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Defending the Bodice Ripper

Dora Abigail Gardner
Eastern Kentucky University

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BY

DORA ABIGAIL GARDNER

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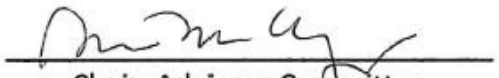

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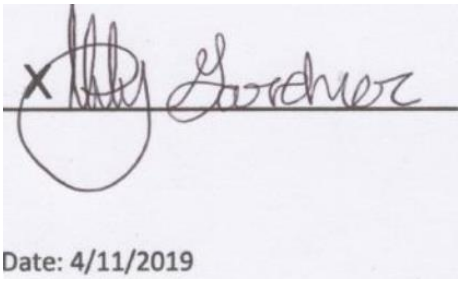

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DORA ABIGAIL GARDNER

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ABSTRACT

Romance novels have always occupied a strange state of limbo in the literary world. Decried by feminists, critics, and by the general populace, what could a whole genre of books have done to be so disparaged, arguably more than any other genre? Books written by women, for women, about women should be hailed as revolutionary in a historically male dominated publishing industry; from a more cynical point of view, an industry that pumps out hundreds of books and brings in millions of dollars every year is surely doing something right and deserves more than a cursory look. Yet they can't seem to shake some strange taint that clings to them. The term "bodice-ripper" has long been used in a derogatory fashion to describe the popular romance genre dating back to the 1970s. A closer examination of these books shows that such hatred is far from justified. Said examination will reveal that so called bodice-rippers are an important part of not only the history of the popular romance genre but serve as feminist and cultural artifacts that can help modern readers and scholars to better understand the position and feelings of women in the 70s and 80s.

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I. Introduction

In 1928, before a crowd of Cambridge students, Virginia Woolf brought up an important question: where, among literature, are the women writers? Beyond the likes of George Eliot or Jane Austen, rather modern examples in the course of things, why were there so few women writing? Over the decades, this question has continued to be asked, leading to a concerted effort to rediscover lost or forgotten authors as well as to promote modern women writers. Yet even at the time of Virginia Woolf's talk, there was a niche where women authors were writing woman-centric stories for an almost exclusively female audience. Since the time of Jane Austen that niche has expanded and bloomed into a full on publishing industry that today brings in over a billion dollars every year. Despite this, that genre has failed over and over again to attract serious literary attention from academics, critics, and the general population alike. It seems like the only ones willing to come to the defense of these novels are the writers and readers themselves.

Romance novels have always occupied a strange state of limbo in the literary world. Decried by feminists as supporting the patriarchy, by critics at large as mindless fluff at best, and by the general populace as little more than release for sexually frustrated women--what could a whole genre of books have done to be so disparaged, arguably more than any other genre? Books written by women, for women, about women should be hailed as revolutionary in a historically male dominated publishing industry; from a more cynical point of view, an industry that pumps out hundreds of books and brings in millions of dollars every year is surely doing something right in our

capitalistic society and deserves more than a cursory look. Yet they can't seem to shake some strange taint that clings to them, has clung to them, for decades. The term "bodice-ripper," among others, has long been used in a derogatory fashion to describe the popular romance genre dating back to the 1970s; indeed, that is where the vitriol against the genre came into its own. A closer examination of these books shows that such hatred is far from justified or at the very least is worryingly uninformed. Said examination will reveal that so called bodice-rippers are an important part of not only the history of the popular romance genre but serve as feminist and cultural artifacts that can help modern readers and scholars to better understand the position and feelings of women in the 70s and 80s.

What Is A Bodice Ripper?

