]he storm within her laid at rest, she looked up to heaven and her heart sent forth its silent offering of praise" (Cummins 114). Her change of name, from "Gerty" to "Gertrude", attests to her transformation, and her position as a teacher further evidences the heroine status as a model for other characters in the novel. In this respect, Gertrude is repeatedly compared with Isabelle "Belle" Clinton, a spoiled upper-class heiress and the heroine's rival for Willie's affection. Overall, the heroine in this novel personifies the ideal of womanhood in the same way that Nancy Armstrong's domestic woman did.

Religion plays an important role in the heroine's transformation, for God is presented as the supreme authority judging her behaviour. This marked religiosity is partly responsible for the critical scorn of the genre, but in the novel it plays a key role in contributing to the heroine's independence. Like Pamela and her predecessors in the sentimental novel, the female characters' proclaimed obedience to God serves to undermine the patriarchal authority deployed by the *pater familias*, whether this is Mr. B in *Pamela*, or Mr. Graham in *The Lamplighter*. Religion thus provides an escape from earthly submission at the same

time that it designs a power position for the heroine, superior to that of men. As Jane Tompkins explains:

By conquering herself in the name of the highest possible authority, the dutiful woman merges her own authority with God's. ... [T]hese female characters become nothing in themselves, but all-powerful in relation to the world. ... As the women in these novels teach one another how to "command" themselves, they bind themselves to one another and to God in a holy alliance against the men who control their material destinies. (163)

As far as the main courtship story is concerned, Gerty and Willie meet as children early in the novel, and together, they play, pray and study. At the beginning, Willie's role is that of a mentor: he is older and he is the first to instruct Gerty in the Scriptures, not least because his father was a clergyman. In addition, Willie has a very specific role to play in life; that is, providing for his poor mother and grandfather. The boy's enthusiasm kindles Gerty's own ambition, and together, "[t]hey talked of how they would spend that future wealth which they both calculated upon one day possessing; for ... she, too, meant to work and grow rich" (Cummins 48). Eventually, Willie leaves the country seeking a better fortune for himself and his family in Calcutta; meanwhile, Gertrude remains behind, takes on a teaching position and assumes the responsibility of caring for other characters.

The couple spends roughly the first half of the book separated, communicating exclusively by letter. During this interval, they have the opportunity to forge their own character, independently from one

another. On the one hand, Willie works abroad and becomes a highly successful man, but he remains as good natured and kind as he used to be. On the other hand, the novel puts a great deal of emphasis on the question of Gertrude's independence and her so-called "duties" as a woman. While *The Lamplighter* cannot be considered a "feminist" text in the way that a second-wave feminist like Modleski would understand the term, the novel makes a subtle and yet quite strong claim for female education and autonomy through the character of Miss Emily Graham. Gertrude's tutor is the primary advocate for the heroine's independence, as can be seen during an argument with her father, Mr. Graham, when she says: "I thought the object in giving Gertrude a good education was to make her independent of all the world, and not simply dependent upon us" (Cummins 136). Turning a deaf ear to the patriarch's complaints, Gertrude starts working as a teacher in a school, a position that allows her to take care of Willie's dying mother, but also to be self-sufficient.

Gertrude eventually quits her job to look after Miss Emily, but she chooses to do it freely. Arguably, this renunciation puts her again in a precarious position, and seemingly suggests that personal freedom and choice are subjected to family responsibilities and caretaking. The text is highly ambivalent in this regard, with its emphasis on the heroine's good work as a nurse, at the same time it promotes women's self-sufficiency. The final message appears to be that it is good to be economically independent, and it is also good and ethically correct to look after the sick.

Besides having important consequences for her financial freedom, Gertrude's decision helps to move the love plot forward: she and Willie cross paths again. This reunion tests the heroine's strength: Willie does not recognise her at first, and he is allegedly engaged to Belle Clinton. As noted above, Gertrude and Willie's romance is slightly different from the courtship plots in *Pamela* or *Evelina*. The protagonists in this novel know each other from an early age, and they keep in touch for most of the novel. The love relationship portrayed in *The Lamplighter* is also manifestly different. For one thing, the figure of the lover-mentor hero does not exist here. Secondly, there is more to Gertrude and Willie's love than there is to Godolphin and Emmeline's desexualised relationship, for example. The heroine here explains how "her heart yearned with more than a sister's love" for Willie (Cummins 261). Also, in his final declaration, Willie establishes his love for Gertrude as the driving-force of his life:

"Have I [Willie] not for years cherished the remembrance of our past affection, and looked forward to our reunion as my only hope of happiness? Has not this fond expectation inspired my labours, and cheered my toils, and endeared to me my life, in spite of its bereavements?" (Cummins 370)

Willie's declaration points at one crucial difference between this novel and its predecessors: the final goal of courtship is happiness, not moral education in the hands of a husband.

Apart from these changes in the conceptualisation of love, the novel's formal characteristics meet the requirements of the most

restrictive definitions of romance novel, including Regis's. The novel possesses the eight essential narrative elements she describes in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*: it starts with the representation of a corrupted society, in which Gerty is a poor and abused orphan girl; Gerty meets her love interest, Willie, when she moves in with True Flint; they remain friends even though they spend their formative years apart, but upon being reunited, heroine and hero believe each other to be engaged to third parties; Gerty realises the true nature of her feelings for Willie when she spots him in Belle Clinton's company; Willie, for his part, confesses to another character that he loves a destitute girl, "but with a spirit so elevated as to make her great—a heart so noble as to make her rich—a soul so pure as to make her beautiful" (Cummins 318-9); the point of ritual death happens when Gertrude almost dies to save Belle Clinton from a fire; sometime after this event, Willie refutes Gertrude's suspicions that he loves another, and in turn he learns that she is not going to marry someone else; when this barrier is overcome, the betrothal finally takes place.

The Lamplighter was, by nineteenth-century standards, a best-seller. Like many modern romance novels, this text created a safe space to discuss a number of issues that pertained to women in particular, such as female education, poverty, the constraints of the feminine role, and last but not least, love and marriage. At this point, also, the formal features of the romance novel as Regis defines them are plainly visible. Cummins's novel departs from its sentimental forebears in the

representation of love as a combination of different emotions, including affection, generosity and even physical attraction. A similar development had taken place in English literature, with the transition from Jane Austen's novels to the works of the Brontë sisters.

2.4. CANONICAL ROMANCE: FROM JANE AUSTEN TO THE BRONTËS

The eighteenth century saw the emergence of the authorial figure. Our understanding of "author" as an exceptionally gifted genius has its roots in the Romantic period and the poets' interest in their personal creative process and in their emphasis on individuality. From this moment onwards, a distinction is made between talented writers and mediocre ones, and it is in this context, when Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, particularly Charlotte, enter the literary canon as the first skilful female creators.⁹¹ These writers have fuelled the readers' romantic imagination for centuries, and they have been repeatedly promoted as examples of respectable, high-quality romance literature to demonstrate the genre's artistic value. Pamela Regis is a case in point, because she affirms that *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is "the best romance novel ever written" (*Natural History* 75). This assertion, however, widens the gap between these canonical writers and their twentieth-century descendants, and seemingly places the latter in the category of mediocre literature.⁹²

⁹¹ Second-wave feminist literary critics denounced the biased (even misogynist) nature of the canon. Gynocritics surfaced as an alternative form of analysis to approach women's writing and its characteristics.

⁹² This was hardly Regis's intention, considering that the volume's primary goal is to repair the reputation of the genre and transform it into a serious category of analysis.

Austen's and the Brontës' impact on the romance genre goes beyond the aesthetic quality of their writing. Firstly, they reworked many existing plotlines and created new, more modern and plausible stories. *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, refashions the lover-mentor plotline where hero and heroine teach and guide one another. A second way in which they updated the romance novel form was through characterisation. Darcy and Rochester remain, as of today, quintessential romance heroes in the collective imagination; likewise, heroines like Elizabeth and Jane have inspired a great number of replicas over the years. Thirdly, and perhaps more importantly for the topic at hand, Jane Austen and the three Brontës occupy a special position within the feminist literary canon, with some critics like Robert B. Martin labelling *Jane Eyre* "the first major feminist novel", albeit with reservations (93). Despite writing in different periods and living diametrically opposite lives, Austen's and the Brontës' interests converge. All of them tackle in their novels the same issues that this chapter has been outlining: female education, gender roles, female economic (in)dependence, or romantic partnership, to name but a few examples. Starting with Austen and finishing with Anne Brontë, this section provides a general overview of these writers with the double purpose of laying bare their contributions to the romance novel, and of explaining why their work continues to have such an impact on modern romantic fiction.

According to popular romance critic Sarah Frantz Lyons, Jane Austen brought about a “domestic revolution” in the romance genre (n.p.), hence the paradox: Austen created modern romance precisely by “killing” some of its defining characteristics. This is most evident in *Northanger Abbey* (1817), a text that engages directly with the reality *versus* romance dichotomy through the eyes of its naïve protagonist, Catherine. Commonly understood as a satire of Gothic narratives, the novel thwarts the heroine’s romantic imagination, and advocates instead for probability and rationalism.

Besides the suppression of fantastic and supernatural elements, Austen is also responsible for other significant transformations in the genre. She developed a new type of realist heroine, an ordinary character who nonetheless “fights” for her own happiness and personal mores. Austen also forsook the open didacticism of sentimental fiction, and turned towards character introspection and interior monologue instead. She presents us with individualistic characters, different from the stereotypical ones in Greek romances and sentimental novels, and much closer to the readers’ everyday experiences. The central love plot in her novels is also changed. Courtship stories are framed into small, provincial communities, and marriage and love are rationalised. Her characters often struggle to define the characteristics of a “good” marital union. The resulting timelessness of the topic is an unquestionable part of our fascination with Austen’s work.

The political implications of these changes have not escaped literary criticism. The appeal to reason and realism at the expense of romance and fantasy provided Jane Austen with a significant position in (male) literary history. Austen was a woman writing like a man; that is, she uses restrained, unadorned language, and more importantly, wit. Even so, her novels centre on the domestic and other related affairs, in compliance with a woman's sphere of knowledge. Doubtless, this lack of sensationalism and her writing into a feminised genre granted her male critical approval. Austen has been equally praised for her ability to portray the minutiae of the English upper classes, as well as for her narratorial irony when describing social mores and attitudes, particularly those concerning marriage. Some scholars have asserted that this irony serves Jane Austen to criticise the aristocratic classes and their privileges, transforming her into a covert reformist writer. By contrast, Marxist critics like Janet Todd contend that Austen was, in fact, a champion of the gentry and a strong defender of the social status quo (*Cambridge Introduction* 34). This ambiguity also applies to Austen's implication with gender politics. The feminist scholar Marilyn Butler calls Austen an "isolated" writer who did not share her contemporaries' overtly vindictory nature (xlv). According to her, Austen's fiction possesses "significant silences" which affect the treatment of women's issues, including marriage (M. Butler xli).⁹³

⁹³ Butler actually deems Frances Burney superior in her critique of marriage and the exploration of role-model figures, including the woman as mentor and/or authority (M. Butler xl). But above all, this author establishes Maria Edgeworth as the epitome of the

All things considered, Jane Austen remains to his day a difficult writer in terms of the political agenda of her works. As Janet Todd puts it, “each [novel] presents a different sort of heroine, a different take on society and the relationship of behaviour and personality to environment, a different sort of investigation, almost a different moral message” (*Cambridge Introduction* 17). Her novels have prompted different interpretations, and in this respect, they match the controversy around modern mass-market romance fiction.

Many contemporary romance writers continue to use Austenesque plots in their own novels, ranging from the couple’s initial apathy or abhorrence in *Emma* (1815) and *Pride and Prejudice*, to a second chance at love as in *Persuasion* (1817). Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’ Diary* (1996) is, in all likelihood, the best-known retelling of one of Jane Austen’s titles, but there are many more. In the past decade, for instance, Juliet Archer has been rewriting Austen’s most popular titles by adding a twist. *The Importance of Being Emma* (2008) reproduces the original plot of *Emma* quite faithfully, but it adopts a different setting and point of view: in a modern UK atmosphere, Mark Knight must come to terms with his feelings for Emma, a successful businesswoman. More recently, the short story “Love Rules” (2014) places Cat from *Northanger Abbey* in a working environment, scarier

Enlightened and (proto)feminist writer whose works created a fictional space to discuss relevant issues for her female contemporaries. To others, Mary Wollstonecraft was the true genius of the time, not only for her pioneering critique in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), but also because her fiction presented readers with a harsh examination of the female status within marriage in works like *Maria: or, the Wrongs of Woman* (1798).

than the Regency setting of the original. The malleability of Austen's plotlines allow modern writers to add secondary themes to the backbone courtship story, without displacing the love relationship and preserving that feeling of entertainment and escape that characterises today's mass-market romance.

Austen's superiority is only challenged by the Brontë sisters. Their unique style, subject matter, or aesthetics continue to be largely researched and debated in the academia. Popular culture, too, has (re)created an image of the Brontës that captivates the public, with Catherine Earnshaw's famous line "I am Heathcliff!" becoming the standard, passionate love declaration in the Anglo-American imaginary.

It is impossible to understand modern romance fiction without the works of Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë. The three sisters brought into their fiction the passion and introspection that characterised the Romantic period. It is well-documented, for instance, that the author of *Jane Eyre* (1847) found Austen's novels lacking, stating among other things, that "the Passions [sic] are perfectly unknown to her" (qtd. in Weisser 36). The Brontës added intensity and complexity to love, transforming it into something radically different but which is closer to our twenty-first-century understanding of it. They introduced the Byronic hero into the romance novel, a quintessential Romantic figure, unapologetically sexual, who is defined as "a rebel, proudly defiant in his attitude toward conventional social codes and religious beliefs, ... [who] yearns to purge himself of demonic self-destructiveness"

(“Byronic hero”). The restoration of sexual desire into the hero’s and heroine’s relationship, as opposed to the desexualisation of love proposed by Charlotte Smith and Jane Austen, is, unquestionably, one of the Brontës’ greatest contributions to the modern romance novel.

A second contribution is the emphasis that the Brontës put on female socioeconomic precariousness. Feminist literary criticism has paid duly attention to this, giving way to the aforementioned idea that *Jane Eyre* is one of the first feminist novels in English literature. This *bildungsroman* traces Jane’s maturity process since she was a neglected child, until a decade after the heroine’s marriage to Edward Rochester. As in the other examples mentioned throughout this chapter, the final union can be interpreted as a threat to the heroine’s empowerment and autonomy. For some, Jane gives up the comforts of her inheritance and devotes herself to looking after Rochester. For others, the declaration “Reader, I married him” constitutes an act of female agency. What is indeed certain is that Charlotte’s novel condemns the unfavourable situation of women explicitly, showing how the society of the time excluded women from good and dignified jobs. This way, the Brontës confirm that romance fiction and feminist demands can go hand in hand. While *Jane Eyre* is the obvious example, thanks to its depiction of a young girl’s struggle to preserve her independence within a romantic relationship, Emily and Anne have also contributed to this allegiance, with their portrayals of toxic and healthy heterosexual relationships.

The “Passions” that Charlotte Brontë found missing in Austen’s fiction are raised to the highest degree in the troubled affair between Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw, the two main protagonists in *Wuthering Heights* (1847). However, Emily Brontë’s text ultimately favours more rational relationships like the one between Hareton and Cathy, the second generation. After all, theirs is the only successful courtship in the book.

Hareton and Cathy’s relationship begins in the worst possible scenario. Having mistaken him for Heathcliff’s son, and then for a servant, Cathy denies having any sort of kinship with the hero. A further obstacle in their relationship is her marriage to Linton Heathcliff, Hareton’s cousin. Despite Linton’s premature death, Cathy is taken “hostage” at the Heights and Hareton remains loyal to Heathcliff. Thus, their courtship inevitably begins amidst a flawed society, and its development is hampered by both external and internal barriers. Hareton’s attempts to be literate are insufficient to attract her attention, at least until he takes her side against Heathcliff in the middle of a violent row. From this point onwards, the two begin to overcome their differences and eventually marry on the New Year’s Day of 1803, when Heathcliff’s death removes the final obstacle between them.

The reader perceives, through Nelly’s eyes, the similarities and differences between the two courtships. Despite his cruel upbringing, Hareton is not as brutish nor as temperamental as Heathcliff, and the second Catherine is more good-natured and honest than her mother.

Ultimately, education brings the younger generation together: Cathy teaches Hareton how to read and write, and in spending more time together, she becomes more mature, a different person from the spoiled and frightened girl who married Linton. Cathy's love equally transforms Hareton into a more cultured and confident man. The parallel structure of the two courtships, as well as the characters' development and the final happy ending, suggest that Cathy's and Hareton's relationship is desirable, whereas Heathcliff's and Catherine's is not.

The subtle mixture of romance and Gothic have granted Emily Brontë's masterpiece a respectable position within English literature. By contrast, Anne Brontë's works have had a more difficult trajectory. Literary scholars began to pay attention to the youngest of the sisters as late as the 1990s. This omission is often justified on the grounds of Charlotte's and Emily Brontë's superior qualities, overlooking the strong connection between *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) with *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, respectively. Another frequent argument is the marked didacticism of Anne Brontë's fiction. A third explanation might be Anne's clear preference for the romance novel form. Both *Agnes* and *Tenant* depict heroines who are rewarded with unconditional love after a series of misfortunes and moral tests. *Agnes Grey* is unanimously understood as a coming-of-age story where the heroine is educated in the ways of life. The novel has little to envy *Jane Eyre* in its portrayal of a woman's

economic instability, but perhaps more importantly, the love plot in *Agnes* is complementary to the heroine's development, not the primary cause of it. Similarly, Helen Huntingdon's moral growth in *Tenant* comes as a result of a failed first marriage, which leads her to choose her second partner more wisely.

Learning and literature go hand in hand in Anne Brontë's fiction, as the writer herself declares in the preface to *Tenant*'s second edition: "My object in writing the following pages, was not simply to amuse the Reader, ... I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it" (A. Brontë, *Tenant* 3). In this case, "truth" refers to the abuses endured by Helen during her first marriage, and her subsequent escape to Wildfell Hall with her son. Helen's diary offers a detailed first-person account of a woman's powerlessness within the institution of marriage, which caused serious controversy in the aftermath of the novel's publication. When paired with the social criticism that pervades *Agnes Grey*, scholars have come to understand Anne Brontë's work as (proto)feminist, as it incorporates many of the demands that would characterise the first wave of feminism at the end of the nineteenth century.

More so than in her first novel, in *Tenant* Brontë merges explicit social protest with the romance novel form. Formally speaking, the text has the eight narrative elements that Pamela Regis lists as essential to the genre, from the flawed society and a point of ritual death, to the moment of recognition leading to the final betrothal. One of the main

obstacles to Gilbert Markham's and Helen's happiness is her marriage to Arthur Huntingdon, who despite his apparent lack of interest in his wife, refuses to divorce her. But secondly and more importantly, there is the problem of Gilbert's unsuitability to be Helen's husband. The first barrier disappears easily as a result of Arthur's demise, but the second one depends on Gilbert's moral education. Brontë purposely subjects her male protagonist to a transformation that shapes his behaviour and his value system.

This process begins with the reading of Helen's narrative. Despite claims to the contrary, Andrés G. López contends that the irruption of Helen's diary is a deliberate move on Brontë's part, as it helps readers to establish a parallelism between Gilbert Markham's and Helen Huntingdon's personal growth (179-80). Anne Brontë believed that individual learning and reformation came through "reading" about other people's experiences, so that "[f]raming Helen's narrative with Gilbert's allows Brontë to preserve the diary's authenticity while making the point that the vicarious experience provided by narratives, these two among them, can and should transform the reader" (Kemp 208).

Beyond these interpretations, I would suggest that Helen's diary has a threefold purpose. Firstly, it is an excellent means to introduce the heroine's point of view into the courtship story. Secondly, it reveals the barriers that prevent Helen from marrying Gilbert. Thirdly, and most significantly, the diary voices Brontë's own feminist standpoints. One

of *Tenant's* greatest merits is the balance effected between Gilbert and Helen's courtship, their progress as individuals, and the book's underlying theme of social protest. Lee A. Talley shrewdly observes that the romance novel offered Brontë the perfect vehicle to convey her moral and political message:

[Anne] Brontë uses the romance, a genre permeated with worldly concerns, to speak loudly about social injustice and the temporal doctrine of suffrage. By ending not just with the marriage of Helen and Gilbert, but also with happy marriages for the other female characters as well, she tries to signify the possibility of transcendent fulfilments through modest and very earthly change. (146)

Anne Brontë's political stance in *Tenant* is very clear. Helen is at disadvantage in a patriarchal system that presses her to marry in exchange for individual self-fulfilment and protection, but leaves her and her infant son unprotected when Huntingdon's abuses become unsustainable. In case readers would miss this point, the heroine tells us about her friend Harriet and her husband Hattersley, a man who ultimately repents and lives a moral and Christian life. In addition, *Tenant* pays attention to the construction of womanhood in Brontë's contemporary sociocultural context. On the one hand, the ideal of Victorian femininity reduced women's opportunities for employment. Helen, for example, depends on her artistic abilities to survive economically.⁹⁴ On the other hand, the portrayal of women as agents

⁹⁴ Helen being an artist is hardly coincidental. Like her heroine, and many other women writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Brontë also wrote for a living. My selection of

capable of changing and putting men on the right track, proves to be an impossible ideal. Helen falls prey to the religious arguments of the time when she accepts the part of a good loving woman struggling to reform a bad man. As Marianne Thormählen has noted, Helen's mistake lies "in constructing a religious rationale to accommodate an [latent physical] inclination that has nothing even remotely spiritual about it" (157). In this respect, Anne Brontë's message in *Tenant* differs from her sister Charlotte's in *Jane Eyre*, and from many other literary works like Richardson's *Pamela*. This novel makes it clear that a man's transformation must originate *within* the individual, as it is the case with Hattersley and Gilbert Markham.

The final happy ending inevitably raises the question of whether Gilbert has become a suitable husband for Helen. As a romance novel, the answer is invariably affirmative. Gilbert *does* change as a result of his relationship with Helen, but, as was noted earlier, his moral development is a personal effort. Brontë has her heroine going back to her husband in time for his death, so that Gilbert must struggle against his follies alone. His retelling the story to his brother-in-law in the main narrative frame allows the reader to witness the different stages of his education process. In his first meeting with Helen after reading her diary, for example, he is very much the same man he was at the beginning of the novel: proud of being physically attractive, and

novels from Lisa Kleypas also includes examples of heroines with literary aspirations. On the whole, these may be interpreted as a reflection on the writer's part about her own artistic practice.

contrary to his own perceptions, a “fop” (A. Brontë, *Tenant* 28). By the time the couple meets again at Staningley, Gilbert has achieved full maturity. To Helen’s comments about his changed attitudes, Gilbert responds: “I am not changed, Helen - unfortunately I am as keen and passionate as ever - it is not I, it is the circumstances that are changed” (A. Brontë, *Tenant* 376). This declaration reveals Gilbert’s awareness that education is an ongoing process and that moral virtue is a continuous struggle. It also signifies the culmination of the whole education process. The novel ends with Gilbert handing over his own house at Linden-Car to his younger brother, and moving into Staningley, Helen’s house in ownership. All things considered, then, *Tenant* presents a happy conclusion that is all-advantageous to its heroine.

Like many other writers discussed throughout this chapter, Austen and the Brontës have used romance novels to illustrate society’s need for change and to challenge conventional gender norms. Also, these authors presented readers with an alternative, favourable image of women and heterosexual relationships that stills inspire readers nowadays.

2.5. FIRST-WAVE FEMINISM AND THE COURTSHIP PLOT: THE “NEW WOMAN” IN LOVE AND DIME NOVEL ROMANCES

Historically speaking, fiction has been instrumental in the articulation of feminist protests and the demand for woman’s equality. The next pages evince the importance of courtship stories in the fight for

women's rights during the second half of the nineteenth century, with the advent of the first wave of feminist activism. Many women novelists continued to use the romance novel and its final happy ending to press for social transformation. Despite the contempt with which they were received by their contemporaries, and even by some modern feminist critics, these writers' contribution to the women's movement was relevant and deserves some commentary. As was the case with the novels of the Brontës, analysed in the previous section, these books foregrounded women's issues and illustrated, more or less explicitly, the key components of successful romantic unions. The second half of this section pays attention to dime novel romances, arguably the most widely read genre in the United States in the final decades of the nineteenth century. By revisiting this close antecedent to the modern mass-market romance novel in both content and audience, my intention is to expose the lingering class bias behind traditional (Marxist) criticism, which often looks at mass-culture products with suspicion.

As was explained previously, women's literary aspirations depended to a large extent on their choice of subject matter. The gendering of literature throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries dictated that women should write about the private sphere, or risk charges of unfemininity levied against them by the most conservative sectors of society. Thus, it is no wonder that most women novelists continued to talk about love and courtship in their texts over the course of the nineteenth century. Those authors who deliberately

introduced “masculine” topics, even within conventional love plots, often did so under a male pseudonym.⁹⁵

In addition, in *Victorian Women's Fiction: Marriage, Freedom and the Individual* (1985), the feminist scholar Shirley Foster associates the interest in love and courtship during this period with the shift in gender roles prompted by first-wave feminism. Moderating Showalter’s and Gilbert’s and Gubar’s theories about the subversive nature of women’s writing in the nineteenth century, Foster argues that “throughout the female pronouncements of the period there is a note of ambivalence, a tension between a desire to challenge and change current attitudes and a reluctance to disturb the status quo” (10). According to Forster, popular writers in the early Victorian period did not attack the institution of marriage *per se*, but their discussion of the characteristics of a good and successful matrimony evidences, at least, a dim reformist spirit (11-12).

Karen Tracey upholds a different thesis in her book *Plots and Proposals: American Women's Fiction, 1850-90* (2000). Tracy analyses the popularity of the double-proposal plot in which the heroine declines her suitor’s first marriage proposal, but ultimately accepts it by the end of the novel.⁹⁶ Tracey explains that the heroine’s initial rejection often stems from her dislike of the hero, which triggers his transformation

⁹⁵ The three Brontë sisters typify this tendency, as does Mary Anne Evans, *alias* George Eliot. The latter chose a male penname because she did not want her works to be categorized as examples of silly novels by Lady novelists, i.e. romantic stories with clichéd characters and plotlines.

⁹⁶ Tracey pays attention to those novels written by US women writers, although occasionally she also alludes to British novels with double-proposal plotlines, including Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

into an appropriate suitor (very much like Anne Brontë's Gilbert Markhan); otherwise, her negative answer may be attributed to her desire to pursue a career or some other personal ambition (Tracey 4-7). It is precisely the books' ending in marriage that leads Tracey to suggest that popular titles such as *Britomarte, the Man-Hater* (1865-6),⁹⁷ by E.D.E.N. Southworth, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Story of Avis* (1877), participated actively in the wider context of first-wave feminist debates around the woman question:

[These authors] involved their literary traditions and their social milieux in dialogue about what female characteristics are most apt to contribute to the happiness of the individual, to the solidity of the middle-class family, and to the strength of a nation, about what path a woman could and should take when she chooses to delay or forego marriage, and about how romance, love and marriage should be conceived and reconceived. (Tracey 14)

Thus, women writers of courtship stories contributed to the advancement of woman's equality in their examination of the private sphere and with the portrayal of more egalitarian relationships between the sexes.

Generally speaking, criticism has largely favoured those women writers whose (semi-autobiographical) novels reflected their explicit commitment to the women's movement.⁹⁸ *Fin-de-siècle* British novelist

⁹⁷ Southworth's text was later published in book format in two volumes, titled *Fair Play: A Novel* (1868) and *How He Won Her: A Sequel to Fair Play* (1869).

⁹⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft is a good case in point. Much contemporary feminist criticism exalts Wollstonecraft's genius, while denying writers like Burney a place in the "canon" of feminist women writers. Notwithstanding, and without devaluing Wollstonecraft's figure,

Mona Caird campaigned for women's right to education, decent employment, and sexual autonomy, among others. Caird pointed directly at marriage as the source of women's subordinated status, and, like many of her contemporaries, she championed a new form of marital union that would bring about a transformation in society. In her article "Marriage" (1888), Caird is confident that "[w]ith the social changes which would go hand in hand with changes in the status of marriage, [there] would come inevitably many fresh forms of human power, and thus all sorts of new and stimulating influences would be brought to bear upon society" (198). This renovated union ought to be "free" and cemented on "love and trust or friendship"; otherwise it would be sterile for both husband and wife (Caird, "Marriage" 196).

In light of the important role that Caird and her ilk conferred to marriage in their project for a new society, these writers' preference for courtship plotlines hardly comes as a surprise.⁹⁹ Caird, Sara Grand, Menie Muriel Dowie and others modelled their female protagonists after the New Woman of the 1880s and 1890s. These new heroines, described as "agent[s] of social and political transformation" by some critics (Heilmann 4), espoused women's suffrage and female education, and revealed the tyranny behind the Victorian ideal of marriage and

or belittling her courage for speaking up in favour of women's rights, it seems necessary that critics should also contemplate and value other forms of protest, as might be utopian writing, with its portrayal of balanced, enriching romantic relationships.

⁹⁹ American feminists also pressed for greater equality in marriage, and many writers equally relied on courtship stories to denounce women's lack of political and economic rights. For further information on this topic, see William Leach's *True Love and Perfect Union: The Feminist Reform of Sex and Society* (1981).

femininity (“New Woman”). Sometimes, in order to emphasise the need for reform, these writers opted for unhappy endings in which heroes refused to accept the heroines’ exigencies regarding personal and economic freedom. A good instance is Caird’s *The Wing of Azrael*, published in 1889, which dramatizes an unhappy marriage in which the female protagonist murders her abusive husband before committing suicide. By contrast, a handful of these reformist writers followed the long-established tradition of portraying happy, renovated marriages as a form of protest. One such example would be Emma Frances Brooke’s *Transition* (1895), a book that ends with a working heroine living happily with her chosen partner. From E.D.E.N. Southworth to Brooke, these writers have been largely praised for their efforts to portray gender inequality.

Conversely, scholars have taken a more nuanced standpoint in relation to the love stories and central courtship plots depicted in romantic penny dreadfuls and dime novel romances, two of the most popular genres at the turn of the century and the immediate forebears to modern mass-market romance novels. This critical mistrust owes much to the pervasive influence of elitist attitudes in the academia, which originated at the same time (and in response to) the rise of mass culture. The nineteenth century witnessed an unprecedented rise in literacy rates, as well a significant transformation of the publishing industry. Circulating libraries like Mudie’s provided people with reading material at affordable prices, and further technological developments in printing

allowed publishers to reduce the cost of books. Halfway through the Victorian period, literature began its conversion into the consumer-oriented business we know today. Publishers issued large amounts of those products which they believed to be attractive in the eyes of readers,¹⁰⁰ and many “popular” genres emerged from the 1840s onwards. This “cheap literature”, as Patrick Brantlinger calls it, targeted the “burgeoning working-class readership in the major urban centers [sic], giving new cause for alarm to upper-class observers” (12). These stories allegedly possessed implausible, repetitive plotlines, and had no other purpose than entertaining the uneducated readership.

According to Gaye Tuchman and Nina Fortin, it was against this background that middle-class male criticism “infused the term *art* with new meaning” (202, italics in the original). These sociologists and cultural critics describe the 1880s and 1890s as a period of “redefinition”, when the quality of a “good” novel was measured against a new form of realism, defined as “a *serious* fictionalized depiction of plausible actions of socially and *psychologically individuated* characters in a stratified society” (10, emphasis added).¹⁰¹ The phrase “psychologically individuated”, in particular, suggests that archetypal characters and conventional plotlines, two key elements of

¹⁰⁰ A similar strategy characterises modern romance novels publishers like Harlequin, whose rapport with readers is documented by Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance* (1984) and Carol Thurston’s *The Romance Revolution* (1987), among others.

¹⁰¹ Section 2.1 of the present chapter explained how in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a similar distinction was made between well-written romances and the formulaic, printed ones, read by the lower, uneducated classes.

the dime novel romance, had no place in the category of “good” novel writing.

Most critical approaches to the dime novel have concentrated on the “masculine” side of the genre, that is, on the quasi-fantastic adventures and voyages, fights, etc. present in many mainstream novels.¹⁰² Comparatively, there are fewer studies about the women’s dime novel whose focus laid on courtship.¹⁰³ Dime novel romances emerged in a context where female readers’ lives had been radically changed, thanks, in part, to feminist achievements. These women had a certain purchasing power and emancipation, principally in urban settings, as factory employees, paid domestic workers, seamstresses, etc. They participated willingly in consumerist practices, buying books on a fairly regular basis. Like the woman magazines and family periodicals of the time, the dime novels that targeted a female audience reflected the readers’ new social status as independent paid labour, but at the same time, they also reflected dominant discourses about

¹⁰² This happens even when romance, understood here as a mixture of love story and marvellous adventures, was integral to dime fiction. The novel that inaugurated the genre, Ann Stephens’s *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter* (1860), deals with the consequences of a failed courtship. The interracial marriage between Malaeska and William Danforth, narrated in the first part of the story, affects their son in an extremely negative way and leads him to abandon his own fiancée and to commit suicide.

¹⁰³ In part, this deficit in critical analysis is a consequence of the books’ disappearance. Felicia L. Carr has pointed out at the biased nature of many collectors of dime fiction, demonstrating how their personal tastes influenced the creation of archives. The “American Women’s Dime Novel Project”, launched online by Carr herself, aims at “providing information about the novels themselves, the authors, the readers, and nineteenth century public reaction”, in an attempt to vindicate the importance of this specific subset of dime literature (“About the Project”).

womanhood, highlighting the role of domesticity in the construction of their identity as women.

The name “Laura Jean Libbey” was synonym with dime novel romances. Libbey’s success and popularity among readers was unrivalled (Masteller 265), and her lucrative “formula”, as it has been described, consisted of the following elements:

Take a beautiful young woman, make her an orphan or the sole support of an invalid mother or sister and thus create the necessity for her to go to work. The wealthy hero is quickly smitten and the villain is quickly attracted. The work place then drops from the story, although not the description of the heroine as a “poor little working girl,” and is replaced by numerous obstacles to the final reuniting of hero and heroine. These obstacles may involve the disapproval of the hero's parents, abduction of the heroine by the villain and near brushes with both death and rape. There is always a happy resolution that brings hero and heroine together and promises a blissful future. (Peterson 21)

From this summary of the plotline, it is obvious that Libbey took some inspiration from previous sentimental writers, but added new features that resonated with the new reading public (e.g. the industrial environment).¹⁰⁴ In addition to the didactic goal of novels like Cummins’s *The Lamplighter*, a “Laura Jean Libbey” story would also have an escapist function, allowing its female readers to fantasise about easier lives where evil is invariably punished, and the girl is saved by a

¹⁰⁴ Twentieth-century Mills & Boon and Harlequin romance novels strongly resemble Libbey’s texts.

handsome, wealthy man. In the preface to one of her novels, Libbey mentions the importance of writing with a moral lesson in mind:

That a novel can do much good or much harm in the world cannot be disputed, for it finds its way to the fireside of the mansion and cottage alike, and is the silent companion which serves to mold the character and future of many a young girl for good or for evil; and, therefore, it is a pleasing thought to the novelist that what has been written has pointed out a strong moral and led no youthful mind astray. (Libbey par. 4)

A few lines later, she goes on to describe her personal views about escapism and fantasy, and her inclination for handsome, wealthy heroes:

The happiest epoch of a young girl's life is the day-dreams she has of the lover who shall come to her some day, and of the roseate future stretching away beyond. I should not like to destroy those girlish fancies. It is not pleasant to think of white doves coming to the muddy pool to drink; it is less pleasant to contemplate innocence drinking at the fountain of knowledge — of the world, worldly. (Libbey par. 11-12)

Interestingly, Libbey's private life differed substantially from the one she devised for her heroines. Growing up in a middle-class family, she started to make money at an early age and she controlled the profits derived from her literary pursuits. Libbey did not marry until she was almost 40 and did not have children. Admittedly, her working-class readers were unlikely to turn into rich heiresses or marry millionaires, but this circumstance did not diminish the pleasure women got when

reading these stories. The working-class reader bonded with the working-class heroine. As Joyce Shaw Peterson puts it, Libbey's novels "appeal[ed] to generalized longings for dignity and a fuller, richer and more comfortable life" than the one readers were likely to experience (33). Doubtless, the heroine's final marriage and subsequent abandonment of the paid labour force reflected the circumstances of many working women, for whom wifhood and childrearing were still a further step in life.¹⁰⁵

Second-wave feminists like Peterson conclude that Libbey's novels are "outside the feminist stream. They make no connection between economic independence, self-fulfillment [sic], female equality and happiness" (Peterson 31). Nevertheless, working-women's reluctance to change their reading habits is indicative of a complex phenomenon that also affects the mass-market romances sold nowadays.¹⁰⁶ Mass culture is still perceived as opium for the people, and consumers as dupes who merely imbibe the texts' ideology. However, women's preference for dime novel romances did not impede them from demanding changes in legislation, better working conditions and salaries, or organising strikes and public marches to make themselves heard. The first wave of

¹⁰⁵ Peterson refers to the period of paid employment as a period of "transition to adulthood", after which women would be "removed into marriages that might include little money, many children and perhaps little enough love" (31-2).

¹⁰⁶ The encounter between the middle-class reformist Dorothy Richardson and a group of female factory workers who read dime novel romances is documented in Richardson's book *The Long Day* (1905). The workers' refusal to abandon their cheap literature for other intellectual, politically committed readings is recounted by Felicia L. Carr in "The American Women's Dime Novel", and by Nan Enstad in *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* (1999).

feminist activism thrived at the turn of the twentieth century, and it did so in the company of popular romance stories like Libbey's.

In her innovative analysis of dime novel romances, working women, and labour politics, historian Nan Enstad contends that female readers were so engrossed in their reading because these narratives "allowed them to briefly bridge painful cultural contradictions that assigned heroic working status to men and heroic 'lady' status only to middle- and upper-class white women" (70). Acknowledging the contradictory messages coded in the books' plots, Enstad nonetheless affirms that dime novel romances put the working woman at the centre of a heroic plot, validating her as an individual and also as a political subject:

[T]he novels were about *being* a female worker throughout. The attacks the heroine encounters are always in the context of her status as worker. Key to the dime novel plot is the question: Can a worker be a lady? That is, does work indeed degrade, spoil one's virtue, make one coarse and masculine? The heroine's adventures make her the victim of male villains who believe her status as worker makes her 'lower' and therefore available for their pleasure. ... When heroines fend off villains, they demonstrate their own worth as workers, without the aid of the hero, though occasionally they are rescued by others. (Enstad 73-4)

With the emergence and consolidation of mass culture products, a distinction was made between a certain type of romance novel which deployed the courtship plot to examine a woman's identity and status in an unequal society, and the popular romance of the masses, whose chief goal was to amuse and provide readers with escape. Hopefully, this

section has demonstrated that this division is highly artificial, inasmuch as both types of stories can entertain, and to some extent, foster political change by endorsing identification with a certain group.

Before addressing the birth of the modern mass-market romance novel, the following pages will introduce, if only very briefly, a handful of twentieth-century romance writers whose novels straddle the line between the popular and middlebrow. On the one hand, this discussion will demonstrate that the boundaries separating these two categories are not as well defined as one would initially suppose. On the other hand, a look of Maeve Binchy's romances will shed light on the complex flow of mutual influences between popular and middlebrow literary texts.

2.6. BETWEEN MIDDLEBROW AND POPULAR: MAEVE BINCHY'S ROMANCE NOVELS

The label "middlebrow" developed in the early twentieth century to designate those literary texts that, without being examples of experimental high art, retain a certain degree of seriousness and enough aesthetic quality to distinguish them from other forms of popular, mass-directed art. The feminist romance critic Lynne Pearce states that "the first part of the twentieth century abounds with romances which fall into the 'middle-brow', 'middle-ranking' category", and which, considering the choppy political waters of the day, reflect the contemporary "existential crisis" affecting interpersonal relationships (*Romance Writing* 143-4). According to Pearce, the courtship plots that characterise this "middle-brow" fiction embrace the idea that love

seldom brings happiness to the people who feel/experience it (*Romance Writing* 145). This gloomy view contrasts deeply, as Pearce herself observes, with the rise in popularity of Mills & Boon, Harlequin popular romances, and their positive understanding of love as “salvation” (*Romance Writing* 145).

This opposition between optimistic and pessimistic endings goes as far back as to Richardson’s *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, and it frequently plays a key role in sorting out middlebrow romances from the popular stories sold by Harlequin and Avon Books. Pearce, for instance, uses this criterion to establish her own corpus of analysis. The presence of a happy ending has also been used by the popular romance scholar Pamela Regis to delimit the romance novel genre. Regis’s definition of the romance novel as a courtship story with a satisfactory ending excludes texts such as Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936) or Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938) on the grounds of their formal features (*Natural History* 48-50). However, Regis’s maxim that not every love story is a romance novel overlooks the fact that literary genres are not stable units, and that influences travel back and forth across different texts and at different times.¹⁰⁷

A brief example will help to clarify this issue. Elinor Glyn’s successful novel *Three Weeks* (1907) was also immensely controversial due to the adulterous relationship it portrays and the veiled references to

¹⁰⁷ For a perceptive discussion of the limits of genre categorisation, see Ralph Cohen’s chapter “Genre Theory, Literary History, and Historical Change” (1991).

sexual intercourse.¹⁰⁸ The book narrates the romantic liaison between a young Englishman, Paul, and an unknown Lady who turns out to be married, but ill-treated by her husband. *Three Weeks*, like many of the middlebrow romances that Lynne Pearce mentions, offers a tragic ending: the female protagonist is murdered by her husband before she can reunite with her lover. While the novel does not close with the mandatory happily ever after that Regis defends as a key component of the romance novel, an obvious connection exists between Glyn's text and the modern mass-market romance story. The subtle insinuations of sexual intercourse offered by this text, for instance, paved the way for more explicit portrayals in the future, and even provided modern romances with the vocabulary to narrate those encounters. The following passage, relating an intimate *rendezvous* between Paul and the Lady, could easily feature in a modern mass-market romance novel:

A madness of tender caressing seized her. She purred as a tiger might have done, while she undulated like a snake. She touched him with her finger-tips, she kisses his throat, his wrists, the palms of his hands, his eyelids, his hair. Strange subtle kisses, unlike the kisses of women. And often, between her purrings [sic], she murmured love-words in some fierce language of her own, brushing his ears and his eyes with her lips the while. And through it all, Paul slept on, the Eastern perfume in the air drugging his senses. (Glyn 120)

¹⁰⁸ Rachel Anderson also analyses the novel *Three Weeks* in her pioneering historiography of the romance genre, *The Purple Heart Throbs* (1974). Her study concentrates on Glyn's personal views about love and how they are reflected in the text. By contrast, I am more interested in those aspects of the text which closely resemble present day mass-market romance fiction.

