Journal of Popular Romance Studies
published in partnership with the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance

"I'm a Feminist, But…" Popular Romance in the Women's Literature Classroom

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Published online: October 2014
http://www.jprstudies.org

Abstract: The enduring popularity of the romance novel makes it an ideal genre to use in teaching feminist literary theory because it raises two compelling questions. What is the women's studies critic to do when a genre dominated by women writers and readers appears to conflict with feminist ideals? And what are teachers to do when that conflict turns up in the classroom: when students feel a disjunction between their pre-existing reading practices and the critical theories that inform their studies? The opposition between feminist theory and women's popular reading practices, in scholarship and in the classroom, is an especially pointed instance of an opposition often expressed in the scholarship of teaching literature more generally. This article examines the conflict between popular and critical literary reading practices. It then focuses specifically on romance by outlining feminist critical arguments both for and against romance reading. Finally, it recommends that we acknowledge these two areas of dissonance (the conflict students may feel as they straddle different reading practices, and the complicated relationship between feminism and the romance genre), and suggests strategies for making them an analytical focus in class.

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Keywords: feminist criticism, genre fiction, popular reading strategies, Popular Romance, scholarship of teaching and learning

> As I grew older and began to better identify my values and beliefs… I realized that reconciling my love of feminist theory and classic romances would be no easy task.
> —Student discussion post, 2012

> To hear my classmates say "I hate that I enjoy this book because it's a romance" makes me clench my fists.
> —Student discussion post, 2012

The enduring popularity of the romance novel makes it an ideal genre to use in teaching feminist literary theory because it raises a compelling question: What is the women's studies critic to do when a genre dominated by women writers and readers appears to conflict with feminist ideals? The question becomes all the more significant when the romance reader and the romance critic are the same person: when, that is, a student who enjoys reading romances is asked to assess them critically. Given the popularity of the romance genre, this is a situation that teachers should expect to encounter every time they bring a romance text to class, and one that provides key opportunities for reflecting not only on romance, but on assumptions in literary and feminist studies that might otherwise go unexamined.

The opposition between feminist theory and women's popular reading practices is an especially pointed instance of an opposition often expressed in the scholarship of teaching literature more generally. Teachers note the disjunction students feel when asked to switch from one set of interpretive practices (popular reading), to another (academic critical reading). This article advocates not only that we acknowledge the disjunction between these practices, but also that we make it an analytical focus. I will outline the different emphases of popular and critical reading, then look more specifically at feminist critical arguments for and against romance to better understand the contradictions students face when they attempt to read romances in an academic context using a women's studies approach. One of these arguments for romance is that the romance genre and the popular, female-dominated reading strategies associated with it can be less alienating to women than the genres and strategies associated with academic literary criticism, a field historically dominated by men. I will attempt to address this shortcoming by identifying ways to approach and incorporate popular romance reading practices for critical analysis in class.

When students are invited to consider women's enthusiasm for the popular romance alongside those aspects of the romance narrative that they find dangerous from a feminist perspective, they are also invited to think critically about the relationship between feminist theory and the diverse women for whom it advocates, including themselves. They must acknowledge their own overdetermination as readers: that they read using practices taken from varied personal and cultural pasts, practices that sometimes conflict with the new perspectives they are embracing as university students. They will be moved to question what critics value in literature, and how assumptions about gender influence those values. In short, they will be invited into a moment of metacognition, furthering their "ability to recognize and evaluate [their] own thinking" (Linkon 68). Students may respond by condemning the romance, by condemning feminist assumptions, or by attempting to reconcile the two. But whatever their conclusions, by juxtaposing what seem to be opposed practices—popular and critical romance reading—they gain a better sense of the beliefs and contexts motivating each.

Popular and Critical Reading Practices

How wide is the gap between critical and popular reading practices in discussions of teaching literature? So wide that some scholars suggest a student who takes easily to one of these practices is likely to be stymied by the other. In his article "Disliking Books at an Early Age," Gerald Graff notes that "when I was growing up I disliked and feared books" (36), and that he only began to enjoy reading after acquiring a literary critical lens for it, "as if having a stock of things to look for and to say about a literary work had somehow made it possible for me to read one" (39). Conversely, Sarah Webster Goodwin describes classes of "sullen and resistant" (233) students who are unwilling to turn a critical lens on their love of romance, either in life or in literature: "as a whole, they do not want to critique romance. To understand it, yes, but not if the price is losing its magic" (234).

As both Graff and Goodwin indicate, critical and popular reading practices use strategies that often conflict. James Marshall, in an examination of studies of these different strategies, reports that academic critical reading and analysis are characterized by "the close reading of selected texts in relative isolation from cultural contexts" (384). By contrast, the popular reading practices of book groups and book clubs stress immersion in the world of the book and are "far more likely … to relate personal experiences, talk about important ethical issues, and share their emotional experience of reading" (386).[1] Critical approaches tend to be text-centered; popular approaches draw more on readers' social and individual contexts.

In an examination of Janeites, or Austen fans, Claudia Johnson also contrasts popular and academic critical reading strategies. Academic practices specify

> that it is inappropriate to talk about characters as if they were real people or in any way to speculate upon their lives before, after, or outside the text itself [as popular readers do]; that biographical information about an author is irrelevant at best and heretical (i.e., a 'fallacy') at worst; … that Austen's novels are essentially about marriage, and that the courtship plot—rather than, say, the category *character*—is the major event in her fiction. (214)

It is important to note that the popular reading practices described by both Marshall and Johnson are highly intellectual. A critical reader might ask how the book's narrative point-of-view reveals a character, while a popular reader might consider how that character, as revealed in the book, would behave in a situation the book does not describe: "before, after, or outside the text itself." Both begin with a text-based analysis (both evaluate the character as created by the book), even though one approach stays with the text and the other moves away from it.

