Women and Romance

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Women and romance: in the tradition of English fiction, as well as in popular culture, these two terms seem inextricably intertwined. Women supposedly dream of romance—or so Freud tells us when he distinguishes between erotic and ambitious fantasies (women have, or should have, only the former);\(^1\) they certainly seem to read and write romances—Scudéry-like romances constituted the light literature of English circulating libraries and continue today, as Harlequin romances, to stock supermarket racks.\(^2\) Women also star in them: Little Nell, Hetty Sorrel, and countless other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century heroines figure the yoking of women and romance, as much as the heroines of Harlequin fiction, or more mainstream books such as Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, do still. Whether conceived as a mode of erotic wish-fulfillment, or as a prose form auxiliary to the novel, romance is thought somehow proper to women and usually derided accordingly. In fact, the connection between women and romance seems so appro-


Introduction

It has been considered almost natural—not requiring, or even open to, interpretation.

But why this yoking? The various meanings of "romance" attest to without explaining it: as my book shows, different critics, in suggesting different answers, define "romance" (and "women") differently, while preserving their connection. Their connection is a constant underlying all these meanings, which serve to uphold this yoking but not to question it. I approach the question of their connection not by offering another definition of these terms but by examining the motives behind their definitions, looking at how they work rather than what they mean. I argue that writers link women and romance, and the meanings of these terms change (and can even contradict themselves), according to a certain economy: the subtle, continuous shifts in what they mean are precisely what make their connection a real yoking, precisely what keep it an ever useful ploy of a dominant system, which maintains its positions of privilege—staked out by those attempting to define themselves as "men" and "novels"—by taking its meaning from women and romance. Women and romance are constructed within the male order and the established tradition of prose fiction that grows out of and upholds that order; they are constructed as marginal and secondary in order to secure the dominance of men and novels. The yoking of women and romance results from their similar function: they are blank counters given whatever meaning establishes the priority of the privileged terms.

Yet the privilege women and romance reflect is a consoling illusion. Since Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, feminists have been explicitly aware of the pitfalls and compensations in the construction of woman as man's other (a dynamic also subsequently highlighted by deconstruction's attention to the interplay of supposed opposites). The status quo defines itself by gesturing to its (debased) mirror opposite, whose lacks and problems seem to point to its own completeness and strength. Yet it actually constructs this other out of elements within it that threaten its position, projecting them outward in hopes of escaping them. Because

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these elements are part of the status quo, it can never elude them, and in its very denial is even able to dwell on without admitting them.

Romance as the novel's other becomes just such a(n ultimately ineffective) scapegoat; as I argue in this book, the first English novels, attempting to define their form, use "romance" (a convenient term at play at that time in the lexicon of prose fiction) to refer to whatever the novel (hopes it) is not, deploying the term in an attempt to draw off contradictions and problems of coherence that undermine the novel's incorporation. The debate between the novel and romance endures beyond this early historical predicament because such scapegoating is necessary to the attempt to define and delimit any integral form. The novel's definition of romance points to its own problems, to problems of representation that it cannot escape. By pointing to these, it also points to the impossibility of its autonomous identity; the novel needs romance in order to give it the appearance of identity and meaning, as well as of privilege, but such identity and privilege are already sabotaged by the very problems that prompt their defensive formation.

In this economy, woman is a scapegoat too, a counter given value by the system in which it circulates. Like romance, she is constructed in opposition to a standard—man—and (circularly) seems to uphold that standard by deviating from it. Yet, just as the definition of romance points to problems of representation, the definition of woman points to problems of (gender) identity. "Men" and "wom-

4Recent theorists, such as Tzvetan Todorov or Jacques Derrida, argue in fact that such contradictions unsettle the firm establishment of any genre. Todorov argues that "the fact that a work 'disobeys' its genre does not make the latter nonexistent; it is tempting to say that quite the contrary is true. And for a twofold reason. First, because transgression, in order to exist as such, requires a law that will, of course, be transgressed. One could go further: the norm becomes visible—lives—only by its transgressions. . . . But there is more. Not only does the work, for all its being an exception, necessarily presuppose a rule; but this work also, as soon as it is recognized in its exceptional status, becomes in its turn, thanks to successful sales and critical attention, a rule" ("The Origin of Genres," trans. Richard M. Berrong, New Literary History 8 [1976]: 160). Jacques Derrida in a sense augments or qualifies Todorov's claims, when he suggests that "every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (in "The Law of Genre," trans. Avital Ronell, Glyph 7 [1980]: 212). For a discussion of the debate between structural and poststructural definitions of genre, see Adena Rosmarin, The Power of Genre (1985).
en” are not fixed categories, essential entities, but constructions that rely on each other for their meaning and position within a hierarchy.