The next section will show how, after the publication of Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* (1972), popular romance fiction offered increasingly graphic portrayals of sex. Woodiwiss's innovation, however, was indebted to texts like *Three Weeks*, with its legitimisation of sexual intimacy out of wedlock and its rare portrayal of female sexual agency. Therefore, the input of texts such as this one ought to be considered in the study of the evolution of the romance novel.

A broader understanding of the genre in the early twentieth century would include writers like the aforementioned Elinor Glyn, but also Florence Barclay, Eleanor Hibbert (a.k.a. Victoria Holt, Jean Plaidy, Philippa Carr), Grace Livingston Hill, Dorothy Eden, Myrtle Reed or Berta Ruck, all of whom have contributed to shaping the formal and thematic characteristics of the romance novel. Some like Georgette Heyer, E.M. Hull, or the aforementioned Berta Ruck occupy an intermediate position between the so-called "formula" that dime novels and penny dreadfuls had exploited in the late 1800s, and the same one that publishers like Mills & Boon made their own in the 1930s. Novels like Heyer's *The Black Moth* (1921) eschewed the spiritual tone that had characterised romance fiction for centuries, and seemed to favour entertainment over moral concerns. Additionally, these writers helped to establish different subgenres within the romance novel, including Regency (e.g. Heyer), desert romance (e.g. Hull), or Christian romance (e.g. Barclay).

In the remaining pages of this section, I examine in more detail one of those figures who inhabited a sort of middle ground between the middlebrow and the popular romance in the final decades of the twentieth century, when the specialised romance publishers we know today were already breaking sales records. Irish writer Maeve Binchy enjoys international recognition as one of the best romance novelists of the last century, a reputation backed up by critics and readers alike.¹⁰⁹ Binchy's success rests on her adherence to the most characteristic elements of the romance novel "formula", while stretching its boundaries by bringing socially relevant themes front-and-centre.¹¹⁰

One final consideration before beginning the analysis of Binchy's selected works is that I have decided to refer to novels like Binchy's as "middlebrow popular" romance, because I am rather reticent to use Kristin Ramsdell's category of "women's romantic fiction", i.e. "longer, multi-layered stories that feature a strong heroine, often with definite goals other than love and marriage, and yet contain an important romance element" (Ramsdell, *Guide* 52-3). Ramsdell's term is less suited for studying the intersection between middlebrow and popular romances proposed in this section, because it fails to grasp the problematic around the literary quality of these texts vis-à-vis mass-market romances. Hence my proposal for an alternative name.

¹⁰⁹ It should be mentioned, though, that when critics refer to the brilliance of her writing they tend to highlight Binchy's journalistic activity as columnist and reporter for *The Irish Times*, rather than her fiction.

¹¹⁰ In a way, by assessing Binchy's contribution to the romance genre I am anticipating the analysis of Rosamunde Pilcher's oeuvre in Chapter Three.

Maeve Binchy is one of the most popular authors within the recent history of Irish literature, and also one of the best romance storytellers of our time. Generally speaking, her greatest contribution to the development of romance novel is her ability to work with *and* within the genre's boundaries, adopting and adapting some of the most prototypical tropes of romance and playing with the reader's expectations. The next pages will deal mainly with three novels spanning her writing career, *Echoes* (1985), *The Glass Lake* (1994) and *Minding Frankie* (2010). Besides, Binchy continued with the long-established tradition of using the romance novel form to address issues pertaining to society as a whole, and to women in particular. The three titles show how thematically complex the modern romance novel can be, by introducing such relevant topics as pregnancy, adultery, or alcoholism, into the usual courtship story.

I would like to start my discussion of *Echoes*, *The Glass Lake* and *Minding Frankie* with an account of their structure in relation to the most prototypical element of mass-market romance fiction, the happy ending. Binchy's novels comply with this requirement, albeit with differences. In some cases the happy ending is fairly optimistic and satisfactory for most characters, while in others it strikes us as highly ambiguous. In the closing pages of *Echoes*, for example, the protagonists Clare and David struggle to maintain their relationship alive. The second half of the novel deals with the problems of their marriage, including his infidelity, her postpartum depression, and the

meddling of one of their neighbours. The final scene suggests that the couple, grown apart by the circumstances, has finally decided to start anew and “walk” towards their happily ever after:

A long time ago, back in Dublin when there had been a simple sort of life, David used to take Clare’s hand in its knitted glove and put it into his pocket for further warmth. He wondered did he dare do that now. Very gently he drew her hand towards him and she placed it in his pocket without him having to do anything.

They walked down the twisty road with the loose stones. Down the hill to Castlebay. (*Echoes* 737)

Customarily, the happy ending reinforces the image that the lovers, once they have overcome the obstacles in their relationship, will continue to succeed in terms of love, work, personal projects, etc. In contrast with this idyllic panorama, this final passage in *Echoes* is full of nostalgia for a better past and doubtful about the future. Certainly, Clare holds David’s hand in a symbolic representation of the happy ending, but there is no guarantee that they will solve their problems: the “twisty road” and the “loose stones” may symbolically indicate further obstacles in their relationship. Consequently, in *Echoes*, Binchy presents us with a darker picture in which happiness and success depend almost entirely on the characters’ future decisions. The book ends with a sort of cliff-hanger that challenges romance readers’ expectations, portraying an unknown future for the two lovers.

With *Echoes*, published in 1985, Binchy was already problematizing one of the genre’s central characteristics, adopting a

more realistic perspective in which happy endings depend exclusively on the lovers' everyday commitment. While her novels are not explicitly educational, this seems to be the underlying message in her fiction, repeated time and again in novels like *The Glass Lake* and *Minding Frankie*, where the denouement is somewhat closer to the conventional happy ending. This (subtle) ambivalence at the end of her novels explains Binchy's absence from the popular romance canon, and brings her closer to the group of middlebrow popular romance writers that Pearce describes.

Apart from these (not so) happy endings, Binchy's novels incorporate several interrelated plotlines which make it difficult for the reader to pinpoint the main courtship storyline, at least initially. Multiplotting endows her works with a richness of characterisation unusual in many Mills & Boon, and Harlequin romances. An example of this is *The Glass Lake*, which begins featuring Helen McMahon as the protagonist, but eventually gives prominence to the courtship story of her daughter, Kit. The fact that Binchy introduces Helen's failed affair before Kit's gives greater depth to the latter's emotions (we have seen her mother's suffering before), at the same time that it avoids stereotypical situations. Binchy takes this decentring of the courtship plot to the extreme in *Minding Frankie*, where Noel and Faith's relationship is shadowed by the life crisis of his friends and family. In the latter case, Binchy may have pushed the limits of the genre too far, bringing it closer to the family saga than to romance.

In Pamela Regis's strict definition of the romance novel, society plays a key role in keeping the lovers apart (*Natural History* 31). This rule applies to our three novels. In *Echoes*, class difference separates Clare and David. In *The Glass Lake*, the community's gossip raises Kit's suspicions about the hero's intentions. In *Minding Frankie*, Noel relies extensively on his family and friends' judgement when it comes to make decisions about his own life. However, the trope of the "reformed society" that marks the ending of a romance novel provides more than a background/obstacle to the courtship. In Binchy's fiction, it allows the writer to introduce secondary themes, and to go further into them. While mass-market romance novels are still regarded as escapist fiction, a-political, and lacking in aesthetic quality, writers like Binchy enhance the genre's reputation by challenging such assumptions, mostly through the topics they cover as well as through the complexity of characterisation.

Echoes, *The Glass Lake* and *Minding Frankie* cover a wide range of themes, including child-parent relationships, rural *versus* urban life in Ireland, the cultural/religious changes produced in the country in the second half of the twentieth century, and last but not least, gender politics. *Minding Frankie*, for instance, portrays an ex-alcoholic father fighting for the custody of his baby daughter. Clare and David's love in *Echoes* thrives thanks to the anonymity of the big city meanwhile in their village, class differences were unsurmountable. The mother-daughter plot is indispensable to a story like *The Glass Lake*, in which

the heroine Kit struggles with her mother's decision to abandon her family for another man, an event that has important consequences for Kit's own romantic liaison. In *Minding Frankie*, Binchy provides a twist by transforming it into a larger family story, but the essence is the same; the novel also brings other issues to the fore.

The workplace is a recurrent topic in Binchy's novels, with the portrayal of heroines entering various professional arenas. Whenever the action takes place in the 1950s and 60s (e.g. *The Glass Lake*), these books relate the heroine's struggle to become a professional, sometimes in opposition to her family and friends. In novels set in more contemporary times, the protagonists must balance the importance of their jobs, with the weight of their families and their community. As for Binchy's treatment of sexuality, her novels do not contain explicit sexual encounters in the likes of the 1970s and 1980s mass-market romances, but most characters are inevitably forced to deal with other aspects of their sexuality. The novels contain examples of infidelities (e.g. *Echoes*), pre-marital sex or abortion, but also discussions about affective commitment, sexual desire, intimacy, etc. Religion is also significantly present, providing in an ironic tone the moral background to judge the characters' actions.

The marked presence of these extra elements alongside the romance story poses a problem for some readers, but as this chapter has been demonstrating, the history of the romance novel is full of similar examples. Also, the themes described above are essentially the same as

those discussed by other (critically-acclaimed) Irish writers of the twentieth century, and supports my own approach to Binchy's oeuvre as an example of middlebrow popular (romance) author. Binchy, in a more popular and accessible way, was offering the general public the same elements, only that her contribution to Irish literature has been largely overlooked due to her status as a popular (romance) writer. As Kevin Rocket has observed, however, Binchy's exclusion from the history of Irish literature is an important omission, since the boom of Irish women writers from the 1960s and the romantic plot are deeply related:

As Irish writing emerged from the stranglehold of both Modernist and realist male writers, and women became more central to Irish writing, it was often in the devalued genre of popular romantic fiction that such voices were heard. When the post-World War II generation of women writers emerged in the 1960s, their texts were filled with depictions of backwardness in rural Ireland, while celebrating the economic and sexual freedom which the 1960s economic boom allowed. (555)

Maeve Binchy's work has not been systematically studied either by specialists in romance fiction, or by critics focused on the history of Irish literature. For popular romance scholarship, her works are considered more serious than the average mass-market romance novel; additionally, she is regarded as too popular, perhaps, for the world of academia.

If anything, these arguments deny Binchy's contribution to both Irish literature and the popular romance genre, and help to maintain the present ghettoization of literature into high and popular compartments.

Binchy's status as a middlebrow popular romance writer, that is, as a writer straddling the categories middlebrow and popular, opens the door to a more comprehensive understanding of the mutual influences between romance writers and their works. As we shall see in the next section and in the analysis of Pilcher's and Kleypas's works in Chapter Three, the mass-market romance novel written in the final decades of the twentieth century owes much to the formal and thematic experimentation that was taking place in the ranks of both "middlebrow" and "highbrow" women's fiction.

2.7. KATHLEEN WOODIWISS AND THE BOOM OF AMERICAN ROMANCE

That the romance novel is now the province of a few specialised imprints is a well-documented fact (Dixon; McAleer; Paizis). As a result, pioneering romance critics like Tania Modleski or Janice Radway often took Mills & Boon and Harlequin as synonyms of the genre.¹¹¹

This section maps the context in which mass-market romance emerged and consolidated thanks to those aforementioned publishers, and touches upon the novels' gender politics. Incidentally, these pages also pay attention to the tensions that inevitably arise between a particular brand of romance and the writers' individual creativity, by focusing on the figure of Kathleen Woodiwiss. Overall, this should

¹¹¹ Occasionally, books published by Silhouette or Avon came up in their investigations as well.

provide an overview of the situation of the romance novel in the second half of the twentieth century, and reveal the ways in which the genre evolved in relation to the sociopolitical movements that characterised those final decades.

The romance novel published by Mills & Boon and Harlequin is partly responsible for the genre's degraded status in contemporary culture. In the same vein that penny dreadfuls and dime novels had been debased in the late nineteenth century, the epithets "cheap", "formulaic", "lowbrow" or "unrealistic" are commonly used to describe these novels. However, the presumed uniformity in style and marketing strategies between the different romance publishers was achieved during the 1970s and 80s, when the majority of independent romance imprints merged under the same company.¹¹²

The British Mills & Boon, founded in 1908, began as a general publisher of fiction and non-fiction books, with an emphasis on "quality and variety" that included other genres besides the romantic novel (McAleer 17). By the end of the 1930s, the firm had moved towards the sole production of romance fiction, and it was quite popular in international literary marketplaces, including the Irish, and later on the American and Australasian ones. Several critics have placed the firm's success on its editorial and marketing policies, and on its ability to retain consolidated authors while introducing new ones at a steady rate (McAleer, Dixon).

¹¹² Avon and Harlequin are nowadays part of HarperCollins Publishers.

According to Joseph McAleer's history of the firm, in the 1940s the (in)famous tip sheets for writers that nowadays define the Mills & Boon romance novel were not fully developed yet, but escapism was already established as their primary goal, a direct consequence of the convoluted atmosphere of those times (146-50).¹¹³ In other words, the Mills & Boon novels were publicized, and consequently understood, simply as a form of entertainment for women. The authors' individual creativity was preserved, provided this fitted what McAleer identifies as "wholesomeness", or middle-class morality (150, 164). The desire to please readers was high on the editor's list of preferences, and McAleer notes the existence of some taboo subjects for writers that remain stable throughout the decades, including pre-marital sex, drinking, war, politics and religion (188-9). This is not to say, however, that these topics were completely absent from the novels, but rather, that the editor acted as an "adviser, attempting to defuse problems in a creative way, without sacrificing the dramatic power" (McAleer 209). For McAleer, the Mills & Boon romance novel was quite homogeneous, at least until the Canadian company Harlequin purchased the firm in 1971 and transformed the company's inner functioning.

In contrast, Jay Dixon's study of Mills & Boon's romances shows a different picture altogether. Whereas McAleer reports the existence of a quasi-formula, dictating that the writers' genius should accommodate

¹¹³ McAleer alludes to the economic crisis of the 1930s and the political tensions generated by the interwar period and then by the outbreak of World War II, to justify the readers' interest in escapist literature, and Mills & Boon's decision to change their editorial policy.

the preferences of the editor and/or editorial board, Dixon's volume enhances the creative freedom of its writers. Where McAleer emphasises the escapist nature of these novels, Dixon combines this longing for escapism with the reader's desire for political and social reform. Thus, according to her, the Mills & Boon romance novel fulfilled a twofold purpose: it amused the reader at the same time it confronted her with everyday problems (Dixon 3, 17, 32).

Dixon writes from a very specific standpoint, as a long-time romance reader and an active feminist (27-29). Her study concludes with the firm assertion that feminism and romance novels share a common goal, even if their methods are different:

In particular, both feminist philosophy and romance ideology demand a change in the way sexual, emotional, economic and working relationships between men and women are conducted. They both have a Utopian vision of society which puts women's desires first, where men adapt themselves to women's needs, and not vice versa, and where there is no perceived difference between the status and social position of men and women. (195)

Dixon's reasoning is worth considering. It provides an adequate response to the conundrum of the romance's appeal for women across different ages, races, religious creeds or social classes: "What [the reader] does want is to be cared for and supported as an equal, just as she cares for and supports her partner —male or female" (Dixon 31). That is, the romance novel addresses women's emotional needs, including love and the desire for a satisfactory partnership with men.

Similarly, Dixon contends that romance fiction vindicates the importance of feminine values, and of the “female sphere” as a whole (34). In this respect, she argues, romance novels resemble those first-wave-feminist voices who demanded that change come mostly from men (Dixon 60). The danger, of course, lies in women taking for granted that their expertise is to be found on the arena of feelings and the domestic, thus implicitly agreeing with the patriarchal division of spheres. This is at the heart of feminists’ reservations about the genre, but Dixon strives to demonstrate that Mills & Boon romance novels challenge the gendered division of spheres.

Her analysis suggests, for example, that many popular romance novelists defended the heroine’s right to work before and after marriage. Furthermore, they demanded that the workplace ought to be transformed to suit women’s needs (Dixon 113-5). Dixon also affirms that Mills & Boon romances have never been oblivious to sex and sexuality, but choose to focus on the emotional rather than the physical side (133). In accordance with the hypothesis that men ought to be feminized, these novels “agree with the argument that men and women have different interests bound up in sex and argue for a change in men’s attitude towards sex, wanting sex to be a part of a loving relationship” (Dixon 137). Thus, the point is not that women cannot engage in sex unless it leads to marriage; rather, romance novels defend that love and affection transform the experience for the better by adding intensity and pleasure. Finally, Dixon claims that Mills & Boon romance novels are

“strongly pro-divorce”, because they encourage women to find the best possible partner (163). In short, she is confident that many Mills & Boon romances possess a clear tone of protest, a feminist subtext.

Notwithstanding the writers’ intentions, Dixon acknowledges that the romance publishing industry *per se* does not have “a stated feminist agenda” (182). The industry’s progressive gender politics widely correspond to the need for selling the product. Both Dixon and McAleer concur that Mills & Boon made great efforts to introduce whatever ideas about femininity were topical at the time, so that the books would continue to appeal to female readers (e.g. McAleer’s thesis that editors tried to avoid taboo themes). Also, the intimate relationship between the company and various women’s magazines in the 1950s (McAleer 227) is a further testimony of the capitalist side of publishing. This situation did not change after Harlequin’s takeover. As a matter of fact, the Canadian company improved the rapport system with readers, so as to keep up to date with social changes and consumer preferences.

Starting as a modest publishing company with permission to reprint Mills & Boon romance novels in America during the late 50s and 60s, Harlequin Enterprises consolidated their presence in the North American book market and eventually annexed their former British partner. The Harlequin Mills & Boon business expanded worldwide in the following decades. McAleer describes the consequences of this merger as a loss of the Mills & Boon romance type (141), and Dixon, for her part, speaks about the “authoritarian stance” which standardized

the “diversity in the storylines that has always been one of the strengths of Mills & Boon” (24). Furthermore, the “interventionist approach on the part of editors may exclude the ‘instinctive’ romance writer” (Dixon 24), undermining individual creativity and personal style, and implicitly, weakening the feminist subtext of the novels.

Kathleen Woodiwiss’s *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) epitomizes this struggle between individual authorial genius and the publisher’s desire for a certain homogeneity that secures profits. The well-known story between the innocent Heather and the worldly Captain Brandon Birmingham is credited with having transformed the romance novel in the twentieth century, shaking its very foundations with the introduction of the bodice-ripper type of romance. Woodiwiss’s contribution is all the more remarkable because her manuscript had been rejected several times, until an editor from Avon Books purchased the rights for its publication; *The Flame and the Flower* proved an almost immediate best-seller. This narrow-mindedness on the publishers’ part may come as a surprise, but the same happened a decade later when Harlequin dismissed Nora Roberts’s first manuscript, simply because they “already had” an American writer (qtd. in Regis, *Natural History* 183). Roberts is one of the most prolific romance writers in history, and it has been estimated that she has more than five hundred million copies of her books in print (Roberts “Interview”). If anything, Woodiwiss’s and Roberts’s

unexpected success evinces the industry's reluctance to take risks that may offend readers and impact their sales negatively.

The myth surrounding *The Flame and the Flower* is very powerful and incredibly complex, but the plot itself is quite straightforward. The plot revolves around a young heroine who runs away from home and kills a man in self-defence near the London docks. Frightened, she mistakes the hero for a police officer and he, in turn, mistakes her for a prostitute and forces himself upon her. Upon his discovery of her virginity during the explicitly narrated sexual intercourse, the hero offers her a position as his mistress, which she refuses. Heather's resulting pregnancy prompts their union in matrimony. As this is a forced-marriage kind of plotline, the narration is primarily concerned with the development of intimacy and love between the spouses, and the obstacles they come across serve to test their growing affection. Woodiwiss was hardly inventing a new type of romance plotline, since many *fin de siècle* novelists had relied on similar stories to convey their reformist messages about what constitutes a good marriage. Moreover, Woodiwiss relied heavily on the archetypes of the virginal heroine and the hypermasculine hero to create Heather and Brandon, and the plotline combines elements from sentimental courtship stories like *Pamela*, with the more modern narrative style developed by Georgette Heyer or Barbara Cartland in their historical romance novels.

It is the legendary status of the novel what makes it so prominent in the canon of popular romantic fiction. Critics like Carol Thurston have

argued that *The Flame and the Flower* was one of the first romance novels to depict the protagonists in the bedroom, hence its landmark importance for the genre's development. This claim has been contested by some critics (e.g. Dixon; myself in the previous section), but for most readers Woodiwiss introduced sex into the genre and inaugurated the sensual historical romance. Furthermore, contemporary writers like Lisa Kleypas often refer to Woodiwiss as an inspiration, not only for the characteristics of her literary production, but for her trajectory as a romance writer as well. Woodiwiss has affirmed that she wrote her first manuscript "merely to please myself", and that she chose to write a romance novel because she enjoyed reading about romantic stories and happy endings ("Interview"). Mass-market romance concentrates the largest number of readers-turned-into-writers than any other literary genre. Contemporary well-established authors such as Nora Roberts or Lisa Kleypas were regular romance readers before they published their own stories, and this trend has continued into the new century, with writers like Maya Rodale.

Academic criticism has also played a part in feeding the legend of Woodiwiss's text. Both *The Flame and the Flower* and *Shanna* (1977), Woodiwiss's second novel, were two key texts in Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984), something that helped to establish the books as the prototypical bodice-ripper in academic and non-academic contexts. Radway describes how the Smithton readers rationalised Brandon's rape of Helen and defended his transformation into a good

husband by the end of the book. As we have seen in Chapter One, Radway found that romance novels like *The Flame and the Flower* told readers “that a woman must learn to trust her man and to believe that he loves her deeply even in the face of massive evidence to the contrary” (*Reading* 149). As Pamela Regis has observed, this kind of remarks are partly responsible for the genre’s bad press (“What Do Critics” par. 4), and for the novel’s fame as well.

All things considered, what makes Kathleen Woodiwiss’s name so important in world of romance fiction is romance writers’ subsequent impulse to define their own work in relation to *The Flame and the Flower*. After the novel’s release, publishers encouraged authors to replicate Woodiwiss’s successful “formula”, based on sexual explicitness and fantastic adventures. This new, more sensual trend affected publishers worldwide, and altered the editorial guidelines of reputed companies like Mills & Boon. McAleer, for instance, describes how many English writers felt pressured to write in this steamier, even *risqué* style (287-9). Carol Thurston and Kristin Ramsdell, too, mention the boom in the Historical subgenre and the increasing renovation of contemporary romance as a consequence of Woodiwiss’s text. The chaste Harlequin romances continued to dominate the marketplace during the 1980s, but the readers’ demand for more “flames and flowers” was covered by new series such as Silhouette’s Desire or

Harlequin's Temptation, in a period that is nowadays known as the Romance Wars.¹¹⁴

Besides these changes, the ghost of *The Flame and the Flower* has had an indirect impact on the writers' own understanding of the romance novel and its possibilities. The charges of patriarchal complicity levelled by critics like Radway led romance writers to ponder critically on the genre's tropes, their meaning, and how they negotiate these generic conventions in their own writing. This self-reflection process culminated in 1992 with the publication of *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, discussed in Chapter One of the present thesis. The essays contained in this volume show the disparity of opinions about the political significance of the genre. Some authors like Diana Palmer highlight the therapeutic value of the romantic fantasy, regardless of its content ("I produce fantasy for people who need a one-hour escape from reality" [Palmer 157]), whereas others like Daphne Clair emphasise the genre's transformative power, stating that romantic novels "are, and always have been, the subversive literature of sexual politics" (Clair 61).

The tensions present in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* mirror the tensions in the development of the romance novel in the

¹¹⁴ The Romance Wars alludes to the period between 1980 and 1984, when publishers like Avon Books and other newly created ones like Silhouette challenged Harlequin Mills & Boon's supremacy in the industry. Silhouette, in particular, issued romance novels with a palpable sensual tone that "robbed" Harlequin of many of its fans. The company responded with its own line of sensual romances, but eventually absorbed Silhouette in 1984.

1980s and 1990s, also evinced in the new century. The therapeutic value of the romantic fantasy, i.e. an evasion of daily-life problems, seemingly collides with the potential feminist value of a story in which the heroine triumphs over adversities, gets everything she wants (including the man), and lives happily ever after. The 80s and 90s are often perceived as a period of transformation, in which contemporary romance novels increasingly normalised professional heroines (heroines who work before and *after* marriage), presented them as sexually empowered, and paired them up with worthy, renovated heroes. Even so, it would be wrong to assume that the old tropes disappeared altogether from the scene. There was, and still is, a perpetual negotiation between the genre's prototypical conventions, on the one hand, and contemporary attitudes and values, on the other.

The historical romance subgenre, for instance, has generally maintained a sexually innocent heroine and a hypermasculine hero in the likes of Woodiwiss's Heather and Brandon. The best-selling *Bar Cynster* series by Stephanie Laurens has been exploiting the alpha male figure since 1998, when the first instalment, *Devil's Bride*, was published. In these Regency romances, the six cousins that form the original series are invariably defined by their family's motto "To Have and To Hold", referring both to property *and* to women. As in Woodiwiss's text, the alpha hero becomes a suitable husband by the end of the book. As opposed to *The Flame and the Flower*, however, the hero is the primary agent in his own transformation. Laurens creates

a background legend surrounding the Cynster family, which downplays the role of the heroine in this process: whenever they meet their significant other, Cynster men willingly give up their womanising past and devote themselves to their spouses. This change comes as a result of their *meeting* the heroine, but the heroines are not directly involved in their transformation. Re-education is exclusively the hero's business.

As far as the sexual aspect is concerned, there has been a gradual change of attitude on the writers' and readers' part. Again, Laurens's *Cynster* series provide a good example. The warrior-like nature associated with hypermasculinity is firmly bound up in their well-tailored suits,¹¹⁵ and on the fact that Cynster men never intimidate or physically abuse the heroines. Their wild, conquering side is only partially unleashed during their (sexual) interactions with heroines. This time, however, Laurens's heroines voluntarily engage in sexual activities, even if men continue to be the initiators. Generally speaking, the books foreshadow the growing importance given to consent in popular romance fiction. Consider, for instance, the following passages taken from Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* and Laurens's *A Secret Love* (2000), where the heroes Brandon and Gabriel realise that the heroine is still a virgin in the midst of sexual intercourse. It is worth comparing their reactions:

Brandon started back in astonishment and stared down at her. She lay limp against the pillows, rolling her head back

¹¹⁵ The Cynster family allegedly descends from the Norman conquerors that crossed the English Channel in 1066.

and forth upon them. He touched her cheek tenderly and murmured something low and inaudible, but she had her eyes closed and wouldn't look at him. He moved against her gently, kissing her hair and brow and caressing her body with his hands. She lay unresponsive, yet his long starved passions grew and soon he thrust deep within her, no longer able to contain himself. It seemed with each movement now she would be split asunder and tears came to her eyes. (*Flame* 21)

It took all his [Gabriel's] effort, and the last shreds of his will, to force himself to ask, "Do you want me to stop?"

Hardly elegant phrasing, but it was all he could manage with her clamped, the tightest, hottest, wettest dream he'd ever had, about him.

Her answer was a long time coming. His teeth were gritted, every muscle straining against the driving need to have her. With what little wit he still possessed he fought to ignore the warmth of the lush body in his arms, the constantly fluctuating pressure against his chest as she breathed rapidly, raggedly. He was so aware of her breathing, he knew when she reached her decision and drew in a deeper breath to deliver it.

He steeled himself to accept it—and prayed.

She shook her head. "No." (*Secret* 128)

Despite the fact that both characters are alpha males, defined in these fragments in terms of their sexual drives, Gabriel's attitude differs significantly from Brandon's. Brandon finally succumbs to his sexual desires, abandoning his initial efforts to be affectionate. Heather remains "unresponsive" and ends up crying as a result of his lack of tact (*Flame* 21). By contrast, *A Secret Love* emphasises the hero's sensibility and empathy through a combination of dialogue and narration, describing the situation and the characters' individual responses. Furthermore, the heroine in this novel is given the chance to

decide what happens to her during sexual intercourse. Laurens continued to publish spin-off books featuring members of the Cynster family until 2015. All these heroes fit into the alpha-male type, even if they perform a slightly different type of masculinity; they are what Abby Ziddle has called the “New Hero” of popular romance fiction (33).

Kristin Ramsdell refers to the 1990s as “a decade of diversity and change” for popular romance fiction (*Guide* 12), and in light of all of the above said, this seems a fitting description. Mass-market romance continued to expand around the globe, and became even more popular in various places like Australia, Spain, China or Japan. As a result, many writers’ and readers’ associations were founded in the 90s, and joined the efforts of the long-established Romantic Novelists’ Association (RNA) and the Romance Writers of America (RWA) founded in 1960 and 1980 respectively, in defence of the romance novel. In addition to this, the genre evolved and new subgenres like fantasy romance, romantic suspense, or lesbian/gay romance emerged. These rivalled in popularity with the ever-present contemporary romance story, and the historical subgenres, including Medieval, Regency and Victorian romance.

By way of a summary, we have seen how the modern romance novel became primarily associated with escapism and women in the hands of publishing houses like Mills & Boon and later on Harlequin. These companies struggled to maintain their loyal readership while

attracting new audiences, and they were very responsive towards sociopolitical changes, always handling innovation and tradition with care. However, previously rejected writers like Kathleen Woodiwiss succeeded and contradicted the publishers' better judgement. As was noted earlier, the popularity of *The Flame and the Flower* within Romancelandia cannot be reduced to one single explanation. Its impact on the genre's evolution, however, has been remarkable. Feminist criticism, for example, boosted the fame of Woodiwiss's text, presenting it as the prototypical bodice-ripper, and by extension, the prototypical romance novel. Those negative critiques in the late 1970s and 1980s propelled a transformation within the mass-market romance novel, converting it, progressively, in a genre that consciously engages with feminist politics.

In the upcoming final section of this chapter, I present a brief summary of the main trends affecting the evolution of mass-market romance fiction in the new millennium. Then, I move on to analyse two different case studies, with the aim of revealing and illustrating the gender politics detected in the present-day (mass-market) romance novel.

2.8. MASS-MARKET ROMANCE FICTION IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM: FROM NORA ROBERTS TO MAYA RODALE

Broadly speaking, the mass-market romance novel of the twenty-first century is defined by genre-blending, internationalisation, exploitation of new technologies, and its supposed commitment to advance

women's rights. Firstly, the romance novel's increasing hybridisation, i.e. its mergence with other literary genres, results in a great number of romance subtypes: fantasy romance, adventure romance, mystery romance, erotic romance, etc. To this, we must add the various levels of sensuality and sexual explicitness, still important factors for cataloguing novels.

Secondly, the genre has continued its worldwide expansion and is no longer an exclusively Anglo-Saxon literary genre. Romance fiction is a profitable business, and places like Japan, Nigeria, and Spain have developed their own romance novel industry. In the Spanish case, writers like Nieves Hidalgo, Anna Casanovas or Olivia Ardey began to publish their stories in the context of the world economic crisis of 2008. Initially, these writers modelled their texts on the romances of Jayne Ann Krentz (a.k.a. Amanda Quick), Judith McNaught or Laura Kinsale, among others, but nowadays it is possible to find romance novels with a distinctive "Spanish" touch. A decade later, these novelists have found a voice of their own, and the settings, culture and lifestyle they depict transcend the stereotypical images of Spain portrayed by many English and American writers.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Popular romance studies largely focus on the romance novel written in English or sold in English-speaking countries. To my knowledge, the romance novels written in Spanish have barely received critical attention, except for Pérez Casal "Love in Times of Crisis. An Approach to Contemporary Romance Novels in Spain" (2016). In this article, I examine the development of the romance novel industry in Spain, first with translations from North American writers like Amanda Quick or Johanna Lindsay, and then, in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008, with the publication of native Spanish authors.

A third aspect that conditions the genre's development is the boom in electronic publishing. Electronic devices safeguard the reader's reputation, sparing that person the public shaming that often accompanies being caught with a mass-market romance paperback in your hands. On a different note, the lower prices that accompany the electronic formats allow readers to buy more books, increasing the demand for new authors and stories. Self-publishing through online platforms like *Amazon* is always an option for aspiring writers, especially for those who wish to exert greater control over their work.

In Chapter One, it was explained that the new millennium fostered a reexamination of the romance novel's gender politics, especially in US novels. Writers, readers and aca-fans —critics who are also romance fans— contend that four decades of feminist activism have left their mark on the genre. Present-day romance novels, they say, paint balanced relationships where heroines can fend for themselves, and heroes are a far cry from the alpha male portrayed in novels like *The Flame and the Flower*. However, scholars like Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff, Eirini Arvanitaki, and Nattie Golubov have expressed their unease about the “feminist” nature of the contemporary mass-market romance.

These feminist critics have drawn a parallel between this renovated heroine and postfeminist femininity. The new romance heroine displays great confidence in her capabilities, she has proved her worth in the workplace and she is economically independent. This neoliberal

emphasis on individual autonomy, however, obscures systemic inequalities and equates liberation with freedom of choice. In the novels analysed by Arvanitaki, for instance, the heroines decide to sacrifice their independence and subordinate their personal interests to those of their partners (25-26). According to the neoliberal rhetoric behind postfeminism, women are empowered by the very opportunity to choose, regardless of *what* their choice is. This extends, among other things, to attitudes about the female body: being sexually attractive and feminine is something the heroine chooses voluntarily (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 499).

At present, I would like to discuss four books written by the most successful romance writer of our time, Nora Roberts. All the heroines in the *Bride Quartet* series possess traces of this postfeminist femininity, yet the books challenge the idea that mass-market romance novel continues to reconcile women with domestic roles. In these books, Nora Roberts portrays successful heroines who eventually enter into romantic partnerships, not because they feel incomplete or socially pressured to do so, but because they want to share their lives with supportive, caring men.

The Quartet is formed by Mac, Emma, Laurel and Parker. Together, these four friends have transformed their favourite childhood game of the Wedding Day into a prosperous business company, Vows, which sells couples the perfect wedding ceremony. This job offers them the opportunity to work together, as well as an appropriate route to develop their individual talents. Mac, the photographer, captures the lovers' happiness during the most important day of their lives. Emma is

responsible for the floristry and other decoration arrangements, and with Laurel, the pastry chef, they create a unique wedding style for each of their clients. Finally, Parker is the one in charge of coordinating their individual efforts and dealing with clients on a daily basis.

The heroines typify postfeminist femininity to a large extent. The equality between the sexes is largely taken for granted; there are only a handful of veiled references to feminism, and only to indicate that the heroines have made their way into the public sphere. Although their age is never specified, the books suggest that they are all near their thirties and making the most of their entrepreneurial success. The social milieu portrayed in the novels is clearly middle-, upper-class, and all heroines engage in consumerist practices with zeal: they go out, they go shopping, and they consume male bodies too, in the form of casual relationships. They wear clean-cut suits and high heels effortlessly; they exercise regularly in their own private gym in order to achieve an attractive body. Their business, too, links them to postfeminist femininity with its glorification of the ritual whereby women have traditionally achieved maturity. On the surface, *Vows* is a resounding celebration of femininity and female consumerism: selecting a wedding dress, choosing a bridesmaid, thinking about the right song for the first dance, etc.

However, the heroines' attitude towards the weddings they celebrate deserves some commentary. As wedding planners, they orchestrate everything down to the last detail, from the ceremony to the catering service, but it is often the case that they mock some of the

rituals of the wedding day, and even put nicknames on the guests. This is especially true in Parker's case, because she has the most direct contact with customers. She often keeps her opinions to herself, though, because this is business and the bride "[i]s the client" (*Happy* 73). A further proof of the heroines' ambiguity towards the world of weddings appears in *Happy Ever After* (2010), when they agree to organise a divorce party for one of her former clients. Despite their initial reservations, they realise that Vows celebrates more than just weddings; it celebrates a woman's decision to start a new life with her chosen partner. In Parker's words, this client:

"... wanted to have this [divorce] party, this new beginning, here [at Vows] especially because it would remind her that the other beginning had started out beautifully, and full of love and hope. That it would help remind her she hadn't make a mistake that Things changed, and now she was going to start again, and by God, she was going to keep right on believing about love and hope." (Roberts, *Happy* 208)

The four love stories narrated in the series make it clear that marriage ceremonies are simply conventionalisms; what truly matters is the couple and the mutuality of love, trust and affection. This can be seen very clearly in Emma's and Parker's books. Emma is often described as the dreamer of the Quartet: she expects to meet and marry her Prince Charming someday, a man with whom she can be physically and emotionally intimate, and start a family. *Bed of Roses* (2009) shows Emma falling in love with a long-time friend of the group, Jack, but

Emma's desire for a partnership of love and life collides with Jack's fear of emotional attachment. Systematically, he rejects her attempts to form a more solid bond, as in spending the night at his house, or leaving some spare clothes there. Jack's emotional distance leads Emma to break up the relationship a few chapters before the ending:

“And I'm not going to settle for what isn't enough. I'm in love with you [Jack], and I want you to love me. I want a life with you. Marriage and babies and a *future*. So this? This isn't enough, not nearly. ... You had your chance. I'd have given you everything I had. If you'd needed more, I'd have found it, and given you that. It's the way I love. It's the only way I know how. But I can't give where it's not wanted and valued. Where I'm not.” (Roberts, *Roses* 306-7, italics in the original)

Ultimately, the hero realises that his fear of serious commitment comes from his parents' failed marriage. He makes peace with his inner demons and he proposes to Emma in the way she had always dreamed, waltzing under the moonlight (Roberts, *Roses* 333-4). Admittedly, the novel ends with marriage and the tacit promise of domesticity for the heroine, because *that* is what she wants.

Likewise, Parker's happy ending happens in her own terms. Arguably, this heroine is the greatest example of successful femininity: she comes from a respectable, well-to-do family, she is a successful businesswoman, physically attractive, impeccably dressed, and she has planned her life to the smallest detail. That includes, of course, love and marriage. At one point, Parker tells her friends about her dreamed relationship:

“I’m supposed to fall in love with a sensible yet brilliant man with a droll sense of humor, and a keen appreciation of art. ... [We] would date casually for some months, getting to know each other, to appreciate each other before we go on a short, romantic trip—location optional. ... And one day, ... during our candlelight dinner, he’d tell me again that he loved me, that I was everything he’d ever wanted. And he’d ask me to marry him. I’d say yes, and that’s how you build a happy ever after.” (Roberts, *Happy* 295-6)

Things do not go as planned when she starts dating Malcolm, one of her brother’s friends. Parker’s initial “infatuation”, as she calls it (*Happy* 215), eventually transforms into love, but, as in the previous case, the hero’s attitude is an obstacle. This time, Malcolm’s reluctance to declare openly his feelings for Parker is both a consequence of his emotional distance, but also of his inferior social status. Parker fails to comply with the major points in her “script”: Malcolm’s personality is far from the one she had envisioned, and she is the first one to express her feelings. Like Emma, however, she will not settle for less than she thinks she deserves: a fulfilling partnership. In looking at her ancestral family home, Parker reflects:

Maybe one day she’d be able to share it, build on it, with the man she loved.

That, she knew, remained the underpinning of all her dreams, her goals, her ambitions. To love, be loved, to share, to build on that love and partnership something strong and lasting.

She could be successful without it. She could be content without it. But she understood herself well enough to know she’ll never feel complete, never feel fully happy, without that loving partnership.

She believed, absolutely, in the power and the strength of love, the promises made, the endurance of commitment. Weddings were a celebration of that, a kind of show full of symbols and traditions. But, at the core it was the vows, the promises, the emotional knot tied between two people believing it would hold for a lifetime that mattered. (Roberts, *Happy* 247)

Parker's words illustrate one of the most controversial themes within mass-market romance fiction: the idea that women must be involved in romantic liaisons to be "complete" and "fully happy". This is one key issue about which feminist critics, romance writers and readers do not seem to agree. Whereas the former believe those messages about "finding your other half" to be pernicious for women's full autonomy as individuals, the latter contend that there is nothing wrong with desiring a romantic relationship, provided it is a union among equals, and cemented on love and mutual respect.

Interestingly, the *Bride Quartet* series ends with the four friends celebrating both their professional and personal achievements on New Year's Day. After trying out Parker's wedding dress, they toast to friendship, to the happiness of the four different couples, and to Vows' continuous success. In the end, Mac, Emma, Laurel and Parker triumph in different areas of their lives. The resulting image is one where women can "have it all": a family, a career, or anything else they put they minds into. This way, romance writers and readers see the genre, with its emphasis on individuality and woman's pursuit of happiness, as an ally of feminism.

That is not to say, however, that all romance novels convey this message, whether consciously or unconsciously. One of the most polemical books in recent times was *For Such a Time* (2014), a Christian/Inspirational romance written by Kate Breslin. The novel was nominated for Best First Book in the RITA Awards in 2015, and it retells the Biblical story of Esther, a woman who saves her people from genocide. Breslin situates the plot of her novel in a Nazi concentration camp, with Hadassah, a Jewish woman masquerading as the German Stella, and Colonel Aric von Schmidt, Commander of the SS and the head of the concentration camp, as protagonists.