Marshall also points out that of the two reading strategies, popular reading is the more dominant and resilient, even for "college-educated readers of more 'serious fiction'" (386). "[T]here is little or no correlation," he writes, "between the reading practices we teach in school and the reading practices in which most adults engage when they leave school" (386). Life-long readers return to the popular reading practices they used before they took up academic critical reading—the latter, if Marshall is correct, stays in the

academy. Thus if literature plays an influential role in society, that influence would appear to operate primarily through popular rather than critical practices.

It follows that scholars who are interested in cultural criticism—and, from a literary angle, in how books contribute to society—should take an interest in popular reading. This is not to say we should abandon the particular strengths, intellectual engagements, and even pleasures of critical reading: in fact if students' university careers are the one brief window in which they adopt academic critical practices, then it is all the more important that we, as academic practitioners ourselves, make the most of that window. But one of the ways we can make the most of it is by working with what students already have and are likely to return to in the future. There is much to be gained from putting the popular ways in which they already read into dialogue with the critical reading practices we are teaching them.

Fortunately, not all students react to the contradictions between popular and critical reading practices by rejecting one and restricting themselves to the other. In five years of teaching a romance unit for a course on "Women and Literature," I have found that most students are open to considering both strategies, despite their varying degrees of experience with popular romance reading and academic critical reading (especially feminist academic criticism).

Students in the class range from those with little-to-no romance reading experience, to those who not only read romances but participate in romance fan organizations. The category of inexperienced romance readers includes many male students, who often report unfamiliarity with the genre (not surprising, considering that 91% of romance buyers are women [Scott]). Unlike Graff, however, even students who have not previously read romances seem prepared not only to take them on, but often to describe the experience of reading them as a pleasurable one. "I'm glad we were given an actual excerpt from a Harlequin book," writes one student, "since we've been talking about them in class so much"; while another notes that "As an outsider coming into the *Pride and Prejudice* universe, I have found the book to be incredibly enjoyable." At times this pleasurable reading is presented as incompatible with critical analysis. In one online post, a student describes suspending his critical understanding of romance plots (an understanding bolstered by class sessions that outlined and analyzed these plots) to better enjoy a novel: "Despite never having read this novel prior to this class, I am fairly certain of the resolution. When I read it, however, I dismiss any such predictions because I am thoroughly enjoying the read and I don't want my predictions to interrupt this surprisingly pleasant reading experience."

This comment is typical in that the student, like many critics, sees popular and critical reading practices as mutually exclusive: working critically by using plot models to make predictions will "interrupt" the experience of "thoroughly enjoying the read." As contradictory as these practices may feel, however, most students appear willing to take on both of them. The student who suspended plot analysis while reading, for instance, readily moved back into critical mode to reflect on his reading experience once it was completed. And unlike Goodwin's students, who "often don't call themselves feminists" (237), my students also seem prepared to approach the course material from a feminist perspective—which is to be expected, given that they have voluntarily enrolled in a class titled "Women and Literature." Indeed, a significant number of students in the class already

identify as women's studies scholars, whose embrace of feminism and its critical practices is a driving force in their intellectual development.

All this engagement with both critical and popular reading practices, however, does not protect students from feeling the differences between them, and wondering if it is impossible to hold both perspectives in combination. This is particularly the case when the critical approach is feminist and the reading material is the romance, since feminist scholarship has often—and not without justification—seen the popular romance novel as harmful to women.

But the feminist critique of the romance is increasingly offset by feminist voices in support of it, sometimes within the academy and sometimes outside of it. By introducing students to both sides of this argument—to the cases for and against romance—we open the door for an appraisal of popular romance reading in particular, as well as of the relationship between popular and critical reading practices more generally.

The Feminist Case Against Romance

The opposition between feminist theory and the romance novel dates back as early as the publication of Janice Radway's 1984 work, *Reading the Romance*. Radway's study is considered a pioneering work in reader-response theory as well as in romance studies, since she took the key step of studying romance by studying romance readers. Radway conducted extensive interviews with a group of Midwestern romance fans, all of them women and many of them, significantly, housewives. To her great credit, she allowed her interviews to change the course of her study entirely. What started out as an examination of the formal properties of romance shifted to encompass an analysis of romance novels' affective qualities as well.

