

Reading Response in Mary Balogh: A Critical Engagement

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Abstract: A long established author of Regency-set romances, Mary Balogh has a history of subverting the trends and tropes of the genre. This paper examines how Balogh uses subversion as a form of participating in the critical discussion on romance novels that took place in the 1980s and early 1990s through her novels *Dark Angel* (1994), *Lord Carew's Bride* (1994), and *The Famous Heroine* (1996). Thematically centred on female agency, sexuality and gender roles, these books illustrate a conversation between a romance author and the discourse of critics as well as illuminate Balogh's views on the themes. The essays in *Dangerous Women and Adventurous Men: Romance Writers on the Appeal of Romance* (1992) edited by Jayne Ann Krentz and Kay Mussell's *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction* (1984) form the framework for the analyses of Balogh's novels as responses to contemporary discussion.

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"Doormat" (31). "Airhead" (32). "Too Stupid to Live" (35). These are some of the categories of romance heroine Candy Tan and Sarah Wendell introduce in *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels* (2009). All can be seen as subtypes of the damsel in distress, the stereotype most often associated with the romance heroine in criticism from the 1970s and the 1980s. Indeed, Germaine Greer writes in 1971 that "[t]he ineffectual heroine is the most important part of the story, ineffectual against ravishment (for how could such a delicate thing kick a peer of the realm in his rising passion?) and against more agreeable forms of sexual conquest" (177). In the late 1980s and 1990s,

however, scholars and non-scholars of varying backgrounds in romance reading sought to broaden the discourse regarding heroines. In her 1984 book *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction*, for example, Kay Mussell replaces the idea that the romance heroine must be "ineffectual" with the claim that she must, instead, prove herself worthy by passing what Mussell calls "the domestic test." "Romances always have female protagonists," she writes, "but not all women are heroines; only women who pass the domestic test by conforming to a set of expectations in values and activities may earn the reward of being chosen by Mr. Right" (89). Carol Thurston's *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (1987), published just three years later, argues that the efficacy of the heroine extends beyond domesticity to include professional and, especially, sexual agency. For Thurston, the evolution of the heroine has led to the development of a New Heroine, who "is both good and sexual, and ... possesses a passionate drive for self-determination and autonomy" (8). However, even as late as 1996, such views as Greer's had not disappeared. In the jointly-authored essay "Reading Romance, Reading Ourselves," for example, Marah Bianca Rhoades writes this about the romance heroine and the reader's relationship to her:

To be the virginal, beautiful, helpless female waiting passively to be overcome by a perfect man who takes her away from the problems in her life to live happily ever after, a man who envelops her and relieves her of the responsibility of her life – on some level don't we all fantasize about that? ... To belong to someone, for in belonging to someone, we no longer have to look out for ourselves but are cared for as a cherished possession. (Clark et al 363)

Rhoades presents the romance heroine as an inactive object, rather than an active subject, "always the possession of the man, held within the totalizing masculine structure of these books" (365). Her use of the words "virginal" and "overcome" is also significant: as in Greer, who pairs the "ineffectual heroine" with narratives of "ravishment" and "more agreeable forms of sexual conquest" (177), Rhoades suggests that romance depends on sexual threat from the hero and that it is structured by the dichotomy of virgins and whores, that is, the demonisation of female sexuality.

In 1992, romance authors took a stand against the derision directed towards the genre and its heroines, in the form of a collection of essays edited by romance author Jayne Ann Krentz, *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of Romance*. Romance author Judith Arnold recalls in her contribution to the collection her first experience with romance novels: "I assumed [the romance novels] would promote the notion that a woman was dependent on a man to give her life meaning and joy – that without a man, a woman was incomplete ... [but] in [these] books, the heroines *did*" (134, original emphasis). Krentz adds the theme of female empowerment: "In the romance novel ... the woman always wins. With courage, intelligence, and gentleness, she brings the most dangerous creature on earth, the human male, to his knees" ("Introduction" 5). Krentz elaborates on the dangerousness of the hero in a collaborative essay with Linda Barlow, "Beneath the Surface: The Hidden Codes of Romance," by particularly discussing the figure of the "devil-hero" who "must be a worthy and suitably dangerous opponent, a larger-than-life male imbued with great power and a mysterious past" in order to present a challenge

for the heroine (19). That is to say, the dangerous, powerful hero is a staple in the genre because of exactly these qualities: he exists to provide the readers the power fantasy his eventual submission creates. The readers, on encountering such a hero on the page, read past his nefariousness and look for the hints of fragility that humanise him and make him suitable for his function in the novel.