The male order constructs woman as man’s contradiction, and at the same time often constructs her as a contradiction—incoherent, mercurial, nonsensical. The other is what allows the subject to construct a self at all, to seem to resolve its own incoherence and contradictions. Lacan calls the pattern of projection and construction “the imaginary,” and this category is helpful because it relates the play of mirrors within the strategy of the other precisely to problems of character and gender. Through the other, the subject reflects back an image of itself, creating the very illusion of a self. For Lacan, the constructed self is necessarily gendered: the subject is subject to a sexual system and appears precisely at the moment it recognizes (its inadequacy within) that system, precisely when its lack puts into play an unassuageable desire.\(^5\) Let me bracket for the moment whether Lacan’s (so-called) description of that system in terms of the Name-of-the-Father and the Phallus wittingly or unwittingly re-enforces the sexual biases that construct the subject; readers need not even accept such a strictly psychoanalytic grammar to agree that the questions of identity and gender are inextricably related. Feminist analyses that differ from, or are even opposed to, psychoanalysis, such as those that focus on an individual’s social and economic role, agree that that role and the identity that arises from it are conditioned (and perhaps even determined) by gender.\(^6\)

In this study, I consider women and romance in terms of their


\(^6\)Even when directly denying the usefulness of psychoanalysis to feminism and arguing for the need to ground ourselves in theories of social change, a critic such as Elizabeth Wilson, for example, assumes that an account of the construction of sexual identity remains necessary to feminism; see her “Psychoanalysis: Psychic Law and Order?” *Feminist Review* 8 (1981): 63–78.
utility within an imaginary dynamic, one that serves seemingly established positions—the male order and its literary tradition—enthroned within the system of power. I chart the various ways the constructions of women and romance are put to use and argue that such a dynamic ultimately defeats its own ends, although such defeat does not necessarily empower women—on the contrary, may even redound on them. Women and romance cannot rescue men and novels from a system of relations whose constrictions these latter hope desperately to elude. Subordinating women and romance grants those ranked above them at best local (although effective and destructive) power, for total control resides in the system of construction and representation in which all terms are determined. At the same time, it seems worth stressing that the male order has no essential connection to those who are biologically male but simply demarcates this uneasy position of privilege in the system of power. This privilege is most often, though not necessarily, assumed by those who are male, however, and even bolstered by references to that maleness (the familiar arguments about strength, brain size, and so on); hence the feminist shorthand, “the male order.”

This system of power is something more than the male order, representation, language, the unconscious, ideology, or culture, although all these terms have at different times and places been used as synonyms for it, and I fall into such shorthand in this book too. The controlling system, however, is what enables these, the governing paradigm that permits and gives shape to our world, the solvent or glue—invisible as ether—that holds our understanding of it together. Derrida’s phallogocentrism, Lacan’s symbolic order, or Foucault’s network of power have been recent attempts to describe this system, and I rely on their suggestions about it, whatever their disagreements. My concern with identity in this study profits from the work of Lacan and Foucault, from their analyses of how the individual subject conforms to and props up the system producing it. I am especially indebted in these pages, however, to recent feminist literary theory and its emphasis on how gender is constructed so that the category of woman in particular underwrites and ensures that system.

I examine in this study eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English novels, but I would argue that the pattern I consider applies
in some degree to any system of power relations that relies on notions of the coherent self and, hence, of fixed gender. Whether such an argument means that (as psychoanalysis might claim) this pattern is transhistorical or that (as followers of Foucault might assert) it emerges historically in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because of changes in the definition of the self cannot perhaps be resolved. What is important to my study is that both these theoretical perspectives, despite their radical disagreements, describe a similar pattern within which to examine these novels.