Reading the Romance is a tour de force that pulls together Marxist, psychoanalytic, reader response, and formalist arguments. It was influential when published and has continued to be an obligatory citation in romance novel scholarship ever since.[2] Like all studies, however, the book has its blind spots, and Radway, writing in a time when homemaking may have seemed more of a gender-restricted default than a career choice, appears to hold it in little esteem. The women in her study, for example, repeatedly state that they value their caregiving relationships with their husbands and children. As individuals whose primary occupation is homemaking, they are "very proud of their abilities to communicate with and to serve the members of their families" (92). Yet Radway, not herself a professional homemaker, seems to find it impossible to believe other women might be happy and fulfilled in that role. Rather than comparing homemakers who take romance-reading breaks to college professors who shut their office doors between classes, Radway sees the caregiver's labor as inherently oppressive. The narrative structure of romance, she writes,

> demonstrates that despite idiosyncratic histories, all women inevitably end up associating their female identity with the social roles of lover, wife, and mother. Even more successfully than the patriarchal society within which it was born, the romance denies women the possibility of refusing that purely

> relational destiny and thus rejects their right to a single, self-contained existence. (207)

Because she doesn't consider the possibility that some individuals might autonomously prefer a "relational destiny" to "a single, self-contained existence," Radway seems convinced that her interviewees have been duped. "[T]his literary form," she writes of the romance, "reaffirms its founding culture's belief that women are valuable not for their unique personal qualities but for their biological sameness and their ability to perform that essential role of maintaining and reconstituting others" (208). Romance novels, to Radway, are a tool used by housewives to reconcile themselves to serving others in a patriarchal society, thereby perpetuating their own oppression.

One wonders if any of Radway's subjects read her study, and if so, what they thought of her claim that reading was the opiate by which they drugged themselves into social submission. But we do not have to wonder what Sarah Webster Goodwin's students thought of her condemnation of romance, because she tells us. Goodwin begins a class on "Romance and Gender in the United States" intending to show her students that romance "is a cultural form of tremendous power, and one that is disadvantageous to women" (233). As she discovers, this argument doesn't fly well in a class of students who aspire to romance in their own lives (234), some of whom even admit, "reluctantly and with hesitant laughter," that they read romance novels (239). "In no other course," she writes, "have I lost so many students; no other course has actually cost me a full night's sleep from worry" (233).

If Radway, in 1984, writes at a time when homemaking might have been seen as a restrictive default for women, Goodwin, in her 1997 article, describes women students who don't feel restricted at all. They don't identify as feminists, "because the need for feminism is over: we are already equal" (237). Goodwin's students, in the process of earning their college degrees, are unlikely to see homemaking as the obligatory choice it may have been for Radway's women, only eight percent of whom were college-educated (50). Like my own students, some of whom were raised by women who freely and deliberately chose a domestic career, Goodwin's students do not assume with Radway that traditional female roles are inherently oppressive (an assumption that carries its own sexism). Nor do they appear to be women's studies scholars, trained to recognize the continuing presence of sexism in a legally equal-opportunity society. Instead, the students in Goodwin's class see neither domesticity nor discrimination as a problem.

Accordingly, these students are at a loss in a class that views the promotion of domestic pairing as a form of sexist domination. It is one thing for critics to write, as Radway does, about distant romance fans who may not be reading the critic's disapproval. It is a far more difficult thing, Goodwin discovers, to bring that disapproval out into the open with students who don't share it.

Despite the unpalatability of their conclusions to fans of the genre, however, critics like Radway and Goodwin have good reasons for distrusting romance novels. The feminist case against romance, as presented by both professional critics and students, works from three main objections:

1. *Romance endorses women's relational roles at the expense of their individual development.*

Radway plots "the narrative structure of the ideal romance" in thirteen steps. In step one, "[t]he heroine's social identity is destroyed" (134). In the conclusion to the novel (steps 11-13), it is restored through union with the hero:

> 11. The hero proposes/openly declares his love for/demonstrates his unwavering commitment to the heroine with a supreme act of tenderness.
> 12. The heroine responds sexually and emotionally.
> 13. The heroine's identity is restored. (134)

Radway sees the romance's emphasis on relational identity (the heroine regains her identity only through union with the hero) as patriarchally restrictive: "[t]he romance does deny the worth of complete autonomy. In doing so, however, it is not obliterating the female self completely. Rather, it is constructing a particular kind of female self, the self-in-relation demanded by patriarchal parenting arrangements" (147). Because the romance emphasizes identity secured through heterosexual union with a man, it seems tailor-made to enforce the traditional female role of dependent wife, discouraging alternatives.

Many of my students find this emphasis as disturbing as Radway does. To quote a discussion post, "The whole idea that a woman 'finds herself' or discovers her true identity only after a man has validated her … is troubling to me." Students embrace the idea that self-discovery is an independent enterprise (hence the "self"), and feminist students especially, because they are aware of how often women have been and continue to be denied such independence, express discomfort with the way romances idealize identity found through another. Even if, as I will argue below, there is much to be admired in a genre that validates women's traditional relational identity, there is also danger in that validation. Women may not default into domestic roles in our own time quite as easily as they did in Radway's, but they are still more likely to end up in those roles than men are, and to feel more pressure to occupy them. It is thus not surprising that feminist readers take alarm when they find that the literary genre that most encourages relational identity is also a genre directed mainly toward women.

2. *Romance plots and characters validate abusive relationship patterns.*

Still more troubling than the heroine's ultimate relational identity is how she arrives at it. In Radway's narrative structure, before the heroine and hero love each other, they hate each other: "The heroine responds to the hero's behavior with anger or coldness," and "The hero retaliates by punishing the heroine" (134). In the most extreme instances, this punishment involves rape, which means that the heroine must regain her identity by loving her rapist.

