

## Telling Gaps and Domestic Tyranny: Georgette Heyer's Regency Romances

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**Abstract:** Georgette Heyer wrote some of the most celebrated and popular historical romances ever published. Her novels also push against the constraints of genre, particularly in relation to the things -- surveillance and male violence, syphilis, incarceration of those wrongfully deemed to be insane, the spoils of empire -- that romance must leave out or downplay in order that the prospect of the "happy ever after" it promises can be fulfilled. This essay tracks a creative tension that emerges in formal instabilities and in terms of content, what Heyer includes, what she leaves out, and what is still yet apparent through its traces. The ideal of a benign stability within families is shown to be as vulnerable to disruption as dreams of the perfect romance coupling, compromised by the power struggles that she shows to be endemic in family life. The troublesome (as families often perceive it) force of sexual desire is validated in the novels by the unvaryingly happy ending determined by the romance formula yet, within the constraints of genre, subtleties in plotting and language, an historical context that is both exploited and elided, create a space for Heyer, and the reader, to reflect, on the nature of the optimistic outcomes she constructs.

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The significance of heterosexual romance as Georgette Heyer writes it characteristically unfolds within a familial context, emphasizing the growing cultural investment in the family as the foundation of economic, political, and cultural life that began in the nineteenth century after the Regency and continued during her writing life. The repetitive sameness of the fundamental structure of the romance plot—the lovers meet, their courtship evolves, the story ends on a proposal of marriage—is deepened in significance by her representation of the social drama that surrounds and gives power to the sexual. Her skill in creating convincing characters allows her to develop potent variations on a theme: the centrality of heterosexual love embedded within the social and psychological minefield of the families the heterosexual union can produce. Her supporting characters are often as vivid as the lovers. Their violence, selfishness, acquisitiveness, and greed make the sexual couplings beguiling by comparison. Yet the presence of infighting and manipulative behaviour threatens to undermine the ideal of triumphant love by exposing its fragility beyond the moment of courtship consummation. Domestic settings are the source of some of Heyer's sharpest insights about the repressive ways in which families can operate—ways that bring home harsh social realities. Certain things even about the lovers themselves cannot be admitted in romance narratives. The consequences of the kind of sexual experience that shaped the urbane, privileged men who serve as heroes in the novels cannot be openly addressed if the potency of Regency romance as redemptive is not to be exposed as potentially pernicious fantasy. Heyer wrote some of the most celebrated and popular historical romances ever published, but her novels also push against the constraints of the romance genre, particularly in relation to the things that romance must leave out or downplay in order that the prospect of the “happy ever after” it promises can be fulfilled.

Heyer's Regency romances, published between 1921 and 1972, contain dozens of memorable instances of formula-driven couplings: reformed rakes, Corinthians, military men, philanthropic aristocrats, or those with a turn for business, and the women they love. The work of Deborah Lutz on the potentially nihilistic category of “the dangerous lover” points to how socially oriented, how domestic Heyer's romances are. The danger in them is not some kind of existential abstraction—the angst, the anomie afflicting the Byronic hero, who usually ends up in exile—it is embedded in the omnipresent, day-to-day, familial structure that produces the lovers. The sense the novels convey of being set in a real world full of believable characters whose lives are shaped by their families and the intricate power relations that dominate behaviour within them comes from two different kinds of reading and research that Heyer excelled in. Her historical research was tied to facts and specificity. She was a living archive, with a “prodigious memory for details of costume and eighteenth-century ephemera” (Kloester 98), a memory built on a “research library of some thousand volumes” (Hodge xii). Her equally impressive knowledge of literature produced a different kind of sensibility, one bound up with an awareness of being at the end of a long tradition producing genres that, while they are always recognisably themselves, are historically changed and inflected: they are protean, as exemplified by the long history of “romance” in all the permutations and genre manifestations of the word.[1] In a rich genre study of *Venetia*, Anne Lancashire argues that it is “the most complex of Heyer's Regency novels,” which uses “the basic plot patterns and character types of pastoral romance” (6,

12). Her novels demonstrate what Susan Sontag called, in a very different context, “the style of a late moment in culture—one that presumes an endless discourse anterior to itself” (viii). Heyer’s research created new history as she deployed it imaginatively, just as her extensive knowledge of literature created a new literary genre, a different kind of sceptical romance. This essay tracks a creative tension that emerges in formal instabilities and in terms of content, what Heyer includes, what she leaves out, and what is still yet apparent through its traces.

The novels used as the focus texts of the following analysis are dominated by those whose characters are, by Regency standards, older, beyond the transports of first love. They are works arising out of Heyer’s own maturity. Venetia Lanyon (*Venetia*, 1958) and Abigail Wendover (*Black Sheep*, 1966) are women in their late twenties rather than the very young girls just out of the schoolroom, of the type summarily and punningly dismissed by Miles Calverleigh as “member[s] of the infantry” (*Black Sheep* 43). At “more than eight-and-twenty” (42), Abigail describes herself “a guardian aunt ... sufficiently advanced in years to be able to accost a strange gentleman without running the risk of being thought shockingly forward” (38). Venetia is also in effect a guardian of her young brother. They are both financially secure, representative of Heyer’s class of independently wealthy heroines for whom marriage is a choice; it is also a choice that neither of them is particularly anxious to make.[2] Their romantic foils are men in their late thirties who, for one reason or another, have outlived the passions of early youth, settling into transactional relationships with a variety of sexual partners and with no ambition to marry. These novels move their plots and settings away from the premarriage ritual of coming out and the public social trials of the London season. *Cotillion* (1953) has a young heroine, but the focus of the novel is shared with the romance between the beleaguered Lord Dolphinton, savagely bullied by his mother, and the no-nonsense, middle-class Hannah Plymstock, who manages both to circumvent and deploy the power of the families she and Lord Dolphinton must escape if they are to marry.