To this day, there is a good amount of confusion about what bodice-rippers truly were. Before they can be discussed academically, it is important to properly define the genre of which they are a subset. The Romance Writers of America (RWA) states that there are only two basic elements that need to be included in order for a work to be called a romance: there must be a central love story and there must be a happy ending ("About Romance Fiction"). A more academic approach is applied by Pamelia Regis in her *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* where she not only defines the genre as "a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines" but also identifies eight separate plot points that every romance novel must contain: a *definition of society*, a *meeting* of the hero and heroine, their *attraction* to one another, the *barrier* that keeps them apart, the *point*

of ritual death where it seems impossible that everything will work out, the *recognition* of what will overcome the barrier between them, the *declaration* of love, and their *betrothal* which may be a literal wedding or simply a promise that the hero and heroine will remain together even once the novel ends (14). Whether one is looking at the genre casually or academically, these definitions are very loose and can easily incorporate any number of characters, sub-plots, and settings. This has led to the creation of nearly every type of sub-genre imaginable, including the bodice-ripper. The distinction between these sub-genres, indeed even an awareness of their existence, is something that has crippled many critical attempts to broadly survey the genre ever since its inception. The term "bodice-ripper" is still bandied about to describe romance novels, despite the fact that it only properly can be applied to a very specific subset of works.

Before the 1970s, the vast majority of popular romance novels were formula fiction; "formula" here means a subsection of the broader term "genre," one that contains all of the essential elements but is narrower in scope. The constriction on pre-1970s formula romance novels came in the form of tipsheets created by publishers that gave authors strict guidelines to follow (Regis 23). The most famous of these publishers in the United States, to the point that their name is still synonymous with the entire genre in many people's eyes, was Harlequin. These slim works, approximately 187 pages, had a fairly consistent formula that they followed which involved a "young, inexperienced...woman" who meets a "handsome, strong, experienced [man] older than herself by ten or fifteen years" (Modleski 36). They were

published on a monthly basis and rarely contained anything more graphic than an impassioned kiss as the heroine follows a rather cookie-cutter “Cinderella Story” (Hubbard 171). Largely inoffensive pieces of fiction, Harlequins and other books published along the same lines were designed to be read quickly and set aside just in time for the next monthly installment.

Critics of the time, and continuing into the present day, often lumped all romance novels together under the assumption that they were Harlequins or something very similar in form and style (Thurston “Popular Historical Romance” 36; Fallon 51). Ann Snitow, writing in 1979, assumed that the romance fiction boom in America was based on the type of watered down stories found in Harlequins (141). She, along with others, struggled to grasp why there was suddenly a renewed interest in these novels. By failing to understand that not every romance novel was formula fiction, just as not every rectangle is a square, there was no way Snitow could have accurately come to a conclusion to her confusion; indeed, her article “Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different”, ended with a proverbial shrug and wound up suggesting that the main reason for the appeal of these novels was the sexual gratification women gained from reading them. She drew parallels between language used in Harlequins, such as describing the man as “hard” both physically and emotionally, and subconscious erotic arousal in women (158). While this may be true for some readers, by failing to look more closely at the actual types of mass published romance novels that were being produced at the time, Snitow missed a whole section of books that didn’t need to rely on subconscious suggestion of sex to titillate readers.

There was also no answer in her studies to suggest why, exactly, the genre had received an explosion of popularity in the 1970s. Harlequin, after all, had been publishing the same sort of stories since 1949. Why did their sales, along with many other publishing companies, experience a 400% growth since 1976 (142)? Fellow contemporary critics such as Faust, Hubbard, Cohn, and Modleski all either focused solely on Harlequins or mistakenly assumed that all romance novels followed the same laid out formula. Others, like Castagna and Radespiel, Fredman and Turner, recognized that the bodice-ripper was its own entity but judged them harshly out of hand without reading more than one or two books by one or two authors. Only a few critics of the time, such as Thurston, Ellis, and Fallon, saw these novels as revolutionary and as a positive move forward for women. Fallon speculates that her fellow critics were unwilling to give the novels a closer examination because the genre revealed something about the "desires of women and about the true nature of their place in a supposedly egalitarian society" (52). Whether critics wanted to acknowledge it or not, however, an entirely new form of literature had emerged onto the scene, one so radically different as to be the spark that would change the popular romance industry permanently both in how it worked internally and how it was viewed externally.

Defining the Term

The commonly accepted definition of a "bodice ripper" is a book written in the 1970s and early 1980s in which the "mainstay" of the story was "the hero's rape of the virginal heroine who ultimately fell for him by the end of the novel… along with fighting, kidnapping, and the predictable storyline of a domineering man, winning the

heart of a passive young woman" (Boniface; Higgs). It was first coined in 1979 by the *New York Times,* who stressed to its readers that the phrase was not their own invention but was commonly used "in the trade," although there is little evidence to support the claim (Lyons and Selinger 92). Many romance readers and authors today consider this term and definition to be derogatory, "collapsing a genre uniquely responsive to the changing fortunes of American women into a stereotype" (Fairchild).

