

IRONY, IDEOLOGY, AND RESISTANCE

IRONY, IDEOLOGY, AND RESISTANCE:
THE AMAZING DOUBLE LIFE OF HARLEQUIN PRESENTS

By

KRISTIN DOWNEY, B.A. M.A.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

McMaster University

© Copyright by Kristin Downey, July 2005

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (2005)
(English)

McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Irony, Ideology, and Resistance: The Amazing Double Life of Harlequin Presents

AUTHOR: Kristin Downey, B.A. (McMaster University)

M.A. (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Professor Imre Szeman

NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 227

Dissertation Abstract

In *Harlequin Presents*, the recurrence of particular moments of resistance suggests that these structures of events have meaning apart from – and perhaps even antithetical to – the ideological outcome of any specific text. The ideological structures presented in the romance novel are not passively accepted, nor do they simply fulfill a single pre-existing need or desire in their reading public. Romance novels utilize ideologies in a self-consciously playful and ironic way. These texts offer multiple ways of understanding the worlds they depict, the structures of understanding contained within being posited and discarded. This thesis proposes a means of interpreting the romance novel captures the ambivalence of the reading experience. I will show how the paradox of the romance novel – the seemingly limitless potential of a feminine discourse of the private sphere that is set within the conservative confines of repetitive narratives of social integration – is incorporated into the structure of the texts themselves.

While the texts in the series manifest standardized outcomes, they also exhibit recurrent patterns of resistance. The serial form of *Harlequin Presents* dictates that this tension between separate value sets and ideologies is never fully resolved. The appeal of the romance novel must then lie between these competing demands. Each of my chapters examines the ways that this ironic tension functions within a different intellectual space. In considering how the domestic sphere, the body and the nation are overlaid with multiple, contested meanings, this thesis maps out the scope of ideological resistance and adherence throughout *Harlequin Presents*.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Imre Szeman, for his unflagging enthusiasm for this project. His kindness and generosity has certainly helped me to complete this dissertation.

I would also like to thank the members of my supervisory committee. Their advice has been invaluable throughout this process.

I would like to thank My Aunt Barbara for peaking my interest. And finally, I would like to thank Shawn for years of love and support.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	1
Adventures in Domesticity: Irony, Ideology and Family Values	44
Living the Emotion: The Harlequin Reader and the Heroine's Body	89
The Stuff of Nation: Fetishizing Ethnicity in the Global Village	151
Conclusion	197
Appendix	205
Bibliography	207

Introduction

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

(Harlequin Presents)¹

According to recent statistics released by Romance Writers of America, the romance novel constitutes roughly half the popular paperback fiction market, and ninety-four percent of its consumers are women (RWA – Industry Statistics). In light of such figures, it should be unnecessary to defend the decision to engage in further analysis of this genre. Certainly, we cannot ignore the most prolific example of contemporary women's writing. These same statistics, however, can have a debilitating effect on the study of the romance novel. The volume of seemingly interchangeable texts that are being produced for the romance market makes analysis of this field as a whole virtually impossible. This state of affairs, in turn, leads to the assumption that we already understand the genre in its entirety.² If romance constitutes half of the paperback fiction market, clearly cultural theorists need to be able to say something intelligent and intelligible about this group of texts. Persistent assumptions regarding the uniformity of the genre seem to be driven by what theorists want or need the texts to be rather than by what they actually are. Anecdotally, I have found that many casual observers with whom I discussed my thesis project were not only surprised but also confused that I would feel the need to limit my study to a "section" of the field. It quickly became apparent that my

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

choice to analyse a type of romance novel did not cohere with the popular cultural assumption that all romance novels are necessarily the same. However convenient, we should not dismiss the nuances of any genre merely because we want simple answers from an object that is too large to grasp in any complexity. At the same time, the study of a genre written and read almost exclusively by women lends itself to facile movements between the representation of women throughout the genre and their conditions of experience in the world at large.³ However much we may desire such easy access to the realm of women's experience, this representational fallacy does not accurately express the ultimate function of the romance novel: to deliver reading pleasure to its consumers.

While we cannot expect the romance novel to stand in for women in society, it remains an exemplar of the writing and consumption of books by women. Not only are all of the pseudonyms explicitly female, but the romance novel genders its reader as female. In fact, the genre constructs a readership that is as uniform as its packaging. While RWA's statistics show that such homogeneity is not necessarily the case (RWA – Industry Statistics), the mainstream romance novel clearly positions itself as a vehicle for delivering reading pleasure to Western, heterosexual women. In mapping the production and function of women's reading pleasure, we need to come to an understanding of the romance novel that situates it somewhere between a simplistic, already known object and a literal depiction of women's social desires. Expecting either too little or too much of the romance novel, each of these viewpoints serves as an ineffective mode of interpretation. In fact, both approaches seem specifically designed to dismiss the

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

romance novel as either a degenerate form of writing or as a disappointment to feminist aspirations.

Somewhere amidst ethnographic studies of patterns of consumption,⁴ diatribes against oppressive conservatism, and giddy speculation concerning feminine communities, the cultural object itself has been lost.⁵ Cultural theorists have become so obsessed with what the romance novel could or should mean that they tend to overlook the far more mundane question of what the contemporary romance novel actually *is*. This dissertation performs a largely formal analysis of the contemporary romance novel. Rather than focussing on the genre as a whole, my investigation will consider the romance novel in its most neglected and marginal form – the contemporary *serial* romance novel. How does Harlequin Presents construct its readership as desiring female consumers? How does the *form* of the serial romance novel affect its production and reception? This thesis proposes a means of interpreting the romance novel in terms of its structural elements and the material conditions of its circulation. I will show how the paradox of the romance novel – the seemingly limitless potential of a feminine discourse of the private sphere that is set within the conservative confines of repetitive narratives of social integration – is structured into the texts themselves.

**The Politics of Pleasure:
Fantasy as Social Commentary in the Contemporary Romance Novel**

But, for some reason, when it comes to the romance novels critics worry about whether the women who read them can tell the difference between

what is real and what is not.

Of course the readers can tell the difference. They do not expect the imaginative creations of romance to conform to real life any more than they expect the fantasies of any other genre to conform to the real world. Like all other genres, romance is based on fantasy and the readers know it. (Jayne Anne Krentz, *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*)

In 1973, Harlequin Enterprises began publishing a line of sexually explicit contemporary romance novels designed to appeal to and generate an increasing demand for erotic content. In their guidelines for prospective writers, Harlequin Enterprises describes their Harlequin Presents line in terms of its capacity to formulate a fantasy with the potential for social commentary: “Although grounded in reality, these stories offer compelling modern fantasies to readers all around the world, and there is scope within this line to develop relevant, contemporary issues which touch the lives of today’s women” (eHarlequin.com). The term “fantasy” is a recurring one in the discourse surrounding the contemporary romance. Frequently used in generic contrast to the conventions of contemporary, middle-brow “realist” fictions, fantasy is a crucial term because it implies some unspecified connection between consumption and consent. In an increasingly circular interpretation of genre, critics posit that romance readers want to consume these “compelling modern fantasies” because this is what fantasy means. Allowing fantasy to serve as the primary conceptual framework for understanding the romance novel has enabled scholars to position the texts as socially relevant to a larger feminist project of mapping resistant modes of women’s writing while admitting to disturbing, patriarchal content. At the same time, this generic label has meant that certain

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

questions concerning power and consumption are never asked.

It is immediately apparent that the romance novel is not a limitless fantasy. The texts bear sufficient resemblance to the social landscape of Western capitalism to rule out that possibility. If the genre were an idyllic representation of women's desires free from the constraints of realism, why would women writers choose to replicate so consistently the material conditions of their own oppression? We are told, instead, that the fantasy is bounded, or "grounded in reality." However, if romance novels merely reproduce existing socio-economic patterns, why call them fantasy at all? Fantasy still implies a somewhat utopian vision. Perhaps the resolution of this dilemma lies in the promise of "An Emotionally Satisfying and Optimistic Ending" (RWA National). A pessimistic reading of current social practices might presume that, while the texts mirror certain aspects of "real life," by ending happily, they diverge from a realistic representation of human relationships. To some extent, however, the label of "fantasy" allows "the happy ending" to become the determinate formal aspect of the text, an aspect that neither requires nor allows testing. If the formula of the romance dictates that "Romance novels end in a way that makes the reader feel good" (RWA National), then demand for the romance novel – as evidenced by mass-consumption – is indicative of compliance with any and all social structures presented in the text. The fundamental problem with applying the term "fantasy" is that it presupposes a non-resistant reception of the text. Since, within this framework, we can no longer question ideological complicity with the text, discussions of the romance novel invariably descend into arguments about content

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

and the social implications of compliant consumption. The romance novel has a happy ending; therefore the reader will, indeed must, be happy. Fantasy, in its most simplistic forms, leaves no room for subversion or dissent.

As with other fictional genres, romance posits a possible ideological structure, but the relationship that any given reader has to that structure is mediated by the fact that, as an object of mass culture, it is simultaneously coercively imposed and willingly consumed. The label “fantasy,” then, in popular usage, functions more readily as an advertisement than a description of genre. By pre-configuring the object as always already desired, the term “fantasy” circumvents any issues of demand. At the same time, Harlequin’s ad-line alludes to the sexual connotations of the term; the fantasy experience is particularly compelling because it provides the reader with “a world full of spine-tingling passion and provocative, tantalizing, romantic excitement!” (eHarlequin.com). This visceral description suggests that fantasy has a direct physical impact upon the reader, the implication being that the sexual identity of the reader, like the sexual response evoked, must originate in the individual. Merging sexual fantasy with social fantasy (i.e., utopian visions of domestic life), Harlequin’s promotional literature effaces the origin of any ideological structure, as well as Harlequin’s own role in its creation, by suggesting that the texts are fulfilling a pre-existing need.

Fantasy is an ineffectual intellectual framework for analysing a mass-cultural object such as the contemporary romance novel because it does not adequately describe the complex relationship that consumers have to the objects that inhabit their world.

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

According to cultural theorists like Judith Williamson and Jennifer Scanlon the commodity form represents a relationship between the object and the consumer. The production of genre – like other commodity forms – is, to some degree, a process of wish-fulfilment, where the commodity form is a “congealed longing, the final form of an active wish. And the shape in which fulfilment is offered seems to become the shape of the wish itself” (Williamson 12). Consumption, on the other hand, does not necessarily indicate compliance to or identification with the desires expressed within the commodity form: “Inevitably offerings of identity ... will leave out as many people as they invite in, collide with other identities, and effect alienation from as well as affinity with consumer culture” (Scanlon 102). We need to come to an understanding of this genre – popular romance – which recognizes that identification with consumer culture is frequently conflicted.

While much recent criticism of the romance has focussed on the ideological content of fantasy in the romance novel, very little consideration has been given to erotic content. In fact, there seems to be no separation between social and erotic constructions, and this slippage has two important functions when discussing this genre: first, it allows critics to examine sexual structures of dominance and submission in terms of patriarchal roles; and second, it allows scholars to tie these social constructs to already existing sexual desires. Both Tania Modleski and Kay Mussell, for example, categorize the romance novel as fantasy. In so doing, these critics examine the narrative structure of the romance novel as an expression of women’s secret desires – the romance plot is

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

characterized as a definitive desirable outcome. The interesting effect of the popularity of the association between romance and fantasy is that, in virtually all of the criticism surrounding the contemporary romance novel, the narrative is interpreted as an exemplar of what women want. If one conceptualizes heterosexuality as a single, simple, and normative construction, then it is easy to understand how publishers could mass-produce and market sexual fantasies that would be readily consumable by millions of women around the world. Ideology gets passed off as sexual fantasy, allowing reader reception to go unexamined.

Even Janice Radway, who sets up her study in *Reading the Romance* as an analysis of reader response, is searching for a single sexual identity that determines “The Ideal Romance” (Radway 119-156). Radway’s ethnographic approach to the romance inevitably attempts to connect the narrative structures found within a few core texts to the material conditions of the lives of her subjects, in order “to explain the appeal of the romance novel” (135). In the very few texts that she actually examines, Radway locates this appeal within a psychoanalytic model of female subject formation (134-56). In labelling the genre “a utopian wish-fulfillment fantasy” (151), Radway positions the romance reader within the culture at large by constructing female desire as a unified category: “all popular romance fiction originates in the failure of patriarchal culture to satisfy its female members” (151). As an intellectual framework, “fantasy” allows Radway to explain why women read romance from the external, inviolate position of the cultural theorist.⁶

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

In the most rudimentary sense of the word, all fictions are fantasy, in so far as they allow the reader to “move beyond structural constraints of everyday life and explore other, more desirable situations, identities, lives” (Ang 93). Why, then, is the criticism surrounding the romance novel so preoccupied with this term? In her introduction to *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* (1992), Jayne Anne Krentz depicts the contemporary romance novel as fundamentally utopian, both in content and in purpose: “For those who understand the encoded information in the stories, the books preserve elements of ancient myths and legends that are particularly important to women. They celebrate female power, intuition, and a female worldview that affirms life and expresses hope for the future” (8). For Krentz, the appeal of the romance lies in its status as fantasy, a spontaneous up-swelling of primal desire articulated within the semiotic context of a homogeneous female community. On the one hand, we are assured that “the fantasies in the books have nothing to do with a woman’s politics” (8). In fact, Krentz defines fantasies, rather simplistically, as “creations of the imagination which are not intended for real life” (2). This characterization – which, in some ways, applies to any form of fiction – is clearly an attempt to exempt the texts from ideological critique, thus protecting them from the “generations of relentless hostility” to which they have been subjected (1). The critics need not concern themselves with any ideological content because “readers can tell the difference between what is real and what is not” (2). For Krentz, the reading practices of millions of women is nobody’s business since it cannot possibly have any impact on the real world.

On the other hand, Krentz's text assures us of the romance novel's boundless potential, as a cultural artefact, for social reform. Her eclectic collection of essays by contemporary romance novelists describes a genre which gives voice to the unique perspectives of its female authors and consistently reinforces female empowerment. It is implied that, as harmless and somewhat uplifting entertainment, the romance novel should be praised, but not interrogated too closely:

Romances are fun ... Nothing further should be required to explain the popularity of the genre. Bubble gum is fun. Fireworks are fun. Roller coasters and ferris wheels are fun. They serve no real purpose. Neither do they fill a void in the grand scheme of things. To my knowledge, no one has ever analyzed why they're there. They exist solely to entertain.
(Brown "The Risk of Seduction and the Seduction Risk" *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* 145)

Like Brown, most of the authors in Krentz's collection defend their genre as coherent with a loosely defined feminist project while simultaneously attempting to close down discussion. The book promises tales of romantic adventure in which heroines triumph, achieving happiness and equality within the sorts of social institutions that romance readers can feel comfortable with. "It is this," as Robyn Donald puts it, "which is the powerful and seductive fantasy at the core of all romance fiction" ("Mean, Moody and Magnificent" *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* 83).

The notion that fantasy must be “at the core of all romance fiction” goes largely unchallenged. Fantasy becomes a convenient term, because the experience of fantasy is presumed to occur within a private sphere of subjectivity, a sphere which should not and could not possibly be interrogated. The apparent sanctity of such a private space is compelling: “Fantasies, and the act of fantasizing, are usually a private practice in which we engage at any time and the content of which we generally keep to ourselves” (Ang 93). Our insistence on the privacy of the experience of fantasizing renders any commodification of fantasy – any attempt to sell the intellectual engagement of individuals with social possibilities – somehow more problematic and discomfiting than merely manufacturing desire for a product. Even if we accept that “an individual is a purely socioideological phenomenon,” and that “the content of the ‘individual’ psyche is wholly conditioned by sociological factors” (Volosinov 34), surely that process of socialization is, as an internal event, a private one. And yet any fiction freely moves across this boundary between public and private spaces: “Fictions, on the other hand, are collective and public fantasies; they are textual elaborations, in narrative form, of fantastic scenarios which being mass-produced, are offered ready-made to us” (Ang 93). All objects in mass culture are public, as they are offered simultaneously to so many other people. We must conclude, then, that it is not mass-produced identity that makes us uncomfortable – simply as a public display of subject formation – but mass-produced sexuality that keys into our fears of the conspicuousness of the subject in mass-culture.

While it is openly acknowledged by scholars, authors, and advertisers that the contemporary romance novel is a public form of mass-produced fantasy, the term “fantasy” implies a residual connection to the sexuality and “real” desires of the genre’s readership. Even the critics who speak to the ideological content of the romance novel consistently appeal to an amorphous set of sexual and social desires that exist in its reading public. In *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982), Tania Modleski describes the romance novel as collective revenge fantasies, in which readers enjoy the ritual humiliation and debasement of a series of hyper-masculine men. Modleski claims access to the desires of a romance reading public through an interpretation of the formal aspects of the genre. Kay Mussell’s *Fantasy and Reconciliation* (1984) assures us that romance novels are “escape fantasy” (1), providing readers with the opportunity to escape to a world ideologically consistent with their own morality and social expectations. Both of these arguments assume that all ideologies represented in the texts are directly mirrored in the readership, as if mass consumption is immediately equivalent to unequivocal mass consent.

Carol Thurston (1987), on the other hand, employs the term “reality fantasy” (91-112). She configures the romance novel as space of social possibilities, “where grassroots social change has and is taking place” (111). Thurston describes the development of the romance novel as an evolutionary process whereby the truly feminist desires of the reading public are gradually introduced into the texts, slowly overthrowing the

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

conservative ideology of the romance genre. Labelling the romance novel as “female fantasy within the confines of conservative ideology,” Jan Cohn (1988) sets up a similar dynamic (36).⁷ For Cohn, romance novels fit Jameson’s paradigm of fantasy production because they work within the system to claim economic power in ways which are socially acceptable, “inventing imaginary or formal “solutions” to unresolvable social contradictions” (Jameson 79).⁸ In the formulations of Thurston and Cohn, the romance genre itself becomes synonymous with a conservative ideology which inhibits a libidinal female impulse towards some form of social and sexual satisfaction, an impulse that exists somewhere outside of the text.⁹

For theorists of the romance novel, the term “fantasy” thus diverges into two separate meanings: it can refer to either a set of generic conventions that envision ideology, or it can denote the loosely defined desires of romance readers. These two separate meanings, however, conveniently converge whenever the discussion turns to issues of consent. Ideological content of an aesthetic act does not necessarily dictate, however, the reception of the cultural product. While genres may constitute “social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact,” it remains impossible “to devise a foolproof mechanism for the automatic exclusion of undesirable responses to a given literary utterance” (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 106-7). It would be an insult to the estimated 50 million romance readers to imply that the hegemonic ideology of the

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

romance novel is simply being coercively imposed by the romance industry. Indeed, the massive revenue generated by the sale of these texts speaks to “a complex strategy of rhetorical persuasion in which substantial incentives are offered for ideological adherence” (Jameson 287). On the other hand, to assume that consumption occurs as a direct result of consumer desire is not only naïve, but implies a complicity with the structures of late-capitalist consumer society; that is to say, a theorist cannot assume that the objects in mass culture are merely produced in answer to the demands of the consumer public.

Mass-consumption obviously indicates widespread appeal, but there is no indication that such an appeal is homogeneous or readily identifiable. Psychoanalytic models of sexuality and subject formation offer us a readily available format for understanding the general appeal of any object to an entire gender.¹⁰ Indeed the application of the term “fantasy” to any form of sexual expression seems to presume a psychoanalytic context. Fantasy, in its Lacanian sense, implies some “kernel of enjoyment” that must be located and worked through (*Žižek Sublime Object* 124-128). As the space in which desire is “constituted (given its objects, and so on),” individual fantasy-scenes invoke a pre-existing lack which fantasy covers up (*Žižek* 118). Ideology, then, as a communal fantasy “implies, manipulates, produces a pre-ideological enjoyment structured in fantasy” (*Žižek* 125). Ideologies are compelling because they appeal to “the Real of our desire which announces itself in this dream” (*Žižek* 48). As a conceptual

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

framework for understanding the romance novel, fantasy challenges us to uncover the “kernel of enjoyment,” to discover the ingredient of universal feminine appeal. As successful as the romance formula has been, perhaps we should question whether anything has universal feminine appeal.

Mass-Produced Fantasy in Commodity Culture: The Harlequin Reader as Lacanian Subject.

After decades of what Keith Negus in *Production of Cultures/Cultures of Production* calls “‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ integration” (84-7), the Harlequin brand is a remarkably homogeneous product whose image and existence in the world is controlled by a centralized source. Harlequin originated as a North-American distributor of the British publisher Mills & Boon. Over the years, Harlequin successfully expanded its brand identity, buying out both the British publishing house and their American competitor, Silhouette.¹¹ Harlequin’s monolithic influence extends throughout the publishing industry. In its many guises (as Harlequin, Silhouette, Signature, MIRA, LUNA, Steeple Hill, Red Dress Inc, etc.), Harlequin controls a virtual monopoly of the serial romance novel market. Navigating Harlequin’s web-site effectively demonstrates how this variegated choice of a single brand is meant to function. The texts are grouped according to series and the consumer needs to identify with a particular category of romance novel in order to find any books on the web-site (eHarlequin.com). The separate categories are grouped according to value-sets, reflecting different models of family,

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

religious and/or professional life.

Now we come to what is perhaps the most compelling reason why fantasy is not the model that we should use to analyze the contemporary romance novel – because it would seem that this is what Harlequin *wants us* to do. Harlequin consistently employs psychoanalytic modes of gendered subject formation to market its product to a supposedly pre-existing, uniform audience. It is perhaps not surprising that the Harlequin reader, as presumed by the packaging of the of the Harlequin Presents line, bears an eerie resemblance to the subject that Slavoj Žižek locates within a commodity-based economic system. Žižek’s treatment of the cultural object as a symptom to be interpreted by the analyst/cultural theorist posits commodity fetishism as arising out of a system of objects: “the symptom, the point of emergence of the truth about social relations, is precisely the ‘social relations between things’” (*Sublime Object* 26). For cultural theorists, this approach can be very appealing, because in late-capitalist society, so much of ideology is evidently embedded in the objects themselves. Similarly, interpreting objects in terms of the symbolic order of the Lacanian system opens up a variety of opportunities for interpretation. Žižek’s mode of cultural critique is completely adequate to the object, but – and this may seem like an odd question in light of that admission – should we use an “adequate” cultural critique to examine the contemporary romance novel?

Applying psychoanalytic theory to the romance novel is quite frankly too easy: this approach inevitably reproduces the romance novel’s image of itself. The seduction

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

and passion that Harlequin Presents guarantees¹² neatly construct the reader as a desiring consumer. In promising a particular response in the reader, Harlequin Presents offers more than an object: it offers both a prescribed reading experience and an identity within the commodity-system as a Harlequin reader. The Lacanian model of the subject fits so neatly into the techniques used to market Harlequin Presents that such a reading of the series becomes virtually indistinguishable from Harlequin's own advertising strategy. I think that it is fair to say that cultural analysis should, where possible, avoid expanding the cultural object's brand identity.

Nonetheless, Žižek's reading of the commodity can help us to understand how Harlequin Presents promotes consumption. In response to the suggestion that we may, in fact, be living in a post-ideological world – that subjects have become cynical enough to no longer believe in ideology – Žižek posits that “*the things (commodities) themselves believe in their place*, instead of the subjects: it is as if all of their beliefs ... are embodied in the ‘social relations between things’. They no longer believe, *but the things themselves believe for them*” (34). In late-capitalist society, the commodity form has replaced the interpellated subject. Ideology then is not a function of the relations between people, or even of people's relations to things. The individual commodities stand in for the process of interpellation, bookmarking a moment of subject formation as already completed. Harlequin Presents, in its form, marketing, inception and reception seems to exemplify this Žižekian model of ideology. The contemporary romance novel understands itself as

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

a symptom of the desire for romantic love on the part of its reading public. Its existence, popularity and economic success points to an overwhelming desire for itself:

Fun Facts About Harlequin

- . Last year Harlequin sold more than 160 million books worldwide — more than 5.5 books a second.
- . Harlequin books are sold in more than 100 international markets and have been translated into more than 23 languages around the world.
- . During the past four decades, Harlequin characters have kissed each other over 20,000 times, shared about 30,000 hugs, and headed for the altar at least 7,000 times.
- . If you set out to read all of the Harlequin books sold over the past 10 years, and averaged about two hours per book, you would be reading for the next quarter of a million years.
- . Approximately one in every six mass-market paperbacks sold in North America is a Harlequin or a Silhouette novel.
- . More than 50 million women read Harlequin books worldwide.

(Fun Facts About Harlequin)

Along with other information provided on their website, Fun Facts about Harlequin forms part of Harlequin's overall marketing strategy. Harlequin attempts to impress the

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

reader with the incomprehensible multitude of their brand: “If you set out to read all of the Harlequin books sold over the past 10 years, and averaged about two hours per book, you would be reading for the next quarter of a million years.” This litany of Harlequin’s breadth associates the text with a wide-spread process of consumption. The purchase of a Harlequin is not the act of an individual subject. The expanse of Harlequin transcends the moment of consumption, and the Harlequin consumer predates the purchase.

This enumeration of the vastness of these texts as a whole elevates the object to the level of the sublime. The Harlequin is, then, “an ordinary, everyday object which quite by chance, finds itself occupying the place of what [Lacan] ... calls *das Ding*, the impossible-real object of desire” (*Sublime Object* 194). For Lacan, the object of desire, “*das Ding*” because it cannot be possibly confronted by the subject. Harlequin flips this association on its head, asserting that the Harlequin is desirable because it is sublime (read incomprehensible). The homogeneity and immensity of Harlequin renders it unthinkable, a cultural object that cannot even be approached – and, conveniently, cannot be examined closely. The sub-text of Fun Facts about Harlequin is – if you think you know what the Harlequin is, you are wrong, because you cannot possibly think of anything this big. In this way, questions such as “Why do women read the romance novel?” or “Is the romance novel really an expression of what women want?” get sucked into the incomprehensible void that is the sublime object. When Harlequin is producing 5.5 texts a second and 50 million women are reading them, questions surrounding

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

women's desire and consumptive practices become absurd. In the face of the sublime, the intellect is reduced to observing, "160 million. Wow, that's a lot of books!"

Fortunately, in Žižek's model we do not need to think of the object at all, because the object is thinking us. The wonderful thing about this reading of the romance novel is the circular reasoning that it produces. Harlequin readers read Harlequins because they are Harlequin readers. Or, to adapt again, the subject can "obtain some contents, some kind of positive consistency, also outside of the big Other, the alienating symbolic network" through fantasy – that is by "equating the subject to an object of fantasy" (*Sublime Object* 46). For years, advertisers, critics, and romance novelists have allowed fantasy to serve as the primary conceptual framework for understanding the contemporary romance novel. This trend appeals to the Lacanian notion that there is no sexual relationship. We, then, need fantasy because it "constitutes our desire, provides its coordinates; that is, it literally 'teaches us how to desire'" (*Plague of Fantasies* 7). For example, Radway's adoption of psychoanalytic models configures the romance as a means of filling the void left in women's lives by oppressive patriarchal structures. In the end, this strategy produces a reading of the romance novel that is singular – that means one thing to all women. Ultimately, this interpretation begs the question because it assumes that the reading practices of the subjects (in this case, women) result from a pre-formed gender identity. Approaching romance through a Lacanian framework renders feminine desire as static and pre-given. As Rita Felski argues in *Doing Time: Feminist*

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

Theory and Postmodern Culture, psychoanalysis offers a very rigid interpretation of gender construction:

Various forms of psychoanalysis ... have been used to elaborate models of the female psyche that can account for women's pleasures and investments in popular forms. Anchored in the eternal verities of the Oedipal script, such models cannot account for historical changes in how gender is portrayed. Nor can they explain how such changes are influenced by economic and political structures. (100-1)

The psychoanalytic approach divorces a cultural object from its socio-economic context and portrays gender as predetermined: "Gender is seen as a preexisting entity that precedes and justifies particular cultural practices, rather than an identity that is realized through such practices" (100).

The problem with allowing any psychoanalytic concept to frame our study of the romance novel is that such an approach invariably seems to impose an *a priori* reception onto the readership. Within a psychoanalytic model, romance readers want to read fantasy because it *is* fantasy, and that is what fantasy means – within the Lacanian system, desire is constituted by fantasy. Here we have uncovered another absurd question: Do people want fantasy? The reason that we cannot conceive of a subject who does not want their own fantasy is because the subject is being constructed by the fantasy. Fantasy fulfills the need for intersubjectivity and answers the "original question of desire

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

... not directly ‘What do I want?’, but ‘What do others want from me? What do they see in me? What am I to others?’” (*Plague of Fantasies* 9). The romance novel is a fantasy because it provides the romance reader with a subject position – that of the romance reader.

This is particularly evident in the packaging of the text itself. Figure 1 is an advertisement for a Harlequin Presents miniseries – books that have been thematically grouped around our romance reader’s insatiable desire for International Doctors.¹³

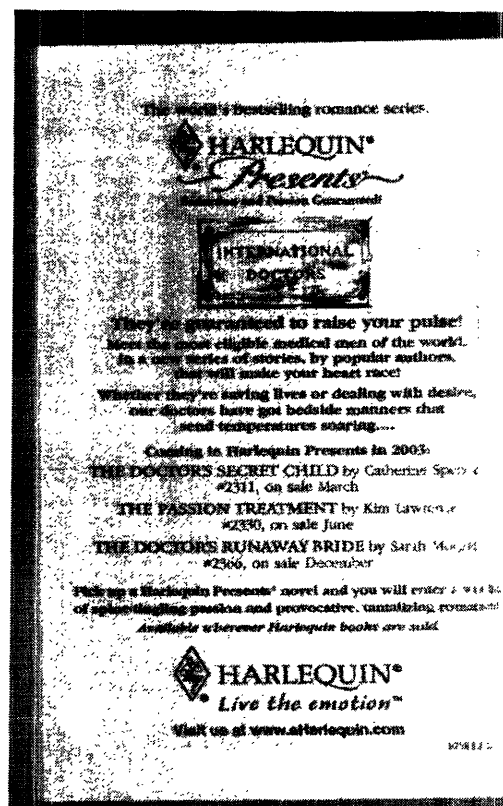


Figure 1

Not only is the romance reader told that she will enjoy the romance novel; she is also assured, with this delightful collection of thinly veiled sexual innuendos, that she will experience several specific physiological responses. Harlequin Presents promises “a world of spine-tingling passion” that will make the reader’s “heart race” and “send” unspecified “temperatures soaring...” As I discuss in my second chapter, “Living the Emotion: The Harlequin Reader and the Heroine’s Body,” Harlequin Presents is marketing not so much a story as an experience in subjectivity. While the by-line “Seduction and Passion Guaranteed!” might conceivably be referring to the seduction and

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

passion of the characters, the phrase “Live the emotion” (a registered trademark apparently) gestures towards a state of being. This advertisement informs readers not only of what they want, but of what they should be and what they should feel.

Strange as it may seem, within this symbolic order, experiences, emotions, spines, hearts and temperatures do not adhere in the self. Remember, there is no self – you are the void – but just so that you do not have to face this horrifying prospect, experiences, emotions, spines, hearts, temperatures, and your subjectivity, will be provided to you at the low, low price of \$5.25.

But wait, there is more!

You can also purchase the Book Mate: “this wonderful invention makes reading a pure pleasure” (Book Mate 1983). Taken from the back of a Harlequin published during the early 80's, this advertisement is for a product that the

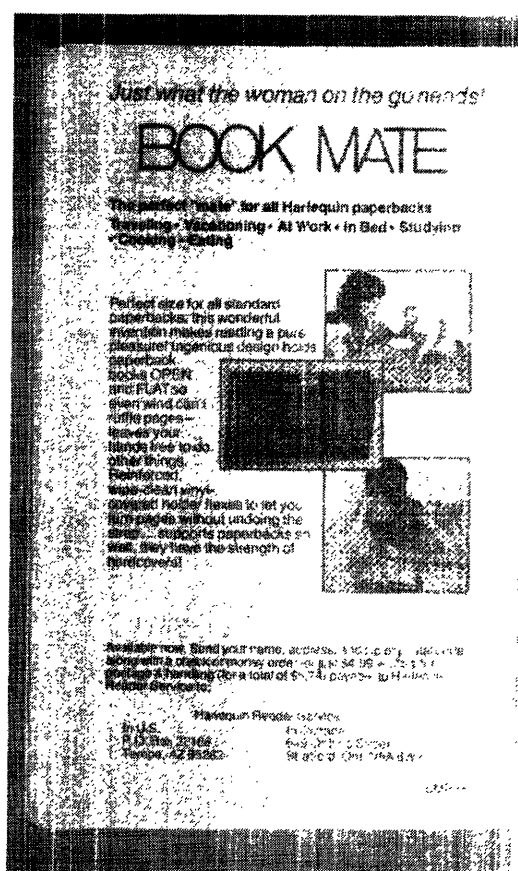


Figure 2

Harlequin Reader Service has been offering for decades.¹⁴ In case you thought this was only a fad, the winter 2003 edition of Harlequin's *Romance* magazine is offering the same

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

contraption to “keep your paperbacks neat and tidy!” and not, of course, to hide the shameful fact that you are reading a Harlequin (Book Mate 2003). Tacitly admitting that no one would want to be seen reading their product, the book cover promises to keep your reading pleasure “pure” and “your paperbacks neat and tidy” because we cannot have your private reading experience spilling out into the public realm.

The traumatic event that the book cover is trying to hide is not the fantasy itself, but the fantasy as public performance. The book cover recurs in Harlequin advertising because it is trying to resolve a disjunction between our understanding of fantasy as “always particular” and the Harlequin’s status as an object of mass-culture. As Žižek argues in *Looking Awry*, the particularity of fantasy

is absolute, it resists ‘mediation,’ it cannot be made part of a larger, symbolic medium. For this reason we can acquire a sense of the dignity of another’s fantasy only by assuming a kind of distance toward our own, by experiencing the ultimate contingency of fantasy as such, by apprehending it as the way everyone, in a manner proper to each, conceals the impasse of his [or her] desire. The dignity of a fantasy consists in its very ‘illusionary,’ fragile, helpless character. (156-7)

The book cover operates as a shield, preserving the “fragile, helpless” “dignity of a fantasy.” Its purpose is to obscure that which must not be defined, because exposure to scrutiny would do violence to the experience of fantasy. The book cover allows us to

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

maintain the illusion, amidst 160 million books a year, of the privacy of fantasy, whereby fantasy, somehow, remains particular to the subject.