The men are as vulnerable as the women. As a young, rebellious male, Miles Calverleigh has been shipped off to India as punishment, and as a virtual exile. Damerel has been made to look a fool by his first love and spends his life as an outwardly cynical libertine, hypocritically shunned by polite society. Dolphinton’s situation as physically and psychologically traumatized is both extreme and exemplary. As romantic heroes they are unlike the pattern of earlier novels: *These Old Shades* (1926), with its inscrutable, invincible Duke of Avon, who “buys a soul” (Chapter One) who will later become his wife, and his comic counterpart, Lord Barham in *The Masqueraders* (1928) who, with boundless confidence, enjoys unfettered freedom to behave in whatever fashion he chooses, including a brief dalliance with Jacobite rebellion. The later narratives of near defeat show Heyer’s social observation at its most effective, and, crucially, her sense of what families mean has evolved from a Gothic exuberance to a realism that draws on her own historical circumstances as well as Regency mores. *Venetia*, *Black Sheep*, and *Cotillion* still stay within the romance pattern in that reciprocal love defines all the couples. In perhaps the least representative of her Regency novels, *A Civil Contract* (1961), “the shining, inaccessible peaks” of romance (375) are “an impractical dream” (374) displaced by friendship, painful compromise, and respect. In the process Heyer humanises the brutality of the financial motivation of bourgeois and aristocratic marital alliances by liberating Jenny Chawleigh and Viscount Lynton from the worst excesses of class antagonism. *A Civil Contract* exhibits

more explicitly than *Venetia* Heyer's subtle linguistic embedding of sexuality and its consequences in her narratives. In all the novels addressed in the following analysis, the ideal of a benign stability within families is shown to be as vulnerable to disruption as dreams of the perfect romance coupling, compromised by the power struggles that she shows to be endemic in family life. A fugitive sense of the physical consequences of a sexual freedom that is publicly disavowed but privately indulged implicitly acknowledges the shadow of sexual infection as her sexually active Regency characters would have known and feared it. The troublesome (as families often perceive it) force of sexual desire can be validated by the happy ending determined by the romance formula, yet, within the constraints of genre, subtleties in plotting and language and an historical context that is both exploited and elided create a space for Heyer and the reader to reflect on the nature of the optimistic outcomes she constructs.

## The Problem with Families

The loving and supportive family of *Arabella* (1949), a reflection of the importance of rebuilding families in postwar Britain, is a distant memory in the darker versions of family ties Heyer later explores. Martin Francis writes that "the consolidation of family life" with an emphasis on "the promotion of the 'companionate marriage'" (644) was a dominant part of social reconstruction after the Second World War. This trend followed a period after the First World War when "the domesticated man" did not hold the same social importance (644). He alludes to the fact that the "Mills and Boon 'alpha male'" was "more likely to be a provincial businessman than a foreign prince" in the light of "the potential fragility of interwar domestication" (644). Heyer's output is at cross-purposes with part of this social agenda, in that the family is no haven of peace, however much her novels support the ideal of companionate marriage. The stereotypical characters and situations of Heyer's plots reflect, but also interrogate, contemporary circumstances at the time they were written.[3] Nine years before *Arabella*, in *The Corinthian* (1940), both Beau Wyndham and Pen Creed are beset by scheming, bullying families, making their courtship a matter of flight, unfolding entirely outside conventional familial structures, including Pen dressed as, and behaving with the freedom of, a boy.

An increasing emphasis on generational conflict and changing gender roles that came to characterize the 1960s (and beyond) is registered in the domestic context of her stories rather than by an undermining of the power of love as expressed through courtship and marriage. In Heyer's imagined world, the processes that D. A. Miller, taking his "conceptual bearings" from Foucault, would later theorize as the "less visibly violent modes of 'social control'" (viii) operate continuously, within the most intimate and inescapable relationships. Miller uses nineteenth-century fiction as his textual base from which to examine "a massive thematization of social discipline" (ix). The familial machinations Heyer characteristically presents demonstrate that power can be alarmingly effective when exercised within the putatively loving confines of home. In Heyer's families, power is no less ruthless when domesticated, or "pulverized" (xiii), to use Miller's word. Contingencies, the accidents of plot—the fortuitous meetings of the lovers, for example—are the formulaically robust yet socially vulnerable exit points for her characters. Heyer's novels

can be entertaining escapism (“I think myself I should be shot for writing such nonsense,” she wrote in 1943 [Hodge xii]), but it is the cleverness of their moves into charting the multifarious modes of coercion that make romance literally a form of escape for her characters that deepens their cultural significance.

The consequences of Heyer’s sceptical sensibility working (through her research) with history to produce genre fiction has prompted the kind of critical accounts that focus on her unromantic attitudes to romance, something she herself expresses in her letters: “[fans] expect me to be a Romantic and I’m nothing of the sort” (Hodge 65). Diana Wallace argues that Heyer’s parody, her “ironic mocking of romance” (83), fundamentally undermines the romance with its investment in the “ideal marriage,” signalling its “unattainability in the ‘real’ world, whether past or present” (83). Such a view clearly raises questions about ways of reading Heyer: Do we respond primarily to the mockery, acknowledge the subtle and pervasive irony, or do we accept the fantasy as offering an authentic way to “read” everyday life? Vanda Wilcox, while noting that the heroines “are distinctly modern in sensibility and behaviour,” asserts that Heyer’s methodology “was inherently antimodernist,” resulting in “linear narrative bolstered always by the known,” with a “middlebrow’s inherent faith in tradition and continuity” (165). Yet the modernity of Heyer’s Regency heroines is the fictional result of a knowing anachronism, a historical *discontinuity*. The thoroughly nasty extended upper-middle-class and aristocratic families that Heyer portrays put a very different complexion on “tradition and continuity.” Overwhelmingly, family traditions entrap and imperil Heyer’s characters. The usually rational choices her lovers make stand out because they are portrayed as valuable in themselves, in that they reconfigure the power politics of sex but, perhaps even more tellingly, they gain their full meaning through a process of contrast with the ugliness from which they provide escape. Pragmatism, rather than mockery, marks the plots.

