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(Dis)Honourable Escapes: Reassessing Sexuality in Georgette Heyer's Historical Romances

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Abstract: Fans and detractors alike often desexualize Georgette Heyer's historical romances, setting them apart from other novels for their lack of "prurience." Yet the text of these novels themselves presents multiple avenues through which this view can and has been challenged. To understand the persistence of this divide among readers, this article presents an analysis of the manner in which sexual activity is rendered visible and invisible in Heyer's novels through a breakdown of sexuality and desire among the heterosexual pairings that appear across thirty-three of her historical romances set in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Contrasting points where sexuality and desire overlap against the situations in which they do not makes evident the invisible social matrix that underlies Heyer's work. This matrix, in turn, sets the limits of desire and its visibility within the narrative. In the process, it also establishes clear outcomes for characters with respect to their potential happily ever afters, including the degree of societal approval, marital happiness, childbirth, and the pattern set for the next generation.

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Introduction

In her 1970 review of *Charity Girl* for The Times, Marganhita Laski derisively wrote, "even if Miss Heyer's heroines lifted their worked muslin skirts, if ever her heroic dandies unbuttoned their daytime pantaloons, underneath would be sewn-up rag dolls" (285). While she acknowledges that most contemporary popular fiction lacks explicit depictions of sex, Heyer's case is unique in that "not to say anything nasty is not necessarily the same thing as not to imply that sexual drives exist. In a good popular novel, be it overtly clean as a whistle, we should never doubt that to put in the dirty bits would be merely to expand it and not to alter or, as it would be in Miss Heyer's case, to shatter it" (285). Yet Heyer's Charity Steane, the titular charity girl, runs away from her home at the start of the novel after she is accused by her cousin of trying to seduce the hero (whom the cousin in question is also trying to woo). After her first conversation with him, she is warned by her aunt that if she "continued to make sheep's eyes at every man" it will inevitably end in a career as a prostitute (55). The hero, despite noting both her physical charms and her cousin's in his own thoughts as well as discussions with other characters, ends the novel by kissing his childhood friend and announcing their engagement.

Was Laski simply an unfair critic, then, mistaken in her reading of Heyer's historical romance? Interestingly, while many fans wrote to *The Times* in response to Laski's article in defence of Heyer's writing, most seemed to concede this particular point, albeit with different interpretations. Peter Arnold, in a letter to the editor dated October 3, 1970, writes, "I must agree with Miss Laski that the lack of sexual motivation in the behaviour of the characters is too noticeable, and is a detraction from essential human authenticity, 'Regency' or otherwise." Another reader, Anne E. Limbar, writes in the same section, "I find her books quite delightful and to introduce sex between her lovely heroines (in reduced circumstances but well born) and her wealthy, masculine heroes would be traitorous!" ("Charity Girl"). Such sentiments have remained common among readers through the decades. Kate Fenton, whose review appears on the back cover of the Arrow editions of Heyer's books released in the early 2000s, writes, "Bosoms do not quiver, still less are bodices ripped. Sense is preferred to sensibility, restraint to passion, and proposals are more characteristically sealed with a joke than a kiss." In a blog post from a Georgette Heyer Re-Read Series published from 2012 to 2013, Mari Ness at *Reactor* approvingly notes that in *Frederica*, "the attraction here is purely intellectual" ("A Dance").

Laski's contemporary A. S. Byatt sums up such perspectives in her defence of Heyer's romances as "[h]onourable" escapist fiction by approvingly remarking on the lack of "prurience" and even ascribing her popularity in part to stories that are "deliberately innocent, not because she does not know about the seamier side of Regency, but because she chooses to hint mockingly at it or ignore it" (239). And in the 1960s and '70s—the period in which both Byatt and Laski published their reviews of Heyer—this "seamier side" was the subject of numerous debates that viewed it as pornographic, normative, or even entirely anti-feminist (Greer 176; Regis 4; McCann and Roach 413). In this context, reviews that repeatedly emphasised "seamy" material's relative unimportance in Heyer's works also attempted (often consciously, as in Byatt's case) to separate her from the mainstream of romantic fiction (Barr 2; Street 240; Rayner and Wilkins 4). As McCann and Roach point out, this equation of the sexual with the "prurient" continues to haunt writers of such fiction to this day (412).

But while her books were the subject of several such debates, Heyer wrote most of her historical romances prior to this period, and the text of these novels themselves presents multiple avenues through which such arguments for desexualised readings can and have been challenged. References to sexuality in Heyer's novels have been explored by scholars such as Stacy Gillis, Laura George, and Geraldine Perriam with reference to queer desire, alternative models of masculinity, and even deconstructions of how these affect the dynamics between couples and their versions of happily ever after. While textual analysis can often be a subjective exercise and there is indeed a difference between the degree of scrutiny with which different readers—casual fans, reviewers and academics—approach a text, such a stark contrast between a facet that one side appears to miss altogether and the other explores in detail does merit a closer look.

