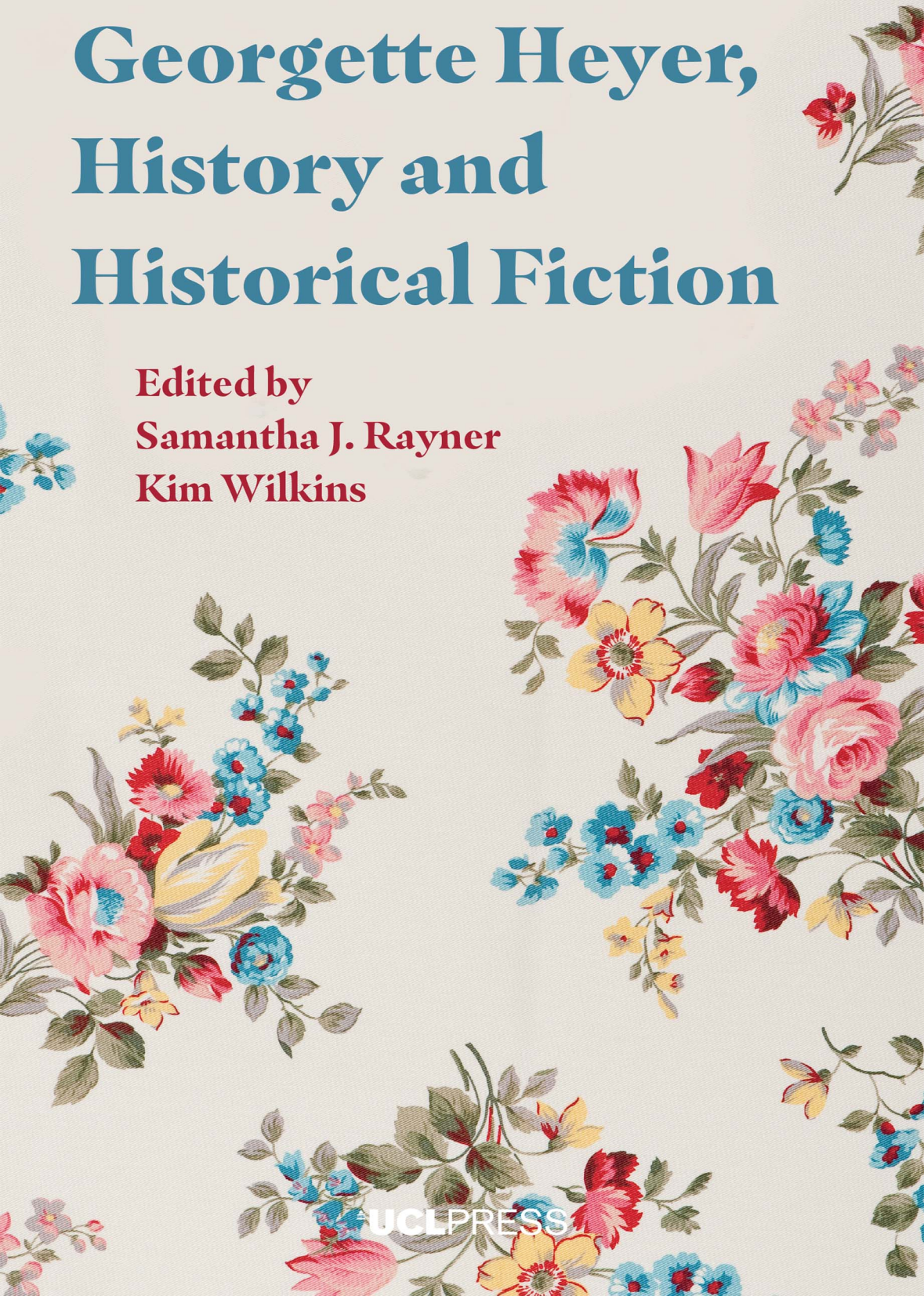


Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction

Edited by
Samantha J. Rayner
Kim Wilkins



UCLPRESS

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 **UCL**PRESS

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This collection is dedicated to our mothers, Pamela Payne and Elaine Wilkins; thank you for introducing us to Heyer and a lifetime of reading pleasure.

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Introduction: the persistence of Georgette Heyer

Samantha J. Rayner and Kim Wilkins

In March 2020, at the beginning of the long tunnel of a global pandemic, *The Guardian* newspaper shared with its readers a list of ‘joyful books for dark, lonely times’. Second on the list was Georgette Heyer’s *The Grand Sophy*, a Regency romance originally published in 1950.¹ It is difficult to imagine any other popular fiction text from 70 years ago being allocated column inches in *The Guardian*, but this is in keeping with the love for Heyer celebrated by such luminaries as Stephen Fry, A. S. Byatt and the Queen.² Certainly, other popular twentieth-century texts have persisted: the works of Agatha Christie and J. R. R. Tolkien, for example. However, these texts have found new audiences through televisual adaptations, which have kept the books in circulation and reinforced their status in literary culture. No such adaptation has kept Heyer’s reputation alive. These authors, too, have garnered extensive academic attention, while Heyer scholarship is still notably thin on the ground. Nor was Heyer a great promoter of herself and her work. She famously eschewed author publicity, declaring ‘My life isn’t of interest – my books (I hope) are. I’m sick to death of chatty bits about authors, & LOATHE this form of advertisement’. So how do we explain the persistence of Heyer’s presence in the consciousness of bookish people all over the world? To consider this question, we turn first to Heyer’s publishing history.

Georgette Heyer was born in Wimbledon, south-west London, on 16 August 1902, the first child of her parents George and Sylvia. Her father was a French teacher at King’s College School while her mother was a talented cellist who had graduated from the Royal Academy of Music. They were in many ways a typical middle-class family of the time. George was an affectionate father to Georgette, making up songs

and pet names for her; as she grew up they shared a love of literature. Her two brothers, George (known as Boris) and Frank, were born in 1907 and 1912 respectively. Jennifer Kloester, Heyer's most recent biographer, underlines that 'Georgette was born into a home in which class and breeding were taken for granted as indicators of a person's worth and social acceptability'.³ She therefore grew up absorbing ideas and attitudes regarding highly structured class society – concepts that would be deeply ingrained in her Regency novels.

George was ambitious. When Georgette was only three he got a job as Appeals Secretary for King's College Hospital, a position that he held until 1910. He subsequently took up the role of Organising Secretary with the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre Committee. In 1914 George accepted the offer of a job in Paris, at Cox's Bank. The family moved there and lived right in the heart of the city, in the Avenue Marceau, close to the Champs-Élysées. They were apparently very happy until the First World War broke out in August 1914, necessitating a sudden return to England. Soon after they relocated, George decided to enlist.

Heyer found her father's absence hard. It also meant that she had to go to school (Oakhill Academy in Wimbledon) – the first time, at the age of 13, that she would experience school life, having previously been taught at home. She was, according to Kloester, 'precocious and unusual'.⁴ Unlike her gregarious father she did not make friends easily, so found school difficult. However, when she did make friends, they proved to be deep friendships; those with Joanna Cannan and Carola Oman, made during the war, were to last many years. Heyer did not go to university, nor did she join the bohemian set of postwar young people, trying to change societal attitudes and structures. A newspaper article about her in the 1920s describes her thus:

She considers herself a Victorian ... she speaks slightly of certain famous modern realists. She detests the average modern novel, and loves the old ones, particularly Jane Austen and Thackeray.⁵

At 18 Heyer was considered striking in looks: five foot ten, slender, elegant and always dressed fashionably but with taste. Jane Aiken Hodge, Heyer's other biographer, says that she was very popular with young men and liked to go out dancing and socialising.⁶ In 1921 her first book, *The Black Moth*, was published: Georgette was only 17. The work had started as a story to entertain her brother Boris, who had

been ill. The adventures of Jack Carstares, earl turned highwayman, had helped Boris to convalesce and Heyer's father, impressed with what he saw, encouraged her to work the story up for publication. She sent it to Constable, a very well-known publisher of the time, and was offered a contract for its publication in the UK and the US, with a £100 advance against sales. It was 'an extraordinary achievement for such a young writer and a thrilling experience to have her work accepted, "first crack out of the bag"'.⁷ By the end of 1930 Heyer had published 11 books – seven historical ones and four contemporary novels that she later suppressed (*Helen, Instead of the Thorn, Barren Corn* and *Pastel*).

She met George Ronald Rougier over Christmas 1920, at a hotel where both families were staying. He was two years older than her and had hoped to become a barrister, but his parents could not afford the long training, so he became a mining engineer instead. The couple became engaged in 1925, but a month later her father died suddenly of a heart attack, leaving Heyer with the burden of raising her brothers and looking after her mother. Writing became something she had to do to support them all – and this need to produce work continued to drive her throughout her life.

The wedding went ahead in August 1925, very quietly. By all accounts Georgette was a loyal wife, committed to following her husband's interests such as bridge and golf; the marriage lasted for nearly 50 years. Quite soon after their marriage Ronald had to go to the Caucasus, by the Black and Caspian seas, for work. The conditions were very poor there so Heyer remained at home in England; here she wrote two more novels, *Simon the Coldheart* (1925) and *These Old Shades* (1926).

By the spring of 1927 Ronald was working in Tanganyika, in Africa, this time accompanied by Georgette. They lived in a compound surrounded by lions and leopards and it was here that she wrote *The Masqueraders*. By the time this was published, in 1928, the couple had moved to Macedonia for Ronald's next, and final, mining post. They then returned to England, supporting themselves on Heyer's writing. She had published with five different publishers by this time (Hutchinson, Mills & Boon, Constable, Longman and Heinemann), but was to find her most productive working relationship with A. S. Frere at Heinemann. Her work became more assured as a result (see *Devil's Cub* and *The Convenient Marriage* for examples). Frere's confidence in Heyer's worth as an author is reflected in Heinemann's decision to purchase the rights to her earlier works and reissue them.

Meanwhile Ronald's career was struggling. He tried his hand at running a sports shop in Sussex, but it was not very successful. It must be remembered that Heyer was still supporting her mother and two younger brothers, so it was hardly surprising that after her son Richard was born in 1932 there were no more children. Ronald and Georgette settled in Sussex in a house called Blackthorns, not far from Horsham. Judging by the accounts in both biographies, this was a large and comfortable house in the country. It had live-in servants, but was sufficiently out of the way of the local village to give the family some privacy.

In the 1930s Heyer also experimented with writing thrillers – a popular genre of the period, significantly well-represented by women writers (Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, Dorothy Sayers, Patricia Wentworth and Ngaio Marsh were then all writing too). Ronald's interest in the law and his own love of detective stories meant he was a great help with these; Georgette was to credit him with untangling plot-lines that she could not satisfactorily resolve. Heyer's detective stories are still in print. Although not her main source of income, they have been praised as excellent examples of the genre by Dorothy L. Sayers and multiple critics in *The New York Times*.⁸

While living at Blackthorns, Ronald began to read for the Bar and Georgette to build her reference library around Regency history in earnest. She made meticulous notes on the period and had indexed vocabulary books, in which she could find information about slang phrases (see p. 191); these, together with the minutiae of Regency life, became a major feature of her novels. Evidence of the effort she put into accurate historical detail explains in part why her books have been admired by generations of readers – many of whom deplore the fact that Heyer is still not afforded the literary status they say she deserves. As Jerome de Groot explains:

Historical novels have often been sidelined or derided for not being serious enough, or taking liberties with facts; 'bodice-rippers with a bibliography'. History should have gravitas, and novels are seen as a corruption of the past, as something inauthentic or untrue, as a mode that encourages a sense of the past as frippery and merely full of romance and intrigue. Good historical writers, such as Catherine Cookson, Georgette Heyer and Jean Plaidy, became critical shorthand for sensationalism, romance and escapism as contrasted with the gravity of History. Historical fiction became the preserve of the popular novelist and those

who were good at it – Bernard Cornwell, Philippa Gregory – were ignored or patronised despite their massive popularity and at times compelling narratives.⁹

Heyer's historical research was extensive and she took pride in her knowledge of period detail. She claimed this as the main reason she was so scathing about the work of writers such as Barbara Cartland, whose focus was less careful with precise historical accuracy (see below).

In 1935 Heyer's first novel set in the Regency period was published, *Regency Buck*. Although this has its faults, Heyer herself approved of it, observing 'I am inclined to think it is a classic! I don't really know how I came to write anything so good'.¹⁰ Heyer's health was suffering during this period, however, and the family took a long holiday to Scotland to help her to recuperate. The mental and physical strain must have been considerable, as she was contracted to produce seven new novels in the next years to two publishers (Heinemann and Hodder).

At last, in 1936, Ronald was admitted to the Inner Temple to begin the next stage of his training for the Bar. Within six years he was qualified, and the family was ready to make the move back to London, despite the chaos of the Second World War. They found chambers to rent in The Albany, just off Piccadilly – somewhere that Heyer had always wanted to live. Close to the London Library, the chambers were spacious and comfortable and the Rougiers were within reach of all the amenities London could offer. As Jane Aiken Hodge points out, however, one of the most obvious advantages of living in London for an author – that of being on hand for promotional interviews and public appearances – was definitely not taken up by Heyer. Far from opening up to her reading public, she worked even harder to protect her privacy. She was dismissive of her fellow authors, apparently referring to them as 'inkies'.¹¹ In a letter of 1955 she laid out her view on publicity in no uncertain terms:

As for being photographed At Work or In My Old World Garden, that is the type of publicity which I find most nauseating and quite unnecessary. My private life concerns no-one but myself and my family; and if, on the printed page, I am Miss Heyer, everywhere else I am Mrs Rougier, who makes no public appearances, and dislikes few things so much as being confronted by Fans. There seems to be a pathetic belief today in the power of personal publicity over sales. I don't share it.¹²

Certainly it is very hard to find interviews or material on her in the public domain that were compiled during her lifetime. That she managed to maintain this privacy without denting her readers' loyalty or sales figures is a tribute to the remarkable popularity of her work.

As she became more and more successful, Heyer was plagued with worries about paying tax. In 1946 she and her husband started their own company, Heron Enterprises, to try and manage this side of things. They were not good at keeping up with their expenses, however, and the accountant that they hired was not very proficient either. Heyer would be almost continuously anxious about tax, or battling to reduce tax demands, for most of the rest of her life. Only when they sold the company to Booker Bros in 1967 did she manage to get things on to an even keel again.

By this early postwar period, Heyer's works were so well-known that she was regularly serialised in the *Woman's Journal*. Her relationship with the editor, Dorothy Sutherland, appears to have been full of clashes and disagreements, but the serials proved a good money-maker and so Heyer maintained the connection for many years. In addition, Foyles bookshop in London had *Friday's Child*, *The Reluctant Widow* and *The Foundling* as offerings in their Book Club, a sign of just how much of a pull the bestselling Heyer was.

One downside to this success was that other writers were now crowding in on the Regency setting and one, in particular, drew Heyer's ire. Barbara Cartland had just started publishing her own Regency-based fictions, and a fan of Heyer's wrote to her to point out the numerous similarities between Cartland's *Knave of Hearts*, *A Hazard of Hearts* and *A Duel of Hearts* and Heyer's *Friday's Child*, *The Corinthian*, *The Foundling*, *The Reluctant Widow* and *These Old Shades*. The mirroring was so blatant in places that Heyer wrote to her solicitor. There is no record of an answer, but the plagiarism stopped, abruptly. It was not so much the copying, according to Heyer, but what she saw as the poor quality of writing: 'I think I could have borne it better had Miss Cartland not been so common-minded, so salacious and so illiterate.'¹³

By 1954 Heyer was making a lot of money, but not managing it very well. She continued to churn out a novel a year during this period to try and ensure that payments kept coming in. In 1962 her son Richard, now a successful barrister himself, married Susie Flint. Heyer confessed that, despite not being at all sure that she would enjoy having a daughter-in-law, she quickly warmed to Susie. This happier family time is also marked by Heyer's move from Heinemann to The Bodley Head. Her long-time editor, A. S. Frere, had moved from one

company to the other, and Heyer followed him. Despite pleas from Heinemann for her to remain, she remained loyal to Frere and did not regret the move: The Bodley Head appeared to be far more proactive in terms of marketing her novels and the first one she produced for them, *False Colours* (1963), was a huge hit. Heyer loved the artwork of Arthur Barbosa, who was brought in to design the cover. Barbosa, a school contemporary of Douglas Bader, Rex Harrison and Laurence Olivier, worked on theatre designs and high-profile magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. As well as being known for designing Heyer's covers, he also created book jackets for the *Flashman* series by George MacDonald Fraser.

To emphasise how prolific she was, by 1964 Heyer had 32 books in print out of the 44 she had written to that point; six of the 44 were the suppressed early novels (p. 3). Her frustration with Heinemann, who still owned the rights to some of her earlier works, continued. In 1965, on the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo, they neglected to ensure that copies of *The Infamous Army*, her novel set during that period, were available – despite the United States, Sweden and Germany all reissuing special editions to tie-in with the occasion.

Heyer's next book with The Bodley Head, *Frederica*, again went straight to the top of the bestseller lists in 1965. A year later Cilla Black named Heyer as one of her favourite authors, catapulting the author into favour with the younger, pop-loving set of the time. She had become a literary phenomenon, reflected by the fact that in 1966 she was invited to lunch with the Queen at Buckingham Palace.

As the decade drew on Heyer's health started to decline. She had bouts in hospital for kidney stones, falls, chest infections and swollen joints. Still she kept writing, and *Cousin Kate* (1968) was followed in 1970 by *Charity Girl*. In 1971 the Rougiers moved to Knightsbridge, as their chambers in The Albany were reclaimed by the owners. They found a wonderful apartment with views over Hyde Park, described by Heyer as 'beautifully spacious and blessedly quiet'.¹⁴ Here she wrote her final completed novel, *Lady of Quality*, published in 1972. By this time Pan was offering £15,000 for paperback rights, a significant sum for an author of that period. Although Heyer tried to work on an unfinished historical novel, eventually published posthumously as *My Lord John*, her health made work very challenging. On 4 July 1974 Georgette Heyer died of lung cancer in Guy's Hospital, London. Her husband was at her side.

In 1970 the first lengthy article on Heyer was published. Written in *The Times* by the journalist and novelist Marghanita Laski, this piece

belittles her achievement, claiming that ‘nothing but the Regency element distinguishes these books from the best of the many thousands that used to fill the “B” shelves in Boots’ Booklovers Library’ and ‘a universal blandness covers all’.¹⁵ *The Times* was so inundated with letters of complaint from furious Heyer fans that the editor was forced to shut down the matter. Heyer responded with her usual amused dismissiveness, saying to Frere:

what a remarkably silly ‘review’ of *Charity Girl* it was! I thought, as I read it, that I could have torn ME to bits far better than she did. Not that it has done me the slightest harm, so it has left my withers wholly unwrung.¹⁶

Only after her death did more sympathetic articles begin to appear. The novelist A. S. Byatt, a constant champion of Heyer’s work, wrote a long piece in *The Sunday Times Magazine* called ‘The Ferocious Reticence of Georgette Heyer’. In this Byatt acknowledged her as ‘one of those rare writers who create an idiosyncratic world, recognisably their own, a world with its own laws and language’.¹⁷ More recently, in a report in *The Guardian* about the granting in 2015 of a blue plaque to Georgette Heyer, the author Harriet Evans commented that

I think what makes her so unique is the rare combination of totally gripping stories, historical detail that is spot-on yet illuminating, characters that are so enjoyable, romantic storylines that are, genuinely, heart-stopping and gorgeous and finally and most importantly all wrapped up and told by someone with a cynical eye. She is not fluffy, or prone to flummery (an excellent Heyer word).¹⁸

Heyer’s books continued to sell. In 1977, three years after the author’s death, Pan sold one million copies of her novels in the UK alone.

At the time of writing Heyer has been dead for 46 years, but still has a loyal readership. Posthumous readerships are, of course, not unusual. After an author’s death ‘maintaining a posthumous legacy becomes a literary industry of its own’ as stakeholders – family, publishers, etc. – try to exploit the deceased’s estate.¹⁹ Authors may also be memorialised in collections of materials (for example, papers and diaries kept in libraries) and at locations (for instance, Heyer’s blue plaque). Leving and White give the examples of Leonid Andreev and Vladimir Nabokov, describing how literary cultures are engaged

in 'consecrating and maintaining literary legacies'.²⁰ The posthumous legacy of J. R. R. Tolkien, on the other hand, relies less on consecration and more on televisual adaptations, including video games.²¹

In Heyer's case, no high-profile film or television adaptation has brought new audiences to her books. Nor has academic or literary consecration extended her legacy. And yet her works persist in the marketplace – not in such numbers, admittedly, but still providing a strong enough market presence to warrant regular jacket redesign and reissue. How are we to explain this persistence? The question is difficult to answer, at least with any rigorous evidence. Anecdote provides us stories of Heyer recommendations being passed from mothers to daughters (a fact borne out by Davidge's research in this book, which shows this is the most common route by which Heyer fans find her work). Romance reading and writing communities amplify her name and passionate fans with public platforms advocate for her, sometimes striking a defiant tone.²² It would seem that Heyer's reputation spreads – and endures – by that most precious of publishing commodities: word of mouth.

Claire Squires suggests that word of mouth is surrounded by 'language of magic and mystification'.²³ Yet word of mouth is a very practical and grass-roots method of marketing books. The potency of word of mouth is in part due to the fact that recommendation is voluntary: recommenders are thus considered both motivated and impartial, at least in terms of commercial interests. Among recommenders may be word of mouth 'opinion leaders', for example literary reviewers,²⁴ who may increasingly be found in digital environments. Goodreads, for example, lists well over 300,000 ratings for Heyer's works.

In fact, the postdigital book culture environment of the twenty-first century has played a large part in extending Heyer's legacy. Her readership intersects with fandoms through its links to romance fiction communities (and, as Jennings shows in this volume, to science fiction communities). Fans thrive in online environments, which allow new routes to interactivity (including creative interactivity such as fan fiction) and communal sharing of affection and opinion. Fans are often also collectors. Abe Books, an e-tailer of rare and used books (owned by Amazon), reports that Georgette Heyer is one of its top ten selling authors, ahead of Charles Dickens and J. K. Rowling, and confirms that collectors can pay four-figure sums for first editions of her works.²⁵ Heyer's work has also proved popular in audiobook form, with notable actors such as Richard Armitage hired to read them. Online fandoms

include the Georgette Heyer Appreciation private Facebook group (3400 fans), @georgettedaily on Twitter (2000 followers), which releases a Heyer quote daily, and the Georgette Heyer podcast.

Despite this reach, there is to-date a surprisingly modest amount of scholarship published on Heyer. Apart from a 2001 collection of Heyer's essays alongside reviews and short critical notes, edited by Mary Fahnestock-Thomas and entitled *Georgette Heyer: A critical retrospective*, and a biography by Jennifer Kloester (Heinemann 2011), there is very little academic work published in a book-length form. Articles have been written sporadically, with recent examples including publications in journals such as *Women* (2015) and the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* (2011, 2013). However, no sustained body of scholarship exists.

Heyer is a writer of large reputation, avid readership and wide influence. This book brings together an international set of chapters that explore Heyer and her contemporaries from a valuable range of perspectives and shed new light on an influential and important body of work. The enduring appeal of her work signals an importance that we believe should be recognised via more academic study and appreciation of her achievements, with researchers from all over the world exploring different aspects of her work. This volume hopes to play its part in such a prospect. It offers chapters from scholars from a diverse range of backgrounds on a diverse range of Heyer-related topics.

In [Part 1](#) researchers consider questions of femininity and masculinity, both in the texts and in terms of what constitutes 'women's writing'. Kathryn Sutherland sets the scene in her account of women writers of historical novels in the early to mid-twentieth century, revealing how the historical novel became a space for women writers and readers to challenge orthodox historical records. Geraldine Perriam turns her attention to gender via one of Heyer's best-loved male characters, Freddy Standen in *Cotillion*. This chapter closely reads Heyer's subversion of the typical masculine romantic hero, a character that her own work was heavily invested in. In *Regency Buck*, as Laura George shows us, it is the female character of Judith who subverts expectations. The Regency period's favourite fashion icon, Beau Brummell, serves as Judith's mentor in these escapades. In both these chapters gender roles are not as clearly demarcated as we might expect in fiction of the period.

In [Part 2](#) chapters concentrate on questions of genre. They consider whether genre expectations may or may not be met in Heyer's work, as well as the ways in which her texts and influence continue to circulate in contemporary genre communities. Kim Sherwood shows how Heyer

has been positioned as both a genre romance writer (with comparisons to Barbara Cartland) and as a writer of consequence in English literature (evoking comparisons with Austen, and ultimately resulting in her long-overdue blue plaque). But Heyer's novels themselves question this binary between popular or genre fiction and worthy literature, in intelligent and self-aware ways. Jennifer Clement explores Heyer's inversion of the marriage plot in *A Civil Contract*. In this work Heyer appears to query the plotting and emotional expectations of traditional romantic novels, in which femininity is shown to be a performance that is emotionally hypocritical. Holly Hirst reads Heyer against the Gothic tradition, arguing that Heyer periodically reaches into this genre but troubles the Gothic romance Ur-plot of brooding heroes and mouldering country houses. Kathleen Jennings discusses the enormous influence that Heyer has had on a different genre, demonstrating the number of science fiction writers who have referred to her or cited her. Jennings shows how Heyer's wit and worldbuilding has its echoes in these stories that are a world away from Regency drawing rooms.

Part 3 explores the sources and influences for Heyer's work, building a clearer picture of which aspects of literature and history she mediated for her audience. Lisa Hopkins discovers echoes of Shakespeare in Heyer's work. She finds not only that plays such as *Much Ado About Nothing* are influential on Heyer's comedy, but also tragedies such as *King Lear* through bathos. Vanda Wilcox shows how the author's experience of the First World War significantly informs the representation of the Napoleonic Wars. Books such as *The Spanish Bride* and *An Infamous Army* feature portrayals of officers and leadership that draw on First World War-era values. Tom Zille delves into Heyer's archives to study the way in which she pieced her Regency world together through research. He examines the stylistic differences in Regency language choice across her oeuvre.

Part 4 draws together a series of chapters that show the range of ways in which Heyer's work continues to circulate and have influence, including across some different (and surprising) academic disciplines. Lucie Bea Dutton provides a history of the only English-language Heyer film ever made, *The Reluctant Widow* of 1949. This chapter studies the reception of the film, including Heyer's own disappointment and anger, and considers the lack of any subsequent adaptations. The psychoanalyst Amy Street unpacks the potential guilty pleasures of reading Heyer in a feminist age. Helen Davidge, a data scientist, crunches the numbers of Heyer's word choice and her readers to provide us with some unexpected insights into how her books were written and continue to be read.

This collection, then, is eclectic – but such eclecticism underscores the wide reach of Heyer’s work. From Shakespeare and the First World War to spaceships and data science, the books of Georgette Heyer are in dialogue with diverse influences and audiences. This interdisciplinary collection hopes to chart several key points on that map of influence and reception, illustrating how Heyer continues to make meaning in the twenty-first century. *The Nonesuch* is the name of one of Heyer’s novels as well as the name of the conference from which this collection started, reflecting her status as a nonpareil of Regency romance writing. ‘Nonesuch’ means a person or thing without equal: in the atypicality of her books, her history and her legacy, there is surely none such as Georgette Heyer.

Notes

- 1 Wahlquist et al., ‘Coronavirus Reading List: Joyful books for dark, lonely times’, *The Guardian*, 10 March 2020.
- 2 English Heritage, ‘Novelist Georgette Heyer Receives Blue Plaque’, 5 June 2015.
- 3 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 13.
- 4 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 33.
- 5 Quoted in Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 45.
- 6 Hodge, *The Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 12.
- 7 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 48.
- 8 For example Margaret Wallace, ‘A Cold, Cornish Spider’.
- 9 de Groot, ‘Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction’.
- 10 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 146.
- 11 Hodge, *Private World*, 64.
- 12 Hodge, *Private World*, 65.
- 13 See Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 275–8.
- 14 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 376.
- 15 Laski, ‘The Appeal of Georgette Heyer’.
- 16 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 372.
- 17 Byatt, ‘The Ferocious Reticence of Georgette Heyer’, *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 5 October 1975, 28–38.
- 18 Harriet Evans quoted in Flood, ‘Georgette Heyer’.
- 19 Leving and White, *Marketing Literature*, 1.
- 20 Leving and White, *Marketing Literature*, 8.
- 21 Gelder, *Adapting Bestsellers*, 6.
- 22 Fenton, ‘I’ve Read her Books to Ragged Shreds’.
- 23 Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 64–5.
- 24 Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 66.
- 25 Abe Books, ‘Georgette Who?’.

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Part 1

Gender

1

‘Where History says little, Fiction may say much’ (Anna Barbauld): the historical novel in women’s hands in the mid-twentieth century

Kathryn Sutherland

In June 2018, in preparation for writing this chapter, I undertook two distinct searches. The first was of Oxford college and faculty libraries (around 40 in all), using the search tool SOLO (Search Oxford Libraries Online). The second, of local charity shops around Oxford, I undertook on foot. In both I was looking for copies of historical novels by British women writers of the mid-twentieth century – specifically those of Norah Lofts, D. K. Broster, Eleanor Hibbert (who wrote as both Jean Plaidy and Victoria Holt), Margaret Irwin, Naomi Mitchison, Mary Renault, Rose Macaulay, Margaret Kennedy, Hilda Reid, H. F. M. Prescott, Dorothy Dunnnett and Georgette Heyer. My online searches yielded little: a few titles from Renault, Macaulay, Mitchison, Kennedy, Reid and Prescott; one from Irwin; nothing at all by Lofts, Hibbert or Heyer.¹

Dorothy Kathleen Broster read history at St Hilda’s College, Oxford from 1896 to 1900 and spent the next 13 years as secretary to the Regius Professor of Modern History there. In 1920 she was among the first group of women granted permission by the university to supplicate for a degree.² With some 15 novels to her credit, Broster is best known for her 1920s trilogy on the Jacobite uprising of 1745 – *The Flight of the Heron* (1925), *The Gleam in the North* (1927) and *The Dark Mile* (1929). Broster was a pioneer of the form, a serious historian whose fiction was founded in solid research; yet only her old college, St Hilda’s, holds reprint copies of the trilogy. In contrast, Oxford charity shops, of which there are many, proved a rich source of paperback copies of in-print and out-of-print titles by Heyer, Irwin, Plaidy, Holt, Lofts, Renault, Mitchison and Dunnnett.

Though individual readers' tastes are less easily prescribed in this way, the discovery that college library and charity bookshop should represent distinct reading spheres is no surprise. Nonetheless, it seems a sad mark of neglect that Oxford college collections (especially those of the former women's colleges) should find such small space for many of the writers who, among the first wave of female graduates, found in the historical novel a means of mediating between the world as they found it and as they wished it to be. These women spoke from and to their cultural moment: the moment when, if such a moment can be marked with precision, women entered history. As I searched, I was reminded of the words of their contemporary, the narrator in *A Room of One's Own*, who, contemplating 'all the women's novels that lie scattered, like small pock-marked apples in an orchard, about the second-hand book shops of London', summed up their failure: '[t]hey wrote as women write, not as men write'.³

From the 1920s to the 1970s, the historical novel flourished in Britain in the hands of women writers. With degrees in History or English, Rose Macaulay, Hilda Reid, Margaret Irwin, Margaret Kennedy, Mary Renault and H. F. M. Prescott were all Oxford educated. Kennedy, who went up to read history in 1915, was a contemporary at Somerville of second-generation suffragists Reid,⁴ Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain. She was both historian (her first book in 1922, *A Century of Revolution*, was a study of the years 1789 to 1920) and historical novelist; she would publish a biography of Jane Austen in 1950 and a general study of fiction under the title *The Outlaws on Parnassus* in 1955. The convergence in Kennedy's writings of professional history, historical fiction and literary history (as well as the significance found in readings of Austen) is witnessed in the work of many women writers at this time. These represent the terms of a revisionist agenda and the coordinates within which a modern women's vision of history and the female self would be plotted.⁵ Relatively recent access to higher education, the events and opportunities of the First World War and the 1918 Representation of the People Act (in which the vote was extended to women over the age of 30) shaped women's sense that, at last, their public participation in their own times was recognised: that their voices and actions mattered.

Above all, the social cataclysm of war propelled women out of romance and into history, as Woolf suggests when she comments on the death of illusion in August 1914 'Shall we lay the blame on the war?'⁶ The older generation among them were pioneers of the women's suffrage movements; Macaulay was a nurse and a land girl before

becoming a civil servant in the War Office; Broster served with the Red Cross as a nurse in France; others, like Reid, undertook agricultural war work. These women discovered their potential through education and war, and their individual histories are within our own living memory.

The evolution of the historical novel

Surveys of the historical novel tend to begin with Walter Scott and the early nineteenth century, with his contribution seen as determining the form's shape and scope for the next hundred years. After Scott – and because of Scott – historical fiction became a vital way of understanding how history works and of connecting past to present. He too lived in turbulent times. Born in 1771, tales of the Jacobite uprisings of 25 years earlier, heard at first hand from those who had been 'out in '45' for Charles Edward Stuart, shaped his early imagination. His adult life was lived in the shadow of war with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. In 1815, within weeks of Napoleon's final defeat and exile, Scott was among the first wave of war tourists picking up trophies on the battlefield of Waterloo. Uncompromisingly reactionary, he met postwar radical agitation with fierce, open opposition, and he died within months of the Great Reform Act of 1832. Within his lifetime Britain threw off the last traces of feudal allegiance. In so doing it shifted closer to an urban and recognisably modern class-based society, with its encroaching industrialisation, new money, new families rising up the scale, old estates and remote villages decaying.

Scott's novels capture and explore his present age of crisis through the lens of history: tales of older times. Novels such as *Waverley*, *Old Mortality*, *The Heart of Midlothian* and *Ivanhoe* are nation-building narratives on an epic scale in which representative human types are caught up in the onward sweep of history. Real and famous historical figures make an appearance, but they are marginal in comparison with the middling sort of characters, all fictional, who, in finding a way through extremes, offer an individual perspective on the major events of public history. History is perceived to be both tragedy and progress, as the clash of declining and ascending societies and values exposes the historical determinants of all human actions.

It is a critical commonplace that Scott's novels enact the myth of history as the confrontation of old and new. In moderating extremes a recognisably modern world is secured; its representative is the

notoriously wavering hero, attached in imagination to the warlike deeds of the past but relishing the security and comfort of the present. Where modernising interests strip Scott's hero of a bellicose masculine independence (except in his innermost imaginings), his females are burdened with a proto-Victorian domestic sensibility.

In establishing the terms of the historical novel, Scott was hailed in his own time as giving the novel itself a serious purpose. He was indeed said to have 'rescued' the genre for male readers as well as determining the shape that professional history writing would take through the nineteenth century. There had been historical fiction before Scott, of course, notably pioneered by women writers. Sophia Lee's *The Recess; or, A Tale of Other Times* (1783) develops its plot, a bold mingling of history and fiction, around Mary, Queen of Scots, using fiction to imagine other historical possibilities: what if Mary had given birth to twin daughters? Released into action, Lee's inventions become a catalyst for testing history's workings and motives, in the manner of eighteenth-century conjectural historiography as practised by David Hume and William Robertson, on both of whom she relies for sources. Scott similarly locates the historical novel in the gaps left by official history. Yet what ought to have been a strategy sympathetic to those whom history neglects becomes in his hands a means to appropriate the novel for masculine discourse – what Scott himself labelled his 'bow-wow strain', which he was careful to distinguish from the form as shaped so far by his female contemporaries.⁷

At a decisive moment in the formation of the modern literary field, Scott's market dominance effectively hijacked serious historical fiction as a male preserve, relegating women's contribution to mere romance. His name and practice are synonymous with the classic historical novel and its profound influence over the development of the great realist novel throughout Europe and America for the next hundred years. Twentieth-century critics of the genre, from the Marxist Georg Lukács (*The Historical Novel*, 1937) through Avrom Fleishman (*The English Historical Novel: From Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf*, 1971) and on to Harry E. Shaw (*The Forms of Historical Fiction: Walter Scott and his successors*, 1983), confirm an origin in Scott. They further note that both the prestige and market success of the historical novel had fallen into irrevocable decline by the end of the First World War – around the time that women writers re-entered the field in significant numbers. In these standard critical studies, only Virginia Woolf appears to escape the downturn, with *Orlando* (1928) widely recognised as a modernist experiment that pushes the form in a new direction. As recently as 2011,

in an essay for the *London Review of Books*, Perry Anderson writes that in the interwar years of the twentieth century 'the historical novel becomes a recessive form, at virtually all levels'.⁸

For Lukács, Fleishman, Shaw and Anderson, the great exponents of historical fiction are, with the partial exceptions of George Eliot and Woolf, all male: Scott, Balzac, Dickens, Thackeray, Tolstoy, Cooper, Manzoni. Anderson concedes that the postmodern period has seen a new flourishing, in which the rules of classical historical fiction are largely 'flouted or reversed' to allow a freer mixing of past and present, the centrality of real historical figures, counterfactual devices and anachronism. Yet he traces this reinvigoration to a New World cohort of male writers – to Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Carlos Fuentes and Mario Vargas Llosa, to Latin America or the Caribbean, to what he names as 'the periphery' rather than to Britain which, in his words, has in the same period 'generated instead mostly Victoriana – Fowles, Farrell, Ackroyd, Byatt, Carey ... or reversions to the much more traumatic First World War, as in Pat Barker's trilogy'. In conclusion he observes:

The postmodern revival, by throwing verisimilitude to the winds, fabricating periods and outraging probabilities, ought rather to be seen as a desperate attempt to waken us to a sense of history, in a time when any real sense of it has gone dead.

There are, it would seem, two distinct things: the historical novel and the historical novel by or about women. The former has the potential to make an authoritative contribution to the field of history. The latter, with those accusations of reversion and recession in mind, is required to make a case for the very inclusion of the feminine (whether as perspective or subject) as a historical category, carrying with it the possibilities of change and revision.⁹

The woman's historical novel has long been tarnished by accusations of low genre and reader expectations. Where the classic historical novel has the potential to break new ground, the finest examples credited with interventions into history itself – the claims that Hugo helped to preserve Gothic architecture in France and Manzoni's fiction shaped the Risorgimento – it is dismissed in female hands as formulaic and generically moribund; at best, it is romance. As the low point to which the form might sink, it faces charges of escapism and costume drama. Gender imbalance interacts in complex ways with genre: a matter of social and political opportunities as well as hierarchies of readers and

writers. To be taken seriously, writers of historical fiction still seek to align their contributions with 'novel' rather than 'romance'.

A favourite theme for Scott is the power of historical process to vanquish visions of romance; this he links to the maturation of the hero and the opportunities for reformed masculine freedoms to shape a modern world. Figured as the emergence of light from dark, of social improvement from barbarism, realism from romance, the very forms of historical fiction are caught up in this education. For women writers and readers the model is only a trap, with the reason to be found in history itself. Romance equates to 'low' reading, a sub-genre and accusation directed specifically towards women readers. The conditions set for women to improve themselves (among them, reading 'better' books) involve the denial of their own sex.¹⁰

Shouldn't an experiment be made to see what would happen if the great male heroes of world literature were replaced by women? Achilles, Hercules, Odysseus, Oedipus, Agamemnon, Jesus, King Lear, Faust, Julien Sorel, Wilhelm Meister?

Women as active, violent, as knowers? They drop through the lens of literature. People call that 'realism'. The entire past existence of women has been unrealistic.

So Christa Wolf argued in her novel *Cassandra*.¹¹ Between the wars in Britain women writers were asking the same question: how might the model of history be reworked to provide new ways of imagining male and female, gender and genre?

The female historian

The discipline of history came under scrutiny in the early twentieth century as itself a hierarchy of forms; political history was placed firmly at the top and social and economic history below, with women historians charting its lower fields. At the same time, a generation of female literary scholars – among them Dorothy Blakey, Joyce Horner and J. M. S. Tompkins – were making a mark with ground-breaking studies of women's major contributions to the development of the novel: Blakey's study of popular fiction, *The Minerva Press, 1790–1820* (1939), Tompkins' *The Popular Novel in England 1770–1800* (1932) and Horner's *The English Women Novelists and their Connection with the Feminist Movement (1688–1797)* (1930).

Eileen Power, who read history at Girton College, Cambridge from 1907 to 1910 and later studied at the London School of Economics, was one of the great pioneering social historians. She discovered a new historical voice and enlarged her discipline of medieval history in writing from the margins of social history and literature and by setting past and present in dialogue. Campaigning for the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and the women's peace movement informed her best-known work, *Medieval People* (1924). Power understood that combining the perspectives of history and literature was a route to reclaiming a past yet unwritten – a past unacknowledged because under-imagined.

At the same time, and across post-medieval periods, Alice Clark, Dorothy George, Ivy Pinchbeck (Power's student) and Dorothy Marshall were giving expression to the voiceless, namely women and the poor. Such groups were traditionally hidden from history because – without the vote and with scant protection from law – their existence was scarcely realised and counted for little.¹² In the interwar years the definition of history was expanding and its constituents were being transformed; women were, crucially, at the heart of it all, profoundly reshaping British historiography. They were at the forefront of what would later be labelled 'history from below', only after it was re-pioneered in the 1950s by male historians such as E. P. Thompson, Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawm.

Norah Lofts, born Nora Robinson in 1904, was writing the new history from a fictional point of view. She gained a teaching diploma at Norwich Training College in 1925 and taught English and History at a girls' school before devoting herself fulltime to fiction on the appearance of her first novel, a life of Walter Raleigh, in 1936.¹³ Lofts' bestselling 'House' trilogy, published between 1959 and 1963 (*The Town House*, *The House at Old Vine* and *The House at Sunset*), records the lives of the inhabitants of a house in the imaginary Suffolk market town of Baildon from the fourteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. The shifting uses and fortunes of the house over time – from wool business to inn to school to a parade of shops – register the familiar Burkean sense of English history as the management of change through repair and regeneration. History takes shape as a series of exiles and homecomings, as studies in rootedness and rootlessness, the chance play of heredity, the traffic between ranks and the absorption of the lives of generations into the fabric of the house itself. Developed as the life within the house, history is here a feminised and domestic narrative in which larger political change is registered upon the everyday.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that so many of the mid-century women writers of historical fiction were among the first generation of female history graduates. They knew their history and their historiography, and were conscious of their role as pioneering historical beings. Those who were not academically trained, such as Georgette Heyer, researched the manners and language of their chosen periods in remarkable detail. It is patronising to assume that these writers and their readers did not understand what fiction might offer to history: a space for mapping alternative histories, for expressing dissatisfaction with History's orthodox and professional faces and for supplementing the official record – what Catherine Morland, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, refers to as 'real solemn history'. It is worth reminding ourselves of the precise terms in which Catherine couches her complaint against the history books: not simply their 'quarrels of popes and kings ... the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all', but the impoverishment of their imaginative engagement. How can history exclude women's lives, she asks, when 'a great deal of it must be invention'?¹⁴ If so much that we take to be history includes the colour, motives and interpretation brought to its narration, then excluding women from it must be a fiction indeed.

'Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history', argued Novalis, the German Romantic thinker. Penelope Fitzgerald used his pithy statement as epigraph to her remarkable historical novel *The Blue Flower* (1995). It is precisely because fiction is invented that it can inform us about reality; historical novels can expand our understanding of history by offering new critical perspectives on the past by means of the story that pretends to be true. The imagined life of the individual allows historical fiction to vivify the nameless men and women who were there, but whose lives and responses are lost from the record. In so doing, historical fiction forges a profound connection between past and present. We might say that there is no history without historical novels: the form provides situated knowledge of the past.

Those women historians at the forefront of developments in social and economic history were engaged in a comparable project to recover different kinds of past and to complicate the narrowly specialised discourses of political, military and institutional history with a more inclusive vision: a past that lives for the reader by integrating with its facts, charts and statistics a finer-grained, more intimate and moralised enquiry. This is a notable feature of the writings of twentieth-century economic historians such as Power, Clark and Pinchbeck, continued in the work of Joan Robinson and Jane Jacobs. The latter's magnificent

The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961) is a late and glorious eruption of social realism (its inset stories about the shopkeeper and the actions of people on the street read like snippets towards a novel) into the arid, professionalised and wholly masculine discourse of mid-century American town planners. Her devastating comment – ‘we are all accustomed to believe that maps and reality are necessarily related, or that if they are not, we can make them so by altering reality’ – might serve as a late summary of what these earlier women in their various disciplines were up against as they attempted to realign the maps to reality.¹⁵

Many of these women came of age in 1918, one hundred years ago, and they knew their moment to be historical. A century later, we are well placed to appreciate this. Our present political consciousness and confidence have been reinvigorated through commemoration: recent celebrations marking one hundred years of women’s suffrage have combined with renewed calls for female equality and respect in public and private life. As we take strength from the past, so too did they: for them, one hundred years ago was Georgian Britain – a particular past within living memory, yet a time and space sufficiently different and apart that it could be used to mediate between the world as they found it and as they might wish it to be. Female academic historians (Clark, George, Marshall, Pinchbeck, Blakey, Tompkins) and novelists discovered a subject and a voice at this time in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British social and literary history. These women were as close to the world of Walter Scott and Jane Austen as we are to them. Some of them read Austen with a professional interest that coincided with and shaped the 1917 centenary commemorations of her death.

The legacy of Jane Austen

The female academic community of Somerville College, Oxford was from the early years of the century to the outbreak of the Second World War a fertile ground for major developments in both feminist politics and Austen studies, the latter inaugurated by Katharine Metcalfe’s period reconstruction of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1912. As Metcalfe, assistant tutor in English Literature at Somerville, planned and produced it, her edition of Austen’s most celebrated novel was a new kind of publishing venture: a project for total immersion, designed to assist the reader in recovering what Metcalfe understood to be the modern equivalent of a Regency reading experience. Facsimile title

page, catchwords and a restored first-edition text were supplemented with an appendix, 'Jane Austen and her Time', which provided notes on contemporary life, social customs and language.

Many of the features of Metcalfe's edition we now take for granted as a regular part of the apparatus of a paperback World's Classics or Penguin edition of a classic novel, but in 1912 there had been nothing like it. She followed it up in 1923 with a companion volume, *Northanger Abbey*, which featured notes on 'Travelling and Post', 'Department, Accomplishments, and Manners', 'Social Customs', 'Games', 'Dancing' and, once again, 'Language'. During and immediately after the First World War, reading Austen became a potent therapy for male and female readers alike – healing, pleasurable, restorative. It was the social detail, glimpses into a bygone era, that proved most sustaining. As Metcalfe explained:

Two apparently contradictory impressions are left after reading Jane Austen's novels: a first impression of her old-fashionedness, a second of her modernness.¹⁶

Austen's social vision gained new significance in 1914–18 because it represented, for men and women, an England worth fighting for: England imagined as the immemorial village clustered round the great house and the church. We are now at the same historical distance from the Great War of 1914–18 as those then alive were from Britain's long campaign against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France – a war that raged for 22 years, from 1793 to 1815, and encompassed almost the whole of Austen's adult life. To young women such as my grandmother, who went out to France in 1917 as a telegraph operator with the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (later known as Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps), Waterloo was as near, or as distant, as my childhood memories of my grandmother's tales of the devastation at the Somme. One hundred years is an emotionally comprehensible span of historical memory: history as familial; the past as almost tangible and yet irretrievably lost; felt in equal measure as a sense of possession and dispossession, both stimulating longing. One hundred years is, in other words, a distance over which the external time of history seems to chime with something inward and intimate in each of us.

In the postwar years of the 1920s, in the wake of a 'European War which opened the doors to the average woman',¹⁷ Austen's particular brand of fiction was a point of orientation for the woman writer in search of a distinct female style. It was to prove an aesthetic

inheritance as precious as economic autonomy to those in flight from the stifling confines of Victorian femininity. For Virginia Woolf in 1928, Austen's legacy of passion schooled proves a freer and more fearless inheritance than Charlotte Brontë's celebrations of high-pitched emotional rebellion, despite the fact that Austen 'never drove through London in an omnibus or had luncheon in a shop by herself'.¹⁸ In the same year Rebecca West, in her essay 'The Long Chain of Criticism', argued for Austen's 'determination not to be confused by emotion' as no sign of limitation in her art or in her dealings with men and women, but rather as evidence of her enlightenment: 'she lived', wrote West, 'in the same world as Hume and Gibbon'.¹⁹ Significantly, Austen was recoverable at this time in a historical rather than a purely affective and domestic context, living and writing within history, and her example amenable to new historical purposes.²⁰ To these neo-Georgians,²¹ her stripped-back aesthetic held generic and sexual-political possibilities undetectable in the sentimental bagginess of a Victorian novelistic inheritance whose proximity provoked rejection.

Austen thus offered a future for women's fiction (a new shape and direction for the novel, as Woolf saw it) and a challenge to the conventional segregation of family history from political history. Her impact on the modernist novel's renewed attention to family structures as they intersect contemporary history is profound; her impact on the mid-century historical novel is no less so. Rather than reanimating the stale and dying conventions of Walter Scott's epic historical typology, the mid-century female historical novelist, like her academic counterpart, inclined to social history. Major postwar studies, for instance Dorothy George's *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* and *England in Transition*, developed a methodology of history as literature, deploying literary sources and devices.

Finding history in Austen rather than her contemporary Scott, Heyer – like the social historians George and Power and the economic historians Pinchbeck and Clark – finds history where it is supposed not to be. One reason Austen was recommended as wartime reading, given to soldiers in the trenches in 1914–18 and to those returning home suffering from what we would now identify as post-traumatic stress disorders, is because it was widely assumed that nothing happens in her novels. Austen was safe to read because she would not excite or over-stimulate the reader; above all, she was disengaged from public events. It is a view summed up in a centenary tribute by Reginald Farrer, writing in the *Quarterly Review* for July 1917 (Austen died in July 1817):

All the vast anguish of her time is non-existent to Jane Austen, when once she has got pen in hand, to make us a new kingdom of refuge from the toils and frets of life. Her kingdoms are hermetically sealed, in fact, and here lies the strength of their impregnable immortality; it is not without hope or comfort for us nowadays, to remember that 'Mansfield Park' appeared the year before Waterloo, and 'Emma' the year after.

This mantra would be repeated regularly through the twentieth century: see, for example, George Steiner's observation that, '[a]t the height of political and industrial revolution ... Miss Austen composes novels almost extraterritorial to history'.²² Austen's popular and critical reception assumed she was even unconscious that worldwide war was waging through most of her adult life – this despite the fact that turbulent public events intimately touched those close to her. Her beloved cousin Eliza de Feuillide, a significant influence on the teenage Austen and as glamorous as any Heyer heroine, was married to a captain in Marie Antoinette's Regiment of Dragoons. Though Eliza escaped Paris and the excesses of the Revolution, her husband was guillotined. Two of Austen's brothers saw active service as naval officers in the East and West Indies, North America, the Baltic and China. Her first three novels were even issued from a 'Military Library', and every one of her fictions explores the effect of contemporary war on the home front; she is our first novelist of the home front. There would be no plot to *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and no resolution to the Elizabeth–Darcy romance without George Wickham, militiaman and seducer. In *Mansfield Park* (1814), Fanny Price's courtship by the anti-hero Henry Crawford has the Portsmouth naval defences as its backdrop. Yet it is in her final novel *Persuasion* (1818), that Austen wrote something quite remarkable: perhaps the earliest study of the present-time as history and, in its heroine, Anne Elliot, a portrait of domestic suffering as the cost that prolonged war exacts from those who stay at home. *Persuasion* is a revolutionary study of the intersection of a woman's private life with public history. Here in Austen's most time-stamped novel, history is written in a different, quieter key from that of her contemporary Walter Scott.

From Austen to Heyer

Heyer's plots draw directly upon those of Austen, who also worked joyously with the conventions of the popular novel of her day. Austen's

romcom formula – a heroine and a hero whose sexual attraction, sparked by tension and difference, is initially thwarted, so that the characters have to learn something from each other and about themselves, negotiate troublesome obstacles and learn to take emotional risks – sums up the outline plot of both *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Grand Sophy* (1950).²³ But Austen rarely tells us what a character looks like, what she wears, how her environment is furnished, the colour and make of her carriage. For her materially rich Regency world-view, conscientiously expanded over a long career, Heyer is far more indebted to Metcalfe's social-historical refit than to anything presented in Austen's thrifty and reticent narratives, their brand of realism peculiarly devoid of material clues.

Between 1912 and 1923, Metcalfe and her publisher husband, R. W. Chapman, did important scholarly work in establishing accurate texts of Austen's novels following the careless reprint history of the later nineteenth century. Conceived before the outbreak of war, their work continued during the conflict thanks to the Army Field Post Office: Chapman, an officer in the Royal Garrison Artillery, was serving in Macedonia and in off-duty moments preparing editions of *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, with material duly sent back to Metcalfe in Oxford. Together they inaugurated the modern critical engagement with Austen and the twentieth-century Austen academic industry. Just as importantly they refashioned the terms on which Austen would be read more widely. Their immersive editions, complete with contemporary prints and fashion plates ('Autumnal Walking Dress' from *La Belle Assemblée*, 1815; 'Library Window Curtain' from *Ackerman's Repository of Arts*, January 1815; 'Full Dress of a Gentleman', also from *Ackerman's Repository*, April 1810), instructions on Regency dance steps, modes of address, styles of carriage (here, at last, we discover the difference between a barouche landau and a landaulet) transform the novels into handbooks to Austen's Regency world. In so doing they provide a bridge between Austen's text and Heyer: Austen reinterpreted as social history. In 1923 contemporary reviewers greeted Chapman's completed edition of the six Austen novels as marking a sea change. The critic A. B. Walkley, himself a recent Austen editor, wrote in the *Edinburgh Review* that

The words are the same but no longer bear the same meaning ... [the] notes ... enable us to put ourselves in [Austen's] place and, in reading, to recreate her works within ourselves.²⁴

A reader wanting to know about the latest Regency fashions or the entertainments at Vauxhall Gardens would be hard pressed to find the information in Austen's novels. But a simple internet search for 'Vauxhall Gardens' now takes you immediately to 'Jane Austen's World', a blog that 'brings Jane Austen, her novels and the Regency period alive through food, dress, social customs and other nineteenth-century historical details'.²⁵ This is Jane Austen first reimagined at the turn of the twentieth century and still going strong in the early twenty-first. In one sense, it is a massive misreading of Austen's art, where everyday materiality is generally rendered only in pathological terms. From the sparseness of its deployment visual detail, in particular, assumes a peculiar intensity in Austen, on occasion even a repulsive fascination: Mrs Clay's freckles and 'projecting tooth'; dead sister Mary's silver knife. As Claudia Johnson has perceptively remarked, 'when objects are made to stand out with specificity in Austen's novels, something is wrong'.²⁶ By contrast, Heyer's reimagining of Austen's world mid-century is far closer to the register that screen adaptations would discover half a century later.²⁷ Heyer inflates Austen's world with sumptuous props and glamorous costumes; bourgeois settings are upgraded and given the glamour of the aristocracy; her heroines are rewarded with virile male suitors. And she found the material for this not in Austen's text, but in her repackaging around 1920.

But is such detail really history? Filmic Austen, mainly a post-1995 phenomenon, brings into new focus what Lillian Robinson sought to clarify in her essay 'Reading Trash' which discusses Austen and Heyer. Her argument is in essence nothing new, reiterating assumptions from the interwar years: 'Literature belongs to women, history to men'. This remains so even when – or, perhaps, especially when – women write historical novels. Addressed specifically to the woman reader, the form is thereby identified as a lower class of fiction, intended for a mass market. Writing in 1978, the feminist Robinson does little to challenge Q. D. Leavis's contemptuous hierarchy of 1932 excoriating the taste of the mass reader (see note 10 above) other than to confess her own relish of the 'lower' forms – her defence being that male readers do not sink so low simply because they scarcely figure as readers *en masse*: mass reading is a female phenomenon. Gender lines remain drawn. The problem, as Robinson sees it, with 'trash' (and, for her, historical romance is the trashiest trash) is that its 'pseudo-information' is not untrue, but fails to reveal the forces at work in society. No more than a thick coating of detail, about costume, transport, manners, and so on, it misleads us into mistaking period set-dressing for participation. Even

when historically situated, she argues, women still remain unhistorical, their lives centred on the private and domestic, their reading escapist fables.²⁸

Of course, there is an escapist element. However, as Nicola Beauman argued a few years later in her now classic study of the women's novel, the pleasures and necessity of escapism should not be denied their place in history. Understood within and as history (in this case, that of the middle-class, home-confined Englishwoman between the wars), escapist reading supplies an outlet and a need where society fails.²⁹ Nothing is read in a vacuum. Escapism is a response and a protest within history. If it is the motor for Heyer's brand of Austen-infused romantic comedy, it also appeared in the repackaging of Austen's novels inaugurated in 1912 by Katharine Metcalfe and made more urgent by the historical events of 1914–18. Those events, if only briefly, gave women a glimpse of possibilities beyond the private sphere. But is there something more in Robinson's dismissal of her own guilty reading pleasure: a lurking anxiety that, after all, social history, the sphere that female pioneers so successfully shaped mid-century, may still not count as 'real' history?

Jane Austen, historical exemplar of the modern novel, had another trick up her sleeve, another line of attack to offer the historically beleaguered woman writer in the early decades of the twentieth century. One hundred years after her death, and coinciding with the contested readings of history that she offered women as various as Metcalfe, Woolf, West and Heyer, a wholly unexpected Jane Austen was launched on the world: the teenage writer. In 1922 Chatto and Windus issued, under the title *'Love and Freindship' and Other Early Works*, the contents of one of Austen's early manuscript notebooks, with an introduction by G. K. Chesterton. At the centre of the notebook lay 'The History of England from the reign of Henry the 4th to the death of Charles the 1st. By a partial, prejudiced, & ignorant Historian', completed a few weeks before Austen's sixteenth birthday.

If, as Rebecca West noted, Austen 'lived in the same world as Hume and Gibbon', she had worked out at a remarkably early age that history is one person's version of events. Her revisionist 'History of England' is not a supplement to the official record offered by Hume, Robertson and Oliver Goldsmith (the historians we know she read; we have no evidence that she read Gibbon), but rather an act of usurpation that also draws mocking attention to the limits imposed on female education. History, as the young Austen makes clear, in her encoded insertion into her account of members of her own family, is partisan and

always written from the perspective of now. Austen's open allegiance to the Stuart cause is signalled by her own portrait in the guise of Mary, Queen of Scots, and that of her mother as the wicked Queen Elizabeth, Mary's executioner and 'that disgrace to humanity, that pest of society'.³⁰ History, the teenage Austen recognised, cannot escape imaginative licence and personal feeling as well as the ideological dogmas of the historian. Rather than masking this lack of objectivity, as her authorities do, she scorns concealment, congratulating herself upon her prejudice in her concluding summary of the reign of Charles the First:

The Events of this Monarch's reign are too numerous for my pen, and indeed the recital of any Events (except what I make myself) is uninteresting to me; my principal reason for undertaking the History of England being to prove the innocence of the Queen of Scotland, which I flatter myself with having effectually done, and to abuse Elizabeth, tho' I am rather fearful of having fallen short in the latter part of my Scheme.³¹

Flushing out, through parody, the tricks of the historian, Austen exposed history's stock of invention, its shared territory with the novel – a form rising in status and encroaching in her day on history's ground. It is tempting to imagine that the rediscovery of Austen's partial and prejudiced 'History of England' in 1922 may have chimed with the efforts of women historians and historical novelists determined to expand the reach of history for their generation to include lives deemed un-noteworthy and unrecorded and to reclaim pasts not yet written.

Notes

- 1 All are represented in the Bodleian Library, the University of Oxford's legal deposit library. In most cases, however, the catalogue entry for each title reads 'stored off-site'.
- 2 Though women had studied at Oxford since the 1870s, attending lectures and sitting examinations, they were not admitted as full members or entitled to claim their degrees until 1920.
- 3 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 75.
- 4 Of Hilda Stewart Reid's novel, *Two Soldiers and a Lady*, set during the Civil Wars of the seventeenth century, one reviewer wrote: 'The strength of the book lies in its abnegation. By deliberate concentration on what might, at first sight, appear to be historically of least importance the author has succeeded in reproducing the spirit of the period – which determined the events'. 'Book Review', *The New York Times*, 18 September 1932, 6.
- 5 For readings of Austen in the 1920s and 1930s see also Lynch, 'At Home with Jane Austen', 159–92.
- 6 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 16.

- 7 This is the argument of Ina Ferris's study, *The Achievement of Literary Authority*, 6–7: 'how was it that for Scott's first readers the Waverley Novels appropriated so thoroughly the already existing category of historical novel, becoming synonymous with it for the rest of the nineteenth century?'
- 8 Anderson, 'From Progress to Catastrophe', *London Review of Books* (2011), 24–8.
- 9 For the contribution of women writers we must look to Diana Wallace's *The Woman's Historical Novel*. Although not dealing specifically with the historical novel (apart from a chapter examining Daphne du Maurier's 'romance with the past'), Alison Light in *Forever England* offers a supple context in which to consider the woman writer and reader as shaped by national and sexual pressures of the time.
- 10 This is implied throughout the influential thesis proposed in Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*.
- 11 Wolf, *Cassandra*, 60.
- 12 Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*; George, *English Social Life in the Eighteenth Century*, *England in Johnson's Day*, *England in Transition*; Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850*; Marshall, *The English Poor in the Eighteenth Century*.
- 13 Lofts, *Here was a Man*.
- 14 Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 104 (chapter 14).
- 15 Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 451.
- 16 Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Katharine Metcalfe, 389. In 1939 Mary Lascelles, another Somerville English tutor, published the first major critical study, *Jane Austen and Her Art*.
- 17 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 106.
- 18 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 69.
- 19 West, 'The Long Chain of Criticism', 264.
- 20 The comparison between Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen that runs throughout *A Room of One's Own* serves to underline this. Even the thrifty proportions of Austen's novels appear to prefigure those Woolf envisages for the novel of the future when, only a page after describing Austen's laughing rejection of the 'male sentence', she writes that 'the book has somehow to be adapted to the body ... women's books should be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men' (*A Room of One's Own*, 77–8).
- 21 There are obvious links between Woolf and others' advocacy of Austen's restrained novelistic form and the preservationist architectural concerns of the Georgian Group, established in 1937: 'The impulse toward imaginative sites which were free of clutter, untrammelled by the baggage of the Victorian, took many forms: the functional "clean" lines of modernist design or equally the raiding of the past for what was felt to be a more rational aesthetic' (Light, *Forever England*, 35).
- 22 Farrer, 'Jane Austen, ob. July 18, 1817', 1917, 249; Steiner, *After Babel*, 9. Compare: 'Austen maintained the same outward silence toward England's military struggle with France as toward the great political events of the day' (Roberts, *Jane Austen and the French Revolution*, 68).
- 23 Other Heyer novels directly reference those of Austen. For example, *Sense and Sensibility in Regency Buck* (London: Heinemann, 1935); *Sense and Sensibility and Mansfield Park in A Civil Contract* (London: Heinemann, 1961).
- 24 Walkley, 'The Novels of Jane Austen', 30–1.
- 25 *Jane Austen's World*. Accessed 5 May 2020. <https://janeaustensworld.wordpress.com>.
- 26 Austen, *Persuasion*, 33 (chapter 5); *Mansfield Park*, 358–9 (chapter 38); Johnson, 'Jane Austen's Relics', 222.
- 27 Although cinema discovered its identity from its beginnings in the 1890s by consciously deploying the expressive devices of the novel, for example by adapting features found in Dickens and in Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Austen's novels did not find their way onto the big screen for another 100 years. The only exception is MGM's 1940 film of *Pride and Prejudice*, starring Laurence Olivier and Greer Garson, and the BBC telefilm of *Emma* in 1948. Radio and television adaptations (afternoon plays, tea-time dramatisations of classic texts) flourished in the mid-twentieth century, but these tended to reinforce a view of Austen's art as thrifty and morally weighted, more appropriately adapted for domestic or schoolroom instruction.
- 28 Robinson, 'On Reading Trash', 200–22.

- 29 Beauman, *A Very Great Profession*.
- 30 The 13 miniature images of monarchs that her sister Cassandra contributed to the 'History' are not only decked out in modern dress, but also appear in several instances to be modelled on Austen family and friends. For details see Jane Austen, *Teenage Writings*, 128; for the medallion images of Elizabeth and Mary, 129 and notes.
- 31 Austen, *Teenage Writings*, 133.

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2

The not so silly ass: Freddy Standen, his fictional contemporaries and alternative masculinity

Geraldine Perriam

'Maybe it's time to see fewer rakes and bad boys and more heroes who know the right way to tie a cravat and try their hardest to fix the problems around them, rather than creating more.'¹

The quote above comes from an appreciation of Georgette Heyer's *Cotillion*, one of her most popular Regency romances. The novel, which features the characters of Freddy Standen and Kitty Charing, was published in 1953. In this novel, as Girshman comments, Heyer subverted the stereotype of the masculine hero and fashioned instead Freddy Standen: a quiet, apparently dim young man whose interests differ from those of Heyer's other heroes. Freddy, the silly ass, becomes the romantic lead, resolving plot dilemmas and inspiring the love of Kitty Charing.² The traditional qualities of a romantic hero appear to be embodied in Freddy's cousin Jack Westruther, who initially inspires Kitty's devotion; but it is to Freddy that Kitty finds herself increasingly attracted as the novel progresses. Heyer often used the Westruther model for her romantic leads. Several of them were Corinthians – sporting, forceful, often cynical men – and a model for many a romantic novelist.³

The character of Freddy Standen drew on other fictional heroes: Orczy's Scarlet Pimpernel, Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey and Allingham's Albert Champion.⁴ All three were outwardly frivolous and unlikely heroes, yet they possessed many of the usual traits of the masculine/man-of-action hero beneath foppish or foolish exteriors. In this the character of Freddy is different, despite exhibiting some of the traits required of a hero in the resolution of plot. To the last, he is a self-deprecating man, unsure whether his love is reciprocated and diffident about declaring his love for Kitty.

In this chapter I contrast notions of the romantic hero with the stereotype of the silly ass – a characterisation adopted by Heyer and many of her contemporaries. I consider a few other silly asses of the period, including a comparison of Freddy’s proposal to Kitty with Lord Peter Wimsey’s to Harriet Vane, in an examination of the demands of consistent characterisation. Freddy Standen is unique among Heyer’s heroes; the alternative masculinity of his characterisation enables Heyer to subvert the stereotypical romantic hero while maintaining the requisite conventions of romance plotting. The argument moves between the novel *Cotillion*, the characterisation of Freddy, other depictions of silly ass characters by authors who were contemporaries of Heyer and enduring interpretations of the romantic hero.