A more complex understanding of the "bodice ripper" acknowledges that the first book to earn that moniker was Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower,* published in 1972; the second followed shortly after in Rosemary Rogers's *Sweet, Savage Love* (Faircloth). The story of these books being discovered has passed into publishing legend even outside of the romance sphere. Nancy Coffey was a senior editor at Avon who, in searching for an original stand alone work, came across Woodiwiss's hefty manuscript. Unable to put it down, she decided that "if I would keep reading this story, other women would too" and passed it on to be published. A couple of years later she would do the same for Rogers's book, firmly setting the trend in motion as both novels performed beyond Avon's wildest dreams, selling millions of copies (Market 47). By 1981, *Publishers Weekly* could clearly define three subsets of the "erotic historical," as these books came to be known: the "sensual historical", embodied by *The Flame and the Flower,* in which the heroine remains faithful to the hero despite his raping her and there is exclusive sex depicted between them*;* the "romantic historical", which is similar but has more historical research and accuracy; and, finally, the "bodice-ripper", which they define as being one in which the heroine

has explicit sex with the hero and other male characters, as well as abuse/rape and no guarantee that the heroine will end up with the hero (Lyons and Selinger 98; Ramsdell 114). However, the term bodice-ripper soon overtook the entire "erotic historical" subgenre in the popular mindset. Thurston defined bodice-rippers in 1981 as stories with "complex storylines and character development… fast-paced action and frequent… sexual activity" at an average of 418 pages in length ("Popular Historical Romance" 37).

Rise of the Bodice Ripper

Why now, of all times, did these types of books rise to prominence in the cultural eye and popularity on reader's shelves? Bodice-rippers, like most works of literature, were a product of and a response to their times; even some contemporary critics realized that the changes in romance genre were a reflection of the changes in women's roles (Ellis 20). To properly discuss them, the cultural soup from whence they emerged needs to be at least partially defined. Full discussion of the 70s and 80s is beyond the purview of this paper, yet there are a few key issues that influenced the dramatic shift within the popular romance genre; namely, the rise of second wave feminism, changing women's rights, and shifting views of female sexuality.

It shouldn't be a surprise that the romance novel genre came into its own during the 70s and 80s—after all, that was "just as the second wave of the feminist movement was cresting" (Fairchild). By the 1960s, seeds had been sown for what would become known as the "new women's movement" or "sexual revolution", in no small part because of the introduction of the birth control pill which would become an

"instrument of equalization" among the sexes (Thurston *Romance Revolution* 16-17). No longer could only men experience the pleasures of sex without worry of pregnancy--with this burden lifted, women began to feel more free to explore their own sexuality outside of the confines of having to create the next generation. *Our Bodies, Ourselves,* published in 1966, was the first work available to women that provided accurate and detailed information about not only reproduction, but rape, venereal disease, and more (Thurston *Romance Revolution* 17). While there were those who condemned the work as pornographic, it stood as a pillar in the fight for women's equal rights--namely, it put into the average woman's hands information about her own body, as well as planting the idea in her mind that she had a *right* to know such information.

In conjunction with the rise of second wave feminism came the call for changes to be made in terms of the legal rights of women. This included the ratification of the Equal Rights Act by Congress in 1972 (Thurston *Romance Revolution* 19), as well as changes in charges against men accused of rape. Carol Thurston notes that "by mid-1970s the number of prosecutions of men charged with rape began to increase dramatically, [and] rape crisis centers were being established all over the country" (*Romance Revolution* 21). This further empowered women by giving them a way to seek help and legal actions against sexual violence and abuse, as well as providing vocabulary for them to speak about their experiences.