Through a breakdown of sexuality and desire among the heterosexual pairings that appear across thirty-three of Heyer's historical romances set in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this paper attempts to present such a detailed analysis. It notes points of convergence between the play of social conventions referred to by Byatt and Laski and the expressions of sexuality within these texts, as well as the spaces where gaps emerge to present a picture of a social matrix that defines the limits of desirable sexuality. In the process, this matrix also establishes narrative acts and consequences for characters with respect to not only physical attraction and sexual engagements but also their effects on the happily ever afters that follow. This includes the degree of societal approval each match is met with, the kinds of marriage couples have, attitudes to parenthood, and the pattern set for the next generation. This clarifies how Heyer's historical fiction renders sexual activity visible and invisible to the reader, allowing for a fuller picture of the contrasting viewpoints seen above to emerge.

Sexuality vs. Desire

To understand how Heyer's novels treat sexuality—broadly defined as physical attraction and sexual activity experienced by a character, including impulses, thoughts, actions, and consequences such as pregnancy and childbirth—we must first look at how and when it transforms into the kind of desire that powers the narrative as a motive force (Clayton 38). Sexuality and desire have been noted by numerous writers to often be at odds with one another across Heyer's novels. In Lee O'Brien's analysis, the former emerges as a force to be tamed and controlled to prevent instability within the family unit, even at the cost of repression. Where it interacts with the latter, subtextual resistances have been read subversively by Lisa Fletcher and Gillis with reference to cross-dressing and homosexual impulses, and between the lines by Perriam in terms of male archetypes.

Even when heroines seize control, as Karin Westman discusses in her exploration of *The Grand Sophy*, they do so by talking back to a narrative that is pushing them in a different direction revealing "a compound and a contradictory impulse" (Strehle and Carden xii). While Westman's analysis of such doubled plots focuses largely on the contradictory impulse that they contain, the compound element that precedes this contradiction (in which "the narrative ventriloquizes cultural values, perpetuating and naturalising patriarchal models of gender that project women's destined and desirable end in the family") may hold the key to the question of when sexuality is rendered most clearly visible by the narrative and when it

is hidden away (Strehle and Carden xii). It is this element, which represents the values and ends endorsed by the narrative, that this article explores as a force through which attraction is rendered more or less visible in Heyer's writing.

For instance, in *The Foundling*, the Duke of Sale describes Belinda, an orphan he meets in the course of his adventures, as follows: "A face of rose-leaf complexion was framed in a cascade of guinea-gold curls, artlessly bound with a ribbon of scarcely a deeper blue than those glorious eyes; the brows were delicately arched; the little nose classically straight; the wistful mouth, with its short upper-lip; as kissable as it was perfect in proportion" (133).

His prospective wife, Lady Harriet, meeting Belinda's tenant-farmer fiancé for the first time toward the end of the novel, thinks,

> He was still wearing his working-clothes, with his sleeves rolled up, and his shirt open to reveal the tanned, sturdy column of his throat, and he presented such a fine figure of a man that not even Harriet, with twenty years of strict training behind her, could wonder that Belinda no sooner saw him than she gave a little scream of joy, and, without waiting for the steps of the chaise to be let down, tumbled headlong into his arms. (372)

In both cases, the leads appreciate the physical beauty of other characters and even briefly think about the reactions it could inspire—yet neither is actually moved to action, and the book ends with them finding a happily ever after with each other instead. It is also worth noting that neither resembles these other figures that their partner finds attractive in the slightest. There is little doubt that they desire one another or that the narrative is satisfactorily resolved by Sale and Harriet's match, but their desire for another is of a very different, deliberate kind that serves ends other than sexual fulfilment. In the last scene of the novel, Harriet is familiarising herself with the workings of Sale's estate (a role that she has been raised to fulfil), even as his cousin toasts the future family that they are expected to build and the position of patriarch that the duke is expected to take on. Sexuality, when separated from desire in Heyer's novels, is often simply left behind as a loose end. This is perhaps why Laski feels that to follow it would rip Heyer's carefully crafted world apart.

But clearly delineating the lines such separations follow becomes all the more important. In the sections that follow, I argue that the different treatments that instances of physical attraction receive illustrate a broader trend in Heyer's novels and depend largely on where they fall within the larger matrix that her narratives hinge on, which emphasises a vision of socioeconomic continuity over all else and would be threatened by the changes that an unrestrained sexuality could offer. Her treatment of love at first sight in *The Toll-Gate* exemplifies this. When Captain Staple and his future wife Helen Stornaway first meet, he is disguised as a toll keeper and she is on her way to church in her gig accompanied by a groom (31). It is obvious to him that she is a lady, and he falls in love at once. But while Nell is obviously attracted to him, as betrayed by her immediate blush and later confession that she thought of him throughout the service she attended, she merely nods at him "in the manner of one immeasurably his superior" and drives away before he makes his real name and status clear to her at their next meeting (32). Desire occurs in the narrative only when attraction is supported by its adherence to this socioeconomic vision.