From early steam engines to the intricate tying of neckcloths, from sedan chairs to the Battle of Waterloo, Heyer’s novels are characterised by extensive research.⁵ Her meticulous authenticity is lightly worn; it is informative yet entertaining, even as it creates a private world, a rich and unique landscape.⁶ It is within this unique landscape that one of Heyer’s heroes – Freddy Standen, Bond Street Beau, Pink of the Ton – woos and wins his Kitty in *Cotillion*. In a discussion of the ‘parodic element’ of Heyer’s fiction, Wallace suggests that Heyer ‘plays games with her audience, ironically mocking the very conventions of romance’. In doing so she signals

both the desire for an ideal marriage *and* a recognition of its unattainability in the ‘real’ world, whether past or present.⁷

Byatt believes this to be an achievement of balance between romance and reality which she describes as ‘a romanticised anti-romanticism’.⁸

On with the dance

The plot of *Cotillion* centres on Kitty Charing, ward and unpaid housekeeper of the miserly curmudgeon Mr Penicuik. He offers her as a bride to any of his five great-nephews, along with the assurance of inheriting his fortune. Kitty is invited to choose one of them, the assumption being that she will choose Mr Penicuik’s favourite, Jack Westruther, with whom she is infatuated. Some of the nephews – but not Jack – duly arrive at Mr Penicuik’s house, Arnside, only to be rejected by a furious Kitty, who finds her guardian’s plans monstrous. Kitty is effectively being auctioned: if she accepts a proposal from one

of the great-nephews, she and her husband will inherit Mr Penicuik's fortune. If she refuses all of the offers made, she will be destitute upon her guardian's death. Perhaps fortunately, the offers made to her by the Reverend Rattray (Hugh) and Lord Dolphinton (Dolph) are in no way romantic.

At the end of her interview with them, Kitty vents her feelings:

'There is no one for whom I have the *least* partiality, and I don't wish to marry *anyone* in your odious family! I think Hugh is a humbug, and Claud has a cruel nature, and Dolph and Freddy are just *stupid*, and as for Jack I am truly thankful that he was not coxcomb enough to come here, because I dislike him more than all the rest of you together! Goodnight!'

The door slammed behind her ... (28)

Kitty escapes the house, hoping to run away, when she encounters another of the great-nephews, Freddy Standen, who has come to Arnside unaware why he has been summoned. He is persuaded by Kitty to become engaged to her so that she may escape Arnside and go to London, where her undisclosed aim is to find Jack.

Reluctantly permitted by Mr Penicuik to go to London, Kitty leaves her governess, Miss Fishguard, known as Fish, behind. She and Freddy then become involved in the affairs of others in a characteristic Heyer romp. All ends well when Kitty and Freddy declare their love for each other.

The character of Freddy, presented as something of a silly ass, is unique among Heyer's romantic heroes. Although she played with notions of heroic status – conceiving a diffident hero, for example, in Gilly, Duke of Sale, in *The Foundling* (1948) – she only adopted a silly ass as hero with Freddy Standen. He presents an alternative masculinity, one that fulfils some of the requirements of a romantic hero and yet does not conform to type. As Girshman acutely observes, Freddy knows how to tie a cravat and manages to solve problems instead of creating them.⁹ Kitty's gradual awakening to Freddy's suitability as a husband is documented through both his actions and Kitty's realisation of what she seeks in a romantic/life partner.

What does make a romantic hero? Jones summarises the romantic heroes of early twentieth-century fiction such as Hornung's Raffles and Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes as follows, calling them part of a 'romance masculinity':

Drawn in part from the colonial violence of early romance revival writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson and H. Rider Haggard and the cosmopolitan rhetoric of English athleticism, Conan Doyle and Hornung helped create what may be called a 'romance masculinity'. In conflict with the moral element of Victorian manliness, romance masculinity is socially rebellious, homosocial, anti-domestic, and driven by the aesthetic experience of romance and danger. Generated from the historical conflicts that surround the representation of British men in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, romance masculinity is a mode, a way of being male; it is a style. Raffles' cosmopolitan violence will echo in the romance masculinities of John Buchan's hero, Richard Hannay, H. C. McNeile's ('Sapper') Bulldog Drummond and Ian Fleming's famous James Bond, making Raffles' 'style' an ideal for British masculinity.¹⁰

This explanation of 'romance masculinity' could also be applied to many of Heyer's Regency heroes – Lord Alverstoke in *Frederica* (1965), Mr Beaumaris in *Arabella* (1949), Lord Carlyon in *The Reluctant Widow* (1946) and, in part, to the character of Jack Westruther in *Cotillion*. Many of Heyer's heroes exhibit the characteristics outlined above to varying degrees, but not all do. Sir Gareth Ludlow, who features in *Sprig Muslin* (1956), is athletic, active and confident, yet he is also sweeter-tempered than other Heyer heroes and is interestingly described as 'modest' (13). The opening chapter of *Sprig Muslin* shows Sir Gareth to be an indulgent uncle with his nephews and nieces, yet also courteous and gentle with the governess. His relationship with Lady Hester Theale, the downtrodden unmarried daughter of Lord Brancaster, shows further sensitivity and understanding.

As noted above, Gilly, Duke of Sale is a diffident hero. *The Foundling* (1948), however, documents his growth into a stronger, more forceful character. At the start of the novel, bullied by his uncle and his valet, Gilly is often overruled; he is scolded by the same uncle, Lord Lionel, for being 'far too diffident' (20). In order to shake off the oppressive Lord Lionel, also his guardian, and his faithful retainers, Gilly embarks on an adventure as 'Mr Dash of Nowhere in Particular', at the end of which he displays more assertiveness. In discussion with his uncle about the sale of some land, he confronts him directly:

The Duke raised his head, and met his uncle's fierce look with one so icily aloof that Lord Lionel was startled. 'I have borne

enough,' [Gilly] said, his voice still level and low-pitched, yet with anger throbbing in it. 'I will not endure any longer this ceaseless thwarting of my every wish. I am fully sensible, sir, of the great debt I owe you for your unremitting care of me, of my interests, but my gratitude would be increased tenfold if you would bring yourself to believe that I am neither a child nor a fool!' (342)

The Foundling's central theme is Gilly's growing confidence and assertiveness. Towards the end of the novel Harriet, his fiancée, acknowledges this, remarking, 'Gilly, no one can foist *anyone* on to you any more' (260).

Freddy Standen remains the sole hero whose characterisation is generally reserved for a secondary character for comic effect. Ferdy Fakenham in *Friday's Child* (1944) shares some of Freddy's characteristics, but he is more of a foil for other characters than a romantic hero. Freddy, however unpromising a hero at the beginning of *Cotillion*, where he is characterised by Kitty (and others) as 'stupid', becomes the deserved object of her affection. As the novel unfolds Freddy's actions and demeanour show that he is able to take action and to resolve difficulties while remaining self-deprecating and modest. The glib assumptions of Kitty and others that he is inherently stupid change throughout the novel, as he progresses from expedient faux-betrothed to Kitty's romantic companion.

Men of the moment: new forms of masculinity

Other authors writing at the same time as Heyer challenged more established notions of the romantic hero in their fiction. Orczy subverted gender stereotypes in her depiction of the Scarlet Pimpernel.¹¹ Despite being a man of action as much as Richard Hannay, Sir Percy Blakeney's public persona is that of an effete dandy, a man more concerned with his cravat than with affairs of state. This proved an effective ruse for the plot of the Pimpernel novels, as Blakeney could pass for a dandy in public while acting as an exemplar of contemporary British masculinity in more covert spheres. The public/private characterisation epitomised by Blakeney was also favoured by some writers of detective fiction. Lord Peter Wimsey and Albert Campion both adopt a public persona as a silly ass, their 'clever foppishness'¹² providing a cover for their detecting.¹³ Both men conformed to the required stereotype in

their detective work, using intelligence,¹⁴ being active and assertive in their work and demonstrating the ability to solve problems.

Freddy Standen differs from these characters in that his persona is not adopted, nor is it a pose. His diffidence, gentle demeanour and air of vacuity are not assumed. In this, Freddy most resembles Bertie Wooster, the creation of P. G. Wodehouse.¹⁵ The difference between the two is that Heyer's skilful handling of character develops Freddy into a romantic hero to whom Kitty can convincingly become attracted. Bertie Wooster attracts women and is attracted to them in turn, but he remains an unromantic figure, with no romantic feelings strong enough to remain committed to a woman. It is the relationship with Jeeves, his manservant, that is paramount. Bertie's character remains largely static. Almost all of the problem solving is carried out by Jeeves, who comments that although Bertie is 'an exceedingly pleasant and amiable young gentleman' he is 'not intelligent' and is in fact 'mentally ... negligible'. Bertie states that Jeeves is a 'mastermind'.¹⁶

Freddy is a silly ass and even Kitty, to start with, refers to him as stupid. Yet in contrast with, for example, Ferdy Fakenham in *Friday's Child* (1944), from the outset Freddy has more substance. At first he seems to be an unpromising model for a hero, being introduced as:

a slender young gentleman, of average height and graceful carriage. His countenance was unarresting, but amiable; and a certain vagueness characterised his demeanour. (31)

He was neither witty nor handsome; his disposition was retiring; and although he might be seen at any social gathering, he never (except by the excellence of his tailoring) drew attention to himself. Not for Mr Standen the tricks of gentlemen seeking notoriety! He was quite a pretty whip, but no one had ever seen him take a fly off the leader's ear, or heard of his breaking a record in his racing curricule ... he was no Corinthian ... and had never been known to indulge in the mildest flirtation. But a numerous circle of male acquaintances held him in considerable affection, and with the ladies he was a prime favourite. The most sought-after beauty was pleased to stand up with so graceful a dancer; any lady desirous of redecorating her drawing-room was anxious for his advice; no hostess considered her invitation-list complete without his name. (101-2)

Far from being a man of action, Freddy is a drawing room favourite. Although he hunts, Freddy is mostly a Bond Street Beau. He is a 'Pink

of the *Ton*' with his 'judgement ... in all matters of Fashion' deemed 'extremely nice' (30). He often criticises the dashing but erratic style of dressing favoured by his sister Meg, preferring Kitty's more natural taste.

Several of the characters in the novel, including Kitty, comment that Freddy is stupid or foolish. As the 'delayed romantic recognition'¹⁷ dawns on Kitty, however, she begins to emphasise Freddy's kindness and other positive attributes. Freddy declares that Kitty has 'too kind a heart', to which she protests:

'Oh, Freddy, how absurd you are! When you have a much kinder one than I have!
'No, really Kit,' protested Freddy, revolted. 'Haven't got anything of the sort! Been on the town for years!' (203)

When Freddy declares that he has no brains, Kitty now disagrees:

'... you have got brains, Freddy!' Kitty said indignantly. Mr Standen, already shaken by having his hand rubbed worshipfully against a lady's cheek, goggled at her. 'You think I've got brains,' he said, awed. 'Not confusing me with Charlie [his brother]?'
'Charlie?' uttered Miss Charing contemptuously. 'I daresay he has book-learning, but you have – you have *address*, Freddy!
'Well, by Jove!' said Mr Standen, dazzled by this new vision of himself. (203)

The appearance of other silly asses in other novels of the same period bear a description similar to that of Freddy. The first is Albert Campion, from *Look to the Lady* (1931):

A tall, thin young man with a pale, inoffensive face and vague eyes behind enormous horn-rimmed spectacles ... in his hand he held a string to which was attached a child's balloon of a particularly vituperant pink.¹⁸

Julia Thorogood remarks that for Margery Allingham, Albert Campion was: 'the goon, the zany, "the private joke figure"'. Nor was Allingham unique; 'in a generation still laughing off the effects of the Great War, she was not the only writer who relished fatuousness'.¹⁹

The second is Lord Peter Wimsey:

At no other time had he any pretensions to good looks, and at all times he was spoilt by a long, narrow chin and a long, receding forehead, accentuated by the brushed back sleekness of his tow-coloured hair. Labour papers, softening down the chin, caricatured him as a typical aristocrat.²⁰

Elsewhere Lord Peter is described as having a 'long amiable face [that] looked as if it had generated spontaneously from his top hat, as white maggots breed from Gorgonzola' (13) – hardly a dashing description. Indeed, the bathetic detail makes it impossible not to view him as a figure of potential ridicule.

Martin suggests that women, and in this specific case, Dorothy L. Sayers, write themselves into their romantic heroes.²¹ They become part wish-fulfilment, part self. Martin suggests that the creation of Lord Peter Wimsey was Sayers' successful creation in herself of her own 'masculine' voice to replace the harmful voice of the patriarchy she had to live within.²² While this does not hold true for Heyer's characterisation of Freddy Standen, many of Heyer's heroes nonetheless represent a desire to portray men and women 'who really *talk* to each other, know what is going on between them'.²³ Kitty and Freddy do indeed talk to each other; it is one of their growing relationship's strengths. Freddy's interventions and problem-solving initiatives are not swash-buckling or dramatic gestures; they are rather mostly practical solutions of such matters as obtaining a special marriage licence, packing for a woman about to elope to France and strategies for rescuing one's betrothed from a vulgar masquerade. It is these qualities that Kitty comes to value.

Both Wimsey and Campion are silly asses, contemporary with, and sharing many of the characteristics of, Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster.²⁴ Where they diverge from Wooster is in their ability to solve crimes, to work in tandem with the police and to woo and marry intelligent, able women with careers of their own. Their silly ass demeanour is both camouflage and ingrained behaviour. Unlike the Scarlet Pimpernel, their nonsense is not entirely assumed. With Freddy, however, his diffidence and proclaimed lack of intelligence and/or learning is not feigned or a disguise. It is his individual combination of courage, kindness and a practical, unassuming ability to solve problems that wins Kitty's admiration.

'Romanticised anti-romanticism': Lochinvar to Legerwood

All three, Wimsey, Campion and Freddy, in their own way, practise 'silly assery' to some extent. None of them is dashing handsome. One character describes Lord Peter Wimsey as 'an effeminate bounder' in a 'tom-fool eye-glass'.²⁵ Their creators are, however, able to fashion heroes from such unromantic material. They present an alternative masculinity. In terms of plot resolution, these characters do their bit as good heroes should, but they remain, to varying degrees, self-deprecating.

In contrast Freddy's father, and his cousin Jack Westruther, are more likely candidates for a Heyer hero. Freddy's father, Lord Legerwood, is a model of a Heyer hero, described by his admiring son as a 'downy one' (45). Legerwood is rather cynical, a little enigmatic, smooth and charming, but also able to rap out his demands when needed. He is close in type to Mr Beaumaris in *Arabella* and Alverstoke in *Frederica*. Jack Westruther is another Heyer hero type: entitled, demanding, self-assured, arrogant, good-looking, sporting and rakish, he is cynically amused at the world. He is happy to keep Kitty immured at Arnside until he decides he wants to marry. Jack is closer in behaviour to Oliver Carleton in *Lady of Quality* (1972) and Lord Damerel in *Venetia* (1958). He is also self-willed and uncompromising when it comes to having his own way, as we see in this passage, where his behaviour allows Freddy an unlikely moment of romantic-heroic glory.

As the novel nears its end, Kitty arrives, with Lord Dolphinton and his fiancée Miss Plymstock in tow, at Hugh Rattray's Rectory, in the hope that Hugh will perform a marriage service for the couple. Jack Westruther then unexpectedly appears, followed by Freddy. Jack has never believed in the story of Kitty's engagement to Freddy. He continues to assume that Kitty is his for the asking and that she is merely duping Freddy to have her revenge on Jack. His absence from Arnside when Mr Penicuik summoned his great-nephews to propose Kitty as a bride for one of them infuriated Kitty, despite her protests that she knew that Jack would not come.

Jack's similarity to the heroes of Walter Scott, once believed by Kitty to be the romantic ideal, is marked in his desire for a virtuous, passive wife-in-waiting, prepared to mark time at Arnside with Mr Penicuik until Jack decides it is time to marry. Like the women in *Marmion* (1808), the poem that features Lochinvar, Kitty's limited agency²⁶ during her time at Arnside, keeping house for her guardian,

is approved by Jack. Like *Lochinvar*, he will appear at a time of his choosing and 'make' her his wife. Kitty's constancy – that quality so prevalent in heroines of romances such as *Marmion* – is taken for granted by Jack. But when Jack decides to call Kitty's bluff on her engagement to Freddy and to suggest that Jack and Kitty marry instead, Kitty begs him to stop:

'... indeed, Jack, I am excessively fond of you, and I daresay I shall always be, in spite of knowing that you are quite odiously selfish, but, if you will not be very much offended, I would much prefer not to be married to you!'

He stood staring down into her perturbed face. The laugh had quite vanished from his eyes and there was a white look around his mouth. Miss Charing had never before had experience of the temper Mr Westruther's cousins knew well, and she was a little frightened.

'So that's it, is it?' he said quite softly. 'George was right after all! Dolphinton was a little too much for you to swallow, but you had indeed set your heart on a title and a great position, and so you laid the cleverest trap for Freddy that I have ever been privileged to see! You cunning little jade!'

It was at this point that Mr Standen, that most exquisite of Pinks, astounded the assembled company, himself included, by knocking him down.

...'Good God!' said the Rector, forgetting his cloth. 'Well done, Freddy! A nice flush hit!' (317–18)

Kitty's rejection of Jack is something the latter has never contemplated, hence his furious denunciation of her virtue. Her lack of constancy, seen through his self-interested eyes, can be explained only by mercenary expediency. He is as emotionally 'flooded' by Kitty's rejection as he is physically flooded by Freddy.

Despite such uncharacteristic and violent behaviour, Freddy remains a practical person, his belief in what constitutes good 'ton' allied with a kind heart. He is not only a devoted son and elder brother, but also someone who can solve problems with dexterity and tact. When Freddy rescues Kitty from a 'vulgar' masquerade, she sees that her schoolgirl romantic notions of heroes such as *Lochinvar* are not only unattainable but impractical.

Brought up by Miss Fishguard to relish the behaviour of Lochinvar, who carried off the bride of Netherby on horseback, Kitty eventually realises the absurdity of such a tale. Freddy may be something of a 'laggard in love' unlike Lochinvar, but Kitty values Freddy's chivalry. As she explains to Freddy's sister Meg:

'I do think,' said Kitty fervently, 'that Freddy is the most truly chivalrous person imaginable ... and a great deal more to the purpose than all the people one was taught to revere, like Sir Lancelot, and Sir Galahad, and Young Lochinvar, and – that kind of man! I daresay Freddy might not be a great hand at slaying dragons, but you may depend upon it none of those knight-errants would be able to rescue one from a social fix, and you must own, Meg, that one has not the smallest need of a man who can kill dragons!' (245)

Modest proposals

Unlike Miss Milbourne in *Friday's Child* (1944), who wishes that the very romantic, Byronic Lord Wrotham would ride off with her from the stuffy Duke of Severn's estate, Kitty prefers Freddy's ability to resolve practical difficulties. This he accomplishes without fuss or flamboyance. It is Freddy's kindness and 'address' that Kitty appreciates. Heyer's knowledge of contemporary romance and poetry from the Regency period and her grasp of classics enabled her to turn super-heroics like those of Lochinvar – 'dashed embarrassing, you know!' (323) – into a comic backdrop for *Cotillion*. The romantic hero motif runs through the novel as a reflection of Kitty's development from immature schoolgirl to lover. It also highlights Freddy's more practical and worldly view of correct behaviour. Histrionic flights of passion are repellent to Freddy, something Heyer neatly demonstrates when Freddy and Camille D'Evron (Kitty's adventurer cousin) converse.

Freddy's decision to help Kitty's cousin D'Evron to elope with Olivia Broughty to France – neatly ridding Kitty of the embarrassment of a cousin who gained duplicitous entry into polite society – takes a practical form. He is frankly bemused by D'Evron's anguish and lack of application to resolving his dilemma. When conversing with the distraught and melodramatic 'Chevalier' D'Evron, each man indulging in comic, cultural stereotyping of the other, Freddy's practicality comes to the fore.

The Chevalier [D'Evron] once more sank his head in his hands, saying with a bitter laugh: 'Oh, you are without sensibility, you!'

'I may be without sensibility, but I'm dashed if I'd sit tearing my hair out when a man came to tell me Kit was in trouble!' retorted Freddy. 'Much good that would do her!' (285)

Freddy is exasperated by the Chevalier, yet it is Freddy's practical suggestions that enable D'Evron and Miss Broughty to be together. Freddy, however, remains diffident and unsure of Kitty. His proposal, at the close of the novel, is sweetly unassuming. There are comic elements within this act, such as his declaration that he has 'no brains' (323), but it is nonetheless clear that Freddy loves Kitty.²⁷ After Freddy has knocked down Jack Westruther, he and Kitty are alone together:

'Don't mind telling you it was as much as I could do to keep a still tongue in my head when [Jack] asked you to marry him tonight. What I mean is, like you to have everything you want. Wished it was me, and not Jack, that's all.'

Miss Charing raised her face from her handkerchief. 'I was never in love with Jack in my life ... I thought I was but I know now that it was no such thing. He seemed just like all the heroes in books, but I soon found that he is not like them at all.'

'No,' agreed Freddy. 'I'm afraid I ain't either, Kit.'

'Of course you are not! No one is! And if somebody was, I should think him quite odious!'

'You would?' said Freddy hopefully. '... if you ever met anyone like that fellow the Fish [Miss Fishguard] talked of – fellow who snatched up some female in the middle of a party ... dashed embarrassing, you know!... You don't feel you could marry me instead? Got no brains, of course, and I ain't a handsome fellow like Jack, but I love you. Don't think I could ever love anyone else. Daresay it ain't any use telling you, but – well, there it is!' (323)

Heyer draws again on *Lochinvar*, returning to the hero motif – something that Kitty now rejects as 'odious'. For Heyer, the fitness of the romantic recognition and resolution of the plot required that Freddy remain 'in character'; his diffident declaration of love is made in the belief that he will be rejected. Freddy retains his hesitant,

inarticulate manner but still manages both to declare his love for Kitty and to convey his hope of marrying her. A sudden change to a romantic masterful hero would be out of keeping with Freddy's character and the tenor of the novel. A proposal from a silly ass must contain a comic element. Freddy's proposal is both loving and comic: it is also romantic. Heyer has deftly developed Freddy via the plot to make him an acceptable choice of mate and, above all, someone whom Kitty can convincingly love. Ford's comments on *Persuasion* could also be applied to *Cotillion*:

Persuasion's anti-romantic tendencies, its continual deflation of romance through irony, comedy or even the dailiness of the characters' lives, is an integral part of its identity as romance.²⁸

Similarly, when Lord Peter Wimsey makes a proposal to Harriet Vane, he is hesitant, exhibiting some of the 'upper class idiocy' that, according to Plain, hides his 'frailty' that 'cuts him down to size'.²⁹ There is a blackly comic element to Lord Peter Wimsey's proposal to Harriet Vane, and Harriet Vane comprehensively punctures Lord Peter's sense of entitlement. Freddy shows no such entitlement toward Kitty.

In Sayers' novel *Strong Poison* (1937) Harriet Vane is actually in prison, having been charged with the murder of her former lover. As she awaits a retrial, in which a guilty verdict will result in her being hanged, Lord Peter visits her. With spectacularly bad timing, and not without a sense of entitlement, as noted above,³⁰ he proceeds to propose to her:

'What I mean to say is, when this is all over, I want to marry you, if you can put up with me and all that.'

Harriet Vane, who had been smiling at him, frowned, and an indefinable expression of distaste came into her eyes.

'Oh, are you another of them? That makes forty-seven.'

'Forty-seven what?'

'Proposals. They come in by every post. I suppose there are a lot of imbeciles who want to marry anybody who's at all notorious.'

'Oh,' said Wimsey. 'Dear me, that makes it very awkward. As a matter of fact, I don't need any notoriety.'

Note the comment from Peter, 'that makes it very awkward'. On hearing that Harriet, because of her notoriety, has received scores of

proposals, Peter is bemused. He is, to use Plain's words, 'cut down to size'³¹ rather swiftly by Harriet's brusque response. Entitlement begins to ebb. Harriet, cynical though not unamused, asks Peter why he wants to marry her. His response reveals a diffidence similar to Freddy's.

[Harriet asks Peter why he wants to marry her]

'Why? Oh, well – I thought you'd be rather an attractive person to marry. That's all. I mean, I sort of took a fancy to you. I can't tell you why. There's no rule about it, you know.'

'I see. Well, it's very nice of you.'

'I wish you wouldn't sound as if you thought it was rather funny. I know I've got a silly face but I can't help that. As a matter of fact, I'd like somebody I could talk sensibly to, who would make life interesting. And I could give you a lot of plots for your books, if that's any inducement.' (89)

[Later] 'Oh, by the way – I don't positively repel you or anything like that, do I? Because, if I do, I'll take my name off the waiting-list at once.'

'No,' said Harriet, kindly and a little sadly. 'No, you don't repel me.' (93)

Neither Freddy's nor Peter's proposal is floridly romantic or gushing. The idea of matching Harriet and Peter at the end of *Strong Poison*, as Sayers initially intended, jarred with the author; she decided that the relationship could not flourish if neatly roped off at the end of the novel. Peter and Harriet had, like Freddy and Kitty, to move at a more prosaic pace, getting to know one another.

Likewise Heyer's understanding of characterisation would not allow her to turn Freddy into a dashing Lochinvar. Instead, through an entertaining sequence of events, Kitty and Freddy reach an understanding and learn to communicate with each other. A sudden, masterful declaration would have been incongruous. One of the reasons Kitty eventually discards romantic notions of superheroics such as those of Lochinvar is their unreality: they do not belong to the world in which the couple live. A choice of mate in the 'romantic anti-romanticism'³² of Heyer cannot be conflated with a fantasy.

Heyer was an astute craftswoman. In her capable hands Freddy Standen, silly ass and alternative hero, demonstrated that it was possible to be both a lover and a fool; to be endearing and heroic; to engender confidence and affection. Byatt might describe Heyer as

‘ferocious’, but she did acknowledge Heyer’s comedy to be ‘archetypal, external’, recognising that it possesses ‘a kind of earthy vigour that is sustaining’.³³ Heyer was also capable of subverting the romantic hero, drawing on contemporary texts and the character of the silly ass to provide a rounded tale of Regency romp, the ridiculous and romance.

Notes

- 1 Girshman, ‘Defending a Happy Ending’.
- 2 The term ‘silly ass’ is associated with the comedies of P. G. Wodehouse, particularly the character of Bertie Wooster. Character actors such as Jonathan Cecil (who played Wooster on stage) and Ian Carmichael (who played both Wooster and Dorothy L. Sayers’ detective hero Lord Peter Wimsey) were often cast as silly asses. As Marina Warner (1994) comments, the ass is a classic figure of fun. Braying or inarticulate, sometimes a figure of pathos, the ass was employed by dramatists such as Shakespeare and Apuleius among others. Heyer’s wide knowledge of the classics, poetry and canonical literature is evident in her work, which includes quotations from Hesiod, Sir Walter Scott, Byron and other well-known works. Freddy Standen’s similarity to Bertie Wooster also demonstrates that Heyer was conversant with contemporary works of fiction and theatre. Monty Python developed the silly ass into the ‘upper-class twit’ in their film of 1971, ‘And Now For Something Completely Different’. The use of the term ‘silly ass’ continues in film and stage criticism. It has also been widely used in commentaries and criticism related to Golden Age (interwar) detective fiction (see Baldick, ‘Literature of the 1920s’; Porter, ‘From Slapstick to Satire’; Bruntsdale, *Gumshoes*).
- 3 Wallace, “‘History to the Defeated’”; Macdonald, *Novelists Against Social Change*.
- 4 Thorogood, *Margery Allingham*; Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers*; Perriam, ‘Sex, Sweet Danger and the Fairy Tale’; Perriam, ‘Who’s Bertie?’; Perriam, ‘Mr Campion and the Other One’.
- 5 Kendra, ‘Silver Forks, Stereotypes and Regency Romance’; Byatt, ‘An Honourable Escape’.
- 6 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*; Hodge, *The Private World of Georgette Heyer*.
- 7 Wallace, “‘History to the Defeated’”, 82–3.
- 8 Byatt, ‘An Honourable Escape’, 265.
- 9 Girshman, ‘Defending a Happy Ending’.
- 10 Jones, ‘E. W. Hornung’s Raffles and the English Aesthetic Movement’, 45.
- 11 Perriam, ‘Who’s Bertie?’
- 12 Light, *Forever England*, 72.
- 13 Schaub, ‘Middlebrow Feminism and the Politics of Sentiment’, 30.
- 14 Kenney, *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers*; Thorogood, *Margery Allingham*.
- 15 Perriam, ‘Who’s Bertie?’
- 16 Wodehouse, *The Inimitable Jeeves*, 3, 53, 35 (order reflects quotations in the text).
- 17 Byatt, ‘An Honourable Escape’, 264.
- 18 Allingham, *Look to the Lady*, 23.
- 19 Thorogood, *Margery Allingham*, 128.
- 20 Sayers, *Whose Body?*, 31.
- 21 Are men less likely to write themselves into female characters? One of the enduring criticisms of many male authors’ depiction of women is that their female characters lack substance and/or depth. This has been noted in both fiction and drama.
- 22 Martin, ‘Fantastical Conversations with the Other in the Self’, 25.
- 23 Byatt, ‘An Honourable Escape’, 265.
- 24 Eads, ‘The Anti-Romantic Comedies of Dorothy L. Sayers’; Perriam, ‘Who’s Bertie?’
- 25 Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, 407.
- 26 Ford, ‘Learning Romance from Scott and Byron’, 82.
- 27 Another comic moment occurs when Freddy asks Kitty to take off her bonnet: ‘Here, take this dashed bonnet off! How the deuce am I to kiss you with a lot of curst feathers in my face?’ (324).

- 28 Ford, 'Learning Romance from Scott and Byron', 87. The purchase of a toothbrush for Miss Broughty when she is about the elope with Camille D'Evron is an incident both comic and prosaic. Ever practical, Freddy knows that his less practical sister Meg will have forgotten some essential item when packing for Miss Broughty.
- 29 Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 13.
- 30 Eads, 'The Anti-Romantic Comedies of Dorothy L. Sayers'.
- 31 Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 13.
- 32 Byatt, 'An Honourable Escape', 265.
- 33 Byatt, 'The Ferocious Reticence of Georgette Heyer', 303.

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3

Judith Taverner as dandy-in-training in Georgette Heyer's *Regency Buck*

Laura J. George

In 1935 Georgette Heyer published *Regency Buck* – arguably one of the more momentous events in the history of popular fiction publishing in the twentieth century.¹ Heyer had also published mysteries and contemporary novels, and her romances to this point – starting with her first published novel, *The Black Moth* (1921) – had focused on mid-Georgian characters. But *Regency Buck* was a departure, and a powerful one. Its Regency period setting not only provided the ground for Heyer's subsequent 25 successful Regency romance novels, but also inaugurated a sub-genre of romantic fiction that remains one of the most popular to this day. In *Publishers Weekly* (issue of 11 November 2019) Betsy O'Donovan, while focusing on current changes to genre conventions for Regency romance, gives Heyer credit for creating the genre:

Beginning in the 1930s, Heyer caused a sensation with a series of witty, slang-filled novels packed with deep research, down to the smallest ruffle or idiom that was allowed into her meticulously rendered, glamorous Regency world. It was also a world that was white, polite, and wealthy (give or take an orphaned heroine).

What followed was the sincerest form of flattery or, as some authors have noted, a form of fan fiction, with armies of readers who are steeped in the source material and prepared to do battle over the details. Heyer's heirs offer one way of looking at that world, but a new generation of writers has slowly, deliberately and often hilariously worked to expand the definition of a Regency romance.²

In her essay “The “Managing Female” in the Novels of Georgette Heyer” K. Elizabeth Spillman inexplicably refers to ‘the demise of the category [Heyer] inspired’ (Regency romances). She further argues that Heyer’s work has outlasted ‘the publishing category to which it gave rise’.³ I would guess that Spillman is referring to the end of the subscription Regency romance ‘lines’ published by most major US presses for several decades. Kensington announced discontinuation of its Zebra Regency romances in 2005; Signet’s line of Regency romances ceased publication in February 2006. The novels in these lines, now considered ‘traditional’ Regency romances, can aptly be considered Heyer fan fiction because so many of them use her slang, her settings and her tropes.⁴ Nonetheless, the Regency romance sub-genre certainly continues to be a strong presence in US publishing, complemented by the explosive rise of self-published Regency and other romance novels. In fact, a search of [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) for ‘Regency romances’ available in ‘Books’, conducted on 8 November 2019, returned over 40,000 titles. Heyer’s 1935 *Regency Buck* is the *terminus a quo* for this enduring, even if continually morphing, phenomenon in the publishing of popular fiction.⁵

Heyer herself felt strongly that she had accomplished something special with *Regency Buck*. She had thoroughly enjoyed writing the novel and had a high opinion of it. In a letter to her publisher (written after *Regency Buck* failed to find a US publisher), Heyer writes:

I’ve been going through it to see where it can be improved, & modesty, as you know, is my long suit – I am inclined to think it is a classic! I don’t really know how I came to write anything so good. I do remember putting in a lot of work on it – And *how* I loved writing it! The characters in it say ‘Very true’ & ‘Depend upon it’ & their spirits get ‘quite worn down’, & it is ‘long before the evils of it ceased to be felt’. And as for the Earl of Worth –! Talk of Heyer-heroes! He tops the lot for Magnificence, Omnipotence, Omniscience, & General Objectionableness.⁶

As Jennifer Kloester continues in her 2013 biography *Georgette Heyer*:

it was the first novel about which she was prepared to claim: ‘It is the best I’ve done, you know. Actual writing, technique, I mean’.⁷

Heyer’s delight in her characters’ language foreshadows the success she would have in later years in collecting Regency-period terms and phrases, and in deploying highly original language (whatever

its Regency-period roots) in her many other Regency romance novels. The language that Heyer fashioned became, in her hands, something akin to a living language, while the terms and phrases she introduced to popular Regency-set fiction continue to appear in scattered ways in Regency romance novels to this day.

However, in the longer quote above, Heyer attributes her sense that *Regency Buck* is special not only to her delight in her characters' words, but also to the hero she created in the Earl of Worth: 'Talk of Heyer-heroes!' He is indeed a departure in significant ways from the heroes of Heyer's previous romances. In her Georgian romances – *The Black Moth* (1921), *The Transformation of Philip Jettan* (1923), republished minus the final chapter as *Powder and Patch* (1930), *These Old Shades* (1926), *The Masqueraders* (1928), *Devil's Cub* (1932) and *The Convenient Marriage* (1934) – certain preoccupations recur. One of the most consistent of these is the focus on male dress; there is also a less consistent but related interest in cross-dressing in various forms.

The heroes of *The Black Moth*, *These Old Shades* and *The Convenient Marriage* conform to what seems to be one of Heyer's ideals at this point: the muscular, physically courageous fop. She seems to delight in the conviction that gorgeous clothing and style need not indicate any lack of traditionally manly attributes such as physical courage and daring. Philip Jettan, in the novel that bore his name on its first publication, makes a dramatic transformation from a rather roughly-dressed country youth into a thoroughly Frenchified exquisite, but he still performs creditably and courageously at a duel. In *These Old Shades* the heroine Léonie deceives most of the novel's characters with her cross-dressing as a boy for the first eight chapters, but whether dressed as girl or boy she displays physical courage, daring and a certain blood-thirstiness throughout the novel. In *The Masqueraders* a brother and sister both cross-dress in such a way as to fool most of London (it helps that the sister is unusually tall and the brother unusually slight). Robin, the slight male passing as gorgeous female, behaves nevertheless courageously in the face of threats from a highwayman. In *The Convenient Marriage* another older, foppish yet manly hero falls in love with a much younger heroine (as occurs in *These Old Shades*). He too conceals his physical courage beneath a foppish, lazy air.

Throughout this sequence of novels, Heyer displays persistent interest in the social constructions of gender through dress – particularly in the ornate masculine dress conspicuous in England and France prior to what J. C. Flugel memorably called 'The Great Masculine Renunciation' of fashion, which he dates to around 1800 in *The Psychology of Clothes*

(Hogarth Press, 1930).⁸ In *Regency Buck* the novel's heroine, Judith Taverner, whom we will meet in more detail later, never departs from stylish feminine clothing, but nonetheless repeatedly demonstrates physical courage and daring through her mastery of horses and whips, right through to her daring race to Brighton. We are told that she even wins reluctant approbation from Worth's tiger,⁹ who dislikes females in carriages at all, let alone driving them. Is it too much to say that Judith represents a sort of development from Heyer's earlier fops in the sense of being a character who succeeds on her own terms in straddling the gendered delineations of the cultures created by Heyer? She is certainly female. Admittedly, she partakes in no duel. She finds her brother's interest in blood sports and gambling appalling. And yet. She enters the novel far more able to handle the reins than her feckless brother and exhibits a desire masterfully to take charge whenever she can. Being a dab hand at the whip only helps her cause and her romance. Dressing as a woman of her time in no way prevents her from demonstrating physical skill in traditionally masculine arenas. If clothing does not make the man, quite, does it make gender?

The Earl of Worth, Heyer's hero in *Regency Buck*, represents continuity with some threads of these earlier 'Heyer-heroes', most notably in his highly deceptive air of boredom and languor. But in his dress he is part of new kind of character – a dandy. As we shall see in the second section of this chapter, the transition from fop to dandy marks Heyer's transition from the Georgian into the Regency romance in a number of significant ways.

At the same time *Regency Buck* shows Heyer continuing to experiment with diverse styles of masculinity, from the quite literally blow-by-blow account of a historical bare knuckle boxing match to the representations of louche royal dukes, from Judith's skill with a driving whip and a snuffbox to her brother's ineptitude at handling reigns and assessing horses. In doing so, *Regency Buck* takes pains to delineate correct understandings of the Regency term 'dandy'. As the novel opens its heroine is fundamentally mistaken about what the term signifies, but she, and we, will soon be carefully corrected.

The lengths to which the novel goes to delineate the correct understanding of the figure of the Regency dandy might seem of a piece with the mass of historical detail it contains. *Regency Buck* is the only historical romance by Heyer in which actual historical figures have considerable speaking parts.¹⁰ The Duke of Clarence, the Prince Regent and so-called Mosaic Dandy, as well as other historical figures, all play important roles in the progress of Judith's story. Besides the extensive use of historical

figures – and for all of Heyer’s conviction that she had written ‘a classic’ – *Regency Buck* features what many later readers have considered to be too much undigested historical information. This includes names of specific inns along the Great North Road at which no character stops, accurate, round-by-round recounting of a famous boxing match, historically misplaced but detailed descriptions of the interior of the Royal Pavilion in Brighton and so forth.

The role that the figure of the dandy plays in this novel is something distinct from this mass of information external to the novel’s romance plot. It is, however, central to understanding the kinds of experimentation that Heyer chose to pursue in this novel. In addition to having the historical figure – and archetypal Regency dandy – Beau Brummell intervene at several key moments to save Judith’s reputation, or to making the hero Worth part of Brummell’s inner circle and himself a dandy in the Brummellian sense, or to offering pointed education to her readers about the historically accurate understanding of Regency dandies, or to presenting in her version of Beau Brummell not only a man who dressed as the historical Brummell did, but also an almost impossibly idealised character whose kindness, wisdom, smiling grey eyes and sage advice have little in common with the historical character at all – in addition to all this, Heyer created a heroine who, under the sign of the dandy, was to experiment explicitly with how far a woman may step outside the boundaries that limit ‘proper’ female behaviour. Judith learns from Worth, for example, how to take snuff with an air. Under the tutelage of the period’s most famous dandy, she learns how to adopt classic dandy behaviours, and in so doing manages to take her behaviour right to the edge of what was considered acceptable for women. She also learns from Brummell how to recover socially once she has overstepped that line. Regency dandies notably resisted their period’s dominant constructions of masculinity. Brummell is therefore an apt tutor for Judith as she learns how to flout successfully at least some aspects of conventional femininity.

Heyer’s Georgian fops

As Heyer well knew, ‘dandy’ was a relatively new term in the early nineteenth century; according to the Oxford English Dictionary its first appearances were in the 1780s. However, it did come to replace most of the earlier terms used to refer to men who took an inordinate interest in their own clothing and social presentation. A complex cloud of earlier

terms, for example fop, beau, macaroni, swell, spark, coxcomb, popinjay and butterfly, intersected with one another in unstable ways throughout the Restoration and eighteenth century. In general this confluence of terms referred to men who demonstrated an excessive gorgeousness in their choice of attire. While Heyer has become nearly legendary for her passionate interest in researching the Regency period – such as recording diction and sketching out costumes and carriages – her interest in Georgian masculine gorgeousness clearly predates these later preoccupations. Her keeping of detailed research notebooks seems to have begun around the time she started Regency romances with the publication of *Regency Buck*.¹¹ Her earlier Georgian novels do not display the exuberant historical detail that weighs heavily on the narrative in *Regency Buck*, at least for some readers. The interest in masculine dress, however, is there from the start.

As I have noted, Heyer started her writing career focused on lavishly attired Georgian males. The first sentences of the ‘Prologue’ to her first novel, *The Black Moth* (1921), are as follows:

Clad in his customary black and silver, with raven hair unpowdered and elaborately dressed, diamonds on his fingers and in his cravat, Hugh Tracy Clare Belmanoir, Duke of Andover, sat at the escritoire in the library of his town house, writing. He wore no rouge on his face, the almost unnatural pallor of which seemed designedly enhanced by a patch set beneath his right eye. (3)

Belmanoir may wear no rouge, but this signature style (black and silver), elaborately dressed hair, diamonds and patch mark him as a man who even in private attends carefully to his appearance. Heyer’s second historical romance is a rather odd novel, first published by Mills and Boon in 1923 under the title *The Transformation of Philip Jettan*; this is the only novel for which Heyer used a pseudonym (Stella Martin). In 1930 the novel was republished as *Powder and Patch* under Heyer’s own name (with the final chapter deleted).¹² In this novel a rather boorish and slovenly young man decides to transform himself into a pure exquisite in order to teach a lesson to various persons. Three men are required to get him into his new attire (including rings, rouge and snuffbox) at the moment of transformation. When Philip first views his new reflection in the mirror he is astounded:

He saw a tall, slight figure dressed in a pale blue satin coat and white small-clothes, flowered waistcoat and gold-clocked

stockings. High red-heeled shoes, diamond-buckled, were on his feet, lace foamed over his hands and at his neck, while a white wig, marvellously curled and powdered, replaced his shorn locks. (55)

After his transformation Philip not only has the apparel but also the physicality and gestures of the fop. He minces rather than walking, draws rather than speaking, takes tiny pinches of snuff and sniffs delicately.

'Devil' Andover, from *The Black Moth*, is a villain, however, and there is not much to Philip Jettan besides his transformation. It is not until her third historical romance, *These Old Shades* (1926), that Heyer develops a fully exquisite romantic hero in Justin Alastair, Duke of Avon. He is introduced to readers thus:

He walked mincingly, for the red heels of his shoes were very high. A long purple cloak, rose-lined, hung from his shoulders and was allowed to fall carelessly back from his dress, revealing a full-skirted coat of purple satin, heavily laced with gold; a waistcoat of flowered silk; faultless small clothes; and a lavish sprinkling of jewels on his cravat and breast. A three-cornered hat, point-edged, was set upon his powdered wig, and in his hand he carried a long beribboned cane ... He proceeded languidly on his way. (1–2)

In Avon, who is physically strong and highly dangerous, Heyer allows her fascination with the seemingly discordant juxtaposition (to modern readers) of elaborate clothes and a masculinity characterised by physical strength and courage full rein. The influence of Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905) is felt strongly in these characters, although none of them has a secret identity as such. But certainly at the start of her career Heyer is strongly drawn to images of masculinity that pull in contradictory directions – the Duke of Avon (ultimately good) is a double for the Duke of Andover (evil) in the earlier novel (Andover's nickname is 'Devil', Avon's is 'Satanas'), and Philip effectively leads two lives with a boorish 'before' and an exquisite 'after'.

I mentioned above that when *The Transformation of Philip Jettan* was republished under Heyer's name as *Powder and Patch*, the final chapter was deleted. *Powder and Patch* thus ends at chapter 19, allowing us to assume that Philip and his true love will probably resume their life in the English countryside; the excursion into exquisite dress has been something of a temporary masquerade. By contrast the deleted final chapter suggests that in changing his dress the hero has changed

his inner being. The earlier version of the novel shows Philip and his love fully immersed in the fashionable life of Paris, with Philip taking charge of the dressing of his new wife and spending 'hours and hours' (179) on the exact placement of a rose in her hair. The apparent loss of the snuffbox that matches his coat is a tragedy.

The expunging of this chapter suggests that by 1930 Heyer was reluctant to carry on with the idea that the small clothes really do make the man; in changing his attire Philip really has changed his internal self and become an exquisite inside and out. But the 1923 novel *The Transformation of Philip Jettan* does suggest that transforming attire radically alters the self. In her next romance Heyer was to experiment further with the readability of the gendered self through clothing.

Heyer suggests that an interest in eighteenth-century fops is not unrelated to an interest in eighteenth-century cross-dressers in *The Masqueraders* (1928) with its cross-dressing brother and sister pair. But there is no suggestion here that cross-dressing impacts the self if that self is female. Prudence, passing as 'Peter', is legible as female to her future husband from their first meeting. He fights a duel to prevent her from having to do so and rescues her from the law at the end. Her brother Robin, small and slight, passes as 'Kate', the sister of 'Peter'. By contrast his true love, Letty, does not recognise him as male until he reveals the deception. She exclaims: 'You – you? A woman? You acted – But it can't be! Kate was a woman' (315). As in *The Transformation of Philip Jettan* (but not in that novel's revised version as *Powder and Patch*), Letty's total astonishment at the end of *The Masqueraders* suggests that the male self can be refashioned by the clothes it wears. The sister cross-dressing as male is clearly legible to the novel's hero as female. But the brother cross-dressing as female meets only disbelief from his future wife: 'Kate was a woman'. Nonetheless Letty, who has been a minor and somewhat silly character throughout, quickly accepts that her future husband passed extremely successfully as a society woman and, as far as we know, moves forward into her marriage without unduly troubling herself about why.

There's more to Heyer's early romances than can be fully examined here, of course, and the hero of *Devil's Cub* (1932) is rough in a way his foppish brethren would never condescend to be. The hero of *A Convenient Marriage* (1934) in some ways revisits Avon from *These Old Shades* – Rule is described as a 'lazy, faintly mocking exquisite', but 'just as his lordship's laced and scented coats concealed an extremely powerful frame, so his weary eyelids drooped over eyes that could become as keen as the brain behind' (16).

The Convenient Marriage can be read as Heyer's farewell to eighteenth-century male finery and the beginning of her interest in defining historical styles of masculinity with more precision. As she will do in *Regency Buck* in the following year, Heyer takes pains to delineate different species of masculine presentation, in particular by contrasting Lord Rule's foppishness with the macaroni style of his cousin, Crosby Drelincourt. But she also takes time in chapter 8 to distinguish in general terms between Macaronis, 'mincing, simpering, sniffing at crystal scent-bottles', Bucks, 'young sparks who, in defiance of their affected contemporaries, had flown to another extreme ... [of] studied slovenliness' and Bloods, 'to be found at any prizefight, or cockfight'.¹³ The most important distinction the novel sets up, however, is between the fop and the macaroni. Rule is a fop, dressed in lace, finicky in presentation; Drelincourt, we are told from the start, is a macaroni. While Rule's attire is sumptuous, rich with lace and gold embroidery, 'exquisite', to use one of the key terms of the period, Drelincourt's is exaggerated to the point of farce:

When he was last ready to sally forth into the street, he wore a blue coat with long tails and enormous silver buttons, over a very short waistcoat, and a pair of stripped breeches clipped at the knee with rosettes. A bow served him for a cravat. (44)

Heyer's narrator remarks, 'The result of all the care he bestowed upon his person was certainly startling' (44). Unfortunately, unlike Rule, Drelincourt is a coward. As he waits for the duel with Lady Rule's brother to begin he quivers, fancies that being blooded is a near-death encounter and takes to his bed for several days afterwards. In fact, in physical confrontations with several male characters Drelincourt can only shrink back and cower. In *Pretty Gentlemen: Macaroni Men and the Eighteenth Century Fashion World* Peter McNeil argues that 'The macaroni, by his very nature, problematises the idea that any type of clothing can express a stable, continuous, and inherent self-being' (228–9). Heyer's Drelincourt does not follow this modern view. His large bows in the place of Rule's lacy cravats are clearly a step too far for Heyer. Andover, Avon, Philip Jettan and Robin Tremaine can all enjoy clothing that the early twentieth-century would call feminine and enjoy duelling and adventure at the same time. Drelincourt is a very simple caricature, though, and, as McNeil demonstrates, caricature was the idiom through which the eighteenth century spoke the macaroni. Heyer seems to have learned this dialect well.

Heyer clearly demonstrated a rich and curious interest in varieties of masculinity and male fashions for the first decade and a half of her writing career. But what made Heyer crow with such delight over the Earl of Worth, dandy hero of *Regency Buck*: ‘Talk about Heyer-heroes!’?

Heyer’s dandies in *Regency Buck*

The dandy of the early nineteenth century was a very different figure from Restoration and eighteenth-century fops and exquisites. Beau Brummell and his followers took pride in dressing simply, in dark colours with accents of (ruffle-free) white at the neckline and wrist. Many of the most famous fops had been fictional, descended from the nearly ubiquitous fops in Restoration comedies. In contrast Brummell, Alvanley and their friends who appear in *Regency Buck* were historical figures, known and commented on by many in their period and after. At the start of *Regency Buck* Judith Taverner has a lot to learn about Brummell and the dandies, as well as the advantages of learning from Brummell how to flout society’s strictures. Judith’s unfortunate first meeting with Worth makes clear to us the extent to which she – as she believes – hates and despises dandies.

At the start of the novel Judith and her brother Peregrine are on their way to London to introduce themselves to the guardian they have never met. Peregrine is used several times in the novel to highlight Judith’s mastery of traditionally masculine skills. She can be trusted to pick out horses, for example, while Peregrine is taken in by showy animals who lack strong muscles and useful temperaments. Judith is a notable whip (driver); Peregrine most definitely is not. During a stay on their way south Peregrine takes his sister for a very inept drive in the country. She is concerned about his ability to drive the two of them before they first set out, and he is already on the defensive before their disastrous first meeting with Worth:

‘You had better let me drive,’ she remarked.

But that, of course, would not do. If she thought she could drive better than he, she much mistook the matter. The brute was hard-mouthed, not a sweet-goer by any means, no case for a lady. (12)

Peregrine thus tries to claim masculinity as his birthright. Being born male should mean, he thinks, that he is automatically entitled to

masculine prowess at feats such as driving a horse-drawn carriage. In the course of the novel, however, Judith will prove that he is mistaken.

Judith is horrified but unsurprised when her brother causes a near catastrophe. As he attempts to turn the gig around in a terrible location, Peregrine is stuck in place when a curricula-and-four comes racing around a curve. A dreadful accident is averted only because of the skill of the other driver, who remains unmoved by the near collision. Judith is incensed to note that 'He spoke, not to her, but over his shoulder to a diminutive tiger perched behind him: "Take it away, Henry, take it away," he said.'

Wrath, reproach, even oaths Miss Taverner could have pardoned. The provocation was great; she herself longed to box Peregrine's ears. But this calm indifference was beyond everything ... He was the epitome of a man of fashion. His beaver hat was set over black locks carefully brushed into a semblance of disorder; his cravat of starched muslin supported his chin in a series of beautiful folds; his driving-coat of drab cloth bore no less than fifteen capes, and a double row of silver buttons. Miss Taverner had to own him a very handsome creature, but found no difficulty in detesting the whole cast of his countenance. He had a look of self-consequence; his eyes, ironically surveying her from under weary lids, were the hardest she had ever seen, and betrayed no emotion but boredom ... Worse than all was his languor. He was uninterested, both in having dexterously averted an accident and in the gig's plight. His driving had been magnificent; there must be unsuspected strength in those elegantly gloved hands holding the reins in such seeming carelessness, but in the name of God why must he put on an air of dandified affectation? (13)

As we have seen, Heyer displayed a keen interest in male attire from the very start of her career. Worth's attire here is displayed in meticulous and loving detail (it receives more space over the course of the novel than do any of Judith's gowns). But the attribute that for Judith marks Worth most decidedly as a dandy is his affectation of boredom. As it happens, this was an aspect of the historical Brummell's public demeanour,¹⁴ but it does not prove particularly true of the fictional Brummell whom Judith has yet to meet.

Throughout all of his early appearances in the novel, Worth not only dresses like a dandy but also demonstrates the embodied qualities that are required. He takes tiny pinches of snuff to sniff 'delicately' (49),

lifts up visiting cards carefully ‘between finger and thumb’ (35) and surveys the world around him with unutterable boredom. Despite the toned-down colour-palette of his dress (‘drab’ is the name of a woollen cloth, typically undyed), Worth has much in common with Heyer’s earlier foppish characters. This is particularly true in his ‘langour’ and boredom, as well as the sense that a physically stronger, more conventionally masculine self is concealed behind a fashionable exterior. The ‘fifteen capes’ on Worth’s driving-coat suggest some of the excess and flamboyance associated with an Avon or a Rule – but the drab colour marks him as a new style of man.

It is once Judith reaches London, however, that Heyer takes pains to correct what Ellen Moers identified as the signal mistake that twentieth-century commentators make about Brummell and the Regency dandies: the idea that dandies dressed ornately. Indeed, Judith’s early education about life in London largely focuses on this error. She comes to London, as we have seen, convinced that she despises dandies and her first encounters in London seem to confirm this view. A Mr John Mills, known as the Mosaic Dandy (a historical figure, as are other dandies in this novel), offends Judith to the point that she was ‘impelled to give him a sharp set-down’ (70). He retaliates by branding her ‘the Milkmaid’ – a nasty reference to her rural northern origins. In addition to this unpleasantness her chaperone, Mrs Scattergood, has stressed to her over and over how important it is that she win Brummell’s approval, which enrages Judith.

In fact Mrs Scattergood takes extraordinary pains to ensure that her charge acknowledge Brummell’s absolute power over the aristocratic social scene in London. She urges Judith to understand that:

Above all, most important, most vital, she must move heaven and earth to earn Mr Brummell’s approval.

‘If Mr Brummell should not think you the thing you are lost!’ said Mrs Scattergood impressively. ‘Nothing could save you from social ruin, take my word for it. He has but to lift his eyebrow at you, and the whole world will know that he finds nothing to admire in you.’ (58)

Judith, however, has already decided that she has heard enough about the famous Mr Brummell:

Miss Taverner, however, was heartily tired of the sound of the dandy’s name. Mr Brummell had invented the starched neckcloth;

Mr Brummell had started the fashion of white tops to riding-boots; Mr Brummell had laid it down that no gentleman would be seen driving in a hackney carriage; Mr Brummell had his own sedan chair, lined and cushioned with white satin; Mr Brummell had abandoned a military career because his regiment had been ordered to Manchester; Mr Brummell had decreed that none of the Bow-window set at White's would acknowledge salutations from the street if they were seated at the club-window. And Mr Brummell, said Mrs Scattergood, would give her one of his stinging set downs if she offended his notions of propriety.

'Will he?' said Miss Taverner, a martial light in her eye. 'Will he indeed?' (58)

Mrs Scattergood and Georgette Heyer are not wrong about the power Brummell briefly wielded over London high society (this power and its wielding has certainly been part of the enduring fascination that seems to follow the Brummell character through history). In fact, a number of the speeches attributed to Brummell in *Regency Buck* derive either from contemporary accounts or, more often, from recollections published after the Regency seemed a vanished period of inexplicable but fascinating excess – that is to say, already in the 1830s. But at this point in the novel Brummell's social power has been repeatedly established; so has the fact that Judith misunderstands both dandies in general and Worth, her guardian, and Beau Brummell in particular. Two of these three misunderstandings will be cleared up the first time Judith is privileged to attend a ball at Almack's.

At Almack's Mrs Scattergood breathlessly tells Judith that Brummell is entering the ballroom, but then is called away to attend to someone else. Judith looks towards the entryway and sees a figure who confirms all of her worst assumptions about dandies, in particular her belief that dandies are men who dress gorgeously. She turns, prepared to:

enjoy her first full sight of Mr George Bryan Brummell. She could scarcely forbear to laugh, for surely there could be no greater figure of fun. He stood poised for a moment in the doorway, a veritable puppet, tricked out in such fine clothes that he cast the two gentlemen who were entering behind him in the shade. It could not be better. From his green satin coat to his ridiculously high-heeled shoes he was just what she had expected him to be.

His conceit, evidently, was unbounded. He surveyed the room through his quizzing-glass, held at least a foot away from his eye, and went mincing up to Princess Esterhazy, and made a flourishing bow. (73)

This figure ‘minces’ like many of Heyer’s previous heroes and wears high heels as they did. In fact, his dress could be said to be of a piece with that of her earlier foppish heroes. The ‘green satin coat’ and ‘ridiculously high-heeled shoes’ would not have looked out of place on a Duke of Avon or on a transformed Philip Jettan back in the mid-eighteenth century. But they do now. In her misunderstanding of the Regency dandy, Judith assumes that this ornate character must be central figure of the scene, the legendary Beau Brummell. But Heyer is building a new kind of masculine hero.

With this, the scene is set for Judith’s education, and the education of every reader. Regency dandies did not dress like their foppish forebearers. They dressed simply and plainly. Judith’s education (and ours) takes place in steps that will be familiar to many readers of popular fiction. Shortly after the man in the green satin coat and high heels has entered the room, a stranger hands Judith the fan she has dropped:

She took it with a word of thanks, and one of her clear, appraising looks. She liked what she saw. The gentleman was of medium height, with light brown hair brushed *à la Brutus*, and a countenance which, without being precisely handsome, was generally pleasing. There was a good deal of humour about his mouth, and his eyes, which were grey and remarkably intelligent, were set under a pair of most expressive brows. He was very well-dressed, but so unobtrusively that Judith would have been hard put to it to describe what he was wearing. (74)

When Judith reflects of her new companion that ‘he might not wear a green-spangled coat, and lead all London by the nose, but she had rather be talking to him than to any dandy’ (75), any reader of popular fiction will know immediately that she is in fact now talking with Beau Brummell himself.

Judith naturally enjoys her conversation with this unknown man, speaking derisively of Brummell without restraining her language. Her interlocutor asks her what Brummell had done to earn her ‘contempt’. Judith replies with devastating frankness:

‘Well, sir, you have only to look at him!’ ... allowing her eyes to travel significantly towards the gorgeous figure at the other end of the room. ‘A spangled coat!’ she pronounced scornfully. (75)

Our heroine is naturally horrified when she learns to whom she has been speaking so openly, but Brummell, in talking to her for half an hour and smiling at her, has made her a central and important figure in London high society. From this point on Brummell will be Judith’s guide and unofficial guardian, helping her learn to move in new social worlds and push against the boundaries they try to maintain about correctly gendered deportment.

Beau Brummell and the dandies around him in Heyer’s *Regency Buck* are the dandies of history – precisely but unobtrusively dressed. But the Beau Brummell figure Heyer gives us is almost impossibly idealised, distinguished by his wit, intelligence, kindness, self-deprecation and a desire to help Judith in every way. In their interactions at this first meeting at Almack’s he makes her reputation, rescuing her from the opprobrium into which Mr John Mills, a second-rate dandy, has cast her. Judith has believed that all dandies are fine and fabulously dressed, but she has been proved wrong. Judith has also believed that Worth, Brummell and all dandies are her natural enemies. She will be proved wrong in these points as the narrative progresses.

Judith Taverner as dandy protégée

Despite her initial error in the hallowed halls of Almack’s, Judith very quickly realises that Beau Brummell is an ally and a guide to her own social deportment as a woman in London’s beau monde. She is not quite sure whether Brummell takes her under his wing ‘because it entertained him to take an exactly opposite view to Mr Mills, or because he desired to oblige his friend Worth’ (79), but nonetheless she starts to learn from him about the pleasures of crossing cultural boundaries almost immediately after their meeting at Almack’s:

He advised her not to abate the least jot of her disastrous frankness. She might be as outspoken as she chose. (79)

In fact, he encourages her to push against society’s boundaries from the start:

Miss Taverner shot a triumphant glance at her chaperon. 'And may I drive my own phaeton in the Park, sir?'

'By all means,' said Mr Brummell. 'Nothing could be better. Do everything in your power to be out of the way.' (79)

That is, Brummell begins instructing Judith in both how to push against society's gender rules and how to get away with the pushing. In fact, both Brummell and Worth instruct Judith in masculine behaviours such as driving and taking snuff, and how to perform these tasks with such an air that she can carry off her transgressions with aplomb.

For example, after Judith has Brummell's permission to drive her own phaeton in the Park, she appears:

driving a splendid match pair of bays in a very smart sporting phaeton with double perches of swan-neck pattern. She was attended by a groom in livery, and bore herself (mindful of Mr Brummell's advice) with an air of self-confidence nicely blended with a seeming indifference to the sensation she was creating. (84)

Following the advice of the most important of all dandies, Judith learns how to take up behaviour considered unbecoming for her gender and to carry it off to her own credit. When she buys herself the perch phaeton, Worth insists that she prove to him her ability to drive challenging horses in an easily overturned vehicle. This she agrees to do: 'Miss Taverner took the whip and reins in her hands, and mounted into the driving seat, scorning assistance' (81). To underscore the transgressive nature of her abilities, Worth's tiger complains bitterly about being driven by a woman. Worth himself, however, a dandy and close friend of Brummell, insists that she be allowed to drive, allowing Judith to demonstrate her skill at a typically masculine task that demands considerable upper-body strength. She takes charge immediately and barks at the tiger:

Miss Taverner gave her horses the office to start, and said imperatively: 'Stand away from their heads! If you are afraid, await us here.' ... On her mettle, Miss Taverner guided the team down the street at a brisk trot, driving them well up to their bits. She had fine, light hands, knew how to point her leaders and soon showed the Earl that she was sufficiently expert in the use of the whip. She flicked the leader, and caught the thong again with a slight turn of her wrist that sent it soundlessly up to the stick. (81)

Brummell has encouraged Judith to be outspoken and Worth now encourages her to drive a dangerous vehicle with dashing horses. Her guardian later concocts a special snuff mixture for her to use and she will study Mr Brummell's method of wielding a snuffbox with exquisite grace, once again doing something 'not many' ladies do (90).

Naturally, as this is a romance novel, despite Worth approving of her driving and dandified snuff-taking, Judith engages in recurring power struggles with him, usually coming off the worse for it. In the midst of one such struggle she makes the rash decision to race her brother down to Brighton – only to discover, to her chagrin, that she is a mere female after all, as she experiences unpleasant sexual harassment along the way despite her abilities with a whip. But here again Brummell, himself in Brighton, teaches her how to recover her social standing:

He flicked open his snuff-box in his inimitable way and took a pinch. 'Drive your phaeton,' he said. 'You are really very stupid not to have thought of it for yourself.'

'Drive my phaeton?' she repeated.

'Of course. Upon every occasion, and where you would be least expected to do so. Did I not tell you once, Miss Taverner, never to admit a fault?'

She said slowly: 'I see. You are right; that is what I should have done at once. I am in your debt.' (294)

Brummell's advice, as always in this novel, is perfect, and Judith Taverner completely recovers socially from her transgressive drive. In fact, Brummell admires her so much that at one point, a bit later, he watches her approvingly as she responds to someone commenting on her scandalous drive:

She raised her brows and said coolly: 'My phaeton? Yes, it has just arrived from town. Some trifling fault made it necessary for me to send it to the coachmaker's, which is why you have seen me walking lately. You must know that I am used to drive myself wherever I go.' She passed on with a smile and a bow.

'Excellent, Miss Taverner!' murmured Mr Brummell. 'You are so apt a pupil that if I were only *ten* years younger, I believe I should propose for your hand.' (297)

Desire and identification mix in this passage, and Judith proves herself to be an extraordinarily apt pupil for the Beau. He continues throughout

the novel to be her guide and a kind of moral guardian; when she feels compelled to accompany the Prince Regent into a private room, it is Brummell who notices and alerts Worth to save her from, at best, indignity.