Not only have romance authors responded to criticism in essay form, but, I claim, also in their fiction. This paper will look at three interconnected Regency-set novels by the Welsh-Canadian author Mary Balogh and examine the way in which three of her novels comment and react to the discussion outlined above. In *Dark Angel* (1994), Balogh subverts the stereotype of the heroine as a mere damsel in distress with no character development whatsoever; *Lord Carew's Bride* (1994) centres sexual threat and contradicts its necessity in a hero; and *The Famous Heroine* (1996) explores gender performativity through Mussell's domestic test. Read this way, as engagements with critical discourse, we can see the novels building on each other. In *Dark Angel*, Jennifer and Gabriel form a typical historical romance couple – the beautiful young woman and the satanic hero – and the main issue is the heroine's agency and its development. This question dealt with, to the conclusion that the heroine need not be a damsel in distress, Samantha of *Lord Carew's Bride* can enter the novel already possessed of agency, and the focus can shift to the nature of the hero and the role of sex. In *Lord Carew's Bride* the *villain* of the novel is satanic, while the hero is explicitly presented as unthreatening. (Even within Balogh's oeuvre – her first beta-type hero, Gerald, appeared in *A Precious Jewel* in 1992 – this hero, Hartley, seems particularly docile.) The sexual threat of the hero and the necessity of taming him are questioned and proven unnecessary. Once sex has been rendered unthreatening, Balogh can move on to the discussion of how a heroine should behave, or whether she needs to act a certain way at all: a move that returns her to the idea of the “domestic test” in *The Famous Heroine*. In short, Balogh takes the qualms of the critics and successively subverts them in her heroines: Jennifer journeys from a passive damsel to an active heroine; Samantha confronts her sexual relationship to the two men of her novel; and Cora overstates and therefore ultimately *non-conforms* to the performance of socially accepted femininity.

Death of a Damsel

At the beginning of *Dark Angel*, Balogh introduces the heroine Jennifer as just such a heroine as critics such as Greer and Rhoades revile: young, innocent, and completely subdued to the will of the men in her life. She is, as Barlow writes in her *Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women* essay “The Androgynous Writer: Another Point of View,” a heroine “who, at the beginning of the romance, may seem to lack her full complement of power authority” (47–48). This is evident in her “patriarchally induced anxieties” (47): when she wonders at her intended Lionel's stiffness and formality after she has accepted his proposal, she concludes that his manner must be due to embarrassment, as “[i]t must be so much more of an ordeal for a man to make an offer than for a woman to receive it. The woman's role was passive while the man's was active” (29). The same thought has, with an air of careless lament, been expressed earlier by her cousin Samantha, and it gives weight to Jennifer's reflection in that it marks this as the common way of thinking in Jennifer's

social sphere – in Samantha’s words, “we [women] are rarely given a say in the ordering of our own lives. That is the way of the world, alas” (22–23). Men get what they want, and women do as they are told and are “acted upon,” as Angie Moorman puts it in “Reading Romance, Reading Ourselves” (Clark et al 364). Jennifer has lived her whole life in a patriarchal society, ruled primarily by her father and subsequently by her fiancé; she trusts their judgment over her own, and on several occasions justifies their behaviour at her own expense.

This is, however, only the initial setting. Balogh soon starts hinting that there is a seed of rebellion in Jennifer as regards this view of passive femininity, to be brought to the fore by the catalytic hero. She is shown to strain against the restrictions society imposes on her. Although, at the surface level, Balogh implies in the scene of Lionel’s proposal that Jennifer does not envy him the active role of offering and being nervous over it, at the beginning of the very same paragraph a subtler but equally notable sign of dissatisfaction is placed. Jennifer “[wants Lionel] to call her Jennifer [instead of ‘Miss Winwood’] and [wonders] if she should say so” (29). She decides it would be “too forward” and, as seen above, reminds herself that her role is passive (29). However, she continues to strain against such patriarchal views without entirely realising it – she fleetingly thinks she should be able to say what she likes to her betrothed (44) and resents propriety that dictates they cannot spend all night together at a ball (52). The first occasion in the novel where Balogh places her in a situation where she can make her own choices is when she meets the hero. As opposed to her father and Lionel, the casual and essentially respectful Gabriel makes offers and suggestions rather than issues commands. The contrast between his and Lionel’s attitude to women is made explicit in the conversations Jennifer has with them in a short span of time: Gabriel’s remark that “[a] woman would quickly lose her appeal, no matter how lovely and ornamental she was, if she had nothing else to offer” (121) is opposed by Lionel’s condescending words,