Women were more in control of not only their bodies, but the world around them, more control than had possibly ever been afforded women before. Unfortunately this didn't mean that the world around them judged them any less

harshly. As Market notes, “younger women and educated middle-aged females” were facing a rather radical change in value systems during the 1970s from the ones they had been raised with (61). Women were still under close scrutiny and, considering the heavy social implications of the word “feminism,” would have struggled to feel comfortable openly reading anything labeled as such. For these women, revolution had to come in a more subtle form. Perhaps from somewhere as innocuous as supermarket shelves, where books with enticing covers of handsome men and the beautiful women who appeared to obsess them beckoned. While most wrote these off as silly little romance novels, there was a change occurring between those pages as well. Women were learning to embrace their independence in ways they had never been able to before. Bodice-rippers were a softer way to enter the conversation that feminists were attacking head on; they helped readers come to terms with the reculturation of sex (Faust 155-156). These novels offered every woman the ability to explore things such as passion and sex in a safe space.

The Flame and the Flower is “widely considered to be the first sexually explicit romance novel,” written at a time when “the old sexual mores were unraveling faster and faster” (Faircloth). Few mass-marketed books were being published that so comfortably explored sex, and certainly even fewer exploring it from the woman’s point of view. Despite both being called romance novels, this was a new breed of beast from the Harlequin serials of yore. Unlike the rather anemic serial romance novels, these “bodice-rippers” were thick, hefty books with “complex story lines and character development… [and] fast paced action” (Thurston “Popular Historical Romances” 37)

that often clocked in well over four hundred pages. They were written with a passion and an acknowledgement that escapist fantasies for women could involve high stakes and daring adventures as well--things often found in other genres more widely considered to be male territory. These were "feisty women of integrity fighting for independence, equality and respect in a 'man's world'… accepted as individuals… fighters… not ashamed to seek satisfaction of those needs" (Thurston "Popular Historical Romances" 41). For their readers, being able to vicariously explore this kind of freedom and respect, as well as the more intimate side of love, would have been not only exhilarating but liberating as well. Even while more radical feminists staged protests and wrote scathing literature about the subjugation of women by the patriarchy, a more quiet revolution was being set in motion in homes across America. The two most commonly discussed novels of this sub-genre are *The Flame and the Flower* and *Sweet Savage Love,* often mentioned by contemporary and current critics. This is in large part because they were the first of their kind. While this is a good first step in opening the door towards looking at the bodice-ripper in a more objective light, the focus on these two novels overlooks literally hundreds of other works, many of which enjoyed similar levels of popularity during their time. This paper will seek to explore themes across several novels that were considered by contemporary critics to be "bodice-rippers," specifically drawing from lists of works compiled by Alice K. Turner in "The Tempestuous, Tumultuous, Turbulent, Torrid, and Terribly Profitable World of Paperback Passion," published in 1978 of best sellers, as well as Carol Thurston and Barbara Doscher's article "Supermarket Erotica: Bodice-Busters Put

Romance Myths to Bed" in 1982. Unfortunately most of these books are out of print and so had to be read according to availability. Still, at least four books from each list were found with no repetition of authors so as to cast a wider net. Those consulted for this paper are *Love's Tender Fury* by Jennifer Wilde (1976), *Mavreen* by Claire Lorrimer (1976), *Moonstruck Madness* by Laurie McBain (1977), and *This Loving Torment* by Valerie Sherwood (1977) from Turner's list; *Courtly Love* by Lynn Bartlett (1979), *Queen of a Lonely Country* by Megan Castell (1980), *Women of Eden* by Marilyn Harris (1980), and *Skye O'Malley* by Bertrice Small (1980) from Thurston and Doscher's article. For the sake of organization, this paper will look closely at these bodice-rippers according to the organization of the term itself: "bodice" being a discussion of the importance of the historical aspect of these books, "ripper" examining more closely the sex contained therein.