I do not want to overstate my case here. Judith remains locked in conventional female roles in many ways and the novel's denouement relies on her being kidnapped by a villain and rescued by Worth. But there is nonetheless something extraordinary in Heyer's experimentations with gender in this novel. None of her earlier foppish heroes have encouraged heroines to emulate them as Brummell and Worth do in the novel, although the Duke of Avon in *These Old Shades* and Sir Anthony Fanshawe in *The Masqueraders* take their lovers' cross-dressing in comfortable stride. Heyer was to focus on a woman cross-dressing as male in only one more novel, *The Corinthian*, written in the 1940s. As Spillman notes, this was to be

the last novel in which she used cross-dressing as a device, and here she used it for comic rather than dramatic effect, signalling a major shift in her writing from the adventurous romance to the comedy of manners. From 1940 on, she was principally a writer of Regency romances.¹⁵

In *Regency Buck* we can see Heyer experimenting with a new form of romance, one that came to have a tremendous impact on popular publishing. She is experimenting as she creates what will become the 'Regency romance' and will indeed end up discarding some of the aspects as she develops it here. Never again will historical figures have extensive speaking roles in her novels, for example. Nor, sadly, will there be any more perfectly marvellous Beau Brummells, nor any more heroines who prove wonderfully apt pupils for the most important dandy of the Regency period. Like Beau Brummell in this novel, Judith Taverner is permitted to become one of a kind – a woman who need not uniformly follow the rules that other women do, just as he has made himself a man who need not abide by the rules that other men must follow. Heyer's interest in dandy culture continues through most of her Regency romances and Heyer readers tend to become adept at visualising perfectly starched cravats and perfectly fitted coats. But female dandies in Heyer? Well, naturally, there is only one.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Jay Dixon, Laura Helper and Jennifer Kloester, without whom this chapter would have been immeasurably weaker. The errors and infelicities that remain are entirely my own. I would also very much like to thank Samantha Rayner and Kim Wilkins both for organising the wonderful conference at which the idea for this volume originated and for all the work of creating it. Much is owed to them for their work in addressing the need for Heyer scholarship in the history of popular publishing. Finally, I would like to thank Catherine Bradley for her meticulous and extremely helpful copy-editing. It takes a team to get any article published, and I am deeply grateful to everyone who participated.
- 2 O'Donovan, 'Blame Jane', np.
- 3 Spillman, 'The Managing Female', 84.
- 4 'Tropes' has become an extremely popular word in social media discussion of romance and other popular genres – in part, I suspect, because of a desire to rewrite the dismissive language of outsiders who might refer to clichés, for example, while not paying sufficient attention to the ways in which new Regency romance novel authors or new writers of television episodes seek to revise and update the 'tropes' and genre expectations of their chosen media.
- 5 As Jennifer Kloester has noted in an email, 'It's worth pointing out (I've done so several times, but I think if others can do so too it's a good thing) that when Heyer began writing books set in the Regency that, unlike today, there were very few books around that dealt directly and specifically with that short period. Of course, since the Regency [sic] became a "thing" this has completely changed.' Personal communication, 27 September 2019.
- 6 Quoted in Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 146.
- 7 Quoted in Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 146.
- 8 A detailed examination of Flugel's formulation and the critique and discussion that have followed in its wake is impossible here. Readers interested in pursuing this topic might wish to consult Chęcinska's essay, 'Stylin', Frantz's essay, 'Jane Austen's Heroes', Kuchta's *The Three Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity* and Roach's chapter on 'Clothes' in *It*, among other sources.
- 9 As any devoted Heyer reader will remember, 'tiger' was the slang name for boys hired to perch behind the driver and to jump down to hold or walk the horses as needed.
- 10 The Hon. Frederick 'Poodle' Byng makes a brief (and very funny) appearance in *Arabella*, as do a few other historical figures, but in general, after *Regency Buck*, Heyer eschewed this sort of historical name-dropping in her Regency romances. In none of her novels is it as pronounced and extensive as it is in *Regency Buck*.
- 11 In an email to me Jennifer Kloester says that, 'It's not clear exactly when she began keeping them [her research notebooks], though I think it was quite early on and certainly by the 1940s. I think I say in the biography that *Regency Buck* is the one novel she stuffed full of ephemera. I think there's a strong sense of discovery and excitement about some of the things (like boxing and coaching and cock-fighting) she'd discovered and she just wanted to get stuff in there. When she got to her next Regency, *An Infamous Army*, two years later, she'd already learned a great deal and was wearing her learning more lightly. By *Friday's Child* she was in her element and knew exactly how to distill the historical material into the story with absolute finesse.' Personal communication, 27 September 2019.
- 12 In the US the Modern American Library, part of Penguin Random House, has begun publishing a new series called 'Torchbearers' dedicated to women writers. Georgette Heyer's *The Transformation of Philip Jettan* was selected as one of the first publications in this new series (the publication date was 10 September 2019). It is something of a peculiar choice in terms of introducing new readers to Heyer.
- 13 Heyer, *The Convenient Marriage*, 107.
- 14 In his *Life of Beau Brummell* Captain Jesse relates this anecdote: 'An acquaintance having, in a morning call, bored him dreadfully about some town in the North of England, inquired with great pertinacity of his impatient listener which of the lakes he preferred; when Brummell, quite tired of the man's tedious raptures, turned his head imploringly towards his valet, who was arranging something in the room, and said: "Robinson". "Sir?" "Which of

- the lakes do I admire?" "Windermere, Sir," replied the distinguished individual. "Ah, yes – Windermere," repeated Brummell, "so it is – Windermere". Jesse 1844, 87–8.
- 15 Spillman, 'The Managing Female', 85.

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Part 2

Genre

4

Pride and prejudice: metafiction and the value of historical romance in Georgette Heyer

Kim Sherwood

Enjoying a Georgette Heyer novel was described as ‘the next best thing to reading Jane Austen’ in a 1967 *Publishers Weekly* review.¹ But another review, in the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1964, accused her of ‘recreating in miniature those gooey marble-backed novels ... read by Jane Austen’s flightiest heroines’.² In this chapter I will argue that Heyer’s work directly addresses this critical binary through the tactics of metafiction.

Metafiction can be defined simply as ‘fiction about fiction’. In the 1980s metafiction theory boomed: Linda Hutcheon advanced historiographic metafiction in *Narcissistic Narrative: The metafictional paradox* (1980) and *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), and Patricia Waugh outlined its conventions and boundaries in *Metafiction: The theory and practice of self-conscious fiction* (1984). However, this discourse did not include substantial consideration of metafiction in popular fiction. Hutcheon, for example, cites John le Carré as an example of popular metafiction, but gives no considered analysis of his work. Mark Currie, in his more recent study of metafiction, argues that

[i]f narrative self-consciousness found its first extended expression in the so-called high culture of literary modernism, it soon flowed outwards into the more demotic realms of film, television, comic strips and advertising.³

However, Currie goes on to characterise detective fiction as marginal metafiction only.⁴ As many of the twentieth century’s bestselling writers in this genre were women – from Agatha Christie to Georgette Heyer – this neglect contributes to the marginalisation of women writers in

academic studies, anthologies and the canon. There has been no substantial discussion of metafiction in the work of Georgette Heyer.

Focusing on *Sylvester, or The Wicked Uncle* (1957) and *Venetia* (1958), this chapter illustrates the prominence of metafiction in Heyer's work. It then explores the ways in which, at the midpoint of her career, she uses metafiction to participate in critical and cultural debates surrounding historical romance. Such debates are rooted in genre and in gender: both the widespread dismissal of historical romance by critics and academics, and the widespread marginalisation of women writers by critics and academics.

Heyer's work reflects Waugh's assertion that '[m]etafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion ... and the laying bare of that illusion'.⁵ She does indeed construct the illusion of her fictional world and then lays that illusion bare, engaging with the battle between romance and realism in the evolution of historical fiction. In this sustained opposition Heyer reveals the potency of illusion – of storytelling – for and by women.

The strategies of *Sylvester*

The female protagonist of Heyer's 1957 novel *Sylvester* is a debut novelist, Phoebe Marlowe. Heyer describes Phoebe's literary efforts in humorous vein:

Having very little interest in mere heroes and heroines she had done no more than depict two staggeringly beautiful puppets, endow them with every known virtue, and cast them into a series of hair-raising adventures from which, she privately considered, it was extremely improbable they would ever have extricated themselves.⁶

Here our heroine draws attention to the great improbability of her fictional adventures and then goes on to have similar adventures herself – the illusion of which is laid bare by her own incredulity.

The modern historical novel, born from the Gothic and historical romance, was codified by Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814) – or rather by Georg Lukács's influential reading in his 1937 *The Historical Novel*. *Waverley* realises: 'the romance of his life was ended, and ... its real history had now commenced'.⁷ Lukács gives a gendered frame to this

transition from romance to realism, dismissing what he calls 'a long list of second and third-rate writers (Radcliffe, etc.), who were supposed to be important literary forerunners', with the assertion that 'Scott's historical novel is the direct continuation of the great realistic social novel of the eighteenth century'.⁸

Joanna Russ has observed that 'the most commonly employed technique and the hardest to combat' in the suppression of women's writing is a process of 'simply ignoring the works, the workers, and the whole tradition' of women writing.⁹ With one 'etc.', Lukács undermines the eighteenth-century women writers who dominated the novel and the evolution of historical fiction. For them, as Diana Wallace argues, the past was 'a fantasy space' in which writers such as Ann Radcliffe could 'centralise a female consciousness'.¹⁰ Lukács depreciated the value of the fantastical, and the value of women's stories, in historical romance. By piercing her own fictional illusion, Phoebe appears to do the same – but this is only the first layer of Heyer's metafiction.

Phoebe is a young writer whose only novel is published anonymously and attracts great speculation, much as Fanny Burney did. She writes Gothic adventure, much like Ann Radcliffe. If Lukács takes all of the women writers of Heyer's Regency setting and consigns them to a black hole signalled by the abbreviation 'etc.', Heyer illuminates them once more, reinstating the works, the workers and the whole tradition by making her protagonist a writer. This is a common tactic of metafiction; as Larry McCaffery observes, metafiction typically explores 'fiction-making' by taking 'as its main subject writers, writing, and anything else that has to do with the way books and stories are written'.¹¹

Having reinstated the women writers of the Regency, Heyer goes on to probe the value of such 'hair-raising adventures'.¹² Lady Marlow, Phoebe's wicked stepmother, disapproves of fiction; Phoebe reads 'romantic novels' secretly, 'her own joyless existence ... lightened by ... a world of pure make-believe'.¹³ Phoebe's novel, *The Lost Heir*, is described as being as 'extravagant as anything that came from the Minerva Press' – taking us back to the *New York Herald Tribune's* comparison of Heyer's novels with those 'gooey marble-backed novels ... read by Jane Austen's flightiest heroines'. Catherine Morland reads Gothic Minerva novels in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) – the Austen novel that most notably, as Ellen Moers argues, targets the Gothic for satire, while also acknowledging it as a site of 'woman's self-conscious creation'.¹⁴ In *Northanger Abbey* we are told that Mrs Radcliffe's works do offer 'great pleasure',¹⁵ but this is ultimately shown to be illusory, Austen

acknowledging that ‘the visions of romance were over’.¹⁶ Here romance is associated with vision, pleasure and happiness – imagination and embodied emotion. Realism is associated with seeing things for what they are, a skill that requires rationality, acceptance and maturity.

This parallels the Bluestocking debate in the eighteenth century around how a woman might be a public intellectual. In this debate the novelist Charlotte Lennox advocated embodied, sensual writing and the use of coquetry to navigate a world ruled by men. Her opponent, the poet and translator Elizabeth Carter, advocated disembodied rationalism, in order to prove to men that a woman could be more than her body. In ‘The Art of Coquetry’ Lennox observes:

The nymph who liberty can prize,
And vindicate the triumph of her eyes:
Who o’er mankind a haughty rule maintains,
Whose wit can manage what her beauty gains;
Such by these arts their empire may improve,
And unsubdu’d control the world by love.¹⁷

In contrast Carter, the great translator of Epictetus who advocated Stoicism, cautioned women in her poem ‘Ode to Wisdom’ to avoid seeking wealth and power. Instead she advises them to be content with ‘An empire o’er the mind’,¹⁸ championing self-regulation within one’s own circumstances – a radical departure from regulation by a husband or by the state.

There are two routes to freedom here, one through the body and one through the mind (and denial of the body). Both routes acknowledge the patriarchal system seeking to restrict women’s freedoms. In response to this a woman may choose to use either the (limited) power of her sexuality to navigate patriarchal restrictions or the (limited) power of her chastity to push forward her status as an equal intellect. Yet such a choice is neither binary nor absolute. Diving headlong into physical adventure, the bold horsewoman Phoebe is reminiscent of Lennox’s *The Female Quixote*, yet her anonymous authorship is reminiscent of Carter’s carefully calibrated reclusiveness, which strengthened her intellectual status. Austen took on this debate, in the tension between romance and realism. By writing incredible hair-raising adventures even as she highlights their lack of credibility, Heyer invokes this tension. She both celebrates the power of romance or make-believe, in which women can escape ‘joyless existences’ and imagine or make themselves into new characters, yet also acknowledges the reality of lived experience,

in which Phoebe's social standing might be ruined by her identity as a writer becoming known. Both routes to freedom are fraught with danger.

Fiction meets fiction

There are many layers of construction in *Sylvester*: the text itself; the world it represents, in which society is carefully constructed and maintained by the *ton*; and the *ton* as translated into Phoebe's fiction. In *The Lost Heir* Phoebe turns Sylvester, the Duke of Salford, into the evil Count Ugolino. When Phoebe flees from Sylvester, he implores: 'Now, don't you enact me a high tragedy! ... I'm not the villain of this or any other piece'.¹⁹ Here the archetype decries his own myth. The layers of the novel soon intersect as Ianthe and her second husband Nugent, inspired by the plot of *The Lost Heir*, kidnap her son Edmund, Sylvester's nephew and ward, along with Phoebe, and take him over the English Channel. The conclusion to *The Lost Heir* is written in high romantic strain:

They ran the boat ashore, and Florian cried: 'Safe! Safe, Mathilda!
At last we stand where Ugolino holds no sway!'²⁰

By contrast *Sylvester* provides a bathetic climax: Edmund is seasick and an overly zealous dog interrupts the potentially ugly confrontation between Sylvester and Nugent. Romance is collapsed by reality.

When Ianthe believes she is the real-life model for the sister in *The Lost Heir*, Phoebe is dismissive: 'How can you suppose that a foolish romance bears the least relation to real life?' Ianthe again blurs the boundaries between historical fact and fiction in her retort: '*The Lost Heir* is no more foolish than *Glenarvon*, and you can't say that bore no relation to real life!'²¹ Published in 1816, Lady Caroline Lamb's novel *Glenarvon* famously draws on her relationship with Lord Byron. The poet himself made frequent attacks on women writers, for example in *The Blues: A Literary Eclogue* (1821), a poem most likely prompted by Elizabeth Carter's nephew publishing a memoir of his aunt. Carter's nephew wrote that his aunt – once considered the most learned woman writer in England – 'could hardly be described in the light of a professed literary character'.²² This attempt to make her more palliative to emerging nineteenth-century restrictions contributes to what Russ calls denial of agency – a process by which a woman is divorced from her own writing and so effectively stops being seen as a writer.

A woman seen as a literary character was likely to be mocked in the era Heyer uses as her setting. Where Elizabeth Carter tried to foreground a woman's mind, Byron insisted that a woman's intellectualism is emotional, even hysterical. His character Lady Bluebottle cries that the whole 'joy of my heart' is 'art / Wild Nature! – Grand Shakespeare!'²³ Byron's attacks on Bluestockings continued in *Don Juan*, where the speaker complains that literary 'taste is gone, that fame is but a lottery,/ Drawn by the blue-coat misses of a coterie'.²⁴ This is similar to Carter's nephew assuring readers his aunt was not a 'common Grub Street writer'.²⁵ If a woman does not have taste, she cannot be a critic; if she is not a Grub Street writer, she is not professional.

By reminding Ianthe that *The Lost Heir* is a romance, Phoebe points, by contrast, to the *written* nature of her story and its tools – the very definition that Waugh gives to metafiction:

a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.²⁶

Considering denial of agency, Russ comments that

There are subtler alternatives to the flat denial of agency: *She didn't write it; he did*. One is: *It wrote itself*. This is highly unlikely, and yet the ploy is used.²⁷

If Phoebe believed romance was a direct reflection of lived experience, she would not be a writer, but a medium, as Mario Paz believed Mary Shelley to be: 'All Mrs. Shelley did [in *Frankenstein*] was to provide a passive reflection of some of the wild fantasies which were living in the air about her'.²⁸ *She didn't write it – it wrote itself*.

But Phoebe is aware of the archetypes and conventions at her disposal as a writer. Of Sylvester she comments, 'if he had not wished to figure as the villain in a romance he should not have had satanic eyebrows'.²⁹ *The Lost Heir* is a *work* of writing, as is *Sylvester*, despite the frequent dismissal of Heyer's work as a form of writing by numbers. In *The Historical Novel* (2010), for example, Jerome de Groot separates Heyer from his overall argument that historical fiction is inherently metafictional. Instead he places her, along with Dame Barbara Cartland and Catherine Cookson, in a chapter on 'genre fiction', focusing on the

conventions of historical fiction ‘for women’. In a sense, focusing on conventions is another version of *it wrote itself*.

Overtuning values – the triumph of *Venetia*

Writing about Heyer, the novelist A. S. Byatt argues that ‘good escape literature has subtle relations to what it is measured against’.³⁰ In Heyer’s 1958 novel *Venetia*, intertextuality highlights the artificiality of the text by marking out its literary antecedents, the texts it will be measured against. Venetia’s invalid brother almost rejects Sir Walter Scott’s *Guy Mannering* in favour of classical reading, but decides to keep it ‘in case I want something to read in the night’.³¹ This reminds us that Scott, prior to Lukács, existed critically, as Northrop Frye observes, on the ‘boundary of serious fiction and romance’; for some he proved ‘too much of a romancer’, or too entertaining, ‘to be worthy of close study’.³² Entertaining historical romance is thus not a return to historical writing *before* Scott, but rather to a generic line that *includes* Scott, who clearly explains in the preface to *Waverley* that ‘the moral lessons ... [must] mix with ... amusement’.³³ Heyer positions her novels in this line, with both the male and female writers who developed the genre she now shaped. In so doing she employs metafiction to reintroduce women into the history of historical fiction, men into the history of romance and herself into the history of both (instead of being cordoned off, as she is by de Groot).

Heyer’s [r]eferences to other texts ... provide an ironic comment on the narrative itself,³⁴ as Mark Llewellyn writes of Sarah Waters’ metafictional tactics. Venetia says of her young suitor Oswald, ‘It’s all Byron’s fault! Oswald can’t decide whether it is his lordship whom he resembles or his lordship’s *Corsair*’.³⁵ Enter Lord Damerel, fabled rake, with whom Oswald feels he is ‘playing the *Corsair*’s role in front of the *Corsair* himself’.³⁶ Damerel calls Venetia ‘abominable’ for labelling him ‘[a] Byronic hero!’³⁷ Though in many ways different – Sylvester is respectable, Damerel is a rake – these male characters do meet the convention of a Byronic hero, not least by possessing his freedom. Sylvester can be withering and rude to all around him, Damerel can live in dissipation – and yet both still hold more power than either woman. If Sylvester acknowledged his freedom to be a villain and Damerel his Byronic status – that is, if both acknowledged their own archetypes – they would also be acknowledging that archetype’s artificial (and therefore potentially fragile) nature. Instead, they are seeking to turn

romance into realism, by dismissing the romance. But Phoebe and Venetia know better.

Heyer can be seen here as navigating genre values, making use of the Byronic archetype before largely deflating it and counterpoising the denigrated (female) romance of the Gothic with (male) realism. She thus strikes what A. S. Byatt calls 'the *precise* balance ... between romance and reality', creating 'a romanticised anti-romanticism'³⁸ that gives Heyer's heroines the same knowing look at their genre she herself possesses.

In *Venetia* literary allusions further reinforce the metafiction at play. As Waugh writes:

the use of literary ... allusion ... reminds the reader of the existence of this world outside everyday time and space, of its thoroughgoing textuality *and* intertextuality.³⁹

In *Venetia* and Damerel's first exchange quotes from Ben Jonson and Alexander Pope, both famous for their wit, fly back and forth; so do quotes from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, *Othello* and *Twelfth Night*,⁴⁰ foregrounding pastoral comedy, tragedy and romantic comedy. Like Scott and Austen, Heyer fuses the (relatively realist) wit and social observation of the comedy of manners with the emotional engagement of romance and tragedy. In such a world, with romance and realism brought together, a woman *can* make believe a new reality.

Venetia is constantly being called a 'green girl' and nobody takes her defence – that though she has seen little of the world, she has read a lot about it – seriously. However, it is Venetia's reading that provides us with a framework by which to measure her self-consciousness – and, by extension, the self-consciousness of the novel. In their first exchange Damerel forcibly kisses Venetia. She calls him 'a pestilent, complete knave'.

Damerel says: 'Bravo! Where did you find that?'

Venetia, who had suddenly remembered the rest of the quotation, replied: 'If you don't know, I certainly shan't tell you.'⁴¹

The words are in fact spoken by Iago, painting a picture of Desdemona's illicit love. The full line from *Othello* is 'A pestilent complete knave, and the woman hath found him already'. Venetia realises belatedly that

a delicately nurtured female (unless all the books lied) would have swooned from shock at being kissed by a strange man ... What she would not have done was to have stayed to bandy words with her wolfish assailant.⁴²

Venetia's subversion of socially (and fictionally) constructed virtue continues for the rest of the novel. For Venetia *has* found her knave and remains in many ways one of Heyer's most active heroines, seeking ill-repute so that Damerel will overcome his irritating morals and marry her in spite of his blackened reputation. As Venetia says, the thought that her uncle 'might find another way of rescuing me from my dear rake puts me in the liveliest dread!'⁴³ Unlike the heroines of 'gooey romance',⁴⁴ Venetia does not need to be rescued – she is, in fact, rescuing herself. As she tells her aunt, 'it's my whole life I'm fighting for'.⁴⁵

Without the pistols requisite for the duel that Oswald tries to force on Damerel, or the boxing gloves used in the fights Damerel gambles on, Venetia's only weaponry is her understanding of social codes – represented metafictionally by the codes of the genre in which she is acting. Venetia sees Damerel as 'entering rudely on to the scene' and continues to allude to him in theatrical metaphors: 'whether he was the villain or merely a minor character it was useless to deny that he had infused life into a dull play'.⁴⁶ This metaphor reminds us this is a fictional world, populated by players with expected roles. Heyer's subversion of these roles operates on several levels. The rake is noble, the constantly expected guardian brother never turns up and Venetia purposefully ruins herself, then to arrive at Damerel's house – without a chaperone and nowhere else to stay the night – in order to propose to him. It is not the rake who seduces the green girl, but the green girl who seduces the rake. As remarkable as this is for its setting of 1818, it is also rather remarkable for its publication in 1958.

The sense of an ending

Heyer's endings present, as Helen Hughes writes, 'the problem of creating a heroine who was aware of the inequalities of a patriarchal society and capable of resenting them, while at the same time showing her ... conforming' through marriage.⁴⁷ Germaine Greer sees this as examples of 'women cherishing the chains of their bondage'.⁴⁸ Yet in my view these readings offer a narrow treatment. While the ending sees the couple conforming through marriage, it is to Venetia and Damerel's

equal gain: Heyer's generic precedent here is the *confrontation transactionnelle* of Austen, rather than the domineering *confrontation polémique* of (stereo)typical romantic fiction.⁴⁹

Georgette Heyer's own view of her writing was ambivalent. While calling herself 'a scribbler of trivial romances',⁵⁰ she also declared:

My style is really a mixture of Johnson and Austen – what I rely on is a certain gift for the farcical. Talk about my humour if you must talk about me at all! ... I know it's useless to talk about technique ... but no less a technician than Noël Coward reads me because he says my technique is so good. I'm proud of that.⁵¹

Talk about her humour they did. Between the poles of Jane Austen and Dame Barbara Cartland, Heyer is also frequently linked to P. G. Wodehouse in reviews and in online discussions between her fans. Whereas Wodehouse was knighted in 1975 for his services to literature, however, Heyer died in 1974 amidst immense popularity, but with her work still the topic of much critical dispute. Such dispute continues to this day. Sociological studies probe whether there is any difference between fans of Georgette Heyer and Dame Barbara Cartland, for example – to discover that readers of Heyer find Cartland 'unreadable'.⁵² One consequence of this is that Heyer's metafiction has gone largely unnoticed, though she was a contemporary of both modernism and postmodernism.

As I have demonstrated, Heyer's texts are built on metafictional foundations. *Sylvester* and *Venetia* both wryly puncture the conventions of their genre, while also revealing its potency. Women such as Phoebe and Venetia are aware of the conventions (and constraints) of their realities; they are able to use those conventions to make up new realities, to tell a different story for their lives and so become their own authors. Elizabeth Montagu, the eighteenth-century Shakespeare critic, knew that male critics would 'take offence' at the prospect of 'an old woman ... reading books and even writing them'.⁵³ Reading and writing are powerful tools, enabling Phoebe and Venetia to change their joyless existences. In writing fiction about fiction, Heyer exposes the gendered lines upon which historical romance has been attacked and advocates for its power, writing of women who become fully alert to the stories that shape their reality. As Deborah Levy writes:

When a female writer walks a female character into the centre of her literary enquiry ... and this character starts to project shadow

and light all over the place, she will have to find a language that is in part to do with learning how to become a subject rather than a delusion, and in part to do with unknitting the ways in which she has been put together by the Societal System in the first place.⁵⁴

Phoebe and Venetia are effectively peeling themselves away from the text to consider the inky shadows they cast on the page. They are aware of the ways in which a patriarchal system seeks to bind them, from the dismissal of historical romance written by women and read by women to the commodification of women's submission sunk deep into the roots of literature – as Claudia Roth Pierpont writes of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), 'the modern novel born in an excruciatingly prolonged contemplation of rape'.⁵⁵ I took a module on eighteenth-century literature as an undergraduate student. In our class on *Clarissa*, the male professor told his group of predominantly female students that all women have sexual fantasies of being tied up. We studied no women writers. Phoebe and Venetia – and Georgette Heyer – are aware of what Virginia Woolf called

[t]he extreme activity of mind which showed itself in the later eighteenth century among women – the talking, and the meeting, the writing of essays on Shakespeare, the translating of the classics.⁵⁶

They also acknowledge the women writers who built on those foundations in the early years of the nineteenth century – for, as Woolf puts it, 'we think back through our mothers if we are women'.⁵⁷ By using metafiction to comment on her writing, Heyer claims the status of writer. This is certainly a daring act in the face of critics eager to relegate her work to 'those gooey marble-backed novels ... read by Jane Austen's flightiest heroines' – a trick so old, it was old in Austen's time.

Notes

- 1 Bannon, 'Forecasts. Fiction', 1967, 191.
- 2 Maurer, 'The flag says bang', in Fahnestock-Thomas, 2001, 198.
- 3 Currie, *Metafiction*, 2.
- 4 Currie, *Metafiction*, 4.
- 5 Waugh, *Metafiction*, 6.

- 6 Heyer, *Sylvester, or The Wicked Uncle*, 214.
- 7 Scott, *Waverley*, 283.
- 8 Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 30–1.
- 9 Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, 4.
- 10 Wallace, in de Groot *The Historical Novel*, 16.
- 11 McCaffery, 'The Art of Metafiction', in Currie, *Metafiction*, 183.
- 12 Heyer, *Sylvester*, 214.
- 13 Heyer, *Sylvester*, 45.
- 14 Moers, *Literary Women*, 126.
- 15 Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 110.
- 16 Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 212.
- 17 Lennox, 'The Art of Coquetry', in Clarke, *Dr Johnson's Women*, 76.
- 18 Carter, 'Ode to Wisdom', in Dodsley, *A collection of poems*, 209.
- 19 Heyer, *Sylvester*, 96.
- 20 Heyer, *Sylvester*, 214.
- 21 Heyer, *Sylvester*, 215.
- 22 Montagu Pennington, in Clarke, *Dr Johnson's Women*, 230.
- 23 Lord Byron, 'The Blues: A literary eclogue', in *Thomas Moore, Works*, 554.
- 24 Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, 144.
- 25 Montagu Pennington, in Clarke, *Dr Johnson's Women*, 230.
- 26 Waugh, *Metafiction*, 2.
- 27 Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, 24.
- 28 Moers, *Literary Women*, 94.
- 29 Heyer, *Sylvester*, 184.
- 30 A. S. Byatt, 'The Ferocious Reticence of Georgette Heyer', *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 5 October 1975, in Fahnestock-Thomas, *Heyer*, 303.
- 31 Heyer, *Venetia*, 68.
- 32 Frye, *Secular Scripture*, 42.
- 33 Scott, *The Complete Waverley Novels*, Kindle.
- 34 Llewellyn, 'Breaking the Mould?' in Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Metafiction and Metahistory*, 206.
- 35 Heyer, *Venetia*, 12.
- 36 Heyer, *Venetia*, 118.
- 37 Heyer, *Venetia*, 36.
- 38 A. S. Byatt, 'Georgette Heyer', in Fahnestock-Thomas, *Heyer*, 277.
- 39 Waugh, *Metafiction*, 112.
- 40 Heyer, *Venetia*, 31–4.
- 41 Heyer, *Venetia*, 33.
- 42 Heyer, *Venetia*, 37.
- 43 Heyer, *Venetia*, 297.
- 44 Maurer, Fahnestock-Thomas, *Heyer*, 198.
- 45 Heyer, *Venetia*, 296.
- 46 Heyer, *Venetia*, 38.
- 47 Hughes, 'Georgette Heyer', in Fahnestock-Thomas, *Heyer*, 516.
- 48 Greer, *Female Eunuch*, in Fahnestock-Thomas, *Heyer*, 279.
- 49 Glass and Mineo, 'Georgette Heyer and the Uses of Regency', in Fahnestock-Thomas, *Heyer*, 426.
- 50 Heyer, in Hodge, *Private World*, 97.
- 51 Heyer, in Hodge, *Private World*, 153.
- 52 Glass and Mineo, 'Uses of Regency', 434.
- 53 Montagu, in Clarke, *Dr Johnson's Women*, 155.
- 54 Levy, *Things*, 26.
- 55 Pierpont, *Passionate Minds*, 120–1.
- 56 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 68.
- 57 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 79.

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5

Loving and giving: realism, emotional hypocrisy and generosity in *A Civil Contract*

Jennifer Clement

Georgette Heyer's novel *A Civil Contract* (1961) forms part of a small group of what I think of as Heyer's 'reverse romances' – namely, romance novels where the central pair begin by getting married and end by realising their love for one another. Like her earlier novels *The Convenient Marriage* (1934), *Friday's Child* (1944) and *April Lady* (1957), *A Civil Contract* inverts the marriage plot by beginning with a marriage and then exploring the process of courtship afterwards. The reverse romance generates its own suspense – not about who will be married to whom, but rather about how two people in a marriage can find love and happiness even when the relationship begins without love, at least on one side.

Sometimes Heyer focuses on a couple where both partners come to fall in love quite quickly but, through various misunderstandings, are unable or unwilling to show their feelings, as in *April Lady*. Another twist appears in *The Convenient Marriage*, where neither party to the marriage is in love at first, but both fall in love as the novel progresses. As these examples show, the reverse romance highlights generic expectations precisely by inverting them. *A Civil Contract* is in fact the novel where Heyer most clearly analyses what romance is, and what it means to write narratives based on improbable dreams of romantic love. In this novel Heyer explicitly draws on Jane Austen's books – not as narratives of romance, but rather as realist novels very much concerned with the practicalities of life and the need for substantial amounts of money to sustain the upper-class lifestyle on which both authors focus. She thus challenges the often-traced genealogy by which Austen is claimed as an ancestor of the romance novel, suggesting instead that Austen's more important legacy is as a realist novelist of manners and

a sharp delineator of the need for emotional hypocrisy in social life, particularly for women.¹

In this chapter I draw on Heyer's use of Austen to support my main argument, which is that *A Civil Contract* gives us both positive and negative portrayals of emotional hypocrisy through its inversion of the marriage plot, and that positive hypocrisy in this novel should be understood as a kind of generosity, a gift from one character to another. *A Civil Contract* is centrally concerned with the problem of financial generosity – a situation experienced by the central male character, Adam, as a crushing burden, a challenge to his masculinity and to his class status as an aristocrat. Adam's deep resentment of financial generosity means that his rich wife Jenny can express her love for him only under the screen of a matter-of-fact, emotionless attention to his comfort. This screen becomes so successful that many other characters believe her incapable of strong feeling or, in the term more often used in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, of sensibility.

Indeed, Jenny herself denies her capacity for sensibility. Yet she is clearly depicted throughout the novel as a deeply feeling person who is very good at a certain kind of hypocrisy – specifically, playing the role of a practical housewife with few thoughts beyond the mundane. Her generous hypocrisy stands in contrast to more selfish forms of hypocrisy shown by other characters, especially those who use their reputations for sensibility to ensure they get their own way whenever possible. Yet Heyer does not completely condemn these forms of selfish hypocrisy. Instead she presents them as the logical result of a society in which female frailty is rewarded with admiration and attention. However, Heyer leaves no doubt that emotional restraint to the point of hypocrisy, and the ability to avoid burdening others with one's own feelings, is the more admirable stance to adopt. In prizing this stance over the romantic one, *A Civil Contract* also challenges the conventions of romance.

Emotional transparency vs hypocrisy

As comedies of manners, Heyer's historical novels are frequently concerned with varying modes of hypocrisy and their role in the social life of the upper-class characters with whom her books are primarily concerned. The opposition between sincerity and acting is central to her work and part of the emotional tension that drives the comedic romantic plots for which her novels are known. In this regard Heyer's work can

be compared to some of her contemporaries such as Angela Thirkell and Margery Sharp; though these novelists all wrote very different kinds of stories, they share an interest in the varieties of hypocrisy – from the self-deceived to the highly self-aware – available, and indeed necessary, for women in social life. In a perceptive analysis Karin E. Westman observes that Heyer’s heroines commonly favour masculine candour over feminine politeness and that, ‘In Heyer’s Regency world, to speak with “candor” means to speak in a masculine voice that prefers masculine slang to “polite” conversation ...’.² Many of Heyer’s heroines are indeed notable for their preference for plain speaking and their lack of affectation – often in contrast to other female characters who enact more conventionally ‘feminine’ behaviour.

However, Heyer also recognises the importance of hypocrisy and the ability to dissimulate one’s feelings in certain circumstances. In fact, in many of her books, the heroine finds herself obliged to wield hypocrisy as an essential tool. As Heyer’s books show, some degree of hypocrisy is vital for the smooth functioning of society. Hypocrisy is even more important for the successful performance of femininity in a world in which women very often find themselves vulnerable and in which they face highly regulated daily lives, especially those who come from relatively poor families. This is not to say that Heyer’s male characters do not often display hypocrisy themselves. It is rather to say that her books make significant connections between hypocrisy and the performance of femininity, in which hypocrisy is an essential component of female subjectivity.

The hypocrite, in a connection that goes back to the word’s roots in ancient Greek drama, is an actor – someone who plays a role while harbouring another kind of self underneath. In early modern England the hypocrite was frequently discussed in religious terms: a self-deceived person who thinks they are truly religious when in fact only observes the forms of religion, without the emotional and spiritual content that makes religion real.³ By the eighteenth century hypocrisy had become more frequently considered as a problem of society and manners, in particular with the new discourse of politeness.

In a recent study of eighteenth-century hypocrisy and femininity, Jenny Davidson observes

Yet for all these eighteenth-century writers, the restraint of appetites calls up the specter of hypocrisy: while politeness and good manners can and should arise from the heart, they are also

the product of years of discipline directed towards the suppression of true feeling.⁴

As Davidson notes, hypocrisy is a reasonable response to the power imbalance between the sexes. Women may be required to pretend to feelings that they do not in fact feel, but hypocrisy can also be turned to useful account for women's own purposes. It may help them to claim a power of concealment that helps them negotiate a world heavily loaded in favour of men:

... women effectively leveraged themselves into a more powerful position by laying claim to what may be called (in my admittedly provocative terminology) the right to be hypocritical: to exert modesty, tact and self-control to a degree that men could or would not. Another way of putting this is to say that by the start of the nineteenth century, women were not merely allowed, but actively encouraged, to cultivate an unreadable quality in their relations with men and with society at large.⁵

In other words the ability to hide behind a facade becomes central to the performance of femininity, in order for women to gain and sustain what limited power they could claim. As Davidson notes, women's inferior position in eighteenth-century power relations is precisely what gives them the right to hypocrisy, a lever that compensates somewhat for their lack of power. Though Heyer gives us many lively female characters who challenge the need for excessive decorum, even the most straightforward of her heroines knows, or must learn, when to put on a performance of modesty to retain their reputation – or when to conceal the true feelings that might endanger them in some way if openly shown.

Davidson is writing of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women and writers. However, Lauren Berlant highlights the continuing relevance of social hypocrisy and its connections to femininity in later modernity when she writes that in the film *A Star Is Born* (1954)

... femininity is seen as a training ground for the profession of acting. Acting, like many forms of engagement with convention, requires the subject to sublimate her being into another's shape while nonpsychotically having a personality to snap back to when the intersubjective moment is over: ... For ordinary women represented in women's culture, life is all about method acting,

and it is the revelation of the labor of representing hypocrisy as emotional transparency that elevates ordinary femininity into situation tragicomedy.⁶

This insight is particularly useful for understanding Heyer's mid-twentieth century representation of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century women in her novels – women whose lives require them constantly to perform a role, to suppress their true emotions and to express emotions demanded by their circumstances, all while appearing emotionally transparent on the surface. Heyer is acutely conscious of the power dynamics that push some women into emotional hypocrisy yet free other women to express exactly what they think and feel any time they please. Her characters of the second sort are often admirable in their candour and sincerity, as well as their aristocratic disdain for what other people might think. Characters of this sort include Sophy, heroine of *The Grand Sophy* (1950), the ironically named Serena of *Bath Tangle* (1955) and a host of older aristocratic ladies who appear as secondary characters throughout the novels and who enjoy the money and status that allows them free expression of their feelings.

More frequently, however, Heyer's female heroes have to weigh carefully when they can openly express their feelings and when they must dissemble. Central to many of her plots is the story of a woman who must learn when and how to be frank, as in *Friday's Child* or, to some extent, *These Old Shades* (1926). Heyer also returns repeatedly in her books to the woman, often a slightly older character, who has learned only too well how to repress her true emotions. She must learn to express herself a little more openly in order to find her happy ending, as in the cases of Hester in *Sprig Muslin* (1956) and Harriet in *The Foundling* (1948).

Self-control and sensibility

Friday's Child is the novel most like *A Civil Contract* in that the heroine is in love with her husband from the start; he must not only learn to recognise that love, but also to reciprocate it. In *Friday's Child*, the heroine Hero is a poor relation who has worshipped her husband Sherry from afar from an early age; she has nothing to offer Sherry but her love, and Sherry's maturation corresponds with his ability to recognise Hero's love and to respond to it. This novel's *Bildungsroman* quality derives not only from Sherry's development beyond the rakishness of his youth, but

also from Hero's need to learn social manners – in a word, to adopt the hypocritical behaviour that enables her to conceal her feelings when necessary in a social setting. Though Hero never overtly states her love of Sherry to him, she never disguises that love either. Yet only the couple's friends see what Sherry is blind to for most of the novel.

Hero is in fact remarkable for her lack of social hypocrisy – a trait that lands her into hot water more than once, as she finds it difficult to accept social double standards that forbid her to act or speak like the young men who are her closest friends. But she is very good at hiding her disappointment when Sherry fails her – which happens frequently. This is represented in the novel as part of the generosity of her love and her gratitude for what she sees as Sherry's gift to her of marriage. The novel makes it clear, however, that the more important gift is Hero's love to Sherry – a love that demands nothing of its object except being allowed to be near him. The whole point of the title, we come to realise, is that Friday's child is 'loving and giving'.⁷ Hero comes to her marriage penniless, but the novel shows us that despite Sherry's superior wealth and status, Hero is the more admirable character, simply because of her emotional generosity

Friday's Child is a light-hearted romp, yet underneath its sparkling surface it hints at darker issues and the real risks women face – in the Regency as well as in the mid-twentieth century – of betrayal, desertion and destitution. *A Civil Contract*, published 20 years later, is a far more serious and realistic novel that exposes some of these darker issues to the light, in the mode of tragicomedy rather than comedy. Central to the story is the concept of hypocrisy as a gift, an expression of generosity in a novel where generosity is highly problematic because of its ability to feminise the aristocratic male by rendering him dependent. As in *Friday's Child*, the love in the marriage comes, at first, only from the wife, Jenny. Her husband Adam is in love with Jenny's friend Julia, but because his extravagant and recently deceased father has left his estate deeply in debt, he marries Jenny instead. She is the daughter of Jonathan Chawleigh, a man who started his life poor but who has enriched himself through hard work. Through Chawleigh, and through Jenny's struggle to learn aristocratic mores and tastes, class is especially visible in this novel in a way that it is frequently not in Heyer's novels – which of course, focus on a tiny group of elites in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. Chawleigh is nearly incapable of hiding his emotions, especially anger. All his feelings play out on the surface, a characteristic that marks him as a self-made man, with little education in aristocratic self-control.

Yet Heyer's novels also depict aristocrats who lack self-control, often through arrogant self-regard. Such figures have a tyrannical and, at times, nearly monstrous quality to them, as with Lord Darracott of *The Unknown Ajax* (1959) or, in a more humorous vein, Lady St Erth in *The Quiet Gentleman* (1951). In other words, the emotional world of Heyer's novels is complex, not easily reducible to class status. In *A Civil Contract*, class identity is at times challenged by a character's ability to feel the right emotions, or through a struggle to match emotions with occasions in the ways demanded by their society. Adam is, in general, very good at this, as is evident when he marries:

Adam, back in his unquiet dream, only obeyed the dictates of his breeding. Good manners demanded a certain line of conduct, and since it was second nature to him to respond to that demand it was with no effort but mechanically that he talked and smiled at the wedding-breakfast.⁸

Adam's emotions are not so much repressed as sublimated into the performance of politeness, which is now 'second nature' to him – a telling phrase that suggests how ingrained his training has become. An aristocratic upbringing is very much an education in politeness for both genders, as we see here, for Adam's rank as well as his personal preference requires emotional self-control. Like Jenny, Adam also puts on a hypocritical performance throughout the novel, though he is not so good at it as Jenny because his performance is based on honour rather than love. On entering into his marriage of convenience, he is obliged by his aristocrats' code of honour to behave well and to conceal his own ambivalence – at times, even repugnance – to his bride. His outbursts of temper usually stem from his deep resentment at his dependence on his wife's father's money, which in his view compromises his social status. Adam's code of aristocratic masculinity is a bar in his successful performance of polite hypocrisy; Jenny's position as a woman makes it easier for her to perform the self-control required of her in this marriage. Adam shares, to some extent, his mother's sensibility, but he also recognises – and is indeed shamed by – his own failures of generosity. When Jenny asks to be taken to his ancestral estate Fontley while pregnant, he realises the extent of his own selfishness:

He had been glad to escape to Fontley from the stifling luxury of Lynton House, but he had never acknowledged to himself that he did not want to see Jenny installed there. It was true, however,

and she knew it; and the humble note in her voice when she uttered her request, the look that told him she was afraid of a rebuff, shamed him more than any spoken reproach. He thought, in horror: *I take everything, and give nothing.*⁹

Though Jenny's money has enabled Adam to keep Fontley, and to dower his sisters, he sees the estate as a place where he can escape from his marriage and from what he feels to be the loss of his identity. His path through the novel traces his development as a character who can finally accept what Jenny has to offer. This is made easier for him by his unexpected success in gambling on the market immediately after the Battle of Waterloo, but before the news of the victory has reached Britain; having won a small fortune, he finds himself better able to accept what the Chawleighs have given him.

Marrying for money – and making it work

Jenny, though born into the *nouveau riche* bourgeoisie, has learned considerable self-control as part of her education in a school for aristocratic girls, which is also how she came to know Julia. Part of Jenny's path in this book is to learn how to enact her new identity as Viscountess Lynton, a member of the upper classes, in an age when marrying for money is considered perfectly acceptable, but marrying drastically out of one's class rather less so. An essential aspect of class identity in Heyer's books is the way in which such identities depend on conduct, particularly in how emotions are experienced and expressed. In the aristocratic circles of Heyer's novels, politeness depends on the ability to enact correct emotions and to mask incorrect or impolitic ones. One of the central contrasts of this novel is built around the characters Jenny and Julia, in a dynamic lifted from Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, a clear influence for Heyer's work. Heyer directly references Austen's novel in *A Civil Contract* – Jenny remarks on enjoying an unnamed book (perhaps *Pride and Prejudice*?) by the author of *Sense and Sensibility*, which Julia thinks too 'humdrum'¹⁰ – but she also refers to it indirectly in Jenny's description:

There was no brilliance in her eyes, no allure in her smile, no music in her flat-toned voice, and not the smallest suggestion of the ethereal either in her person or her bearing. ... She enjoyed a joke, but did not always perceive that one had been made; and she looked as though she had more sense than sensibility.¹¹

This description, given to us from Adam's point of view, is largely accurate; Jenny *does* have more sense than sensibility, and yet she has sensibility as well, albeit well hidden under her unemotional demeanour. *A Civil Contract* ultimately shows that the binary of sense and sensibility does not hold up in a social world where polite hypocrisy is required to survive. Ironically Jenny's emotional control marks her as more 'upper-class' in conduct than some of the aristocrats in this novel, in particular Julia.

Such emotional control also links Jenny to other Austen heroines besides *Sense and Sensibility's* Elinor, namely Fanny, the heroine of *Mansfield Park*, a novel Jenny reads in *A Civil Contract*.¹² In a challenge to some genealogies of the romance novel, where Austen is often claimed as an ancestor, Heyer associates Austen more closely with the unromantic Jenny rather than the overly romantic Julia (who prefers Byron's poetry to Austen's novels). In this novel, Jenny likes Austen because she reads her as a realist writer who deals with everyday people and problems – as, in fact, an *anti*-romantic writer.¹³ This preference for the mundane business of life foreshadows *A Civil Contract's* focus on the same kind of mundanity, in contrast to the romances Heyer made her name writing. Heyer explicitly invokes Austen here as a realist author and, like Austen, she focuses on the inevitability of hypocrisy in everyday social life.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Heyer does draw on Austen's binary between sense and sensibility – evident in *Mansfield Park* as well as in the novel of that title – but she complicates that binary to a degree that has not been fully recognised. In *Sense and Sensibility*, of course, Elinor, the sensible sister, is indeed a character of deep feeling, who uses tact as a way of sparing others.¹⁴ Heyer takes up this aspect of Austen's characterisation and uses it for her own, twentieth-century consideration of how tact, or hypocrisy, can be understood as an act of sacrifice and of generosity. Davidson argues that Austen presents hypocrisy as both necessary and, in some cases, admirable; and that tact is an essential quality for interacting with others:

Unlike Maria Edgeworth, who is committed to an ideal of perfect sincerity, Austen seems to accept as legitimate the idea that tact results from a desire not to hurt someone or to protect the other from one's own sense of superiority. For Edgeworth, tact is moral weakness, while for Austen it is a moral obligation of some complexity.¹⁵

As Davidson notes, tact often arises out of inferior status, where a woman of lower birth learns to read character more fully than do her superiors and to hide her own thoughts and feelings in self-defence. Jenny's tact, or hypocrisy, is like that of Fanny in *Mansfield Park* – both restrictive and enabling, a sign of her inferior birth status and also a sign of her superior ability to read character.

It may seem counter-intuitive to say that Jenny is notable for her tactful hypocrisy, even if this form of it is coded as positive. This is in part because Heyer repeatedly describes her as blunt, as incapable of dissimulation and as a woman who has difficulty acting according to upper-class mores of politeness. She is capable of strong feeling, however, and also of hiding that feeling with a wooden face. After Julia faints at a party on meeting Adam, for example, Jenny covers up the potential scandal so successfully that afterwards one lady thinks she is unaware of the emotional undercurrents of the situation and wonders if she is 'awake upon *any* suit':

She was mistaken: Jenny was quite awake upon that suit; and under a stolid demeanour she turned it over and over in her mind. Not by so much as a flicker of an eyelid did she betray to Adam how fully alive she was to the implications of Julia's dramatic swoon.¹⁶

Knowing that Adam still loves Julia, Jenny is determined to protect him from curious intruders and to maintain her own facade of indifference. By playing the role of the practical, insensitive woman, Jenny hides her own feelings to help spare Adam's. And she is more successful at playing this role than Adam, and certainly Julia, could ever be – perhaps precisely because she comes from a different background and is acutely conscious that she does not belong in their aristocratic milieu. As Davidson puts it, women and class inferiors are more likely to be inscrutable because they are regarded as inferior; such inscrutability gives them a necessary protection. Coming from the newly rich bourgeoisie rather than the aristocracy, Jenny plays a role all the time as she learns how to find her way in her new world.

While other characters comment on what they see as Jenny's lack of feeling, she herself often observes that she has no sensibility. However, the novel calls into question what sensibility really means when, as the narrative makes clear, Jenny has a great deal of it. In *A Civil Contract* characters who lay explicit claim to sensibility are generally exposed as selfish, near-hysterical women. In this context,

sensibility looks like a role in which a certain kind of femininity is played for advantage rather than being real, sincere feeling. Sensibility can be a more or less conscious tool, as with Lady Lynton, Jenny's mother-in-law. Her children are shown to be fully aware of their mother's manipulative tricks. Charming as long as she gets her way, Lady Lynton uses her reputation as a highly sensitive female to ensure that she does get what she wants. Her hypocrisy is clearly laid out in a relatively early scene of the novel, where Adam's sister Lydia explains her mother's nature to Jenny:

'Well, it's true, Adam. For my part, I think *someone* ought to explain Mama to Jenny! The thing is, you see, that she positively delights in being ill-used, and making us all feel guilty for no reason at all. Don't heed her! I *never* do!'

This frank exposition of her mother-in-law's character startled Jenny, but by the time she had spent two days at Fontley she had begun to see that there was a good deal of truth in it, and began to feel much more at ease.¹⁷

Lady Lynton has her good qualities – she is highly supportive of Jenny when the latter is in childbirth, for example. However, she has ensured that her family will remain sensitive to her own comfort by cultivating a reputation for sensibility that allows her to manipulate them and others. Sensibility, for Lady Lynton, is clearly a useful tool rather than an expression of sincere feeling.

Julia is a more complex case than Lady Lynton, although one can see how the former's character might be likely to develop along similar lines, given the resemblance between the two women. Indeed, it is possible that Adam is attracted to Julia not just because of her beauty, but also because her feminine sensibility is very like his mother's – a similarity that, initially at least, he does not seem consciously to appreciate. Julia appears at first as a spoiled but highly attractive young woman, prone to fainting and liable to imagine herself into the vapours. She is encouraged in this sense of herself by the men who flock around her, calling her 'Sprite – Sylph – Zephyr'.¹⁸ Charming and wilful, Julia enacts a very conventional form of aristocratic – and manipulative – femininity, untainted by any sense of how people really live outside the charmed circle in which she has spent her own life. Although she claims to be willing to live in poverty with Adam, the novel makes it very clear that she has no idea what poverty actually is. Meanwhile her interactions with Adam tend towards the hysterical – as when, on

being told marriage to him is out of the question, she blames him for the whole situation:

Addressing herself to Adam, standing rigid behind a chair, his hands gripping its back, she said in a voice choked by sobs: 'I could have borne any privation – any discomfort! Remember it!' She laughed hysterically, and hurried to the door. Looking back, as she opened it, she added: 'My courage did not fail! Remember that too!'.¹⁹

Julia is clearly high strung and under pressure in this scene, but the novel consistently critiques her excessive shows of sensibility. It validates Jenny's perspective instead when she remarks that she has never really understood her friend, who seems capable of 'hoaxing' herself into hysterics.²⁰ Julia is not a conscious hypocrite, but her excessive sensibility precludes her seeing others' point of view and from showing the emotional generosity that Jenny is so willing and able to offer.

We see Julia through Adam and Jenny's eyes but never from her own point of view. As the novel progresses, however, Adam becomes increasingly aware of the ways in which Julia's sensibility disguises her fundamental selfishness. When, at a party Adam and Jenny are hosting, Julia tells Adam that she plans to marry an older man, Adam feels responsible for her unhappiness. Yet the way in which she tells him arouses his resentment:

As he performed his duties, arranging his guests suitably in the windows, no one would have guessed that beneath his smiling calm a tumult of emotion was raging. Julia's words had been knife-thrusts; he winced under them, and was startled to recognize in the medley of rage, jealousy, and hopeless desire, resentment. The thought flashed into his mind that she might have spared him.²¹

Here Adam's sense of duty clearly mandates his own hypocritical hospitality as what he owes to his guests. Yet it is perhaps this same sense of duty – which mandates that he never wound a guest *or* a host – that prompts him to recognise Julia's desire to hurt him under the cover of her own sensitivity. Balked of marriage to Adam, Julia acknowledges only her own pain, refusing to recognise the reasons why Adam has chosen to help his family by marrying for money. Since Adam has married Jenny, Julia tells him, she needs to find love

somewhere: 'I can't live if I'm not loved!'²² Key here is the passivity of the sentiment – Julia may love, but more important to her is *being* loved. Love and admiration are the breath of life to her and the lack of either drives her to hysteria – a point that is made completely clear by the end of the novel.

Romance in the real world

The resolution of the novel arises out of Julia's sense of insult at what she sees as Adam's desertion of his sister Lydia's engagement party to avoid her own presence. Adam has in fact missed the party because he spotted a chance to recoup his family fortune through a once-in-a-lifetime stock market gamble, a chance that even his father-in-law fails to recognise. When Adam returns home, Julia throws a tantrum:

She never tried to shine down her friends; Adam knew how prettily she would coax a shy girl out of her shell, and he guessed that had she found a vacant throne awaiting her at Fontley, she would have handed Lydia on to it, with enchanting grace. The trouble had been that she had found Lydia already established on the throne. She had not stepped down from it; nobody had considered that she had any right to it. ... She had obviously spent a miserable evening, feeling herself neglected, and was now in a mood to pick out any grievance that offered, and to magnify it into a tragedy.²³

From Adam's newly alert perspective, Julia appears unreflective and unaware of how her behaviour looks from any reasonably objective point of view. As he finally sees, Julia is a mistress of self-deception. Her genuine care for her friends coexists with her sense of her own importance and in a crisis the latter predominates. In so doing Julia exposes her own hypocrisy which, unlike Jenny's, does not derive from love, but rather from selfishness. In this passage from the end of the novel, Adam finally sees her excessive need for attention laid bare once the glamour of her performance of sensitivity wears thin.

Julia's supposed emotional transparency – she faints easily, lacks emotional self-control and tends towards hysterics – is actually based on a kind of apparently unconscious hypocrisy. In this the appearance of transparency allows her to maintain her self-image as a fragile creature who needs continual comfort and protection. The novel does provide some excuse for her behaviour, however. It is apparent that Julia has

always been praised and protected, and perhaps has never had the chance to develop any other way of being:

The thought that she, who had always been Papa's pet, was now in his black books proved to be too much for Julia's fortitude. She settled down to cry in good earnest ... As soon as she knew herself to be still loved she grew calmer, and when he said that he sympathized with her much more than she guessed she was so passionately grateful that she was ready to promise to do anything he wished.²⁴

As 'Papa's pet', Julia has been infantilised to some degree; she has indeed been rewarded for her displays of fragility. She is never critiqued to the degree that some of Heyer's hypocrites are in other novels, but she is shown to be both immature and unconsciously cruel in her inability to recognise or cope with life's more quotidian demands.

In contrast Jenny, though also her father's pet, has learned or been born with more toughness. Chawleigh's insistence that she learn to be an aristocrat has forced her into a social life she has never enjoyed but which she sees as her duty to endure. Heyer's tendency to a kind of genetic determinism becomes evident when Jenny takes to the life of a country gentry woman like a duck to water – a preference Heyer assigns to her peasant blood, derived from her mother's side of the family.²⁵ But Heyer rarely attributes the characteristics and tastes of her characters based *solely* on blood inheritance and class. As I mentioned earlier, even her aristocrats earn criticism from time to time – based, usually, on a lack of self-control, or on unjustified and ruthless arrogance.²⁶ Selfishness is a cardinal sin in her books, along with a disregard of the code of honour, while a notable characteristic of her leading characters, particularly female ones, is their generosity. Such characters are not necessarily self-sacrificing, but they put others' needs before their own as an expression of love.

Jenny's generosity – and her hypocrisy – stems from her love for Adam, a love that leads her to agree to a marriage of convenience because this is the only way she can help him financially.²⁷ Knowing that Adam does not love her, Jenny knows also that he loves Julia and will not welcome any expression of her love for him. This situation drives her emotional hypocrisy: concealing her love is precisely her generous *expression* of love for him, along with her observation of his every wish and taste. This is where the novel makes its strongest case for the performance of hypocrisy as, at its best, an expression of generosity,

a genuine gift from one character to another. Jenny's performance of relative indifference is masterly, betrayed only from time to time, as when she is unexpectedly rapturous over Adam's small gift of a fan.²⁸ It is not until nearly three-quarters of the way through that the novel makes explicit that Jenny loves Adam and has since she first met him:

Friendship might hold no place in a girl's dreams, but dreams were insubstantial: escapes from reality into the glorious impossible. To consider the likely future was not to dream: it was to look forward; the essence of a dream was to ignore probability and one knew it, even at the height of fancy, when one imagined oneself the beloved of a slim young officer, whose eyes, weary with suffering, held so much kindness, and whose smile was so charming. No thought of friendship had entered plain, plebeian Jenny Chawleigh's quite hopeless dream; but friendship was not to be despised after all: it was a warm thing, perhaps more durable than love, though falling such a long way short of love.²⁹

Jenny's realism does not preclude as much capacity for love as Julia's – in fact, she arguably feels much more, because for her loving is more important than being loved. But her generosity is a sacrifice, one made at considerable cost to Jenny; although she ultimately earns Adam's love, she knows this love is a realistic one based on common interests, rather than the romantic love or devotion that she will always feel for him.

The passage above seems like a reflection on Heyer's own career writing improbable romances. *A Civil Contract* exposes the work and emotional labour involved in making a marriage work. In doing so, it represents marriage as real and romance as fantasy – a pleasant fantasy, but one not necessarily to be found in ordinary life. The novel does give us successful love matches, but the marriage at its centre works because of Jenny's generous hypocrisy. Her performance costs her a great deal of suffering, which eventually pays off in the novel's ending when Adam finally tells his wife that he loves her. This emotion is not the romantic love of his desire for Julia. It is rather the realistic love of a man who finds in his wife the best friend he did not know he needed.

In this book, Heyer makes plain the emotional costs of romance in a realist world. In so doing she exposes as fantasy the novels that have earned her so many readers, but that she regarded as simply good escapist fiction. Characters such as Julia, with their excessive love of romance and blindness to the realities of life, find some excuse in their sheltered upbringing and in a social world that prizes the impractical

femininity they embody. But the novel's main interest lies with women such as Jenny who yearn for love but also recognise the demands of real life. *A Civil Contract* may well be, as it has been called, Heyer's best book.³⁰ Yet it is also the book that most openly challenges romantic conventions and, consequently, the genre that Heyer did more than anyone to establish in the course of the twentieth century.

Notes

- 1 Catherine Roach makes a succinct description of this genealogy: 'If by *romance novel* one means an Anglo-authored, love-based courtship resolving to a happy marriage, then the literary ancestry traces back through highlights such as the Harlequin/Mills & Boon publishing empire, the Regency-set novels of Georgette Heyer, and the nineteenth-century masterworks of Jane Austen to Samuel Richardson's 1740 bestseller *Pamela*.' In *Happily Every After*, 6.
- 2 Westman, 'A Story of Her Own Weaving', 173.
- 3 See Clement, 'Acting (False) Humility', chapter 2, 41–55.
- 4 Davidson, *Hypocrisy*, 8.
- 5 Davidson, *Hypocrisy*, 11.
- 6 Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 226.
- 7 Heyer, *Friday's Child*, 284.
- 8 Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 98.
- 9 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 214.
- 10 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 67.
- 11 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 62. See also Regis, *Natural History*, 139.
- 12 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 238–9.
- 13 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 67.
- 14 Davidson, *Hypocrisy*, 154.
- 15 Davidson, *Hypocrisy*, 154.
- 16 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 147.
- 17 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 130.
- 18 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 29.
- 19 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 35.
- 20 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 247.
- 21 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 206.
- 22 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 206.
- 23 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 387.
- 24 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 164.
- 25 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 271.
- 26 *Justified* arrogance is another matter altogether, however, as a book like *These Old Shades* indicates.
- 27 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 284.
- 28 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 137.
- 29 Heyer, *Civil Contract*, 281–2.
- 30 Hodge, *The Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 144.

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6

Georgette Heyer and redefining the Gothic romance

Holly Hirst

Romance readers are all too familiar with the disregard with which romance reading and writing is often treated. In my field of scholarship, the Gothic, it is rare to find more than a passing mention of the Gothic romance despite it being one of the most commercially successful forms of Gothic literature in the twentieth century.¹ Dismissed by scholars as generic in the worst way, it is envisaged as a genre reliant on a cookie-cutter plot that simply repeats again, and again, and again, as some Jane marries her Mr Rochester for the thousandth time. These critiques were formalised and expanded upon by feminist critics, such as Michelle Massé, Tanya Modleski, Joanna Russ and Anne Williams, in the latter half of the twentieth century, each of whom provided their own strangely differing ‘universal’ Ur-plot.² Even Lori A. Paige, approaching the Gothic romance as a reader and writer of romance in *The Gothic Romance Wave* (2018), returns cyclically to a definition based on a range of ‘standard elements’³ which are seemingly essential to the Gothic romance. Almost no attempt has been made to interact with individual texts rather than the genre as a whole; each novel is simply viewed as a facsimile of the next. The novels of Georgette Heyer, though rarely categorised as ‘gothics’, offer a useful rebuttal to such formulaic conceptions of the intersection of the Gothic and the romance: a less dismissive conception of the Gothic romance.

The most succinct and comprehensive analysis of the Ur-plot formulas prevalent in current criticism is found in the article by Joanna Russ, ‘Somebody’s Trying to Kill Me and I Think It’s My Husband’ (1973). According to Russ, the recipe for a ‘gothic’ (referring to the Gothic romances which rose to prominence as a publishing category and romantic sub-genre in the 1960s and 1970s) is as

follows: one inexperienced young *Heroine*, a 'large lonely brooding' *House* in exotic *Country*, an absent (usually deceased) or wicked mother figure, an absent father, a 'dark, magnetic, powerful, brooding, sardonic *Super-Male*', *Another Woman*, a *Buried Ominous Secret* or two, *Ominous Dialogue* and an inevitable *Untangling*. For flavour, she suggests, you can also throw in a child under the putative care of the *Super-Male* and a 'shadow male', who appears a gentleman but is inevitably revealed to be the villain.⁴

The claims for the ubiquitous nature of such *Jane Eyre*- or *Rebecca*-inspired Ur-plots begin to fall apart when we compare Ur-plot models between themselves. In fact, all differ in more or less important ways (Anne Williams insists on a supernatural element, for example, while Michelle Massé references a dashing young hero in direct contrast to an older brooding 'dark man'). More importantly, however, these supposedly descriptive Ur-plots become critically prescriptive, distorting our interactions and understandings of the texts themselves, which rarely conform to such reductive formulations. The critical emphasis on the romance between a brute and an ingenue when applied, for example, to the works of Victoria Holt (perhaps the most famous writer of 'gothics') obscures the centrality of a variety of female inter-relations. These relationships – rival, friend, 'mother', dependent, mentor, support, enemy or double – are frequently the principal focus of the novel, the heroine's journey and the source of threat. As this brief example illustrates, it is all too easy to erase the reality of the texts when we impose a formulaic conception of the genre universally upon them. It also means that many texts, including some of Heyer's novels, are never engaged with as Gothic romances, or as points of intersection between the Gothic and the romance, despite clearly being entrenched in both genres or modes.

As Paige has noted, there is actually 'considerable variation'⁵ even between 'gothics'. However, even Paige, in her concentration on 'gothics', returns to a broadly formulaic conception of the Gothic romance. If we are to engage seriously with the way in which the Gothic and the romance intersect, we must move beyond a simplistic conception of a second-hand Gothic, borrowing tropes, aesthetics and affects and slapping them haphazardly onto a central love story. Rather, in approaching the Gothic romance, we must examine the intersection between Gothic mode and romance: how both function symbiotically to provide entertainment, fantasy, comfort and even escape, while simultaneously offering complex and multivalent engagements with a wide

range of topics and concerns, from the relational to the psychological to the social. No other writer could be more suitable for the task of illustrating the richness and possibilities of such an intersection than Georgette Heyer. This chapter aims to demonstrate how Heyer's novels function as Gothic romances and how an investigation of individual texts can broaden our understanding of the possibilities of the intersection of the Gothic and the romance found in Gothic romances.

Heyer is infrequently associated with the Gothic romance. None of her novels were sold as 'gothics' and only one, *Cousin Kate* (1968), was reviewed as Gothic by contemporary publications.⁶ Only *Cousin Kate* and *The Reluctant Widow* (1946) broadly fit into the Ur-plot prescribed by Russ with their plucky heroines entering houses filled with secrets, murderous threats, familial disharmony and, in the case of *Cousin Kate*, madness. However, although critics of Heyer rarely engage with her as a Gothic writer, and readers are sometimes resistant to the categorisation, fans have increasingly pointed to the Gothic elements in many of her titles.⁷ Scholar and fan Susannah Fullerton, for example, highlights the Gothic elements of *Devil's Cub* (1932), *Faro's Daughter* (1941), *Friday's Child* (1944) and *The Reluctant Widow* (1946).⁸ Heyer is, in fact, a Gothic writer extraordinaire, who engages with the mode across a range of genres, undertaking complex intertextual engagements with Gothic texts, tropes and concerns that reach beyond the Victorian Gothic model found in *Jane Eyre*, instead primarily engaging both explicitly and implicitly with the early British Gothic (c.1764–1831).

Heyer's work offers a useful index of the way in which the Gothic mode was deployed and reimagined across various popular fiction genres. *Footsteps in the Dark* (1932) is a detective story and clear Gothic parody where the inhabitants of the house try to get to the bottom of its supposed haunting by a ghostly monk – a cover for a gang of smugglers. Her short story 'Night at the Inn' (1960) is a frequently jarring mix of romance and cannibalistic murderers, which deploys Gothic aesthetics of obscurity, tension and claustrophobic terror to present a thoroughly Gothic world in which the horrifying lurks beneath the everyday. In her psychological novel *Penhallow* (1942) Heyer offers a bleakly Gothic depiction of a family in crisis, murder, suicide and psychological disintegration. The techniques and tropes she deploys in these texts are echoed in her romance novels, in which she frequently interweaves Gothic elements. These range from the seemingly *Jane Eyre*-ian plot structure of *Cousin Kate* and the Gothic villainy of Andover in *The Black Moth* (1921) to the smilingly

debonair and murderous usurper Basil in *The Talisman Ring* (1936) and the cabal of homicidal smugglers of *The Toll-Gate* (1954).

It is all too easy to miss the Gothic quality of many of Heyer's novels if we rely on the dominant discourses of either romance or Gothic scholarship: respectively, an Ur-plot based definition of the 'gothics' as a publishing category or a terror-orientated definition that treats romance in the genre as of little merit or relevance. Heyer's light comedy and 'closed' happy endings (the story is resolved, happy ever after for all!) are often perceived as antithetical to the Gothic mode. However, what we find in Heyer is a different understanding of the Gothic and its possibilities in both uncovering and laying threats. She offers, frequently, a form of 'Austenian Gothic' that mirrors the devices of Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), in which Catherine Morland's wild Gothic misreading of the world points unerringly to the underlying 'mundanely' Gothic reality of, for example, spousal abuse and the intrinsic threat of societal power structures to those outside them.