## Syphilis, Sexual Excess, and Violence

Heyer creates persuasive, believable fictional worlds that deploy the type of social and psychological realism developed in the nineteenth-century novel, particularly when it comes to embedding the desires of her characters in a densely imagined social world. The term that most pleased her was “technician” (Hodge 153). Her skill in depicting the social construction of the self can, however, be self-defeating, in that it raises questions that early-twentieth-century historical romance was not designed to confront. The destructive bodily consequences of sexual licence are one such area. While Heyer’s historical research is well documented in terms of uncontroversial content (dress, colloquial speech, the topography of London) it is less apparent in the novels whether she had access to material on the extent of the sexually transmitted infections that were endemic in Regency sexual life. There is, to my knowledge, no record of her research in this area. It is unlikely that she was unaware of William Hogarth’s narrative paintings and engravings *A Harlot’s Progress* (1731), or *A Rake’s Progress* (1733–35), with their confronting images of syphilis and its consequences. While Hogarth’s moral judgements are clear, and these sequences all have a didactic function, so is the fact that syphilis is assumed to be endemic in the social milieu that he portrays. In *A Civil Contract* (1961), the least escapist and perhaps the soberest and

most unsettling of her novels, Hogarth's *Marriage A-la-Mode* (1743–45, with a syphilitic child depicted, as well as adults) is reimagined as Heyer transposes it from the savageries of eighteenth-century satire to the more humane possibilities of companionate love that developed as the nineteenth century progressed.

The novel was a trial for Heyer to write: "I sit and look at the bloody thing, & wonder what can have possessed me to embark on it" (Kloester 333). The subtext of sexual infection is absent, but the lack of reciprocated sexual feeling at the heart of the relationship between Jenny Chawleigh and Viscount Lynton pushed Heyer to the limits of what it was possible to say about the failures of sexuality in a romance novel. It condemns its "too commonplace and matter-of-fact" (374) heroine to a life without the sexual pleasure romance typically promises. Unusually for Heyer, the novel celebrates sexual *loss* and an at best fitful sense of marital fulfilment ("*I couldn't live in alt all the time, so I daresay I'm better of as things are*" (374; Jenny's thoughts here are italicized). The language used in the proposal scene is unique in the Regency romances in that a degree of male sexual disgust is indicated as the price that must be paid if the marriage is to happen at all: "He kissed her hand, and then, lightly, her cheek. She did not look as though she liked it. And since he had no desire to kiss her, he let her go her hand, not offended, but relieved" (69). The word *look* carries a sad burden: Jenny is not repelled by him; she is simply aware of the ugliness that must accompany such a financially driven coupling. Her plight lies, as with so many of Heyer's heroines, in her unconventional intelligence, her clear-eyed understanding of the nature of the bargain she must enter to marry. He is looking for money, not love, finding himself—or rather his title—being bought and paid for by a formidable, stupendously rich middle-class businessman, a "cit" who actually works for his money. Mr. Chawleigh's *realpolitik* hits the viscount with the force of "a tidal wave" (49). Jenny's surprising (to her husband) knowledge of how the world works includes her awareness of what it means to have sex with him, given that he is in love with someone else:

The honeymoon had contained awkward moments that were inevitable in the circumstances, but these had been overcome, thanks largely (Adam acknowledged) to the prosaic attitude adopted by his bride. If their union was devoid of romance, less embarrassment attached to it than he had foreseen. Jenny was sometimes shy but never shrinking. The trend of her mind was practical; she entered into married life in a business-like way; and almost immediately presented the appearance of a wife of several years' standing. (102)

Her understanding of her circumstances includes a pragmatic assessment of how much being a wife requires a convincing performance. The deftness of this passage is indicative of the ways in which Heyer's novels provoke sexual speculation at the same time as they deflect it.

The same subtlety informs the less easily represented sexual realities of aristocratic life. In *Venetia*, Mrs. Hendred, trying to explain Venetia's father's divorce and her mother's sexual adventurousness, rather desperately observes "a more *improper* set than the Prince's people I daresay never existed!" (278). The language is both understated and revealing, but the consequences of that "impropriety" in terms of the depredations of what was termed "the clap" or "the pox" never rise explicitly to the surface in the novels. Her

research may have uncovered allusions in private letters, but the subject was generally so shrouded in shame that references even there may be rare. Even now, early-nineteenth-century statistics on syphilis, incurable at the time, with its devastating consequences for physical and mental health, not only for men and women but also for their offspring, are hard to come by because the etiology of the disease was so little understood. The disfiguring chancres that heralded its onset must have been a perpetual source of anxiety, a dark reality lying underneath the obsession with appearance and dress that Heyer so copiously documents.[4]

Beau Brummell is an allusive presence in the novels, making an appearance as Lord Worth's close friend in *Regency Buck* (1935). In his biography of Brummell, Ian Kelly states that "it was estimated that 15 per cent of the population of Paris and London had them both [syphilis and gonorrhoea], but the proportion was higher in the circles in which Brummell moved" (297). He reveals evidence based on documents held in "the asylum in France where he died" (10) that Brummell's cause of death was the complications of tertiary syphilis, making him a particularly intriguing "symbol for a new mode of urbane masculinity" (5), the type of male that Heyer constructs in her novels. Simon Szreter and Kevin Siena have recently provided statistical and documentary evidence for the late eighteenth century, including Boswell's "candid record of his sexual exploits" in his diary, which includes "19 episodes of venereal disease, most contracted through commercial sex transactions." They state that throughout the eighteenth century, "the majority of men who lived in cities would at some point contract at least gonorrhoea." In Kelly's account, British army officers returning from the Napoleonic Wars brought "a virulent strain" of syphilis with them "that spread quickly through the officer classes, the bagnios and brothels of London, and thence, in turn, to their other habitués" (Kelly 299).[5] The world Kelly paints is recognisably Heyer's, but with its sexually dangerous aspects visible.