Where continuity and attraction diverge, the treatment of the characters involved reinforces the larger message of the importance of the former through the consequences

they face for their actions. These may vary from quietly noting and ignoring the sexual impulse to acting upon it with disastrous results that haunt them and society (Belinda, the eponymous foundling, is believed by others to be the result of such an affair between a nobleman and an unnamed woman he was not married to) and inevitably lead them to a fate at the margins. Rather than an animal or transcendent experience, Heyer's work presents sex as not only a social act but *the* social act: constitutive of society itself (Snitow 706). As such, it becomes an experience that can be rendered visible or invisible by the extent to which it serves the societal narrative of continuity that is as vital to Heyer's version of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as her detailed descriptions of gowns and estates

In this setting, the approved form of desire emerges as something that entails breaking free of unthinking sexuality. And even when this condition is fulfilled, physical attraction is subordinated to the narrative not just in the manner seen in the example above but also in that desire may occur even in its absence. In *A Civil Contract*, desire in the absence of a sexual spark is a recurring theme as the male lead grows to enjoy his domestic life with the woman he marries while attracted to another. Even by the end of the novel, while his desire for his wife is undeniable, it is also markedly not sexual in the slightest in contrast to his previous courtship.

None of this is to say that sexual attraction simply does not occur between different kinds of people, merely that it is not equated with desire unless it aligns with this narrative. Kisses and affairs with sex workers may be explicitly mentioned or hinted at in the conversations of other characters, but if a man appears genuinely besotted with such a woman, it is portrayed as irresponsible behaviour. On multiple occasions, the purchase of jewellery or horses for a mistress is used to further illustrate a character's excessive spending and carelessness, hinting at the potential for ruin. By contrast, a husband performing similar actions, such as Lord Cardoss in *April Lady*, is described simply as doting, although if he is the male lead he will still set some limits, albeit much higher ones, indicating his concern for the sustained prosperity of his family.

The Social Matrix

The mechanisms by which the narrative validates or dismisses expressions of attraction and sexuality can be clearly laid out through an examination of Heyer's historical romances, in which a certain pattern emerges as to who is allowed a happily ever after with whom. Indeed, in works like *Bath Tangle*, Heyer resolves her overarching plots by simply matching everyone up in accordance with this general set of rules that prevail across her novels (Ness, "Rewarding"). These rules are largely based on the socioeconomic backgrounds of the characters involved rather than their individual personalities or preferences. The labels in the table below draw upon Heyer's own terminology for different classes to present a brief overview of the forms they generate in her novels.

Table 1: Relationship Types Across Classes in Heyer

	Upper Ten Thousand	**Landed Gentry**	**Bourgeoisie**	**Working Class**
Upper Ten Thousand	HEA.	Could work, but the burden of adapting to a different social setting lies entirely with the "lower" partner.	If the bourgeoise partner is a woman, could work, but the burden of adapting to a different social setting lies entirely with her. If a man, disastrous.	Disinheritance and estrangement if serious; a brief affair if not.
Landed Gentry	Could work, but the burden of adapting to a different social setting lies entirely with the "lower" partner.	HEA.	Only if the bourgeois partner is extremely wealthy.	Disinheritance and estrangement if serious; a brief affair if not.
Bourgeoisie	If the bourgeoise partner is a woman, could work, but the burden of adapting to a different social setting lies entirely with her. If a man, disastrous.	Only if the bourgeois partner is extremely wealthy.	HEA.	A step down for one partner, but occasionally possible.
Working Class	Disinheritance and estrangement if serious; a brief affair if not.	Disinheritance and estrangement if serious; a brief affair if not.	A step down for one partner, but occasionally possible.	HEA.

While a more detailed list of all thirty-three novels examined to arrive at these classifications is given in the Appendix, *Bath Tangle*, as mentioned above, is perhaps the clearest example

of this format. From the outset, wealthy, aristocratic Serena does not fit her suitor Hector Kirby's plans for their prospective future together despite their mutual physical attraction because while he is a respectable military man with property and a small fortune, they look upon and understand the world around them in entirely different terms. Kirby does anticipate this being a barrier, but he mistakenly believes that the issue is primarily a financial one initially and even wishes Serena were not the notable heiress she is (a suggestion she ridicules, no more able to imagine life without her money and the status it bestows on her than cutting off a limb). However, as we see through other characters like Mrs. Floore, the wealthy but unfashionable widow of a tradesman, in Heyer, money is not the only determinant of class.

Multiple variables—how they obtained their money, their education level, ancestry, land ownership, position within the ruling class—determine the exact place characters occupy as well as what they can feasibly aspire to. But Heyer, despite the historical accuracy of her descriptions, does tend to view these categories as static to a degree they were not in real life, given that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a transitional period for Britain's ruling classes, with those consigned to a lower level (the bourgeoise, in her terms) demanding a share of power commensurate with their growing economic heft. Despite resistance in England in the wake of the French Revolution, reforms such as the 1832 Representation of the People Act did eventually make their way through Parliament and pave the way for modernisation in formal, institutional terms, even as more informal metrics like land ownership and access to classical education grew (see Phillips and Wetherell). Even Jennifer Kloester, who for the most part follows the scheme laid out by Heyer in the structure of her historical description of the world her characters inhabited, does note that the new middle classes were a diverse lot, with both Mr. Chawleigh (whose daughter was deemed wealthy enough for a viscount) and some of his more senior employees technically falling into the same category (6).