Austenian Gothic in *Sylvester, or The Wicked Uncle*

Sylvester (1957) offers an example of this form of Heyer-ian Gothic – intertextually referential, frequently parodic and whose charming characterisations, witty dialogue and gentle comedy hide a Gothic world. The title of the novel itself – *Sylvester, or The Wicked Uncle* – echoes the title formulations of eighteenth-century Gothic novels (such as *The Italian, or The Confessional of the Black Penitents* (1796) by Ann Radcliffe or *Zofloya, or The Moor* by Charlotte Dacre). In doing so, it deliberately sets up Gothic expectations. As these coexist alongside the certainty of romance inseparable from Heyer's Regency texts, we are prepared for an Austenian Gothic: a novel whose parodic hyperbole encodes the legitimate threats of a mundanely Gothic extra-fictional world. Heyer further establishes the link to the Gothic mode through intertextual references, most particularly to Caroline Lamb's *Glenarvon* (1816). In *Sylvester*, the heroine Phoebe has written and is in the process of publishing *The Lost Heir*, whose hero is, visually at least, based on Sylvester. It is constantly associated with *Glenarvon* as a fellow Gothic *roman-a-clef* – a comparison that underscores the parity between the fictional villain, Count Ugolino in *The Lost Heir*, and the novel's hero, Sylvester. In reiterating the parity between the two Gothic *roman-a-clefs*, Heyer draws on the known relationship of imitation between life

and art associated with *Glenarvon's* villainous Lord Ruthven, famously based on that most Byronic of Byronic anti-heroes, Byron himself.

There are three Gothic 'layers' to *Sylvester* of which the *Lost Heir* is the first. The *Lost Heir* is a truly Gothic perception of the world in which 'character and events are exaggerated beyond reality, to become symbols, ideas, passions'.⁹ Thus the man who bloodlessly seeks a noble bride becomes the heartless villain who persecutes an innocent ingenue with his hands steeped in blood. This Gothic representation of the world is easy to reject, however, as it is explicitly fictional and its own creator disavows its relevance to reality. Phoebe chooses Sylvester as a model for the villain primarily because 'of the way his eyebrows slant, which makes him look just like a villain',¹⁰ but soon admits that he 'isn't villainous at all'.¹¹ It should be noted, though, that such an easy dismissal is somewhat undermined by Phoebe's recollection of their first meeting and the odious superiority Sylvester displayed, which prompted her own hurt and distaste. Something real lurks behind her choice of fictional villain.

Beneath this first overtly fictional Gothic rendering of reality, there is a second layer of Gothic perception. Ianthe, widow of Sylvester's twin brother Harry, echoing Catherine Morland's continual Gothicisation of her own life in *Northanger Abbey*, casts herself in the role of persecuted heroine. She perceives the world as a Gothic novel in which the lives and freedoms of both herself, her son and her deceased husband are, or were, threatened by the 'wicked uncle', Sylvester. Phoebe is also guilty of such self-Gothicisation at the beginning of the novel when, for example, she runs away from a compulsory marriage to a man who, in reality, neither wants to marry her nor has any intention of forcing his attentions upon her. In both cases Sylvester is cast as the Gothic villain in a Gothic 'novel' of someone else's imagination, which is understood by the reader to be, at the literal level, a misinterpretation or misrepresentation of the facts.

The third 'layer' is the 'real' Gothic world beneath the misperceptions. Peeling back the layers of parody, we find a Gothic framework which the exaggerated Gothic lenses of the first two layers illumine. Phoebe's home is abusive; her stepmother is both emotionally and, it is suggested, physically abusive towards her. She flees from it in terror of a coerced marriage to an uncaring man who poses, as the novel demonstrates, an emotional and social threat to Phoebe. This threat is exemplified by the results of his tirade at the ball, which leads not only to Phoebe's emotional devastation but also to her rejection by society and her decision literally to flee the country. Ianthe, despite her

privileged life and ceaseless complaints, is placed in a dependent and untenable position, particularly as regards her son, over whom she has no rights. The kidnapping of both Henry and Phoebe has its comic side, but both are taken against their will and Henry is abducted by neglectful parents, every bit as threatening to his emotional and physical welfare as Phoebe's Count Ugolino to his fictional relatives. Lurking behind the laughter is a thoroughly Gothic world.

This Gothic reality recasts Sylvester as a dark hero whose darkness is illuminated by his role as Gothic villain in the first two Gothic 'layers' of the novel. By 'dark hero', I mean something akin to the 'Byronic super-male'¹² and the 'Grand, Dark Man'¹³ that appear in the work of romance scholar Russ and Gothic scholar Joseph Crawford respectively: a figure almost unanimously avowed to be central to the Gothic romance itself across Ur-plot definitions. For Russ, he is 'an older man, a dark, magnetic, powerful, brooding, sardonic' super-male¹⁴ and for Crawford he is a 'redeemable, Byronic romantic hero'.¹⁵ While some of these characteristics are certainly to be found in Sylvester – he is some years older, more powerful and emotionally distant at various points – the definitions themselves are too reductive. The term 'Byronic' is both too specific and overdetermined to be useful.¹⁶ Sylvester is a model of propriety rather than a rebel: conscientious in his duties; universally polite; capable of deep feeling but prone to expressing emotion in a restrained way;¹⁷ he cares for his young nephew; and has his closest relationship with his mother.

Sylvester bears little if any resemblance to Byron's most famous heroes, such as the diabolic Manfred or the charismatic vengeful Giaour. Likewise, to suggest that he is an updated model of Heathcliff or Rochester, frequently cited as the models of the Gothic romance hero, is patently untrue. He would despise them both as brutes, ignorant or uncaring of the duties that attend their positions. Heyer's 'dark' Gothic hero Sylvester exceeds the reductive bounds usually placed around the definition of the Gothic romance 'dark man' – 'dark, magnetic, powerful and brooding' – and forces us to interact with the 'dark hero' not simply as a stock character but as a heroic 'type' that is defined not by easily reproduced features but by his role in the novel.

Reimagining the Gothic dark hero in Heyer

Crawford has usefully mapped the development of the 'dark hero' from the Gothic villains of the eighteenth century, such as the brutish yet

compelling Montoni of Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) or the luxurious and debonair Marquis de Montalt in her *Romance of the Forest* (1791). The Romantic reimagining of Satan and the Byronic figure itself rewrote the villain as tortured hero and in the influential Gothic romances of the Brontë sisters, *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wuthering Heights* (1847), the 'heroine, rather than having a hero (who is entirely heroic) to marry and a villain (who is entirely villainous) to escape, instead has a hero-villain whom she must *redeem*'.¹⁸ The traits that previously marked the villain (criminality, sin, rebellion, world-weariness) become markers of the hero to be redeemed.

Just such a hero-villain is found in Heyer's *These Old Shades* (1926). The Duke of Avon warns his heroine that 'I come of vicious stock, and I have brought no honour to the name I bear. Do you know what men call me? I earned that nickname [Satanas], child; I have even been proud of it. To no woman have I been faithful, behind me lies scandal upon sordid scandal'.¹⁹ Sardonic, ruthless and vengeful, he is partly redeemed by love. His son Vidal offers another variation of this reformable hero-villain in *Devil's Cub* (1932), but hints likewise at the diversity of the model. He is, according to his Mary, a 'wild, passionate, spoiled boy'.²⁰ Though Vidal is certainly murderous, potentially a rapist and undoubtedly brooding, he is a far cry from the almost Machiavellian omniscience and machinations of his father.

Sylvester appears to have little to do with such violently amoral and immoral figures. However, Avon's Satanic plotter, corrupted by a lifetime of vice; Vidal's amoral and murderous boy, tainted by an immoral world and an amoral family; and Sylvester's dutiful son and landlord, hardened by privilege and the death of his brother, are all recognisably dark heroes. Dark heroes may frequently share a variety of characteristics, from physical markers to personality traits, but they are not defined by any specific physical, emotional or material characteristics. The 'dark hero' is rather defined by his function and role within the text, which are indissolubly connected to both his need for and discovery of redemption. Prior to this their behaviour is marked by coldness, severity, hardness, bitterness, dismissal, emotional repression or ungoverned libertinism. This ends, at least in terms of their relationship with the heroine, when the 'explanation' occurs and mutual love is professed and misunderstandings cleared away although Heyer, always at heart a realist, never offers an easy narrative of total redemption. In *Sylvester*, his mother tells Phoebe, 'his wife, if he loved her, could do much to *improve* him, but she won't alter his whole character'.²¹

Heyer's dark heroes can be redeemed to some degree, but they remain realistically resistant to a simplistic narrative of total redemptive transformation. Such a transformation is often merely a fantastical overwriting of decades of experience, conditioning, education, trauma and development thanks to the power of love. Heyer's heroes always retain a little of their darkness as a threat as well as a titillating temptation.

What this broader definition of the dark hero offers is also the key to questioning those definitions of the Gothic that focus on an aesthetic of fear and in doing so ignore vast swathes of the genre, privileging horror over Gothic romance as central to definitions of the genre. The 'dark hero', and his role in the Gothic romance, highlight the importance not of fear and terror but of threat. Beyond the aesthetic or affect of fear, even in those texts such as the *Castle of Otranto*, which is more ridiculous than terrifying, it is threat which boils below the surface of every Gothic text and every Gothic romance. It may be one specific threat – in *Otranto* one such threat is Manfred's vicious pursuit of Isabella – or an over-arching, interconnecting series of threats, such as the threat of usurpation and betrayal in *Otranto*. The dark hero, in all his manifestations, from his uneasy beginnings in texts like Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1821) to Charlotte Brontë's Rochester and Heyer's Sylvester, both represents and, in his redemption, rewrites the threat of the novel.

In *Sylvester* the threats explored in the novel are those arising from wealth, power, a male-dominated world and the emotional trauma of grief. Sylvester represents a real threat to Phoebe's personal wellbeing, social standing and material comfort through, for example, his initial inclination to offer a loveless marriage and the inevitable resulting curtailment of Phoebe's freedom and emotional fulfilment. Sylvester functions also as an avatar of the social structures which narrow her options and represent a societal structure that is ultimately and multi-valently oppressive.

These threats are echoed in various figures throughout the novel. Nugent's monstrous selfishness, which does not stop short at abduction, springs from the same root cause as Sylvester's emotionally stultified, prideful duty: inherited money and rank. The coercive, brutal and demeaning treatment handed out by Lady Marlow is a result both of the power structures within the family and of Phoebe's lack of redress due to her gendered confinement to the options of marriage or spinsterhood.²² Sylvester is both a producer and product of these structures, as much in need of salvation as redemption. Frozen by both the psychological

trauma of his grief and his duty, Sylvester, like the dark heroes before him in the Gothic, needs to be saved.

The dark hero is central to Ur-plot conceptions of the Gothic romance. *Sylvester* goes part of the way in breaking the shackles of these reductive formulas by pointing to a much broader understanding of the dark hero. However, the dark hero is not the only hero of Heyer's Gothic romances nor of the Gothic romance more generally – a fact that undermines reductive Ur-plot definitions due to its very centrality to their depiction of the genre. As Paige notes, the dark hero is far from ubiquitous. However, she goes on to claim that 'few readers remember or pine for the thousands of bland gothic heroes' who are, in her understanding, the only other option.²³ Anyone who has met *Cotillion's* Freddy Standen (chapter 2) can attest to the appeal of a hero who is the very antithesis of his dark counterpart. Heyer's work is dotted with heroes who defy the 'dark hero' type – and even escape the Mark I/Mark II categorisation she famously posited about her own work at a midpoint in her career. In depicting such heroes in her more obviously Gothic novels, Heyer forces a reconsideration both of Gothic heroism and of the Gothic romance, to whose definition and appeal the dark hero is often considered central.

The quiet hero of *The Quiet Gentleman*

The Quiet Gentleman (1951) offers a paradigmatic example of Heyer's Austenian Gothic, this time devoid of dark heroes. Like *Sylvester*, the text asserts its Gothic credentials through parodic and knowing reference to Gothic antecedents and intertextual references to the early British Gothic. The house, Stanyon, is described as the work of 'one of Mr. Walpole's more fervid adherents'.²⁴ This is a reference to Horace Walpole, whose Gothic passion project and dwelling, Strawberry Hill, was both an architectural talking point and inextricably linked to his genre-starting 'Gothic tale' *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which took inspiration from his home. Stanyon Castle's winding passage-ways, secret doorways and hidden danger all pay an often parodically tinged debt to the castles of the early British Gothic through which its heroines were wont to both wander exploratively and flee. There is also glancing reference in *The Quiet Gentleman* to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey, the authors of Gothic or Gothically-tinged poetry, such as the vampiric 'Christabel' (1816) and the demonic tale *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) respectively. These intertextual

reference points raise Gothic expectations that the text is quick to meet.

The Quiet Gentleman is a tale of murderous threat unusually focused on the hero's, rather than the heroine's, danger. Returning from the war to a hostile family with whom he is barely acquainted, Gervase faces continuous threats to his person. A creeping menace dogs him, skulking through the house under cover of night. Family tensions swirl, jealousy, mortal enmity and resentment fester and murderous intentions are acted out under the lightly comic surface of the novel. It is, in the end, revealed to be his cousin Theo, his only friend, who seeks his life and hopes to incriminate his brother Martin, leading to the death penalty. He dreams of inheriting the estate and winning the hand of Marianne.

Facing the threat alongside Gervase is the anti-Gothic heroine Drusilla. First dismissed by Gervase as prosaic and plain, their relationship gradually deepens although rarely forms the focus of the novel. Drusilla is one of Heyer's anti-Gothic heroines: a key part both of Heyer's parodic engagement with the Gothic and her production of an alternative mode of Gothic heroism. Drusilla is compared throughout with Marianne, who appears to be the perfect Gothic heroine, taken straight from a Radcliffe novel. Beautiful, innocent, inclined to superstition and to extreme emotional reactions, she is the Gothic heroine that Drusilla quite literally wishes herself to be. Having saved Gervase's life after he is shot, Drusilla deplores her own lack of appropriate 'heroism', lamenting: 'Here had been an opportunity for spasms, swoonings, and a display of sensibility, utterly neglected!'²⁵ However, as she notes herself, pursuing such a course would have resulted in Gervase's death. She is precisely the understated, practical, rational, intelligent and ultimately prosaic heroine required to survive a Gothic world of murder, betrayal and persecution. In this she joins a long line of Heyer's anti-Gothic heroines, from Mary Challoner in *Devil's Cub*, who is ready and willing to shoot her aggressor, to Aunt Bosanquet in *Footsteps in the Dark*, who busily cleans out a skeleton-infested cupboard with disinfectant. These are the women, Heyer suggests, who will survive a Gothic world, confronting and ultimately outwitting its threats.

An unusual heroine demands an unusual hero. Gervase offers a paradigmatic example of the 'quiet hero' (a term taken from the title of this novel). Far from the insipid creature of virtue and sensibility conjured up by Paige, Gervase is a uniformly courteous, good-natured, kind, forgiving, warm and humble but also dashing, intelligent, witty, humorously resistant to his family's antipathy and a strikingly competent

fencer. The quiet hero is not defined by any specific set of characteristics and has many forms, from the quivering sensibility of Valancourt in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and the dogmatic diligence of Jonathan Harker in *Dracula* (1897) to the elegance and understated assurance of Gervase and the dashing exuberance of Jack Carstares in *The Black Moth* (1921).

It is the function of the quiet hero that defines the category; the quiet hero rather than representing and rewriting the threat of the novel, opposes it both literally and figuratively. Gervase manages both to track down and deal with his would-be murderer; he stands as a model of alternative masculinity and aristocracy, who contrasts the amoral and emotionless ambition and greed found in Theo. He counters resentment with forgiveness, antagonism with love and greed with generosity. The quiet hero offers the heroine, and the reader, an alternative world, one whose creeping threats may be opposed rather than simply rewritten. Far from boring, these heroes dash across the pages of Gothic romances with a laugh on their lips, a gleam of intelligence in their eyes and a steady promise of security, reaping hearts as they go.

The Gothic romance: reimagined

In Heyer's body of work we find again and again an interaction with the Gothic which defies both formulaic, Ur-plot based conceptions of the Gothic romance and Gothic scholarship's largely exclusive emphasis on fear. This chapter set out to redefine the Gothic romance in the light of Heyer's work, and these examples offer a starting point from which to launch such a definition. Heyer's Gothic relies on intertextual interplay with specific references to Gothic texts and authors, complemented by obvious, knowing, sometimes parodic reference to or deployment of Gothic tropes and aesthetics. Gothic expectations are raised and fulfilled, though not in the exaggerated way that the Gothic lens of heroines such as Phoebe might suggest. Gothic settings, from the labyrinthine halls of Stanyon Castle to the burning windows of Broome Hall, however parodic their description, recreate locales of authentic fear, porous houses, infested or open to invasion by evil.

Heyer's heroes demonstrate the range of Gothic heroism, from the dark hero-villain to the quietly heroic rescuer. In doing so, they undermine the reductive attempts to define and dismiss the Gothic romance as little more than a million versions of *Jane Eyre*, complete with domineering dark hero. Overt fear-mongering is largely absent from Heyer's novels, but Gothic threat recurs again and again,

underlining the primacy of threat in defining the Gothic and questioning definitions that rely on fear as central to the genre. Her heroines, often immune to the weaknesses of fear, offer an alternative model of Gothic heroinism. Pivotaly, Heyer's Gothic romances – or romances in the Gothic mode – show the ways in which humour and the Gothic survive hand in hand. Gothic worlds lurk beneath the witty sallies of her protagonist. Happy endings survive a Gothic nightmare. The Gothic romance rises triumphant over its own fears.

Notes

- 1 In key critical guides to the Gothic, such as Fred Botting's *Gothic* (1996) or *The Encyclopaedia of the Gothic* (2013), the Gothic romance is barely afforded a sentence worthy of attention. Even those Gothic critics who do turn their focus, albeit briefly, to the Gothic romance treat it dismissively, as we find in both Anne Williams's *Art of Darkness* (1995) and Joseph Crawford's *The Twilight of the Gothic* (2014).
- 2 I am referencing the definitions found in the following works: Russ' article 'Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband', Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, Massé, *In the Name of Love: Women, masochism and the Gothic* and Williams, *Art of Darkness*.
- 3 Paige, *The Gothic Romance Wave*, 2.
- 4 Russ, 'Somebody's Trying to Kill Me', 666–9.
- 5 Paige, *The Gothic Romance Wave*, 6.
- 6 'Miss Heyer serves up a very different sort of tale in the same period setting, nothing less than a full-fledged Gothic.' Barbara Benson, 'Forecast (Fiction)', *Publishers Weekly* 194 (9 September 1968). In *Heyer*, Fahnestock-Thomas, 219.
- 7 I am grateful for the feedback from the Georgette Heyer Appreciation Group on Facebook, many of whose members took part in an informal call for feedback on the conception of Heyer as a Gothic writer. Although some members were reluctant to denominate Heyer a Gothic author, I received a large volume of nominations of Heyer's texts as Gothic, with *Cousin Kate* and *The Reluctant Widow* being the most popular. *The Talisman Ring*, *Sylvester*, *The Unknown Ajax*, *The Quiet Gentleman*, *Venetia*, *Cotillion*, *The Toll-Gate* and *Bath Tangle* all received multiple votes.
- 8 Fullerton, 'A Most Excellent Influence', 23.
- 9 Angela Carter, *Fireworks*, quoted in Susanne Becker, *Gothic Forms*, 9.
- 10 Heyer, *Sylvester*, 52.
- 11 Heyer, *Sylvester*, 52.
- 12 Russ, 'Somebody's Trying to Kill Me', 679.
- 13 Crawford, *Twilight of the Gothic*, 31.
- 14 Russ, 'Somebody's Trying to Kill Me', 668.
- 15 Crawford, *Twilight of the Gothic*, 52.
- 16 In *Byronic Hero: Types and prototypes*, 35–61, Peter Thorslev has usefully investigated the Byronic hero, his forebears and his dominant traits. He argues that the Byronic hero is a mix of Gothic villain, 'man of feeling', 'gloomy egoist', 'noble outlaw' and 'Romantic rebel', and owes much to the figures of Cain, Milton's Satan and Faust. He is therefore 'distinguished ... by his capacities for feeling', has an 'intense concern with personal grief' and is prone to 'long, pessimistic self-analyses', as well as being a rebel who shows 'defiance toward traditional social codes and morals' and an archetypal over-reacher.
- 17 In the comments that at his brother's death Sylvester 'didn't shed a tear' (Heyer, *Sylvester*, 288) – something that she interprets as heartlessness but the discerning reader understands to represent an emotion so deep that it cannot be expressed.
- 18 Crawford, *Twilight of the Gothic*, 23.
- 19 Heyer, *These Old Shades*, 336.

- 20 Heyer, *Devil's Cub*, 266.
 21 Heyer, *Sylvester*, 324.
 22 Phoebe, obviously, is attempting to escape using her fiction writing. It is notable that Sylvester is so dismissive of this activity, reiterating the threat he ultimately presents and fulfils in terms of her autonomy and right to self-governance.
 23 Paige, *The Gothic Romance Wave*, 119.
 24 Heyer, *The Quiet Gentleman*, 7.
 25 Heyer, *The Quiet Gentleman*, 255.

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Heyer ... *in space!* The influence of Georgette Heyer on science fiction

Kathleen Jennings

'Regency England, as rendered by Heyer, is *scarily* amenable to a space opera setting.'¹

Introduction

Georgette Heyer's influence on the genres of historical fiction and romance generally, and the sub-genre of Regency romance in particular, is well-documented – indeed, while she is recognised as a historical novelist, she is commonly described as the mother of Regency romance.² However, Heyer's historical romances – particularly her Georgian and Regency novels – have also influenced, inflected and inspired a vibrant tradition within several sub-genres of speculative fiction. Perhaps most noteworthy is her influence on long-running (and frequently militaristic) space opera series.

In this chapter I will trace the influence of Heyer's Regency novels on several speculative fiction sub-genres.³ After a few caveats in relation to genre terminology I will look at the overlapping readerships, and then consider how speculative genre worlds have consciously and gleefully adopted Heyer's Regencies – not only as part of the sphere of speculative fandoms, but as a formative influence on their own writing. After considering the more obvious connections with Regency fantasy and fantasy of manners, I will look at three separate, long-running series of space opera novels, the authors of which explicitly acknowledge their debts to Heyer. I will argue that the parallels that can be drawn between those series and Heyer's Regencies not only illuminate less commonly considered (and emulated) aspects of her craft; they also suggest some

less purely techno-militarist grounds for the popularity of these science fiction series.

A few notes on genre

A rigorous definition and taxonomy of genre fiction is outside the scope of this chapter. It can also create the impression of hermetically sealed categories of literature (and consumers), whereas my argument relies upon the existence of a more fluid transfer of ideas. However, labels still have their uses. For the purposes of this chapter, unless otherwise specified, I will use the catch-all term 'speculative fiction' to refer to works traditionally categorised, marketed, shelved or otherwise generally recognised as fantasy and/or science fiction. Under that banner, the terms 'fantasy' and 'science fiction' refer, broadly, to a categorisation of the main 'impossible' elements of those stories: magic (or something like it) versus technology. I will pay a little more attention to the self-identification of some sub-genres, particularly fantasy of manners. In that case, the process by which practitioners, readers and critics define an emerging sub-genre is itself illuminating. However, while I have collected some relevant extracts of conversations, it is not my intention to attempt a definitive history of these sub-genres in this chapter.

I propose to use the term 'romance' in a similarly cavalier fashion. While Heyer and her peers prefigured a great deal of modern romance, and are more commonly discussed in that context, many of her works predate contemporary categorisations. In general, it is worth noting that her historical novels frequently glance only infrequently at their central romance (consider, for example, *The Talisman Ring* or *The Foundling*),⁴ while the books shape-shift between historical novel, romance, melodrama, espionage novel, comedy of manners and mystery. As this chapter's focus is on speculative rather than romance influences, I will not dwell on sub-genres of romance (traditional Regencies, Regency historicals, and so forth), other than to acknowledge their existence. When I refer to Heyer's novels, I am referring to those set in Georgian and Regency times, generally referred to simply as her 'Regencies' (at the risk of over-extending the common 'long Regency' expression). There is a degree of continuity in style (and occasionally characters) between Heyer's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels, and the sense of an evolving world rather than strictly delineated milieus. Moreover, and relevantly, they tend to be discussed in reader circles as a set.

Genre worlds and creative practice

Another area in which too-strict categorisation obscures the transfer of ideas is in the description of roles played by major actors in genre fields. At the most basic level, almost all writers are readers. To an extent in the romance field and to a highly-developed degree in speculative fiction circles, however, there is a vigorous exchange of roles and ideas between authors, readers, publishers, critics and the broader fan community. In this chapter I will use the term 'genre worlds' to refer to this ecosystem, with reference to Kim Wilkins' development of Becker's 'art worlds' to characterise the (Australian) fantasy publishing field as 'a research and development space' with 'few rigid distinctions between roles'.⁵

As will be seen, many of the individuals figuring in the history of these genres fill more than one role. It is also evident (and important to remember) that those same individuals may fill multiple roles in other genre worlds at the same time.

A shared fandom

In my experience it is remarkably common to find, among the ranks of dedicated fans and writers of speculative fiction, vocal fans of Georgette Heyer. My first inkling that this was not merely a statistical anomaly among my own friends was when I visited a science fiction bookstore in Toronto that had shelves dedicated to the works of Georgette Heyer. I then began to take notice of just *how many* science fiction readers, and by no means exclusively female ones, were ardent fans of Georgette Heyer. Book review and fan blogs commonly listed her as a favourite and influential author, alongside J. R. R. Tolkien and Isaac Asimov. If I spoke her name at a science fiction convention, it would summon a circle of enthusiasts.

To take just one example, consider Tor.com.⁶ This is 'a site for science fiction, fantasy, and all the things that interest SF and fantasy readers',⁷ and is now itself an influential speculative fiction publisher; many of its contributors are published authors and respected critics. A search of its archives returns, at the date of writing, 78 posts discussing the fiction of Georgette Heyer in some capacity, 44 of which can be found under their dedicated 'Georgette Heyer' tag. This is not a high proportion compared, for example, to search results for such foundational authors as Mary Shelley or Tolkien (these return results of 95 and 339 respectively).⁸ However, given that Tor.com is a website dedicated

to speculative fiction, 78 is not an insignificant number. Nor are these incidental references: Hugo Award-winning author Jo Walton has written several articles about or touching on Heyer's work, while author and reviewer Mari Ness has contributed an extensive series of posts,⁹ each dedicated to an individual Heyer novel. Both have attracted lively discussion in the comments.

Additionally, given the overlap between Heyer and speculative fiction readers, comparisons to Heyer's work frequently appear in the marketing and promotion (formal and informal) of speculative fiction works. Consider the following quotes, taken from a range of marketing material and review sites:

'Georgette Heyer meets Agents of S H I E L D.'¹⁰

'Georgette Heyer meets William Boyd.'¹¹

'Georgette Heyer meets Anthony Trollope with some Edward Said and a very big dash of feminism.'¹²

'An enchanting cross between Georgette Heyer and Susannah Clarke.'¹³

'Georgette Heyer meets Diana Wynne Jones.'¹⁴

'Georgette Heyer meets Dumas.'¹⁵

'Georgette Heyer meets Harry Potter.'¹⁶

'Criminal Minds meets Georgette Heyer meets Outlander.'¹⁷

'Georgette Heyer meets Buffy the Vampire Slayer.'¹⁸

'The Fugitive meets Harry Potter meets Georgette Heyer.'¹⁹

These references demonstrate that Georgette Heyer's name is recognised as a touchstone by marketing departments and bloggers alike who are advertising to a speculative fiction audience. Hers is a name that clearly means something to speculative fiction readers.

This overlap in readerships is venerable. While panels on Regency fantasy (and the odd Heyer-specific event) are still common at fan conventions, the World Science Fiction Convention (Worldcon) saw the establishment of Regency Dances, the Almack's Society for Heyer Criticism and Georgette Heyer high teas in the 1960s, when Heyer herself was still active.²⁰ And it is significant that this is not merely a case of parallel enthusiasms: Georgette Heyer work was already being imported into speculative fiction spaces and those attending these events included significant speculative fiction authors and editors.²¹

Influence on writers

Given the creativity involved in genre communities, and the overlap between ‘professional’ and ‘fan’ creativity previously mentioned, it is perhaps inevitable that these shared fascinations bleed through into work nominally in the other genre.

Although this chapter focuses on speculative fiction, the traffic does go both ways and provides more evidence for the role-switching between fans and practitioners. Take, for example, two books that, while more obviously anchored in the traditions established by Heyer, are also explicitly about the experiences of speculative fiction fandom (and, indeed, authorship).

The first of these is Tessa Dare’s romance *Romancing the Duke*.²² A clear (if consciously giddy) descendant of the genre Heyer founded, this book is constructed around a barely veiled, loving satire of *Star Wars* fandom (the plot of which is repositioned within the novel as a Gothic melodrama). A second example is Karen Joy Fowler’s *The Jane Austen Book Club*.²³ While marketed (particularly after the release of the movie) primarily as ‘chick lit’, this book attracted comparisons to Heyer²⁴ (Fowler is herself a fan²⁵). Fowler is also a well-respected author in speculative fiction circles, however, and the book contains scenes at a science fiction convention (Westernescon)²⁶ along with discussions of classic works of speculative fiction, including those by Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ and Carol Emshwiller.²⁷

These examples, although evidence of the overlap in readership, are fairly incidental to the shape of the novels in question. Consideration of the influence of Heyer’s influences on science fiction, however, begins to reveal a more thorough-going impact on the shapes of stories.

Regency fantasy

Heyer’s influence on speculative fiction appears, at first glance, to proceed in a logical continuum of sub-genres from Regency fantasy to the fantasy of manners, before heading out into the apparently more remote reaches of science fiction.

Regency fantasy presents the most immediately obvious point of intersection. This sub-genre involves the introduction of a fantastic element – dragons, magic, alternate history – into a Regency setting. (There is also a robust sub-genre of paranormal Regency romance,²⁸ but that is more in the romance genre and therefore outside the scope of

this chapter.) Naturally, the possibilities for innovation here are varied, with cited influences frequently including Jane Austen, Patrick O'Brian and C. S. Forester, as well as Georgette Heyer herself.

A notable example of Regency fantasy is Naomi Novik's *Temeraire* series,²⁹ which introduces dragons into the Napoleonic Wars. These began as Patrick O'Brian fanfiction, but Novik states that they were influenced by Heyer (among others) on a 'meta level':

ideally I want my readers to feel the way reading my books, that I felt and feel reading those. They delight me, even after so many times reading them, and more specifically they give me a sense of being welcomed into a different world or time, with an emphasis on welcome.³⁰

Further texts to consider in this sub-genre include Susanna Clarke's stately, mythic *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*³¹ and her accompanying collection *The Ladies of Grace Adieu and other stories*.³² Yet Clarke owes a greater debt to direct research into her era – particularly the stylings of its authors – than she does to Heyer. Other texts include Patricia C. Wrede and Caroline Stevermer's domestic, romping, epistolary *Sorcery & Cecelia: or The Enchanted Chocolate Pot*³³ (Wrede specifically cites Heyer as being a strong influence on her work³⁴ and also uses her as a model for writing instruction);³⁵ Garth Nix's YA adventure *Newt's Emerald*³⁶ (Nix is a considerable fan of Heyer);³⁷ Alison Goodman's Georgian urban fantasy *Lady Helen and the Dark Days Club*³⁸ (Goodman cites Heyer as one of her influences, along with Anne McCaffrey);³⁹ Mary Robinette Kowal's tactile, textile *Glamourist Histories*⁴⁰ (Kowal is also a Hugo Award-winning science fiction author who inserts Doctor Who into all her historical fantasy novels)⁴¹ and Zen Cho's *Sorcerer to the Crown*⁴² (Cho is also a reader of Heyer).⁴³ It is worth noting the publication dates of these books – Wrede and Stevermer's 1988 novel was reissued in 2004 with sequels, while the rest represent a twenty-first-century resurgence of the genre.

Many of these books have received many awards and are heavily reviewed within speculative fiction communities. Several of their authors also write science fiction, while most are embedded in the broader speculative fiction community as fans as well as writers.

However, while these books share the Regency setting, few are particularly Heyeresque beyond that milieu. The quotation from Novik above, however, suggests a different emphasis from that of setting.

While Novik retains many of the familiar Regency trappings, her comment is significant for two reasons: first, she does not identify the appurtenances of the Regency as the primary appeal of Heyer's works and second, what she strives to recapture in her military-centric novels is – of all things – a sense of *welcome*. Both reasons suggest that the mechanics of Heyer's creation of a knowable and navigable world hold a strong appeal for Novik, aside from the specific historical period.

The two appeals of Georgette Heyer

A metaphor for this appeal can be found in Steven Levy's work *Hackers: Heroes of the computer revolution*. This book relates how early mainframe hackers at MIT included members of the Tech Model Railway Club.⁴⁴ This club included two sub-groups. One was interested in what was on top of the display: the trains, the tracks, the hills, the historical accuracy. The other was interested in the wiring under the display that made it all work. This is a practical analogy for the distinct lines of Heyer's influence. There are for the purposes of this chapter two main traditions – neither superior to the other, but each with a keen awareness of one particular aspect of her work.

The first tradition is formed by those fascinated with the milieu: the visible surface of the display. Here can be found variations on the world established by Heyer, explorations of the long Regency, whether closely researched or heavily invented,⁴⁵ a love affair with its specific institutions and jargon, its cant and courtesies. While a lot of Regency romance clearly belongs to this camp, so – in the speculative field – does much Regency fantasy. Its authors pick up a beloved setting and add magic to it – or pick up a fantasy story and clothe it in sprig muslin and well-cut coats.

The second tradition, however, is entirely willing to change out those historical settings, with their Corinthians and schoolroom chits, high-perch phaetons and high-stakes games of Faro. Instead, these authors and readers are fascinated by the intricacies of Heyer's wiring – the circuits, motors and switches that make her books work. And in this tradition will be found arguments for the deeper and wider appeals of Heyer's novels – and some unexpected angles on the appeal of science fictional worlds.

Fantasy of manners

Surveying the speculative fiction genre, two primary sub-genres take this wiring-and-engines, cogs-and-wheels approach to Georgette Heyer. The first, the fantasy of manners, has certain superficial similarities to Regency fantasy, and Heyer has been recognised as an influence on the genre practically from the term's invention in 1991.⁴⁶ The sub-genre has also been referred to as (or as containing, or as giving rise to) Mannerpunk⁴⁷ and, although this is a far less common reference, the term does contain a clue as to the appeal of Heyer to authors and readers.

There is a tendency in this sub-genre to deploy 'weaponized etiquette';⁴⁸ to elevate manners and diction to the status of action sequences.⁴⁹ Here the high-tech (of the high tech/low-life juxtaposition of cyberpunk) and the magic (of high fantasy) are both largely replaced with propriety, wits, knowledge.⁵⁰ Nor is this the wholesale oversetting (through might or magic) of an existing society. In this sub-genre, in order to have elements that free a character 'from the constraints of ordinary society',⁵¹ those constraints must be navigated (ideally, with wit and aplomb) and the systems of the world renegotiated.⁵² It is by pushing against them from the inside that the plot derives much of its energy.

In fact, one of the defining features of this sub-genre is that those constraints, behaviours and social rules, the movement of the characters within the invisible structures of their world – the *systems* of these creative worlds – tend to be more important than magic in the world-building. The primary speculative element of these books is often the simple existence of the wholly invented world; there is frequently little or no magic as such. In fact, it is propriety itself that replaces magic⁵³ – witness Ellen Kushner's *Swordspoint*,⁵⁴ a foundational text of the genre (the invention of the term 'fantasy of manners' is itself claimed by, and generally attributed to, Kushner),⁵⁵ and one that has continued to be developed by Kushner into the twenty-first century.⁵⁶

Kushner wrote the first book shortly after discovering Heyer (and Dunnett).⁵⁷ The superficial influence of Heyer's tropes (and Kushner's reinvention of them) is particularly visible in *The Privilege of the Sword*,⁵⁸ the third novel of the series, in which a country girl comes to the unnamed city for the Season, looking forward to gowns and balls, and is forced by her eccentric uncle to dress as a boy and, much against her will, learn to fence. But it is neither a Regency setting nor a romance, so the force of the plot must derive from other impulses.

This sub-genre can be further distinguished from Regency fantasy because this is not a case of an author breaking open a Regency stereotype by inserting new approaches into it. Rather, Kushner has by this point created a world with manners, traditions and possibilities already diverging from Heyer's Regency: the recognisable tropes of *Privilege of the Sword* (the season, the gowns, the marriage mart) appear more as homage to Heyer's books than as changes rung upon them. The world of Kushner's *Riverside* is not Heyer's, but the inexorability of the processes that catch and transform Kushner's characters, the structural importance of the social cruelties and niceties, are keenly familiar.

The integral nature of these processes to the world and the plot were identified in early discussions among significant key fans of the fantasy of manners. Madeleine E. Robins has observed that the world of a fantasy of manners must have 'rules that you can learn', and that 'FoM [fantasy of manners] is all about being really deliberate in negotiating the world'; Jo Walton has identified a requirement that 'It has manners used as weapons', adding that, 'while the story might not change the world, it matters to society and in that sense the fate of the world is at stake, because the characters' world is social'.⁵⁹

This tends to suggest, as has been stated before, that the particular influence of Heyer on this genre could be attributable to the example she sets of worldbuilding: the construction of a universe that is not merely observable by readers and an exciting setting for characters. Cory Panshin 'stated that what Heyer and Tolkien (and science fiction by analogy) have in common is the creation of a Secondary Universe complete in and of itself'.⁶⁰ Since many books do this, however, Panshin's statement suggests that a particular *type* of world is key to the Heyer-inflected fantasy of manners. Many a fictional world may appear static until acted upon by characters (or author): in Heyer's case, as in Kushner's, the social construction of the world is in a sense self-motivating and self-perpetuating (clever programming, if you will, to refer back to Levy's hackers). The interaction of mores, manners and expectations (of both the character and the reader) within the created world sets and keeps the plots of fantasies of manners in motion.

This aspect of Heyer's craft, while finding expression in her Regency setting, is separable from it. Speculative fiction writers, well-versed in criticism and fandom as well as in the competencies of their own genres, have proved themselves able to take these lessons from Heyer and emulate them in their own worlds.

The domestic, chaotic element of this school of fantasy is worth keeping in sight⁶¹ – for it, too, is rarely about people entirely oversetting

the status quo. World-spanning quests and world-ending threats are often perceived as being more commonly the order of the day in the broader fantasy genre. But like much of Heyer – and like the more earnest fantasies of manners – much of the pleasure and momentum of these stories is derived from watching characters negotiate their (however marvellous) quotidian setting and fight their (however mundane) battles, using only their knowledge of their world and the materials they have to hand.

This tight focus on the actions of characters *within* a defined world – manipulating society and culture to their own ends, perhaps, but not remaking it – is sometimes missing from Regency fantasy. That genre, by introducing magic into a recognised, pre-defined world, necessarily reshapes it. Yet in spite of the difference in their settings, neither Heyer's novels nor the standard fantasy of manners are about setting a society up so that it can be knocked down. Ultimately they are about skilful *navigation* – through finesse, rather than strongarming – of a solid, three-dimensional, responsive world.⁶²

Science fiction

The sub-genre where the influence of Heyer really begins to unfold – and to illuminate some pleasures of speculative fiction in turn – is in the descendants of the sub-genre formerly known as planetary romance:⁶³ space opera (that 'wide variety of character-driven adventure stories, usually set against variously-imagined galactic milieus'),⁶⁴ with its elements of hard, social and military science fiction set in the distant future.

I have positioned discussion of this sub-genre last because it is superficially the furthest removed from Heyer's novels. For one thing, these books tend to rely on and explore the consequences of scientific progress, however far-fetched these may be. With a few faint exceptions (see, for example, *Frederica*),⁶⁵ this was not a field with which Heyer commonly engaged; on most spaceships (although not all)⁶⁶ the natural historical trappings of a Regency are entirely absent. However, this merely suggests that the explicitly acknowledged inspiration taken from Heyer lies below the surface of the story.

For another, these space opera series are frequently heavily military if not outright militaristic – a trait not primarily associated with Heyer's works. Although I am not alone in finding Heyer and C. S. Forester two sides of the same coin,⁶⁷ Heyer's books are concerned

with (superficially) very different battlefields and weapons: assembly rooms and drawing rooms, asides and aplomb, fashion and cutting wit. Yet, as Vanda Wilcox discusses in [chapter 9](#) of this volume,⁶⁸ whatever Heyer's primary focus, she was conscious of the effect of war and the military on her world – and particularly of their effect on society, social structures and associated narratives. Heyer's characters are also frequently strategic in mounting campaigns to achieve their goals (an interesting and appealing deployment of military plots in the domestic sphere). Further, it is worth noting that Forester and Heyer are frequently cited as joint influences⁶⁹ and their readers overlap: both authors, for example, are seated at the heart of 'Age of Sail' fandoms⁷⁰ (of which Novik, author of *His Majesty's Dragon*, is a member and of which even *Star Trek* is arguably a product). Ultimately it would seem that Heyer's preoccupations are perceived as, at the very least, *sympathetic* to military-minded readers.

The practical outworking of a conscious adoption of Heyer's influence in space opera can be seen in several key, long-running and sprawling series (although the term 'series' suggests a concise, strict progression of books, whereas these series are more commonly referred to as 'universes' and 'sagas').⁷¹ These are David Weber's *Honor Harrington* books (commencing with the 1993 *On Basilisk Station*,⁷² with the most recent book in the central series being 2018's *Uncompromising Honor*),⁷³ Sharon Lee and Steve Miller's *Liaden Universe*®⁷⁴ (commencing with the 1988 *Agent of Change*, and with the most recent novel at the time of writing being 2019's *Accepting the Lance*),⁷⁵ and Lois McMaster Bujold's *Vorkosigan* saga (commencing with the 1986 *Shards of Honor*),⁷⁶ with the most recent publication in the series being the 2018 novella *Flowers of Vashnoi*.⁷⁷

In relation to the concept of genre worlds, and the movement of influences through them, these series have some interesting connections. That the *Liaden Universe*® survived past the initial three books is largely credited to its online fandom,⁷⁸ and the series began its life with Del Rey books (whose co-founder, Lester del Rey, was a Heyer fan).⁷⁹ Further, all three series have been published by Baen Books, a publisher famous for a very particular flavour of military/adventure speculative fiction ... and whose founder, Jim Baen, is also reported to have been a fan of Heyer.⁸⁰

I will begin with David Weber's *Honor Harrington* series, a.k.a. the *Honorverse*. This has obvious connections to C. S. Forester's *Hornblower* novels; apart from the clear echoes in the heroine's name and career, the first novel is dedicated to Forester.⁸¹ The series is also consciously

drawn from the life of Lord Horatio Nelson⁸² – albeit set in the 41st century, with a central female character – and extends into several spin-off series and an ample handful of short story anthologies.

Comparisons have certainly been drawn between Weber's novels and Heyer's work. Yet while it is tempting to focus on the relationships in this regard, the author himself does not, although he does explicitly acknowledge a broader debt to Heyer.⁸³ In discussing his writing philosophy, he uses Heyer as an example of his approach and specifically admits that 'Heyer heroines were fully developed PEOPLE with working brains who coped'⁸⁴ – a telling word, in the context of characters competently navigating their worlds.

Further, Weber is perfectly willing to find Heyer's influence in *other* authors' works. For example, in his introduction to Christopher Anvil's collection *Interstellar Patrol*, Weber notes that Heyer's characters, like those of Anvil (and Lois McMaster Bujold)

always have a perfectly logical reason for everything they do, yet they slide inevitably from one catastrophe to another in a slither which rapidly assumes avalanche proportions.⁸⁵

While this quote is also additional evidence for the overlap in readership of genres, there are other interesting conclusions to be drawn from Weber's comment here. Logical actions require a logical framework; slithering to disaster requires a regularly drawn-up board of snakes and ladders. Weber also enlarges upon the mechanics of military science fiction, noting

I would differentiate between what I consider to be 'military science-fiction' and what I consider to be ... something else masquerading by the same name.⁸⁶

His fascination is with the sense of people coping with a situation that 'traps' them – and the military serves this role as much as a Regency society can.

It is about human beings, and members of other species, caught up in warfare and carnage. It isn't an excuse for simplistic solutions to problems.⁸⁷

Sharon Lee and Steve Miller's *Laden Universe*® encompasses 21 novels and numerous chapbooks. It combines a very far future setting,

complex internal lore, strict honour codes and Byzantine bureaucracies. Yet fans have compared the pleasures of these books to those of Heyer's novels.⁸⁸ Again, the authors themselves acknowledge this debt. Sharon Lee introduced Dorothy L. Sayers' novels to Steve Miller, who in return introduced Lee to Georgette Heyer.⁸⁹ 'Romance,' they say in the introduction to their 2009 novel *The Dragon Variation*, 'after all, is part of being human – of being people.' This blending of speculative fiction and romance is noted in responses of romance readers: 'This book is not, strictly speaking, a romance novel, and yet it totally is.'⁹⁰

Two of Lee and Miller's novels – 2001's *Local Custom* and *Scout's Progress* – the authors describe as 'Space Regencies, if you will, and our bow to Georgette Heyer, acknowledging all that she taught us, as writers and as readers'.⁹¹ In doing so, they acknowledge once again that they are not simply honouring Heyer as fans, but turning to her for craft lessons. When Lee observes that 'Regency England, as rendered by Heyer, is *scarcily* amenable to a space opera setting',⁹² this is an acknowledgement extending beyond the conscious tribute novels. And like Weber, Lee and Miller also recognise the genre's broader debt to Heyer.⁹³

This brings us to the third example: Lois McMaster Bujold's *Vorkosigan* saga. This saga numbers 16 novels, not including short stories and novellas. There are wormholes, interplanetary wars, multiple civilisations with widely varying degrees not only of technological development (including genetic manipulation and uterine replicators), but also of cultural and philosophical approaches to it. The novels tend to focus on the exploits of the Vorkosigan family and their connections on the previously isolated and isolationist planet of Barrayar. This has developed a feudal, patriarchal, militaristic, Russian-inflected culture and is just beginning to open up to the wider universe.

Bujold, just as wary of being pinned down to one genre as Weber, Lee and Miller, is notable for her 'slippery use of genre'.⁹⁴ She herself identifies it as 'military SF, coming-of-age, mystery, romance both gothic and comic, a touch (but seldom the tone) of horror'. She also observes

That my novels of character were packaged and sold as military SF by Baen Books was probably a lucky break for me, as it allowed me to sneak in under the radar of genre expectations.⁹⁵

However, on the evidence so far, it is beginning to seem arguable that a slippery, Heyer-influenced approach to the genre may be a feature rather than a bug for this publisher, if not the broader genre.

Like Weber, Bujold is conscious of the pressures the structure of a world can put on characters. She writes of her own focus on ‘the stresses on people of technological change driving social change’⁹⁶ as one of the things that makes her work science fiction. But that interaction of plot and people and society – in particular, of society putting stresses on characters more than the other way around – is equally, of course, a key element of Heyer’s Regencies.

Bujold herself specifically acknowledges a general debt to and affection for Heyer; she once listed as her favourites ‘all the rest of the [Heyer] Regencies while we’re about it’.⁹⁷ Her connections to Heyer are also acknowledged and valued by fans, who have undertaken careful annotations of connections in the *Reader’s Companion*.⁹⁸ Although that project focuses on relational and surface similarities, it is Bujold’s ‘foundational Barrayaran milieu of efficient imperial service’ that Lennard connects to Heyer’s writing.⁹⁹

In addition, like Lee and Miller, Bujold has written a conscious tribute novel: in this case her 1999 novel *A Civil Campaign: A Comedy of Biology and Manners*.¹⁰⁰ The title, of course, alludes to Heyer’s *A Civil Contract*, published in 1961 (although *A Civil Campaign* is not a deliberate response to that book).¹⁰¹ The book’s dedication is ‘For Jane, Charlotte, Georgette and Dorothy’: Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Georgette Heyer and Dorothy Sayers.¹⁰²

The plot of *A Civil Campaign* centres on a political wedding and an awkward courtship. This is orbited by several culturally difficult incidental romances, two inheritance court cases (one dealing with how a tradition-bound and highly patriarchal society will deal with a transgender heir) and the development of a genetically engineered and regrettably mobile food source. It also features a number of characters who belong to types familiar to readers of Heyer. There is, for example, the privileged and competent hero who, having decided it is time to marry a calm and self-possessed heroine, goes about it in entirely the wrong way. There are assorted dreadful relatives, hapless bachelors, managing dowagers and charmingly foolish bachelors-about-town, augmented by a Greek-chorus of sturdily loyal and protective retainers and drivers. Cameo appearances are made by intensely capable and distantly amused parents, who descend occasionally to observe the chaos caused by their offspring and to pass comment.

A Civil Campaign does not map to any individual Heyer – although it is worth noting that another novella, *Captain Vorpatri’s Alliance*, has obvious comparisons to aspects of *Cotillion*, while Bujold’s 2016 novel

Gentleman Jole and the Red Queen was compared to ‘a space opera written by Jane Austen’.¹⁰³ Heyer’s influence, however, as well as being explicitly acknowledged by the author, is traceable in the text. Bujold manages several sly nods to surface-level Regency tropes, including the wearing of gloves to a formal dinner, although in this case they are worn by a botanist carrying out a ceremonial planting in a garden of native species.¹⁰⁴ The *Reader’s Companion* identifies a number of these elements-in-common, including esteem for military service and ‘the extreme importance in almost all Heyer’s novels of honour and reputation’,¹⁰⁵ and extensively annotates allusions and references, from the cover art to vehicular connotations to speech tags.

But ultimately the influence of Heyer on the series as a whole is not in these affectionate allusions. The degree to which many of Bujold’s characters and the systems which their romances set in motion, as well as the unexpected benefits (plot and personal) of social competency, were already endemic to the *Vorkosigan* universe demonstrates Heyer’s influence on Bujold’s books beyond *A Civil Campaign*. These are books about characters navigating an intricate and established world, one which in other moods adopts Heyer’s handling of ‘something serious about human experiences of warfare’ and ‘acute emotional intelligence’¹⁰⁶ to create a universe robust enough to sustain a digression – at a key moment in its characters’ histories – into a madcap comedy of manners.

The influences

These series by Weber, Lee and Miller and Bujold demonstrate several common features that are relevant to understanding not only the effects of Heyer’s influence on, but also the suitability of her models for this sub-genre. Heyer’s Regencies do in some respects function as a series, albeit in a milieu- rather than character-driven fashion, not unlike many of her heirs (see, for example, Diana Wynne Jones’s rather erratic approach to series, as well as the sagas/universes discussed above). Heyer creates a robust world (arguably more robust than the relatively brief and interstitial real Regency,¹⁰⁷ although by no means static). Within this world she is able to play with genre (mystery, melodrama, espionage, romance) without doing any damage to the superstructure. Meanwhile readers – as they acquire familiarity with the world of her books – can trace the fates of beloved character types if not individual characters; they have the pleasure of watching those characters run afoul of, and

learn to use, the rules that readers themselves have come to understand so well.

This play of genres (and shifting viewpoints) is, as demonstrated, something writers of space opera have more freedom to do than writers of strictly categorised romance. Viewed in this way, the influence of Heyer on long novel series – and her usefulness to those who write them – is explicable. There is for the reader a pleasure in familiarity with a rigorous and multifaceted world, even as there is in familiarity with a genre, and in the premonitions of disaster and flashes of delighted surprise that occur when a character's movements twist familiar elements into new alignments. There is a narrative energy lent by the outer membrane that surrounds a well-defined world, against which characters can kick verbally as well as physically, and within which good dialogue – reverberating off the established structure – can have the impact of an action sequence. A sustained series, drawing from Heyer's construction of her world, gives an author the ability to create robust story-worlds. These in turn can support a variety of overlapping sub-genres and modes, as well as the rational framework necessary for a satisfyingly inevitable slither into disaster.

Gwyneth Jones has pointed to 'the secret appetite for romance and sentiment that characterises the "militarist" audience',¹⁰⁸ she also argues that these influences coincide with a softening of military science fiction in sympathy with fluctuations in international conflict. But it is also possible – as these books demonstrate – to argue the reverse: that this 'militarist' science fiction, these planetary romances with their far-ranging, multifaceted codes and cultures and bureaucracies offer something particular to a subset of readers. Those readers do not necessarily get this from heirs of Heyer who are primarily interested in what is happening on top of the display – or from books whose primary function is the pleasure of military hardware and other trappings. For those who love Heyer's springs and catches, her impetus and switchbacks, her plot stylings which frequently spare only a nod to their nominal genre, this field of science fiction offers a great deal of pleasure.

For in a time when many societies appear to be actively divesting themselves of strict concepts of manners and propriety,¹⁰⁹ and even bureaucracies are reeling under those changes, there are ever-fewer institutions that offer so many tropes ready-made for a weaponisation (or indeed a comedy) of manners – let alone one accompanied by a sense of wonder. For surely at least a part of the appeal is the fantasy of a world in which wit and aplomb are as reliably effective as large-bore weaponry.

Certainly a long-form science fiction series allows the construction of a robust world even as it indulges in rich details unfamiliar in the reader's everyday world. Beyond that, however, 'militaristic' settings (and all three series discussed lean heavily on the military aspect) add an extra degree of impact to the social aspect. In a quasi-military setting, as in Heyer's *Regency*, language has immediate power. Hierarchy and protocol matter, actions have severe consequences, disgrace means a genuine risk to life as well as career and clothes (especially but not only uniforms) carry complex weights of meaning. Moreover, as in Heyer, wide-ranging events (war! wormholes!) have local – even domestic – consequences for a military society. On the other hand, in a multi-planet setting, events that threaten an individual world may be perceived as a domestic, drawing-room-level conflict: one with high personal stakes, perhaps, but not entailing the end of a universe. Finally, in military, multi-world settings, the ability to navigate complex cultural networks is not only a useful plot device, but also a genuine skill. A character may even rise to have, as Jones puts it

the vicarious sense of being a privileged insider: someone who may seem insignificant, but who at any moment may command the people right at the top of the organisation.¹¹⁰

Such a character trait is perhaps familiar to readers of Heyer, and one that they can thoroughly enjoy.

Conclusion

The craft lessons and possibilities in Heyer's books have enriched genres superficially remote from her own. Heyer's mastery of the construction of her world and the deployment of her characters within it has been influential on writers handling intricately constructed stories that are multi-threaded, multi-character and even multi-book. The further reaches of speculative fiction demonstrate this influence, revealing a nuanced appreciation of the pleasures of Heyer's novels quite apart from her historical settings.

A more thorough history of the spread of Heyer's influences also has the potential to reveal much about the ecosystems of genre worlds. Such an exploration could illuminate not only the texts, but also the connections within, and the fabric of, the literary communities out of which these texts emerge. The influence of Heyer on science

fiction – particularly military inflected, long-form space opera – can be understood through the appreciation of its readers and authors not for the surface aspects of Heyer’s novels – the historical detail and setting – but rather for their underlying structures and mechanics. This understanding also demonstrates ways for practitioners of writing to transfer practices and craft lessons between genres.

However, such consideration of Heyer’s legacy also offers alternative approaches to the perceived ‘romance of militarism’¹¹¹ within long-form speculative fiction. Rather than the militaristic elements being the primary charm of such books, or the structures of a comedy of manners providing a palatable cloak for warhawks, it is possible that for some readers the vigorous, rationally chaotic joy of these far future worlds preserves and enables – as certain other genres do not – what they learned to love at the hands of Georgette Heyer.

Notes

- 1 Sharon Lee, ‘Regency England, as rendered by Heyer, is *scarcily* amenable to a space opera setting’.
- 2 See, for example, Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 125.
- 3 Thanks in particular are due to Helen Davidge, Garth Nix, Geraldine Perriam and Vanda Wilcox for useful conversations and input which added to the final chapter.
- 4 Heyer, *The Talisman Ring* and *The Foundling*.
- 5 Wilkins, “A Crowd at Your Back”, 115–25, 116 and 118 and Becker, *Art Worlds*. For further discussion, see also Kim Wilkins et al., *Genre Worlds*, <http://www.genreworlds.com>.
- 6 ‘Tor.com: Science fiction. Fantasy. The universe. And related subjects’, <http://Tor.com>.
- 7 Tor.com, ‘About us’, <http://Tor.com/about-us>.
- 8 If those numbers seem low, searches of *Frankenstein* or *The Lord of the Rings* bring up 465 and 1,495 results respectively.
- 9 Ness, ‘Heyer Reread’, *Tor.com*, 26 June 2012 and subsequent posts in that series.
- 10 Gauthier, ‘Georgette Heyer Meets Agents of S H I E L D’, *Original Content* (blog), 20 March 2017.
- 11 ‘False Lights’, HarperCollinsPublishers Australia. Accessed 9 October 2019. <https://www.harpercollins.com.au/9781786695352/false-lights/>.
- 12 Justine Larbalestier quoted regarding Zen Cho’s *Sorcerer to the Crown*. Accessed 9 October 2019, <https://zencho.org/sorcerer-to-the-crown/>.
- 13 Naomi Novik quoted regarding Zen Cho’s *Sorcerer to the Crown*. Accessed 9 October 2019. <https://zencho.org/sorcerer-to-the-crown/>.
- 14 Dobrez and Rutan, ‘Magic Below Stairs’.
- 15 Jonathan Strahan quoting Kelly Link regarding Ellen Kushner: Jonathan Strahan, ‘Reading, not Writing, and Stuff’, *Coode Street* (blog and podcast website). 22 September 2006. <http://www.jonathanstrahan.com.au/wp/2006/09/22/reading-not-writing-and-stuff/>.
- 16 Jackie ‘the Librarian’, ‘Sorcery & Cecelia: or The Enchanted Chocolate Pot (Cecelia and Kate, #1)’, *Goodreads*, 24 September 2007. <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/6748536>.
- 17 Meredith Schwartz quoted on Julie McElwain by French, ‘Sayers, Superstars, Shinigamis ...?’.
- 18 ‘Bloodlust and Bonnets’, *The Telegraph Bookshop*. Accessed 9 October 2019. <https://books.telegraph.co.uk/Product/Ms-Emily-McGovern/Bloodlust-and-Bonnets/22475047>.

- 19 Waite, 'My Favorite Subgenre'.
- 20 Friend, 'The Science Fiction Fan Cult'; 'Almack's Society for Heyer Criticism', *Fancylopedia* 3, 23 June 2015, <http://fancylopedia.org/almack-s-society-for-heyer-criticism>; 'Georgette Heyer Tea', *Fancylopedia* 3, 25 February 2019, <http://fancylopedia.org/georgette-heyer-tea>; 'Regency Dance', *Fancylopedia* 3, 30 January 2019; <http://fancylopedia.org/regency-dance>. Helen Davidge's research has also explored some of the contemporary overlap in readership (see [chapter 13](#) of this volume).
- 21 See, for example, 'Almack's Society for Heyer Criticism'. Lester del Rey (instrumental in the creation of the contemporary concept of the space opera and co-founder with Judy-Lynn del Rey of the Del Rey imprint of Ballantine Books) is listed among the attendees at the 1972 Worldcon tea.
- 22 Dare, *Romancing The Duke*.
- 23 Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*.
- 24 Drew, *Literary Afterlife*, 272.
- 25 Dowling, 'The Far Edges of Imagination'.
- 26 Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*, chapter 4.
- 27 Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*, chapter 6.
- 28 See Nagy, 'The Apple and the Tree', chapter 23, e-book.
- 29 Novik, *His Majesty's Dragon*.
- 30 Novik, 'Favourite is a hard word ...'.
- 31 Clarke, *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*.
- 32 Clarke, *The Ladies of Grace Adieu*.
- 33 This first volume of the trilogy was originally published in 1988. It was reprinted in 2004 and followed by several further books. Interestingly, the original cover art emphasises the fantastic elements, while the reissue doubles down on the historical elements and (from the cover) might almost have no magic in it at all. Wrede and Stevermer, *Sorcery & Cecelia*.
- 34 Wrede, 'From the Mailbag #7'.
- 35 Wrede, 'Viewpoint problems'; 'The Opening'; 'Lights, camera ... Part II'; 'Last Plot Post ...'.
- 36 Nix, *Newt's Emerald*.
- 37 Nix, 'Georgette Heyer's Regency Romances And Me'.
- 38 Goodman, *Lady Helen and the Dark Days Club*.
- 39 Centorcelli, '[Interview] Alison Goodman'.
- 40 This series commences with Kowal, *Shades of Milk and Honey*, 2010.
- 41 Kowal, 'Where to Find the Doctor in All of My Historical Fantasy Novels', *Tor.com*.
- 42 Cho, *Sorcerer to the Crown*.
- 43 Cho, Twitter message to author, 9 October 2019.
- 44 Levy, 6–8.
- 45 Hodge, *The Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 87–8.
- 46 Keller, 'Manner of Fantasy', 1–9. 'Fantasy of Manners'; Walton, 'Fantasy of Manners'; Nepveu, 'Panel Report'.
- 47 Aja Romano, 'The rules of Mannerpunk every Jane Austen fan should know', *The Daily Dot*, 31 January 2019, <https://www.dailydot.com/parsec/what-is-mannerpunk-a-guide/>.
- 48 The page title of Aja Romano's 'The rules of Mannerpunk every Jane Austen fan should know'.
- 49 Keller, 'Fantasy of Manners'.
- 50 de Bruin-Molé, 'I had no idea ...'.
- 51 Emily C. A. Snyder, 'An In-Depth Interview with Teresa Edgerton', *ChristianFantasy.net*, 2001. Accessed 18 October 2019. <http://www.christianfantasy.net/towerofivory/articles/teinterview.html>.
- 52 '[M]annerpunk is punk ... because they are able to use the system of manners to destabilize established hierarchies and become integrated members of a new and increasingly personal social order.' Megen de Bruin-Molé, 'I had no idea'.
- 53 Kushner, 'The Big Idea'.
- 54 Kushner, *Swordspoint*.
- 55 Nepveu, 'Panel Report'; Kushner, 'The Big Idea', interview which also contains Kushner's vivid evocation of the world out of which this sub-genre emerged.

- 56 Kushner, in collaboration with other writers, has expanded and further diversified the world of the Riverside novels in the serialised prequel *Tremontaine*: Kushner et al., *Tremontaine*.
- 57 Kushner, 'World of Swordspoint'.
- 58 Kushner, *Privilege of the Sword*.
- 59 Nepveu, 'Panel Report'.
- 60 Friend, 'The Science Fiction Fan Cult', 90, citing Cory (Seidman) Panshin in the out of print fan magazine *Nieckas*. Incidentally Panshin's husband Alexei Panshin also derived some aspects of his science fiction worlds from Heyer and influenced the development of fantasy of manners. See Sharon Lee, 'I should say that we're not the first to think so' and Nepveu, 'Fantasy of Manners reading list'.
- 61 See, for example, Hambly, *Stranger at the Wedding*; Walton, 'A treat to re-read'; and Wynne Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle*.
- 62 This is particularly visible in Heyer in the case of the Freddy Standens of her world, as set out by Geraldine Perriam in [chapter 2](#) of this volume.
- 63 Clute and Langford, 'Planetary Romance' and Pringle, 'Planetary Romance'.
- 64 Bujold, 'Space Opera, Miles, and Me'. The explanation in this chapter is necessarily somewhat simplified. See also Hartwell and Cramer, 'How Shit Became Shinola'.
- 65 Heyer, *Frederica*.
- 66 The television series *Red Dwarf* does have an episode in which the characters enter a virtual reality 'Pride and Prejudice Land' in Jane Austen World'. *Red Dwarf*, series 7, episode 6, 'Beyond A Joke', directed by Ed Bye, written by Robert Llewellyn and Doug Naylor, featuring Craig Charles, Chris Barrie and Danny John-Jules, aired 21 February 1997, BBC2.
- 67 They are frequently cited as joint influences: see for example, regarding Bujold, and those she in turn influenced, Kincaid, 'Fiction since 1992', 174. Their readers and fans overlap: both authors, for example, are referenced at the heart of the 'Age of Sail' fandoms: 'Age of Sail', *Fanlore*, 14 October 2019, https://fanlore.org/wiki/Age_of_Sail.
- 68 Wilcox, [chapter 9](#) of this volume.
- 69 Kincaid, 'Fiction since 1992', 174.
- 70 'Age of Sail', *Fanlore*, 14 October 2019, https://fanlore.org/wiki/Age_of_Sail.
- 71 See, for example, Sharon Lee and Steve Miller, 'Correct Reading Order'.
- 72 Weber, *On Basilisk Station*. See also the 'Honorverse' listing at: Weber, 'Bibliography'.
- 73 Weber, *Uncompromising Honor*.
- 74 Brown, 'The Little Series That Could'.
- 75 Lee and Miller, *Accepting the Lance*.
- 76 Bujold, *Shards of Honor*.
- 77 Bujold, *Flowers of Vashnoi*.
- 78 Brown, 'The Little Series That Could'.
- 79 'Almack's Society for Heyer Criticism'.
- 80 Nepveu, 'Panel Report: Fantasy of Manners'.
- 81 Weber, *On Basilisk Station*.
- 82 Weber, 'In Honor I gained them'.
- 83 Weber, 'David Weber', interview by Toni Weisskopf, *Baen*. September 2003. <https://www.baen.com/Interviews/intdweber>.
- 84 Weber, 'That Ticking Sound'; and Weber, 'EP- In some ways, I agree with you completely about the "messiness" of life and the desirability – at least theoretically – of having fiction echo that same absence of ... artificially imposed order, shall we say?', comment on 'That Ticking Sound' by David Weber at *Tor.com*, 8:55 p.m., 25 July 2009, <https://www.tor.com/2009/07/22/that-ticking-sound/comment-page-1/#comment-40659>.
- 85 Weber, 'Introduction', in *Interstellar Patrol*, vol. 1, by Christopher Anvil, ed. Eric Flint.
- 86 Weber, 'In Honor I gained them'.
- 87 'They're also about personal responsibility, personal commitment, friendship, and the fact that even the "bad guys" trapped in fighting a war are seldom really "villains".' Weber, 'In Honor I gained them'.
- 88 See, for example, Hyland, 'After Georgette – The Liaden Universe® by Sharon Lee and Steve Miller'; and Drew, *Literary Afterlife*, 272.
- 89 Lee and Miller, Introduction to *The Dragon Variation*, *Baen*, 19 October 2019, <https://www.baen.com/Chapters/1439133697/1439133697.htm>.