The romance reader is a remarkably cynical subject. After all, she understands the romance, a story of two people falling in love, to be fantasy, and romantic love to be the impossible-real. Nor is this cynicism an unacknowledged part of her identity. Romance novelists like Judith Krentz insist that romance readers know what they're reading is not real (2). As Žižek points out, the cynicism of this fetishistic-split does not indicate an absence of ideology. It may well be the case that: "They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know" (*Sublime Object* 32). Yet, the appearance of seeing through an illusion only serves to reify the ideological fantasy. Labeling the texts as fantasy is an exercise in sleight of hand. The apparent cynicism of the argument – "We know it's not real, therefore it is fantasy" – does not alter the phenomenal rate of consumption. And the awareness of one illusion does not mitigate the gigantic leap of logic that this assertion performs: just because something is not real does not make it utopian.

As a conceptual model for understanding the romance novel, Žižek's mode of reading cultural objects and his explanation of how ideology and fantasy function in capitalist society work extremely well. This method illustrates the way that the romance novel operates, employing psychoanalytic models of gendered subject formation to construct the consumer as an emergent property of the commodity-form. It is a very

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

comprehensive theoretical model that is entirely adequate to its object. Within the Lacanian system, any questions that might undermine the reading cannot be asked because they do not make literal sense. At the same time, a whole economy of the object is being obscured by this reading, which de-historicizes the cultural object to the point where you can no longer ask simple, and important questions, like “Where did it come from?”, “How was it produced?” and “Who benefits from its consumption?” Fantasy, as a mode of interpretation for the romance novel, seems to completely shut down the discussion.

Reading the Ironic Structure of Serial Texts

While the “formula” of the contemporary romance novel bears a striking resemblance to events and structures of feeling evident in a variety of eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century literary texts of the same name, that does not imply that critical analysis should move freely between the two forms. The contemporary romance novel relies greatly on the domestic ideology perpetuated by novelists throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century.¹⁵ The romance novel habitually recycles the strategies and plot devices employed in canonical texts, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Wuthering Heights*. As mass-produced cultural objects in late-capitalist society, however, contemporary romance novels, especially series or category romance novels, are fundamentally different cultural artifacts than their earlier counterparts. It may not be

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

productive to ascribe differing values to “high” and “low” culture, but these two categories do affect how objects function in society. As populist or middle-brow as the gothic novel was in its time, the landscape of literary production has shifted since the nineteenth century. Romance novels are now produced, received, and consumed in an inherently different fashion than canonized texts. We cannot rely on literary models employed in the analysis of individual texts to uncover the cultural significance of the Harlequin brand. While any individual romance novel might mirror the closure and reintegration of older romance genres, the serial nature of a Harlequin Presents novel dictates that the process is not complete. The form of this cultural object creates the expectation of – indeed it necessitates – repetition.

The serial romance novel, as a genre which consistently breaks away from and returns to a coherent, normative ideological system, follows the pattern of reification in mass culture, where reification “strategically arouses fantasy content within careful symbolic containment structures which diffuse it, gratifying intolerable, unrealizable, properly imperishable desires only to the degree to which they can again be laid to rest” (Jameson “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” 141). Yet, how effectively can these “imperishable desires ... be laid to rest” in a genre which, through its serial nature, resists closure or completion? The contemporary serial romance novel may promise a satisfying and optimistic ending, but these texts do not exist separately in the world. Harlequin Presents does not offer a single fixed moment of closure; any ending forms part of a

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

series, laying to rest anxieties which will inevitably return to haunt us. While Jameson is describing a process that recurs within mass-culture as a whole, his argument presupposes closure within the individual objects. My contention is that the repetition of this process of arousal and containment must leave a trace within the generic structure of the romance novel. The formula of the romance novel is so prevalent, so routine, and so “codified” that ironic structures of subjectivity arise, undermining any straight-forward reading of ideology and interpellation.

As we will see throughout the narratives explored in my first chapter, “Adventures in Domesticity: Irony, Ideology and Family Values,” the romance heroine consistently resists and is reintegrated into an extant ideological matrix – a process that both questions and reasserts fixed social identities. The contemporary romance novel can be read as embracing a poststructuralist model of subjectivity, where, as Chris Weedon observes, “a constant battle is being waged for the subjectivity of every individual” (105). The romance heroine never passively follows her prescribed path. If change and conflict shape the narrative of all literary forms, narrative development in the romance novel occurs almost entirely within the minds of its main characters. In the end, the true drama being enacted is one of false interpellation, where the characters are temporarily interpellated into a provisional ideological structure, one that is inevitably overturned. Deceived and misguided, these internally conflicted characters are left to explore ideological alternatives that do not cohere with the ultimate agenda of the series. These

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

diversions are always revised at the end of any single text, but as a whole they form an integral part of the overall structure of the series. The hero or heroine temporarily loses sight of the ultimate fluidity of subjectivity, believing meaning to be fixed by an individual perspective:

The exclusiveness of the assumption of a particular form of subjectivity, which rules out its alternatives, together with the individual's misrecognition of herself as the true author of her thoughts, speech, writing, gives the articulation of subjectivity in language the temporary appearance of fixity. (Weedon 105)

However internally coherent a character's provisional ideological perspective may be, any stance is subject to revision: "any interpretation is at best temporary, specific to the discourse within which it is produced and open to challenge" (Weedon 86). The romance novel recurrently depicts this drama of poststructural subject formation.

In order to render the eventual containment of inappropriate ideologies more viable, the contemporary romance novel – and in particular the serial romance novel which has less opportunity to elaborate on any psychological subtleties, in any one text – relies on the ironic structure that arises out of the formulaic nature of the texts and their inevitable repetition. Contrary to popular perception, the plot of the contemporary romance novel is not a straightforward enactment of the standard set of events: boy meets girl, they fall in love and then get married. Rather, the hero and heroine encounter a

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

series of obstacles devised to convince them that a romantic resolution is impossible. Obviously – and it clearly is obvious to everyone except the inhabitants of the text – in the romance novel, a romantic resolution is not only possible, but inevitable.¹⁶ Initially, the romance plot erects a perspective which is inconsistent with the ideological structures reasserted at the end of the text. The romance novel employs any number of plot devices to distract the protagonists: the main characters may be convinced that they hate each other; the heroine may believe the hero has cheated on her; the hero may presume that the heroine is a promiscuous whore, or an avaricious bitch. In the climax of the story, the romance plot elides the previously constructed subject position and replaces it with a new perspective that reconfigures the events and ideas represented in the text. The protagonists magically discover the truths obscured by their misconceptions and assert that they were in love all along. This sudden shift in subjectivity allows a reader to adopt an ironic distance from the text, a perspective that arises out of knowing how the story will end.

In a sense, this structure presents the reader with two competing ideological systems. The reader may use her knowledge of the outcome to resist the initial perspective of the hero and/or heroine, recognizing this interpellation as a false recognition and embracing the final perspective that arises out of reintegration into the social order. In many cases, the reader must comply with this expectation in order for the text to make literal sense. Complicity with a neo-conservative set of family values, then,

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

is required within the very structure of the text. At the same time, the ironic perspective constructed by the romance novel undermines the capacity of any ideology to be truly definitive to the genre's readership. As Felski observes, we should not dismiss conflicted representations of women in popular culture, because it is through these very disjunctions that contemporary gender is constructed: "Female identity is not an authentic ground or a solid foundation, but a fluctuating fiction that owes a great deal to the contemporary media and the society of the spectacle" (111).¹⁷ Both processes of resistance and resolution posit distinct interpretations of women's place in the social order. While either alternative is, at best, provisional, an ironic reading of the contemporary serial romance novel suggests the possibility that any of the ideological perspectives presented throughout *Harlequin Presents* might play a part in subject formation.

This is not to suggest that the heroine functions as a role model for female readers. As Ien Ang observes in "Melodramatic identifications: televisual fiction and women's fantasy," the "'images of women' approach to fictional representations overlooks "the large emotional involvement which is invested in identification with characters in popular fiction" (92). Ang outlines a model of women's fantasy in which identification does not necessarily map onto real life in a one-to-one fashion:

female fictional characters [in melodrama]...cannot be conceptualized as 'realistic' images of women, but must be approached as textual constructions of possible *modes of femininity*: as embodying versions of

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

gendered subjectivity endowed with specific forms psychical and emotional of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and specific ways of dealing with conflicts and dilemmas. In relation to this, they do not function as role models but are symbolic realizations of feminine subject positions with which views can identify *in fantasy*. (92)

For Ang, fantasy is a medium through which women explore gender roles. Ang's more poststructuralist approach to the genre of fantasy is much closer to the process of ideological formation played out within Harlequin Presents. Yet, as I have argued, more psychoanalytic readings of fantasy – where fantasy is seen as a representation of a utopian portrayal of women's role in society or as an object that constitutes women's desire – render it an ineffective conceptual framework for describing the serial romance novel. The term 'fantasy' is accompanied by too much theoretical baggage for us to adopt it in this instance.

We need to consider the possible role of Harlequin Presents in subject formation, without extrapolating outwards into the real world. Romance readers are more astute than critics have normally given them credit for: "They do not expect the imaginative creations of romance to conform to real life any more than they expect the fantasies of any other genre to conform to the real world. Like all other genres, romance is based on fantasy and the readers know it" (Krentz 2). In providing readers with "symbolic realizations of feminine subject positions" (Ang 92), the romance novel should not be

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

read as a guide to conduct or a pure expression of women's vision of the world. Instead, the genre should be taken as a sign that women's fiction has a far more complex role in the articulation of gender and the supply of reading pleasure than merely providing women with "realistic" examples of how to live their lives. The ironic structures employed throughout the series may undermine any simple identification with a female fictional character, but the different ideologies posited throughout the series must still have some significance to the readership: "To subscribe to the provisional nature of meaning is not to imply that it does not have real effects" (Weedon 86). In *Harlequin Presents*, the recurrence of particular moments of resistance suggests that these structures of events have meaning apart from – and perhaps even antithetical to – the ideological outcome of any specific text.

The ideological structures presented in the romance novel are not passively accepted; nor do they simply fulfill a single pre-existing need or desire in their reading public. Romance novels utilize ideologies in a self-consciously playful and ironic way. These texts offer multiple ways of understanding the worlds they write about and these structures of understanding are posited and discarded at will. What strategies do these texts employ to ensure "ideological adherence" (Jameson 287)? What residual traces do the tensions between ideological possibilities leave behind? My first chapter, "Adventures in Domesticity," examines a cross-section of texts, investigating how they mobilize a variety of recurrent plot devices within the domestic sphere – such as the

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

marriage of convenience, unplanned pregnancy, sexual dysfunction, infertility, infidelity, unemployment – to both reify and challenge the ideological institutions of marriage and the family. The romance novel erects a set of structures and archetypal figures that function as a testing ground on which characters demonstrate ideological adherence. Yet, at the same time, it is these ways of understanding the world – that is, ways that ‘fit’ dominant or mainstream ideologies – that are constantly being tested. Harlequin’s complex mapping of family values provides a socially acceptable backdrop but the structure of these texts dictates that its occupants are always pushing at the boundaries of their world.

Individually, none of these storylines articulate a coherent ideological agenda. Writing on a series such as Harlequin Presents raises several problems. One cannot closely analyze this series without considering individual examples and yet, evaluating the idiosyncrasies of any single text will obviously never encapsulate over thirty years of material. At the same time, sweeping generalizations about the genre are too reductive, overlooking a multitude of nuances and examples of resistance to generic structures. By engaging in a formal analysis of individual plots, I hope to tease out some of the more prominent ideological threads running through this series. These plot devices recur and intertwine in a manner which suggests a set of anxieties that need to be examined in greater detail – anxieties which do not cohere with an understanding of the genre as fantasy. Rather, these structures function ironically, demanding ideological adherence on

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

the part of the reader and, at the same time, exploring alternatives. While individual texts attempt to resolve any issues that they raise, returning to the ideological centre of the series, the meandering paths collectively taken by these texts cover extensive social and cultural possibilities. Over the series, this process of resistance and subjugation forms a pattern as prominent and durable as the set of ‘acceptable’ ideologies that these texts consistently return to. The rejected ideological alternatives are sufficiently recurrent to suggest that the experience of the romance novel is as much about visiting these illicit constructions of private space as it is about asserting a safe, domestic fantasy world.

In my second chapter, “Living the Emotion,” I explore the conflicted process of identification within the ironic space of the heroine’s body. The heroine’s fluid subject position places competing demands on the body. Throughout the process of resistance and capitulation to the ideological agenda of the genre, the heroine’s body is heavily inflected – it comes to “mean” at once many different things. The heroine’s relationship to her own body is impeded by a discomfort with female sexuality. *Harlequin Presents* undercuts its depiction of a desiring female subject by impeding the heroine’s connection to her own body and mediating the reader’s access to the heroine’s body by deflecting it through the perspectives of other characters. As the space through which the reader is supposed to “Live the Emotion,” the body of the heroine is meant to serve as the reader’s primary site of identification. As the location of female sexual pleasure, the heroine’s body is also used to propel the narrative towards a romantic resolution. At the same time,

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

the heroine's body is obscured and circumvented in a variety of ways, and the series' unwillingness to directly depict the heroine's body suggests a discomfort with the idea of a desiring female readership.

While the packaging and marketing of Harlequin Presents promises an idealized romantic experience, the narratives primarily concern themselves with working through the obstacles that women typically encounter in private life. This thematic disjunction between Harlequin's brand identity and the "reality" of women's experiences as presented in the texts manifests as an ironic gap between cover and content. The distance between the heroine's textual body and her depiction in the cover art suggests that the experience of the romance novel is a conflicted process of identification which presents a multiplicity of "possible *modes of femininity*" (Ang 92). As consistently as Harlequin incorporates psychoanalytic models of female identity into their advertising strategies, whereby Harlequin readers are prompted to look to the cultural object to affirm their identity within consumer society, this construction of gender bears little resemblance to the narratives themselves. Harlequin Presents may market itself as a "symptom" of the desire amidst its reading public to experience romance, but the stories make no attempt to assert female identity in this fashion. Harlequin Presents heroines do not read romance novels, and they do not define their identity through practices of consumption: "Never having been the slightest bit interested in material possessions, Emily struggled to understand why someone would strive for unlimited wealth" (2453: 33). Nor do the texts

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

in this series invariably cohere around the family values Harlequin claims as part of its brand identity. Harlequin Presents' ironic depiction of the heroine's body – as an avatar for the reader within Harlequin's system of consumption, a means of effecting a romantic resolution of the plot and a tool of resistance to the genre's value system – indicates that we must look further than the packaging or popular reception of these texts in order to uncover their role in female subject formation.

My third chapter, "The Stuff of Nation: Fetishizing Ethnicity in the Global Village," considers how national identity emerges out of collection of texts which are marketed as an undifferentiated mass. How can we characterize the nationality of the British/Commonwealth heroine across the variegated selection of texts that comprise Harlequin Presents? What assumptions underlie the disingenuous promotion and distribution of this series throughout the Western world? Harlequin Presents employs a variety of techniques to construct the heroine's Western identity as normative and all other national identities as differentiated and subject to scrutiny. Throughout the last thirty years, the trope of the travel romance has morphed into a commodification of exotic ethnicities. I will investigate how the national identity of the Harlequin Presents hero is marketed as a feature of the text and ethnicity is reduced to a signifier of sexual prowess. Ultimately, all of Harlequin's advertising is part of an attempt to construct the Harlequin reader. This focus on the salient ethnicity of the hero indirectly fashions the category of Western womanhood. Harlequin Presents appeals to colonial discourses of Western

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

civility to carve out an empowered female subject position as a connoisseur of ethnic difference. In presenting the Harlequin Presents hero as a commodity available to the Western female consumer, the series relegates the threatening forces of masculinity and patriarchy to the interchangeable status of “flavours.”

The contemporary serial romance novel functions ironically, positing and discarding a wide range of possible meanings. Any exploration of subject formation or reading pleasure throughout Harlequin Presents needs to account for its incoherent ideological structure. In the end, the structural meaning of the romance novel is our closest link to the romance reader as a subject position. While the texts in the series manifest standardized outcomes, they also exhibit recurrent patterns of resistance. The serial form of Harlequin Presents dictates that this tension between separate value sets and ideologies is never fully resolved. The appeal of the romance novel must then lie somewhere in the tensions between these two forces. Each of my chapters examines the ways that this ironic tension functions within an different intellectual space. In considering how the domestic sphere, the body and the nation are overlaid with multiple, contested meanings, this thesis maps out the scope of ideological resistance and adherence throughout Harlequin Presents.

Notes

-
1. This is the standard disclaimer included with publication information in the front pages of all Harlequin Presents novels.
 2. Journalists who proudly admit to never having read a romance novel feel comfortable characterizing the entire genre as “cheesecake” (Köhler) or lumping the contemporary serial romance in with the longer, singular historical romance: “Harlequin Enterprises Ltd., famous for its bodice-ripper novels” (Blackwell). For the record, Harlequin does not publish anything that would be called a bodice-ripper.
 3. Some of these arguments seem to be more of a reflection of what the theorists want the romance novel to be than an accurate representation of how these texts exist in the world. Dawn Heinecken, for example, insists that since 1986, “feminist values have been incorporated and naturalized in romance texts” (150). Similarly, Jackie Stacey and Lynne Pearce suggest that the romance novel promises to “provide the catalyst for transformation and change” (13).
 4. In addition to Radway’s *Reading the Romance*, see Lynda Crane’s “Romance Novel Readers: In Search of Feminist Change?”
 5. Very few theorist have given any serious consideration to the form of the romance

novel as anything other than as a simple, already known and understood literary form. In *Doubled Plots: Romance and History*, Susan Strehle and Mary Paniccia Carden do acknowledge the inherent contradiction in the structure of the romance plot: “Each narrative of love expresses a compound and contradictory impulse: on the one hand, the narrative ventriloquizes cultural values, perpetuating and naturalizing patriarchal models of gender that project women’s destined and desirable end in the family; on the other hand, the narrative talks back, revealing women’s frustration, dissent, and potentially subversive responses to those patriarchal constructions” (xii). This anthology, however, tends to focus on individual examples of popular culture, as singular texts with stable resolutions and does not examine the serial form of the category romance novel.

6. For a more detailed discussion of the implications of Radway’s study within the broader context of feminist cultural studies, see Sue Thornham’s *Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies* (105-108).

7. In “Having It All: Consumption and Ideological Tension in an Innovative Romance Novel,” Tamar Heller also argues that the romance novel offers the fantasy of upward mobility through marriage.

8. Cohn cites this passage from *The Political Unconscious* on page 12 of *The Erotics of Property*.

9. This is not to say that Thurston's model of genre depicts the romance novel as a stable entity. Thurston describes the forces of generic structure and feminist impulse as a constant tension that leads to gradual change over time.

10. In "Cavewoman Impulses: The Jungian Shadow Archetype in Popular Romance Fiction" for instance, Amber Botts argues that the Harlequin hero's attractiveness lies in the pre-programmed female psyche: "The desire for a 'caveman' provider/protector will always be imbedded within the female psyche since, according to Carl Jung, humans carry that prehistoric memory deep in their collective unconscious" (65). Similarly, Teresa Ebert claims that the romance novel is a manifestation of a patriarchal symbolic order that exists to naturalize gender roles. Like most Lacanian theory, Ebert's argument relies on the assumption that all gendered subjects have an identical fantasy life and an homogeneous relationship to cultural objects. Also, see my discussion of Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (8-9).

11. I am using Naomi Klein's model of the brand to understand Harlequin's marketing strategy; for a more comprehensive discussion of how companies expand their brand identity see *No Logo*.

12. The actual ad line is "Seduction and Passion Guaranteed." See Harlequin Presents advertisements such as Figures 2 and 6 in Chapter 2. For further discussion of the device

see pages 22-4.

13. See Figure 1, International Doctors advertisement taken from the back pages of Emma Darcy's *The Bedroom Surrender* (2003).

14. See Figure 2, Book Mate advertisement taken from the back pages of Charlotte Lamb's *Betrayal* (April 1983).

15. For a more detailed discussion of how the novel came to be concerned primarily with the domestic sphere, see Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction*. Armstrong traces how women writers throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century "seized the authority" they needed to consolidate the "ubiquity of middle class power" (5). The novel has long been a feminine discourse, consumed by women and concerned with private, domestic issues.

16. As Audrey Thomas observes in "A Fine Romance" the reliably repetitive form of the romance novel creates a unique situation where "*The reader... [knows] more than the heroine*" (7). The irony of the romance novel relies, in no small part, on its predictability.

17. In "Judith Krantz, Author of *The Cultural Logics of Late Capitalism*," Felski examines a particular example of contemporary women's popular fiction, the "money, sex, and power novel." In her analysis, Felski encounters "two coexisting narratives and thematic clusters" (110). One of these narratives articulates the practices of consumption

of women in late capitalism and the other expresses a more traditional discourse of self-improvement. Ultimately, Felski's reading of the money, sex, and power novel embraces these modern and postmodern constructions of female identity as concurrent, rather than mutually exclusive. Like Felski, I would like to suggest that a multiplicitous approach gives a more balanced representation of contemporary women's popular fiction.

Adventures in Domesticity: Irony, Ideology and Family Values

As a genre that deals primarily with courtship and the family, the contemporary romance novel is a mass-produced, public display of private life. In its mapping of the domestic sphere, Harlequin Presents places great emphasis on the reinstatement of patriarchal models of marriage and the family: all of the texts inevitably end with the same two-parent, heterosexual family unit. The narrative structure of any individual text legitimates a particular outcome as necessary or natural. Harlequin Presents carefully aligns the principles of romantic love with a particular image of domestic life. On the surface, this format seems designed to manipulate the readership into complying with the ideological agenda of the Harlequin brand. If we were to assume that each text reaches a closure or resolution, then we could locate a definitive moment of reader compliance or gratification in the “Emotionally Satisfying and Optimistic Ending” (RWA National). Such a reading of the contemporary romance novel, however, arises out of a mode of literary criticism that considers each individual text to be a singular, completed artifact. The narrative of the romance novel is structured around a process of resistance and eventual capitulation to the ideology of romantic love – and, for Harlequin Presents, the two-parent model of the family that consistently accompanies romantic love. As a set of *serial* romance novels, Harlequin Presents is distinguished both by the pre-determined outcomes of individual texts and the inevitable recurrence of particular forms of

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

resistance. In examining the texts as part of an unfinished, ongoing discussion surrounding the role of women in the private spaces of late-capitalist life, this chapter will consider how the structure of the series as a whole facilitates an ironic reading of the texts. In this open space of possibility, the texts are able to simultaneously challenge and reify certain ideological structures.

While any individual text adheres to a generically dictated form of narrative closure, the vision of domestic life that arises throughout *Harlequin Presents* is far more fluid and dynamic than is apparent in the narrative structure of any single text. This is not to suggest that the series evinces any desire to abandon traditional models of family life. Rather, *Harlequin Presents* occupies the ambiguous space between what Arlie Russell Hochschild labels traditional and egalitarian codes: “Life is all about trying them out and finding out how a given aspect of a code *feels*. Irony is the tone we strike when we can’t hang on and can’t let go” (Hochschild 47). In order to carve out a space of indeterminacy, the series uses the dramatic irony that arises from the readership’s awareness of a predetermined outcome and the genre’s recurrent structure of false interpellation. This chapter will employ a synecdochical approach, examining the interplay of codes within individual texts and allowing these examples to illustrate how spaces of indeterminacy function throughout the series. Each section of this chapter examines a recurrent device that appears in many texts throughout the series, plotting the scope and effect of *Harlequin Presents*’ use of irony within the domestic sphere.

The Marriage of Necessity

One of the most frequently seen plot devices in Harlequin Presents is the marriage of convenience. In a pragmatic sense, marriage is convenient to the romance novel because it allows for sexual activity within the conservative bounds of social acceptance. This device, however, forms part of a more complicated dynamic. As a material exchange, the marriage of convenience acknowledges that the institution of marriage is not necessarily concurrent with romantic love. Marriage is the marketplace where money, sex, domestic labour, social status and procreative capacity are traded ‘freely’ and the exchange value of each of these commodities is established through each marriage enacted. If (for example), in one text, a heroine in dire economic straits agrees to provide childcare for a widower in exchange for social and economic security, then we must conclude that this is, at some level, a fair exchange. Claiming to be ‘grounded in reality,’ Harlequin Presents clearly understands itself to be complying with some concept of social realism. Collectively, these marriages of convenience map out a socio-economic system of exchange that someone – somewhere – considers potentially equitable, or at very least believable.

As the romance plot conventionally ends with marriage, it is easy to conclude that this final exchange is the ultimate goal of the romance novel, that “power, not love, lies at the heart of the fictions of popular romance. In the fantasy gratification offered by contemporary popular romance are not only the secret sentimental and sensual delights of love but the forbidden pleasures of revenge and appropriation” (Cohn 3). The marriage

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

of convenience, however, is not consistent with Jan Cohn's reading. Within *Harlequin Presents*, marriage frequently occurs at the beginning of the story. Rather than functioning as a resolution, marriage, as a material exchange, provides the setting for the conflict. As a plot device, the marriage of convenience thwarts a truly conventional understanding of marriage as a social institution – marriage is not allowed to go unexamined as the ideal social and familial structure.

This is not to say that these texts propose alternatives to marriage as a social institution. *Harlequin Presents* novels invariably end with a stable, two-parent, monogamous, heterosexual family unit, and the series ruthlessly enforces all of the patriarchal baggage that accompanies this model of the family. The ideological undercurrent of these narratives, however, is not marriage as an ideal institution; it is romantic love as an opiate. The ideological message buried in the marriage of convenience as a generic structure is that without romantic love the material circumstances of marriage are unbearable. The persistence of this plot device suggests that marriage as an institution is not sufficient: if it were, either generations of heroines in loveless marriages would not be so profoundly unhappy or the majority of texts in this series would be incoherent.

In so far as romantic love seems designed to entice women into the institution of marriage, it appears to function within capitalism as a means of controlling women's access to social and economic power. The romance narrative invariably leads to the heroine's integration into an institution that, historically, has positioned women as either

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

an object of exchange or the conduit of wealth. If we understand marriage to be an inequitable exchange, then romantic love certainly has a lot to answer for. In her discussion of the historical roots of romance fiction, Cohn observes that the emphasis on romantic love potentially undermines any material advantage that a heroine may gain from an “economic alliance”: “the application of new values of romantic love to marriage, now conceived as a romantic rather than economic alliance, denied women their only remaining opportunity for economic self-improvement” (Cohn 130). In any conventional romance plot – boy meets girl, they fall in love and then they get married – it is always of primary importance to demonstrate that the acquisition of wealth and power was never the intent of the romance heroine. This does not, however, mitigate the potential for a covert enjoyment of this inevitable economic success: “The particular brilliance of romance fiction is the way it covers its tracks in the interests of serving both convention and fantasy; for the central, the elemental, condition that romance honors in the surface text is the economic disinterestedness of the heroine” (Cohn 131). In marrying well, the heroine is able to achieve economic success – a success that the reader can vicariously enjoy – without challenging the idea that women should not desire economic success.

The marriage of convenience, though, subverts this older formula by systematically devaluing the public or socio-economic aspects of the institution of marriage. Economic success is significantly less satisfying when the heroine would prefer to run off and live in a hovel rather than spend another day in a loveless marriage.

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

The conventional romance plot establishes the altruistic motivation of the heroine before any marriage occurs, allowing the secret fantasy of a woman achieving economic and social power to coexist inside the more socially acceptable narrative of a woman finding romantic love. The marriage of convenience, on the other hand, actively works to separate the material circumstances of marriage from romantic love. By allowing the heroine to reject a marriage based exclusively on a material exchange, this generic structure attempts to refine the romantic product, ensuring, perhaps, the disinterestedness of the reader as well as the heroine. Indeed, the predominance of this generic device in Harlequin Presents suggests that, for this series at least, romance is not a fantasy of economic success, but is functioning in some other way.

The marriage of convenience clearly does not project a utopian vision of marriage as an institution. In fact, this structure allows these texts to explore a set of concerns and anxieties that accentuate the inequities that contemporary women often encounter. The marriage of convenience is almost always contracted out of social or economic necessity. The romance heroine is frequently burdened by the demands of family members: ailing parents, errant siblings and orphaned infants have forced many a marriage of convenience. While some heroines marry to avoid the social stigma that these texts attach to being an unwed mother, many are coerced into these arrangements in order to hide a dark family secret or to accumulate enough money to pay off the exorbitant medical bills of a sickly mother or the gambling debts of a shady avuncular figure. Within the world of the contemporary romance novel, women have few opportunities

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

outside of marriage for acquiring wealth and security. Denied the opportunity to attend post-secondary education, many romance heroines are pushed precipitously into menial, subservient jobs which frequently centre around the skills used in the domestic sphere, finding work as a nanny, a maid, a housekeeper or a waitress. If a heroine does venture out into the world of commerce, she rarely advances past the position of personal assistant to a man who invariably earns more than twice as much as she does. Marriage is proposed as the only solution for women who are unable to earn a living at minimum wage employment and still meet the unreasonable demands placed on their time and their pocketbooks by dependants.

Given the bleak material circumstances that most romance heroines face, it is easy to conclude that “The fantasy gratification provided by romance comes through the achievement of the heroine’s success in marrying well in spite of [the conditions imposed on women by society]” (Cohn 131), but marriage does not necessarily present a solution to the material problems that these heroines encounter. In Charlotte Lamb’s *Desire* (December 1981), Natasha Blair turns down a marriage proposal which would have offered her social and economic security, stating “I’d just have a different set of problems, that’s all” (472: 86). Finding herself pregnant after a brief sexual encounter with a stranger, Natasha’s pragmatic response to the proposal of her “reluctant husband” (81) demonstrates an awareness of the problems heroines typically encounter in a marriage of convenience:

Natasha looked up, her face startled. “Marry you?” She had not expected

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

that. Her lips were parted on an intake of incredulous breath, then she shook her head fiercely. “Of course I won’t marry you. That would be worse, can’t you see that?”

“Worse?” He seemed taken aback.

“Worse than having the baby by myself. I’d be saddled with a husband I don’t want too.” (81)

In this passage, marriage is presented as an additional burden rather than a resolution to the heroine’s problems. The heroine clearly recognizes her role within the patriarchal family structure as the primary caretaker of the home and any of its occupants. Natasha may not resist her interpellation into this gender role but she does initially reject a marriage that would merely compound her problems by producing an additional dependant. Despite the obvious social and economic benefits to be accrued from this union, Natasha bases her original decision to refuse the hero’s offer on a highly sophisticated understanding of the ramifications of this decision within the private sphere; Natasha explicitly values the private concerns of the division of domestic labour and her personal relationship with her husband over the more public concerns of social standing and financial security.

Romancing the Family

In the end, Natasha is coerced into marriage for the sake of her unborn child. Indeed, Harlequin Presents is organized around a two-parent model of the family that is

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

ruthlessly imposed.¹ While heroines in the series consistently resist the inevitable outcome of the text, they are ultimately integrated into Harlequin's conservative vision of the private sphere. The heroine may attempt to withstand her interpellation into a new family unit, but her commitment to her own family is never called into question. She is frequently the primary care-giver for younger siblings and sick or dying relatives. When a social or economic crisis arises, the heroine is alarmingly willing to fling herself onto the sacrificial pyre of familial devotion. This affiliation to the institution of the family is at the core of every heroine's identity and forms part of the value-set that comprises Harlequin Presents's brand identity. As the primary site of reader identification, the heroine never deviates from this ideological stance; she is expected to consistently uphold the principles of romantic love and familial bonds that Harlequin has come to represent. As the series situates its narratives almost exclusively in the privacy of the domestic sphere, Harlequin Presents relies implicitly on the assumption that women's role in society is the maintenance and protection of this sphere.

The Harlequin Presents narrative is organized around the tyranny of circumstance. It is precisely her role as defender of the family that makes the heroine vulnerable to various forms of coercion. Frequently employed plot devices depict the heroine fending off the vicissitudes of poverty, illness, and death by resorting to a range of oddly criminal behaviours – most commonly theft, blackmail, and prostitution, albeit couched in less strident terms and inflected by mitigating circumstances. As the drama of the romance novel is generally played out within the domestic sphere, the heroine is called upon to

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

protect herself and her relations from a myriad of external influences. This dynamic serves to delineate public and private realms, leaving the heroine clearly affiliated with the private space of the family.

The Harlequin Presents series is as concerned with asserting a consistent model of family as it is with providing a narrative of romantic love. Both the hero and the heroine are interpellated into the institution of family with the same consistency that they capitulate to the inevitability of their marriage. Consequently, the difference between familial and romantic love is at times rather unclear. The heroine's devotion to the ideal of family often fixes her in coercive relationships with her step-brother/brother-in-law/hero. These vaguely incestuous narratives exploit the heroine's position within the text in order to limit her resistance to the romantic outcome – the heroine is effectively stuck with the brother/hero because she will always acknowledge the importance of family.

The hero is far more likely to resist the familial ties binding him to a particular narrative outcome. Heroes frequently need to be interpellated into the ideology of the family. Ultimately, this acclimatization is as coercive as the force with which the main female characters are propelled into marriage. The hero in Allison Kelly's *Yesterday's Bride* (August 1997) initially views his daughter as an interloper into his romantic relationship:

'...she's had your love for as long as I haven't.'

'That's a stupid comment! Parental love isn't the same as...as what

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

we had.’

‘So tell me, which is stronger, Taylor?’ he asked. ‘Because I know from first hand experience they can’t coexist.’” (1903: 58).

Craig’s inability to distinguish between romantic and parental love leads him to conclude the two are mutually exclusive. Within the narrative, however, these two types of love are interchangeable. Taylor and Craig’s romantic love for each other is never called into question. The primary conflict of the text centres around Craig’s unwillingness to admit the child into their family.

Yesterday’s Bride utilizes the same devices and techniques to effect Craig’s capitulation to a particular model of the family that the series typically employs to consolidate the romantic relationship between the hero and the heroine. Craig and Taylor’s marriage broke down five years earlier, when Craig made his antipathy to fatherhood too apparent. In seeking a reconciliation with his estranged wife, Craig is thrown into constant contact with his five-year-old daughter. The father/daughter romance of the text eerily mirrors the conventional hero/heroine romance plot, culminating in an emotional scene of physical discovery:

‘Can... can I touch it?’ she asked.