The novel is well-researched and contains emotionally charged passages portraying the crimes committed against the Jewish community during World War II. Despite its marked religious content, the novel centres on the development of a love relationship between Aric and Hadassah/Stella, who works as his secretary. Hadassah's gimmicks keep many Jews from experiencing a horrible death, and she ultimately saves Aric's soul as well. Hadassah initially believes the hero to be beyond redemption, and she fights her attraction for him given what he has done against her people. However, through patience and understanding, and after he has sentenced her to death in a German furnace, Hadassah's messages of love and compassion finally reach Aric and radically change his worldview. The hero saves Hadassah and forgives her for lying to him about her real identity; he also saves the lives of hundreds of Jews in the process. By the novel's end, both

characters look at the future together; even though the book mentions that Aric will likely face punishment for his role in the Nazi genocide, there is also a hint that the Jews he has helped will speak on his behalf and spare him any penalties.

The hero's characterisation as a Nazi soldier was one of the most controversial aspects of this novel. The historical setting magnifies the power imbalance between hero and heroine, mirroring "Old Skool" romances in which heroines were at the mercy of the older, more experienced, and physically stronger hero.¹¹⁷ Even though Aric reforms and becomes a pious man by the novel's end, he holds the heroine's life in his hands through the entire courtship process. This inevitably raises the question of limits, and leaves readers wondering how much the hero can be transformed, and to what extent he can be forgiven for his past behaviour. Similarly, Hadassah's attraction to Aric in spite of what he represents, and then her unconditional love for him, debunk the hypothesis that romance heroines are no longer responsible for the hero's education. Of course, Hadassah exhibits great courage in defending her people against the cruelty of Nazi officials, thwarting their mass killings on various occasions. However, as one reader observes in her review of the novel:

¹¹⁷ The term "Old Skool" was coined by Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan in their blog *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*, to refer to the bodice-rippers and sensual historical romances sold during the 1970s and 1980s. Old Skool romances were progressively replaced by "New Skool" romances, which depict more egalitarian relationships between more masculine heroines and more feminized heroes. For more information, see Wendell and Tan.

Hadassah's attachment to Aric always struck me more as a naturally loving person (her main character trait throughout the story is being incredibly maternal to every child she comes across) who has been demeaned, degraded, and left out in the cold, understandably clinging to any bit of mercy or affection she can find, rather than an Inspiring Love Story. (Rachel)

For many, *For Such a Time* was a step back in the portrayal of feminist heroines, even in the context of historical romance, where the power imbalance is more tolerated than in the contemporary romance subgenre.

In the last four or five years, the convoluted sociopolitical atmosphere in the United States has had a significant impact upon mass-market romance. Newspaper articles and magazines have put the genre under the spotlight, praising the changes that have taken place in these novels as a result of feminism. Most notably, the reputed feminist magazine *Bitch Media* published an article in 2018, titled "For the Love of Independence: Romance Authors Are Literature's Unsung Heroines." This article interviewed some of those writers who are consciously transforming the romance novel into an ally of feminist activism. According to the author, romance fiction can be considered feminist in two different ways. Firstly, the genre offers a rare portrayal of female agency: "romance is often deeply grounded in smart, talented, powerful women doing amazing things—and getting the guy(s) and/or girl(s), too" (smith [sic] par. 9). This agency also extends to sexual matters, since romance fiction "allows women to explicitly center and explore their own pleasure" (smith par. 5). Secondly, the romance novel

is a genre written and read chiefly by women, and even the industry itself is becoming feminized, with more and more women becoming agents and editors. The writer ends her article with a list of feminist romance writers, including Tessa Dare, Beverly Jenkins or Sarah Maclean. The latter, for instance, has publicly showed her discontent with US President Trump's treatment of women, and radically altered the characterization of the hero in one of her latest novels. The male protagonist in *The Day of the Duchess* (2017) is, in MacLean's own words, no longer the prototypical alpha hero of romance, but a "feminist alpha":

[Even] though the icy cold Duke of Haven retains the hallmarks of the archetypal alpha, he uses that power, money, influence toward a singular purpose — making himself a partner worthy of his wife, Seraphina, who is now wealthy and powerful in her own right. Haven's motivations are never muddled. His deep love and abiding respect for his estranged wife — whom he had pushed away with his aggressive masculinity — is never in question. Haven is willing to do anything to raise Sera up, a willingness that delivers its own challenge to their romance, as she is skeptical of this new man with his new passion for equal partnership. Their love was hard won, for them and for me. ("How Trump" par. 14)

Before concluding this section, I would like to turn briefly to one of those writers who are intentionally reworking romance tropes and conveying feminist messages to the readership. A self-declared feminist, Maya Rodale used to look down on romance novels because she believed the books to be "frivolous", lacking in artistic quality, and

demeaning to women (*Dangerous Books* 7-8). The first romance novel she read drastically changed her mind, and nowadays Rodale has become one of the genre's most popular authors, and one of its fiercest advocates. In 2015, Rodale wrote and self-published *Dangerous Books for Girls: The Bad Reputation of Romance Novels Explained*, a book where she assumes the role of critic and lays out the reasons why she believes romance novels are publicly derided. The genre's association with women, with triviality and escapism, and with happy endings are only some of the explanations she gives. In addition, Rodale tackles the relationship between feminism and romance novels directly, countering those arguments that place them at opposite ends of the woman's rights scale. According to Rodale, romance novels "are, in fact, all about the women and focus on things that matter to women, like personal acceptance or balancing work, love and family" (*Dangerous Books* 133). Furthermore, the romance industry is about women finding economic "success and happiness not by denying their femininity but by reveling in it" (Rodale, *Dangerous Books* 136).

Rodale's latest series attests to her commitment to the romance novel and to feminist activism. In the author's words, *The Gilded Age Girls Club* series is about "[l]ife, liberty and happily ever after in Gilded Age Manhattan" (Rodale, "Gilded Age" par. 8). The books combine a central courtship story with a discussion of woman's subordinated status in society. The first installment in the series, *Duchess by Design* (2018) depicts a heroine, Adeline Black, struggling to make her mark.

“[A] seamstress by trade, with grand ambitions to be a dressmaker” (Rodale, *Duchess* 17), Adeline takes great pleasure in her love for fashion, but this interest also has a revolutionary purpose. Adeline’s mother was economically dependent on a man, and Adeline wants a better future for herself, one where she can be self-sufficient (Rodale, *Duchess* 289-90). In addition to this personal reason, there is also a political one. The heroine firmly believes that a woman’s dress can be “empowering” if it is adapted to her needs (Rodale, *Duchess* 46); like the advocates of rational dress at the end of the nineteenth century,¹¹⁸ Adeline comes up with seductive designs, which allow more freedom of movement and, provocatively, introduce pockets. Needless to say, her employer holds a more traditional view of fashion, and rejects these innovations. Adeline’s plan to establish her own business in the future is initially ruined by the arrival of Brandon, Duke of Kingston. The Duke’s overt interest in her tarnishes Adeline’s reputation, and she is immediately dismissed.

Suddenly destitute, Adeline finds help to start anew in the Ladies of Liberty Society. A secret organization of middle-class reformist women, the Society’s primary goal is to help working women to achieve economic independence. As one of the members explains:

“While our sisters clamor for the vote—as they jolly well should and we support them—we take more direct, but

¹¹⁸ The movement for rational dress was one of the many manifestations of first-wave feminism. During the second half of the nineteenth century, feminists, most of them belonging to the middle-class, demanded an alternative style of dressing that permitted greater mobility and activity.

discreet, action. We have no wish to wait for laws or society's expectations to change. We will not seek permission. We simply place ladies in positions where they might do good, honest work for a fair wage. We believe that the more women are justly employed, the more powerful a force they'll be together, and the more men will have to acquiesce to our demands for equality." (Rodale, *Duchess* 117)

Sorority and female friendship possess a very prominent role in this novel. Besides the Ladies of Liberty Society, Adeline's co-workers, Rachel Abrams and Rose Freeman, are also a source of support, and they quit their jobs in protest for Adeline's unfair treatment. They also help her managing her new shop, and act as Adeline's advisers.

Duchess by Design strengthens the connection to feminism by introducing Emma Goldman, a well-known first-wave feminist who wrote extensively on the issue of marriage, love, and woman's emancipation. Following Goldman's philosophy, Adeline and Brandon must achieve personal independence before they can be together. In Adeline's case, that amounts to succeeding in her business plan; Brandon, for his part, must find a way to save his bankrupt estate without marrying a rich heiress. As in Nora Roberts's *Bride Quartet* series, Adeline is allowed to have it all by the novel's end: she has achieved economic independence, she has married the man she loves, and she has formed a family. Furthermore, the heroine continues to run her business, which has expanded to other major cities like Paris and London.

Rodale purposely engages in a discussion of feminist activism, of women, and of what constitutes appropriate reading. In a playful manoeuvre, she has the heroine and her friends reading dime novel romances, like the ones discussed earlier in this chapter. Adeline, Rose and Rachel enjoy reading “the fantasy of the working-class girl swept off her feet by the handsome millionaire bachelor before she quits her job and they settle into blissful domesticity” (Rodale, *Duchess* 29). However, the characters’ own plans do not match that fantasy. The heroine has other ambitions besides marriage, and even though she accomplishes that “blissful domesticity”, this comes as a result of her personal efforts. In a way, the references to dime novel romances can be read as defence of women’s reading preferences, and of their right to indulge in romantic fantasies, without compromising their desire for individual self-realisation.

Thus, we can say that *Duchess by Design* shows the genre’s commitment to advance a woman’s right to a happy, enriching life. This novel is but one example of a romance novel designed, purposely, to promote a favourable image of a woman, in which she decides how to live her life.

* * *

These pages have provided a quick review of the antecedents and development of the contemporary romance novel in English. Firstly, this chapter has studied the gendering of the genre in the Renaissance and during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Secondly, it has

exposed the biased nature of literary criticism, which denies the aesthetic quality of romances, especially when they target the working-class woman reader. Thirdly, this chapter has also discussed individual authors and their contribution to the evolution of the romance novel. And last but not least, it has paid special attention to the ways in which the genre conveys messages about female emancipation, heterosexual love, and individual happiness. In the hands of Frances Burney, Anne Brontë, Maeve Binchy and Maya Rodale, the romance novel exhibits a distinct political tone that should be understood as part of the feminist effort to reorganise society.

The following chapter examines the evolution of two well-known writers of romance novels from the second half of the twentieth century up to the present day, Rosamunde Pilcher and Lisa Kleypas. In the works selected for discussion, these writers deploy the appropriateness of the romance novel form to discuss woman's identity, as well as other relevant topics for feminism, such as love, family, work, and maternity, to name only a few. Incidentally, the analysis of Pilcher's and Kleypas's novels shows the great sophistication of the romance genre, in both its middlebrow and mass-market popular forms.



3. ANALYSIS OF SELECTED AUTHORS AND WORKS

The previous chapters explained how the choice of authors and works to be analysed is one of the most controversial issues in popular romance studies. Early critics of the mass-market romance novel like Ann Barr Snitow and Tania Modleski used random samples to investigate the genre. Soon afterwards, scholars developed more sophisticated and rigorous methods to minimise the risk of generalisations or faulty conclusions. Janice Radway's 1984 ethnographic study is a good case in point, but her innovative methodology has been equally subjected to critique.¹¹⁹

Fully aware of the perennial problems involved in corpus selection, modern scholars take great care in picking their primary bibliography and in justifying their decision. Sarah Frantz and Eric Selinger have acutely observed that “[i]t is a dirty job, keeping up with romance, and the ones who have to do it are not scholars, but ... the ‘fans’” (6). However, as Catherine Roach has pointed out, aca-fans, the academics who are also readers, are the ones leading the study of romance fiction

¹¹⁹ Radway, for instance, was heavily criticised by the contributors to *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* (1992). The interviewees in Radway's study, for instance, privileged historical romance at the expense of other subgenres, which in practice translates into another partial account of the genre.

nowadays (*Happily* 31-8). Since the aca-fan's interest in the genre goes beyond the purely academic, s/he is aware of which writers and novels top the best-seller lists, which ones have become canonical in the genre, or what is trendy at a given moment. Thus, a writer's or a novel's popularity continue to guide the selection of texts to a large extent. This is complemented by other criteria. Stylistic innovation would be one example, as would be the author's commitment to advance the critical study of the genre. The ongoing interest in Jennifer Crusie Smith's writing, for instance, attests to the prominence of these alternative rationales.

The present work takes these issues into consideration. On the one hand, it focuses mainly on the analysis of two selected authors and some of their most iconic novels, with the purpose of illustrating the romance novel's involvement with feminist debates from the final decades of the twentieth century to the present day. On the other hand, this study aims at vindicating the aesthetic quality of many contemporary romances, be they middlebrow popular or simply mass-produced. However, I am cognizant that the impending analysis of Pilcher's and Kleypas's works barely taps into the complex phenomenon of romance fiction, and that any conclusions derived from this study may not extend to other writers and their works.

Having said that, my own choice of authors deserves some commentary. In the vast sea of modern romance fiction, the names of Rosamunde Pilcher and Lisa Kleypas stood out for four main reasons.

Firstly, their popularity among readers has held steady throughout the period covered by this dissertation. Secondly, their stylistic features and their ability to innovate while respecting the boundaries of the genre suggest a deep understanding of the romance novel form, its adaptability, and the possibilities offered by the genre to convey messages about female emancipation. Thirdly, their creative evolution owes much to the development of the women's movement. Finally, their respective nationalities were also determinant in their selection; the British Pilcher predates the American Kleypas in the same way that the modern romance novel industry developed in the United Kingdom before moving to North America.

This chapter will unfold as follows. Firstly, it will introduce the figure of Rosamunde Pilcher and the most characteristic features of her writing. Next, it will proceed to analyse the selected titles, *The Empty House* (1973), *The Shell Seekers* (1988) and *Winter Solstice* (2000). These novels do not merely span Pilcher's career as a novelist; they also demonstrate that modern romance novels can be formally and thematically challenging, without losing their entertaining essence. The second half of this chapter will deal briefly with Lisa Kleypas's biography, and then move on to discuss her writing and four of her most popular novels, *Dreaming of You* (1994), *Suddenly You* (2001), *Devil in Spring* (2017) and *Smooth Talking Stranger* (2009). The last two titles purposely introduce feminist heroines, which makes their analysis all the more suitable and interesting for the present research project.

3.1. INTRODUCING ROSAMUNDE PILCHER AND HER WORKS

Time has consolidated Rosamunde Pilcher as one of the greatest romantic novelists of our time. Her death in February 2019 has elevated her name to canonical status, despite having substantial differences with the American mass-market romance produced after 1970, when the bulk of the romance industry settled in North America and category romances took the centre stage.¹²⁰

Born in Cornwall in 1924, Pilcher (née Scott) developed a passion for creating stories at an early age, and honed her storytelling skills for more than fifty years. She launched her literary career in 1949 under the penname Jane Fraser and in partnership with Mills & Boon, the leading romance publisher in the UK at that time. This association provided Pilcher with a solid reputation as a romance novelist, and a loyal readership that would accompany her for many years. In the 1950s, Pilcher began using her own name as well, and dropped the pseudonym altogether in the late 1960s. Pilcher's works transcended national borders, as some of her earliest titles were republished by Harlequin in the US.¹²¹ However, the real breakthrough in her career came with *The Shell Seekers* (1987), a multiple viewpoint novel concerned with the life and loves of Penelope Keeling and her children. Due precisely to its relevance within the author's trajectory, this will be one of the novels analysed in this chapter.

¹²⁰ Category romances like Harlequin's are largely modelled by the publisher's editorial guidelines or tip sheets. More often than not, publishers stipulate a certain word count, level of sensuality, or character type.

¹²¹ e.g. *Young Bar*, originally released in 1952 and reissued in 1965.

After the publication of *The Shell Seekers*, Pilcher's status as a romance writer was somewhat altered. For one thing, she became more experimental, adding secondary interrelated plotlines, and defying readers' expectations by introducing tragic love stories amidst the conventional, happy ones. This coincided in time with the rise in popularity of the American mass-market romance novel and its staple "satisfying and optimistic ending" ("About the Romance"), a requirement that Pilcher did not necessarily meet. Unlike many contemporary romance novels after the 1970s, Pilcher's books do not have explicit sexual content. This does not mean that Pilcher rejected the presence of sex in romance, or held, like Barbara Cartland, a fixed idea about what romance stories should be about. Sex is indeed a part of the novels and of the courtship process, but it is hardly ever brought to the fore. On a different note, Pilcher's later works not only increased in complexity, but also in length. Her last works nearly triplicate the standard length of Harlequin Mills & Boon novels, and double in size those single-title romances written by Lisa Kleypas, Nora Roberts, or Maya Rodale.

Pilcher kept a somewhat low, neutral profile throughout her career, especially when compared to some of her contemporaries such as Barbara Cartland.¹²² Even so, this author was fully integrated in the romance community, and in 1960 she was a founding member of the

¹²² Barbara Cartland's name was, and to some extent still is, a synonym with romantic fiction. She was the target of Germaine Greer's criticism, for instance, in *The Female Eunuch* (1970), and her declarations about issues such as femininity and virginity, gained Cartland a reputation of conservative writer towards the end of her life.

Romantic Novelists' Association (RNA), the first professional organisation born to represent the interests of romance writers and shield them against critical derision. Nevertheless, this appearance of absolute normality turned the name "Rosamunde Pilcher" into a brand in its own right, delivering a very specific kind of romance which is best described as evocative and picturesque, on the one hand, and reassuring and comforting, on the other. Lavish descriptions of landscapes and small communities add a feeling of intimacy to the love story, which unfolds smoothly until the final happy ending. Pilcher's iconic status is further attested by the collectibles directed at fans who might be interested in the more private aspects of her life.¹²³ Curiously, this writer enjoys a great success in Germany, where many of her stories have been adapted to television, causing a surge of tourism in the town of St. Ives, Cornwall, the inspiration for the fictional town of Porthkerris in many of her novels.¹²⁴

Many of Pilcher's titles are still in print. The books' simple yet rich narrative style, in tandem with plausible love plots and everyday characters do not lose currency. Pilcher's magnificent descriptions of the Cornish and Scottish landscapes are much appreciated. Similarly, the community in which the love story unfolds is often given a prominent role in the books. This is especially true in *The Shell Seekers* and *Winter Solstice*, which reflect the habits and customs of the society

¹²³ *The World of Rosamunde Pilcher* (1995) and *Christmas with Rosamunde Pilcher* (1997), edited by Siv Bublitz, contain a brief note by the author, plus photographs of her personal life with her family, recipes, and, in the latter case, also short stories.

¹²⁴ See Jakat.

they portray, and thus serve to introduce other themes that may (not) be directly related to the central courtship plot. Pilcher's fiction also traces the changes that have taken place in British society and geography, and serve as a fictionalised ethnography of the lives of the British middle- and upper-classes during the second half of the twentieth century. It is for this reason that we may consider Pilcher's works as an example of the middlebrow popular romance I described in the previous chapter. Like Maeve Binchy's, Pilcher's novels are concerned with the courtship of one or more couples, but they also widen the scope to include secondary plotlines involving other characters and themes. This relative decentring of the courtship plot and the presence of these extra elements separate her from many American romance writers whose works follow the strict definition provided by the Romance Writers of America association.¹²⁵

Characterisation is, unquestionably, another reason why Pilcher's books continue to sell. This author drew everyday heroines and heroes with faults and virtues, that in many cases resounded with readers. Generally speaking, Pilcher's novels are examples of the female *bildungsroman* genre, that is, stories concerned with a woman's coming of age and the formation of her identity. In *Young Bar* (1952), one of her earlier Mills & Boon novels and written under the penname Jane Fraser, Pilcher recounts the maturing process of Barbara Lonsdale, the young

¹²⁵ For an extensive discussion of the problems associated with the definition of romance novel, see the introduction to Chapter Two in the present thesis. For an explanation of middlebrow popular romance, see also section 2.6.

Bar of the title. Fifteen years later, in 1967, *Sleeping Tiger* told the story of Selina, another young girl who learns to live her life in her own terms. In the novels selected for discussion in this chapter, the courtship plot occurs in parallel to the heroines' psychological self-development. In *The Empty House* (1973), Virginia takes her destiny and her children's in her own hands, after years of submission to her most immediate relatives. In *The Shell Seekers*, arguably Pilcher's best-known work, Penelope narrates in retrospect her personal and affective development in the context of World War II; additionally, this book tells us about two other heroines, Olivia and Antonia, and their maturing process. Last, but not least, in *Winter Solstice* the protagonist is already an aged woman, and there are no flashback episodes telling readers about her personal growth. Even so, the novel features two other heroines, Carrie and Lucy, who undergo a series of transformative experiences.

Pilcher's male protagonists possess some features of the Mills & Boon prototypical hero. In books like *Sleeping Tiger* or *Another View* (1968), for instance, there is a significant age gap, with 20-year old heroines and heroes who are a decade older, as in many Mills & Boon romances. Consequently, the hero is invariably more mature and experienced, and in books like *Young Bar*, mentioned earlier, he acts as an adviser, helping the heroine through new experiences. As was explained in Chapter One of the present thesis, second-wave feminist scholars like Kay Mussell argued that the romance hero played the part

of father-husband, protecting and teaching the heroine, conferring her a status as “woman” (*Fantasy* 112-4).

However, Pilcher’s heroes differ from the Mills & Boon hero in significant ways, so they cannot be simply equated with them. The novels portray a slightly different relationship between hero and heroine. Since her transformation is geared towards independence and achieving selfhood, the hero acts more like a complement in the process. This will be evident in the analysis of *The Empty House*, where Eustace plays a secondary, supportive role. Also, it must be noted that Pilcher’s heroes never mistreat the heroines, as was allegedly the case with some Harlequin, Mills & Boon romances. Admittedly, there are novels in which the lovers initially dislike each other; but abusive, deceitful attitudes are often displayed by other characters. In Pilcher’s *The End of Summer* (1973), for instance, Jane believes herself in love with her cousin Sinclair, a gallant young man who tries to manipulate her. Jane eventually realises Sinclair’s true nature and begins a relationship with David Stewart instead, her family’s lawyer and a man with an exemplary behaviour.

Without further ado, the next section undertakes the analysis of our first case study, *The Empty House*. The following pages will show how, under Pilcher’s masterful pen, the romance novel becomes the perfect vehicle to narrate a woman’s path towards autonomy

3.1.1. *The Empty House* (1973)

The Empty House contains all the elements that make Rosamunde Pilcher an exemplary romance storyteller: a simple but emotionally charged love plot, relatable characters, a heroine who grows psychologically stronger by the hour, and a happy ending.

The heroine in this book is Virginia Keile, a twenty-seven year-old woman, recently widowed, who finally sums up the courage to live the kind of life she had always dreamed of. In this respect, the protagonist of *The Empty House* is very similar to other Pilcher's heroines, like Emma, from *Another View* or Selina, from *Sleeping Tiger*. On this occasion, however, the role of the hero in the heroine's maturity process is much clearer, hence my decision to focus primarily on this text. Virginia always got swept up in other people's plans for her; she did not have the strength to stand up and make her own decisions, at least until life gives her a second chance at love with a man she met in her youth. In this novel, the hero clearly functions as a catalyst that leads the heroine to confront her own fears and take the reins of her life.

The novel opens with a lonely Virginia, looking from a distance at the fields of Penfolda, a typical Cornish country farm. Random thoughts occur to her, reflecting her troubled state of mind in the earlier part of the story. The heroine thinks of her children, Cara and Nicholas, "incarcerated in the alien London nursery, taken to Kensington Gardens each day by Nanny; to the Zoo and the Costume Museum and suitable films by their grandmother" (*Empty 2*). Meanwhile, she is thousands of

kilometres away visiting some friends, “aimless” (*Empty* 3), and recovering from a fever and from the death of her husband who died prematurely a few months before. Yet Virginia also muses about the owner of Penfolda, Eustace Philips, and his whereabouts; she wonders what may have become of him since they last saw each other. Clearly, the heroine’s choice of a destination is far from accidental. Ten years ago, in the small towns of Porthkerris and Lanyon, the course of Virginia’s life was changed forever.

As readers, we are active participants in reconstructing Virginia’s life history and the events that have brought her back to Cornwall. Unlike in novels like *Sleeping Tiger*, where the events are told in chronological order so that it is easier to follow the heroine’s psychological transformation, the action in *The Empty House* is often interrupted by analepses. Pilcher cleverly alternates between the past and the present. These flashback moments tell us about the first failed courtship between Virginia and Eustace, the heroine’s subsequent marriage to another man, and her suffocating, unhappy married life. This serves a clear purpose: Virginia has the opportunity to start anew after her husband’s passing, but she runs the same risk of getting carried away by others. Her memories remind the heroine that her personal happiness is once again at stake, and that she is the only one who can fight for it.

At the start of the novel, Virginia finds herself at a crossroads. She has received a letter from her daughter, Cara, subtly asking to leave

London. Virginia knows it is time for her to pick up the pieces of her life and take responsibility for herself and her offspring. However, this decision inevitably entails a conflict with her mother-in-law, Mrs. Keile, and the children's Nanny. Afraid of this confrontation, the heroine puts off the subject time and again:

Knowing she was evading a vital issue, she would shelve her own anxiety, always with some excuse to herself. I can't think about it now, I'm too tired. Perhaps in a couple of years when Nicholas goes away to prep school, perhaps then I'll tell my mother-in-law that I don't need Nanny any longer; I'll say to Nanny it's time to go, to find another new baby to look after. And perhaps now I'm too emotional, I wouldn't be good for the children; they're better with Nanny; after all, she's been looking after children for years.

Like a familiar sedative the well-word excuses came pat, blunting Virginia's uneasy conscience. (*Empty* 12-3)

Virginia is a person who feels "grateful for directions" (*Empty* 15), but eventually feels remorseful for not following her own path. This tug of war with herself continues throughout the first chapters, and the arrangements she makes to establish herself and her family in Cornwall are largely carried out in secret:

She did not want to have to put into words what was, at best, only a vague idea. She did not want to be drawn into an argument, to be persuaded either that the children were best left in London with their grandmother or that [her friend] Alice ... would insist on having them there [at her house]. (*Empty* 23)

Virginia thinks a place called Bosithick might be the right place to move into, but she is profoundly disillusioned when she visits the ruined cottage. Despite its privileged location near the sea (and near Penfolda, Eustace's farm), Virginia feels disappointed and takes it as a personal failure. Things change, however, when she comes across Eustace Philips in the local pub and he invites her to his home.

The book presents Virginia's and Eustace's first meetings, past and present, one after the other. On the way to Penfolda, the heroine recalls her first encounter with Eustace at a local party, when she was seventeen and he was twenty-eight. In this momentary flashback, she also remembers her brief visit to his house, ten years ago. Eustace, who lived alone with his mother, had a homely house, full of love and affection, elements that the young Virginia missed in her own life (*Empty* 45). Upon entering the farm's kitchen, a decade later, the heroine evokes that feeling of warmth and domesticity, and is delighted to find the place is exactly as she remembers. Doubtless, the adult Virginia still longs for that domesticity. After some catch-up, the couple's conversation drifts towards more serious matters: her children and her future prospects.

The hero sets Virginia's emancipation in motion when he alludes to her "infinite capacity for being pushed around" (*Empty* 54). One by one, Eustace debunks the heroine's lame excuses, and exposes the truth of her circumstances. With regards to her refusal to settle in Bosithick, he states:

“[These are excuses f]or not having a show-down with your mother-in-law or the old nanny or possibly both. For making a scene and asserting yourself and bringing your own children up the way you want them to go.” (*Empty* 56)

These recriminations prompt Virginia’s reaction. On an impulse, the heroine leaves Penfolda, travels back to Porthkerris, rents the cottage near the sea, and finally tells her friend, Alice, about her intentions. Only that his time she will not be dissuaded. With unprecedented confidence, the heroine affirms: “I’m twenty-seven. And I’m not helpless. And I’m responsible for myself” (*Empty* 62). Virginia’s initial self-assurance falters during the confrontation with her mother-in-law, and when she dismisses the Nanny. However, it is instantly recovered when she talks to her children. Her daughter, Cara, thanks her for going back to them. The next morning, Virginia feels a different person altogether:

Virginia awoke slowly, to a quite unaccustomed mood of achievement. She felt purposeful and strong, two such alien sensations that it was worth lying for a little, quietly, to savour them. ... She told herself that after last night she would never be afraid to tackle anything, no problem was unsurmountable, no problems too knotty. ... She had turned a corner. From now on everything was going to be different. (*Empty* 77)

Taking care of the children on her own turns out an entirely new experience for the heroine. For the first time Virginia realises the repetitiveness and weariness of domestic chores, such as cooking, laundering, cleaning, etc. At one point, on a rainy afternoon, she thinks:

What I would like would be to go back to [Alice's house] and know that Mrs. Jilkes [the housekeeper] had lunch ready and waiting, and there would be a cheerful fire in the drawing-room, and lots of new magazines and newspapers and nothing to do for the rest of the afternoon except read them. (*Empty* 116)

Under no circumstances, however, does she contemplate the idea to surrender the children's custody to her mother-in-law. Her new self is willing to take on the task, and this assertiveness extends to other areas of her life as well, including romantic affairs.

Eustace and Virginia's relationship moves forward when the heroine learns that Eustace, and not her friend Alice, had prepared the cottage for her family's arrival. In a pivotal scene, Virginia takes the children with her to Penfolda to thank him in person, and on Eustace's suggestion, they all go down to the beach to play in the sand. The heroine notices the connection between her children and her beloved, and she is eager to clarify what happened between them a decade ago. Eustace, in turn, encourages Virginia to return to Scotland and leaves without discussing the past (*Empty* 149-51), thus prolonging the conflict that keeps them apart. Thanks to another of those flashbacks, readers know that Eustace and Virginia find themselves in exactly the same situation they were all those years ago. Apparently, Eustace had promised to call her back some day and invite her to Penfolda, but he never did. Virginia, disappointed and fearful of his rejection, had not contacted him either (*Empty* 92-8). This lack of communication jeopardises the couple's happy ending, *again*.

Virginia's friend helps to bring down the barrier. In one of Virginia's visits, they talk about Eustace and about what happened ten years before. Alice explains how Virginia's mother might have lied to her daughter, so that Virginia would follow the path Mrs. Parsons had prescribed for her: marrying a respectable upper-class man and enjoying a luxurious, comfortable life. When Alice mentions a letter that the heroine knew nothing about, all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place (*Empty* 174-6). As a testament to her new, more confident self, Virginia drives to Penfolda to confront Eustace. In the final pages of the book, they talk about the past and about the obstacles that separate them: the presumed class differences, but more importantly, their cowardice to discuss feelings. Once these issues are resolved, Virginia and Eustace inform the children about their decision to start a new life together, in Penfolda.

At first glance, *The Empty House* reconciles the heroine with domesticity, but this is exactly what the heroine had wanted all along: to become "a farmer's wife" who looks after her husband, her children and her home (*Empty* 180). From a feminist point of view, we may consider this role reductive, as Modleski, Mussell and others believed it to be. However, readers are frequently told about Virginia's loneliness in the various flashbacks that appear throughout the novel. On the one hand, the heroine was never close to her mother, and she had no relationship with her father or other relatives. On the other hand, she was never in love with her husband. Virginia herself admits that she married Anthony

“on the rebound. ... in a desperate bid to avoid the London Season that her mother had planned for her, culminating in the final nightmare of a coming-out dance” (*Empty* 165). As she tells Eustace in the final pages of the novel, her home was never in Kirkton, her property in Scotland: “[this] was Anthony’s house. Without him to keep it going, it has no life at all” (*Empty* 181). By contrast, with Eustace Virginia forges an affective bond and creates a home for herself.

The novel portrays a woman’s transformation from a fearful, easily manipulated person into a fully-grown individual who makes choices that benefit her. This is mostly evident in her decision to rebel against the authority, i.e. her mother in law, her children’s Nanny, and even her old-time friend, Alice. Virginia resolves to raise her two children by herself and to sell her dead husband’s property in Scotland. Her determination remains firm even when her union to Eustace appears impossible. Because she stays true to her newfound self, she is rewarded with a new life in Cornwall, with the man she loves and with her children. This way, the happy ending ought to be understood as a prize for the heroine’s courage, even if it entails domestic bliss.

Before concluding this section, I would like to touch briefly upon those aspects where *The Empty House* seems to be ahead of its time. For one thing, Pilcher’s hero differs substantially from the womanizer tycoon that critics like Tania Modleski, a decade later, associated with Mills & Boon romances. Likewise, Eustace has nothing to do with the aggressive, hypermasculine hero portrayed in novels like *The Flame*

and the Flower, published roughly around the same time. Eustace Philips strikes us as a man with simple tastes, who works hard but earns a modest living, but someone who treats his partner with love and respect. In other words, he builds on the long tradition of feminised romance heroes, and anticipates the creation of the masculine, yet sensitive hero of later decades.

The narrative unfolds in a way that permits readers to compare Eustace with Anthony Keile, the heroine's first husband. Anthony is described as a child with an adult lifestyle, a "Peter Pan" of sorts that evades responsibilities and has little interest in becoming emotionally intimate with his wife (*Empty* 165). Eustace is the exact opposite. He shows an interest in Virginia from the very beginning, when they first met at a party, and also when they were reunited a decade later and he asked her about her future plans. That wake-up call to the heroine early in the novel, when he exhorts her to take the reins of her life, testifies to his concern with Virginia's well-being and her individual growth. Furthermore, Eustace can play the part of a loving father to Cara and Nicholas. Whilst Anthony entrusted the children's care to his former Nanny, Eustace takes time to *be* with the children and play with them, as is shown when he takes them to the beach to play and cooks dinner. All things considered, then, the novel is an obvious commentary on the elements that constitute a healthy, enriching love relationship, a thesis that also applies to more recent novels.

This particular novel also stands out for the way in which it weaves secondary themes into the courtship narrative. Most notably, mother-daughter relationships are a prominent theme in this book. To begin with, there is the complex relationship between Virginia and Mrs. Parsons. The latter manipulates the heroine as she pleases, and she makes a conscious effort to keep Virginia and Eustace apart, lying to her about Eustace's phone calls and hiding his letter. There was no real affection between Virginia and her mother, and by the novel's end, the heroine comes to see the real Mrs. Parsons, as "not merely snobbish and determined, but devious too" (*Empty* 176). Despite everything she did, however, Virginia does not explicitly hate her mother; she simply sees her as "more human" (*Empty* 176).

As a result of her own experience, Virginia constructs her relationship with her daughter in a completely different way. Whereas Mrs. Parsons sought to direct Virginia's life, overlooking her wishes, Virginia earns her daughter's affection by *listening* to her. The heroine travels to London at the beginning of the novel because Cara wrote to her, implicitly asking for help. She also tries to conquer her daughter's shyness with love and patience, not by gratuitous criticism. The novel shows a great complicity between Cara and Virginia, where both of them work closely together to make their new life in Cornwall more comfortable: either shopping for goods, looking after Nicholas, etc.

By way of a summary, we can say that *The Empty House* portrays a central love story that contributes to the heroine's psychological

development in a positive way. Her love for one man, and his love for her, transform Virginia into a more mature, self-confident person. Her personal growth is rewarded in with the creation of a meaningful love relationship, and the company of her two children. Apart from portraying the heroine's struggle to become more independent, the novel incorporates other secondary themes that challenge our reductive understanding of romance novels as simple love stories. *The Empty House* contains an implicit discussion of good and bad heterosexual relationships, as well as a debate around female personal interrelationships. As will be evident in the analysis of *The Shell Seekers* and *Winter Solstice* in the upcoming sections, these issues—a woman's maturity process, heterosexual relationships, mother-daughter bonding—can be considered a staple of Pilcher's writing.

3.1.2. *The Shell Seekers* (1987)

In an article titled “*The Shell Seekers* and Working Women Readers' Search for Serenity” (1999), literary scholar Suzanne W. Jones wrote:

The female characters' and the readers' romance in Rosamunde Pilcher's *The Shell Seekers* is not with a tall, dark and handsome man, but with a warm, cosy English country cottage or a tastefully decorated London flat to which they can escape, and where the arduous, monotonous housework that makes for serene repose and domestic comfort is done behind the scenes by someone else and the most difficult choice the working woman has to make is whether to luxuriate in a scented bubble bath or take a walk after work. (339)

Jones's piece is one of the few academic works tackling Rosamunde Pilcher's most popular novel.¹²⁶ This critic guesses right when she observes that the text provides readers with escapism and a fantasy of middle-class comfort. However, Jones fails to consider *The Shell Seekers* as an example of romance novel, and therefore, her analysis neglects what the book has to say about heterosexual romantic relationships, women's professional aspirations, motherhood, and other issues.

The Shell Seekers is a multivocal, multiplot narrative articulated around three heroines and their respective courtship stories. The leading protagonist is Penelope Keeling, a sixty-four year-old woman who suffers from a heart condition and has a very complex relationship with her offspring. Penelope's father was a reputed painter, and his legacy, a painting called *The Shell Seekers*, is worth a fortune on the market. Two of her three children pressure her to sell it, but Penelope refuses. A chain of events stirs Penelope's past memories, including a miserable marriage and an adulterous affair during World War II. The second heroine in *The Shell Seekers* is Olivia, one of Penelope's daughters. She is a middle-aged successful executive, with a liberated lifestyle and multiple romantic liaisons. Olivia, unlike her two siblings, respects and defends her mother's decision to keep the painting, and she is keen on maintaining her independence. Finally, there is Antonia, a shy young

¹²⁶ Another example would be Sara Martin Alegre's "Searching for Pearls: Rosamunde Pilcher's *The Shell Seekers*" (2000). The popularity of Pilcher's novel serves this critic to vindicate cultural studies as a legitimate field of enquiry.

girl of eighteen who comes to live with Penelope after her father's death. Antonia's father, Cosmo, was Olivia's lover once, before she gave priority to her professional objectives. In Penelope's company, Antonia transitions into adulthood and finds her first love. The three heroines' lives are profoundly interconnected, as are their courtship stories. For practical purposes, however, I will be analysing each of the heroine's narrative arc separately, exposing the themes present in each of the storylines.

Penelope's love life is narrated retrospectively, through a series of analepses that show the heroine's progress from early adolescence up to her mature years. Penelope's father, Lawrence Stern, was a famous artist, and her mother, Sophie, one of his models. The heroine was born and raised in a bohemian style; and unlike other girls, she grew up with great freedom. Penelope also possessed a certain naïveté that proved fatal when, at the outbreak of World War II, she decided to enlist in the Women's Royal Naval Service. There, she met her future husband, a dashing young officer named Ambrose Keeling.

Throughout the novel, Pilcher plays with some of the romance's most characteristic conventions and reader's expectations. On this occasion, she subverts the trope of instant attraction between an expert seducer and an innocent girl. Ambrose is soon captivated by Penelope's "marvellously romantic and bohemian life-style" as well as by her uninhibited, "cosmopolitan" behaviour (*Seekers* 251). They make love, and in an ambiguous scene, one of them professes to love the other:

“Darling.”
“Yes.” A whisper. “Yes.”
“Are you all right?”
“All right? Oh, yes, all right.”
“I love you.”
“Oh.” No more than a breath. “Love.” (*Seekers* 260)

Some pages later, readers learn that Ambrose made that love declaration. His motivations remain unclear, yet everything indicates that he said those three words to comply with an unwritten romance script, by which a woman needs proof of love before she accepts sexual intercourse (*Seekers* 281). Penelope’s interjection, by contrast, swiftly deconstructs said stereotype (*Seekers* 281). Later on, we learn that Penelope enjoyed the experience, but felt nothing more (*Seekers* 420).

Unprotected sex resulted in Penelope’s pregnancy, and whilst the heroine assured Ambrose that he was in no way expected to make an honest woman of her, the couple got married without too much ceremony. They did not have to wait long to be separated, though. Penelope, pregnant, moved into her parents’ house in Porthkerris, whereas Ambrose was sent abroad to the Mediterranean. They met up on a couple of occasions, always with disastrous effects. By the time the baby was born, Penelope felt miserable and detached from both husband and daughter. She confessed to her own mother, Sophie, that she did not love Ambrose, that she did not want to be with him: “He was wrong. Everything was wrong” (*Seekers* 295). Almost from the start, she regretted “that idiotic marriage” to a man she had nothing in common with (*Seekers* 420).

Similarly, Penelope was not thrilled by the prospect of having a baby. In this respect, *The Shell Seekers* demystifies motherhood and the idea that women are naturally suited to look after children. Upon first seeing her baby daughter, for instance, Penelope felt cheated by all the cultural myths surrounding maternity: “She had never had anything to do with [babies]; had never even held one, but she believed implicitly that once you actually saw your own child for the first time, you would recognise it instantly. ... But this did not happen” (*Seekers* 292). Her own mother in law, Mrs. Keeling, chose the baby girl’s name: Nancy. Penelope’s motherly love developed over time, but it was not immediate.¹²⁷

The relationship between the future Penelope and her three adult children besmirches motherhood all the more. Except for Olivia, Noel and Nancy quarrel with her mother over money, obligations, responsibilities, etc. They reprimand her for not selling her father’s painting and refusing to share the resulting profits with them. In part, these arguments and their taut relationship are responsible for Penelope’s heart problems (she dies, in fact, the day after a showdown with Noel), but the heroine stands her ground against them. She donates *The Shell Seekers* to the Art Gallery in Porthkerris, sells other minor works and distributes the profits amongst her children *and* friends. Her children’s selfishness teaches Penelope a valuable lesson:

¹²⁷ As we shall see later, Olivia’s storyline argues a similar point, for this heroine, too, prefers to be childless and to establish herself in the public sphere.

Self-reliance. ... To be yourself. Independent. Not witless. Still able to make your own decisions and plot the course of what remains of your life. I do not need my children. Knowing their faults, recognising their shortcomings, I love them all, but I do not *need* them. (*Seekers* 335, italics in the original)

Doubtless, *The Shell Seekers* offers a raw portrayal of parenthood, shattering the idea of harmonious domesticity.¹²⁸

Going back to the theme of Penelope's courtship, World War II had an important impact on the heroine's life. For one thing, it kept Ambrose thousands of miles away, leaving Penelope as the only carer for baby Nancy. Food rations and thousands of internally displaced people were also very relevant shortcomings of the war, and Penelope and her family had to shelter a family of evacuees. In addition, Penelope's mother died in the London Blitz. The one good thing about the war, however, was the arrival of Major Richard Lomax, a British Army officer stationed in Porthkerris.