My claims about the construction of gender and genre may seem to risk the charge of functionalism: I may seem to imply that the male order is in control of the functioning of this signifying system in which it is actually itself defined, that it is able to effect its own self-interest by defining the category of woman, for example, according to whatever allows for its own smooth operation. Rather than implying that systems of relations are so simple, however, I explore our wish that they were so and show instead that categories such as “woman” are not transparent but mark precisely those contested sites that make any claim to power, by “men,” for example, problematic (that such problems inevitably hinder smooth operations is what actually opens up a space for analysis and makes my investigation possible). My conclusions ultimately put into question claims to power, suggesting that the bid for power may effect its own kind of indenture. The idea that they might (or ought to) control it keeps those within the position of the male order locked within the system of power relations that favors them (but at a cost).

Moreover, the strategy of scapegoating I describe might more specifically be seen as the process Freud called “negation,” a rejec-

7And the differences between such groups lessen considerably if one attends to the redefinition of his historical context that Foucault seems to imply in the last two volumes of the History of Sexuality, in which he reverts to the Classical period to discuss the subject, the same period that underlies psychoanalytic and deconstructive discussions of identity. See Michel Foucault, The Use of Pleasure, vol. 2 of The History of Sexuality, trans. Robert Hurley (1986), and The Care of the Self, vol. 3 of The History of Sexuality, trans. Robert Hurley (1988).

8For another discussion of the relation between feminist methodology (this time Marxist feminism) and functionalism, see Michèle Barrett, “Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender,” in Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class, and Race in Literature and Culture, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (1985), 71–73.
tion that foregrounds crucial material while attempting to protect against it with a shield of denial. By denying that the figure in a dream is his or her mother, for instance, a patient actually indicates that it is (and the following chapter will attempt to account for why the mother might be Freud's exemplary figure here): "Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed; indeed, it is already a lifting of the repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed." Although Freud goes on to suggest that, through negation, the mind "enriches itself with material that is indispensable for its proper functioning," the easy and straightforward operations of functionalism are already put into question. As categories that give the male order access to what it otherwise cannot admit, women and romance do more than simply allow it to function; they also embody just what hinders its operations. That they do both at once, however, suggests the problem of determining the valence of contradiction. The undecidability of negation, the problem of whether the subject can ever really say no to what propels it, suggests that one recent approach to contradiction—celebrating it as the locus of subversion—may be too pat. The suggestion implicit throughout Foucault's work—that contradiction can be the very dynamic that enforces an inescapable order by providing the (specious) appearance of dissent from it—usefully qualifies the mystification of contradiction. At the same time, however, such qualifications can become overly programmatic themselves, if imposed on all contexts, presented as truth (as Foucault himself, in holding open the possibility of resistance to power, well recognized).

How then do we as subjects work within systems of signification and power? Let me unbracket here the question of whether our inscription within the dominant discourse is witting or not. This book is predicated on the idea that no one can avoid working within, and so re-enforcing, systems of power, but the understanding that we all must do so is crucial; it allows us to see and to open up, if not to subvert, those systems. As Foucault and Derrida both argue, the notion of subversion is necessary to the ruling order,

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10Freud, "Negation," 236.
which enforces itself by deploying the possibility of transgression.\textsuperscript{12} But, because, as subjects, we are caught within a system that already seems to inhabit any space outside it we might imagine, we need not stop analyzing the space we are within. It is crucial to recognize our situation in this space, and an important way to map it is to focus on the moments that seem to transgress it, the strategies of sameness and difference that promise different routes to what might be the same end—the consolation of freedom that seems to sustain our struggle.

What distinguishes feminism from the male order is that feminism to some degree has always been aware of the indifference of power, of our painful entrapment as subjects within it, and of the necessity for continuing to resist what we cannot imagine how to overcome, without wishfully denying it. The male order establishes itself precisely by ignoring its own implication within a controlling order; it identifies with and attempts to take the place of that order by insisting on women’s subjugation. Feminist theorists such as Mary Jacobus, Margaret Homans, Eve Sedgwick, Gayle Rubin, and Christine Froula have all in different ways described the methods used by patriarchy to cement and assert the bonds between men by forging them on the site of the woman.\textsuperscript{13} Whether in the Oedipal triangle or male systems of exchange, the construction of occluded or invisible women gives the laws of male privilege their currency. Her expulsion or subservience is meant to hide that the bonds of patriarchy are shackles that can never be removed, although they may seem to be lessened, through the defensive oppression of others.