Her eyes were more imploring than her words, and her smile when Craig nodded caused his heart to constrict. She placed a tentative finger to the shaving cream and giggled when it came away coated in foam. The

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

sound seemed to tinkle within the confines of the tiled bathroom and Craig found it almost melodious. Her hand returned to his face, but this time traced the area below his left eye.

... ‘Mummy says they aren’t scars. They’re bravery badges.’

He laughed. ‘Bravery badges?’

‘Mmm. See, I’ve got some too.’ She pulled open her robe and indicated a series of tiny marks around both her nipples. ‘You know... I got them when I was a baby from all those machines that were plugged into me.’ (110-1)

Positioned towards the end of the text, this scene functions as an affective climax that solidifies the relationship between Craig and Melanie. The tactile recognition of their emotional bond combined with the unveiling of Melanie’s body closely resembles the genre’s standard love scene. Craig’s response to his daughter’s tentative overtures illustrates the importance of family values to the ideology of the romance novel. These texts use consistent devices and coercive measures to ensure the main characters’ capitulation to both marriage and the two-parent family structure. Like the heroine, Melanie has the same capacity to cause the hero’s “heart to constrict.”

Frustrated Housewives: Evaluating Traditional Gender Roles

Harlequin Presents’ model of the family is explicitly mapped out and gender roles

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

are strictly enforced. The traditional division of labour within the family is rarely questioned. While a heroine may choose to have a career following marriage, she is never the primary wage earner and she generally opts to stay at home with children until they are old enough to attend school. On the issue of women in the workforce, the contemporary romance novel walks a somewhat inconsistent line. Discontentment with the rigidly defined role of wife is not infrequent. In Charlotte Lamb's *Runaway Wife* (August 1990), Francesca Ransom describes her position in the home as constricting and unsatisfying: "I arrange flowers and sit on committees and help at charity functions ... but it's an empty life and I'm sick of it" (1290: 47-8). By the end of the first chapter, Francesca has left her husband of ten years; she insists that she is searching for independence and an equitable lifestyle: "I want a life of my own, I want to live it in London, and I want a job as interesting and absorbing as yours!" (48). Her unarticulated list of demands, however, is far more domestic in its focus and contains an underlying set of assumptions about the role of women in society that goes unexamined.

Francesca's desire for change is primarily motivated by her inability to function as a conventional wife, rather than a desire to take on a less traditional role: her only child has left for boarding school and she is unable to conceive again; her husband works in the city and she rarely sees him; and she suspects that her husband is having an affair with his secretary. On the surface, the text appears to advocate the equitable inclusion of women in the workforce. Francesca complains at being abandoned alone on a country

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

estate and, by the end of the book, she is working in London for her husband's company in "an equal working partnership"(140). By acquiring this position in the company, Francesca triumphs over her husband's secretary, who is characterized as a manipulative, career-oriented woman whose ambition clearly extends beyond improving her position in the company:

Janice Sylvester was the type of woman who didn't like her own sex and was what was known as 'a man's woman'. She radiated sex appeal, but she had brains, too. Oliver had often said that Janice had a tough mind, and Francesca believed it. Those hostile eyes were clever and hard; diamond-sharp eyes with no softness anywhere in them. She used her sex like a weapon, Francesca thought. (84)

Janice's desire to be successful in her career is equated with a sexual aggression that is consistently gendered as masculine: "Men like to be the ones who do the hunting; they don't like to feel they are being hunted. Janice chased me too hard; it was beginning to annoy me" (185).² As a foil whose ambition has limited her success in the domestic sphere – Janice has never married or produced children – she sets boundaries for how far a woman can safely venture into the realm of employment without becoming "a man's woman." Like most heroines, Francesca's foray into the public sphere is carefully controlled and circumscribed, and her exploration of a non-traditional gender role is explicitly mitigated by private concerns.

**Miscarriage and Infertility:
Healing the Breach of Familial Disruption**

Francesca's introduction into the workforce is only permissible after the couple has come terms with the likelihood that there will be "no more babies" (140). The baby that they do not, or cannot, have creates a vacuum in the structure of the family, a space of possibility into which Francesca can insert a variety of aspirations. It is only when the model of the family is disrupted that the terms of marriage can be renegotiated. This dynamic can be seen in other texts where a miscarriage has occurred or where a couple is struggling with infertility. Diana Hamilton's *Savage Obsession* (September 1993) details the separation and reconciliation of a couple who experienced a miscarriage six months before the text begins. In the first chapter, Beth Savage leaves her husband when Zanna, Charles' old girlfriend, arrives with her two-year old son – who Beth deduces is the product of their former love affair. Measuring her suitability as a wife by her capacity to produce children and attract the love of her spouse, Beth convinces herself that she cannot possibly compete with the overbearing fecundity of Zanna:

That Charles would choose to stay with her, having never loved her, particularly since, following the accident and the miscarriage, she had been told she might never conceive again, when he could have the woman who had once dominated his life, and the child they and created together, was a pretty forlorn hope ... (1588: 25)

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

Beth's conclusion is not entirely unfounded since their marriage seems to have been established on precisely these terms: "He wanted a wife, a child to inherit – several children in point of fact. And she, Beth, was suitable, had proved herself capable, in Mrs Penny's absence, of running South Park like clockwork and, as an added bonus, acting as his hostess when he entertained contacts, stepping into the shoes Zanna had vacated" (11). That Charles pursues his fugitive wife despite her inability to fulfill all of these requirements, suggests that the text may posit an alternative to this rather restricting definition of a wife's role in the family.

While *Savage Obsession* demonstrates some sensitivity to the debilitating effects that the loss of a child can have on a marriage, the text does not suggest any alternative structure for the institution of marriage itself. Beth's miscarriage causes a rift in her marriage, opening a space that could potentially have been filled by a different definition of marriage, one that does not centre around procreation. Rather than showing Beth coming to terms with her infertility and allowing the couple to build a relationship on a different basis, the text complies with a more conventional concept of marriage by reconfiguring all of the circumstances which threaten the family unit: Beth becomes pregnant and Zanna's child is ultimately revealed to be Charles's brother's son. The text identifies infertility as a possible threat to Harlequin's ideological agenda, but through its transparently formulaic ending, *Savage Obsession* leaves this threat unresolved.

The fantasy of resistance to the ideological structure of marriage articulated at the

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

beginning of the text is remarkably short-lived and buried amidst a plethora of ironically proposed alternatives. Beth leaves her home to work in a secluded cottage as the secretary of a middle-aged author. This pseudo-marital arrangement overtly mirrors the marriage of convenience that Beth has just left; in fact, Charles remarks upon it immediately: “Making yourself indispensable to yet another man?” (48). The text erects a variety of possibilities for marital bliss, yet none of them are ever truly viable. The third-person subjective narrative may insist that “Charles had sought her out for one purpose only – to discuss the divorce” (71) or that “She should never have married him. She’d been such a fool to even consider the possibility that it could work. Such a damn fool!” (5), but an experienced romance reader knows that both main characters are working extremely hard to hide the love that they have for each other – a love that they will eventually confess amidst a sudden flurry of communication.

Savage Obsession is resolved in a very conventional fashion: the couple confess their undying love to each other over the crib of their newborn son, explaining to each other how all of their marital conflict had been based on a series of misunderstandings (169-186). Beth’s unexpected pregnancy in the middle of the book ameliorates any desire to construct a positive identity independent of her role as wife and mother. Nor is there is much evidence that the grief, guilt, and resentment that Charles expresses in the middle of the text ever dissipates: “‘You were expecting our child. You were light with joy, a complete and confident woman.’ His mouth twisted in a bitter line. ‘And I

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

changed all that. You lost the child and, for all we know, lost the opportunity of conceiving another. And I was behind the wheel” (119). The pain and ineptitude that both characters feel when faced with their inability to fulfill traditional marital roles never really goes away; it permeates the text, largely unacknowledged – “the truth was here, between them, a cruel, cold and hurting thing” (117) – and is never laid to rest.

Most of the problems in Beth and Charles’s marriage are not openly addressed because they are phantasmal, based entirely upon the delusions that both characters have fabricated to explain each other’s bizarre behaviour. The text raises serious marital concerns such as infertility and infidelity and then retroactively erases them from the text with a happy ending that sweepingly reconstructs the events that occurred. The accident that led to Beth’s miscarriage, however, cannot be excised and the pain and conflict that the text evokes leaves residual doubt concerning the institution of marriage itself. While Beth and Charles manage to construct an archetypal family unit, the text offers no suggestions regarding how they could have salvaged their relationship had circumstances not worked in their favour. Lingering moments of ideological openness such as these abound throughout the series. Problems that cannot be resolved within the standard narrative structure leave gaping holes in the ideological fabric of Harlequin Presents. However consistently the series might conclude each text with a particular model of family life, the Harlequin family that emerges out these spaces of indeterminacy is far more conflicted than any individual text would indicate.

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

Harlequin Presents has not abandoned its project of the consolidation of the family. Productive family units are very important in the contemporary romance novel. Krentz argues that the tendency to end each novel with pregnancy or with the birth of a child demonstrates the romance novelist's desire to "celebrate life," (7) but the choice to not have children is frequently characterized as unnatural or even sinister. Typically, the peripheral figure of the unmarried woman without children is depicted as an avaricious sexual predator. Professional women are frustrated characters who act out sexually and/or violently, threatening the stability of any text's central romantic relationship. If a romance novel has a female villain, she will almost certainly be located in the workplace. The antagonist in Helen Brooks's *Husband by Contract* (January 1998) escapes detection because, as the married sister of the hero, she seems comfortably fixed in the familial realm. Jealous of the heroine's relationship with both of her brothers, Bianca appears to be merely out of sync with the rest of her family. However, as the narrative progresses, the extent of Bianca's interference with the primary romantic relationship becomes apparent. Adopted and infertile, Bianca is driven mad by her insecurity within the family structure. Bianca expresses her dysfunction through promiscuity and deceit, staging an elaborate deception to convince her sister-in-law that her husband has been unfaithful and finally revealing the depths of her 'depravity' by alluding to the numerous men who can attest to the fact that she is "very much a woman" in the dramatic confrontation where her machinations are discovered (1934: 174).

As a member of the hero's immediate family, Bianca's story must reach a conclusion that eliminates the threat she poses to the primary, nuclear family unit. Unlike the standard ideological deviation that these texts tolerate and then reintegrate, Bianca's madness cannot be easily resolved. She refuses reintegration, declaring herself to be outside of the moral structure of the text itself: "You think you are so righteous, so noble, ha! You make me laugh with your petty notions of right and wrong. I do what *I* want. I am answerable to no one – no one!" (176). Clearly, Bianca's shockingly deviant ideological standpoint needs to be controlled. Killed instantly when her speeding car veers off the road, Bianca's demise is described in a short, dissociated paragraph. Told from the third-person limited perspective of the two police officers reporting the incident, the text does not refer to her directly, but the reader knows that Bianca is the "young wife" whose death is so obliquely described: "It was a tragedy, a shocking tragedy ..." (183). As a plot device, however, it is somewhat less than surprising. Had Bianca's treachery occurred within the workplace, her deviance could have been more easily resolved – she would have been transferred to another workplace or had her employment terminated. But Bianca has violated the sanctity of the domestic space in a manner that the series does not tolerate and consequently, is violently ejected from the family unit.

Sexual Harassment and the Workplace

The public forum of the workplace stands in binary opposition to the privacy of

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

the domestic sphere. While the romantically astute and domestically skilled heroine navigates the private space of the home with a certain amount of savvy, the workplace is fraught with dangers that the Harlequin Presents heroine is ill-equipped to cope with. Single women in the workplace are subject to sexual harassment and, due to their precarious economic circumstances, are frequently the victims of sexual coercion. Living on the edge of destitution, many heroines make brief forays into prostitution – selling their sexual favours, and occasionally their virginity, for exorbitant prices to a man that they later marry.³ Similarly, many heroines endure the sexual advances of employers who indiscriminately wield their power. These encounters with prostitution and sexual harassment, however, are very much inflected by social circumstances and rely on class distinctions to separate themselves from ‘truly’ illegal activities.

Depicting harassment within two very distinct workplaces, Roberta Leigh’s *Two-Timing Man* (December 1993) highlights the ways in which these texts codify spaces as safe and unsafe. Abby Stewart initially meets Rossiter Hunt while covering her impoverished cousin’s shift as a waitress in questionable drinking establishment. Within this setting, Abby is immediately conscious of her own vulnerability: “Entering the smoke-filled Kitty Club, Abby was conscious of the male eyes running lecherously over her scantily clad body, lingering at bare shoulders, swelling breasts, and exaggerated length of thigh below the cut-away briefs. Squirming inside, she lowered the tray of drinks to shield herself” (1609: 13). Evidently, her trepidation is justified, as she

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

valiantly endures being “ogled, pawed, propositioned and insulted” (23).

Rossiter, on the other hand, appears somewhat less heroic in this setting. Displaying open disdain for the “bimbos” surrounding him (18), Ross accuses Abby of being a thief and a prostitute (20; 22). When they meet the second time, in a business setting, Abby is the one who is embarrassed and required to explain her behaviour. The responses and reaction of both characters shift within this new environment. Ross continues to express sexual interest, but his overtures are much more inhibited: he limits himself to sexual innuendo and several oblique references to cats. In the club, Abby responds angrily to all sexual overtures, clearly offended by “the insinuating and degrading remarks of these disgusting pigs” (14). In a business meeting however, when Ross makes explicitly sexual remarks concerning Abby’s “Kitten image,” Abby’s response is far more conflicted:

Abby knew he was deliberately trying to rile her, and recognizing that the least sign of temper would amuse him all the more, she gave a husky laugh and crossed her legs, allowing her skirt to rise above her knees and afford him a longer expanse of shapely leg on which to feast his eyes. If he insisted on seeing her as a sex object, she might as well use her assets to advantage! (61)

As a client of Abby’s father’s PR company, Ross seems to be able to say and do whatever he wants with impunity. Abby’s discomfort with these circumstances is evident, but she

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

does not object his comments; rather she attempts to make this moment of objectification empowering. In neither workplace is Abby safe from sexual harassment. Her willingness to accept harassment, however, is dependent on her relative class position. In *Harlequin Presents*, workplaces are universally unsafe: in her cousin's workplace, a space where she does not belong, Abby resists threatening and demeaning behaviour; in her own workplace however, a space she is fully integrated into, Abby accepts similar behaviour as the perils of the job. Her response to the two incidents does not arise from a consistent stance on the treatment of women in the workplace, but rather her position within a social hierarchy. Ross' behaviour is inappropriate, not as an act of sexual harassment *per se*, but as a failure to successfully navigate the social landscape of the text and demonstrate sufficient sensitivity to Abby's class identity.

Sexual harassment is certainly ubiquitous throughout the *Harlequin Presents* series. On the whole, heroines tolerate such occurrences with great equanimity. While heroines are frequently hurt or frustrated by this behaviour, they seem to consider it an inescapable feature of their participation in the workplace. In *The Boss's Secret Mistress* (February 2004) by Alison Fraser, the heroine is subjected to the gamut of sexual innuendo by her new employer:

She was finally stirred into retaliation. 'Have you a problem with that, Mr Rycart?'

He fronted her in return. 'Not at all. I look forward to working in

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

close liaison with you myself, Miss Lloyd.’

And let that be a lesson to me, Tory thought, clenching her teeth at the barely hidden double meaning.

She looked to the other two men, but if she expected any support she was in for a disappointment. Alex had put the American’s comment down to sexist humour and was chuckling at it, and Simon was enjoying her discomfort.

It was every man for himself. (2378: 67)

Any heroine who ventures into the treacherous space of office life has entered a man’s world, where she is at an obvious, yet unavoidable, disadvantage. Tory is effectively being punished for adopting the role of a man, and the most disturbing facet of this vignette is her interpellation into the system that oppresses her.

As Tory’s aggressor is the hero of the text, she is eventually coerced into a sexual relationship with him. The obligatory romantic resolution of this narrative does not mitigate the overt inequity of the social circumstances that it describes. Heroines accept this onslaught of workplace harassment because, within the world of the romance novel, women have no recourse. Harassment is presented as an inherent danger of the workplace; it is part of the contract that all women sign when they agree to violate the sanctity of the domestic sphere by exchanging their labour on the job market: “She couldn’t work for him now, no way. Her glance fell to the contract she had just signed

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

and, as though he had read her mind, he told her softly, ‘I’m afraid it’s too late for second thoughts now, and for regrets... You are committed’” (2314: 58). Seemly aware of her own ironic role in the text, the heroine recognizes the inevitability of this outcome. The hero’s sexual overtures will always be unwanted as long as the heroine resists the resolution of the text. An attitude of compliance with, or resignation to, sexual harassment is part of the Harlequin heroine’s capitulation to her ambiguous structural position.

Heterosexual Desire within the Domestic Labour Market

Many Harlequin Presents heroines do not have the skills needed to venture into the world of commerce, but this circumstance does not necessarily make them more safe. Lynne Graham’s *The Italian’s Wife* (March 2002) tells the story of Holly Sansom, a homeless, unemployed, unwed mother from Somerset who collapses from hunger and exhaustion in front of the limousine of a rich Italian philanthropist. Rio Lombardi quickly moves Holly and her child into his apartment, replacing the fiancée that he had ejected from his home an hour earlier, after discovering her in bed with another woman. Holly’s circumstances are particularly desperate; she has no money, no education, no apparent skills and no family in London. The marriage of convenience that Holly and Rio agree upon is an interesting arrangement because the primary commodity that Holly offers in the exchange is suitable morality and the desire to be an excellent parent.

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

Bound by a specific set of circumstances and surrounded by examples of inappropriate parenthood and sexuality, Holly's status as the ideal wife is defined in opposition to the other characters in the text. The primary attributes she possesses that qualify her for this position are heterosexuality, fertility and naïveté. By contrasting Holly's personality with that of Christabel – Rio's previous fiancée whose sexual identity is remarkably salient – *The Italian's Wife* constructs an unexamined, normative sexuality. The text is framed by the two appearances of Christabel: the first, when she is discovered in bed with another man's wife (2235: 5-10) and the second, when she leaves a friend's party, sobbing on Rio's shoulder (161-3). Intimidated by her predecessor, Holly comes to interpret her own role in Rio's life in relation to her limited knowledge of Christabel.

Holly's evaluation of herself, however, is predictably diffident: "She was more or less just anybody on her own terms. She was young, female and reasonably presentable but that was that" (134). In asserting herself to be ordinary, Holly also establishes herself as normative. Christabel's sexual identity is openly identified, serving as a counterpoint to the heterosexuality of both characters. Rio separates himself from Christabel's 'deviant' lifestyle without openly stating a sexual preference by adopting a particular ideological stance: "Violence coursed through Rio in a molten wave and a shudder of angry revulsion passed through him. If she hadn't been a woman he would have knocked her through the wall and if that was an old-fashioned reaction, tough!" (7). Similarly, Holly's inability to comprehend Rio's explanation for his break up with Christabel

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

situates her heterosexual identity as ‘natural’ and normative:

Holly’s lips parted company and stayed parted while she attempted to compute that rather more shocking slant to her inner picture of infidelity and betrayal, but no matter how hard she tried she could not fit Christabel into that context. “Are you serious?”

Rio dealt her bemused face a sudden exasperated appraisal. “They were making love.”

“Oh...” Holly had no ready response to make. (172)

Holly’s countrified confusion in the face of an alternate sexual orientation suggests both that homosexuality is an inherently urban phenomenon and that Holly has never had to give much thought to her own sexual identity. By the end of the text Christabel moves from secretive denial to openly declaring her bisexuality: “Christabel’s life had moved on too and she certainly seemed content. Having set up a successful modeling school, she had then caused a great stir with the announcement that she was bi-sexual and a reformed addict” (184). The collapsing of these two ‘social problems’ epitomizes the text’s attitude towards homosexuality. While heterosexuality is assumed and therefore invisible, homosexuality is abnormal because it is apparent, the subject of scrutiny and observation: the reader is eventually tipped off by Christabel’s sister that she ““was confused about her sexual orientation when she was a teenager”” (174).

Holly’s sexuality, then, is only covertly defined in opposition to Christabel’s

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

sexual identity. The reader's knowledge of the circumstances surrounding Rio's broken engagement ironically highlights sexual identity as Holly spends the majority of the text wondering, "Why would [Rio]... settle for her when he could have Christabel Kent or her equivalent as his wife?" (136). This irony permeates the text as many of the traits that Holly possesses to make her the ideal wife carry variegated sexual connotations. For example, Holly's willingness to perform domestic labour becomes a display of sexual attractiveness and availability: "He settled his outraged gaze on the female behind weaving from side to side as Holly knelt on the floor with her bucket and scrubbed like a Victorian housemaid. He stilled, attention entrapped by the wholly feminine fullness of that *derrière*, every line defined by the fine fabric shaping its delicious curves" (41). By contrasting the rustic innocence of Holly's working-class subject position with the urbane sophistication of Christabel's indolent bourgeois status, Graham erects a series of binaries that naturalizes heterosexual motherhood and imbues the domestic sphere with sexual overtones.

Biological Imperatives: Integrating Sex into the Harlequin Family

One Night with the Sheikh (July 2003), by Penny Jordan, also associates motherhood with female heterosexuality. While babysitting her half-sister's four month old daughter (Fleur), Mariella Sutton travels out to an oasis "to confront her sister's faithless ex-lover and tell him just what she thought about him!" (14). Trapped overnight

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

with Xavier Al Agir, Fleur's father's cousin, the couple act as surrogate parents to the teething infant. The physical presence of the child circumscribes their relationship. As all of their initial erotic encounters centre around caring for the infant, parenting becomes a sexualized task (30-2; 38-42; 45-8). While Fleur's presence serves as a reminder of the possible outcome of imprudent sexual conduct, Mariella's desire and longing is directed as much towards Fleur as it is towards Xavier. Mariella's sexual impulses are consistently attributed to maternal instinct and even her erotic dreams focus on acquiring a child: "'You are crying for the child,' he told her softly. 'But you must not. I shall give you a child of your own to love. Our child!'" As she looked at him he started to touch her, smoothing the covers from her naked body with hands that seemed to know just how to please her" (2332: 124).

On the surface the text appears to be equating sexuality with biology, suggesting that all eroticism is driven by a desire to procreate: "Quite obviously her body had recognized that Xavier's genes were superlative and her brain fully endorsed her body's recognition" (134). This scientific perspective, however, is part of a larger process of false interpellation. When Mariella eventually seduces Xavier, she rationalises her own sexual aggression as an altruistic, maternal sacrifice: "Never in a thousand lifetimes could she have behaved like this for her own gratification, for the indulgence of her own sexual or emotional feelings, but she was not doing it for them, for herself, she was doing it for the child she so desperately wanted to give life!" (146). The notion that all sexual

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

impulses are derived from a biological imperative is the ideological filter through which Mariella attempts to understand her own sexual identity.

The opposing ideological perspective of romantic love, however, is always present in the text, and Mariella's attempts to deconstruct her own sexual impulses are infused with irony:

As he moved through the water she could see the powerful sinews in his thighs contracting against its pressure. Trying to distract herself she visualised what lay inside that heavy satin male flesh, the bones, the muscles, the tissues, but instead of calming her down, it made her awareness of him increase, her wanton thoughts fiercely pushing aside the pallid academic images she was trying to conjure, in favour of some of their own: like a close-up of that sun-warmed flesh, roped with muscle, hard, sleek, rough with the same fine dark hair she could see so clearly arrowing down the centre of his body. (51)

The “pallid academic images” that Mariella employs to situate her experience of sexual desire within an objective framework are clearly inadequate, and quickly overcome by her individual sexual identity.⁴ Nonetheless, the text's attempts to eroticise motherhood cannot be easily dismissed, by explaining them as individual responses. In attributing her sexual and emotional impulses to a biological drive to procreate, Mariella constructs an ideology that erases the need for marriage and romantic attachment and posits the single

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

parent household as a viable alternative family unit. Mariella's provisional perspective is sufficiently internally coherent for her to maintain it throughout the majority of the narrative. Yet Mariella's explicitly sexual response to the hero – a response that the reader is structured into through descriptions of Xavier's "sun-warmed flesh" – renders her alternate vision of the family rather tenuous. The text simultaneously maintains both possibilities by allowing Mariella the opportunity to explore her fantasy of escaping her role as heroine, while maintaining the structural integrity of the narrative through sexual tension and oblique hints at an eventual romantic outcome.

Despite her apparent resolve to raise the child that she conceives on her own, Mariella and Xavier do marry at the end of the book and the final image of the text is one of a cohesive nuclear family wandering through a secluded garden: "Silently, they walked through the garden together, his arm around her drawing her close, her head resting against his shoulder, the children in their arms" (184). Mariella's final confession that "It wasn't just sex. I tried to pretend it was to myself because I was too afraid to admit how I really felt" (180) contradicts her previous attempts to reduce her sexual impulses to a basic biological urge. Residual traces of the eroticism of Mariella's maternal impulses permeate these final idyllic images, suggesting that motherhood still forms part of her sexual identity. Mariella's covertly played out fantasy of resistance to dominant conservative ideology – her attempt to construct a sexual identity independent of marriage and romantic love – may be short-lived, but despite their conservative

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

resolutions, these texts explore a variety of ideological possibilities. Despite the overwhelming reification of a particular vision of family life, the series dedicates a significant amount of attention to alternative ideological structures. It does not necessarily follow that narrative closure completely negates the process of exploration that proceeds it.

Fidelity and the Promiscuous Doppelganger

In a similar vein, Harlequin Presents also offers a space of possibility for sexual promiscuity. Without ever advocating a sexually liberated lifestyle, these texts employ a variety of devices which allow the reader to vicariously experience sexual activity outside of marriage. While the romance heroine's conduct is always above reproach, the romance frequently constructs an alter ego, either real or imagined, who has engaged in inappropriate sexual behaviour.

In *Mistress Material* (February 1997), Sharon Kendrick's virginal heroine, Suzanna Franklin (Suki), is a successful model with an international reputation for having "more lovers than Mata Hari!" (1867: 11). Suki's career necessitates that she publicly perform a sexual identity that does not meet the ideological demands of the contemporary romance novel. At the same time, it is this disjunction between her reputation and the actual range of her sexual experience that motivates the majority of the conflict between the two main characters, and thus constitutes the ironic undercurrent of the romance plot.

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

Suki resists a romantic attachment to the hero, Pasquale Caliandro, because he does not recognize her “true” sexual identity and consequently fails to comply with the demands of the romance narrative – he does not confess his love and insist that she marry him. Suki’s promiscuous alter ego serves several, additional functions, establishing that virginity is not the primary commodity being exchanged, while also allowing the romance to explore alternative ideological possibilities without diverging from a rigid ideological agenda. While Suki never escapes the traditional sexual path of the romance heroine, the hero does fall in love with the heroine as she performs a divergent sexual identity.

In the end, the text hypothetically condones an alternate lifestyle while strictly monitoring the behaviour of the main characters. Pasquale’s sister, Francesca, is a successful career woman, who marries and has children after her “crazy” and “impetuous” youth (122). Promiscuity, then, is not necessarily inconsistent with romance and marriage, but it is never a viable option for the romance heroine – who must uphold higher standard of rectitude than the peripheral figure of a younger sister. While Suki decides that she herself wants to give up her career in order to have a family, she vehemently defends Francesca’s right be a working mother: “‘we were talking hypothetically,’ she said firmly. ‘And I was standing up for Francesca. Call it sisterhood, if you like.’” (187). Clearly, the bonds of “sisterhood” extend only so far – the heroine’s “hypothetical” allegiance is not reflected in her own conduct. Throughout

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

this series, heroines consistently make the same choices: to limit their sexual partners and to sacrifice their career and education in favour of the demands of their family. In fact, these choices are made so consistently that one must conclude that all alternatives are only ever ironically proposed.

The heroine's role is so rigidly defined that if there is a fantasy inherent to the romance novel, it clearly not one of unlimited freedom. The romance is predictably pessimistic about the scope of women's options in contemporary society. The heroine's predetermined choices are not necessarily the best decisions that any woman can make, as she may be surrounded by other female role models who are content in their alternative lifestyles: elderly childless aunts, single career-minded girlfriends, and promiscuous scatterbrained younger sisters are rarely made to regret their own choices in life. The romance heroine is consistently coerced by generic convention, societal expectations, socio-economic circumstance and the Machiavellian machinations of the hero into fulfilling a specific role. The structure of conflict in the romance novel reveals that the romance heroine is not striving to get married; she is striving to make her marriage work. The only fantasy really apparent in the romance novel is that romance is a fantasy – that romantic love is a coherent ideology that allows institutions like marriage and the family to function. In the end, the epithet "fantasy" is indicative of the self-consciousness of the romance reader: the term designates nothing more than an awareness of the extent to which the genre requires and tests the suspension of disbelief.

The Heroine's Role: Narrative Structure and Textual Resistance

The romance heroine never chooses to live according to a specific ideology, but the ironic structure of the romance novel, which illustrates the inadequacies of alternative ideological possibilities, maintains the illusion of choice. In *The Marriage Surrender* (March 1999) by Michelle Reid, Joanna Bonetti struggles with her inability to fulfill the role of the romance heroine. The victim of a sexual assault the week before her wedding, Joanna has left her husband without any explanation when she found herself unable to consummate the marriage. Finding herself in debt, Joanna is compelled to seek out the help of her estranged husband rather than enduring the advances of a lascivious loan shark:

Well, she was back to making choices, seeing Arthur Bates' grotesque figure looming threateningly in front of her and knowing that once again she had to draw the same conclusion she had drawn each time she reached this same unpalatable point.

There was no choice.

She was caught, held fast in a trap of her own making. Her own fears, failures and wretched inadequacies the bait with which she had ensnared herself. (2014: 57)

Manoeuvred by circumstance into enacting a role which she can no longer fulfill, Joanna

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

attains moments of self-awareness when she confronts the disjunction between her real sexual identity – as a character whose experiences have taken past her prescribed role as heroine – and the one imposed upon her by the genre: she comprehends her actions as both within and beyond her control: “The choice that was no choice.” (9).

Joanna is presented with options that are never particularly viable: she could pay off her debt to Arthur Bates by having sex with him and she could abandon her marriage again, ignoring her husband’s insistence that they resolve their problems. The romance heroine, however, is never allowed to commit adultery or concede that her marriage cannot be salvaged. Instead, Joanna is confounded her own status as a wife who “can never be a proper wife” (78). As such, she falls outside of the system of consent that forms the ideological filter through which Joanna understands her own sexuality: “‘They stole the only thing I could give you! N-now I can’t give myself at all!’ she finished achingly. ‘I can’t do it, Sandro. I’m sorry, but I *just can’t do it!*’” (163). Joanna and Sandro’s marriage remains unconsummated because Joanna understands herself as no longer capable of consent.

The ideological system that Joanna clings to is so ruthlessly limited in its definition of female sexual agency that the sexual assault compromises her subjectivity. In enforcing this interpretation of the heroine’s textual role, Joanna asserts a paradox that effectively denies herself any subject position at all. Without a place within the system of consent, Joanna cannot act or desire to act sexually. The structure of the romance novel

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

dictates that mutual desire exist between the two main characters, yet Joanna does not recognize herself as a desiring subject: “It was awful, this dizzying tumble of confused emotions that wanted their own safe space – yet they wanted him to fill it” (76). Joanna’s desire exists, as it must, but she does not own it; in a bizarre deferral of emotional culpability, it is Joanna’s emotions that want things, not Joanna herself. This manner of understanding one’s place in the world is sufficiently internally coherent for Joanna to inhabit it for the majority of the text. Similarly, the reader must recognize this ideological structure as comprehensible in order for Joanna’s thoughts and actions to make literal sense. However, the text ultimately resolves these contradictions through a re-evaluation of virginity that represents a rejection of this system.

This shift in the ideological landscape occurs during the denouement, when Sandro confronts Joanna’s understanding of her sexual status: “‘You have difficulty finding enough courage to give yourself to me. *Yourself*, Joanna,’ he repeated forcefully. ‘Your *virgin* self! The self you give freely to me – which is the real gift of love from one person to another. Not that fine veil of skin you set so much store by’” (170). Amidst the bewildering assortment of ideas about virginity, sexuality, and consent that this text posits, the reader can recognize this interpretation as the definitive one by the profoundly liberating effect its pronouncement has on Joanna:

Her legs gave out, sinking her weakly onto the bed because she had suddenly realised that Sandro was oh, so right!

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

In her own case, what was gone was indisputably gone! Pining over its loss was never going to bring it back again!

She *had* been clinging to the principles of a long-lost cause! She truly *was* a frightened virgin at heart, afraid to give herself freely to the man she loved in case he took and found her wanting!

And what those two men had done to her *didn't* count, not any more. (170-1)

Apparently, this new definition of virginity – as the state in which one remains until engaging in consensual sexual relations – circumvents the paralysing ideological dilemma that Joanna faced. The text cannot undo the events which led to Joanna and Sandro's marital problems, but it can reconfigure the problem so that it no longer 'counts.' The reader is led, along with Joanna, to identify with a particular ideological structure. We recognize the 'truth' by its effect on the events in the text. Until she encounters this definition of sexual identity, Joanna is completely incapacitated. Coerced by an expectation that the situation be resolved and by a requirement that the narrative make literal sense, the reader adopts this structure of understanding. The reader must comply with this interpellation because the only other alternative is to reject meaning itself.

Virginity as Trace

While virginity is no longer a requirement for a Harlequin Presents heroine, it frequently plays a pivotal role in the development of the romance plot. When the heroine adopts an provisionally posed identity, virginity forms a physical trace of the alternate “truth” that will ultimately be uncovered. Virginity remains the heroine’s link to her true role as romantic love interest, and grounds the heroine in the appropriate value-set. In Julia James’ *The Italian’s Token Wife* (January 2005), Raffaello di Visconti cannot claim his inheritance unless he marries before his thirtieth birthday. In a fit of pique, Raffaello proposes to the unwed mother he finds cleaning his bathroom. Magda’s appearance, career and marital status all establish her as the perfect opportunity for Raffaello to antagonize his overbearing father: “*Dio*, but his father would be apoplectic! His son presenting him with a bride who had a fatherless kid in tow and who cleaned toilets for a living. Who looked as drab and plain as the back end of a bus. That would teach him to try and force his hand—” (2440: 18). As an orphan with no formal education, few job prospects and an infant to support, Magda garners the reader’s sympathy. In contrast to Magda’s strength in the face of adversity, Raffaello and his family look like elitist snobs. Raffaello’s father’s accusation that Magda is “plain, ignorant, common,” and “immoral” (86) are contrasted with the warm reception that she receives from Raffaello’s housekeeper, who concludes that Magda is “nothing more than a misfortunate single mother” (73).