Richard was, and still is by the time the novel begins, Penelope's one true love. They met by chance in the town's Art Gallery, and like Ambrose, Richard was instantly drawn to the heroine. This hero was an educated man with artistic sensibilities, and he aspired to a teaching position once the war was over. Attentive, kind and affectionate, he soon gained everyone's favour in Porthkerris. In Richard's company, Penelope found happiness again:

¹²⁸ The novel also warns against a mother's excessive interest on their children. Mrs. Keeling, Penelope's mother-in-law, is a good case in point. After hearing the news about her son's hasty marriage, Mrs. Keeling became "[a]wash with self-pity and loneliness, pierced by the jealousy of spurned love" (*Seekers* 272).

Happiness – remembered from the days before the war, before Ambrose, before Sophie’s shocking death. It was like being young again. But I am young. I am only twenty-three. She turned from the wall to face the man who stood beside her and was filled with gratitude, because in some way it was he who had wrought this miracle of déjà vu. (*Seekers* 413-4)

Needless to say, the ghost of Ambrose was never far from sight. As her connection with Richard strengthened, the heroine regretted her impulsive, loveless marriage all the more: “A dreadful, ghastly mistake”, she reflected, a dire consequence of her youth, her naïveté and her misguided idea that all married couples were as happy as her Lawrence and Sophie (*Seekers* 420). Even so, her union to Ambrose did not stop Penelope from getting romantically and sexually involved with Richard. The heroine felt a profound connection, both sexual and psychological, cemented on similar moral values and a taste for simple things. On this occasion, love was reciprocal, and the declaration simultaneous: “At precisely the same moment, they both spoke. ‘I love you’” (*Seekers* 456). Between the summer of 1943, when they first met, and Richard’s departure for Europe in the spring of next year, Penelope spent some of the happiest months of her life. However, Richard’s plans for a future with Penelope and little Nancy were truncated by his death on D-Day.

Penelope’s biography suggests that a meaningful romantic partnership is key to a woman’s happiness: after Richard’s sudden disappearance, there were only the “left-over[s]” (*Seekers* 501). Penelope carried on, looking after her infant and her aged father, and

after the war's end, she settled in London with Ambrose. They had two more children, Olivia and Noel, but the marriage never took off for various reasons.¹²⁹ With three grown children and a comfortable, peaceful existence in her old age, Penelope nonetheless continues to mourn Richard. This can be seen in her growing interest in Antonia's and Danus's courtship, which will be discussed in a few pages. However, the definite proof of the heroine's undying love for Richard comes at the very end of her life. Penelope dies with her beloved's name on her lips: "The pain was gone. The sun was gone. Perhaps behind a cloud. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. He was coming. 'Richard.' He was there" (*Seekers* 590). True happiness reaches Penelope at the end, when she reunites spiritually with Richard in death.

Through Penelope's storyline, Pilcher makes some thought-provoking statements about issues like motherhood, love, and woman's sexual impulses, but *The Shell Seekers* goes one step further and embarks upon a discussion of domesticity, femininity, personal ambition and self-abnegation through the characterisation of Olivia, the second heroine in the novel, and Nancy, her sister. Olivia remains an elusive character throughout the book, and what we know about her and her personality usually comes from other sources, usually her sister. As a matter of fact, the narrative constructs them as antagonists, so in order

¹²⁹ Besides lack of love, there were other pressing issues. Ambrose enjoyed gambling and was recurrently in debt. Penelope and Ambrose's own mother had to pay his creditors back several times. Ambrose also had several affairs over the years, until he finally asked Penelope for a divorce (*Seekers* 362-8).

to understanding Olivia's character properly, we need to dissect Nancy's first.

Penelope's eldest daughter has made femininity, wifehood and motherhood her sole priorities in life. Wittingly and mockingly, the novel attributes Nancy's glorified vision of home and family life to her reading romance fiction. In describing her old-fashioned house, for instance, Nancy says:

It was perfect. ... the house was the final realisation of all her adolescent dreams —fantasies nurtured by the novels that she devoured, of *Barbara Cartland* and *Georgette Heyer*. To live in the country and to be the wife of a country squire —these had long been the peak of her modest ambitions, after, of course, a traditional London Season, a white wedding with bridesmaids, and her photograph in the *Tatler*. (*Seekers* 19, emphasis added)

With this description, Pilcher lays bare romance tropes and the stereotypes surrounding romance readers with tongue-in-cheek humour. The reader recognises these names and conventions, and sees in Nancy a caricature of the romance reader who cannot distinguish between real life and fantasy.

Broadly speaking, *The Shell Seekers* warns readers against such a whimsical worldview. Nancy's daydreaming and her conscious pursuit of traditional femininity have brought her immense emotional frustration, unhappiness and economic hardship. On the one hand, she refuses to see her desperate situation for what it is: the cost of living in the old Georgian building, plus her two children's expensive education,

is leading Nancy and her family to disaster (*Seekers* 18-21). On the other hand, the organisation of her household obeys to conservative gender roles: Nancy oversees the staff and household, the children's activities and their social commitments; in turn, her husband George goes to work and comes back home to enjoy "the fire with a glass of whisky and the newspaper" (*Seekers* 25). Nancy feels rejected by her family sometimes, and she is mostly resentful:

Being a wife and mother, she told herself, was a thankless task. One devoted herself to husband and children, was considerate to one's staff, cared for one's animals, kept the house, bought the food, washed the clothes, and what thanks did one get? What appreciation? ... She longed for appreciation, for love, for affectionate physical contact, for someone to hug her and tell her she was marvellous, that she was doing a wonderful job. (*Seekers* 30)

Nancy's ideal of femininity is tied up with upper-class notions of splendour, frivolous glamour and economic prosperity, but also with physical beauty. As the following passage demonstrates, Nancy gauges other women, including her sister, according to their sexual appeal and their performance of heterosexual femininity:

Olivia was brainy and ambitious, obsessed by books, exams and academic achievement; ... Painfully tall and thin, flat-chested and bespectacled, she displayed an almost arrogant lack of interest in the opposite sex, relapsing into a disdainful silence whenever one of Nancy's boyfriends turned up, or disappearing up to her bedroom for a book.

...Right up to that extraordinary happening, five years ago, she had honestly believed that her sister was either a

virgin or totally sexless. (There was, of course, another and more sinister possibility, which occurred to Nancy after ploughing her way dutifully through a biography of Vita Sackville-West, but this, she told herself, really didn't bear thinking about.) (*Seekers* 44-5)

That “extraordinary happening” Nancy alludes to was Olivia's sudden elopement to Ibiza for love. At that time, Nancy idealised Olivia's decision, explaining to her acquaintances how romantic her sister was in abandoning her professional career “for love” (*Seekers* 46). This reaction is hardly a surprise, considering her romantic reveries. However, Olivia's resolution to break-up her relationship, come back to London and succeed in the business arena filled Nancy with more bitterness, since her sister, the opposite of hegemonic femininity, is both sexually attractive and economically prosperous. A combination of jealousy and rancour pervades Nancy's description of the present Olivia:

Her appearance today was as uncompromising as ever Ugly, even, but almost frighteningly chic. Deep-crowned black velour hat, voluminous black coat, cream silk shirt, gold chains and gold earrings, knuckle-duster rings on her hands. Her face was pale, her mouth very red; even her enormous black-rimmed spectacles she had somehow turned into an enviable accessory. Nancy was no fool. As she followed Olivia across the crowded restaurant to their table, she had sensed the frisson of masculine interest, seen the covert glances and the turned heads and known that they had not been turned for pretty her, but for Olivia. (*Seekers* 45)

Nancy, by contrast, has lost her beauty and her good physical shape. Her own housekeeper had told her a few pages earlier that she looks old and should go on a diet (*Seekers* 24).

Olivia's life contrasts deeply with Nancy's, even with Penelope's. This heroine embodies many of the premises of second-wave feminism: she has received a high-quality education, she pursues her career ambitions, and she relishes her sexuality. In other words, Olivia is master of herself. As a student, she strived for academic excellence and she had a promising career on the editorial business.¹³⁰ In the novel, the one-year liaison with Cosmo Hamilton in Ibiza is described as a retreat from all the pressures and responsibilities she faced on a daily-basis, a "sabbatical" (*Seekers* 68). Recovered, Olivia eventually resumes her life in London and her former position in a prestigious woman's magazine. By the time the novel begins, Olivia personifies success, both personal and professional. Her life does not revolve around domesticity and she does not mourn unconsummated romantic affairs.¹³¹

Olivia's courtship story deserves some attention for various reasons. Firstly, it is instrumental in bringing Antonia and Penelope together. Antonia is Cosmo Hamilton's only daughter, and upon her father's death she contacts Olivia. The latter then brings the girl to

¹³⁰ Olivia studied her degree at Oxford University, and she belonged to Lady Margaret Hall. Incidentally, this was the first college to educate women in said institution, a fact that strengthens the character's association with the image of woman promoted from the feminist movement.

¹³¹ Olivia's type of feminism is clearly a liberal one, but this does not make it less valuable; especially if one takes into account that the novel was published in 1987, when conservative parties cut social expenses in both the United States and the United Kingdom, and the feminist movement was acquiring an even greater negative reputation.

Penelope's house, and their friendship develops. Apart from its relevance for the plotline, Olivia's affair is noteworthy because like Penelope's, it does not end happily ever after. Significantly, though, this time it was the heroine's choice. In addition, Olivia's and Cosmo's relationship plays with the readers' expectations about some of the romance genre's conventions, which are also worth commenting on.

Very briefly, Olivia was vacationing in Ibiza when she met Cosmo Hamilton at a party. They were instantly attracted to each other, and after a couple of outings together around the island, they became intimate. After that, Cosmo asked Olivia to just "stay" with him in Ibiza, but the heroine had more than her peace of mind to consider. Back then, she discussed her life project and her ambitions with Cosmo:

"I'm not a domesticated creature. I'm thirty-three, the Features Editor of a magazine called *Venus*. I've worked for my living and my independence ever since I left Oxford, but I'm not telling you this because I want you to be sorry for me. I've never wanted anything else. Never wanted to be married or have children. Not that sort of permanence." (*Seekers* 67)

Olivia and Cosmo reached a compromise when she accepted to be with him for a year, as a momentary halt on the road to success. Much to Cosmo's surprise, when the time came to say goodbye, Olivia's reasons were the same ones she had stated before:

"These months with you are different, like nothing that's ever happened before. It's been like a dream, stolen out of time. ... But you can't dream for ever. You have to wake up. Soon, I shall start getting restless and probably

irritable. And you will wonder what is wrong with me and so shall I. And I shall make a private analysis of the problem and discover that it's time I went back to London, picked up the threads, and got on with my life." (*Seekers* 101-2)

Olivia left Cosmo without looking back after ten months of happy cohabitation. At one point in the narrative, Penelope blames her daughter's behaviour on Olivia's preoccupation with her career, which "matters to her more than anything else in the world", as well as on her "horror of dependence, and committal, and putting down roots" (*Seekers* 231-2). Olivia herself explains that her desire to be financially independent is partly a reaction against her father's behaviour. Ambrose, as we have seen, squandered his money and used Penelope's to pay off his gambling debts. Besides these, however, the text brings up other stronger motivations for Olivia's decision, such as self-realisation:

"... I told you my father was a lightweight sort of man. He never influenced me in any way. But I am always determined to emulate my mother, to be strong and independent of everybody. And, as well, I have a creative need to write, and the sort of journalism which is my profession fulfils that need. So I'm lucky. I do what I love to do, and I get paid for it. But that isn't all. There's a compulsion somewhere, a driving force that's too strong to fight. I need the conflict of a demanding job, decisions, deadlines. I need the pressures, the flow of adrenaline. It turns me on." (*Seekers* 101)

In many ways, Como was a conventional man, a stereotypical romantic hero. Much older than Olivia was at that time, he sought to

live life to the fullest in Ibiza. He was handsome, sexually experienced, and largely unpreoccupied by responsibilities. He had no plans for the future, no savings, nothing that might help himself or his daughter in case something were to happen to him: “I simply hope that by the time I drop off the hood, [Antonia] she’ll have find herself a rich husband” (*Seekers* 100). This particular statement enraged Olivia, and gives way to one of the novel’s most feminist allegations:

“Cosmo, don’t say things like that. Don’t talk in that ghastly archaic Victorian way, condemning Antonia to dependence on some man for the rest of her life. She should have money of her own. Everywoman should have something of her own. . . . [Money] buys lovely things; not fast cars or fur coats or cruises to Hawaii or any of that rubbish, but real, lovely things like independence and freedom and dignity. And learning. And time. (*Seekers* 100)

Apart from whatever personal ambitions Olivia might have had, she and Cosmo held opposite viewpoints on life and their relationship would have eventually collapsed. Admittedly, Olivia entertained the possibility of staying in Ibiza, but eventually refused to give in to the romantic fantasy offered by Cosmo and a life free from external pressure. On this occasion, the hero’s love declaration and marriage proposal were not enough to convince the heroine to abandon her own goals; the price she would have to pay for love was too high. Somewhat clichéd, Cosmo remained unmarried for the rest of his days, since Olivia was, allegedly, “the love of his life” (*Seekers* 231). Although she is sad to hear about her former lover’s death, the Olivia we know at the

start of the book does not regret the decision she had made five years earlier.

So far, we have seen how *The Shell Seekers* contain, more or less explicitly, a discussion of issues pertaining to women. Penelope's plotline is mainly a platform for discussing the suitability of a good partner and addresses other secondary issues such as female sexual pleasure or motherhood. In Olivia's case, the novel adopts an unequivocal feminist overtone. Not only does it introduce some of the most pressing demands of second-wave feminists, such as equal career opportunities or sexual freedom for women; it also normalises the image of the successful businesswoman by portraying her as a complete, self-fulfilled person who is not deluded by the fantasy of domestic bliss. With regards to the third courtship, Antonia's, it is an example of a *bildungsroman* story, very similar to the ones narrated in Pilcher's earlier novels.

Antonia's life is at a critical point when the book begins. Her mother had remarried and she had been living with her father for a few years until Cosmo's premature death. Consequently, she has neither relatives nor money to fend for herself. To make matters worse, she is still very young (barely eighteen) and shy, she is not educated in any profession and she is at a loss about her future. Olivia offers her some guidance to start a new life: modelling for various magazines. Antonia shivers at the prospect, but she is willing to do it in order to become

financially independent. If anything, her attitude reveals her strength of character, a staple quality for a romance heroine:

The thought of actually doing such a job filled Antonia with alarm, but if she could earn some money that way, surely it was worth a bit of agonising and embarrassment and having one's own faced caked in make up. And anyway, however hard she thought, she couldn't come up with anything else that she really did want to do. She quite liked cooking and gardening and planting things and picking fruit ... but it wasn't possible to make much of a career out of picking fruit. And she didn't want to work in an office, and she didn't want to work in a shop, nor a bank, nor a hospital, so what was the alternative? (*Seekers* 322)

Penelope turns out to be Antonia's lifesaver. She gives her time to heal after her father's death, emotional support, and reinforces her self-esteem. In keeping Penelope company, performing various domestic tasks such as gardening, Antonia has time to think about her life and the future, and to contemplate other pathways besides modelling. The final stimulus comes from Danus, Penelope's gardener and the hero of this plotline, someone with whom Antonia feels at ease from the very first moment.

The novel introduces titbits of information about Danus's past and his mysterious behaviour. He comes from a Scottish family of means, but he is employed as a gardener in England; he refuses to drive and he does not drink alcohol, a fact which leads everyone, including Penelope, to suspect he was involved in car accident at some point in the past (*Seekers* 341-2). Despite his enigmatic conduct, however, both

Penelope and Antonia trust Danus blindly. As was mentioned in the quotation above, Antonia also feels drawn to manual labour and horticulture, and together, they talk about their respective life goals: his, establishing his own garden centre, and hers, still undecided, but very similar to his (*Seekers* 374-5).

Both Danus and Antonia are inadvertently caught in the crossfire between Penelope, her children and the painting, so their marginal status within the family strengthens their relationship even more. In addition, Penelope notices their connection as well as the striking resemblance between Danus and her former lover, Richard, and purposely creates opportunities for them to be together. As she confesses to a long-time friend towards the end of the novel, Penelope sees in the young couple a replica of her own affair with Richard Lomax (*Seekers* 534). In this respect, *The Shell Seekers* may be regarded as a cyclical narrative, where the first two courtship stories fail, but the third one succeeds and implies an indirect commentary on the first one.

Even though the couple's attraction is mutual and obvious to everyone who meets them, their respective introvert personalities, in tandem with the hero's enigmatic past, block the advancement of their relationship. It moves forward thanks, once again, to Penelope. When they agree to accompany her to Porthkerris for one final visit, Antonia finally confides her feelings and her frustrations to Penelope: "Nothing has happened. That's what's wrong. I get so far, and then I get no

further. I think I know him. I think I'm close to him, and the he puts up this reserve. It's like having a gate slammed shut in your face.” (*Seekers* 552) Penelope urges Antonia to confront Danus and tell him exactly how she feels: ““You're not a child””, she reminds her (*Seekers* 554). The heroine does follow Penelope's advice, with very positive results.

Eventually, the obstacles on the road to their happily ever after are revealed. Firstly, Danus feels like he has nothing to offer Antonia. He is not yet in a position to start his own business, and his savings do not amount to much. Penelope, however, swiftly deconstructs his argument: ““You must snatch at happiness, hold it tight and never let it go. ... What does it matter if you have to manage on a shoe-string?”” (*Seekers* 562) The second, most important barrier of all is Danus's presumed illness, the explanation behind his unusual behaviour. Due to his epilepsy, the hero feels unsuitable for marriage, at least until his diagnosis is confirmed. Penelope and Antonia encourage him to undertake more medical tests, and the results come out clean.

The reunion between Danus and Antonia takes place right before Penelope's funeral. At that point, the barrier posed by his illness falls, and the betrothal, as Pamela Regis's defines the moment when the hero asks the heroine to marry him, takes place: ““It's just the beginning. A whole new start. For both of us. Because whatever I do, I want us to do it together. ... I have nothing to offer you, but please, if you love me, don't let's ever be apart again”” (*Seekers* 627). Hand in hand, Antonia

and Danus proceed to the church to pay their respects to Penelope. Thanks to the latter's generosity, Danus is bequeathed an important sum that puts an end to the couple's uncertain economic future, thus surmounting all obstacles.

Thus, the third courtship story presents two young people in love pursuing a common goal. By the novel's end, Antonia has found her place and she has embarked upon a whole new life, filled with projects that motivate and satisfy her. As Olivia rejoices in the final pages of the book:

All, for Antonia and Danus, had ended well. And Mumma had been right in her judgement, because they were the sort of young people who deserved encouragement, and to be given, if necessary, a helping hand. Which she had done. Now, it was up to them, with their tumbledown cottage and their cultivator and their hens and their plans for the future, and their marvellous unshakeable optimism. (*Seekers* 669)

Pilcher, in the introduction to the tenth anniversary edition, described *The Shell Seekers* as “a big fat novel for women” centred on “upper-class Bohemians”, “[g]reed and acquisitiveness” and “the days before the war” (Introduction, par. 12-4). Yet the book, as we have seen, is about much more. Pilcher's excellence as a romance writer reached new depths with this multiplot, polyphonic work. She masterfully intertwines three heart-warming courtship stories with a wide variety of issues, from motherhood to love, from feminism to a woman's maturing process and self-discovery. The book proves that feminism and romance

are not mutually exclusive, and that romance novels can be aesthetically impeccable.

In her own words, Pilcher aimed at providing readers with a good story that caught their attention, “start[ing] them off on the long and wonderful road of reading for pleasure” (Introduction par. 28). In *The Shell Seekers*, we find a self-conscious romance novel that exceeds, in some respects (e.g. dimensions, formal and thematic complexity), the boundaries of the dominant American category romance of the period; the novel, nonetheless, stirs the same emotions and delivers the same final satisfaction.

3.1.3. *Winter Solstice* (2000)

Winter Solstice encapsulates the most representative aspects of Pilcher’s fiction writing since the publication of *The Shell Seekers* in the late 1980s: a multi-layered plotline filled with lavish descriptions of landscape, disparate and relatable characters, and an unexpected event that brings them all together for a climatic denouement. Some of the themes present in this book have already been discussed in previous sections, such as the characteristics of a healthy romantic relationship, hegemonic femininity, or the career *versus* the domestic woman. Other topics like sexuality in old age are fairly new.

This last novel revolves around two courtship stories and includes a young girl’s *bildungsroman*. The leading characters are Elfrida Phipps and Oscar Blundell, sixty-two and sixty-seven years old, respectively. While the two had been friends for some time, their romantic affair

begins when Elfrida agrees to settle in Scotland with Oscar, after the tragic deaths of his wife and young daughter. The main obstacle in their relationship is, naturally, Oscar's grief, but Elfrida's support as well as the unexpected arrival of Elfrida's relatives will help the hero to make a fresh start. The second pairing in *Winter Solstice* is between Sam Howard, an attractive man with a broken marriage, and Elfrida's distant cousin, Carrie Sutton, a successful thirty-year-old woman who is also going through a relationship setback. Last but not least, there is Lucy's coming-of-age story. Thanks to her incipient friendship with a local boy, the teenaged Lucy awakens to a world of possibilities, loses some of her introvert ways and starts building up her own identity.

In view of the characters' personal journeys, Elfrida's and Oscar's relationship strikes us as very touching. In the first pages of the novel we meet Elfrida, a retired actress who has recently moved to Hampshire in the hopes of starting a new life. Other characters describe her as a resolute and brave woman (*Solstice* 46), and she certainly demonstrates it throughout the novel.¹³² At sixty-two, Elfrida is financially self-sufficient and quite content with her lot. Her only preoccupation would be solitude. Elfrida married twice with disastrous consequences, and her most recent affair was with a mysterious man she lovingly dubs "Jimbo". With him, Elfrida felt the happiest person in the world: "I

¹³² Elfrida's acting career symbolises her determination. Her cousin, for instance, notes how the young Elfrida was "gloriously attractive, and admirably rebellious, fighting parental opposition, and finally going on the stage and becoming an actress" (*Solstice* 46). Her multiple sexual liaisons are also a key element in Elfrida's rebelliousness, and the reason why some characters with traditional mores look down on her with disapproval, e.g. Carrie's mother, Dodie (*Solstice* 171).

never thought it could be like this. I never thought one could be so close and yet so different from a single human being. He's everything I've never been, and yet I love him more than any person or anything I've ever known" (*Solstice* 47). Sadly, Jimbo died from Parkinson some time before the story's beginning, leaving Elfrida emotionally shattered for some time, and a little lonely.

Soon after arriving in Hampshire, she befriended Oscar Blundell, his wife, and their daughter. Despite her efforts, Elfrida liked Oscar "perhaps too much": "She was well past the age of romantic love, but companionship was another matter. From their first meeting outside Dibton church, when she had been instantly taken with him, she had come to enjoy his company more and more" (*Solstice* 27-8). Only his personal situation (i.e. he is married) prevents the heroine from confessing her true feelings or acting in any determinate way. Even so, Elfrida, with her independent lifestyle, occasionally finds herself "longing for company. Specifically for Oscar." The worst part of loneliness, she reflects, is "[n]ot having someone to remember things with" (*Solstice* 67).

Oscar Blundell is an easy-going, attractive old man, but unlike Elfrida, who has taken her destiny in her own hands (e.g. a career in acting and an economically independent life), Oscar largely lives under the shadow of his wife, Gloria. A proficient musician and a music teacher for many years, the hero married a widow late in his life, had a child named Francesca, and exchanged London for Hampshire

following his wife's wishes (*Solstice* 10-11, 17, 288-9). In the countryside, his days go by playing the organ at the local church, sprucing up the garden and spending time with his eleven-year-old daughter. Mrs. Gloria Blundell, by contrast, leads a much more hectic lifestyle, organising and attending parties, entertaining guests, and being the centre of the town's social life. Unfortunately, Elfrida notes at some point that "Gloria Blundell, hard-headed and a stomach like a tin bucket, drank too much. She was never incapable, never hung over. But she drank too much" (*Solstice* 32). One night, on the way back home from a party, Gloria and her daughter Francesca perish in a car accident.

Oscar's and Elfrida's relationship starts some time after this event, when Oscar finds himself homeless and without enough money to keep on living on his own. Gloria's adult children by her first husband have hastened him away and, trusting an old uncle's and Elfrida's advice, Oscar decides to establish his temporary residence in Sutherland, in the Scottish Highlands. He asks Elfrida for "help" to move on and invites her to accompany him. After some hesitation, she accepts: "He meant it. He was asking her to go away with him. He wanted her. She, Elfrida. Eccentric, disorganised, not beautiful any longer; even a little raffish. And sixty-two years old" (*Solstice* 89).

As Elfrida would later confess to her distant relative, Carrie, she and Oscar became intimate after their arrival in Scotland, an arrangement that suits both of them and provides them with "comfort" (*Solstice* 325). For most of the novel, the protagonists are immersed in a

routine where Elfrida looks after the house, and Oscar remains taciturn and isolated from the world. His pain stands in the way of the couple's happy ending, and Elfrida knows this:

“Oscar and I are very close, yet I know that part of him is still withdrawn, even from me. As though that part of him was still in another place. Another country. Journeying, perhaps. Or in exile. Across a sea. And I can't be with him because I haven't got the right sort of passport.” (*Solstice* 544)

Ultimately, Elfrida's support, alongside Carrie and Lucy's arrival, put the hero on the right track to healing. Firstly, he goes to the local pub (*Solstice* 61); then, he clears the garden (*Solstice* 335-6), and he goes for a night out with his new acquaintances, the Kennedys (*Solstice* 392). In the novel's last scene, he performs Beethoven's Song of Joy at the local church, being his return to music a symbol of his psychological recovery. Elfrida, as Oscar himself states, was a key agent in the process of his recovery:

“... one thing is truly certain, and that is that you have helped me to start again, and it is you who have made a dark and painful time not only bearable and possible but even joyful as well. I think you carry joy around you. We can't go back. Life, for both of us, can never be the same as it was, but it can be different, and you have proved to me that it can be good. I told you a long time ago that you could always make me laugh. And you have made me love you. Now, I cannot imagine an existence without you. Please marry me.” (*Solstice* 686)

Elfrida's and Oscar's courtship is the most transgressive one in the novel. Their storyline covers remarkable topics such as ageing, loneliness, love and sexuality. As we have seen, Pilcher constructs Elfrida's character as a strong-willed woman who pursued her youth dreams. In her old age, she is an independent woman who falls in love and experiences sexual desire.¹³³ Elfrida is also a woman preoccupied with her looks (e.g. she dyes her hair) but not a primp. In fact, she takes pride on being perceived as eccentric; at one point in the novel, for instance, she explains how "looking bizarre was one of Elfrida's best ways of boosting her confidence" (*Solstice* 8). Clearly, the burden of old age and the social expectations attached to it matter very little to the heroine. In this respect, *Winter Solstice* deserves recognition for breaking up social taboos and stereotypes about womanhood and ageing women.¹³⁴

Related to the question of old age is, as we have seen, solitude. This was the main reason why Oscar married Gloria in the first place:

"... one day, in a quite matter-of-fact fashion, [Gloria] said that she thought it would be a good idea if we married. She explained that she did not enjoy living without a man, and she felt that I [Oscar], in my advancing years, would be glad of a wife to take care of me. It all sounds, I know, a

¹³³ The same holds true in Oscar's case. He has little money after his wife's death, but he refuses to enter a nursing home (*Solstice* 86). The novel makes a strong case for the independence and autonomy of the elderly.

¹³⁴ Since the novel questions the very concept of old age and demonstrates the extent to which it is a cultural construct, *Winter Solstice* may be of interest for scholars working on the field of ageing studies. The title refers to a date in the calendar as well as to the decline inherent to old age, but the truth is that Pilcher offers a rare portrayal of elderly people as physically and mentally sound people, with their own desires and life projects. In this respect, *Winter Solstice* clearly combats ageism.

little cold-blooded, but the truth is that I was extremely fond of her and she, I think, of me. We were neither of us in our first flush of youth, so old enough to make a success of what other saw simply as a marriage of convenience.” (*Solstice* 289)

In part, Elfrida’s and Oscar’s union is a response to loneliness. As quoted in previous pages, Elfrida also longed for someone to share her life with (*Solstice* 67). The book does not condemn the rationale behind Oscar’s first marriage, but his union to Elfrida is cemented on other elements besides companionship. There have more akin personalities, and a complementariness that transcends whatever similar interests they may possess. As the following passage evidences, Oscar is deeply in love this time, and the marriage proposal is seen as a “formality”:

“I [Elfrida] will stay with you happily for the rest of my life, but I don’t want you to feel you have to marry me.”

“I [Oscar] don’t feel that. I love you and I honour you just the way things are, and I don’t suppose either of us gives a jot what other people think or choose to say. All things being equal, I should happily settle for carrying on just the way things are. But we have Lucy, now, to consider.” (*Solstice* 685)

As in many of her previous titles, in *Winter Solstice* Pilcher contraposes various kinds of romantic relationships: some are good, some are better, and others are simply a complete failure. Carrie’s and Sam’s courtship is the second affair depicted in the novel, and, as it happened in *The Empty House* and *The Shell Seekers*, it becomes a platform for discussing the characteristics of a good relationship, but also other issues like traditional femininity.

Carrie is an intelligent, beautiful young woman with a successful career. She has a friendly relationship with her father, Elfrida's cousin, but she keeps at a distance from her mother, Dodie, her sister Nicole, and even her adolescent niece, Lucy. The reason for this distancing is that they do not have much in common, and in fact they have very different ambitions in life. Whereas Dodi's and Nicole's lives are and have been too focused on men, material luxury and social events, Carrie went to university and now holds an important job in Austria, as a public relations officer for a prestigious travel firm. When the novel starts, however, Carrie is back in London, heartbroken. Picking up the various scraps of information provided in the novel, we learn that she had been romantically involved with a married man, and that the relationship has recently ended. She confides in Elfrida when they meet in Scotland, and elaborates on the particularities of her romance with Andreas as well as her broken emotional state. Even so, Carrie is convinced that she will eventually recover from the loss: "I'll recover. I'll recover from Andreas and I'll recover from my little cold in the head. Life goes on. I'm here, with you. I shall pull myself together and do my best to be cheerful" (*Solstice* 374).

The heroine's wretched state is also partly attributed to other circumstances. Besides her highly demanding job, in which she was meant to deal with other people's problems, Carrie returned to London in the middle of a family row. Her mother, Dodie, and her sister, Nicola, refuse to sacrifice their personal plans to look after Lucy, and Carrie, the

self-proclaimed “dogsbody” of the family (*Solstice* 643), is forced to step in and handle the situation. Consequently, the heroine is “tired of being strong. Tired of being the sturdy pillar against which everybody leaned” (*Solstice* 321). Carrie is the one who contacts Elfrida in Scotland and brings Lucy with her as a temporary solution.

As was the case in *The Shell Seekers*, *Winter Solstice* also compares different versions of femininity within the same family. Dodie and Nicola represent conventional stereotypes of womanhood and even project an image of selfishness. Dodie leads a comfortable existence, travelling around the country and meeting with friends. As for Nicola, her goal in life was to marry young and have a dreamed wedding (*Solstice* 136), only to divorce after her husband’s infidelity. According to Carrie, Nicola took Lucy and moved back into her mother’s flat, and by the time the novel begins, she has begun an affair with a wealthy American man. Carrie’s description of Nicola’s looks hints at her frivolous personality, as a woman exceedingly concerned with appearances:

They had never been close, never been friends, never shared secrets. ... Whenever she thought of Nicola, Carrie always had a mental picture of her wearing some little outfit. Skirts and sweater co-ordinating. Shoes matching handbags, a silken scarf toning exactly with her lipstick. A bit like one of those cardboard cut-out dolls they used to dress in paper outfits with folding tabs to fix them in place: a paper sundress for the beach, a furry-collared coat for a winter walk, a crinoline and poke bonnet for the fancy-dress party. (*Solstice* 153)

By contrast, Carrie is introduced as being more interested in books and learning than in prototypical feminine concerns. She refused, for example, to be Nicola's bridesmaid; she worked "passionately" at her studies because she wanted to attend Oxford, and she displayed a tomboyish look that bothered her mother to the extreme (*Solstice* 138). To Nicola's accusations that Carrie's life has been nothing but "one long holiday", the heroine replies:

"Nicola, you clearly haven't the faintest idea what I've been doing. My job was public relations officer for a prestigious travel firm, and each morning, nine people had to report in to my office. I had a secretary and an apartment of my own, and in high season I very often worked seven days a week. So let's hear a little less about irresponsibility." (*Solstice* 155-6)

Carrie and Lucy have much in common, since neither of them fits into Dodie's and Nicola's ideal of femininity or emulate their plans. When news of Nicola's marriage to her American boyfriend reach Lucy and Carrie in Scotland, the latter takes it as the final proof of her sister's self-centredness. Despite the fact that Lucy is their responsibility, Oscar, Elfrida and Carrie take matters into their hands and offer Lucy the opportunity to stay in Scotland (*Solstice* 650-1).

Overall, the novel presents Carrie as the best, most likeable character. The heroine epitomises a different kind of femininity, one that merges traditionally deemed masculine features (e.g. professionalism,

resilience) with conventional feminine ones.¹³⁵ All characters portray the adult Carrie as very feminine, delicate and elegant. Her future match, Sam, describes her thus:

Carrie, with her smooth cap of chestnut hair, her dark and expressive eyes, her slenderness, her long neck. Her slanting eyebrows, the fascinating mole at one end of her mouth. Her voice, deep-toned, with an underlying suggestion of laughter ... Her wrists were narrow, her hand long-fingered and capable, with unpainted nails, and she wore on her right hand a sapphire and diamond ring that looked as though it might have once been pressed upon her by some besotted man, mad to marry her. ... She was totally without artifice. If she had nothing to say, she said nothing. If she aired an opinion, it was deliberate, considered, intelligent. (*Solstice* 500-1)

Sam's and Carrie's courtship resembles Oscar's and Elfrida's, inasmuch as both characters have lost someone, albeit less tragically. Sam has recently separated from his wife, left New York City and returned to his native UK. Sam, apparently, had not been a very loving husband; he focused almost exclusively on his career and neglected his marriage, until Deborah fell in love with another man and abandoned him (*Solstice* 98-9, 521-2). In Sutherland, Sam encounters Elfrida, Oscar, Lucy and Carrie by mistake. Believing the house in which they reside is empty and available for purchase, Sam shows up at the front door. Fate surprises him with a snowstorm, and the tenants kindly invite to stay and keep them all company.

¹³⁵ Carrie strikes the perfect balance between masculinity and femininity when she assumes the responsibility of looking after Lucy. Lucy's step-mother, by contrast, is presented as an ambitious woman, who has no time or interest in her husband's child (*Solstice* 150-1, 163).

The hero is instantly captivated by Carrie, and believes that their relationship is simply meant to be: “Right now he needed an emotional involvement like he needed a whole in the head. But Carrie had been waiting for him, the last link in that extraordinary chain of coincidence, compounding the sensation that he was a helpless pawn in some other person’s game” (*Solstice* 500). Carrie, however, is reluctant to consider the possibility of an affair with Sam, and he knows this: “She enlarged on nothing, volunteered no gratuitous information, and he was left with the sense of a strong door firmly shut between them and that nothing was going to persuade Carrie to open it” (*Solstice* 502).

It takes Carrie some time to acknowledge her own attraction to Sam and discuss the barrier that separates them with him. Inevitably, the main obstacle in their incipient relationship is Andreas’s memory (e.g. she still wears the ring he gave her), as Carrie is afraid of being hurt again. Sam, after all, is separated from his wife but he has not actually divorced her (*Solstice* 524). For Carrie, history is repeating itself again and she initially thinks she might be at her best alone: “Perhaps right now I’m better off that way. Independent. Not belonging to any person” (*Solstice* 526).

Carrie’s and Sam’s storyline does not have a happy ending in the conventional sense. There is not, as in Elfrida’s and Oscar’s case, a love declaration nor a wedding ceremony in sight. Rather, what we have on this occasion is the characters’ resolution to see each other regularly and test the strength of their feelings. By the end of the novel, Sam decides

to file for divorce and buy the house where Oscar and Elfrida have been staying; Carrie, for her part, will establish herself in London and find a new job. “No promises. No commitments”, Sam says, yet their last scene together shows them kissing for the first time, a token of love that hints at a joyful, lasting union (*Solstice* 696).

The two courtship stories in *Winter Solstice* narrate the characters’ personal losses, their recovery, and their finding themselves again. Lucy’s story is also about maturing and figuring out her own individuality. Hers is not a proper love story, but Rory Kennedy’s impact on this process should not be overlooked. Lucy is clearly infatuated with him, but romantic feelings are never addressed explicitly in the pages of the book. Rather, Pilcher emphasises Rory’s positive influence as he encourages Lucy to take control of her life.

Lucy is a shy, introvert girl of fourteen who lives with her mother and grandmother in London. As we have seen before, she does not have much in common with them, and, as Carrie acutely observes, they often treat her as a liability (*Solstice* 151). Her only confidante is her diary, which registers the steps in her maturing process. She is immensely thankful to Carrie, Elfrida and Oscar for welcoming her in their lives. They treat her as an adult and take her opinions into consideration, something that the insecure Lucy appreciates (*Solstice* 465).

However, Rory Kennedy is the real catalyst of Lucy’s transformation from child to young woman. The eldest son of Elfrida’s and Oscar’s friends, Rory is eighteen and he has good looks, he is

friendly and affectionate. He takes it to himself to show Lucy around town, and he takes her to various places, like a school dance (*Solstice* 429) He also boosts Lucy's self-confidence. "“Stop putting difficulties in you own way”" (*Solstice* 468), he admonishes, and Lucy pays heed to his advice. One of her diary entries records Lucy's recent self-imposed standards: firstly, "I'm not stupid"; secondly, "If I don't assert myself a bit, nobody else is going to"; thirdly, "I can make my own arrangements"; and finally, "I must be more enterprising. I can take care of myself" (*Solstice* 488-9). The first step in Lucy's transformation is symbolic: she has her ears pierced against her mother's wishes, and she flaunts her gold earrings defiantly (*Solstice* 483). Later on, Lucy also starts dressing more maturely, with clothes that make her look more like woman than a young girl (*Solstice* 624). Thanks to Rory's encouragement, she does not feel like "a little child any more" (*Solstice* 489).

As in Pilcher's previous novels, the romantic relationship provides the incentive to change the heroine's life for the better. In addition to listening to Lucy's most intimate thoughts and supporting her decisions, Rory argues in front of Oscar, Elfrida, and others that Lucy should stay in Scotland, where she feels comfortable: "“She told me she'd never been so happy as she is here. ... So don't send her back. Keep her here”" (*Solstice* 644). Eventually, Lucy agrees to come and live in Sutherland with Elfrida and Oscar. Meanwhile, Rory is expected to go

abroad for a gap year. Lucy's diary shows that she looks forward to his return:

I think he is really my best friend. He is going to Nepal next month and is tremendously excited about it. I shall miss him but I will see him again, I am sure, when he gets back in August. Whatever has happened by then, I shall make a point of seeing him, and I shall be fifteen then. Fifteen sounds much older than fourteen. (*Solstice* 688)

Lucy's words contain an element of hope, which suggests that these two might start a relationship at some point. What is certain, however, is that Lucy has changed due to Rory's friendship and her own self-determination. She has "reached a turning-point or a watershed" (*Solstice* 488), and she is no longer the tractable girl that readers encountered at the beginning of the novel.

* * *

Winter Solstice was Pilcher's last novel, and one that exemplifies the main features of her writing style, as well as her own understanding of courtship stories and their multiple possibilities. In the three novels I have discussed in this chapter, each belonging to a different moment within her fifty-year old career, Pilcher narrates a woman's coming-of-age story. The heroines' individuality often develops simultaneously and in relation to the love story, but Pilcher's heroes serve a clear purpose: initiating the heroines' transformation into completely realized human beings, not just in roles as wives and/or mothers. *The Empty House*, *The Shell Seekers* and *Winter Solstice* compare good and bad

romantic relationships, and make it clear that a healthy heterosexual relationship is based on love, mutual respect, and a preoccupation with the other person's well-being. Interestingly, and despite being examples of romance novels, the books also promote the idea that women can live a plentiful and satisfactory life without serious romantic commitment. Olivia Keeling, one of the three heroines in *The Shell Seekers*, is the paramount example.

Beyond these issues, the novels also introduce other themes that have been of great interest to women and feminism, historically speaking. Pilcher often discusses competing forms of femininity that have risen with second-wave feminism, and taps into woman's sexuality, motherhood, social expectations, and so on. Her richness in characterisation and the presence, more or less explicit, of these topics explains Pilcher's reputation as one of the finest (romance) novelists of the last century. However, as the second half of this chapter will demonstrate, American mass-market romance also possesses a great deal of literary artistry, and it equally addresses many women-related issues. Lisa Kleypas's novels show that mass-market romance fiction can be entertaining and deeply political at the same time, even if there are some aspects in these novels that should be approached with caution.

3.2. INTRODUCING LISA KLEYPAS AND HER WORKS

American writer Lisa Kleypas is one of the most eminent faces in present-day mass-market romance literature. Her professional achievements have been duly recognised with several RITA nominations and awards,¹³⁶ and like Pilcher's, her books have had international outreach. Kleypas has always been an advocate of the romance novel genre and of the women who read it, a stance that has only strengthened with the passage of time. As will be evident in the analysis of Kleypas's selected titles, this author does not recoil from commenting on a wide range of topics such as patriarchal femininity, woman's sexual pleasure, female sorority, women's professional aspirations and economic independence, or motherhood. Her concern with these issues, nonetheless, is contingent on what she perceives as the romance novel's chief goal: offering women some escape from their daily routines and responsibilities. Prior to discussing the main features of Kleypas's fiction and her selected works, it is mandatory that we pay some attention to her personal trajectory, since this has had a remarkable influence on her writing.