Putting "Her" Story in History

When Coffey first brought *The Flame and The Flower* to her boss, Peter Meyer, for publishing, his objections were less about it being a "woman's book" and more about it being a historical novel (Fallon 53). In the publishing industry, historical romances hadn't been successes on the market for over thirty years (54). Woodiwiss's novel, then, was revolutionary not only in its inclusion of sex, as most critics focus on, but also because it brought back to fame a sub-genre of romance that had laid dormant for three decades. Since then, the genre of historical romance has expanded and flourished far beyond the bodice-ripper days of the 70s and 80s, for the same reason that to this day readers and viewers are entranced with historical dramas. In part,

readers “yearn to escape…to a time when life was simpler, better defined, more exciting, and more romantic” (Ramsdell 116). That is, back to a time before social media led us to believe that everyone else has a better life than us, before global news coverage revealed the horrors unfolding daily across the world--admittedly, a more romanticized version of history, but history nonetheless. The books read for this paper are set in a diverse collection of time periods, which include but aren’t limited to a decade after the Norman invasion of 1066 (*Courtly Love*), eighteenth century America (*Love’s Tender Fury*), in the aftermath of the Battle of Culloden (*Moonstruck Madness*), and, of course, the ever popular eighteenth/nineteenth century England (*Mavreen*). What made these books feel even more authentic was that many historical romances, both then and now, contain a good amount of research done by the author (it could be argued that Georgette Heyer began the trend with her in depth study of Regency England culture). Both Megan Castell and Claire Lorrimer cite the historical non-fiction they used in writing their novels, while Jennifer Wilde sets her characters firmly into the historic timeline by having them respond to and interact with various events, such as the Boston Tea Party (287). For the women of the 70s, in a time when everything was changing rapidly, there must have been some comfort to look to the stable past where roles were better defined. To stop the observation there, however, would be only scratching the surface of a deeper trend that went beyond a nostalgia for yesteryear.

Talking About Now, Then

While the majority of "bodice-rippers" are set in the past, they deal with very modern issues. As Thurston and Doscher so succinctly put it, "historic settings seem to give authors a chance to send messages about contemporary women's issues, and also to imply that the drive for individual dignity and respect has motivated women for hundreds of years" (50). Not only could these books transport a reader back in time, but they could give modern women the sense that their struggle wasn't one that simply sprang out of nowhere. Mentions of feminism and feminist ideas abound throughout the books read for this essay. One example found in nearly every story was the heroine's actively railing against the tight constraints society put around them."What precisely did God intend for young women to do? Why can't I have a cause and goals as you do? Why must I sit docilely and wait for someone's permission to live my life?" Mary's cry is one that certainly applied to the 1870s, but just as easily could have been echoed without alteration by a woman in the 1970s (*Women of Eden* 70). Skye laments that a woman's only role is to be a "wife or a nun" while wistfully hoping that things would someday be different (*Skye O'Malley* 27). Marietta finds that even an education can't save her from a "hard, unfeeling world for a woman alone" (*Love's Tender Fury* 23). In *Courtly Love,* Serena feels a sharp "sense of injustice at being dominated by men and restricted because [she is] a woman" (270). A young Mavreen sums this all up nicely: "Girls are not as free as boys are" (*Mavreen* 42).

Heroines in these novels weren't shy about speaking up when they felt wronged. They engaged in conversations, often with the hero himself, expressing their

distress in ways that wouldn't have been acceptable in a truly historic setting. Elizabeth, in *Women of Eden,* lectures John when he grumbles that he can never understand what women want. "What have you always wanted [John]? Freedom, dignity, the right to pursue your own destiny, the opportunity to make those decisions that affect and influence your spirit and soul and body." She draws the conclusion that the main difference between men and women in their wants is their physiology, but that physical differences between the sexes isn't significant in any "fundamental or profound way" (507). When challenged that all she really wants is to be a man, Serena in *Courtly Love* retorts that "Perhaps in some respects you are right. I would have others respect me for myself not merely because I have a passable face or because my body induces lust in some. I have a mind--I think and feel the same as does a man" (115). She further hammers the point home by pointing out that "a horse is treated with more respect [than a woman]--at least it has a use, a value, which, it appears, a woman does not… Am I only a womb with attached limbs?" (116). Cerridwen responds cooley when approached by Rhys that "there have always been women who ruled themselves. Men forced them to be goddesses, saints, or witches… [And] have never known whether to worship or destroy them, and so have done both" (*Queen of a Lonely Country* 181). This last quote especially speaks to the idea that the struggle for equality by women has been going on since the beginning of recorded history.