Magda's compromised social and moral status as an unwed mother strengthens the class division between the hero and heroine. All of the heroine's unfortunate circumstances, and her supposed undesirability as a bride, are a direct result of her class position. At the same time, the author uses the distinct positions of the hero and heroine to erect a separate moral system. By juxtaposing Magda's hard-working, austere lifestyle with the judgmental affluence of Rafaello and his family, James clearly affixes a moral value to the two class positions. James further explores the possibility that poverty might yield a greater commitment to family values. While Rafaello's impending inheritance is a site of conflict within his family, Magda's willingness to endure the humiliation of marrying a man who considers her a "Skivvy" (23) demonstrates her commitment to securing the future of her infant son. In the value system that emerges from this class division, marriage is incompatible with the well-being of family. While Magda's poverty affirms her dedication to her son, it has also produced her unwed status. Similarly, her marriage to Rafaello is the trial Magda has to endure to prove her worth as a mother:

In her arms, Benji stirred. Gently Magda bent to kiss his fine dark hair, her heart swelling with love. She lifted her eyes again and stared out the window. She had done the right thing in agreeing to this bizarre marriage; she knew she had. However weird this was, she was doing the right thing for the right reason.

For Benji. (31)

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

By offering her a hundred thousand pounds to help him thwart his father's dynastic schemes, Raffaello provides Magda with the means of maintaining her single-parent family unit, a narrative development that poses a significant threat to the ultimate ideological agenda of the text.

In the end, Magda's unsuitability is entirely superficial. Once she improves her appearance, Raffaello's impression of Magda undergoes a radical shift:

She would grace any setting---and he would make his father see that. Make him acknowledge her intelligence, her education---self-taught, and all the more credit to her, he thought soberly, given her grim financial circumstances. Make him see that every cruel description of her had been wrong---see even her devotion to her baby that had made her stoop to such menial work as he had found her in. (113)

While Raffaello's abrupt change of attitude is further evidence of the moral inferiority of his class position, it is an alteration that is mirrored in the narrative itself. Magda's relative social standing is radically reconfigured when her virginity is revealed. James' configuration of the morality of class hinged upon Magda's status as an unwed mother. When it is ultimately revealed that Benji's biological mother was a dying cancer patient who conceived "a child in any way she could, to leave something of herself behind" (141), the threat to text's two-parent family system is severely diminished. Benji's biological mother was, indeed, unwed, but there were extreme, mitigating circumstances

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

and this morally tainted figure has conveniently died.

Virginity is by no means a uniform trait in the Harlequin Presents heroine, but the revelation that Magda did not have sex outside of marriage is necessary to reassert the genre's standard of family. *The Italian's Token Wife* successfully establishes Magda's moral superiority as an unwed mother. In this instance, a mere change in opinion would not be sufficiently convincing. Magda's virginity is a physical presence that underpins the entire narrative, forming a moral centre for the text. In fact, Magda's virginity gives the text more leeway to explore the topic of single-motherhood. The conclusions tentatively reached by the text – that Magda's devotion in the face of adversity makes her a more exemplary parent than a financially stable, two-parent family environment could produce – are dependent upon the ironic framing of this setting. Such exploration is only possible because this threat to the ideology of the series is effectively erased once it is revealed that Magda never was, biologically, a single parent.

As a plot device, virginity also serves the function of focussing the narrative gaze onto the moment of consummation. The revelation of the heroine's virginity marks the textual moment. Virginity becomes the signpost for the exposure of truth, allowing it to serve as a pivotal, structural element of the plot. In *Marco's Convenient Wife* (April 2003) by Penny Jordan, Marco's nanny is accused of seducing the husband of her previous employer. Alice fails to convince Marco of her innocence until their wedding night, when it becomes apparent that Alice had not seduced anyone. The physical

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

evidence provided by Alice's virginity certainly helped her to win their argument: "“Why did you let it happen, Alice? To punish me for misjudging you? To make an irrevocable, unassailable point?”” (2314: 139).

Jordan establishes Alice's innocence immediately, disclosing in the second paragraph of the text that Alice did not “miss” the father of her previous charges, “who had made her last few months in the employ of his wife so uncomfortable, with his sexual come-ons towards her” (5). The conflict of interpretation between the hero and the heroine is introduced shortly after, when Alice realizes that Marco sees her as “some silly Northern European tourist looking for a cheap holiday fling” (8). Repeatedly hinting at Alice's lack of sexual experience, Jordan effectively aligns the reader's sympathies with the heroine. This device reinforces the reader's anticipation of the moment of consummation, infusing the incident with multiple layers of signification. The first sexual encounter between Alice and Marco serves as a moment of revelation, where justice and truth prevail, a moment of transformation that ““changes everything”” (138). *Marco's Convenient Wife* offers a standard romantic resolution by reasserting the moral infallibility of the stable, monogamous family unit, but the ironically posed identity of the Harlequin heroine as sex tourist was sufficiently convincing to require this physical assertion of the heroine's purity. Alice's body plays a pivotal role in the development of the narrative. This emphasis on the heroine's virginity, however, is just one of the many devices Harlequin Presents uses to focus the reader's attention on the heroine's body and

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

position it as the primary site of identification. My next chapter will consider the different ways that the heroine's body underpins the ironic construction of the romance narrative.

Notes

1. For further discussion of the family values expressed in Harlequin Present and how a two-parent model of the family is asserted when the heroine becomes pregnant, see Chapter 2, 127-36.
2. For a more lengthy discussion of the female antagonist in the Harlequin Romance novel, see Susan Weisser's essay, "The Wonderful-Terrible Bitch Figure in Harlequin Novels."
3. This plot device has become so popular that, in the year 2003, 12.5% of Harlequin Presents had the word "mistress" in their title. While no more than two titles on the book shelf contained the word "mistress" in any given month, this trend has increased to 22% in 2004. This rather old-fashioned term indicates a permanent, illicit relationship that implies payment in goods, if not cash.
4. For an excellent discussion of the euphemisms commonly employed in the Temptation series and the ramifications of such oblique references to sexuality and the body, see Rosemary Johnson-Kurek's essay "Leading Us into Temptation: The Language of Sex and the Power of Love."

**Living the Emotion:
The Harlequin Reader and the Heroine's Body**

His mouth ravished hers, allowing her no quarter, no defence, and he overpowered her effortlessly, easily. She was a willing traitor, oh, so willing! (Julia James, *The Greek's Virgin Bride*)

The heroine of a Harlequin Presents novel is a remarkably standardized figure. She is, almost universally, a thin, white, pretty, able-bodied woman between the ages of 18 and 29. If one begins with the premise that the contemporary romance novel is a fantasy, one might be tempted to conclude that the purpose of the heroine is to provide the reader with a suitably idealized avatar through which she can experience the romance and excitement of the text – to, if you will, “Live the Emotion.”¹ The packaging of the text certainly bears out this interpretation. Consisting of a portrait of a man and a woman engaging – with varying degrees of intimacy – in some form of physical contact, the cover art of a Harlequin Presents depicts the heroine with the same startling degree of uniformity consistently employed by advertisements for cosmetics and hair products. We can assume, then, that someone, somewhere, believes that the attractiveness of the heroine plays a part in the consumer's decision to purchase the text. As a series, however, these texts are not selected by consumers from the vast array of paperback fiction based on their individual characteristics. The placement of an attractive woman on the cover of a Harlequin Presents is not designed to entice readers so much as to signal

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

the text's position within a particular genre or series. Just as it is impossible to parse the consumer's desire to purchase an individual text from their desire to continue reading a series, it is difficult to separate the impact of the structural elements of Harlequin Present's packaging from the necessity that these structural elements remain consistent.

In attempting to locate the significance of an idealized female body within this series, we encounter a particularly difficult quandary: is this manner of depiction what women want or is it merely an aspect of what the series is? Is the heroine an ideal, or is she merely familiar? This problem is further complicated by the fact that, in these texts, the female body is an ironic space, layered with multiple, contested meanings. The heroine's body is, at once, a generic convention, a character in an individual text, the subject of a third person limited narration, the object of a desiring male gaze (and at times a critical female gaze), the site of burgeoning sexual impulses and the conduit for the experience of sexual pleasure. Any analysis of how the body functions in the romance novel must take into consideration the multiple purposes that it serves within the text. Mapping out the contested site of the body is particularly important because each of these different ways of constructing the body, each mode of understanding, manufactures a different relationship between desire, consent and consumption – each layer of meaning imagines a different relationship between the reader and the text.

Any given text employs a rather transparent marketing strategy of reader identification. For example, the cover of Sara Wood's *The Greek Millionaire's Marriage* (2004) depicts a formally attired couple dancing in a romantic, Mediterranean setting.²

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

Using an image that alludes to wealth, privilege and exoticism, the packaging of this text signifies an experience as much as a narrative. The perspective of the gaze in this image is that of a voyeur, with the gazer intruding on an intimate moment between the figures portrayed. But while the heroine's body displays the requisite set of attributes – white, thin, pretty, able-bodied – it is this same set of attributes that makes her virtually indistinguishable from any other heroine to grace the cover of a Harlequin Presents novel. It

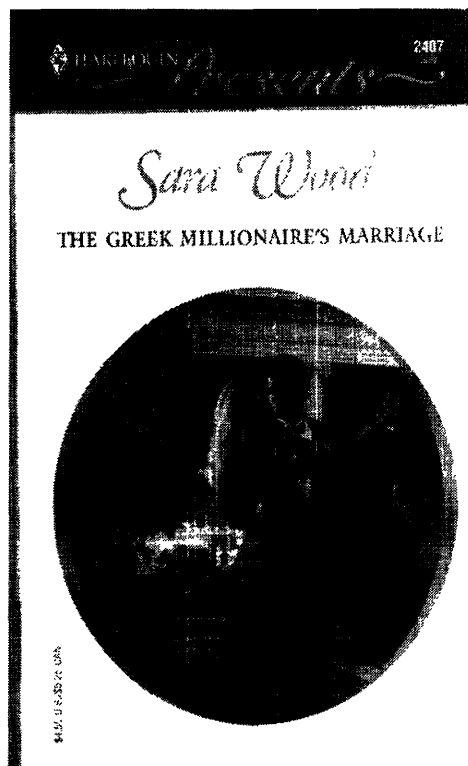


Figure 1

is both an ideal body and a featureless one: the heroine's averted face possesses no distinguishable features. In this configuration, the heroine's body becomes a blank space into which readers can project themselves.

Indeed, the marketing surrounding many of the Harlequin Presents miniseries promises an experience rather than a book. In an advertisement for Foreign Affairs, a series of books released in the Harlequin Presents line, the reader is offered a "dream ticket to the vacation of a lifetime."³ Sounding more like an airline than a publishing company, Harlequin suggests "Why not relax and allow Harlequin Presents whisk you

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

away to stunning international locations.” The tenor of all of these statements is that the reader somehow inhabits the text: the reader is told that by picking up a Harlequin Presents, they will “enter a world of spine-tingling passion and provocative, tantalizing romance.” In the end, Harlequin does not advise the reader to read about the emotion, but rather to “Live the emotion.”

This formulation of the romance novel, as experience, presents the heroine’s body as a vessel for a female reader’s desires. Consider, for example, the way in which the claim, “Where irresistible men and sophisticated women surrender to seduction under the golden sun” constructs subjectivity. The miniseries is portrayed as a place inhabited by two possible subject positions. Both “irresistible men” and “sophisticated women”

act, in that they “surrender to seduction,” but, as

there are only these two positions, it is clear that the one is surrendering to the seduction of the other. While the adjectives “irresistible” and “sophisticated” may be relevant to this action – women surrendering to men because they are irresistible and men

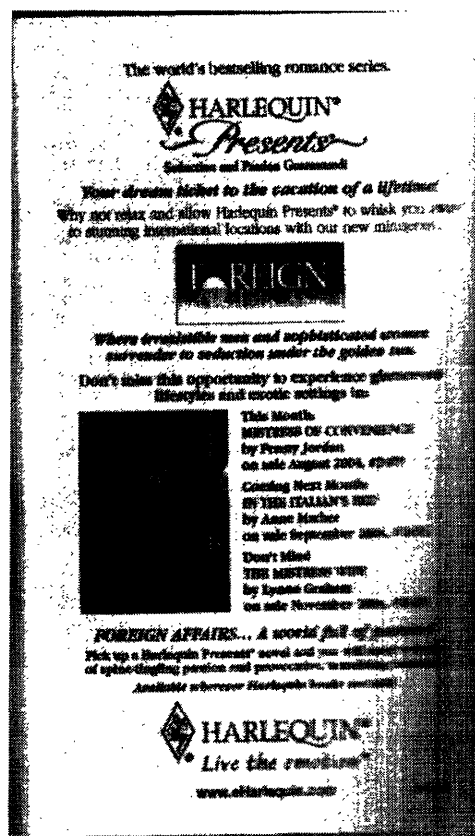


Figure 2

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

surrendering to women because they are sophisticated – the general purpose of this sentence appears to be advertising the overall appeal of the place itself. The miniseries, then is a place “under the golden sun” where women are “sophisticated” and men are “irresistible” and where seduction and surrender occur. The implication of advertising any place is that consumer is being offered the opportunity to visit it, as this is the only manner in which a place can be consumed. The adjectives “irresistible” and “sophisticated,” then, are directed at the consumer, but as resistance is an action and sophistication a state of being, the subject position of the heroine and the reader are contracted down into a single perspective.

Under Surveillance: Narrative Gaze and the Conspiring Body

While Harlequin Presents may be marketed as an opportunity to experience the text from the heroine’s perspective, inhabiting the body of a romance heroine is no easy task. Not only are the texts rarely told from any single perspective, but being in her own body, understanding and owning its needs and desires, appears to be an arduous undertaking for the average romance heroine. Sara Wood’s *The Greek Millionaire’s Marriage*, for instance, begins from the hero’s perspective. The reader’s first glimpse of the heroine’s body is through her husband’s possessive gaze: “Glancing around, he allowed himself an indulgent moment of pleasure, letting his gaze linger on his wife’s incredible body, and enjoying the gleam of her golden-goddess skin against the luxurious

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

cream leather seat” (2407: 5). This framing of the heroine’s body as a thing to be owned and enjoyed resonates throughout the text. As Olivia and Dimitri’s marriage begins to deteriorate, all of Dimitri’s schemes centre around negotiating access to the object denied: “Oh, yes. To have that glorious body in his bed, to remind her how good their sex had been, that would ease his ache” (43). Ironically, Olivia’s resistance to her husband’s overtures seems to stem from a recognition of her husband’s unarticulated motives: “he thought women were mere toys, designed for his pleasure” (57). While Dimitri seems blissfully unaware that his viewpoint might be in any way demeaning, Olivia sees her husband’s possessiveness a threat to her very subjectivity:

Olivia stood in the middle of the luxurious bedroom, mistress of all she surveyed, co-owner of the mansion and its valuable contents, of a penthouse in Athens overlooking the Acropolis, a Georgian house in Berkeley Square, a yacht, a private jet and apparently unlimited funds. Yet never had she felt so bereft, so shorn of everything she valued ... She was a wife now. A possession. (15-16)

The text erects a hierarchy of being, where Olivia cannot own anything as long as she remains merely an object to her husband’s desires. It is a system that Olivia capitulates to, understanding even her own desire for a monogamous relationship in terms of her own object status: “If he did have a mistress, she would leave him. She would not be shared” (16). Within this ontology, objects exist on the level of multitude while

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

subjectivity is singular. As an object, Olivia does not interpret Dimitri's infidelity as sharing her husband, but rather as being "shared" herself. The fact that both hero and heroine mirror the same interpretation of the heroine's body without openly discussing it suggests that perhaps the heroine's body *is* property.

Neither of the main characters attempts to dispute the body's 'thingness.' Rather, the conflict between the hero and heroine centres around Olivia's willingness and ability to identify with her body. Escaping her object status requires a definite separation between body and mind. In order to establish that she is not that thing which was previously owned and controlled by her husband, Olivia positions her subjectivity distinct from her body:

She had seen his gaze, however. 'I'm just a body to you, aren't I?' she flung, hot and flustered. 'Nobody seems to care if I have a mind –'

'I did,' he objected, moving away and cooling himself down by finding an open window. 'Once,' he added, before she got the wrong idea. (82)

Both parties acknowledge that Olivia is more than "just a body" – that Olivia and her body are not a singular, ontological whole. The issue at hand is whether or not Dimitri cares if Olivia, the subject position, consists of the sum of Olivia's body and Olivia's mind or merely Olivia's body, alone. The question that Olivia thinks she is asking is, "Am I just an object to you?" If the text was operating with a single unified formulation

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

of the heroine's body, Dimitri might have answered this question and cleared up all of the confusion on page 82. Certainly, the book would have been significantly shorter, but it is vitally important to the genre that the hero, the heroine and the narrative voice spend the entire text talking at cross-purposes.

Dimitri's rather bizarre response to Olivia's question can be attributed to an entirely different understanding of the status and function of the heroine's body within the text. For Dimitri, the body is the vessel through which sexual desire is expressed and experienced. Olivia's accusation immediately follows a moment in which Dimitri subjects Olivia to his overtly sexualized gaze: "He noticed the thrusting dark nipple of her left breast and wished he could surround it with his lips and tug it until she begged for mercy. But she had wriggled the scarlet silk back to its proper place and the moment was lost" (82). While it is positioned within Dimitri's 'notice,' Dimitri wields narrative control over the heroine's body. The description of Olivia's left breast is given from the Dimitri's point-of-view; it is depicted as an aroused, desirable object whose function is to interact with Dimitri's body and allow him to exert control over Olivia herself. Having just been denied Olivia's body by Olivia, Dimitri does not interpret Olivia's question literally: clearly, Olivia and Olivia's body are not the same thing because the former just denied him access to the latter. The question that Dimitri answers is, "Do you want more from me than my body?" Dimitri's denial of a desire for anything beyond the body-object, is not, as Olivia supposes, an attempt to fix her as a "thing;" it is a refusal to admit

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

to any lingering romantic attachment to his estranged wife. Instead, Dimitri directs all of his feelings for Olivia towards the body that continues to respond to his advances. As long as Olivia herself declines to occupy the subject position of the heroine's body, Olivia and Dimitri remain at an impasse.

Throughout the text, the descriptions of Olivia's body are given from one of three perspectives: 1) as directly seen by Dimitri; 2) from Olivia's standpoint, deflected through her interpretation of Dimitri's perspective; or 3) the experience of sexual desire from the point-of-view of the body itself. As Olivia attempts to escape from her marriage, and Olivia's body continues to respond to her husband, Olivia and Olivia's body emerge as distinct subject positions. Olivia's agenda is endangered when her body escapes her control, acting and desiring outside of the restraints that she has placed on herself: "Games, she thought, her heart sinking. No. It was actually leaping. Her lower lip trembled. Heaven help her. He wanted her to indulge him with some sex game and she found that thrilling! Somehow she dredged up a disdainful look" (50-1). In this passages, the heroine's body operates as if under remote control. Only with great difficulty can Olivia force her body to act according to her will rather than Dimitri's. Indeed, Olivia is so concerned with how Dimitri views her body and its sexual response that he is able to elicit from it that she is unable to see her own body directly.

The reader has no access to Olivia's image of herself before marriage, because the narrative begins several months after Olivia and Dimitri were married. While the text

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

makes many references to the happy memories of the early months of their marriage, there is little evidence that Olivia ever existed outside her relationship with Dimitri. Even in the moments when she exerts control over the heroine's body, Olivia sees only her body's capacity to act in relation to Dimitri: "Languorously she wound her arms about his neck and kissed him on the mouth. She had one weapon. Her body. And she'd use it to good effect" (72). Although Olivia's body is described from her own point-of-view, she uses her body and understands its utility in terms of its effect on Dimitri. Olivia's disjunction from her body is hardly surprising, because the narrative function of the heroine's body is entirely antithetical to Olivia's professed intentions:

Despairing, she fought her appallingly wayward, abandoned nature and tried desperately hard to remain indifferent. But he had taken her in his arms now and his body almost touched hers. Every inch of her wanted to strain forward so she could feel the hard, muscular torso against the softness of her breasts and enjoy the pressure of his narrow hips as his pelvis settled against hers. (43)

While Olivia fights "her appallingly wayward, abandoned nature," the desiring space of the heroine's body, "every inch of her," is undermining all of her efforts to escape her husband's control. This dynamic between Olivia and her body mirrors the dramatic irony of the text. The reader knows the eventual outcome of this struggle because the reconciliation of hero and heroine is dictated by generic constraints. Similarly, the

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

heroine's body continues to act according to its "nature," straining toward this inevitable encounter with the hero. Unclouded by the ideological struggle that the heroine is engaged in, the body's intentions remain somehow pure. Olivia's unwillingness to inhabit her body, then, becomes synonymous with her inability to recognize the 'truth': "‘Olivia, be honest,’ he murmured as her hands screwed into tight fists. ‘Admit what you feel. I see it in every line of your body’”(117).

Olivia sees her own subject position through a framework of body/mind dualism that is reminiscent of the ironic structure of the narrative. Within the contemporary romance novel, resistance to the romantic resolution of the plot – while a necessary component of every text – is always an ironic gesture (or readable as such). Unlike the narrative structures of other serial genres such as the mystery novel or the spy novel, surprise plays no part in the pleasure of romance reading. However sincere these forms of resistance may appear, they are always undercut by an awareness of the imminent outcome predetermined by the genre; however coherently and consistently Olivia insists that she does not want a reconciliation with her husband, the 'natural' desires of her body undermine this stance. In *The Greek Millionaire's Marriage*, the heroine's body colludes with the very structure of the text to 'naturalize' a particular outcome. The heroine's desire – a motivating force, driving the plot towards a romantic resolution – appears to spring fully formed from the inscrutable space of the body.

Similarly, advertisements for Harlequin Presents specifically locate the impulse to

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

consume these texts within the reader's body – a space that, in the packaging of the texts, becomes intertwined with the heroine's body. Harlequin's invitation, "Pick up a Harlequin Presents and you will enter a world of spine-tingling passion and provocative, tantalizing romance" (Foreign Affairs), elides the reader's body with that of the heroine, promising a physiological response that occurs in an indeterminate space. Any configuration of the body, then, that allows the 'natural' impulses of the heroine to pass unexamined is employing an analogous strategy of obfuscation with regards to the consumption of and reaction to the text itself. The construction of the heroine's body within Harlequin Presents fits in with the larger project of generic stabilization, effectively limiting the range of responses to any given text. In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson describes this difficult process as the goal of all contemporary literary forms:

Still, as texts free themselves more and more from an immediate performance situation, it becomes ever more difficult to enforce a given generic rule on their readers. No small part of the art of writing, indeed, is absorbed by this (impossible) attempt to devise a foolproof mechanism for the automatic exclusion of undesirable responses to a given literary utterance. (Jameson 107)

For Harlequin, the desire to control textual reception is amplified by the serial nature of the texts: Harlequin Presents is marketed as a single homogeneous commodity that

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

requires a stable, loyal readership. Just as the heroine's body is 'naturally' inclined to respond to the hero, the reader is inferred to be 'naturally' disposed to respond in a predetermined fashion to the structure of the books in this series.

The Idealized Body vs. The Modesty Trope

The indirectly seen and uninhabited heroine's body is a recurring motif in Harlequin Presents. The series employs a variety of strategies to distance the heroine from her own body, deflecting descriptions of the heroine's body through the hero and other characters. In Cathy Williams' *His Virgin Secretary* (2004), the heroine's conception of her own body is consistently refracted through the perceptions of others. Katy's descriptions of her own body are overlaid by an overtly negative body-image, and her capacity to accurately describe the heroine's body is impeded by her desire to gauge its relative worth, in terms of the elusive opinions of others:

Ever since she was fourteen and had watched on the sidelines as her friends had developed hips and breasts and all the things that the boys seemed to gravitate towards, Katy had nursed the unspoken feeling that her slightness, her small breasts, her boyish shape, were to be concealed at all costs. Baggy, all-enveloping clothes had become her preferred mode of dress, even though her parents had repeatedly told her that she was beautiful. She had always known better than to believe them. Her parents

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

adored her. They would have found her beautiful if she had had three heads and a tail. (2390: 21)

We see in this passage two necessary facets of the heroine's characterization working at cross-purposes. While the presentation of the heroine's body on the cover of the Harlequin may appear idealized, the text's ability to reproduce this space as idealized is impeded within the narrative itself by the heroine's modesty. As long as the narrative-voice is dominated by the heroine's perspective, the reader's access to her body remains obscured by the heroine's negative perception of it. Traces of the underlying desirability of the heroine's body surface despite Katy's negative portrayal. The reader can recognize the "slightness," "small breasts," and "boyish shape" as attractive features despite Katy's attempt to literally and figuratively conceal them. Similarly, the recalled comments of Katy's parents provide us with an alternate vision of Katy as "beautiful," a perspective that is not erased by Katy's self-effacing gesture of dismissing her parent's viewpoint as biased.

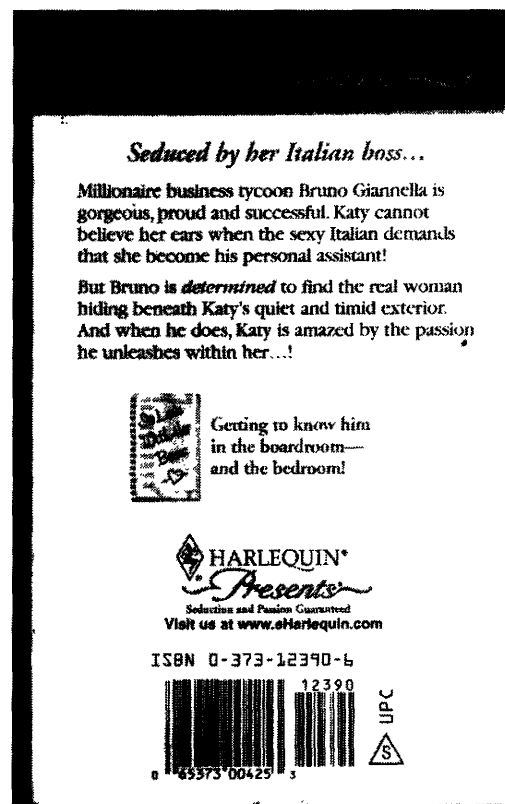


Figure 3

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

of being, fixing the heroine's body in an instant where it is in flux, as Katy shifts between the two subject positions. The description of the heroine on the back cover also manages to lose Katy in the space between her "quiet and timid exterior" and the libidinal impulses that erupt from an undefined interior space. Katy remains somehow independent of both the outward display and internal response of her own body, hiding behind the former and reacting with amazement to the latter.

In the end, this disjunction between the heroine and her body constructs female desire as an ephemeral moment of mind-body connection which is eternally deferred. By alienating the heroine from her own body, female desire is obliquely depicted. While residual traces of Katy's sexual agency are left behind by her movement from a virgin to a sexually active woman, the heroine's "passion" originates from the indistinct, ulterior space of the "real woman." The body, then, becomes synonymous with the "real" – an inscrutable space into which the consumer can dump all of her anxieties surrounding female sexuality and sexual agency. The text's use of the expression "real woman" is enormously suspect. Not only does it serve to naturalize a particular brand of heterosexuality as pertaining to "real women," but as a marketing technique, it generalizes the heroine's desire, expanding this unexamined, desiring space to include the reader. The "real woman" lurking beneath Katy's exterior comes to signify all female desire, acknowledged and unacknowledged. The reader need not examine her impulse to consume the text, as all female desire is derived from the terrifying Lacanian space of the

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

“real” woman, a space that must also reside within the reader because that is what “real woman” means.

The packaging and marketing surrounding the Harlequin Presents series consistently employs a psychoanalytic model of sexuality and identity formation. The texts, on the other hand, use different strategies for circumventing any direct depiction of a desiring, embodied female subject. Rather than expressing direct desire for the hero, Williams’ heroine uses the hero as a filter to intensify her own sense of inadequacy: “The minute she clapped eyes on him, she knew how she would feel. Gauche, awkward, unbearably plain and dowdy” (7). Katy’s persistent application of this modesty-as-dowdiness trope certainly undermines any interpretation of the heroine’s body as an idealized avatar for the reader. Harlequin by-lines have yet to invite the reader to live the embarrassment as a “gauche, awkward, unbearably plain and dowdy” woman. Nor is the reader likely to be able to find the heroine’s body while her only access to it is through Katy’s convoluted gaze. The reader is granted brief, tantalizing glimpses of Katy’s body in her moments of self-deprecation such as the following painful comparison with the ‘other woman’ (Bruno’s girlfriend, Isobel): Katy

arrived at the dismal conclusion that, next to Isobel, she had appeared even more gauche and unsophisticated than she usually was. A little brown moth alongside a sparkling butterfly. Her comfy garb seemed screamingly spinsterish in comparison with Isobel’s rampantly provocative dress ...

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

Compared to Isobel, he must have thought of her as something that had stepped out from under a stone. (58)

A direct description of the heroine's body, however, is deferred until the moment when it revealed to the hero: "He found that he was holding his breath, looking at Katy, at the body she had always kept well hidden. Long, slender legs, a slightness that bordered on gamine, breasts that pushed provocatively against the wet black Lycra with the lace that was coming undone" (100). Not only does this strategy circumvent the problem of the heroine appearing vain (or even at all conscious of her physical presence); it overlays the moment in which the heroine's body is revealed with sexual tension.

The sexual overtones of the hero's scopophilic gaze⁷ are clear; the heroine's body is uncovered as an active object, breaking free of the modest restraints placed upon it. The reader's complicity with the sexual implications of the gaze, however, is structured into the text itself. The reader's first unobstructed view of the heroine's body is related from Bruno's perspective, positioning the reader as an empathetic onlooker, capable of appreciating the 'provocative' nature of the spectacle. The manner in which this moment of seeing is alluded to and postponed, as well as the length at which the text dwells on the incident – dividing it between two chapters and relating it from the perspectives of multiple characters – certainly infuses Katy's unveiling with textual significance. The way that Williams withholds a description of the heroine's body until half way through the text and then draws out the event suggests that this exhibition provides some form of

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

gratification to the reader. The reader's position within this dynamic between gazer and object, however, is difficult to fix due to the multiple perspectives through which the incident is ultimately presented.

In the following chapter, this event is revisited from an alternate subject position. The heroine's recognition of herself as the object of Bruno's gaze is constructed as a moment of sexual awakening: "A slow curling heat spread through Katy's body as their eyes locked. Bruno was looking at her, really looking at her and this time his expression wasn't shuttered" (101). Nor does the text's fascination with this instant of incipience end with Katy's description of it. With a rare glimpse into the mind of a peripheral character, the incident is described for a third time by a silent observer, Bruno's elderly godfather:

He was finding it hard not to grin or at least toss her some little cliché about young people blithely assuming that the old were good for nothing except maybe dozing in a chair by the pool while they couldn't keep their hands off one another. It had been something of a surprise when he had blinked open his eyes and watched the scenario being played out in front of him and he had been on the verge of leaping up, if his bones would enable him to do anything as energetic as leaping, so that he could interrupt, but he hadn't. He might be an old man but he knew mutual attraction when he saw it. (106)

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

In a structure reminiscent of the ambiguous heroine depicted on the cover of this text, the heroine's body is revealed to the reader as it is in flux. The liminal image of Katy "emerging from the water" fixes her body in a moment of immanence: "One foot rested on the side of the pool, the other was still on the step in the water" (100). The intense scrutiny of this moment – where Katy is seen, sees herself being seen and is seen seeing herself being seen – highlights the multiple demands placed on the heroine's body at this juncture in the text.

The transience of the heroine's body in its moment of disclosure suggests that it is operating as a sign. Katy's body is not described in itself; rather, it is interpreted in terms of its meaning and effect. Perspective, in the romance novel, is mutable. Each of the characters reads the significance of this event differently. By the end of the text, the perspective of the main characters is sweepingly reconstructed in terms of a romantic attachment that they felt all along but were unable to recognize. A common element shared by each interpretation suggests that Katy's unveiling represents the "mutual attraction" felt by the protagonists. A multifaceted desire is constituted in this moment of signification: the reader is meant to recognize Katy and Bruno's desire for each other, their desire to see or be seen, and Bruno's godfather's desire to see them together. The significance of this desire, however, is certainly open to interpretation and, indeed, shifts several times throughout the text as the characters are gradually interpellated into the ideological structure of the romance novel. These divergent readings of the text and the

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

conflicting representations of desire that accompany them are structured into the narrative itself. They are not the function of a resistant reader or a revolutionary author, and they pose no threat to the standardization of the Harlequin Presents format. Rather, these periodic moments of resistance are entirely scripted, built into the ironic structure of the genre.

**Models of Consent:
Textual Coercion and Reader Resistance in a Narrative of Rape**

On the one hand, the standardization of a particular outcome across the series – i.e. the way that sexual desire is consistently reintegrated into the framework of romantic love – suggests that desire, in all of its manifestations, is always already mobilized towards this effect. Indeed, this construction of desire, where multiple interpretations are ironically presented only to be finally discarded in favour of a generically dictated (and clearly previously anticipated) interpretation, suggests that this ‘final’ representation of desire resolves the issue, providing the reader with some form of ‘ultimate’ truth. When so many ulterior interpretations of the meaning and effect of desire are presented throughout the text, how are we to distinguish between them and determine which, if any, are being posited as definitive? Certainly, there are several structural cues that seem to indicate an intended effect on the reader – assuming, of course, that the text is structured effectively. If the author opts to draw out a particular event, representing it from multiple perspectives, we might conclude that this event is significant or that the representation of

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

this incident is meant to provide the reader with some form of gratification. Similarly, the placement of a particular interpretation of desire at the end of the text might indicate its ascendancy over other posited interpretations, or at the very least its capacity to resolve the anxieties raised within the narrative.