Kleypas was born in Texas in 1964 and grew up in Massachusetts. She attended Wellesley College and majored on political science. She has talked extensively about the reasons that led her to pursue a career as a romance novelist in the various interviews she has given over the

¹³⁶ As was mentioned earlier, the RITAs are the most valued awards in the American romance publishing industry. Kleypas gave a keynote speech in 2007 and she emceed the awards ceremony in 2015.

years. Chiefly among them was the impact of reading Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* (1972), the first romance novel she ever read and which made a lasting impression ("Conversation"; "New Wellesley Grad"). Secondly, Kleypas had been trying her hand at writing novels for some time, during summer breaks and in college. Around the same time as her graduation, her agent got her a lucrative contract with one of the big romance publishers of the period, NAL. An article published in the *People Magazine* in November 1987 portrays twenty-something Kleypas as a misfit, someone who prefers to read and write romantic stories instead of seeking other, more "noble" professions. Furthermore, Kleypas's participation in the Miss USA competition is perceived to be in contradiction with her education at Wellesley:

"I had always been the cheerleader type," she says. "When I won, I felt like the ultimate woman. I felt very powerful in my attractiveness." The title led her to the Miss America contest—singing, in the talent segment, a country song she had written—and a 500-calorie-a-day diet. "I looked terrific," she says. "Nothing jiggled when I moved." She was amazed when she failed to make the Top 10, but not surprised at the criticism she received back at Wellesley. "A lot of people felt I was degrading women by being in the pageant," she says bitterly. "I met with a lot of disapproval." (Reed par. 7)

This interview does not paint a very positive image of Kleypas. The quotation above, for instance, suggests that as a young woman, the writer was excessively focused on her physical appearance. In addition, the text finishes with a brief reference to Kleypas's single status, and to her wish to find a boyfriend (Reed par. 9).

It is interesting to compare Kleypas's declarations in this early article with the answers she would give years later. In 1998, when she had already carved a niche for herself in the romance novel industry, Kleypas spoke more critically about novels like *Where Passion Leads* (1987), her first book and one that portrays the heroine's rape by the hero:

[*Where Passion Leads* was a] very flowery novel with the kind of forced seduction scenes that I would never write now—but of course, this was the eighties, and the genre was still developing (as I was). ... [This scene] made me so uncomfortable that I had the hero being sorry and apologizing for the entire rest of the book. I have never done one since. (Kleypas, "Conversation" par. 10)¹³⁷

On this occasion, she also mentioned the Miss America contest, explaining how she felt about the whole experience and how it influenced her creative process. Whereas the young Kleypas had contended that she felt sexier when she was slender, in 1998 she recalled and acknowledged the pressure she felt to fit into a certain beauty canon:

Now, this sounds contradictory, but the pageant had two effects on me: it gave me a sense of being sexy and attractive, but it also made me extremely self-conscious about my appearance. For a couple of years afterward, I

¹³⁷ For the most part, Kleypas's first novels are out of print. On her website, she attributes this to the differences in writing style and characterisation that separate *Where Passion Leads* from her more recent titles: "I suppose I could sell the rights and have them republished. However, they are so vastly different from the books I'm writing now (more than twenty years later), that readers expecting a 'Lisa Kleypas' novel would not be getting what they thought they had paid for" (Kleypas Q&A).

had to keep reminding myself that it was all right to leave the house if I was a few pounds heavier or my skin had broken out. Being in the pageant almost makes you feel obligated to look perfect all the time. (Kleypas, “Conversation” par. 12)

The experience was positive in some respects (e.g. “public speaking, poise training, etc, gave me some polish I badly needed” [Kleypas, “Conversation” par. 12]), and it allegedly changed Kleypas’s writing. It led her to break stereotypes and create realistic female heroines, for instance: “I seldom, if ever, write about physically perfect heroines— they are always short, or plump, or too thin, or small-breasted, or there is some uncertainty that makes them less than 100 percent confident. After all, that’s how we real women are” (Kleypas, “Conversation” par. 14).

In more recent interviews, Kleypas has openly discussed the beauty industry, gender inequality, even conservative politics. She has also stated on various occasions that she considers herself “a feminist”, arguing that there is still a long way to go before real equality exists (“New Books”). A diachronic study of her fiction attests to Kleypas’s growing commitment to advancing the feminist agenda by overtly debating issues pertaining to women. One need only compare her early Old Skool romances such as *Only with Your Love* (1992) with her latest series, the *Ravenels*, to see how feminism has increasingly permeated her writing.¹³⁸ In one of her most popular series, the *Wallflowers*,

¹³⁸ Kleypas began writing Old Skool romances like those of Kathleen Woodiwiss, i.e. stories where the power imbalance between the protagonists is too high, and the heroine is often

Kleypas presents a group of four young girls who decide to help each other in order to secure husbands. On the one hand, *Secrets of a Summer Night* (2004), *It Happened One Autumn* (2005), *Devil in Winter* (2006) and *Scandal in Spring* (2006) are conceived as a critique on traditional (Victorian) mores, which prevented women from finding economic stability outside marriage. On the other hand, the books emphasise women's bonding and sisterhood,¹³⁹ mirroring Kleypas's own close friendship with several romance writers.¹⁴⁰ Lately, novels such as *Devil in Spring* (2017) and *Hello Stranger* (2018) have been presented as examples of a renovated, feminist type of romance fiction because they deal with women's difficulties to balance work and family life, the glass ceiling, etc. As a matter of fact, Kleypas was one of the guest speakers in the Strand bookstore's event "Let's Woman-Splain Romance!", which I mentioned in the Introduction to this dissertation.

Even so, her adherence to conventional romance tropes jeopardises Kleypas's alliance with feminism. To give one example, two of the four

subjected to some kind of physical abuse. Throughout the 1990s she developed a voice of her own, experimenting with the genre's conventions and limits, and creating stronger, more autonomous heroines.

¹³⁹ See Pérez Casal's "Developments in Contemporary Romance Fiction: Lisa Kleypas and Women's Bonding" (2017) for a brief discussion of the novels' portrayal of female sorority.

¹⁴⁰ Kleypas's sudden focus on women's bonding concurs with two different events in her life. In the first place, a flood in 1998 stripped Kleypas's family from all their possessions, and her colleagues from Avon sent her clothes, food and other supplies to help her to start anew. During these tough times, Kleypas bought romance novels to escape from her difficult situation; according to the author, this was also the time when she decided to devote all her efforts to romance writing (Kleypas "About Lisa"). In the second place, Kleypas had become involved with a group of fellow romance writers around the same time she was writing the *Wallflowers*. Kleypas, Eloisa James, Connie Brockway, Teresa Medeiros and a few others created the *Squawk Radio* blog, which ran between 2005 and 2007. The author herself has referred to this experience as the inspiration behind the *Wallflowers* series (Kleypas "Historical Romance Legend").

novels analysed in the remainder of this chapter, *Smooth Talking Stranger* (2009) and *Devil in Spring*, feature feminist heroines who are paired with alpha males. Kleypas's prototypical hero has inherited some features from well-known characters like Heathcliff or Brandon Birmingham, from *Wuthering Heights* and *The Flame and the Flower*, respectively. He is older, tormented, powerful, self-confident, highly intelligent, sexually experienced and he is capable of physical violence. Admittedly, the passage of time has influenced Kleypas's understanding of the romance hero, in the sense that he will never exert his power over the heroine. Unlike Pilcher's heroes, however, which might be better classified as beta heroes (e.g. sweet, easy-going), Kleypas's are still exceedingly protective, possessive and dominant.

The fact that her heroines are feminist whilst the heroes are still shaped by traditional masculinity owes to Kleypas's personal understanding of the romance genre. The writer elaborates on this topic in Wendell's and Tan's volume, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms* (2009): "... after twenty-two years of being published, I've come to realize that what makes a romance novels successful, not only in financial terms but also in a creative sense, is to think *inside the box*" (qtd. in Wendell and Tan 124, emphasis added). For Kleypas, female protagonists are "placeholders" and "seem to be held to a higher standard of behavior" (qtd. in Wendell and Tan 61). By contrast, the romance hero is the one who provides the fantasy element, the escape which, in the writer's opinion, justifies the genre's success:

What I do rather like when a modern woman reads a historical romance, she gives herself “permission” to experience being protected, pampered, even sexually dominated without any guilt. (qtd. in Wendell and Tan 63)

I think that in our everyday lives, most of us have to work really hard. Most of us have to be really professional. Most of us have to be strong through really tough experiences. So you need just a little emotional break, or a little mental break. And when you sit down and read a romance novel, if it's well done, you're going to have a really wonderful emotional escape where you're going to feel something really positive and really good. (Kleypas, “Historical Romance Legend” par. 57)

Kleypas’s thesis lines her up with other voices in Romancelandia that also vindicate the fans’ critical reading abilities.¹⁴¹ This author argues in favour of freedom of choice: her choice to *write* romances with dark heroes, and the female reader’s choice to *read* said romances, without any implication of anti-feminism whatsoever. In an interview with romance blogger Michelle Buonfiglio, Kleypas called herself a “new feminist” in a way that inevitably reminds us of third-wave feminism:

I’ve come to understand that women are complex and smart enough to wade through this sea of choices we all face (Should we be stay-at-home moms, or work-outside-the-home moms? How should we dress and behave? How should we relate to the opposite sex?) . . . and none of us can or should be conveniently labeled.

Women are beautiful, intelligent, capable, insightful, sexual, caring, risk-taking, multitasking, and most of all, strong. And we always have been. It’s just that only in

¹⁴¹ See Chapter One, sections 1.2 and 1.3 of the present work.

modern times have we been able to express all these aspects of ourselves. (Kleypas, “Best-Selling Author”, par. 6-7)

The four romance novels by Kleypas selected for discussion exemplify different stages in the writer’s career, as well as the different subgenres employed by the author.¹⁴² *Dreaming of You* (1994) is a staple of Kleypas’s fiction, probably because the protagonists of this historical romance shackled the conventions of the time in which the novel was published. The same holds true for *Suddenly You* (2001), a stand-alone romance that vindicates female sexual pleasure in the context of a Victorian setting. The next one, *Devil in Spring* (2017) is not only one of Kleypas’s latest novels, but also one who has been marketed as a feminist romance story. Finally, the last section in this chapter discusses *Smooth Talking Stranger* (2009), a contemporary romance novel that openly vindicates the need for feminism in the present day, and shows the genre’s suitability to host debates about a myriad of issues like heterosexual relationships or motherhood. Overall, a close reading of these texts will elucidate the ways in which feminist ideas impregnate the content of modern mass-market romance fiction, whilst remaining firm to the genre’s *raison d’être* as entertainment and escape.

¹⁴² Kleypas’s reputation comes mainly from her excellence in the historical romance subgenre, in partnership with Avon. In 2007, however, the author moved out of her comfort zone and published two series of contemporary romance novels with St. Martin’s Press, between the years 2007 and 2015. Kleypas returned to Avon in 2015 with a new book series, the *Ravenels*.

3.2.1. *Dreaming of You* (1994)

Previous to Lisa Kleypas's publication of *Dreaming of You*, we may consider *Where Passion Leads, Love, Come to Me* (1988) or *Give Me Tonight* (1989) as examples of Old Skool romances, since they possess some of the elements that made romance novels the object of feminist concern during the 1980s: passive, inexperienced heroines on the one hand, and inaccessible, cold-hearted heroes on the other. By contrast, *Dreaming of You* signals a turning point in the writer's career. At this point, Kleypas had totally overcome Kathleen Woodiwiss's influence and her own voice is palpable in the protagonists' characterisation, the novel's underlying themes, and the writing style.

The plot in *Dreaming of You* is as simple as the themes are complex. This historical romance tells the story of Sara Fielding, a nineteenth century writer conducting research for her new novel. Her intention is to infiltrate Craven's, a fictional gentlemen's club in London, and interview its owner, Derek Craven, a self-made man with a secretive, shady past. In the first pages of the novel, Sara saves the hero's life in a street fight. As a result, he grudgingly agrees to open the doors of the club to her, as well as to answer her questions regarding its functioning. Derek's and Sara's love transforms them both, and they must overcome a series of internal and external barriers before living happily ever after. The Epilogue portrays a happy romantic relationship in which both members, but especially the heroine, have reached their full potential: Derek is involved in various political projects on behalf

of impoverished people, and Sara, for her part, balances a successful writing career with the joys of family life. In all likelihood, this justifies the novel's enduring popularity among the readership and its canonical status within the (historical) romance genre.

Sara Fielding epitomises the changes produced at the heart of mass-market romance fiction during the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period of consolidation of the feminist influence, especially with regards to the female protagonist.¹⁴³ Firstly, this section will show how this particular heroine forsakes the traditional feminine roles of wife and mother that govern the Victorian society in which the story develops. In choosing to marry Derek Craven instead of her long-time fiancé, Sara acquires a complete, multifaceted identity that involves being a writer, a political reformist, a wife and a mother, all at the same time. Similarly, the following pages will discuss the novel's defence of an active female sexuality and of female sexual pleasure. Finally yet importantly, this section will show that Sara's vocation for literature can be read as an allegory of romance writing. The character's decision to pursue a writing career regardless of the social stigma it implies mirrors the situation of many romance writers, Kleypas included.

The first half of *Dreaming of You* is largely concerned with the heroine's inner conflict. Sara, a successful yet anonymous novelist, lives in the provincial town of Greenwood Corners, where she takes

¹⁴³ Sara shares some features with the heroine in Kleypas's 1993 novel, *Then Came You*. In this story, Lily Lawson (a.k.a. Lawless Lily) also challenges the rigid gender norms of nineteenth-century England. Among other things, this heroine has a child out of wedlock and she is a member of a gentlemen's club.

care of her elderly parents.¹⁴⁴ The novel begins with Sara's visit to London, but the heroine plans to return to her hometown at the end of her research trip. As she explains to the hero, Sara is being courted by Perry Kingswood of Greenwood Corners, and she expects to marry him soon despite his mother's opposition. Mrs. Kingswood, apparently, does not approve of Sara's artistic ambitions nor the topics she chooses to address (e.g. prostitution, gambling) (*Dreaming* 19). In this early encounter between the protagonists, Derek mocks Sara's domestic, humdrum life, an attitude that reflects Sara's own private thoughts. As she confesses to Derek's employee a few pages later:

"Nothing ever seems to happen in Greenwood Corners," she admitted, "I'm always writing about the things other people do. Sometimes I'm desperate to *live*, to have adventures and *feel* things, and—" She broke off and made a face. "I hardly know what I'm saying. What must you think of me?"

"I think," Worthy said with a smile, "that if you long for adventure, Miss Fielding, you've made quite a start tonight." (*Dreaming* 25, italics in the original)

Worthy's words will prove true. Derek's lifestyle is the complete opposite of Sara's: he lives in town, wears fashionable, even eccentric clothing; he does what he pleases unhindered by social expectations and he is unapologetically sexual. Sarah, by contrast, has hardly ever abandoned the countryside; she dresses plainly, almost spinster-like,

¹⁴⁴ The reference implied in the protagonist's name is difficult to miss. The heroine bears the same name as Henry Fielding's sister. The real Sara Fielding was also a novelist, yet her name is seldom mentioned in histories of English literature although she is one of the "mothers" of the novel in England. She wrote both fiction and criticism with a marked moralist tone, as was customary in the eighteenth century.

and conceals her physical sexual attributes (e.g. a voluptuous bosom) (*Dreaming* 78). Her only gestures of defiance are her writing and her stubborn personality. Despite her angelic, impeccable behaviour, the hero senses the “reckless edge” beyond her façade (*Dreaming* 74), but due to his own internal demons he prefers to keep at a distance.¹⁴⁵

What little contact she has with Derek, however, imbues Sara with a mixture of “danger” and “fascination” (*Dreaming* 44), a consequence of her living in a liminal state between what is socially prescribed and the fulfilment of her own desires. Her experiences at Craven’s, which include conversations with the employees and the prostitutes who work there, open the heroine’s eyes to a new world and a different side of life. Sara’s discontent with her own situation crystallises in an interior monologue that reveals her deep frustration, and the therapeutic effect that writing plays in her life:

All of her life she had been quiet and responsible, living vicariously through the experiences of others. It had been enough to content herself with family and friends, and to write. But now she regretted the things she had missed. She had never made a mistake more serious than forgetting to return a borrowed book. Her sexual experience had been limited to Perry’s kisses. She had never worn a gown cut low enough to show her bosom, or danced until dawn. She’d never really been intoxicated. Except for Perry, the men she had grown up with in the village had always regarded her as a sister and confidante. Other women

¹⁴⁵ Derek’s internal conflict has its roots in his social inferiority. He was born of a prostitute and raised in the poor London streets. Through dubious means, Derek managed to start Craven’s, the gentlemen’s club, and amass a fortune. Nevertheless, his past crimes (theft, body snatching, even prostitution), have tarnished his soul, and he feels inadequate to satisfy Sara.

inspired passion and heartbreak. She inspired friendship.
(*Dreaming* 82)

Despite a couple of sparking, bawdy encounters between Sara and Derek (which will be discussed later in this section), the heroine leaves London and returns to her hometown. At home, however, “[i]nstead of relief and joy, she felt hollow, as if she had left some vital part of herself behind” (*Dreaming* 168). Sara cannot help but compare her experiences in the city with her monotonous existence at Greenwood Corners. The main source of unhappiness is her fiancé, Perry Kingwood, a man that represents tradition and conventions. Perry wants Sara to quit her writing career and to devote herself entirely to domestic affairs:

“But I know better than anyone, darling. I know the fondest wishes of your heart —and I’m going to make them come true. After that, there’ll be no need for you to worry with all your daydreaming and scribbling. You’ll have me and a houseful of your own children to occupy your time with. All a woman could want.” (*Dreaming* 173)

Both Perry and his mother, Mrs. Kingswood, expect Sara to become the “Angel in the House”, the asexual, self-sacrificing archetype of Victorian femininity that writers like Virginia Woolf have questioned at great length.¹⁴⁶ This role, however, stifles the heroine. Symbolically, the clothes she wears express Sara’s reluctance to devote herself to these duties: whereas Derek had asked Sara to get rid of her sober hats, Perry asks her to use them again, but these “no longer

¹⁴⁶ See Woolf’s *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays* (1942), especially the chapter titled “Professions for Women”.

seemed to fit the way they once had” (*Dreaming* 189). Noticing the heroine’s growing uneasiness, Perry ultimately confronts her:

“You’re changing,” Perry had complained. “Day by day you’re becoming a different person, why can’t you be the sweet, happy girl I fell in love with?”

Sara hadn’t been able to answer. She knew better than he what the problem was. He wanted a wife who would never question his decisions. He wanted her to make difficult sacrifices in order to make his life pleasant. And she had been willing to do that for years, for the sake of love and companionship. ... *He’s right, I have changed*, she thought unhappily. The fault was with her, not him. Not long ago she had been the kind of woman who would have been able to make Perry happy. *We should have married years ago*, she thought. *Why didn’t I stay in the village and earn money some other way than writing? Why did I have to go to London?* (*Dreaming* 192, italics in the original)

Perry’s refusal to become intimate with Sara finally prompts their final break-up. Perry, a man more preoccupied with intellectual affairs than worldly concerns, deplors sexual impulses: “decent, God-fearing people should have the moral to control their animal urges—”, he cautions her (*Dreaming* 201).

Within the pages of this novel, the reader finds an examination of the Madonna-Whore dichotomy. To begin with, all the male characters, even the hero, see Sara as the embodiment of virtue, a gentle virgin impervious to sexual desire. As a counterpoint, the novel introduces Sara’s *doppelganger*, Tabitha, one of the prostitutes that work in

Derek's club.¹⁴⁷ Everyone notices the arresting physical likeness between the two women: "Although they were quite different in temperament, outwardly they shared a striking resemblance, both of them the same size and height, with chestnut hair and blue eyes" (*Dreaming* 61). The novel goes on to deconstruct both archetypes, by merging them within Sara and Tabitha. In addition, Lady Ashby, the villain in the story, should also be mentioned in this context, because she departs from the prototypical villainess in significant ways.

First and foremost, *Dreaming of You* recounts Sara's efforts to transcend the reductive image of the Madonna and to convince people that she has a right to experience sexual pleasure. One climatic moment occurs during a masquerade celebrated at Craven's a few nights before Sara's departure for Greenwood Corners. Here, the heroine disguises as Mathilda, the protagonist of her first novel and who happens to be a prostitute. Her costume allows Sara to look and behave in ways that would otherwise be prohibited to a respectable woman:

She felt as if some reckless stranger had replaced her usual cautious self. The midnight-blue gown molded to her figure, cut so low that her breasts seemed ready to spill from the meagre bodice. A broad satin sash fastened with a gold buckle emphasized her small waist. The mask

¹⁴⁷ *Dreaming of You* has Tabitha and other prostitutes working at Craven's. The hero cannot be considered a pimp in the sense that he does not make a direct profit from the girls' activities: "Their presence adds to the ambiance of the club, and serves as an added enticement to the patrons. All the money the house wenches make is theirs to keep. Mr. Craven also offers them protection rent-free rooms and a far better clientele than they're likely to find on the streets" (*Dreaming* 38). Needless to say, Sara rejects this arrangement wholeheartedly, and when a wildfire destroys the club at the end of the novel, Derek's connection to prostitution ends.

covered the upper half of her face but revealed her lips, which Monique and Lily had insisted on darkening with the faintest hint of rouge. ... [H]er hair in a cluster of curls on top of her head, ... perfume ... applied sparingly to her bosom and throat. ... Sara had started at the unfamiliar reflection in the mirror, ... an experienced woman, well-versed in the art of seduction. (*Dreaming* 104)

When this temptress' identity is revealed, Sara voices her anger at the limiting social morality that equates good women with chastity:

“Well, Mr. Craven,” she said aloud, her voice shaking, “if you don't want me, I'll find a man who will. D-damn you, and Perry Kingswood too! I'm not a saint or an angel, and... I don't want to be a 'good woman' anymore! I'll do what I please, and there's nothing anyone can say about it.” (*Dreaming* 130)

In light of both Derek's and Perry's refusal to initiate a sexual affair with her,¹⁴⁸ the heroine comes to see spinsterhood as the only viable alternative. A conventional marriage, after all, would mean sacrificing one of her two basic needs: either writing or sexual self-expression (*Dreaming* 268-271). In marrying Derek once he has overcome his internal barrier, Sara manages to “have it all”: she can continue writing, she can have her own family, and she can relish her sexuality as well.

Besides “killing” the Angel in the House, Kleypas also offers a sympathetic picture of the fallen woman. Readers are told that Sara's first novel told the story of Mathilda, a young woman who escaped the countryside only to fall prey to prostitution. Allegedly, by focusing on

¹⁴⁸ As was noted earlier, Derek's negative to have sex with Sara stems from his own internal barrier: he regards himself as inferior (in social class, manners, etc.). Therefore, he does not share Perry's dated, limiting understanding of womanhood.

the women who are forced to sell their bodies, Sara sought to “show that they were not the amoral creatures people considered them to be” (*Dreaming* 38). *Dreaming of You* also humanises the prostitute, and presents her as a *real* woman, with a history of her own. Tabitha, Sara’s *doppelganger*, appears in one scene with a look that emphasises their physical and situational similarities, in as much as they are both young women from the countryside, with old parents and from a family of modest means:

It was difficult to recognise the house wench, who was now dressed like a simple country maid. ... [S]he was clad in a demure lavender gown not unlike those that Sara owned. The usual wanton disorder of her hair was tamed into a neat coif and topped off with a modest bonnet. The faint resemblance between them was more marked than usual.

... “My ma thinks I’m a maid for a grand lord in London, carrying coal an’ water, polishing silver an’ such. It wouldn’t do for ‘er to know I works on my back at Crawen’s.” (*Dreaming* 195)

Moreover, the prostitute in *Dreaming of You* is given the ability of soothing others, a role initially played by the Madonna. In one of the novel’s most emotive passages, Derek visits Tabitha looking for solace instead of sexual relief:

“‘E came to my bed. ‘E told me not to say anyfing [sic], no matter what ‘e did. No matter what ‘e said. Then Mr. Crawen turned the lamp down an’ took me against ‘im... (...) ‘Let me hold you, Sara,’... all night long it was, ‘im pretending it was you. It’s because we look alike, you an’ me. That’s why ‘e did it.” (*Dreaming* 197)

In both scenes, when Sara assumes Mathilda's identity and when Tabitha comforts the hero, the line dividing the whore from the virgin becomes blurred. In constructing both characters as mirror images, the novel denounces the artificiality of both roles and argues for a more comprehensive portrayal of woman.

The character of Lady Joyce Ashby is also worth discussing in relation to the archetypes of Madonna and Prostitute. In the early pages of the novel, Joyce personifies the predatory woman. Derek, her most recent lover, describes her in the following terms:

Joyce slid from the bed and strode to him, pausing for a moment to admire her naked body in the mirror. Married at a young age to an elderly widowed earl, she had satisfied her sexual urges by taking a long string of lovers. Any pregnancies had been terminated quickly, for she would never ruin her figure with children, ... Joyce's cunning wit and beauty had made her a society favourite. A lovely predator, she devoted herself to ruining any woman whom she perceived as a threat to her own position. (*Dreaming* 28)

Broadly speaking, Joyce possesses many of the features associated with the evil woman: shrewdness, sexiness, and sexual experience, even to the point of perversion, because she is "willing to do anything for the sake of pleasure, no matter how debauched" (*Dreaming* 28). Derek put an end to their affair some time before meeting Sara, but Lady Ashby cannot bear the thought of being abandoned. She seeks revenge against Derek for his disparagement while simultaneously trying to reconcile

with him. Among other things, her jealousy leads her devise a rape attempt against Sara, kidnap her, and burn Derek's club to the ground.

Whilst the novel paints Joyce as the villainess, it departs from previous portrayals of the other woman as simply spiteful. Kleypas tells us about Joyce's trauma from the beginning, and briefly allows her to explain the rationale behind her hateful actions:

"I want you to understand. I was forced to marry at the age of fifteen. ... I begged my father not to sell me to an old man, but he was mesmerized by the thought of the Ashby lands and wealth. My family profited greatly by the marriage. ... I promised myself that from then on I would take whatever pleasure I could find. Never again would I let anyone control me. I'm different from all the spineless bitches who allow men to mold their lives however it pleases them." (*Dreaming* 112)

Sold as a commodity at an early age, sex and sexuality became the cornerstone of Joyce's identity. Joyce has had multiple lovers whom she manipulates at will. Lord Glanville is a paramount example: Lady Ashby convinces him to rape Sara in exchange of access to her own body (*Dreaming* 256-7). When Derek terminates their liaison, Joyce loses control over her life and her individuality as well: "If I allowed you to toss me aside so easily when you tired of me, I would be nothing, Derek. I would have been reduced to the state of the fifteen-year-old child I once was, forced to submit to the will of an indifferent man" (*Dreaming* 112). In this respect, *Dreaming of You* provides a background story for the fallen woman, and places the focus on the patriarchal society that has turned her into a monster.

Interestingly, Kleypas has Lady Ashby punished for her actions against Sara and Derek at the end of the novel. In spite of the author's endeavour to rationalise her loathsome behaviour, Joyce is brought under control by her husband and will be sent away from London; in Joyce's own words, she will be "caged like an animal" (*Dreaming* 356). Clearly, this character poses a threat that must be neutralised before the main protagonists can achieve their happy ending. Joyce's fate, however, strikes us as rather ambiguous: she is meant to live in isolation in Scotland, but she will do so in comfort and not in a "lunatic hospital, where she might be subjected to cruel treatment and also prove an embarrassment to the family" (*Dreaming* 356). From the little we know about Lord Ashby, his concern for his wife's well-being is not in line with his personality. Thus, it is almost as if Kleypas's own sympathy for the character had made its way into the page and interceded on her behalf.

Echoing some of the theories present in the 1992 volume *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, *Dreaming of you* is essentially concerned with integration of masculine and feminine elements within the protagonists. Before the happy ending can take place, the hero must overcome his own sense of inferiority and his fear of intimacy, both of which are direct consequences of his disadvantaged, orphaned past. Derek learns to love and the Epilogue shows him as a fully integrated individual.¹⁴⁹ Not only does he have a

¹⁴⁹ In this respect, the novel recreates the classic story of a powerful man being tamed by the love of a good woman. Even so, Derek personifies a less threatening version of masculinity

family with Sara and their daughter; he has also decided to put his considerable political and economic power to good use, in pursuit of social improvements in relation to Victorian inequality and class-prejudices (*Dreaming* 367-8). Likewise, the heroine undergoes a learning process and begins to act according to her own ideas. This entails, as we have seen, her negative to become the Angel in the House, as well as the acceptance and enjoyment of her sexual needs. The final pages of the novel portray Sara as a successful novelist and public speaker, who arrives home to her husband and daughter and proceeds to breastfeed the baby. In the last scene, she and Derek make love again for the first time after the baby's birth, centring on the physical changes brought about by motherhood (*Dreaming* 370-1). Her sexual climax constitutes an affirmation of all the different elements within her psyche: the writer, the passionate woman, the wife and the mother.

On a final note, I would like to touch upon another issue, if only briefly. Throughout this section, I have argued that Sara's career as a novelist challenges the narrow conception of (Victorian) femininity. However, her writing also serves other purposes: in the first place, it has therapeutic value, because it allows her to surpass the limits of her everyday experience and learn about such varied topics as sex, poverty, vice, etc. Secondly, Sara's writing has also a marked political tone. As we have seen, the heroine wants to influence the public's perception on

than his forebears in the 1980s. While dominant and even intimidating, Derek does not threaten Sara's autonomy, nor does he attempt to control her in the way Perry does.

certain topics; this was her chief motivation for composing *Mathilda*, her first novel.

All things considered, it is possible to draw a parallel between Sara's situation and the circumstances of many romance writers. Society as a whole, and (feminist) academic criticism in particular, has looked at romance novels and the community around it with a mixture of reluctance and contempt. As I explained in Chapter One of this dissertation, romance writers and readers have been traditionally exhorted to quit their obnoxious habit. Similarly, some characters in the novel pressure Sara to quit writing, both because her choice of subject matter is inadequate, and because she should spend her time pursuing other ambitions. Like Sara, romance writers have elaborated on the political nature of their works as well. Books such as Krentz's *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* vindicate many writers' commitment to advance the feminist agenda by presenting their readers with a positive portrayal of women, in which their needs, desires and concerns are treated fairly and in all their complexity.

Kleypas addresses these issues in *Dreaming of You*, a novel published two years after Krentz's collection. Kleypas's interest in the female writer and the way society perceives her surfaces every now and then in her fiction, and it appears in the two novels I will be discussing in future sections of this thesis, *Suddenly You* and *Smooth Talking Stranger*.

3.2.2. *Suddenly You* (2001)

The novel analysed in this section is one of the rare examples of stand-alone romances written by Lisa Kleypas. Usually, her novels are grouped into series, linked together by recurrent characters. To give an example, *Dreaming of You*, in tandem with *Then Came You* and the short story “Against the Odds” (2003) constitute the *Gamblers* series. *Smooth Talking Stranger* and *Devil in Spring*, the other novels discussed in this Chapter, also belong to different series, the *Travises* and the *Ravenels*, respectively. Broadly speaking, serialisation allows for a better assessment of the post happy-ending life of the protagonists. In “Against the Odds”, readers revisit Derek and Sara, this time as secondary characters in the love story of their eldest daughter. Readers are told about the ways in which their partnership has evolved, certifying that the hero and heroine of *Dreaming of You* are still in love and that they have achieved their personal and professional goals. Whilst the protagonists in *Suddenly You* appear only in this novel, the book’s Epilogue delivers a glimpse of their lives a few years after their courtship has ended, with the purpose of satisfying the readers’ curiosity about their future together.

Suddenly You was published during one of the most productive periods within Kleypas’s thirty-year-old career. Not only did the author produce four novels and two short stories between the years 1999 and 2003; these were also banner years. Some of Kleypas’s works became RITA finalists (e.g. *Suddenly You* in 2002), winning two of these

awards; one in 2002 for the short piece “I will”, and another for *Worth Any Price*, in 2004. Kleypas’s popularity among readers and critics continued to grow steadily thanks to the marketplace success of novels like *Devil in Winter*, *Smooth Talking Stranger*, or *Cold-Hearted Rake* (2015). Unfortunately, the attention garnered by her most recent works has relegated novels like *Suddenly You* to the background, at the risk of obviating the text’s exceptional quality and its innovative characteristics.

In this novel, Kleypas delves into some of the issues she had already brought up in *Dreaming of You*. The leading female character in *Suddenly You* is Amanda Briars, an admired English novelist living in 1836, a historical period marked by increasingly rigid gender norms. Once more, Kleypas deploys the romance novel form to advocate for female emancipation and female sexual pleasure. In addition, the novel is set at the time when mass literature as we would understand it today began to emerge, describing both the transformations in the publishing industry, and the way in which the average reader approached books in the nineteenth century. As will be evident later in this section, *Suddenly You* asserts the importance of escapist literature in the face of critical disdain, an idea championed by writers and readers of popular romance fiction, including Lisa Kleypas.

The beginning of *Suddenly You* is highly unexpected and unorthodox: it shows the heroine hiring the services of a male prostitute. Amanda’s life circumstances have prevented her from

experiencing sexual intimacy and she wants to remedy that: “‘I am a spinster, Mrs. Bradshaw’”, she explains to the brothel’s owner, “‘[i]n a week’s time I will be thirty years old. And yes, I am still a v-virgin—’ She stumbled over the word and continued resolutely. ‘But that does not mean I must remain one’” (*Suddenly* 2-3). Needless to say, the expected gigolo who appears at her door is not who he was supposed to be: he is the hero, Jack Devlin, a powerful publisher interested in reissuing Amanda’s first novel in instalments.

On second thoughts, the heroine tries to back out and to get rid of her visitor as soon as he shows up at her doorstep. The main reason is her own acquiescence to the Victorian morals that establish a certain role for unmarried woman:

She had resigned herself to being a dignified spinster... she had even convinced herself that there was great freedom in her unmarried circumstance. However, her troublesome body didn’t seem to understand that a woman should no longer be bothered by desire at her age. At a time when twenty-one was considered to be old, thirty was most definitely on the shelf. She was past her prime, no longer desirable. An “ape-leader” was what people called such a woman. If only she could make herself accept her fate. (*Suddenly* 6-7)

To these prejudices, we must add Amanda’s inferiority complex. When her enigmatic guest describes her as a “woman of great boldness, imagination, and beauty”, Amanda’s self-deprecating remarks betray her own dislike for her body:

Her attractions were moderate at best, and that was only if one completely discounted the current feminine ideal. She was short and while on some days she could be described as voluptuous, on others she was most definitely plump. ...

Without physical beauty, Amanda had chosen to cultivate her mind and imagination, which, as her mother had gloomily predicted, had been the final stroke of doom.

Men did not want wives with well-cultivated minds. They wanted attractive wives who never second-guessed or disagreed with them. (*Suddenly* 13)

Kleypas intentionally creates a heroine who does not fit beauty standards, and who is forced to live according to a set of rules that prevent her from being a complete individual. Fundamentally, *Suddenly You* tells the story of a woman's insubordination against social conventions, and her acceptance of both her physical appearance and her sexual needs. The relationship with the hero is a key element in this whole process. Jack Devlin possesses an enviable self-confidence and an independent spirit that foster Amanda's budding rebelliousness.

The heroine we meet in the early pages of the novel has already challenged some of the rules governing a woman's behaviour in Victorian times. For one thing, Amanda is financially self-sufficient. Unlike her two older sisters, who married and established families of their own, the heroine stayed at home to look after her ill parents. For five years, she provided palliative care and dealt with the emotional distress inherent to such a situation on her own. Amanda does not regret her decision, but she nonetheless laments that "the last precious years of her youth had been sacrificed for duty and love" (*Suddenly* 113). In this daunting scenario, writing became a scape valve for her: "Rather than

allow herself to be poisoned with frustration, ... Amanda had started to write in the late evenings and early mornings” (*Suddenly* 46). This hobby eventually turned into something serious and “with each page she had hoped her novel might be worthy of publication. With two books published and both her parents gone, Amanda was [now] free to do as she pleased” (*Suddenly* 46). The profits derived from her writing, alongside her father’s will and the money she obtained from selling the family’s house, allowed the heroine to relocate to London and begin a new life. In addition, spinsterhood permits a great deal of freedom to a woman with economic stability. On the one hand, Amanda can “attend one of many supper-parties, private domestic readings, or literary discussions” at will (*Suddenly* 47). On the other hand, she “like[s] being able to act and speak with no checks on her freedom. The notion of a husband whose legal and social authority completely eclipsed her own... intolerable [sic]” (*Suddenly* 52).

Amanda admits privately to herself that her independent lifestyle has advantages *and* disadvantages. Carnal knowledge is one such example, as is solitude: “...how nice it would be to attend parties and lectures with a beloved companion. Someone to talk and argue and share with. ... Yes, independence was the best path, but it wasn’t always the most comfortable one” (*Suddenly* 52). The feeling that she is missing something “that everyone else in the world seemed to have experienced” (*Suddenly* 21), as well as her decision to take her life into her own hands, are behind the impulse of hiring a man’s services.

Despite these moments of boldness, throughout much of the novel Amanda remains torn between her own desires and people's expectations regarding a woman's behaviour. When the hero kisses her for the first time, for instance, Amanda cannot decide whether to stop him or prolong the kiss. Thanks to Jack's "patient courting of her body" (*Suddenly* 31), Amanda's arousal finally supersedes propriety: "Why shouldn't she allow him to kiss and caress her? What good did her virtue do her? Virtue was a cold bedfellow; she knew that better than anyone" (*Suddenly* 32). The hero, therefore, acts as a catalyst that helps Amanda to overcome her inhibitions and learn more about the workings of her body under sexual stimuli. Their kissing and touching elevates the heroine's passion to unprecedented levels until she finally reaches orgasm:

... his fingers slid downward to the place where she had never imagined being touched, where she tried never to touch herself. ... His fingertips teased and rubbed, finding the most exquisitely sensitive place of all, a tiny peak of flesh that quivered to life at his touch. Heat blossomed in her loins, breasts head. ... His finger flexed inside her while his thumb nudged the burgeoning little point of pleasure, and he repeated the maddening stroking until she reached upward with a shaken cry, unravelling, her volatile senses finally catching fire. (*Suddenly* 40)

Admittedly, we may concur with critics like Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff when they argue that romance stories continue to present heroes that know more about the heroines' yearnings than they

themselves do.¹⁵⁰ Yet it is fair to say that this early encounter between Amanda and Jack is all about the heroine's awakening to sexual pleasure,¹⁵¹ and that in the context of Victorian morality depicted in the novel, the heroine's preconceptions had already stopped her from exploring her sexuality, e.g. when she says that "she tried *never* to touch herself" (emphasis added). The hero simply gives her that extra, necessary push to embark on a journey of sexual self-discovery.

Amanda and Jack become involved again some time after clearing out their initial mistake, when she agrees to work with him on the reedition of her first novel. In part, that first and bizarre encounter permits a fast-growing intimacy between the protagonists. They talk freely about a myriad of issues such as literature, women and society, sexuality and sexual pleasure. In one of those conversations, for instance, they discuss the links between love, intimacy, and sexual intercourse. Jack calls Amanda's attention to the intricacies of both male and female sexual satisfaction, and defines it as an interplay of different elements: "Intimacy is the most pleasurable with a partner who is willing to be playful in bed... someone who is amusing and uninhibited" (*Suddenly* 157). When the sexual tension between them becomes too much to handle, Amanda bravely accepts Jack's offer to have intercourse: "It was time. She understood the risks, the limits, the possible consequences, and she was willing to accept all of that for the

¹⁵⁰ See section 1.3 of the present thesis for a brief discussion of Gill's and Herdieckerhoff's work.

¹⁵¹ Significantly, the hero refuses to achieve his own climax. He leaves soon after Amanda has reached orgasm (*Dreaming* 41-2).

sheer joy of being with him” (*Suddenly* 201). The hero heeds to her wishes and they make love for the first time in her own terms: “‘I’ve waited thirty years,’ she whispered, lurching awkwardly to bring herself over him. ‘Let me decide when and where. Please. You decide the next time’” (*Suddenly* 210).

It is the heroine who sets the terms and conditions of their affair: she proposes a three-month relationship after which they will separate amicably (*Suddenly* 12). Their liaison is characterised by unrestrained passion, as well as by sexual experimentation. This supports the thesis that the hero’s role is to open the heroine’s eyes to the pleasures of sex:

Jack treated her as no man ever had, regarding her not as a sedate spinster but as a woman of warmth and passion. On the occasions when Amanda’s inhibitions got the better of her, he teased her ruthlessly, provoking a temper she had never suspected herself of having. There were times, however, when Jack’s mood changed and he was no longer a mocking rogue but a tender lover. He would spend hours cuddling and stroking her, making love with exquisite gentleness. During those times, he seemed to understand her with a thoroughness that frightened her, as if he could see into her very soul. (*Suddenly* 234)

Amanda’s self-perception changes as a result of her relationship with the hero: “Jack had taught her that she was a desirable woman, one with qualities that many men might appreciate” (*Suddenly* 239). He boosts her confidence in her intellectual abilities, at the same time that she comes to perceive her non-canonical body as a source of pleasure, and not shame.

Inevitably, some obstacles appear. Amanda falls in love with Jack, but she refuses to confess her true feelings. From their conversations, the heroine assumes that Jack is not at all interested in marriage: his plans for the future do not include a wife who can look after his home, and he is not particularly fond of children either (*Suddenly* 164).¹⁵² In addition, one of Amanda's sisters exhorts her to marry a man with whom she can have an agreeable relationship, regardless of sexual passion: "I tell you most emphatically, you must shape your life to fit the conventions. My advice is to end the affair at once, and apply yourself toward finding a gentleman who will be disposed to marry you" (*Suddenly* 248).