Marriage

With the advent of the women's movement there was a retaliation against marriage and the systematic oppression of wives that could be traced back throughout

history. Feminists railed against the institution, effectively throwing the baby out with the bathwater in their attempt to right past wrongs. This, combined with other cultural movements at the time in America, can be linked with the fact that by 1973 two out of every ten marriages were ending in divorce (Thurston "The Romance Revolution" 20). Understandably, many women were made uncomfortable by the rapidly shifting social mores. Bodice-rippers offered a comfortable middle-ground for them, one where marriage wasn't demonized but instead became the vehicle for the ultimate expression of equal and powerful love. Heroines and heroes alike in these novels refused to be unequally yoked, as perfectly exemplified by *Courtly Love.* Here both protagonists fought against being used: Serena bluntly informs her husband that "A woman has as much pride, as much honor as a man, but she is treated as if she had none!" (116) while Gyles fumes that he won't be treated "as if he were a stallion put out to stud, his only worth to be found in his body" (39). Beyond flipping the traditional narrative by having the hero be uncomfortable about being forced into marriage simply to provide an heir, *Courtly Love* also explored the challenges both parties faced in trying to accept one another as equals. In the end their marriage turns from being a forced union to a loving one because hero and heroine come to realize as well as accept the strengths and flaws in their partner. Bodice-rippers were radical in suggesting that marriage could be more than what the popular culture portrayed; more than a wife meekly sitting around the home while the husband went out to do all the important things. Marriage, according to these books, should be an exercise in trust and equality as well as love.

There were still other perks to a historical setting. While a woman might feel judged for thinking about her sexuality in a modern perspective--indeed, what would separate that from the pornography that was so publicly decried?--the space of hundreds of years given by a romance novel set in the past allowed some relief of any "remaining guilt about the desire to be freer sexually" (Fallon 59). Of course these were highly romanticized versions of the past, but no different from other types of fiction. They reflected "changing social values in [1970-80s] society" that had been "imposed on these historical settings" (Thurston "Popular Historical Romances" 43).

The Issue of Sex

The sexual revolution didn't mean that suddenly everyone became comfortable discussing sex and related topics overnight. The current cultural climate towards such things should be a clear indicator of this; we still are more comfortable discussing violence than sex in popular media. Because "bodice-rippers" had explicitly sexual scenes, though they would at most take up six or seven pages of a five hundred page novel, they were dismissed by male critics and largely attacked by their female counterparts. This would be similar to looking at a painting and focusing on one square inch of detail to describe the piece as a whole. For doing this, an art critic would be shunned, while a literary critic, when speaking of romances, is cheered on. Beatrice Faust, writing in 1980, boiled down the novels to being "stories with rape" in her discussion of them (146) even going so far as to consign the books to "pornotopia" (148) and claiming that "the plot exists mainly to justify sexual occurrences" (152).

Pornography for Women

Snitow wasn't the only critic who drew a direct connection between these novels and pornography. Ann Douglas wrote an article in *The New Republic* in 1980 that bore a very similar title, "Soft-Porn Culture: Punishing the Liberated Woman." In it she defined romance novels as "porn softened to fit the needs of female emotionality" (27) and full of "increasingly anti-feminist content" (26). She expressed "serious concern for their women readers," who were supporting the patriarchy by "co-sponser[ing] male fantasies about themselves" (28). This strong language of outrage against the romance genre was not uncommon nor was the infantilizing of their readers by assuming they were being brainwashed in some way. The common assumption was that "bodice-rippers" and other sexually-explicit romance novels were the reading material of sexually frustrated and oppressed women who were missing something from their lives (Market 59). They were viewed as little more than "escapist fantasies" and/or "accessories to masturbation" (Faust 152). In the culture of the 1970s, any mention of sex, especially mutually enjoyable sex, was considered pornographic. The term "pornography" is a tricky one in our modern sphere, to say the least; in the context that these critics used it they obviously intended it to be a derogatory remark, a boiled down and unflattering comment about women and sex. What most critics, both past and current, fail to understand is the difference between sex for lust's sake and sex for love's sake. Publications such as *Playboy* were widely available for men, showcasing graphic pictures, and in the mind of many, romance novels became lumped in with them. *Playboy* itself saw fit to make fun of "bodice-

rippers" when, in a rather ironic twist, Catherine Fredman wrote that popular romance fiction was "trash fiction" that could show men about "how women would like to think of the sexual act" (73). She did admit that "there's more to the world of trash than the stereotypical bodice-ripper", yet accompanying the article was a guide of "How to Rip a Bodice" complete with pictures of a woman acting shocked initially at having her clothes ripped off, then caught up in a passionate kiss with her ravisher (75).

