The Killers occupy a contentious place in contemporary music. Their emergence onto the popular music scene in 2004 was characterized by a fusion of rock, “lo-fi fuzz” (Prevatt, qtd. in Keene 36), synth-pop, and new wave revival. The band’s early visual aesthetic, mostly embodied through the stage persona of frontman Brandon Flowers, gave conspicuous nods to glam rock and the “British pop dandy” (see Hawkins), but shared elements with the concurrently rising emo genre with its similar penchant for men in tailored suits and “Authenticity” (210). While early hits “Mr. Brightside” and “Somebody Told Me” still receive radio and club play, their more recent work has received less commercial success and critical acclaim[1]. Following the release of their fourth studio album in 2012, Chris Bosman of TIME and Consequence of Sound described the band as “both grand and forgettable” and “embarrassingly satisfying” (para. 1), while Craig McLean of the Independent hailed them as “America’s greatest rock band” (n.p.). While Flowers himself appears to espouse this attitude in some public statements, in others he seems to apologize for work by the band that he finds subpar. They are, in short, a musical entity in a state of constant fluctuation, contradiction, and evolution.

One such evolution comes in their treatment of love and romance. Rhodes identifies love as “rock’s great theme” which the genre addresses “in all its positive, negative, and ambivalent connotations” (25). The Killers’ engagement with the theme alone is certainly not unique. What is noteworthy, however, is the nature of their evolution, which has been marked by conspicuous thematic and stylistic transformations, changes in reception, and, perhaps most significantly, their frontman’s return to his Mormon faith and much-publicized church-influenced commitment to his wife. In chronological terms (outlined below), their early work largely abstained from positive depictions of romantic relationships, centering instead on breakups, unreciprocated desire, and seemingly doomed pick-up lines (“Somebody told me/That you had a boyfriend/That looked like a girlfriend/That I had in February of last year”). By the release of their fourth album, their subject matter had evolved to focus heavily on love, with a particularly notable concern for love in long-term relationships. From the first track off their first album to the first single off their fourth, The Killers made a dramatic shift from murdering the object of their narrative focalizer’s affection to marrying her.

Surveying popular music, Madanikia and Bartholomew define love as a musical theme as “expressions of romantic love or caring for a potential, current, or past romantic partner, as well as any content that involved a romantic relationship” which may also, but not always, “involve expressions of sexual desire” (3). For the purposes of this article, I will consider songs as being about love/romance when their lyrics explicitly describe such a relationship (or the loss of one) or clear romantic and/or sexual desire. The band’s early studio albums posit bad endings to such desires, ranging from jilted emasculation to murder. The rejection theme continues in the release of 2007’s Sawdust, a compilation album of early singles, B-sides, and rare tracks. The album contains a number of songs that address romantic relationships, including The Killers’ first promotional single and exception to their early focus on the consequences of rejection, “Glamorous Indie Rock and Roll.”

Most other songs, however, pertain to smugly single-sided desire or the loss of a relationship. In keeping with the angrier approach suggested on Hot Fuss, “All the Pretty Faces” is a frenetic rock song in which the focalizer seems torn between love and violence, desire and rejection. “Leave the Bourbon on the Shelf” here functions as a breakup song, although it is in fact a prequel to The Killers’ take on a rock murder ballad in Hot Fuss’s “Jenny Was A Friend of Mine.” (The Murder Trilogy will be discussed in detail below.) Other romance-centric tracks here include “Under [End Page 2]” the Gun,” “Who Let You Go,” and a cover of Kenny Rogers’ “Ruby, Don’t Take Your Love to Town.” Before closing with a remix of “Mr. Brightside,” the album features one of the band’s most popular covers, Dire Straits’ “Romeo and Juliet.” This album thus seems to collect several love-centric songs that were not selected for the early studio albums.

However, the next studio album, Day & Age (2008), withdraws from explicit love, its loss, and romance. No love-centric songs (per this article’s definition) appear on the album save for one: “Tidal Wave,” which was exclusive to the iTunes edition. Yet with their fourth LP, Battle Born (2012), The Killers focused consciously on romance, a turning point away from their previous work. The album explores romantic relationships with a maturity that is both unusual for often youth-centered rock and a departure from the images of the bewildered and rejected young boys on Hot Fuss. Not coincidentally, “Miss Atomic Bomb” acts as a sequel to “Mr. Brightside” both musically and lyrically, featuring its antecedent’s signature guitar motif and the apparent decision of the Mr. Brightside character to move on from the woman he cannot have. Several other tracks on the album concern romance, heartache, and even the hardships of marriage: “Runaways,” “The Way It Was,” “Here With Me,” and “Heart of a Girl,” and, on the deluxe edition of the album, “Prize Fighter.” Finally, a failed romantic relationship is lamented on “Just Another Girl,” a previously unreleased bonus track that closes their Greatest hits collection, Direct Hits (2013). Their fifth studio album Wonderful Wonderful (2017) focuses more personally on marital relationships, specifically that of Flowers and his wife Tana.

It is clear from this survey that The Killers’ studio work has evolved toward romance rather than away from it, to such a point that their recent work is dominated by songs about love, to the dismay of some fans[2]. Several concurrent factors have
precipitated this shift, including aging band members and fans. Flowers’ stated distaste for much contemporary rock music, and the peculiar place of Flowers as a devout Mormon rock star with ambitions of becoming an even greater one. More generally, the shift also participates in the critically well-established ability of rock music to explore and challenge masculinity via songs about love and desire. This article traces the band’s thematic evolution as an investigation into rock’s varying modes of masculinity, gender politics, and the star persona of the frontman figure. While Moore cautions against some humanities approaches to music studies (“Introduction” 7), my analysis of the music itself will primarily concern lyrics, which, Griffiths notes, are often de-emphasized in music studies despite their influence on the music itself (40-43). My focus on Flowers as the driving force of the band’s thematic evolution also requires a lyrical focus, as he is the band’s primary lyricist and spokesperson, and lyrical analysis is particularly efficient in revealing the “complex interplay between myth and music(ian)” (McCarthy 28). Furthermore, as this article will demonstrate, changes in the band’s treatment of romantic relationships are correlated with events in Flowers’ personal life. Through song lyrics, Astor and Negus argue, musicians “inevitably negotiate the meaning of their own biographies” (200). The band’s evolution is, therefore, most conspicuous through analysis of lyricism and the gradual identification of Flowers himself as his own focalizer. [End Page 3]

Rock Masculinities

The trajectory of The Killers’ evolution from murder to marriage can first be contextualized through an understanding of the relationship between masculinity and rock music. Much of the scholarship on this relationship concerns more popular, more aggressive, or conspicuously harder rock acts. Discourses of masculinity in the respective works of The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, both all-male bands that have straddled similar rock/pop lines to The Killers, have received a respectable amount of academic and non-academic study. Rock has traditionally been addressed as a male-dominated genre, and even when women do find prominence in the genre, Crider argues, rock “has always conformed to the expectations of hegemonic masculinity” (259). Male focalizers are also standard and can be reasonably assumed in many, if not most, songs performed by men in the rock and pop genres, further supporting a link from masculinity and maleness to such music.[3] Focalization, an essential element for this analysis, occurs in “the relationship between the ‘vision’ of the agent that sees, and that which is seen” (Bal, Narratology 104). The reader/listener is presented with the perspective not only of the narrating voice but also the implied perspective of the agent witnessing or participating in the events of the text, ultimately allowing up to three or four levels of focalization (Bal, Narratologie 32). With regards to masculinity, personal focalizers are especially embedded within lyrical music, which implicitly creates the masculine figure through a gendered human voice.

R.W. Connell’s theoretical model of “hegemonic masculinity” provides a starting point for several contemporary studies of masculinity and music. In her model, hegemonic masculinity is understood as a socially prescribed set of images and practices which men are expected to exhibit publicly. Frith and McRobbie’s seminal work on “cock rock” in 1978 provided a detailed analysis of hyper-aggressive masculinity in rock music that allowed only for anger and jealousy as male emotional expressions. This category was juxtaposed with what the authors termed “teenybop,” whose focalizer was an “incompetent male adolescent” who sang of his own “self-pity, vulnerability, and need” for the “unreliable, fickle, and more selfish” woman (375). However, Frith’s 1985 “Afterthoughts” admits this work oversimplified much of rock’s gender relations. Nonetheless, their study of women’s sexual objectification and men’s anger and sexual prowess is echoed in much rock criticism and is even now not without merit. In 2005, Connell and Messerschmidt revisited Connell’s original theoretical framework to adjust for more nuanced understandings of masculinity and to establish a “renovated analysis” of prescribed male qualities (854). This revised study rejected the former premise of an automatic subordination of women but maintained that gender hierarchies are still powerfully in place (846-7). Men’s abilities to navigate appropriate contexts for hegemonic practice are also acknowledged. Hegemonic masculinity, then, “is not static or essential” and may or may not include all the qualities previously ascribed to it (Houston 159).

Musical masculinities have indeed evolved to include performances that defy traditional criticism or that fluidly fuse characteristics of traditional understandings of gendered expression. Leonard posit Kurt Cobain, with his emotional neediness contrasted against aurally aggressive grunge rock, as a challenge to binaries such as Frith and McRobbie’s (25). Biddle, meanwhile, recognizes the “new male singer/songwriter,” who is characterized by “openness to vulnerability, a commitment to social and sexual intimacy, and [End Page 4] a tendency to want to avoid the overt spectacularisation of masculinity” (125). The Killers are far from the more aggressive musical forms of rock with which many critics of music and gender have been concerned, nor do they display the soft sensitivity of Biddle’s characterization, whom are exemplified by more musically and vocally subdued singers Sufjan Stevens and José González. What can be found in their work, however, is a negotiation of these spheres of musical masculinity that alternately upholds and challenges rigid critical classifications, beginning at one extreme (murder) and ending at what here serves as its thematic opposite, husband-and-fatherhood. These negotiations manifest particularly through a series of masculine focalizers who have gradually forsaken narrative distance to become identifiable as the band’s frontman himself.


Heartbreak is a common subject in The Killer’s music, as in rock at large, but is highlighted in their work by certain early tracks in which it leads to murder. Their Murder Trilogy comprises, in narrative order, “Leave the Bourbon on the Shelf,” “Midnight Show,” and “Jenny Was A Friend of Mine.”[4] In the first song, the focalizer is rejected by his girlfriend, Jennifer, in favor of another man. In the second (which is actually the tenth and penultimate track on Hot Fuss), he murders her, and in “Jenny” (which opens the album), he is interrogated by the police, ultimately confessing to the crime. The lyrics of “Leave the Bourbon” themselves do not indicate that he will kill her for this perceived transgression, but a threat is implied:

Give me one more chance tonight
And I swear I’ll make it right
But you ain’t got time for this
And that wretched bell is ringin’
And I’m not satisfied until I hold you

The final chorus modifies the last line to say “I’m not satisfied until I hold you tight.” The last word takes on new significance when paired with “Midnight Show.” Here, the focalizer confronts Jenny and strangles her: “I took my baby’s breath beneath

the chandelier/Of stars and atmosphere/And watched her disappear.” We may now interpret the addition in the previous song as foreshadowing the manner in which Jenny will die. The embrace/strangulation motif is repeated in the
The Murder Trilogy blends rock aggression with less masculine-coded emotional sensitivity to depict the most extreme reaction to rejection. The act of strangulation is particularly aggressive and dominating, requiring applied physical force over a prolonged period in order to ensure death. Through this act, the focalizer expresses the traditional stereotype of hegemonic male aggression while retaining a petulance that still echoes Frith and McRobbie’s limited analysis. Perhaps the most vocally emphatic tracks of Hot Fuss are the two pertaining to Jenny’s murder. In these, Flowers’ voice moves from a disaffected, narcissistic bluntness (“I know my rights/I’ve been here all day and it’s time/For me to go so let me know/It’s all right”) to loud, growling protest (“I just can’t take this/I swear I told you the truth!”) in “Jenny” and a repetition of “no” over climactic driving guitars and a sustained wail in “Midnight Show”). In both songs, it is only when the focalizer becomes angry or is threatened with the revelation of his crime that Flowers emotes. His desperate pleas for Jenny to reconsider before he murders her compromise the smug dominance that he otherwise displays. Regarding the sexual murderer, an iconic figure in murder ballads, Reynolds and Press write that “Murder is the final expression of his passion, the proof and testament of his love. It’s a form of absolute possession, a terrible sanguinary intimacy” (28). In these songs, Flowers perhaps inadvertently aligns himself with Nick Cave, whom Reynolds and Press label “the most powerful exploration” of that expression in rock (the alliance is the more significant in that Cave has experienced a similar musical evolution, the lyricism of which owes much to his personal spirituality). In this way, the focalizer-murderer becomes a morbid, romantically rejected embodiment of Connell and Messerschmidt’s revised, plural hegemonic masculinities, which may involve conflicting emotional ambivalences (852), but still invite physical violence even if they are no longer predicated upon it (840).

On Hot Fuss, “Jenny” is followed by The Killers’ first single, “Mr. Brightside.” This marks the first blatantly love-centric song in their musical corpus, but it is far from a celebration of love. The song instead reveals the inner paranoia and envy of a male focalizer observing the woman he desires with another man. His protestation that he has “been doing just fine” at the beginning of each verse is contradicted by a sense of emasculation as he imagines the couple preparing for sex:

Now they’re going to bed
And my stomach is sick
And it’s all in my head

[...]

I just can’t look
It’s killing me
And taking control

The self-identified Mr. Brightside does not resort to murder when he perceives himself rejected, and his song thus removes him from the aggressive masculine/emasculated dichotomy found in the Murder Trilogy. The music video further establishes this removal, as Flowers appears as a nervous but smugly flamboyant dandy in contrast to the older, more emotionally collected Eric Roberts in their battle for the girl. Here, the embodied focalizer is at his least hegemonically masculine and most like a music dandy, who, “mocking his own self-loathing [...] exhibits an outward expression of superiority” (Hawkins 5). This dandy, Reynolds and Press argue, is himself a “revolt against the proper model of masculinity” (17). Flowers’ dandy, however, lacks a rock dandy’s typical politically transgressive nature due to his inability to participate in the “supposed sexual freedom” of the aesthetic identity (Hesmondhalgh 57).

While “Mr. Brightside” refrains from violence, it is worth noting that its 2012 sequel, “Miss Atomic Bomb,” evokes destructive imagery. With a decade between them, the two songs are positioned at polar opposite eras in The Killers’ thematic trajectory: “Mr. Brightside” occurs at the new wave/post punk-revival beginning and “Miss Atomic Bomb” is the centerpiece of the Springsteen-influenced arena rock of Battle Born. Here we return to Mr. Brightside’s focalization as he at last relinquishes his desire for the girl. There is a conspicuous maturity to the song, not only due to the years between albums and a more developed tone in Flowers’ voice but also within the lyrics, which denote a passage of time: “I was new in town, a boy with the eager eyes,” “When I look back on those neon nights,” “We were innocent and young,” “Sometimes in dreams of impact I still hear” (all emphases mine). The paranoid boy of the first track has grown into the man who has granted himself the power to leave the scene of his rejection. Accordingly, the frenetic, friendless, club-friendly dance-rock of its predecessor is replaced by a smoothly building rock ballad. The identification of the girl as “Miss Atomic Bomb” creates a sense of her as a sudden, all-destroying force, yet the focalizer, previously unmanned by his romantic desire, now emerges whole (“The dust cloud has settled/And my eyes are clear”). Yet, in keeping with the masculine destructive drestessiveness of Hot Fuss, the song closes with doublespeak suggesting a bad and bitter end for one of the pair. While the focalizer’s declaration that “this love that I’ve cradled/Is wearing thin” does not result in Miss Atomic Bomb’s murder, the subsequent lyrics “But I’m standing here/Anon/You’re too late/Your shock-wave whisper has sealed your fate” imply that something undesirable awaits her. This fate, however, is clouded in ambiguity as the narrative adopts another layer in the song’s finale. The “you,” previously addressing Miss Atomic Bomb through the focalization of Mr. Brightside, now shifts to Mr. Brightside himself, addressed by the song’s external narrator, who may possibly be the mature Mr. Brightside as a distinctly separate entity speaking to his younger self. As the song fades out, a final verse describes Mr. Brightside with images that imply assault:

It feels just like a dagger buried deep in your back
You run for cover but you can’t escape the second attack
Your soul was innocent, she kissed him and she painted it black
You should have seen your little face, burning for love
Holding on for your life

Then backing vocals (also primarily provided by Flowers) juxtapose this narrator’s voice with Mr. Brightside’s as the latter repeats the pre-chorus:

But you can’t survive (All that I wanted was a little touch)
When you want it all (A little tenderness and truth, I didn’t ask for much)
What is particularly notable here is that the first shift is not signalled; the listener only realizes that "you" is now Mr. Brightside when the focalized "she" enters. The fluid shift leaves it open to question if the final promise of death ("you can't survive"), whether literal or figurative, is addressed to the man or the woman of the ill-fated pair. As (currently) the final piece in the band’s exploration of romantic destruction, "Miss Atomic Bomb" removes the male focalizer from the jealous paranoia of his first appearance and the homicidal actions of Jenny’s murderer, but, as if an homage, it still ends with a sense that the emasculation of rejection will have negative, if ambiguous, consequences.

“I Don’t Really Like You”: Ambivalent Desire (2006-2008)

The Murder Trilogy now stands as an anomaly in the band’s musical corpus; despite their name (which was inspired by a New Order video), they did not build their recording career on killing. While some subsequent songs have addressed failed relationships, none have ended in death or emotional raving. Ambiguity and ambivalence, however, persist, and the post-Hot Fuss era can be romantically characterized by focalizers at war with their own emotions. The 2006 sophomore album, Sam’s Town, featured only one song that can be considered love-centric. “Bones” is one of the band’s few erotically suggestive songs; as will be discussed in the final section of this article, the band typically avoids references to sex. The song juxtaposes a playfully inviting chorus (“Don’t you wanna come with me/Don’t you wanna feel my bones/On your bones/It’s only natural”) with verses that suggest inexperience and even disdain on the part of the focalizer. The line “And in the ocean we’ll hold hands” is immediately followed by a Hot Fuss-esque tonal bluntness in “But I don’t really like you.” An image of the focalizer weeping is similarly immediately followed by a sonically joyful first chorus. The second chorus yields to an unemotional spoken admission that provides insight into the focalizer’s ambivalence: “I never had a lover/I never had soul/And I never had a good time/I never got cold.” His romantic and sexual inexperience has prevented him from feeling the opposing pleasure and pain of a relationship.

Male ambivalence comes to the forefront of “All the Pretty Faces,” recorded during the Sam’s Town era and released on Sawdust. Here the focalizer asks the focalized subject to “help [him] out” immediately before proclaiming “I don’t feel like loving you no more.” The line that follows (“I don’t feel like touching her no more”) shifts the focalized from second-person you to a feminine third person. The chorus echoes Hot Fuss’s violence as well as its ominous aural tone as drummer Ronnie Vannucci Jr. hits the cymbals on every eighth note with Mark Stoermer’s bass also picking up during the lines “You’re not going anywhere without me/These trials don’t prepare the air of love/You’re not telling anyone about me/And you shake and you bleed while I sing my song.” Other tracks on Sawdust are similarly steeped in romantic ambivalence. Despite its title, “Under the Gun” is not a song about murder but rather about a focalized man who is “tied to a dream” of the deceptive woman he loves. The chorus is entirely a repetition of his request to the narrator: “Kill me now, kill me now, kill me now.” According to the narrator, however, the man’s release can come only from the woman herself, whom the man still characterizes as an “angel.” His desire to be destroyed rather than continue suffering at her hands boasts shades of Mr. Brightside but lacks Brightside’s paranoid, 80s pop-influenced charisma and thus makes him seem the more emasculated of the two.

These songs, as well as those referencing romantic relationships on Sawdust, withdraw from the violent passions of Hot Fuss but do not replace them with other forms of romantic or sexual desire. Indeed, some songs suggest a cynicism about love. “Where the White Boys Dance” sets a break-up, focalized by a woman, against the comedic cultural motif [End Page 8] of unsophisticated young men who “might have a chance” only because she is upset. Flowers’ disaffected tone as he voices the focalizer of “Who Let You Go?” sounds bored with desire when he sings “I find it so romantic/When you look into my beautiful eyes/And lose control” (emphasis mine). Day & Age returns to the avoidance of explicit love-centric songs. Confident masculine lust is nowhere to be found in the band’s 2006-2008 studio work, nor is the unabashed romanticism of the rock ballad. Up to this point, The Killers have complicated their treatment of love by infusing it with either ambivalent naiveté at best, or a petulant and selfish desire at worst.