By the end of *Bath Tangle*, Hector ultimately finds his match in Serena's ridiculously young stepmother Fanny, whose background, morals, and manners complement his, just as Serena's are shown to be in harmony with those of Ivo Barrasford, the marquis of Rotherham. Ivo weaponises his position in society against Mrs. Floore's granddaughter, Emily, to whom he finds himself engaged after a major misunderstanding on his part; the girl is completely taken aback when he ruthlessly exposes her to a social milieu that she has barely seen and is not given much of a chance to fit into, given the lack of guidance provided by either her fiancé or parents. Emily is also defenceless when he compounds the problem by making "violent love" to her (Heyer, *Bath Tangle* 297). She is unable to safely repulse Ivo, unlike Serena herself, who before the start of the novel called off her engagement to him after an argument with no particular consequence for her social standing or financial status beyond some gossip. Emily escapes only through extraordinary circumstances generated by Ivo in a bid to free himself of her, and even then her mother warns her of her likely social ruin, although there are hints that this may be averted by her future marriage to the son of her grandfather's business partner—once again, a closer class-based match who appears to understand her better.

Despite Ivo's brutal attempts throughout to overwhelm all around him, especially Emily in a sexual manner, it is worth noting that one character remains unaffected: Serena, the woman he ends up with. From the Victorian novel to Harlequin romances, male leads in heterosexual romantic fiction have tended to take on dominant roles in the relationships

they pursue (Cohn 39–62; Allan 26–27). But in Heyer, heroes of both the Mark I and Mark II varieties—"the brusque, savage sort with a foul temper" (of whom Ivo is a classic example) and "suave, well-dressed, rich and a famous whip"—rarely go against the wishes of the women they are paired with (Hodge 49). Other alternative heroes, such as Freddy Standen in *Cotillion*, stray even further from this mould.

While men and women in Heyer are held to different standards, they are equally punished for stepping out of the defined bounds of what the social matrix permits. Male characters have as much of a chance as women do of taking the fatal step down when it comes to marriage based solely on attraction as the women in Heyer's novels. One of the chief concerns that haunts Mary Challoner, the heroine of *Devil's Cub*, is that the man she loves must not risk punishment and ostracisation by society for marrying her if she is deemed to be below him by his family or peers—a fear that has its roots in seeing the same play out in her parents' marriage.

> She did not think that his love would survive exclusion from his own order, nor could she for an instant contemplate dragging him down to the society of lesser men. She thought, sadly, that she had seen too clearly how a man could sink to be able to cheat herself into supposing that the Marquis would maintain his position. Her own father had been disowned by his father, and he had ceased to associate with his old friends, because he had been looked at askance, as one who had committed the unforgivable sin. (252-53)

While men may be permitted to explore sexual avenues restricted for women before marriage[1], when it comes to whom they may desire without being rendered objects of ridicule and scandal, they are equally bound. The prospect of a marriage deemed a mésalliance threatens both as it risks upsetting the established order.

The closest Heyer comes to a Cinderella story is in *A Civil Contract*, in which the adjustment period is shown to be fraught with difficulties as Jenny's enormous wealth uneasily balances against Adam's empty but socially valuable title, and the ever after is a matter of finding happiness in routine rather than attraction. Hector, who dwells at length on Serena's beautiful appearance in *Bath Tangle*, is daunted by the prospect of her dominating him socially. It is the potential of a comfortable life with a like-minded woman that draws him into marriage with Fanny regardless of his earlier attraction to Serena. Even Ivo's final proposal to Serena projects this equality into their future: "You may set the county alight, if you choose, but ride rough-shod over me you will not, if we fight from cockcrow to sundown!" (312). Unrestrained sexuality, in this regard, is a threat not just to the family or in terms of the possibility of diseases, as noted by O'Brien, but also to the distinctly modern romantic ideal of companionate marriage as Heyer interprets it—as a partnership of socioeconomic equals maintaining the existing order (Regis 56).

Those who ignore this order to pursue physical attraction garner censure not just in terms of how they are treated by the plot but in how other characters describe their actions. Examples abound, from young men like an infatuated Oswald Denny making a nuisance of himself over Venetia Lanyon in *Venetia* to an older Julian Lindeth's instant attraction to Tiffany Wield in *The Nonesuch* and the elderly Mr. Theale's pursuit of Amanda Summercourt in *Sprig Muslin.* The reactions Hector's courtship of Serena receives also illustrate this perfectly:

> The habitués of the Pump Room derived considerable entertainment from it, one gentleman asserting that it was now his custom to set his watch by the Major's arrival; and old General Hendy, whose own practice was to steer a gouty and determined course to Fanny's side, saying indignantly that he never saw such a silly, moonstruck fellow, and had a good mind to tell him what a cake he was making of himself. (104)

He is described as acting during this period like "a man dazzled by strong sunshine" to the extent that he is blind to the hints of both his senior officers as well as members of Bath society who pronounce "that such a match would be scandalously unequal" (105). Hector opens himself up to ridicule here because even though his desires and motives are more complicated than those of the men pursuing sex workers discussed earlier, his behaviour also risks straying from the established order.