In typical pornography, the goal is the fulfillment of some sexual desire usually in a crude setting with little, if any, emotional connection between the people engaged in the act. "Pornography is sex without love; in romance, love is center stage" (Williamson 126). However, "sex in romantic fiction…is anything but pornographic…There is little sex for the sake of sex, even in bodice-rippers" (Market 59). The sex scenes, while they may provide some source of sexual release for female readers, serve a greater purpose: the deepening and strengthening (or, in some cases, weakening) of the relationship between the hero and heroine. Unlike in pornography, sex is not the end goal of the narrative, but rather an integral part of the story. Like it or not, sex is a fact of life--bodice rippers not only accepted this fact but also asserted that mutual pleasure was a necessary aspect. Men and women alike were required to be equal in all things including their pleasure, turning the women from objects into participants.

Love vs Lust

Luther asserts that "romance is one of the few places where a woman is a *subject* in sex, rather than an *object.*" This is as true today in the modern romance

novel as it was in the bodice-rippers of yore. Heroines weren't afraid to speak up against men who tried to use them only as a means of sexual release, while heroes found themselves overwhelmed with a desire to have more than a simple physical connection. Charity, heroine of *This Loving Torment,* vows after several misadventures that "I will let no man hold me in his arms for his own purposes… If need be, I will dissemble, I will flirt and entice [to] gain my own ends. But I will give myself only for love" (255). While this may have been an unrealistic point of view to have historically, given that the novel was set in 1686 and women had little autonomy when it came to determining their social position, Charity is obviously speaking from the perspective of a more modern woman. Serena in *Courtly Love* further expresses that there is a difference between sex and love even in marriage. Forced into matrimony, she states that her future husband, Lord Gyles, "is not wedding my mind, only my body… [He] will never possess me totally" (20). Some heroines flipped the script entirely, turning men into the sexual object, as Marietta does in *Love's Tender Fury.* Knowing that crossing the ocean aboard a slave ship means she will most likely come to serious harm, Marietta finds Jack, a sailor to whom she trades sexual favors for safety. Over time she grew fond of him and even enjoyed him for the physical aspects of his body, but never did she confuse this relationship for one of love. "In truth, I had merely used him" she mused to herself at a later point in the story (46). Later she realized that love itself could be further divided into types when becoming intimate with Jeff Rawlins (notably not the main hero); she loves him, but it's not the same type of love that she feels/felt for the main hero. Still, though, sex with him was different than it had been with the

men who forcibly violated her; “this was love, not sex, love expressed in a manner far more poignant and meaningful than words could have expressed” (223).

The heroes were often less clear about the distinctions between love and lust, but still expressed a knowledge that something was different. In *Women of Eden,* Burke’s first encounter with Mary leaves him dazed; he finds himself lost in her singing, thinking to himself that with her “the act of love would not be carnal sin but rather an ethereal flight to paradise” (16). Similarly, Niall is perplexed by his reaction towards the titular heroine in *Skye O’Malley* when she “affected him as no female had ever done… He desperately wanted to bed the wench, but there was a great deal more to it than that, something he had never felt before” (20). Not all heroes were lost, however. Gerard, speaking to Mavreen, tells her that “to share love to its fullest is the closest of all unions between man and woman” (*Mavreen* 14).