“If I Go On With You By My Side…”: Marriage Rock (2012-Present)

The release of Battle Born in 2012 saw the greatest thematic shift in The Killers’ music by consciously focusing on romantic relationships. The love-centric songs on the album do not repeat the motifs of spurned suitors or ambivalence; instead, many of them relate the perspectives of focalizers who navigate established and prolonged relationships. The first single (and second track on the album), “Runaways,” is an up-tempo arena rock song, powered by militaristic ghost notes on the drums and resplendent with energetic keyboards, that traces a pair of lovers from their courtship to pregnancy to engagement and ultimately to marriage. While dissimilar in tone, tempo, instrumentation, and vocal clarity, the track shares a trajectory with Springsteen’s “The River” (1980), depicting the idealism of young love (“a teenage rush”) as it rises to confront adult responsibilities (“We got engaged on a Friday night/I swore on the head of our unborn child/That I could take care of the three of us”). The couple soon wish to escape from their new roles. The focalizer sings, “But I got the tendency to slip when the nights get wild/It’s in my blood,” while his wife “says she might just run away/Somewhere else, someplace good.” The bridge and final verse see the focalizer, like Springsteen’s, comparing the relationship’s better days to its current tension:

We used to look at the stars and confess our dreams
Hold each other till the morning light
We used to laugh, now we only fight
But baby, are you lonesome now?

At night I come home after they go to sleep
Like a stumbling ghost I haunt these halls
There’s a picture of us on our wedding day
I recognize the girl but I can’t settle in these walls

The repetition of “I knew that when I met you/I’m not gonna let you run away/I knew that when I held you I wasn’t lettin’ go” in each chorus moves from evoking romantic attachment to marital imprisonment. Unlike the similar language of the Murder Trilogy that describes Jenny’s murder, here inextricable embraces are used to signify the upholding of matrimonial bonds.
A melodically catchy song about marriage is, to a degree, an unusual choice to mark any band’s return after four years, especially when their sales have declined with each [End Page 9] album. Yet it does participate within a critically undefined group of songs in which a romantically committed man rediscovers freedom not through leaving (or murdering) his partner but through roaming away from the family home. It is perhaps no coincidence that this motif appears in the music of some of the band’s influences, who are also known for being in committed relationships, as well as being consciously religious. The “tendency to slip when the nights get wild” in “Runaways” echoes Johnny Cash’s “I Walk the Line,” which “pledges masculine fidelity while suggesting its opposite” (Edwards 84). For country and rockabilly performers like Cash, roaming allows focalizers to regain “some sense of lost working-class freedom and individualism” (88). The road similarly functions in Springsteen’s work “as source of male power” (John Connell 211). The Killers’ focalizer here finds comfort in driving, as related in the final pre-chorus’s triumphant contrast to the “stumbling ghost” he is at home: “I turn the engine over and my body just comes alive,” he sings, sustaining the final syllable triumphantly as the drums, rhythm, and bass uniformly punctuate the musical phrase. Although driving does not bring the focalizer of “The River” the same ecstatic release as that of “Runaways,” the convergence of the two songs is here amplified.

The next song on the album, “The Way It Was,” continues the driving motif, beginning with a man driving through a desert. Its music is much more subdued, resembling a power ballad, which “court[s] intimacy” as the “singer impart[s] what comes across as deeply felt emotions and draws in listeners through delicate coudour” (Metzer 438-9). Here, the focalizer reminisces about the early days of a romance but finds the relationship has soured. The chorus subsequently questions whether or not the couple will be able to salvage their love. The interplay between singer and musicians inserts a pause between short phrases as represented here, signalling an increasingly emotive uncertainty: “If I go on/With you (by my side)/Can it be/The way it was.”[8] If this song only resembles a power ballad, the subsequent track, “Here With Me,” actually is one. The song begins slowly and mournfully as the focalizer, accompanied by a piano, laments a past failed relationship (the opening line, “Wheels are turning,” continues the evocation of driving). Like the previous two tracks, this one juxtaposes carefree images of young romance with a more mature man’s sense of loss. The focalizer is almost painfully vulnerable in his nostalgic desire, with Flowers crying out the chorus and eventually vocalizing in falsetto. Unlike Jenny’s murderer, this focalizer cannot confront the object of his desire when he encounters her but rather flees from her, deciding to passively “wait” for her to return to him. As the song closes, he can only repeat his desperate request, “I want you here with me.”

With “Miss Atomic Bomb” belonging more to the narrative begun in Hot Fuss, the remaining love-centric song on the album is another ballad (but not a power ballad). “Heart of a Girl” relates the first meeting of two young lovers who now struggle to “hear that ancient refrain,” but the suggested marital strife does not end in late night roaming or separation, as the focalizer realizes his partner has chosen to stay with him: “Staring down the mouth of a hundred thousand guns/And you’re still here/You’re still here.” This realization is followed by the emphatic proclamation “I believe that we never have to be alone.”

The track closes with an informal renewal of marital vows: “Standing on stone, you stand beside me/And honor the plans/Here/You’re still here.” This realization is followed by the emphatic proclamation “I believe that we never have to be alone.”

“The Way It Was” and “Here With Me” are two of the songs that have been described as offering a sense of closure to the band’s early years, in part because of the way they conclude with a sense of resolution. “Miss Atomic Bomb” leaves the listener with the image of a devoted couple working toward the [End Page 10] continuance of their relationship. A final crash and a sustained chord on the synthesizer emphasize a sense of narrative finality.

“Heart of a Girl” pairs with “Prize Fighter,” a bonus track on the deluxe edition of Battle Born, to create a very personal exploration of frontman Flowers’ actual marriage (the story of “Heart” is indeed how he and Tana met). That exploration continues in The Killers’ fifth album, Wonderful Wonderful. Although the album’s lead single, “The Man,” is a parody of machismo, as if to mock previous cocksure focalizers, much of its promotion has concerned its three songs that specifically concern Tana and Brandon’s divorce and their struggle with complex PTSD, which Flowers believes is contributing to her suicidal depression directly and apparently from her perspective (Beaumont para. 16). “Rut” is followed by “Life to Come,” a quasi-spiritual rock song in which the focalizer promises “to be the one” who will “be there in the life to come.” In “Some Kind of Love,” which prominently samples Brian Eno’s “An Ending,” the focalizer, here identifiably Flowers himself, softly praises his wife’s strength and discourages her from self-harm, leading up to a plea sung by Flowers and his and Tana’s three sons. In the title track, which is more musically experimental than much of the band’s catalog, the focalizer sings to a “motherless child” who seeks “rescue” and will find it “hear that ancient refrain,” but the suggested marital strife does not end in late night roaming or separation, as the focalizer realizes his partner has chosen to stay with him: “Staring down the mouth of a hundred thousand guns/And you’re still here/You’re still here.” This realization is followed by the emphatic proclamation “I believe that we never have to be alone.”

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“Miss Atomic Bomb” leaves the listener with the image of a devoted couple working toward the [End Page 10] continuance of their relationship. A final crash and a sustained chord on the synthesizer emphasize a sense of narrative finality.

“This burning belief in salvation and love”

Building on analyses by music scholars Frith and Auslander, Sutton explicates three “layers of performance” (209). The first is the musician himself: here, Brandon Flowers outside the public eye, the man, husband and father, composer, and primary lyricist for The Killers. The second is the star: here, the Brandon Flowers who appears onstage and in paratextual materials. The third is the narrator and/or focalizer that has been this article’s focus hitherto, who need not bear any resemblance to the prior layers, and it is this third that has steadily emerged as an audible and visible presence within the band’s music.

As a practicing Mormon who now abstains from alcohol and drugs, Flowers is an unlikely rock star[7] In an interview with The Daily Beast, Flowers describes his decision to devote himself to his faith in terms that we can see reflected in his de-eroticized, drug-free music: “[…] being committed to my wife and family, I can’t see any downside to it. There are people who’ve done the sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll thing and made it happen for them, but I knew even when I was young that that wasn’t going to work out for me” (Stern para. 14). [End Page 11] However, his current devotion to his faith did not occur until after Sam’s Town (para. 13), thus aligning the sneering, desperate murderers and rejected lovers of the band’s early work with each other, during which time Flowers has stated that he experienced “a rebellious streak” (para. 21). Writing for The Mormon Women Project, Tana Flowers has similarly emphasized her husband’s temporary departure from his faith in this period (para. 1). He has since committed himself to his wife and children and prioritized them over music; their inclusion as focalized subjects and performers on Wonderful Wonderful provides musical evidence of an increasing thematic...
The Mormon emphasis on marriage is evident in “Heart of a Girl,” and thus it is all the more appropriate that the band’s 2012 album places it as the final love-centric song. As an influence on Flowers even prior to his re-commitment to the church, it likely also accounts for the continued lack of sexuality in the band’s work. The most explicitly sexually-charged lyrics in their corpus occur prior to Jenny’s murder in “Midnight Show” (“You got a real short skirt I wanna look up”) and the chorus of “Bones,” but even these songs do not venture into the raw sexuality that is often associated with rock. While by no means universal, the genre’s frequent “separation” of sexuality from “fidelity and trust” and “the demands of conventionality, including marriage” poses a challenge for the rock musician who adheres to their faith more than simply nominally (Hesmondhalgh 56). As Hesmondhalgh argues, rock often deploys sexuality as a means of “opposition to structure and [...] central institutions of order and continuity” (63). While Hesmondhalgh points out that alternative rock allows for a “hyper-masculine but desexualized rock style, derived from the frenetic energy of punk,” The Killers’ sound has evolved further away from that energy; the one track that could be described as having “the frenetic energy of punk” on Wonderful Wonderful, “Run for Cover,” was in fact composed between the Sam’s Town and Day & Ageers. The remembrances of youthful sexuality in Battle Born’s love-centric content are relatively tame: “Did you forget all about those golden nights?” and, respectively, “Your body was tan and your hair was long/You showed me a smile and my cares were gone.” The latter continues to echo the nostalgia in Springsteen’s “The River,” in which the focalizer describes “Her body tan and went down at the reservoir.” Springsteen’s musical influence on The Killers is made all the more relevant through his own own admitted religious ties and struggle to reconcile his experience of the world with his faith (Marsh 97). Although Springsteen has dealt with sexuality more frankly than Flowers, his focalized women (whom are frequently named Mary) are undoubtedly colored by Catholicism (Moss 343-4). In the Mormon context, too, is Flowers’ lyrical evolution from murder to marriage.

Complications superficially arise in Flowers’ solo work. To date, Flowers has released two solo albums, Flamingo (2010) and The Desired Effect (2015). The first boasts a more explicit spirituality than The Killers’ work, with “Crossfire” fusing images of lovers with a cosmic battle between heaven and hell. “Playing with Fire” features a more direct statement that appears to reference Flowers’ own precarious place as a rocker who is equally religious and ambitious, aged by marriage and fatherhood, but determined to keep his faith:

Ten thousand demons hammer down with every footstep
This church of mine may not be recognized by steeples
But that doesn’t mean that I will walk without a God [End Page 12]

Rolling river of truth, can you spare me a sip?
The holy fountain of youth has been reduced to a drip
But I’ve got this burning belief in salvation and love
This notion may be naive, but when push comes to shove
I will till this ground

Yet The Desired Effect sees a brief return to early form. The album makes heavy use of synthesizers in stark contrast to Battle Born’s arena rock, a sonic homage to 80s pop and new wave, and its lyrics feature darker treatments of love and desire. The chorus of the first single, “Can’t Deny My Love,” ends with the lines “And you can run to the hills/And you can close your eyes [...] But you’re not gonna deny my love.” Likewise, the upbeat, brass-backed “Lonely Town” relates the perspective of a stalker who, while lacking the energy of the Murder Trilogy’s focalizers, references having a knife.

However, these songs are not permitted to carry the narrative theme of the album. Two songs after “Can’t Deny My Love” is “Still Want You,” a campy pop song accompanied by doo-wop style feminine backing vocals in which the focalizer proclaims continued love for his partner in spite of all the troubles of the world. Then, two songs after “Lonely Town,” Flowers settles back into the theme of simultaneous spiritual and romantic longing. In “Never Get You Right,” the focalizer addresses a troubled woman whom he romantically describes as “born lost and dirt blonde.” Another Springsteenian veneration of the focalized woman is suggested as he ends each chorus with an affirmation of her power: “The people passing by/Should tremble at your sight.” This veneration now serves as a lyrical prelude to Flowers’ songs for Tana in The Killers’ Wonderful Wonderful, as does the image of the focalized woman as a lost child. The focalizer of “Untangled Love,” the last love-centric song on Desired Effect, seeks the kind of romance that may lead to marriage and fatherhood and ultimately appears to find it: “It took a lot of faith, it took a lot of lies/But I finally came to realize/Untangled love/I can see it in your eyes.” Therefore, like Battle Born, the album closes its exploration of love with images of stable monogamy, and leads to the autobiographical depictions of marriage on Wonderful Wonderful. Finally, with no distance remaining between Flowers and the narrative focalizer of his work, he sings lines such as “You got the grace of a storm in the desert/You got some kind of love” directly to the focalized woman, who also lacks narrative distance. As Flowers has admitted in multiple promotional interviews for the album, the focalized woman is literally his wife. The Killers’ most recent work, then, brings their evolution far from the beach where Jenny died and directly into the Flowers home.

Conclusion

Music critics still contextualize the band through their early interest in murder. A September 2017 interview with NME’s Marc Beaumont begins with the band being shown Jeffrey Dahmer’s glasses. Flowers voices mild personal identification by reminding Beaumont that one of Dahmer’s escaped victims shared Flowers’ surname. Beaumont describes Flowers as “slightly embarrassed” by the venue, a club across from Dahmer’s former apartment (para 3). According to Beaumont, Flowers disavowed any role in selecting the venue, suggesting a distaste for the continued association of his and the band’s work with violence and death. It is clear from the band’s thematic shifts that they have largely moved on from the sneering young man who murdered his ex-girlfriend and who opened their first album. “Jenny Was A Friend of Mine” has rarely played in the weeks leading up to the release of Wonderful Wonderful’s release. While Flowers has explicitly identified only three of the ten songs on Wonderful Wonderful as pertaining to his wife, the album’s exploration of his marital relationship has dominated the pre-release press, with Flowers giving nearly identical statements to publications such as Rolling Stone, NME, and Q regarding the album’s intimacy to him. The departures of bassist Mark Stoermer and lead guitarist Dave Keuning from the tour, although it has been stated that this was for personal reasons, highlights the role that Flowers has played in directing the band’s shift.
Though The Killers have been neglected by popular music scholarship and even seem to suffer from some neglect from music critics, their discography provides insight into rock's shifting concerns about love and sexuality, particularly through the lens of masculinity. The video for the aptly-titled "The Man," Wonderful Wonderful's first single, depicts Flowers as a parody of masculinity who repeatedly affirms "I'm the man." The video's contextualization of the self-proclaimed man through visual references to deserts, Las Vegas, and celebrity ambitions further encourages a reading of the song as a self-aware critique of specifically Flowers' early focalizers. Such a reading, then, enables realization of the thematic shift in Flowers' more personally authentic odes to his wife on the album. As part of his stated commitment to his family and church, he appears to be extricating himself from his early image and thematic interests.

Other themes persist in The Killers' work, such as the American dream, fate, and overcoming self-doubt and regret. However, it is through their journey from murder to marriage that we may find a particular negotiation of the expectations of masculinity within rock – and where it intersects with themes that have been more artistically and critically neglected in the genre, such as marriage, fatherhood, and a more explicitly conservative spirituality. The band's seemingly precarious future at the time of this writing calls into question whether or not these subjects are sustainable when made so explicit, especially when they have increasingly become linked to a frontman's personal beliefs and family life. Regardless of sustainability, however, the band's discography reveals a fascinating gender-coded trajectory from some of rock's most famous masculine themes (aggression, sexual liberation) to the affirmation of marital and religious faithfulness.

[1] Indeed, Noisey reports that "Mr. Brightside" has remained in the UK charts every year between 2004 and 2017.

[2] Observation of various Killers fan spaces online reveals a noticeable (but by no means universal) disdain for the band's overtly romantic work, especially songs that seem to reference Flowers' relationship with his wife.

[3] Challenges to the association of the male rock/pop singer with a male focalizer seem infrequent. A notable example occurred with Matchbox 20's "Push" (1997). Despite being criticized for seeming misogynistic, its chorus ("I wanna push you around / […] I wanna push you down / […] I wanna take you for granted"), is complicated by each verse's opening with "She said…"

[4] The Murder Trilogy is not the band's only negotiation of a woman's murder. In 2005, their setlist commonly included "Where Is She?", a song written about the 2003 death of Scottish teen Jodi Jones. The song shares some similarities with the trilogy; like the fictional Jenny, Jodi was murdered by her boyfriend. However, in response to public backlash, the band did not release any official recordings of the song. It cannot, therefore, be counted amongst their standard catalog or the Murder Trilogy. Moreover, Flowers has stated that the song's focalizer is Jodi's mother, not her killer. While it does point toward the band's early fascination with murder, it is not part of the same negotiation of rock masculinity as the trilogy.

[5] The motif is more explicit in alternate live versions of the song, in which Flowers sometimes sings "She couldn't scream while I held her throat" or even "She kicked and screamed while I held her throat" ("The Killers' Top Ten Most Played Concert Tracks" para. 11).

[6] "By my side" is only sung by backup vocals. Thus, Flowers' lead vocal track makes this phrase even shorter.

[7] Certainly, Flowers is not the only Mormon to find mainstream success in music. However, he currently lacks the wholesome family appeal and light pop of, for instance, the Osmonds. His continued adherence to Mormonism, which he has affirmed to Rolling Stone in September 2017 (Greene paras. 7-8), also distinguishes him from rock/pop musicians like Tyler Glenn, the frontman of Neon Trees (with whom The Killers have toured). After coming out as gay in 2014, Glenn has spoken openly of his estrangement from the church and a sense of separation from God.

[8] What is omitted here is the repetition of "not gonna deny" before the line's fulfillment at the end of the chorus. The song may also be interpreted as a religious song in which the focalizer of the chorus takes on the qualities of the God of the Book of Job and the New Testament's Jonah as He promises his own inescapability. This possibility is emphasized in the music video, which (in contrast to the 80s pop sound of the song) casts Flowers as Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown. [End Page 14]

[End Page 15]

Works Cited


A Masculine Romance: The Sentimental Bloke and Australian Culture in the War- and Early Interwar Years
by Melissa Bellanta

October 24th, 2014

In 1915, the Australian poet and journalist C. J. Dennis published a book of verse called The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke. When read in sequence, the verse told a love story about an uncultivated young man, Bill, and his sweetheart, Doreen, who worked in a Melbourne pickle factory. Though written in verse, the narrative was what we might now call a romantic comedy. Its humor sprang from the fact that Bill was the antithesis of a romantic type, yet he proved himself a hopeless romantic just the same. In the parlance of the day, Bill was an Australian “larrkin.” He was a young rowdy from the city who spent most of his time fighting, gambling, drinking and street-hawking – yet by the end of the narrative he had transformed into a loving husband and family man. Told in the first person by Bill, the work proved enormously popular. It sold prodigiously during the First World War, prompting Dennis to write four spin-off works over the following decade. Over that period, the currency of The Sentimental Bloke(as it became known) grew rather than waned. It became a multi-media phenomenon, comprising a silent film and travelling stage musical, and it was frequently recited on radio and in concert halls.

Crucial to the success of The Sentimental Bloke was the fact that it was a masculine romance. It was a love story expressing heterosexual romantic feeling from a male point of view and in a self-consciously masculine way. As such it touched a cultural nerve. The war and early interwar years were rife with confusion about men’s relationship to women and romance. Australian men had been expected to be warriors during the war, but upon return were expected to transform into caring spouses (Garton). Romantic Hollywood leads such as Rudolph Valentino became celebrities in early interwar Australia, admired for their sophistication and charm (Matthews 4; Teo 2012: 1). At the same time, however, prominent voices such as the bohemian artist and writer, Norman Lindsay, decried romantic love as feminine and marriage as suffocating to men (Forsyth 59). The Bloke helped audiences to navigate these conflicting messages. It insisted that it was possible for a modern Australian man to be romantic without compromising his masculinity, provided he did so in a sufficiently straightforward manner and steered clear of “Yankee” savvy.

The content and reception of The Sentimental Bloke requires us to think more subtly about the relationship between Australian masculinity and romantic sentimentality across the early decades of the 1900s. Chiefly, it requires us to give more credence to Australian men’s interest in certain forms of romantic popular culture, and to masculine constructions of romantic feeling, than most previous scholars have allowed. Yet Australianists are not the only ones who will benefit from contemplating The Sentimental Bloke. In the field of romance studies at large, romantic love is still largely treated as “feminized love,” to borrow Anthony Giddens’ phrase (43). As things stand, the phrases “masculine romance” and “masculine sentimentality” function almost as oxymorons within romance studies – the key exceptions being in a few discussions of homosexual romance (e.g. Shuggart and Waggoner 26–7). My hope is that this discussion will prompt romance scholars to take more interest in masculine romance, and to consider in particular how this relationship developed in the war and early interwar years.

The multi-media phenomenon of The Sentimental Bloke

Almost as soon as it hit the bookstores in late 1915, it was apparent that The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke[later shortened to The Sentimental Bloke] held a powerful popular appeal. Dennis had engaged in canny publicity for The Bloke in the preceding years, publishing a few poems about Bill in an earlier work (“The Sentimental Bloke”.Bulletin). The publicity paid off because by 1920 approximately 110,000 copies of the book had sold in Australasia and the United Kingdom (McLaren 92). That was an astonishing figure for any Australian work given the country’s population was less than five million at the time. Yet it hardly represented the total number of those familiar with its verse. Reports of The Bloke being read aloud in workplaces, performed on recital stages, borrowed from the New South Wales Bookstall Company Library and handed around among Australian servicemen indicate that it reached a considerably larger audience (Chisholm 58; Lyons and Taksa 67; Laugesen 51).