Wives and Widows

Once the appropriate marriage occurs, men and women in Heyer's world gain significantly more leeway in terms of pursing sexual partnerships and even a semblance of equality (though the latter depends entirely on the husband's attitude). A wife's affairs are often discussed in the same breath as her husband's, provided he is complaisant enough—and many do appear to be. Julia Oversley, discussing her prospective engagement and the potential of an affair with her now married love says,

> "Are you thinking of what people would say? But if I were to be married? One's position is then so different!"
>
> He gave a shaken little laugh. "Oh Julia, my little foolish one! No, I wasn't thinking of your position, but of Jenny's. I couldn't mortify her so. She offered me a carte blanche once, but I knew when I entered into our contract that I was marrying a girl bred into a stricter mould than is general in our order. . . . [P]osition wouldn't compensate her for the humiliation of being pitied, or sneered at, by the ton, because it was seen that I still loved you, Julia."
>
> "Oh, no, no! But people don't! Think of the Ashcotts! Everyone knows that Ashcott is more than Mrs Porth's *friend*, but no one—"
>
> "It is also pretty freely rumoured that Lady Ashcott has found consolation," he interrupted. "But what would Jenny do, if I neglected her? She wasn't born into our set; she hasn't a host of friends and relations, as you have—as Lady Ashcott has." (*A Civil Contract* 240)

Once again, the concerns that stand in the way have more to do with the different social and economic backgrounds of the characters involved: Julia and Adam have a distinctive understanding of the rules governing their relationship with other genders facilitated by the

advantages of being born into the *ton*. Adam knows his wife Jenny does not share it, and it would upset the already delicate balance within their marriage, which reaches its tentative equality based on his rank and her money provided neither abuses their particular advantage. This hints at the different rules by which men within this strata treat women of their own class versus the rest.

For women born into this particular social set, the status of being a wife bestows on them new opportunities by allowing them to participate in conversations and avenues for action previously closed off. Meg Standen in *Cotillion* finds "that the world of ton had far more to offer a dashing young matron than ever she had suspected when she was demure Miss Standen" and is proudly able to regale her brother with her newfound knowledge of gossip related to affairs and illegitimate children at Almack's (110). Some of these avenues remain open to wives even if their husband predeceases them, although other restrictions may be reimposed, as seen in cases such as that of Lady Barbara Childe from *An Infamous Army*. Heyer may have been inspired by the lives of real Regency figures such as Lady Cowper, the duchess of Devonshire, and Lady Oxford, to name a few of the most prominent. As Kloester notes, many such upper-class women "understood their world and its often contradictory rules, and frequently chose not only to play by them but also to manipulate and use them to their advantage," especially once they married and produced the all-important heir—even though discretion still remained a vital necessity for them (66). Sherry, the careless hero of *Friday's Child*, initially tells the young bride he impulsively marries to gain control of his fortune, "[Y]ou won't find me the sort of husband who's for ever kicking up a dust over trifles. I shan't interfere with your pleasures, as long as you keep 'em discreet, my dear" (35).

Indiscretion, though, does not necessarily take the form of an affair's being public knowledge but rather emerges from whether it challenges patriarchal norms governing the family structure marked by the status of married women as extensions of male family members in a legal, financial, and social sense that prevailed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England (Kloester 76). Even the newfound freedoms women receive upon marriage, discussed above, are essentially the result of placing themselves under the protection of their husbands' reputations. As a delighted Sir Humphrey thinks in *The Masqueraders* when a viscount's son offers for his scandal-prone daughter's hand in marriage, "[N]o one would dare to talk scandal of the prospective Viscountess of Barham!" (276).

While, historically, marriage provided sexual agency to women, it came at the cost of a total surrender of their bodies to one specific man, and the limits of this freedom were also set by his willingness and capacity to defend them. This sexually precarious position was accentuated by the social precarity it engendered as well as the financial risks it carried. These three aspects were inextricably linked by laws that treated married women as extensions of their husbands, leading to their virtual nonexistence as legal entities and helping uphold a sexual double standard in both society and law (Thomas 201). In circumstances where two married persons were at odds with one another, women were left at a distinct disadvantage. For instance, the acrimonious legal proceedings between the unhappily married Caroline and George Norton in the 1830s began not with any mention of his violent temper or dependence on his wife's money, but with a "criminal conversation" suit he filed against Lord Melbourne, whom he held had challenged his ownership of his wife's affection and sexual services (Shaney 24). Predicated on the idea that a wife was her husband's property and a repository of his honour, criminal conversation treated relations

outside of the marriage as a kind of theft for which compensation was owed to the man. While George Norton's case was eventually dismissed, even contemporary commentators freely speculated that he had filed it to extract more money from his beleaguered wife (Shaney 24). In doing so, he demonstrated the degree to which such statutes provided men with legal options to enforce their overall control over their wives through their bodies. Moreover, criminal conversation carried with it not only the implication that his wife owed her husband perpetual access to her affections and body (which indeed she did by law) but could also only be prosecuted by a husband with an adulterous wife and not the other way around (Thomas 199).

After decades of trying to break free, Caroline wrote in 1854 that for women in such circumstances, "failing her natural protector, the law should be able to protect; that some direct court of appeal should exist" (Norton 167–68). Cases such as these and the popular discussions they engendered at the time did not necessarily dispute the social structure that appointed men as protectors, but they did question its limitations and failings. Contemporary commentators, including those like Eliza Lynn who were critical of the organised women's movement, argued that Caroline's case represented "no prespostrous escape from womanly duty . . . no high-flown assertion of equality in kind; but simple justice" (Lynn 260).