- 90 Sessarego, Review of *Local Custom* by Sharon Lee and Steve Miller.
- 91 Lee and Miller, 'The Dragon Variation by Sharon Lee and Steve Miller'.
- 92 Lee, 'Regency England, as rendered by Heyer'.
- 93 Lee, 'I should say that we're not the first to think so'.
- 94 Nicholls, Tringham and Langford, 'Bujold, Lois McMaster'.
- 95 Bujold, 'Space Opera, Miles, and Me'.
- 96 Bujold, 'Space Opera, Miles, and Me'.
- 97 Bujold, quoted in Nikohl and Lennard, *A Reader's Companion to A Civil Campaign* by Lois McMaster Bujold, 23.
- 98 Nikohl and Lennard, *A Reader's Companion*.
- 99 Lennard, *Of Sex and Faerie: Further essays on genre fiction*, 86, e-book.
- 100 Bujold, *A Civil Campaign*.
- 101 Bujold, quoted in Nikohl and Lennard, *A Reader's Companion*, 22.
- 102 Bujold, quoted in Nikohl and Lennard, *A Reader's Companion*, 9–10.
- 103 Review of *Gentleman Jole and the Red Queen* by Lois McMaster Bujold, in *Publishers Weekly*, 21 December 2015.
- 104 Bujold, *A Civil Campaign*, chapter 9, e-book, http://www.baen.com/chapters/acc_9.htm.
- 105 Nikohl and Lennard, *A Reader's Companion*, 24.
- 106 Lennard, *Of Sex and Faerie*, 86.
- 107 Ness, 'Welcome to the Georgette Heyer Reread'.
- 108 Jones, 'Wild Hearts in Uniform'.
- 109 Arguably all times.
- 110 Jones, 'Wild Hearts'.
- 111 Jones, 'Wild Hearts'.

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Part 3

Sources

All's Well That Ends Well: Shakespearean echoes in Heyer's Regency novels

Lisa Hopkins

In *Mansfield Park* Henry Crawford declares that 'Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how. It is a part of an Englishman's constitution'.¹ In Fanny Burney's *Evelina* Sir Clement Willoughby quotes *Twelfth Night* by comparing the heroine to 'patience on a monument'.² Georgette Heyer, influenced by Austen and Burney in so many respects,³ also posits a world in which characters possess an easy familiarity with Shakespeare's work. As Jennifer Kloester declares:

Heyer took pleasure, both conscious and unconscious, in paying homage in her writing to her favorite authors: using Shakespearean quotations as book titles and frequently taking Shakespearean, Austenian and Dickensian characters and plots as the starting point for her own plots and characters.⁴

Laurie Osborne, noting that 'Shakespearean references frequently appear in that most vilified of American genres, the romance novel', observes that:

Shakespeare appears most often in two sub-genres, Regencies and historical romances. Both genres are overtly, even aggressively patriarchal in their double standards and policing of female virtue. Both offer dominant men who are subdued and matched by women who effectively subvert masculine control over their lives and marital choices. Since marriage remains the goal and resolution, however, patriarchy remains intact. Shakespearean allusions become pivotal in this paradoxical combination of female agency and patriarchal dynastic demands.⁵

Allusion to Shakespeare, whose comedies are celebrated equally for the wit and resourcefulness of their heroines and for their unabashed use of multiple marriages, might indeed seem an appropriate means of helping to keep the marriage plot acceptable to readers who might otherwise find it trite or overly conservative. However, it is not only the comedies on which Heyer draws; she also deploys allusions to tragedies and to the Roman play *Antony and Cleopatra* to suggest that it is really better to live life a little less in alt than Shakespeare's suffering heroes do. It is my aim in this chapter to explore what Osborne calls 'Heyer's complex, often unmarked, appropriations of Shakespeare',⁶ and to argue that they play an important part in the creation of her preferred brand of urbane, witty comedy.

Cheltenham tragedies

Heyer is a very theatrically-minded novelist. In *The Unknown Ajax* Hugo directs the rest of the family in what is effectively a play, casting and costuming them to deceive Lieutenant Ottershaw. The most overtly theatrical of her novels is *Venetia*, in which the eponymous heroine discovers that her mother is alive when she spots her in the opposite box during a performance. *Venetia* also uses theatrical terms when thinking about Damerel: 'whether he was the villain or merely a minor character, it was useless to deny that he had infused life into a dull play'.⁷ Most suggestively, Damerel himself asks sardonically

Did you fancy a tragedy to lie behind me? Nothing so romantic, I fear: it was a farce – not one of the ingredients lacking, down to the inevitable heroic meeting at dawn, with both combatants coming off scatheless (91).

Damerel's disavowal of tragedy affords us an important clue to the ways in which Heyer uses theatrical allusions. Of all dramatists, she turns most often to Shakespeare. In *A Civil Contract* Adam's mother advises her son to 'Recollect what the poet says! I'm not sure *which* poet, but very likely it was Shakespeare, because it generally is, though why I can't imagine!';⁸ in *The Toll-Gate* Nell tells her grandfather that Captain Staple is 'Like Hotspur, you know, in that passage which always makes you laugh!';⁹ suggesting a household in which Shakespeare is regularly read aloud. I have discussed elsewhere Heyer's uses of Shakespearean quotation in her detective fiction;¹⁰ here I am going to argue that in her

Regency novels she uses Shakespeare in two principal ways, sometimes to support atmosphere and sometimes to puncture it.

This distinction is slightly nuanced by a clutch of references to *Antony and Cleopatra*. Heyer normally has little time for regrets; her characters know that they ought not to dwell on relationships which can never develop. However *Antony and Cleopatra* is a play which glamorises nostalgia, and when Heyer alludes to it she does allow a more elegiac note to be sounded, even if only briefly. Generally, however, she uses Shakespearean tragedy to mock excessive emotion, while the resilient, cross-dressing heroines of his comedies are models for her own enterprising young women who – like Viola and Rosalind – often ensure not only their own marriages but also those of others.

Heyer's Regency novels range widely across the Shakespearean canon. In *The Spanish Bride* Johnny Kincaid observes when he falls out of love 'Richard was himself again!'¹¹ In *Friday's Child* Hero informs the astonished Ferdy that both her name and his are 'out of Shakespeare' – specifically she is out of *Much Ado About Nothing* and he is 'in *The Tempest*, I think'; she reminds Sherry too that his name, Anthony, is found in *Antony and Cleopatra*.¹² *Friday's Child* also has characters named Isabella and Prosper, the first recalling *Measure for Measure* and the second offering another echo of *The Tempest*. When Sherry warns his uncle, 'If my mother chooses to let you batten upon her, she may do it, but you won't batten on me any longer, by Jupiter you won't!' (17), he uses the same phrase that Hamlet applies to his uncle when he asks his mother why she wants to 'batten on this moor'.¹³ In *Frederica* the hero quotes 'rumour ... is a pipe' from *Henry IV, Part Two*, but forgets everything except the first few words (26); this is ironically appropriate, since the passage in question is all about inaccurate transmission of information.

Another reference occurs in *Sprig Muslin*, with the would-be poet Mr Ross, who believes that there is promising matter for a dramatic tragedy, in blank verse, in the Divorce and Death of Queen Katherine of Aragon. 'Only, did Amanda feel that it would be presumptuous for a lesser poet to tread in the steps of Shakespeare?'¹⁴ This question takes us back to *Henry VIII*, the play from which Henry Crawford reads aloud in *Mansfield Park*, and whatever Amanda may feel, the reader is unlikely to rate Mr Ross's chances of equalling Shakespeare's handling of the theme very highly.¹⁵ In *Arabella* Mr Beaumaris is 'the god of his idolatry' for the dog Ulysses,¹⁶ echoing Ben Jonson's praise of Shakespeare. A less expected presence is *Troilus and Cressida*, but the play's martial

theme meant that it enjoyed something of a revival during the Second World War.¹⁷ We should therefore not be surprised that *The Unknown Ajax* both quotes and takes its title from this work,¹⁸ nor that the heroine of *False Colours* is called Cressida.¹⁹

Shakespearean quotation reaches its peak in *Venetia*. Heyer observed of the book that ‘my hero ... is rather given to quotation’²⁰ and actually so is Venetia: between them they echo *Julius Caesar* with ‘lend me your ears’ (7) and ‘most unkindest cut of all’ (212); *As You Like It* with ‘Oh, how full of briars is this working-day world’ (28); *Othello* with ‘pestilent, complete knave’ (30) and ‘My reputation, Iago’ (31); *Antony and Cleopatra* with ‘my salad days’ (55) and ‘custom had staled her variety’ (90); *Much Ado About Nothing* with ‘Everything handsome about you’ (56); and *Hamlet* with ‘We could an if we would’ (88), ‘Alas, poor Yorick’ (129), ‘assumed that virtue’ (149), ‘a consummation devoutly to be wished’ (314) and Damerel’s persistent characterisation of Venetia as ‘a green girl’ (87). We also hear of Old Capulet and Lear (92), and *Romeo and Juliet* is directly quoted in ‘parting is such sweet sorrow’ (284). In all two tragedies, two comedies and two Roman plays are quoted from in the novel. The resulting effect is a generic uncertainty, increasing our sense that *Venetia*, which includes both divorce and disability, is a little darker than is usual for Heyer’s Regency romances, leaving us perhaps not quite sure where the narrative is likely to go.

Venetia’s range of quotations neatly illustrates the different ways in which Shakespearean allusion is deployed in Heyer’s Regency novels. Some plays are evoked only in order to be satirised, or to create a bathetic effect. Heyer is particularly fond of echoing *Hamlet*, but she does so usually to create a contrast with tragedy rather than in support of any tragic atmosphere. In *Arabella*, for instance, Lady Bridlington ‘vowed there had never been anything to equal Kean’s *Hamlet* on the English stage, but derived considerably more enjoyment from the farce which followed this soul-stirring performance’.²¹ Quotations from *Hamlet* are typically misquoted, misunderstood or misapplied, generally to comic effect. In *The Nonesuch* Lindeth comments that Waldo is ‘Hoist with his own petard’, which Waldo mischievously tells Tiffany is improper.²² Jenny, the heroine of *A Civil Contract*, goes to see the actor Edmund Kean in *Hamlet* and *Othello* (216) and Adam’s melodramatic widowed mother enters ‘trailing yards of crape, mobbed with black lace’ (16) – an echo of the First Player’s ‘*But who – ah, woe! had seen the mobbled queen*’, which is interrupted by Hamlet with “‘The mobbled queen’”, to which Polonius adds ‘That’s good’ (2.2.498–500). Later

Adam looks at his mother and ‘view[ed] with dismay the trappings of her woe’ (84), echoing Hamlet’s description of his black clothes as ‘the trappings and the suits of woe’ (1.2.86). The final scene of *Hamlet* might possibly be glanced at in *Regency Buck* when Peregrine cries ‘The wine! What have you put in the wine?’ (290). Again, however, the dominating note is one of bathos: the wine is drugged rather than poisoned and Worth’s intentions are benign. In *False Colours* Kit comments to his mother that problems ‘come not single spies, but in battalions, don’t they?’; her mistrustful response, ‘That sounds to me like a quotation’,²³ is correct, as Claudius in *Hamlet* tells Gertrude that ‘When sorrows come, they come not single spies, / But in battalions’ (4.5.78–9). In Shakespeare’s tragedy the remark refers to multiple deaths, however, thus putting into perspective the rather less serious problems faced by the characters in *False Colours*.

Although Lady Denville is suspicious rather than entirely certain that what Kit offers her is a quotation, Heyer is confident that her readers will be on surer ground. In *Cotillion*, for example, Freddy

conducted himself very creditably at Shakespeare’s grave, saying that at all events he knew who *he* was, and adding a further touch of erudition by telling Kitty an interesting anecdote of having escorted his mother to the theatre once to see Kean in *Hamlet*, and of having dreamt, during this memorable performance, that he walked smash into a fellow he hadn’t set eyes on for years. ‘And, by Jove, that’s just what I did do, the very next day!’ he said.²⁴

Freddy may know who Shakespeare is, but he is wrong about where he is buried: what he has seen in Westminster Abbey is a memorial plaque, *not* Shakespeare’s grave, which is in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon. There is also a quiet nod to *Hamlet* when Kitty first proposes the sightseeing tour to Freddy. The ‘list of all the historic edifices she wished to see ... made his eyes start from his head with horror’ (133), a comment appearing to glance at the Ghost’s warning that he could make his son’s ‘two eyes like stars start from their spheres’ (1.5.17). The same phrase also occurs in *The Nonesuch* when Tiffany tells Laurie that she is going to London: ‘Mr Calver’s carefully arranged locks were too lavishly pomaded to rise on end, but his eyes showed a tendency to start from their sockets’ (259). Wilfred Steane also refers to Hamlet in *Charity Girl*, noting crisply ‘I am wholly at a loss to understand why anyone should have supposed me to have shuffled off this mortal coil.

In the words of the poet. Shakespeare, I fancy'.²⁵ He is right here, but less successful when he later declares that Desford 'has been like a woodcock, justly slain by its own treachery. Or words to that effect. My memory fails me, but I know a woodcock comes into it' (231). It does – but the lines for which he gropes are those of Laertes, 'Why, as a woodcock to mine own springe, Osric. / I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery' (5.2.312–13), a phrasing slightly more elegant than Steane's version. Both Steane and Freddy possess a little learning, but Heyer clearly depends on her reader possessing rather more, and so being able to enjoy the misrepresentation and misapplication of Shakespeare in general and of *Hamlet* in particular.

Heyer noted of her detective novel *Penhallow* that her friend Carola Oman 'calls it my "Lear"'.²⁶ *King Lear* is also used in her Regency novels, again primarily to create bathos. In *Bath Tangle* Rotherham has a cousin Cordelia and Mrs Floore's maid calls Emily 'a serpent's tooth' (254) – an epithet also recalled in *The Grand Sophy*, when Sir Horace asks his sister 'I suppose you didn't play Ombersley false, did you?' (8). She denies it, but concedes that Ombersley called Charles 'a serpent's tooth' (9), King Lear's term for a thankless child. Letty's aunt in *The Masqueraders* is also called Cordelia, and sees the difficulties inherent in Letty's situation rather than any possible solution. In *Lady of Quality* Ninian Elmore too has a sister called Cordelia and another called Lavinia, a name that appears in *Titus Andronicus*; he laments that Cordelia in particular speaks to him 'as though she had been acting in some tragedy or another' (215).

Macbeth and *Othello* are rarer presences in Heyer's work, but they do appear. In *The Reluctant Widow* Francis Cheviot echoes Macbeth by terming sleep 'Great nature's second course' (233) and John Carlyon by referring to Louis De Castres' 'taking-off' (193), while in *Sprig Muslin* Sir Gareth tells Lady Hester that her brother and the general are 'all sound and fury' (259). In *Frederica* Charles knew that if he was to persuade Charis and Endymion not to marry by special licence he had to 'keep them to the sticking point' (372) and *Othello* too is evoked when Charis, like Desdemona, 'turned as white as her shift' (337). In *Regency Buck* Peregrine is nearly sure that the play he has seen was '*Othello*, or some such thing' (41); there is also a touch of *Othello* in *The Reluctant Widow* when John observes of Eustace, 'There are some men, ma'am, who have such twisted natures that they cannot see virtue in another without hating it' (51). In all these cases, the note of tragedy is sounded only to be disavowed, and is connected only to characters who are peripheral to the narrative or soon disappear from it.

From *Romeo and Juliet* to *Antony and Cleopatra*

Above all, *Romeo and Juliet* is typically evoked only in order to trivialise the sufferings of overly emotional lovers. The play is inappropriate to Heyer's world because her heroes and heroines typically 'marry in', meaning that their partners are not only of their own class but acceptable to those whose opinion they value (one reason why Lydia's good opinion of Jenny is emphasised in *The Convenient Marriage*) and remaining in the class into which they were. Romeo and Juliet marry to disoblige their families and are thus for Heyer an example to be avoided. In *The Nonesuch* we hear of 'the extraordinary revulsion of feeling experienced by young Mr Montague when he first clapped eyes on Miss Capulet!' (137), while Laurence shows his own folly in describing Waldo and Miss Trent as 'star-crossed lovers' (244). The narrator ironically calls Charis and Endymion 'star-crossed lovers' in *Frederica* (334); later the hero Alverstoke refers to the pair as 'this very boring Romeo and Juliet' (375). In *Bath Tangle* 'Lady Serena sat down at the head of the table, commanding the star-crossed lovers to come and take their places, as though she were presiding over a nursery meal' (276) and Rotherham complains that 'What I *thought* to find here was Emily playing Juliet to Gerard's Romeo!' (299). Reference to the play is also made in *The Corinthian*; when Pen tells Richard about the romance of Piers and Lydia, he drily observes 'For myself, I find the theme of Montague and Capulet hopelessly outmoded'.²⁷ In *Sprig Muslin* the schemes of Mr Ross and Amanda are presented in ironic terms: 'Perched on the stable-ladder, a modern Romeo and his Juliet discussed ways and means' (161). Some of these couples marry and others do not. None is ever allowed to contract a secret marriage in the way that Romeo and Juliet do, however, because – as Charles explains to Charis and Endymion in *Frederica* – that would be not only reprehensible, but also very silly.

The obvious exception to this use of tragedy to puncture atmosphere rather than to support it is *Cousin Kate*, the nearest Heyer comes to melodrama or the Gothic. Torquil echoes Gertrude by saying 'There is a willow grows aslant a brook' and Hamlet by worrying about bad dreams;²⁸ he subsequently goes mad, kills his mother in her bedroom as Gertrude thinks Hamlet might do to her and drowns himself as Ophelia does. Kate expects him to encounter 'more attractive metal' (135) than herself, echoing Hamlet's description of Ophelia as 'metal more attractive' (3.2.108), even as Lady Broome compliments her on having 'even been managing all the household affairs, *to the manner*

born, Delabole tells me!' (260), quoting Hamlet's observation that he is 'native here / And to the manner born' (1.4.14–15). Lady Broome also tells Kate 'You're not a green girl!' (266), Polonius's term for Ophelia, before saying 'I am ... going to ask you to look at two pictures' (271), just as Hamlet shows Gertrude miniatures of his father and uncle; Kate also twice uses 'batten' (95 and 109), the word Hamlet applies to the way Gertrude looks at those pictures. Later Philip says, 'This, I fancy, is where we kick the beam' (279), loosely echoing Laertes' promise to Ophelia that 'thy madness shall be paid with weight / Till our scale turn the beam' (4.5.156–7). After Torquil has died, Philip concentrates his efforts on ensuring that he can be buried in the churchyard (318), the issue that also exercises Laertes when Ophelia dies.

There are also hints of more serious uses of *Hamlet* in *The Quiet Gentleman*, where Gervase says to Martin 'choose a foil, and see what you can achieve with it! All these wild and whirling words don't impress me, you know' (61) – an echo of Horatio's reference to 'wild and whirling words' (1.5.139). Francis Cheviot in *The Reluctant Widow* similarly speaks of 'the funeral baked-meats'.²⁹ In both novels one family member really does kill, or intend to kill, another, and the recurring allusions to *Hamlet* contribute to the atmosphere of unease and violence. Generally, however, the purpose of such allusions is, as Heyer herself would have said, to depress pretension – specifically the type of pretension that consists of wanting conduct and putting on airs to be interesting.

There is also an ambivalence in the way in which *Antony and Cleopatra* is used. I have already observed that in *Friday's Child* Hero tells Sherry that he is out of *Antony and Cleopatra* (68), and the play is featured in other novels too. Gilly, the hero of *The Foundling*, says to Gideon 'I would I had thy inches' (69), directly quoting a remark made by Cleopatra to Antony.³⁰ The phrase 'my salad days', another direct quotation from Cleopatra (1.5.76), appears in *Frederica* (75–6 and 224), *The Corinthian* (41) and *Cousin Kate* (78). A reworking of *Antony and Cleopatra* – Dryden's *All for Love* – is evoked in *Black Sheep*, where Miles Calverleigh dismisses his attempt to elope with Celia Morville as 'All for Love, or the World Well Lost'.³¹ Most significantly, *Antony and Cleopatra* provides a structuring presence in *An Infamous Army*. Judith too refers to 'my salad days';³² Barbara says to Charles 'Oh! You! Infamous! I did not bargain for a man of your inches!' (77); Lady Vidal is named Augusta, the feminine version of Augustus, and disapproves of Barbara's love for Charles Audley, just as Augustus frowns on the relationship between Antony and Cleopatra, while Harriet Taverner plays

Octavia to Barbara's Cleopatra over Peregrine's affections. Barbara, a widow like Cleopatra, borrows Harry's clothes and goes out in public (239–40), just as Cleopatra 'put my tires and mantles' on Antony and herself 'wore his sword Philippan' (2.5.21–2). More obliquely, Judith acknowledges that Barbara may have had some excuse for her bad behaviour because 'It is as though your engagement to Charles was acted upon a stage, in all the glare of footlights, for the amusement of your acquaintances' (270); Cleopatra fears to be 'shown / In Rome' (5.2.207–8) and worries that

The quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us and present
Our Alexandrian revels; Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth; and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I' th' posture of a whore.

(5.2.215–220)

There is a similar, unusually serious recognition in *An Infamous Army* of the potential psychological cost of living one's life in public view, especially in time of war. Above all, however, *Antony and Cleopatra* is a play about what might have been. This is why I think it may be glanced at in *A Civil Contract*, where the sight of her bedroom in the newly refurbished Lynton House makes Jenny exclaim 'Good gracious, does Papa think I'm Cleopatra?'.³³ Jenny has nothing of Cleopatra's glamour, but she does have something of the quality of falling short which Cleopatra fears will beset future attempts to tell her story. There is also something of the same sense of deficit as at the end of *An Infamous Army*, where Charles Audley has been physically reduced by his injuries in battle and is no longer quite the husband Barbara had expected. *Antony and Cleopatra*, a play that glamorises romance, in Heyer comes to stand for the gap between romance and reality. In stories where characters have really suffered, as opposed to putting on airs to be interesting, it is permissible for once to feel some regret, and *Antony and Cleopatra* is used to support that.

Present mirth hath present laughter

It is, however, comedy that Heyer really likes. In *Arabella* the heroine herself is hailed by an admirer as 'the New Titania' (5), a source of

much mirth to her brothers. In *Bath Tangle* Serena admits she can be 'shrewish' (112); this, together with the emphasis on her copper-coloured hair, may be a possible hint of Alastair ancestry, since the idea of taming is evoked in connection with both Mary, to whom Vidal says 'I'll tame you' (88), and Barbara, who complains that 'It was said that I had met my match, that I was tamed at last' (270). More definitely, however, it is a nod to *The Taming of the Shrew*.

As You Like It is a particular favourite of Heyer's. In *The Masqueraders*, where the old gentleman says 'My father was much addicted to the works of Shakespeare', Robin advises Sir Anthony to 'Thank God fasting',³⁴ echoing the disguised Rosalind's advice to Phoebe. In *The Black Moth* one of the signs that Belmanoir is redeemable is that he tells Diana 'There was no thought of pleasing you when I was christened',³⁵ echoing a comment of Orlando's to Jacques about Rosalind. In *The Toll-Gate* "Just as high as my heart," quoted Captain Sta[p]le' (119), again recalling a remark made by Orlando about Rosalind.

Heyer is also fond of *Much Ado about Nothing*. In *The Masqueraders* Sir Anthony's sister, who helps the lovers, is called Beatrice. In *Sylvester Tom's* father describes the supposed elopement as 'much ado about nothing' (150), while in *Charity Girl* Henrietta says 'I fear I am like Beatrice, and was born to speak all mirth and no matter!' (101). *The Reluctant Widow* also contains an echo of *Much Ado* when Elinor demands 'My lord, did you *indeed* marry me to that man?', to which he replies, 'Certainly not: I am not in orders. You were married by the vicar of the parish' (63). This echoes a pun made at the ill-omened first wedding of Hero and Claudio. Elinor's paradoxical status as both maid and widow also has a touch of *Measure for Measure* about it, and Sir Matthew Kendall's view of Eustace's death is 'that all was well that had ended well' (192). This is an allusion of which Heyer is particularly fond. She employs the same phrase when Edward grandly renounces Venetia, declaring that 'all's well that ends well' (301); Cecilia in *The Grand Sophy* similarly says 'All's well that ends well!' (315); Charles Trevor, having averted the marriage of Charis and Endymion, tells Frederica that 'all's well' (367); after the duel in *Friday's Child* Isabella remarks 'It is a case of all's well that ends well, in fact' (185); and in *The Talisman Ring* Sarah Thane acknowledges 'All's well that ends well, however' (261). The play is also a submerged presence in *Black Sheep*, since Miles Calverleigh is quoting from it when he says 'That I should love a bright particular star!' (157). For Heyer, the idea that all's well that ends well is a better rounding-off of a story than the 'consummation

devoutly to be wished' which her characters sometimes threaten to borrow from *Hamlet*. An example occurs in *The Corinthian*, where the hero is brooding on the fact that he has never been in love and supposes he never will be: "Which, I suppose," remarked Sir Richard to one of the new gas-lamps, "is a – is a consummation devoutly to be wished, since I am about to offer for Melissa Brandon" (25). The consummation for which Hamlet wishes is suicide – but in *The Corinthian* this can be considered only in comic terms, with the idea that Sir Richard might have killed himself rather than marry Melissa being merrily seized on by Melissa's brother as a hilarious indictment of his sister's lack of appeal.

More than any Shakespearean play, however, Heyer echoes *Twelfth Night*. It is the source of one of her favourite words, 'fadge'.³⁶ The play is a clear influence on her fondness for twin plots, a device central to *Sylvester* and *False Colours* and one that also lurks in the background of *The Masqueraders*, where Prudence and her brother Robin both cross-dress, and where Prudence has a duel forced upon her and a tale is spread that she is a fine swordsman (128), just as Sir Toby puffs Viola by saying she has been fencer to the Sophy (3.4.272 – a line that may also have exerted an influence over the title of *The Grand Sophy*). In *A Civil Contract* Adam's sister Lydia decides to be an actress following an amateur performance in *Twelfth Night* (38). The play is evoked again in *Devil's Cub* when Vidal addresses Mary as 'little Patience' (84), perhaps suggesting Viola's image of patience on a monument. In addition, when the landlord protests about Mary's having fired Vidal's pistol, Vidal's words to his steward, 'Fletcher, take the fool away' (99), echo Olivia's instruction about Feste (1.5.34). When Sir Roland Pommeroy visits Rule in *The Convenient Marriage*, 'From the movement of his lips it might have been supposed that he was silently rehearsing a speech' (257), rather as Viola begs Olivia to hear her out because she has learned the speech by heart. In *Cotillion* Jack Westruther addresses Olivia as 'Most radiant, exquisite, and unmatchable beauty' (210) and later calls her 'sovereign cruelty' (211), both epithets being among those applied to the Olivia of *Twelfth Night*. Meanwhile Freddy sapiently says 'Don't think it'll fadge' (192), a word used by Viola, while Meg, also like Viola, is discomposed at not being able to deliver a speech she had 'conned' (243). *Twelfth Night* is a particularly appropriate text to find in *Cotillion* because Orsino falls in love with Viola without ever noticing, since he believes that she is a boy and that he himself has an unquenchable passion for Olivia. This is also the underlying pattern of *Cotillion*. Its heroine Kitty believes herself to be in love with Jack Westruther while Freddy, the true hero of the novel, hides in plain sight because

he too is in a sense disguised, apparently a mere stopgap while Kitty (and perhaps the reader) waits for a more glamorous character to take centre stage.³⁷

Twelfth Night is a submerged but significant presence in *The Reluctant Widow*. Bereft of her father, Elinor, like Viola, resolves to work for her living. Nicky's artless declaration that 'I'm excessively sorry, but I have killed Eustace Cheviot!' (25) echoes Sebastian's admission to Olivia that he has hurt her cousin, and Carlyon shares something of Viola's philosophy when he says 'we must trust to come about' (30). Moreover, the fact that Nicky is only present at all because of a performing bear recalls the strongly developed bear imagery of *Twelfth Night*.³⁸ Bear metaphors are important elsewhere in Heyer too. As well as the obvious allusions to *Troilus and Cressida*, from which it takes its title and several quotations, *The Unknown Ajax* also has a subliminal bear motif. Anthea comments that Lord Darracott 'has been like a bear at the stake all these months' (9); he now proposes 'to lick [Hugo] into shape' (21). In *Venetia* we find not only three direct quotations from *Twelfth Night* – 'Item, two lips, indifferent red' (31), 'A blank, my lord' (56) and 'build me a willow cabin at your gates' (310) – but also Damerel's remark to Venetia that Oswald 'should have taken you in his arms, like *this*, and not as though he were a bear' (130). Venetia herself describes Edward as 'as sulky as a bear' (299). The bear metaphor recurs in *The Toll-Gate*, with Nell's aunt said to have been 'sulky as a bear' (133), a phrase repeated in *A Civil Contract* when Jenny reports that Lydia is 'as sulky as a bear' (314). *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare's last and greatest comedy, is the play to which Heyer turns when she wants to impart a sense of rightness and happiness to events and to create a sense of social continuity. Such a concept is emphasised most notably in *A Civil Contract*, in which a socially authorised marriage ultimately comes to seem a better idea than the love match that Adam initially thought he wanted.

It is in fact this sense that the partner originally desired may not actually be the best that helps to account for Heyer's interest in Shakespearean comedy. It is a frequent maxim in her books that few people marry their first loves – and may be the poorer for it when they do. In *The Grand Sophy* Cecilia Rivenhall wants to marry Augustus Fawnhope, but she will be much better off with Lord Charlbury, just as her brother Charles will be happier with Sophy than with Miss Wraxton; in *Bath Tangle* Hector Kirkby and Serena Carlow think they are in love with each other, but both are proved wrong. In each of Heyer's preferred Shakespearean comedies there is an insistence that

for the good of the community as a whole at least one character must accept a substitute partner rather than the one they initially desired: Orsino in *Twelfth Night* must marry Viola instead of Olivia; Phoebe in *As You Like It* must accept Silvius rather than Orlando; Bertram in *All's Well That Ends Well* must make do with Helena rather than Diana. In all of these cases individual wishes must give place to social necessity, in the same way that no Heyer couple can ever elope to Gretna Green. Heyer does recognise the pull of desire which cannot be fulfilled, which is why *Antony and Cleopatra* is allowed to lurk in the background in some of her books. However, with the single exception of *Cousin Kate*, full-blown tragedies such as *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* have no place in her Regency novels except as the weapons with which she pricks the bubbles of isolation and self-obsession.

Notes

- 1 Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 335.
- 2 Burney, *Evelina*, 41.
- 3 In *Bath Tangle* Fanny sees Fanny Burney (now Madame D'Arblay) and recalls that *Evelina* was her favourite book (Heyer, *Bath Tangle*, 69–70). For the influence of Austen, see for instance Hopkins, 'Georgette Heyer', 61–80.
- 4 Kloester, 'Literary Genius', 12–13.
- 5 Osborne, 'Romancing the Bard', 47–64, 47.
- 6 Osborne, 'Romancing the Bard', 48.
- 7 Heyer, *Venetia*, 36.
- 8 Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 33.
- 9 Heyer, *The Toll-Gate*, 91.
- 10 Hopkins, 'Shakespearean Allusion'.
- 11 Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 353. *Richard III* is remembered elsewhere too: in *Royal Escape* Charles II exclaims 'A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!' (Heyer, *Royal Escape*, 110).
- 12 Heyer, *Friday's Child*, 67–8.
- 13 Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.4.66–7.
- 14 Heyer, *Sprig Muslin*, 145.
- 15 I am of course aware that *Henry VIII* was written partly by John Fletcher, but for Austen, Heyer's characters and probably Heyer herself it was a play by Shakespeare.
- 16 Heyer, *Arabella*, 177.
- 17 In Edmund Crispin's *The Case of the Gilded Fly* (1944) Nicholas Barclay says of Donald Fellowes and Yseut Haskell, 'I have a friend who's making a bloody fool of himself over her. "I am as true as truth's simplicity, and simpler than the infancy of truth" – you know' (25), while when Nigel sees Yseut coming out of Robert Warner's room 'Troilus' words came unbidden to his mind' (55) and Rachel West remembers 'my first part in London – a very tarty Helen in a production of *Troilus*' (164) (Crispin, *Gilded Fly*, 2009). Similarly in Ngaio Marsh's 1943 *Colour Scheme* 'Gaunt had begun to talk about the more difficult plays, of *Troilus and Cressida*, of *Henry VI* and finally of *Measure for Measure*' (Marsh, *Colour Scheme*, 2011, 152).
- 18 For example 'the elephant Ajax' (76), 'unknown Ajax' (232) and finally 'noble Ajax' (340), as well as 'vaulting ambition' (127, a reference to *Macbeth*) and 'most unkindest cut of all' (338, a reference to *Julius Caesar*). Heyer, *The Unknown Ajax*.
- 19 In *The Foundling* there may conceivably be an echo of *Titus Andronicus* when Mr Mamble says 'They say black will take no other hue, and black I'll remain to the end of my days'

(Heyer, *Foundling*, 314). In *The Grand Sophy*, the scene with the Jewish moneylender has a ring of *The Merchant of Venice* (Heyer, *The Grand Sophy*, 192). In *April Lady* there seems to be an echo of *The Winter's Tale* when Dysart finds a cockroach in his cup and races it against a spider. He is also said to have 'swallowed a spider' (Heyer, *April Lady*, 167), and though it is clear in context that this refers to financial difficulties, it does potentially recall Leontes' image of jealousy as seeing a spider in a drink: this would be apt because Cardross is indeed jealous of Dysart. *Regency Buck* also evokes *The Winter's Tale* when the Regent is referred to as 'the Prince Florizel who had captivated the world thirty-odd years before' (Heyer, *Regency Buck*, 264), though this is not of course Heyer's invention. It is also *The Winter's Tale* that is being quoted in *The Grand Sophy* when 'Mr Fawnhope having become rapt in contemplation of a clump of daffodils, which caused him to throw out a hand, murmuring: "Daffodils that come before the swallow dares!"' (178); William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, 4.4.117–19).

- 20 Hodge, *The Private World*, 127.
- 21 Heyer, *Arabella*, 70.
- 22 Heyer, *The Nonesuch*, 136.
- 23 Heyer, *False Colours*, 100.
- 24 Heyer, *Cotillion*, 135.
- 25 Heyer, *Charity Girl*, 177.
- 26 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer: Biography of a bestseller*, 241.
- 27 Heyer, *The Corinthian*, 158.
- 28 Heyer, *Cousin Kate*, 49 and 120.
- 29 Heyer, *The Reluctant Widow*, 193.
- 30 Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.3.41.
- 31 Heyer, *Black Sheep*, 50.
- 32 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 101.
- 33 Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 112.
- 34 Heyer, *The Masqueraders*, 264 and 219.
- 35 Heyer, *The Black Moth*, 268.
- 36 Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 2.2.32.
- 37 In addition names from *Twelfth Night* are sprinkled throughout Heyer's books. In *Venetia* Aunt Hendred laments, 'I thought I should have died of despair when Mama – your grandmama, my dear – and Francis made me give up poor Sebastian! I cried for three days without ceasing, but in the end, you know, I was married to your uncle, and I am sure nothing could have been more comfortable!' (265). In *False Colours* Evelyn falls for a Patience, also the name of the girl Lord Lindeth marries in *The Nonesuch*, echoing Viola's description of her imagined sister as 'like Patience on a monument, smiling at grief'. In *Bath Tangle* Rotherham tells Serena that 'To spar with me will save you from falling into a green melancholy' (12), and this is also found in *Black Sheep* where Miles Calverleigh speaks of 'a green and yellow melancholy' (52).
- 38 Sir Andrew wishes that 'he had bestowed that time in the tongues that I have in fencing, dancing and bear-baiting' (1.3.90–1) and Fabian says of Malvolio 'You know he brought me out of favour with my lady about a bear-baiting here' (2.4.6–7), to which Sir Toby replies 'To anger him we'll have the bear again, and we will fool him black and blue, shall we not, Sir Andrew?' (2.4.8–9). In the quarrel scene Fabian says Cesario 'pant and looks pale as if a bear were at his heels' (3.4.287–8): Stephen Dickey's formulation is that 'Toby and Fabian, adept baiters both, ... goad Cesario and Andrew into attacking each other' (Dickey, 'Shakespeare's Mastiff Comedy', 255–75, 272).

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Georgette Heyer, Wellington's Army and the First World War

Vanda Wilcox

'Military anecdotes are never acceptable to me. [...] The reflections of a General must always be of value – though I fancy we have heard enough of the late war: those of a junior officer can only weary his audience.'¹

When these words were published in *The Quiet Gentleman* in 1951, some among Georgette Heyer's readers must have found themselves wholeheartedly in agreement. If they were seeking escapism from postwar austerity, they would certainly have been keen to hear no more about the 'late war' and all the depressing reflections to which the conflict of 1939–45 would have given rise. But unlike her character the Dowager Countess of St Erth, who uttered this blighting remark, Heyer found military anecdotes more than acceptable. Military memoirs and histories were a source of profound interest and inspiration to her. She famously researched and read deeply, and for all that she has been seen as primarily a writer of romance her passion not just for history but for the history of war shines through in her work. Indeed, several of her novels feature extremely detailed battle scenes – her depictions of Hastings and Waterloo display a formidable knowledge of both events – while serving army officers and veterans populate her casts of characters. Given that Heyer lived through two world wars, it is perhaps unsurprising that war and soldiering should loom large in her mental world, as they would have for her many readers. But what influence did these conflicts have on her writing? In the novels about the Napoleonic Wars, where she engages most explicitly with war, there are numerous clues to suggest that the First World War had a profound and lasting effect on Heyer's understanding of war and conflict, while

the cultural legacies of 1914–18 can be traced in multiple ways through her historical romances.

This chapter first positions Heyer's work within the landscape of interwar fiction as shaped by the First World War. It then explores her depiction of Wellington's army across several novels. Finally it considers Heyer's construction of gender roles in wartime.²

English middlebrow fiction and the Great War

Much literary scholarship about the cultural impact of the First World War lies in the shadow of Paul Fussell's 1975 classic, *The Great War and Modern Memory*.³ He proposed that innocence, certainty, 'high diction' and traditional romantic conceptions of war as heroic and glorious were decisively and permanently destroyed by the First World War, and replaced by a more cynical and above all ironic world-view. He writes:

there seems to be one dominating form of modern understanding; [...] it is essentially ironic; and [...] it originates largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War.⁴

In support of this argument, Fussell cites the interwar 'war books boom' and the profusion of anti-war poetry. Since the 1960s, he claims, these have come to dominate British cultural perceptions of the war and its impact on literary production.⁵

The most dramatic years of this literary output were 1928–30, when *All Quiet on the Western Front* became a runaway bestseller first in Germany and then in Britain (over 25,000 copies were sold in a fortnight when the work was first published in March 1929). At almost the same time R. C. Sherriff's play *Journey's End* was first staged; it would go on to become 'the great middlebrow success of the interwar years on the stage [...] and the most successful war play ever produced in Britain'.⁶ The play is open to many interpretations, and indeed critics and audiences responded in a variety of ways to its first production. However, it has generally been taken as a condemnation of war and as a part of the 'futility' school of war memory, even though that was certainly not Sherriff's intention.⁷ Fussell suggests that in the face of the horrors of the war, certainties and fixed meanings became impossible, while postwar literary fiction had to grapple with

rupture, discontinuity and the loss of the conventions and traditions of the past – even in works not directly about the war itself.

However, this interpretation of modernism and modernity as reactions to the Great War relies heavily on the analysis of a very elite literary corpus (in addition to ignoring the fact that disenchantment was not solely a product of the frontline experience).⁸ Between the wars British fiction was dominated not by the highbrow but by the middlebrow: bestselling popular writing, produced by and for the middle classes and asserting the enduring value of both traditional literary forms and traditional moral, social and political values. The middlebrow transcended genre: it included the historical novel, a form that became increasingly associated with women writers and readers in the 1930s, detective mysteries, contemporary fiction and more.⁹ Like the modernists, many middlebrow writers tackled the consequences and legacies of the Great War. However, as Rosa Maria Bracco has shown, they took a very different approach. In her book *Merchants of Hope* she analyses:

a host of minor literature which attempted to rescue the war from futility not through the defunct rhetoric of glory and honour but by describing for its readers the link between the suffering and the lessons of the war, and an uninterrupted pattern of historical, and particularly English, significance.

An enormous corpus of middlebrow writing, including bestsellers both about the war and other fields, ‘ascribed sustaining and irreducible meaning to history, legitimized by parochial strands of traditional and national writing’.¹⁰ In other words, while the brutality, suffering and horrors of the war were fully acknowledged in middlebrow writing, it was perceived neither as futile nor ironic, but ultimately a worthwhile, even essential endeavour. The war was brutal, but not brutalising; it was inhumane but not dehumanising. In fact the very horrors of the war made the men who served in it and overcame its terrors the more heroic. In public and private memory, and in cultural representations, the war was regularly depicted in deeply traditional terms.¹¹

In rejecting irony and the discontinuity of the highbrow modernists, Bracco explains that

middlebrow literature in the inter-war years kept the canon of nineteenth-century fiction, as it understood it, alive and functioning by safeguarding it against modernism.

It 'ultimately reaffirmed continuity' and was 'clearly modelled on nineteenth-century fiction'.¹² Georgette Heyer's work is firmly located in this tradition and the disruptive modernist effects of the First World War find no place in her work. On the contrary: the idea of 'ascribing sustaining and irreducible meaning to history' sounds like a precise definition of her creative approach. Heyer's methodology was inherently antimodernist. While she was by no means scholarly in her methods and practices, she placed tremendous value on research. Her work – based on the deliberate assembling of a great barrage of detail and on the meticulous use of primary sources for historical figures to establish a concrete and entirely linear narrative, bolstered always by the known – was a tacit rejection of the entire modernist approach. There were no doubts or haziness, no unknowability or fog of war for Heyer.¹³ Instead, her work is a clear example of Bracco's description of middlebrow's inherent faith in tradition and continuity – values which almost all of her romantic and historical production embraces.

However, this does not mean that the war and its cultural representations had no effect on Heyer's writing. Far from it: in her work we can identify many features common to other middlebrow authors of the period, both male and female, that derive directly from the problems and interpretative difficulties of the war. It is worth noting that the First World War came at a critical moment in Heyer's life. She was almost 12 years old when it began and living with her family in Paris, where they remained throughout August and September 1914; during the battle of the Marne she could clearly hear the German guns. In 1915 her father volunteered for the army, despite being overage. He received a temporary commission and was despatched to France, where his excellent French served him well; in 1916 he was promoted to a captaincy and eventually moved into a Staff position. Serving in non-combatant roles throughout, George Heyer eventually earned the MBE for his war service. Meanwhile his wife, Georgette's mother, volunteered as a nurse with the Red Cross. Heyer's very close relationship with her father, as well as connections with various family and friends who served, meant that the war played a critical role in shaping her teenage years.¹⁴

The Napoleonic Wars dominated the era in which Heyer chose to set most of her works: the Regency. During the First World War comparisons with the conflict of the previous century were regularly made – the centenary of the Battle of Waterloo fell during the war, and once again the same belligerent powers were engaged in fighting not all that far away from the original battlefield, albeit in a very different

alliance (rather embarrassingly for commemorative purposes).¹⁵ Indeed Heyer makes a knowing nod to the battlefields of the First World War in *An Infamous Army*, when the Belgian Comte de Lavissee comments, 'this poor land of mine has often been the battlefield of Europe, and may be so yet again – perhaps many times'.¹⁶ More than these direct comparisons, however, the First World War influenced the ways in which war is represented in Heyer's novels, and informs some of the value judgements we can identify associated with officers, soldiers and military conduct.

This is not, of course, to deny the care with which she pursued accuracy, above all in her more 'serious' historical novels, which include the two works in which she focuses explicitly on the Napoleonic Wars. Her research was extensive, exploiting a range of primary sources and incorporating Wellington's own words wherever she could find them, as the notes and bibliography included in *An Infamous Army* make clear. She also consulted many biographies and memoirs and relied a great deal on the ground-breaking work of Sir Charles Oman, Chichele Professor of Modern History at Oxford. He published an enormous history of the Peninsula War in seven volumes between 1902 and 1930, and an important study entitled *Wellington's Army* in 1913;¹⁷ he was also the father of Heyer's close friend Carola. However, as many scholars have observed, Heyer's literary world was not an accurate recreation of the past. It was rather a private one in which twentieth-century mores and values are set within a diligently assembled framework of historical detail.¹⁸ In the words of Maroula Joannou:

Heyer uses verifiable historical facts to transform the known past into a utopian space in which fantasies and romantic aspirations can be expressed.

Her heroines are distinctly modern in sensibility and behaviour; her private Regency is strongly reflective of the era in which they are written (as we see, for instance, when we consider the extent to which opulence, playfulness and wish-fulfilment are actually increased in the 1940s novels written under wartime and postwar austerity).¹⁹ Paul Fussell noted that 'everyone fighting a modern war tends to think about it in terms of the last one he knows anything about'; Heyer, writing about a historical war, tended to think about it in terms of the most recent one she knew anything about.²⁰

Heyer wrote two novels specifically about the Napoleonic Wars: first *An Infamous Army* (1937), about the Battle of Waterloo, and then

The Spanish Bride (1940), which covers the Peninsular Campaign and the Hundred Days. Although she tends to downplay the social impact of the conflict in many of her works, there are several other books which heavily feature both political and military elements of the Napoleonic Wars in their plot (such as espionage, smuggling, Waterloo), including *The Reluctant Widow* (1946), *The Unknown Ajax* (1959) and *A Civil Contract* (1961). In the latter two novels the hero is a veteran of the conflict, as he is also in *The Quiet Gentleman* (1951) and *The Toll-Gate* (1954). Meanwhile even when little or no mention is made of war, military service features commonly as a current or potential career for many minor characters. Beyond her Regency works Heyer also wrote very detailed battle scenes in *Simon the Coldheart* (1925) and *The Conqueror* (1931), while the theme of England at war is also dominant in *Beauvallet* (1929).

This chapter examines three specific areas in which the influence of the First World War on Heyer's writing about war and military matters is clearly discernible. First, her depiction of officers and officership; second, her depiction of other ranks; and finally, her presentation of wartime gender roles. For these purposes *The Spanish Bride*, published in 1940, is of particular importance. It would have been almost impossible for Heyer (and indeed anyone of her age) not to be thinking about the First World War at the moment when the Second broke out. However, *An Infamous Army*, which stages the unlikely romance between dashing widow Lady Barbara Childe and the serious-minded Colonel Charles Audley against the backdrop of Napoleon's Hundred Days campaign, also offers numerous echoes of the Great War.

Beyond these three themes, there are several other areas in which the influence of the First World War might be traced but which lie outside the scope of this chapter. One is Heyer's depiction of the Duke of Wellington himself, who seems to resemble Sir Douglas Haig in several key respects. Haig was not, in the interwar years, the pantomime villain that British popular culture later made him – on the contrary, he was widely admired, and as a living embodiment of aristocratic service was perhaps to Heyer almost above criticism, just as Wellington was.²¹ It might also be interesting to examine some of the ways in which Heyer writes about combat itself as reflecting the prevailing images and style of First World War writing. Her description of Badajoz is the best example. Siege warfare was the aspect of the Napoleonic campaigns closest to the experience of the First World War, and a close reading of her account of the storming actually evokes the act of 'going over the top' of the trenches.

Wellington's army in Heyer's novels

In choosing to focus so much on the army, Heyer reveals her interests to be fundamentally those of the post-Great War era rather than the early nineteenth century itself, for before the climactic events of Waterloo the navy was generally of far greater cultural importance. Consider Austen's novels in which the navy is paramount – respectable, even heroic – and the army barely considered (unless to disparage the morals and conduct of the militia). If anything, Heyer's almost total snubbing of the navy is quite an odd perspective given its importance at the time of which she writes (particularly given the huge popularity of the almost contemporary 'Hornblower' novels by C. S. Forester, the first of which was published in 1937). During and after the First World War, however, the British navy was perceived as having contributed much less to overall victory than the army, and Heyer's representation of post-1815 England perhaps reflects this judgement.²² Instead of heroic naval officers, Heyer's heroes are army officers in elite units – usually the cavalry or the Rifle Brigade.

Heyer's officer corps

Many of Heyer's characters – both heroes and secondary figures – are, or want to be, army officers. They can be placed into three broad groups as a military career performs one of three key functions for these characters: it offers redemption, escape or respectability. Most commonly, the prospect of service offers a chance for personal redemption and reform, a way out of an idle and purposeless life and a way to be useful to both society and one's family. This is especially true for dissolute younger sons or brothers who can only be rescued from uselessness (or worse) by some wealthy relative buying them a commission (for example, Dysart in *April Lady*, Bertram in *Arabella* and Cedric Brandon in *The Corinthian*, who is keen to go off to the Peninsula).²³ For other characters a commission represents an escape from boredom and from the irksome constraints of civilian life – this applies to *The Toll-Gate's* John Staples, Richmond in *The Unknown Ajax* and possibly to Gideon in *The Foundling*. Finally officership is suitable for, or perhaps productive of, responsible, loyal, serious-minded, dutiful gentlemen: Amanda's Captain in *Sprig Muslin*, Gervase in *The Quiet Gentleman*, Hector Kirby in *Bath Tangle*, Adam Deveril in *A Civil Contract*. And of course, implicitly, the feckless wastrels of the first group

will eventually be converted into this latter type by the time they have done their growing up in the army, although the novels acknowledge it does not always work: Conrad, Venetia's brother, for example, remains fundamentally selfish and immature despite his military career.

While Heyer chooses to situate most of her novels in the very highest echelons of society – far outstripping her supposed model, Austen – she does not echo this choice in military rank. In these war years of high casualties and rapid promotion, colonels and even generals could achieve their appointments surprisingly young (Wellington himself was not quite 40 when first sent out to command the British forces in the Peninsula). It was perfectly possible for a senior officer to be young enough to star in a romantic tale. Instead, Heyer's military heroes are usually junior officers. This is highly revealing of an important cultural legacy of the First World War, whereby in both fiction and non-fictional writing junior officers were the predominant protagonists. The particular importance Heyer gives to junior officers is revealed, rather paradoxically, in the remark made by the dowager countess in *The Quiet Gentleman* (1951) quoted at the start of this chapter. When the awful – and remarkably stupid – Dowager declares that junior officers' accounts of the late war are of no interest, we can be sure that Heyer means quite the opposite: in the mouth of one of her most loathsome characters, these words can only be interpreted as deeply ironic. Certainly Heyer, who had read so vociferously on the subject, did not appear to think that we had heard 'enough' of the Napoleonic War or she would not have contributed her own works in the field. Nor did she disdain junior officers in her writings.

It is instructive, however, to consider the Dowager's remark in the light of the enormous 'war books' publishing boom that began in the 1920s and continued into the 1930s, in which the memoirs, diaries and fictional accounts of veteran officers became incredibly popular.²⁴ The works of Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves are perhaps the best known, but less commercially successful memoirs proliferated during this period. Officers' memoirs were of course the main primary source on which Heyer drew so skilfully in her research for *The Spanish Bride*. This is also the most important work we have for assessing her depictions of Wellington's army since, unlike *An Infamous Army*, even the romantic plot strand is based on real historical figures. The novel is based on the true (and well-documented) story of Harry and Juana Smith's marriage, which took place in 1812 immediately after the British storming of Badajoz, when Juana was just 14. Heyer had read Harry Smith's memoirs in 1937 while carrying out her extensive

research for *An Infamous Army* and saw in his story the potential for a full novel, despite the difficulty for modern readers in envisaging a child bride as a figure of romance. Along with Smith's *Autobiography* (first published in 1901), the memoirs of John Kincaid (1830 and 1835) and George Simmons (1899) allow some of the novel's most important characters to speak in their own words.²⁵

It is clear that Heyer, like the reading public of the 1930s, believed junior officers' recollections of war to be very important indeed. But while these memoirs are crucial sources for her, right down to sections of dialogue, the contemporary fictional landscape suggests other models too. The officer as dashing young adventure seeker, such as *The Toll-Gate's* John Staples, carries echoes of the fictional veteran Hugh 'Bulldog' Drummond, star of the immensely popular (if low-brow) adventures written by H. C. McNeile under the pen-name 'Sapper' during the 1920s and 1930s. Bulldog Drummond was a gentleman, a patriot and a physically fearless thrill-seeker. His wartime experiences had made him bored of the stifling conventions of peacetime life – a description that almost precisely matches Staples too.²⁶

The values embodied by Heyer's officers are deeply imbued with codes about 'Englishness'; they echo her contemporary writers of historical romance closely. Helen Hughes offers a portrait of the type: English upper-class men are superior, chivalric, unflappable, innately more militarily skilful, deserving of victory and indeed of supremacy; they are loyal, rooted in rural culture, unpretentious and dependable – embodiments of honour and decency. Hughes argues that in early twentieth century historical novels war is perceived as an area in which England excels. Individual freedom, independent spirit and personal autonomy, contained within a framework of aristocratic guidance, form the basis of English parliamentary democracy, but also make England both militarily strong and deserving.²⁷ These themes, highlighted by Hughes, recur in the depiction of the war against Napoleon, described in Heyer's works as a 'monster'.²⁸

Heyer's officers also embody the common characteristics that her contemporaries bestowed upon First World War officers. Interwar fictional First World War officers are either aristocratic (and Heyer's novels repeatedly emphasise the 'natural superiority' of the aristocracy)²⁹ or upper-middle class, committed to 'playing the game' at all times. Their conduct is flippant, light-hearted and jocular, sport-loving and unemotional, their bravery and patriotism always extremely understated, their treatment of tragedy or disaster ironic and detached.³⁰ This sounds like a precise description of Harry Smith and his friends, or indeed of

Charles Audley and his coterie. Wellington was known to prefer aristocratic officers and certainly in Heyer's fictional world he was surrounded by them.

In reality, however, only a tiny proportion of the officer corps was aristocratic, the majority being drawn from the middle class or at most the minor gentry.³¹ Wellington was not greatly enamoured of promotion from the ranks, believing that 'you could not perfectly trust' officers who had been commissioned in this way as 'their low origin came out' when it came to a propensity to drink.³² Such officers did nonetheless exist, just as they did in the First World War, but they feature neither in the interwar fiction on 1914–18 nor in Heyer's writings on the Napoleonic Wars. Instead the social and cultural profile of British junior officers in Heyer's novels is clearly drawn from the same shared imaginary as the fictional officer corps of Great War writing.

Wellington's troops and the 'Tommy's' of the First World War

The influence of the Great War on Heyer's depiction of Wellington's army is also clear in the way she writes about the ordinary rank and file soldiers. The British army had comprised some 40,000 men in 1792; it was forced to expand incredibly fast to reach roughly 250,000 by 1813. These additional men were recruited, or at least perceived to be recruited, exclusively from 'the lowest classes of British society' and were widely seen as the 'dregs'.³³ Wellington himself supposedly described them repeatedly as 'the scum of the earth', declaring it to be 'quite shocking what excesses our men committed when once let loose'.³⁴ He apparently stated that

people talk of their enlisting from their fine military feeling – all stuff – no such thing. Some of our men enlist from having got bastard children – some for minor offences – many more for drink; but you can hardly conceive such a set brought together.³⁵

These feelings were largely inspired by the troops' conduct at Ciudad Rodrigo, Badajoz and Vitoria. Here well-documented atrocities and mass plunder were widespread, with officers wholly unable to control the depredations of their men. Literacy rates and education among enlisted men were extremely low in this period, as was respect for conventional moral standards. Men enlisted when they had little real

alternative in terms of career or livelihood and plunder was seen by many as a legitimate and intrinsic reward of service. Heyer's description of the sack of Badajoz made this clear: drinking, thieving, destroying homes and property for the sheer sake of it and raping women of all ages were the order of the day. She describes it as 'a hell of misrule in which the horrors of the breaches were being fast surpassed' in which 'no efforts of the officers could quell the unleashed brutality of [the] men'.³⁶ Even though the atrocities are only lightly sketched, this is nonetheless an unusual scene to encounter in a romance novel. It might have been a little surprising for British readers to dwell on these crimes in 1940, just as British Expeditionary Forces once more made ready to set foot on the European mainland, but Heyer is at pains to suggest that the inhabitants of the town brought matters on themselves (by failing to surrender earlier) and had only themselves to blame. Thus, even within the novel, the worst depredations of the British forces are subtly excused and downplayed.

We can understand the attitude which both the army authorities and respectable British society held towards the ordinary private soldier by examining army disciplinary methods and witnessing how they evolved over time. The Peninsula army had employed a brutal system of discipline, which fundamentally treated the men as criminals; it relied heavily on extremely brutal corporal punishment and both the threat and the regular use of capital punishment. In her description of the aftermath of the sacking of Badajoz, Heyer notes that Wellington 'hanged one or two men, and the rest took timely warning'.³⁷ This brutality was only gradually diminished by successive reforms starting in the 1830s, but Wellington himself, based on his own experiences in command, remained staunchly convinced of the efficacy and necessity of brutal disciplinary methods until his death in 1852.³⁸ Flogging in the military was only really phased out by about 1850. Interestingly, however, there was no public complaint nor any sense that it was disproportionately harsh or brutal during the Napoleonic era itself. Only from the mid-nineteenth century were recruits seen in a more positive light. Military historian Hew Strachan explains that:

The process of 'improving' the soldier was [...] a gradual one. If finally successful, it might perhaps so alter the public image of the army as to attract a better class of recruit. The growth in the popularity of the soldier in the nineteenth-century [...] is particularly apparent from about its mid-point.³⁹

By the era of the First World War troops had become representatives of the nation to be supported and celebrated. Corporal and capital punishment were seen as much more controversial and the humble soldier had become the salt of the earth.⁴⁰

Indeed, by 1914–18, the ordinary British private was reimagined in an altogether more chivalric mode – and one that made him a much more suitable subject for romance. A women’s magazine story entitled ‘The Bridegroom at War’, published in 1916, describes a scene in which the heroine, Peggy, faints in the street and is assisted by several ‘Tommyes’ nearby:

The girl’s white face and utter helplessness appealed to the manliness and chivalry that are in every British soldier – a chivalry that extends to the helpless wounded of the enemy and to their enemy’s women.⁴¹

The innate chivalry of the British soldier towards the enemy and his women would have been news to the people of Badajoz, who endured mass rape, murder, plunder and defilement a century earlier. Interestingly, however, although Heyer describes these brutal scenes scrupulously, whenever she offers us imagined dialogues of ordinary private soldiers they are surprisingly polite, even honourable, respectful of their officers and moved by an instinctively chivalric code in their treatment of Juana Smith. They ‘regard her with affectionate respect’, treat her as ‘a lady quite out of the common run’ and take great pains not to ‘soil the ears of the likes of her’ with reference to their own extra-marital relations, thus preserving her purity and virtue.⁴²

In her presentation of ordinary private soldiers, Heyer is entirely typical of other interwar middlebrow writers. Bracco notes:

the working-class was [...] referred to [...] with the same concern, affection, and (when necessary) severity that officers had displayed towards their men. If the working classes let themselves be guided [as in] the wartime common effort, justice and harmony would be among [the] great rewards.⁴³

In middlebrow war novels the ‘figure of the young soldier’ is characterised by ‘endurance, self-sacrifice and sense of humour’ along with a prosaic, pragmatic approach to military service.⁴⁴ The Highlanders who enchant Judith in Brussels before Waterloo or Harry Smith’s men who treat Juana as a kind of mascot fit more closely with this paradigm than

they do with Wellington's 'scum of the earth'. Where Heyer draws on the historical record, we see Wellington's troops; where she draws upon her imagination (especially for dialogue), we find the cultural image of the First World War Tommy, dressed up in a scarlet uniform.

If Wellington's officers and men, in Heyer's hands, turn out to owe quite a lot to their counterparts of a full century later, what of the heroines in these novels? Even the two 'war books' are still romances, and both Barbara Childe and Juana Smith must pursue their love lives in close proximity to the battlefield. Of these two, it is arguably *The Spanish Bride* which shows the influence of the Great War most directly, but both were intimately concerned with women's conduct and responsibilities in wartime.

Modelling gender roles in wartime

The Spanish Bride was published in early April 1940, when Britain once again found itself at war. Much women's fiction in the Second World War would follow the model of the First, in which 'multiple and often conflicting constructions of wartime behaviour [were] offered to young women in cultural discourse, through plots which are at once escapist and at the same time reflect the actual concerns of readers'.⁴⁵ While Heyer's research had been active for several years before publication, much of *The Spanish Bride* was written after 3 September 1939, with the war under way; she finished the novel just before Christmas. Heyer was acutely aware of the war while writing the novel and indeed the *Woman's Journal*, which regularly serialised her work as part of its prestigious literary list, turned it down as being too heavy for readers at the time.⁴⁶ Most of Heyer's later wartime writing would be escapist, as her own comments on *Friday's Child* in 1943 made clear:

I ought to be shot for writing such nonsense [...] but it's unquestionably good escapist literature [...] and I think I should rather like it if I were sitting in an air-raid shelter or recovering from flu.⁴⁷

This function, always an important element in the appeal of her writing, became even more central in wartime. Not only readers but she herself as a writer was keen to enjoy something more light-hearted to distract her from the oppressive news from the continent.⁴⁸ At the same time her self-denigration is perhaps part of a wider trend of

disparagement of women's cultural contribution in wartime, as Diana Wallace has argued.⁴⁹ It is thus not surprising that Heyer decided to abandon the more serious Napoleonic subjects after 1940, nor that she did not in the end write the Agincourt novel that she briefly contemplated at this time as a patriotic response to national crisis. Yet what it lacked in escapism *The Spanish Bride* made up with its didactic function, clearly addressing the concerns of the Second World War in light of the experience of the First.⁵⁰ This is also by no means the only novel in which Heyer sets out strong instructions; Laura Vivanco has convincingly outlined the strong didactic functions of *The Nonesuch* (1962) in her research.⁵¹

To a generation which had hoped that the war of 1914–18 would end all war, this was a terrible time; the shadows and fears of that conflict returned to them in full. What lessons, then, might the British reading public – and Heyer's public in particular – draw from a still earlier experience of total war, to enable them better to endure and understand the current conflict? First, the novel offers a strongly consolatory message: not only do British forces win a memorable and lasting triumph, but the much-feared prospect of an enemy invasion is utterly defeated by the effectiveness of the British Expeditionary Forces. In the spring of 1940, with the phony war about to give way to full-scale combat, this spoke directly to contemporary anxieties – even though the British Expeditionary Forces which were to fight in Norway and France over the next three months would not live up to the Peninsula example. Beyond this optimistic and patriotic conclusion, the novel has much to say about men and women's conduct in wartime.⁵²

Juana's marriage, attended as it is by great urgency (the couple marry just a few days after meeting) and little formality, is an extreme example of a common phenomenon: the wartime wedding. In 1939 and 1940 British 'war brides' took sexual and romantic risks unnecessary in peacetime; they rushed to the altar, exchanging the conventional romance of a carefully planned wedding for the security of married status as their men went off to war. Juana's story therefore had a particular appeal at this moment.⁵³ We see some of this climate of risk-taking too in Heyer's description of social life in Brussels in 1815 in *An Infamous Army*. At a ball, early in the novel, Heyer writes, 'civilian gentlemen were plainly at a discount, and the young lady who could not show at least one scarlet uniform enslaved was unhappy indeed'.⁵⁴ All through May and June the characters live 'in a whirlpool' with 'no time for anything but pleasure [...] as though we were all a little mad', in the

sensible Judith's words.⁵⁵ As news spread of the imminent engagement at the Duchess of Richmond's ball, held the night before Waterloo, a strange atmosphere arose in which:

officers [...] lingered to exchanged touching little keepsakes with girls in flower-like dresses who [...] clung with frail, unconscious hands to a scarlet sleeve. [...] A queer, almost greedy emotion shone in many countenances. Life had suddenly become an urgent business, racing towards disaster, and the craving for excitement, the breathless moment compound of fear, and grief, and exaltation [...] surged up under the veneer of good manners and shone behind the dread in shocked young eyes.⁵⁶

These scenes of excitement conditioned by fear, along with the seductive glamour of the men in their military uniforms, echo the moral panic about 'khaki fever' that arose during the First World War. In such strange times, it was lamented by some that 'young women were so excited by the sight of men in military uniforms that they behaved in immodest and even dangerous ways'.⁵⁷ At the Duchess of Richmond's ball in 1815 young women are gripped with a kind of 'scarlet (coat) fever' and forget their careful training. In 1914 wartime led the shackles of sexual morality to be cast off and previously respectable girls to transgress established boundaries (or at least so it was widely feared in Britain). A drumhead marriage was obviously preferable to this in Heyer's view; in *The Spanish Bride* war brides might see that their story held a romance all of its own, with the reassurance that a happy outcome was possible after even the briefest of courtships. In fact, women's magazines during the First World War actively encouraged the romance of the 'reckless' marriage as a way for women and girls to participate actively in the 'drama' of the war.⁵⁸ The heightened emotional climate of the war must be directed towards romance and marriage, safely containing the sexuality of young women.⁵⁹

But what came next? No twentieth-century British war brides could follow the drum as Juana did; Heyer's novel instead allowed a fantasy for the wife or girlfriend left behind, a way imaginatively to follow her partner into the largely masculine domain of the battlefield.⁶⁰ The novel emphasises the hardships and stress – not to mention danger – that this entailed for Juana, perhaps reassuring readers that they really were better off at home and that this exploit was best left to the realm of the imaginary. Diana Wallace has argued that

The meticulously-researched detail of Heyer's historical settings novels produces an effect of 'realism' [...] but it also, paradoxically, acts as a kind of distance, signalling the text's status as fantasy.⁶¹

Juana's experience is at once 'realistic' and entirely fantastical. But there is still a clear lesson for women readers about their conduct in wartime: Juana is dedicated and self-sacrificing, she quickly learns to take on all the necessary domestic tasks to enable her to support her husband and she never makes a fuss, even when she experiences a minor injury to her foot. She quickly 'rouse[d] herself from her state of self-pity' and 'drank the tea Harry brewed for her' (like the good Englishwoman her marriage has apparently made her!), then set out her plans to overcome the injury 'in a determined voice' before 'stoutly den[ying] feeling any pain'.⁶² Above all Juana never asks Harry to neglect his duty or in any way fall short of giving his best self to the army. When she is struggling one night in a storm before the battle of Salamanca, she meets Harry's fellow officer Johnny Kincaid, who is in love with her. He asks her whether her husband is busy on some task for his superior officer and she replies: 'Enrique never neglects his duty'. 'Only his wife?' said Kincaid quizzically. 'You know better!' she retorts.⁶³ A few weeks later, facing separation in the face of an upcoming skirmish, Harry sends her away to safety – a prospect she views with dismay:

Words seemed to be strangled in her throat; she wanted to cling to him, to hold him fast; but of course she knew she must not do that.⁶⁴

Jealous and furious if she thinks she has been neglected for another woman, Juana is perfectly happy to come second to Harry's military duty. She is in many ways the antithesis of the coquettish, superficial woman, interested only in fashion and fun, who is so brutally stigmatised in many interwar middlebrow works – and in some of Heyer's own romances. Women readers in 1940 could thus see a patriotic model for themselves to follow, very much along the lines which many First World War recruiting posters had embraced: *Women of Britain say Go!* and *Is your best Boy in Khaki?*⁶⁵ Trying to keep your man at your side was shown to be selfish and unworthy; properly feminine behaviour required that he do his military duty. Indeed, this was the form which patriotic sacrifice took for women: in Nicoletta Gullace's words, 'the sending of men to battle became the womanly

equivalent of enlistment itself.⁶⁶ When Harry Smith is first told he is to be sent to America, Juana cries desperately. But then

when the first abandonment of her despair was over, Juana said: 'you must go. It is your duty. I am sorry I cried. You see, I – I had never thought that perhaps we might be separated.'⁶⁷

She resolves to be 'calm and reasonable' and even manages to tell Harry that she is glad for him. This depiction comes straight from Smith's autobiography:

My duty was my duty – I gloried in it; my wife even still more so, and never did she say, 'You might have been with me', or complain if I was away. On the contrary, after many a day's fatiguing march, when I sought her out in the baggage or awaiting me, her first question invariably was 'Are you sure you have done all your duty?'⁶⁸

Heyer, however, rewrites this anecdote from the feminine perspective and greatly expands upon it, reiterating Juana's conduct on multiple occasions. Her courage and self-sacrifice exactly embody the Great War era's presentation of those values in their feminine form.