In 1919, the Australian film-maker Raymond Longford released a cinematic version of The Sentimental Bloke.Longford’s film was also a commercial success. It broke box-office records for an Australian-made film after it premiered in Melbourne that October (Bertrand; Pike and Cooper 120). A theatrical version of The Bloke was also successful after it opened at Melbourne’s King’s Theatre in September 1922. It starred Walter Cornoock in the lead role, a man described for years afterwards as the “Original Sentimental Bloke” (“Walter Cornoock Coming”; “Pot Luck”). The production played for twelve weeks in Melbourne before touring Australia and New Zealand for almost two years. Versions of the musical continued to be performed throughout Australasia for the rest of the decade, during which time recitations of the verse were also broadcast on radio and performed on the elocution stage (e.g. “Today’s Radio”; “Today’s Broadcasting”; “The Sentimental Bloke: A Triumph of Elocution”).

Inspired by the success of The Sentimental Bloke, Dennis wrote four loosely-connected works of verse between 1916 and 1924. These were The Moods of Ginger Mick (1916), Doreen (1917), Digger Smith (1918) and Rose of Spadgers (1924). The Moods of Ginger Mick was also narrated by Bill and became a best-seller in its own right. It concerned the decision by Bill’s larrkin friend Ginger Mick to enlist in the Australian Imperial Forces and travel overseas to take part in the war. Ending with Mick’s tragic death in battle, it had sold over 70,000 copies by 1920 (McLaren 119). Ginger Mick was also made into a film by Raymond Longford in 1920 (Pike and Cooper 129). Although beyond the scope of my discussion here, fresh adaptations of The Bloke continued to appear throughout the rest of the century. These included a talkie film directed by Frank Thring in 1932 (poorly executed and unpopular, and thus omitted here), a ballet by Victoria’s Ballet Guild in 1952, a new stage musical and recordings of the verse by the country music singer Tex Morton in the 1960s, a television drama in 1976, and another rendition in dance by the Australian Ballet in 1985 (Boyd; Dermody; McLaren 199–200; Ingram).
The larrkin everyman

When The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke first appeared, some critics hailed Bill as a novel figure in Australian popular culture. According to a writer for the Sydney Morning Herald, Dennis had broken new ground with the work: “a poetic cycle has never been written about such an unpoetic individual as Bill” (“The Sentimental Bloke” SMH 1915). [End Page 3] This claim was inaccurate. Dennis was not the first Australian writer to use a rough male figure as a romantic protagonist. Four years earlier, in fact, the Sydney-based writer Louis Stone had published Jonah, a novel about a street-fighting larrkin who fell in love with a poor-but-genteel woman and struggled to win her regard. The Melbourne writer Edward Dyson had also included a romantic larrikin as a supplementary character in his collection of narratively-connected sketches, Factly ‘Ands (1906).

Back in the 1890s, the romantic larrikin had been sent up in the odd vaudeville act performed on Australia’s Tivoli Theatre circuit. These were modelled on English offerings about romantic Cockneys such as Albert Chevalier’s famous music-hall song, “My Old Dutch” (Bellanta Larrkins 35). The use of Cockney figures to voice masculine romantic sentimentality was indeed a feature of British popular culture from the last years of the nineteenth century. In Australia, however, theatrical songs such as “I’ve Chucked Up the Push for My Donah” (meaning “I’ve given up my street-fighting friends for my sweetheart”) had a mocking rather than celebratory air. Created in 1892 for the touring British burlesque comedian, E. J. Lonnen, this act ridiculed the very concept of larrikin romance (Bellanta Larrkins 36).

Though the idea of writing about a romantic larrikin was not original, the way in which Dennis went about it was. The bushman had long been presented sympathetically in Australian culture: a spare, usually solitary figure often portrayed as the essence of the Australian character. The same could not be said for the urban larrikin. In spite of Dyson’s and Stone’s efforts and the occasional story by Henry Lawson (e.g. “Elder Man’s Lane”), larrikins had overwhelmingly been portrayed as vulgar or frightening before Dennis published his work. Back in the 1880s, in fact, the press had fomented a full-scale moral panic about a “larrikin menace” in the colonial capitals after a number of nasty pack rapes of young women took place in inner-industrial Sydney. News reporters had written sensational stories of these outrages, calling their youthful perpetrators larrikin “brutes” and “fiends.” (Bellanta Larrkins 86–91). By the turn of the century, some writers and artists had started creating mocking caricatures of larrikins – the vaudeville routine just mentioned being an obvious example. Bill was obviously different from these earlier representations in that he was offered as a subject with whom audiences could identify.

The fact that Bill was offered to audiences as a subject of affectionate identification was apparent from the opening moments of The Sentimental Bloke. He was depicted in the throes of dissatisfaction with his ne’er-do-well life, wishing for something more uplifting, though he scarcely knew what it might be:

... As the poit sez, me ‘eart ‘as got
The pip wiv yearning for ... I dunno wot.

The preface, written by Henry Lawson, an iconic literary figure in Australian culture, signaled that this yearning of Bill’s gave him the status of everyman. “Take the first poem”, he wrote. “How many men... have had the same feeling – the longing for something better – to be something better?” Bill was thus presented as an ordinary “bloke” rather than the denizen of a brutish underworld. Though his quaint vernacular and lack of guile, he was able to voice the feelings of any fundamentally decent man, rough around the edges or otherwise. [End Page 4]

The romantic properties of The Sentimental Bloke

Bill might have appeared alone and vaguely yearning in the opening stanzas of The Sentimental Bloke, but it was clear from the next poem that the narrative concerned romantic love. From that moment, the plot proceeded almost as if anticipating Pamela Regis’ hard-line definition of romantic fiction in her Natural History of the Romance Novel. Following its trajectory, one can tick off each of her “eight essential elements” of romantic narratives (30). In the first place, it began with a description of “the initial state of society in which heroine and hero must court” in the form of Bill’s disconsolate musing about his larrikin life (30). It then proceeded to the meeting between hero and heroine; introduced obstacles to their union in spite of their mutual attraction; and came to a point of what Regis calls “ritual death” (35–6), in which it seemed impossible that Bill would prove himself capable of true romance. As one would expect, it then showed Bill’s prospects being reborn, ending with the pair joyfully united against the odds.

The first obstacle to Bill’s romantic union with Doreen was in the form of a straw-hatted suitor, a man Bill called the “stror ‘at cool” (47–52). Unable to help himself, he challenged this socially-superior rival to a fist-fight (50). Doreen was so displeased after the pair was wed. This took place after Bill was tempted into a drunken bender with his larrikin mate, Ginger Mick. Nursing his hangover in bed the next day, he was painfully aware that he might have destroyed his romance with Doreen. “Eight weeks uv married bliss / Wiv my Doreen, an’ now it’s come to this!” (86). This point of “ritual death” was soon turned to new life, however, when the couple left the city for a small farm. In the final moments of the action, Bill and Doreen appeared blissfully ensconced in their own cottage, mutually delighting in a newborn son.

The illustrations accompanying the print version of The Sentimental Bloke highlighted its romantic properties. Drawn by Dennis’ friend Hal Gye, they portrayed Bill as a “Cupid” or “chivalric innocent” (Elliott 254, Cross 57), complete with chubby thighs and stubbily diaphanous wings. On a dust-jacket for an early edition, Gye depicted the couple cooing at each other, with Bill offering a cherub-like Bill playing a concertina at the foot of a balcony as Doreen looked down from above (Figure 1). Advertisements for the silent film similarly highlighted its romantic character. One created for West’s Olympia cinema franchise broke down the narrative into its key romantic elements. It comprised four cartoons representing stages in Bill and Doreen’s love-story. In the first, Bill appeared, sad and lonely before he met Doreen; in the second, Doreen was shown snubbing Bill after their quarrel; in the third, the pair were tearfully reconciled; and in the fourth, “hitched.” [End Page 5]
Figure 1: Cover image by Hal Gye for a 1919 edition of Dennis' work
Australian masculinity and the “open secret” of romantic sentimentality

Since *The Sentimental Bloke* was so obviously presented as a romance, one might be forgiven for expecting that the text and its protagonist would have been ridiculed in the Australia of its day. A great deal of what we hear about Australian culture and masculinity in this period emphasizes the dry-witted bushmen as a key figure, “laconic” and “sentimental as a steam-roller” (“Anzac Types” cited in Caesar 150). Much has also been written about the celebration of the tough and irreverently humorous returned serviceman in 1920s Australia (e.g. Seal; Caesar; Williams 127–33; Fotheringham 2010). Historian Richard Waterhouse has argued that opposition to Victorian-era piety and morality was paramount in urban Australia’s popular culture by the end of the First World War (176), while Peter Kirkpatrick (52) and Tony Moore (117–43) show that members of interwar Sydney’s bohemian scene regarded marriage and domesticity contemptuously. In actual fact, one of these bohemians did ridicule the Bloke for his romantic sentimentality. The earlier-mentioned artist and writer, Norman Lindsay, burnt a copy of *The Sentimental Bloke* on a crucifix and described Ginger Mick as “maudlin rubbish” (Butterss 2009: 16; 2005: 118).

Fascinatingly, though, mocking reactions of this kind were rare. Even masculinist papers such as the *Bulletin* and the *Lone Hand* produced glowing reviews (“The Sentimental Bloke” *Bulletin*; “The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke”; “C. J. Dennis”). The vast majority of critics responded to Bill much as he was presented to them: with affection and/or empathy. After the silent film was released, for example, a reviewer for the *Green Room* suggested that he had been nervous about whether Arthur Tauchert, the actor playing Bill, would do the justice to the character. “Nearly everybody knew Dennis’ creation by heart, and we all had a hazy mental vision of the gentleman who loved Doreen to distraction”, he wrote. Happily, the actor had acquitted himself admirably: “Tauchert’s Bloke is the Bloke of Blokes” (“C. J. Dennis’ Characters”). Five years later, in 1924, a country Victorian critic waxed rapturous about *The Sentimental Bloke* musical: “You’ll laugh, you’ll cry… and you’ll join in and say it is the greatest of all” (“The Sentimental Bloke” *Horsham Times*).
Reports of audiences laughing and noisily applauding recitations of The Bloke point to the fact that ordinary citizens also responded warmly to Bill (e.g., “Lawrence Campbell”; “The Sentimental Bloke” SMH 1922). One of Dennis’ friends, Alec Chisholm, would later recall the enthusiasm he and his colleagues at a country newspaper felt for The Bloke early in its career. Even the most “hard-bitten” of composers used to beg him to read from it as they worked, Chisholm wrote. “We knew in particular ‘The Introduction’, that delicate tale … of the initial meeting between the Bloke and the ‘bonzer peach’ [Doreen]” (58). Another middle-class reader recalled that even though she had not been a fan of the colloquial verse during her childhood in the 1920s, “The Sentimental Bloke was a great favorite of Dad’s” (cited in Lyons and Taks 67).

Because The Sentimental Bloke relied so heavily on colloquialisms, it was never regarded as Literature. As Martyn Lyons and Lucy Taks observe, the work never received “official sanction” (67). It was left off school and university curricula and ignored by most academics until the late twentieth century. Yet this lack of official approval offered vital clues as to why Bill was regarded so affectionately. One of the reasons he was so widely favored [End Page 8] was that he tapped a vein of “unofficial” knowledge about men and romance that had long existed on the sly, as it were, in Australian culture. The Bloke presented masculine tenderness as what Eve Sedgwick would call an “open secret” (145), in other words. Its comedy sprang from the suggestion that all men had the capacity for romantic feeling, even though they tried to hide it beneath a hard-bitten or laconic exterior. Everyone knew that men could be sentimental even though “officially” this was not supposed to be true.

One of the ways that The Bloke gestured at an ordinary belief in male sentimentality was via its original title, The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke. By this means it likened its fourteen poems to romantic songs performed by the earnest young Bill. Male vocalists sang romantic ballads such as “Annie Laurie” and “Belle Mahone” any night of the week in Australian homes or vaudeville shows in the years before, during and immediately after the war (Bellanta “Australian Masculinities”). Just in case fans missed the allusion, the sequel Ginger Mick made explicit reference to these commonplace songs. In a letter written to Bill from a military camp in Egypt, Ginger Mick declared that ballads such as “Bonnie Mary” and “My Little Grey Home in the West” were dear to Australian servicemen’s hearts. Laced with memories of sweethearts and romantic picnics, these songs helped to sustain Australia’s soldiers as they coped with battle far from home. “When I’m sittin’ in me dug-out wiv me rifle on me knees”, Mick began:

An’ a yowlin’, ‘owlin’ chorus comes a floatin’ up the breeze,
Jist a bit o’ “Bonnie Mary” or “Long Way to Tipperary”–
Then I know I’m in Australia, took an’ planted overseas.
… O, it’s “On the Mississippi” or “Me Grey ‘Ome in the West”.
If it’s death an’ ‘ell nex’ minute they must git it orf their chest.
‘ERE’s a snatch o’ “When yer Roamin’” – “When yer Roamin’ in the Gloamin’.
‘Struth! The first time that I ‘eard it, wiv me ‘ead on Rosie’s breast.
We wus comin’ frum a picnic in a Ferntree Gully train…
But the shrapnel made the music when I ‘eard it sung again (61).

In her rich study of Australian servicemen’s reading habits and entertainments during the war, Amanda Laugesen reveals a considerable interest in romantic and otherwise sentimental cultural forms. In their letters home, she tells us, numerous Australian soldiers mentioned the works of Gene Stratton Porter, “a [female] American novelist who wrote romantic novels with a strong moral message and whose works sold in the millions” (62). Others mentioned the sentimental novelists Marie Corelli, Jean Webster, Hall Caine and Charles Garvice (who also wrote under the female pseudonym Caroline Hart) (61–2) – many of whose works were made into films in the 1910s. Laugesen also notes that troop publications “clearly articulated a strong sentimentality focused on home and family” (61), and that servicemen’s vaudeville shows routinely featured romantic songs of the sort referred to in Ginger Mick (79–104; Bellanta “Australian Masculinities”).

In pointing to a significant cross-gender interest in romantic ballads and novels, Laugesen gives us a sense of why Dennis was able to appeal to folk knowledge about masculine sentimentality in The Sentimental Bloke. Her examples also suggest that we need to revisit the standard scholarly accounts of male cultural preferences in early-twentieth century Australia. Those accounts tell us plenty about adventure novels and sporting [End Page 9] dramas (e.g. Crotty; Dixon; Fotheringham 1992). Some also tell us about “galloping rhymes” and stories about stoic bushmen (e.g. Schaffer; Murri; Dwyer), but are silent on the topic of a male investment in popular romance. As The Bloke’s success makes clear, however, neither representations of galloping adventurers nor of laconic bushmen amounted to the sum total of popular understandings about Australian masculinity. Nor did men confine themselves to cultural forms that promoted such stereotypical versions of masculinity in the early 1900s. Their cultural consumption was always more complex than that.

A plain approach to romance

If The Sentimental Bloke tapped a vein of unofficial knowledge about masculine romantic feeling, it also, as I said earlier, touched a cultural nerve. The work’s combination of comedy and sentiment sprang from the fact that masculine romance was indeed edgy territory in the war- and early interwar years. It is true that ballads such as “Bonnie Mary” continued to be performed and cherished in the 1920s and even beyond. They were starting to be seen as old-fashioned by then, however, with their quaveringly tender choruses and address of the beloved as “thou” and “thy” (“I have watched thy heart, dear Mary…” / Bonnie Mary of Argylie”). Easiest songs of this kind were made the subject of irreverent parodies, in some cases by men who were embarrassed by their emotional impact and wanted to demonstrate that they were not in their thrall (Seal 57–9; Bellanta “Australian Masculinities” 426–7). Similar things may be said of the sentimentality focused on home and family among Australian servicemen during the war. That sentimentality had to be carefully managed in order to prevent it from detracting from military solidarity, hedged about by jokes and the celebration of male-on-male company (Seal 66, 75–7).

Contending claims made about the relationship between men and romantic sentiment became even more apparent after the armistice, when servicemen were being repatriated. The work went a degree of ambivalence about both sets of ideals (Garton). It was in this context that The Sentimental Bloke’s suggestion that all men were romantic in spite of their hard exteriors (and friendship with mates) really came to the fore. Yet the work went a
lot further than gesturing at the “open secret” of men’s romantic feelings. It also suggested that there was a distinctively masculine approach to romantic sentimentality that any man might adopt without fear of embarrassment, the hallmarks of which were plainness and straightforwardness. These were the qualities that marked out a “real” man’s romantic tendencies from a woman’s, and distinguished him from effeminate types.

The key way in which The Sentimental Bloke constructed a masculine approach to romance was by juxtaposing the exemplary Bill with two other male characters, both of whom were portrayed as comparatively effete. The first of these men was the parson who conducted Bill’s marriage to Doreen. The second was the straw-hatted rival who also sought Doreen’s hand. Of these, the parson was the most effeminate. In both Dennis’ original text and Longford’s adaptation, he was dressed in flowing vestments and comically labelled “is nibs” or “the pilot cove” by Bill. At the start of the wedding scene, Bill mocked his mincing manner, mimicking his reading of the vows in what was supposed to be a sing-song voice: “An’–will–yeh–take–this–woman–fer–to–be / Yer–wedded–wife?” Bill then interjected robustly:

O, strike me! Will I wot?

Take ‘er? Doreen? ‘E stan’s there arstin’ me!

As if ’e thort per’aps I’d rather not!

Take ‘er? ‘E seemed to think ’er kind was got

Like cigarette-cards, fer the arstin’.

Still, I does me stunt in this ’ere hitchin’ rot,

An’ speaks me piece: “Righto!” I sez, “I will.” (77)

As the ceremony proceeded, Bill became steadily more frustrated with its “swell” and “stylish” character:

… Ar, strike! No more swell marridges fer me!

It seems a blinded year afore ’e’s done.

We could ’a’ fixed it in the registree

Twice over ’fore this cove ’ad ’arf begun.

I s’pose the wimmin git some sorter fun

Wiv all this guyver, an ‘is nibs’s shirt.

But, seems to me, it takes the bloomin’ bun,

This stylish splicin’ uv a bloke an’ skirt. (79)

This scene was instrumental to The Bloke’s message that plainness and directness were characteristic of a masculine approach to romance. There was no doubting that Bill was powerfully in love with Doreen (“Take ‘er? … ’E stan’s there arstin’ me! / As if ’e thort per’aps I’d rather not!”) Unlike the parson or the “wimmin”, however, he believed that his feelings stood for themselves without need for elaborate packaging.

The idea that Bill’s stance on romance was solidly masculine was reinforced by his contrast with the “stor ‘at coot.” This “coot” was full of simpering smiles and “tork” about his office job in Doreen’s company. Bill, on the other hand, was incapable of glib eloquence: “No, I ain’t jealous – but – Ar, I dunno!” (39). His inability to “tork the tork” was portrayed as a sign of the genuineness of his romantic intentions: a cause for laughter, perhaps, but also proof of his salt-of-the-earth straightforwardness. The “coot” also dressed in what Bill contemptuously described as a “giddy tie an’ Yankee soot” (49), while Bill himself preferred ordinary street attire. The film made this distinction even more conspicuous by choosing the weedy Harry Young to play the “coot”. His slender physique was an obvious foil to the burliness of Arthur Tauchert’s Bill.
Australian masculinity and the Americanized culture of romantic love

Preserved in the subtitles to the film, Dennis’ description of the coot’s dress as “Yankee” added another dimension to the representation of Bill’s masculinity in *The Sentimental Bloke*. In the eyes of certain interwar critics, at any rate, the Bloke was seen as quintessentially Australian, a refreshing change from the American characters who were becoming increasingly prominent in Australian popular culture. As early as 1916, in fact, a writer for the *Sydney Morning Herald* described *The Bloke’s* use of an Australian vernacular as a welcome break from the “Yankee slang” so often served up to Australian audiences in “comedies and in plays dealing with the American criminal class” (“The Sentimental Bloke” SMH 1916). Comments of this kind were also made in relation to Longford’s film. One Brisbane critic praised its Australian scenery and ambience, pleased that it moved “right away from the rather hard and artificial American convention” (“Entertainments.”)