Courtesans, "demi-reps ... Cyprians ... 'The Fashionable Impures,'" were "a key feature of the lives of rich London men at the beginning of the nineteenth century; they cast an elegant veneer ... over the West End sex trade" that disappeared in the "different economy of prostitution" of the Victorian period (Kelly 13). Heyer faithfully reproduces the "elegant veneer." Many of her romantic heroes are referred to as having a familiar ease with "the muslin company" before they meet the always-virginal women they fall in love with and marry. As Sherry says in *Friday's Child* (1944), "'Confound you, Hero [the innocent and vulnerable 16-year-old he marries], there's nothing in it! Everyone has a fancy-piece or two, but it don't signify a jot, take my word for it!'" (29). The habitual association of upper-class males with courtesans is presented as a lighthearted matter, a way of characterizing the maturity and worldliness of the romantic heroes, or, as in Sherry's case, a youthful wildness that will be outgrown in the interests of love. In contrast, "the Fashionable Impures" are rarely individualized or given a key role. One exception is the wonderfully (pseudonymously) named "Mrs Clapham" and "Mrs Winkworth" in *Black Sheep*. "Mrs Winkworth" is Dolly, the Dasher, Miles Calverleigh's friend and instrument of his nephew's comeuppance.

Mr Calverleigh, laughter in his eyes, took two long strides towards her, caught her in his arms, and heartily embraced her.

She returned the embrace, but said: "Now that's quite enough! I'll have you know I'm a respectable woman now!"

Mr Calverleigh, most reprehensibly, gave a shout of mirth.  
“Well, you know what I mean!”  
(201–02)

A group of “dashers” makes an all-too-brief appearance in the romance precincts of *Venetia*, energizing Damerel and the Priory, “playing Hunt the Squirrel,” and saving one of his cronies from burning to death in his bed (a possibly irreverent nod to *Jane Eyre*). They are not given names. In the space of the few lines given over to them in the novel, they are described using derogatory terms current at the time: “convenients,” “shameless lightskirts,” “Mr Ansford’s ‘peculiar’” (27–28). The brilliantly explicit bawdiness of Restoration comedy outmatches Heyer in terms of its brutal portrayal of the sexual politics of an earlier, even more licentious age, yet she quietly assumes the same reality. The dashers’ sexual world, the men who inhabit it, constitute the norm, not an aberration, and one against which the redemptive power of love must be shown to prevail (as it does even in Restoration comedies). Usually, the “Incognitas” vividly inhabit the margins of her fiction, brilliantly disruptive traces of the world Heyer’s fashionable world cannot do without. Their existence shaped the nature of conventional marriage and the moral values it officially embodied. Infidelity defined fidelity, making family structures unstable, always potentially tyrannical, particularly as they bore down on women, whose behaviour was policed not only by husbands but also by fathers, mothers, siblings: the whole panoply of the patriarchal family. That particularly cruel and repressive aspect of Regency life produces some of Heyer’s most effective characterisations and plots.

Heyer’s reticence regarding the physical cost of sexual behaviour is understandable, even perhaps historically authentic, given that the extent of venereal disease in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has only recently begun to be fully understood in statistical terms as opposed to the cultural knowledge embedded in colloquial language and the rare survival of personal accounts such as Boswell’s. But it is also a telling example of how the romance/marriage plot thrives on lacunae and deflection. “On No account,” Heyer wrote, in the context of a wry definition of “The secret of My Art,” “must the story be About anything in particular, or hold water for half a minute” (Kloester 298). Familial discord can be naturalized within the romance/marriage plot, but to acknowledge that simply being a sexually active male in the Regency carried with it certain risks that even love could not cure remains a matter for the margins of the novels, obscured by a focus on the more acceptable parts, in genre terms, of historical context—fashion, “flash cant,” gambling, the streetscapes and architecture of Regency London. Gaps, however, do not necessarily indicate wholesale evasion on Heyer’s part. The politics of marriage in the novels includes a complex representation of the functioning within the norm of intractable if not quite unspeakable forms of knowledge. An oblique, knowing acknowledgement of the dire perils of sex—which made marriage a lottery for many young, inexperienced wives, as well as making a mockery of the unfailing optimism of the romance/marriage plot—often emerges as comments made by pragmatic older women in conversations with the young heroines who, on marriage, will enter the dangerous sexual economy that defined their social milieu.

Damerel’s past “loves” are understood by *Venetia* to be part of a pattern of privileged men’s behaviour (“witness all the histories” [63]) that leaves their true characters untouched. It is a familiar pattern that Heyer repeats, found in many romance



plots. It determines that, finally, the reformed rake meets a woman who will make fidelity worth the sacrifice for him it entails. It is her older friend Lady Denny, not Venetia, who brings the question of male behaviour to bear on marriage, not simply courtship. Her view reflects experience that arises from her husband's infidelity after marriage, not solely his premarriage behavior; he is assumed to be duplicitous in both. Her words locate men's actions within a culturally sanctioned as well as biologically determined essential difference: "Men, my love, are different from us" (64). She unfolds a rather unnervingly cold-blooded vision of the essentially two-faced nature of the male sex: "I hold it to be very wrong to rear girls in the belief that the face men show to the females they respect is their only one" (64).

The hypocrisy of men and the compulsory ignorance of women that underpinned upper-class heterosexual unions where bloodlines, property, and inheritance were vital concerns is explained in terms of Lady Denny's no-nonsense snobbery and self-interest, which allow reality to briefly intrude into public, mendacious constructions of chastity and fidelity while leaving the fantasy intact for the men and women who could not do without the cover it provided. Gentlemen must be excused the judgments inflicted on the "demi-beaux and the loose-screws" who are assiduously kept away from "females of our order" (64). It is not until *Black Sheep* that Heyer allows her hero to be an amiable "loose-screw" who has outgrown his sexual dealings with—if not his affection for—"the muslin company" and who has no tolerance for double-dealing and the hypocrisy that Lady Denny insists is indispensable for survival within the upper orders:

"I daresay that if we were to see them watching some horrid, vulgar prize-fight, or in company with women of a certain class, we shouldn't recognize our own husbands and brothers. I am very sure we should think them disgusting! Which, in some ways they are, only it would be unjust to blame them for what they can't help." (64)