Our very division into 	extit{gendered} subjects is one way power deploys itself. But even the privileged term within gender division is privileged at a cost, and men’s very identification with power is


what most threatens to sabotage them, and all of us. The male order's blind identification with ultimate authority is destructive to everyone inscribed within gender (and risks being ultimately so, according to the claims of feminists such as Dorothy Dinnerstein or Carol Cohn who connect gender roles and the scapegoating of women with the danger of nuclear apocalypse\(^1\)). But, at the same time, the male order is also too simply the other for feminism; feminists' unexamined use of that term tends to deny women's implication in authority—to deny the ways we as feminists cannot, in devising our own theories, say no to fathers like Freud but must use their very perspectives in our struggles with them, and also the ways we as women (necessarily) move within and use the language and structure of dominance itself, simply by operating as subjects who use language, for example. I intend to foreground an examination of these vexed relations to the orders that create us by unraveling the particular strategies that invest men and women, novels and romance, with meaning within those orders.

I examine the consolations of gender and genre by attempting to engage with what have been crucial questions for feminist literary theory; my readings question how genre in prose fiction in general, and in certain exemplary English novels in particular, relies on gender division. The attention to the working of power through the conduit of gender in these novels, however, is inseparable from an attention to key issues in recent feminist debate. Working through questions of form, reading certain novels that particularly put the relations between the novel and romance into play, I also engage in and investigate feminist literary analysis, meditating on its problems and strengths.

The first chapter, for example, outlines the formal emphasis of this book. (In doing so, it interrupts the literary history that this investigation constructs too, delaying for a moment the chronological progression of the rest of the chapters in order to introduce the topics and themes crucial to this study.) It considers the ways

representation mediates our approach to the material by examining how the category of history can trade on certain gender assumptions. My reading of George Meredith's fiction, especially *Diana of the Crossways*, engages in the ongoing critical dialogue about the construction of history in literary analysis by focusing on women's role in that construction: her deployment enables the gender consolation encoded into certain uses of the category of history. An investigation of Meredith's treatment of romance reveals some of the pitfalls built into the concept of history as it is frequently used, suggesting as well dangers we need to recognize in our feminist investigations.

In chapter 2, Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* provides a focus for a discussion of the tradition of women's writing. Lennox's use of the term "romance" puts into question whether the relation of women and romance is as straightforwardly disabling as some feminist critics, such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, have argued. Lennox's use of romance demonstrates instead that woman's ancillary and dependent position does not depend on her association with some particular derided form, but that such associations might actually expose the very mechanisms of her derision. At the same time, a reading of Lennox's novel impels us to question the subversiveness that Elaine Showalter suggests inheres in women's writing in the association between women and certain forms such as romance.

An investigation of the debate about essentialism in feminist literary theory organizes a discussion of Mary Wollstonecraft's fiction. The way her work links certain figures—especially the mother and the prostitute—to romance facilitates an inquiry into the contradictions within recent treatment of the (woman's) body in feminist analysis, especially those readings that focus on the social and economic determinants of meaning. This chapter argues that the turn to the material world, pared down and reduced to the figure of the body, rather than simply freeing feminist interpretation from ideological baggage, must itself be determined by particular assumptions that can also boomerang onto feminism.

The fourth chapter explores my own assumptions by exploring the uneasy relation of Foucauldian interpretation to feminist analysis. The divided nature of romance in Charles Dickens's novels suggests the oscillations of power which recent Foucault-inspired
critics of Dickens chart. At the same time, however, the treatment of women in those novels exposes how male claims to power depend on but are called into question by the denial of women's oppression.

Chapter 5 considers what feminist literary criticism might attempt in the future, how it might proceed given what seems the current theoretical impasse, the difficulty if not impossibility of imagining resistance. This chapter reinterprets George Eliot’s pessimism, the double bind for women within her novels that has troubled feminist critics, as a reaction to just such a dilemma. A reading of Eliot’s treatment of romance specifically in terms of the feminist debate about the specular order, about whether or not the gaze is male, suggests feminism’s implication within the orders we as feminists wish to oppose and escape. Rather than suggesting that we cease in our attempts to oppose and resist, however, Eliot’s fiction suggests that a wishful ignorance of the limits within those attempts may be more destructive to them than recognizing their limits, than admitting the boundaries past which we cannot see. I end with a short conclusion meditating on what those boundaries have been in my discussion.