Our heroine decides to break her affair with the hero prematurely, but she intends to remain a spinster. However, when she finds herself pregnant with Jack's child, Amanda puts the unborn child's interests above hers and accepts the marriage proposal of a friend, with a combination of "relief" and "resignation" (*Suddenly* 295). Clearly, her union with Charles Hartley, a widowed writer, contradicts the heroine's ideal marriage as a commitment cemented on love as well as on emotional and sexual intimacy. In her sister's words, Amanda's choice is the most "judicious", the most pragmatic one, one that "will be of great benefit to all parties concerned" (*Suddenly* 311). However, as was the case in *Dreaming of You* with Sara's and Perry's betrothal, this kind of

¹⁵² The reader, however, has access to Jack's point of view and knows that his infatuation with Amanda goes beyond simple physical attraction (*Suddenly* 255-6). Eventually he realises that he, too, loves her, but he cannot bring himself to tell her until it is too late (*Suddenly* 309-10).

marriage will not do for the heroine; it is lacking in some crucial aspects. Eventually, Jack learns the truth about Amanda's pregnancy, and he asks her to marry him and let him take responsibility for his child.

Jack proves an excellent husband. On the one hand, he continues to reinforce her self-esteem: "He was the kind of husband she had never known she needed: a man who shook her from her complacency and inhibitions, a man who made her cavort and play until she had lost all bitterness over the responsibility-laden years of her youth" (*Suddenly* 342). On the other hand, the hero encourages Amanda to accept new professional challenges. Besides continuing with her writing career, he urges her to embark on a new project and become chief editor of the *Coventry Quarterly Review*, a distinguished literary magazine: "You, the first woman editor of a major magazine... by God, I'd like to see that", he says in encouragement (*Suddenly* 348). Buoyed up by his support, Amanda takes on this new enterprise with zeal. She sets out to demonstrate that women possess the same professional abilities as men, and that they can assume an active role in the public sphere whilst leading a perfectly satisfying domestic life.

The last barrier in the protagonists' way to happiness is overcome right before the book's closure. Amanda suffers a miscarriage, and to the tragedy of losing her unborn baby, we must add her fear that Jack will abandon her now that his responsibilities have disappeared. Of course, that is not the case, and in the final pages of the novel we witness the protagonists' love declaration. The final sex scene

symbolises the couple's reunion, and the Epilogue confirms their good fortune and prosperity five years into the future. From Amanda's point of view, we see Jack playing with their oldest son, whilst the heroine, pregnant again, is busy working on the next issue of the *Coventry Quarterly Review*. The ending of *Suddenly You*, therefore, portrays Amanda as a fulfilled individual who has effectively overcome the limitations posed by a sexist society. The heroine is "proud of her accomplishments, particularly in proving that a female editor could be as bold, intellectual and free thinking as any man" (*Suddenly* 37). The heroine balances her presence in the public sphere with a domestic life in which she finds an equal degree of joy.

Besides portraying a heroine who triumphs in every facet of her life, there is another aspect of this novel that deserves our attention. *Suddenly You* makes some thought-provoking remarks about the meaning and purpose of literature, the publishing industry, and high *versus* popular art, which we can extrapolate to the romance publishing industry and to Kleypas's own literary ambitions.

Amanda, as we have seen, is a successful nineteenth-century writer who is revered by readers and criticised by the literary gurus of her time. Apparently, her novels are "lacking in decency", only because she is a woman daring to discuss "deception, violence, betrayal" in her fiction (*Suddenly* 20).¹⁵³ Despite critical objections, Amanda's position in the literary value scale is revealed as superior to her friend's, Mrs.

¹⁵³ Like Kleypas herself, Amanda pictures "country people, workingmen and clergy, officers and rural squires" struggling with their passions (*Suddenly* 48).

Francine Newlyn, a writer of popular and lowly silver-folk novels. Generally speaking, Amanda is manifestly proud of the aesthetic quality of her works, and she gently mocks the sentimental tone of Mrs. Newlyn's texts (*Suddenly* 57).

In turn, Jack Devlin owns a publishing house specialised in sensation novels and other forms of commercial literature. Among his most recent publications we find *The Sins of Madam B*, a book containing the scandalous memoirs of Mrs. Bradshaw, the madam running a brothel whom Amanda contacts at the beginning of the novel. Jack's path crosses Amanda's because his most recent project concerns her directly. He has bought the rights of *An Unfinished Lady*, the heroine's first novel, and he plans to launch it in serialised format, the least prestigious of all publication types. According to Amanda, the novel is riddled with "faults of plotting and characterization" (*Suddenly* 73), but Jack is convinced that a rigorous editing process will upgrade the text's quality and turn it into a best-seller (*Suddenly* 87-8).

Amanda is noticeably concerned with her status as a serious writer, and she fears that the plot of *An Unfinished Lady* may be too sensational and thus tarnish her reputation (*Suddenly* 88-9). The novel, after all, narrates the protagonist's efforts to live "strictly according to society's rules" and the errors she makes in pursuit of happiness (*Suddenly* 141-2).¹⁵⁴ Amanda concurs with the maxim 'art for art's

¹⁵⁴ The similarities between Amanda and the female protagonist of *An Unfinished Lady* are obvious. According to Jack, Amanda sympathises with the character, and as the writer, she refrains from condemning the heroine's behaviour. In fact, the novel makes it clear that

sake', inasmuch as she values aesthetics over profit. She is also initially sceptical towards the idea that cheap formats can accommodate well-written novels. Overall, then, the heroine is presented as the guardian of literary hierarchies and excellence.

Jack's arguments persuade Amanda to take a chance at rewriting the novel into serialised form. To begin with, he offers her a staggering amount of money and a high print run which she cannot resist. Kleypas uses Amanda to expose the commercial side of "serious" literature, pointing at the hypocrisy that characterises some middle-brow authors and other creators of high art when they claim to be unaffected by sales numbers or economic rewards. More sophisticated, however, is Jack's belief that literature should be accessible to everyone, namely because it is a gate to other worlds that provides relaxation and "escape" to people in difficult circumstances:

"... owning books shouldn't be a privilege of the rich. I want to print good books in a way that the masses can afford them. A poor man needs the escape far more than a wealthy man does."

"Escape," Amanda repeated, having never heard a book described in such a way.

"Yes, something to transport your mind from where and who and what you are. Everyone needs that. A time or two in my past, it seemed that a book was the only thing that stood between me and near insanity. I—" (*Suddenly* 116)

society's unfair expectations regarding a woman's proper behaviour are to blame for the heroine's final demise (*Suddenly* 142).

Amanda relates with the situation that Jack describes because “she, too, had experienced the utter deliverance that words on a page could provide” (*Suddenly* 117). Consequently, the heroine’s biased perceptions about what literature should be are radically changed. In all likelihood, the romance novel reader can empathise with Jack’s statement as well, because escape is also the genre’s primary *raison d’être*. Furthermore, Jack’s words echo Kleypas’s own standpoint in relation to romance fiction. As was explained earlier in this chapter, Kleypas chose to devote her talents for storytelling to romance after a traumatic episode in which her family’s possessions were destroyed. In the aftermath of this event, the optimistic ending of romance acted as a healing balm against Kleypas’s apprehension and uncertainty about the future:

We [my mother and I] needed that hope and that happy ending, and the optimism that a romance would give us. And it was like a blinding light . . . I don’t want to sound over-dramatic, but it was really like a spiritual experience for me. Because I realized that what I did had incredible meaning. And I have never wondered since then if romance novels are as important as “literary” ones. (“This Author Has Legs”)

In *Suddenly You*, Kleypas also questions the idea that popular literature, in this case serialised fiction, does not involve any special abilities, or even a certain amount of work on the writer’s part. As Jack cleverly points out, “there’s a particular style that’s required... each instalment has to be self-contained, with a suspenseful conclusion that

makes the readers look forward to the next month's issue. Not an easy task for a writer" (Suddenly 88). Parts of Jack's description can be easily extrapolated to the genre of mass-market romance fiction. As Kleypas herself knows, romance authors must meet certain requirements while simultaneously offering something new that keeps readers glued to the page.¹⁵⁵ A thorough knowledge of the genre's conventions and how to manipulate them, balancing character development and secondary plotlines, writing relevant sex scenes that contribute to the development of the central relationship, or researching the book's setting, are only some of the skills required for creating a good romance story. In this respect, this novel gives a detailed picture of what goes behind the scenes of writing and packaging a text for mass consumption.¹⁵⁶

By way of a summary, then, *Suddenly You* may also be read as an example of *Künstlerroman* or artist's novel, in which the writer's evolution is scrutinised. The book prompts a debate around issues like the state of the art (e.g. the perceived degeneration of literature in the face of mass-production; excessive sentimentalism), economic benefits, taste, and popular fiction *versus* high literature. Finally, Kleypas's novel defends the artistry of mass-produced (romance) literature and its power to relieve the reader's anxiety and stress, an argument that justifies

¹⁵⁵ This refers to Kleypas's statement that romance writers should think "inside the box", an idea that I mentioned in section 3.2 of this chapter when dealing with the author's personal understanding of the romance genre.

¹⁵⁶ Besides the writer's creativity and editorial work, the novel touches briefly upon the subject of marketing and distribution, and how these contribute to increase sales numbers.

Kleypas's own decision to continue experimenting with the possibilities of romance fiction to give voice to women's needs and desires.

3.2.3. *Devil in Spring* (2017)

Devil in Spring is one of Kleypas's most recent titles, and one that evinces not only the author's personal preoccupation with feminist issues, but her pledge to advance the feminist agenda amidst a convoluted sociopolitical context.

The book I will be analysing in this section is the third instalment in the *Ravenels* series, six historical romances set in England in the late nineteenth century, a period of deep socioeconomic transformations, including the rise of first-wave feminism.¹⁵⁷ The first two novels in the series, *Cold-Hearted Rake* (2015) and *Marrying Winterborne* (2016), foreshadow the increasingly close links between feminist activism and the romance publishing industry. Both novels introduce hot topics such as sexual consent and female sexual agency, in a clear reflection of the public interest in this topic. With various sexual abuse scandals making the headlines in the past few years,¹⁵⁸ American society has become particularly sensitive to issues of sexual harassment, consent and the grey areas around it (e.g. use of coercion, drugs), and even systemic

¹⁵⁷ The last instalment in the series, *Chasing Cassandra*, is scheduled for 2020.

¹⁵⁸ Some examples would be the prosecution of American comedian Bill Cosby, the prison sentence against doctor Larry Nassar of the US Gymnastics for abusing more than two hundred women and young girls. Another well-known media case is Harvey Weinstein's, which brought the cinema industry under the spotlight and caused the #MeToo hashtag to go viral in social media. To this, we may add the various accusations of sexism and inappropriate behaviour against the US President Donald Trump, which tarnished his reputation before, during, and after the presidential election in 2016.

misogyny.¹⁵⁹ Romance readers, too, have become increasingly aware of these matters, and demand that their favourite literary genre adopt an overt political standpoint in relation to woman's rights, racism, religious tolerance, and other topics.¹⁶⁰

The publication of *Devil in Spring* has put Kleypas's name in the avant-garde of an innovative, feminist romance fiction. As we have seen throughout the past sections, however, this author's interest in merging romance and feminism goes back a long way. When asked about creating "more progressive, or more outwardly political" characters considering the current political landscape, Kleypas responded:

Since I was already going in that direction before Trump got elected, I can't say that it's changed it. It certainly has confirmed to me that this is the right direction for me to be going because I think it's important to show where women have come from. It's also good to demonstrate a healthy, respectful, romantic relationship. (Kleypas, "Romance Queen" par. 19-20)

On this occasion, Kleypas resorts to the historical romance subgenre in a conscious effort to talk about gender inequality. More specifically, *Devil in Spring* condemns the laws of coverture affecting married women during the Victorian era, at the same time that it vindicates a woman's resolution to pursue other goals beyond

¹⁵⁹ As both Cochrane and Munro have acutely observed, the rise of the internet and social media have played a key role in fostering debate on these issues, and rekindling feminist activism, reaching and permeating people and places from all over the world.

¹⁶⁰ The last pages in Chapter Two of this dissertation already explained how new faces like Maya Rodale are purportedly reworking romance tropes to bring feminism into the romance novel in more explicit ways.

domesticity. In part, the book may be regarded as the culmination of Kleypas's commitment to feminism. Even so, it may be perceived as disappointing in some respects since, despite its clear defence of feminist principles, *Devil in Spring* pays lip service to the first wave of activism that advocated for equal rights between men and women. In all likelihood, this omission owes to Kleypas's desire to enter political debates while preserving the escapist tone that has traditionally defined mass-market romance fiction, and Kleypas's oeuvre in particular. Whilst for some critics this refusal to engage with feminism on a textual level smudges the genre's self-proclaimed status as the "foremost feminist genre", this does not mean that the novel has no feminist messages to convey.

The female lead in *Devil in Spring* is Lady Pandora Ravenel, a recurrent character in this book series. The following excerpt, taken from *Marrying Winterborne*, shows the first meeting between our heroine and Lady Berwick, the epitome of conservative Victorian womanhood:

"I'm making a board game. If it turns out well, I will sell it in stores, and earn money."

... "Does it not concern you, "she [Lady Berwick] asked Pandora, "that this hobby, along with the distasteful desire to earn money, will alienate prospective suitors?"

"No, ma'am."

"It should. Don't you wish to marry?" At Pandora's lack of response, she pressed impatiently. "Well?"

... "No, I don't wish to marry, ever. I like men quite well—at least the one's I've been acquainted with—but I shouldn't like to have to obey a husband and serve his

needs. It wouldn't make me at all happy to have a dozen children, and stay at home knitting while he goes out romping with his friends. I would rather be independent.”
(*Winterborne*, ch. 19)

Part of what Lady Berwick labels “unconventional” in Pandora’s behaviour is a sign of undiagnosed ADHD, a condition that makes it more difficult for the heroine to stick to the rules governing Victorian upper-class society. This problem, in tandem with Pandora’s disregard for etiquette and her great entrepreneurial spirit, render the heroine a social misfit. Lady Berwick’s attempts to mould Pandora’s character in *Marrying Winterborne* are ineffectual to say the least, and by the time novel starts Pandora remains the opposite of Victorian womanhood. The previous exchange anticipates the conflict between Pandora and the hero of *Devil in Spring*, Gabriel, also known as Lord St. Vincent. The heroine’s plans to commercialise her invention clash with the hero’s expectations about what a woman should look forward to in her life.

In *Consuming Agency and Desire in Romance* (2018), Jenni Simon argues that the romance consumer is no longer attracted to “traditional” loves stories. “Young readers”, she observes, “have new social realities that demand more independent and empowered female leads. To maintain their loyalty, writers have to create plotlines that reflect these women’s lives” (Simon 33). *Devil in Spring* meets the first requirement by featuring a heroine that challenges the status quo, but the plotline is fundamentally a retelling of the forced marriage story. Pandora and Gabriel, two perfect strangers, find themselves in an unorthodox

situation that resembles a midnight *rendezvous*. In the Victorian period in which the novel is set, the protagonists are forced to marry to safeguard the heroine's reputation; otherwise, Pandora would be considered a fallen woman and risk greater social ostracism.

The first half of the novel narrates the actual courtship. Gabriel originally proposes to Pandora out of duty. As a handsome young man, the hero relishes the perks of his bachelorhood. However, as a member of the English peerage, Gabriel is expected to take on a wife of good social position. Pandora, an earl's daughter, would be a most suitable candidate were it not for her eccentric behaviour (*Devil* 51-3). In contrast with other women who would be more than willing to have him as a husband, the heroine turns down his first offer: "It has nothing to do with you; it's just that I don't intend to marry at all" (*Devil* 27). The hero's puzzlement over her behaviour gives way to genuine interest and then to love, yet Pandora expounds repeatedly on her motives for remaining single. The impossibility of carrying out her professional aspirations within the framework of the English legal system leave spinsterhood as the only feasible option: "I want to be self-supporting", she tells Gabriel (*Devil* 27). The hero, who sincerely believes that marriage is an advantageous contract that guarantees a woman's "safety" (*Devil* 119), has a hard time understanding the heroine's viewpoint. Pandora's reaction comes swiftly:

"Not if 'safety' means being owned. As things stand now, I have the freedom to work and keep my earnings. But if I marry you, everything I have, including my company,

would immediately become yours. You would have complete authority over me. Every shilling I made would go directly to you—it wouldn't even pass through my hands. I'd never be able to sign a contract, or hire employees, or buy property. In the eyes of the law, a husband and wife are one person, and that person is the husband. I can't bear the thought of it. It's why I never want to marry." (*Devil* 119)

Pandora's speech uncovers Gabriel's bias, which manifests itself as a form of equal-but-different essentialism: "Any man who chooses to believe women's minds are inferior is underestimating them at his own peril. However, nature imposes certain domestic roles by making the wife the bearer of children" (*Devil* 121). Kleypas's other historical romances, including *Dreaming of You* and *Suddenly You*, criticise Victorian mores with different degrees of explicitness, but the hero is often presented as an exception to this archaic, prevailing morality. In *Devil in Spring*, by contrast, the hero is part of the problem at the beginning. Upon hearing Pandora's arguments, Gabriel contacts a lawyer that confirms the heroine's words: the marriage contract subsumes a woman's rights into her husband's, transforming her into a female covert that cannot own property or make decisions without her husband's consent.

Gabriel's feelings for Pandora encourage him to come up with a subterfuge, an amendment to the Married Women's Property Act which would allow the heroine to start and control her board game business, if not in theory, at least in practice:

“Here’s how we would structure it: Upon our marriage, when your business automatically transfers to me, I’ll put it in trust for you and hire you as the company president.”

“But... what about legal contracts? If I can’t sign anything, how can I enter into agreements with suppliers and stores, and how could I hire people—“

“We could hire a manager to assist you, on condition that he always comply with your wishes.”

“What about the company’s profits? They would go to you, wouldn’t they?”

“Not if you folded them back into the business.”

Pandora stared at him fixedly, her mind working over the idea, trying to comprehend what such a future would look and feel like. ... It wouldn’t be ownership, but it would have the appearance of it. Rather like wearing a tiara and asking everyone to pretend she was royalty, when they all knew it was a sham. (*Devil* 204-5)

Pandora’s rebellion against social dictates has attracted much attention both inside and outside Romancelandia. In the various interviews Kleypas gave apropos the book, this character has been upheld as an example of the genre’s commitment to portray stronger, more independent heroines in view of the current attack on women’s rights (e.g. Kleypas “Romance Queen”).

It may have become evident by now that the conflict in *Devil in Spring* has no easy solution. Since the law prevents Pandora from rightfully owning her business, the happy ending in marriage would mean a betrayal of the character’s very essence. Kleypas here makes a daring move to solve the problematic: the heroine experiences a sort of epiphany in which she realises that she cannot, in fact, “have it all”. Gabriel’s attentions and his apparent understanding of her most intimate

fears and desires (e.g. his attempts to find a loophole to give her greater legal freedom) make Pandora fall in love with him. Furthermore, the heroine realises that if she does not accept the hero's proposal, she will be facing an incomplete existence:

In that moment, Pandora realized it would kill her not to have him. She might actually expire of heartbreak. She was becoming someone new, with him—they were becoming something together—and nothing was going to turn out the way she'd expected. Kathleen [her sister-in-law] had been right—whatever she chose, it wouldn't be perfect. She would have to lose something.

But no matter what else she gave up, this man was the thing she couldn't lose. (*Devil* 219)

In relation to this particular scene, feminist scholar and romance blogger Jackie C. Horne observes that “Pandora's transgressive feminist desires have been abruptly recast as an immature girl's unwillingness to compromise, the need for heterosexual love held forth as the most important thing in Pandora's (any girl's?) life” (“Historical Gender Tightrope” par. 9). Whilst Pandora's sudden realisation appears as a *deus ex machina* device that brings the hero and heroine together, this does not mean that we should completely ignore the content of her declarations. What is at stake in *Devil in Spring* is not just Pandora's board game business; it is also a life in solitude without the promise of love and companionship. Thus, the passage above constitutes a rather sincere declaration of affective needs and the possibility of a future that includes both professional goals and coupledness. The novel speaks frankly about the sacrifices inherent to romantic relationships, where

one's own goals are not abandoned, but concessions are inevitable in order to create a life in common. As Pandora explains to Gabriel, she has “‘conditions. Thousands of them’” before she can agree to a marriage (*Devil* 222). Among these, the heroine emphasises three: personal space and privacy (“‘I need a room in the house that is only mine’”), the desire to obviate the word “obey” in their wedding vows, and fidelity (*Devil* 222-3).¹⁶¹

The second half of the novel shows Pandora and Gabriel struggling to accommodate what the hero identifies as “marital boundaries”; that is, their respective individual needs and personal projects (*Devil* 235). The focus lies primarily on the heroine, who still worries about her business schedule and in what ways her new social position as Lady St. Vincent will delay them. An example of this can be found in Pandora's lack of enthusiasm with wedding arrangements or the idea of embarking on a long honeymoon:

She was well aware, of course, that a honeymoon had become traditional for upper- and middle-class newlyweds. But she was terrified of being swallowed up in

¹⁶¹ The latter means the termination of Gabriel's affair with Nora Black, a married woman who had been his lover prior to the story's beginning. In all fairness, Mrs. Black's plays a minor role in the plot. Initially, she exemplifies the hero's darker side, for she is the only person who understands Gabriel's sexual drives (*Devil* 53-4). Their respective personal issues (i.e. his fear of failure and her married condition) prevented them from reaching any kind of emotional intimacy (*Devil* 260-1), yet Mrs. Black is reluctant to let their affair die. She tries to convince Pandora that she is nothing but a momentary distraction to Gabriel, and that he will eventually go back to her (*Devil* 298-9). Pandora, however, does not fall into her trap. As was the case with Joyce's character in *Dreaming of You*, Kleypas gives us some background information to understand the female foil's actions. Nora Black is a young woman married to an old man, a former army officer, who does not provide her with either emotional or physical satisfaction. Like Lady Ashby, Mrs. Black is portrayed as a woman profoundly dissatisfied with her lot.

a life while all her plans and dreams fell by the wayside. She wouldn't enjoy going away somewhere, thinking about all that awaited her at home. (*Devil* 224)

A further point of conflict after their marriage is Drago, Gabriel's trusted man and Pandora's newly appointed footman. The hero puts this man in charge of Pandora's safety whenever she leaves the house to visit printers, factories, etc., so as to protect her from thieves, offenders and other criminals. The heroine initially finds Drago's presence distressing and demands that he should be replaced with someone closer to her expectations (*Devil* 258-9). Little by little, though, Pandora gets used to the footman's presence, and the two of them reach a compromise: Drago agrees to give her more freedom, provided that she follows his guidance if he perceives any imminent threat (*Devil* 277-8).

The ultimate test in the protagonists' relationship comes in the final chapters of the novel. Pandora, who has been visiting various areas of London in search for the best manufacturer for her product, is inadvertently caught up in a conspiracy. The heroine becomes a target of the Fenians or Irish nationalists when she witnesses their preparations for an attack against government authorities. The heroine sustains important injuries, but the medical skills of Dr. Garrett Gibson save Pandora's life.¹⁶² Even so, Gabriel fears for her well-being: since

¹⁶² Dr. Garrett Gibson was a secondary character in both *Marrying Winterborne* and *Devil in Spring* before she was upgraded to protagonist in *Hello Stranger* (2018), the fourth book in the *Ravenels* series. Like Pandora, Garrett is also a rarity in the Victorian context in which the novels are set. As the first female doctor in England, Dr. Gibson must combat the prejudices of her male peers as well as the patients. Eventually, her excellent abilities as a surgeon win other characters' respect. The fact that a female doctor, and not the hero, saves

her attempted murderer was the same person whom the heroine had first contacted to print her board game, Gabriel intervenes to postpone Pandora's work schedule and reduce her unconventional activities to the minimum. His meddling enrages the heroine, who feels that the hero has broken his most important promise: "His control was going to extend to her business. He was going to decide when and how much she could work, and oblige her to ask his permission for whatever she wanted to do, all in the name of protecting her health" (*Devil* 334).

Pandora confronts the hero head on, first accusing him of keeping her "sedated in the attic with an ankle manacled to the floor" (*Devil* 335), and then explaining the truth of her feelings for him: "I'm never going to obey you. But I'm always going to love you" (*Devil* 337). The ensuing love scene signifies a renewed commitment to create a life together in which the heroine's boundaries are respected:

Although the subject of Pandora's board game business was not brought up again that night, she knew that Gabriel wouldn't stand in the way when she finally decided to resume her work. He wouldn't like her outside interests, would no doubt air his opinions about them, but he would gradually come to understand that the more he accepted her freedom, the easier it would be for her to be close to him.

... Their marriage would be a partnership, just like their waltzing... not perfect, not always graceful, but they would find their way together. (*Devil* 339-40)

Pandora could be interpreted as a deliberate move on Kleypas's part to introduce conventional romance tropes, albeit with a twist.

The last chapter confirms that Gabriel will not exert his lawful authority over the heroine. Unconcerned with his objections, Pandora agrees to carry out a risky manoeuvre that would bring the leader of the Fenians to justice. Not only does the heroine single out the correct man amongst the crowd; she also uncovers a devious plot that would have cost the lives of three thousand people, including the Prince of Wales. Pandora and Gabriel return home safe and sound, feeling the promise of love and happiness now that all obstacles are gone.

As in all Kleypas's novels, the Epilogue is of paramount importance. In this case, the final pages depict Pandora and Gabriel in front of a "Sold Out" sign: "[t]he board game of the season, The Great Department Store Shopping Spree will be back in stock soon" (*Devil* 364). The author comes up with a happy ending that is all about the fulfilment of the heroine's professional ambitions. There are no references to children, a rather surprising detail if we take into account Kleypas's previous stories, and Gabriel's presence serves as an affirmation of what a healthy, supportive relationship should look like.

The decision to finish the novel this way was intentional. On the one hand, Kleypas is confident that she will "mention in a future book that she'll have had a child, but the real satisfaction for her [Pandora] has to be that she finally achieves this goal of creating a successful game and establishing a successful business for herself" ("Romance Queen" par. 9). On the other hand, Kleypas purposefully chooses to

transmit the message that a romantic relationship demands sacrifices on both sides, but it eventually pays off:

In *Devil in Spring*, there was no easy answer for the conflict, ... her dream's over when she gets married. His personal expectations of having a wife to run the household and be traditional and be a duchess someday, his dream's over too. So the two of them together have to come up with a new dream that looks different than either of them expected. Neither of them get everything that they want. I happen to feel like that really reflects real life, but that's a good thing.... if you find the right partner, as a couple you're going to create something together that is going to be better than what you could do or have individually. ("Romance Queen" par. 20)

Kleypas identifies herself as a feminist, and in *Devil in Spring* she conveys feminist-based ideas about female emancipation and agency. Curiously, the novel fails to situate Pandora's struggle to be economically independent within the wider context of first-wave feminism. As critics we can only speculate why, but in view of Kleypas's professional development there is a good chance that the escapist function of romance fiction be the reason for this. As we have seen in the introduction to the author's profile, this particular writer thinks about the romance genre as a tool that women readers use to evade reality temporarily. This would explain why, despite possessing a clear feminist subtext, the majority of her works avoid entering directly into political debates.

Devil in Spring and its immediate successor, *Hello Stranger*, partly break this rule. In the present case, Kleypas makes sure that readers are

aware of her political intentions in the final Author's Note, in which she reveals that a real life person, Elizabeth Magie, inspired Pandora's character.¹⁶³ Kleypas largely conceives the book as a "homage" to Magie, a pioneering woman that registered a patent for a board game that would eventually become the Monopoly (*Devil* 367). Due to her desire to put more "*history* into historical romance" ("Romance Queen", italics in the original), Kleypas restores to its rightful place the figure of a woman whose impact in contemporary culture has been largely overlooked in favour of a man's, Charles Darrow.¹⁶⁴ The author's efforts to write *herstory* should be fairly appreciated, just like her final words of encouragement:

More than ever, after having read so much about the incredible frustration and suffering of our sisters in the not-so-distant past, I cherish the rights they fought for—and won. Never discount your worth, my dear friends. Our opinions and our voices are valuable! The sparks you have inside will provide light for future generations, just as those wonderful women did for us. (*Devil* 368)

Kleypas's final statement in *Devil in Winter* may be read as a call for action, which reminds female romance readers that the feminist movement still thrives in the face of gender inequality. As the author declared in a recent interview, "... we have so many more rights now and we can own things, thank god, [but] there are a lot of parallels to

¹⁶³ The same holds true for Dr. Garrett Gibson. Kleypas based the doctor's character on Elizabeth Garret Anderson, the first female physician in England. After her license, the English medical school refused to accept women amongst their ranks for at least a decade.

¹⁶⁴ To learn more about the origins of the monopoly game and how Magie's name shuffled into oblivion, see Walsh.

how it used to be. We still have a ways [sic] to go” (“Romance Queen” par. 10). With this novel, Lisa Kleypas ratifies that romance novels and feminism are by no means mutually exclusive, and that the genre can be used as a platform for discussing various issues affecting women in heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, this section has hopefully demonstrated that contemporary mass-market romance, despite its presumed history of anti-feminist messages, can be put at the service of the feminist project, disseminating feminist principles whilst preserving its chief escapist tone.

3.2.4. *Smooth Talking Stranger* (2009)

This final section discusses one of Kleypas’s most popular and thematically sophisticated novels. Published in 2009, *Smooth Talking Stranger* initially marked the end of Kleypas’s Texan trilogy or, as fans have nicknamed the books, the *Travis* series. With *Sugar Daddy* (2007), this author irrupted in the contemporary romance subgenre. Described by Kleypas herself as a novel with “a broader scope than the other books I’ve done” (“Writer’s Corner”), Liberty Jones’s story is also an examination of race, class difference, femininity and motherhood. The presence of these themes sometimes overshadows the courtship plot, as was the case with Pilcher’s *The Shell Seekers*. By contrast, in *Blue-Eyed Devil* (2008) and *Smooth Talking Stranger* Kleypas masterfully intertwines the secondary themes with the love plot, making them inseparable. In the first case, Kleypas portrays the horrors of an abusive marriage and marital rape, before she unites the heroine, Haven Travis,

with a man that represents the exact opposite of her first husband. In *Smooth Talking Stranger*, the author employs two of the most popular romance tropes, the doorstep baby and the double-suitor plot, to make powerful statements about femininity and sexuality, motherhood, and heterosexual relationships. As will be evident in the upcoming pages, these themes orbit around and influence the development of Ella's and Jack's courtship. The latest addition to the series, *Brown-Eyed Girl* (2015), endeavours to attain the same degree of excellence, yet it fails to grasp the depth and innovative tone that characterises its predecessors.

Overall, *Smooth Talking Stranger* combines a critique of patriarchal femininity with a message of female emancipation, reminiscent of Pilcher's heroines Olivia and Carrie whom I discussed in sections 3.1.2 and 3.1.3 of this chapter. Kleypas overtly called Ella Varner a "feminist" during an interview to promote the book ("About Smooth"), and the heroine explicitly labels herself a feminist throughout the novel. Interestingly, Kleypas's deliberate choice of a first-person narrator allows her to simultaneously bolster feminist principles and casting aside rigid conceptions on the feminist identity, defending a woman's right to choose her own path.

The plot unfolds as follows: after been told that her younger sister has just had a son whom she has abandoned in their mother's incapable hands, the heroine brings her life into a halt and moves to Houston, Texas. Pressured by her family and by her own sense of responsibility,

Ella agrees to assume the infant's care while Tara enters a mental health clinic. Against her sister's wishes, though, Ella secretly begins to search for baby Luke's father and contacts Jack Travis, the most likely candidate. Jack, who is a former womaniser and the city's top bachelor, is also the hero in this novel. The paternity issue is cleared up expeditiously and Jack is absolved of any parental duties,¹⁶⁵ but rather than ignoring Ella and little Luke, he becomes actively involved in their situation. Jack procures them a place to stay, and he uses his many contacts and his influence to reach out to Luke's father. The hero becomes Ella's main source of support during these difficult times, and the two of them fall deeply in love. As for the book's most prominent themes, later on we will see how the novel constructs Jack and Ella's boyfriend as opposites, but first, let us focus on other equally salient motifs.

Like the previous instalments in the *Travis* series, *Smooth Talking Stranger* stands out for its commentary on female interrelationships, particularly mother-daughter bonds. Broadly speaking, the relationship between Ella, her sister Tara, and their mother, Candy, may be best categorised as toxic, defined as it is by emotional manipulation. Ella herself tells us about her traumatic childhood in the early pages of the novel: the father divorced and remarried, whereas Candy, the ultimate "drama queen", was allegedly more interested in herself and her

¹⁶⁵ Luke's paternity is one of the best-kept secrets in the novel. Towards the end, Ella and Jack discover that the real father is a wealthy religious pastor, Noah Cardiff. Cardiff is already married with children and he has a significant worldwide media presence, hence his decision to stand aside and let Tara's family fend for themselves with the newborn.

romantic affairs than in her daughters' welfare (*Smooth* 3-4). In addition to parental neglect, the sexual abuses perpetrated against Tara by Candy's third husband complete the picture of a dysfunctional family.

Candy, and to a lesser extent, Tara, personify a wrong kind of womanhood, one that is constructed exclusively in relation to men. About her mother, Ella explains that she is "a woman who badly needed love and yet was unable to return it... a woman who struggled to control and dominate the people who tried to get close to her. ... [which resulted in] a constant and exhausting turnover of lovers and friends" (*Smooth* 11). In their first meeting, when Ella arrives to pick up the baby, it is clear that Candy strives to mitigate the passage of time, exercising regularly and dressing as a younger woman in order to look as attractive as possible:

Mom looked the same as always: slim, fit, and dressed like a teen pop star, no matter that she was pushing fifty. She wore a tight black tank top, a denim miniskirt cinched with a rhinestone-encrusted Kippy belt, and high-heeled sandals. Her forehead was as taut as the skin on a grape. Her hair had been bleached into Hilton blonde, falling to her shoulders in meticulously sprayed waves. (*Smooth* 17)

That Candy measures a person's worth according to his/her sexual appeal becomes obvious whenever she censures Ella's physical appearance. In addition, Candy competes with her daughters for male attention. She readily comments that men always take good notice of her (*Smooth* 299) and apparently, she slept with Ella's teenaged boyfriend once (*Smooth* 15-6). Candy also makes a pass at Jack Travis,

exaggerating what she perceives as Ella's physical defects and accentuating her own positive qualities: "Mom proceeded to present herself as the desirable original, the brand name, with me as a failed copy" (*Smooth* 300).¹⁶⁶ Candy's need to assert her superiority also extends to Tara, to the point of calling her a "slut" when she was fifteen years old and had her first sexual experience (*Smooth* 15). In the present time, Candy refuses to take care of Tara's baby because she cannot afford to look her real age: "I don't want him [her boyfriend] to think of me as a grandmother" (*Smooth* 20), she argues, as this would clearly jeopardise her youthful image.

Ella's sister, Tara, takes after their mother in some respects. Unlike the heroine, who has "the good luck to be born moderately pretty", her younger sister was born "in the realm of goddesses" (*Smooth* 10). Tara is essentially described as the prototypical dumb blonde whose good looks define her as an individual: "Her beauty ... caused people to assume she was stupid, and truth to be told, it had not exactly driven Tara to prove her intellectual mettle" (*Smooth* 11). By the time the novel begins, Ella's sister has no real ambitions and takes on temporary jobs. She earns enough money to live a luxurious and riotous life in the company of their cousin, "a local starfucker of sorts" (*Smooth* 26), and the many men that frequent Houston's upper-class sphere. From a young age, Tara has had multiple liaisons with various men, "[j]ust like

¹⁶⁶ Revealingly, chief among these virtues is the possession of a sexy body. Candy bluntly tells Jack that people have complimented her on the firmness of her vagina: "I've been told... that I have the cutest coochie in Texas—'" (*Smooth* 301).

our mother” (*Smooth* 11). Yet unlike Candy, who is clearly a calculating person, Tara lacks the audacity to manipulate the men she dates to her own advantage.

Her most recent affair results in Luke’s birth, an unwanted pregnancy that immerses Tara in a depressed mood and brings her harrowing past to the forefront. In the first phone conversation between Ella and her sister, the latter expresses the alienation she felt whenever she looked at Luke and the trauma of growing up with Candy’s “conniptions, and all those men she brought in the house” (*Smooth* 79). Despite sharing the same painful experiences, Tara blames Ella for forsaking her and she does not hesitate to exploit Ella’s sense of guilt to her own advantage. She surrenders her baby’s care to Ella without considering the emotional and economic implications this has for the heroine:

“Just decide what you want to do. But all I need is for you to take care of the baby for three months. Three months out of your whole life, Ella! Can’t you do that for me? It’s the only thing I’ve ever asked from you! Can’t you help me, Ella? Can’t you?”

Her voice was hemmed with panic and fury. I heard my mother’s tone as Tara spoke, and it frightened me. (*Smooth* 83)

Tara receives psychological assistance at the mental health clinic and starts on the path to recovery. Albeit superficially, the final pages of the novel remark on her efforts to become more autonomous and assertive, but her identity is never completely divorced from men: “You

[Ella] don't trust anyone or believe in anything. Well, I'm different I don't want to be alone—I need a man, and there's nothing wrong with that" (*Smooth* 330). At the end of the day, Tara still plays the part of the married man's mistress.

Our heroine has taken her life in a completely different direction from her mother and sister. Ella moved to Dallas, "desperate to escape that smothering life, with all its soul-destroying patterns" (*Smooth* 80). She has also sought for alternative ways to define herself and evaluate her self-worth, like her education or her job as an advice columnist. She is "no longer a child" who can be manipulated, but a woman with "a college degree, a career, a steady boyfriend, and a circle of good friends" (*Smooth* 3-4). Ella is a vocal advocate for economic self-sufficiency, and she tries to convince Tara to secure some kind of maintenance for herself and for Luke. Similarly, in her magazine column, the heroine offers some guidance to female readers on how to conduct themselves in romantic relationships, emphasising, first and foremost, that women "don't need a man to feel complete" (*Smooth* 67). In a way, Miss Independent, Ella's alias, symbolises everything the heroine wants to be: a fearless woman that tackles her problems directly and "never needs to be rescued" (*Smooth* 30). As Ella observes throughout the novel, however, she is a real woman with flaws, and she does not always live up to the expectations of her alter ego.¹⁶⁷ Among

¹⁶⁷ As Ella's own relationship with Jack Travis strengthens, Miss Independent loses some of her objectivity and becomes less dogmatic. She comes to see her readers as real women, and the task of giving advice becomes trickier (*Smooth* 310).

other things, Ella cannot escape the lure of Jack Travis, a man that embodies some of the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity.

Regardless of her achievements and her sincere struggle to live independently, Ella's actions are sometimes conditioned by her mother and sister. Ella remains "the problem-solver" of the family (*Smooth* 18), stepping in and assuming Luke's guardianship for a limited period. Candy and Tara also influence Ella in other, more subtle ways. Most notably, Candy's volatile character, her lack of real affection for her daughters and her multiple romantic affairs lay at the heart of Ella's fear of commitment, one of the obstacles in her relationship with Jack Travis: "Closeness meant that the one you loved the most would cause you the most damage. How did you unlearn that? It was woven deep between every fiber and vessel. You couldn't cut it out" (*Smooth* 76). Throughout the novel, the heroine breaks this emotional isolation and learns to open her heart to others, first the baby and then Jack.

For all of the above, it becomes clear that *Smooth Talking Stranger* offers a negative portrayal of male-oriented femininity, represented by Candy and Tara. To a large extent, the book also comments extensively on motherhood as an institution, the qualities of a good mother, and the sacrifices associated with childrearing. Through the interactions between Candy, Ella and Tara, as well as between Tara and Luke, and Ella and Luke, Kleypas delivers the message that maternity should be a woman's choice, and not a social imperative.

The novel presents Candy as a competent caretaker but a dreadful mother. During the few hours that she takes care of little Luke, Candy demonstrates that she knows how to handle a baby's physical needs:

Mom showed me how to burp him and to change the diaper. Her competence surprised me, especially since she had never been a baby person, and it had undoubtedly been a long time since she had last done such a thing. I tried to picture her as a young mother, patiently attending to the never-ending tasks of caring for a baby. I couldn't imagine she had enjoyed any of it. (*Smooth* 25)

By contrast, she knows very little about emotional caregiving. Candy lacks "motherly instinct", and she only had children because that was the socially prescribed role for women: "It was what women did when they got married", she explains to Ella (*Smooth* 22). Her self-centredness leads Candy to build a selective narrative, in which she was a single, working mother with two young children under her care. Her narcissism prevents her from seeing the reality of circumstances, including her third husband's abuses. From Candy's point of view, Ella and Tara simply do not give her enough credit for her efforts: "'And I did my best. I made sacrifices to give you the best childhood I could. And neither of you seems to remember any of it. It's a shame, how ungrateful children are. Especially daughters'" (*Smooth* 22). In light of this, it is easier to understand why she delegates the responsibility of looking after Tara's baby to Ella. Candy does not feel attached to Luke in any way and recommends that Tara should give him up for adoption

in order to avoid social stigma (*Smooth* 20). As we have seen in previous pages, babies are a hindrance when it comes to enticing men.

Ella's reaction to Luke is very different. She knows nothing about babies and motherhood is not among her future plans, but she understands that Luke is helpless, a kind of "hot potato, doomed to be tossed back and forth" (*Smooth* 24). As the plot unfolds and Ella tries to locate the baby's father, readers get a first-hand account of the physical and mental exhaustion inherent to parenthood. Distress over how to proceed, lack of sleep, balancing work and her new responsibilities, all of them take their toll on Ella, swinging her moods and radically changing her lifestyle (*Smooth* 90). Nevertheless, Ella makes room for the baby in her life, and in seeing his daily development and participating in the process, she bonds with him (*Smooth* 91). Luke brings down the walls that Ella had built around herself in self-preservation, and he comes to feel like a son to her (*Smooth* 291). When Tara eventually comes to take the baby away, the separation leaves Ella emotionally devastated: "I felt nervous and defeated. And somewhere deep inside I was aware of lurking anger. Not a lot of anger; just a small, potent kindling, enough to burn out any remaining hint of optimism about my own future" (*Smooth* 326).