In a series where so many significations of desire are offered only to be discarded, this notion of a textual dictatorship may be the best we can do. To the extent that the text controls meaning, it might be said to coercively impose an ideological construction of desire onto its readership. Still, any reading of an individual narrative in terms of its structural components (i.e. resolution, climax, etc.) tends to overlook both the serial and the ironic aspects of these texts. Given a series that exhibits such playfulness concerning ideological structures (as various texts consider and discard a multitude of gender and sexual roles), we must entertain the possibility that at any time the reader might not be entirely complicit with the ideological agenda put forward. As Dave Morley observes in “Texts, readers, subjects,” the contemporary subject is never the function of any particular text:

We must distinguish between the positions which the text prefers and prescribes in its discursive operations and the process by which concrete individuals, already constituted as ‘subject’ for a multiplicity of discourses, are (successfully or inadequately) interpellated by any single text (Morley 168-9).

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

We may be able to discern the subject position that an individual text assumes in its readership, but subjects are formed through their exposure to “a multiplicity of discourses.” The Harlequin reader – the subject position assumed by the text – is not an isolated mode of subjectivity; it intersects with other discourses, because Harlequin *readers* do read other texts. Hence, how are we to understand the body, and desire as they are expressed through the body, within this ironic structure? The possibility of a resistant reader becomes particularly intriguing when a text raises competing interpretations of the heroine’s desire – when the conflict over the meaning and extent of the heroine’s desire threatens to undermine the structure of the genre itself.

To investigate this interplay between resistance and textual coercion, let us look closely at the strategies employed within a particular text, Charlotte Lamb’s *Betrayal* (1983). The narrative begins in the midst of a holiday romance, but when Muir confesses his feelings, Cathy admits that she is already engaged to another man. Unwilling to betray her disabled fiancé, Cathy continues to reject Muir’s overtures, until, in a spectacularly confusing scene, Muir shows up at Cathy’s house and rapes her – sort of.⁸ Here I must admit my own biases on this subject. To me, their interaction looks quite a bit like rape. The transcript of the event is certainly damning: “‘You’re mad, you can’t do this!’ she gasped. ‘You’re hurting, Muir! I don’t want to, don’t make me – please, Muir, for God’s sake, not like this!’” (585: 68). However, judging by the confusion that follows this moment in the text, it becomes apparent that I am wrong – a definitive

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

description of this event as rape would do violence to the intent of the text. As the remainder of the narrative explores several divergent interpretations of this event, the text insists that its significance cannot be so easily fixed.

Through her manipulation of plot and circumstance, Lamb manages to control not only the events of the text, but also the scope of interpretation itself. Following their coupling, Cathy and Muir fight and she falls down the stairs. When Cathy's father returns home and finds his daughter lying naked and concussed in the foyer, he responds to her declaration, "I didn't want to do it, Daddy, ... He made me, he hurt me. I couldn't help it!" (71), by calling the police and having the strange naked man arrested. Muir is then charged, oddly enough, with rape. While this development in the plot raises the possibility that Muir might be a rapist, his confusion in the face of such a charge quickly establishes this interpretation to be within the phantasmagorical realm of irony: "Muir had not understood, even then, what *construction* the other man had placed on what he had seen, what Cathy had said" (my emphasis 82). As events coalesce around Muir the rapist, this ironically posed identity begins to take substantial form. Muir is held for questioning by the police, and when Cathy's amnesia prevents her from testifying, Muir is mistaken for the "nutter lurking about the town, attacking women" (89) and is charged with the attempted rape of another woman, a nurse who had been attacked the week before. *Betrayal* enacts the model of consent that Catharine MacKinnon describes in "Rape: On Coercion and Consent," where consent is a function of the "indices of

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

relationship to men” (MacKinnon 46).⁹ The text collapses the identities of stranger and rapist, allowing Muir to occupy the position of his rapacious double as long as Cathy’s loss of memory prevents her from “knowing” him: “I was a stranger in town, they were hunting a man who fitted my description – I didn’t have a prayer, did I?” (113).

As Muir is caught up in the rapid progression of criminal proceedings, he is effectively cast in the role of rapist. Throughout this portion of the text, Muir insists that he is innocent and that Cathy’s testimony will exonerate him. While Muir assumes the mantle of rapist, he affects the events in the text as if this identity were authentic: everyone that Muir encounters engages with him as a criminal. However, Muir’s consciousness of his other identity as hero remains as the sole trace of this ironic construction: “‘When she gets over the accident she’ll tell them the truth.’ Muir insisted. He looked down at the table. ‘I love her, Sam’” (90). When the capture of the “real” rapist – the shadowy stranger who breaks into the nurse’s home – and the return of Cathy’s memory finally separate this collapsed identity of hero and criminal into two distinct characters, Cathy and Muir’s feelings of guilt and righteous indignation work together to reify the ideological premise that there are two types of rape. Unless the reader accepts that acquaintanceship is equivalent to consent, Cathy and Muir’s argument concerning whether or not her loss of memory was intentional makes no literal sense. The underlying assumption is that if Cathy had remembered that she knew him, Muir could not have legitimately been charged with a crime. As long as we adhere to the

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

principles of textual realism, readers are left with two options: to either accept the slipperiness of the text's definition of rape, or to abandon coherence itself and insist that the characters are not acting rationally or consistently.

While Muir is successfully extracted from the judicial system and replaced by the “real” criminal, evidence of his guilt of something – however ill defined – permeates the remainder of the text: “He might angrily deny that he raped her, but in a sense he had taken her by force, and he knew it: he had done it quite deliberately, it had been a calculated gamble” (124)¹⁰. Like a latent memory, awareness of the event emerges periodically. While rarely referred to directly, traces of the original rape can be seen in the reactions of the characters and an underlying impression of violence and fear: “She was in love with a man who hated her and intended to hurt her, and every instinct of self-preservation and common sense urged her to run before it was too late” (136). Both characters acknowledge the existence of conflict but have great difficulty articulating it. While there is a general understanding that Muir should never have been charged with rape, it remains ironically clear that something remarkably like rape occurred: “‘He didn’t break in,’ said Cathy. ‘I let him in, and I wasn’t raped – well, not technically, I suppose that would depend on your definition of the word rape – there are rapes and rapes’” (136)¹¹. Cathy never comprehensively delineates this distinction, but apparently these two types of rape are distinguished in terms of appropriate recourse. Muir’s affront is derived from the manner in which this private matter was ignominiously thrust in into

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

the public sphere: “Any reputation I had was blown to smithereens when I was charged with rape. Even my so-called friends looked sideways at me” (130). Ultimately, the incident’s innate privacy is linked to its structural importance to the text: the romance novel and its subject matter need to remain in the private realm.

Desire and the Body of the Text

Making sense of the model of consent that Lamb utilizes in *Betrayal* requires an understanding of the way that desire functions within the genre. On the surface, the discrepancy between Cathy’s admission that non-consensual sex occurred and her inability to publicly accuse Muir of rape evidences a remarkable complicity with her own subjugation. Indeed, Muir’s repeated insistence that Cathy wanted to be raped seems to be a horrifically inadequate defense:

‘We didn’t make love,’ Cathy retorted angrily. ‘You forced me, I didn’t have a choice. You may not call that rape, maybe you prefer a nicer name for it, but you know I’m telling the truth this time – you made me give in to you. You held me down on the floor and took me and ignored everything I said.’

There was a dark red stain on his cheeks and his eyes leapt with rage. ‘You wanted me! Okay, I forced the issue, but I had to make you

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

admit the truth about how you felt, and one minute later you'd stopped protesting and you were responding the way I knew you would because you wanted me, whatever you said to Telford, whatever lies you've told yourself.' (125)

On the one hand, Cathy and Muir's argument is an enactment of the existing social landscape. The two parties are separated on the basis of their divergent experiences of the event and are trying to negotiate across the gender divide. The characters articulate, in this archetypal fashion, the gap between the victim's experience of rape and the attempt by general society – here represented by a man's point of view – to objectively determine whether the accused might reasonably have known that the victim did not consent. Muir's defense, however absurd, is the standard legal defense that requires that the man, the arbiter of objectivity, to read the woman's mind. We must look to contemporary legal discourse to unravel the logic of Muir's arguments. As MacKinnon observes, legal discussions of rape construct consent as “a communication under conditions of inequality. It transpires somewhere between what the woman actually wanted, what she was able to express about what she wanted, and what the man comprehended she wanted” (52). Cathy and Muir's discussion is inflected by the understanding that “whether or not a contested interaction is authoritatively considered rape comes down to whose meaning wins” (52). Muir's response is definitive because it establishes his lack of a criminal mind-set: he thought, and still thinks, that she was

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

consenting. In a sense, this argument shifts the focus of the conflict from the personal to the public realm. *Betrayal* positions Cathy's rape as merely another facet of the many injustices that the Harlequin Presents heroine faces when she ventures into the public sphere. The heroine is not raped by the hero; rather, she is violated by the narrative's social and political setting.

This is not to suggest that the text uses this conflict as a means of critiquing existing social mores. Cathy's stance as the innocent victim of Muir's sexual aggression is as ironically posed as Muir's criminal identity. Following his incarceration, Muir coerces Cathy into breaking off her engagement to Stephen Telford and returning with him to London as his fiancée. In this new environment, Cathy continues to position herself as a victim, living in constant anticipation of further violence: “‘And you can stop jumping every time I come anywhere near you!’ He came close, a hand lifting to push the hair back from her throat. Cathy stiffened as he bent and kissed the exposed skin with lingering deliberation. ‘It makes me want to hurt you,’ he said very softly. His teeth grazed her lobe, bit delicately, making her flinch” (148). In the end, it is the heroine's desire which undermines her ability to maintain this identity. The body's response eludes the heroine's control, blurring the line between sex and violence:

A moment later he was lying beside her, kissing her throat, his hands touching her with possessive desire, and Cathy's body began to tremble violently as she felt the rough, muscled thigh move against her own. A

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

piercingly intense sensation thrust through her, she wanted him too much to care any longer if he meant to hurt her, when he kissed her mouth it opened to his searching, demanding kiss, her arms locking round his neck.

(156)

While Cathy's identity as victim allows her to resist the generically pre-determined outcome, it was always an entirely scripted resistance and her capitulation to Muir's sexual overtures was inevitable. Nonetheless, the failure of Cathy's resistance does not render it less poignant. Nor does Muir's final explanation that force was necessary mitigate the fact that force was used: "It was a damnable situation to be in – for all three of us – but, Cathy, the only way out was to cut the Gordian knot, break free by force" (187). The existence of Cathy's resistance to the romantic resolution of the text might be dictated by the genre, but the form that it takes suggests a lingering trauma.

In fact, the most striking element of this storyline is not the manner in which the heroine's consent is coerced or disregarded, but rather how effectively this literal narrative of rape functions within the confines of the contemporary romance novel. The violence with which Cathy's capitulation is elicited resonates throughout the series as a whole. The romance plot is structured such that the heroine always resists social/sexual/romantic integration. This integration, in turn, is always coercively imposed, if not by the hero, then by the genre itself. If anything, Muir's insistence that force was necessary indicates a moment of meta-textual awareness (at the very least, it is

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

an innovative defense – “The genre made me do it”). Muir’s description of himself as a character manipulated into a corner might be a flimsy excuse for rape, but it is an extremely apt description of his position within the text: ““You’d even been clever enough to make me force myself on you, so that you wouldn’t need to tell yourself you were guilty anything! You provoked me into taking you; you admitted you loved me but refused to break off with Telford, refused even to see me if I waited for months for you”” (159). *Betrayal* is, after all, a romance novel. All resistance is ultimately cowed, and both characters are repeatedly and effectively punished for refusing to fulfill their designated roles within the text.

Betrayal is a particularly literal enactment of the force consistently employed by the genre. The ideological structure of the text is merely operating very close to the surface in this example. Not only are the main characters instruments of the romantic agenda, but they both demonstrate an unusual awareness of their role within the text. Muir’s decision to rape the heroine is described as a deliberate attempt to resolve the situation, “a calculated gamble” (124). Similarly, Cathy’s amnesia emerges as a passive-aggressive attempt to punish them both their failure to comply with the goals of the text:

‘You lied when you pretended to have amnesia, didn’t you?’ he demanded.

Cathy didn’t answer, ice-cold with anguish ...

‘No,’ Cathy sobbed, then she broke down entirely, sobbing out a

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

muffled denial. ‘No, no, no, I forgot, I forgot – I felt guilty and ashamed and I forgot, but it wasn’t deliberate, I wasn’t pretending!’ (160)

Cathy’s guilt and shame arise from her inability to consent, to behave according to the dictates of the genre. Following the rape, Cathy rationalizes her anger toward Muir as an extension of her own self-loathing: “‘You forced me to make love to you, I hated it!’ Cathy shouted, hating herself so much she felt she hated him, she wanted to hurt him the way that she was hurt” (70). Cathy’s amnesia manifests immediately after Muir is arrested and does not dissipate until he is released. Cathy’s inability to recognize Muir while he is publicly labeled a rapist highlights her enforcement of generic constraints – the heroine could not possibly be in love with a criminal. The inference, however, that her amnesia may have been intentional emerges as a moment of bizarre self-consciousness: this heroine demonstrates overt compliance with the dictates of not only her own body, but the body of the text as well.



Figure 5 **Pregnancy and the Incipient Body**¹²

The genre is certainly ruthless in its imposition of structure. Desire is not the only tool that the texts have for effecting a particular outcome. If a heroine continues to resist social integration despite her sexual impulses, the heroine’s body can collude with a romantic resolution in other ways. An unwanted pregnancy can be an

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

extremely efficient plot device for compelling contact between the hero and heroine. Within the romance novel, abortion is unthinkable and marriage unavoidable. While heroines occasionally consider other options, they are all eventually manoeuvred into a stable, two-parent family unit. As heroines consistently resist this outcome, however, the pregnant body comes to be represented as a violated and colonized space. In *Harlequin Presents*, a baby is accompanied by a manifold set of social expectations – it moves into a heroine’s body, rendering her vulnerable to social censure. No matter how ardently the heroine may profess to detest the hero, marriage is always understood to be necessary under these circumstances. Pregnancy effectively hands control of the heroine’s body over to the hero.

Despite these pressures, the heroine in Violet Winspear’s *Desire Has No Mercy* (1979), considers aborting her foetus. After prostituting herself to pay off her sister’s gambling debt, Julia initially views this new disruption in her life as a “link she must soon find the courage to cut” (300: 9). Julia agrees to marry her seducer, despite the fact that she would “sooner throw ...[herself] under a bus!” (16), because she is ultimately more afraid of the intrusiveness of the medical procedure involved in ending her pregnancy:

But stark in her mind was another image ... that of a clinical room where a white-gowned figure leaned over her body with a gleaming instrument in his hand ... She was a coward. She had known all along in her heart that

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

she couldn't submit to the instrument that would have set her free from Rome Demario ... the very thought of abortion a defiling and wretched procedure. (20-21)

Julia's options are severely limited, and all of them involve further violation of her body. The text dwells on this "gleaming" image of metallic intrusion and juxtaposes it with Julia's memories of the "throbbing, sensual destruction of [her] ... chastity" (12). Julia chooses marriage only because her fear of the metallic phallus of the "white-gowned" figure overrides her fear of Rome. It is, however, a very close call.

Further encroachment upon Julia's body is not limited to the consummation of her marriage. In opting to marry Rome, Julia allows her distasteful pregnancy to continue, a condition she perceives to be gradually annexing her body:

It was bad enough that she felt so queasy when she first woke up, the physical proof that she was bearing his child, so mortifying when she looked in the mirror and saw her own pallor and the tiny beads of sweat on her skin. And there would be more to suffer! Her body would fill out and grow heavy, and that unwanted burden inside her would sap her energy and take the youthful spring out of her walk and the lustre out of her hair. She would look horrible, and then would come the painful sweating business of giving birth. (34)

Along with these obstreperous physiological changes, Julia's new, alien body begins to

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

manifest its own, independent volition: “her own body was reacting to him, as if it were separated from her mind and was primitively drawn to his as if in some strange effort to protect what she intended to kill” (13). A distinct set of sexual responses develop, responses attributed to the colonized portion of her body: “I’ve only to touch you to know that I’m the man who made you pregnant. If I took you in my arms right now I’d feel that instinctive response of your flesh – oh yes, my dear, it happens and I feel it whether you like it or not. It’s a bond you can’t easily snap with your lying little teeth. Part of me is there inside you ...” (82). Unlike the unimpregnated romance heroine, Julia’s compliance is coerced by a body whose ownership is contested. Julia does not give into the impulses of her own body; rather, she complies with the dictates of an “other” body – a strange amalgam of self, child and the physiological changes associated with pregnancy.

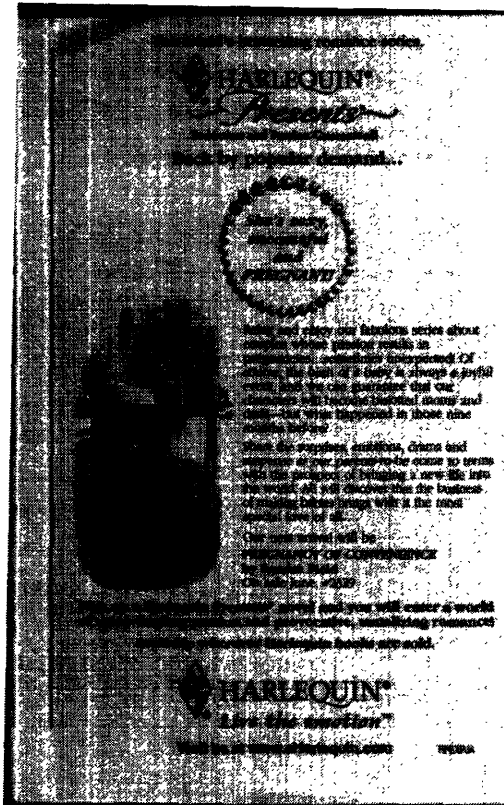


Figure 6

Despite the horror and frustration with which many romance heroines greet the

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

news of impending motherhood, pregnancy as a plot device is “Back by popular demand.”¹³ The “Expecting” sub-series has been around in some form since Harlequin Presents began marketing individual series in the mid-nineties. Any reader familiar with the genre might be alarmed at the prospective introduction of more “unexpected” pregnancies into the series, but we are reminded, “Of course, the birth of a baby is always a joyful event.” The saccharin optimism of this assurance is difficult to reconcile with “the painful sweating business of giving birth” (*Desire Has No Mercy* 34). The disjunction between the content and the packaging of this “fabulous” series is startling. The success of the series evidences the appeal of sharing “the surprises, emotions, drama and suspense as our parents-to-be come to terms with the prospect of bringing a new life into the world.” However, while the series is marketed in terms of its capacity to provide the reader with an experience of joyful expectation, this experience is very rarely reproduced in the narratives.

While Julia’s aversion to the prospect of motherhood is unusually strong, pregnancy narratives in Harlequin Presents generally function in the same coercive manner seen in *Desire Has No Mercy*. The statement, “She’s sexy, successful and PREGNANT!” is the closest that this advertisement comes to reproducing the reality of the series. The final descriptor is clearly distinguished from the previous ones, suggesting that it negates, or at least severely limits, the other two adjectives. The emphasis placed on the word pregnant captures, to some extent, the shock and dismay felt

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

by a heroine who discovers that she is no longer in control of her life. The reader may be invited to savour the incipience of the heroine's body, but the heroine can "expect" to be coerced into marriage with the father-to-be, however repulsive, and to lose all socio-economic independence. In fact, the caption's emphasis on success is significant. The heroines in unwanted or "unexpected" pregnancy narratives are generally more economically, socially and professionally successful than your average romance heroine – an eventuality that makes the indignity of being forced into an undesirable marriage more pronounced. The "successful" heroine has more to lose. The appeal of pregnancy as a plot device suggests a rather disturbing trend in romance readership: the desire to see independent, professional women brought into line.

Daphne Clair's *The Riccioni Pregnancy* (2003) illustrates the degree of force typically brought to bear on a pregnant heroine. Roxane and Zito are married at the beginning of the text, but they have been living estranged for more than a year. When Zito reenters her life, Roxanne refuses to resume their relationship; she is unwilling to abandon her new life in New Zealand with "her increasingly interesting job and her varied new circle of friends" (2305: 92). Roxane's impression of married life certainly reinforces this decision: "She tried to infuse into her words some of the remembered helplessness and frustration, a growing fear of being totally smothered, of never having the opportunity to develop into a fully adult human being. 'I felt ... I felt empty and suffocated. As if I had no existence of my own'" (117). Discovering that she is

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

pregnant, Roxane quits her job and returns to Australia. The prospect of a difficult pregnancy makes her reconciliation with Zito inevitable; Roxane's state of dependency becomes indistinguishable from her state of pregnancy, "a reality that she could not ignore" (141).

Roxane's pregnancy does not pose a solution to her marital problems, but it does deflect her attention away from them: "'Right now,' Roxanne confessed, 'I don't care that I never get to make a decision of my own. But I won't be pregnant forever'" (158). The text's description of Roxane and Zito's relationship bares little resemblance to the



ecstatic parents-to-be depicted on the cover.¹⁴ Instead of coming "to terms with bringing a new life into the world,"¹⁵ Roxane and Zito are living in denial. They are polite but distant, and the couple await the imminent birth of their child with something akin to dread, as if the event threatens to dissolve the truce they have declared:

Sometimes it seemed to be taking forever. Roxane grew bigger, and the baby's movements were unmistakable now ... They ate at the same

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

table, slept in the same room, and almost every day took an undemanding walk with her hand tucked into his arm ... Zito was watchful and considerate and patient—and strangely aloof.

While she lived in a cocoon of pampering and preparation she was aware that Zito was keeping an emotional distance between them. (158-9)

While the pregnancy forces Roxane and Zito into recurrent contact, it is clear that the couple have outstanding issues that remain unresolved.

Once their son is born, Roxane undergoes a miraculous transformation. She finally comes to understand Zito's "overbearing" (178) nature and accepts her place in the family hierarchy, now that she herself has someone to smother:

Roxane returned her eyes to the baby, and felt a piercingly familiar sensation, a strange mixture of joy and terror and heartbreak. 'Is this how you felt about me?' she asked Zito. 'As if it was absolutely necessary to keep me from the slightest hurt, and it was your job to know what I needed and see that I got it, even if I didn't know myself?'

'Yes. Exactly.'

Softly, she said, 'I think I understand.'

'I didn't take into account that you weren't a helpless baby.'

'I'm a mother now. Maybe it helps?'

'Maybe.' (182)

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

Zito seems less than willing to relinquish his role as patriarch. Indeed, the birth of their child only solidifies the family structure. Roxane may be a mother now, but she can still expect to be treated like the child of an overprotective parent. The resolution offered by this text is not a change in hero's behaviour, or an erasure of the events which threatened their marriage; *The Riccioni Pregnancy* closes the text with the heroine's integration into the ideological structure of the institution of the family. Roxane's previous bid for independence is ruthlessly ignored.

Just as the other texts in the Harlequin Presents line are marketed with romantic images that give no indication of the conflict that permeates the texts, *The Riccioni Pregnancy* employs an iconography image of happy marriage and expectant motherhood. The Expecting series is pushing Family with the same fetishistic fervour that the genre dedicates to the idea of Romance: "the business of making babies brings with it the most special love of all ..." ¹⁶ This series can be branded with the baby rattle icon seen in Figure 5, because Harlequin's value-based marketing strategy is easily reducible to the idea of Motherhood, or Family. In depicting the compliance of the heroine, the series is presuming the compliance of the reader. The Expecting line invariably presents an image of elated incipience, not because the heroine evinces pleasure at the prospect of motherhood – although her compliance will be ultimately forced in the text's resolution – but because Harlequin assumes that its readership will correctly interpret and approve of this image. The packaging of the text sells the idea of Family, even while the narrative of

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

the Riccioni family is far from idyllic. While the hostile takeover of the heroine's body in a pregnancy narrative incorporates both the heroine and the reader into the ideology of Harlequin's brand, these narratives systematically recount an ambivalence towards shifting the social landscape of family life that resonates throughout the series.

The Broken Body: Widening the Gap between Cover and Text

The disjunction between the body represented on the cover of any Harlequin Presents and the heroine's body as it is depicted within the narrative arises primarily from Harlequin's marketing strategy. As a series romance line, Harlequin Presents is marketed in its totality and not in terms of the content of individual texts. As I discussed in my introduction, the advertisements for Harlequin Presents and the packaging of the texts implicitly construct a Harlequin reader. The different series (Harlequin Presents, Harlequin Romance, Silhouette Desire, etc.) as well as the separate sub-series (Expecting, Wedlocked!, Latin Lovers, 9 to 5, etc.) are designed to aid the reader in navigating her way through the vast array of texts. The choice of text, then, is not based on content, but is rather on a process of self-selection.¹⁷ The consumer identifies herself as possessing a distinctive value-set and purchases the appropriate text. Ultimately, this process of consumption has very little to do with the object itself. A gap arises between the images and values employed in marketing the series and the ideas expressed within the text, and from this space emerges a variety of forms of counter-representation. For the purposes of

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

this chapter, I will be limiting my discussion to resistant constructions of the body.

The Phantom Lover (1994), by Susan Napier, is a text that plays with this distinction between cover and content within the narrative itself. The text buries the heroine's body amidst multiple layers of mistaken identity. As the narrative opens, Honor, mistaken for an animal rights activist/terrorist, has been arrested while “*lurking and skulking*” outside the hero's home (1707: 8). While he and Honor have been exchanging letters for the past several months, Adam is unable to identify the “distressingly plain” (11) visitor as his correspondent, because the letters were, in fact,

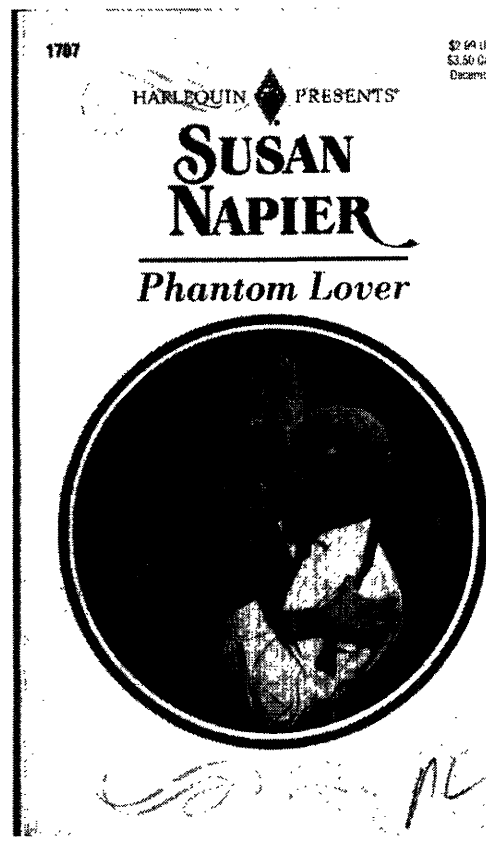


Figure 8

addressed to Honor's beautiful older sister Helen. The heroine's body is repeatedly described, not as it is, but as it falls below the hero's expectations:

By no stretch of the imagination could the unruly brown curls that tumbled around her shoulders be described as spun gold. Or the oval face sprinkled with freckles and rendered stern by the thick straight brows be

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

considered beautiful. Her nose, rather pink from the spring cold she was shaking off, was the only thing about her that was glowing. And no one in his or her right mind would call her sturdy figure ‘delicate’ ... (14)

Adam could be forgiven for his mistaking his love interest; Honor’s “sophisticated sister” (17) bears far more resemblance to the archetypal romance heroine. The reader’s expectations are similarly thwarted. The heroine depicted on the cover of *Phantom Lover*¹⁸ is a questionable representation of the “short and fat” heroine described in the text (55). While the cover art an individual Harlequin Presents is not always an accurate reflection of the text, Napier exploits this disjunction, allowing a non-idealized body to occupy the role of heroine; this opens a space of possibility, as the author accommodates the romance structure to the deviant body.

Napier wedges Honor into the role of romance heroine with the same ironic force that she squeezes Honor’s body into Helen’s cast off designer dress:

What looked elegant on Helen’s willowy size ten verged on tacky when draped on a figure which hovered erratically between size twelve and fourteen, even though the famous designer label claimed the figure-hugging tube was of the ‘one size fits all’ variety.

It had undoubtedly been a mini on Helen, revealing a startling amount of long, slender leg. On Honor the length was more modest but the fit definitely wasn’t. It was desperately tight across the hips and bust

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

and although the stretchy, bubble-knit fabric hid a multitude sins there was no getting away from the fact that it made her look disappointingly lumpy.

(66)

Honor is not the typical Harlequin heroine and – just in case the reader is unable to recognize that fact – her difference is consistently reinforced through comparisons to Adam’s original love interest, Helen. At the same time, the text repeatedly eroticizes these images of fleshy over-flow, focusing on Honor’s “extravagant curves” (43), and the way her breasts “swell” (162) over her clothing. Honor’s desire, like her collection of provocative lingerie, captures the reader’s attention as it bursts forth from restraints:

He stilled, staring down at the contents, then lifted his head to cast a taunting glance at her fiery face as he deliberately, slowly, stirred the frothy, multi-coloured confection of lace until a violet suspender spilled over the edge and dangled provocatively into space, swinging like a brazen pendulum measuring out each long second of her embarrassment.

(45)

This image of the overflowing underwear drawer encapsulates the heroine’s inappropriate excess. Honor’s sexuality is located in the moment she escapes the confines of her ideal counterpart.

While many Harlequin Presents heroines are not cognizant of their own physical beauty, Honor’s imperfections are tangible. Napier challenges the modesty trope

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

consistently employed by the genre by inserting a heroine whose body is an accurate reflection of her own negative body-image. Honor's awareness of her body, however, seems limited to the extent to which her form exceeds the ideal. Just as many heroines are unable to accurately comprehend their body, Honor seems to see only the fleshy outline of where her body extends past the idealized heroine's body. The hero, too, appears fixated on this manifestation of her body: "This lacing must be uncomfortably tight ...' he suggested softly, pulling it momentarily tighter, the compression delivering a sexual jolt to her highly sensitised nerve-endings" (167-8). Yet, Honor's distinct body-identity allows her to express her desire in unusual ways. Honor's discomfort with her role as heroine renders her both awkward and versatile. She consistently misinterprets Adam's actions and responses:

Her chest puffed up in rage, an effect that he then had the gall to study openly. It was very difficult to cut a man down with a glare when all his attention was fixed on her breasts. No doubt he thought them too large... She wished there were some physical flaw of his that she could stare rudely at... (69-70)

Yet, emboldened by her success at masquerading as the heroine, Honor eventually tries on other personas, as well. When the hero accuses her of attempting to extort money, a typical romance heroine would angrily protest her innocence. Instead, Honor revels in the opportunity to engage in "illicit" behaviour: "An image of herself as a dangerous

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

villainess conquering the superior strength of her masculine prey with brilliant strategems stalked across her brain, strongly appealing to her damaged ego” (97). Napier utilizes her heroine’s deviance to play with generic constraints, infusing the space between the ideal and the textual reality with its own sexual overtones.

In *The Greek’s Virgin Bride* (2004), Julia James uses a similar technique to import a disfigured body into the role of the heroine. The packaging of this text gives no indication of the crippling accident that Andrea endured as a child. The heroine on the cover is standing comfortably in a long dress which effectively obscures “the scarred, runnelled tissue of her legs,... the twisted muscles of her thighs,... the knife-cut knees, ... [and] the warped, lumpen line of her calves” (2383: 125).¹⁹ Similarly, the back cover neglects to mention the role that Andrea’s disability plays within the text. James buries her heroine’s physical flaws within the narrative, hiding the imperfections of the heroine’s body within the ironic construction of a marriage of convenience. Nikos agrees to marry Andrea, sight unseen, in exchange for a

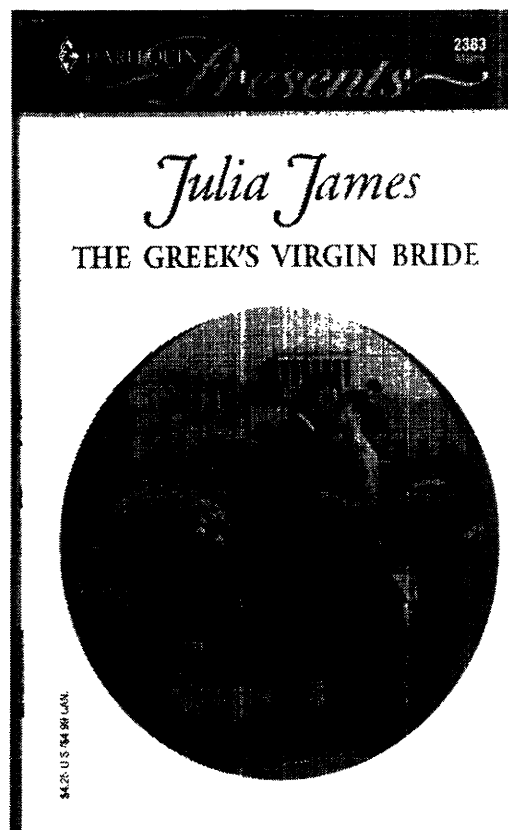


Figure 9

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

controlling interest in her grandfather's company. A reader would expect Nikos' determination to marry the heroine, "Whatever she looked like" (16), to serve as an amusing counterpoint to the desire he will eventually feel for his beautiful wife.

Following this pattern, Nikos is relieved to discover that he will not be "shackled to a plain wife" (40). However, as the couple begin preparation for their wedding, James makes several allusions to the fact that there is something wrong with Andrea's body. When she first meets her Grandfather, Yiorgos cryptically mentions that Andrea can "walk perfectly well" (29). Andrea makes a point of wearing concealing clothing and clearly believes some aspect of her anatomy to be repellent: "any initial sexual attraction men showed in her would not last—not when they saw the rest of her" (21). The text also hints at the debilitating effect of Andrea's imperfections; she occasionally experiences pain in her legs and is oddly grateful for being "a functioning adult in the world" (21). Despite these references to her disability, Andrea effectively passes as an able-bodied heroine; the reader, like Nikos, never directly sees Andrea's injuries or the effect they still have on her life.