Women's bodies, as the key sites of such debates, were essentially treated as sites of legal and social contestation. The effects could be seen in their social lives and intimate relationships as well. And while Heyer rarely addresses such struggles directly, she does play upon their consequences in her plots, as Gillis observes in the case of *Regency Buck*. The contest between Judith's suitors is framed in terms of control over both her person and her wealth. Though in Heyer the male hero is unlikely to shirk his responsibilities, he can hardly fulfil his role without a woman playing the complimentary part as the object of his protection. In *The Convenient Marriage,* the villainous Lethbridge plans to rape Horatia specifically to humiliate her husband Lord Rule, making it clear that he regards his action less as an attack directed at her as a person but rather as a way to desecrate something that he acknowledges belongs to the other man. He is perfectly willing to indulge in laughing banter with her even as he calmly tells her what he plans to do for his revenge, with his dialogues in the scene making it clear that his plan has little to do with any personal enmity toward her as an individual despite it being her body at stake. And when Rule challenges Lethbridge to a duel, it is as much for the preservation of his own honour as his wife's.

Marriage granted men far more autonomy, particularly in pursuing women outside of their own class, as the risk of a disastrous alliance was then essentially nil. While single, even the most notorious rakes were advised caution in venturing beyond the clearly defined groups of permissible women when pursing affairs. Heyer reflects this when the duke of Avon, himself referred to as Satan, warns his son against pursuing a relationship with a merchant's niece in *Devil's Cub*: "I would advise you, Dominic, to amuse yourself with women of a certain class, or with your own kind, who understand how the game is to be played" (25). A host of rules still governed their conduct and varied based on the participants. The precise prescriptions may have differed based on gender and socioeconomic background, and those who did not follow them risked creating, in the duke's words, "the kind of scandal I deplore" (25).

Within these bounds, though, male characters find room to behave in a manner that would not be permitted in the circles they were born into. This could be a relief but also a convenient excuse for inexcusable behaviour, as seen in *Venetia*:

> Men—witness all the histories!—were subject to sudden lusts and violences, affairs that seemed strangely divorced from heart or head, and often more strangely still from what were surely their true characters. For them chastity was not a prime virtue: she remembered her amazement when she had discovered that so correct a gentleman and kind a husband as Sir John Denny had not always been faithful to his lady. Had Lady Denny cared? A little perhaps, but she had not allowed it to blight her marriage. "Men, my love, are different from us," she had said once, "even the best of them! I will tell you this because 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. I daresay, if we were to see them watching some horrid, vulgar prize-fight, or in company with women of a certain class, we shouldn't recognise 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. One ought rather to be thankful that any affairs they may have amongst what they call the muslin company don't change their *true* affection in the least." (63–64)

Lady Denny's words can hardly be taken at face value (after all, leaving her husband for his infidelity would be so immensely difficult for her legally, socially, and financially that her explanation is as much a means to reconcile herself to his actions as to justify them to her young neighbour), but they do provide a hint to the extent to which unequal social relations left some men to act as they pleased with little regard for either the women from other classes they had sexual relations with or those from their own that they married.

(Re)Producing Class

A different kind of challenge could also spring up in the case an heir was either not born or the first child borne by a woman had a biological father who was not her legal spouse. In *The Foundling*, Lady Ampleforth warns her daughter that love is not something to be thought of before an heir is born, although she may do as she pleases later (57). In this view, sexual acts for purposes other than procreation are portrayed as an indulgence that could only be afforded once continuity was ensured. A darker version of this warning can be seen in one of Heyer's few ventures into the Gothic, *Cousin Kate*. Lady Broome, aware of her son Torquil's growing mental illness, resolves to marry him to his cousin Kate so that he can produce an heir. Both Torquil and Kate are treated as little more than vessels to ensure the unbroken succession of Broomes at their country estate, Staplewood. To entice Kate, she tells her that her prospective husband can easily be confined on account of his illness (a plausible scenario given the harsh laws governing the lives of the mentally ill in England during this period) and "once you have given Staplewood an heir—why provided you are discreet, which I don't doubt you would be, I shall turn a blind eye on any little *affaires* which you may have!" (272).

Motherhood is celebrated as a step toward completing the narrative of continuity rather than the more conventional pregnancy arcs seen in category romances, which portray pregnancy and child-rearing as a stand-in for wedded felicity with children that complete and strengthen the sexual bond at the heart of the heterosexual couple's family life (Roskanwoski 1; Boswell 9–12). Mothers and fathers in Heyer's novels are rarely involved in actually raising their children. Indeed, Heyer seems almost suspicious of parents who are known to be attached to their children, especially mothers—some, such as Lady Buxted in *Frederica* or Lady Ianthe in *Sylvester*, are shown to have ulterior motives for wishing to be perceived as such by society, while others, like Mrs. Yardley in *Venetia* or Mrs. Cliffe in *False Colours*, appear to be harming their children through their over-involvement. The central adult figures who dominate the childhoods of most characters and continue to serve them as trusted retainers in adulthood, often playing pivotal roles as side characters themselves, are usually nannies, nurses, and governesses.