The idea that Bill represented a specifically Australian masculinity was partly influenced by the surge of interest in national identity that accompanied Australia’s effort in the First World War (Seal; Williams). Yet it was also influenced by a consciousness of the developments that had already taken place in the United States if not also Australia. As Jill Matthews tells us, all manner of mass-produced American commodities began making their way to Australia during the 1910s. These included “technology, machines and gadgets, business methods, fashions and amusements” (Matthews 11). The arrival of “Yankee” commodities was even more apparent in the 1920s, a decade in which American manufacturers and entertainment companies vigorously expanded their international reach (12; Teo 2006: 182; Glancy). The majority of the Australian public was manifestly enthusiastic about American culture and products in this period; there would not have been a market for them otherwise. Even so, a niggling concern about Americanization was growing among the general populace. This was apparent in a defensive insistence on the Australianness of *The Bloke*, which in cinematic form was vaunted as a “True Australian Film.” After the premiere of Longford’s *Bloke*, a writer for Sydney’s *Picture Show* even commended him for marshaling a team “as great in their particular sphere of acting as any teams D. W. Griffith ever assembled”, attempting to place him on a par with the great American filmmaker (cited in Tulloch 65).

In press interviews about his films in the early interwar period, Longford emphasized his nationalist passion for Australian settings and characters (“C. J. Dennis’ Characters”: “The Man Behind ‘Rudd’s New Selection’” 32). Later in the 1920s he would speak bitterly of the early troubles he had experienced trying to convince cinemas to screen *The Sentimental Bloke*. Australian film distributors and cinema owners had been so much under the thumb of American operators that he had been forced to hold the premiere for the film in Melbourne Town Hall, he complained (Blake 35–36). These complaints reinforced the fact that the Bloke was to be regarded as “intensely Australian in type” during the 1920s, investing him with a normative power through his association with Australian national identity (“Sentimental Bloke” Townsville Daily Bulletin; see also “The Sentimental Bloke” Brisbane Courier). More pertinently, they helped to ensure that Bill’s approach to romance was understood as an Australian alternative to the American culture of romantic love.

As Hsu-Ming Teo tells us, Australia’s culture of romantic love was undergoing a process of Americanization in the 1920s (2006). By this, she means that a more commodified approach to courtship and romantic fantasy was emerging, modeled on developments that had already taken place in the United States. For decades in America, a premium had been placed on gifts and paid outings as the key means for a man to express romantic feelings towards a woman (174–77; Illouz). American popular culture also celebrated men who made declarations of love with a suave eloquence: Al Jolson singing the smash hit “You Made Me Love You” (1913), or the alluring heroes of romantic films such as *The Sheik* (1919) and *The Big Parade* (1925). In addition, American advertisers promoted commodities such as soap and lipstick to female consumers on the basis that they would enhance their chances of romance with glamorous men. A similar process was just starting to become evident in Australia at the end of the First World War.

The Americanizing influences on Australia’s culture of romantic love were largely directed at young women in the 1920s. Advertisers did not begin inducting Australian men into romanticized consumerism until the 1950s. Before then, “items of personal or leisure consumption for men” — products such as Berger Paints, Dunlop rubber, Boomerang whisky, and General Motors-Holden cars — were advertised through images of factories rather than appeals to men as consumers with romantic desires (Teo 2006: 181–86). This made for a disconnect between young Australian men’s and women’s approach to the culture of romantic love that became increasingly apparent over the interwar era. The disparity was strikingly evident by the time American servicemen arrived in Australia in their thousands during the Second World War. Young Australian women tended to regard these “Yanks” as romantic heroes, while Australian men resented the Americans’ success with “their” women and superior access to consumer goods (Lake 1990; 1992; Connors et al 140–88).

Knowing what we do about the representation of Bill in *The Sentimental Bloke* helps us understand why Australian men’s approach to romantic love tended to be so different from Australian women’s. The work treated Bill’s lack of glamour and suavity as a boon; proof not just of the genuineness of his romantic intentions but his Australianness. Crucially, it also suggested that Australian men risked compromising their masculinity if they entered too enthusiastically into the Americanized culture of romantic consumerism. “Intensely Australian” types were neither supposed to indulge in glibly romantic “tork” nor trouble over their appearance if they wanted to avoid accusations of effeminacy. They were supposed to regard being plain and unadorned as a good thing, even in their dealings with women. This was not because Australian men did not care about romance, however, but rather because such things detracted from the honest force of their feelings.

The gender of romantic love

With all this talk of Australianness, it would be easy to assume that non-Australian scholars have little to learn from *The Sentimental Bloke*. This is not the case. Admittedly, the fact that plainness and straightforwardness were claimed to be characteristic of “intensely Australian types” suggests that an unusual degree of emphasis on these qualities could be found “Down Under.” Yet Australia was not the only place in which one could find critiques of elaborately packaged sentimentality, or of an Americanized culture of romantic love, in the war- and interwar years. In *Hollywood and the Americanization of Britain*, for example, Mark Glancy discusses divisively gendered reactions to the romantic actor Rudolph Valentino, whose glamorous masculinity was regarded as suspicious by many British men in the 1920s. In *The Decline of Sentiment*, American film scholar Lea Jacobs also speaks of a decisive shift in cultural taste taking place in the United States if not also Anglophone society more broadly, beginning in the 1910s and reaching critical mass the following decade. This shift was away from the “genteel” conventions of Victorian sentimental culture, she tells us, and towards a more informal and
understated aesthetics. Its predominantly male advocates presented it in gendered terms: as a movement away from feminine standards of taste towards something simultaneously more modern and robustly masculine (1–24).

As Jacobs sees it, the movement away from elaborate or genteel sentimentality attracted a motley collection of participants. Some were modernist cultural producers. Others included the naturalist writers, film-makers and critics who gravitated to New York in the 1910s. Both the naturalist novelist Theodor Dreiser and the critic H. L. Mencken, for example, were keenly interested in experimenting with vernacular speech. They believed that the vernacular conveyed feeling more honestly and forcefully than the polished language of literature (11–12). In this they had something in common with Dennis, regardless of their other differences. Similarly, the film-maker Thomas de Grasse and his colleagues had something in common with Raymond Longford in spite of the fact that they were unlikely to have been aware of each other’s work. Like Longford, America’s naturalist film-makers rejected glamorous characters in favor of depicting “plain folks” on screen in the 1910s and 1920s (29).

While there was a wide-ranging reaction against Victorian-era sentimentality in English-speaking society, The Sentimental Bloke suggests that scholars such as Jacobs go too far. It reminds us that not all reactions against “genteel” involved a rejection of sentimentality per se. An analogous point may be made about reactions against a glamorous consumerist culture of romantic love. It was possible for a critic to take umbrage at the commodification of romantic love in American[ized] popular culture without spurning romantic love in its entirety. Jacobs’ use of the phrase “decline in sentiment” is misleading because of this, for it implies a wholesale rejection of tender feeling rather than a more limited movement away from a certain sentimental style among certain cultural arbiters.

Another reason that the concept of a “decline in sentiment” is misleading is that it overlooks the fact that “genteel” sentimental forms continued to be consumed and enjoyed in Anglophone culture on the eary, in spite of the fact that they were criticized as old-fashioned or embarrassing. A continued interest in romantic ballads was an obvious example of this. In Britain, at any rate, regular performances of such ballads by male vocalists continued well after the Second World War (Hoggart 53–66). More pertinently, the concept of a wholesale feminization of sentiment – of the rejection of sentiment on the basis of its connections to femininity – overlooks the likelihood that a range of “masculine” expressions of romantic sentimentality developed in the early twentieth century. I have explored only one example of this here, although I began by noting that Australia’s first examples of romantic larrikins were influenced by British depictions of romantic Cockney men. It would be fascinating to explore the use of the Cockney vernacular and characters to voice masculine approaches to romantic love in British culture in the early 1900s, as well as to investigate analogous examples in the United States and elsewhere. The multi-media character and enormous popularity of The Sentimental Bloke in Australia certainly suggests that examples of masculine romance might fruitfully identified and explored elsewhere in Anglophone society.

The persistence of masculine sentimentality in Anglo- or American culture across the twentieth century has attracted attention from a number of scholars in recent years. International scholars such as Jennifer Williamson and Eve Sedgwick (131–46) have indeed grappled with similar issues to those discussed in an Australian context here (see also Chapman and Hendler; Shamir and Travis.) Sedgwick in particular has highlighted the fact that heterosexual men’s expressions of tender feeling remained an “open secret” in American culture and everyday life long after masculinity was “officially” supposed to have become incompatible with sentimentality. At the very least, this work should alert romance scholars to the need to take the relationship between heterosexuality and masculine romance seriously. It suggests that romance scholars should give more thought to the complex relationship between masculinity and romance in twentieth-century culture instead of treating romantic love as “feminized love”. Many men were uncomfortable with elaborate expressions of romantic feeling or the consumerist culture associated with American popular romance by the 1920s. Demeaning romance as feminine was not the only response to this discomfort, however – another was the construction of avowedly masculine articulations of romantic sentiment such as that of The Sentimental Bloke. [End Page 16]

**Works Cited**


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Almost every major critic of popular romance fiction—and probably minor ones too—notes that in reading the romance novel, readers will encounter virgin heroines. "For most of the genre's history," Pamela Regis explains, "the romance heroine was depicted as a virgin" (35). Indeed, in the first wave of romance scholarship, the trope of female virginity was often presented as a necessary feature of the genre. "Virginity is a given here," Ann Snitow thus declares in her influential early article, "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different":

"The heroine is not involved in any overt adventure beyond trying to respond appropriately to male energy without
Srivastava’s study was not based on a very broad sample of the genre—she only considers a handful of Harlequin romances—and it is tempting to dismiss her claims as dated, given the evolution of romance fiction since the 1980s.[1] But consider some recent Harlequin titles: The Timber Baron’s Virgin Bride (Clair, 2009), The Spaniard’s Virgin Housekeeper (Hamilton, 2009), The Playboy Sheikh’s Virgin Stable-Girl (Kendrick, 2009), Capelli’s Captive Virgin (Morgan, 2009), Rescuing the Virgin (Rosemoor, 2009), The Virgin’s Price (Milburne, 2009), His Convenient Virgin Bride (Dunlop, 2010), Virgin on Her Wedding Night (Graham, 2010), and novels with female virgins in the title are not the only ones where such characters appear. Clearly, the virgin heroine is still a regular character in popular romance fiction.

Indeed, even if modern romance fiction no longer insists on “making heroines compulsorily intact and reifying a hymenal virginity,” as a more recent scholar, Jocelyn Wogan-Brown puts it, what she calls the “cultural performance” of female virginity, at least in some metaphorical sense, remains remarkably important to the genre (346). “Harlequin romances (within the many subgenres) have come to ‘represent virginity not as an essentialized and mystical anatomical condition,’” this scholar writes, “but as an interior state, produced by volition and emotion” (346-7). Bloggers Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, whose familiarity with the genre is far broader than most scholars’, concur: “male virginity is relatively innocent, as proven by her inexperience or her outright virginity,” remains “one of the more peculiar constants of most romance novels, from historicals to contemporaries to paranormals to even erotica” (37). They explain in Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches Guide to Romance. “No matter what type she is,” they add, “she is definitely not the ho-type” (37).

What, though, of the sexually unawakened heroine? Is there a “type” for the male virgin in popular romance? At first glance, this figure is perhaps a rarity, both in fiction and in scholarship. Many current studies of the popular romance hero, for example, focus on the “alpha male” hero, a figure who tends to be as sexually experienced as he is powerful, masterful, and—at least as the novel begins—emotionally reserved. In fact, as an anecdote from romance author Monica Burns reveals, the alpha hero may seem hard to square with the idea of male virginity:

A little more than a year ago, I was getting ready to write my March 2011 release Pleasure Me. My editor and I had talked at a conference, and she’d asked me to make the hero a virgin. My initial powerhouse on the outside was, ummm . . . sure, I supposed I could. Inside I was thinking WTF? I write alpha heroes. How in the hell am I going to write an alpha male who’s never been with a woman?

Even Laura Vivanco and Kyra Kramer’s discussion of the virgin romance hero, which appeared last year in the Journal of Popular Romance Studies, finds oddly little to say about him: “Virginal heroes do exist in the genre,” they point out—but their discussion quickly moves on to cite a short questionnaire attached to the Mills & Boon edition of Susan Napier’s Secret Admirer, which seems to play down this figure’s importance. “[M]any heroines in our stories are virgins, but it is rare for the hero to be sexually inexperienced,” the questionnaire explains.

In this article, I hope to move beyond merely acknowledging the virgin hero’s existence to a more complex, theorised understanding of him as a complex character within the genre of popular romance fiction. My argument is that male virginity in romance novels is worthy of a more significant study than it has thus far been afforded—in part because male virgins are treated so differently in these novels from the ways they appear in cinematic representations, and in part because studying the virgin hero allows us to revisit some of the most puzzling and provocative of Northrop Frye’s pronouncements on the “romance,” broadly considered: in particular, his claim that in “romance” there is a “magical emphasis on virginity, the fact that virgins can do things other can’t” (CW XV:219, 236), but that “this prudery [about virginity] is structural, not moral” (CW XV:187). With Frye in mind, my approach to the topic will be anatomical; that is, I will anatomise various “types” of the virgin hero in modern popular romance fiction, with some exploration of how they overlap and relate to one another. I will close with an extended discussion of one recent romance novel, When the Duke Returns, by Eloisa James, to demonstrate how a single text can make use of several distinct tropes concerning male virginity and the quest-like narrative structure surrounding its loss.

To understand the construction of male virgins in popular romance, we might begin by turning to the burgeoning field of “virginity studies.” Unfortunately, this body of research so far only contains the scantest of mentions of male virginity. In Hanne Blank’s book, Virgin: The Untouched History, the most “untouched” of topics is the male virgin; and the culture surrounding male virginity is surprisingly peripheral to Anke Bernau’s Virgins: A Cultural History. Laura M. Carpenter’s Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences, however, offers us insights not only into the modern social realities of male virginity, but perhaps also into the silence surrounding it in scholarship. While “girls can be labelled ‘sluts’ if they have sex without love,” Carpenter reports, “boys can be labelled ‘wimps’ or even gay should they not have sex early enough in their adolescence” (12).[2] Male virginity not only must be lost; it must be lost as quickly as possible: if Virginia is for lovers, as the old advertisements used to proclaim, then (male) virginity is for losers. In Frygian terms, when the male is beyond the “normal age” to lose his virginity, he becomes an alazon figure, the kind who serves as “an object of ridicule in comedy or satire” (CW XXIII:331).

I am not the only scholar to make this connection between the male virgin in popular culture and alazon. In his reading of the recent Hollywood comedy The Forty Year Old Virgin, Celestino Deleyto struggles to argue that Andy, the hero of the film, cannot quite be seen as “a ridiculous man or as an Aristotelian alazon” because of “other traits of his character [that are] more affirmative” (259). We might, however, reverse the argument, since those affirmative traits serve precisely to contrast and counterpoint Andy’s long-enduring virginity, which otherwise would indeed leave him simply “an object of ridicule” (Frye, CW XXII:331). He often seems like one in any case: as Deleyto himself notes, “one of the narrative and commercial goals of the centrality of Andy’s sexual innocence is its exploitative potential: it becomes the perfect excuse for the deployment of gross-out discourse on sexuality” (260). Inasmuch as the film moves beyond that “gross-out discourse” into telling an actual love story it proves itself to be a romance, rather than simply a sex farce, but it’s clear that the “Happily Ever After” of Andy’s romance plot requires him to lose his virginity to the film’s heroine, Trish—after which, we are assured, he will not only retain all those other, “affirmative” traits, but will put them to their proper use in the context of a truly “adult” (which is to say, sexual) relationship.

The Forty Year Old Virgin frequently invokes the discourse of ridicule that Carpenter describes surrounding male virginity: that is, the question of whether Andy is “a wimp” or “gay.” It does so for comic effect, notably in the film’s repeated bantering exchanges about “how I know you’re gay.” But one might well wonder how the representation of the virgin hero in this film,
which was written and directed by men (Steve Carell and Judd Apatow), differs from the representation of the virgin hero in popular culture that is written by women, for example, popular romance fiction.

As Sarah S. G. Frantz and Katharina Rennhak write in their introduction to *Women Constructing Men: Female Novelists and Their Male Characters, 1750-2000*, several issues are at stake in the study of female-authored masculinity. The first of these arises from questions of power. As Frantz and Rennhak explain, feminist scholars have long studied the ways that male characters in female-authored texts serve as “catalysts for the construction of gender identity” (174). Carpenter says about virginity loss in everyday discourse—that it “represents a rite of passage, a process of transition from one role to another,” girls who become sexual beings at seventeen (136). The announcement of virginity seems to be one of the requirements of the male virgin romance novel: indeed, as far as I can tell, all virgin heroes at some point confess that they are virgins, as though this articulation were a defining feature of masculinity, in itself, at least for a romance hero. The romance heroine’s virginity, by contrast, may be declared aloud, but it is often also “written” by her body in the form of pain during sexual intercourse, blood on the sheets, or other signs that the heroine must read and respond to—and if he fails to see any signs, like the hero in Maureen Child’s atypical *First and Forever* (1991), a Harlequin Temptation, we are introduced to a mature heroine, Laura Daniels (she is 35), who meets a younger man, 22 year old Alex Shaw, who happens to be a virgin. “I’ve never been with a woman, Laura,” he tells her forthrightly: “I’m a virgin” (136). The speaking-aloud of the hero’s virginity often arrives, for the sick virgin hero, in the context of some explanation of his wounded, hence virginal, status. In the case of Alex Shaw, a car accident gets the blame: “I was seventeen. Guy hit me. When I woke up . . . [ . . . ] It’s impossible for me to convey the pain, the horror—the goddamned fear” (135). Some of that “horror” spills over into the depiction of Alex’s recovery and his life after the accident. As he further explains: “While I learned a lot during that time, I managed to miss quite a few things about the real world. I feel so . . . different, so ignorant of life. I never really had any friends. I fell behind other people my own age” (136). What Carpenter says about virginity loss in everyday discourse—that it “represents a rite of passage, a process of transition from sexual youth to adulthood” (143)—thus seems true in this novel, since Alex’s transition to adulthood has been delayed (“I fell behind”). A later passage makes this issue quite explicit. “Alex was a boy,” the heroine thinks to herself, a little disappointed (156).)

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The construction of virginal Alex as a “boy” in *First and Forever* leads quite naturally into a second common archetype: the student/virgin hero, with the heroine as his teacher. Kendall makes the most of the erotic potential built into this archetype, and of the power imbalance as well. When Laura arrives at Alex’s apartment, she promptly and playfully takes charge, and Alex is glad to go along with her mix of metaphor and role-play scenario:

“Time for night school.” Wordlessly she led him to the bedroom and stationed him next to the water bed. Kicking off her shoes, she turned on the lamp next to his bed.

“Lesson number one,” she began with a smile that put to rest any doubts about her talents at seduction.

“Sometimes it’s better with the lights on.”

Alex returned her smile, intensifying it. “Should I take notes?” (163)

She continues elaborating a series of lessons:
As the scene comes to a climax, the power dynamic is reversed, with Alex assuming the generically-typical quality of sexual mastery. Although she begins by leaving the lights on, Laura eventually “couldn’t watch any longer, closing her eyes to the delicious things he was doing to her body. Things no man had ever been able to do to her body” (167). One thinks of Frye’s observation that, in a romance, “virgins can do things other can’t” (CW XV:219, 236)—and, perhaps, of the sharp contrast between Alex’s immediate sexual prowess and the Andy’s goodhearted, fumbling, and extremely brief first time in The 40 Year Old Virgin, which is played entirely for comic effect. Although it’s true that the two men both respond with boyish enthusiasm to their first sexual episode—“Wanna do it again?” Alex asks (169)—this parallel hardly cancels out the striking, generically-specific difference between them when it comes to satisfying the heroine, perfectly, right from the very first time.

In Bonnie Dee’s The Countess Takes A Lover (2009), we see a variation of the teacher/student motif, one common enough to be its own archetype. This time, the student is a genius, and in the genius virgin archetype, the hero has not had sex because he is simply too intelligent to be concerned with carnal matters. His mind has been elsewhere. In The Countess Takes A Lover, readers are told about a virgin hero of twenty-five years of age:

Science and reason had always been the guiding forces of his life. Animal impulses were for the uneducated, unthinking louts. There must be more to life than satisfying base lust with bestial coupling; otherwise the whole of society might as well run about in animal skins cooking shanks over open fires. (31)

The genius virgin hero gives visible form to an enduring dichotomy in patriarchy: that is, the association of men with intellect and the mind, and women with emotion, sex, and the body. In this line of thought, only men are fully human—and as we can see in that reference to “uneducated, unthinking louts,” within the category of “men,” some men are more fully human than others. Needless to say, the novel does not endorse this line of thinking—rather it introduces the dichotomy in order to undo it.

This process plays out even more vividly in Jo Davis’ Under Fire (2009). Here our virgin hero Zack Knight, 26, is a “so-called genius” (3), while the heroine, Corinne “Cori” Shannon, is an exotic dancer who works for private parties at night and—to trouble the patriarchal dichotomy—also studies during the day to become a nurse. Cori exudes sexuality: “she was sex incarnate” (75) and “she put the ‘voom’ in vavoooom” (11). Zack’s sexuality is alluringly present, but repressed, a duality that plays out nicely in the novel’s choice of career for him (he’s a fire fighter) and in his behaviour at the outset of the novel. “He’d never been good at relating to women on any level—pathetic, but true”—we learn, “and now he had to keep from staring like an idiot at the goddess standing in front of him” (2). But if being a ‘genius’ makes him “like an idiot,” this doesn’t last:

Her big, white smile blasted him with a double shot of desire. Awakened his slumbering libido. She was sex incarnate, a treat he’d never sampled. He’d wondered if she’d believe his innocence, then reminded himself it didn’t make any difference. Even if he wasn’t a disaster zone, Cori was way out of his league. (75)

In this novel, as we’ve seen elsewhere, the hero has to articulate his virginity to the heroine, a moment that shifts the novel back into the student / teacher model we saw in First and Forever.