There is an interesting contrast here with Barbara in *An Infamous Army*: she is evidently bored by, and impatient of, Charles's military duties in the early part of the novel. Frivolous and selfish, she encourages him to neglect his work in favour of pleasure-seeking and romance. Early in their romance, with the great struggle against Napoleon looming, she asks him to apply for leave; he replies 'Unthinkable!' She asks:

'Perhaps you don't wish for leave?'
'I don't,' he said frankly. 'Why, what a fellow I should be if I did!'
'Don't I come first with you?'
He glanced down at her. 'You don't understand, Bab.'
'Oh, you mean to talk to me of your duty!' she said impatiently.
'Tedious stuff!'⁶⁹

Barbara's conception of duty is depicted as flawed and limited: she sees it only as an imposition (perhaps a consequence of her unpleasant first marriage and difficult upbringing) and cannot understand the elevated, lofty conception of duty that a true soldier such as Charles embraces.

He, with typical English reticence, cannot or will not attempt to explain it to her – it is too heartfelt. She has little interest in patriotism either, being wholly absorbed in herself and even – shockingly! – flirting with a foreigner, the Belgian Count de Lavisse.

Unlike Juana, Barbara has to learn the value of duty. Only once she has redeemed herself through extreme anxiety and hard work, once the fighting has begun, can she even begin to see Charles's service in a more 'correct' framework: when he returns to the house briefly after the battle at Quatre Bras and before the main engagement at Waterloo, to change and eat, she remains calm and reassuring. Judith says in surprise:

'He behaved as though nothing were of the least consequence but this dreadful war!'

Barbara gave a laugh. 'Is anything else of consequence? I like him for that.'

Judith replied, 'You are made to be a soldier's wife.'⁷⁰

It is no coincidence that Barbara's redemption comes about through the patriotic and womanly work of care-giving, and in particular through nursing. The idealised role of women as carers was critical to wartime rhetoric in 1914–18, even when it came to less immediately obvious areas such as the recruitment of women for industrial work.⁷¹ Nursing was the form of care which received most attention and, especially at the outset of the war, aristocratic and upper-middle class women volunteered to nurse in considerable numbers. Heyer's mother was a volunteer nurse and her close friend Joanna Cannan joined the Volunteer Aid Detachment (VAD) in 1914.⁷² Joanna even fell in love with and married a handsome young captain, thus embodying the glamorised myth of the romantic, aristocratic young volunteer nurse which has rather overshadowed the realities of professional nursing during the First World War.⁷³

Professional military nursing did not exist during the Napoleonic Wars, of course, being a creation of the Crimean War. After the Battle of Waterloo, as Heyer describes it, the local population turned out onto the streets of Brussels to help the wounded, as well as inviting them into their homes to convalesce, while 'local ladies worked hard' to assist them. Yet nursing in general was not seen as suitable work for well-born ladies in this period; it was a task rather undertaken by lower-class women or nuns.⁷⁴ By contrast, in *An Infamous Army* Heyer's aristocratic ladies rush to volunteer their time and efforts as nurses as if they were

in an early form of the VAD. As well as patriotism, their actions are motivated by the need to be involved in the stirring events unfolding:

The feeling of being able to do something which would be of use in this crisis did much to relieve the oppression of everyone's spirits.⁷⁵

Arguably, however, these women's quest to participate actively was a twentieth-century attitude, a product of the First World War quite anachronistic in the context of the Napoleonic era. Nursing exposes Barbara (and her hostess Judith) to the horrors of conflict and shocks her out of her complacency and selfishness. This episode proves to be a turning point in the novel, transforming Barbara from a shocking flirt into a self-sacrificing caregiver, ready for the reader to identify with and finally worthy of the hero's love. In short, it is nursing that makes her into a romantic heroine. It will be her care – feminine, devoted and self-sacrificing – that is crucial to Charles Audley's ultimate recovery and survival after being wounded, despite the practical reality that 'there was so little that could be accomplished by inexpert hands'.⁷⁶ The experience of nursing the wounded in the streets also establishes a unique bond between the two women, making them comrades-in-arms. When they describe their work to their middle-class acquaintance Lucy Devenish, she is horrified.

Lucy shuddered. 'Oh, how I admire you! I could not! The sight of the blood – the wounds – I cannot bear to think of it!'

Judith and Barbara catch one another's eye:

A faint smile passed between them; in that moment of wordless understanding each was aware of the bond which, no matter what might come, could never quite be broken between them.⁷⁷

The inimitable camaraderie born of shared hardship and trauma is a key theme in the Great War memoirs of both men and women.

Barbara's misbehaviour in the first half of the novel arises at least in part from resentment that army duties might drive love and romance out of her lover's mind. This was a fear that many women experienced in 1914–18, and again after 1939. Here, too, *The Spanish Bride* provides a very consoling picture. Throughout the novel we see that Harry Smith's concern for Juana is real and profound despite

his military responsibilities. She is loved and cherished however demanding his duty may be; the female reader whose partner was away at war could thus find reassurance that her lover was still thinking of her, still devoted. Crucially, however, this romantic love in no way hinders Harry's devotion to his duty nor makes him any less the soldier. This is at once reassuring to the woman reader who, unlike Juana, could not accompany her man overseas and thus might fear being forgotten. But in fact Harry is also a model for men: his marital responsibilities and his military responsibilities are kept in perfect balance, and he successfully upholds the highest standards of both military and domestic masculinity. There is, apparently, no opposition between the two – though it is clearly not easy to fulfil both roles.

This is a significant response to a hugely important debate which had played out during the First World War in Britain. How should men balance their military and their domestic duties, and by what codes of masculinity should a true British man try to live? Jessica Meyer, Laura Ugolini and others have highlighted the way in which during the First World War masculinity became a publicly contested ground; men's private duties as husbands, fathers and sons were weighed in the balance against their public and patriotic duty to serve as soldiers.⁷⁸ Put in its most basic form, should masculinity be martial or domestic? Despite a strongly patriotic, even militaristic wartime culture, there was a surprising degree of space for men to express and uphold alternate forms of masculine ideal during the First World War. The conflict between multiple models was not easily resolved. Harry Smith, however, successfully integrates both identities, emerging as an excellent, responsible officer *and* a devoted husband. For men and women in 1940, facing the prospect of renewed tension in negotiating conflicting ties of homeland and family, Meyer offers an idiosyncratic but consoling image of how to perform masculine duties in wartime. A lesson from the Napoleonic Wars could help to resolve a problem which the experience of the First World War suggested might well recur in the Second.

Conclusion

At the end of *An Infamous Army* the Duke of Wellington visits Lady Worth and says to her (in words taken from one of his actual private conversations):

'My friends, my poor soldiers – how many of them have I to regret! [...] I have never fought such a battle, and I trust I shall never fight such another. War is a terrible evil, Lady Worth.'⁷⁹

While Wellington never had to fight another such battle, Britain certainly did. To read of the battle scene of Waterloo, with its gruesome piles of dead lying in muddy Belgian fields, less than 20 years after the end of the First World War would immediately evoke that conflict. Although the novel presents war against the dictator who has conquered most of Europe (Napoleon) as righteous and necessary, Heyer's readers, no less than Heyer herself, would have ardently hoped in 1937 that Britain would never have to fight another such war. By 1940, when *A Spanish Bride* was published, those hopes had been dashed. Taken together, Heyer's military writings drew on the experience of the First World War to offer models through which British women and men could rise to whatever challenge they might meet – and so prove themselves worthy of their heroic ancestors of more than a century before.

Notes

- 1 Heyer, *The Quiet Gentleman*, 13. The fictional St Erth, who has recently sold out, served in the 7th Hussars, later to be the regiment in which the young Douglas Haig was first commissioned.
- 2 Many thanks are owed to Shelagh Wilcox Hughes, who introduced me to the delights of Georgette Heyer as a child and took me to visit the battlefield at Waterloo, and to Jessica Meyer, who encouraged and inspired me to work on this project. Since I began it several other women historians of the First World War have confessed to me their secret enjoyment of Heyer. I am grateful for the opportunity to present this work at the 2018 'The Nonesuch' conference in London and for the comments received there; Jonathan Boff and Ann-Marie Einhaus also made helpful suggestions. I recently learned that Ann-Marie Einhaus presented a paper entitled 'Facets of Memory: Georgette Heyer and the Oblique Literary Memory of World War I' at the Modern Languages Association Conference in 2016, which I have unfortunately not seen.
- 3 Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*.
- 4 Fussell, *The Great War*, 15.
- 5 On the history of how the war has been perceived, represented and remembered in Britain see Todman, *The Great War: Myth and memory*. For important critiques of Fussell's argument, see Smith, 'Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*: Twenty-five years later', 241–60; McLoughlin, 'The Great War and Modern Memory', 436–58.
- 6 Bracco, *Merchants of Hope*, 145.
- 7 Bracco, *Merchants*, 178.
- 8 Frayn, *Writing Disenchantment*.
- 9 Wallace, "'History to the Defeated'", 76–92 (pp. 76–7); Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*.
- 10 Bracco, *Merchants*, 1.
- 11 Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*.
- 12 Bracco, *Merchants*, 12.

- 13 Compare Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War*, 14–15.
- 14 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 33–40.
- 15 Raxhon, *Centenaire sanglant*.
- 16 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 127.
- 17 Oman, *Wellington's Army*.
- 18 See the rather rude definition of her period detail as 'pseudoinformation' which 'ultimately reveals nothing about society', Robinson, 'On Reading Trash', 321–35.
- 19 Joannou, *Women's Writing*, 80.
- 20 Fussell, *The Great War*, 314.
- 21 Todman, "'Sans Peur et sans Reproche": The retirement, death, and mourning of Sir Douglas Haig'. On Heyer's attitude to Wellington see Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 169–70.
- 22 On the cultural image of the British navy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack*; Colville and Davey, eds, *A New Naval History*.
- 23 Bell, 'Cross-Dressing in Wartime'.
- 24 For an early assessment of the phenomenon see Falls, *War Books*.
- 25 Harry George Wakelyn Smith, *Autobiography of Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Smith*; Kincaid, *Adventures in the Rifle Brigade*; Kincaid, *Random Shots from a Rifleman*; Simmons, *A British Rifle Man*.
- 26 Meyer, 'The Tuition of Manhood', 113–28.
- 27 Hughes, *The Historical Romance*, chap. 5.
- 28 For instance, in *The Grand Sophy* Lady Ombersley refers to 'the escape of that dreadful Monster from Elba'. Heyer, *The Grand Sophy*, 7.
- 29 Hughes, *Historical Romance*, 136.
- 30 Bracco, *Merchants*, 70–1.
- 31 Haythornthwaite, *British Infantry of the Napoleonic Wars*, 8.
- 32 Stanhope and Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, *Notes of Conversations with the Duke of Wellington*, 13.
- 33 Linch, *Britain and Wellington's Army*, 5.
- 34 Stanhope and Wellesley, 9, 14.
- 35 Stanhope and Wellesley, 18.
- 36 Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 34.
- 37 Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 59.
- 38 Strachan, *Wellington's Legacy*, 80–2.
- 39 Strachan, *Wellington's Legacy*, 79–80.
- 40 See for instance Herbert, *The Secret Battle*, which offered a stark denunciation of the practice of capital punishment in wartime.
- 41 Cited in Acton, 'Best Boys and Aching Hearts', 173–93 (190).
- 42 Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 61–2.
- 43 Bracco, *Merchants*, 52–3.
- 44 Bracco, *Merchants*, 54; 67–70.
- 45 Acton, 'Best Boys', 183.
- 46 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 197–8.
- 47 Hodge, *The Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 11.
- 48 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 205–9.
- 49 Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel*.
- 50 For this phenomenon more generally in middlebrow fiction see Stewart, 'The Last War', 259–81; also Bell, 'Cross-Dressing in Wartime'.
- 51 Vivanco, 'Georgette Heyer: The Nonesuch of Regency Romance'.
- 52 See also Bell, 'Cross-Dressing in Wartime', who argues that *The Corinthian*, published later in 1940, 'negotiates and addresses a number of social and political debates current at the time', relating to proper wartime conduct and in particular to gender roles (461). It is interesting that Heyer chose to set this work at the height of the Peninsular War, around 1812/13, reinforcing the idea of a parallel between this conflict and the Second World War.
- 53 Joannou, *Women's Writing*, 68.
- 54 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 23.
- 55 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 261.
- 56 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 248.
- 57 Angela Woollacott, "'Khaki Fever" and Its Control', 325–47, 325.

- 58 Acton, 'Best Boys', 181–2.
- 59 In some of Heyer's later works this theme returns, for instance Amanda in *Sprig Muslin* is keen to be married as soon as possible precisely because she knows her Captain may be sent away. Heyer also later explored the possibility that a traditional wartime romance between an eligible young woman and a wounded hero is not necessarily a good idea: Julia and Adam's relationship in *A Civil Contract* is the product of wounded-hero syndrome and would have led to a disastrous marriage.
- 60 The idea of women accompanying soldiers overseas in their imagination was directly explored by other middlebrow writers between the wars, for instance the very successful 1932 novel by Pamela Hinkson, *The Ladies Road*. Bracco, *Merchants*, 114–15.
- 61 Wallace, "History to the Defeated", 82.
- 62 Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 160.
- 63 Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 90.
- 64 Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 126.
- 65 Paul Ward, "Women of Britain Say Go", 23–45.
- 66 Gullace, *The Blood of Our Sons*, 63.
- 67 Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 289.
- 68 Harry George Wakelyn Smith, *Autobiography*, 74.
- 69 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 107.
- 70 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 294.
- 71 Smith, 'The Girl behind the Man behind the Gun', 223–41.
- 72 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 41–2.
- 73 Hallett, *Veiled Warriors*. In some ways Vera Brittain is the prototype for Heyer's aristocratic ladies on the streets of Brussels.
- 74 Howard, 'British Medical Services at the Battle Of Waterloo', 1653–6.
- 75 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 263.
- 76 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 276. Judith's complaints about the excessive cheerfulness and jocularly of the military doctor John Robert Hume appear drawn directly from the account by Magdalene, Lady De Lancey of nursing her husband on his deathbed at Waterloo. De Lancey, *A Week at Waterloo in 1815*.
- 77 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 282.
- 78 Meyer, *Men of War*; Ugolini, *Civvies*.
- 79 Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 402.

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Georgette Heyer and the language of the historical novel

Tom Zille

One of the most conspicuous features of Georgette Heyer's novels, and one that readers are likely to experience as a signature quality of her writing, is the idiom that her historical novels employ – above all, the famous 'Regency slang'. Given the prominence of historical language in Heyer's novels, the fact that it has attracted hardly any critical attention seems surprising. Yet this neglect is the result of a broader lack of theoretical engagement with the relation between the historicity of a historical novel's subject matter and that of the idiom in which it is constructed. Few steps towards developing a theoretical framework for the analysis of this problem have been taken, and often those that have – as the present investigation will show – stand in contrast with the practice of the genre.

One of the recurring themes of any such study must be the question of 'authenticity': for historical fiction, more than other literary genres, always has to come to terms with issues of historical 'faithfulness'. These arise from the genre's engagement with a period setting, historical characters, and the mentality of ages past vis-à-vis a readership that looks for both immersion and alterity. Naturally this also pertains to the use of language. One of the qualities of Heyer's novels which critics have consistently highlighted is their ostensible historical authenticity, a quality the author strove to achieve on the linguistic level as on any other. This is especially true of the idiom she created for her Regency romances in which, as her colleague Carola Oman put it, 'not one word was false, or out of place'.¹ And while historiography in Heyer's own lifetime began to abandon the concept of history at which her attempts at authenticity aimed, writers of historical fiction, herself included, were often slow to respond to such paradigm shifts.

While Heyer took a conservative approach to history, this chapter will show that the idiom she created for the Regency novels was thoroughly innovative; it may well be her most original contribution to the genre. To this end, the chapter will examine Heyer's historical idiom in the 26 romances set in the Regency period, from *Regency Buck* (1935) to *Lady of Quality* (1972), the largest and most distinct part of her *oeuvre*, with particular attention given to her 'Regency slang'. In doing so it will draw not only on the novels, but also on Heyer's private papers. The aim is to trace the sources and influences that impacted on the genesis of Heyer's historical idiom and so put her stylistic innovation in the broader context of her own development as a writer and the development of the genre of historical fiction.

In addition, this chapter will assess the historical 'faithfulness' and effectiveness of Heyer's historical language against both her own aims and her literary environment. In keeping with this dual focus, the methods used here incorporate elements of close reading as well as the analytical tools of the approach that has come to be known as 'corpus stylistics', i.e. the application of the methods of corpus linguistics to literary texts (the more traditional terms would be 'statistical stylistics' or 'stylometry').² In providing the first comprehensive analysis of Heyer's historical idiom, the chapter will not only investigate a key element of her writing, but also illustrate how an investigation of a 'language of the historical novel' could begin.

The background and genesis of Heyer's historical idiom

Heyer prided herself on what she felt was the historical 'authenticity' of her novels. The best evidence for this is provided by her incensed reaction to the plagiarism debate during the 1950s and 1960s with fellow writers Barbara Cartland and Kathleen Lindsay, both of whom had attempted, rather ineptly, to copy her period idiom, among other features.³ A passage from a letter that Heyer wrote to her legal adviser in 1950 illustrates how offended she felt by Cartland's 'ignorance' of the period:

[N]o novelist who had found, through research, the rather recondite bits of period colour [...] could possibly have fallen into the gross errors that bespatter Miss Cartland's pages. She [...] displays an almost abysmal ignorance of her period. Cheek by jowl with some piece of what I should call special knowledge (all

of which I can point out in my books) one finds an anachronism so blatant as to show clearly that Miss Cartland knows rather less about the period than the average schoolgirl [...].⁴

Heyer herself, by contrast, devoted a great amount of time to her historical research. Her private research library comprised around a thousand volumes.⁵ These included various etymological and subject dictionaries, Peerages and style manuals, Fanny Burney's *Diary and Letters* as well as the diaries of numerous Regency aristocrats, Charles Oman's *History of the Peninsular War* (1902–30) and Wellington's field dispatches.

Her sources were either period publications or twentieth-century historical works with a strong focus on 'factual' detail. She avoided revisionist or left-leaning histories, a decision that partly accounts for the conservative social outlook in her novels. As Jennifer Kloester observes, Heyer

assumed the superiority of all things English, [...] and, although acknowledging many of the faults, foibles and failings of those in power during the Regency, maintained an air of indulgent [...] understanding that their 'Englishness' would cover a multitude of sins.⁶

She favoured traditional, political history as championed by her friend Carola Oman's father, the historian Charles Oman, and her autodidactic approach to history often treated an accumulation of sources as a substitute for an approach informed by theory.

Heyer copied the information yielded by her historical research onto index cards, which were collected in a series of binders; of these, 15 have survived.⁷ The most relevant for the present enquiry are the volumes labelled 'Vocabulary' I and II, respectively (Fig. 10.1). Between them, these volumes contain the 132 index cards on which Heyer recorded the lexicon of her Regency idiom, grouped into thematic categories such as 'Abuse', 'Appearance', 'Conduct', 'Exclamations', 'Fashion', 'Horses' (a surprisingly large category), 'Manners', 'Money', and 'Talk', often with sub-categories such as 'male/female'. Usually, Heyer took down the words without definitions or etymology. From these lists of expressions emerges her 'Regency slang': examples include 'quavery-wavery', 'christened with pump-water' and 'noggy' (both meaning 'drunk'), 'jaded to death', 'the cream of the thing' (excellent), 'Sneck up! Go hang!', 'bum-squabbled' (having failed), 'full of juice'

(rich), 'jargoozled' (surprised), 'clever-shins', 'a sad romp' (in 'Abuse/female'), 'oyster-faced' (unshaven), 'queer as Dick's hatband', 'to be down pin' (be downcast), 'to be quite buckram' (punctilious), manners 'like a Macaroni merchant', 'nifty-naffy' (proud), 'down as a hammer, up like a watch-boy' (clever) and thousands more.

It is largely impossible to determine at what stage of her career the author assembled which parts of her notebooks. However, there are a few exceptions, such as the chronologies of the Peninsular Campaign and Waterloo, researched in preparation for *The Spanish Bride* and *An Infamous Army* respectively. The precise way in which Heyer employed her lexical research is also difficult to determine, especially since almost none of her typescripts and drafts have survived. Additionally, much of her research was conducted at the London Library, where her choice of books necessarily remains obscure to the present-day enquirer.

However, a look at the way in which Heyer employed the information recorded in these binders tells us something about the use of the binders themselves. Many of the phrases never actually appear in the novels. This applies to several entries in the list above, including 'quavery-wavery', 'jargoozled', 'quite buckram' and 'noggy'. There are some, such as 'christened with pump-water', 'clever-shins' and 'jaded to death', which can be found only once in all of the Regency novels. On the other hand, the list contains clear favourites of the author's, for instance the expression 'queer as Dick's hatband', which occurs a total of nine times across seven different novels, or 'full of juice', which turns up 13 times across seven novels. Others cluster together in tight sections of Heyer's *oeuvre*, sometimes appearing only in a single novel: for example, almost all occurrences of the phrase 'sneck up!' are in *The Unknown Ajax* (1959). This suggests that the author would occasionally refresh her memory of certain pieces of vocabulary in the binders and then employ them in quicker succession than usual.

Yet the value of the binders for the present enquiry has its limits, for instance when we observe that the popular slur 'a Macaroni merchant' only enters Heyer's works in the 1960s. This may be accidental or it may point to a gap in her lexical research which she filled at that time: with the information at hand there is no way of knowing. As the examination of this small sample of words and phrases already strongly suggests, Heyer's construction of her Regency historical idiom was greatly influenced by the vagaries of the system she had chosen to assemble information.

Aside from her historical sources, Heyer read period fiction, with Jane Austen as her perennial favourite. Outside the Regency era,

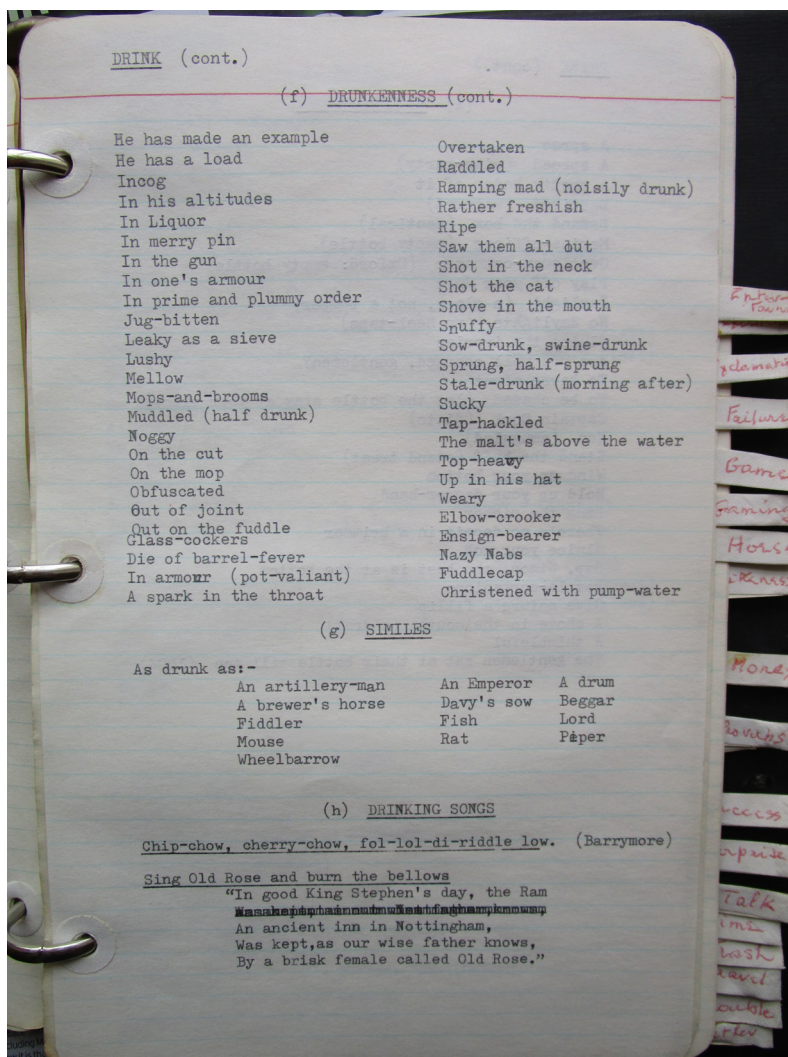


Figure 10.1 A page from one of Heyer's 'Vocabulary' binders. With permission of the Heyer Estate. Photograph by the author

this included Shakespeare as well as Dickens, Thackeray, Gaskell and Stevenson.⁸ In her own period she read writers as diverse as Rudyard Kipling, Ethel M. Dell, D. K. Broster and Ivy Compton-Burnett. She also enjoyed, and was influenced by, the popular historical novelists of her own day as well as those of the late nineteenth century. Among the latter were Rafael Sabatini (best known for *Scaramouche*), Jeffery Farnol, the Baroness Orczy (author of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*) and

Stanley Weyman. Their influence on Heyer's writing will be examined in greater detail below.

Over Heyer's lifetime, historical fiction at large, and romance in particular, was to undergo significant stylistic changes, only some of which she embraced. In her survey of the developments around the turn of the century, Helen Hughes detects a gradual 'reduction of obvious structural and stylistic barriers between text and reader' in popular historical romance; but other elements, especially the stilted, archaising rhetoric typical of Victorian fiction, persisted well into the twentieth century.⁹ Geoffrey Trease cites a strikingly ludicrous example from Jeffery Farnol's *Geste of Duke Jocelyn* (1919):

'Safe, quotha?' said Sir Pertinax, scowling back over his shoulder. 'Not so! Surely we are closely pursued – hark! Yonder be horsemen riding at speed – ha, we are beset!'¹⁰

At the opposite end of the scale, and contemporary with Heyer, Hughes's survey finds Barbara Cartland, an author who removed further impediments to readability to create a 'more colloquial and more up-to-date' style.¹¹ Other historical novelists embraced linguistic anachronism in a far more comprehensive way. This is especially true of those commonly classed as avant-garde or highbrow – for instance Naomi Mitchison, who credited herself with being the first 'to see that one could write historical novels in a modern idiom',¹² Mary Butts, Sylvia Townsend Warner and H.D., whose *Palimpsest* (1926) tested the boundaries of the genre by a setting in two different periods. The general trend in highbrow historical fiction in Heyer's lifetime was towards calculated anachronism in matters of style and material detail and faithfulness regarding the intellectual and emotional condition of ages past. This evolution corresponded with the development in theory: the two most influential theorists of historical fiction of the time, Herbert Butterfield and Georg Lukács, both rejected the application of outward period detail as 'a veneer of history' and mere 'picturesque bagatelles' respectively.¹³ Middlebrow practitioners of the genre, on the other hand, frequently defended the use of historical paraphernalia as a prerequisite to reader immersion.¹⁴

It is with reference to the faithfulness to an historical mentality rather than period detail, therefore, that Heyer's novels have been challenged. In her famous essay 'Georgette Heyer is a Better Writer than You Think', A. S. Byatt complains about the Penguin Literary History's claim that despite Heyer's Regency phraseology, 'the values and drift

of her dialogue are essentially modern'.¹⁵ Similarly, Diana Wallace in her brief treatment of Heyer describes the latter's period depiction as essentially superficial.¹⁶ While Heyer's letters show her frequently revelling in her superior knowledge of the period she had chosen to write about, she might not have resented this kind of criticism as much as she did the accusation of inaccuracy in matters of 'factual' detail, which she regarded as her forte.

Since the present study will be driven by linguistic enquiry, it will not be able to assess a quality such as faithfulness to some historical 'spirit of the age'. When it comes to historical idiomatics, much of the analysis is limited to the kind of hard facts – etymological data, descriptions of syntax and grammar – that a critic such as Lukács would have dismissed as 'picturesque bagatelles'. In the matter of style, Heyer abhorred all kinds of modernist experimentation. Her use of language puts her in closer vicinity to the 'popular' historical realism described by Hughes than to modernist novelists. Yet despite her conservatism in many formal matters, the historical idiom she created for her novels was wholly unique, as the following closer examination of Heyer's Regency novels will reveal.

The narrative voice

Dialogue accounts for much of the distinctiveness of Heyer's style, which is why this chapter's analysis of the narrative voice will be briefer than that of the representation of speech. Nevertheless, because the author used different techniques and assimilated different influences on the various diegetic levels, it will be an important component of this investigation.

Jennifer Kloester has already described the ways in which Heyer incorporated textual historical sources such as diaries and dispatches into her narrative. She stresses her talent for capturing their essence, stripping them of unnecessary detail, and recontextualising them in such a way as both to serve her narrative and to allow the reader to infer much of the original situation. Frequently Heyer would remodel the direct speech in her sources as the voice of the omniscient third-person narrator in her novel, or vice versa, and adapt first-person narratives in such a way as to completely obscure their original form.¹⁷ For the purposes of this chapter, the focus will be shifted towards those instances of an historical idiom that were not prompted by direct historical precedent – Heyer's 'purely fictional' idiom.

As in the novels of her precursor, Jane Austen, the narrative voice in Heyer's novels mainly serves to introduce characters and their situation, to cover time lapses, and to describe landscapes, architecture and period paraphernalia. This is particularly true of costume – Heyer's favourite material aspect of the Regency period. Often the narrator's description is not only intended to immerse the reader in the setting, but also to instruct them and reinforce the narrator's authority. In a typical scene from *Charity Girl*, for instance, the reader learns that '[t]he Viscount was wearing the coat, the buckskin breeches and the topboots which were the correct morning-attire for any gentleman sojourning in the country [...]'.¹⁸

As Bryony Stocker has proposed, 'authenticity' in historical fiction comprises in effect 'a negotiation between the evidence available to the writer, the reader's existing understanding of the period and the imaginative power of the author'.¹⁹ One of the strategies for creating an 'authentic' historical idiom described by Stocker is 'reader guidance'; this employs a practice of signposting, using the names of people and places to alert the reader constantly to the narrative's period setting.²⁰ Heyer regularly relies on this technique, as in the following passage. Here Judith Taverner, the heroine of *Regency Buck*, is being familiarised with the conventions of fashionable life:

She learned that no lady would be seen driving or walking down St. James's Street; that every lady must be sure of being seen promenading in Hyde Park between the hours of five and six. She must not dare to dance the waltz until she had been approved by the Patronesses of Almack's [...]. And above all, [...] she must move heaven and earth to earn Mr Brummell's approval.²¹

The voice is oscillating here between 'pure' narrative and free indirect discourse, a borderland that Heyer inhabits almost as self-assuredly as her model, Austen. The technique of 'reader guidance' is exemplified not only by the references to customs, but also by places evocative of the period, such as the Hyde Park promenade or Almack's. In addition, the mere mention of 'Beau' Brummell is enough to enforce the period immersion of a reader even marginally acquainted with the Regency's popular image.²²

Description often contains hints of judgement which, once more, recall the writer on which Heyer modelled herself. This is often mediated by the survey's being conducted through the eyes of a character. In *The Reluctant Widow* the heroine observes a number of gentlemen:

[Carlyon] was dressed with neatness and propriety, and although he wore breeches and top-boots in preference to the pantaloons and Hessians favoured by town-dwellers, there was no suggestion in his appearance of the slovenly country squire. His brother John was similarly neat; but the high shirt collar affected by Nicky, and his complicated cravat, indicated to Elinor's experienced eye an incipient dandyism.²³

This paragraph also acts as another example of the 'instructive' kind of description inasmuch as the reader is being educated about customs of town and country fashion. Furniture and architecture are described in similar style (though somewhat less obtrusively), as in the following scene, in which Judith Taverner visits the house of a gentleman:

It was indeed a fine house, fitted up, apparently, in the first style of elegance. The saloon in which they stood was a noble apartment hung with a delicate blue paper, and with tall windows giving on to the square. The curtains, which were of blue and crimson silk, were draped over these in tasteful festoons [...].²⁴

The extent to which this historical novelist uses material detail to immerse her readers in the period far exceeds that contained in novels published during the period itself. As Kloester observes, 'Heyer is obliged to do far more than a contemporary writer, such as Austen, to delineate the period for her audience', thus effectively 'forcing' her readers into the period.²⁵ In both passages, the reader's judgement is guided by the mention of the 'propriety', 'neatness', 'tastefulness', etc. of the material artefacts described. The form, which once more balances narrative and free indirect discourse, lends itself very successfully to this technique, allowing the reader to share the character's perspective.

Heyer's attitude to linguistic anachronism is the same on all narrative levels. There is, however, a marked stylistic difference between the narrative voice and the various levels of speech representation when it comes to the use of idioms and period jargon. The latter is notably absent from the narrative voice and enters free indirect discourse only very rarely. Given the rigid avoidance of anachronisms even on this level, however, this difference seems to be motivated by Heyer's attempt to distinguish different stylistic strata rather than levels of historicity. The narrative voice is as much 'of the period' as the characters' speech is, but its tone is more formal, serving to enforce

its authority compared to the more colloquial style of expressions that most of the characters favour.

Another dimension of Heyer's historical stylistics is syntax, which has even attracted some critical attention. E. R. Glass and A. Mineo have made a brief attempt to trace the influences Heyer assimilated for her sentence structure and find Austen at its root:

Heyer obtains an echo of Jane Austen by creating a measured pace with a sequence of subordinate clauses. With this pace and relative lack of metaphors and abstractions, the concrete neatness of most of Heyer's writing offers a plausible version of a neoclassic prose style.²⁶

It should be noted that in their survey, it is never specified to which levels of narration these observations are meant to apply. Both the 'measured pace' and 'relative lack of metaphors and abstractions' are what first and foremost characterise the narrative voice – the dialogue of Heyer's Regency novels is anything but 'measured'. Yet even on the level of the narrator, 'abstractions' can only be said to be absent if the term is understood to exclude Austenian/Heyerian favourites such as 'sensibility' or 'propriety', which feature heavily.

In fact, even on the purely syntactical level, the description of Heyer's as a 'plausible' version of the neoclassical prose style is correct only if we understand the term in a reader-response way. On the whole, Austen's sentences are longer than Heyer's – while the average sentence lengths of Austen's novels are generally between 20 and 25 words, those of Heyer's range from 12 to 18.²⁷ The balance between narrative and dialogue is somewhat more 'successful', if we assume that the adaptation of Austen's syntax was indeed Heyer's goal. As John Burrows has shown in his corpus-based analysis of Austen, dialogue and narrative (in terms of their word count) achieve an almost equal footing in *Emma*; one of the novels he uses for comparison, Heyer's *Frederica* (of 1965, also a late work), comes close to achieving the same equilibrium.²⁸ To interpret this as a direct attempt at imitation, however, would ultimately be mere speculation.

In terms of her lexicon, the assimilation of influences intersects with the writer's own stylistic evolution. Helen Davidge has analysed Heyer's Regencies using the new Dale-Chall Formula, which gauges 'readability' as a proportion between 'familiar' and 'unfamiliar' words in a given text, based on a list of 3000 pre-selected 'familiar' words.²⁹ The resulting table shows an overall increase in reading complexity

across our corpus, with a regression line starting in the early 1940s and rising steadily throughout the 'Regencies'. There are only a few outliers – such as *The Spanish Bride* of 1940, the setting of which during the Peninsular Campaign accounts for a higher percentage of military-strategic vocabulary, and which therefore has a complexity score as high as otherwise novels of the 1960s reach.³⁰

What Davidge's analysis demonstrates is that as Heyer grew more experienced as a writer and researcher, her vocabulary grew more complex and specific. While the Dale-Chall Formula is essentially ahistorical, many of Heyer's Regency archaisms would be classed as 'unfamiliar' according to it; historical vocabulary thus probably accounts for part of this reading complexity.

It has already been mentioned that Heyer occupies a kind of middle ground between the highbrow avant-garde represented by Naomi Mitchison on the one hand and Barbara Cartland's lowbrow, escapist popular fiction on the other. Yet in fact, this once more demonstrates that Heyer underwent a stylistic development as a writer in some ways contrary to the trend in popular romance fiction described by Helen Hughes. As her body of works grows, Heyer's style becomes more complex and demanding. This is especially true of her historical idiom, as the following examination on the level of speech representation will show.

Speech representation

Not only has the dialogue in Heyer's novels been highlighted in countless reviews as the most successful feature of her historical idiom, but it is also without doubt the most prominent feature of her Regency romances. Therefore, the remainder of this chapter's investigation will be devoted to the representation of direct and reported speech and thought in the Regencies. This will involve taking a closer look at the ways in which Heyer employs the expressions recorded in the binders, as well as considering the distinction between direct and reported speech, the different registers of speech, and the use of reporting verbs.

As mentioned in the previous section, the narrative voice in Heyer's novels rarely features her characteristic 'Regency slang'. In reported discourse, by contrast, we do on occasion find instances of these expressions. When the thoughts of a character are reported, period vocabulary sometimes enters into the wording, as in the following sentence, from *Lady of Quality*: 'She hoped that he was not

moped to death at Chartley, but feared that he must be finding life very flat'.³¹ Or, to offer a longer example from the same novel:

[r]ecalling Annis's past suitors, all of whom had been blessed with good-looks and distinguished manners, she began to suspect that Annis had been making a May-game of her brother [...].³²

In both of these instances of reported thought, period expressions stand out that are nevertheless not oppressively colloquial, much in keeping with the character of the people whose thoughts are reported.

Where the report of speech borders on free indirect discourse, the vocabulary can be more striking. In *Charity Girl*, a character's unexpected lack of accommodation leads him to muse on his situation:

Only a greenhead would suppose that there was the smallest chance of obtaining any but the shabbiest of lodgings in Brighton [...] if he had not booked accommodation there; so he was obliged to resign himself to several days spent in kicking his heels in London.³³

These are the thoughts of a young man whom we have learned his brother's butler knows to be 'inclined to be a rattlecap', another example of how the slang enters free indirect discourse. That these are completely conscious choices on the author's part is demonstrated by scenes such as the following, in which

nothing would do for him but to explain the circumstances which had compelled him to appear before her looking, as he termed it, like a dashed shabrag.³⁴

In this case the qualifying 'as he termed it' puts an additional, somewhat ironically amused distance between the reporting voice and that of the character himself. Burrows, in his examination of *Frederica*, finds that "character narrative" [the term he uses for free indirect discourse] can scarcely be distinguished from dialogue except in its observance of the forms of indirect speech'.³⁵ As closer examination of the dialogue will show, this statement is only correct inasmuch as it refers to matters of syntax and vocabulary range. The density of specifically Regency vocabulary definitely does provide a major difference between the levels of narrative and speech representation.

Proceeding on our way from indirect to direct speech, however, we first encounter an element that usually receives very little attention: reporting verbs, also known as ‘speech tags’, the verbs used to embed direct speech into a narrative. Consider, for instance, the following scene from *Lady of Quality*, quoted at some length because it will be analysed at multiple levels:

She managed to keep her countenance, and said, with only a tiny tremor in her voice: ‘I beg your pardon! Indeed, I can’t think how I came to say anything so shatter-brained, for something seemed to tell me at the outset that it was not an elopement!’

Lucilla said, with dignity: ‘I may be a sad romp, I may be a little gipsy, and my want of conduct may give people a disgust of me, but I am *not* lost to all sense of propriety, whatever my aunt says, and nothing could prevail on me to elope with *anyone*! Not even if I were madly in love, which I’m not! As for eloping with Ninian, that would be a nonsensical thing to do, because –’

‘I wish you will keep your tongue, Lucy!’ interrupted Ninian, looking very much vexed. ‘You rattle on like a regular bagpipe, and see what comes of it!’ He turned towards Annis, saying stiffly: ‘I cannot wonder at it that you were misled into supposing that we are eloping. The case is far otherwise.’

‘Yes, it is,’ corroborated Lucilla. ‘Far, *far* otherwise! The truth is that I am *escaping* from Ninian!’

‘I see!’ said Annis sympathetically. ‘And he is helping you to do it!’

‘Well, yes – in a way he is,’ Lucilla admitted. ‘Not that I wished him to help me, but – but the circumstances made it very difficult for me to stop him. It – it is all rather complicated, I’m afraid.’

‘It does seem to be,’ agreed Annis.³⁶

This passage exemplifies many of the typical features of Heyer’s Regency idiom (not least how it is used with humorous intent), but for the time being we shall concentrate on speech tags. In the piece of dialogue quoted above, these are forms of ‘say’, ‘interrupt’, ‘corroborate’, ‘admit’ and ‘agree’. In a passage this short, such diversity is already remarkable, but in the Regency romances at large there appear more than a hundred different reporting verbs. In order to gauge the overall prevalence of various speech tags, a sample was taken from four Regency romances representing different stages in Heyer’s literary development: *Regency Buck* (1935), *The Reluctant Widow* (1946), *The Unknown Ajax* (1959)

and *Lady of Quality* (1972). For each of these novels, the occurrence of speech tags in the first 20,000 words was examined.³⁷ Then the number of total occurrences of each of these speech tags was established by computing a cross-section of the four samples. According to this analysis, which should be largely representative of this part of Heyer's *oeuvre*, the 50 most common speech tags in the Regency romances, in descending order of prevalence, are:

say – reply – exclaim – ask – agree – add – cry – remark – demand
– retort – respond – interrupt – repeat – explain – answer – declare
– gasp – murmur – enquire/inquire – protest – interpolate – utter –
announce – snap – suggest – object – assure – sigh – admit –
promise – whisper – return – mutter – stammer – nod – falter –
ejaculate – pursue – recommend – confess – disclose – comment
– interpose – blurt out – shout – burst out – command – assert
– amend – observe.

In terms of their relative distribution, 'say' is always the most common one, even though the exact value varies between the novels. In the early novel *Regency Buck*, forms of 'say' account for approximately 60 per cent of the speech tags; for the two novels that represent Heyer's 'middle years', this value decreases into a percentage closer to the low 40s. Finally, in *Lady of Quality*, 'say' accounts for half of the reports of direct speech that use a tag, the other half being largely drawn from the set cited above. There are a few other developments regarding individual speech tags. Some of them Heyer seems to have 'discovered' for her use only at a specific point – 'corroborate', for instance, does not appear anywhere in *Regency Buck*, but does feature in virtually all other Regency romances. Overall, however, the set remains fairly constant.

All of these words were in use during the Regency and so are no lexical anachronisms in themselves. Their usage, however, marks a turn away from the period style. To make recourse to Heyer's predecessor once again: in Jane Austen's novels, forms of 'say' also account for roughly half of the speech tags.³⁸ The other half, however, is made up of a much smaller set of speech tags – in a similarly-sized sample from *Pride and Prejudice*, only 11 other reporting verbs occur: forms of 'reply', 'cry', 'add', 'repeat', 'protest', 'explain', 'observe', 'return', 'answer', 'continue' and 'call', accounting for an altogether more sober style of speech report. More often than Heyer, Austen avoids using speech tags altogether, instead allowing the attribution of speech to be inferred from the exchange itself.

The advantages of emphatic speech tags such as 'disclose', 'explode', 'mourn', or 'pant' are obvious. They provide easy tools for the writer to convey a more vivid image of the dialogue to their reader, even if highbrow writers in Heyer's own day chose to give them a wide berth. Forms of 'pant' are used by Heyer predominantly in her novels of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s; afterwards they grow rare, evidence perhaps of her attempts to distance herself from low-brow competitors such as Cartland.

If Heyer uses a broader variety of these words than was common for novels written during her chosen period itself, it is because on this level of the construction of her Regency idiom, Austen is not the primary influence. It has been noted above that Heyer also read the popular historical novelists of her own day and the late Victorian age – writers such as Orczy and Sabatini. While Heyer's dialogue quickly evolved beyond their immediate influence, the lexical choices for her reporting verbs indicate a far more lasting influence in this regard.³⁹ When a comparable sample of speech tags in the most popular novels of Orczy (*The Scarlet Pimpernel*) and Sabatini (*Scaramouche*) was analysed, a set of over 30 different speech tags was found in each, revealing considerable lexical overlap with Heyer.⁴⁰ The main difference is that Heyer eschews obvious archaisms such as 'quoth', which are found in Sabatini, but their use of speech tags is otherwise very similar.

It is Heyer's usage of speech tags rather than their etymology, then, that might be called anachronistic – illustrating once more how different influences found their way into her writing. What her use of reporting verbs also recalls is the intersection of generic conventions and an author's individual style with attempts at historical 'accuracy'. Already on this level, we see Heyer balancing ostensible authenticity with narrative effectiveness, further evidence of which will be provided by a closer look at her dialogue.

Jennifer Kloester, speaking of Heyer's dialogue, observes that '[h]er inclusion of a necessarily wider range of classes and characters inevitably demanded a Regency vocabulary rather broader than Austen's'.⁴¹ We might indeed go further than that and say that in contrast to the narrative voice and indirect representations of speech, for the direct speech of her characters Austen does not seem to have been the model at all. The dialogue of the Regency romances is the creation of Heyer alone. And while this idiom is peppered with the author's 'Regency slang', the characteristic period expressions often highly colloquial in nature, it resolutely excludes features such as strong profanity and assumes largely ideal communicative situations,

thus illustrating the limits of an analysis that would look for historical verisimilitude alone.

As Jane Aiken Hodge has noted, in her 'Georgian romances', which preceded the better-known 'Regencies', Heyer's dialogue was still derivative of the popular historical novels of her day.⁴² Yet with her Regency romances she had shed this influence completely; their characteristic archaisms do not appear in any of the novels in this corpus. Even colourful period expressions such as 'pshaw' and 'pish' only occur in some of the early Regencies of the 1940s and subsequently vanish from the author's active vocabulary.

With respect to the over 3000 period phrases Heyer recorded in her binders, the density of their occurrence in her texts is what is perhaps most immediately striking about the Regency idiom – and, even though all were culled from early nineteenth-century sources, completely without precedent in the historical period itself. The stylistic range extends far beyond that of any period source of hers, with upper-class colloquialisms used with the same self-assured touch as thieves' cant.

If we look again at the scene from *Lady of Quality*, the 'Regency slang' incorporated in the dialogue includes the following expressions: 'shatter-brained', 'a sad romp', 'a little gipsy' and '[rattle on like] a regular bagpipe', which occur in quick succession. Unsurprisingly, none of these were ever used by Jane Austen. On the whole, the evidence suggests that Heyer valued the absence of anachronism in her dialogue higher than the effectiveness of the latter and trusted in her readers' ability to decode the more obscure elements of her period idiom. Yet her forcing the reader to infer the meaning of a period expression from the context can, in some cases, compromise the effect. In the passage we have been looking at, 'shatter-brained' is fairly self-explanatory and 'rattle on like a regular bagpipe' may easily be understood to signify garrulity. In order to decode 'a sad romp' and 'a little gipsy' as more than just vaguely negative terms, however, it is helpful to have her notebooks at hand, in which the former is listed under 'Abuse/female' and the latter can be found in the category of 'Manners/impropriety'. To some extent, Heyer's decision to leave terms like these wholly unexplained may have been motivated by her knowledge that many readers were seasoned Heyer-experts, familiar with her lexicon and probably enjoying the sense of being 'insiders'.

Heyer even employs words and phrases that might well be misconstrued as anachronistic by readers not perfectly informed about the period – 'perceptual anachronisms', as we might call them. The writer

Geoffrey Trease tells the story of how his editor alerted him to the use of the apparently modern-sounding expression ‘What the dickens’ in one of his stories set in the Restoration period: although the phrase had been in use since the Early Modern period, many readers would perceive it to be an anachronism.⁴³ In such cases, Heyer invariably sides with her research – and indeed, this very expression, ‘what the dickens,’ is used by her in both *The Spanish Bride* and *Charity Girl*.

To be accused of factual error was anathema to Heyer. In 1951, following publication of *The Quiet Gentleman*, she received a letter suggesting that in the novel she had mistakenly referred to ‘stepsons’ as ‘sons-in-law’. The comment led to her venting her dissatisfaction in vigorous terms:

[A]lthough my refusal to alter in-law to step might lay me open to the criticisms of SOME, an emendation would draw down upon me the far more important strictures of OTHERS who would accuse me (rightly) of having introduced modern terminology into a Regency book.⁴⁴

As Jennifer Kloester records, only three historical errors of the factual kind have been detected to date in Heyer’s novels.⁴⁵ None of them are related to her historical idiom. With regard to language, the present enquiry turned up only one possible anachronism. In *The Unknown Ajax*, a manservant advises a visiting gentleman, ‘I’m sure I ask your pardon, but you don’t know his lordship like I do, and you want to be careful, sir – very careful’.⁴⁶ The *Oxford English Dictionary*, however, dates the first known occurrence of this particular usage of the word ‘want’ as no earlier than 1860.⁴⁷ There are six instances of this usage in Heyer’s Regency novels, all of which can be found in direct speech. Of course there remains at least a theoretical possibility that Heyer, who sometimes gained access to unpublished period sources, had discovered a precedent for this expression unknown to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

In addition to that, oral usage may be assumed often to precede written or print usage, which brings up another issue. In her (re)construction of a Regency idiom, Heyer did not only draw on print sources, but also clearly tried to reconceive or emulate the qualities of a spoken idiom. As we have seen, colloquialisms in her novels almost exclusively appear on the level of speech representation. Yet there is further evidence to be found in her use of contractions and punctuation. Encountering the former in his statistical survey of Austen’s novels, for

which Heyer's *Frederica* served as a comparative example, Burrows describes

[...] the use of contracted forms like 'I'll' and 'won't', 'we'd', and 'shan't'. [...] Jane Austen uses them sparingly and, with occasional exceptions for consciously smart speakers like Tom Bertram, confines them to vulgar speakers like Mrs Jennings and the Steele sisters. Georgette Heyer's dialogue abounds in the whole range of such contractions to the extent that 'don't' ranges with 'do' among the most common words of all.⁴⁸

In the absence of samples of spoken Regency English, attempts at reconstructing orality must necessarily aim at either plausibility or effectiveness rather than authenticity. Nonetheless Bryony Stocker, in her theory of 'Bygonese', has grouped contractions of the kind mentioned by Burrows as signalling a 'hybrid approach' that blends conscious anachronism into an otherwise plausible period diction.⁴⁹ At least with regard to the frequency with which her characters employ them, we can assume that Heyer's use of contractions is based on a stylistic choice rather than research. The same is true of punctuation intended to signal orality: in the passage from *Lady of Quality* cited above, 10 out of the 17 sentences of dialogue end in an exclamation mark rather than a simple full stop. That may be a particularly heated exchange – there is, after all, talk of elopement – but nevertheless the frequency of 'emphatic' punctuation is entirely characteristic of the Regency corpus at large.

Burrows, in his examination of *Frederica*, notes the 'extraordinary abundance of exclamation marks in Georgette Heyer's dialogue' in a novel in which for all but one character exclamation marks are a more common way of finishing a sentence than full stops are. He regards this as a sign of realism:

The exclamations, repetitions, half-formed phrases, and broken syntax of most 'utterance' are more directly registered in the dialogue of modern novels than in most novels of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁵⁰

And even where Heyer was unable to draw on specific historical sources, it can be taken for granted that such contractions and exclamations were features of colloquial speech in the period.

On the other hand, as alluded to above, there are strict limits to how far Heyer will go in her quest for plausible orality. This is evident

in, among other things, her attitude to oaths and swearwords. 'Damned' and related forms are very frequent in her works, in fact, they occur in all of the Regency novels. This seems to be a concession of a kind, however. 'Blast', for instance, enters Heyer's Regency novels only once, in *The Spanish Bride*: 'Much his precious lordship cares for that! Blast him, why should we worry?'⁵¹ This is the same novel that, taken on its own, accounts for almost three-quarters of the instances of 'bloody' (in its use as an expletive) across the whole Regency corpus – a density no doubt motivated by the presence of so many military men in a novel set during the Peninsular War.

Beyond their primary function as markers of linguistic historicity, most of Heyer's period colloquialisms also serve as means of characterisation. This issue, incidentally, is apt to remind us of the limits of distant readings. Having thoroughly analysed vocabulary variance in Heyer's *Frederica*, John Burrows concludes from his statistics that when it comes to character differentiation in dialogue, '[...] the range of differentiation among the major characters of a novel by Georgette Heyer is narrower than Jane Austen's range [...].'⁵² He detects only one major fault line among all of her literary personnel:

Heyer's character-differentiation [...] tends to dissolve into a single grand differentiation between adults [...] and real or virtual children.⁵³

This, for Burrows, in a way is achievement enough in a modest realist novelist, but there are problems with such an approach.⁵⁴ Burrows' statistical analysis does not account for the qualitative rather than quantitative difference between such variants; it also is unable to distinguish between a character's using a characteristic expression ironically or unironically or to detect when they are merely quoting the speech of another character. Consider, for instance, the following scene in *Charity Girl*. Lord Nettlecombe is reacting to the suggestion that he should provide for his hitherto unknown-of granddaughter by setting her up with an allowance:

But this proposal made Nettlecombe's eyes start alarmingly in their sockets [...]. He said in a choked voice: 'Squander my money on that little gypsy? Do you take me for a cabbage-head?'

He received prompt support from his bride, who advised him strongly not let himself be choused out of his blunt. She added [...] that [...] she had no notion of raking and scraping

to save his blunt for him only to see it thrown away on a hurly-burly girl who had no claim on him. 'It's bad enough for you to be obliged to grease Jonas's wheels,' she said, 'and when I think of the way he's behaved to me, trying to get you to turn me off, let alone coming the nob over me, it turns me downright queasy to think of him, and that nifty-naffy wife of his, living as high as coach-horses at *our* expense!'⁵⁵

There is a great deal of lexical variety here and, while Lord Nettlecombe's contribution to the dialogue is much shorter than his wife's, we instantly notice that both of them pepper their speech with 'Regency slang'. For Lord Nettlecombe, the terms are the 'little gypsy' again, along with 'cabbage-head'; Lady Nettlecombe refers to her husband's being 'choused out of his blunt', as well as 'hurly-burly girl', 'coming the nob over me', 'nifty-naffy' and 'living as high as coach-horses', to name but the most prominent expressions. While the relative density of period colloquialisms may be the same for both of these characters – such an assumption is indeed borne out by the text at large – the qualitative difference between these expressions is something that mere statistics cannot capture. While Lord Nettlecombe's phrasing is wholly in keeping with the linguistic idiosyncrasies of style Heyer deals out to her upper-class Englishmen, Lady Nettlecombe's jargon is meant to reflect her low birth and lack of breeding. She is her husband's former 'lady housekeeper' and, in Heyer's world, as a social climber has to employ an idiom that marks her as inescapably base.

The contrastive image in such a case is provided in the same novel by a character such as Lady Silverdale. On finding unexpected colloquialisms entering the speech of her daughter, she remonstrates with her:

'I must request you, Hetta, not to employ vulgar slang when you are talking to me! [...] I have not the remotest conjecture what *handsomely over the bricks* may signify, but I collect that you have heard Charlie say it, and I must tell you that you are very ill-advised to copy the things young men say.'⁵⁶

It seems clear that a purely statistical analysis of lexical variance would be unable to register the level of contempt with which the 'slang' expression is obviously used here. We may assume that among the set of characters of this novel in particular, Lady Silverdale is cast much more in the image of her snobbish author than Lady Nettlecombe. Yet at the same time, when having the former criticise the vocabulary vagaries of

her child, Heyer's tongue must be firmly in her cheek, given how much attention she devoted to creating this aspect of her texts.

After the Austenian echoes in the narrative voice and the techniques of speech report influenced by Sabatini, Orczy and Farnol, the dialogue that assembles a whole period idiom of its own is the most *sui generis* feature of Heyer's novels. As has been shown, its main concern is less with faithfulness and authenticity than with plausibility and effectiveness. Its attitude to anachronism is rigorous, even if the very definition of 'anachronism' is rather selective. If elsewhere in Heyer's writing it is actual anachronism that is eschewed while intellectual and emotional anachronism persists, in the realm of language lexical anachronism is never tolerated; usage is also manipulated to such a degree as to produce texts that may be no more 'of' the Regency than of Heyer's own period. And while, to borrow this expression for a final time, the presence of the writer's carefully researched 'Regency slang' may epitomise Lukács's 'picturesque bagatelles', we may also say that, surely, they have never been more picturesque than here.

Conclusions

As this examination has shown, the historical idiom Heyer created for her Regency romances is highly complex. Its originality varies between the levels of narrative and speech representation. As we have seen, the syntax of Heyer's narrative voice is closely modelled on Austen, while her use of speech tags betrays the influence of the popular historical novelists of her own day as well as the late nineteenth century. Her famous 'Regency slang' is Heyer's own creation, however, and may well be her most original contribution to the genre.

In terms of her attempts to create an 'authentic' linguistic component of her period setting, it has been demonstrated that Heyer eschews anachronism on all narrative levels – though closer examination of the corpus has also revealed how limited the author's definition of 'anachronism' really is. While, much in keeping with her traditional view of history, Heyer avoids lexical and grammatical anachronism, usage is manipulated far beyond the period's own conventions, in order to facilitate the idiom's effectiveness for a modern readership. We have seen that in the broader context of her period's development of the genre, Heyer is to be classed among the middlebrow conservatives. Yet in spite of the traditions and tenets on which it is built, her Regency idiom is clearly a major innovation. And while, across

narrative levels, we have seen her balance attempts at ‘authenticity’ with something closer to plausibility, her ‘Regency slang’ in particular becomes on occasion so obtrusive a textual feature as to transcend its historicity completely and force its function of evoking the period far into the background. In terms of language’s immersive function, Herbert Butterfield has proposed that in historical fiction, very little is actually needed to create a great effect:

[a] cathedral bell, or the mention of Agincourt, or the very spelling of the word ‘ycleped’ may be enough to send the mind wandering into its own picture-galleries of history.⁵⁷

Heyer’s historical idiom obviously goes above and beyond such minimal requirements. As a signature quality of her novels, it becomes almost an end in itself – a textual feature that makes Heyer’s Regency world so decidedly her own, counterbalances many of the more conventional and formulaic aspects of her fiction, and allows readers to derive aesthetic pleasure from her ‘Regency slang’.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Kloester, *Georgette Heyer: Writing the Regency*, p. 177. For bio-bibliographical information the chapter will mainly rely on Kloester, *Georgette Heyer: Biography of a bestseller*.
- 2 The author owes a debt of gratitude to Helen Davidge and Timo Stösser for advice and support regarding digital corpora.
- 3 For a concise summary of the controversy, see Kloester, *Writing the Regency*, 193–9.
- 4 Letter to Geoffrey Drury, 22 May 1950; cited in Kloester, *Writing the Regency*, 196–7 (197).
- 5 For an overview, see the auction catalogue, [Sotheby’s], *Catalogue of Printed Books*, 13. Cf. also Hodge, *The Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 71.
- 6 Kloester, *Writing the Regency*, 118.
- 7 The author gratefully acknowledges the support of Judy Rougier, who provided him with access to Georgette Heyer’s papers and graciously permitted the use of the picture (Fig. 10.1).
- 8 Cf. Kloester, *Writing the Regency*, 15.
- 9 Hughes, *Changes in Historical Romance*, 78 et seqq.
- 10 Trease, ‘Language in the Historical Novel’, 126.
- 11 Hughes, *Changes in Historical Romance*, 87.
- 12 Mitchison, *You May Well Ask*, 163.
- 13 Butterfield, *The Historical Novel*, 37; Lukács, *The Historical Novel* [1937], 197.
- 14 Cf. for example Sheppard, *The Art & Practice of Historical Fiction*, 160, 171 and *passim*.
- 15 [1969], reprinted in Fahnestock-Thomas, ed., *Georgette Heyer*, 270–8 (271). The author was unable to locate the original quotation to which Byatt objected.
- 16 Wallace, ‘The Woman’s Historical Novel’, 129–43 (133).
- 17 See Kloester, *Writing the Regency*, 178–87 and especially 183–7, for the incorporation of source material in Heyer’s novels.
- 18 Heyer, *Charity Girl*, 5.

- 19 Stocker, “Bygonese”, 308–18 (310).
- 20 Stocker, “Bygonese”, 315–6.
- 21 Heyer, *Regency Buck*, 49.
- 22 This also recalls the ‘technique of instructing characters and the reader simultaneously’ described by Miriam Youngerman Miller. An example of this is using fictional characters to explain period vocabulary or jargon to other characters. Youngerman Miller, 71–90 (82).
- 23 Heyer, *The Reluctant Widow*, 68.
- 24 Heyer, *Regency Buck*, 40.
- 25 Kloester, *Writing the Regency*, 203.
- 26 Glass and Mineo, ‘Georgette Heyer and the Uses of Regency’, 421–34 (430).
- 27 Data based on a Voyant Tool analysis of the Voyant Austen Corpus and the Regency Corpus assembled for the present enquiry. Stéfan Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell, *Voyant Tools*, 2018.
- 28 See ‘Key to Graphs and Tables: Dialogue: Character-tags and Distribution of Word-Tokens among Characters’ (unpag.), in Burrows, *Computation into Criticism*.
- 29 Cf. Chall and Dale, *Readability Revisited*.
- 30 Davidge, ‘Data Science’, [chapter 13](#), present volume.
- 31 Heyer, *Lady of Quality*, 211.
- 32 Heyer, *Lady of Quality*, 162. While obsolete, the phrase ‘make a May-game of’ does not appear in Heyer’s vocabulary notes.
- 33 Heyer, *Charity Girl*, 181.
- 34 Heyer, *Lady of Quality*, 28.
- 35 Burrows, *Computation into Criticism*, 166.
- 36 Heyer, *Lady of Quality*, 15.
- 37 Due to the challenge that the identification of direct speech in literary texts still poses to artificial intelligence, the speech tags in these four samples were counted by hand.
- 38 Based on a 20,000-word sample from *Pride and Prejudice* (ed. Pat Rogers, 2006); for an analysis that uses a different methodology but arrives at similar conclusions, see Peprník, ‘Reporting Phrases in English Prose’, 145–51 (150).
- 39 While one of Heyer’s other favourite writers, Charles Dickens, also used a broad variety of speech tags in his novels, it is the lexical choices that most strongly point to the Orczy set; cf. Nishio, ‘Dickens’s Artistry of Reporting Verbs’.
- 40 The counting was again done ‘by hand’. The editions used were Baroness Orczy, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* [1905] (Leicester: Brockhampton Press, 1961) and Rafael Sabatini, *Scaramouche* [1921] (London: Hutchinson, 1973). Another popular historical novelist read by Heyer, Stanley Weyman, was surveyed as well, *A Gentleman of France* [1893] (London: The Bodley Head, 1974). He proved a statistical outlier inasmuch as he is the only novelist analysed here in whose text sample forms of ‘answer’ rather than ‘say’ were the most common speech tag.
- 41 Kloester, *Writing the Regency*, 201.
- 42 Cf. Hodge, *Private World*, 17, 28.
- 43 Trease, ‘Language in the Historical Novel’, 126–9 (128).
- 44 Quoted in Hodge, *Private World*, 91 (original emphasis).
- 45 Kloester, *Writing the Regency*, 175–6.
- 46 Heyer, *The Unknown Ajax*, 52 (original emphasis).
- 47 ‘want, v.’ *OED Online*.
- 48 Burrows, *Computation into Criticism*, 8.
- 49 Stocker, “Bygonese”, p. 313. Stocker’s example for this is the historical novelist Hilary Mantel.
- 50 Burrows, *Computation into Criticism*, 213–5 [sic].
- 51 Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 140.
- 52 Burrows, *Computation into Criticism*, 44.
- 53 Burrows, *Computation into Criticism*, 54.
- 54 Cf. Burrows, *Computation into Criticism*, 205. He notes that ‘[...] mere aberration, descending into entropy, would yield merely average coefficients [of variation]’.
- 55 Heyer, *Charity Girl*, 141.
- 56 Heyer, *Charity Girl*, 149.
- 57 Butterfield, *The Historical Novel*, 1.