Of course you have a mind ... If it is a good mind, it will recognize the wisdom of deferring to the greater experience and better judgment of the men who have charge of you and women considerably older than yourself. ... I certainly expect [a wife] who knows her own place and mine. (133)

Having given Jennifer a taste of respect, Balogh starts to show more of her annoyance towards Lionel’s controlling ways and Jennifer starts to defy society in favour of her own wishes.

About halfway through the novel comes what can be considered to be its Point of Ritual Death, “the moment in the narrative when the union of heroine and hero seems impossible” that implies the barriers between them will stand (Regis 14). In this novel, the ritual death is a social death rather than a representation of physical demise: a false letter, presumably proving an indiscretion between Jennifer and Gabriel, strips the former of her respectability in society, and subsequently leads to her liberation of its strict requirements and her rebirth as an active individual. After accepting Gabriel’s offer to help her keep her social status through marriage, Jennifer starts to show her marked discontent more boldly: she sneers at Gabriel, taunts him, and her language becomes heavily marked with verbs such as “own” and “possess” whereas before Gabriel’s proposal she did not use them at all.

These show that although she has been bent to the will of men, she is aware of it now, and her bitterness is made clear in her speech:

After tomorrow morning you will possess my body, my lord. It seems to be important to you. You will never possess my heart or my respect or my esteem. I will hate you every day for the rest of my life. (203)

Contrary to the situation before, she is now aware of the control and power a husband will have over her, a situation “all heroines deplore” (Thurston 74), at least the ones of late 1970s and early 1980s examined by Thurston in *The Romance Revolution* (1987). Balogh now shows Jennifer to really be one of Thurston’s New Heroines in her resentment of the notion that men are active and women passive; she has recognised her need and right to have agency and to make her own decisions instead of being controlled. What marriage during the Regency meant, however, was the control of husband over wife, and she will submit to it, but not without the bitterness exemplified in the quote above. As Gabriel and Jennifer discuss Lionel shortly after their rushed marriage, her strain against the patriarchal restraints is expressed in a plea:

She could not speak for a while. Her teeth were clamped together. “I cannot command anything, can I?” she said. “I would ask you, Gabriel, I would beg you please never to mention his name to me again. If there is one shred of decency in you, do that for me.” (229)

It is thus clearly acknowledged that she is legally and socially in his power and cannot order him to do anything. All she can do, within the bounds of the society she has grown in, is to plead.

However, as observed in Penelope Williamson’s *Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women* essay “By Honor Bound: The Heroine as Hero,”

[b]y the end of the book there is an ideal union of two equal partners, each respecting the other’s abilities, complementing their strengths and weaknesses – a true marriage in the broadest sense of the word. (129)

Gabriel and Jennifer together form a new, less corrupted society through their marriage (cf. Regis 44), a society where she feels comfortable asserting herself, as exemplified by a scene where he asks her to join him for breakfast and she, quite belligerently, asks whether she has a choice in the matter (*Dark Angel* 252). Receiving the affirmative answer and the comment, “You are not my prisoner, Jennifer. Only my wife” (252) she is happy to accept his request of company. She accepts because she has been given the choice and her decision will be respected; the freedom to choose and act prompts her to exercise her rights more. In the final scene of the novel she alone holds the power, a new situation in her life and product of this new society. She heads to her husband’s bedroom, notably without knocking and therefore without asking permission, and starts with an assertive, “I want our marriage to continue” (304). These are not the words of a woman content to let others dictate her future: she is “in control; the choice is hers” (Williamson 129).