“I’m sort of . . . new at, you know . . . ”

Sitting up, she stared at him, processing what he’d said. Holy crap! “You mean, you’ve never gone down on a woman before?”

He groaned, slapping a hand over his eyes. “More than that. I’ve never had sex with a woman, period.” (143)

Following his virginal announcement, Cori begins to introduce Zack to the pleasures of sexuality and, of course, not only does he lose his virginity, but “the sex was pretty damned amazing” (149), not embarrassing, frustrating, or disappointing, to either party.

The discourse of male virginity in Under Fire also introduces us to a fourth common archetype: the virgin hero as commodity. “Good god,” Cori ponders at one point, “how on earth had she snared one of the last sexy male virgins over the age of twenty-one?” (143). Such a construction of female virginity is certainly not novel in any sense; female virginity has long been prized and required at marriage, reducing women to the status of commodities. The commodification of male virginity, by contrast, is rarely so reductive as female virginity—and when it is, when the male is now commodified and spoken of as an object, a virgin, rather than as a subject (who just happens to be a virgin), this reduction is often played for comedy. Consider Katherine Deauxville’s The Last Male Virgin (2002) in which we are introduced to Dr. Peter Havistock, “the author of the surprise bestselling book Determining Anthropological and Developmental Social Factors Among the Papua New Guinea Aborigines in the Antorok Valley” (6). Indeed, his celebrity is so popular that readers learn that “[t]he Harry King show called. They want me to be interviewed on CNN tonight” (23). Havistock, in this interview, explains how he survived a plane crash that killed his parents—a variation, perhaps, on the sick or wounded virgin motif—and how he subsequently spent a great deal of time in the jungles of Papua New Guinea. Pressed by an interviewer, he has no embarrassment about his state: “I believe what you are getting at is that I’m still a virgin,” he says (39). For Havistock there is nothing out of the ordinary about his lack of sexual experience; for Harry King and his viewers, there is nothing but shock: “I’m sorry, Doctor, I’m told our lines are jammed, so we are going to have to answer some of these calls. It seems a lot of people would like to talk to you” (40-41). The question of why the phone lines are jammed is quickly answered: Havistock has become a fetishised commodity.

Deauxville clearly has fun, throughout the novel, playing with popular culture stereotypes and readers’ expectations. Havistock, for example, is utterly unfazed by his virginal identity, with no fear that it brands him as a “wimp” or as “gay” or as something less than an adult man. Indeed, he turns the tables on a woman who gives voice to those views: Leslie snapped, “To many people in our society here in the U.S., and maybe to most of the world, a man who is twenty-nine years old and hasn’t had sex is . . . is . . . unnatural!”
Playing with the usual Romantic-primitivist assumption that indigenous cultures are more sexually open than the West—Havistock’s book recalls Margaret Mead’s famous Coming of Age in Samoa just as his name recalls that of sex researcher Havelock Ellis—our virgin hero explains that “f[rustration and sexual repression have no meaning in their [Antorok] language; they don’t think of themselves that way” (Deauxville 93). In such a cultural context, many of the meanings of male virginity seem to fall away, leaving Havistock quite bemused by his effect on American women:

“And they [Antorok] would never understand why my saying I’m a virgin on television is evidently like a shot of Viagra to apparently hundreds of women.”

“Women don’t take Viagra! At least, I don’t think they do. But you’re . . . you’re an aphrodisiac, that’s for sure.” (93)

Although he shares some traits with the sick virgin hero and the genius virgin hero, Havistock’s openly announced “aphrodisiac” quality seems linked neither to a boyish arrested development nor to a charmingly awkward repression of the body. It’s all about his status as a commodity, a rare thing that can be desired, when it’s advertised on television, by hundreds of women at once.

In conclusion, I want to consider the ways these various archetype’s come together in a particularly complex novel with a virgin hero, Eloisa James’s Regency historical novel When the Duke Returns. The novels of Eloisa James have a rather large number of male virgins; by my count, at least five of her novels incorporate them, and this repeated use of the trope suggests an effort to explore its narrative and symbolic possibilities. This novel tells the story of a duke, Simeon, who returns home to his wife, Isidore. The pair was married via proxy while he was travelling through exotic lands; upon his return the twenty-three year old bride-realises, to her disappointment, that her groom-husband (six years her senior) not only is a virgin, but intends to remain one. The first chapter emphasises this departure from the usual male-virginity trope:

“He’s a virgin.”

“What!”

“He’s a virgin and—”

“Your husband is a virgin?”

“And he won’t bed me.”

Jemma, Duchess of Beaumont, sank into her chair with a look of almost comical dismay on her face. “Darling, if there were ever grounds for annulment, these are they. Or this is it,” she added with some confusion. “Is he some sort of monk?” (11)

The attention to language here, as Isidore’s friend Jemma wonders whether these “grounds for annulment” should be singular or plural, reminds us that the hero’s virginity, too, is partly a matter of language: in the romance novel, as I argued above, it must be announced and articulated to be real.

As this opening chapter continues, the female friends repeatedly discuss male virginity as an emasculating, even monstrous phenomenon. “What sort of man stays a virgin until he’s near to thirty?” Isidore demands. “That’s almost disgusting. How am I supposed to introduce him to the bedroom, Jemma? Men do this sort of thing on their own. Honestly, if he’s never used his equipment—well, who’s to say that it will function at all?” (13). In part, of course, this speech reveals her anxiety—Isidore, too, is a virgin, not an older, more experienced woman like Laura in First and Forever—and in part it reveals her frustration about being treated as a commodity, “Isidore, property of the duke” (10) rather than as a woman with her own emotional, social, and even sexual desires. Jemma’s agreement that “incapability lies at the heart of this situation” (20), however, as the conversation end, shows that the novel is aware of and informed by modern American discourse about male virginity as a sign of lack, something for wimps. Never, for example, do the women praise Simeon for having remained loyal for eleven years to his proxy bride; instead, he seems at fault for not having learned about “this sort of thing on [his] own” (13).

Given the elaborate explanations other novels have offered for the hero’s virginity, we might expect to find something comparable here, and we do. Simeon, it seems, spent his childhood “long[ing] to escape his parents’ pitched battles” (22)—a version of the sick virgin archetype—and as an adult he now aspires to “quell” any strong emotion and be instead a “follower of the Middle Way” (22), a vaguely Eastern philosophical discipline he adopts during three years of “rigorous solitude” in India. (57). The novel explicitly links this philosophy’s aspiration to mastery over emotions and the body with a particular construction of masculinity: he spent those years “learning endurance, manliness, the Middle Way;” we read; “he had learned to create an oasis of calm around himself, no matter what happened” (57). Clearly, then, Simeon is not just a version of the sick virgin, but also a version of the genius virgin as well, a man who embodies the patriarchal split between body and mind, alternatively disciplining or ignoring the former, “animal” side of himself and identifying only with the latter, “principled, thoughtful” side that makes him a “human being” (162).

In this novel, the genius virgin tends to pride himself not just on his intellect, but on his self-control. When his Indian teacher Valamksepa “used to recite the poetry of Rumi,” we learn, “Simeon had exulted because he was free from the embarrassments described by the poet, particularly the way that “reason was powerless” in the face of desire (162). At one point, Isidore laments that “she had the remarkable bad luck to be married to the one man in control of his body” (206), but Simeon associates the absence of self-control with “violent tempests of emotion” (162) both inside himself and between members of his household, as he witnessed with his parents. This issue of control, or the lack of it, is crucial to the point in James’ narrative where both hero and heroine lose their virginities. “That was the wonderful thing about it—there wasn’t an ounce of composure about Simeon now, nothing of the controlled man,” Isidore marvels. “His face was alive with pleasure” (206). In this scene, self-control begins to take on a new meaning, redefined or displaced into the sexual act: “I can’t control
myself much longer.” Simeon says as he makes love to Isidore, and to her delight “his voice sounded dark and anguished” (263). As the scene ends, the narrator locates us squarely in Simeon’s point of view: “[p]leasure was roaring in his legs, and Isidore was meeting him now, raising her lips in a way that made him want to bite her on the collarbone, act like a rampaging beast” (264). Finally during the orgasmic moment, we are told, “[h]e threw his head back and roared like a man who was never quiet, like a lion claiming his mate” (264): a clear signal that he has finally come to inhabit and “claim” his own animal nature.

With this turn, Simeon’s virginal journey might seem to be complete. However, unlike earlier novels considered in this study, the post-coital moments in James’s text are not spent considering the completion or perfection of the sexual experience; that is, the sex was not entirely satisfying, neither for Isidore (who has yet to climax, and who finds Simeon’s semen rather disgusting) nor for the hero himself. “We weren’t very good,” he said propping himself upon an elbow” (267). Having both become sexual subjects, this couple must now learn to be ‘good’ at it: a remarkable displacement and revision of the teacher/student motif that I discussed earlier. Simeon is quite willing to act as both student and teacher, asking Isidore a series of questions about her sexual body and offering to demonstrate certain aspects and capacities of his. She finds the questions and offers startling: in response to his inquiry about how it feels to have breasts, for example, she initially replies “How does it feel? Simeon, do you think you’re a normal man” (267). The fact that she does so with “a delicious low gust of laughter,” however, shows that the novel does not consider being a “normal” man an entirely good thing, since it implies a lack of curiosity about women, or at least women’s sexual subjectivity.

The first time marks a juncture between having completed the necessary act of virginity loss and becoming a sexual subject; however, as we likely know, the first time is hardly ever a good time, let alone “pretty damned amazing,” as it was in Under Fire (149). But James’ novel does not simply distinguish between sexual activity (i.e. losing one’s virginity) and sexual happiness (which is to say, being “good” at sex, or making it both enjoyable and satisfying for both partners). It further distinguishes between sexual happiness and marital happiness, which requires much more than mere sexual compatibility. The final hundred pages of the novel focus primarily on how the couple arrives at the latter. But in an elegant turn, James frames the couple’s mutual struggle towards marital success in the same terms that shape their virginity loss and subsequent sexual education. The two forms of happiness cannot be reduced to one another, but the obstacles to both, and the lessons that must be learned to achieve both, are set in parallel. Control, vulnerability, respect, the desire to belong to a beloved and to possess him or her (not exclusively as a rare commodity, although not entirely not as a rare commodity): these topics and their key terms come up in each context.

The final moments of the novel offer a scene that embodies this parallelism. As the novel enters its closing chapters, there has been a constant, even growing tension about the success of the marriage; indeed, “the king has interested himself personally in the dissolution of [Simeon’s] marriage,” we learn, “on the ground of [his] insanity” (342). But after a series of melodramatic twists and rescues—and the novel itself calls them “melodramas” (346)—the couple find themselves ensconced in a sumptuous carriage, a vehicle metonymic with marriage, enjoying a passionate scene in which sex and love and companionate union are inextricably conjointed. “In the moments that followed, broken only by their whispered endeavours,” we read, Simeon “realized something his heart already knew. They were partners” (363). And, as we learn in the novel’s two-part epilogue, their marriage is not only re-consecrated after this, but “a year or so later” the couple become the parents of triplets (371), each of them a “living, breathing, adorable source of chaos” (372). As Simeon thinks to himself in the closing lines of the text, “living in a clean tent on the banks of the Ganges river” leaves one with “no gummy smiles, no warm little bundles, no beautiful, impetuous wives, no responsibilities. . . . No life. Real life’” (373). Isidore’s pregnancy and childbirth are thus metaphorically shared: the metaphorical virginity loss of their true, marital union (rather than of their first sexual encounter) has transformed each of them into a child-bearing, if not child-bearing, parent.

To close, virginity in popular romance fiction is never simple, even—or perhaps especially—for when the virgin is the romance hero. Romance authors do not simply treat the male virgin as an alazon or ridiculous character who is simply in need of sex, post-haste: instead, writers of romance treat male virginity as a topic worthy of serious consideration and sometimes quite elaborate exploration. No matter which archetypes he belongs to, the virgin hero can be read as a narrative trope, whether moral, structural, ideological, or as an opportunity to explore female desire. But more than that, in some contemporary popular romance fiction—as in the James novel—the male virgin asks us to read him through all of these lenses at once and by turns: a complexity that borders on the complexity of male virginity in real life, if one can still speak of “real life” in an academic context. Romance novels have been criticized for the ways in which they apparently reinforce patriarchal norms, but when we read these novels with a particular focus on male virginity, we find that romance novelists are quite conscious of these norms, and they sometimes break new ground in both gender and genre. Male virginity may receive its most honest and most complete fictional treatment in the genre pervasively written "by women, for women": the popular romance novel.

Works Cited


Modern romance novels written in English have a pedigree which stretches back to the eighteenth century:

"There Are Six Bodies in This Relationship: An Anthropological Approach to the Romance Genre" by Laura Vivanco and Kyra Kramer

August 4th, 2010

Modern romance novels written in English have a pedigree which stretches back to the eighteenth century:

Harlequins can be traced back through the work of Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen to the sentimental novel and ultimately [...] to the novels of Samuel Richardson, whose Pamela is considered by many scholars to be the first British novel (it was also the first English novel printed in America). (Modleski 15)
Defined as novels in which “The main plot centers around two individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work” (RWA) and which conclude with “an emotionally-satisfying and optimistic ending” (RWA), romances constitute a genre which, despite being “so stable in its form” (Regis 207), has not remained unchanged: “Although the base plot […] remains constant, themes vary from decade to decade and author to author” (Dixon 8). With regard to the portrayal of sexuality in the genre, however, it has been suggested that although many modern romances “portray human sexuality more explicitly than in the past, […] assumptions about male sexuality […] have not altered as much as one might expect from Samuel Richardson’s Pamela to one of last month’s Harlequin Romances” (Mussell 4). It has also been argued that “the popular romance genre since 1972 has been divided into two basic types — the sweet romance and the erotic romance — with the fundamental difference between them being the presence or absence of specific sexual behavioral norms and explicit sexual activities” (Thurston 7). We have examined primary texts in English which span more than two centuries, and which include both “sweet” and more explicit romances, in order to explore some of the continuities and variations that exist in the interactions between the bodies of the “individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work.”

Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret M. Lock’s “The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology” provides a framework within which many of the existing analyses of the physical appearances, social statuses, and sexual behaviours of the characters in romance novels can be pieced together to reveal differing models of romantic relationships. Scheper-Hughes and Lock’s essay, which draws on Michel Foucault’s theories about the body, can be summarised thus:

> The human body is both naturally and culturally produced, and each body has three distinct points of analysis and perspective […]. While the most obvious body is the individual body, or the embodied self, the human body is also a social body and a political body. (Kramer)

This tripartite approach to understanding the human body can usefully be applied to the protagonists of romance novels. We can think of them as individuals with physical bodies (the individual body), as representations of cultural identities (the social body), and as characters existing in a particular political context (the political body). Each character’s three bodies can be conceptualised and analysed separately, but they exist simultaneously and therefore, as we shall see, a description of a character’s appearance in the least sexually explicit of romances may nonetheless intimate much about the sexuality of his or her social body.

Since each protagonist has three bodies, there are six bodies in a monogamous romantic relationship. Although we will discuss all six bodies, our discussion will centre around some socio-sexual aspects of the social bodies and a few socio-political elements of the political bodies. We focus in particular on one configuration of the six bodies which is both extremely common in modern romances and has a long history within the genre, and then briefly discuss a few alternative configurations, some of which are relatively recent innovations and others of which have been present in romantic fiction for centuries.

**The Individual Body**

As humans, we understand that we have a body; our consciousness is embodied in a physical self. This is the individual body, an “expectant canvas of human flesh” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 10). The individual bodies of heroines vary, and one may have “a pair of fine eyes” (Austen, *Pride* 73) while another has a “lush lower lip and unblemished skin” (Lindsey 65), but “some indication, however slight, of the heroine’s physical attributes has always been an important part of the romantic novel” (Anderson 85). Social beliefs are inscribed on the “expectant canvas” of the body as soon as value judgements are included in the description. A heroine’s appearance, for example, may be compared to particular ideals of feminine beauty and attractiveness:

> Was he looking at her nose? ‘Strong’ was the euphemism that people tossed around but Grace knew what she saw in the mirror every morning. Her nose was too big for the perfect oval of her face, too distinctive. Like her height, another ‘advantage’ that she had been encouraged to flaunt rather than conceal. She knew without vanity that she was beautiful, but not in the classical sense of the word. Her features taken piece by piece were far from perfect — apart from her nose, her blue eyes were too widely spaced, her mouth too full — but together with her gleaming cap of midnight-black hair they formed a striking whole. Her beauty was ‘unique’ and in this era of mass-production uniqueness had an inflationary value. (Napier 6)

Ann Barr Snitow has suggested that “There are more descriptions of his [the hero’s] body than of hers [the heroine’s]” (248), and although

> The body of the romantic hero may represent an ideal of masculine beauty, […] beauty here is the equivalent of physical strength, and physical strength itself becomes a sign of something more, a definition of authentic virility as a power that is always scarcely contained. (Cook 155)

Descriptions of a hero whose “Iron-hewed strength rippled from every muscle” (Lindsey 47), or whose “gold-blond hair had been cut military short, a style that looked both severe and sexy” (Mallery 19), certainly call attention to his strength (which may be a component of his socio-political body) and to the potent sexuality of his socio-sexual body.

Since sexual desire is such an important part of romantic relationships, it is unsurprising that even in “sweet” romances, or in scenes which involve non-sexual activity, descriptions of the protagonists’ individual bodies are often overlaid by references to their socio-sexual bodies:

> Harlequins revitalize daily routines by insisting that a woman combing her hair, a woman reaching up to put a plate on a high shelf (so that her knees show beneath the hem, if only there were a viewer), a woman doing what women do all day, is in a constant state of potential sexuality. (Snitow 249)

Bodies are more than flesh, blood, and bone: the social and political bodies co-exist with, and are written on, the individual body.
The Social Body

The social body can be thought of as the way in which the individual body relates to its cultural context. Descriptions of the protagonists' clothing and adornments can be particularly helpful in revealing the social body. In Johanna Lindsey's Defy Not the Heart, for example, we are told that the hero's preference for "simple attire said a lot for his character" (274). His avoidance of ostentatious dress reveals his lack of vanity and is a culturally approved masculine behaviour, albeit perhaps a historically anachronistic one for a novel set in the Middle Ages.[2] Clothing may thus assist both in distinguishing between male and female individual bodies and in increasing or decreasing the former's masculinity and the latter's femininity, for although "The 'naturalness' of gender is constantly invoked, [...] masculinity and femininity are disciplines of the body that require work" (King 33). Women, for example, are expected to construct their social bodies through how they dress and adorn themselves. In turn, "Cultural constructions of and about the body are useful in sustaining particular views of society and social relations" (Scherer-Hughes and Lock 19), and women's fashion has been deemed problematic by many feminists because it can reinforce negative images of women:

Turning woman into an ornamented surface requires an enormous amount of discipline and can cause discomfort, not to mention untold feelings of inadequacy. [...] Female styles over the years have also served to confirm myths about woman: as duplicitous, over-sexualised temptress; delicate and weak or narcissistic, frivolous and obsessed with trivialities. (King 36)

Culturally constructed "ideas about men and women, their appropriate behaviors and attributes, and their relations to each other" are called "gender ideologies" (Blackwood 240-41). Despite the fluid nature of gender across cultures, each culture's ideologies about gender tend to assume that gender is natural, inherent, and determined by a person's sex at birth. For example, "the social sciences in the postwar period [...] posited women as expressive (emotional) and men as instrumental (pragmatic, rational, and cognitive)" (Gutmann 388). Cross-cultural studies have found that most societies hold consensual ideas — guiding or admonitory images — for conventional masculinity and femininity by which individuals are judged worthy members of one or the other sex [...]. Such ideal statuses and their attendant images, or models, often become psychic anchors, or psychological identities, for most individuals, serving as a basis for self-perception. (Gimore 208)

Masculinity can be defined as "anything men think and do to be men" (Gutmann 386, emphasis added). In many societies, perhaps even all cultures, "there is a constantly recurring notion that real manhood is different from simple anatomical maleness" (Gimore 208) and that manhood must be earned or achieved in particular ways. After his first experience of sexual intercourse, for example, a rare virginal romance hero tells his heroine that "I gave you my virginity; you gave me my manhood" (Napier 133). Zilbergeld suggests that sexuality is an area in which men feel under particular pressure to earn and demonstrate manhood:

One of the cornerstones of the masculine stereotype in our society is that a man is one who has no doubts, questions, or confusion about sex, and that a real man knows how to have good sex and does so frequently. For a man to ask a question about sex, thereby revealing ignorance, or to express concern, or to admit to a problem is to risk being thought something less than a man. (5)