In the last chapters, Ella and Jack overcome all the obstacles in their relationship: namely, the heroine's decision to abandon Houston in order to avoid being hurt again. Jack proposes to Ella and she accepts, but the heroine realises that Luke is an integral part of her happiness,

and that she “would never be quite whole without him” (*Smooth* 364). As may be self-evident by now, Kleypas’s romances purposefully portray heroines that triumph in all aspects of their life, and *Smooth Talking Stranger* is not an exception. In the final pages of the novel, the author reunites Ella with Luke on the eve of her wedding to Jack. Unexpectedly, Tara asks her sister if she would like to legally adopt Luke. Tara had already felt detached from the baby before entering the mental health clinic, and this feeling has not disappeared: “I’ve been taking care of Luke, spending a lot of time with him, and it’s still like it was in the beginning. He doesn’t feel like mine. He never will. I don’t want children, Ella. I don’t want to be a mother... I don’t want to relive our childhood” (*Smooth* 367). The Epilogue shows Luke welcoming Ella home after a business trip and calling her “Mama” (*Smooth* 372).

Despite the fact that the heroine willingly becomes a mother in the end, two different elements refute the idea that this novel reconciles women with the traditional feminine roles. For one thing, Ella’s career is on the rise. Miss Independent’s column is being transformed into a book, provisionally titled “Six Strategies for Finding and Keeping Happiness”. Like all other Kleypas’s heroines, Ella successfully combines a happy domestic life with a demanding job. In the second place, the novel also defends other life options for women. Tara is a good case in point, because in giving up Luke, this character defies social expectations about what a mother should do and feel: “Just because a woman can have children,” she declares succinctly, “it

doesn't make her a mother'" (*Smooth* 367). Apart from vindicating motherhood as a personal choice, this book also defends that women have the right to take control of their lives and make whatever decisions they want. Ella, for example, clearly disapproves of her sister's commitment to a married man who offers her no guarantees. Even so, she accepts that her sister is entitled to live life in her own terms (*Smooth* 366-7). *Smooth Talking Stranger*, therefore, shows that there are many paths towards happiness, all of them worthy of respect.

On a different but related note, this novel deals extensively with the nature of romantic relationships, marriage, and female emancipation, three key issues in the feminist agenda. At the outset of the novel, Ella is romantically involved with a man called Dane. Their partnership works because Dane "was always gentle, reading my signals, never demanding too much. He made me feel safe for the first time ever" (*Smooth* 7). However, deep inside Ella knows that some element is "missing" in their relationship, preventing them "from reaching absolute closeness" (*Smooth* 7).

It does not take long for the reader to discover that Dane receives much more than what he gives. He has Ella accommodating his preferred lifestyle, for instance, including veganism. Despite the fact that she "like[s] the health benefits" and the peace of mind associated with consuming animal-free products, this diet is not something she would have chosen for herself. She confesses to Jack that "[t]he reason I eat vegan is because my boyfriend Dane does. I never feel full for

more than twenty minutes, and it's hard to keep up my energy”” (*Smooth* 58-9). In turn, Dane does not make any sacrifices for Ella, not even the important ones. He encourages the heroine to travel to Houston and find a solution to the problem of Luke and Tara, but he refuses to become actively involved in the situation. He has his own life goals, and assuming the responsibility for a child is not among them (*Smooth* 97-9). Ella, therefore, has to shoulder this burden alone.

Dane personifies a different type of masculinity. He is described as a “beta”, an easy-going man, preoccupied with environmental issues and uninterested in conventional romantic relationships. At the beginning of the novel, Ella explains to Jack that she and Dane do not believe in marriage: “I could make Dane a legal promise that I would love him forever, but how can I be certain I will? You can't legislate emotions. You can't own someone else. So the union is basically a property-sharing agreement. ... The institution has outlived its usefulness” (*Smooth* 65-6).¹⁶⁸ Ingenuously, Ella assumes that her relationship with Dane is solid despite his negative to help her with the baby, hence her disbelief when she discovers that theirs was an open partnership with no strings attached. ““In a mature relationship”, Dane clarifies at some point, “there are no problems and no guarantees. We don't own each other”” (*Smooth* 100). When her physical and emotional connection with Jack strengthens, the heroine finally understands that Dane “had always been a friend I had slept with, and how entirely

¹⁶⁸ Love should be, according to the heroine, “[t]he only thing keeping two people together” (*Smooth* 66).

different that was from having a lover who could be a friend” (*Smooth* 222). Ella and Dane follow different paths, and in Jack Travis’s company she finds a rewarding, supportive intimate relationship.

At first, Ella distrusts the hero. His good looks and his womanising past identify him as the prototypical alpha male, “the kind who had spurred evolution forward about five million years ago by nailing every female in sight. They charmed, seduced, and behaved like bastards, and yet women were biologically incapable of resisting their magic DNA” (*Smooth* 40). Like other Kleypas’s heroes, Jack possesses traces of hypermasculinity, including physical strength, a strong-willed, authoritative personality, and innate self-confidence. A further element that confirms Jack’s alpha nature is his passion for outdoor activities and physical labour. According to his sister, Haven, Jack has “a basic need to test himself against the land, and nature” (*Smooth* 133). The hero is also given a chance to describe himself, as we see in the following lines:

“...You can’t stand between a Texan and his power tools. We like them. Big ones that drain the national grid. We also like truck-stop breakfasts, large moving objects, Monday night football, and the missionary position. We don’t drink light beer, drive Smart Cars, or admit to knowing the names of more than about five or six colors. And we don’t wax our chests. Ever.” (*Smooth* 145)

Ella initially perceives Jack as “unapologetically masculine” (*Smooth* 41), and “an old-fashioned man’s man” (*Smooth* 146). For these reasons, his gentle side surprises her. Jack is tender and

affectionate with Luke, and he helps Ella to locate the baby's father. Furthermore, the hero also finds Ella a suitable accommodation in town and he offers to prepare the baby's room, and to take care of him while she rests: "I like you, Ella. I respect what you're doing for your sister. Most people in your situation would back down rather than take the risk. I don't mind helping someone who's trying like hell to do the right thing" (*Smooth* 121). These gestures evince Jack's true personality and his hero qualities, establishing him as the complete opposite of Dane.

In part, Ella associates her fascination with Jack with the lack of a fatherly figure:

It had left me with a deeply buried attraction to strong men, men with the capacity to dominate, and that terrified me. So I had always gone in the other direction, toward men like Dane who made you kill your own spiders and carry your suitcase. That was exactly what I had wanted. And yet someone like Jack Travis, unimpeachably male, so damned sure of himself, held a secret, nearly fetishistic allure to me. (*Smooth* 87)

As a woman struggling to be emotionally independent, Ella sees this attraction towards an alpha male as problematic. In addition to her fear of commitment which is a consequence of her upbringing, the other obstacle in Jack's and Ella's relationship is the apparent irreconcilability between the heroine's feminist ideals and the hero's traditional manliness. Throughout the novel, Ella has the opportunity to test Jack's behaviour and opinions on a wide range of issues (e.g. equal opportunities for men and women), so as to judge his place "on the

evolutionary scale” (*Smooth* 146). Ultimately, it is through his actions, and not his words, that the hero demonstrates his worth. Beneath his appearance of hegemonic masculinity, there lies a sensitive and supportive man, ready to stand by the heroine’s side and to contribute to her growth as an individual. Doubtless, Jack is one of the characters that best exemplifies Kleypas’s conception of the romance hero as a man who anticipates the heroine’s needs without yielding his most enticing (masculine) features.

Smooth Talking Stranger posits that marriage is compatible with a feminist identity, even if the hero possesses traces of hypermasculinity. By the end of the novel, Ella’s standpoint in relation to marriage is thoroughly changed:

It occurred to me much later that the people who said marriage was just a piece of paper were usually people who had never done it. Because that cliché discounted something important—the power of words... and I, more than anyone, should have understood that.

Somehow the promise we had made on that piece of paper gave me more freedom than I’d ever known before. It allowed us both to argue, to laugh, to risk, to trust—without fear. It was a confirmation of a connection that already existed. And it was a bond that extended far beyond the borders of a shared living space. We would have stayed together even without a marriage certificate... but I believed in the permanence it represented.

It was a piece of paper you could build a life on.
(*Smooth* 361-2)

In this novel, Kleypas expresses the sentiments of many women whose desire for autonomy is usually opposed to their longing for

emotional and sexual intimacy and security. The final ending reconciles both: marriage enables Ella's personal and professional growth, at the same time that it leaves untouched her commitment to the feminist agenda. Besides introducing woman-related topics that have historically been part of the feminist debate, *Smooth Talking Stranger* challenges a monolithic understanding of feminist identity, reconciling theory (i.e. what a feminist is supposed to be) and practice (i.e. what she is in reality, a woman with affective needs).

* * *

Already at the onset of her career, we have seen Lisa Kleypas preoccupied with issues affecting women. In historical romance novels like *Dreaming of You* and *Suddenly You*, this author looked back in time to assess the situation of the female protagonist in a period when women's rights were severely limited by law and social norms. Through the portrayal of Sara and Amanda, Kleypas vindicated a woman's right to lead a completely satisfying life, in which she can be sexually and emotionally satisfied, establish a family of her own, and develop a successful professional career. *Devil in Spring* is a far more recent novel and one that departs significantly from this trend because, as we have seen, the heroine cannot "have it all". Here, Kleypas adopts an overt political stance, by bringing to the fore the unequal status of women in the nineteenth-century English legal system. As was explained in the analysis of the novel, Pandora's character represents women's historical pursuit of equal rights. This fact attests to the author's pledge to

advance the feminist agenda amidst a convoluted socio-political context like the one we are living in. Far from being an exception, Kleypas's engagement with feminism is also palpable in *Smooth Talking Stranger*, a book that might as well be interpreted as the culmination of her own personal and creative evolution. In this contemporary romance novel, Kleypas talks about the need for feminism in our present time, while simultaneously questioning essentialist conceptions of what a feminist looks like. The underlying message of this text is that despite contradictions, all women can take part in feminism as long as they believe in equality.

Besides illustrating the growing commitment that some romance writers have made with the feminist movement, the analysis of Kleypas's selected titles has demonstrated the aesthetic worth of some mass-market romance novels. Our case studies, for instance, combine entertainment with politics in remarkable ways; they show an awareness of narrative rhythm and depth of characterisation that can rival with "more prestigious" novels like Pilcher's *The Shell Seekers*; most of them also present a metaliterary reflection that would meet the approval of the most sceptical literary critics. All things considered, therefore, the study of Lisa Kleypas's figure and of some of her most popular and interesting works has effectively challenged some of the assumptions that still plague the most commercial branch of the romance novel genre.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the most pressing issues in contemporary feminist activism is the definition of feminism itself, and its relationship with a postfeminist discourse that seeks, on the one hand, to undermine the reputation of one of the most far-reaching sociopolitical movements of the last century, and to certify its demise, on the other. Younger generations of self-proclaimed feminists have challenged this postfeminist rhetoric, arguing that generalised sexism has not been eradicated, and that gender inequality and misogyny are still a scourge that no democratic society should tolerate (e.g. Walker “Becoming”; Banyard; B. Campbell). Invoking the spirit of third-wave feminist Rebecca Walker, sociologist Sylvia Walby has recently declared that “[t]here are many ways in which the subject of feminism is constituted, including promoting womanhood, claiming the equal treatment of women with men, and imagining the transformation of gender relations. There is not a single approach, but rather a mix” (50). These same activists and theorists demonstrate that feminism is thriving in our society, no matter the difficulties to define the concept in non-essentialist terms.

Against this background, mass-market romance fiction has been exalted as the “foremost feminist genre, written for women/by women” (“Let’s Woman-Splain”). This and other similar claims (e.g. Crusie

Smith “Romancing Reality”; Hall; Rodale *Dangerous Books*) have put the genre at the centre of feminist scholarly debate once again, prompting questions about the *de facto* meaning of “feminist” in this context and about the (in)compatibility of the romance genre with the feminist project. In addition, the implicit assertion that anything that is produced by a woman becomes automatically “feminist” has rekindled an old-time argument among feminist ranks which goes as far back as the 1980s, with critics like Rosalind Coward asking whether women’s novels are feminist novels by definition (“This Novel”).

This dissertation emerged from the need to verify the above-mentioned hypothesis, but also as a long-time reader’s attempt to expose the (academic) bias that denies romance novels aesthetic value or politically progressive content. As its very title indicates, *Antecedents and Development of the Contemporary Romance Novel in English: A Study of the Contribution to the Genre by Rosamunde Pilcher and Lisa Kleypas* traces the evolution of the often-derided genre of mass-market romance fiction, and it does so by focusing on its relationship with feminist theory and activism. The project’s subtitle denotes the specific interest in analysing the genre’s development during the second half of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first, a period when both feminism and romance novels experienced radical and rapid transformations, partly because of their mutual influence.

In reviewing the genre’s extensive and complex relationship with feminism, not only have I attempted to study the genre as a prospective

ally for the feminist agenda, but to vindicate as well the paramount importance of approaching romance fiction from this perspective. According to some voices, the third wave of scholarship on popular romance in which we are currently situated “largely dispenses with the question of whether romances are good or bad for women” (Teo 18), but this standpoint clearly minimises the role played by this question in the ongoing evolution of the genre. Thus, this project contributes to the fast-growing field of popular romance studies by engaging with its methodological issues. A second way in which this dissertation adds to the development of this particular field is by focusing on a handful of selected novels that span the careers of two reputed romance writers, Rosamunde Pilcher and Lisa Kleypas. Whilst mindful about making generalisations over an incredibly vast and ever-changing literary genre, the study of Pilcher’s and Kleypas’s titles suggests that not only has modern romance fiction been incredibly sensitive to the debates going on at the heart of the feminist movement, but that the genre has plunged into them wholeheartedly. One of the novels analysed in this dissertation, *Devil in Spring* (2017), is a good case in point. Kleypas’s book proves that these texts can combine their traditional escapist function with a conscious political message about female autonomy and contemporary heterosexual relationships.

To accomplish such an ambitious enterprise as the one I have proposed, important decisions had to be taken. To begin with, I have focused almost exclusively on the romance novel’s characteristics,

sometimes in detriment of other approaches. The valuable contributions of ethnographical research have been duly taken into account in the course of this investigation, but my own approach to the romance novel has been primarily textually-based. Adding other methodologies would have undoubtedly elongated the research process and diverted our attention from our main goal: studying the texts' diachronic evolution in relation to feminism.

The second most important decision that had to be made pertains to the corpus selection process. In Chapters Two and Three of this dissertation, I have provided an overview of the genre's historical development which clearly and inevitably privileges certain authors and works over others. As I mentioned in the Introduction, and explained later at the beginning of Chapter Two, comprehensive definitions of the romance novel enlarge the corpus of analysis and make it impractical for research purposes. Yet too strict definitions also have their drawbacks. Namely, in refining in excess we overlook contact points with other genres and even genre-blending, both essential to understand the romance novel's development over the years. Throughout this study, I have attempted to find a middle ground between broad and narrow definitions, opting sometimes for widening the scope in pursuit of a better understanding of the romance's historical relationship with feminist ideas and activism.

Similarly, delimiting the number and the identity of the authors that would constitute my main object of study was also a difficult task.

Rosamunde Pilcher and Lisa Kleypas were finally selected for their respective chronologies and different nationalities, their thorough knowledge of the romance novel form, and lastly, for their ability to merge entertainment with strong political messages. This does not mean, however, that there are no other relevant authors to consider, like Maeve Binchy or Maya Rodale, both mentioned in Chapter Two, or others like Joanna Trollope, Barbara Taylor Bradford, Marcia Willet Alyssa Cole, Courtney Millan or Sherry Thomas. Indeed, the study of these other names and their works should be the next step in future research.

Choosing the actual texts for discussion has been equally difficult. In view of Pilcher's and Kleypas's long and prolific careers, I had to establish specific criteria that justified the choice of a reduced, manageable sample that would still be considered as representative of their trajectories. Among these, I would highlight the popularity of the books among the readership, the year in which they were written, their obvious engagement with feminist debates, and, last but not least, their aesthetic quality. These parameters have been useful for grouping together a series of texts that challenge many of the myths surrounding romance fiction, and back up the assertion that mass-market romance can be, if not the "foremost feminist genre", at least an ally in the fight for gender equality. Doubtless, some of the methodological decisions I have expounded here will be judged as more appropriate than others, yet they have served the double purpose of studying the romance

novel's evolution over the centuries, paying special attention to its development over the last fifty years, and demonstrating that some romance novels deserve our consideration as feminist texts, to the extent that they promote a multidimensional image of the female protagonist and defend her right to *freely* partake in multiple lifestyle options.

Having outlined the main methodological issues that this research project has encountered, I now proceed to summarise the content and main findings of each of the three blocks that make up this dissertation. Chapter One has offered a concise contextualisation of the origins of the (feminist) academic interest in romance novels and explained the creation of popular romance studies in the 1980s. In rereading the history of feminism as a sociopolitical movement, it becomes apparent that love and heterosexual relationships have been traditionally perceived as two key agents in the subordination of women. Second-wave feminist activists, in particular, puzzled over those women who continued to subordinate their personal ambitions to their partners', regardless of the substantial increase in work opportunities for them. Many women still assumed the burden of domestic chores and childrearing as well, on the basis of love and a woman's supposed biological nurturing abilities. As we have seen, high-profile feminists of the time like Germaine Greer believed that romance stories provided a script for heterosexual coupledness, and in the process obscured the inequalities inherent to these relationships (*Eunuch* 198-9).

Greer's hypothesis was later refined by Tania Modleski, Kay Mussell, or Janice Radway, among others. Generally speaking, these feminist critics agreed that the popularity of romance fiction was indicative of women's discontent with their status as wives, mothers and homemakers. With these findings in their hands, and considering the genre's growing sales, these scholars showed their concern over the possibility that romance reading might forestall women's demands for more egalitarian relationships and satisfying personal lives (Radway, *Reading* 212). Inevitably, this fear strengthened the genre's already negative reputation in society, adding a touch of "anti-feminism" to the generalised perception that romance novels were mass-produced, badly written entertainment. Only a minority of critics favoured a positive view of the romance novel genre. Carol Thurston, who wrote in the late 1980s, first formulated the hypothesis upheld by many fans and aca-fans nowadays (e.g. Kamblé "Female Enfranchisement"; Wendell *Everything I Know*; Rodale *Dangerous Books*). According to this author, romance fiction is a useful tool to disseminate feminist messages to readers, some of whom may be reluctant to think about feminism in more direct ways (Thurston 132).

Chapter One has commented on romance writers' and readers' reactions to these earlier studies. Jayne Ann Krentz's 1992 anthology, for example, and Jennifer Crusie Smith's essay published in the 1997 *Paradoxa* issue denounced the conspicuous elitism of Modleski, Radway and others, arguing that they consistently presented themselves

as the leaders and representatives of true feminism. Taken as a whole, Krentz, Crusie Smith and others partook in the precepts of third-wave feminism, a somewhat revolutionary way of approaching feminist theory and practice that emerged in the 1990s. Most notably, third wavers stressed individualism without risking collective action, in a tacit recognition of the diversity and multifaceted nature of (feminist) women (e.g. Heywood and Drake Introduction). Other than preaching racial, religious, and sexual inclusiveness, third-wave practitioners also acknowledged different forms of empowerment and female agency (e.g. Dicker and Piepmeier), which expanded to include popular culture's representation of women. Thus, when romance novels are analysed from the point of view of third-wave feminism, the books' preoccupation with traditional feminine issues like romantic relationships and domesticity becomes a legitimate discussion of many women's concerns. More importantly, the interest in these topics does not preclude a sincere engagement with the feminist movement. The final section in Chapter One touches briefly upon the community of romance writers and readers who claim that reading romance narratives has taught them many feminist lessons, ranging from the components of egalitarian, respectful partnerships to a woman's right to openly explore her sexuality.

The next chapter, Chapter Two, travels across time in order to study the evolution of the romance novel, being the unifying thread the different purposes which the genre has served in relation to the feminist

cause. As we have seen, sociocultural changes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries progressively circumscribed women to the domestic. Female writers of the period like Frances Burney or Charlotte Smith challenged these rules with their professional activities and their great public presence, but paradoxically, their works seem to endorse these restrictions. Stories like *Evelina* (1778) and *Emmeline* (1788) portray heroines who must learn to survive in a world fraught with obstacles, one of them being the lack of opportunities for women outside marriage. These skilled writers used the courtship plot in the romance novel to contrapose good and bad heterosexual relationships, and ultimately emphasised the importance of finding an amiable companion who did not threaten the heroine's integrity, symbolised by their virginity. Whilst *Evelina* and *Emmeline* may fall into what feminist critic Jane Spenser has dubbed "a tradition of conformity" (143), this does not mean that the texts could not harbour a degree of protest against the increasingly reductive role of women.

The same holds true in Jane Austen's case, and in the case of the three Brontës. Apart from being four of the most successful romance writers in the genre's long history, these authors have met with the approval of many feminist critics due to their sharp descriptions of the private sphere and the injustices committed against women in a male-dominated society. The Brontës, in particular, maintain to this day a privileged status within the romance novel canon as a result of their raw depiction of emotions (a testament of their Romantic nature) and their

clear feminist stance. On the other side of the Atlantic, the most popular woman authors of the day also wrote stories about love, coupledness, and female emancipation. This dissertation has dissected Maria S. Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854), a novel which narrates the maturity process of its heroine, Gertrude, and her eventual reunion with her childhood's beloved. Cummins's text ends with the protagonists living happily ever after, yet both hero and heroine must develop their own selves independently before they can overcome the obstacles that separate them. Besides the love plot, *The Lamplighter* also offers a stark defence of female education and professional opportunities for women that has nothing to envy of classics like *Jane Eyre*.

First-wave feminist writers like the British Mona Caird introduced very similar vindications in their fiction, also through love and courtship plots. Whilst many of these New Woman writers preferred to finish their books with a tragic ending that emphasised women's subordinate status within marriage, others continued with the long-established tradition of envisioning utopian, egalitarian unions for their protagonists. Nearly a century later, in the heyday of second-wave feminism, Irish writer Maeve Binchy also deployed the romance novel form to engage readers in a discussion of heterosexual relationships and female sexuality, the family, religion, changing gender roles, etc. A look at Binchy's work reveals that this writer was most interested in the possibilities of romantic fiction to explore female subjectivity in the context of a twentieth-century, rapidly changing Ireland. On the whole,

what these writers and their popularity evince is that the courtship story that characterises romance fiction has had an important presence in the development of feminist thinking, both before and during the greater peaks of activism.

Chapter Two has also dispelled the myth that romantic narratives, especially mass-produced ones, hinder the advance of the feminist agenda. As the critic Nan Enstad has explained in relation to dime novel romances, the closest antecedents of modern mass-market romance fiction, nineteenth-century working women validated themselves as political subjects through reading these stories, a fact that facilitated their participation in feminist protests and labour strikes (73-4). The boom of American romance in the 1970s, epitomised by Kathleen E. Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* (1972), coexisted with many of its readers taking part in second-wave feminist vindications. If fact, we have seen how Woodiwiss's representation of femininity, female sexuality, and intimate relationships has been imitated or challenged by subsequent romance writers like Stephanie Laurens, Sarah MacLean or Lisa Kleypas in the final decades of the twentieth century. More recently, in a context where critics like Nattie Golubov have argued that romance novels promote an image of women and feminism that reverberates with postfeminist rhetoric, Nora Roberts' *Bride Quartet* series and Maya Rodale's *The Gilded Age Girls Club* series nuance this hypothesis. Novels like *Bed of Roses* (2009) or *Duchess by Design* (2018) relish traditional feminine elements (e.g. weddings and fashion,

respectively), at the same time that they champion hard-working, independent heroines who demand partnerships that allow them to blossom as individuals. Rodale's text, in particular, typifies a new type of romance novel that consciously endeavours to combine feminism with femininity in non-harmful ways.

Additionally, the historical overview presented in this second chapter has investigated the origins of the romance's tarnished reputation. The genre's presumed anti-feminism would be one key explanation, but there are other interrelated factors such as the gendering of the genre, the rise of (male) academic criticism and finally, the romance novel's association with mass culture, all of which should be also taken into account. To begin with, critics like Lori Humphrey Newcomb have argued that throughout the Renaissance, influential writers like sir Philip Sydney consolidated a distinction between profitable reading on the one hand, and escapist, immoral reading on the other (131). Romance was placed into the second group, and it was (artificially) associated with a female readership in an attempt to justify the (male) writers' intellectual superiority (Newcomb 127). Next, the sentimental novel of the eighteenth century established women as the main producers of stories about love and domesticity. The genre flourished in the hands of Frances Burney and Charlotte Smith, but the sociopolitical upheaval prompted by the French Revolution in 1789 resulted in a devaluation of sensibility and sentimentalism, in favour of a more rational, sober style. Rather than dying out, the various elements

that conformed the sentimental tradition were disseminated, becoming part of subsequent literary movements and genres, such as Romanticism or the American domestic fiction of the mid-century, written and read mostly by women. The latter's emphasis on emotion, everyday issues, and moral didacticism, earned the genre the scorn of its contemporaries and of the literary gurus in the developing academia. In the nineteenth century, the "good" novel became progressively "'constructed', self-reflexive, concerned with language, difficult. It was original and individual. It was modern" (Tuchman and Fortin 202). When innovation became a synonym of "art", archetypal characters and plotlines such as the ones that characterised domestic fiction were despised and regarded as aesthetically mediocre, an idea that still pervades literary criticism to this day.

Its association with mass culture has contributed even further to the vilification of the romance (novel). In a first phase, the invention of the printing press led to the increasing differentiation of good and bad romances, depending on the means of production. Mass-printed books, the reading material of the "maidservant" and the lower classes were identified as poorly written and of inferior quality, as opposed to the well-written, more acceptable romances enjoyed by the upper and middle classes (Newcomb 134-5). The same applies to dime novel romances and penny dreadfuls, two of the most popular genres during the late nineteenth century, and to modern mass-market romance fiction. As we have seen apropos Maeve Binchy's figure, literary

criticism often distinguishes between high art, middlebrow and popular. These categories, of course, are not self-contained, and some writers and works straddle the line between two of these groups. This situation lays bare the subjective criteria upon which literary criticism is customarily built. The most popular texts risk the charge of repetitiveness and inferior quality. In Binchy's case, her degree of formal experimentation distinguishes her works from those of the average, mass-market romance authors of her time (e.g. Kathleen Woodiwiss). At the same time, though, her success in the marketplace also excludes this novelist from the category of middlebrow writing. Besides, Marxist scholarship has strengthened the idea that mass consumption equates complicity with the system, which inevitably leads to the erasure of protest. In this light, mass-market romance fiction has been perceived as a tool that preserves the status quo, specially where gender roles are concerned. As I discussed in previous pages, however, the situation is not exactly so.

The analysis of certain selected works by Rosamunde Pilcher and Lisa Kleypas in Chapter Three questions the validity of these negative assumptions about romance fiction. First and foremost, Pilcher's *The Empty House* (1973), *The Shell Seekers* (1987) and *Winter Solstice* (2000), and Kleypas's *Dreaming of You* (1994), *Suddenly You* (2001), *Devil in Spring* (2017) and *Smooth Talking Stranger* (2009) reveal the extent to which romance fiction has engaged with feminist debates over the last fifty years. The diachronic perspective adopted in this

dissertation shows a progression from Pilcher's 1973 *bildungsroman* to Kleypas's most recent titles, in which heroines such as Pandora in *Devil in Spring*, and Ella in *Smooth Talking Stranger*, express a clear feminist sentiment. The first of our case studies portrays a female figure who learns to stand her ground against the people who try to control her. In *The Empty House*, Virginia's love for a man called Eustace sets her life on a new, unexpected course, for she must demonstrate to the hero and to herself that she can take the reins of her own destiny. This includes assuming the responsibility over her two young children, on the one hand, and decision-making following her own criteria and desires, on the other. The book ends with the heroine and hero overcoming all the obstacles in their relationship and living happily ever after, as well as with the heroine rejoicing in the pleasures of domesticity. Superficially, *The Empty House* supports the thesis that romance novels reconcile women with the patriarchal roles of wife, mother and homemaker, yet this idea is discredited by looking at the kind of relationship that the heroine establishes with the hero. The union between Virginia and Eustace is based on mutual love and commitment, and unlike the heroine's first marriage, it promotes her autonomy. By the end of the book, it is expected that she will continue to act according to her more confident self, thus providing a slightly different model for female behaviour than the traditional, subservient housewife.

The second novel analysed in Chapter Three, Pilcher's *The Shell Seekers*, broadens the spectrum of what a woman can do by portraying

three women with very different life trajectories. The main protagonist, Penelope, married a man she was infatuated with at a very young age, a decision that had lasting consequences for her. This hurried marriage posed an obstacle when she met the love of her life a few years later, but more importantly, it brought Penelope and her three children a life of economic hardship. By means of a retrospective narration, this novel elaborates on the characteristics of good and bad heterosexual relationships, promoting unions based on reciprocal love, respect, and common goals. These ideas lie at the foundation of Antonia's own romance story. Like Virginia, the second heroine in *The Shell Seekers* undergoes a maturing process into adulthood, and ultimately begins a new life where she works on something that she is passionate about, in the company of the man she loves. Finally, the third protagonist in the novel, Penelope's daughter Olivia, personifies the new woman of the 1980s, career oriented and economically independent. Pilcher provides Olivia with her own courtship story, but this heroine forsakes a life of domesticity in pursuit of self-realisation, which on this occasion takes the form of professional success. *The Shell Seekers* talks extensively about the dissatisfaction generated by patriarchal femininity. In constructing Olivia and her sister Nancy as opposites, Pilcher demystifies old-fashioned conceptions about home, wifhood and motherhood, and paints a positive image of the career woman as a fulfilled person, someone who does not need a partner to achieve complete happiness. Published in 1987, the novel contradicts the most

conservative segments of society, whose discourse recurrently blamed feminism for women's supposed unhappiness (Faludi 2). Doubtless, the three greater strengths of *The Shell Seekers* are its attack on reductive images of womanhood, its legitimation of different lifestyles for women, and its commentary on rewarding heterosexual relationships.

Pilcher's last book, *Winter Solstice*, returns to some of these themes. Once again, we find a multiplot romance novel in which the author compares alternative forms of femininity. One of the three heroines, Carrie, is clearly contrasted with her mother and sister, two women who define themselves through social status and relationships with men. For her part, Carrie embodies the values promoted by second-wave feminism. Unlike her sister, who focused on an ideal wedding and on creating a family, the heroine opted for a good education and performing a highly demanding job for many years. Furthermore, when her affair with a married man terminates and she returns to the UK, Carrie is convinced that after the initial grieving she will "recover" and move on (*Solstice* 374). Halfway through the novel she encounters Sam, the hero, and whilst the heroine agrees to meet up with him frequently, she intends to go on with her life without eschewing her own projects and responsibilities. Her sister Nicola, in turn, is depicted as a selfish woman who prioritises her own desires at the expense of her daughter's well-being. Fourteen-year-old Lucy is the second female protagonist in the novel, and the shy teenager learns very valuable lessons from her aunt. Carrie becomes a sort of role model that

she tries to imitate, which, in tandem with Rory Kennedy's friendship, encourage Lucy to grow more assertive, confident and resilient. Last but not least, there is Elfrida, the real heroine of the book and the guiding thread figure. A mature woman, Elfrida is described from the beginning as a woman who follows her own path. At sixty-two, for instance, this heroine begins a relationship with a man of her vicinity, recently widowed. Not only does this decision break social protocols about mourning, but it also defies the stereotypes about ageing people, sexuality, and love. As we have seen, Elfrida and Oscar's relationship goes beyond mere companionship; they engage in gratifying sexual intercourse at first, and then they lose their hearts to each other.

Apart from discussing the ways in which Pilcher incorporates feminist debates into her novels, Chapter Three has explained how the publication date and the formal and thematic characteristics of *The Shell Seekers* and *Winter Solstice* have placed this author in the limbo between the categories of middlebrow and popular romance. For one thing, Pilcher's international reputation consolidated at a time when American writers had already occupied centre stage. Her books do include references to sexual intercourse, but these have nothing to do with the unabashed descriptions of sex that defined the American mass-market romance novel. Secondly, the novels I have researched for this project possess a playfulness and desire for experimentation that American mass-market romance did not yet exhibit. Thirdly, the sheer size of *The Shell Seekers* and *Winter Solstice* sends a very powerful,

visual message to the public. The books exceed by far the average length of category romances and single-title romances, a trait that surreptitiously identifies Pilcher's latest novels as "something else". When taken as a whole, these elements create a false division between Pilcher and other mass-market romance writers that can be misleading.

In examining Lisa Kleypas's figure and some of her most popular works, this dissertation proves that mass-market romance fiction partakes of some of these characteristics. Kleypas's novels test the boundaries of the romance novel form, while simultaneously respecting the genre's primary escapist function. Additionally, some of the novels selected for discussion present a remarkable degree of self-reflection on the writing practice, which attests to the multiple, complex layers of meaning embedded in these allegedly "formulaic" stories. And, of course, in the four novels analysed here, it is possible to detect a feminist subtext, since the books introduce female leads who resist social pressures to acquiesce to traditional feminine roles.

After a few years imitating Kathleen Woodiwiss's style, Kleypas developed a voice of her own and began to introduce themes that have nowadays become a staple of her fiction. *Dreaming of You* possesses all the ingredients that have made Kleypas one of the most successful romance writers of our time: a relatable heroine who strives to live her life in her own terms, against a historical background that prevents her from becoming who and what she wants to be, and an alpha-male hero that supports her and aids her in the process. As we have seen, the

protagonist in this first novel is Sara Fielding, a name charged with obvious (literary) implications. Sara is a successful nineteenth-century writer who must fight the dominant gender ideology of Victorian times, the “Angel in the House”, by which women are expected to suspend their needs to attend to those of their families. The heroine’s long-time fiancé, a very traditional man, wants Sara to devote herself entirely to nursing him and their future offspring, denying her the most essential forms of personal development: her writing and her sexuality. The heroine’s encounters with the hero, Derek, progressively open her eyes to the prison-like role she is about to enter, and ultimately encourage Sara to break up her engagement. The heroine resolves to remain a spinster, unless she can meet a man who does not force her to conform to the restrictive ideal of Victorian womanhood. She finds that person in Derek, and by the final pages of the book, Sara has successfully managed to have it all: she has a physically and emotionally satisfying relationship with her partner, she has just become a mother, she continues to write and publish, and she has turned into an eloquent spokesperson for social change. Among other things, this novel can be read as a firm defence of a woman’s right to choose what she wants to do with her life, as well as a strong vindication of female sexuality. To some extent, the novel also offers a mild commentary on romance writing. Sara’s decision to pursue a literary career against social approval is a metaphor for the situation of many romance authors, who

are also encouraged to quit their profession on the grounds of its inappropriateness.

In *Suddenly You*, a novel published in 2001, we come across the same central arguments. Thirty-year-old Amanda Briars is a well-established writer in nineteenth-century England, but she is seen as a spinster in the eyes of her contemporaries. While this situation has some advantages for her (e.g. she is economically independent), it also has certain shortcomings, like solitude and sexual inexperience. In a daring move, and against the Victorian ideal of femininity that construes women as sexless beings, the heroine begins a temporary affair with the hero of the novel. Jack Devlin is the catalyst that puts Amanda on a journey of sexual self-discovery, and his *joie de vivre* also boosts her already rebellious nature. When the two protagonists marry a few chapters before the end, Kleypas sets the focus on the ways in which the hero supports the heroine's personal growth, encouraging her to take on new challenges and to diversify her professional interests. The novel's epilogue thus portrays a fulfilled heroine, who takes pride in both her personal and professional achievements. Similar to the heroine of *Dreaming of You*, Amanda triumphantly juggles a domestic life with her work as an editor of a prestigious literary magazine. As we have seen, though, this happy ending where the heroine achieves professional and personal fulfilment is not the only remarkable element within this novel. *Suddenly You* brings to the fore the intricacies of writing "popular" texts, challenging the widespread assumption that mass-

produced literature does not require any creative abilities on the writer's part. Furthermore, as a writer who has intentionally and exclusively devoted her talents to the writing of mass-market romances, Kleypas represents her protagonists explicitly discussing literary topics of irrefutable interest such as the meaning and purpose of literature, alleged hierarchies of artistic worth, the process of characterisation in fiction, the relationship between women and the literary marketplace, etc. All these issues give us a flavour of the great complexity existing underneath a simple courtship story.

The last two novels analysed in this dissertation, *Devil in Spring* and *Smooth Talking Stranger*, demonstrate the thematic sophistication of modern mass-market romance fiction, and exemplify the tight relationship between feminist activism and mass-market romance fiction. In the first case, we run into a novel purposefully written to give visibility to the historical fight for women's rights. The starting point of *Devil in Spring* is Lady Pandora Ravenel's desire to establish her own board game business. In order to do that, however, it is mandatory that she remains single, for the English legislation of the 1870s prevents wives from owning any personal property. When a scandal threatens her reputation and she meets the hero, the heroine's well-crafted plans are cut short. Readers witness Pandora's distress, and see how her unflinching resistance to marriage collides with her growing feelings for Gabriel. The first half of the novel shows the heroine torn between her life-long professional dream and the opportunity to build a life with

the person she loves. Kleypas resolves this tension with a negotiation in which neither of the protagonists get exactly what they want but they both are reasonably satisfied. Gabriel does not get a conventional wife who plays hostess and takes proper care of the household and the children. In return, Pandora must give up her hopes of owning her business *de facto*, and contents herself with managing it in practice. Despite the fact that the heroine's protest against the unfairness of the legal system exists in vacuum, with no reference whatsoever to the first wave of feminist activism that was sweeping across the country at that time, the author's note included at the end of the book confirms that Pandora's characters should be interpreted as a tribute to those women who devoted their energies to building a fairer world, and who have been silenced by *his-story*. With this novel, Kleypas nods to the current revival of the movement, vindicating the importance that feminism has had in the pursuit of woman's rights in the past.

Smooth Talking Stranger goes one step forward and shows the need for feminism in the present time. As part of a series of contemporary romance novels centred on the heroine's psychological development in relation to social factors (e.g. race, class, family situation, etc.), this book stars an explicitly feminist heroine. Contrary to her mother and sister, whose identity and individual worth are gauged through relationships with men, Ella Varner has resolutely looked for alternative ways to define herself. The heroine is well-educated, and she has a successful job that makes her financially

independent; at the onset of the novel, she is also in a relationship with a man other than the hero. A great deal of the plot is geared towards a discussion of female autonomy and motherhood, with the heroine defending the first as a vital necessity, and the second as an individual choice. In parallel, Kleypas engineers a double-suitor plot to foreground the components of healthy coupledness. In contrasting Dane and Jack, Ella's former boyfriend and the hero of the novel, respectively, this writer posits emotional intimacy and mutual support as two key elements in romantic relationships. Despite the heroine's initial distrust of the marriage union, *Smooth Talking Stranger* finishes with the lovers' wedding and with the couple's adoption of Ella's baby nephew. As was explained in the analysis of the novel, this does not entail the assimilation of the heroine to the traditional feminine role. Rather, the novel acknowledges multiple ways of being a feminist and doing feminism, in accordance with one of the main precepts of twenty-first century feminisms. Throughout the novel, Ella realises that her feelings for a man who exhibits some of the traces of hegemonic masculinity, or her desire for a more canonical relationship are not incompatible with her beliefs about female emancipation or the equality of the sexes. Moreover, the heroine learns to respect other women's life choices when these are taken freely, as the final reconciliation between the heroine and her sister indicates.

Considering all of the above said, we may conclude that romantic stories, a genre as elusive as it is popular, have played an important role

in the awakening and shaping of a feminist consciousness, due to their portrayal of heterosexual relationships and their fictionalisation of a woman's identity and its development. The handful of romance novels analysed in the present work cover a period of approximately fifty years, five decades in which the feminist movement has undergone two—if not three—interconnected phases. Throughout this span of time, feminist theory and activism have had its peaks of popularity and moments of decline; they have been transformed by the people who practice it, and so have mass-market romance novels. The present study is well-aware of its limitations, inasmuch as it recognises that mass-market romance fiction is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that demands multiple theoretical approaches. While constituting, above all, an exercise in literary criticism, this investigation corroborates the hypothesis that romance novels can join forces with other branches of feminism in pursuit of gender equality. The feminist critic and romance fan Jenni Simon has recently argued that “[t]he romance genre offers a unique picture of individual activism through its creators” (5). This dissertation has proven that feminist activism can be also found in the content of the stories themselves. Admittedly, this political protest is closer to a liberal feminist standpoint, at least in the novels studied here, but this does not necessarily invalidate it. Writing back in 1979, feminist scholar and mass-market romance critic Ann Barr Snitow wrote in relation to Harlequin romances, that romance novels “may well be closer to describing women's hopes for love than the work of fine

women novelists” (160). Snitow wrongly assumes that (mass-market) romance writers cannot be “fine women novelists”, but she may be in the right when she talks about the texts’ acute portrayal of women’s hopes. In their novels, Rosamunde Pilcher and Lisa Kleypas envision romantic relationships between women and men where both members can thrive individually. That surely deserves our rethinking of the genre and its possibilities for advancing the feminist agenda in contemporary society.



