

Samantha J. Rayner and Kim Wilkins (eds). *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction*. London: UCL Press, 2021. Pp. 320. UK £0.00 (ebook); £25.00 (paper). ISBN: 9781787357600.

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Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction (2021), edited by Samantha J. Rayner and Kim Wilkins, is a varied and pleasant read: the approaches are sometimes surprising and each chapter is rather light in style. Deeper inspection, however, proves it to be of limited use to popular romance scholars.

The collection is derived from presentations first heard at the Nonesuch Conference at the Institute of English Studies, Senate House, London, June 2018. Open to anyone with an interest in Heyer, the audience contained scholars, authors, and enthusiasts alike (yours truly included). It is to be expected that out of such a variety of backgrounds something uneven will arise, and Rayner and Wilkins must be commended for having put together a set of chapters that remains true to Heyer in its cheerfulness throughout.

In the introduction, titled “The Persistence of Georgette Heyer,” the editors refer to Heyer’s ongoing popularity, and note that the collection reflects it with its varied subjects and disciplines: the chapters cover gender studies, film, genre, psychoanalysis, and data science, to mention a few. Rayner and Wilkins proclaim that “[t]he enduring appeal of [Heyer’s] work signals an importance that [they] believe should be recognised via more academic study and appreciation of her work” and that “[t]his volume hopes to play its part in such a prospect” (10). The thirteen chapters in the book offer various approaches to Heyer’s fiction, divided into four parts sharing a common theme: “Gender”, “Genre”, “Sources”, and “Circulation and Reception”.

There are chapters in all four parts that I think are good additions to our understanding of Heyer’s role in the development of the genre of historical romance. Laura J. George’s “Judith Taverner as Dandy-in-Training in Georgette Heyer’s *Regency Buck*” (53–72) is an astute close reading of gender performance in Heyer’s first Regency-set novel and offers insight into the function of dandies, both historically and in literature. Holly Hirst suggests in her well-researched “Georgette Heyer and Redefining the Gothic Romance” (105–118) that Heyer uses the Gothic as a mode rather than a genre in such works as *Sylvester*,

or *the Wicked Uncle* (1957) and *The Quiet Gentleman* (1951), much in the way Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) does. Tom Zille writes on the topic of Heyer's famous research of the Regency period and especially the development of vocabulary in her novels in his ambitious "Georgette Heyer and the Language of the Historical Novel" and is the first in the collection to note Heyer's less salubrious tendencies, in the form of noting her selectiveness in choosing her historical sources. The highlight of the collection, Kathleen Jennings's "Georgette Heyer... *In Space!*" in the "Genre" section, illustrates how Heyer's influence crosses genre lines and is behind the popularity of many science fiction and fantasy novels, explicitly or implicitly.

There is, however, a balance issue. One cannot help but feel that the collection has been put together out of what has been on offer, rather than as a considered whole. At least for popular romance scholars, the meat is in the first two parts. The chapters in "Sources" are not quite as astute as the readings in "Gender" and "Genre," the latter of which is the strongest in the collection. Further, the "Circulation and Reception" chapters feel like add-ons and separate from the rest, even from each other. On the other hand, it is possible to read a kind of narrative arc to this arrangement. The "Gender" part is introductory in nature, the "Genre" part builds up to the climax which is Jennings's chapter, while "Sources" is the beginning of the wind-down, and "Circulation and Reception" closes the collection off on a happy ending.

In several cases, the chapters that did not particularly impress me did so because I am a romance scholar. On several occasions, I found myself jotting down notes on sources I wish had been considered. For example, *Venetia* (1958) is analysed in several of the chapters, particularly from an intertextual perspective, yet no reference is made to any of the articles on that novel in this journal (**Elizabeth Barr** in issue 3.2, 2013, **Anne Lancashire** in volume 9, 2020; Laura Vivanco's **article** in issue 3.2, 2013 gets a nod in one instance). On other occasions, references to Pamela Regis's *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2013) or the use of articles in *Women Constructing Men: Female Novelists and Their Male Characters 1750–2000* (edited by Sarah S. G. Frantz and Katharina Rennhak, 2009) would have been useful.

The eclectic gathering of authors leads to a mismatch of styles and depths, but the plot of the collection, as it were, makes sense: we start from basics, have good fun, begin to wind down, and the final chapters delve more into realms beyond literary studies. It is clear work has been done on the order, but it does not quite erase the unevenness. Nonetheless, the best parts of *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction* offer much food for thought, and even the worst cases raise questions and issues I think will be fruitful to consider in future research.