Manhood, then, is a status which once achieved must be maintained, and it therefore appears to be a status more easily lost by males than womanhood is by females. Jo Beverley's Cyn Malloren, for example, must frequently fight to maintain his manhood because his individual body constantly calls it into question:

Despite all evidence to the contrary people would persist in seeing him as fragile, even his family who certainly should know better. [...] As a boy he'd believed age would toughen his looks, but at twenty-four, a veteran of Quebec and Louisbourg, he was still disgustingly pretty. He had to fight duels with nearly every new officer in the regiment to establish his manhood. (6)

As Gilmore has observed,

femininity seems to be judged differently. It usually involves questions of body ornament or sexual allure, or other essentially cosmetic behaviors that enhance, rather than create, an inherent quality of character [...]. femininity is more often construed as a biological given that is culturally refined or augmented. (208-09)

Even if she chooses not to augment her femininity but instead performs actions and behaviours associated with masculinity, a heroine may do so without losing her womanhood. In E. M. Hull's The Sheik, for example, Diana Mayo's "boyish directness" (6) and the fact that she is "far more at home" (14) in "smart-cut breeches and brown boots" (13) than in "pretty dresses" (14) are the result of having been "brought up as a boy" (9). Nonetheless, "Diana Mayo, with the clothes and manners of a boy, was really an uncommonly beautiful young woman" (17), and one who at a ball can be found "ten deep in would-be partners" (3). By contrast, cross-dressing heroes are extremely rare, and if a hero acts in ways which are associated with femininity, this will tend to be dealt with circumspectly, so as not to impugn his masculinity. Cyn Malloren may disguise himself as a woman for a time, but he does so to play "knight-errant" (Beverley 25) to a "damsel in distress" (28). He is an experienced soldier, and the reader is aware that beneath the feminine dress he has chosen to wear, his individual body bears witness to his masculine socio-political and socio-sexual bodies: "He had a scar across his chest which it seemed no woman could ignore. It came from a minor wound, a long shallow saber cut, but it looked dramatic" (31). The scar is described in considerable detail while Cyn is dressing in "female garments" (58) for the first time and the reader is again told that women find it irresistible, thus emphasising the masculinity of Cyn's socio-sexual body: "All the women who had been favored with a glimpse of it had been impelled to touch it, [...] some with a finger, some with their mouths" (59). It also provides information about his socio-political body: seeing the scar convinces the heroine that "you really are a soldier" (59). In addition, even in disguise "His jaw was a little too square, his cheeks too lean. He carefully applied rouge to them, and was heartened to realize that for once he looked too masculine" (65). In another romance, analysed by Mary M.
The group of cultural beliefs about masculine sexuality known as the
male sexual drive discourse was identified by Hollway [...]. Zilbergeld [...]. Sexualities of the Social Bodies

Gender ideologies create, and are simultaneously created by, beliefs about human sexuality. There are deeply ingrained cultural beliefs about the differences between male and female sexuality (Kane and Schippers). A clergyman in Richardson’s Pamela, for example, attempts to excuse Mr. B.’s abduction and intended rape or seduction of Pamela on the grounds that “tis what all young Gentlemen do” (135). These differences, however, may not all have biological causes: “Foucault […], Tiefer […], and others have argued that sexuality is constructed within particular sociocultural contexts and discourses” (Gilbert, Walker, McKinney, and Snell 755). Far from being entirely innate, 

sexual potential takes its form through a number of social processes, including ideologies of religion or ritual, ethnicity, class, gender, family, and reproduction, as well as the material and social conditions of everyday life. These processes provide the interpretive context for sexual desires, feelings and longings. (Blackwood 237)

Women have long been constructed as sexually “feeble and passive, literally a receptacle for the desires of the male” (King 31). This may explain why so many romance heroines, particularly in older romances, are virgins who are initiated into sexual activity by a romance hero, although thereafter they may enjoy sex immensely. Romance author Doreen Owens Malek argues that the heroine’s virginity is important because

virginity is a gift that can only be given once, and it is ideally bestowed on a woman’s great love. This giving of virginity adds an immeasurable element of drama and power to the story. It changes the heroine, of course, but in romance novels it also changes the hero. (118)

It is significant that Owens Malek only discusses the virginity of female characters. Virginal heroes do exist in the genre, but as acknowledged in a short questionnaire which Mills & Boon appended to Susan Napier’s Secret Admirer, “Many heroines in our stories are virgins, but it is rare for the hero to be sexually inexperienced.” In Owens Malek’s description of virginity there is no suggestion that the hero might be a virgin whose virginity would be considered a “gift that can only be given once” and would change the heroine. Napier’s virgin hero, Scott Gregory, does, however, use this kind of language:

‘Couldn’t you tell, Grace? Was my gift such a paltry thing? I thought one’s partner could always tell.’ […]

“What gift? T-tell-what?” she stammered […]

“Why, that it was my first time, of course.” (133)

If we reword the quotation from Talbot which we cited earlier in the essay, so that “artist” is replaced by “male virgin,” we can say that this gender reversal casts

a shadow of doubt […] on the gender identity of [male virgins]. Being [a male virgin] is not masculine. The two identities sit uneasily together; there is a suspicion of homosexuality or, less serious but still quite unsuitable, being ‘weird’. (93)

Grace, in her attempt to reconcile Scott’s claim of virginity with the knowledge that he has “been out with lots of women” (139), eventually asks “Are you homosexual?” (140) but Napier has already defused most of the suspicions about Scott’s sexuality and masculine identity by ensuring that the revelation occurs after Scott has lost his virginity and demonstrated that in all other respects his sexual behaviour is identical to that of a great many other romance heroes. Having literally, as well as emotionally, chased the heroine until she surrendered to him:

His desire […] had proved insatiable. And, although the second and third time they made love it was not with the stunning speed of the first, it was still fiercely, gloriously energetic. […] He made her feel unutterably sexy […]. In short, he was every bit the fantastic lover. (131)

By taking the lead in initiating sex, ensuring that his partner experiences hitherto unknown heights of pleasure, and demonstrating the stamina necessary to repeat the experience several times in one night, Scott has proved that he is indeed a man.

The group of cultural beliefs about masculine sexuality known as the
In the romance genre, however, perhaps because it often offers “a fantasy of female empowerment” (Phillips 55), the heroine will tend to possess “an unrelenting and absolute power” over the hero’s mind and body. The conventional line is often literally “No other woman had affected him like this before” (Johnson-Kurek 127). It is possible for a hero to resist the power of the heroine’s allure. He may even seek to deny the possibility of any attraction, as Darcy does when he states that “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me” (Austen, Pride 59). He cannot, however, resist indefinitely and Darcy eventually confesses to Elizabeth Bennet that “In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you” (221). If she is aware of the attraction the hero feels towards her, a heroine may exult in it:

his mouth, hard and hungry, fell upon hers, dragging over her lips as though to punish her.

But what Jessica tasted was victory. She felt it in the heat he couldn’t disguise, and in the pulsing tension of his frame, and she heard it clear as any declaration when his tongue pushed impatiently for entry.

He wanted her. (Chase 160)

Madeline has a similar response to the evidence of her hero’s desire:

She’d seen the desire that flamed in his eyes when he held her. She’d felt the tremors in his arms and heard the pounding of his heart. A heady sense of feminine power shimmered in her veins. It thrilled her that she could cause such a reaction and make her eager to test her power over him once again. (Lovelace 133)

The Mighty Wang

Each of these heroines has aroused her hero’s Mighty Wang. The term “Mighty Wang” (Wendell and Tan 36) was coined by Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan as a humorous way to describe the extremely large and effective sexual organ possessed by many a romance hero. The Mighty Wang (MW) can also be thought of as a symbol of the male sexual drive discourse: it is a penis functioning as a symbol of the ideal masculine socio-sexual body. The term “MW,” as it is used in this paper, will refer not to the individual body’s penis, but to the hero’s socio-sexual body. The appropriation of the name of this particular body-part to refer to the whole of a hero’s socio-sexual body seems particularly apt given that in romances there is frequent “use of the personal pronouns — me, he, him, himself — to signify this body part […]. The seemingly unavoidable use of these pronouns is a […] curious euphemistic practice because it equates the man’s penis with the man himself” (Johnson-Kurek 119). The sentence “She cradled the rigid length of him in her palm” (Castle 172) is an example of this kind of writing: the part seems to become the whole. Conversely, when the reader is told that a hero’s body has “Long, long legs, […] a broad back that went on forever, all golden-skinned and rock-hard” (Lindsey 47), the allusion to another part of the hero that might be long, broad, and hard is not subtle.[3]

When the MW performs acts which are common to the male sexual drive discourse, he is giving a demonstration of the socio-cultural attributes of masculine sexuality. Although Austen is so discreet about these matters that the reader is left to surmise what she or he will about the precise ways in which “the utmost force of passion” (Pride 228) might be expressed physically, many of the more explicit modern romances take the reader into the bedroom to observe the MW in action; it is not uncommon for the hero’s penis to be, if not quite “Two Feet Long, Hard As Steel, And Can Go All Night,” as described in the title of Zilbergeld’s chapter on “The Fantasy Model of Sex,” at least unusually large, hard, and possessed of immense stamina. Although Zilbergeld was writing in 1978, his comment that “Much of the explicitness of recent […] fiction serves only to give more detailed presentations of the same old myths” (53) continues to ring true in relation to the romance genre. The size of Ranulf’s penis, for example, is implied when, prior to his second sexual encounter with Reina he partially reassures her by reminding her that “you have withstood my size once without dying” (Lindsey 177) and Dain fears that his immense organ will damage his virgin wife: “His lust-swollen rod strained furiously against his trousers, a great, monstrous invader that would tear her to pieces” (Chase 223).

The MW exists “in a state of constant hornytoad” (Wendell and Tan 84) and Wendell and Tan have noted its immense stamina:

There is a concept of recovery time that never really affects the romance hero, and thus casts mortal men with normal turgid boners in a shameful light, because immediately after having a great orgasm, real men need at least a half hour before they can think about going another round. (167)

Another of the characteristics of the MW as it appears in more explicit romances is that it can “Elevate sexual intercourse to near heavenly experiences, one orgasm at a time” (Wendell and Tan 84). During Clare’s first experience of sexual intercourse, for example, she experiences “passion without subtlety: a primal, desperate need for union that swept them both into the heart of the storm” (Putney 292). This, however, is merely “a synopsis” (300), and “the unabridged version” (300) which follows is so intensely pleasurable that afterwards Clare murmurs “This could make someone forget about God, for it is hard to imagine that heaven can offer anything more” (301). If the heroine is sexually experienced, she has generally never had sex quite as good as the sex she has with the MW. In Merline Lovelace’s His Lady’s Ransom, for example, Madeline, despite “Having twice been wed, […] was yet a stranger to the feeling that suddenly coursed through her at the sight of this tall, broad-shouldered man” (29-30) and the contrast is even greater once they actually reach the bedroom:
In less explicit romances, the description of the MW's kisses may seem to foreshadow the even greater delights still in store for the heroine. Germaine Greer once sarcastically commented of a Barbara Cartland romance that “when handkissing results in orgasm it is possible that an actual kiss might bring on epilepsy” (178). Cartland did not, of course, write a scene in which handkissing literally resulted in orgasm but she did use hyperbolic language to describe the intensely pleasurable sensations experienced by her heroines while kissing:

...and it was even more wonderful than she had thought it could be.

She had not imagined a kiss could make her feel as if a streak of sunlight ran through her body, making her pulsatingly alive. (Cartland, *Problems* 138)

The heroine of Beverly Jenkins’s *Josephine* experiences similarly intense sensations while being kissed by a MW:

Her whole world seemed to have come alive in response to his kisses. Now she understood how a girl could become overwhelmed and allow a boy to take liberties he shouldn't. The soaring sensations and rising emotions were so exciting, Jo didn’t want to stop.

They had to, however, and they both knew it. (227)

In Georgette Heyer’s *Devil’s Cub*, the pleasure and power of the MW’s embrace almost render the heroine unconscious:

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. (277)

Another way in which the sexual potency of the MW may be revealed is via a description of the hero’s sexual history: Richardson’s Mr. B. has an illegitimate child by a woman he seduced; Cartland’s Duc de Savigne has had many liaisons with “women whom he takes up on an impulse and apparently without any consideration for their feelings, discards [...] as soon as they bore him” (Love 8); and another hero, prior to meeting his heroine, “took what the wenches threw at him, never doubt it” (Lindsey 223). While multitudes of former sexual partners can serve as a demonstration of the MW’s allure, this can also be expressed via descriptions of women who find the hero attractive but who may not have had direct experience of his sexual prowess. Mr. B., for example, “is admir’d, as I know, by half a dozen Ladies” (Richardson 41) while Adam Morgan is “a young man accustomed to having young ladies jump at his beck and call” (Jenkins 176) who has “never had a young lady throw my interest back in my face” (188). Given the number of willing females available to him, it takes a very special woman to capture the MW’s permanent attention: a woman with a Glittery HooHa.

**The Glittery HooHa**

Although the term “Glittery HooHa” (GHH) “emerged at the internet discussion board Television Without Pity” (Vivanco) between 2004 and 2006, authors have long been describing heroines as glowing, sparkling and glittering. Pamela has “speaking Eyes” which can “overflow” with tears “without losing any of their Brilliancy!” (Richardson 186) and we learn of Syrilla that

there was something more than mere beauty about her, he thought, which made her different from other women.

It was the fact that she was so intensely alive, and that when she was animated she seemed almost to sparkle as she spoke, while her eyes shone as if they had captured the sunlight. (Cartland, *Love* 81)

A more recent example of a glittering heroine is Jo Best, whose “dark unblemished skin glowed with health and beauty. She was by far the most radiant young woman he’d ever had the pleasure of knowing” (Jenkins 123).

The GHH is a symbol of the female socio-sexual body and in particular of female sexual allure. Its glitter indicates the desirability of the heroine’s socio-sexual body. When Mr. B. states that Pamela is “so pretty, that go where you will, you will never be free from the Designs of some or other of our Sex” (Richardson 87), he is revealing that he himself has some quite definitely sexual “Designs” upon her GHH. Austen is much more reticent about sexual matters and Darcy has no immoral “Designs” on Elizabeth, but when he notices “the beautiful expression of her dark eyes” (Pride 70) and is “forced to acknowledge her figure to be light and pleasing” (70), it is evident that despite having initially “looked at her only to criticise” (70), he is unable to deny the growing attraction he feels towards her GHH. As is demonstrated by *Pride and Prejudice*, there is no need for a heroine to be either the most beautiful woman in the novel, or one whom all men find irresistible. What matters is the special effect her GHH has on the hero:

A woman with a hooha as glittery as this girl merely needs to walk around as glitter falls from her netherparts, leaving a trail for Our Hero to follow. And once he finds her, it only takes one dip in the Glittery HooHa to snare him forever. [...] For yea, no matter how many hoohas he might see, never will there be one as glittery as hers. (Crusie, Stuart, and Rich 237)

The heroine’s GHH is not merely sexually alluring; it is powerful enough to render a MW monogamous. Even while the attraction remains unconsummated and the hero’s physical penis (which is part of his individual body) has not penetrated the “hooha” or vagina (which is part of the heroine’s individual body), it is not uncommon for the hero to realise that his MW is no longer attracted to other women and their less glittery GHHs. Cyn Malloren “found he had difficulty imagining being aroused by any woman other than this one” (Beverley 68). In Diana Palmer’s *Silent Night Man*, the hero sets up a date with...
of reference” (Gutmann 396). Regardless of the cause of the conflation, few men actually equate their manhood with their genitalia, nonetheless many studies indicate that they are a favorite point of analysis.

Perhaps the conflation of the Phallus with the penis occurs because while “generally ethnographers have concluded that the sexual organs were naturalized and their representations were saturated with tropes like this is yours.” […] That same thought was only beginning to form in his own mind. He smiled sheepishly. (86)

In romance, then, it is often “the heroine’s task to remake male sexuality, to subordinate it […] to love” (Cohn 30) and her success is made possible by her GHH.

Not all romance heroes need their sexuality to be “remade” in the same way. Some heroes have repressed, rather than hyperactive, MWHs. Heyer’s Simon the Coldheart, for example, states that “There is no place for women in my life, and no liking for women in my breast” (16). In this case, the GHH regulates the MW by bringing forth a “new-born passion” (298). In Napier’s Secret Admirer, the hero’s sexuality was affected by his step-mother who, when he “turned fifteen […] decided that it was time I was taught the facts of life … on a practical basis” (154). Sent to a private boarding school by his father as punishment for what was assumed to be the attempted rape of his step-mother, Scott found that his “guilt and revulsion about sex in general was reinforced by the crude boastings in the dorm” (156). After that, he “never felt so strongly attracted to any one […] that I was willing to allow myself to be vulnerable” (158), but the heroine’s GHH changes his attitude towards sex. Whether hyper-sexual and promiscuous, or repressed and underused, the MW is attracted to, and then regulated by, the GHH.

Although the GHH is irresistible to the MW, the MW is also extremely attractive to the GHH. In some cases “The hero’s proximity alone can send the blood pounding through her veins, make her hands tremble, deprive her of speech and reason” (Douglas 26). In Anne Herries’s Captive of the Harem, the heroine expresses this attraction in terms of magic:

The sweetness of that kiss had surprised her, and aroused a longing for something that she did not understand, robbing her of the will to resist him. She had felt as though he cast a magic spell over her by some sorcery — was it this that made so many of the harem women eager for his notice? (99)

The heroine, who is generally unaware of the extent of her GHH’s power over the MW, may initially fear the “magic spell” cast by the MW. Such fears are not unfounded. In Barbara Samuel’s The Love Talker, in which the hero is quite literally a magical being, we are given a description of the full extent of the damage a MW can cause to women whose GHHs are not glittery enough to tame it:

The Love Talker is a fixture of Irish faery lore, a seductive and dangerous being indeed, a conscienceless faery who ravishes the senses of unsuspecting women and leaves them to pine away to their deaths. In all the poems and stories, he is the King of Rakes, a libertine of unholy power. (195)

This reflects the way in which male sexuality is culturally constructed as an active, unemotional, possibly dangerous part of masculine behaviour.

In a romance novel, the sexual desires and activities of a hero and heroine often reveal their growing emotional attachment, but how, when, where, and with whom the protagonists have sex, as well as the ramifications of their sexual activity, can express socio-cultural ideologies about what constitutes “ideal” sexuality.

The Political Body

Sex is not simply an activity engaged in by individual bodies: “Cultures are disciplines that provide codes and social scripts for the domestication of the individual body in conformity to the needs of the social and political order” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 26). These codes and scripts are often translated into law, making it illegal to go against the cultural definition of normality. One of the most significant differences between the social body and the political body is that while the social body may be subjected to cultural sanctions, such as being socially marginalised, the political body may be disciplined by the state, especially through imprisonment.

Romances, however, generally conclude with the political bodies of the protagonists being rewarded. One of the key narrative elements of a romance is the “betrotthal,” a “scene or scenes” in which “the hero asks the heroine to marry him and she accepts; or the heroine asks the hero, and he accepts” (Regis 37). Marriage, or even the promise of marriage, gives both cultural and legal recognition to their relationship and legitimises the joining of their social and political bodies as well as of their individual bodies. In romances the pairing of the hero and heroine’s individual bodies, and of the MW and GHH, is complemented by the pairing of their socio-political bodies, which we shall call the Phallus and the Prism.

The Phallus in Romance

Teresa Ebert has described the romance hero as the personification of the Phallus:

The phallus […] is ideologically disguised as a full, embodied presence, […] Harlequin Romances, for example, are saturated with representations of the male anatomical organ. These representations take the form of tropic substitutions for the penis, as in such descriptions of the hero as “straight and tall, as brown and unbending as the monster trees rearing … behind him,” and “the erect masculine figure astride the horse”; or, more directly, “the thrusting weight of steel-hard thighs and hips.” These images […] rely the penis and thus mystify male power, sensuality, and sexual difference as physical and natural, while concealing the production of the phallus as signifier as well as the construction of male prowess and privilege in signification behind the naturalized penis. (34)

Perhaps the conflation of the Phallus with the penis occurs because while “generally ethnographers have concluded that few men actually equate their manhood with their genitalia, nonetheless many studies indicate that they are a favorite point of reference” (Gutmann 396). Regardless of the cause of the conflation,
In this essay the “Phallus” refers to the socio-political body which expresses aspects of masculinity associated with the Father, such as authority, the capacity to administer punishment, and the ability to love and care for those under his protection. If a full range of Phallic traits is evinced by a hero then his socio-political body is a Completed Phallus.