There may be mitigating factors here. Radway's readers don't like rape stories (71), and romance reviewers Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan argued in 2009 that rape romances are an "Old Skool" phenomenon (13), largely dated: "The rapist hero went away by degrees … cultural sensibilities have changed, and fictional rape, especially by the hero, is more likely to burn the average romance reader's biscuit than melt our butter" (24-5). Arguably, the most egregious instances of the hero punishing the heroine have never been embraced by women readers, and are a legacy issue now.[3]

But the legacy is very real. Even in contemporary romances, the relationship between hero and heroine can be highly dysfunctional, even abusive. Recent megahits *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, for instance, feature heroes who keep stalker-close tabs

on the heroine's whereabouts (sometimes without her knowledge), and heroines who become emotionally dependent in ways that isolate them from other relationships or life activities (Peronto). Radway describes women's interest in abusive romances as an attempt to come to terms with their oppression: "the same awful possibilities of violence that dominate bad romances are always evoked as potential threats to female integrity even in good romances, simply because women are trying to explain this situation to themselves" (72). Violence, sadly, is something women readers, past and present, can relate to.

Even the mildest of punishments still send the message that the best relationships evolve out of antagonism between the partners and humiliation of the heroine. Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice* is "punished" only in the sense that she suffers when she discovers she has been wrong, and Fitzwilliam Darcy does not desire to punish her at all—only to tell his side of his story. Most readers of this very beloved romance come to the conclusion that both hero and heroine required humiliation: it betters their proud and prejudiced characters, a development set up from the very title of the book. Novels, after all, require transformation. A romance story in which heroine and hero fell instantly in love and stayed there would be very short. Whatever its narrative rationalization, however, a genre in which love is repeatedly founded in hate sets a problematic model for human relationships.

3. *Romance novels are commercial, formulaic productions of little literary value that perpetuate harmful media stereotypes.*

Romance novels are undeniably a lucrative commodity. The Romance Writers of America (RWA), who keep some of the best-documented statistics on the subject, report that romance "generated **$1.438 billion** in sales in 2012" and "was the largest **share of the U.S. consumer market** in 2012 at 16.7 percent" (emphasis RWA's).[4] Literary fiction, by comparison, generated $470.5 million (Scott). Radway argues that romances are not only sold like advertised commodities, but have the same effect on their readers: the romance novel "presents satisfaction, contentment, and pride, not as a result of the individual's actions or social intercourse with others, but as the natural consequence of the activity of consuming or displaying a particular product. Happiness is not an emotional condition that one creates for oneself through action; in advertising, it is a thing that one can buy" (117). By Radway's argument, romance buyers are fed virtual happiness, rather than acting to create real happiness.

One can presumably buy happiness by purchasing literary novels as well, yet literary critics do not object to this. Romance novels, from a literary critical perspective, are different not only because they are so much more successfully sold, but also because, like other branded commodities, one is as good as another. To the critic, if not to the romance reader, romances lack individuality. Even literary romances often follow the thirteen predictable points in Radway's plot outline. And category romances, by this logic, are even worse, appearing in numbered series where each book is guaranteed to resemble the next, since all must adhere to a formula established not by the author who writes individual stories, but by the publisher who sells them in mass. Content aside, one can distinguish a category romance from a single-title romance by the size of the author's name on the cover: if the name is as large as or larger than the title of the book, it's probably not a category romance. Indeed, for anyone who believes in authorial genius or originality, the category romance is a slap in the face. "I don't like the thought that writing a book all comes down to

a 'formula' that any average person can follow," writes one student. "I realize that this is snobby, but I just feel that having the … ability to write an amazing book is rare, so the fact that it has to be 'dumbed down' really annoy[s] me." The standardization of the romance is seen to attack both the author's genius and the reader's intelligence.

The other and more feminist problem with the romance novel's commodification is that it repeats harmful gender stereotyping also found in the larger culture. As one self-proclaimed early romance fan in my class wrote, her childhood reading "gave me a very distinct idea of what I needed to be to be considered a woman of worth. To be as successful as the characters in these books I needed to be patient, quiet, shy, beautiful, unique, kind, generous, thin, organized, well-kept, virginal, and most of all, inexplicably captivating."[5] Students are quick to note that romances promote stereotypical standards of worth not only in their heroines, but also in their heroes. In Radway's description, "[t]he hero of the romantic fantasy is always characterized by spectacular masculinity," and it isn't difficult to find this hero surviving in current writer's guidelines for romance writers.[6] As a male student wrote, the romance could "create unrealistic standards among women for men to be prince charming and to live up to the highest expectations of chivalry." Existing in a typological box themselves, romances encourage their readers to stay in them, and to seek other people who match pre-existing, standardized, and unrealistic expectations.

The Feminist Case for Romance

Even feminist scholarship that is highly critical of romance has good reason to look for the up-side of a genre so clearly associated with women, and Radway and Goodwin both find positives there. Further, students and critics influenced by third-wave feminism, which tends to be more open to stereotypical femininity than the second-wave criticism of Radway's time was, may be more open to romance along with it. As one student writes of the *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books* romance review and fan site:

> I like what the S[mart] B[itches] girls are doing because they show it is not a negative thing to read or write a romance, everyone is free to explore and enjoy as they like! Like these books and the third wave of feminism, I think we should be valuing each interest…. I think we must be careful about putting certain opinions or ways of living into the category of "not as good" or into "not a true feminist…"

From both the second and the third wave, then, feminist arguments in favor of romance point to the genre's utopian potential, its validation of traditional female roles, and its challenging of individualist assumptions that have been problematic for women readers and writers, particularly in an academic context.