Her warning emerges using language that is both frank and evasive, mediated through the inevitable guarded primness of upper-class conversation, at least as women were expected to conduct it. "Vulgar prize-fights" were orchestrated violence for the voyeuristic benefit of the crowd of overwhelmingly male spectators. It was the least savage of the blood sports available "for husbands and brothers," given that the boxers, working-class males, had a degree of choice about participation, and killing them was not the object of the exercise. It is presented in a benign way in the novels, as largely a matter of fitness for the well-to-do men who sparred in Jackson's Saloon with retired boxer Gentleman John Jackson. The violent spectacles that were set before a male audience were actually much more diverse. Within the context of an analysis of blood sports and their relationship to gender, class, and English nationalism, Moira Ferguson notes that rural labourers organised "bull-baiting, bear-baiting, cock-fighting, and dog and cat fighting ... fights were even arranged between dogs and monkeys" (325). Such pastimes crossed class boundaries: "the gentry team up with workers for their own nefarious enjoyment" (334). A divide emerged between "factions of the ruling class ... who condoned and participated in the blood sports ... and those who vehemently opposed them" (334). The subject of Ferguson's analysis is the work of the Quaker Elizabeth Heyrick, who fought against animal cruelty, slavery, and the desperately cruel circumstances endured by most working men and women. Her

campaigns unfolded at the time that Heyer's Regency romances are set. The connecting threads between all the areas in which Heyrick sought reform are cruelty and injustice based on exploitation of those perceived to be weak. In the real Regency world, the fact that violence was part of upper-class behaviour was well understood. It is part of the fabric of Heyer's novels, but its harshness is ameliorated and masked by their comic register.

Cockfighting is a recurring theme, often as a suitably manly passion for unruly younger brothers such as Peregrine in *Regency Buck* or Martin Frant in *The Quiet Gentleman*. It is never described in detail. All Heyer's heroes are foxhunters—"bruising riders to hounds" is the regularly repeated phrase. The riding, but never the way the fox is killed, is described. What is troubling about Lady Denny's straight-talking lies in what it implies but does not state outright. The existence of blood sports served as a sign for a much broader social currency of violence. The fact that violence underpinned male dominance in other, more conventional circumstances is handled more explicitly in the novels, but with a register that undermines the seriousness of the acts being represented. Some of Heyer's most popular romantic heroes use their superior bodily strength against the women they will marry in their first meetings. Lord Worth in *Regency Buck* (1935) forces Judith into his carriage, kissing her against her will, later telling her, in his mocking way, that she was lucky he did not assault her, correcting her word for the incident—"insult"—to his own characterization of it as an "excess of civility" (49).[6] In *Devil's Cub* (1932), a drunken Vidal tries to rape Mary Challoner, stopping only when she shoots him. Damerel sexually assaults Venetia, thinking she is a servant girl stealing his blackberries (28). Lord Sheringham in *Friday's Child* habitually hits his childhood friend—"Oh how you did slap my cheek!" she adoringly reminisces. "It was red for hours and hours, and I had to make up such a tale to account for it!" (27). His favoured method of assault, which continues after their marriage, is boxing her ears, a mealy-mouthed way of saying he slaps her hard on both sides of her head.

The novels imply without ever explicitly stating it in the narrative descriptions of these acts that violence underwrites the male dominance of the ruling elite in the Regency world, an investment in physical violence that did not decline until the mid-nineteenth century (Tosh 334). Heyer's language sanitizes—and sexualizes—acts that would otherwise be judged to be brutish. It is not simply the double standard being articulated in *Venetia* and elsewhere in the novels. The sexual and cultural politics being addressed are more insidious. What Lady Denny exposes is the necessary complicity of wives who forgo the right to speak openly about the reality of marriage not only because it (literally) pays them to do so, but also because they have no personal power, nor power within the marriage contract, to arrange things otherwise. The novels as a whole assume an uncomfortable reality: an elite group obsessed with arcane and exclusionary social rituals, fashion, elegance, and display in which male violence and sexual excess are simply taken for granted.

If physical assaults on women are trivialized, the threat of sexual infection is dealt with by more subtle narrative manoeuvres. The literary consequences of Heyer's complex relationship with Regency sexual politics and the masculinity it produced can be seen clearly in *Venetia*. The lines of dissipation on Damerel's face, the sense of unfitness that determines his initial refusal to marry Venetia, take on a very different significance if the reader speculates that it is venereal infection that is exercising his mind, not simply his openly scandalous life, which will, he believes, irretrievably sully her reputation. The novel,

however, does not allow such speculation any room to take hold. In a complicated manoeuvre that is the climax of the novel, Heyer gives an object lesson in how the realities of romance can be made to prevail in narrative terms. She transmutes his conviction of his potential defilement of Venetia into his chivalric conviction of his *moral* unworthiness, which is conveyed in abstract terms with poetic references to the annihilation of space and time: “What I regret I can never undo, for the gods don’t annihilate space, or time, or transform such a man as I am into one worthy to be your husband” (331). Ironically, Heyer is at her most authentically historical when she replicates the socially useful practice of turning a blind eye. The last chapter is a skilfully choreographed verbal dance of deflection in which the dissipated, world-weary Damerel, lover of “Fashionable Impures,” is finally transformed into Venetia’s rescuer: a knight in shining armour. The man, that is, whom she desires him to be.

The closure of *Venetia*, for all its lighthearted banter about orgies, is an example of a different kind of historical discontinuity in Heyer—the domestication of the aristocratic lover. Some of her super-rich heroes come to possess the moral sensibility characteristic of the amatory heroes in Victorian fiction, where middle-class values were incorporated into fictional representatives of the type. Max Ravenscar in *Faro’s Daughter* (1941), for example: “The schoolgirls won’t like him being a Mere Commoner, but I’m so fed up with writing a lot of wash about improbable dukes and earls” (Kloester 225). They are improbable to the extent that, through the machinations of the plot, they come to reflect the public moral virtues of a soon-to-be politically ascendant middle class, an ascendancy that was partly framed in moral terms, a morality that was subject to its own hypocrisies. Heyer brings her aristocratic heroes into line with the ideals of a middle-class masculinity that became such a potent ideological force in the Victorian novel, males that James Eli Adams describes as reflecting new forms of “status and privilege within an increasingly secular and industrialized society” (50) and that John Tosh characterized as “an entrepreneurial, individualistic masculinity,” invested in a “punishing work ethic ... validation of the home, and a restraint on physical aggression” (331).