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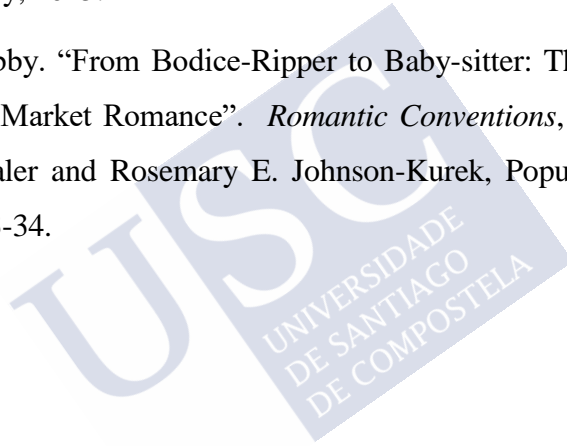
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Appendix: “Resumo”

Un dos debates máis controvertidos dentro do activismo feminista contemporáneo atinxe á propia definición do termo e á súa relación cun discurso posfeminista que tenta minar a reputación dun dos movementos sociopolíticos máis relevantes do último século e declarar o seu pasamento. As novas xeracións de autoproclamadas feministas desmenten estas ideas, argumentando que o sexismo está lonxe de ser erradicado e que a desigualdade de xénero e a misoxinia son unha lacra social que ningunha sociedade democrática debe tolerar (p. ex. Walker, “Becoming”; Banyard; B. Campbell). Recentemente, a socióloga Sylvia Walby, evocando o espírito da feminista de terceira onda Rebecca Walker, declarou que “o suxeito do feminismo se constrúe de maneiras moi dispares, tales como a promoción da feminidade, a defensa da igualdade das mulleres con respecto aos homes e a concepción dunha mudanza das relacións entre os xéneros. Non existe un único camiño, senón varias rutas entrelazadas” (50, tradución propia). Estas mesmas activistas e teóricas demostraron que o feminismo está moi vivo hoxe en día, a pesar das dificultades para definir o concepto sen incorrer en fundamentalismos.

Neste panorama, a novela romántica de masas vén de ser loada como o “xénero máis feminista de todos, escrito para/por mulleres” (“Let’s Woman-Splain”, tradución propia). Esta e outras afirmacións semellantes (p. ex. Crusie-Smith “Romancing Reality”; Hall; Rodale *Dangerous Books*) colocan unha vez máis este xénero literario no punto de mira do feminismo académico, xerando un debate arredor do significado de “feminista” neste contexto e sobre a (in)compatibilidade da literatura de corte romántico co proxecto feminista. A maiores, a aserción implícita de que calquera produto feito por mulleres é, por definición, un produto “feminista”, reavivou un antigo debate que data, polo menos, dos anos 80, cando feministas coma Rosalind Coward cuestionaban que unha novela escrita por unha muller fose equivalente a unha novela feminista (“This Novel”).

Esta tese de doutoramento ten como obxectivo principal verificar estas hipóteses, pero tamén supón un intento, por parte dunha lectora, de dar conta dos prexuízos (académicos) que negan a existencia de calquera tipo de valor estético ou contido político progresista dentro das novelas románticas. Coma o seu título indica, *Antecedentes e desenvolvemento da novela romántica contemporánea en inglés: estudo da contribución ao xénero de Rosamunde Pilcher e Lisa Kleypas* amosa a evolución dun xénero tan desacreditado como é o da novela romántica de masas a través do estudo da súa vinculación coa teoría e a práctica feministas. O subtítulo deste proxecto deixa entrever o interese especial que ten a análise do xénero e do seu desenvolvemento ao longo do

último medio século, un período no que tanto o feminismo coma a novela romántica experimentaron unha rápida e radical transformación, causada, en parte, pola súa influencia mutua.

Ademais de sopesar o potencial desta literatura como aliado da axenda política feminista, ao indagar na longa e complexa relación que existe entre a novela romántica e o feminismo, tamén reivindicamos a necesidade de estudar este xénero literario desde unha perspectiva teórica feminista. De acordo con algunhas voces, a terceira onda de estudos sobre o romance popular na que nos atopamos actualmente "deixa de lado a cuestión de se as novelas románticas son boas ou malas para as mulleres" (Teo 18), unha postura que minimiza de xeito evidente o papel que esta pregunta segue a desempeñar na evolución da novela romántica. Así pois, este proxecto contribúe ao desenvolvemento desta disciplina ao traer á palestra algunhas cuestións metodolóxicas. Alén disto, esta tese tamén contribúe ao desenvolvemento deste eido de estudo a través da análise de varias obras de dúas escritoras moi recoñecidas dentro do xénero, Rosamunde Pilcher e Lisa Kleypas. Malia que somos conscientes dos perigos que traen consigo as xeneralizacións sobre un xénero literario tan amplo e en constante evolución, a lectura crítica das novelas de Pilcher e Kleypas suxire que a ficción romántica contemporánea é especialmente sensible aos debates no seo do movemento feminista e ademais participa activamente neles. Un dos textos analizados nesta tese, *Devil in Spring* (2017), exemplifica claramente esta idea. A obra de Kleypas

confirma que as novelas románticas poden seguir actuando como literatura de entretemento e, ao mesmo tempo, introducir, de xeito consciente, unha forte mensaxe política sobre a autonomía feminina e as relacións heterosexuais contemporáneas.

Para acadar os obxectivos propostos houbo que tomar varias decisión importantes. A primeira delas foi a de centrarse case de maneira exclusiva nas características das novelas románticas, en detrimento doutras metodoloxías. As contribucións doutras disciplinas coma a etnografía tivéronse debidamente en conta, pero o enfoque desta tese de doutoramento é maioritariamente textual. A introdución doutras metodoloxías complementarias tería alongado excesivamente o proceso de investigación e desviado a atención do propósito principal: estudar a evolución diacrónica dos textos con respecto ao feminismo.

A segunda decisión relevante está relacionada co proceso de selección do corpus. Os capítulos segundo e terceiro desta tese repasan o desenvolvemento do xénero ao longo da súa historia, pero a visión que ofrecen é inevitablemente parcial xa que privilexia a certos autores e obras sobre moitos outros. Tal e como se explica en distintos puntos deste traballo, unha definición ampla de “novela romántica” aumenta de forma significativa o volume do corpus a analizar e complica o proceso de investigación. Con todo, unha definición moi restritiva tamén presenta desvantaxes, que pasan por obviar puntos de contacto entre xéneros literarios e incluso a mestura de xéneros dentro dun mesmo texto (*genre blending*), dous fenómenos esenciais que explican a

evolución formal e temática da novela romántica. Este estudo tenta atopar un termo medio entre ambos os dous extremos, optando ás veces por unha perspectiva máis ampla, coa finalidade de entender mellor a relación histórica entre o *romance* e as ideas e o activismo feministas.

Tamén foi unha tarefa ardua delimitar un número concreto de autores a analizar e establecer a súas identidades. Finalmente, foron seleccionadas Rosamunde Pilcher e Lisa Kleypas por mor das súas respectivas cronoloxías e nacionalidades, do seu profundo coñecemento da novela romántica e da súa capacidade para unir entretemento e conciencia política baixo un mesmo paraugas. Isto non quere dicir que non houbera outros autores de renome aos que ter en conta á hora de mergullarse no mundo da novela romántica. Entre outros, esta tese considerou brevemente a figura de Maeve Binchy e Maya Rodale no segundo capítulo, pero hai outras escritoras coma Joanna Trollope, Barbara Taylor Bradford, Marcia Willet, Alyssa Cole, Courtney Millan ou Sherry Thomas que tamén son merecedoras da atención da crítica. Sen lugar a dúbidas, estes nomes e a súa produción literaria deberían ser o obxecto de futuras investigacións.

A escolla dos textos para o estudo de caso tamén tivo a súas complicacións. En vista da dilatada traxectoria de ambas as dúas escritoras, establecéronse unha serie de criterios nos que basear a elección dun número reducido de novelas que, ao mesmo tempo, puidesen ser consideradas representativas da ficción de Pilcher e Kleypas. Entre eles, habería que destacar o éxito das obras entre o

público lector, o ano en que foron publicadas, o seu grao de implicación cos debates feministas e, para rematar, a súa calidade estética. Estes parámetros resultaron moi útiles á hora de reunir unha serie de textos que contradín moitos dos mitos arredor da ficción de corte romántico e que corroboran a teoría de que as novelas románticas, mesmo sen ser o “xénero máis feminista de todos”, poden axudar na loita pola igualdade. De seguro, algunhas das decisións metodolóxicas que aquí se expoñen serán máis ou menos apropiadas ca outras. Non obstante, serviron para cumprir cos propósitos desta investigación: trazar o desenvolvemento da novela romántica ao longo dos séculos, cunha maior énfase na segunda metade do século XX e comezos do XXI, así como probar que algunhas novelas románticas merecen ser consideradas textos feministas, pois promoven unha imaxe polifacética da muller protagonista e defenden o seu dereito de escoller libremente o seu estilo de vida.

Unha vez expostas as cuestións metodolóxicas máis salientables desta investigación, é o momento de ofrecer un breve resumo do contido e os achados de cada un dos tres bloques que forman o presente traballo. O primeiro capítulo inclúe unha contextualización das orixes do interese que a crítica (feminista) especializada ten na novela romántica e explica a xénese dos chamados estudos do romance popular na década de 1980. Ao revisar a historia do feminismo coma movemento sociopolítico, compróbase cómo o amor e as relacións heterosexuais se percibiron coma dúas das causas principais da

subordinación das mulleres. A segunda onda feminista, en particular, amosábase sorprendida polo feito de que moitas mulleres tendesen a supeditar os seus intereses e ambicións persoais aos das súas parellas, sen ter en conta as oportunidades que agora se lles presentaban. Moitas mulleres asumían como propias a carga das labores domésticas e da crianza dos fillos, deixándose levar polos discursos en torno ao amor e a suposta predisposición biolóxica das mulleres para o coidado. Feministas de renome coma Germaine Greer crían que as novelas de tipo romántico promovían un tipo concreto de relacións de parella heterosexuais, á vez que edulcoraban as desigualdades existentes nestas relacións (*Eunuch* 198-9).

Tania Modleski, Kay Mussell e Janice Radway, entre outras, desenvolveron a hipótese de Greer nos seus traballos. En termos xerais, estas críticas feministas viron na popularidade das novelas románticas un sinal de que as mulleres estaban descontentas cos roles dominantes de esposa, nai e ama de casa. Con esta idea entre mans e á luz do aumento incesante do éxito desta clase de literatura, estas académicas amosaron a súa inquietude ante a posibilidade de que a lectura de novelas románticas impedise ás mulleres demandar relacións sentimentais máis igualitarias e vidas persoais máis satisfactorias (Radway, *Reading* 2012). Inevitablemente, este medo reforzou a mala reputación da que xa gozaba o xénero, engadindo “antifeminista” á listaxe de epítetos para referirse a estas novelas, entre os que se inclúen “produto de masas”, “entretemento” e “mala calidade”. Tan só uns

poucos críticos ofreceron unha visión favorable da novela romántica neste período. Carol Thurston, quen escribiu a finais dos anos 80, foi das primeiras en formular a hipótese de que a ficción romántica serve para diseminar postulados feministas entre as lectoras, incluso entre aquelas máis remisas a falar sobre o feminismo (132). Moitos fans e *aca-fans* (termo que designa a aqueles críticos que tamén son fans do seu obxecto de estudo) comparten esta idea a día de hoxe (p. ex. Kamblé “Female Enfranchisement”; Wendell; Rodale *Dangerous Books*).

O primeiro capítulo tamén fala das reaccións que estas primeiras aproximacións críticas provocaron entre as escritoras e as lectoras de novelas románticas. A antoloxía *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, publicada en 1992 da man de Jayne Ann Krentz, e o ensaio escrito por Jennifer Crusie Smith no ano 1997, denuncian a superioridade coa que Modleski, Radway e as outras se erixiron coma as líderes e principais representantes do auténtico feminismo. Unha ollada dende os nosos días, revela que tanto Krentz coma Crusie Smith comungaban cos preceptos da chamada terceira onda feminista, unha forma innovadora de entender a teoría e a práctica feministas que xurdiu durante os anos 90. As simpatizantes desta nova onda reivindicaron o individualismo sen deixar de lado a acción colectiva, nun recoñecemento tácito da diversidade que caracteriza ás mulleres (feministas) (p. ex. Heywood e Drake Introduction). Alén de promover a inclusión racial, relixiosa e sexual dentro do movemento, o feminismo

de terceira onda tamén reconece múltiples formas de apoderamento e axencia femininos (p. ex. Dicker e Piepmeier), incluída a representación da muller na cultura popular. En consecuencia, a preocupación que amosan as novelas románticas por temas tradicionalmente femininos (as relacións de parella, a vida doméstica) convértese, dende o punto de vista desta terceira onda, nun interese lexítimo polos problemas que atinxen ás mulleres. É máis, o interese por estes temas non impide que haxa un compromiso sincero co movemento feminista. Aínda que de xeito breve, a derradeira sección do primeiro capítulo menciona a comunidade de escritoras e lectoras que aseguran que as novelas románticas lles ensinaron moitas leccións feministas, desde as características propias dunha relación sentimental baseada na igualdade e no respecto, até o dereito dunha muller a explorar a súa sexualidade sen inhibicións.

O seguinte capítulo viaxa a través do tempo para estudar a evolución da novela romántica, empregando como fío condutor os modos tan variados en que as novelas románticas contribuíron á causa feminista. Durante os séculos XVII e XVIII, os cambios socioculturais acontecidos nas Illas Británicas circunscribiron a muller ao ámbito doméstico de maneira progresiva. Autoras coma Frances Burney e Charlotte Smith contradicían estas normas a través da súa actividade profesional e da súa gran presenza pública, mais semella que as súas obras apoiaban tales restricións. Novelas coma *Evelina* (1778) e *Emmeline* (1788) contan cunha protagonista feminina que aprende a

desenvolverse nun mundo cheo de obstáculos, un dos cales é a falta de oportunidades para as mulleres fóra do matrimonio. Estas talentosas escritoras empregaron a historia base do cortexo que define as novelas románticas para contrastar diversos tipos de unións e subliñar a importancia de casar cun bo home que non ameazase a integridade da heroína, cuxo símbolo é a virxindade. *Evelina* e *Emmeline* poden considerarse exemplos do que a crítica literaria feminista Jane Spencer denominou “tradición conformista” (143, tradución propia). Porén, as novelas demostran un certo grao de protesta contra os roles tan limitados que as mulleres podían desempeñar.

Algo semellante ocorre no caso de Jane Austen e das Brontë. Ademais de ser catro das escritoras con máis sona de todo o xénero, contan co beneplácito de moitas críticas feministas debido ás descrições tan perspicaces que fan da esfera privada e dos atropelos que sofren as mulleres nunha sociedade profundamente patriarcal. A día de hoxe, as tres irmás Brontë manteñen unha posición privilexiada dentro do canon da novela romántica por mor da representación tan humana que fan das emocións (unha proba da súa natureza romántica) e pola súa postura claramente feminista. Ao outro lado do Atlántico, as autoras máis populares tamén escribían historias sobre o amor, a parella e a emancipación feminina. Esta tese estudou o caso concreto de *The Lamplighter* (1854), unha novela de Maria S. Cummins que narra o proceso de maduración da súa protagonista, Gertrude, e a relación que ten co seu namorado. A obra de Cummins remata coa parella

protagonista gozando do seu final feliz, pero antes deben percorrer cadansúa viaxe emocional e superar os atrancos que lles impiden estar xuntos. En paralelo á trama amorosa, *The Lamplighter* avoga pola educación e por maiores oportunidades laborais para as mulleres dun xeito que nada ten que envexar a clásicos coma *Jane Eyre*.

Aquelas escritoras que, coma Mona Caird, se consideraban a si mesmas feministas trataban temas moi semellantes na súa ficción e facíanos tamén a través de historias de amor e cortexo. Moitas das autoras que escribían sobre a *New Woman* do século XIX decantábanse por un final tráxico que evidenciase a situación de precariedade na que vivían as mulleres casadas, mentres que outras autoras preferían continuar coa longa tradición de representar unións utópicas, nas que ambos os dous membros estivesen en igualdade de condicións. Aproximadamente un século despois, no punto álxido da segunda onda feminista, a escritora irlandesa Maeve Binchy tamén empregou a novela romántica para mergullar o público nun debate sobre as relacións heterosexuais e a sexualidade feminina, a familia, a relixión, a transformación dos roles de xénero tradicionais etc. Basta con ollar brevemente o traballo de Binchy para decatarse de que esta escritora posuía un gran interese polo potencial da novela romántica para explorar a subxectividade feminina no contexto dunha Irlanda do século XX en rápida transformación. En termos xerais, todas estas autoras demostran que a trama do cortexo na que se fundamentan as novelas románticas tivo (e segue a ter) unha gran presenza dentro do

movemento feminista, ben sexa antes, durante ou despois dos picos de maior actividade.

Este segundo capítulo tamén rebate a teoría de que as narrativas de corte romántico impiden o avance do proxecto feminista, especialmente aquelas producidas ao abeiro da cultura de masas. Tal e como expón a crítica Nan Enstad cando fala das precursoras máis inmediatas da novela romántica de masas que coñecemos hoxe, as chamadas “novelas de dez centavos” (*dime novel romances*), as mulleres traballadoras autovalidáronse a través da lectura destas historias. Noutras palabras, moitas mulleres do século XIX construíron unha identidade política diferenciada grazas a estas novelas, o que favoreceu a súa participación en manifestacións feministas ou en folgas obreiras (73-4). O auxe da novela romántica americana nos anos 70, exemplificada pola novela *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) de Kathleen E. Woodiwiss, tampouco evitou que moitas lectoras se sumasen ás reivindicacións da segunda onda feminista. A representación que fixo Woodiwiss da feminidade, da sexualidade e das relacións de parella condicionou de xeito importante o desenvolvemento do xénero, de xeito que escritoras contemporáneas de gran calibre coma Stephanie Laurens, Sarah MacLean e Lisa Kleypas ou seguiron a súa estela ou optaron por desmarcarse dela. Actualmente, sagas coma a de *Bride Quartet* de Nora Roberts e a *Gilded Age Girls Club* de Maya Rodale cuestionan a validez do o argumento, defendido por moitas académicas feministas, segundo o cal as novelas románticas reproducen a retórica do

posfeminismo (p. ex. Golubov). *Bed of Roses* (2008) e *Duchess by Design* (2018) deléitanse naqueles elementos asociados convencionalmente coa feminidade (vodas e moda, respectivamente), pero non por iso deixan de promover unha imaxe positiva da muller, na que esta é independente, traballadora e non se conforma cunha relación sentimental que a limite como persoa. Neste senso, a novela de Rodale éríxese como a representante dunha nova clase de novela romántica, na que o feminismo e a feminidade co-existen de maneira inocua.

De forma paralela, o repaso pola evolución do xénero ao longo da súa historia saca á luz as razóns que explican a súa mala reputación na sociedade e na esfera académica. Unha delas, a do suposto antifeminismo das novelas románticas, xa foi mencionada anteriormente, pero a esta habería que engadir a feminización do xénero, o desenvolvemento da crítica literaria (masculina) e, por último, a vinculación do xénero coa cultura de masas. Para empezar, expertas coma Lori Humphrey Newcomb demostraron que foi no Renacemento cando escritores coma *sir* Philip Sydney consolidaron a distinción entre ler por proveito ou ler por entretemento e diversión (131). O romance foi adscrito a este segundo grupo e asociouse cada vez máis cun público feminino (que non sempre era tal), nun intento de xustificar a superioridade intelectual do autor home (Newcomb 127). Con posterioridade, a novela sentimental do século XVIII estableceu ás mulleres como as produtoras principais de relatos amorosos e domésticos. O xénero floreceu da man de Frances Burney e Charlotte

Smith, pero experimentou un importante declive con motivo dos cambios socioculturais derivados da Revolución Francesa de 1789. A literatura do momento adoptou un estilo sobrio e moito máis racional a expensas da sensibilidade e do sentimentalismo, que se viron absorbidos por outros movementos literarios coma o Romanticismo, ou pola novela doméstica estadounidense, un xénero enormemente popular a mediados do século XIX, escrito e lido maioritariamente por mulleres. Co tempo, este último adquiriu unha mala reputación por mor do seu interese pola emoción, os problemas cotiáns e o seu carácter eminentemente didáctico. As institucións académicas que se estaban a desenvolver nesta época determinaron que a “boa” literatura era aquela que posuía un ton “auto-reflexivo, preocupado pola linguaxe, difícil. Era orixinal e individual. Era moderna” (Tuchman and Fortin 2002, tradución propia). No momento en que innovación e arte se converteron en sinónimos, as personaxes arquetípicas e as tramas convencionais que definen a ficción doméstica foron tachadas de mediocres, unha concepción que aínda impera nunha gran parte da crítica literaria actual.

A súa vinculación coa cultura de masas contribuíu aínda máis ao desprestixio da novela romántica. Nun primeiro momento, a invención da imprenta trouxo consigo unha diferenciación entre romances bos e malos, dependendo de cal fose o seu medio de produción. Os producidos en masa, aqueles que constituían o principal material de lectura da “criada” e das clases baixas, asociáronse cunha mala prosa e por tanto cunha calidade literaria inferior, distinguíndose así dos

romances das clases medias e altas, igualmente deplorables, pero dun maior valor estético (Newcomb 134-5). Coas novelas de dez centavos estadounidenses e os *penny dreadfuls* británicos do século XIX aconteceu algo similar e a historia repetiuse unha vez máis no caso das novelas románticas de masas que se publican nos nosos días. Esta tese explica, a través do estudo da escritora irlandesa Maeve Binchy, cómo a crítica literaria clasifica os textos de acordo coa alta, a media ou a baixa cultura (*high*, *middlebrow* e *popular art*). Por descontado, estas categorías non son compartimentos estanco e un mesmo autor ou unha única obra poden encaixar en varias delas. Precisamente por iso, esta tese demostra que a crítica literaria tradicional non é tan obxectiva como presupón. Habitualmente, referímonos aos textos populares como versións dunha mesma historia que se repite unha e outra vez e que, normalmente, deixan moito que desexar no referente á calidade. No caso de Binchy, o grao de experimentación formal que define as súas novelas afastábaa doutras escritoras de novelas románticas de masas da súa época (p. ex. Kathleen Woodiwiss). Porén, o éxito do que gozaba esta escritora entre o público lector tamén serviu para excluila das categorías de *high* e *middlebrow*. Alén disto, debemos ter en conta tamén que a tradición académica marxista postulou que consumo e complicidade co sistema van da man, eliminando así calquera posibilidade de revolta contra o establecido. Así pois, a literatura de corte romántico, en especial aquela que se enmarca dentro da cultura de masas, serve para manter o statu quo, sobre todo no que a roles de

xénero se refire. Esta investigación desmente, precisamente, que isto sexa exactamente así.

A análise das novelas seleccionadas das autoras Rosamunde Pilcher e Lisa Kleypas forman o groso do terceiro capítulo, e serven para cuestionar a validez destas conxecturas con respecto á novela romántica (de masas). As tres novelas representativas de Pilcher, *The Empty House* (1973), *The Shell Seekers* (1987) e *Winter Solstice* (2000), xunto con catro das obras máis coñecidas de Kleypas, *Dreaming of You* (1994), *Suddenly You* (2001), *Devil in Spring* (2017) e *Smooth Talking Stranger* (2009), demostran o grao de implicación da novela romántica nos debates feministas dos últimos cincuenta anos. A perspectiva diacrónica que ofrece este estudo amosa unha clara evolución dende o *bildungsroman* de Pilcher, publicado a comezos dos 70, até as novelas máis recentes de Kleypas, nas que as protagonistas femininas Pandora, de *Devil in Spring*, e Ella, de *Smooth Talking Stranger*, adoptan unha postura evidentemente feminista. No primeiro dos textos analizados neste capítulo, Virginia Keile é unha muller que aprende a manterse firme ante os intentos dos demais por controlala. A protagonista de *The Empty House* namórase dun home chamado Eustace. Este sentimento serve para que lle dea un xiro á súa vida e lle demostre a el, pero sobre todo a si mesma, que pode coller as rendas da súa vida. Entre outras cousas, Virginia asume o coidado directo dos seus dous fillos pequenos e comeza a tomar decisións respectando o seu propio criterio e desexos. Esta novela remata cando a parella

protagonista supera os obstáculos que os separaban e deixa entrever que vivirán felices para sempre, gozando dos praceres da vida doméstica. Este desenlace podería entenderse coma unha reafirmación dos roles de esposa e nai, pero só se non temos en conta a clase de relación que establecen os protagonistas. A unión de Virginia e Eustace fundaméntase no amor e no compromiso mutuos. Ao contrario do que lle aconteceu á protagonista no seu primeiro matrimonio, é unha unión que promove a súa realización como persoa. As derradeiras páxinas da novela levan a promesa implícita de que Virginia seguirá comportándose de acordo coa confianza que define o seu novo Eu e propoñen, deste xeito, unha conduta alternativa para a muller, afastada do estereotipo da ama de casa submisa.

A segunda das obras analizadas no terceiro capítulo, *The Shell Seekers*, amplía o número de posibilidades por medio da representación de tres mulleres con traxectorias vitais moi dispares. A personaxe principal da novela de Pilcher é Penelope, unha muller que casou moi nova tras un noivado moi breve. Esta decisión tivo consecuencias moi importantes para ela, xa que cando coñeceu o amor da súa vida Penelope xa estaba comprometida con outro home. Alén disto, o marido de Penelope contraía débedas de xogo habitualmente, o que poñía en risco a seguridade económica da protagonista e dos seus tres fillos. Pilcher narra a historia de Penelope a través de analepses, unha técnica que lle permite á autora contrastar varios tipos de relacións de parella e promover aquelas que se constrúen a partir do amor, do

respecto mutuo e dun plan de vida similares. Estes ideais son os piares da relación que Antonia, outra das protagonistas, mantén cun mozo chamado Danus. Coma na novela anterior, Antonia pasa de nena a muller e comeza unha vida apaixonante na que desempeña un traballo que a satisfai persoalmente. Todo isto na compañía da persoa que ama. Por último, a terceira protagonista de *The Shell Seekers*, Olivia, é un reflexo da muller que imaxinaban as feministas nos anos 80, unha muller con ambicións propias e independencia económica. Olivia, coma a súa nai Penelope, coñeceu o amor, pero preferiu dedicar o seu tempo e os seus esforzos a lograr o éxito profesional, no canto de gozar dunha vida doméstica e sinxela. Esta novela fala abertamente da insatisfacción que normalmente xera unha vida construída exclusivamente arredor do fogar e da familia. Olivia e a súa irmá Nancy son dúas personaxes completamente antagónicas. Ao comparalas, Pilcher consegue desmitificar o doméstico, o coidado do fogar e os roles de esposa e nai abnegadas. Pola contra, a novela ofrece unha imaxe positiva da muller traballadora, describíndoa coma unha persoa autorrealizada, que non precisa dun home para levar unha vida plena. Publicada en 1987, esta novela contradí o discurso dos sectores máis conservadores da sociedade, que culpan o feminismo da suposta infelicidade na que viven as mulleres (Faludi 1). Sen lugar a dúbidas, a grandeza desta obra reside no seu ataque contra unha concepción limitada da muller, a lexitimación que fai dos múltiples modos de vida que poden levar as mulleres e o debate que xera en torno ás relacións heterosexuais.

A derradeira das novelas de Pilcher que se estudan aquí trata novamente algúns destes temas. En *Winter Solstice*, atopamos unha novela romántica con múltiples tramas na que a autora compara distintos tipos de feminidade. Para comezar, a novela contrapón a personaxe de Carrie coa da súa nai Dodie e a súa irmá Nicola, as cales se definen a si mesmas por medio dos vínculos que establecen cos homes. En cambio, Carrie encarna moitos dos valores promulgados dende a segunda onda feminista. Mentres que a súa irmá preferiu ter unha voda de conto e formar unha familia a unha idade moi temperá, Carrie escolleu unha boa educación e unha profesión moi esixente. Cando o home co que tiña unha relación sentimental decidiu abandonala para regresar coa súa esposa, a nosa protagonista móstrase convencida de que acabará por "recuperarse" e que seguirá co seu propio camiño (*Solstice* 374, tradución propia). De feito, Carrie está decidida a seguir coa súa vida cando coñece a Sam, o heroe da historia, malia que accede a dedicarlle unha parte do seu tempo. Por outra banda, Nicola, a irmá de Carrie, semella unha egoísta que só se preocupa por si mesma e polos seus desexos, mesmo cando ten unha filla ao seu cargo. Lucy é outra das protagonistas da novela, unha adolescente que aprende a mirar a súa tía coma un modelo a seguir. Imitando a Carrie e grazas á influencia que un rapaz chamado Rory Kennedy exerce sobre ela, Lucy empeza a actuar de forma máis decidida e a tomar decisións sobre o seu destino. Xa para rematar, atopamos a personaxe de Elfrida, a auténtica protagonista e fío condutor da novela. Elfrida é unha muller

madura que segue as súas propias normas. Con algo máis de 60 anos, embárcase nunha relación cun veciño un chisco maior ca ela que enviuvou recentemente. Aparte de desafiar as convencións sociais que afectan o loito, Elfrida e Oscar desafían os estereotipos en torno á vellez, a sexualidade e o amor. A súa relación transcende o simple desexo de compañía: nela tamén se dan o desexo sexual e o amor sincero.

Neste terceiro capítulo faise algo máis que falar da maneira en que Pilcher incorporaba debates feministas nas súas novelas. Nas súas páxinas tamén se explica como a data de publicación de *The Shell Seekers* e de *Winter Solstice*, así como as súas características formais e temáticas, colocaron esta autora a medio camiño entre as categorías de *middlebrow* e *popular*. Unha das razóns principais é que o prestixio internacional de Pilcher se consolidou nun momento en que as escritoras norteamericanas de novela romántica xa ocupaban un espazo central no xénero. Outros dos motivos está relacionado coa presenza explícita do acto sexual. As novelas de Pilcher falan de sexo dun xeito velado, mentres que moitas das novelas románticas que estaban a triunfar no mercado norteamericano eran moito máis explícitas e outorgábanlle moito máis peso dentro da narrativa. Tamén habería que engadir que as tres novelas que se estudaron aquí amosan unha clara vontade de experimentación que moitas das novelas románticas norteamericanas aínda non posuían. A todo isto, o tamaño tamén resulta fundamental para comprender este fenómeno. *The Shell Seekers* e

Winter Solstice envían unha mensaxe moi importante (e moi visual) aos lectores, xa que, co seu elevado número de páxinas, suxiren que se trata de textos algo diferentes á novela romántica de masas convencional, pensada para consumir rapidamente. A combinación de todos estes elementos crea a falsa impresión de que Pilcher é superior a moitas outras escritoras de novelas románticas de masas, cando en realidade non é así.

Por medio da análise da figura de Lisa Kleypas e dalgunhas das súas novelas máis populares e representativas, esta tese proba que algunhas destas características tamén están presentes nas novelas románticas consideradas de menor prestixio e calidade. As obras seleccionadas xogan cos límites formais e temáticos do xénero, mantendo ao mesmo tempo a súa natureza como literatura de entretemento. Algunhas destas novelas tamén presentan un elevado grao de metaficcionalidade que demostra a complexidade que pode chegar a acadar este tipo de literatura. E, por suposto, as catro novelas restantes tamén conteñen un fondo claramente feminista, posto que todas elas están protagonizadas por mulleres que cuestionan os roles femininos tradicionais.

Despois de varios anos imitando o estilo da célebre Kathleen Woodiwiss, Lisa Kleypas desenvolveu unha voz propia e un interese por certos temas que a día de hoxe son parte indispensable da súa obra. *Dreaming of You* é unha novela que contén todas as características que fan desta autora unha das máis triunfadoras da nosa época: unha

protagonista coa que é fácil empatizar, que intenta levar unha vida na que se sentir realizada nun contexto histórico e social que lle impide ser quen quere ser, cun heroe moi masculino que a axuda e apoia nese proceso de autodescubrimento. A protagonista é Sara Fielding, un nome cunhas implicacións literarias considerables. Sara é unha escritora recoñecida do século XIX que se ve obrigada a loitar contra o ideal feminino imperante naquela época, o denominado “Anxo do Fogar”, que determinaba que as mulleres debían consagrarse aos coidados da súa familia e do seu fogar e deixar as súas propias necesidades á marxe. O prometido de Sara, un home de ideas moi conservadoras, quere que Sara asuma o papel de nai e esposa abnegada, privándoa de dúas formas básicas de realización persoal: a escrita e a súa sexualidade. Cando a protagonista coñece o heroe da historia, Derek, decátase de que está a piques de entrar nunha gaiola e decide romper o compromiso. Sara contempla estar solteira como a única opción viable, a non ser que atope un home que lle permita actuar libremente. Sobra dicir que esa persoa é Derek e que, ao final da novela, Sara leva unha vida máis ca satisfactoria, sen renunciar a nada: ten unha relación sexual e afectiva excepcional co seu cónxuxe, acaba de converterse en nai, segue escribindo e publicando novelas e, por último, tamén actúa coma voceira de distintas causas sociais. Por estes motivos, *Dreaming of You* pode lerse coma unha defensa do dereito das mulleres a elixir o seu porvir e tamén coma unha defensa da sexualidade feminina. Até certo punto, esta novela tamén fala dos prexuízos que acompañan as autoras

de novelas románticas. A decisión de Sara de seguir escribindo a pesar do estigma social non deixa de ser unha metáfora da situación na que se atopan autoras coma Kleypas, a quen a sociedade anima a abandonar a súa profesión.

En *Suddenly You*, unha novela publicada no ano 2001, atopamos os mesmos temas. Amanda Briars tamén é unha escritora moi sonada na Inglaterra do século XIX e, aínda que acaba de cumprir os 30 anos, a sociedade xa a ve coma unha solteirona. Amanda reconece que esa situación ten as súas vantaxes, tales coma a independencia económica, pero tamén inconvenientes coma a soidade e a falta de experiencia sexual. Desafiando os estándares da época, que como vimos na novela anterior constrúen a muller coma un ser asexuado, a protagonista decide embarcarse temporalmente nunha aventura co heroe da historia. Jack Devlin é o catalizador que impulsa a Amanda a emprender unha viaxe de autocoñecemento sexual. A súa actitude fresca e irreverente contribúen a fortalecer o lado máis rebelde de Amanda. Cando a parella casa, uns cantos capítulos antes do remate da novela, Kleypas pon o foco na maneira en que Jack apoia o crecemento persoal da protagonista, propoñéndolle novos retos profesionais. O epílogo mostra unha muller satisfeita coa súa situación e cos seus logros profesionais e persoais. Coma Sara, Amanda é quen de gozar dunha vida doméstica plena sen que iso implique sacrificar o seu soño de editar unha revista literaria. Alén de todas estas cuestións, *Suddenly You* trata abertamente das dificultades para escribir literatura popular, refutando todas esas

teorías sobre a literatura de masas coma algo fácil, que non require ningunha dose de creatividade. Mais aló disto, a novela comenta sutilmente a propia situación de Kleypas, unha escritora que decidiu dedicarse tan só a escribir novelas románticas de masas de maneira consciente. Kleypas amosa os seus protagonistas discutindo sobre asuntos de grande interese, entre os que se inclúen o significado e o propósito da literatura, as xerarquías en torno ao valor estético, o proceso de caracterización nunha obra de ficción ou a relación das mulleres co mercado literario. Estes temas dannos unha visión máis completa da complexidade latente ás historias que versan principalmente sobre o amor entre dúas persoas.

As dúas últimas novelas analizadas nesta tese, *Devil in Spring* e *Smooth Talking Stranger*, ilustran, por unha banda, a sofisticación da novela romántica de masas contemporánea e, por outra banda, a estreita relación que o xénero mantén co activismo feminista. A primeira destas obras, *Devil in Spring*, é unha novela concibida en parte para dar visibilidade á loita histórica polos dereitos das mulleres. A novela comeza coa presentación da protagonista, *Lady Pandora*, e o seu sonho: crear unha empresa dedicada ao deseño de xogos de mesa. Para acadar ese obxectivo, a nosa heroína debe permanecer solteira, xa que as leis vixentes na Gran Bretaña de 1870 non permiten que as mulleres posúan calquera tipo de ben ao seu nome. Porén, o plan de Pandora vese afectado cando un escándalo ameaza a súa reputación e coñece o heroe. Como lectores, somos testemuñas do malestar e o desacougo que

invaden á moza unha vez que os seus sentimentos por Gabriel ameazan con destruír os seus plans de futuro e viceversa. A primeira metade da novela céntrase na decisión que debe tomar Pandora, entre o soño dunha vida e a oportunidade de formar unha familia xunto o home que ama. Kleypas resolve este conflito de tal xeito que ambos os dous protagonistas se mostran satisfeitos co resultado, aínda que este non sexa exactamente o que cada un deles pensaba inicialmente. Gabriel non casa cunha muller que vaia exercer as labores de anfitriño, nai e señora da casa, como lle correspondería a alguén da nobreza. Pola súa parte, Pandora renuncia á propiedade expresa do seu negocio e confórmase con manexalo a efectos prácticos. Cabe dicir que aínda que as protestas de Pandora ante a inxustiza do sistema existen nun baleiro, sen referencias explícitas á primeira onda feminista que se estaba a espallar naqueles anos polo país, a nota da autora que se inclúe ao final da novela confirma o desexo de Kleypas de render homenaxe a todas aquelas mulleres que pelexaron por un mundo máis xusto e a quen a historia silenciou co paso dos anos. Con *Devil in Spring*, Kleypas súmase ao rexurdimento do movemento feminista que estamos a presenciar na actualidade. Faino reivindicando a importancia que tivo o feminismo no pasado para a consecución dos dereitos das mulleres.

Smooth Talking Stranger vai un paso máis alá e defende a necesidade de seguir apostando polo feminismo nos tempos que corren. Esta novela forma parte dunha saga de novelas románticas contemporáneas (é dicir, situadas no tempo presente) que se centran

sobre todo no desenvolvemento psicolóxico da protagonista en relación a certos factores sociais (raza, clase, situación familiar etc.). Nesta ocasión, atopamos unha muller, Ella, que se considera a si mesma feminista. Fronte a súa nai e a súa irmá, que miden o seu valor persoal dependendo das relacións que establecen cos homes que as rodean, a protagonista desta historia tenta definirse a si mesma conforme a outros criterios. Ella posúe unha educación superior, ten un traballo que lle permite ser economicamente autosuficiente e, ao inicio da novela, está nunha relación cun home que non é o heroe da historia. Unha gran parte do argumento de *Smooth Talking Stranger* está pensado para tratar a cuestión da emancipación feminina, da maternidade e defender, como fai Ella, a importancia da primeira e a non-obrigatoriedade da segunda. En paralelo, Kleypas diseña unha trama na que a protagonista debe escoller entre dous homes, coa finalidade de expoñer as características dunha relación sentimental saudable. Ao comparar a Dane, o mozo de Ella, con Jack, o verdadeiro heroe da novela, Kleypas propón a intimidade emocional e o apoio mutuo coma os dous eixos fundamentais sobre os que construír unha relación de parella. A pesar da desconfianza coa que Ella ollaba o matrimonio, a novela remata coa súa voda con Jack Travis e a adopción do seu sobriño, de apenas uns meses de vida. Tal e como se explica na análise pormenorizada do texto, este desenlace non equivale á asimilación dun rol tradicional. Mais ben o contrario. *Smooth Talking Stranger* reconece que hai múltiples maneiras de entender e vivir o feminismo, de acordo cos

postulados feministas propios do século XXI. No transcurso da novela, Ella cae na conta de que nin os seus sentimentos por un home que posúe algúns dos trazos característicos da masculinidade hexemónica, nin a súa aposta por unha relación de parella canónica, son incompatibles coas súas crenzas feministas con respecto á igualdade dos xéneros ou a independencia da muller. Tal e como deixa entrever a reconciliación entre Ella e a súa irmá, a nosa protagonista aprende a respectar as eleccións doutras mulleres, sempre e cando estas se fagan libremente.

En vista de todo o exposto ao longo destas páxinas, podemos concluír que as novelas de corte romántico, un xénero tan amplo coma popular, xogan un papel moi importante no espertar dunha conciencia feminista, todo grazas ao seu interese polas relacións entre homes e mulleres e pola dramatización que fan da identidade feminina e o seu desenvolvemento. As novelas obxecto de estudo abranguen un período de aproximadamente cincuenta anos, cinco décadas nas que o movemento feminista experimentou dúas (mesmo hai quen di tres) fases interconectadas. Ao longo deste tempo, a teoría e a práctica feministas tiveron momentos de gran popularidade, momentos de declive e ambas as dúas teñen sido transformadas pola xente que participa delas. O mesmo podería dicirse das novelas románticas. Este estudo é consciente das súas limitacións, en tanto que recoñece que este xénero literario é un fenómeno incrivelmente complexo e multidimensional que precisa ser analizado desde varias perspectivas

teóricas. A través do exercicio da crítica literaria feminista, esta investigación corrobora que as novelas románticas poden formar parte do esforzo colectivo (feminista) e axudar a lograr a igualdade real. Nun traballo recente, a académica feminista e lectora de novelas románticas Jenni Simon afirma que “o xénero da novela romántica ofrece unha imaxe de activismo individual da man das súas creadoras” (5, tradución propia). Esta tese engade que o activismo tamén está presente no propio contido dos textos. Aínda que o activismo existente nas novelas aquí tratadas sexa moi semellante ao do feminismo liberal, non debe ser totalmente rexeitado. A finais da década dos 70, en pleno auxe da segunda onda do feminismo, Ann Barr Snitow escribiu que as novelas románticas, exemplificadas polo xigante editorial Harlequin, “debuxaban cun maior acerto as esperanzas de moitas mulleres con respecto ao amor, incluso mellor que as escritoras de máis renome e calidade” (160, tradución propia). Snitow equivocouse ao dicir que as autoras de novelas románticas (de masas) non poden ser escritoras de “renome e calidade”, pero estaba no certo ao sinalar que estes textos amosan as esperanzas de moitas mulleres. Nas súas obras, Rosamunde Pilcher e Lisa Kleypas imaxinan relacións de parella nas que o home e a muller xermolan individualmente. De seguro, iso merece que reconsideremos a nosa actitude perante este xénero literario e que teñamos en debida consideración o seu potencial para avanzar no proxecto feminista nos nosos días.