1. *Romances offer women a way to acknowledge their oppression and imagine a better future.*

A devoted teacher, Goodwin loses sleep and listens to the "Romance and Gender" students who speak to her through their "passive walk-out" (233). "I have learned," she

writes, "to concede to my students that there is something to admire in the romance paradigm: that it is not just an enforcer of the status quo but a fantasy vehicle for change, a utopian impulse" (239). Radway sees similar potential in the romance:

> Romance reading supplements the avenues traditionally open to women for emotional gratification by supplying them vicariously with the attention and nurturance they do not get enough of in the round of day-to-day existence. It counter-valuates because the story opposes the female values of love and personal interaction to the male values of competition and public achievement and, at least in ideal romances, demonstrates the triumph of the former over the latter. Romance reading and writing might be seen therefore as a collectively elaborated female ritual through which women explore the consequences of their common social condition as the appendages of men and attempt to imagine a more perfect state where all the needs they so intensely feel and accept as given would be adequately addressed. (212)

If Radway's ultimate conclusion in *Reading the Romance* is that romances prevent women from bettering their lot by repeatedly insisting that their relational roles are their destiny, here she suggests that the romance does at least allow them to imagine that relational destiny in "a more perfect state." Radway's housewife romance-readers nurture others but are insufficiently nurtured themselves. Romance heroines, by contrast, are nurtured by romance heroes. Romances, then, allow their readers not only to experience vicarious nurturing through identification with the heroine, but also to acknowledge and explore the lack of nurturance in their own lives. If they do not encourage reform, they at least allow women to acknowledge the need for reform.

2. *Romances challenge a male-modeled individualism.*

Romances allow Radway's housewives not only to address a lack of nurturance in their own domestic, relational positions. They also allow them to imagine a society in which those positions are appreciated rather than denigrated. It is painfully ironic that in the same paragraph where Radway observes that the romance "opposes the female values of love and personal interaction to the male values of competition and public achievement," she refers to women in domestic roles as "the appendages of men." Why do women read romances, and why might feminists love them? Because, unlike Radway, romances do not assume that people in relationally-oriented traditional female roles are categorically subordinate to people in individualistically-oriented traditional male roles.

If romance imagines "a more perfect state" for Radway's women, it also validates where they are presently. Relationships and domesticity are supreme in the romance, even if elsewhere relational domestic work continues to be devalued culturally and economically: the stereotypical housewife outside the romance is desperate, dumb, or bored, and people who care for children are paid little, if at all. As long as women are associated with "love and personal interaction," in opposition to a masculinity-associated "competition and public achievement," then they win with the romance novel, where love triumphantly rules.

As Goodwin comments, updating Radway, the importance of relationships is a theme that continues to resound in a culture where sexuality is not always relational. If Radway's women defaulted into relational roles, Goodwin describes romance readers who may feel pressure to deny their desire for close emotional relationships. The persistence of romance, she writes, suggests "an enduring dissatisfaction with the pleasure of sex without emotional involvement. We read in category romances explicit sex scenes, but in the context of a familiar—very familiar—affective bond." Romances thus "return sexuality to the affective bond in the fantasy life of a reader who may feel some social pressure to be stronger, more autonomous, than she wants to be" (239). Romances thus validate not only women who elect to stay in traditional relational roles, but also women who feel overly pressured to leave relationality behind in pursuit of emotional and sexual independence.

In the romance, both the heroine and, significantly, the hero opt for a committed relationship. Not only the woman but also the man—typically, as Radway points out, a hyper-masculine man—must embrace a relational destiny if the novel is to achieve a happy romantic ending. The obligatory antagonism between heroine and hero in the standard romance plot is key in this validation. It establishes that both heroine and hero are capable of independence, and when they trade it in for romance they do so freely, accepting relational lives as superior lives.

Thus if romance's undermining of individualism is sometimes seen as a danger by feminist critics, it might also be seen as an asset. This is particularly the case since feminism, along with other identity politics approaches, has reason to be highly suspicious of the "single, self-contained existence" that Radway presents as a basic human right. Quite apart from the fact that nobody actually lives a single, self-contained existence, there are ideological perils in imagining such a life as the ideal state. The individual in the Western intellectual tradition has been defined by a male model.[7] As a student in Goodwin's class aptly notes of a study that critiques women's emphasis on finding romantic relationships, "They're thinking just like men. You're not serious unless you're just focused on work and career" (236). Goodwin notes in her class, correctly, that "romance is a relatively recent and unusual phenomenon" and "not primarily biological, but cultural" (233). But the same might be said of individualism. Romance and individualism indeed go hand-in-hand: romance is after all the celebration of individual choice (rather than family arrangement) in a relationship between two people, each of whom is uniquely irreplaceable to the other. If we are to critique romance as a social construction (and we ought to), then we should give individualism equal scrutiny.

3. *Romance provides women with an alternative to a sexist high-culture literary canon.*

"Why does every female genius have to die insane and alone?" writes one student in my class in response to the story of Judith Shakespeare in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf famously tells the story of Judith, William Shakespeare's hypothetical sister whose attempts to duplicate her brother's career end with her suicide, to make the point that social and educational inequities would have prevented even a woman as talented as Shakespeare from finding success as a Renaissance writer. This is an essential point to make, but as my student's response emphasizes, women's doomed and helpless fate under social oppression is a story that high-culture literature tells repeatedly. It is also a story that can, as romance writer Jennifer Crusie observes, be profoundly alienating to women. In

her former career as a Ph.D. student, Crusie writes, "I had to read *Madame Bovary*, I had to read *Anna Karenina,* I had to read 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,' I had to read Faulkner and Fitzgerald and Lawrence. I had to see Hester Prynne as the great American heroine who triumphs by remaining celibate for the rest of her endless life." While in the middle of this mandatory curriculum of stories of disastrous female sexuality, Crusie, looking for examples of women's narratives, begins reading romances:

> 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 though they were forming permanent pair bonds, women who moved through a world of frustration and detail and small pleasures and large friendships, a world I had authority in.