The case of Jennifer is one of Balogh subverting the stereotype of the passive romance heroine who must patiently wait for a man to rescue her: Jennifer's distress stems from having allowed men to make decisions and act for her rather than anything else. After the point of ritual death she ceases to expect help from men, as once they perceive her guilty of indiscretion all the men she has trusted have turned their backs on her – Lionel does not speak to her, and her own father canes her – and her willingness to please them has proven meaningless. As Gabriel, in contrast, continues to offer her options and choices, she becomes a more assertive, active individual, no longer in need of a man to choose for her. In losing all, she gains all.

His Rising Passion

Having established in *Dark Angel* the fact that a romance heroine need not be passive, in *Lord Carew's Bride* Balogh turns to discussion of sexuality and, more specifically, the question of whether the hero needs to be a sexually threatening Alpha man. The heroine of this novel, Samantha, continuously flees from sexual attraction, after having been hurt by it in *Dark Angel* where she appeared as a secondary character. This plot element calls into question not only the notion that it is necessary for a romance novel to have an imposing hero – Lionel, villain in this novel as well, is described as externally angelic and irresistibly attractive but a beast underneath, a “devil [who] can pass in high society” (Barlow & Krentz 17), whereas the hero, Hartley, is unassuming and physically plain – but also the all-too-common misconception of romance novels as porn for women: explicit sex scenes are scarce, and there is a tenderness to them which highlights the theme of sexual threat through its absence. Samantha struggles with her inability to separate love and (sexual) passion, and her actions are dictated by her wish to avoid the latter. By pairing her with the kind and gentle Hartley, Balogh addresses the role of passion and sexual threat so often misconstrued to be crucial for a romance novel, whether we date this misconception to Greer's derision of the sexual dynamics in novels by Georgette Heyer and Barbara Cartland (1970), to the emergence of sexually explicit romance novels in the wake of the sexual revolution, or to the embrace of the dangerous man as a foil to the heroine in *Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women* some twenty years later.

Contrary to the claim that the heroine's power struggle is against the power of the hero, as Krentz's notion of taming the hero suggests (“Introduction” 5), Samantha's battle is against the power of the villain. The sexually threatening Alpha of this novel is Lionel, whose attentions to Samantha are distressing and force her into actions she perceives as completely free but are, in fact, born of fear. In *Dark Angel*, Samantha was sexually assaulted by Lionel and thought herself in love with him, only for her to discover he used her to his own ends. Her experience with him was “humiliating and excruciatingly painful” (335) and has left her insecure and afraid of what she defines as love. When *Lord Carew's Bride* begins, six years after the events of *Dark Angel*, Balogh writes that Samantha

... was not in search of a man of her own. She did not believe in love. Not for herself, anyway. And she had no intention of marrying. She wanted to remain free and independent. (314)

Samantha holds her independence and freedom to act and think in high regard, which is confirmed when Lionel returns to London after the exile imposed on him after the events of *Dark Angel*: amidst her confused feelings, Samantha is “terribly afraid ... that somehow he still [has] power over her” (406). She has been in the power of this man before, and her love led to pain. Therefore, she is not about to allow herself to love again. But although Samantha “[prides] herself on her maturity and worldly wisdom” (457), she does not see that her refusal to allow love into her life is a direct consequence of Lionel’s control over her; she is letting the wrong he has done her influence her whole life. While she enjoys the attentions of a large “court” of admirers (334), she does not, as seen above, look for love. However, love is exactly where her very first action of the novel – a decision to go walk on her own – takes her, as it is as a consequence of this walk that she meets Hartley.

Hartley Wade, the docile, gentle, and utterly unimposing hero of the novel, makes no attempts to control Samantha and treats her as an equal, which makes her like him and leads to her using her free agency. It is continuously repeated that Hartley makes Samantha feel “safe” (e.g. 463, 472, 483). Unthreatened, Samantha makes the decision to meet Hartley on several occasions, every time without a chaperone. It is noteworthy that to an experienced reader of Regency romance, this signals action against the rules of society: a young lady should not be alone with a man who is neither related to her nor a trusted family friend, especially without anyone knowing where she is. Samantha reflects on this after one of their meetings, and concludes that it is “dreadfully improper, even for a woman of four-and-twenty” (350). She feels no guilt, however, because she feels no sexual attraction to him and instead views him as a friend (350). This is a significant clue of her misunderstanding love for sexual passion, and her thoughts are repeated on several occasions: for example, after their engagement she reflects that