Heyer possibly also underplays raising children because in her work social classes are replicated almost entirely by birth, once again reinforcing the vision of a mostly static stratification. Vital clues can be found in phrases that crop up across all of Heyer's novels to describe the nobility and gentry: "to the manner born," "born hosed and shod," or even simply "Quality" are all meant to denote innate qualities passed down by generations of "good breeding" that lend these characters an aura instantly recognised by all sections of society. These characteristics appear to be more nature than nurture, if we believe the side-by-side comparisons that the narrative and other characters alike make between the vicomte de Valmé and Leonie, whose places were switched at birth by the villain of *These Old Shades*, leading to a farmer's son being raised as a viscount and a noblewoman as a commoner in Paris:

> For a moment, they stood shoulder-to-shoulder, the one slim and delicate, with eyes that matched the sapphires around his neck; and glowing curls swept back from a white brow beneath whose skin the veins showed faintly blue. The other was thick-set and dark, with square hands and short neck; powdered, perfumed and patched, dressed in rich silks and velvet, but in spite of all that rather uncouth and awkward. (55)

The eugenicist and racial bent of such physical descriptions is also apparent and has been explored in detail by contemporary readers and scholars (particularly with reference to the infamous scene involving Mr. Goldhanger in *The Grand Sophy*—a perennial problem for Heyer fans and publishers, who have even attempted to excise him from the text entirely in some newer editions) (Alter 2023). For the argument presented here, it is enough to note that it presents yet another angle from which desire is linked with the continuity of a class, with the vicomte's supposed mother being accused of "bad blood" by her brother-in-law owing to his obvious "boorishness" just a few pages prior in the text (*These Old Shades* 51).

It is once the children reach the age of marriage that the parents' more active responsibilities kick in. Chief among these is ensuring that their progeny too make suitable matches. The very traits that Austen gently mocks in Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* are elevated to the pinnacle of good sense by Heyer's characters. Mrs. Tallant in *Arabella* is determined to make excellent matches for her daughters by pairing them with the best available men in terms of social and financial status, and the daughters agree that it is what

would be best for them and their family. Those who allow their children to marry only for love or the fulfilment of physical attraction are largely portrayed as irresponsible, and they may even doom their children to a lifetime of difficulties.

The consequences of such actions, especially where participants from different backgrounds come together, could vary but once again demonstrate how an unruly sexuality would be kept at the margins: an illegitimate daughter could be plausibly recognised as a "natural sister" by a generous enough family (only privately, of course), as seen by Mr. Vinehall's ready acceptance of one of Amanda's more interesting stories in *Sprig Muslin* (226), while another might be left in the care of an orphanage, as with Belinda in *The Foundling* (353) and left to make her own way in the world. Historically, not providing for a child, even one born outside wedlock, was condemned although still largely considered a personal matter. These were judged more in terms of manners than morality (although the line between the two is always blurry for Heyer). In *Friday's Child*, it is Sir Montagu's reluctance to acknowledge a child as his that condemns him as bad *ton* in the eyes of his peers rather than his having had an affair with a working class woman, even though having given in to her attraction to him is enough to see her ruined and cast out from her former life. While children form the core function that desirable marriages serve in ensuring the stability of Heyer's world, the children born of unions based entirely on sexual impulse have no particular place in it at all, save what their circumstances allow them to create.

Conformity, Rebellion, and Quiet Escapes

But does this reduce Heyer's characters to puppets enacting the same predictable play over and over again? It would seem that between the narrative compulsions of socioeconomic continuity that shape the plot in highly specific ways along with a tendency to reduce the central romantic figures to Mark I or Mark II types, it should be quite easy to reduce Heyer's historical romances to simple formulas. But her sheer variety of topics, plots, and romantic storylines these defy such an explanation.

The factors mentioned above certainly do provide a template that these novels follow, but it is far less restrictive in practice than it may appear at first glance. As mentioned above, a heroine like the Grand Sophy is quite capable of mastering the rules and writing her own story that both follows and bends these (see Westman). Of course, not all attempts end quite as well as a protagonist's. Lady Aurelia in *Venetia*, unhappily married to a man with whom she has little in common, does escape via a divorce and second marriage but suffers a social death: at the hands of the *ton*, who refuse to receive her at their events; among her former family, with a husband who pronounces her actually dead and retreats to his country estate, only confiding the truth of her continued existence to his eldest son who follows in his father's footsteps and refuses to acknowledge her; with neighbours, who gossip about her for a while before turning her into a cautionary tale; and with servants too afraid or ignorant to know what actually happened or discuss it openly. While hers is the most blatant example, there are other, gentler routes that characters take to chart their own way, and some even retreat quite willingly to the margins. *Cotillion*'s Lord Dolphinton, treated unkindly by society and most of his own family, retreats to his encumbered country estate with his plebeian wife and appears to be happy with this outcome even as it neatly takes him out of the mainstream of the world of the *ton*.

Not all who are dissatisfied turn away quite so dramatically. In *False Colours*, the perfect-on-paper couple Lord Denville and Cressida Stavely may have all around them cheering them on, but their personalities simply do not fit together. Rather than making the mistakes their respective parents did in pursuing perfect marriages with precise social equals with whom they have nothing in common (as Denville's parents did, achieving perfect continuity and social distinction with limited happiness) or making an odd match that throws the family in disarray (as Cressida's father does at the start of the novel, leading even his own mother to treat him with contempt), they navigate a middle path where they settle one rung away from perfection on the matrix, with acceptable matches that suit them better on a personal level—although it is worth noting that Denville's slightly more controversial choice is quietly put aside by Heyer, presumably to be resolved after the end of the main storyline, and even Cressida needs to go through a far more circuitous route to marry Denville's younger brother than was necessary for a betrothal to the extremely eligible Lord Denville himself.