The techniques of obfuscation that James uses to conceal the heroine's body are hardly unusual. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, texts frequently defer the moment in which the heroine's body is seen, infusing the instant where the body is unveiled with significance. By preventing the reader from effectively seeing the heroine's body until the hero does, the text aligns the reader's gaze with that of the hero, placing the reader in

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

the eroticized position of voyeur. James plays with these expectations; she uses the conventions of the genre to focus the reader's gaze in a manner calculated to evoke horror, pity and disappointment. While the reader has been forewarned that Andrea does not possess the ideal heroine's body, Nikos has received none of these cues. The author relies on the reader's familiarity with the genre to convey the impact that Andrea's deformed body has on Nikos, forcing the reader to share his defeated expectations:

Her hand moved on her thigh, sliding the silk away, letting it slither from her thighs to the bedclothes on either side.

She looked at him. There was no expression in her eyes. None at all.

There was silence. A silence so profound Nikos knew he could hear his own heart beating.

Oh, dear God, dear God ...

He stared down, the twisted, pitted surface of her legs scarring into his retinas as deeply as the scars that gouged and knotted her limbs from hip to ankle, tunnelling through her wasted muscles, winding around her legs like some hideous net.

Horror dawned through him. She saw it in his face, his eyes.

(122)

A Harlequin reader has been conditioned to expect the same sexual pay-off that Nikos

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

anticipates in the moment where the heroine's body is revealed. Instead, the slow panning gaze dwells upon a catalogue of deformity. By framing the reader's access to the heroine's body according to generic conventions, James forces the reader to follow this detailed inventory of imperfection. This scene becomes a grotesque parody of the typical dynamic of gaze and desire: Nikos sees Andrea's body, is seen seeing the heroine's body and his reaction of horror is duly noted. Ultimately the reader is implicated in Nikos' reaction because the reader's response is always structured into the gaze.

James uses the conventions of the genre to launch an attack on the reader's position within the system of consumption. In this moment where Andrea punishes Nikos for his unreasonable expectations, James traps the reader through her identification with the scopophilia of the hero. The impact of this attack registers on the hero's gaze, "scarring into his retinas as deeply as the scars that gouged and knotted her limbs," but the horror of the circumstances are equally felt by the reader. The emotional impact of this scene, with its invocation of horror, pity, disappointment and embarrassment, highlights the reader's complicity with a generic structure that demands an idealized heroine's body and delivers sexual pleasure to the reader in the moment where that body is revealed. Andrea purposely sets up her moment of disclosure as an attack on the hero's gaze, attempting to inflict her own sense of disappointment and inadequacy onto the hero. Andrea decides to launch this attack in response to Nikos' earlier conflation of

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

visual and sexual pleasure:

Desire kicked through him, hard and insistent.

‘You’re so beautiful—’

His voice was husky.

Andrea heard it, heard the note of raw desire in it. Her breath caught, and a shot of pure adrenaline surged through her. Then the words he had uttered penetrated, and the rush died, draining away like dirty oil from the sump of a wrecked car.

You’re so beautiful...

Her mouth made a tight twist, and her eyes took on a strange brightness. (120)

Andrea’s anger is clearly directed at the expectation of the heroine’s beauty, and she extracts her revenge from the system that has burdened her with a role she cannot fulfill. At the same time, *The Greek’s Virgin Bride* effectively punishes the reader for her participation within this system. Caught in a moment of erotic voyeurism, the reader is made to feel guilt and embarrassment at her capacity to derive sexual pleasure from this generic trope.

Seduction and Passion Guaranteed!²⁰

We look more eagerly than we have ever done before for the real love

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

which seems for the moment lost in the obsession of the media with sex.

This is not the romance for which men have fought and died over the centuries. (Barbara Cartland, *A Magical Moment*)

It is in the graphic sex scenes of Harlequin Presents that the reader's relationship with the heroine's body is at its most conflicted. The North American appearance of Harlequin Presents, in 1973, coincides with a shift that was occurring in the wider romance market. In the early seventies, the Gothic fiction market of the 50's and 60's was being replaced by the Historical Romance, a longer, somewhat less formulaic genre that featured explicit sexual content.²¹ The 32 women whom Janice Radway interviewed in *Reading the Romance* all "agreed that they found Harlequin's new more explicit preoccupation with male violence nauseating, and several even admitted that they stopped buying them to avoid being subjected to this form of male power" (76). The criteria that Radway puts forward for the "Ideal Romance," criteria that allow the novels to replace the nurturing environment of a mother-daughter relationship (151), do not apply particularly well to Harlequin Presents, a line whose violent manifestations of romantic relationships extend to stalking, sexual harassment, and rape. Nonetheless, the fact that Harlequin sold over 160 million books in 1999 suggests that a significant number of women understand their reading practices in different terms. The romantic ideal that Harlequin presents us with may not be "the romance for which men have fought and died over the centuries" (Cartland "Author's Note"), but it is the romance that more than 50 million women

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

purchase for less than half the price of a standard paperback novel.²² Barbara Cartland's distinction between sex and romance both demonstrates the disjunction created within the genre by the introduction of erotic content and suggests the possibility that the standard, historically generated formulation of "real love" does not account for this new "obsession of the media with sex."

It would be difficult to fully examine Harlequin Presents without considering its graphic sexual content, a feature which clearly distinguishes it from the more traditional Harlequin line, Harlequin Romance. Mills and Boon, the British incarnation of these same texts, has used differing shades of roses on the front cover to obliquely advise readers of the explicit material in particular texts. While Harlequin Presents has no qualms about taking the reader past the bedroom door, this brand of Harlequin has never employed a consistent warning system. Instead, the series relies on the

reader's understanding of the branding system to determine which line they should purchase. In 1999, Harlequin Presents introduced a Passion miniseries, designed to offer



Figure 10

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

the reader “a little extra *spice*.” While these “stories that *sizzle*”²³ have recurred periodically since their introduction in 1999, the most notable feature of this sub-series is its lack of consolidated identity. There is little to distinguish the warmer, spicier Passion line from Harlequin Presents, in general.

If anything, the Passion series seems to be a marketing ploy designed to test the tolerance of readership for the idea of sexually explicit narratives. The back cover of *The Seduction Project* (1999), is unusually cryptic in its description of the text.²⁴ Apparently, the title phrase “The wanting ...” needs no further clarification and the words “passion,” “desire” and “seduction?” are highlighted in red. As the content of *The Seduction Project* is entirely undistinguishable from the narrative of any other Harlequin Presents, we must look to the packaging of the texts to discern the purpose of these distinctions. The texts in the Passion line call attention to themselves as erotica in a manner that other Harlequin Presents books rarely do. Randomly marking the occasional

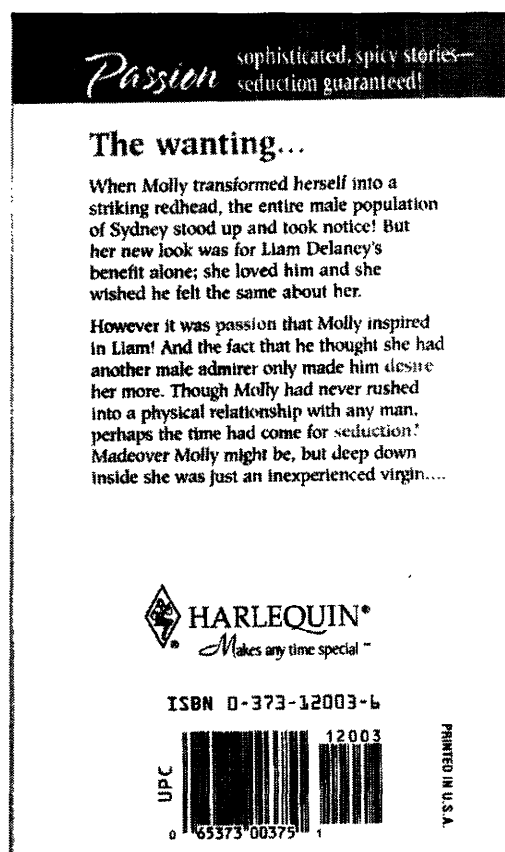


Figure 11

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

text as more sexually explicit seems to serve two functions: first, the Passion series is a mechanism for tracking the popularity of the concept of “passion”; and second, this line can directly advertise the sexual content of these texts without branding the rest of the series as too “spicy” (read sleazy) – this might be a strategy for acquiring new consumers without offending the existing readership.

Despite the detailed, explicit descriptions of sex ubiquitous throughout Harlequin Presents, the packaging of these texts steer clear of the “s” word. Seduction and passion may be guaranteed, but the word “sex” is extremely rare. The guidelines for Harlequin Presents advises prospective authors that: “the central relationship in a Presents novel is a provocatively passionate, highly charged affair, driven by conflict, emotional intensity and overwhelming physical attraction, which may include explicit lovemaking” (Writing Guidelines). Sexual tension is consistently, deliberately written into the series. The anomalous marketing surrounding a small selection of otherwise indiscernible texts only highlights the fact that Harlequin does not market the remainder of its series in this fashion. The conspicuous absence of references to the “explicit lovemaking” that distinguishes this line of romance novels suggests that perhaps Barbara Cartland was right – sex might be a threat to romance.

Sex can be a useful, motivating plot device, but it clearly carries connotations that threaten to undermine the value system established by the narrative. The main characters frequently have sex, but the word itself remains taboo. The word is a gauntlet thrown

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

down in the midst of an argument: “‘Sex!’ she snapped, tugging out clumps of grass without being aware of what she was doing. Sometimes he got her so angry!” (2262: 164). Sex is a looming spectre that threatens to undermine any romantic relationship: “after this morning’s—what? Scene? Seduction? *Sex?*” (2344: 143-4). Sex is both necessary and insufficient; it forms an integral part of the plot, yet in isolation, is a horrifying prospect:

‘Ellie, I know there’s nothing between us but sex ...’

Oh, he was nothing if not blunt, Ellie thought wretchedly, wrapping her arms around herself to protect herself from the pain. (2232: 183)

In isolation, sex is seen as a threat to the value system of the series. Heroines rarely see themselves as particularly interested sex:

Suddenly all she could think about was sex and she dragged her eyes away from his, just *mortified* by her own thoughts. What was the matter with her? She never thought about sex. She thought about love and marriage and babies, and of course sex was part of that, but she never thought about *sex on its own*. (2453: 21)

While “explicit lovemaking” falls under the larger rubric of romance, “*sex on its own*” only points to the terrifying absence of romance. The heroine of a Harlequin Presents book inhabits an indeterminate space between ‘just sex’ and romance. The heroine enters

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

into “a provocatively passionate, highly charged affair,” (Writing Guidelines) but unlike the reader, the heroine has been given no guarantees of a romantic outcome. The idea of sex, without romantic love, encapsulates all of the heroine’s fear and uncertainty.

In Miranda Lee’s *The Seduction Project*, Molly is required to navigate this interval between ‘just sex’ and “explicit lovemaking.” Frustrated with her friend Liam’s lack of sexual interest, Molly decides to change her appearance. She sees this decision to attract the hero’s attention as a dangerous, but necessary exercise:

She blushed in the darkness, her blood pounding through her body, her head whirling with a wild mixture of shame and excitement. Was she wicked to think about such things?

She didn’t feel wicked. She felt driven and compelled, oblivious to everything but wanting Liam with a want that had no conscience, only the most merciless and agonising frustration. Oh, how she wished she were dazzlingly beautiful, with the sort of body no man could resist!

(2003: 31)

The rather insignificant alterations to Molly’s visible aspect – she dyes her hair red and dresses more provocatively – have a profound impact on her life. The text presumes an immediate correlation between identity and appearance. In seeming seductive, Molly is understood to be in danger of embodying ‘just sex’. Molly views this prospect with “a wild mixture of shame and excitement” because she recognizes the indeterminacy of the

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

role she is about to adopt: having “the sort of body no man could resist” may be the only way to achieve her goal, but this new form has the capacity to overwhelm her. Molly’s dilemma illustrates the fundamental ambiguity of the role of the heroine’s body. The heroine’s body, like the text itself, functions both as a caveat, proscribing female sexuality and a commodity that offers the reader a formulaic experience of female sexuality. Molly’s fraught relationship with her own body stands in for the reader’s anxiety towards the text.

Liam certainly notices the changes to Molly’s appearance, but he seems to find Molly’s new identity similarly threatening: “you’re no longer the Molly I knew and loved. You’ve turned into a bloody monster. A sarcastic, stropky sex-mad monster” (153). Just when Molly appears to be losing herself in this new role, the author redeems Molly’s actions by shifting the context. The reader is presented with a foil; Liam’s previous girlfriend, Roxy, appears as a grotesque example of an excessively sexualized body. In the end, the contrast between Molly and Roxy establishes Molly’s identity as qualitatively different from a truly “stropky, sex-mad monster”:

She actually sashayed into the room, utterly unabashed at her nudity. Her long blonde hair shifted in sensual disarray across her shoulders, her melon-like breasts undulating sensuously, bringing attention to their lush size, plus their very pink, very pointed nipples.

Molly would not have put it past her to have painted the damned

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

things, then iced them to their presently stunningly erect state. (166-7)

Roxy's timely interruption makes "Moved-on-Made-over Molly" (179) appear substantially less threatening. The gap between Roxy's uninhibited behaviour and Molly's self-conscious attempt to attract the hero is very evident in this scene. Molly is still capable of being shocked at Roxy's inappropriate display. Molly's lingering sense of restraint signals that her changes are only superficial. The evidence that Molly's value system remains intact is what makes it possible for the hero to fall in love with her, despite her new, threatening appearance: "She's still there, hiding underneath your new red hair and your newly found assertiveness. I think that's why my feelings for you are different to what they were with any of those other girls. Different, and deeper" (180).

In the end, the relationship between the Harlequin Presents reader and the heroine's body demonstrates a discomfort with the manner in which these texts are consumed. As an instrument of the reader's gratification, the heroine's body threatens to uncover the base, sexual underpinnings of the experience of reading. There is a tension between the values presented in the text – values like family, romantic love, appropriate behaviour in polite society and modest femininity – and the way these objects exist in the world. The Presents line may guarantee seduction and passion, but it remains very leery of implying anything about the sexual proclivities of its readership. As the most likely avatar through which the Harlequin Presents reader is expected to "Live the Emotion," the heroine's body forms the locus of the relationship between reader and text. Hence,

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

the heroine's fraught relationship with her own body becomes a metaphor for the reader's discomfort with her role as consumer. After all, Harlequin sells romance – not porn – so it must be the last bastion of defense against the “obsession of the media with sex.”

The Harlequin Presents heroine inhabits a space of indeterminacy. The multiple demands placed on the heroine's body overlay the corporeal existence of the heroine with contested meanings. Any individual reading of the heroine's body provides only a provisional insight into the complex function that this space serves throughout the series. At any given moment, the heroine's body is structured in resistance to, or is employed in the consolidation of, any number of competing ideological perspectives. The separate functions of the heroine's body illustrate the variety of ways that readers relate to the text. Across the series, the identity of the Harlequin Presents heroine emerges out of this tension between separate value sets. Through a close examination of these moments of ideological tension, we can catch glimpses of the complex relationship that readers have with the contemporary serial romance novel.

Notes

-
1. Note that the phrase “Live the Emotion” is registered trademark of Harlequin Enterprises Limited. See Figure 2.
 2. See Figure 1, front cover of Sara Wood’s *The Greek Millionaire’s Marriage* (2004).
 3. See Figure 2. This advertisement is taken from the back pages of Julia James’ *Bought By Her Latin Lover* (2004).
 4. See Figure 3, front cover of Cathy Williams’ *His Virgin Secretary* (2004).
 5. See Figure 4, back cover of Cathy Williams’ *His Virgin Secretary* (2004).
 6. Virginité, as marketing tool, operates quite differently from the way it typically functions in the text. Frequently referenced in the titles of Harlequin Presents, virginité (an aspect of textual packaging) needs to be distinguished from virginity (a facet of the heroine’s identity), and virginity (a plot device). For further discussion, see Chapter 1, pp. 26-8.
 7. I am using scopophilia here to refer to “pleasurable structures of looking” (Mulvey 325). For an interesting discussion of the scopophilic gaze in film, see Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” While I have not directly integrated this essay, Mulvey’s discussion has provided me with an analogous understanding of how the gaze

is constructed within a different medium. As I discussed in my introduction, I have avoided using psychoanalytic models for reading the romance novel, as I feel that it would be too complicit with the marketing strategies that Harlequin employs.

8. This is not to imply that the events in the text are particularly ambiguous. Yet, to describe Cathy and Muir's interaction as "rape," without qualification, would be misleading in a text that insists that "Truth was never black and white, it was a grey cat walking in the shadows" (159). In selecting this text, I am to some extent entertaining a range of ideas which I personally find offensive.

9. MacKinnon argues that, unable or unwilling to discern the intricacies of a victim's experience of rape in order to determine whether or not consent took place, the legal establishment has systematically shaped sexual relations according to the experience of men. As a result, the current definition of rape has become limited to: "a strange (read Black) man who does not know his victim but does know she doesn't want to have sex with him, going ahead anyway" (51).

10. Clearly, there is more happening in this quote, but I will come back to it later.

11. I should note that this comment passes completely unexamined. I can only suppose that the reader is meant to accept this distinction without question.

12. Baby rattle icon in Figure 5 is taken from the spine of Carole Mortimer's *To Mend a Marriage* (2001).

13. See Figure 6. This "Expecting" advertisement is taken from the back pages of Sara Wood's *Husband by Arrangement* (2003).

14. See Figure 7, front cover of Daphne Clair's *The Riccioni Pregnancy* (2003).

15. See Figure 6.

16. See Figure 6.

17. Here, I am drawing loosely on Bourdieu's ideas of consumption and subject formation in a differentiated class society, as articulated in *Distinction*.

18. See Figure 8, front cover of Susan Napier's *Phantom Lover* (1994).

19. See Figure 9, front cover of Julia James' *The Greek Virgin's Bride* (2004).

20. This is the standard ad-line of Harlequin Presents. See Figures 2, 4 and 6.

21. For a more detailed account of this shift in publishing practices see John Markert's "Romance Publishing and the Production of Culture" and pages 19 to 45 of Radway's *Reading the Romance*.

22. As Stevi Jackson argues in “Women and Heterosexual Love: Complicity, Resistance and Change,” the “shifting patterns of sexual relationships” (59) have not significantly hurt the romance industry: “purveyors of romantic fiction are not suffering a contradiction of their markets. Rather they are adapting their plots to suit shifts in sexual mores – but their more assertive, less virginal heroines are still seeking Mr. Right” (60).

23. Both references taken from advertisement in back pages of Miranda Lee’s *The Seduction Project* (1999), see appendix 1. The same ad-lines are employed in later advertisements. See Figure 10, Passion advertisement taken from back pages of Helen Bianchin’s *The Husband Test* (2001).

24. See Figure 11, taken from the back cover of *The Seduction Project* (1999), by Miranda Lee.

**The Stuff of Nation:
Fetishizing Ethnicity in the Global Village**

There can be no love between strangers. (Anne Hampson, *Gates of Steel*)¹

In May of 1973, Harlequin republished Anne Hampson's 1970 Mills & Boon novel *Gates of Steel* as the first in their new Harlequin Presents line. *Gates of Steel* tells the story of an English secretary who travels to Greece as the paid companion of two children whose Greek father is dying in a hospital in London. Unwilling to abandon Fiona and Chippy to their new guardian, who "doesn't seem to care very much for children" (6), Helen Stewart marries the brooding uncle and settles in Cyprus. By the third chapter, Helen's paid holiday is beginning to look more like a story of migration. Yet, at no point in the text does Helen ever identify with her new culture. She maintains the perspective of a tourist throughout the novel, and, at the same time, serves as the last bastion of Englishness for the two children, protecting them from complete assimilation. This first book, *Gates of Steel*, sets the tenor for the remainder of the line.

Despite the liminal status of the texts – these are, after all, predominantly English novels repackaged for a North American audience – the female English tourist/immigrant abroad is a recurrent theme throughout the Harlequin Presents series. This chapter will investigate the varied and often conflicting ways these texts construct national identity. I will examine how the fluid movement of these texts and their narratives across the borders of nations superimposes multiple layers of ethnicity and national identity onto

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

both the heroine and the hero. Ultimately, these myriad subject positions are marketed as commodities produced for the voracious consumption of the Harlequin Presents reader. How do these narratives of tourism, immigration, and citizenship in a larger global community impact the sexual politics of nation? Harlequin Presents is an amorphous mass of texts that constructs nation as a fluid category. In order to understand the ambiguous space of nation, we need to approach this cultural object in terms of its capacity to simultaneously challenge and reify ideological structures. The concept of nation is developed throughout the series in a discontinuous fashion; ethnicity is only ever obliquely addressed. Using the theoretical models developed in previous chapters, I will attempt to map the divergent construction of national identity across the series.

Harlequin Presents is an amalgam of texts, from a variety of mostly first-world countries, marketed as a unified, homogeneous product. While most of the authors in the series are English, books from Australian, New Zealand, South African, Canadian, and American authors are occasionally featured in the line. Generally, the heroine of the text exhibits the same nationality as the author, although there are rare examples of authors who choose to position their heroines within one of the other countries listed. As a whole, the texts represent heroines from this set of nations with little differentiation. As Alan Middleton observes in Richard Blackwell's article, "Harlequin slump causing heartache," the serial romance novel is not marketed according to traditional publishing practice: "Harlequin's product 'is not a book, it's a packaged good'" (Blackwell). Most Harlequin Presents novels are marketed to their North American audience as a uniform,

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

branded commodity. The national identity of the Harlequin Presents heroine, then, emerges from the absence of a discernable national affiliation. The willingness of Harlequin to market these diverse texts as a single series without comment or distinction conveys the general impression that these nationalities are interchangeable. The success of the Harlequin Presents brand in North America, a success that rivals the popularity of Mills & Boon in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, suggests that the reading practices of these countries are also interchangeable.²

The production of the heroine as belonging to this singular, undifferentiated category is immediately suspect. On the one hand, it portrays nationality within Western culture as homogeneous identity – blank, undifferentiated stuff that need not be labelled and that can be sold *en masse* in any marketplace, to any consumer. The marketing, or lack thereof, of the national identity of the Harlequin Presents heroine is reminiscent of many mass-produced objects in consumer society. Individual bars of soap are not marketed for their distinctiveness.³ As a strategy of ethnic identification, however, the presentation of national identity as a uniform commodity suggests that Harlequin Presents is engaged in the larger project of the consolidation of Western whiteness. While it may serve as an effective marketing technique for a mass-produced product, the presentation of Western, national identities as interchangeable has the effect of creating an inviolable category of whiteness.

In “The Unexamined,” Ross Chambers argues that “whiteness” produces itself as an singular, indivisible category in order to escape scrutiny. As an “*aparadigmatic*”

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

(142) category, whiteness employs “the differential structures that mediate social relations ... to distribute certain privileges to unmarkedness—the privileges of normalcy and unexaminedness—while marked categories acquire characteristics (of derivedness, deviation, secondariness and examinability) that function as indices of disempowerment”

(142). The blank whiteness of the Harlequin Presents heroine is all the more pronounced in comparison with the frequently marked ethnicity of the hero: Helen Stewart’s Englishness, in *Gates of Steel*, is salient only as it is distinguishable from the Greek “otherness” of the hero. As Chambers describes, whiteness produces itself as unmarked through this contrast with the other:

Whiteness— like other “blank” categories—is the denial of its own dividedness through the production of its other(s) as examinable, because splitting; and examinability, (producing the separation of the unexamined and the examined), is the scapegoating device through which the distinction between the in(di)visible (those whose whiteness is simultaneously invisible and undivided) and the (di)visible (those groups whose visibility is a function of their split identity as others, and produced them as examinable) is enforced. (149)

The predominance of narratives of tourism and migration throughout Harlequin Presents reinforces this dynamic. The story of the English heroine abroad is reproduced in a variety of settings. Consequently, a splitting of the hero’s identity between an extensive array of visible, exotic ethnicities is in direct contrast to the heroine’s consistently blank,

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

unmarked English whiteness.

The depiction of other (Non-White) ethnicities in Harlequin Presents advertising as divisible and “examinable” has become more pronounced in recent years. As the series has begun marketing individual lines, many of these sub-series have focussed exclusively on the ethnicity or nationality of the hero. The ethnicity of the hero in the Latin Lovers advertisement opposite is under intense scrutiny.⁴ His “Latin charm” is presented as innately distinctive, making him a “special kind of lover.” The Latin Lovers line, like other of its kind (Greek Tycoons, Italian Husbands, International Doctors etc.)⁵, shamelessly exploits ethnic stereotypes, relying on the reader’s acceptance of these groupings of text as natural and meaningful. These sub-series derive their coherence from the consumer’s understanding that ethnic distinctiveness is not only salient, but can be split off and marketed as a commodity.

Readers are invited to experience Latinness, as if

this feature of the hero’s identity were independent of its production in the text.

This systematic grouping of texts according to the ethnicity of the hero creates

The world's bestselling romance series

HARLEQUIN®
Presents
Seduction and Passion Guaranteed!

VIVA LA VIDA DE AMOR!

They speak the language of passion.

In Harlequin Presents, you'll find a special kind of lover—full of Latin charm. Whether he's relaxing in denim or dressed for dinner, giving you diamonds or simply sweet dreams, he's got spirit, style and sex appeal!

Fiona Hood-Stewart

THE BRAZILIAN TYCOON'S MISTRESS

Vicor Santander is determined to have English rose Aramina Dampierre in his bed. And what he wants, he gets! It will be for nothing more than pleasure, though—Victor will never again allow a woman to mean anything to him. But he has never met anyone like Aramina, and slowly he starts to realize she might be the woman he can't walk away from.

Harlequin Presents #629
Available in November

Available wherever Harlequin Books are sold.

www.aharlequin.com #629

Figure 1

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

meaning. Harlequin readers desire texts based on the Latin, Greek, or Italian nationality of the hero because that is how the books are placed in relation to each other. As Jean Baudrillard observes in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, objects in consumer society derive meaning from the code of signification erected between objects:

This object does not assume meaning either in symbolic relation with the subject (the Object) or in an operational relation to the world (object-as-implement): it finds meaning with other objects, in difference, according to a hierarchical code of significations. This alone, at the risk of the worst confusion, defines the object of consumption. (Baudrillard 64)

While these marketing techniques rely on the reader's acceptance of these categories as self-reflexively consistent, Harlequin Presents is a closed system that cannot be extrapolated outwards into the world at large. The desire for Latin Lovers does not refer to any ethnic characteristics embodied by real people, and should not be seen to reflect how the reader relates to anything other than the object of consumption. Instead, this advertisement constructs a relationship between the reader and the text that is internally coherent – it fits into the “hierarchical code of significations” created by the series.

The reader is effectively taught her position within this system of signification. The Latin Lovers advertisement represents the desire for heroes with “Latin charm” as extant in the readership. The qualities of the Latin hero are stabilized as an archetype by attributing them to a singular figure: “Whether he’s relaxing in denims or dressed for dinner, giving you diamonds or simply sweet dreams, he’s got spirit, style and sex

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

appeal!” There is an expectation in the advertisement that the reader comply with this understanding of Latinness as a category. The reader is assured that she will “find a special kind of lover” within the series, as if the search anteceded this advertisement. Yet, the qualities of the Latin hero and the desire to consume the experience of “Latin charm” emerge from this arrangement of the texts. As we will see, this grouping of texts is as much about the consolidation of English/Commonwealth identity as it is about the consumption of the fetishized ethnic identity.

The Harlequin Reader as Sex Tourist

Your dream ticket to the vacation of a lifetime! (Foreign Affairs)⁶

One of the most enduring examples of the consumption of ethnicity is the travel narrative. Tourism and romance are strange bedfellows. The romance plot almost always ends in marriage, and the tourist is supposed to return home. Diane Negra has characterized the tourist romance depicted in late-twentieth-century film as a form of “thrill-seeking tourism,” one that ultimately results in expatriation, characterized by the fact that the heroine does not return to her original culture, “rejuvenated” (82-85). Interestingly, Negra does not describe these narratives as stories of migration. Instead, she considers the de-assimilation of the heroine as an interesting side-effect of contemporary tourism. Complete integration into a foreign culture may be a logical extension of the tourist’s search for an authentic foreign experience, but as an expression of national identity, these stories of exodus from centres of Western civilization to exotic

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

locales are a relatively recent form of cultural expression: “one of the most striking features of these texts is that, in stark contrast to the assimilationist credo of earlier Hollywood films, they de-assimilate their heroines” (Negra 88).

According to Negra, these narratives articulate the inadequacy of the heroine’s country of origin: “tourist experience is now most frequently positioned as an opportunity for integration and stimulation that will make up (implicitly or explicitly) for the deficiencies of daily life” (83). One of the most significant differences, however, between the films that Negra describes and the typical holiday romance of the Harlequin Presents series is that the films *end* in marriage. In these films, marriage and expatriation are presented as a resolution to the social problems that the heroine encounters, whereas in the Harlequin Presents series, marriage frequently occurs at the beginning of the novel. In this series, expatriation is not posited as a solution the deficiencies of British life. Instead, the Harlequin Presents heroine exhibits significant resistance to the process of assimilation: “‘I’m staying British’” (2312: 141).

Helen Stewart, the heroine in Anne Hampson’s *Gates of Steel*, does marry her Greek employer, but she is remarkably unwilling to surrender her Britishness. Assimilation is not presented as an appealing prospect. In fact, Helen views the foreignness of her husband with trepidation: “She would come to regret the marriage, for to live with this dark foreigner, whose way of life and customs were so different from her own, could not possibly be pleasant” (41). The heroine clings to her nationality, seeing it as protection from her husband’s patriarchal authority: “‘I’m sorry to go against your

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

wishes, Leon, but I'm not being dictated to. I'm English, remember'" (50). The threat of integration into Greek culture looms over Helen and her half-English charges. Through his interaction with the local children, the young boy is eventually infected with the misogynist perspective of "eastern men" (45): "Chippy is fast becoming a true Cypriot. He considers the female to be inferior" (44). It is difficult at this point to parse the separate ideological perspectives of the two main characters in order to discern where the reader's sympathy is meant to lie.⁷ This polarization of nations systematically blurs the line between feminism and cultural imperialism (the hero may be sexist, but the heroine is beginning to sound rather racist). The texts subtly alludes to some common ground in between these two perspectives that is less ideologically distasteful than either extreme, as we know that the two characters will eventually be reconciled – this is after all a romance novel.

At the same time, Helen seems to view Leon's perspective as dangerously appealing. Leon's arguments against such cultural innovations as the equality of women carry sexual connotations: "In your country the woman is equal, but in gaining this equality she appears to have lost something far more precious ... she is not treated with care by the male sex – is not cherished'" (45). The text suggests that equality, in removing the distinctions between the sexes, has somehow de-eroticised male/female interaction in English culture. Leon's gaze follows Helen throughout this discussion, watching intently as she completes small domestic tasks: "He turned his head, watching her as she reached up to place the glass on a high shelf. Her dress came up and when she

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

turned he was glancing at her legs” (46). The implication of Leon’s gaze is that Helen is somehow more feminine while engaged in this activity and, therefore, more attractive. Helen seems to agree that the gender equality attributed to English culture inhibits sexual expression. When Leon later implies that all people have sexual needs, Helen responds that “Women are different, especially English women” (86). Consequently, Helen views any concessions to Leon’s “eastern” point-of-view as tantamount to “complicating her life by running the risk of awakening any desires in her husband.”


Within the hierarchy of eroticism constructed by the text, the English begin to look rather inferior. Helen’s unwillingness to consummate her marriage fits neatly into this structure: the general understanding that the English are innately frigid permeates the text. Even Leon’s elderly aunt refers obliquely to the sexual incompatibility of the couple: “English, eh?” His aunt shrugged. ‘Oh, well, I expect you know what you’re doing” (115). The hero is positioned as the superior practitioner of sex: “with all Greeks, whether they be Cypriots or not, love was an art, an art in which they knew they excelled” (97). The implications of this erotic structure for the unfortunate English man is explicitly spelt out: “The Englishman’s a novice by comparison” (97). Helen, however, is in a more enviable position. These comments regarding the relative sexual prowess of the two ethnic groups are structured in terms of Helen’s capacity to experience or enjoy their efforts. Leon is described as an artist, but Helen is depicted as the connoisseur. This superior position is mirrored in the Harlequin Presents reader, who is given the opportunity to select and appreciate the artistic endeavours of a wide variety

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

of ethnic groups.

In general, the travel narrative is marketed as an opportunity to experience a foreign culture. The Postcards From Europe series invites readers to collect proofs of purchase designed to resemble stamps of passage.⁸ The advertisement suggests that the reader will amass a number of these experiences, and the item offered, a photo album that can hold “pictures of your travels,” is a particularly literal interpretation of Harlequin’s promise that the reader will “travel across Europe in 1994.” Nonetheless, the intent to position the

**Travel across Europe in 1994
with Harlequin Presents and...**



As you travel across Europe in 1994, visiting your favorite countries and your favorite cities, don't forget to collect four proofs of purchase in return for an appealing photo album. This photo album can hold over fifty 4"X6" pictures of your travels and will be a precious keepsake in the years to come!

One proof of purchase can be found in the back pages of each **POSTCARDS FROM EUROPE** title...one every month until December 1994.

To receive your gift, please fill out the information below and mail four (4) original proof-of-purchase coupons from any Harlequin Presents **POSTCARDS FROM EUROPE** title plus \$5.00 for postage and handling (check or money order—do not send cash), payable to Harlequin Books, Inc. IN THE U.S.: P.O. Box 9048, Buffalo, NY, 14269-9048; IN CANADA: P.O. Box 625, Fort Erie, Ontario, L2A 5K3.

Requests must be received by January 31, 1995.
Please allow 4-6 weeks after receipt of order for delivery.


	Name: _____
	Address: _____
	City: _____
	State/Province: _____
	Zip/Postal Code: _____
	Account No. _____
ONE PROOF OF PURCHASE 077 KBY	

Figure 2

reader as a middlebrow, European traveller is clear. The Postcards from Europe advertisement produces the reader not as someone who wants to travel, but as someone who does travel. At the same time, the photo album offer makes no overt reference to the romantic elements of the texts. In removing the desire to read a travel romance and then replacing it with the subject position of the traveller, this advertisement collapses the experience and the object into a single, unified need. Baudrillard observes that consumer culture frequently operates in this fashion, glossing over the object’s position in the

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

relations of production: “Desire is abstracted and atomized into needs, in order to make it homogeneous with the means of satisfaction (products, images, sign-objects, etc.). And thus to multiply consummativity” (Baudrillard 83). The traveller needs to travel in order to realize her identity. The books in this series become interchangeable in their capacity to satisfy this need. The tourist is an ideal consumer for a mass-produced, homogeneous series because she does not require a particular experience, she only requires more experiences.