The work ethic remains absent in the elite Regency world Heyer creates, but she celebrates domesticity in a way that was alien to the louche aristocratic values of upper-class life. The shift is often marked in the narration by homely details. As she is being abducted by Miles Calverleigh (an abduction he engineers to rescue her from the overwhelming pressures her sister Selina puts on her to remain unmarried, at least to him), Abigail frets about not having a toothbrush (252), a nicely domesticated indication of her consent to his proposal of marriage, one used several times in the novels. Arabella makes it plain she will not elope “without a change of clothes, or my hairbrushes, or my tooth-powder,” a proposition Beaumaris readily assents to, assuring her he would take great pleasure in buying them for her (250). The real destination of the elopement is his grandmother’s house, where a glass of warm milk awaits, not the reckless road to Gretna Green. All Heyer’s heroes reflect the mid-nineteenth-century evangelical “revolution in masculine values” with their insistence on character and self-restraint (Tosh 334). Evangelicalism had its own problems, subject as it was to “the old language of paternalism” (Davidoff & Hall 113), but it carried some promise of a commonality of aims and values between husband and wife, rather than the inequities and violence of aristocratic licence that Heyer subtly registers in the remarkably secular world she describes.

Masculine sexuality in itself (as opposed to individual manifestations of it) is not presented as a threat in Heyer. Venetia, for example, is never afraid of Damerel. Instead of sexual violence or assault, or the graphic, Hogarthian confrontation with the sexually transmitted wages of sin that emerged within the apocalyptic discourse of satire, she is shown as caught up in familial snares: the demands of her younger brother, whose physical frailty, caused by a poorly treated hip fracture, makes him perpetually irritable and self-centred, the selfishness of her older brother, Conway, who uses her to do the mundane hard work of running the estate, then the unpleasant task of dealing with his monstrous, social-climbing mother-in-law and naïve young wife. Both brother and lover threaten Venetia's ability to fulfil her desires and reflect in their different ways her father's sequestration of her for her mother's sins.

The fundamental predicament of Venetia is one of the cruellest in the Heyer canon, exemplifying the tyrannies of control that are such a potent force undermining female freedom. It is a Gothic trope—the imprisoned heroine—but in this case the gaoler is ignorance, the enforced ignorance of Venetia, rather than castle walls and moats. When her lively, unfaithful mother divorces her father, he shuts himself up in his country estate, effectively shutting Venetia up with him, virtually burying her alive (279), and telling her that her mother is dead. Almost everyone else around Venetia knows this is not so, including her brothers, her guardian, her aunt and uncle, the servants, the neighbours, and her dull, censorious country wooer. Damerel also knows but, after an early slip, which Venetia fails to recognise as such, keeps the knowledge to himself.

As with the many limits on women's freedom, the rationale is protection: if given her head, Venetia's tainted blood will out. The real reason for her father's action, which emerges obliquely, is punitive. He has been made into the least sympathetic of figures: the cuckolded husband. "Poor man!" says Venetia, "to be set dancing to the tune of *Cuckold's All Awry*" (280). Unable to control his wife, the patriarch can at least control his daughter. Venetia is perhaps the most powerful instance in Heyer's novels of her representation of the cruelty, the "selfish folly" (279) that underpins the upper-class patriarchal family and patriarchal marriage. With the insouciance of the rake, Venetia's mother "positively *flaunted* herself all over town, though not, of course, *received*, and only think how degrading for Francis it would have been!" (279). The reader is brought full circle back to Lady Denny's insistence that husbands be excused what wives must be punished for. The novel's indictment of conventional upper-class marriage and the familial structures that support it demonstrates the discursive mechanisms—the techniques—that allow Heyer to expose the base, transactional nature of aristocratic marriage, while at the same time insisting that the institution itself can be salvaged if the right people manage to marry.

## **Romance: Surviving Surveillance and Domestic Tyranny**

Heyer's older heroines have all, one way and another, been confined within close familial networks that replace sexual love with family duties. A major source of conflict in her plots concerns the way conjugal life requires a continuing supply of "defeated" women (spinsters who cannot be permitted to marry) to support the inevitable result of marriage and consummation in the nineteenth century: large numbers of offspring requiring care

and maintenance, and lovers who become fathers and remain brothers with a taste for domineering behaviour. Sisters are no less manipulative. Surveillance is unremitting. In *Black Sheep*, Abigail is subject to the overbearing interference of her brother and the unremitting emotional blackmail of her sister Selina, who uses her nervous spasms that result in collapse as a neat and unanswerable weapon of emotional blackmail, causing Mrs. Grayshott to inform her son that “the sooner Miss Wendover’s numerous ailments carried her off the better it would be for Abby” (223). The sacred nature of family ties is demolished by the engaging Miles Calverleigh, whose genial but relentless indifference to family obligation liberates Abigail: “You know, there is a great deal of balderdash talked about family affection. How much affection have you for *your* family” (45); “I didn’t like my brother Humphrey and I didn’t like my father either” (46). He is even more contemptuous of his nephew: “Family ties don’t mean anything to me. Didn’t I tell you so once?” (158). He is aware of Abigail’s brother’s slyly bullying ways: “I daresay he’d wear you to death, trying to heckle or cajole you into giving me up” (158). Miles’s “go to hell” attitudes are validated in the novel by its conclusion, and they are implicitly linked to broader historical realities relating to the source of his money.