[w]hat she and Hartley had was better than love. Far better. There would be none of the deceptive highs and shattering lows of love in their relationship. Only friendship and gentleness and kindness and – oh, and safety. She clung to the word and the idea more than any other. ... She wanted [the marriage bed] – with him. Without any extreme of emotion. With just – affection. (483–484)

The repetitions of safety and Samantha’s longing for it directly challenge the claim that a hero must be an opponent of the heroine, something to be tamed, as Krentz puts it: Hartley is working with Samantha rather than against her.

Lionel’s return prior to her engagement to Hartley crumbles Samantha’s perceived control over her emotions and actions as he renews his sexually charged advances on her, but instead of rendering her passive with fear, these advances spur her into more decisive and impulsive, even desperate actions. Shaken by Lionel’s manipulative words during their waltz – again a significant detail, as Regency readers will immediately know this dance to be scandalously intimate; it was “considered ‘fast’ because of the close embrace of the partners” (Thompson) – she rushes out of the ballroom only to unexpectedly run into Hartley. In the comfort of his company she then initiates two indiscretions: first, she asks him to stroll outside with her (437) and then, to kiss her (441). The very next day, shaken and insecure after a morning visit from Lionel, she further tries – and fails – to establish

control over her life by agreeing to Hartley's proposal without taking the time to think about it, believing she is accepting him for the right reasons (463). Even after their marriage Lionel's influence over her continues: on their wedding night her new husband confesses his love for her, and she is overwhelmed:

Oh, dear Lord. Oh, dear Lord. No. Please, no. She would lose him [Hartley]. She was going to lose him. Feelings like that could not last. And feelings like that could not subside into affection or friendship. Only into hatred and pain. And despair. ... She was crying then, loudly and wetly, and could seem to do nothing about it. Everything was ruined. She had had no idea. If only she had. She could have prevented this from happening. ... And she had married him to escape from the terrors and insecurities of passion. (516)

She does not trust him because of Lionel, who has taught her to equate lust with love.

However, through patience, gentleness, and his willingness to argue when necessary, Hartley finally earns Samantha's trust and helps her see that love does not necessarily equate tempestuous and forceful sexual passion. Thus the power of Lionel over her is dispelled and she can find peace, and even achieves her personal vengeance on her tormentor. This latter event takes place at a ball, in a most symbolic fashion. Lionel surprises Samantha alone in the garden: this harks back to *Dark Angel*, where he forces a kiss on her while she is helpless to resist and thus exerts sexual power over her. It is therefore only fitting that this time, disillusioned of the power of sex and with her newly gained confidence, Samantha is "not going to let such a snake steal any kisses without putting up a fight" (564) and knees him in the groin. Through this manifestation of her agency and bodily and sexual autonomy, Balogh marks her as one of the new, more active heroines, one who "takes control of her body and her destiny" (Thurston 25), as opposed to the helpless damsels already denounced in *Dark Angel*. Moreover, one cannot but note the striking resemblance of the scene to the Germaine Greer quote presented in the introduction, that of a heroine in this type of situation being "ineffectual against ravishment (for how could such a delicate thing kick a peer of the realm in his rising passion?)" (177). Delicate though she may be, Samantha proves herself quite effectual enough, and shows no hesitation in introducing her knee to the more tender parts of her opponent's anatomy.

The Infamous Heroine

Having settled the questions of the heroine's agency and the (un)necessity of sexual threat from the side of the hero, Balogh moves on to discuss the heroine as the *hero* of the romance narrative. The eponymous heroine of *The Famous Heroine*, Cora, is explicitly and unapologetically active and sexual. In making her heroine bold and confident, especially in a novel with such a title, Balogh addresses the question of what is considered heroic and, subsequently, whether a heroine must behave in a certain manner. As Krentz points out in "Introduction" to *Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women*, "the romance novel is the only genre in which readers can routinely expect to encounter heroines who are imbued with the qualities normally reserved for the heroes in other genres: honor, courage, and

determination" (5). Cora displays all these qualities and is, even for a romance heroine, remarkably active, which raises questions about what this means for her as a heroine: how is the female-heroic performed, and is the performance of traditional femininity necessarily passive?