And all of this overlooks the numerous occasions when sexuality and desire happily coincide by the end of the story, such as in *Devil's Cub*, where the hero's passionate embraces are readily welcomed by his bride and they ride off into the sunset to a stable relationship that lasts well into old age, as we see from our final glimpse of them in *An Infamous Army*. Vidal, a notorious rake at the start of the novel, does want Mary but in a purely physical manner that renders her deeply uncomfortable and afraid: "[I]n his half-closed eyes was a gleam that alarmed her more. The man meant mischief. His glance stripped her naked" (Devil's Cub 87). After he learns that she is a "lady" by the standards of his social class and the granddaughter of one of his father's old friends, he decides to marry her instead. And after his parents learn of the same and are satisfied by her bearing and deportment as much as her calm personality, his want transforms into a desire supported by the narrative and takes on a form pleasing to Mary herself as well:

> He had caught her in his arms so fiercely that the breath was almost crushed out of her. His dark face swam before her eyes for an instant, then his mouth was locked to hers, in a kiss so hard that her lips felt bruised. She yielded, carried away half-swooning on the tide of his passion. But in a moment she struggled to get her hands free, and at once his hold on her slackened. She flung up her arms round his neck, and with a queer little sound between a sob and a laugh, buried her face in his coat. (273)

The social matrix functions somewhat akin to a roadmap in Heyer's novels. Sticking to it ensures the transformation of sexual attraction into socially sanctioned desire while off-roading comes with bumps that may prove to be hurdles or disasters, depending on how they are handled. This also makes it easier to understand how doubled plots work in and for Heyer. From the perspective of the narrative they endorse, if "the narrative talks back, revealing women's frustration, dissent, and potentially subversive response to these patriarchal constructions," then to be able to clearly see what values it is talking to provides better criteria for analysis of what it sanctions and seeks to dismiss (Strehle and Carden xii). If subversions threaten the existing social order, they are sanctioned—but sometimes characters are aware of and willing to bear these sanctions in the pursuit of their happiness.

This does not affect the stability of the order itself, given that they are quietly moved to its margins or clearly labelled as deficient to varying degrees by their society.

In either mode, though, sexuality is rendered if not entirely invisible then certainly less obvious. In case of the approved pairings, it is woven into the very fabric of society itself becoming a seamless part of what was and shall (in the world of the *ton* as portrayed by Heyer) continue to be; in those that fall on the opposite extreme, it is often taken off the page entirely after being noted with a conclusion that depends upon the imagination of the reader. This explains why some see sexuality as a complex contradiction in her historical romances, some find its subversive presence between the lines, and others argue that to expand upon it would destroy the storyline—all of them are quite right. It is a deft trick that Heyer pulls in creating a setting based on continuity that keeps physical concerns present but firmly in the background even as she builds a society and plot around them. Doing so blurs the distinction drawn by critics such as Laski and Byatt, as well as their successors, between sexuality and its absence, challenging the very basis on which they differentiate Heyer as better or worse than the rest of the genre. It also presents a complication for readings of historical romance which equate desire with sexuality alone and risk missing the more complicated relationship between the two, especially in deliberately created settings that draw on but are not confined only to the social and moral mores of particular time periods, as they interpret these to serve narrative ends.

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[1] I deliberately use the term *restricted* rather than *closed*. While women are certainly expected to maintain an appearance of innocence prior to the wedding, Heyer is clearly quite sceptical about whether any but the youngest actually possess such innocence (a sentiment she expresses most clearly through Annis Wychwood, the unmarried older heroine of *Lady of Quality*). Many have "prior attachments" or "boy-and-girl stuff" behind them, which covers a wide range of other acts, stopping short at the loss of virginity.

Appendix

List of Heyer novels used as primary sources, organised according to the time period in which they are set:

Set in the Eighteenth Century:

- *The Black Moth*
- *These Old Shades*
- *The Masqueraders*
- *Powder and Patch*
- *Devil's Cub*
- *The Convenient Marriage*
- *The Talisman Ring*
- *Faro's Daughter*

Set during the Regency:

- *An Infamous Army*
- *Regency Buck*

- *The Corinthian*
- *Friday's Child*
- *The Reluctant Widow*
- *Arabella*
- *The Foundling*
- *The Grand Sophy*
- *The Quiet Gentleman*
- *Cotillion*
- *The Toll-Gate*
- *Bath Tangle*
- *Sprig Muslin*
- *April Lady*
- *Sylvester*
- *Venetia*
- *The Unknown Ajax*
- *A Civil Contract*
- *The Nonesuch*
- *False Colours*
- *Frederica*
- *The Black Sheep*
- *Cousin Kate*
- *Charity Girl*
- *Lady of Quality*

Note: Historical works set in earlier periods, such as *Simon the Coldheart* and *Beauvallet*, have been excluded, as have biographical accounts, such as *My Lord John* and *The Spanish Bride*, as this paper is limited to exploring the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which the majority of Heyer's historical romances are set. The short story collection *Pistols for Two* has also been excluded as this article focusses primarily on her full-length novels, which differ from the former in their format and structure.

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