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Part 4

Circulation and reception

A reluctant movie? *The Reluctant Widow* on screen

Lucie Bea Dutton

The time is the age of Wellington and Waterloo, an era in history which offers screenwriters Gordon Wellesley and J. B. Boothroyd full opportunity to provide a colourful stylised romance, complete with swordplay and heroics. Audiences which prefer an exciting film divorced from everyday activity will find this film good entertainment. The story places Jean Kent, a governess, in a web of sudden, sordid violence. Her healthy naivete and humour enable her to survive various crises, including a marriage of convenience to a dying man and another to Guy Rolfe, who is a British intelligence agent trying to foil Napoleon's agents. Unknown to Miss Kent, all parties are trying to find a document hidden in the chateau which she inherited from her first marriage. Reluctantly a widow of the first man, reluctantly a wife of the second, reluctantly falling in love with him and reluctantly becoming aware of the whole plot, she finds the document, and then is almost done in by the chief espionage agent, Julian Dallas, the 'most dangerous assassin in England'. But Rolfe goes to the rescue of his wife, kills Dallas, and the plans of the French are foiled.¹

Introduction

On 6 August 1949 the *Derby Evening Telegraph* noted the 'amount of good screen material to be found in Georgette Heyer's historical novels'.² The newspaper was reporting on the production of *The Reluctant Widow* – a rare screen adaptation of one of Heyer's books, released in 1950. With an experienced director, excellent set design,

competent actors and a strong story, *The Reluctant Widow* should have been a successful film. For Heyer, however, the experience of watching *The Reluctant Widow* transfer from page to screen was not a positive one. She was not averse to the filming of her novels – which could have been a potentially lucrative source of income – but she was so unhappy about this production, in particular the casting of Jean Kent as her heroine, Elinor Rochdale, that she refused to see the finished picture.

The Reluctant Widow was directed by Bernard Knowles. He had experience of costume drama, having recently made *The Magic Bow* (1946) and an adaptation of Norah Lofts' *Jassy* (1947) for Gainsborough Pictures. *The Reluctant Widow* was said to be his hundredth picture: his first film as director, *A Place of One's Own*, had been released in 1945, but he started out as a film photographer in the silent era on *Squibs' Honeymoon* (George Pearson, 1923). According to the *Manchester Evening News*, he 'worked consistently with so many top-rank stars that down at Denham they call him "Box-office" Knowles'.³

Set design was in the hands of the very talented Carmen Dillon, who had just won an Academy Award for her set decoration for *Hamlet* (Laurence Olivier, 1948). Dillon caught the mock-Gothic settings and decayed grandeur of *The Reluctant Widow* with her usual aplomb and created a magnificent version of Highnoons. Carefully chosen props added to the chaos of a neglected, crumbling mansion, notably in Eustace's decadent bedroom, and Dillon created 'a house infected with sliding doors, secret panels, mysterious strangers who prowl the midnight hours and creepy knick-knacks of all kinds'.⁴ She also created London scenery, including a reproduction of Horse Guards Parade.

However, Knowles's experience and Dillon's talent were not enough to turn *The Reluctant Widow* into a good film. Heyer's original story would have been strong enough to make a satisfying picture, but screenwriters Gordon Wellesley and J. B. Boothroyd chose to embellish her plot, making it so complicated that it became almost incomprehensible. This, combined with an uneven tone in Knowles's direction, resulted in a disappointing film which has deservedly almost vanished into obscurity.

Making extensive use of primary source material, this chapter will tell the story of *The Reluctant Widow* on film. It is a story of authorial hopes, expectations and ultimate disappointments; the tensions inherent in transitioning from page to screen; and negative critical response. I will consider casting, and Heyer's objections to Kent in particular. In addition, making use of the original novel, the film's shooting script and a close viewing of the film as released, I will explore the changes that

Wellesley and Boothroyd made to the plot and how these changed the nature of Heyer's material.

'Plenty of conversations, but perhaps not enough pictures'

Published in 1946, *The Reluctant Widow* is the story of Elinor Rochdale and her adventures – or misadventures – which start with confusion over the ownership of a carriage. It features characters less immediately attractive than Hugo and Anthea (*The Unknown Ajax*, 1959) or as tempestuous as Phoebe and Sylvester (*Sylvester*, 1957), while the mystery plot is less compelling than that of *The Talisman Ring* (1936) or *The Quiet Gentleman* (1951). However, *The Reluctant Widow* conjures an enjoyable mixture of Gothic mansions, tangled relationships and one of Heyer's most enjoyable younger brother characters in Nicky Carlyon. It is also very funny. From his artless outburst 'I'm excessively sorry, but I have killed Eustace Cheviot!'⁵ to his telling Elinor, 'If you had known my cousin better you *would* have wanted to be a widow',⁶ Nicky is a reliable source of humour throughout. Elinor's dry commentaries on her predicament are also very enjoyable ('But what a charming prospect for me! Saddled with a ruined estate, crushed by debt, widowed before I ever was a wife – it is the most abominable thing I ever heard of!').⁷

When *The Reluctant Widow* was published, Heyer's place in the fiction market was secure. Indeed, nine years earlier, on the publication of *The Talisman Ring*, it was reported that

Georgette Heyer is monopolising a corner of the market for historical thrillers. Over 400,000 copies of Miss Heyer's books have been sold in English editions alone [...] The author manages, without an excess of description, to make the reader feel that for the time being he is really living in a past age.⁸

On the publication of *The Corinthian* in 1940, it was further reported that

Miss Heyer proves once more that she can turn out a good yarn and employ all the tricks, devices and historical hokum which go to make up a successful novel in this genre. It is such good, rollicking stuff, so absolutely unrelated to anything outside the

realm of pure entertainment, that it is a welcome diversion in times like these.⁹

Reviews of *The Reluctant Widow* were a little more mixed, as some critics greeted the complex plot with slight scepticism. Carl Fallas wrote in the *Manchester Evening News* that any reluctance was ‘just a very well-regulated pose which the heroine, a Miss Rochdale, aged 26, knew how to keep up through a swift week or two of storming adventures’.¹⁰ In the *Observer* Norman Collins mocked the complexities, but still enjoyed the book, joking that:

Panels slide, feet tramp up and down secret staircases, a man is murdered, and a plot that would have foxed Wilkie Collins [...] is unfolded in all its wantonness and perversity. Is the novel pure nonsense? Yes. Arrant and blatant! Should it therefore be avoided by the select and serious? No. A hundred times, no. Gusto such as Miss Heyer’s comes direct from the gods. Because of it *The Reluctant Widow* romps, rollicks, and revolves as irresistibly as a steam-roundabout. And even the most reluctant reader will be wildly whirled away despite himself.

And, he predicted, the ‘National Association of Governesses in Fiction’ would soon have a new member in Elinor Rochdale.¹¹

The complexity of a plot ‘that would have foxed Wilkie Collins’ might have signalled that *The Reluctant Widow* was not the ideal candidate for film adaptation. And there was another challenge: at a time when new library acquisitions were routinely reported in the local press, Wicklow’s librarian noted that the *Widow* had ‘plenty of conversations, but perhaps not enough pictures’.¹² This comment presumably related to Heyer’s writing of key scenes – the inquest into Eustace Cheviot’s death, Lord Carlyon’s visits to London, the murder of Louis de Castres – as conversations after the event. The literary device highlights Elinor’s isolation at Highnoons, and emphasises that her knowledge of the circumstances in which she finds herself is usually learned through Carlyon or Nicky, rather than through her own experience or observation. This is effective in a novel, but such textual devices are less effective on screen. A cinema audience was likely to want to see Carlyon in London and to witness the inquest. Filmmakers adapting the original text would, therefore, be looking for ways to substitute ‘plenty of conversations’ with ‘enough pictures’. Yet in doing so those who adapted *The Reluctant Widow* lost more than they gained.

Georgette Heyer and the film world: 'The whole thing is so upsetting'

Despite healthy earnings from her writing, Heyer always felt short of cash and worried about her tax bill; film adaptations could have increased her earning power significantly. Jennifer Kloester writes that 'Georgette had always wanted her novels to be made into films, but so far the various proposals from film companies had come to nothing'.¹³ She also quotes a letter from Heyer to her agent that appears to express enthusiasm for the prospect:

Why the blazes not one of those stinking film companies can see what a Super-film *Regency Buck* would make beats me.¹⁴

In addition Kloester quotes Heyer hoping that Fox Films would buy *The Talisman Ring* in 1936.¹⁵ She further notes that in 1939 Heyer's publisher Heinemann sent producer Alexander Korda her novel about Charles II, *Royal Escape*,¹⁶ but these proposals were not taken forwards.

In 1946 British producer Sidney Box, then head of Gainsborough Studios, part of the Rank Organisation, bought the rights to *The Reluctant Widow*.¹⁷ Heyer must have been pleased at this development: finally, a film of her work looked likely to come to fruition. Initially she seems to have had no objections to being associated with the project. In September 1947 the *Tatler and Bystander* published her photograph with the caption that 'her *The Reluctant Widow* is to be filmed'.¹⁸ But two years later, once the film was in production, she became increasingly unhappy about the treatment of her book. Kloester quotes correspondence that indicates that she felt her novel – and her reputation – were being badly served. Heyer wrote:

At all events I think I can get my name removed from the thing and I shall. It seems to me that to turn a perfectly clean story of mine into a piece of sex-muck is bad faith, and something very different from the additions and alterations one would expect to be obliged to suffer. If I had wanted a reputation for salacious novels I could have got it easily enough. The whole thing is so upsetting.¹⁹

However, her name did appear on the shooting script,²⁰ in the opening credits and in advertising. Presumably it was not contractually possible for the author to disassociate herself, however disappointed she might have been with the outcome.

Casting *The Reluctant Widow*

The actors cast in the two leading male roles were Guy Rolfe as Carlyon and Julian Dallas as Francis Cheviot. Rolfe was then being promoted by Rank as a new leading man, with his career firmly on the rise. It was reported that he and Kathleen Byron (who played Madame de Chevreux, a new character created for the film) were the

newest and busiest team in British films today ... They are making two pictures at the same time in different studios. At Denham they are appearing with Jean Kent in *The Reluctant Widow* and at Pinewood play leading roles in *Prelude to Fame*.²¹

Rolfe had started his working life at J. Sainsbury Ltd in Pinner Road and Station Road, Harrow, where 'he nearly lost a finger in an accident with a bacon slicer'.²² He then joined the Metropolitan Police in 1933 before embarking on a career as a stage actor. In 1946 Rolfe signed a contract with Rank who ensured that he received 'a gratifying response' from the fan magazines. 'Well, girls, Guy's a smasher,' said *Film Illustrated Monthly* in May, 1948. Rank's publicity writers were even more inventive and, to this day, film books refer to him as a former boxer, although the boxing seems to have been limited to knocking out an opponent in a tent at Pinner Fair!²³ Poor health in the form of tuberculosis limited his career as a leading man, but Rolfe continued to act on the stage and in films – mostly in villainous supporting roles such as King John in *Ivanhoe* (Richard Thorpe, 1952) and Edward Seymour in *Young Bess* (George Sidney, 1953).

Julian Dallas gave perhaps the best performance in the film as Francis Cheviot, seeking opinions on his 'sage and parsley coat', behaving imperiously at Highnoons, attempting to retrieve a stolen War Office memorandum addressed to the Duke of Wellington and engaging in highly competent swordplay. In 1950, after *The Reluctant Widow*, this promising newcomer went to Hollywood under his real name, Scott Forbes, armed with a contract with Warner Brothers. From 1956 to 1958 Forbes starred in the popular television series *The Adventures of Jim Bowie*. According to his obituary:

it was a well-kept secret [...] that Jim Bowie, with his deep Southern drawl and astonishing good looks, was played by an Englishman educated at Repton and Balliol College, Oxford. The

promoters of the series, feeling that the US public would not accept a frontiersman played by an Englishman, launched him with a fabricated biography, claiming that he had been born in South Africa and grown up in eastern Pennsylvania.²⁴

The Reluctant Widow is therefore an interesting introduction to Forbes's career. Other roles were taken by Barbara Murray, who played a very young version of Miss Beccles or Becky, while Peter Hammond took the role of Eustace. Anthony Tancred, who had little screen experience, played Nicky as a callow youth and Paul Dupuis played a French villain, Nivelles.

'Good time girl'

The most important casting decision was, of course, who would play Elinor. Kent was not the first choice for the role; in 1948 the *Liverpool Echo* announced that Margaret Lockwood, 'the Rank Organisation's No.1 woman star' was 'due to star in a Technicolor picture, *The Reluctant Widow*, a comedy set in Regency England'.²⁵ Lockwood was extremely popular, having scored box office hits with Gainsborough melodramas such as *The Wicked Lady* (Leslie Arliss, 1946), 'those baroque Maurice Ostrer efforts of the 1940s in which Margaret Lockwood flaunted her cleavage while James Mason scowled in the background',²⁶ and her casting would have been a significant asset. In the *Daily Mirror* Reg Whitley reported that he had talked to the actor on the set of *The Cardboard Cavalier* (Walter Forde, 1948) at Denham Studios, and had learned that

Maggie's future programme, which takes her into 1950, includes a variety of roles. After precocious Nell, she is due to play the part of a blind girl in *Madness of the Heart*. After that, Margaret achieves her heart's desire to play in colour, the role of *Elizabeth of Austria*. Then will follow the somewhat lighter part of *The Reluctant Widow*.²⁷

However, in June 1949 the *Daily Mirror* reported that Kent, who had played secondary roles in Gainsborough melodramas, had 'signed to play the coveted title role in Georgette Heyer's yarn, *The Reluctant Widow*'.²⁸ Efforts were made to conjure up the old Gainsborough magic, resulting in reports that *The Reluctant Widow* had

similar ingredients as in *The Wicked Lady* ... swash-buckling adventure, gallantry, villainy, passion and excitement in a Regency setting with a powerful supporting cast.²⁹

It was also described as ‘a highly-coloured Regency melodrama in the best *Wicked Lady* tradition’.³⁰ Whether Heyer would have appreciated her work being associated with the overt passions of the Gainsborough melodramas is doubtful, however, and she was certainly unhappy with the casting of Kent. Jane Aiken Hodge quotes her as saying

I am being driven frantic by the advance publicity from Denham (Studios) and am trying to think what I can do about it. I feel as though a slug had crawled over me. I think it is going to do me a great deal of harm, on account of the schoolgirl public. Already I’m getting letters reproaching me. They have turned the Widow into a ‘bad-girl’ part for Jean Kent.³¹

And had Heyer read the *Daily Express* report of Kent’s *Reluctant Widow* having ‘a whale of a time. She has a part ... that is a cross between the *Wicked Lady*, *Forever Amber* and the barmaid at the local’,³² she would surely have been extremely concerned about what had happened to her Elinor.

Today Kent is mainly remembered for her supporting roles in Gainsborough melodramas such as *The Wicked Lady*, *Fanny by Gaslight* (Anthony Asquith, 1944) and *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (Arthur Crabtree, 1945). She also appeared in films with contemporary settings, such as *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1945), where she played the unfaithful wife of soldier John Mills, or *Good Time Girl* (David MacDonald, 1948), in which she played ‘the female equivalent of the “spiv” – that is to say young, rebellious and sexually and socially disruptive. She would always fight her corner’.³³ As the press pointed out at the time

it seems strange to note here that Jean Kent, whose home life is beyond reproach, should constantly play the part of the erring heroine. She says she likes that kind of part.³⁴

In 1978, looking back on her career, Kent remembered that

the studio bosses spent money as if there was no tomorrow. But [I] remember feeling the first uneasiness around 1950. Production

costs were rocketing and, quite frankly, many of the films just weren't worth it.

Kent admitted that she only could 'bear to watch' three of her films:

Champagne Charlie, which I have a soft spot for, and *Caravan*, because I met my husband during it. And there was *Good Time Girl*, in which I played a juvenile delinquent befriended by a caddish married man played by Dennis Price. It was one of my best roles. But, honestly, little else.³⁵

Kent did not mention *The Reluctant Widow* in that 1978 interview. Sadly the interview she gave to the British Entertainment History Project in 2006 goes through her career film by film, but misses out *The Reluctant Widow*.³⁶

While Kent was experiencing 'uneasiness' around film quality, and Heyer was regretting that she had been cast at all, the actress was still a selling point for the box office. The Odeon Cinema Coventry organised a competition to win photographs of her: entrants had to write a birthday greeting to her, incorporating the words *The Reluctant Widow*.³⁷ The *Tatler* reported that 'Jean Kent goes good', and noted that the screen's 'bad girl' had 'a completely different type of role ... as a self-possessed woman who finds herself widowed half-an-hour after her marriage'.³⁸ Despite Heyer's concerns, Kent's Elinor is, in fact, priggish rather than a sexually voracious 'bad girl'. She lacks the humour of Heyer's Elinor, but her crisp enumeration of her circumstances to Carlyon ('Not only slander! Defamation! Humiliation! Threats of Dispossession! Prosecution! [...] Bow Street! Newgate Prison! And no doubt after that, the gallows!')³⁹ is a pleasure to watch. In short, Kent did a respectable job with an over-complicated script that bore only a passing resemblance to Heyer's novel.

'An adventurous drama of smuggling, duelling and death'

Film adaptations of novels do tend to omit or change events and characters to render their source texts more cinematic, but *The Reluctant Widow* takes this convention to extremes. Screenwriters Wellesley and Boothroyd substantially reworked the plot, which, as a result, became very confused. Heyer's emphasis on the developing

relationships between the characters, and her satirical approach to the Gothic settings, were replaced by intrigue and espionage. Cinemagoers were promised 'an adventurous drama of smuggling, duelling and death'.⁴⁰ Smuggling and duelling play no part in the book, other than a passing reference to the role of free-traders and the possibility of Elinor finding brandy at Highnoons.⁴¹ Yet from this exchange the screenwriters developed an episode in which a new character, Scowler the Smuggler, played by Ralph Truman, climbs in through a window and tries to discuss brandy with Elinor – thus demonstrating (with a heavy hand) that Highnoons is not secure at night. This entirely unnecessary plot complication also calls Elinor's morals into question, with Scowler telling her that 'you're not that innocent, or you'd not be in this house'.⁴²

Perhaps reaching similar conclusions to Wicklow's librarian that their source text had 'plenty of conversations, but perhaps not enough pictures',⁴³ Wellesley and Boothroyd chose to show, rather than talk about, events such as the inquest into Eustace's death and discussions at the War Office about missing documents. They also changed the nature of some of the characters: Carlyon is a composite of three brothers while Miss Beccles, originally one of Heyer's shrewd older governess characters, becomes Becky, Elinor's 'scatterbrained school friend'.⁴⁴ Nicky, such a source of amusement to the novel's Elinor – and to the reader – is transformed into a callow, naive young man, lacking both the absurdity that makes his textual equivalent so funny and his sidekick, the dog Bouncer. As Heyer's readers know, much of the pleasure of her novels comes from her complex and nuanced characters, and her secondary characters are as well drawn as her leads. In some cases the supporting cast is more attractive than the main characters, for example in *Friday's Child* (1944), where Ferdy, George and Gil are much more likeable than Sherry. The changes made by Wellesley and Boothroyd reduced Heyer's creations to flat onscreen shadows of their textual selves, with the secondary characters lacking the humour, eccentricities and sheer joy of their novelistic equivalents.

While the characters were simplified, Heyer's already complicated plot was made far more complex, rendering the story almost incomprehensible. The *Staines and Ashford News* made a valiant attempt to summarise it:

A fast-moving story of spy intrigue, combined with light-hearted romance, the story is set in England on the eve of Waterloo. Whilst waiting for a coach which is to take her to her new job, Elinor (Jean Kent) is molested by a drunk (Peter Hammond). She is rescued,

but in continuing her journey gets into the wrong coach and meets Lord Carlyon (Guy Rolfe). Nicky, who rescued Elinor, arrives with news that Eustace, from whom he rescued Elinor, is dying from wounds received in the encounter. Eustace is determined to send Nicky to the gallows, but agrees to exonerate him if Elinor marries him, and thus prevents Carlyon from inheriting property. Half an hour after the marriage Eustace dies. There follows a chain of exciting events, brilliantly acted, which culminate in a duel to the death for a much sought-after secret document.⁴⁵

In most plot summaries Kent's Elinor is represented as being entirely passive, not like a Heyer heroine at all. The *Kington Times* describes how she

accidentally becomes involved in espionage. As a result she is forced into marrying a dying man to save another from the gallows, trapped into a second marriage, manhandled by a French spy – not to mention having the sanctity of her bedroom invaded by a dangerous Regency rake.⁴⁶

Only after 'being trapped into second marriage by a handsome he-man' does she discover that this 'has its compensations'.⁴⁷

Some reviews, such as that of the *Worthing Herald*, did grant the heroine some agency, pointing out that 'despite her reluctance, Miss Kent contrives to get herself married twice, widowed once, and, through espionage, becomes the saviour of her country'.⁴⁸ Guy Rolfe's Carlyon, on the other hand, took control as 'her masterful second husband who finally succeeds in trapping the traitors, recovering the secret despatch and winning the love of the Reluctant Widow'.⁴⁹ Stills of a steamy clinch between Kent and Rolfe used in advertising promised more than they delivered:⁵⁰ any sexual tension was sadly lacking onscreen, despite Kent's low cut dress and references to 'her scandalous gay adventures on the eve of Waterloo!'⁵¹

'Intrigue, treason and espionage on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo'

According to the shooting script, Wellesley and Boothroyd intended that the film would start with an image of Napoleon – 'the mounted figure of the Corsican, grim and statuesque, silhouetted against a

stormy sky'.⁵² In so doing they emphasised the immediate pre-Waterloo timing that enhances the excitement of the plot's 'intrigue, treason and espionage'.⁵³ In the next scene Elinor and Nicky travel into Sussex together; they meet on board a coach and strike up conversation. At an inn at Billingshurst Elinor is harassed by Eustace who tries to kiss her. She struggles. 'Temper! Temper! Don't tell me you've got to be taught the rules,' he tells her. Nicky, recognising his fellow passenger from the coach, comes to her rescue, provoking the confrontation that leads to Eustace's eventual death.

In the novel, this confrontation results from Nicky's objections to Eustace insulting Carlyon; Elinor does not meet Nicky until he comes to tell Carlyon that he is sorry but he has 'killed Eustace Cheviot'. Some stills were taken of Elinor at the Billingshurst inn with Eustace and Nicky, although the film, as released, does not start with the scripted scenes of Napoleon, nor the confrontation at Billingshurst. Instead it features Elinor alone in a coach on the way to Highnoons, a voiceover setting the scene for her adventures, which she describes as an 'experience no respectable female should be called upon to endure'.

At Highnoons Elinor meets Carlyon. On screen he is a stern military man, in contrast to Heyer's description of a

very gentleman like-looking man, with a well-favoured countenance and a distinct air of breeding [...] dressed with a neatness and a propriety at welcome variance with his surroundings [...] a man of fashion.⁵⁴

The film's Carlyon has elements of Heyer's three Carlyon brothers; in the novel he explains that 'one of my brothers is on Sir Rowland Hill's staff, in the Peninsula; another is secretary to Lord Sidmouth at the Home Office, and in general resides in London'.⁵⁵ This composite allowed the screenwriters to create military scenes in a London setting. In addition, in a significant deviation from the novel, Carlyon

as a Regency major, [is] dishonourably discharged from the Duke of Wellington's Army [...] a full platoon of soldiers was on parade to witness the ceremony. Guy's epaulettes and sash were taken from him, and his sword broken.⁵⁶

According to the shooting script, this court martial scene was informed by 'actual words and actions of the Ceremony according to our Military Advisors';⁵⁷ the *Motherwell Times* indeed reported that

standing by to check authenticity was Mr C. G. P. Lawson, author of *History of the Uniforms of the British Army*, and a recognised authority on military dress and customs.⁵⁸

The filmmakers could, of course, have consulted Heyer herself, given her extensive knowledge of the period, but they do not seem to have done so. Perhaps this was for the best; seeking her advice about the historical accuracy of wholly unnecessary plot complications would surely have only increased Heyer's anger.

A court martial sequence would have been complicated enough as a straightforward addition, but Wellesley and Boothroyd added a further twist. Carlyon is being dishonourably discharged from the Army – or is he? Somehow his superiors have convinced him to pretend to be a traitor and be humiliated in front of his men, but it is all subterfuge. He has in fact agreed to set a trap for a group of French spies. This allowed for the introduction of an entirely new character: Kathleen Byron's Madame de Chevreux. She is a French spy who has used her sexual allure to manipulate many of the male characters: Carlyon, Lord Bedlington, Francis. Even young Nicky has heard of her, much to Carlyon's disquiet:

CARLYON: (swiftly) What do you know of Madame de Chevreux?
NICKY: Only what they say at Oxford –⁵⁹

In the shooting script Elinor implies that Madame de Chevreux takes payment for sexual favours, telling her that 'I feel you would do better in the city. The streets would surely provide more customers'. This line did not make the final film, presumably having been cut by the censors.

Following his court martial, Carlyon visits Madame de Chevreux in her 'intimately feminine, and very French' boudoir.⁶⁰ Here she plots to escape to France with Carlyon, with a document of safe conduct all prepared. But, she explains, before she leaves England, she wants just 15 minutes at Highnoons so that she can search for 'one small thing'. The audience is expected to believe that Carlyon will allow her access to Highnoons – where Elinor is living – to find something hidden therein: a missing War Office memorandum. This is not at all credible, even as a double bluff on Carlyon's part; nevertheless Madame de Chevreux travels to Highnoons with another new character, Nivelles (a reworked and expanded character based on the novel's Louis de Castres). There she tries to convince Elinor to give her a clock in which the document, helpfully marked *Highly Secret and Confidential*, is hidden.

'Spy versus patriot, sword versus sabre, and innocence versus intrigue'

The additions of the court martial and Madame de Chevreux's scheming may provide a focus for 'innocence versus intrigue',⁶¹ but they confuse the film's plot significantly. The story was further complicated by the addition of a second marriage for Elinor and a dramatic duel to the death between Francis and Carlyon. These events are set in motion following the inquest into Eustace's death. In the novel there is no need for Elinor to attend the inquest; instead she stays at Highnoons, with Miss Beccles, where the

two ladies returned to their interrupted task of dragging all the books from their shelves in the library, clapping them together, dusting the covers, and restoring them to their places.⁶²

On the return of the Carlyon brothers, Nicky announces

They have not put me in irons, Cousin Elinor! The Crowner was a great gun! I had not thought it had all been so simple. To tell you the truth, I did not above half like the notion of having to give my evidence, but no one could have been more civil!⁶³

On screen Nicky's comic observations are replaced with dramatic scenes of Elinor attending the inquest in person. Called upon to give evidence after her character is maligned, she is saved by Carlyon who argues successfully that she is too unwell to give evidence. During the carriage ride back to Highnoons, Elinor and Carlyon quarrel. She predicts that his actions will eventually lead her to Newgate Prison and the gallows. He responds that she should remarry, 'as a mere formality, a stratagem' to secure Highnoons, explaining that 'once you were my wife neither of us could be forced to testify against the other'. As she descends from the carriage in high dudgeon ('Oh! You are insufferable!'), she scares the horse and it bolts, taking Carlyon and the carriage with it – and setting up circumstances in which Elinor will agree to marry Carlyon half way through the film.

Heyer's Elinor agrees to no such arrangement until the final page of the novel, but her 'Yes, Edward, if you please! I would like it of all things!'⁶⁴ was clearly insufficiently dramatic for the screenwriters. The film therefore has not just one midnight marriage, but two. The first wedding, when Elinor marries Eustace, is faithful to the novel, but the

second deviates significantly. After the inquest Elinor is sent for in the middle of the night to find Carlyon on his deathbed; it is hinted that he has broken his back while trying to control the bolting horse. They are married then and there, but Elinor soon realises she has been tricked as Carlyon sits up to demonstrate that he is not dying after all, and warns her 'Not a word to anyone until after I'm buried'.

Narratively this second marriage is highly problematic. Visually it looks like a dream sequence and for some time afterwards its 'real' or dream status is unclear, a status exacerbated by Carlyon's decision to keep it secret.⁶⁵ Once it is established as 'real', the small amount of sexual tension that existed between Kent and Rolfe evaporates. The marriage does set up the climax of the film, however – a duel scene which again does not appear in the novel. Francis arrives at Highnoons, ostensibly to attend Eustace's funeral, but really to seek out the missing memorandum. He reads poetry to Elinor, presses his advances and is interrupted by Carlyon. Nicky has already signalled that Francis is 'the most dangerous duellist in England', and he and Carlyon proceed to duel over Elinor, a sudden desire on Francis's part to escape with Elinor to France and – somewhere in the mix – the missing memorandum.

While *The Reluctant Widow* was in production, this duel was heavily trailed. It was reported that:

armed with heavy sabres Guy Rolfe and Julian Dallas have been 'fighting to the death' for Jean Kent on *The Reluctant Widow* set at Denham Studios. Neither of the stars had ever fenced before, although Guy Rolfe as an ex-boxer, knew something about the footwork. Coaching them in the cut and thrust technique was ex-Royal Marine fencing instructor Rupert Evans, who recently arranged the fights in *Treasure Island*. Finally won by Guy Rolfe, *The Reluctant Widow* fight will last five minutes on the screen. The duel was achieved without serious injury to either contestant, although sticking plaster was frequently needed for cut hands.⁶⁶

Sadly, like so much else in the film, the duel scene was so complicated that the efforts of Rolfe and Dallas – who fought in Highnoons in the hall and on the stairs, knocking over a suit of armour before entering the library – are ultimately underwhelming. After the swordplay, which lasts for over two minutes, it appears that Francis is about to stab Carlyon with a knife. Instead, Carlyon turns the knife on Francis. This would have made a satisfactory climax, but, instead, the viewer is distracted by Nivelles and Nicky, both carrying guns, and a final shooting

of Nivelles, carried out offscreen behind closed doors. Eventually Carlyon carries Elinor from the library, to the sound of her voiceover advising that 'and so I came to the end of my adventures and found happiness and peace. Happiness anyway'.

All of these additions and changes add nothing to Heyer's original story. Of course a film needs to show, rather than describe, events, but it would surely have been possible for the filmmakers to do so without the elaborations and complications added to *The Reluctant Widow*. Could Carlyon's court martial perhaps have worked had it resulted from a misunderstanding, rather than being an elaborate double bluff? If it were necessary to add a glamorous spy such as Madame de Chevreux, was it necessary to stretch credibility and suggest that Carlyon would allow her to visit Elinor? If such effort was expended in filming a duel scene, surely it would have been more effective to allow the viewer to focus on this rather than a distracting offscreen shooting? And one midnight marriage, as set up by Heyer, is just about believable. But two? The scriptwriters fundamentally misunderstood Heyer's ability to create believable characters and a satisfying plot. Instead of using her source material to create a faithful adaptation, they over-embroidered her ideas and lost the essence of *The Reluctant Widow* along the way.

'Very stuffy and very dull'

When the picture was complete, there are hints that *Two Cities* and the Rank Organisation were uncertain about its likely critical reception. *The Reluctant Widow* notably had no press screening, which prompted some unfavourable reaction. 'It is only natural that one should draw certain conclusions,' complained the *Kensington Post*. 'Particularly when not only the Press but West End audiences are not invited to see [...] one of the most publicised films of the year.' This reviewer could not advise viewers whether to see it because it was 'not being shown anywhere before it comes to the Odeon Kensington and West London cinemas of the Odeon circuit'.⁶⁷ The *Daily Express* pleaded 'No, Jean, please don't be shy ...' and asked 'But does Miss Kent, or her producers, want me to tell you what I think of her performance? They haven't said so to me.'⁶⁸

Advertising promised that 'intrigue, passion and expert sword-play [would] set this film in a class by itself' and promised 'spellbinding romance of a kind you really enjoy'⁶⁹ – but the critical reception was not particularly positive. When the film was shown on television in 1972 it

was described by a critic as a '20-year old costumer which was out of date when it was made'.⁷⁰ And contemporary reviewers agreed. The *Irish Independent* was damning:

Two Cities Films see to it that [Elinor] does not die and that she is not bored. Unfortunately they do not do the same for the audience. [...] While one is all in favour of atmosphere in a period piece such as this, with its setting in England on the eve of Waterloo, there is no excuse for over-stuffing it with all the violences [*sic*] of a melodramatic thriller.

It was, concluded this reviewer, 'very stuffy and very dull'.⁷¹ Others complained, with some justification, that the tone was uneven and – with Wellesley and Boothroyd's embellishments – the plot was unconvincing:

Elinor has obvious difficulty in keeping a straight face when a suitor reads verses to her. I could hardly blame her for not believing in the plot, for two deathbed marriages in one week seem improbable even on the eve of Waterloo. But the director, Bernard Knowles, should have decided whether the film was to be a burlesque of costume drama or a high romance ... How much of the humour is intentional is open to question.⁷²

There was some sympathy for the actors who, despite the problems with the plot, acquitted themselves with credit. One reviewer wrote that Kent, 'for so long the "minx" of British films, is given the opportunity to prove that she is an extremely talented and versatile actress',⁷³ while Rolfe was said to have 'display[ed] his charm to good purpose'.⁷⁴ However, on the whole the reviews suggested that they had been let down by their material. 'Jean Kent and Guy Rolfe don't get the best of opportunities in this somewhat stagey period piece. Verdict: Just tolerable', wrote one critic.⁷⁵ Another pointed out, rather tartly, that 'Jean Kent proves once again that she could act if only she had the chance. She does not get it here'.⁷⁶

In the United States *Variety* – a publication with a tendency to dismiss British films however good they were – was unsurprisingly disparaging. It described *The Reluctant Widow* as a

minor British-made espionage meller [melodrama] with poor box office potential [...] a poor item with weak prospects in the

US market. Initially handicapped by a minor troupe of thespers unknown in this country, pic is completely floored by a confusing yarn made even more confusing by a choppy editing job. Pic was apparently intended as a farce, but the script fails to sustain any comic mood. The film quickly gets lost in a maze of complications amateurishly strung together and lacking real point.

Kent played ‘competently’, Rolfe was ‘a bit wooden’ and Byron was ‘badly miscast and wholly unconvincing’; only Dallas, the reviewer claimed, displayed a ‘suave finesse’.⁷⁷ Even less favourable was the *People*, which noted that ‘New York critics yesterday called *The Reluctant Widow* ... “very poor ... shallow, pompous”’.⁷⁸

It cannot be assumed, of course that these contemporary critics were familiar with Heyer’s novel. They would have been reviewing the film as a work in its own right, and their irritation at deficiencies in plot and characterisation would not have arisen from frustration at changes made as the story transitioned from text to screen. For a Heyer reader it is very difficult to imagine watching the film without prior knowledge of the novel; if one does not know the novel, is the film more enjoyable? Not necessarily, if the critics were anything to go by.⁷⁹ Nor can this critical reaction have been good for Heyer’s reputation, and this must have been of great concern to her. Those critics or audiences who were unfamiliar with the novel, and who saw her name appearing on screen at the beginning of the film, may well have assumed that they were watching a faithful adaptation of her work.

Conclusion

Heyer ultimately refused to see the film, although her son Richard Rougier attempted a viewing. According to his obituary:

While he was in his teens, his mother wrote him into books such as *The Reluctant Widow* ... When he went to see Bernard Knowles’ 1950 film ... he walked out halfway through.⁸⁰

Given the deviations from her story, Heyer’s decision to avoid the film entirely was probably wise. However, she missed seeing some of its more successful elements. Dillon’s marvellous set design conjured the world of *The Reluctant Widow* with great attention to detail – from the crumbling decay of Highnoons to her stunningly accurate recreation of

Horse Guards Parade, via the disorder of Eustace's deathbed at the inn at Billingshurst. Perhaps everything was slightly more Gothic than in Heyer's original, but Dillon was true to Elinor's joking description:

I hope there may be a blasted oak. I do not ask if a spectre walks the passages with its head under its arm: that would be a great piece of folly. [...] The house is clearly haunted. I have not the least doubt that that is why only two sinister retainers can be brought to remain in it. I dare say I shall be found, after a night spent within these walls, a witless wreck whom you will be obliged to convey to Bedlam without more ado.⁸¹

And Heyer's misgivings about Kent were perhaps misplaced. Kent's Elinor is no 'good time girl' and in many ways her portrayal is similar to that of the original character, although Elinor's valiant attempts to control her sense of humour are missing. Readers can thoroughly empathise, when, listening to Nicky's tale of a bear, his enforced rustication and his altercation with Eustace, Elinor

who had all the time been standing by the table, listening with gradually increasing appreciation to young Mr Carlyon's artless recital, was betrayed into uttering a sound between a choke and a gasp.⁸²

Because the film's Nicky is naive rather than amusing, however, Kent has no need to suppress any laughter at his antics. As for Rolfe, he made the most of his rare opportunity to play a romantic lead. His Carlyon might be less charismatic than if he had been played by the popular Gainsborough leads James Mason or Stewart Granger, and he did not possess the dangerous sexuality of an actor such as David Farrar, but his performance is certainly respectable. The male acting honours belong to Dallas, however, who gave a much more flamboyant performance.

Overall it is nonetheless hard to disagree with the acid review in the *Derby Evening Telegraph*:

Heigh ho for regency melodrama, boys, with Napoleon prowling dangerously on the Continent, and smugglers lurking with brandy casks in the shrubberies, where rapiers clash, ladies can show their shoulder-blades, and dispatches helpfully marked 'The Duke of Wellington: Most Secret and Confidential' change hands among the frills and powder puffs of milady's boudoir. With a consistently

heavy treatment this might have been sound and not unentertaining melodrama in the Tod Slaughter manner; with a consistently light one, a good satire on costume drama. But the prevailing mood wavers wildly between these extremes, and the resultant impression is that the director knew neither what he was trying to do nor how to do it. This uncertainty of mood is exemplified in the two principal roles: Guy Rolfe barks and swaggers and outwits Napoleon's spies, while Jean Kent handles the thrust and parry of Regency repartee with a skill worthy of Elizabeth Bennett. Both good performances – but they don't belong in the same picture.⁸³

This pertinent criticism sums up exactly what is wrong with *The Reluctant Widow* on film. The original novel is very funny, but the film lacks much of its intrinsic humour and is uncertain about its genre; is it comedy, thriller or melodrama? Thanks to the screenwriters' misguided attempts to introduce a more complicated web of intrigue with new characters and unconvincing episodes, it has fallen into a somewhat deserved obscurity.

In making her decision not to watch *The Reluctant Widow*, Heyer missed the one opportunity to see any of her works on film. Despite tantalising hints in the trade press, other films of her novels, announced in her lifetime, went unrealised. In 1947 *Box Office* announced that, in Hollywood

MGM acquired from its British sister company the screen rights to *Friday's Child*, originally planned for filming in England. The work of an English novelist, Georgette Heyer, it has been added to the future slate of the Culver City plant and assigned to Edwin Knopf for production.⁸⁴

And in October 1959, *Motion Picture Daily* reported that

acquisition of screen rights to *The Conqueror*, a novel by Georgette Heyer, was announced yesterday by Cinerama Inc for production in the wide-screen process. A screen play has been prepared by playwright R. C. Sherriff, and the property will be renamed *William the Conqueror* for the screen.⁸⁵

A Pan paperback edition film tie-in was produced, but no film appeared.⁸⁶ And in 1966 there were discussions about a proposed US

television adaptation of *False Colours* to be directed by Herbert Wilcox, the husband of actor Anna Neagle who was both a fan and a friend of Heyer.⁸⁷ Jane Aiken Hodge also refers to a mooted 'all-English all-star production of *An Infamous Army* for the anniversary of Waterloo'.⁸⁸ Yet none of these projects came to fruition.

There might be a far more positive story to be told about adaptations of a different nature. Heyer's work was often read, dramatised and serialised on Australian radio since a reading of 'On Such a Night' in 1937.⁸⁹ In Britain, BBC Radio productions of Heyer's work started in 1953 with a dramatisation by Philip Dobson of *The Corinthian*, starring Richard Hurndall as Sir Richard Wyndham and Denise Bryer as Penelope Creed.⁹⁰ In 1958 *The Talisman Ring* was read by Hurndall in 12 instalments during *Woman's Hour*.⁹¹ There have been two adaptations of *The Toll-Gate*, in 1958⁹² and 1974.⁹³ *Sylvester* appeared in 1959⁹⁴ and *Royal Escape* was broadcast in 15 instalments for *A Book at Bedtime* in 1967.⁹⁵ In 1986 the *Afternoon Play* was *Regency Buck*⁹⁶ and *Friday's Child* made an appearance in the *Romance Season: Playhouse* and again in *Saturday Night Theatre* in 1995.⁹⁷ *Romance Season: Playhouse* and *Saturday Night Theatre* also presented *Faro's Daughter*.⁹⁸ A four-part adaptation of Heyer's detective mystery *Envious Casca* was broadcast in 1997⁹⁹ and *A Book at Bedtime* presented a ten-installment version of *Arabella* in 2008.¹⁰⁰

I suspect that at least some of these radio adaptations were far truer to Heyer's original vision than was Two Cities' *The Reluctant Widow*. As a film in its own right, it is not particularly satisfactory. As an adaptation of a Heyer novel, it is clumsy and heavy-handed. But it is a curiosity and, having spent some time reading the shooting script, I have a new respect for the actors involved. They did their best with what became a very incoherent story. Ultimately, however, without the wit and deft plotting of Georgette Heyer, *The Reluctant Widow* is sadly a reluctant watch.

Notes

- 1 'Reviews, *The Reluctant Widow*', *Motion Picture Daily*, 13 September 1951, 10.
- 2 'Star Dust: Gossip of stage and screen', *Derby Evening Telegraph*, 6 August 1949, 3.
- 3 John Stratton, 'Going to the Pictures', *Manchester Evening News*, 11 November 1949, 3.
- 4 'Film Reviews: *The Reluctant Widow*', *Focus: A film review, Organ of the Catholic Film Institute*, June 1950, 179.
- 5 Heyer, *The Reluctant Widow*, paperback edition (London: Arrow Books, 2004), 25.
- 6 Heyer, *Reluctant Widow*, 64.
- 7 Heyer, *Reluctant Widow*, 66.

- 8 'The Bookshelf', *Morpeth Herald*, 29 January 1937, 3.
- 9 Vernon Fane, 'The World of Books: Self-portraits of the famous', *Sphere*, 16 November 1940, 222.
- 10 Fallas, 'Merry Widow of Regency Days', *Manchester Evening News*, 8 August 1946, 2.
- 11 Norman Collins, 'New Member', *Observer*, 28 July 1946, 3.
- 12 'Wicklow Town Library, Some New Books to Read', *Wicklow People*, 14 September 1946, 2.
- 13 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 152.
- 14 Kloester, 152–3.
- 15 Kloester, 160.
- 16 Kloester, 197.
- 17 'Box Buys Widow', *Motion Picture Daily*, 3 September 1946, 11. By the time the film was made in 1949 Gainsborough was in decline and the production was undertaken by Two Cities Films, also part of Rank.
- 18 'Elizabeth Bowen's Book Reviews', *Tatler and Bystander*, 17 September 1947, 374.
- 19 Kloester, 81–2.
- 20 Gordon Wellesley and J. B. Boothroyd, *The Reluctant Widow*, final shooting script 'Based on the novel by Georgette Heyer', dated 9 September 1949, BFI National Archive, SCR-15044.
- 21 'For Your Entertainment, Film Flashes', *West Sussex County Times*, 9 December 1949, 2.
- 22 'From Sainsbury to Hollywood', *Pinner Observer*, 29 November 1990, 20.
- 23 'From Sainsbury to Hollywood', 20.
- 24 Jenny Pearson, 'Obituary: Scott Forbes', *Independent*, 29 April 1997. <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-scott-forbes-1269859.html>>. Accessed 10 October 2019.
- 25 'News of the Stars', *Liverpool Echo*, 22 June 1948, 2.
- 26 Geoffrey Macnab, 'Looking for Lustre: Stars at Gainsborough'. In *Gainsborough Pictures*, edited by Pam Cook, 99–117, 99.
- 27 Reg Whitley, 'Talking Pictures', *Daily Mirror*, 2 July 1948, 2.
- 28 'The Stars are Looking Up', *Daily Mirror*, 24 June 1949, 4.
- 29 'At the Theatres Next Week: Picture Theatre Bellshill', *Bellshill Speaker and Mid Lanarkshire Gazette*, 8 September 1950, 8.
- 30 'At the Cinemas, Mechanics', *Nottingham Evening Post*, 1 July 1950, 3.
- 31 Hodge, *The Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 81.
- 32 Leonard Mosley, 'No, Jean, please don't be shy ...', *Daily Express*, 28 April 1950, 4.
- 33 Geoffrey Macnab, *Searching for Stars*, 135.
- 34 'Margaret Thompson's Film Column, Two busiest actors hit stardom', *Essex Newsman-Herald*, 13 December 1949, 2.
- 35 Rupert Butler, 'The Gainsborough Girls', *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 14 January 1978, 8.
- 36 British Entertainment History Project, Interview Number 549. It is likely that the omission was an oversight rather than arising from a refusal on her part to discuss the film.
- 37 'Entertainments Review: Greetings to Miss Kent', *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 20 June 1950, 4.
- 38 'Facts from Filmland, Jean Kent Goes Good', *Falkirk Herald*, 30 November 1949, 3.
- 39 *The Reluctant Widow*, transcript from film viewing.
- 40 Advertising, Kirkcaldy Rio Cinema, *Fife Free Press and Kirkcaldy Guardian*, 18 November 1950, 10.
- 41 "I am sure Eustace had his brandy from the free-traders. If you should come upon any kegs, in some unexpected place, such as an outhouse, for instance, just tell me". "This only was needed!" said Elinor. "I am now to enter into dealings with a pack of smugglers! Perhaps, after all, you had better leave some money with me, for I dare say they will wish to be paid for their trouble! And though, to be sure, life at Highnoons has been a trifle flat these past two days, I should not care to be at loggerheads with a set of desperate persons who would not, I dare say, boggle for an instant at murder!" Heyer, *Reluctant Widow*, 168.
- 42 Shooting script.
- 43 'Wicklow Town Library, Some New Books to Read'.
- 44 'By the Way, Decision', *Worthing Gazette*, 17 August 1949, 3.
- 45 'Stage and Screen, Majestic Theatre', *Staines and Ashford News*, 26 May 1950, 3.
- 46 'Entertainment, Clifton Cinema, Leominster', *Kington Times*, 26 August 1950, 3.
- 47 Whit, 'Films Next Week: Rialto', *Liverpool Echo*, 16 June 1950, 4.

- 48 'Her Waterloo', *Worthing Herald*, 19 May 1950, 14.
- 49 'Next week's films at the Gaiety', *Sligo Champion*, 1 September 1951, 5.
- 50 Advertising, Plaza, *Gloucester Citizen*, 9 September 1950, 7.
- 51 Advertising, Odeon Newcastle, *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 26 May 1950, 8.
- 52 Shooting script.
- 53 'Stage and Screen', *Market Harborough Advertiser and Midland Mail*, 1 September 1950, 15.
- 54 Heyer, *Reluctant Widow*, 6.
- 55 Heyer, *Reluctant Widow*, 17.
- 56 'Films and Gossip, Regency Court Martial', *Motherwell Times*, 20 January 1950, 12.
- 57 Shooting script, Scene 96.
- 58 'Films and Gossip, Regency Court Martial'.
- 59 Shooting script.
- 60 Shooting script.
- 61 'Amusements Guide', *Nottingham Evening Post*, 3 June 1950, 5.
- 62 Heyer, *Reluctant Widow*, 161.
- 63 Heyer, *Reluctant Widow*, 162.
- 64 Heyer, *Reluctant Widow*, 278.
- 65 Despite having watched the film repeatedly, I still think of it as a dream sequence, due to its filmic style and the narrative disruption.
- 66 'Picture Parade', *Crawley and District Observer*, 30 December 1949, 3.
- 67 'Next Week's Films – By the Uninvited', *Kensington Post*, 28 April 1950, 6.
- 68 Mosley, 'No, Jean, please don't be shy ...'.
- 69 Advertising, Playhouse, *Northumberland Gazette*, 4 August 1950, 2.
- 70 'TV Guide', *Sunday Times*, 11 June 1972, 52–3.
- 71 'This Week's Films', *Irish Independent*, 18 September 1950, 8.
- 72 Sylvia Dye, 'Birmingham Films, Two Reluctant Heroines', *Birmingham Gazette*, 30 May 1950, 4.
- 73 'At the Cinemas', *Evesham Standard*, 6 October 1950, 5.
- 74 'Films of the Week: Royal Hippodrome', *Belfast Newsletter*, 3 July 1951, 2.
- 75 Ross Shepherd, 'The Week's Films', *People*, 30 April 1950, 6.
- 76 'Film Reviews: The Reluctant Widow', *Focus*.
- 77 'Film Reviews: The Reluctant Widow', *Variety*, 5 September 1951, 6.
- 78 'Poor Widow', *People*, 9 September 1951, 5.
- 79 I introduced *The Reluctant Widow* at the British Film Institute in 2015, and was careful to stress the film's positive aspects – particularly Carmen Dillon's sets – in that introduction. The screening went down fairly well with the audience and one film historian colleague, who does not read Heyer, insists that she 'really likes' it. On the other hand, my partner, who was at the screening, remembers it as 'that terrible Georgette Heyer film with the ripping off of the epaulets at the Court Martial'.
- 80 James Morton, 'Obituary: Sir Richard Rougier', *The Guardian*, 8 November 2007, 38.
- 81 Heyer, *Reluctant Widow*, 70.
- 82 Heyer, *Reluctant Widow*, 30.
- 83 C.A.M., 'The Reluctant Widow, Around the shows in Derby this week', *Derby Evening Telegraph*, 6 June 1950, 2.
- 84 Ivan Spear, 'Hollywood Report: An active week evinced for story purchases', *Box Office*, 2 August 1947, 30.
- 85 'Acquire Conqueror for Production in Cinerama', *Motion Picture Daily*, 1 October 1959, 1–2.
- 86 Heyer, *The Conqueror*, Film tie in: 'The epic story of William the Conqueror, subject for a spectacular new film' (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1962), author's collection.
- 87 Kloester, 359.
- 88 Hodge, 154.
- 89 'Thursday December 16, 2GB, Sydney', *Wireless Weekly*, 10 December 1937, 34.
- 90 Broadcast on the BBC Home Service, 5 April 1953.
- 91 Broadcast on the BBC Light Programme, 8–23 September 1958.
- 92 Broadcast on the BBC Home Service on 8 March 1958 as Saturday Night Theatre and 30 October 1958 as the Thursday Play.
- 93 Broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 20 July 1974 as Saturday Night Theatre and 9 September 1974 as Afternoon Theatre.

- 94 Broadcast on the BBC Home Service, 29 August 1959.
- 95 Broadcast on the BBC Home Service, 21 August–8 September 1967.
- 96 Broadcast on BBC Radio 4, 6 October 1986. Like the film of *The Reluctant Widow*, the 1986 *Regency Buck* radio adaptation privileges the mystery elements of the story over the growing relationship between Judith Taverner and Lord Worth, presumably the choice of dramatist Neville Teller and director David Johnston.
- 97 Broadcast on BBC Radio 4, 28 January 1995 and 16 February 1996.
- 98 Broadcast on BBC Radio 4, 4 February 1995 and 25 November 1995.
- 99 Broadcast on BBC Radio 4, 12 March–2 April 1997.
- 100 Broadcast on BBC Radio 4, 3–14 March 2008.

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12

Georgette Heyer – guilty pleasures

Amy Street

How can we as modern women explain to ourselves why we still read and love Georgette Heyer? I am asking this because I have a problem: that even after all these years, reading Georgette Heyer is still something of a guilty pleasure rather than an unalloyed one. The tension between these two feelings, guilt and pleasure, produces a state of discomfort. It also raises a question: what is the pleasure and what is the guilt? Is the guilt because of some aspects of the books which cause displeasure, yet we read (and enjoy) them all the same? Or is the guilt something to do with the pleasure itself?

In an attempt to unravel the complicated relationship between pleasure, displeasure and what Freud called ‘Unpleasure’, I will turn to my home discipline of psychoanalysis, in particular to Freud’s theories of the ‘Pleasure Principle’.¹ I will argue that the books can be experienced at different levels. The pleasure and displeasure take place at what might be called the adult, sublimated level, and can be thought about using more or less rational criteria in the fields of aesthetics and ethics. However, the Unpleasure – or *guilty pleasure* – comes from deeper longings that have been repressed, and that, when we experience them again, produce feelings of guilt and shame.

Pleasure

When Freud speaks of the ‘Pleasure Principle’, he is describing the driving force of the id that seeks immediate gratification of all needs, wants and urges. But he also speaks of the pleasures, albeit sublimated, provided by the arts. In this section I will be looking at these more

straightforward pleasures derived from an aesthetic appreciation for Heyer's novels as cultural artefacts. In preparation for writing this chapter, I posted the question of how we are to understand our devotion to Heyer on Twitter. The answer was quick and overwhelming: because she is brilliant.

Yes, she is the eponymous Nonesuch. My respondents agreed that she writes wisdom and froth equally well, and can feather-edge a corner between them. She is witty, erudite and a consummate stylist. Almost without fail, her use of research feels so natural and universally human that, in most cases, the reader barely notices it as period detail except for the thrill of discovery it gives. The rhythm and pacing of her writing are both masterly, and improve upon rereading. She holds the long-form of the novel superbly, and within it, she creates wonderful set pieces. Her main characters are richly drawn and deeply attractive in many different ways, while most of her cast of supporting actors could support an entire novel to be devoted to them.

Frederica is Heyer's most admired novel as voted by Heyer's followers on Twitter, and is a marvellous example of her artistry.² Written in 1965, at the end of a phenomenally productive decade which included *Sylvester*, *Venetia*, *The Unknown Ajax*, *A Civil Contract*, *The Nonesuch* and *False Colours*, *Frederica* contains all the elements that mark Heyer out as the nonpareil of romance writers. At the centre of the novel are Frederica and Alverstoke: a stoic, charming heroine, burdened with the care of her siblings, and a bored alpha hero who cares for nothing. Both are surprised by their growing feelings for the other, and their romance takes place within an environment rich with period detail and beautifully drawn secondary characters. Some of the aspects that particularly delight me include the characters of Miss Winsham, Lord Buxted and Charles Trevor; the change of narrative viewpoint from Frederica to Alverstoke as they think separately about how much they are drawn to each other; Restorative Pork Jelly; colourful quotes such as 'Isn't it odd that you may send a little boy out as neat as wax, and within half-an-hour he will be a perfect shag-rag!'³; the backstory of the farmer and his sister; the nursing and recovery of Felix; Alverstoke's growing maturity; his relationship with Jessamy; the inkwell and seals at Monk's Farm; Lady Jevington, Alverstoke's sister:

It was really impossible to be interested in such commonplace children. That he was equally uninterested in her own offspring did, however, argue a selfish disposition.⁴

These are some of the pleasures that make Heyer's work so compelling: her mastery of craft and historical period, her psychological acuteness and her ability to move freely between comedy and deeply poignant emotions.

But even an author of this range and quality is not above reproach, and throughout her work there are a number of flies in the ointment. These are what I think of as the displeasures.

Displeasures

By displeasure I mean those aspects of the books which might be morally and culturally incongruent for a contemporary reader, displaying properties that are inconsistent with our fundamental beliefs of who we are and what we believe to be right.

Heyer's books reflect her culture, her historical period and her own belief system: implicitly and explicitly, the books are hetero-normative. She also reveals herself to be homophobic, racist, classist, a eugenicist, an upholder of gender-based double standards and of the inequality of the status quo. Much of this goes against the grain for a modern reader. If we consider ourselves to be any or all of the following: feminists, vaguely left-leaning, liberal, sexually liberated, independent, working, cynical and/or worldly-wise; if we abhor racism, violence against women or inequality in its many social forms, how are we to reconcile Heyer's views with our own? More importantly, how are we to keep on reading and enjoying her?

Some readers have trouble with the actions of some of Heyer's characters: Vidal trying to be a rapist, Sherry hitting Kitten in *Friday's Child* – euphemistically described as boxing her ears. However, Heyer does not necessarily endorse the character's actions. The fact that both men reform speaks for itself.

What I have more difficulty with are those examples of blind prejudice that represent Heyer's own beliefs. But given that Heyer's culture and historical period are what they are, can she really be blamed for her old-fashioned views, however offensive they are to us today? As readers and fans, we may grab at this possibility of skating over a moral difficulty; but the historical context rationalisation cannot suffice to explain away or forgive, for example, the anti-Semitic moneylender scene in *The Grand Sophy*.⁵ The novel was published in 1950, only five years after the end of the Second World War. This scene is an egregious act of, to put it kindly, tone-deafness on Heyer's part. In

fact the character is as racially problematic as Shylock and Fagin, and many other fictional portrayals of Jews from mid-twentieth-century British fiction. Another source of displeasure is Heyer's position in the nature–nurture debate, a position that reveals the pervasiveness of her profound snobbery based on the British class system and has common ground with the beliefs of the eugenics movement, with its inherent racism and classism. Heyer's belief that breeding will out despite upbringing appears in many throwaway comments, particularly in her early Georgian romances. For example in *The Masqueraders*, when Prudence is unmasked, proposed to, then refuses because she does not know her true name or birth, Sir Anthony says: 'Ay, you've pride. Did that spring of low birth?'⁶

In *These Old Shades* this belief that aristocracy is some kind of heritable character gene is played out. Delicate, aristocratic Leonie constantly reveals her genetically inherited nobility, despite being brought up as a skivvy, while the poor bumbling farmer's son who replaced her in her aristocratic family is left with his atavistic longings for the turnip fields of his birth parents.⁷

We all have to find our own way to negotiate these displeasures – just as we negotiate them in our daily lives, ignoring them for the sake of something else that feels more important to us. The aforementioned anti-Semitic scene, for example, is also in my opinion one of Heyer's funniest, most brilliantly staged set pieces. Despite my own Jewish background I cannot give it up, even though I have chucked many another novel away from me in disgust for similarly nasty and clichéd portrayals of Jews. It is a tribute to the power and deep illusion of escapism that we can convince ourselves that the sense of the times gives a more immersive experience that feels true to the life of the period, even if it is actually a stronger reflection of Heyer's own time than the Regency. Even so, these moments of compromise cannot really be justified in a consistent way: we make a choice, and we either talk ourselves out of guilt or live with the fact that we choose entertainment over moral rectitude.

Unpleasure

Freud's idea of 'Unpleasure' arose from clinical observations of his patients. As adults we are all more or less subject to what Freud called the 'reality principle' – the capacity to defer gratification or to seek it in ways that are socially acceptable. In order to achieve this, thoughts

and feelings felt to be inappropriate have had to be repressed out of consciousness, though they never disappear completely. As we attempt to find our place in the world, we might feel degrees of shame and guilt about those feelings when they re-emerge into consciousness or reveal themselves through our actions. This 'return of the repressed', and its accompanying unpleasurable affects of guilt and shame, are what I will now be exploring in relation to Heyer's writing.

Interestingly, Heyer herself displayed shame about her writing, albeit through humour. Although fiercely protective of her work, and a meticulous and dedicated craftswoman, she also mocked and denigrated herself for her writing and, to an extent, her readers for liking it. She said of *Friday's Child*:

Judging from the letters I've received from obviously feeble-minded persons who do so wish I would write another *These Old Shades*, it ought to sell like hot cakes. I think myself I ought to be shot for writing such nonsense, but it's unquestionably good escapist literature and I think I should rather like it if I were sitting in an air-raid shelter, or recovering from the flu.⁸

These put-downs may be a transparent version of the British trope of self-deprecation – a performance of modesty – and perhaps Heyer is professing a cynicism she does not feel. A reader is often aware when a writer is writing something mechanically or cynically. We do not usually find this in reader reactions to Heyer's work. The author's enjoyment of her work and of the fictional world she has created, as well as her investment in her characters, shines through.

There are a couple of occasions when a sense of something tired and stale appears – for example, in *Lady of Quality*, which in my view is a poor copy of *Black Sheep* without its sparkle and lightness of touch; and *April Lady*, a paler version of *The Convenient Marriage*. In both the same themes are played out with close resemblance but far more heavily-handedly. But such books are the exception rather than the rule. So why is Heyer ambivalent about what she does? What was she secretly ashamed of? What criticism is she pre-empting?

Heyer knows she is 'good' at writing 'escapist' literature, with the emphasis firmly on escapist: the kind of thing somebody would read while ill or in dire straits. As an avid reader of Heyer, and lifelong fan and promoter of her work, I too suffer from an ambivalence similar to hers, to the extent that in some company I am diffident about speaking

of my enjoyment. How can I account for this rumble of guilt and shame, this lurking phantom of a taboo?

Guilty pleasure – fantasy and reality

In Freud's essay, 'Creative writers and Day-dreaming',⁹ he sheds light on this question. He writes about how creative writing descends from the imaginative play of children:

The creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of fantasy which he takes very seriously – that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion – while separating it sharply from reality.

Specifically, for Freud these childhood fantasies are wish-fulfilment fantasies. The wishes are often unacceptable or taboo to the wisher, which is why in adult life they mostly remain private and repressed from consciousness. It is these repressed fantasies and wishes expressed in Heyer's writing which lie at the root of her – and my – ambivalence. The overarching fantasy is of the fairy-tale ending – of two people being joined forever in love and living happily ever after in a homeostatic state of bliss. There are two underlying fantasies which lead the reader to this place.

The first and more obvious one is the classical Oedipal scenario as described by Freud: the idea that the first love object for a little girl is her daddy. Heyer's men are almost all, if not directly fatherly, at least phallic. I mean phallic in the psychoanalytic sense of the word – they seem to have 'it'.

'It' can simply mean a literal phallus – and certainly sexual prowess is constantly implied. But they also have status and riches, and marvellous capacities – driving to an inch, handy with their fives, able to get a hansom when it is coming on to rain. They are men without obvious weaknesses or vulnerabilities. They have flaws, certainly – usually manly flaws of bad temper or arrogance – but they are fairly unassailable.

Georgette Heyer was strongly in thrall to this image of a fatherly lover. In many of her books we are presented with a version of the idealised father: a figure who has all the power, the authority, the wisdom, the material goods, the capacity to make things happen, to control nature, to excel. Most importantly, he exclusively loves

the heroine and wishes to bestow on or share all this largesse with her, and usually to look after her in a way that is both paternal and lover-like.

While for some the idealised father of childhood can form a template to which subsequent men are compared, by the time we get to adulthood we have mostly let go of this ideal man. The incest taboo is firmly installed; not only do we learn that we cannot marry our daddies, but we have also usually come to realise at some point that our actual fathers have feet of clay. They are just people, and we look elsewhere and more realistically for a lover, husband or other.

In part, this is why I think there is some shame or guilt involved in the pleasure derived from such a fantasy of a man: we know this is not reality, nor permissible, yet part of us hangs on to the dream of the perfect, all-providing man. In the dream, in the fairy-tale, there is a moment when we too can have 'it' – and/or be 'it' for the other. Through the hero, the reader can indulge in a fantasy of union with the father without breaking the incest taboo.

However, I also want to consider another – and deeper – underlying fantasy that is played out in Heyer's romances, and possibly in all romance writing of the happy-ever-after variety. This is not about the little girl and her father; it is about an earlier relationship, the very first relationship that we all experience, that between *mother* and baby. This is the prototype for all relationships and the source of our deepest longings – the first two-person relationship, the original couple.

Important characteristics of this relationship are, first, that it is *total* and *exclusive*: the mother and baby form a *unit*. The paediatrician and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott went so far as to say 'there is no such thing as a baby'¹⁰ – meaning that a baby cannot exist without a mother and can only be thought of in that combined way. Second, the relationship cannot survive in this form. This will be an inevitable loss – and it is an important one, because it is the loss that gives rise to desire. One has to leave the mother to discover the world.

But the loss is not of the mother as an individual. It is rather a loss of *the unitary relationship with the mother* – the preverbal symbiosis in which the baby and mother are one, with the baby's needs known before they have to be articulated, before language comes into the picture at all. Freud describes this as a fragmentary vestige of a kind of consciousness possessed by an infant who has not yet differentiated him or herself from other people and things.¹¹

A psychoanalytic view is that human beings never quite come to terms with the loss of that symbiotic relationship, that sense of oneness,

and that is why we will try to regain it, even if only in our imaginations. The happy-ending trope is that experience of unity par excellence, when no future of ordinary ups and downs needs to be considered. The fact that in real life it is more of a beginning than an end is irrelevant to the emotional need for that moment. Heyer's novels offer us a chance to relive that original symbiotic relationship through the romance and the happily-ever-after. But she does it in a particular way. She does give us the wish fulfilment, but in an acceptable form.

'Your astringent quality'

In his essay mentioned above, Freud said that the skill of the writer lies in his capacity to express his own fantasies (possibly universal fantasies) successfully, in a way that others can enjoy them. S/he does this by bribing us with 'the aesthetic yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his fantasies'.¹²

Not all romance writers are able to do this: they may provide romantic relief for the wish fulfilment, but without that Heyerian 'astringent quality'¹³ (which Alverstoke so admired in *Frederica*) – the wit, the style, the erudition – leaving the reader feeling both over-full and lacking. I liken the feeling to when I have eaten too many chocolate hobnobs in one go – too full, not satisfied, wondering why I did it and really regretting it. Romance novels can be too sweet, too much, without enough aesthetic or intellectual pleasure.

Heyer works hard to avoid the hobnob effect. She generally manages to allow us both to have our cake and eat it – we get to indulge our deepest fantasies for a moment, the lost love contained in the unit of mother-and-baby, as well as the lost idealised father of the oedipal period. By expressing it in a form which is clever, learned and funny, sharp as well as sweet, she aims to make our forbidden fantasies acceptable to our adult selves, to gratify our realistic, humorous and even cynical side.

This final paragraph from *Frederica* encapsulates Heyer's skill at combining all the necessary ingredients. I have added in italics a commentary that explains my points above.

It has always seemed to me that if one falls in love with any gentleman one becomes instantly blind to his faults (*humour – meta-comment on the corny version of romantic love*). But I am not blind to your faults, and I do not think that everything you do or

say is right! (*realism*). Only – is it being – not very comfortable – and cross – and not quite happy, when you aren't there?' (*mother-baby*).

'That, my darling,' said his lordship, taking her ruthlessly into his arms, 'is exactly what it is!' (*masterful romantic lover*).

'Oh—!' Frederica gasped, as she emerged from an embrace which threatened to suffocate her. 'Now I know! I am in love!'¹⁴ (*pure happy ever after*).

Freud thought that the writer's skill could allow us to enjoy our own daydreams 'without self-reproach or shame'.¹⁵ This turns out not to be quite true, despite the best efforts of Heyer – and others. If it were that straightforward, there would be less of a culture of denigration of romance writing from non-romance readers and less prickly defensiveness on the part of romance writers themselves. Of course there are prejudices around 'genre' and 'women's writing', but these do not cancel out the complicated feelings that arise when we indulge our wish fulfilment fantasies. It seems that the underlying pleasure is too permeated with the guilt to do away with Freud's self-reproach and shame.