At the beginning of a romance novel, however, most heroes have Incomplete Phalluses. Such heroes tend to demonstrate authoritarian or aggressive aspects of Phallic masculinity, including “the threat of violence, the law-giving nature, the ownership of the world, a power vested in physical presence” (Cook 154), and few of the softer qualities, such as care-giving. In a romance in which the Incomplete Phallus displays many of the negative characteristics of men in patriarchal culture, the hero of the romance can also be “its villain, a potent symbol of all the obstacles life presents to women” (Phillips 57). In Lindsey’s Defy Not the Heart, the hero abducts the heroine on another man’s behalf before marrying her himself, and in Napier’s Secret Admirer the hero poses a threat on a business level because he’s “powerful enough to destroy us if he wants to — he’s done it before to other companies” (22). Not infrequently the heroine is wary of the Incomplete Phallus, and rightly so, since he may attempt to use his power and authority to imprison or coerce her: In Lovelace’s His Lady’s Ransom, for example, the hero is convinced that the heroine is nothing more than a GHH to be controlled and has her confined within an isolated castle. In other romances the MW and Incomplete Phallus may work in conjunction, through rape or sexual assault, to assert their dominance over the heroine. This is the case in Richardson’s Pamela, in which the hero attempts to rape the heroine, and in E. M. Hull’s The Sheik, in which the hero succeeds in such attempts.

More recent romances do not tend to include rapes of the heroine by the hero, but one can still find “ritual” versions, such as a punishing kiss which serves to demonstrate the social status and/or physical power of the Incomplete Phallus, and the sexual potency of the MW.

The Incomplete Phallus tends to have obtained his power and authority from one or more typically male-dominated cultural areas. He frequently has high social status (e.g. Duke, Sheik), wealth (billionaire, tycoon), or both. With or without wealth, he usually displays fighting skills or at least physical strength (SEAL, warrior, cowboy). In his most obviously patriarchal guise he has the ability to regulate society by enforcing the law (police officer, sheriff), or he may try to perfect society by fighting a corrupt system (outlaw, spy, private detective). There are, of course, other professions open to heroes, but many of them seem to involve power in forms strongly associated with masculinity.

Many Incomplete Phalluses lack emotional connection to others, but this lack can manifest itself in a number of different ways. A hero with a very strong MW and a very Incomplete Phallus may be a rake who spends much of his time engaging in sexual activity, as Dain does in Loretta Chase’s Lord of Scoundrels:

He lusted for virtually every attractive female he saw. He had a prodigious sexual appetite [...]. If he lusted for a whore, he paid her and had her. If he lusted for a respectable female, he found a whore as a substitute, paid her, and had her. (49)

In slightly less extreme cases this type of hero may be a “passionate, romantic figure with a past, perhaps most familiar in Charlotte Brontë’s Mr. Rochester” (Mussell 119). Sometimes rakish behaviour is ascribed to a deep emotional pain suffered by the hero:

He had deliberately set out to defy the conventions, to shock decent men and women, to become a by-word for everything that was debauched and immoral.

He had succeeded, but strangely enough it had not eased the hurt which had caused him to behave in such a manner, and the wound within himself had not healed. (Cartland, Love 84)

Although a rake generally acts in response to the demands of his MW, particularly where the heroine is concerned, his Phallic attributes may be considerable. Richardson’s Mr. B., for example, is a landowner, Justice of the Peace, and Member of Parliament and Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan states that “The French Government has no jurisdiction over me. I am not subject to it. I am an independent chief, my own master. I recognise no government. My tribe obey me and only me” (Hull 63).

A second type of Incomplete Phallus may be identified by his devotion to his work (often in one of the typically Phallic professions listed above) and his avoidance of family ties. This type of hero’s Incomplete Phallus tendencies thus take precedence over those of his MW. Often this behaviour too is shown to be an imperfect coping mechanism developed in response to emotional trauma. Napier’s business “paranha” (22), for example, has been “taking over electronics companies, and offering preferential deals to anyone who has business with RedWing” (97) as part of his plan to destroy his father’s company in revenge for the way his mother was treated:

My mother died because she couldn’t afford a life-saving operation. [...] She asked him for money and he told her that she had made her bed and now she could lie on it … but he meant die on it. [...] my father had no humanity. (97)

He may be an emotionally wounded warrior, like Susan Mallery’s Rafe, whose “[…]I folks died when I was four. There wasn’t anyone else. I became a ward of the state. ‘[...] He’d learned to take care of himself and never need anyone’” (183). Diana Palmer’s Tony, a “professional soldier” specialising “in counterterrorism” (41), was physically abused by his father, who also “started doing things to my little sister, when she was about eight. […] My mother caught him at it […] She stabbed that knife up to the hilt in his stomach, all the way to the heart. […] I never saw so much blood” (70-71). Then, “When my sister and I went into foster care, it was like the end of the world. Especially when they separated us. […] She killed herself” (57). As he acknowledges, “I’ve got a past that’s going to make it hard for any woman to live with me on a permanent basis” (74). In Lindsey’s Defy Not the Heart, the hero is an emotionally damaged, illegitimate, mercenary knight who has no home, but it was his burning ambition to correct that lack. It was his only goal, yet it was an all-consuming one.
This particular ambition, and his authoritarian attitude towards his followers, put him on the brink of transforming into a third type of Incomplete Phallus.

This type manifests the incompleteness of his Phallus by the way in which he assumes his patriarchal authority and family duties. Although he may work hard, be a (phallic) pillar of the community, and a devoted father or brother, he tends to be an authoritarian patriarch who is emotionally flawed in some way. Darcy is an example of this kind of hero, since he has both high social standing and wealth, his father is deceased and he therefore stands in loco parentis to his younger sister, and he is declared by one of his servants to be “the best landlord, and the best master [...] that ever lived” (Austen, Pride 270). This patriarch’s flaw, the evidence of his emotional lack, is his pride. Simon the Coldheart embodies, as far as that is possible for a human, the qualities of justice — “If it was a question of judgment or arbitration men found Simon relentlessly, mercilessly just” (Heyer 19) — and of omniscience:

‘[...] God alone knows what will come to this poor land!’

‘Nay, not God alone,’ the secretary said. ‘My lord knows also.’ (Heyer 6)

God-like in his own domain, Simon is omnipotent and one might say he “Suffer[st] the little children to come unto” (Mark 10:14) him because he “dost love children” (Heyer 114). In general, however, he seems incapable of feeling warmer emotions: “something he seemed to lack, for with all his assets and attainments, he was cold as stone, almost as though some humanising part of him had been left out in his fashioning” (130).

The Prism

The feminine equivalent of the Phallus is the socio-political body we shall term the Prism. The word appears in the rakish Marquis of Vidal’s mocking designation of Mary Challoner as “Miss Prunes and Prisms” (Heyer, Devil’s Cub 49), a phrase which characterises her as prim and disapproving. The term “Prism,” as used in this essay, also draws on Jayne Castle’s Orchid, set in a futuristic society in which many individuals are “talents” but only a few, including the heroine, are “prisms”:

talents [...] possessed a specific type of paranormal power that could be actively used. [...] The psychic energy that talents produced endowed them with a sixth sense. But unlike the other five senses, it could not be accessed except in brief, unpredictable, erratic bursts without the aid of a prism. [...] In them, paranormal energy took a different form. Prisms possessed the ability to focus the powers of a talent for an extended length of time. (3)

Even though a romance heroine’s Prism is initially incomplete, it nonetheless focuses her hero’s powers, enabling his Incomplete Phallus to fulfil its potential in a socially acceptable manner and become a Completed Phallus. The Prism embodies the Mother aspect of femininity and the Incomplete Prism’s motherliness tends to manifest itself in differing combinations of two different qualities. The first is nurturing tenderness, and the second is feistiness, which may also be thought of as an incomplete version of maternal authority and

the lioness aspect of the female personality [...] It’s acceptable for a woman, socially, to be outspoken and rude when defending her children — everyone knows not to get between a mother bear and her cub. (Wendell and Tan 59)

With the decline in the number of virgin heroines there may have been an increase in the proportion of heroines who are biological mothers, but childless heroines have long been given opportunities to display the nurturing aspect of their Prisms. Such heroines may often be found caring for children, either due to their jobs or because they have responsibility for younger siblings or abandoned infants. Slightly less blatant demonstrations of the Prism’s nurturing motherliness include expressions of love and care for animals or vulnerable friends. As Wendell and Tan declare in their humorous “ten commandments of heroine conduct” (36):

Thou shalt have a nurturing streak larger and warmer than the South China Sea. Thy desire for children shall be unquestioned [...] And shouldst thou choose to remain child-free, thou fear of nature, verily thou shouldst display thy nurturing streak with animals. (36)

Elizabeth Bennet’s mother is so incompetent a parent that Elizabeth attempts to provide her sisters with both maternal care and authoritative maternal guidance. When her older sister Jane is “very unwell” (78), it is Elizabeth, not their mother, who feels “really anxious” (Austen, Pride 78) and tends to her during the illness. Furthermore, “Elizabeth had frequently united with Jane in an endeavour to check the imprudence of Catherine and Lydia; but while they were supported by their mother’s indulgence, what chance could there be of improvement?” (241). In Cartland’s The Problems of Love, the heroine has taken on the role of mother: “I now have the family to look after, because my mother died five years ago” (11). On this heroine’s wedding day it also becomes apparent that in some respects she resembles the hero’s mother: “I was thinking in Church today when we were married that you were like the lilies that were arranged on the altar. I have never felt that about any other woman with the exception of my mother” (145). In some romances, the heroine may express motherly feelings towards the hero. Mary, the heroine of Heyer’s Devil’s Cub, recognises that

it was not a notorious Marquis with whom she had fallen in love; it was with the wild, sulky, unmanageable boy that she saw behind the rake.

‘I could manage him,’ she sighed. ‘Oh, but I could!’ (110)

Similarly Jessica sees “the lonely little boy in” Dain (Chase 269), and understands that he needs “love [...] he needed it far more than many, because, apparently, he hadn’t had so much as a whiff of it since he was a babe” (269). In some
people turning away from him, he wasn’t about to trust her with something as fragile as his heart. Not before he knew that the
reason behind this stance: “she knew. She read it in the pain in his eyes, in the set of his shoulders. After a lifetime of
she was a marriage-and-kids kind of woman and that he wasn’t a marriage-and-kids kind of guy” (158). Zara intuits the
clearly an Incomplete Phallus because he has no desire to become the head of a stable family unit: “Rafe had told her that
Mallery’s
The final transformation of the Incomplete Phallus may take place in a dramatic, emotionally charged scene. In Susan
and his deceased grandfather’s hatred, and “can believe in my childhood again” (376). His suffering lasts for 285 years, until he meets
If he had feelings of loneliness or uncertainty about his role in life, these will be resolved by the Incomplete Prism. Barbara
Simon 300) and so teaches Simon to love; and Josephine is “a beautiful, headstrong woman” (Jenkins 100), and so the “man who marries you
you will have to have patience, a strong mind and an even stronger wit” (100).

Completing the Phallus

The Incomplete Prism’s feistiness poses a challenge to the Incomplete Phallus’s authority and its nurturance gentles him,
bringing into focus his softer qualities. Many romances conclude with the hero “endowed with maternal qualities; he is not
simply the phallus but also the maternal phallus: the ideal mother and father” (Treacher 80). However, since the Father also
has nurturing qualities it should not be assumed that a Completed Phallus is an androgynous parental figure. The
transformed hero is “the ideal male, who is masculine and strong yet nurturant too” (Radway 97). In becoming a Completed
Phallus the hero suffers no loss of his culturally ascribed masculinity: he will still tend to exert control and power over others,
but he is more likely to take the heroine’s views into account, and protectiveness will take the place of jealousy and
aggression. Johanna Lindsey’s Ranulf, for example, becomes the Lord of Clydon and his military prowess ensures the safety
of Reina, her lands, and dependants. The Completed Phallus’s Prism-inspired paternal care for the wider community may
also be expressed politically. As the Marquis of Osminton declares:

I had never expected a woman to think seriously as you do on social and political questions, which have always
been left to men. [...] It will help and inspire me to make a greater effort in that direction than I have done in the past. (Cartland, Problems 144)

If he couldn’t before, he will now be able to express his feelings and often becomes an emotionally involved father. In
Chase’s Lord of Scoundrels, for example, Dain could initially only think of his illegitimate son as an “unspeakable thing” (293)
which “was as foul inwardly as it was hideous outwardly, [...] there was not a scrap of good it could have inherited from its
deprieved monster of a sire” (293-94). Dain’s own self-loathing has clearly affected his perception of the child who looks so
much like him, but Jessica forces him into a situation in which he cannot help but realise that his son is indeed “just like his
father, he needed someone [...] to accept him” (340). Jessica’s conviction that Dain is not “a monster, impossible to love”
(339) alters Dain’s perception of both himself and his son, and enables him to accept love for himself and show it to his child.
In much less traumatic circumstances the Marquis of Osminton, too, is reconciled to the idea of fatherhood and confesses that

Once, before I knew you, [...] I thought that children might disturb my well-organised life and perhaps be
destructive, but now, because I love you, my darling, I think of nothing more wonderful than to see you holding
my son in your arms. (Cartland, Problems 146)

If he had feelings of loneliness or uncertainty about his role in life, these will be resolved by the Incomplete Prism. Barbara
Samuel’s Galen is a faery cursed “to wander between the mortal and faerie realms, never to cross to either,” and so
experiences a “loneliness so vast ‘twould make stones cry” (Samuel 199). His suffering lasts for 285 years, until he meets
Moira who feels the allure of his MW, but is able to resist it in order to break the curse. As a heroine with a strong Incomplete
Prism, she “wanted to protect him, protect him from the despair she’d glimpsed on his face [...] protect him from having to
return to the lost world of his exile” (247). Clare Morgan may not have to break a faery curse, but she is “the one Marta
forsaw [...] who would heal her Nikki’s heart” (Putney 346). It is thanks to Clare that “Nicholas Davies, the Gypsy Earl of
Aberdare” (12), a man who says he doesn’t “give a damn about anyone or anything” (17), becomes involved in his local
community, is reconciled with an estranged best friend, finds himself emotionally “free” (377) from his dead wife’s betrayal
and his deceased grandfather’s hatred, and “can believe in my childhood again” (378).
The final transformation of the Incomplete Phallus may take place in a dramatic, emotionally charged scene. In Susan
Mallery’s The Sheikh & the Virgin Princess, Rafe is an emotionally-wounded warrior hero who has power and status but is
clearly an Incomplete Phallus because he has no desire to become the head of a stable family unit: “Rafe had told her that
she was a marriage-and-kids kind of woman and that he wasn’t a marriage-and-kids kind of guy” (158). Zara intuits the
reason behind this stance: “she knew. She read it in the pain in his eyes, in the set of his shoulders. After a lifetime of
people turning away from him, he wasn’t about to trust her with something as fragile as his heart. Not before he knew that
In a way that parallels the GHH’s regulation of the MW, the Incomplete Prism completes the Phallus, making him a happier, better man than he was without her: “till within these few Days, I knew not what it was to be happy. [...] I hope, from her good Example, [...] in time, to be half as good as my Tutoress” (Richardson 308).

**Completing the Prism**

As with Incomplete Phalluses, there is variation in what is lacking in Incomplete Prisms. Some extremely feisty Incomplete Prisms are described as having a boyish appearance or behaving manfully. Diana Mayo, for example, “looks like a boy in petticoats, a damned pretty boy” (Hull 2). It is said of Lady Margaret that she “fights at the head of her men” (Heyer, Simon 135) and when she “don[s] boy’s raiment” (196) in an attempt to escape from Simon she looks like “a slim stripping” (196) and declares “In man’s clothes I stand, and a man will I be!” (216). Feistiness taken to the point of manliness is depicted in these two novels as a characteristic of which the heroine must be broken, at least inssofar as she relates to the hero, so that she can become a Completed Prism. Diana Mayo’s sheik adopts particularly violent methods:

> with a greater arrogance and a determination stronger than her own Ahmed Ben Hassan had tamed her as he tamed the magnificent horses that he rode. He had been brutal and merciless, using no half measures, forcing her to obedience by sheer strength of will and compelling a complete submission. (Hull 226-27)

She comes to think of him as “A man of men. Monseigneur! Monseigneur! Mon maître et mon seigneur!” (245) and Lady Margaret murmurs “Stern, merciless conqueror! Simon, mon maître et mon seigneur!” (Heyer, Simon 299).

Another way in which heroines may demonstrate their feisty nature is by engaging in “Too Stupid To Live” (TSTL) behaviour. This type of behaviour was “first recognized […] at romance supersite All About Romance” (Wendell and Tan 31) but AAR’s Laurie Gold has clarified that the term:

> tstl, or too-stupid-to-live […] actually came from a very well-known author who wrote me about it in 1997 and asked to remain anonymous. A tstl heroine does things like going […] where specifically told not to by the hero and ends up endangering both with her foolishness.

In Diana Palmer’s *Silent Night Man*, the heroine knows that “some crazy person is trying to kill me!” (48), and she has been told that her apartment “is a death trap […] Easy entrance and exit right outside the door, no dead bolts, a perfect line-of-sight aim for anybody with a high-powered rifle with a scope” (48). Her safety can only be assured if she moves in with Tony, whose professional skills will enable him to act as her bodyguard. She does so, but after an argument with him she decides to prove to him that she “wasn’t a doormat. No way was she staying in here to listen to him cavorting with his girlfriend! No way!” (82). Unfortunately, and rather predictably, the hit man “was watching and followed her home” (93). Tony only just arrives in time to save her. TSTL behaviour on the part of the heroine thus gives the hero an opportunity to display his manly prowess, and may demonstrate the extent to which the heroine needs the protection of a Phallus.

Removed from the context of TSTL behaviour, and described in terms which are more flattering to the heroine, this protection could be thought of as a benefit which accrues to the heroine once she has taken indirect control of his Phallus: “his almost superhuman physical strength is now hers to command” (Phillips 58). Once the heroine of Lindsey’s *Defy Not the Heart* marries Ranulf, for example, she is safe from attacks by other males intent on usurping her wealth and power. Regardless of whether one views this outcome as evidence of the heroine’s lack or of her triumph, the end result is that the Completed Prism falls under the protection of the Completed Phallus.

Marriage to the Phallus may also enable a Prism to enter the socio-political elite or, “Put more polemically, popular romance tells the story of how the heroine gains access to money — to power — in patriarchal society” (Cohn 3). Millie, a woman who “came from a poor background, and lived on a meager budget” (Palmer 58), marries Tony, who is “rich” (62). In Richardson’s *Pamela* there is an even more marked elevation in the social status of the heroine: the landowner hero marries “his Mother’s Waiting-maid” (261) and “She was regularly visited by the principal Ladies in the Neighbourhood; who were fond of her Acquaintance” (499). In Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Bennet, though not noted for her intelligence in other matters, perceives the material benefits which will accrue to Elizabeth upon her marriage to Darcy: “how rich and how great you will be!” (386). By the end of *Devil’s Cub*, Mary, a commoner, is engaged to the Marquis of Vidal who is “one of the biggest prizes on the matrimonial market” (Heyer 14).

Increased access to money and power may give the Completed Prism greater opportunities for displaying the nurturing aspects of the Prism. After her marriage to the Earl of Aberdare, Clare may have had to give up

> being a full-time teacher, but [...] now that she had Nicholas’s deep purse to plunder, she was able to help people on a broader scale. There were no more hungry children in Penreith, and the valley was becoming the prosperous, happy place she had dreamed of. (Putney 379-80)

Similarly, whereas Richardson’s *Pamela* as an Incomplete Prism, having received a charitable gift, exclaimed “O how amiable a Thing is doing good! — It is all I envy great Folks for!” (18), once she has been transformed by marriage into a Completed Prism she is able to reward her new servants, take Mr. B.’s illegitimate child into their home, and display “a diffusive Charity to all worthy Objects within the Compass of their Knowledge” (499).

The conclusion of Richardson’s novel also reveals that Pamela “made her beloved Spouse happy in a numerous and hopeful Progeny” (499), and in the epilogue to *Thunder and Roses* we learn that Clare “was almost sure that the next Gypsy
and this section therefore provides only a very brief overview of just a few of the alternative models to be found within the
there are alternative models of how the six bodies of romance protagonists can interact, some of which also have a very
Incomplete Phallus, and an Incomplete Phallus completes an Incomplete Prism, has been present in the genre for centuries,
Although the alchemical model of relationships, in which a GHH regulates a MW, an Incomplete Prism focusses an
Some Alternative Models

The Alchemical Model of Relationships

In the model of romantic relationships outlined above, the processes of transformation are complex and involve
the protagonists’ individual bodies, a GHH and MW, and an Incomplete Phallus and Incomplete Prism. Frantz suggests that a
heroine who gives her breast milk to a supplicant hero is “appropriating patriarchal power for herself, but she is also then
genorous enough to return some to the hero, who continues to embody patriarchal power” (27). In such scenes, the
individual bodies of the protagonists perform actions which can be read as symbolising the changes that are occurring to
their socio-political bodies: the Incomplete Prism becomes a Completed Prism through her relationship with the Incomplete
Phallus, and does so in a way which renders him Completed too. The GHH tends to be the catalyst for the transformation,
because by ensuring that the MW desires union with this particular GHH, the hero’s Incomplete Phallus is brought into
contact with the heroine’s Incomplete Prism. The Incomplete Prism then transmutes the glitter of sexual attraction into the
goal of a socially sanctioned relationship between a Completed Prism and Completed Phallus. This, then, may be termed the
alchemical model of relationships and it has been summarised by Mr. B., who admits to Pamela that “after having been
long lost by the boisterous Winds of a more culpable Passion, I have now conquer’d it, and am not so much the Victim of
your Love, all charming as you are, as of your Virtue” (Richardson 341); or, put more succinctly, “her Person made me her Lover; but her Mind made her my Wife” (474). Here “your Love” and “her Person” seem to refer to what we might term the
heroine’s GHH, whereas her “Virtue” and her “Mind” are aspects of her Prism.