The most efficient way of understanding what Balogh does with Cora is to approach the character through one of the foundational monographs on popular romance fiction, Kay Mussell's *Fantasy and Reconciliation*. Published in the same year as Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) and somewhat overshadowed by that ethnographic study, Mussell's book analyses what her subtitle calls the *Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction*. Among these formulas is what Mussell calls "the domestic test": in order for a character to be considered a romance heroine they must, according to Mussell, fulfil three roles, those of wife, mother, and homemaker (89). Mussell goes on to claim that these requirements help patriarchal society "[assess] female attractiveness to men" and "[prescribe] proper attitudes toward beauty, wealth, and adornments" (90). Jennifer and Samantha pass the test in the conventional way. While Cora also fulfils the requirements, the analysis below shows how exaggerated all these qualities are in her. By overstating these features in Cora, Balogh makes a salient point on how these roles that Mussell sees as passive can easily be made markedly active, and how this overstatement marks Cora as the titular heroine while keeping her actions decidedly *heroic* in the same active way that often earns male characters the appellation. Indeed, close examination shows that this novel can be read as a thorough and substantive mockery of the domestic test.

The most obvious role Cora fills is that of the mother. While she does not have children of her own as yet, she demonstrates her nurturing nature by constantly rushing to aid children and animals (Mussell 101), regardless of time, place, or common sense. Grown up in a merchant family in the relative countryside of Bristol without the restrictions of high society, Cora acts quickly and more on intuition than thought, and never pauses to think what is safe or suitable for a young lady: she does not wait for or even expect a man to act on her behalf. Balogh demonstrates this several times in the course of the narrative. To begin with, there is the unseen rescue of the grandchild of the dowager from drowning; even the stoic Duke of Bridgwater comments that this is "a damned heroic thing to do" and that the family "will be eternally in her debt" (12). A little later, driving in Hyde Park, she "[hurls] herself over the side of Lord Francis's high-perch phaeton" (53) in order to rescue four little dogs from the hooves of a horse. In a less heroic but just as indecorous an act, she helps a child chase a hat the wind keeps blowing out of their reach, again in a public park. On yet another occasion involving a child, this time a decoy in Vauxhall Gardens, Cora wanders into a trap in her attempt to help the child (127). When assaulted in the dark of the trees, she does not hesitate to give as good as she gets (128). And at the end of the book, she goes to the aid of a child once more, this time to effect a rescue from a tree.

Balogh portrays Cora's suitability for the role of wife through her sexual curiosity. In a departure from *Dark Angel* and *Lord Carew's Bride*, in *The Famous Heroine* sex and sexuality are not presented as intimidating to the heroine – or rather, this change reveals Balogh's step-by-step approach to this topic: in *Dark Angel* Samantha is sexually assaulted; in *Lord Carew's Bride*, Samantha regains access to her sexuality in the mode of affection, rather than threat; therefore it is not necessary for Balogh to present sex as potentially threatening in *The Famous Heroine*, as the matter has been previously addressed. In fact, Cora's attitude towards sex is expressly positive. As she has no mother to explain marital

duties to her, it is the dowager duchess she is staying with who performs the task, and although still a virgin, Cora

had already known or guessed most of what she had had to say, but the knowing had never frightened her, as it was perhaps supposed to do. It had only aroused her curiosity to experience it for herself. And a little more than curiosity. She had always *wanted* it and was unable to imagine how any woman could cringe from the very thought of it. (164, original emphasis)

This is an important excerpt in preparing the reader for the wedding night. In the midst of their love-making, Francis pauses for a moment, “gathering his breath and control” (177), and this is where the power structure of the encounter changes in a single-sentence paragraph: “And then she took charge” (177). This is an unusual occurrence in a historical romance novel, especially when the heroine is inexperienced, and therefore the sentence is heavily marked to a seasoned reader. It marks Cora as too eager, dangerous from a patriarchal point of view that demonises female sexuality. Balogh, of course, does not present Cora’s behaviour as unacceptable; it merely foregrounds her enthusiasm for her marital duties and therefore emphasises, symbolically, her suitability as a wife. In this, Balogh goes against tradition: heroines of Regency romance are generally passive when it comes to their wedding night, both for reasons of (supposed) historical detail and what the publishers considered the public would find acceptable (Thurston 99).