This fascination throughout the Harlequin Presents series with the holiday romance provides the opportunity for the realization of other identities as well. As John Urry observes in *The Tourist Gaze*, travel narratives can provide us with insight into the culture of the travellers themselves to the extent that any such explicit articulation of difference “is a good way of getting at just what is happening in ‘normal society’” (Urry 2). The experience of foreignness consolidates the national identity of the tourist. The movement of a traveller mirrors the dialectic of other/self that Homi Bhabha describes as a fundamental part of the process of nation building: “The difference of space returns as the Sameness of time, turning Territory into Tradition, turning the People into One. The liminal point of this ideological displacement is the turning of the differentiated spatial boundary, the ‘outside’, into the unified temporal territory of Tradition” (Bhabha 300). Only in moving across the borders of nations and recognizing the otherness of separate territory can national identity be realized.

**The Politics of Difference:
Ordinary Heroines and the *Extraordinary Men Who Love Them***

We return, then, to the question of national identity in Harlequin Presents. If a national identity is being articulated through these travel narratives, what nation is emerging? Englishness, as a category, seems little more than a neutral backdrop for the brilliant distinctiveness of other ethnicities. When the hero in Fiona Hood-Stewart's *The Brazilian Tycoon's Mistress* redecorates his English country estate, the reader is given a brief glimpse of quintessential English style as it is contrasted with the flamboyant display of the hero's ethnically marked taste:

Gone were the drab, musty Adam green brocade wall coverings, the drooping fringed curtains and the gloomy portraits of Sir Edward's none too prepossessing ancestors. Instead she was greeted by soft eggshell paint, white curtains that broke on the gleaming parquet floor, wide contemporary sofas piled with subtly toned cushions, and the walls—the walls were a positive feast of the most extraordinarily luminous paintings she'd ever set eyes on. (2429:14)

The drabness of Sir Edward's English decor is described in meticulous detail in order to highlight the difference of the hero's alterations. Englishness is seen, here, only to mark the hero as distinct: “it's so unexpected, and bright, and so— well, so un-English” (15). The heroine is positioned in this scene, not only as the arbiter of taste, but as the representative of all that is normal: the hero's decorations are “un-English” because

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

they are not what the heroine expects.

Similarly, the ethnicity of the blank, featureless Harlequin Presents heroine is difficult to fix. In general, the series recounts stories of independent, yet ordinary, heroines thrust into unusual circumstances in “sophisticated, glamorous, international locations” (Writing Guidelines). The normative identity of the heroine, however, is never explicitly articulated. It emerges only in moments of contrast with the other. The heroine in Michelle Reid’s *The Sheikh’s Chosen Wife* (June 2002) only makes reference to her own “‘ordinary’” ethnicity through her characterization of the hero’s deviance:

‘What is it with you people that you can’t behave in a normal, rational manner?’ she threw at him, eyes bright, hurt and accusing ...

The *you people* sent Hassan’s spine erect; the mention of divorce hardened his face. ‘You are one of *my people*,’ he reminded her curtly.

‘No, I am not!’ she denied with an angry shake of her head. ‘I am just an ordinary person who had the misfortune to fall in love with the *extraordinary!*’ (2254: 75)

Place has no effect on the ascendancy of the English observer. Even outside of her native country, Leona maintains her ethnocentric position of cultural superiority, complaining of the inability of other “people” to “behave in a normal and rational manner.” Despite her marriage into the foreign culture, Leona continues to assert her ordinary status, insisting that she is unmarked by her husband’s “‘*extraordinary*’” ethnicity.

The Harlequin Presents heroine lays claim to her English identity despite travel,

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

marriage, and expatriation because her national identity is grounded in the broader context of the series. While any individual character might venture past the secure boundaries of “Territory,” Harlequin Presents continues to assert the unity of “Tradition” through sheer volume. The outward movement of travel is undercut by the recurrence of origin. The normative place from which the texts consistently begin forms a singular, consolidated national identity. Heroines traverse the treacherous space of difference with the solipsistic certainty that their normal identity will remain untouched. In fact, the normative state of the heroine is so singular and inviolable that she is frequently represented as entirely isolated, belonging to a nation of one. In *The Italian’s Demand* (October 2003) by Sara Wood, the heroine agrees to move to Italy in order to provide her half-Italian nephew with access to his “heritage”: “She contrasted it to the life Lio would lead with her in England. And found it wanting. No family. No loving community. Just her” (2354: 153). Verity may consider her nephew’s English life to be “wanting,” but her own identification with this virtually empty category is clear. Lio’s Englishness is insufficient for his development of a national identity because England has only one citizen, “Just her.”

The half-English offspring of the heroine and her English relatives are often unable to claim any affiliation with the heroine’s normative nationality: “She was married to a Brazilian, the child would be a Brazilian” (2405: 135). Englishness distinguishes itself from the other ethnicities presented in the series by requiring an entirely unmarked national identity. These texts do not seem to advocate a English diaspora. Some

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

heroines of the Harlequin Presents series are less than willing to contribute to the Imperialist project of seeding the world with half-English progeny. In fact, such dynastic pursuits are generally characterized throughout the series as un-English. The English in Harlequin Presents are not a prolific race. The heroines do not see themselves as having an obligation to go forth and multiply; they do, on the other hand, believe that other nationalities cherish this goal. Indeed, the heroine in Michelle Reid's *The Morning After* (January 1997) aligns the hero's violent aversion to the idea of an abortion with his old-world ethnicity:

‘You are the result of too much interbreeding from your vengeful Spanish side, that’s what you are!’

‘Marriage? Babies?’ She shrieked. ‘I would rather rip this hypothetical child out of my womb myself than be a party to bringing another of your kind into this w— !’

The stinging slap issued to the side of her face silenced her. The hands gripping her shoulders and pulling her hard against him made her gasp. The eyes, when she managed to focus on them, were aflash with rage. He looked bigger, darker, more alien than he’d ever managed to look before. (1859: 107-8)

Cesar is described as “more alien than he’d ever managed to look before” in the moment where he asserts his desire to procreate. Annie’s “hypothetical” offspring retains none of its mother’s Englishness. Cesar’s dark, alien difference carries forward into the next

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

generation and their union promises to produce only another of his “kind.”

The cultivation of ethnicity coincides with the plot devices commonly used to enforce the two-parent family structure.⁹ Ultimately, the manner in which nationality is constructed throughout *Harlequin Presents* serves a structural purpose, one that regulates the ideological agenda of Harlequin’s brand identity. Half-English children are understood to have a distinct heritage that needs to be fostered and developed. There is never a correlating expectation that these children need to learn about their English heritage. Englishness escapes scrutiny. We must conclude that either it is presumed to be an innate quality that does not need to be learned, or that these hybrid children have no claim to a English identity. Hybridity places an extra burden on the half-English child: “This is the best thing for Liam. He is part Italian, he has a heritage and a way of life to learn about” (2346: 11). As part of this process of self-realization, half-English offspring are summarily expelled from the country. A side-effect of this construction of ethnicity is that half-English children inevitably leave England to learn how to be “other.” This diasporic movement serves two functions: it removes the threat of miscegenation from the sanctity of English territory, and compels the English heroine to venture out into the space of difference.

As narratives of English diaspora, these storylines are unusual in that they trace only the initial exodus from the country of origin, and continually erase this movement by resetting the narrative with each text. The explicit non-Englishness of hybrid children is a side-effect of this erasure. The travel narrative does not detail the expatriation of the

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

English heroine; instead, it depicts the experience of a foreign culture from the unassailable perspective of the English tourist. The heroine is never lost to this exotic environment: the Harlequin heroine is always a tourist, and she symbolically returns to her place of origin through the repetition of the series. Her Englishness passes through the experience unscathed, the text ending before the heroine is completely assimilated. The serial format of the texts lends itself to a cyclical definition of English identity. Harlequin Presents does not provide a narrative of emigration; rather, it offers the reader the recurrent experiences of a English tourist/consumer. The indirect, ambiguous construction of national identity in Harlequin Presents dictates that we see the nationality of the heroine only through the repeated delineation of the extraordinary ethnicities and deviant cultural practices that she observes with impunity. The heroine herself may consistently avoid assimilation, but at a larger structural level, anxieties surface concerning the disappearance of so many Harlequin Presents heroines into these cross-cultural marriages.

**The Lost Heroine:
Coping with a Tarnished Image of Western Womanhood**

Many of the ethnically distinct heroes have parents whose inter-cultural marriages were fraught with conflict. The English mothers and stepmothers of Harlequin Presents heroes do not reflect well on the nation as a whole: ““She had very little time for her baby, but he was her stake in the Verdi fortune. After the birth she had no time for her

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

husband either – only for spending his money and flirting with other men. After the divorce she returned to England with what she wanted – a fat settlement” (2263: 50). Throughout the series, the landscape of Europe and South America is littered with avaricious English divorcees; and it is from such experiences that many heroes form the opinion that English women are calculating and promiscuous. Similarly, the hybrid offspring of the heroine’s relatives are generally born into extremely dysfunctional families. In Penny Jordan’s *Marco’s Convenient Wife* (April 2003), the marriage of orphaned infant Angelina di Vencenti’s parents is described as entirely unviable:

‘I have to admit that Aldo was perhaps a rather spoiled young man. I counselled him not to marry Patti, they were too different!’ He paused, his expression grim. ‘But Aldo was a very headstrong man. They had very different aspirations, but neither of them were prepared to listen to any voice of reason or caution; they had fallen in love... Or so they claimed.’ (2314: 97)

It is easy to see, from the tone of Marco’s commentary, that even if Patti and Aldo had not had their young lives cut tragically short, Angelina’s home-life would have been far from idyllic.

These shadow narratives of cross-cultural marriages-gone-wrong threaten to destabilize the resolution offered by the text. While the heroine within the narrative is never fully absorbed into her new culture, the threat posed by emigration (the prospect of being trapped within a foreign, incompatible culture) is manifest in subtle references to

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

previous generations of English heroines. These cautionary tales bear an ominous resemblance to the primary narrative. Romantic love is the only resolution offered by the series to the problems encountered in inter-cultural marriages. Aldo and Patti seem to have begun their marriage with as much chance of success as any other hero and heroine, and yet, their love did not last:

‘Love is always important ... but their interpretation of love would not be mine, and if it was “love” then I regret to say it was a love of only a very short-lived duration, although it gave me no pleasure when Aldo confirmed that my prediction that this would be the case had proved to be correct. By then Angelina was on the way ...’ (97)

The disastrous results of Aldo and Patti’s attempt to bridge the gap of “different aspirations” cast a pall over the burgeoning relationship between Alice and Marco. The text is acutely aware of the potential difficulties that the couple face: “Cross-cultural marriages were always, by the very necessity of their nature, bound to be more of a risk than those between people who shared the same background and upbringing” (22-3). These caveats are juxtaposed with the overt differences between Marco and Alice. While Alice herself continues to represent English normalcy, these reminders of difference provide us with a brief, indirect glimpse into Englishness as a category of cultural identification.

Alice reveals her understanding of her own cultural identity in the moments where she describes Marco’s different background and value-system. Alice carefully aligns

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

herself with the romantic ideology asserted by the genre:

“Well it’s obvious that a man like you— a man in your position, with your family background,” she amended hastily when she saw the ominous way he was frowning at her, “would think of marriage in different terms to someone like me. I expect that you are used to the kind of marriages where it’s more about... about position and wealth, than two people who love one another...” she finished. “I suppose it’s all about having different values.” (113)

As she articulates Marco’s difference, Alice indirectly describes herself as someone who believes that marriage should be “about...two people who love each other.” Alice constructs their relative value-based subject positions as the result of socio-economic status and “family background.” This correlation of Alice’s cultural identity and the romantic ideology of the text suggests that Alice’s nationality is meant to serve as a site of identification – or, at the very least, empathy – for the reader. The shadow narrative of Patti and Aldo’s unfortunate marriage, however, combines with the misinformation that was fed to Marco by Alice’s previous employer¹⁰ to form an alternate definition of English national identity as less traditional and more promiscuous than its Italian counterpart: “I have it on good authority, your values, unlike mine, are very modern... I know about your... affair with your previous boss” (113-4). While Alice’s reputation is eventually cleared, Patti’s character is given no chance of redemption; consequently, the image of English women as shallow, mercenary, and sexually promiscuous is never

completely dispelled.

A lingering discomfort with the issues raised in the text is evident in the desperate reassurances offered at the end of the book. Jordan asserts her resolution by repeating it three times, making multiple attempts to close the narrative and attaching an epilogue. In the final chapter, Marco's insistence that the couple's love is imperative supports the assumption that it will endure despite the "risk" posed by their difference: "I have to love you, Alice, because it is my fate; my destiny..." (182). The insufficiency of this assurance is evident in the repetition of narrative closure, where the couple further vows to never again question the romantic resolution offered by the text:

'Promise me that you will never, ever doubt again that I love you.'

'I promise,' Alice assured him. (185)

Just in case the reader possesses any remaining doubts, Jordan appends a two-page epilogue that depicts the couple five years later, coping happily with the problems of cultural difference:

If someone, anyone, had tried to tell her five years ago just how her life was going to turn out she would never have believed them, never have dared to believe she could be so loved or so happy ...

But she was, and according to Marco he fully intended to make sure that she remained so for the rest of their lives together! (187)

This reiteration of the assurance that Alice and Marco remain happy and in love highlights the threat that these shadow narratives ultimately pose to the genre as a whole.

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

The narrative of the lost heroine represents a failure of romantic love that threatens to undermine the entire series. Such narratives gesture towards a fallibility in the resolution generally offered in Harlequin Presents. As the storyline points outside of the primary narrative, it reminds the reader of the serial nature of the texts, invoking all the other heroines in other texts who were abandoned in this same state of vulnerability. At the same time, the other English woman threatens the representation of the nationality of the Harlequin Presents heroine. These texts

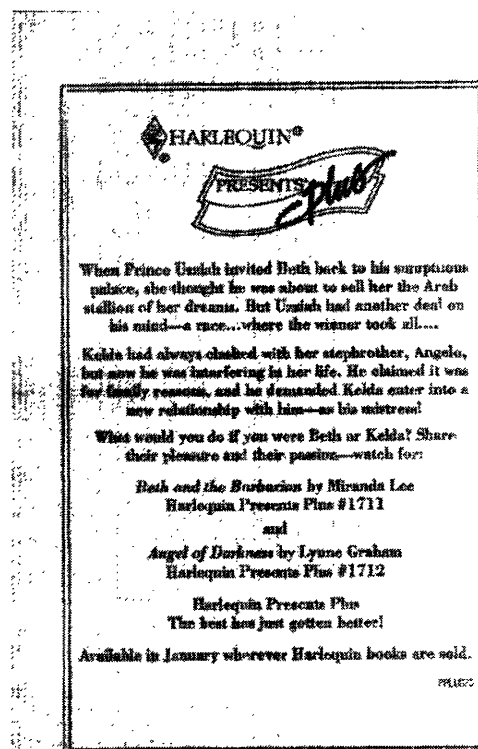


Figure 3

go to great lengths to collapse the seemingly incommensurate identities of reader, heroine, English citizen, romantic idealist, and genre (in so far as the heroine is interpellated into the ‘natural’ outcome of the text) into a singular, inscrutable, homogeneous subject position. In this Harlequin Presents Plus advertisement, for instance, the intention that the reader identify with the travelling English heroine is so transparent that the advertisement prompts the reader to speculate on an entirely collapsed identity.¹¹ The question, “What would you do if you were Beth or Kelda?” both clarifies where the reader’s empathy is meant to lie in this interaction with the exotic

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

and offers a very literal integration into the text. This advertisement conveys the expectation that the reader will be able to simultaneously occupy the positions of romance reader and English heroine. Any alternative depiction of English womanhood potentially undermines this identification. The ‘other’ heroines populating the series promise to split this collapsed subject position of heroine/reader. The ‘other’ woman has the potential to pull apart the category of Englishness, separating the reader from the heroine and exposing the process of reading to scrutiny.

The hero’s step-mother in Diana Hamilton’s *The Italian’s Bride* (July 2002) is described as a sexually promiscuous, “‘mercenary, cold-hearted mother’” (2263: 50) who showed little interest in either of her sons. Ascribed to her Englishness, these unfortunate traits are genetically passed on to her half-English offspring:

The charming, feckless, utterly faithless Vito had had many affairs— a gene he had inherited from the English girl his father had married five years after his first wife, Lucenzo’s mother, had died. A year later Christine had given birth to Vittorio and, her duty done, as she’d seen it, she’d embarked on a string of unsavoury affairs. (16)

It is hardly surprising, given this construction of English womanhood, that Lucenzo initially believes Vito’s English mistress, “who got pregnant by a wealthy married man and wielded the coming child like a weapon” (61) must be “a mercenary little tramp” (60). While Lucenzo’s impression of the heroine is eventually dispelled, Vito’s mother’s character has been maligned beyond recovery. Two interpretations of “the English girl”

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

inhabit this text, creating competing sites of identification for the presumably English reader. The characters in *The Italian's Bride* take every opportunity to expostulate, in great detail, on the negative traits of Christine, Vito's mother. Christine's version of English womanhood is, if not ascendant, then at least more clearly articulated than Portia's national identity.

The memory of Christine's perfidy seems to drive the heroine's actions. Needing to redeem the category of "the English girl," Portia personifies a variety of virtues: she is innocent and trusting, hard-working, a devoted mother, kind to the elderly, etc.. The narrative of Vito's scheming, avaricious mother combines with the patent inadequacies of Portia's home-life – where her "domineering, cold" (76), unnaturally distant and judgmental parents are only too happy to ship her off to Italy – forming a very unflattering backdrop of English life. Portia's need to separate herself from these negative portrayals of Englishness makes her actions appear involuntary and pre-determined: "I feel trapped... I feel like a puppet. People are pulling my strings and I'm making the right movements because I don't have any choice in the matter" (164). Portia consistently makes the "right" choice as it is defined in opposition to this alternate site of English identification. The burden of redeeming the category of Englishness severely limits the scope of the heroine's actions.

In fact, Portia's embodiment of these altruistic characteristics eventually threatens the romantic agenda of the text. Portia agrees to marry the hero, despite the absence of any romantic assurances, out of a pragmatic recognition of the insufficiency of her

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

English lifestyle:

Like every Italian family, they adored the new arrival...

Back in England his life would be bleak by comparison. Her parents made no secret of the fact that they resented the intrusions of a baby into their quiet, boring and rather joyless lives. And her earning power was low so it could be ages before she could save enough to afford to rent a couple of rooms. Then there would be the question of proper childcare. She would manage it somehow, she knew that, but it would always be second best. (152-3)

The life that Portia's infant son faces in England certainly suffers in comparison to the loving acceptance he has received in Italy. England is depicted so negatively in *The Italian's Bride* that Portia, the devoted mother, could not possibly subject her child to such an upbringing. Unable, or unwilling, to integrate herself into this cold, joyless vision of England, Portia sees herself as isolated, ostracized, and impoverished within this setting. The England that Portia recalls is not sufficient – it “would always be second best” – because it offers no community or national affiliation. The blankness of English identity may exempt it from scrutiny – separate it from distinctive (Non-White) ethnicities – but this featureless nationality ultimately offers little appeal.

Portia's need to differentiate herself from this definition of Englishness supercedes her role as heroine. In capitulating to this set of material concerns, Portia refuses to assert the romantic ideology generally upheld by the heroine. Portia does not

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

return to England to struggle in poverty; she is given no such opportunity to prove her commitment to romantic ideals. Portia agrees to remain in Italy and marry the hero because it is in the best interests of her son and the elderly, invalid father of Vito and Lucenzo. Yet she does feel pressured to live up to her role as heroine: “To tie herself to a man who couldn’t love her when she loved him to pieces would be the cruellest thing she could ever do to herself” (151). Portia views her decision to enter into a loveless union with the hero as innately self-sacrificing, as placing the emotional and material needs of others above her own desires.

In the end, Portia is an extremely conflicted heroine who capitulates to the demands placed on her as a representative of her nation despite her commitment to the belief system supported by the genre. This internal turmoil is finally expressed when Portia breaks down and pleads for a resolution to the competing interests of familial obligations and romantic love:

‘I can’t marry you, Lucenzo!’ she wailed. ‘I kept telling myself I could. For Sam. For your father. And everything. I guess I’m being really selfish... I’m thinking only of myself, and I know I shouldn’t, but I can’t go through with it. Please try to see! Oh, Lucenzo, don’t you understand? I might love you but it isn’t enough. I need to be loved!’ (183-4)

Portia’s textual role as the redeemer of English womanhood inhibits her identification with her alternate role as heroine. Here, the two categories of Englishness and romance heroine are separated and placed in competition with each other. Unlike other romance

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

heroines, Portia is unable to simultaneously inhabit both identities. In this example, where Englishness needs to be supported and clearly described, the heroine cannot make any facile associations between romance and nation – she cannot, like other heroines before her, claim to be a romantic merely by virtue of her nationality.

Generally, the texts in this series move seamlessly between the two categories. This fluid expression of identity allows Harlequin Presents to naturalize an association between English women and romance that has clear implications for the reader's identification with the text and her willingness to purchase other texts in the series. This collapsed identity of heroine/citizen/idealist is too slippery to be questioned or examined. The indistinctly British or White Commonwealth nation of the Harlequin Presents heroine bears a striking resemblance to Harlequin's undifferentiated target market. The Harlequin reader is meant to recognize herself in this site of identification. The English heroine's alignment with romantic ideals sends the message that Western women want to read romance novels, reifying Harlequin's unassailable position in the romance publishing industry. In the end, the narrative of the lost heroine upsets this dynamic. By raising the possibility that Western women might not all be romantic idealists, these stories suggest that perhaps the genre does not have universal appeal. In exposing the category of Western womanhood to scrutiny, these narratives threaten to uncover the reading practices of the Harlequin consumer. If the romance reader is not a naturalized category identical to Western womanhood, then perhaps this category is being strategically constructed by Harlequin advertising. The image of the mercenary, sexually

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

avaricious Western woman needs to be contained because it threatens Harlequin's brand identity.

Western Women and Eastern Men: The Harlequin Reader and a Sexuality of Place

Don't miss this opportunity to experience glamorous lifestyles and exotic settings. (Foreign Affairs)¹²

As we have already seen, Harlequin's focus on the exoticism of place situates the reader as a superior, normative observer of foreign cultures. The heroine as tourist occupies the somewhat privileged position of a civilized, experienced connoisseur of place. In adopting the position of traveller, the heroine comes to know the foreign culture as external, fixed and objectified. The heroine's role in the text fits in well with the British discourse of Orientalism. As Edward Said observes, this construction of the British subject as an authoritative, knowing observer situates the Orient as an object to be dominated:

Knowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and the distant. The object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny; this object is a "fact" which, if it develops, changes, or otherwise transforms itself in the way that civilizations frequently do, nevertheless is fundamentally, ontologically stable. To have such a knowledge of a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. (32)

The travel narrative places difference at a safe distance and positions the English heroine

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

as the dominant subject.

At the same time, all Harlequin Presents' narratives are, ultimately, a vehicle for romance. Within the sub-genre of the travel romance, Harlequin's consistent focus on travel as the means through which romance is experienced effectively obscures the series' role as a romance delivery system. While the position of the tourist is only strengthened by "multiple consummativity" (Baudrillard 83), the mass-consumption of romance is inconsistent with the ideology of romantic love. The resolution offered by the texts insists that romantic love is singular and enduring. The romance reader's avaricious repetition of the experience of romantic love suggests that this resolution is glaringly insufficient. In marketing the romance novel as an experience of place, Harlequin opts not to remind the reader of the more distasteful and somewhat problematic elements of

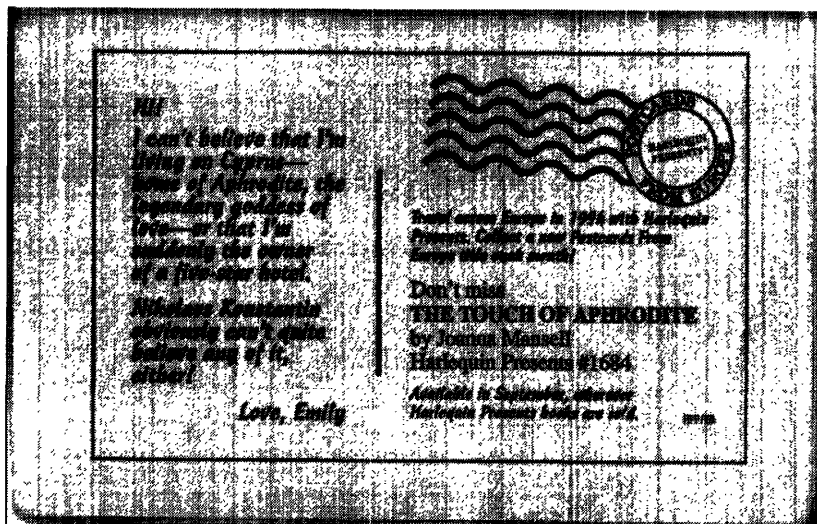


Figure 3

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

her own practices of consumption.

The exotic settings promised in travel oriented advertisements serve as a gloss for the eroticism of difference systematically reproduced in the texts. Rather than promising romantic or sexual experiences with an exoticized man, travel advertisements describe the texts as an experience of an exotic place. The advertisement for *The Touch of Aphrodite* focuses on the cultural attractions and opulent accommodations of Cyprus, making only an oblique reference to the novel's Greek hero.¹³ The reader is expected to decode the promise of romance buried within the advertisement in the same manner that a romantically-minded recipient might read into a postcard from a friend. The advertisement positions the reader as someone who identifies with romantic ideology but is remarkably distant from the experience of romance within the text. The promise that the reader will "Travel across Europe" and "Collect a new Postcards from Europe title each month!" pointedly avoids reference to romance as a repeated experience.

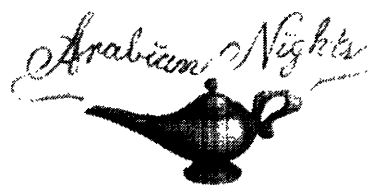
In their multiplicity, the texts become objects of consumption. The romance reader is depicted as a collector of things and not – it is hardly surprising – a compulsive sexaddict. The strategy of the Postcards from Europe series indicates a discomfort with this tension between the reader's position within this system of consumption and her identification with the romance in the text. Unlike the Expecting series, the Postcards from Europe campaign is not organized around a singular, value-based concept. Just as the tourist is expected to amass a wide variety of foreign adventures, the reader is urged to collect a series of discrete experiences. The reader is being sold – not romance, not

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

family – but her own role within the process of consumption. In conflating place and romance, Harlequin is able to sell their texts as distinct and multifarious. The reader is invited to sample from a broad spectrum of settings throughout the continent, but the Postcards from Europe series relegates romance to the periphery. While the travel experience comes equipped with romance and the series depicts a breadth of European heroes, Harlequin ascribes the features of difference and repetition to the setting, leaving the romantic elements of the text unsullied by these practices of consumption. By the end of the nineties, however, Harlequin becomes less squeamish in their commodification of exotic ethnicity, and their marketing strategy undergoes a distinct shift.

**Commodified Ethnicity:
the Exotic as a Floating Signifier¹⁴**

The new ethnic hero is divorced from his exotic locale. Difference is no longer relegated to a distant place far outside English territory. Ethnically distinctive heroes now travel freely between nations, and many do not even own an isolated Greek island or crumbling Italian *castello* to which they can abduct the heroine. The exotic appeal of the travel narrative is distilled down into the sexual appeal of an exotic hero. The only connection between the texts advertised in Figure 5 is the ethnicity of the hero.¹⁵ This grouping of the texts suggests that readers make purchasing decisions based on the understanding that



Spent at the sheikh's pleasure...

Figure 4

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

this ethnicity possesses unique sexual capital. By placing the two texts in relation to each other, Harlequin asserts that these “two sexy Italian heroes” have an identifiable quality that can be extracted from the narrative and marketed as a separate commodity.

In this separation, the commodity of ethnicity is sold, not as a feature of the text, but as a category that has been invested with additional exchange-value independent of any individual text. Harlequin no longer needs to explain how these groupings are meaningful.

Unlike the Latin Lovers advertisement shown in Figure 1, the sexy Italian heroes advertisement

makes no attempt to describe the ethnic category, or justify the connection being drawn between the two texts. In fact, Harlequin tends to treat the coherence of these categories as self-evident. The Arabian Nights icon, shown in Figure 4, provides no further explanation. This icon does not covertly imply an exotic sexual experience that the reader might encounter in a distant locale; it explicitly promises a sexual gratification with is inextricably linked to the hero’s ethnicity.

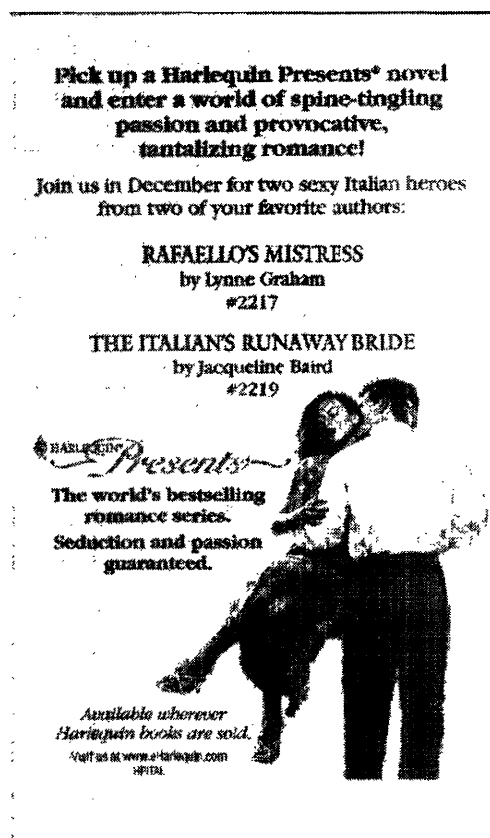


Figure 5

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

By connecting the appeal of foreign heroes to the idea that certain ethnicities possess sexual capital, Harlequin is able to move away from marketing themselves as a travel company. No longer restrained to fixing the hero in a particular location, Harlequin begins to utilize the exotic as a floating signifier. English readers need look no further than their own capital city to experience an exotic encounter with a sheikh like Prince Khalim.¹⁶ While the other two heroes are distinguished by their profession, Khalim stands out as racially distinctive despite the familiarity of his geographical

location. In the London Playboys advertisement, Harlequin manages to incorporate ethnic difference into the nation-state. Any threat of ethnic diversity is mitigated by the commodity status of Khalim's ethnicity.

The placement of the incommensurate qualifier, "a sheikh," as indecipherable

from the professions of the other two

heroes, suggests that this is merely a feature of Khalim's identity – the characteristic that

The world's bestselling romance series.

HARLEQUIN®
Presents
Seduction and Passion Guaranteed!

They're gorgeous, powerful, successful
and utterly irresistible!

They're

**LONDON'S MOST
ELKIBLE PLAYBOYS**

Guy Masters—a millionaire art dealer
Prince Khalim—a sheikh
Philip Caprice—a property tycoon

In this fantastic new subseries
by favorite Presents® author
Sharon Kendrick

you'll meet the women who've tamed the untamable...

Guy's story:
The Untouchable Mistress
January 2002 #2227

Khalim's story:
Surrender to the Sheikh
February 2002 #2233

Philip's story:
The Mistress's Child
March 2002 #2239

Available wherever Harlequin books are sold.

HARLEQUIN®
Makes any time special!™
Visit us at www.harlequin.com #EJAAJMG7




Figure 6

**Hot-Blooded
Husbands** let them keep you
warm tonight!

Figure 7

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

makes him a marketable hero.

This fetishization of ethnicity extends even further with the Hot- Blooded Husbands icon depicted in Figure 7. This series is not marketed on the basis of an individual ethnic category. The phrase, “Hot-Blooded Husbands,” refers indiscriminately to all ethnic groupings that have been attributed sexual capital.¹⁷ This series appeals – not to a particular stereotype – but to the process of fetishism that these ethnic categories have undergone. This seemingly arbitrary grouping illustrates the racial assumptions underpinning Harlequin’s depiction of non-English ethnicity. The “Hot-Blooded” pun implies both a sexual and geographical connection: these “Husbands” derive their surplus sexual appeal from their space of origin outside of, and to the south of, the central position of England. This icon keys into the North/South dichotomy frequently employed in colonial discourse to depict non-white races as less rational and more sexualized than their English counterparts. Obviously, such Imperialist concepts are apparent in virtually all of Harlequin’s fetishism of ethnicity. The Hot-Blooded Husbands series is interesting because it does not bury its racist, geo-centric assumptions within an existing stereotype. Instead, the icon shamelessly flaunts its Imperialist subject position. The reader is expected to recognize the ethno-centric colonialism of their own practices of consumption and purchase the text because the hero manifests any one of the interchangeable ethnicities that have been sufficiently fetishized.

Distancing the Patriarchy: Feminism as a Discourse of Civility

This is not to say that the appeal of the non-English hero is exclusively sexual. These narratives also bring a variety of social stereotypes to bear on their ethnically distinctive hero. The less civilized, socially backwards

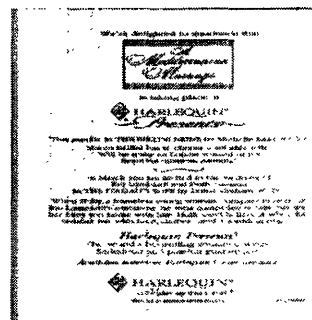


Figure 8

countries of southern Europe, Latin America and the Middle East are held up as exemplars of a more traditional, less modern lifestyle. The appeal of the ethnic hero, then, is due in no small part to the ease of his identification with a set of values that Harlequin itself has come to stand for. These distant, southern spaces are depicted as unaffected by the recent social changes that threaten a traditional definition of marriage and family. The Mediterranean Marriage series projects a more old-fashioned image of wedlock by seamlessly melding the classical decor surrounding the icon with the print and phrasing generally employed in a wedding invitation.¹⁸ Conceptually, the advertisement connects the space of the Mediterranean with traditional aspects of English social life, such as the rituals and practices associated with a traditional wedding ceremony. In so doing, however, Harlequin implies that these traditions are no longer predominant in England but remain ubiquitous throughout southern Europe.