It is only because the heroine possesses both a particularly glittery GHH and an Incomplete Prism that she is able to have a
transformative effect on both the MW and the Incomplete Phallus; as Janice A. Radway observed with regard to Alaina
McGaren, the heroine of Kathleen Woodiwiss’s Ashes in the Wind “It is [...] the combination of her womanly sensuality and
mothering capacities that will magically remake a man incapable of expressing emotions or of admitting dependence” (127).
A GHH unaccompanied by an Incomplete Prism will be unable to effect the transformation of the Incomplete Phallus, as is
demonstrated in Diana Palmer’s Silent Night Man in which, as the heroine is aware, the hero has frequently found other
women sexually attractive and “the brassier they are, the better you like them” (50). These women, however, appear to have lacked Incomplete Prisms, for as the hero explains:

“Those glittery women are fine for a good time. You don’t plan a future around them.”

He was insinuating that they were fine for a one-night stand. (60)

The brassy glitter of these promiscuous women is very different from the special glitter of the heroine, who is “illuminated”
(59) and displays a special “radiance” (59) when in the presence of the hero. Her GHH is so closely associated with her
Incomplete Prism that, like Mr. B.’s Pamela, she “would never go to bed with a man she hadn’t married” (58), and both novels conclude with the hero and heroine safely united in matrimony. Cartland’s Syylla also has a glitter which is quite
clearly inextricable from her Prism: “she had a radiance in her face that was not of this world” (Love 87), and since for the
hero she “brought back dreams [...] of a woman who could be innocent and pure and inspire a man spiritually as well as
physically” (152), she may serve as a reminder to the reader that where some heroines are concerned, marriage is
definitely Holy Matrimony.

The initial fear that many heroes experience in response to their overwhelming desire for the heroine can therefore be
understood not solely in sexual terms (as a fear of a monogamy caused by a desire so strong and so specific for the GHH
that the MW can barely feel attraction towards any other woman), but also as a fear of the gentling which will occur as his
Incomplete Phallus is focussed by the Incomplete Prism. The way in which the heroine’s GHH binds the hero to her, enabling the
Incomplete Prism and Incomplete Phallus to act on each other and become Completed, has been described by Cook as an
bargain: his love for her sex. [...] He finds pleasure in the confession of love because love is something he has
learned to deny and fear, often as the result of a terrible experience in earlier life. She finds pleasure in the
confession of sex because she can give freely to the hero what he has brought about in her and not fear the ruin of
her identity. The formula of the bargain creates a kind of symmetry, a pretence of equality. The father of desire
meets the mother of love and they exchange gifts. Each makes the other complete in a fantasy of total union.

But the bargain is also, on the heroine’s part, about attaching desire to social convention, to propriety, to marriage.
It is part of her traditional role that she should represent virtue. [...] Her function is to [...] reassure us that, in the
end, desire and the law are compatible. (157)[7]

There can be no better representative of the “traditional role” than Pamela, whose would-be suitor is so thoroughly
reformed by his interactions with her Prism that he becomes “the best and fondest of Husbands; and, after her Example,
became remarkable for Piety, Virtue, and all the Social Duties of a Man and a Christian” (Richardson 499).

Some Alternative Models

Although the alchemical model of relationships, in which a GHH regulates a MW, an Incomplete Prism focusses an
Incomplete Phallus, and an Incomplete Phallus completes an Incomplete Prism, has been present in the genre for centuries,
there are alternative models of how the six bodies of romance protagonists can interact, some of which also have a very
long literary history. It would be impossible to offer a comprehensive survey of all of these models in the space available,
and this section therefore provides only a very brief overview of just a few of the alternative models to be found within the
One of these alternative models offers the reader a hero who, at the start of the novel, already embodies masculine perfection. His MW needs no regulation and almost all he requires in order to become a Completed Phallus is a wife. Marriage is necessary in order to comply with the demands of heteronormativity: as Fulk tells the young Simon, “a man must take a wife unto himself” (Heyer, Simon 115), or, as Austen somewhat satirically observes, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Pride 51). Among these near-perfect heroes are Frances Burney’s Lord Orville, who is depicted “as a fully formed paragon of male manners from his first appearance” (Hamilton 429), and Austen’s Mr. Knightley. A more recent example may be found in Heyer’s The Nonesuch.

Sir Waldo Hawkridge, the novel’s hero, is known by this nickname which means perfection! […]

“A paragon, certainly.” […]

‘Sir Waldo is first in consequence with the ton, and of the first style of elegance, besides being very handsome, and hugely wealthy!’ (26)

Sir Waldo, who “commanded as much liking as admiration” (169), is also a philanthropist and a responsible and caring role model to his younger cousin. This kind of hero is “the more conventional, sensitive, mature and competent husband-lover” who “has great strength and stability and seems particularly solid and trustworthy” (Mussell 119-20). He can be found in the novels of Betty Neels, which Jay Dixon recalls reading “to fill my need for a knowledgeable and calm father-figure” (35). As Mussell observes, such heroes appeal […] because of their implicit stability, their self-knowledge, and the status they can confer through marriage. If this figure seems more mature and sensitive than other men, and more attractive and intelligent, he offers an assurance of sexual fidelity because he knows his own mind in choosing the heroine. […] His strength and power derive from self-assurance, self-control, and uncompromising moral principles. (124)

Since his MW is already perfectly regulated, and he already manifests the full range of qualities required to be a Completed Phallus, the heroine’s GHH and Prism function solely to attract him and assure him of her suitability, but there is no need for them to effect a major transformation of his personality. She, however, may be taught by him, as is the case in Austen’s Emma, or enjoy the benefits which, as described above, generally accrue to a Completed Prism. In The Nonesuch, for example, Ancilla Trent is saved from life as a governess and restored to the social circle from which her father’s death had distanced her. In addition, Sir Waldo’s philanthropy will give her ample opportunity to manifest the charitable, caring aspects of the Completed Prism, particularly as his “mother […] will welcome you with open arms, and will very likely egg you on to bully me into starting an asylum for female orphans” (275).

Many modern “inspirational” romances feature an explicitly Christian version of this near-perfect type of hero. His possession of a MW may be implied via descriptions of his individual body: “The heroes’ physical stature and good looks reinforce their virility and attractiveness to heroines” (Neal 149). In Cheryl St. John’s The Preacher’s Wife, for example, Samuel Hart is “broad-shouldered” (13) and although “it was inappropriate that she should notice his well-defined cheekbones or his recently shaved, firm, square chin, […] she had. Even his deep, rich voice arrested her attention” (15). The use of the word “inappropriate” suggests that Josie, the heroine, is not merely cataloguing the features of Samuel’s individual body: despite his status as “a widower, a father and a preacher” (109) he has “a fluid agility and masculine grace” (109) — in other words a MW — which “she couldn’t help but appreciate” (109). That the ideal Christian romance hero’s MW is pre-regulated and incapable of succumbing to uncontrollable lust is made very clear in the guidelines provided by some publishers. In Steeple Hill’s Love Inspired romances, for example, “Any physical interactions (i.e., kissing, hugging) should emphasize emotional tenderness rather than sexual desire or sensuality” (eHarlequin). Similarly, the guidelines for Barbour Publishing’s Heartsong Presents stipulate that:

Physical tension between characters should not be overdone. Do not be overly descriptive when describing how characters feel in a particular romantic moment, for example, kissing, embracing, and so on. It has been our belief from day one that we can tell a great love story without going into excessive physical detail. People can easily imagine the desires and tensions between a couple who are blossoming into love. Kisses are fine (no tongues or heights of arousal, please).

One consequence of the sexual restraint demonstrated by this near-perfect Christian romance hero is that he poses a challenge to some aspects of the “male sexual drive discourse” so often present in the mainstream romance genre’s depiction of heroes’ socio-sexual bodies. In addition to having a well-regulated MW he retains all the rugged individualism, toughness, and power of secular heroes but combines this traditional masculinity with gentleness, patience, and attention to female needs, from snuggling to child-rearing. (Barrett-Fox 97)

He, like the near-perfect secular hero, is thus in possession of a Phallus which can become fully Completed without the need for major personality changes. However, despite the strong similarities between the near-perfect Christian hero and his secular counterpart, there is one very significant difference between the processes by which their Phalluses, and the Prisms of their heroines, become Completed: “The transformation that seems ‘magical’ in secular romances is explained by divinely sparked spiritual growth in their evangelical counterparts” (Neal 5). Returning again to Samuel Hart, we find that he has an almost perfect Phallus, “He represented everything that was good and perfect about fathers and husbands” (St. John 157), but he does occasionally make mistakes and “Whenever he overlooked the obvious, whenever he let pride get in the way of what was best, God graciously pointed his foolishness out to him” (209).

The “beta” hero presents a challenge to the gender roles underlying all of the previous models because his Phallus is never Completed: he is never transformed into an authoritative, patriarchal figure. He is “More playful and relaxed.” “More of the
“boy (or man) next door” type, “Considerate of his heroine’s feelings and opinions” and “The sort of man that a reader can actually imagine meeting, falling in love with, marrying — and being able to live with!” (Walker 100). Jayne Ann Krentz scornfully describes him as a “neurotic wimp” and “a sensitive, understanding, right-thinking ‘modern’ man who is part therapist, part best friend, and thoroughly tamed from the start” (109). It is indeed true that “you don’t get much of a challenge for a heroine” (109) from such a hero, if that challenge is understood in terms of demonstrating the power of her Prism and GHH. He brings into question the role of the heroine in the alchemical model because he tends not to need her to tame, gentle, domesticate or regulate his bodies.

Although Krentz attributes the beta hero’s appearance in romance to “a wave of young editors fresh out of East Coast colleges who arrived in New York to take up their first positions in publishing” (107), he is not a recent invention. Edward Ferrars in Austen’s Sense and Sensibility (1811) is too diffident to do justice to himself; but when his natural shyness was overcome, his behaviour gave every indication of an open affectionate heart […] All his wishes centered in domestic comfort and the quiet of private life. (49)

Like the more recent “beta” heroes, he has been found wanting by some readers:

There is a strong tendency among critics to disparage Edward Ferrars as romantic hero. […] I suspect that Edward’s gender dissonance has stymied even professional readers. […] Edward […] lacks aggression altogether: for the most part he is retiring, he is passive, and he is as backward a lover as ladies are enjoined to be. […] As to society, Edward lacks ambition and the desire to be somebody in the world […] Against the grain of the affluent gentry’s model for men, but consonantly with the female model, he aspires to nothing higher than a happy domestic life. (Perkins 5-6)

This “beta” hero is favourably contrasted with an “uncommonly handsome” (75) rake, as is also the case in Heyer’s Cotillon, in which she “was teasing her fans […] by making ineffective Freddy the hero rather than handsome Jack Westruther” (Aiken Hodge 91). Jack is “a tall man” (Heyer, Cotillon 110) with “powerful thighs” (110), whereas Freddy is “a slender young gentleman, of average height and graceful carriage” (36), and this smaller, less physically powerful individual body is matched by a less attractive socio-sexual body and a very socially acceptable but non-dominant socio-political body:

He was neither witty nor handsome; his disposition was retiring; and although he might be seen at any social gathering, he never (except by the excellence of his tailoring) drew attention to himself […] he was too inarticulate to pay charming compliments, and had never been known to indulge in the mildest flirtation. But a numerous circle of male acquaintances held him in considerable affection, and with the ladies he was a prime favourite. The most sought-after beauty was pleased to stand up with so graceful a dancer; any lady desirous of redecorating her drawing-room was anxious for his advice. (108-09)

Many “beta” heroes are neither shy nor sexually inexperienced, but as a type the “beta” hero, because of his lack of a Completed Phallus and the fact that he often possesses character traits more often associated with femininity, challenges the way in which particular groups of traits (such as those which are characteristic of the Prism) tend to be assigned only to individuals of one biological sex.

Although the Phallus is firmly associated with masculinity and the Prism with femininity, psychologists have long acknowledged that no individual is exclusively imbued with qualities ascribed to only one gender:

In every human being, Freud […] remarks, “pure masculinity or femininity is not to be found either in a psychological or a biological sense. Every individual on the contrary displays a mixture.” […] It is now generally accepted […] that masculine and feminine principles are not inherent polarities […]. Still, […] there exists a recurrent cultural tendency to distinguish and to polarize gender roles. (Gilmour 214)

Sexual, social, and political power are expressed in highly gendered ways when the MW and Phallus are strongly associated with heroes and their male individual bodies, while the GHH and Prism are strongly associated with heroines and their female individual bodies.

Elizabeth Bevarly’s Dr Mummy challenges such gender roles, but unlike romances featuring “beta” heroes, it does so by reversing the biological sex of the characters who, by the end of the novel, possess the Prism and Phallus. Perhaps in order to neutralise the threat to the hero’s masculinity which might result from this departure from the usual configuration of the six bodies, the transformation is not revealed until the epilogue, long after the hero’s “appealingly rugged, startlingly handsome […] And big. Really, really big” (24) individual body has been established as being in conformity with the masculine ideal. The relationship between Nick and Claire’s socio-sexual bodies also conforms to romance conventions: “Nick’s hot, unyielding body before her, and the sense of his overwhelming possession thrilled her in a way that nothing else could” (117). The transformations undergone by their socio-political bodies, however, are anything but conventional. Nick begins the novel as an Incomplete Phallus: law enforcement is a typically Phallic profession and he works as a “narcotics detective” (15). Years before the start of the novel he had wanted to marry Claire and become a Completed Phallus:

He’d wanted them to have a half-dozen kids, just as his folks had done. He’d […] wanted Claire to stay at home with the kids, had wanted to work himself to death to take care of the family financially. […] And Claire just couldn’t see that happening. She hadn’t wanted to give birth to and care for six children — or even one child. She hadn’t wanted to be a homemaker — she’d wanted to be a doctor. (48)

Nick’s dream of having a large family with Claire is achievable, but only by abandoning traditional gender roles. By the end of the novel he has been transformed into a Completed Prism, a homemaking, stay-at-home parent who is “in charge of the bake sale this year” (184) and certain that “the job I have now is so much more important than the one I had before” (185). Claire, initially an Incomplete Phallus who had resisted parenthood, dedicated herself to her highly paid professional job, and who “had always had difficulty revealing any honest emotion” (56), becomes a Completed Phallus as the family’s only wage-
Romances featuring protagonists of the same sex may also offer new dynamics between, and depictions of, their six bodies. Phyllis M. Betz states that in a lesbian romance “The very fact that two women have determined to pursue a passionate relationship contravenes traditional social norms and expectations” (105), and as Paulina Palmer has observed, “by placing characters who identify as lesbian in a heterosexist frame and highlighting the tensions this generates, they alert the reader to the ideological limitations of the romance genre and the social codes which it inscribes” (203). Michelle Martin’s Pembroke Park, for example, opens as Lady Joanna Sinclair is walking and daydreaming about romances, and so it is while “half expecting to find Ivanhoe” (2) that she first encounters Lady Diana March and “instead of a knight in shining armor there was a fair damsel […] She was […] dressed in brown turkish trousers” (2). Lady Diana’s individual body is female, but her socio-political body has traditionally masculine attributes, as indicated by her attire and the comparison with Ivanhoe. Her “excellent birth […] her friends at the highest level of English society, and her vast fortune” (164-65), as well as the role she plays in rescuing Joanna from familial oppression, mark her as the possessor of an Incomplete Phallus. As the more sexually experienced of the two, her socio-sexual body can be thought of as a MW. For her part Joanna, who despite having been married has “never been in the throes of a Grand Passion” (111), has a GHH and as the mother of a young daughter and a woman in need of protection, she is clearly an Incomplete Prism whose love will heal Diana’s emotional wounds. In many respects, then, Pembroke Park tells the traditional story of how a GHH and Incomplete Prism work together to gentle and complete a MW and Incomplete Phallus, but because that MW and Incomplete Phallus belong to a person with a biologically female individual body, Diana “flagrantly sidestep[s] every rule of social decorum” (4).

Conclusion

Romance novels, because they deal so explicitly with sexuality and men’s and women’s roles within sexual relationships, are cultural agents (primarily for women) for the transmission of gender ideologies. Gender ideologies, in turn, “construct men’s and women’s sexualities” (Blackwood 240). Although we have stressed the degree of continuity that exists in the depiction of the alchemical model of heterosexual romantic relationships, the genre has responded to changes in social attitudes towards sexuality and gender roles. In addition, despite the fact that all romances feature protagonists with three bodies (individual, social, political) there are some romances which offer alternatives to the pairing of a female protagonist’s individual body, GHH, and Prism with a male protagonist’s individual body, MW, and Phallus. Such romances provide alternative “guiding or admonitory images” (Gilmour 208) regarding ideal masculinity or femininity. Due to the diversity that exists within the genre, the many bodies of romance heroes and heroines may be sites of reinforcement of, or of resistance to, enculturated sexualities and gender ideologies.

Works Cited

Primary Texts

There's no need to remind him every 6 months. #Masculinity. 1 reply 0 retweets 4 likes. Reply.

On Apr 6 @peterdaou tweeted: "What are your thoughts on #masculinity a.." - read what others are saying and join the conversation.  If a man says he'll do something, he'll do it.

Centuries the era of 'the great masculine renunciation,' a period of increasing modesty and simplicity in middle- and upper-class men's apparel was not unknown in the medieval period, but, "In the Middle Ages, the norms regarding clothes were based on the nearly timeless precept that differentiations in social structure should be recognized by means of dress, hair and beard. However, at the same time – thanks to Christianity – clothes were endowed with a number of moral-symbolic interpretations [...] controversy was caused on the one hand by the fashions prevalent at royal and aristocratic courts, and on the other by the symbolic attire of the ascetic religious movements, which opposed in equal measure the opulence of the Church and of the laity" (Klaniczay 52). It is only in much more recent centuries that simple fashions for men have been widely adopted by the aristocracy: "Clothing historians have labeled the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the era of 'the great masculine renunciation,' a period of increasing modesty and simplicity in middle- and upper-class men's dress" (Kuchta 54).

Unusually, this description is given from the point of view of a gay male, Theodric, who also observes the hero's "tight, exquisitely curved arse" (47).

Regis acknowledges that "In romance novels from the last quarter of the twentieth century marriage is not necessary as long as it is clear that heroine and hero will end up together" (37-38).

Rape may also function, as Kate Saunders has observed in her introduction to The Sheik, as a way to ensure the heroine "is morally off the hook, in an era when female sexual desire on its own was shameful and improper" (vi).

Another indication of his near omniscience is that "No matter how softly one might creep up to him, he always knew of the minor character's "physical body lay beneath the lush grass in the fenced-in cemetery behind the tiny white church. His spirit had gone on to be with the Lord" (7).

[1] For a more detailed analysis of the genre's history, see Pamela Regis's A Natural History of the Romance Novel
[2] Simplicity in men's apparel was not unknown in the medieval period but, "In the Middle Ages, the norms regarding clothes were based on the nearly timeless precept that differentiations in social structure should be recognized by means of dress, hair and beard. However, at the same time – thanks to Christianity – clothes were endowed with a number of moral-symbolic interpretations [...] controversy was caused on the one hand by the fashions prevalent at royal and aristocratic courts, and on the other by the symbolic attire of the ascetic religious movements, which opposed in equal measure the opulence of the Church and of the laity" (Klaniczay 52). It is only in much more recent centuries that simple fashions for men have been widely adopted by the aristocracy: "Clothing historians have labeled the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the era of 'the great masculine renunciation,' a period of increasing modesty and simplicity in middle- and upper-class men's dress" (Kuchta 54).
[3] Unusually, this description is given from the point of view of a gay male, Theodric, who also observes the hero's "tight, exquisitely curved arse" (47).
[4] Regis acknowledges that "In romance novels from the last quarter of the twentieth century marriage is not necessary as long as it is clear that heroine and hero will end up together" (37-38).
[5] Rape may also function, as Kate Saunders has observed in her introduction to The Sheik, as a way to ensure the heroine "is morally off the hook, in an era when female sexual desire on its own was shameful and improper" (vi).
[6] Another indication of his near omniscience is that "No matter how softly one might creep up to him, he always knew of the approach, and needed not to see who it was who drew near" (111).
[7] With regard to the "pretense of equality," Cohn suggests that "the belief that a fair bargain has been struck between two parties when one offers rank and wealth and the other, moral improvement is the kind of pious wish-fulfillment called on to mask social relations that are far less benign" (140).
[8] Another significant difference between Christian romances and many secular romances is that characters in Christian romances have a fourth, spiritual, body. The existence of a spiritual body is explicitly mentioned in Cheryl St. John's The Preacher's Wife, in which the reader is informed that a minor character's "physical body lay beneath the lush grass in the fenced-in cemetery behind the tiny white church. His spirit had gone on to be with the Lord" (7).