Certainly neither Heyer nor I are quite immune from it. The guilty pleasure lies in the secret knowledge that I as a reader – and Georgette Heyer as a writer – recognise that in our enjoyment of her work we are indulging in forbidden fruit, that we are still clinging to those remnants of childhood fantasy that our grown-up selves have abandoned long ago.

Notes

- 1 Freud, 'Civilization and its Discontents', 64–148.
- 2 Heyer, *Frederica*.
- 3 Heyer, *Frederica*, 214.
- 4 Heyer, *Frederica*, 5.
- 5 Heyer, *The Grand Sophy*, 183–92.
- 6 Heyer, *The Masqueraders*, 142.
- 7 Heyer, *These Old Shades*.
- 8 Hodge, *The Private World of Georgette Heyer*, xii.
- 9 Freud, 'Creative writers and Daydreaming', 143–53.
- 10 Winnicott, 'Parent-infant relationships', 37–55.
- 11 Freud, 'Civilization and its Discontents'.
- 12 Freud, 'Creative writers and Daydreaming', 153.
- 13 Heyer, *Frederica*, 138.
- 14 Heyer, *Frederica*, 329.
- 15 Freud, 'Creative writers and Daydreaming', 153.

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Data science: Georgette Heyer's historical novels and her readers

Helen Davidge

Section 1

'My story, madame, begins as all good stories should ... Once upon a time.'¹

Introduction

Georgette Heyer, the bestselling English novelist, wrote over 50 novels. She is best known for her eighteenth-century and Regency romance novels, but she also wrote pure historical novels, modern romance and murder mysteries.² As she was so instrumental in the popularisation of the historical romance novel, it is surprising that there is not more rigorous analysis of her work and that there has been no extensive study of her readers. By using data science, this chapter aims to show some new ways of analysing her texts and audience through statistics.

Data science was described by the *Harvard Business Review* in 2012 as 'the sexiest job of the 21st century'.³ It is a rapidly growing industry: part of the digital revolution. A data scientist will use mathematical statistical methods, big data, machine learning, artificial intelligence (AI) and computer algorithms written using computer programming to mine data, process data, analyse data and extract information and results. The data in question could be a table of information, images, text or sound – anything, in fact, that can be stored digitally. In short, a data scientist uses coding (computer programming) to solve real world problems creatively and to derive statistical and meaningful results from data. Most of the techniques used have been known for a long

time, but only in recent years has there been the computer power to implement the techniques and explore this field of research.

Data science has a very tenuous link with the Regency times and Heyer. Ada Lovelace, who wrote the first computer algorithm in the mid-nineteenth century, was the daughter of Lord Byron, the infamous Romantic poet who rose to fame in the Regency period and who is mentioned in several of Heyer's novels. In the twentieth century computer technology evolved, and during the first decade of the twenty-first century the term 'data scientist' was coined. To date, data science's prevalence among researchers in literary studies and publishing studies is still emerging; it has much more room to grow. The rest of this chapter demonstrates two kinds of data analysis that can be performed on books: text analysis and audience analysis.

Section 2 of this chapter presents text analysis on Heyer's eighteenth-century and Regency novels, focusing on gender and school-grade reading level. The chapter then moves on in section 3 to discuss the findings of the Heyer readers' survey, looking at their favourite novels, heroines and heroes, followed by an investigation of the attributes of a typical Heyer reader before exploring their reading habits. This chapter concludes with suggestions for possible further work and the conclusions of this initial research. The epigraphs used in this chapter have been selected from Heyer's most popular novels.

Section 2: Text analysis on Georgette Heyer's historical novels

'He ... spent the better part of his days at the Parsonage, poring over texts.'⁴

Text analysis is a statistical exploration of words with the aim of finding out information about the text and/or the writer or writers. In the 1980s a study was conducted with the use of computer programming, looking at the 30 most common words in Jane Austen's novels.⁵ These words were compared with the most frequently used words in several other novels, including Heyer's relatively late novel *Frederica*. With the advancement of computers, the type and range of analysis has increased greatly. An author's corpus (or body) of text, which is now stored digitally, can easily be retrieved, the data extracted, cleaned (so that it can be understood by the algorithm) and analysed.

2.1 Description of the text analysis method

The text analysis work was performed using the computer language Python⁶ in PyCharm⁷ and Jupyter Notebooks.⁸ The corpus used was Heyer's 8 eighteenth-century novels and 26 Regency ones. There is some debate as to the exact dates of the English Regency period but, including Heyer's eighteenth-century novels, the whole of the long Regency period is covered (see [Appendix 1](#) for the full list of novels). These were read into the cleaning computer algorithm as txt files, where each file contained only the main text of the novel. Initial cleaning work included removing characters not understood by the code, for instance letters with accents, or the pound sign, and converting all letters to lower case. These cleaned text files were then saved as csv files prior to analysis by text algorithms.

The cleaning algorithm used the Python libraries Pandas and String.⁹ Python libraries are open source code written by other people. The frequency of words used in each novel was calculated using the Python libraries `itertools` and `Collections`. The library `textstat`¹⁰ was used to calculate two reading levels for each novel. From the different reading levels calculable using the `textstat` library, the New Dale-Chall Formula¹¹ and the Automated Readability Index¹² were used. The New Dale-Chall Formula is an algorithm which uses 3000 of the most common and easy to read words in the English language and measures how many of the words are in the body of text. Instead of looking at vocabulary, the Automated Readability Index algorithm looks at word length, the number of characters in a word, sentence length and the number of words in a sentence. To analyse both the frequency of words and the measuring of the reading level algorithms the Python library Pandas was used.¹³

2.2 Georgette Heyer's use of female and male pronouns

The first analysis which was performed using the text in Heyer's novels was to examine whether there was a change in her use of pronouns over her writing career. By using the output of the frequency of all words in the selected Heyer novels, the use of female and male pronouns was investigated. Female pronouns considered were *she*, *her* and *hers*, and the male pronouns considered were *he*, *him* and *his*. An assumption made here is that the measurement of the number of pronouns used in a novel is a good indication of the genders of characters being described, i.e. a novel that focuses on and involves more female

characters will have a higher proportion of female pronouns rather than male pronouns, and vice versa. To test this, research was performed to see whether a female or male character was more likely to be described by their name or a pronoun. The research did not suggest that there was any bias, and so the percentage of pronouns was felt to be a good indication of the character gender split in a novel. Note that this is not counting the *number* of people/characters in the novel, but instead measures the amount that is written about them in the novel.

Figure 13.1 reveals the results of this research. On the graph the stars represent Heyer's novels, plotted in chronological order, and the y-axis shows the percentage of female pronouns used. For example, the second novel is at 30 per cent, meaning that it has 30 per cent female pronouns and 70 per cent male pronouns, thus showing that this novel is clearly male dominated. The diagonal line illustrates the trend line of the female to male ratio. This line shows that Heyer's early books are all very male-dominated, with just over 30 per cent female pronouns. This ratio gradually becomes more equal during her writing career, until in the later part it is about 50 per cent. In her final Regency novel, *Lady of Quality*, Heyer discusses and describes women more than men. Some notable exceptions to this trend line occur, however, and are highlighted: *The Foundling*, *The Toll-Gate* and *The Unknown Ajax* all emerge as heavily male dominated. Also labelled are the novels which have an approximately equal ratio.

Noting the gradual change in ratio, it would be interesting to research whether Heyer's thoughts on men and women changed throughout her life. She was home schooled by her father until the age of 13 and grew up in the company of two younger brothers. Having a fair amount of male company in her early years may account for her early novels being so male dominated. She is known to have thought that men were more interesting because she believed them to be more logical than women. Yet Heyer had both male and female friends throughout her life, for example Joanna Cannan, Carola Oman, Alexander Frere-Reeves, Pat Wallace and Max and Joan Reinhardt. Before the marriage of her only son, in 1962, Heyer had intimated she did not want a daughter, but she subsequently became good friends with her new daughter-in-law. This new relationship – and its unexpected success – may have influenced her writings. In order to investigate this a dashed vertical line has been plotted in Figure 13.1, showing the year in which her son married.¹⁴

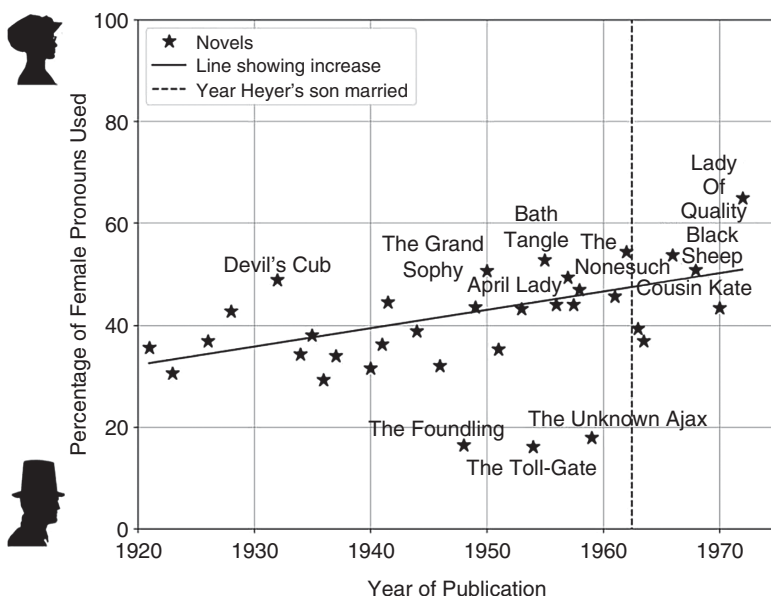


Figure 13.1 Percentage of female to male description in Heyer's novels

This figure shows the percentage of female to male pronouns used in Heyer's eighteenth-century and Regency novels. The novels, in publication order, are represented by black stars. The line of best fit for these novels is represented as the black line and clearly shows an increase in female pronouns throughout Heyer's writing career. The dashed line represents 1962, the year in which Heyer's son married. Source: the author.

2.3 The reading level of Georgette Heyer's novels

The second stage of the text analysis was to investigate the school-grade reading level of Heyer's novels. Two metrics were chosen, the New Dale-Chall Formula and the Automated Readability Index, both explained in section 2.1 above. Figure 13.2 shows the New Dale-Chall Formula score for Heyer's novels and Figure 13.3 shows the Automated Readability Index score. In both figures Heyer's novels are shown as stars and are plotted in chronological order, while the y-axis gives the American school-grade reading level. In Figure 13.2 novels near the bottom of the graph have a smaller vocabulary and a lot more of the simple words; novels near the top have the more complicated words.

What can clearly be seen is that Heyer's language changes over her career. Her third novel, *These Old Shades*, has relatively simple language (the New Dale-Chall Formula would treat its French words as unknown English ones, not complex words). Her language level then

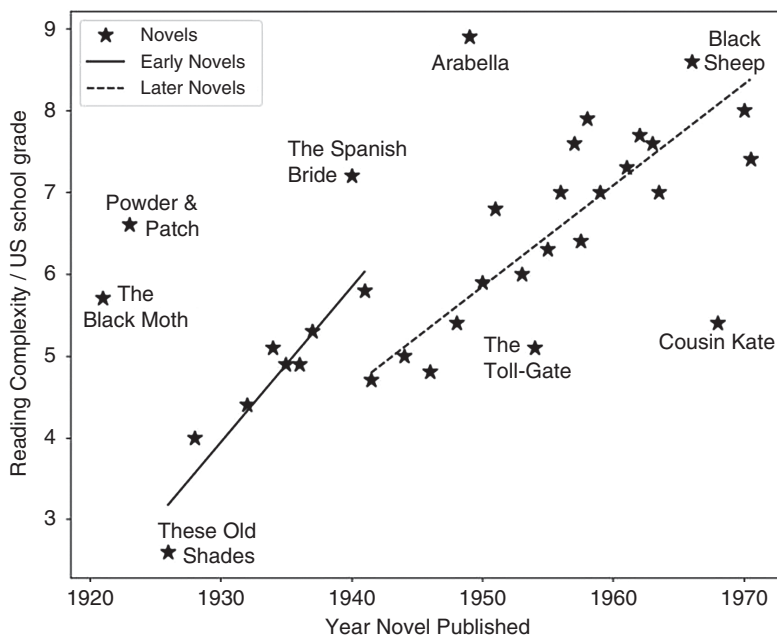


Figure 13.2 The reading level of Heyer’s novels using the New Dale-Chall Formula

This illustration shows the US school-grade reading level for Heyer’s eighteenth-century and Regency novels, found using the 3000 most common words. The novels, shown in publication order, are represented by black stars. The black line is the line of best fit for Heyer’s earlier, mainly eighteenth-century novels, with the outliers removed. The dashed line represents the line of best fit for Heyer’s later Regency novels, also with the outliers removed. The graph shows that her writing level increases with her early novels, decreases slightly with the Regency novels and then increases further. Source: the author.

increases until about the 1940s, represented by the black line. Then the level takes a sudden drop before increasing again, as shown by the dashed line. What should be noted is that the 1940s was the decade in which Heyer was changing from mainly writing eighteenth-century novels to Regency ones; it is, for example, about the time *Friday’s Child* was written. This same trend can be seen in [Figure 13.3](#). Novels near the bottom of [Figure 13.3](#) have shorter words and sentences than those near the top. In [Figure 13.3](#) the black line shows a sharp rise in word and sentence length. This increase plateaus in the 1940s and then continues to rise, though at a less steep gradient.

It does not seem surprising that the complexity of a novelist’s writing skill may increase during their career. What is interesting in

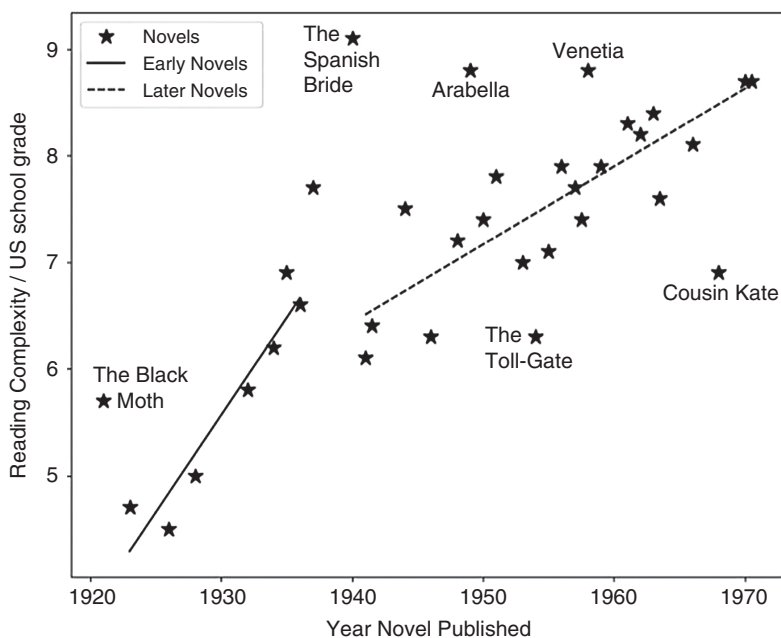


Figure 13.3 The reading level of Heyer's novels using the Automated Readability Index

This illustration shows the US school-grade reading level for Heyer's eighteenth-century and Regency novels found using word and sentence length. As in Fig. 13.2 the novels, represented by black stars, are in publication order. The line of best fit for Heyer's earlier, mainly eighteenth-century novels is represented by the black line, with the outliers removed. The line of best fit for Heyer's later Regency novels, with the outliers removed, is shown as the dashed line. This graph shows the same trend as Fig. 13.2: Heyer's writing level increases with her early novels, then plateaus when changing to writing Regency novels and then increases further, at a shallower gradient. Source: the author.

these two graphs, however, is that the complexity decreased a little when Heyer changed to writing Regency novels, then increased again. Perhaps the difference in historical period, with attendant changes in her historical and vocabulary knowledge through research, may have briefly affected this complexity. Biographical factors may also be important here. Heyer's personal life during this time shows that she was under financial strain, supporting her husband in his new legal career and her son at prep school. She was also under the emotional strain of the Second World War: her brother had been called up and her brother-in-law died in action, and for a while after this she was unable to write. Heyer was also exposed to German bombings, living first in Sussex and then moving to London.¹⁵

Labelled in Figures 13.2 and 13.3 are the outliers. *The Toll-Gate* and *Cousin Kate* both have shorter words and sentences than novels written about the same time. She wrote *The Toll-Gate* with the view to having it serialised, so this may have influenced her writing, while *Cousin Kate* is her only attempt at a serious Gothic horror. Her other novels with Gothic elements include more humour, for instance *Sylvester* and *The Reluctant Widow*. A different writing style could have influenced her choice of words. During the writing of both novels Heyer had various health issues: she suffered from skin complaints and sinusitis while writing *The Toll-Gate*, and was ill with flu and oedema when she wrote *Cousin Kate*. Heyer herself felt that the latter suffered due to her illness and was not as good as her other work. It does indeed seem likely that her poor health affected her writing at this time.¹⁶

The Black Moth, *The Spanish Bride* and *Arabella* all have a higher English level than books written around the same time. Heyer started writing *The Black Moth* in serialised form for her convalescing brother in February 1920, and her father suggested she write it up into novel form. By March 1921 she had received the publication contract from her publishers. Thus she did not spend many more months working on it than her other novels, but as a teenage girl she would have had the opportunity to devote more time to writing than after she was married; neither did she have the financial stresses of supporting her family.¹⁷ What can be noted in Figure 13.2, however, is that both *The Black Moth* and *Powder and Patch* have fewer common words contained within them than do the novels published immediately after. Is the young Heyer finding her writing style? Or, as these are the only two of her historical books published while her father was alive, did he perhaps help with the editing of them? The fact that Heyer did a large amount of research when writing *The Spanish Bride* (her sources included *Harry Smith's Autobiography*, *History of the Rifle Brigade* by William Cope, *Adventures of the Rifle Brigade* by John Kincaid and Sir George Scovell's unpublished diaries about the Napoleonic Wars)¹⁸ or the fact she is writing about a lot of military events may have intensified the complexity of her writing for that particular novel. It is unknown why *Arabella* has a higher reading level than the other novels published at the same time, however: Heyer wrote it quickly and is not believed to have done the level of research she did for *The Spanish Bride*.¹⁹ The data show changes in creative writing ability over a career, influenced by various factors.

2.4 Further text analysis work to be performed on Georgette Heyer's novels

Data science provides us with some possible other avenues for textual analysis. It would be useful to measure Heyer's increase in writing sophistication against other similar authors. Does Heyer's writing stand out compared with her contemporary authors? Other stylometry studies on authors contemporary to Heyer include some of the novels of Agatha Christie²⁰ and the use of machine learning to compare the works of Agatha Christie with Dorothy Sayers.²¹ Further work could include calculating the language level of the novels of historical romance authors contemporary to Heyer (for example, Barbara Cartland and Mary Stewart). In carrying out such studies one could look at each author individually, to see if they follow the same trend as Heyer, increasing complexity of the English level with time, and also compare their writing level and word frequency with Heyer's.

A lot of further text analysis and natural language processing work could also be performed on Heyer's novels. One such technique is sentiment analysis, which studies both the sentiment attached to words in the text and the sentiment of the characters in a novel; it also allows the study of the novel as a whole, by showing the underlying structure and emotions within.²² Do the sentiments in a novel that Heyer wrote at pace to make a publishing deadline differ from those in works that she spent a long time in researching? The data presented above already suggest that events in her life affected the way in which Heyer's novels were written. It would be interesting to see if these events influence the sentiment and structure of the novels as well. She was a very private person, so studying the sentiments in her text and how it varies between novels may give us new insight into her feelings about certain times in her life. Sentiment analysis has been performed on the works of various authors, among them Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, J. K. Rowling, William Shakespeare and the Grimm Brothers, but no such thorough analysis has yet been performed on Heyer's works.²³

Section 3: Survey of Georgette Heyer's readers

Data science as a methodology for book studies allows a frictionless toggle between the textual and the paratextual. When an author has a large enough and enthusiastic enough audience, this presents another potential rich dataset for analysis. We are able to determine

the answers to questions such as what are the attributes of the average Heyer reader, what is her best loved novel and does it change with reader age or location? To obtain a statistically meaningful result, a survey of her readers was undertaken. In this internet age surveys are much easier to conduct: once the answers have been collected, computer code can then be written to process the large volume of replies quickly to obtain results. The code can output the results visually in a variety of ways. This section presents the results of a survey of Heyer's readers. The main visualisations used in this chapter are graphs in the form of frequency diagrams and pie charts, as well as tables. These types of graphs are a good way to visualise the numbers of different responses given.

3.1 Description of how the survey was conducted

The information about Heyer's readers was collected using 40 questions, as mentioned above. This survey, designed specifically for this chapter, was accessible online, so as to reach as many readers as possible. The survey website Kwik Surveys was selected as it was the best free website which fitted the needs of the survey, i.e. it did not limit the number of questions and allowed a variety of ways in which to answer them. The questions were designed to analyse several things: the most and least popular Heyer novels and characters, the general reading habits of a Heyer reader and the supporting demographics.

With this in mind the survey was comprised of four parts, each consisting of roughly ten questions.

The first section was on Heyer's novels. The second was on the readers' reading habits of Heyer and her influence. The third section was on reading habits in general and the fourth asked demographical questions about the reader. The survey contained a variety of response types, suitable for what was being asked. Some tasks asked for short and succinct answers, for example 'List your top five Heyer novels'. Other questions asked the reader simply to rate something, for example 'On a scale of one to ten, with ten being the highest, how much has Heyer impacted your life?' Further questions were in the form of multiple choice, some with only one answer allowed, for example 'Have you read any non-English versions of Heyer?' (answer: 'Yes'/'No'). Others accepted multiple answers, for example 'Do you write or have you written' proposed the following replies: 'For a job', 'For personal enjoyment', 'Fan Fiction', 'Have not written', 'Prefer not to say'. For all personal topics (for example, questions concerning gender) the option

of 'Prefer not to say' was offered. The reader was not required to answer all questions. [Appendix 2](#) gives the survey questions in full.

The survey was shared in various places on social media services. It was shared on the Georgette Heyer Appreciation Facebook Group, a group with over 3000 members.²⁴ The link for the survey was published on Twitter by several users, including the @georgettedaily account, which has over 1000 followers.²⁵ It was also posted in the Georgette Heyer section of Goodreads²⁶ and shared with the speakers at the Nonesuch Conference, Institute of English Studies, London, 2018.

The survey was filled out by 230 people. Unless stated otherwise, all results described below are obtained from these completed surveys and thus are taken from a sample of Heyer's readers who use social media. After the results of the survey had been compiled into a master csv file, multiple computer algorithms were created in Python using PyCharm and Jupyter Notebooks to draw statistical insights about Heyer's readers.²⁷ The main Python libraries used were: Pandas, NumPy²⁸ and matplotlib.²⁹

3.2 The readers' favourite novels, heroines and heroes

'She was put so much in mind of all her favourite heroes.'³⁰

The first section of the survey mainly focused on the novels and characters that the readers liked and disliked. The survey asked readers to state their top five favourite Heyer novels, their five least favourite Heyer novels and their five favourite heroines and heroes, as well as their five least favourite heroines and heroes. The results can be seen in [Tables 13.1 to 13.6](#). All tables were created by weighting the readers' answers. Thus for each set of answers the novel in first place was assigned a value of five and the bottom place novel was assigned a value of one. Weighting data means that the reader's top novel will influence the results more than the reader's fifth favourite novel, but all novels are included.

The survey also asked the reader how many Heyer novels they had read. There was a broad range of responses, from fewer than five to 57. Because the readers have read different numbers of Heyer works, the results of these tables have been biased towards novels that more readers have read, for example her Regency novels. What should be noted is that the list of ten favourite novels is independent to the list of ten least favourite novels as they come from two different data sources, for example 'List your top five Heyer novels' and 'List your five

least favourite Heyer novels'. The same independence is found in the favourite and least favourite heroines and heroes.

Table 13.1 shows the ten most popular Heyer novels in descending order. What is interesting to note is that only Heyer's eighteenth-century and Regency novels are in the readers' top ten. The results of the readers' least favourite Heyer novels can be seen in table 13.2. Four of these novels are not romances; three of them are not set in the eighteenth century or the Regency period. Interestingly, *A Civil Contract* makes it into both tables.

In 2017 surveys were conducted on both the Georgette Heyer Appreciation Facebook Group³¹ and the @georgettedaily Twitter account³² to find the favourite Heyer novel. On both Facebook and Twitter *Frederica* was voted as top. On Facebook *Venetia* came in second place, while on Twitter *Sylvester* was second. These results are in general agreement with the findings of this paper, as these three books are all within the top five most popular novels in Table 13.1. The survey of this chapter found *Frederica* to be the second favourite novel, while *Venetia* was favourite and *Sylvester* fourth favourite. Tables 13.3 and 13.5 gives the readers' ten favourite heroines and heroes respectively. The most popular novels, heroines and heroes are all quite clustered. Both the heroine and the hero from the top ten lists are found in six of the top 11 favourite novels.

The least popular are not so clustered. The ten least favourite heroines can be found in Table 13.4, while Table 13.6 gives the ten least favourite heroes. Looking at Tables 13.4 and 13.6, it is apparent that readers dislike pairs of lovers – an emotion that seems independent from the novel in which they appear. For instance, Serena Carlow and Ivo Barrasford are both among the ten least favourite heroines/ heroes respectively, but *Bath Tangle* does not feature in the ten least favourite novels. Looking at Tables 13.1 through to 13.6, readers seem

Table 13.1 The ten most popular Heyer novels in descending order

<i>Venetia</i>
<i>Frederica</i>
<i>Cotillion</i>
<i>Sylvester</i>
<i>The Grand Sophy</i>
<i>These Old Shades</i>
<i>Devil's Cub</i>
<i>The Unknown Ajax</i>
<i>The Talisman Ring</i>
<i>A Civil Contract</i>

Table 13.2 The ten least popular Heyer novels in descending order

Cousin Kate
A Civil Contract
Charity Girl
Penhallow
My Lord John
Powder and Patch
April Lady
Royal Escape
The Spanish Bride
Regency Buck

Table 13.3 The ten most popular Heyer heroines in descending order

Sophy Stanton-Lacy
Venetia Lanyon
Frederica Merriville
Sarah Thane
Mary Challoner
Phoebe Marlow
Léonie de Bonnard
Arabella Tallant
Prudence Tremaine
Jenny Chawleigh

Table 13.4 The ten least popular Heyer heroines in descending order

Nell Merion
Serena Carlow
Judith Taverner
Cleone Charteris
Barbara Childe
Horatia Winwood
Kate Malvern
Deborah Grantham
Hero Wantage
Annis Wychwood

Table 13.5 The ten most popular Heyer heroes in descending order

Freddy Standen
Hugo Darracott
Jasper Damerall
Vernon Dauntry
Justin Alastair
Robert Beaumaris
Miles Calverleigh
Tristram Shield
Sylvester Rayne
Dominic Alastair

Table 13.6 The ten least popular Heyer heroes in descending order

Julian Audley
Ivo Barrasford
Adam Deveril
Anthony 'Sherry' Verelst
Dominic Alastair
Charles Rivenhall
Philip Jettan
Justin Alastair
Oliver Carleton
Giles Merion

quite divided about the Alastairs, who feature in *These Old Shades* and *Devil's Cub*. Léonie de Bonnard, Justin Alastair, Dominic Alastair, *These Old Shades* and *Devil's Cub* are all in the top ten for their respective categories; but Justin and Dominic Alastair are also within the bottom ten least favourite heroes.

The results of the survey were used to explore whether readers' favourites changed according to the age of the reader or the country in which the reader was located. No obvious variation could be discerned between the different groups of readers. However, a larger dataset could investigate this more rigorously.

It was also investigated whether readers liked or disliked a particular type of heroine or hero. The heroines were split into those considered 'normal, sensible and practical' (for example Mary Challoner or Frederica Merriville) and those who are more exotic or romantic in type (for example Léonie de Bonnard or Hero Wantage). The heroines were also split into younger (for example Horatia Winwood or Arabella Tallant), middling-aged (for example Sophy Stanton-Lacy or Judith Taverner) and older (Venetia Lanyon or Barbara Childe). Nearly 20 per cent of readers strongly preferred the normal and sensible heroines, with older readers more likely on average to dislike the more exotic/romantic heroines strongly. Maybe these more practical characters are preferred because the readers can relate to them or aspire to their positive qualities. This possibility is something that Heyer was aware of; she wrote in an unpublished essay that female readers like an ordinary woman, someone like themselves.³³ The older heroines were preferred by readers, with 12 per cent strongly liking the middling age heroines and 14 per cent of readers strongly preferring the older heroines. One might assume that older readers can relate more to the older heroine; but conversely younger readers were observed to dislike the younger heroines strongly.

The heroes were split into the 'dark' heroes and others, i.e. those who had a rakish past (for example, Jasper Damerl or Justin Alastair) and those who had not. The heroes were also divided into younger (for example, Dominic Alastair or Freddy Standen), middling-aged (for example, Sylvester Rayne or Charles Rivenhall) and older (for example, Vernon Dauntry or Miles Calverleigh). It was found that nearly 20 per cent of readers strongly preferred the 'darker' heroes, while 7 per cent strongly disliked them. Apart from those listed above, no other distinctions could be found between readers' preferences.

A smaller survey had been conducted at the 2016 Georgette Heyer conference in Sydney, Australia.³⁴ Attendees were handed a questionnaire on arrival and about half the attendees completed the Ermert survey (so-called because the survey results were given to the author in a private communication by Julia Ermert). The Ermert survey asked readers for their favourite Heyer novel, heroine and hero, and the first Heyer novel the attendee had read. It has been assumed that most of the readers who filled out the Ermert survey were living in Australia. However, as results of the survey for this chapter have shown that there does not appear to be any noticeable difference between readers' favourites by location, we feel it is appropriate to compare results of the two surveys.

Using the results of the Ermert survey, the five most popular Heyer novels in descending order are: *The Grand Sophy*, *Devil's Cub*, *Frederica*, *Venetia* and *These Old Shades*. These top five novels are in general agreement with the findings of the survey of this chapter. All of the top five Ermert survey novels are listed in the top seven of the survey for this chapter. One small difference is that *Venetia* is ranked first in the survey of this chapter, but in fourth place in the Ermert survey. The top five heroines from the Ermert survey are Sophy Stanton-Lacy, Frederica Merriville, Venetia Lanyon, Mary Challoner and Arabella Tallant. Sophy Stanton-Lacy, Frederica Merriville and Venetia Lanyon are in the top three for the survey of this chapter, while Mary Challoner is ranked fifth favourite and Arabella Tallant comes a little lower at eighth. From the Ermert survey the five most popular heroes are Hugo Darracott, Vernon Dauntry, Jasper Damerl, Freddy Standen and Sylvester Rayne. Though in a different order Hugo Darracott, Vernon Dauntry, Jasper Damerl and Freddy Standen are all in the top four favourite heroes in the survey of this chapter, with Freddy Standen coming first, not fourth. One more noticeable difference is that Sylvester Rayne is the ninth most popular hero in the survey described by this chapter, while he is the fifth most popular in the Ermert survey.

One thing that may have influenced people filling out the Ermert survey would be that they completed it during the 2016 conference, so may have been influenced by the contents of the papers presented. In addition the survey described in this chapter asked for the top five novels, heroines and heroes from the reader; the answers were then combined, weighting those the readers ranked as higher. There is no evidence to suggest that the results of the Ermert survey were combined in a weighted manner. Although the Ermert survey was completed by a relatively small number of people, it generally correlates with the results of the survey described in this chapter.

3.3 The average reader

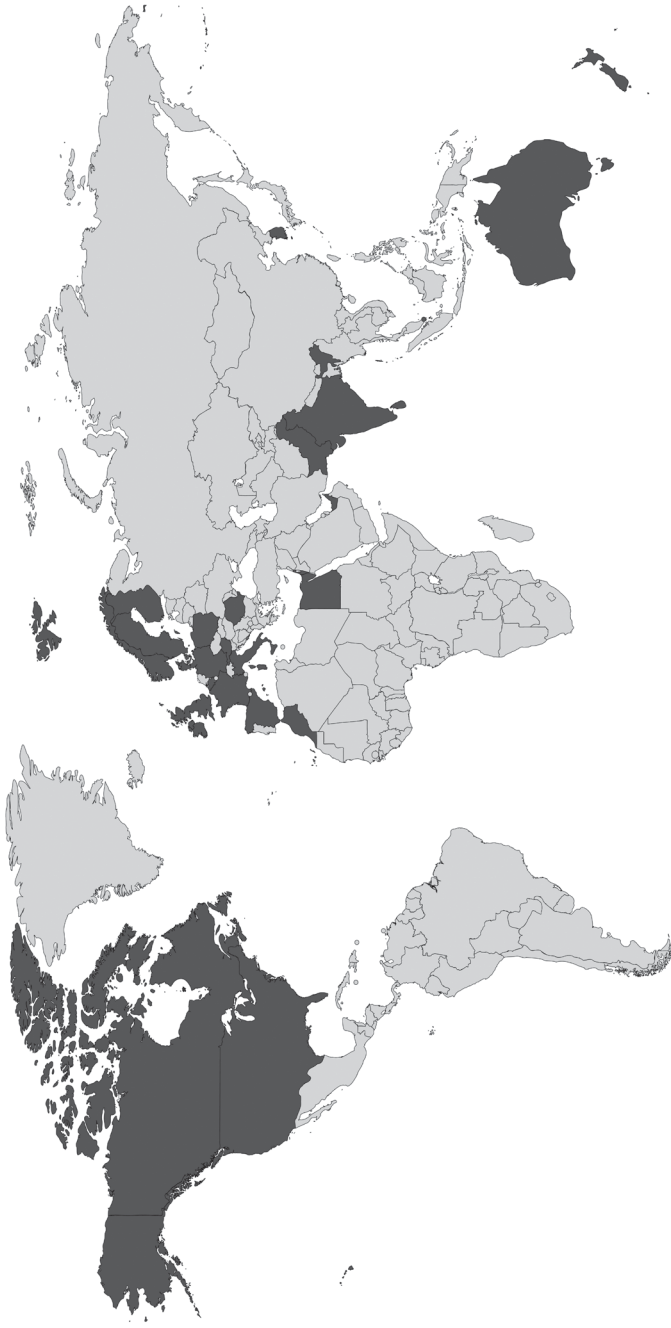
'Not, I fancy, above the average, ma'am.'³⁵

The second and fourth sections of the survey focused on demographics of the readers and their reading habits. [Figure 13.4](#) shows the countries in which the readers live and the top pie chart in [Figure 13.5](#) shows the frequency for each country. Note that, in order to have a larger sample to compare results from different areas, countries with small numbers of Heyer readers have been combined into regions.

The first pie chart in [Figure 13.5](#) shows that just over one-third of the readers live in the United States of America, another third live in the United Kingdom and the final third live in the rest of the world, with Australia being the next highest represented country, providing 10 per cent of the readers. [Figure 13.6](#) gives the frequency histogram of readers' ages, revealing that one-third of the readers are currently in their fifties. The sharp drop of numbers for readers in their seventies, and possibly sixties, could be due to the fact that the survey was filled out online.

Age is still a significant factor as to whether a person uses the internet. Adults over the age of 75 have always used the internet the least, though this is increasing, while less than 50 per cent of people aged 75 and over use the internet in the UK. Those aged between 65 and 74 make up the next lowest internet usage group.³⁶ If the survey was to be repeated, more ways to reach more of these readers missing from our dataset would be investigated.

The survey also asked readers at what age they were introduced to Heyer's work and by whom. [Figure 13.7](#) shows that three-quarters of the readers were introduced to Heyer's novels as a teenager and [Figure 13.8](#) gives the methods by which the readers were introduced to her works. The most common way was by their mother, followed by at



Created with mapchart.net ©

Figure 13.4 Map showing the locations of the readers surveyed

This figure shows the locations, in dark grey, of the Heyer readers who filled out the survey. It was created using [Mapchart.net](https://mapchart.net), where the selected countries have been shaded. Source: CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://mapchart.net/feedback.html>.

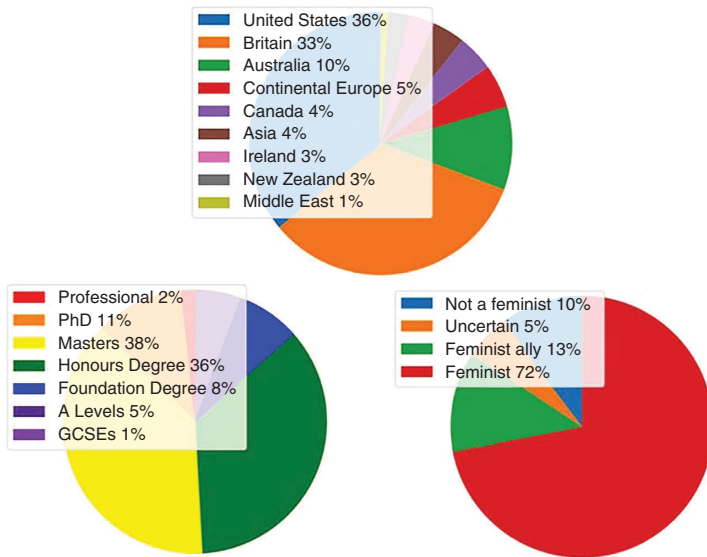


Figure 13.5 Pie charts giving information about the Heyer readers surveyed

Top pie chart: locations of Heyer readers; bottom left pie chart: education levels of Heyer readers; bottom right pie chart: Heyer readers' identification as feminist (or not). Source: the author.

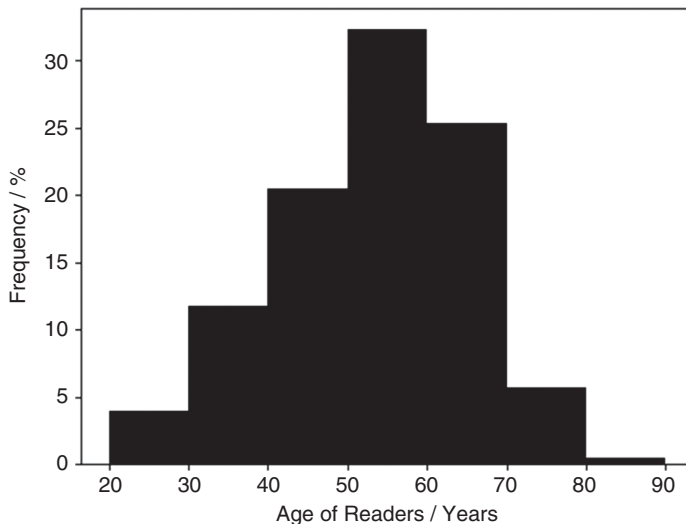


Figure 13.6 Distribution of the ages of Heyer's readers

This frequency diagram shows the age range at which Heyer readers were first introduced to her work. About one-third of the readers are aged in their fifties. The sharp drop-off in readers in their seventies could be a selection effect from the readers surveyed, as the survey was accessed online. Source: the author.

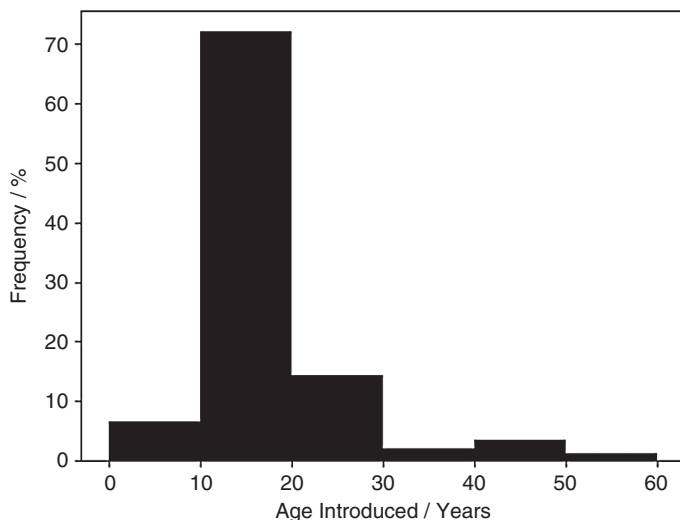


Figure 13.7 Distribution of the ages at which Heyer readers were introduced to the author

This frequency diagram shows the age range at which Heyer readers were first introduced to her work. Over 70 per cent of the readers surveyed were introduced to Heyer’s novels in their teens. Source: the author.

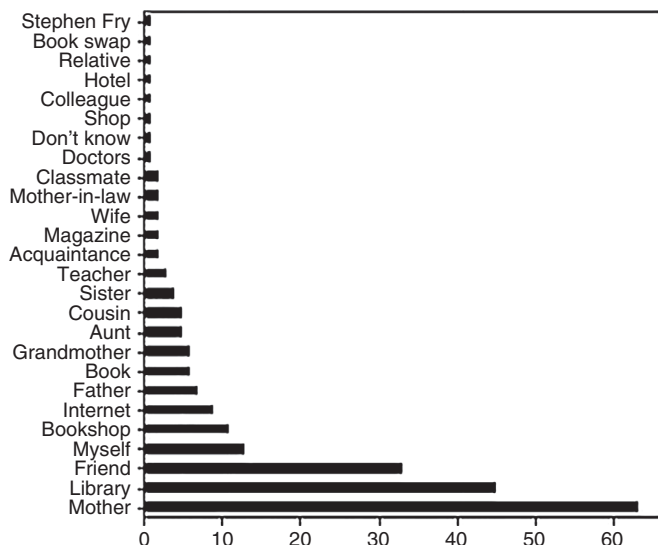


Figure 13.8 Main methods by which Heyer readers were introduced to her work

This bar chart shows the main ways in which the readers surveyed were introduced to Heyer’s work. The three most common methods are by their mother, at a library or by a friend. The number on the x-axis states how many readers were introduced by each method. Source: the author.

the library and then by a friend. The lower left pie chart in Figure 3.5 shows that 87 per cent of readers have a university degree and 11 per cent have a PhD. This high percentage of readers with a PhD could be partly influenced by other speakers at the Nonesuch Conference, 2018, filling out the survey. But how does the fact that 87 per cent of the readers have a BA/BSc compare to the national average? The Office for National Statistics state that in Britain 34 per cent of the working population have a university degree, so this indicates a strong bias for Heyer readers to have a degree.³⁷

The survey also investigates whether the readers saw themselves as similar to Heyer. The results of the survey showed that readers do not see themselves as very similar to Heyer; of those who had read a biography on Heyer, none of them felt they had strong similarities with her, while nearly 60 per cent felt they had no similarities at all. To investigate if readers of Heyer were more likely to have had a similar education as her (she was predominantly home-schooled), readers were asked if they had had a non-standard education. Five per cent of the readers stated that they did not attend mainstream education. There are other forms of non-standard education, but, if we focus on home-schooling, how typical is five per cent across a population? As two-thirds of the readers are from the United Kingdom or United States of America, the home-schooling numbers for these countries were explored. About 0.2 per cent of United Kingdom children and about 3.4 per cent of children in United States of America are home-schooled.³⁸ Only about half the people who did not have a mainstream education were from United States of America. Thus, tentatively, the research shows that there is more than the expected number of readers who did not have a standard form of education, but follow up work on this is required.

From the 230 people who completed the survey, just two of them declared themselves as male. The sample of readers is thus very strongly female-dominated and would suggest that Heyer novels are significantly read by women. The lower right pie chart in Figure 13.2 shows that 72 per cent of the readers surveyed identified as feminist and a further 12 per cent stated that they are a feminist ally. Thus 84 per cent of the readers have feminist leanings. Compared to the United States of American and United Kingdom average, this is very high. Between 23 per cent and 34 per cent of women in the United States of America identify as feminist,³⁹ while the number for women in the United Kingdom is between 9 per cent and 35 per cent.⁴⁰ Heyer herself was not openly feminist in her writings. On the contrary; her characterisation, particularly in her early, modern romances, tends to

not be overly flattering to women.⁴¹ In these books and later ones she is not complimentary about women labelled as suffragettes or their eighteenth-century equivalent, bluestockings.⁴²

3.4 Georgette Heyer readers' reading habits of other authors

'Its plot was as extravagant as anything that came from the Minerva Press'⁴³

The third section of the survey questioned readers about other authors and novels. As well as asking them their favourite books and writers, the survey also questioned them about 25 famous authors and 25 different genres. It was investigated whether the readers had read and liked other historical novelists writing at the same time as Heyer. Margaret Campbell Barnes, Clare Darcy, Mary Ann Gibbs, Margaret Irwin, Norah Lofts and Anya Seton were selected as historical romance authors contemporary to Heyer. [Figure 13.9](#) shows, from the readers who had read these six authors, the percentage that enjoyed their books, that thought they were OK or that disliked them.

The aforementioned novelists have not been widely read by the Heyer readers. Less than 10 per cent had read Margaret Campbell Barnes or Mary Ann Gibbs. The most read author is Anya Seton, whom nearly half of the readers had read. The author enjoyed by the highest percentage of readers is Margaret Campbell Barnes, as none of the readers stated they disliked her – but this could be due to the fact she has not been read by many of the people who filled out the survey. The least liked of these writers is Norah Lofts, read by just over one-third and disliked by 20 per cent of these.

Readers were also asked whether they enjoyed reading authors who were writing during the time that Heyer was writing about, that is eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novelists. [Figure 13.10](#) shows seven female eighteenth- and nineteenth- century authors. Jane Austen, Frances Burney and Ann Radcliffe are late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century writers, and Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell wrote in the nineteenth century, a little later than the time in which Heyer's Regency novels are set. These authors have been more widely read by the survey respondents than the writers contemporary to Heyer. This could be because Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters and Elizabeth Gaskell are generally thought of as 'classic' writers. Most of those answering the survey have read novels by Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, about two-thirds have read those of Elizabeth

Gaskell and about one-third have read those of Frances Burney and Ann Radcliffe. Unsurprisingly Jane Austen, who has been read by 97 per cent of the readers, is liked by 93 per cent of these. The least enjoyed writer is Ann Radcliffe, who was only enjoyed by one-third of the respondents who had read her. **Figure 13.11** shows E. F. Benson and P. G. Wodehouse, comedic writers, contemporary to Heyer. Just under one-third of the readers have read E. F. Benson, and over half of these state that they enjoyed his novels. Just under two-thirds have read P. G. Wodehouse, out of which 85 per cent say they enjoyed reading them. **Figures 13.9** to **13.11** show that for the novelists chosen Heyer readers tend to prefer classic authors and also comedic writers who were writing contemporary to Heyer, rather than romantic historical novelists writing at the same time as Heyer.

This theme that the readers have a strong sense of humour also comes across in the survey in other ways. **Appendix 3** states some of the humorous answers that readers gave in the survey. In addition 96.5 per cent of the readers surveyed stated that one of the things they enjoy about Heyer’s novels is her humour, so it can be concluded that readers generally appreciate the sense of humour in Heyer’s novels.

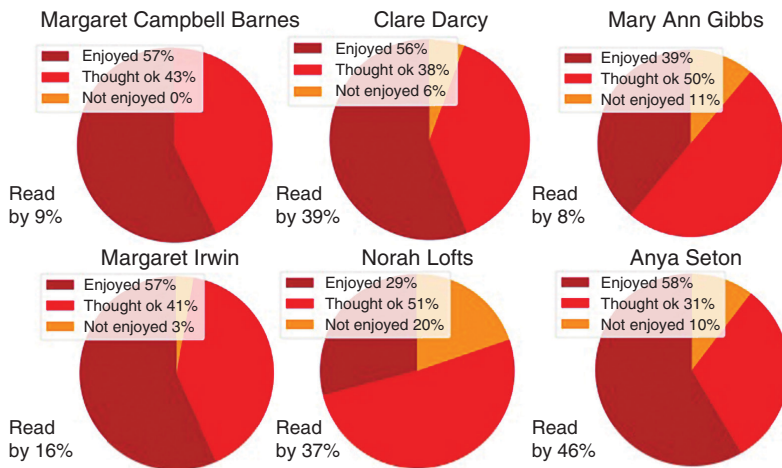


Figure 13.9 Historical writers contemporary to Heyer

Six pie charts showing the reading habits of the readers surveyed regarding historical writers contemporary to Heyer. None of the authors has been greatly read by the survey respondents; the most popular, Anya Seton, has been read by a little under one-half of them. Margaret Campbell Barnes, Clare Darcy, Margaret Irwin and Anya Seton are generally enjoyed by those who have read these authors. Norah Lofts is the author least enjoyed. Source: the author.

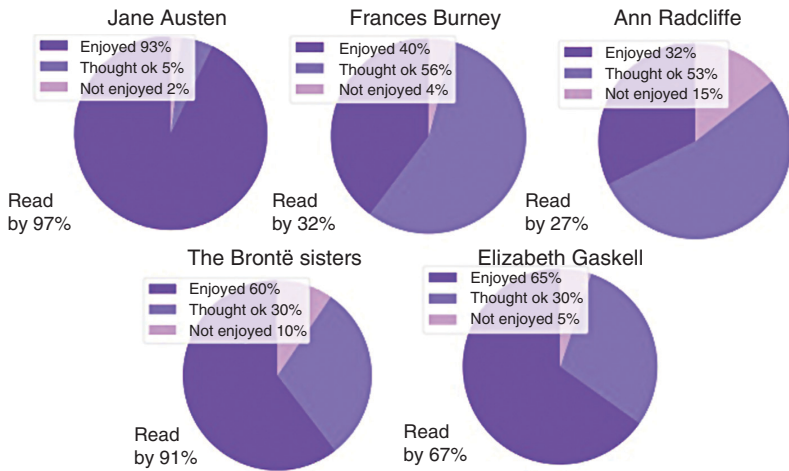


Figure 13.10 Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century female authors

Five pie charts showing the reading habits of the readers surveyed regarding later eighteenth- to mid-nineteenth-century writers. The top rows show later eighteenth-century to early nineteenth-century writers; the bottom row shows mid-nineteenth-century writers. Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters are the most widely read. The least widely read are Frances Burney and Ann Radcliffe. Jane Austen has been enjoyed by nearly everyone who has read her. The Brontë sisters and Elizabeth Gaskell are generally well liked, while Ann Radcliffe is mainly thought of as 'ok'. Source: the author.

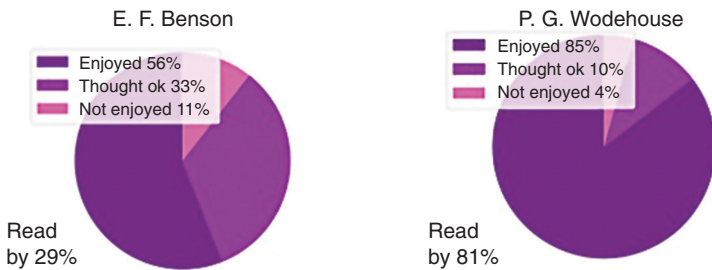


Figure 13.11 Comedic writers contemporary to Heyer

Two pie charts showing the responses of Heyer readers to two comedic writers contemporary to Heyer. P. G. Wodehouse has been read by the greatest number of Heyer readers surveyed, while E. F. Benson has been read by the fewest. These charts show that generally the Heyer readers enjoy comedic writers contemporary to Heyer. Source: the author.

3.5 Further work to be performed using the Georgette Heyer survey data

It can be seen, then, that data science methodologies can give insight into reader behaviour and engagement – information that could be useful to researchers and industry. Even with this small number of people, interesting results have been found: for instance, popular and least popular books and characters, and preferred writers. To have a more representative sample of Heyer readers a much larger survey needs to be undertaken, however, especially with those readers not very engaged with social media. One way to reach more readers could be to print out the survey and put it in local libraries. [Figure 13.8](#) states that the most common method readers were introduced to Heyer is by their mother and the third is by a friend; also listed are father, grandmother, cousin, aunt, sister, wife, mother-in-law and other relative. Thus these readers active on social media could be asked to assist their friends and relatives not on social media to fill out the survey.

Some of the other ways in which people engage with the internet, not already mentioned, are through podcasts and YouTube. There are currently two Georgette Heyer podcasts in production.⁴⁴ Future research could contact both sets of podcasters to share the survey. Also a light-hearted video could be made, potentially Heyer characters speaking to the readers, and uploaded to YouTube with the survey website link embedded.

The work of this chapter has not made a thorough study of the readers' reading habits: this was a pilot piece of research. Those that partook in the survey were asked to list their favourite authors, novels and books genres. Once this data has been cleaned (for example, checking for authors who write under several names), a recommendation engine will be created. The recommendation engine will be built using the readers' favourite novels, authors and genres in a machine learning algorithm multi-label classifier (for example, a Logistic Regression model). Once built and trained, the model would take a list of the favourite novels, authors and genres of someone who has not yet read Heyer and output a list of Heyer novels they may enjoy.

By looking at the genres enjoyed by the readers who filled out the survey, it has been found that a slightly higher percentage of readers like the fantasy genre (54 per cent) than the romance genre (50 per cent); and that just under half of the readers also like the sci-fi genre (46 per cent). It is interesting to note that so many Heyer readers also like fantasy and sci-fi novels – a fact that supports the research

being conducted by Kathleen Jennings (chapter 7). Further work to study this overlap would be interesting. If a strong link is found, this could suggest that readers feel Heyer has created her own universe for her novels, akin to a fantasy or science fiction universe, and that the Regency period is a cohesive storyworld.

Section 4: Conclusion

‘... and finished up his epic speech.’⁴⁵

This chapter has argued for the inclusion of data science methodologies in book studies. It presented the results of the first computer-based text analysis of Georgette Heyer’s historical romances and the first large-scale survey of her readers, both conducted using data science. The text-based analysis has shown that Heyer’s later novels describe and discuss female characters in more detail than her earlier novels. The analysis also shows that her later novels have a larger vocabulary and longer words and sentences, and reveal a curious plateau in her writing level when she moved from writing novels set in the eighteenth century to those set in the Regency period. This temporary halt in the increase of Heyer’s writing complexity may be due to the fact she was writing about a different time. However, setting this change in the context of her life and world events (her financial stresses and the Second World War) shows that both these factors could also have impacted her work.

The second half of the chapter focused on the survey of Heyer’s readers: 230 people took part in the survey. This found that the most popular Heyer novel is *Venetia* and the least popular is *Cousin Kate*. Using the results of the survey, it was revealed that the average Heyer reader is probably from the United Kingdom or United States of America, is female, in her fifties, identifies as a feminist and has a university degree. She was probably introduced to Heyer as a teenager, by either her mother, at the library or by a friend. To make an initial study of the fans’ other reading habits, their thoughts on 25 other authors were asked. Some of the main results of this is shown in Figures 13.9 to 13.11. These seem to suggest that Heyer readers prefer classic authors and comedic writers contemporary to Heyer. Further work might analyse the lists of ten favourite writers named by the readers, looking for other popular authors. Other further work could include creating a machine learning recommendation engine to suggest Heyer novels to new readers. Above all the survey showed how much Heyer is read and enjoyed by a wide

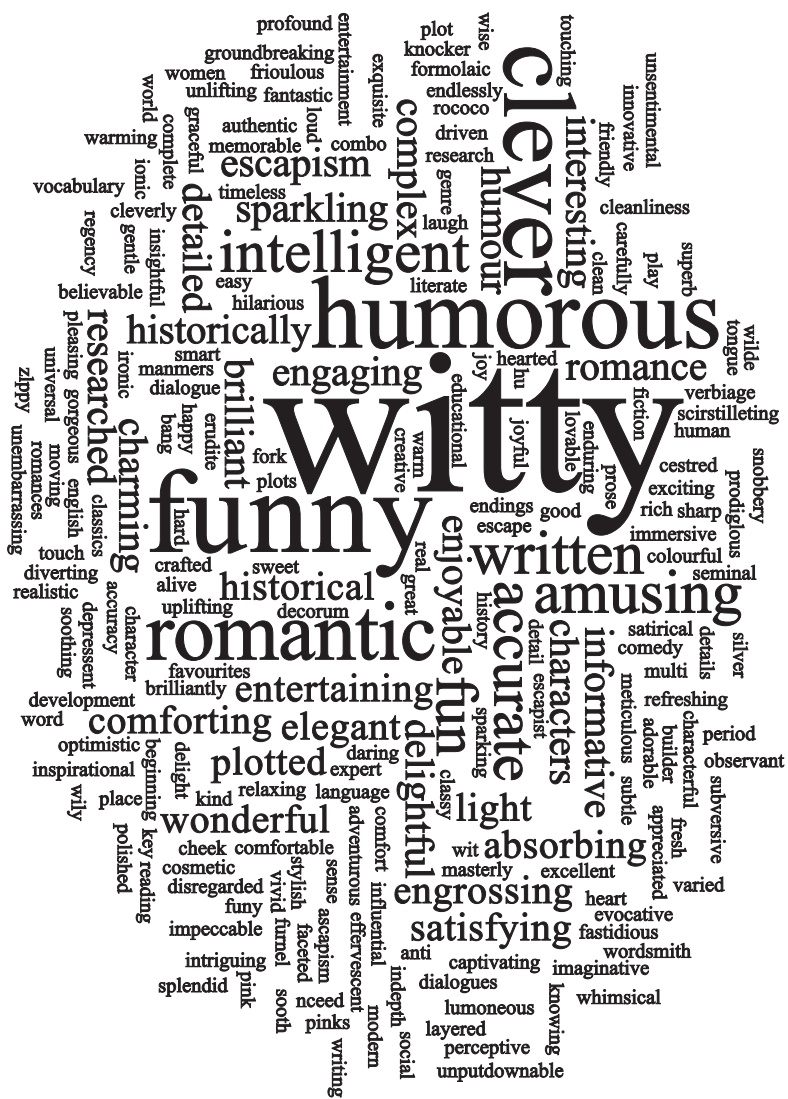


Figure 13.12 A word cloud of the words used to describe Heyer and her writing

This Google word cloud has been created using the three words each reader surveyed used to describe Heyer and her writing. The most commonly occurring words are: witty, funny, humorous, clever, romantic and intelligent. Source: the author.

variety of people, of different ages and nationalities. Figure 13.12 shows a word cloud of the words that Georgette Heyer's readers have used to describe this witty, funny, clever and humorous Queen of Regency Romance.⁴⁶

Notes

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- 2 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 394.
- 3 *Harvard Business Review*, 2012. Accessed 25 August 2019. <https://hbr.org/2012/10/data-scientist-the-sexiest-job-of-the-21st-century>.
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- 13 GitHub, 'GitHub Repository of Reading Level of Georgette Heyer's Novels', 2019.
- 14 Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 6–7, 20–2, 147–8; Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 27–9, 42, 95–8, 101, 338.
- 15 Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 51; Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 214–15, 231–2.
- 16 Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 98–106, 178–83; Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 304–10, 368–72.
- 17 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 50.
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- 33 Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 309.
- 34 Ermert, private communication, 2018.
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- 45 Heyer, *Devil's Cub*, 110.
- 46 The author would like to thank Anastasia Hellewell, Richard Busuttill, Jean-David Bodéan and Amy Street for their contributions to this chapter. The author would also like to thank the members of the Georgette Heyer Appreciation FaceBook Group, the followers of @georgettedaily Twitter account and the Georgette Heyer Group on Goodreads for their time in filling out the survey.

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Appendix 1

List of Georgette Heyer's novels used for the text analysis

Eighteenth-century novels

The Black Moth
These Old Shades
The Masqueraders
Powder and Patch
Devil's Cub
The Convenient Marriage
The Talisman Ring
Faro's Daughter

Regency novels

An Infamous Army
Regency Buck
The Corinthian
The Spanish Bride
Friday's Child
The Reluctant Widow
Arabella
The Foundling
The Grand Sophy
The Quiet Gentleman
Cotillion
The Toll-Gate
Bath Tangle

Spring Muslin
April Lady
Sylvester, or The Wicked Uncle
Venetia
The Unknown Ajax
A Civil Contract
The Nonesuch
False Colours
Frederica
The Black Sheep
Cousin Kate
Charity Girl
Lady of Quality

Appendix 2

Survey questions

Section 1: Heyer's novels and you

When listing favourites, please start with your favourite first and work down your favourites list. A rough order is fine. If you cannot decide, please tick the box at the end. Blank spaces are permitted if you have not read five Heyer novels.

Q1 List your top five Heyer novels

Q2 List your top five favourite Heyer heroines (please give either full name or first name and novel)

Q3 List your top five favourite Heyer heroes (please give either full name or first name and novel)

When listing least favourites, please start with your least favourite first and work up your list. A rough order is fine. If you cannot decide, please tick the box at the end. Blank spaces are permitted if you have not read five Heyer novels.

Q4 List your five least favourite Heyer novels

Q5 List your five least favourite Heyer heroes (please give either full name, or first name and novel)

Q6 List your five least favourite Heyer heroines (please give either full name, or first name and novel)

Q7 Do you feel that any of the characters (major or minor) in a Heyer novel bear a resemblance to you? If so, feel free to give examples.

Q8 How many Heyer novels have you read?

Less than 5

5 – 9

10 – 19

20 – 29

30 – 39

40 – 50

51 – 55

55

Section 2: Georgette Heyer and you

Q9 At what age did you read your first Heyer novel?

Q10 Who introduced you to Heyer?

Q11 Have your favourite Heyer novels and characters changed over the years?

Yes

Maybe

No

Do not know

Prefer not to say

Q12 Tick all of the different types of copies of Heyer you have.

Physical book

Audio book

First owner of the book

Borrowed from the Library

Inherited from friend/relatives

Borrowed from friend/relatives

Electronic copy (e.g. Kindle)

Large print book

Q13 Tick all of the main ways you read Heyer.

Reading during the daytime

Reading at night-time

Spending several hours reading

Reading for a short period of time

Just reading favourite extracts

Reading one book over a period of days until it is finished

Holiday reading

Reading while travelling

Reading one (or more) Heyer many times over the years

Q14 Have you read any non-English versions of Heyer?

Yes

No

Q15 If you have read a biography on Heyer, do you feel that you are:

Very similar to her

Have some similarities

No similarities

Have not read a biography on her

Q16 On a scale of one to ten, with ten being the highest, how much has Heyer impacted your life?

Q17 Do you think that films should be made of Heyer's novels?

Yes

No

Uncertain

Q18 Tick the main reasons you enjoy reading Heyer.

Romance

History

Characters

Humour

Clean romances

Ease of reading

Complexity of language
Military history

Q19 If you met Heyer, which (one) question would you ask her?

Q20 If you met Heyer, what (one) thing would you like to say to her?

Q21 Have you ever created something inspired by Heyer, e.g. fan fiction, YouTube video? If so please give details.

Q22 What three words would you use to describe Heyer's work?

Section 3: History and literature

Q23 List your top ten favourite authors (can include Heyer) (order is not important).

Q24 List your top ten favourite novels (can include Heyer) (order is not important).

Q25 Tick the story genres which you enjoy.

Adventure
Auto/biographies
Children's Literature
Classic
Comic/Humour
Comics/Graphic Novels
Crime/Detective/Mystery
Dystopian/Social Science Fiction
Erotica
Fan Fiction
Fairy Tale/Fable
Fantasy
Folklore/Mythology
Gothic Horror
Historical Fiction
Historical Romance
History with a difference e.g. Steampunk
Horror

Legend/Epic
Realistic Fiction/Modern Day
Romance
Science Fiction
Short Story
Suspense/Thriller
Teenage Romance/Chick Lit

Q26 For the following authors, tick one from: Read and enjoyed, Read and thought it was OK, Read and did not like, Have not read.

Jane Austen
E. F. Benson
The Brontës
Fanny Burney
Margaret Campbell Barnes
Barbara Cartland
Agatha Christie
Bernard Cornwell
Diana Gabaldon
Mary Ann Gibbs
Clare Darcy
Charles Dickens
Alexandre Dumas
C. S. Forester
Elizabeth Gaskell
Philippa Gregory
Thomas Hardy
Robert Harris
Margaret Irwin
Norah Lofts
Patrick O'Brian
Ann Radcliffe
Anya Seton
William Shakespeare
P. G. Wodehouse

Q27 Do you, or have you written

For a job
For personal enjoyment

Fan Fiction

Have not written

Prefer not to say

Q28 Do you have a qualification in writing or in English? If so, as what level (can include GCSE/O-Level/US High School Diploma/Year 10 School Certificate etc).

Q29 Do you have a qualification in History? If so, as what level (can include GCSE/O-Level/US High School Diploma/Year 10 School Certificate etc).

Q30 What historical periods especially interest you, if any?

Q31 Are you particularly interested in women's history?

Yes

No

Uncertain

Prefer not to say

Section 4: A little about yourself

Q32 Are you

Female

Male

Gender queer

Prefer not to say

Q33 Which age range are you in?

Under 10

10 – 19

20 – 29

30 – 39

40 – 49

50 – 59

60 – 69

70 – 79

80 – 89

90 – 100

Prefer not to say

Q34 What is your Nationality/ies (name all)?

Q35 What is/are your Country/ies of Residency (name all)?

Q36 Is English your first language?

Yes

No

Prefer not to say

Q37 Highest level of education?

Q38 List any/all professions you have had.

Q38 Did you have a standard/mainstream education?

Yes

No

Prefer not to say

Q40 Would you consider yourself a feminist?

Yes

No

A feminist ally

Uncertain

Appendix 3

A sample of the comical answers written by the Heyer readers while completing the survey

- Do you know how many male lives you've made difficult because they cannot live up to your heroes?
- The idiot in April Lady
- She hated her fans so I would be very reluctant to ask her anything other than if I could get her a drink
- Would you please sign my copy of Sylvester?
- Cardross [does he even have a first name?]
- Whatever the jerk's name was, Faro's Daughter, I forget his name, Bath Tangle, Boring Guy, The Foundling
- Jane Austen (Hey – she's got to be in the top ten somewhere! Sorry that you're under Enid Blyton, Jane; really sorry. What can I say? I'm an intellectual lightweight!)
- DAMEREL!!
- Regency Buck is unreadable, I've attempted The Quiet Gentleman 2x & failed, The plot of Black Sheep is Adults Know Best. Who needs that? The Grand Sophy has its virtues, but its hero has no charm. Venetia makes me grit my teeth, I've never found Arabella charming
- If you met Heyer, what question would you ask her? I don't think I would dare. She didn't seem to have much patience with her readers
- There are no heroes in Penhallow

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