For Crusie, romance is not utopian fantasy. It describes a world more familiar and real to her than the world of the academic literary canon, in which sex condemns a woman to an early death (often at her own hand), and marriage means slavery. In the world of romance, the autonomous woman need not "die insane and alone." She can live on and have a successful relationship that assists rather than thwarts her self-realization—which, after all, is something that many women actually do.

Crusie's experience serves as a vivid reminder that domestic suburbia is not the only place where women suffer the effects of patriarchy. The world of high culture has its own forms of oppression, as does the world of academic research, and critics and professors are no more immune to the influence of patriarchy than are mass-market publishers. And here we might pause to consider how an emphasis on individualism has affected the way high-culture literary institutions define authorship, and correspondingly how they define good literature. We value originality in literature partly because, despite literary criticism's present-day emphasis on historical and cultural context, we still think of the best literary works as the products of exceptionally talented individuals. In my student's words, having the "ability to write an amazing book is rare." A book with a formulaic plot, by contrast, doesn't feel rare at all. If anyone could write it—if many have in fact already written it—then it feels short on genius.

But our critical emphasis on originality in literature is not just cultural and historical; it is also to a certain extent illusory. If girl-meets-boy, girl-hates-boy, girl-loves-boy is a clichéd plot (romance), so too is wife-is-unfulfilled, wife-rebels, wife-dies (*Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina, Revolutionary Road*, "To Room Nineteen," etc.). Indeed, it might be said that both narrative paradigms are merely opposite sides of the same modern Western relational coin: one utopian and one dystopian, and both entirely derivative.

I don't want to overstate the case here. I am certainly not arguing that there's no qualitative difference between, say, *To the Lighthouse* and a stack of Harlequins. Many criteria apart from plot structure might separate romances, or at least category romances, from high literature. Radway for instance points out that the romance readers in her study prefer conventional prose that does not require "hard work" to follow (196-7). But not all novels with a romance plot use transparent language: the Radway readers who avoid

difficult prose also avoid Jane Austen (197). Given that complex language may appear in romances, and borrowed plots in high-culture novels, we might ask whether the romance's poor literary reputation is founded not only on notions of quality but also on gender politics.

Johnson, for example, has noted that mid-twentieth-century literary scholars, primarily male, made Jane Austen novels into acceptable material for serious study by masculinizing the way they were read. Chastising non-academic Janeites for their love of "novels by 'a mere slip of a girl,'" scholars "participate[d] in that demand to consolidate and reinvigorate masculinity elsewhere visible in the larger context of British and American culture" (220). This revision of thinking on Austen was part of a larger effort to further university study of the novel itself, which previously had not been considered worth scholars' time:

> Academic literary criticism of the 1940s and early 1950s saves Austen from her admirers and for a middle-class professorate by celebrating her acerbity and seriousness, championing her fiction as a legitimate object of study in the as yet young field of novel studies over and against the ostensibly frivolous appreciation of Janeites. (220)

Predictably, one of these legitimizing, masculinizing strategies was to de-romanticize this writer of romance plots. "Indeed," Johnson writes, "Austen's very skepticism about romantic love is in part what qualifies her as a tough-minded fellow traveler" (221). Austen a romantic? Not really. Put her on the syllabus![8]

That the novel's disreputability is associated with women readers and their relational interests would not have come as any surprise to Austen herself, who lampooned such attitudes. Although *Northanger Abbey* provides a critique of readers who confuse fiction with reality, it is also scathing toward those who look down on novels as a gender-coded waste of time. When heroine Catherine Morland "with all the civility and deference of the youthful female mind, fearful of hazarding an opinion of its own in opposition to that of a self-assured man," asks the foolish Mr. Thorpe if he had read Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*, he shoots her down: "Udolpho! Oh, Lord! not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do" (47). But Thorpe's opinion is in turn shot down in this exchange between Catherine and the novel's hero, Henry Tilney:

> "…But you never read novels, I dare say?"
>
> "Why not?"
>
> "Because they are not clever enough for you—gentlemen read better books."
>
> "The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all Miss Radcliffe's works, and most of them with great pleasure." (102)

In the world of *Northanger Abbey*, the ability to take pleasure in books that women read cements Henry Tilney's general fabulousness. In the world of Austen criticism, however, it would mark him as a lightweight of ambiguous sexuality who fails to understand "that the business of studying [literature] is serious indeed, requiring analytical skills and specialist knowledges available through courses of study at colleges and universities" (Johnson 214). Amongst those with "something else to do," novels are not for fun.