The imperial source of much British wealth is rarely acknowledged in the novels. But, as with the clap and Mrs. Clapham, things the romance formula does not easily countenance are nevertheless linguistically registered. Abby finally makes the connection: “So now you are a nabob! How stupid of me not to have guessed it!” (160). In the process of demolishing his nephew, Miles remarks, “India suited me down to the ground” (236), suggesting his capacity for ruthlessness was honed in a way that the novel does not explicitly acknowledge in its narration, although Heyer was aware of it: “I expect he amassed his fortune in the easy thoroughly shady way which all the nabobs, as far as I can tell, did in India” (Hodge 172). Eighteenth-century drama is again a source of the kind of matters that Heyer expresses only glancingly. In Samuel Foote’s “bawdy satire” of 1772, *The Nabob* (quoted in Dalrymple 225), Sir Matthew Mite is “an obnoxious India-returned parvenu,” corrupt and larcenous:

*Touchit*: We cunningly encroach and fortify little by little, till at length, we are growing too strong for the natives, and then take possession of their money and jewels.

*Mayor*: And don’t you think, Mr Touchit, that is a little uncivil of us?

*Touchit*: Oh, nothing at all! These people are little better than Tartars or Turks.

*Mayor*: No, no, Mr Touchit; just the reverse: it is they who have caught the Tartars in us.

Edmund Burke, during the celebrated impeachment trial of Warren Hastings, which began in 1788, painted the East India Company as more of “a crime syndicate” than a trading company and Hastings as “a robber. He steals, he filches, he plunders, he oppresses, he extorts.” [7] The well-organized, spectacularly successful plunder has muted presence in *Black Sheep*. In Heyer’s romances, the Tartars are domestic and equally inclined to dominance.

The most devastating version of family tyranny is that endured by Lord Dolphinton in *Cotillion*. He is “a seven-months child” (146), twenty-seven years old in the novel, whose

vulnerability is ruthlessly exploited by his mother, “a hard-featured woman with a predatory mouth,” “tyrannical to her son, and ruthless in the methods employed to achieve her ends” who probably helped her husband along to his “untimely decease” (147). Like the Nabobs, her motives are financial. She keeps control of his fortune, allowing him “a pittance” (160), enriching herself at her son’s expense, keeping him in terrified subjection by threats to have him incarcerated. As Hannah observes, “If he don’t do what she bids him, she threatens she’ll have him under lock and key, and tell everyone he’s mad” (158). Given that Heyer’s research library has now disappeared, it is impossible to say with certainty that she did research in the area of the laws relating to lunacy. Her research was so thorough, however, that the fact that she makes this reference to it can be taken an indication that she knew the law and the abuses of it.

Gothic novels habitually use the incarcerated heroine as a plot device, but Heyer invokes a more specific social reality here: incarceration of the insane, and those who were wrongfully deemed to be so, represented a social problem all throughout the nineteenth century, with laws increasingly framed to protect the rights of vulnerable citizens. Sarah Wise reports numerous instances of “wrongful incarceration and physical assaults on inmates.” She refers to the case of Mr. Ladbroke, an East India Company officer, confined under a false name “by his stepfather and unable to obtain his release.” This was one of thirty-one cases documented by Trophimus Fulljames in 1822. Fulljames had delusional episodes and once “fired a pistol in the direction of the Prince Regent,” with the consequence that his report was dismissed on the grounds of his unreliability. Wise records that it was common for men to be locked up so that “a wife, relative, or trade associate could obtain control of the alleged lunatic’s finances, property, and business.” Because of the difficulties of gaining access to female patients, there is an “imbalance of male-to-female false incarceration stories.” Thus, in making the victim of threats of unlawful imprisonment and denial of rights a male, Heyer invokes a social reality that was documented at the time: an imbalance that was more a result of access to women in asylums than the lack of women so treated. Heyer’s practice is thus typically well-informed historically, a knowledge base that is deployed to literary ends. Dolphinton’s plight, together with Freddy Standen’s less threatening circumstances, allow her to complicate representations of male power: it is communicated, paradoxically, through the apparent lack of it. The word *hero* sits uneasily on the narrow shoulders of both, making them two remarkably unconventional male romantic heroes.

“Excessively wealthy,” although not admitting to be as rich as “Golden Ball” (34), Freddy is a dandy in the Beau Brummell mode—adept at all the fashionable nuances of dress and address that dominate his world. Geraldine Perriam in an analysis of Freddy’s qualities has coined the term *alternative masculinity*, a type of behaviour she tracks as emerging in “the stereotype of the silly ass” (37), locating his characterisation in the context of Dorothy Sayers’s Lord Peter Wimsey and Margery Allingham’s Albert Campion. The silliness is a performance, a knowingness that cannot allow itself to be perceived as such. In Dolphinton’s case it manifests as an enforced duplicity that buys a physical freedom his mother would otherwise not allow. Freddy is not violent. He has none of the athleticism and predatory sexuality that define the conventional lover embodied by Jack Westruther, who is revealed to be cruel, selfish, and dangerous. Social and familial judgments emasculate Freddy and deny his intelligence. He is popular because he is seen as no threat sexually to young women. He is a beautiful dancer, a skill presented by his sister

Meg in a way that belittles him: “however stupid you may be, you are far the best dancer in London!” (126). His freedom to move in society is based on a misreading of his strength—an intuitive kindness, combined with an ability to quietly figure out ways to circumvent the cruelty and self-seeking, veiled as elegance, of the fashionable world. It becomes clear that his understanding of fashionable codes is at least in part a mechanism of survival. He knows what clothes to wear, and they become a form of armour. Freddy’s diffidence is a result of being perpetually devalued by his family, as in his father’s urbane lethal jabs: “I ain’t clever, like Charlie, but I ain’t such a sapskull as you think.” “I have always known you couldn’t be, my dear boy.” (100–01). His wealth and a pragmatism that he masks with a certain vagueness of demeanour give Freddy the means to do what he wants despite his family’s propensity to dismiss him as a fool. At the climax of the novel, Heyer allows him, the least violent of men, to floor Jack Westruther with “a nice, flush, hit,” which he freely admits he couldn’t repeat, but if necessary, he will try to do so (318). The assurance bestowed by wealth and class allows him to rescue himself, as well as Kitty, keeping his status as hero intact.