The remaining role of homemaker is fulfilled when Cora takes over Francis’s household, her new home. After their wedding night, she is out and about before Francis even wakes up (183), and when he does, it is to find that his new wife has already spoken to various members of staff and is well into the process of taking over the running of the household (184). Again, as if mocking Mussell’s conventional test, Balogh has Francis find Cora at the stables (184), an out-of-the-house realm that is not traditionally considered female, and therefore taking her homemaker responsibilities a little too far. Her husband, however, is enchanted rather than reproachful. In fact, Francis’s constant presence during Cora’s moments of action is significant: his gender performance is ambiguous, and so he and Cora balance each other out. While Cora lacks many of the qualities considered traditionally feminine, she has many that are considered the province of male heroes, such as the “honor, courage, and determination” (Krentz 5) noted earlier. Francis, on the other hand, has many qualities that are markedly feminine; he is, for example, very eloquent and witty, pays great attention to his dress, and plays the piano forte. However, when it comes to beginning their lives together, he is content to let Cora take energetic control of the house and thus assert herself in the feminine role, but at the same time he does not resent her overstepping the boundaries of the female sphere.

While the character of Cora clearly adheres to the domestic test, her agency makes it impossible to claim that by allowing her character to conform Balogh “prescribes proper attitudes toward beauty, wealth, and adornments” (Mussell 90) in the traditional sense that women are passive and only to be acted upon. Without her agency Cora would be the traditional heroine, in the sense that she would be at the mercy of men. Cora is, in fact, explicitly aware of men trying to tell her what to do:

There were several points about the conversation that unexpectedly irritated Cora. For one thing, she was being spoken of in third person – by three *men*. As soon as two or more men got together, of course, the superiority of their gender made a woman quite insignificant. (155, original emphasis)

Cora's obvious resentment in that final line marks her sense of herself as an active individual rather than a passive object akin to a hat stand. She also categorically refuses to be passive. Her impulses lead her towards masculine-coded heroics: she acts immediately rather than waits for someone – a man – to make a decision. However, she also conforms to the domestic test with gusto. In presenting her as an active performer of the roles required by the test, Balogh makes her the titular heroine while at the same time empowering her from the beginning.

Conclusion: Critical Engagement

As the essays in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* show, romance authors of the 1990s were aware of the academic discussions of popular romance across the previous decade. It is no wonder, then, that their fiction would address the issues raised by the critics. Whether Balogh intended her novels to be read as critical commentary or not, the books I have discussed inarguably engage in thoughtful and playful ways with the claims about the genre made by seminal 1980s works of romance criticism: so much so that, to me, it seems Balogh is deliberately adding her commentary to the discussion. Such engagement with critical discourse has been noted in other romance authors of the 1990s (see Moore & Selinger on Jennifer Crusie) and has not stopped after the decade ended, either. Romance authors continue to subvert tropes and defend the genre in their novels, essays, blogs, podcasts, and various other platforms on social media.

To read romance novels as texts in dialogue with critical discussion, I would argue, enriches both the fiction and the scholarship. It makes the latter more approachable to those readers who may not be academically inclined, and offers a practical demonstration of subversion rather than just a theoretical one. Balogh's novels, for example, are enjoyable without knowledge of the critical engagement as well, and a seasoned reader of Regencies will appreciate the subverted tropes as commentary regardless of academic background. The subversions are, of course, also crucial to the development of the genre. Whether Balogh's later works remain in discourse with the evolving criticism of popular romance, her work with tropes in the 1990s cannot nor ought to be ignored either by casual readers or critics.

As this reminds us, literature never exists in a vacuum. It is always connected to the conversations being had at the time of writing, and therefore close reading of contemporary – or, at least, near-contemporary – texts can be just as revealing as that of older texts. This paper has sought to provide an example of how criticism and literature can be read against each other, not merely as criticism following fiction but the other way around – fiction following criticism. Such readings build a more rounded understanding of the conversation media is in with theory: texts of all kinds build on each other, rather than being separate. It is a complex relationship, to be sure, and one that merits further

attention. It shows us who we are, and where we want to go, and keeping an eye on that is always advisable.

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