Harlequin Presents's social mapping of Europe and the Middle-East consistently depicts England and other northern/Western countries as modernized or socially advanced. After all, the "liberation" of women was presented as a *fait accompli* within

the first text of the series; according to Anne Hampson, women had achieved equality in Britain by 1973: ““In your country the woman is equal”” (1: 45). In comparison, places such as Cyprus and Sicily are depicted as untamed wilderness. The heroine in Margaret Rome’s *Castle of the Fountains* (September 1982) interprets the Sicilian hero’s account of his emigration to America at the age of ten as tale of civilization’s interference with a “wild boy” in his natural state:

her heart ached for a wild boy of the mountains who, at an unruly age, had been trapped, crated, labelled, then dispatched to an alien land to suffer confinement within a succession of brick walls until he was suitably tamed, tutored, and finally stamped with the mark of civilization’s approval. (532: 118)

Upon his return to his native land, Silvatore quickly abandons the “living standards accepted as normal by the people of more enlightened nations” (185-6). Silvatore’s natural state, however, apparently lends itself to the patriarchal models of marriage and family that England has allowed to fall by the wayside: “he will always be *capoccio*—head of his household, expecting complete subjection from his bride” (168).

On the one hand, this recurrent structure of the modern English heroine thrust into conflict with an “archaic” (2388: 115) representative of the patriarchy further asserts the ascendancy of the English observer. In labelling the hero’s foreign culture uncivilized, the heroine fixes these social practices as knowable and exposed to scrutiny: “*machismo* flowed from him, barbaric as the golden buckle holding the belt around his waist—the

buckle depicting a beast and a reptile from which she was finding it impossible to raise her eyes" (532: 180). At the same time, the bestial barbarism of the ethnic hero is presented as a more natural state of manhood. Civilized English society may have moved away from these patriarchal models but the series does not necessarily approve of this cultural shift. The ethnic hero is disturbingly attractive precisely because he embodies a model of masculinity that the heroine both fears and desires: "she might rebel at times against his masculine dominance, yet that in itself was an intrinsic part of the attraction" (2312: 135).

Harlequin Presents distances itself from older, patriarchal models of marriage and family by locating them outside of the territory of the Commonwealth. Yet, it is clear that this model of the institution of marriage still holds some appeal as this is precisely the value-set marketed in miniseries such as *Italian Husbands*.¹⁹ The advertisement shown in Figure 9 clearly aligns the hero's ethnicity with a willingness to enter into the ~~type of husbandry~~ ~~They're tall, dark, and ready to marry!~~ ~~Don't delay, pick up the next story in this great new miniseries... pronto!~~ ~~On sale this month.~~ ~~MARCO'S PRIDE by Jane Porter #2385~~ ~~Coming in April~~ ~~HIS INHERITED BRIDE by Jacqueline Baird #2385~~ ~~Don't miss~~ ~~May 2004~~ ~~THE SICILIAN HUSBAND by Kate Walker #2593~~ ~~July 2004~~ ~~THE ITALIAN'S DEMAND by Sara Wood #2405~~ ~~Pick up a Harlequin Presents® novel and you will enter a world of spine-tingling passion and provocative, tantalizing romance!~~ ~~Available wherever Harlequin books are sold.~~ ~~Visit us at www.aharlequin.com~~ ~~©1999~~ type of husbandry. The hero's ethnicity is marketed as a desirable trait, and the series' focus on the hero's ethnicity is a clear implication as

The world's bestselling romance series.

HARLEQUIN®
Presents
International Product Group

Mamma Mia!

ITALIAN HUSBANDS

They're tall, dark... and ready to marry!
Don't delay, pick up the next story in
this great new miniseries... pronto!

On sale this month.
MARCO'S PRIDE by Jane Porter #2385

Coming in April
HIS INHERITED BRIDE by Jacqueline Baird #2385

Don't miss
May 2004
THE SICILIAN HUSBAND by Kate Walker #2593

July 2004
THE ITALIAN'S DEMAND by Sara Wood #2405

Pick up a Harlequin Presents® novel and you will
enter a world of spine-tingling passion and
provocative, tantalizing romance!

Available wherever Harlequin books are sold.

HARLEQUIN®
Live the emotion™

Visit us at www.aharlequin.com ©1999

Figure 9

that English men are somehow more recalcitrant and evidently less “ready to marry” than their Italian counterparts. Throughout the series, the English fiancé has become a somewhat maligned figure. Unable to lay claim to the overwhelming “*machismo*” of the non-Western hero, English men are frequently described as “a bit dull... and a trifle weak” (2346: 65).

In Sara Craven’s *The Forced Marriage* (May 2003), the Italian hero evidently presents a more appealing prospect than the English man to whom the heroine is originally engaged. The speed with which Flora accepts the “attractive alternative” (2320: 39) of an evening with the Italian stranger certainly suggests that her relationship with her fiancé is far from perfect. Flora’s friend describes this original relationship as an indifferent development arising from middling expectations: “I never felt that you and Chris were the couple of the year. You met and liked each other, and it—drifted from there... Maybe you both reached a stage where marriage seemed a good idea, and you were content to settle for just all right rather than terrific. It happens a lot” (90). Apparently, quite a number of English couples contemplate such a mundane union: after all, “It happens a lot.” It would seem that English culture does little to foster the ideology of romantic love, and the institution of marriage has been reduced to an empty gesture resulting from the aimless drifting of disenfranchised subjects. In the absence of older patriarchal models, marriage becomes something that just happens, for no particular reason, divorced from any cultural context.

The patriarchy may have reduced women to objects of exchange but at least it

offered clearly defined roles and drew from a wealth of cultural imagery. In *Vendetta Bride* by Rebecca King (August 1994), the heroine briefly fantasizes what her life would be like if her English fiancé were not a “desiccated adding-machine” (1678: 45): “Just for a minute she thought of pistols at dawn, and had the image of James utterly destroying this man then turning and taking her in his arms. But the, shoulders bowed, she turned her head away” (1678: 35). Sadly, James’ modern subjectivity seems to prevent him from enacting this heroic rescue. Clearly, the unprepossessing James cannot possibly compete with the vibrant difference and patriarchal *machismo* of the text’s Italian hero, Alex Baresi. In comparison with these foreign models of masculinity, English culture offers such poorly defined gender roles that the English man seems in danger of disappearing altogether. James’ masculinity is permanently compromised by his unwillingness or inability to enact this violent, possessive archetype. Alex quickly dismisses his English rival as entirely unworthy of notice: “‘Look’ at the way,... he has given you up without a struggle. A real man would kill to keep a woman like you” (46). The unfortunate James is merely “— a cypher, a nothing man” (46). In capitulating to the civilizing influence of English society, the English man has allowed himself to be erased.

This strategy of attributing patriarchal values to foreign, exotic spaces sets up a covert critique of “existing” social practices. Harlequin Presents seems to believe that Western society is drifting away from a core set of family values and the traditional gender roles that accompany them. Locating the patriarchy in an external culture allows

the series to explore the efficacy of modern and traditional social practices from a relatively safe distance. At the same time, the traditional value-set of the ethnic hero makes him more appreciative of the domestic qualities generally attributed to a Harlequin Presents heroine. The unskilled, uneducated, rural heroine of Lynne Graham's *The Italian's Wife* (March 2002) may find herself unemployed and homeless on London's streets, but she quickly interpellated into a two-parent family where her skills as nurturing caregiver are highly valued.²⁰ Holly's proportionate success within these two spheres suggests that the categories of mother and housewife have been systematically devalued in contemporary English society. It is hardly surprising, then, that so many Harlequin Presents heroines flee to the relative security of "Italian Husbands."

While the series looks outside of England for validation of traditional gender roles, Harlequin Presents is careful to situate these values far from any English national identity. The patriarchal values located in the ethnic hero are relegated to the status of spectacle. Like the barbaric image on Silvatore's golden belt buckle, from which the heroine "was finding it impossible to raise her eyes" (532: 180), this exaggerated depiction of patriarchal masculinity may hold the fascination of Harlequin Presents readers, but it is never incorporated back into the nation state. Generations of Harlequin Presents heroines may have abandoned the modern sensibilities of Western civilization to holiday in the exotic space of Eastern patriarchy, but the serial nature of the texts dictates that the central position of Western society is always recovered. For the last thirty years, Harlequin Presents readers may have pondered the eternal question "What would you do

if you were Beth or Kelda?" (Harlequin Presents Plus), but this identification with the English/Commonwealth heroine has not shifted. The direction of the gaze outwards towards these other spaces only solidifies the sense of nation emerging within the series: "turning ... the differentiated spatial boundary, the 'outside', into the unified temporal territory of Tradition" (Bhabha 300). The serial romance novel permits this movement outwards only because it is always recuperated. The ironic structure of the romance allows, in fact it necessitates, an exploration of the dangerous appeal of the Other without compromising the integrity of the category of Western whiteness.

Notes

1. This quotation is taken from the back cover of Anne Hampson's *Gates of Steel* (May 1973).
2. In "Harlequin Romances in Western Europe: The Cultural Interactions of Romantic Literature," Annick Capelle launches a comprehensive analysis of the translation of Harlequin Romances into French and Dutch, looking at the selection of texts, their packaging and the translation of the narrative. While Capelle does note some alterations to suit the unique cultural environment of both countries, the most striking thing about this analysis is how uniform the final product remains.
3. In *Merchants of Venus*, Paul Grescoe describes the epiphany of one Harlequin executive in 1969 as a realization of the utility of the company's potential to sell literature as a homogenous product: "Heisy saw at once that Harlequin was a product, like soap or shortening. It had a brand name, even a logo with that little guy with the diamond, and covers that virtually appeared identical, book after book... Harlequin, he concluded, was nothing more or less than branded literature that could be promoted like any other branded consumer product, like Tide or Crisco" (76).
4. See Figure 1, an advertisement taken from the back pages of Lucy Monroe's *The Italian's Suitable Wife* (October 2004).

-
5. See Greek Tycoons advertisement and Survey 2003 advertisement in Appendix.
 6. Byline to a Foreign Affairs advertisement, see Figure 2, Chapter 2.
 7. I have to admit that I find some early Harlequin Presents novels (especially those from the 70's) particularly difficult to approach. Thirty years is a long time in popular culture.
 8. See Figure 2, Postcards From Europe offer featured in the back pages of Lilian Peake's *No Promise of Love* (November 1994). While the icon used most closely resembles a postage stamp, this image still evokes the concept of movement across borders.
 9. The argument that half-English children need experience and develop their ethnicity is frequently employed to coerce the heroine into marriage. For a discussion of the plot devices commonly used surrounding pregnancy and child-rearing, see Chapter 2 pp. 127-36.
 10. Throughout the majority of the text, Marco believes that Alice had an affair with the husband of her previous employer. This supposition is only reevaluated when Alice's virginity is finally revealed. For further discussion of this element of the narrative, see Chapter 1 pp. 35-36.
 11. See Figure 3, Harlequin Presents Plus advertisement for *Beth and the Barbarian* and *Angel of Darkness* taken from back pages of Susan Napier's *Phantom Lover* (December

1994).

12. This quotation is taken from a Foreign Affairs advertisement. See Figure 2 in Chapter 2.

13. See Figure 3, Postcards From Europe advertisement for *The Touch of Aphrodite* (September 1994) taken from the back pages of Rebecca King's *Vendetta Bride* (August 1992).

14. Figure 4, Arabian Nights icon, taken from back cover of Penny Jordan's *One Night with the Sheikh* (July 2003).

15. See Figure 5, Sexy Italians advertisement taken from back pages of Helen Bianchin's *The Husband Test* (December 2001).

16. See Figure 6, London's Most Eligible Playboys advertisement taken from the back pages of Catherine George's *Husband for Real* (January 2002).

17. Figure 7, Hot-Blooded Husbands icon, taken from back cover of Michelle Reid's *The Arabian Love Child* (December 2002).

18. See Figure 8, portion of A Mediterranean Marriage advertisement taken from the back pages of Catherine George's *Husband for Real* (January 2002).

19. See Figure 9, Italian Husbands advertisement taken from the back pages of Lynne

Graham's *The Banker's Convenient Wife* (March 2004).

20. For further discussion of the valuation of domestic labour in Lynne Graham's *The Italian Wife* (March 2002), see Chapter 1 pp. 18-22.

Conclusion

...the substantial function of literature is to *secure consent*. To make individuals feel 'at ease' in the world they happen to live in, to reconcile them in a pleasant and imperceptible way to its prevailing cultural norms. (Franco Morretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*)

The contemporary serial romance novel is an example of women's writing at its most formulaic. In the past, Harlequin went to great lengths to standardize its product, circulating writers guidelines that stipulated, chapter by chapter, the exact progression of the plot. While the new writing guidelines are far less prescriptive than earlier Harlequin formulas, it does "advise keeping in touch with current reader preferences by reading the most recent titles available in the Harlequin Presents line" (Writer's Guidelines). Harlequin's emphasis on the repetition of form allows it to maintain consistency across a vast number of texts produced by a decentralized pool of authors. The writing guidelines, however, emphasize this predetermined structure in terms of "reader preferences," indicating that the series remains invariable because this is what readers want. Certainly, Harlequin's substantial foothold in the publishing industry is a testament to the success of a formulaic approach to women's fiction. At the same time, the homogeneity of Harlequin's product is precisely the aspect that renders it the most repugnant to middle/high-brow literary taste. Churning out identically packaged texts designed to be placed on supermarket shelves next to the latest edition of *The National Enquirer*, Harlequin seems to encapsulate the most abhorrent aspects of mass-culture in a literary form.

The anxiety that the literary establishment feels towards this degenerative example of

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

fiction manifests in colourful stories of Harlequin's labour saving techniques and its general perversion of a modernist model of authorial power: monkeys are said to be slotting adjectives into preformatted sentences; graduate students are asked to generate books from pithy synopses; and the same book is published multiple times under different titles. One remarkably persistent rumour is that someone has written a computer program to randomly generate Harlequin texts.¹ Each of these tales focuses on Harlequin's mode of production, projecting the orator's discomfort with Harlequin's existence as mass literature onto the manner in which the texts are created. This idea of Harlequin as the product of a soulless, mechanized process displaces our fear of a postmodern erasure of literary boundaries onto a devalued cultural object that can easily be dismissed as beneath our notice. More disturbing than our desire to scapegoat Harlequin for our anxieties over mass culture is the implication that Harlequin's machinations pass undetected. Narratives of Harlequin's mass production gleefully imply that Harlequin readers are too stupid to notice or too desensitized to care that their practice of reading has degenerated into the consumption of a mass-produced object.

I would hope that it is unnecessary by this point to observe that Harlequin Presents is probably not produced by either monkeys or a computer program (although I have yet to authoritatively rule out the graduate student theory). I am also reasonably certain that I have not read the same book under a different title, and I like to think that I would have noticed such a development. As I have discussed, texts in the Harlequin Presents series do exhibit standardized patterns. The epitome of mass culture, Harlequin's style is a reflection of its mode of production and distribution. Any attempt, however, to devalue a genre based purely on its formulaic structure is grounded in an irrational nostalgia for a modernist ideal of artistic production. In

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

“The Culture Industry,” Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s reaction to the standardized products of industrialization expresses a general discomfort with a shifting definition of art: “The great artists were never those who embodied a wholly flawless and perfect style, but those who used style as a way of hardening themselves against the chaotic expression of suffering, as a negative truth” (Adorno and Horkheimer 37). Harlequin Presents is an artifact of a postmodern culture industry, and the series exhibits little desire to emulate “the great artists” of earlier literary forms. Breaking away from style to express “a negative truth” is simply not the function of the contemporary serial romance novel. Yet, literary sensibility dictates that by conforming to generic structures, Harlequin novelists are, in fact, striving for inferiority: “the inferior work has always relied on its similarity with others – on a surrogate identity”(Adorno and Horkheimer 37). Allowing such sensibilities to colour a study of Harlequin Presents prompts us to overlook the possibility that the “surrogate identity” of the romance novel might be produced in response to “reader preferences” (Writer’s Guidelines). We must overcome our distaste and consider the eventuality that reading pleasure in late capitalist society may have little to do with great art.

As Franco Moretti observes in *Signs Taken for Wonders*, literary critics do tend to ignore the ways that texts conform to the dictates of style. Genre studies have been marginalised simply because this is not the way that literary historiography works. The focus on how ‘valuable’ examples of literature differentiate themselves from normative style makes any study of the function of genre or form extremely difficult:

literary history has never ceased to be *histoire evenementielle*, where the events are great works or great individuals. Even the great historical controversies, when all is said, turn almost exclusively on the reinterpretation of an extremely small

number of works. This procedure condemns the concept of genre to a subaltern, marginal function, as is indicated most starkly in the formalist couple convention-defamiliarization, where genre appears as mere *background*, an opaque plane whose only use is to make the *difference* of the masterpiece most prominent. Just as the ‘event’ breaks and ridicules the laws of continuity, so the masterpiece is there to demonstrate the ‘triumph’ over the norm, the irreducibility of what is really great. (Moretti 13).

Positioning genre as the “opaque plane” upon which “great works” distinguish themselves may aid us in the study of a ridiculously small number of canonized texts, but it will never give us much insight into general reading practices. We need to consider how mundane texts fit into the process of creating and stabilizing genre if we want to understand the cultural role of contemporary popular fiction. As Janice Radway observes in *A Feeling for Books*, popular fiction needs to be examined as “a counterpractice to the high culture tastes and proclivities that have been most insistently legitimized and nurtured in academic English departments for the last fifty years or so” (9-10). Traditional literary models are of little help to us because popular fiction has constituted its own concept of literary value.

Harlequin Presents is not a medium that lends itself to distinctiveness. The contemporary serial romance novel flourishes amidst its own bland replication. The form and content of Harlequin Presents work in perfect synergy to mass produce a literary commodity capable of exploiting brand loyalty to maintain a consistent consumer base. Harlequin Presents represents precisely the unity of style and content that Adorno and Horkheimer disdain as the inauspicious product of the culture industry:

The reconciliation of the general and the particular, of the rule and the specific demands of the subject matter, the achievement of which alone gives essential, meaningful content to style, is futile because there has ceased to be the slightest tension between opposite poles: these concordant extremes are dismally identical; the general can replace the particular, and vice versa. (Adorno and Horkheimer 36-7)

By focussing on the cultural function of high art, Adorno and Horkheimer fail to consider the possibility that, in other cultural forms, style itself might be essential and meaningful. Harlequin Presents does embody the circular logic of the cultural industry. As a literary form designed for mass production and mass marketing, Harlequin's structure is dictated by its means of production. Therefore it manifests whatever ideology is necessary to reproduce itself: "[The products of the culture industry] are just business is made into ideology in order to justify the rubbish that they deliberately produce" (31). Having no pretension to high art, Harlequin has always embraced this extremely effective means of cultural production. The style of Harlequin reflects more than just the ideology of business; it articulates the *status quo*. In the business of securing the consent of its audience, Harlequin Presents offers us valuable insight into "prevailing cultural norms" (Moretti 27).

Rather than considering the cultural meaning of the romance novel *despite* its formulaic structure, we should examine this cultural artefact as a fortuitous example of how popular fiction actually functions in late capitalist society. We should not dismiss this opportunity to investigate how popular, middle-brow fiction has "performed the necessary ideological labor" of carving out its own class consciousness (Radway 351). My decision to study the romance novel in its most

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

standardized form was deliberate. On the whole, contemporary popular fiction conforms to the dictates of genre, working within these systems to express general cultural trends. Remarkable, reactionary, or revolutionary literary expression does not fit into this particular model of reading pleasure. Popular fiction is a comfortable medium that fulfills a particular literary function and has little to do with challenging the reader: “Literature... indicates how deeply rooted is our desire to make the ‘adjustment’ to the existing order *coincide* with some idea of ‘happiness’. It makes us realize that ‘consent’ – feeling that we ‘want’ to do what we ‘have’ to do – can be one of the highest aspirations of the individual psyche” (Moretti 40). Mass-produced and mass-consumed popular fiction actively works to reconcile the subject to the social order that makes possible its own means of production. As an ideological manifestation of late capitalism, popular fiction has a vested interest in maintaining the *status quo*.

At the same time, delivering real, lasting satisfaction to its reading public would obviously render contemporary popular fiction obsolete. Ultimately, these literary forms offer only a provisional reconciliation. The artefacts of the culture industry only ever deliver partially on their promises:

The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu... The secret of aesthetic sublimation is its representation of fulfilment as a broken promise. The culture industry does not sublimate; it represses. (Adorno and Horkheimer 38).

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

My ambivalent reading of the dual functions of the contemporary serial romance novel describes the conflicted interpellation of postmodern subjects under late capitalism. This dissertation focuses on the ways in which Harlequin Presents works within generic conventions. It is the recurrent features of the series – its plot devices and characterizations – that constitute the Harlequin Presents reader through a process of ironic negotiation. As I discuss in my introduction, the romance novel does not offer direct insight into the gendered fantasies of western culture, but Harlequin Presents does show us how a group of texts can define its own readership and create meaning independent of literary value. Like other examples of popular fiction, Harlequin Presents both reifies existing social structures and resists the satisfaction of social desires. The serial nature of Harlequin Presents makes this conflicted process all the more salient. The formulaic elements that I have considered form a collection of seemingly incommensurate impulses, resisting and complying with Harlequin's stated ideological agenda. Harlequin Presents makes no attempt to subvert its own formula because this ironic structure is a necessary condition for the continuation of the series. If the romance novel delivered, unconditionally, on its promise of an "An Emotionally Satisfying and Optimistic Ending" (RWA National), romance sales would plummet. Harlequin Presents, like most forms of popular culture, necessarily fails to satisfy the consumer. Resistance and dissatisfaction are, therefore, structured into the texts themselves.

Notes

1. Each of these literary urban legends have been related to me on more than one occasion by multiple sources. Emerging quickly in casual conversations, such tales were framed as evidence vital to my thesis project. Clearly, I had not yet grasped how poorly such texts fit into literary models, and needed to be educated as to how inappropriate my choice of field was.

Appendix

Passion

Looking for romance that's hot?
Wanting a read that has a little
extra spice?

Every other month since 1999,
Harlequin Presents is filled to bring you
romance that turns up the heat!

Look out for:

The Seduction Proposal by Lisa Marie Lee
Harlequin Presents #2003, January 1999

The Marriage Surrender
by Michelle Bell
Harlequin Presents #2014, March 1999

Marriage Under Suspicion
by Sara Craven
Harlequin Presents #2026, May 1999

Pick up a PRESENTS PASSION—
where seduction is guaranteed!

Available wherever Harlequin books are sold.

HARLEQUIN
Publishers since 1949

Passion Advertisement (1999)

The world's bestselling romance series.

HARLEQUIN
Presents
Romance and Fiction Entertainment

GREEK TYCOONS

They're the men who have
everything—except a bride...

Wealth, power, charm—what else could
a heart-stoppingly handsome tycoon need?
In the GREEK TYCOONS miniseries you have
already been introduced to some gorgeous
Greek multimillionaires who are in need of wives.

THE GREEK TYCOON'S SECRET CHILD
by Cathy Williams
on sale now, #2376

THE GREEK'S VIRGIN WIFE
by Julia James
on sale March, #2380

THE MISTRESS PURCHASE
by Penny Jordan
on sale April, #2386

Pick up a Harlequin Presents® novel and you will
enter a world of spine-tingling passion and
provocative, tantalizing romance!

Available wherever Harlequin books are sold.

HARLEQUIN

Greek Tycoons

HARLEQUIN®
Presents
The world's bestselling romance series.

Pick up a Harlequin Presents® novel and you will enter a world of spine-tugging passion and provocative, tantalizing romance!
2002 offers an exciting selection of titles by all your favorite authors.

Are you looking for...?

REVENGE
Cole Cameron's Revenge #2223, January
by Sandra Martin

Of Matrimony & Marriage
The Bellini Bride #2224, January
by Michelle Reid
The Italian's Wife #2225, March
by Lynne Graham

THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY
by Sharon Harcourt
The Unsettling Woman #2227, January
Surrender to the Duke #2228, January
#2229, January
The Millionaire's Mistress #2230, January

Passion™
His Miracle Baby #2232, February
by Kate Walker
A Secret Vengeance #2236, March
by Miranda Lee
The Secret Love Child #2242, April
by Miranda Lee

MISTRESS OF A MILLIONAIRE
The Italian's Wife #2225, March
by Lynne Graham

Survey 2002

The world's bestselling romance series.

HARLEQUIN®
Presents
Seduction and Passion Guaranteed!

Every book is part of a miniseries in 2003.
These are just some of the exciting themes you can expect...

WEDDINGS

Your dream ticket to the location of a lifetime!

HUSBANDS

Talk, dark—and read to rave!

INTERNATIONAL DESTINATIONS

They're guaranteed to raise your pulse!

GREEK TYCOONS

They're the ones who own everything—except a wife.

MARRIAGE IS THEIR BUSINESS

Legally wed, but he's never going to let you go.

THE LANGUAGE OF PASSION

They speak the language of passion.

Passion™

Sophisticated spy series—seduction and passion guaranteed!

Pick up a Harlequin Presents® novel and you will enter a world of spine-tugging passion and provocative, tantalizing romance!
Available wherever Harlequin books are sold.

HARLEQUIN®
Live the emotion™

Visit us at www.harlequin.com

Survey 2003

Bibliography

Primary Sources: Textual

Harlequin Presents. 1-2456. Toronto: Harlequin Books, 1973-2005.

Primary Sources: Other

Arabian Nights. Advertisement. *One Night with the Sheikh* July 2003: back cover.

Book Mate. Advertisement. *Betrayal* April 1983: no pag.

Book Mate. Advertisement. *Romance: Bonus Bucks Catalog* 2003: 4.

eHarlequin.com: The Ultimate Destination for Women's Fiction. Harlequin Enterprises.

Online. February 1st, 2004. <<http://www.eharlequin.com/cms>>

Expecting. Advertisement. *Bought by Her Latin Lover* August 2004: no pag.

Foreign Affairs. Advertisement. *Husband by Arrangement* May 2003: no pag.

Fun Facts About Harlequin. Harlequin Enterprises. Online. February 1st, 2004.

<<http://www.eharlequin.com/cms/about/aboutArticle.jhtml;jsessionid=ZMGUEBPIA1WNBLAUEAKCAOQ?pageID=021101cu05001>>

Greek Tycoons. Advertisement. *The Banker's Convenient Wife* March 2004: no pag.

Harlequin Presents Plus. Advertisement. *Phantom Lover* December 1994: no pag.

Hot-Blooded Husbands. Advertisement. *The Arabian Love-Child* December 2002: back cover.

International Doctors. Advertisement. *The Bedroom Surrender* 2003: no pag.

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

Italian Husbands. Advertisement. *The Banker's Convenient Wife* March 2004: no pag.

Latin Lovers. Advertisement. *The Italian's Suitable Wife* October 2004: no pag.

London Playboys. Advertisement. *Husband for Real* January 2002: no pag.

Mediterranean Marriage. Advertisement. *Husband for Real* January 2002: no pag.

Passion (1999). Advertisement. *The Seduction Project* January 1999: no pag.

Passion (2001). Advertisement. *The Husband Test* December 2001: no pag.

Postcards from Europe. Advertisement. *No Promise of Love* November 1994: no pag.

RWA – Industry Statistics: Romance Writers of America. Online. February 21, 2005.

<http://www.rwanational.org/statistics/industry_stats.htm>

RWA National: Romance Writers of America. Online. February 21, 2005.

<<http://www.rwanational.com/romance.stm>>

Sexy Italians. Advertisement. *The Husband Test* December 2001: no pag.

Survey 2002. Advertisement. *Husband for Real* January 2002: no pag.

Survey 2003. Advertisement. *One Night with the Sheikh* July 2003: no pag.

The Touch of Aphrodite. Advertisement. *Vendetta Bride* August 1992: no pag.

Writing Guidelines: Harlequin Presents. Harlequin Enterprises. Online. December 16th,

2004 <[http://www.eharleuin.com/cms/learntowrite/ltwArticle.jhtml?](http://www.eharleuin.com/cms/learntowrite/ltwArticle.jhtml?pageID=021101wu09001)

[pageID=021101wu09001](http://www.eharleuin.com/cms/learntowrite/ltwArticle.jhtml?pageID=021101wu09001)>

Secondary Sources

Adorno, Theodor and Horkheimer, Max. “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

Deception.” *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Ed. J. M. Bernstein. London: Routledge, 1991.

Althusser, Louis. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971. 127-186.

Ang, Ien. “Melodramatic Identification: Television Fiction and Women’s Fantasy.” *Living Room Wars*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. 85-97.

Armstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction*. New York: Oxford, UP, 1987.

Baudrillard, Jean. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Translated by Charles Levin. St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981.

Bhabha, Homi K. “DessemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation.” *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Bhabha. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Blackwell, Richard. “Harlequin slump causing heartache.” *Globe and Mail* 21 Feb. 2005 <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/ArticleNews>>

Botts, Amber. “Cavewoman Impulses: The Jungian Shadow Archetype in Popular Romance Fiction.” *Romantic Conventions*. Ed. Anne K. Kaler and Rosemary E. Johnson-Kurek. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999. 62-74.

Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1984.

Capelle, Annick “Harlequin Romances in Western Europe: The Cultural Interactions of

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

- Romantic Literature.” *European Readings of American Popular Culture*. Ed. John Dean and Jean-Paul Gabilliet. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996. 91-100.
- Chambers, Ross. “The Unexamined.” *The Minnesota Review* 47 (1996): 141-156.
- Cohn, Jan. *Romance and the Erotics of Property: Mass-Market Fiction for Women*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1988.
- Crane, Lynda L. “Romance Novel Readers: In Search of Feminist Change?” *Women’s Studies* 23:3 (1994): 257-269.
- Ebert, Teresa L. “The Romance of Patriarchy: Ideology, Subjectivity, and Postmodern Feminist Cultural Theory.” *Cultural Critique* 10 (Fall 1988): 19-57.
- Felski, Rita. *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*. New York: New York UP, 2000.
- Foster, Thomas. “‘The Postproduction of the Human Heart’: Desire, Identification, and Virtual Embodiment in Feminist Narratives of Cyberspace.” *Reload: Rethinking Women + Cyberculture*. Ed. Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002.
- Grescoe, Paul. *Merchants of Venus: Inside Harlequin and the Empire of Romance*. Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 1996.
- Heinecken, Dawn. “Changing Ideologies in Romance Fiction.” *Romantic Conventions*. Ed. Anne K. Kaler and Rosemary E. Johnson-Kurek. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999. 149-172.

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

Heller, Tamar. "Having It All: Consumption and Ideological Tension in an Innovative Romance Novel." *Genre* 30 (Fall 1997): 243-264.

Hennessy, Rosemary. *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identity in Late Capitalism*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Jackson, Stevi. "Women and Heterosexual Love: Complicity, Resistance and Change." *Romance Revisited*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995. 49-62.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.

Johnson-Kurek, Rosemary E. "Leading Us into Temptation: The Language of Sex and the Power of Love." *Romantic Conventions*. Ed. Anne K. Kaler and Rosemary E. Johnson-Kurek. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999.

Klein, Naomi. *No Logo*. Toronto: Random House, 2000.

Köhler, Nicholas. "The Art of Romance." *National Post* 25 Jan. 2005: AL10.

Krentz, Jayne Ann, ed. *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women: Romance Writers and the Appeal of the Romance*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.

Laclau, Ernesto. *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism – Fascism – Populism*. London: NLB, 1977.

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

MacKinnon, Catharine. “Rape: On Coercion and Consent.” *Writing on the Body:*

Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory. Ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury. New York: Columbia UP, 1997. 42-58.

Markert, John. “Romance Publishing and the Production of Culture.” *Poetics* 14 (1985): 69-93.

Modleski, Tania. *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*. Hamden: Archon Book, 1982.

Morley, Dave. “Texts, readers, subjects.” *Culture, Media, Language*. Ed. Stuart Hall et al. London: Hutchinson, 1980. 163-173.

Moretti, Franco. *Signs Taken For Wonders*. Thetford, Norfolk: The Thetford Press Ltd., 1983.

Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *A Cultural Studies Reader*. London and New York: Longman, 1995. 321-332.

Mussell, Kay. *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women’s Romance Fiction*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984.

Negra, Diane. “Romance and/as tourism: Heritage whiteness and the (inter)national imaginary in the new woman’s film.” *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies*. Ed. Matthew Tinkcom et al. London: Routledge, 2001. 82-97.

Negus, Keith. *Production of Cultures/Cultures of Production*. Du Gay, P. Sage Publications: 1997.

Radford, Jean. *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*. New York:

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986.

Radway, Janice A. *A Feeling for Books: The Book of the Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

Scanlon, Jennifer. Ed. *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader*. New York: New York U P, 2000.

Smith, Jennifer Cruise. "This Is Not Your Mother's Cinderella" *Romantic Conventions*. Ed. Anne K. Kaler and Rosemary E. Johnson-Kurek. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999. 51-61.

Stacey, Jackie and Pearce, Lynne. "The Heart of the Matter: Feminists Revisit Romance" *Romance Revisited*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995. 11-45.

Strehle, Susan and Carden, Mary Paniccia. Eds. *Doubled Plots: Romance and History*. Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2003.

Thomas, Audrey. "A Fine Romance, My Dear, This Is." *Canadian Literature*. 108 (Spring 1986): 5-11.

Thornham, Sue. *Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies: Stories of Unsettled Relations*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000.

PhD Thesis – K. Downey / McMaster – English

Thurston, Carol. *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

Urry, John. *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. London: SAGE Publications, 1990.

Volosinov, V.N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik. New York: Seminar Press, 1973.

Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice & Poststructuralist Theory*. New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1987.

Weisser, Susan Ostrov. "The Wonderful-Terrible Bitch Figure in Harlequin Romance Novels." *Feminist Nightmares: Women at Odds*. Eds. Susan Ostrov Weisser and Jennifer Fleishner. New York: New York UP, 1994. 269-282.

Williamson, Judith. *Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture*. New York: Marion Boyars, 1986.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Looking Awry*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991.

---. *The Plague of Fantasies*. New York: Verso, 1997.

---. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. New York: Verso, 1989.