Lord Dolphinton’s status is more precarious in social terms and less central in terms of plot. The happy ending promised by romance allows the most disturbing aspect of *Cotillion* to develop unchecked. The psychological violence directed at Dolph (as the characters call him), which always contains the threat that it will become the physical violence of incarceration, is persistently played for comedy. It is uncomfortable reading, an example of the latitude genre facilitates by allowing humanity and decency to be held in suspense. Because we know that such dark possibilities as sectioning and incarceration in an insane asylum hold no place in the resolution of romance plots, Heyer clearly feels able to allow Dolph to be the object of disturbing humour, as when he hides in a cupboard under the stairs or under a table if he thinks his mother is about to appear. He is essentially placed in the same category as women: systemically vulnerable and in need of rescue, a gain in terms of gender politics that provides some amelioration of the insensitivity of the humour. In a neat counterpoint to Freddy’s clever exploitation of the social power his aristocratic wealth confers on him, Dolph will come into full ownership of his Irish estate by marriage with Hannah Plymstock, who lives with her overbearing brother, who is both a “Cit” and a “Revolutionary” who can’t stand earls. Both brother and mother are outwitted. Hannah’s value for Dolph is not wealth it is middle-class pragmatism and strength, emphasizing the middle-class rather than aristocratic values that become increasingly apparent in Heyer’s heroes. Class and gender subversion are intertwined as driving forces of the narrative. Freddy’s feminine understanding of the ways in which appearances can be mobilized to circumvent nastiness without open insurrection allows him to prevail. Hannah’s masculine common sense and strength give Dolph the means to access his inheritance (“Hannah thought of it. I ain’t clever: she is” [155]). What connects both heroes is their circumvention of the machinations of their families, who value the power and fashionable appearances Heyer is so skilled at representing.

## Conclusion

In every one of Heyer's Regency romances, the structure of romance prevails, and yet within that formulaic constraint a considerable amount of social realism makes itself felt via the mechanisms of exploiting the obstacles to romantic fulfilment that the romance plot requires. Almost without exception Heyer's lovers assert the power of sexual love—sexual selection—against what love can become after marriage and within complex kin structures that represent not individual fulfilment but the social necessities of aristocratic lineage and the preservation of wealth. Traces of other, less readily acknowledged sexual realities further deepen the complexity of a formula that is remarkably open to inspired subversion. What A. S. Byatt called Heyer's "ferocious [personal] reticence" may equally be applied to the vigour of her prose that turned reticence into a complex mode of signification. In doing so Heyer exemplifies the best possibilities that the romance formula can produce as she demonstrates why the fantasy matters. Within the constraints of genre, she manages always to give full force to the kind of personal horrors that social structures produce, limitations that must be perpetually challenged if they are not to obliterate spirit, love, and sex.

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[1] Strehle and Carden provide a useful summary of the slippages in signification that accompany the word *romance* in its very long travels (xiii-xvi). In Chapter 2 of *Romance Writing*, Lynne Pearce gives a detailed account of the evolution of romance as genre from "the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries" (31-37). In *Tales of Love*, Julia Kristeva traces the "code" of romance in the twelfth century, the idealized "*fin amor* ... for which we still hold a postromantic nostalgia," and the intrusion of "Reason" and the real world, the "satirical zest" that accompanied the transition from song to narrative that led to the end of idealisation "*fin amor* is dead, long live procreation" ("The Troubadours..." 280-96). The movement in romance between an ideal and the real, a fall of sorts, is evident in Heyer's Regency romances.

[2] Karin Westman, invoking a metafictional context, calls such heroines "self-authoring": "Combining masculine speech with masculine knowledge, Heyer's Regency heroines can make story into history, thereby altering the expected narratives of their lives" (166). In what can be read as a counterpoint to Westman's view of the masculinity of Heyer's heroines, Pearce examines some of the less reassuring implications of popular romance novels, "which are, after all, romantic *comedies*," including the problematic nature of "the triumph of female love" (136-41), which catches heroines up in the toils of femininity.

[3] There is ample material for a longer study of Heyer as social historian not simply of the Regency period but, by implication, of her own contemporary milieu. Waldo Hawkrige, the Nonesuch, is, for example, a philanthropic aristocrat who addresses the problem of what later came to be called delinquency. "Waldo's brats" are a group of young men he is using his wealth and status to educate into stable careers and useful lives. It is an activity that has considerable resonance with post-war social reforms aimed at "turning out good citizens and good men" (Wills 157, 160) and must have added to Heyer's readers' understanding of the kind of man Waldo is.

[4] Heyer's fictional reticence is not at all unique—it is common in realism as well as romance. The impact of sexually transmitted infections on the nature of marriage achieved overt fictional presence only in New Woman fiction in the 1890s, where novelists directly address late-nineteenth-century awareness of the debilitating consequences of syphilis in



particular and its impact within marriage. Lesley Hall's essay is an invaluable overview of the medical, social, and literary history of syphilis in the nineteenth century.

[5] The description quoted by Kelly is lurid and hyperbolic, possibly placing this "virulent" new strain within xenophobic fears of the foreign (Lesley Hall, private email): "boils are exploding in groins like shells, and purulent jets of clap vie with the fountains" (300).

[6] Francis Grose's definition of "Buck" is revealing: "A blind horse; also a gay debauchee." Mrs. Imber, Damerel's cook, describes his guests as "several rackets bucks and ... three females whom she recognised at a glance for what they were" (27). Wallace describes Heyer's romances as "the socialisation of the hero and a marriage on the heroine's terms" (83). This may be optimistic in that there is no sense in *Regency Buck*, one of Wallace's examples, that Lord Worth is subject to Judith's terms. In most of their conflicts—the most telling being her defeat in the matter of the curricle race to Brighton—Worth ruthlessly suppresses her attempts at independence. Wallace describes Worth as enforcing "the constraints of polite London society" (83). As successful lover he never gives up the role of enforcer; the novel does not repudiate the suppressed violence of his behaviour which guarantees his superior sense of social reality. The wild Yorkshire girl does not survive.

[7] Dalrymple 308; Smith 85–86. Charles Rivenhall's fortune in *The Grand Sophy* also comes from an inheritance from a Nabob.

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