And so we return to the pervasive opposition of critical and popular reading. Goodwin may learn from her students to appreciate romance, but she still despairs when a class full of women, viewing the BBC *Pride and Prejudice*, "emits a collective sigh" as Darcy "simply removes his cravat, throwing back his head and revealing his neck" (240). "At that moment," she recalls,

> I doubted that I would be able to edge those students into a critical perspective on the film. I was right. Not until I got them into Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was I able to pull them along with me—because that novel, more than anything else we read, places ambivalence and its catastrophes overtly and brilliantly on the table. (240-41)

Perhaps it is to be expected that a pedagogy founded on the assumption that romance is "disadvantageous to women" finds it more difficult to analyze a story in which a woman gains a hard-won understanding with a man she comes to admire and happily marry, than a story in which a woman idealizes a lover who steals her money, flirts with infidelity, and beats her. As long as students can't analyze the romances that make them sigh, they will have only a fragmentary understanding of romance altogether—and not to mention (especially if Marshall is correct about the dominance of popular reading practices) of their own past, present, and future reading choices. If we really want students to analyze the narratives of romance—utopian as well as dystopian—especially when we teach in a culture that is so caught up in these narratives, we must enable them to work critically from their pleasure as well as their discomfort.

Critiquing from Pleasure

Perhaps the first step in making room for students to read pleasurably as well as critically is to acknowledge that all interpretive practices have strengths and weaknesses, and academic reading is no exception. Literary critical reading has its own limits, its own professional turf to defend, and its own forms of sexism. It can benefit students in any academic class on feminist literary studies to be aware of work like Johnson's: studies that draw attention to the ways male scholars have elevated themselves above other men by comparing those men's reading practices to women's.[9] This is not to say that the texts and practices privileged by scholarship are all bad, but that they are part of the same patriarchal culture that pleasurable romance reading is a part of, and susceptible to the many of the same defects. Correspondingly, just as scholarly reading has its strengths, so too does pleasurable reading. We can encourage multiple modes of approaching a text.

Further, we should bring these multiple modes into the classroom. Literary education need not be presented as a unidirectional progressive move from one style of reading to another. We should not only acknowledge the validity of non-academic forms of reading, but explore them in an academic context. The following practices may enable such consideration:

1. *Use and integrate multiple venues of discussion.*

This article is certainly not the first to advocate using different discussion formats—large group, small group, online posts, etc.—to make it easier for students with different learning styles and comfort levels to enter a discussion (see for example Linkon 67-8). But it is all the more important to make different entry points available when the topic is romance reading, so often disparaged in high-culture contexts including academe. Assigning online responses is particularly effective, as it allows students to venture opinions that they might be shy about expressing in person. The downside of online posts is that they can sometimes go unread by other students, so if I find one that is particularly apt, I bring it into class for closer attention.

2. *Juxtapose high- and low-culture romances.*

As Pamela Regis reminds us, "[t]he courtship story [was] a major force shaping the novel in English" (63). Great novels are often great romances, and the moment we include high-culture texts in the romance genre, we dramatically increase the number of students willing to admit they enjoy romances. Including high-culture novels has the further advantage of opening the question of why some texts are valued in an academic context more than others. Students may consider factors from syntax to assumptions about originality to fan-culture reading practices to the dynamics of canon formation.

Making romance novels the focus of these considerations helps us unpack how a text or genre's association with women affects our perception of its literary quality, since romance is associated with women readers and writers. If *Pride and Prejudice* is as well written as, say, *Anna Karenina*, they why are fans of the one considered sillier than fans of the other? To what extent do they seem unserious because of their practices (dressing up in Regency costumes at conventions, sighing over the attractions of male characters), and to what extent is it because, as Johnson notes, "we now live in a cultural environment when it can be assumed that literature written by women is literature written for women" (213), and a female readership is considered less prestigious than a male readership? Or to what extent are these two possibilities related?

3. *Analyze pleasure.*

If students feel comfortable admitting that they enjoy reading romances, they can turn a critical lens on their enjoyment. Radway herself points out that her study is not a comprehensive overview of romance readers (48-9). It is also, by now, dated. Students who enjoy romance themselves can respond to *Reading the Romance* by offering their own answers to the questions Radway asks the women in her study, extending its scope. Because Radway studied housewives, for example, many of her explanations for romance

reading revolve around homemakers' needs and concerns. But if full-time college students read for reasons similar to those of Radway's housewives (escapism, for instance), then what other explanations can they offer? What does pleasurable reading accomplish for them, and how do these ends differ from the ends accomplished through critical reading?

Beyond student responses, it can be useful to analyze other groups of avid romance readers. Web sites such as *The Republic of Pemberley* (Austen fans) or *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books* are rich in reader responses to and analyses of romances.

4. *Give air-time to both sides of the debate.*

Few, if any, teachers have a pedagogical style that is neutral, whether they work from the conviction that romance is "disadvantageous to women" or that romance is unfairly maligned for its association with femininity. But when a genre is as widely-read and as provoking in its gender politics as romance is, we need to recognize that there are multiple ways to look at it. Students may have highly emotional responses to romance, whether because they cherish it deeply or because they feel it has harmed them. And teachers should make room for these varying positions, perhaps even by modeling them. During the romance unit in "Women and Literature," I often open a class session by flip-flopping on the position I expressed in the previous class, sometimes in response to student online posts that jumped on the last class's bandwagon. My own preference is to keep students guessing about where my bandwagon is headed, but it can also be effective to make it clear that there are multiple bandwagons to jump on, whether or not they are embraced by the instructor.

5. *Teachers who like romances (or who admire people who do) should admit it.*

If you happen to enjoy romances, admitting it need not compromise your ability to critique them. (I point out to students that in addition to reading romance novels, I also consume enormous quantities of butter, which I am reasonably certain is not good for me.) If you wish you could blend romance and suspense like novelist Mary Stewart, say so. If your friend the feminist biochemist is addicted to soap operas, say that too. If romance is the top-selling genre of fiction, then students who admit to reading it should not need to do so "reluctantly and with hesitant laughter." Romance reading is so widespread that even those who don't partake in it usually know and respect someone who does: in discussing romance, one student writes, "all I could think about was how my mother and grandmother would feel." A feminist literature classroom shouldn't ignore these thoughts, but should be attentive to the reading habits of our mothers, our grandmothers, our friends, and ourselves.

There are a wide variety of romances out there. Readers who have no patience for misogynist "Old Skool" punishing kisses or drugstore Harlequins may find that they not only admire the narrative structure of *Jane Eyre*, but also enjoy, just a little bit, Jane and Rochester's jousting repartee. If this describes you, say so, even if you still have reservations (*Jane Eyre,* for one, offers fodder aplenty for these). It's easiest to encourage others to be open about their varied reading experiences if you go first.

In Conclusion

First the disclaimers. I don't by any means wish to devalue academic literary reading practices, on which I have built a career. Nor do I wish to deny the misogynistic elements in romance fiction, or that some romances and romance subgenres are particularly ugly in this regard. I acknowledge the existence of very, very badly written romance novels, and I don't believe that the distinction between high- and low-culture literature is entirely based on sexism (although I have been persuaded that it is partly so). I am willing to accept that there may be readers, some of them maybe even students in my classes, who consume romance for the self-defeating purposes that Radway describes.

But I also believe, strongly, that most of my students are savvier than that—particularly those who are already fluent, or aspiring toward fluency, in the feminist critical convictions that inspire scholars like Radway and Goodwin. And while some of them may be unable to reconcile loving both romance and feminist criticism, others may find that they can—even if sometimes they feel (understandably) that these two loves conflict.

Further, years of discussions with students about their reading have convinced me that English teachers owe a debt to popular fiction genres, including romance, for their entry-level recruiting: for providing easy-to-read texts that capitalize on the lure of popular typologies, books that help readers develop the fluencies that allow them to approach other books. If I believe we should criticize romances, I also think we should be grateful to them.

And for all that we see—accurately—as wrong in the romance, we should also suppose—humbly—that some of its appeal might be in its rightness. If we believe in the capacity of our students to distinguish between goods and evils, then we should open ourselves to appreciating the books that they appreciate—and assist them in turning an eye on their appreciation that is both critical and open-minded. As we do this, it cannot hurt to remember how often love is a positive force in human endeavor, whether it be romantic love for other people, or readerly love for the stories they tell.

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[1] Marshall cites book club/group studies by Janice Radway and Michael Smith.

[2] See for example Goodwin (234, 238-9), Tan and Wendell (20), and Regis, who calls *Reading the Romance* "the single most influential work on the romance novel" (5).

[3] This claim should be liberally qualified. Rapist romances are still out there. Further, Wendell and Tan suggest that the rape of the heroine may only "have shifted focus; instead of violating the heroine's hoo hoo, rape may be visited instead on her will. This sort of metaphorical breach is especially pervasive in paranormal romances, in which heroines are often changed or transformed without their consent, even against their express wishes, by the hero" (25)

[4] Statistics are not as available for other countries. The Romance Writers of Australia report that out of "10 million books sold each year in the UK… seven million are romance novels," but do not cite a source for this information.

[5] This reader's list of romance heroines' features doesn't entirely match that of the ideal romance heroine as described by Radway and her readers, whose most valued traits are intelligence, independence, and a sense of humor (77), not patience and shyness. Both this student's and Radway's heroines are conventionally beautiful and virginal, however (132).

[6] The Harlequin Desire hero, for instance, is a "powerful and wealthy hero—an alpha male with a sense of entitlement, and sometimes arrogance," and Harlequin Medical heroes are "top-notch docs, hot-shot surgeons," not nurses.

[7] More broadly, it has been defined by the model of those in power: not only male but white, heterosexual, etc.

[8] In this discussion of how the quality of a genre is associated with its masculinity, I've focused on the romance plot, but even diction preferences arguably carry gender biases. Scholarship on *Frankenstein* shows that Mary Shelley's simpler prose suits our own contemporary tastes more than her husband Percy's Latinate revisions of her manuscript, through which Percy displays an education that was unavailable to women of the Shelleys' time (Mellor 162-3). Perhaps we like our writing dumbed down now. Or perhaps our period is merely different in its tastes than the Shelleys', and simplicity ("Do not overwrite," and "Avoid fancy words," as Strunk and White advise [72, 76]) is now prized by educated men, and therefore desirable.

[9] It is important to note that men are not the only offenders here. Although most of the fan-disparaging Austen scholars whom Johnson cites are men, some are women. As Gayatri Spivak has noted, a person who belongs to multiple identity groups may well choose to speak from the perspective of the group in power (for example, "The subordinated gender following the dominant within the challenge of nationalism while remaining caught within gender oppression is not an unknown story" [2119]). A person who is both female and an accredited scholar may thus be likely to speak from a scholarly perspective, even if that perspective disparages women. If male scholars elevate themselves above other men by suggesting that those men's reading practices are womanish, we might expect female scholars to avoid those same practices to demonstrate that they, true scholars, are not that kind of women.

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