The Elephant in the Room

Despite being books written for women, by women, about women, these books were widely despised for keeping women oppressed. While bodice-rippers occupied the same “cultural space as the feminist movement,” it seemed to “represent its polar opposite” (Luther). One of the biggest controversies about these novels was the trope of having the heroine experience at least one rape. Faust claimed that rape in these novels was used to “ameliorate the tension” women felt over their “primal guilt” in seeking to enjoy their sexuality (150). Similarly, Castagna and Radespiel claimed that bodice-rippers “[glorify] male aggression as an intensifier of female sexual pleasure… [and are] a form of fiction which portrays rape as romantic

and rapists as heroes" (299). If a romance is to be labeled as feminist, the sex in the book "should be mutually pleasurable or that its failure to be [so] should be presented as an issue in the novel, rather than the natural state of things" (Luther). This exact paradigm is reflected in so called bodice-rippers. A study by Thurston reveals that in 52 "erotic historical novels" published between 1972-1981, 54% of heroines are raped in the course of the novel. Yet only in 18.5% of the stories is it portrayed as something sexual—in the rest, it's displayed as an act of assault (Lyons and Selinger 92; Thurston and Doscher 50; Fallon 54). Still, it is easy to understand why any discussion of rape would cause concern in an increasingly sensitive society, especially if no critic bothered to read the actual books as many detractors failed to do. It's also important to note that the term "rape" didn't carry the same weight in the early 1970s as it does now; there was little, if any, language or vocabulary available to discuss it. As incomprehensible as it may seem to modern readers, the subject of rape wasn't widely discussed in America until the late 1970s (Market 62).At the same time that society began to take rape seriously, romance novels were already moving away from the trope all together. They had leaped into the fray before lawmakers and commentators, discussing a very real concern that women had in a way women could understand. Rather than glorifying or validating rape, these novels were often openly critical about the way society treats victims of rape as well as provided realistic portrayals of the trauma faced after the assault.

Rape as Violence

In the eight books read for this paper, there is never once a time when rape is "welcomed" (Castagna and Radespiel 299), nor did they "offer the rapist/hero as the only possible solution: he may abuse you, but he does it out of 'love,' and he can protect you from men whose abuse is loveless and more horrible than his" (Castagna and Radespiel 320). In none of the books read for this paper was rape ever presented as anything other than a violation, and a violent one at that. Some of the scenes are less detailed than others, yet there are a few that allowed the reader to feel some sense of the trauma that the heroine was undergoing. The language is not romanticized and the fact that this is wholly against the woman's will is made explicit. The following scene from *The Women of Eden,* in which Mary is set upon and gang raped, is presented in full in order to show the linguistic and emotional horror expressed by the writer towards the act:

> As hands commenced pulling back the layers of her garments, as she felt the coolness of dirt beneath her bare legs, as a head with grizzled beard and whiskers lowered itself over her, as something of indiscriminate size and force wedged itself between her legs, as the double pressure on her body crushed her arms bound beneath her, she calmly gathered the few remaining fragments of her soul and took them to a deeper level. In the last moments of consciousness she was aware only of the rhythmic rocking motions of her body, the fire burning deeper inside her, the awareness of what was happening rendering her brain useless (256).

Similar language is found throughout the novels read for this paper. Charity describes her rape as "savage" and causing her "revulsion" even as the act itself leaves her feeling "weak with pain and fear and a humiliation deeper than anything she had ever known" (*This Loving Torment* 69). There is nothing romantic in this act. There is

nothing that might fuel women's emotions in order to feel pleasure, as some critics presumed was the point of these scenes. In these cases and in others, bodice-rippers drew a clear line between the act of rape and the act of sex, much less that of making love.

These novels also made it clear that just because a man and women were married did not mean that rape couldn't happen between them, which was a revolutionary idea in and of itself. The first stirrings of marital rape laws weren't discussed in America until the late 1970s (Hasday 1376). As Skye notes in her eponymous novel, "resistance was useless. She was his wife, his chattel. She obeyed and was once against subject to pain and degradation" (*Skye O'Malley* 53). In Harlequin novels of yore, marriage was seen as the end goal and the ultimate happy ending, which was a point of contention with feminist critics. While bodice-rippers did still end with the hero and heroine together, they often weren't shy to show that marriage wasn't necessarily the fairy tale ending presented in most Harlequins. In *Courtly Love,* Serena informs her husband, angrily and sarcastically, that "I have forgotten, there can be no rape between husband and wife, can there? Holy vows were spoken over us, so you may do with me whatever you wish" (300). With *Skye O'Malley* being published in 1980 and *Courtly Love* in 1979, these books were commenting directly on the times, their authors adding their own voices to a nation-wide debate taking place in courtrooms.

Treatment of Victims

Many bodice-rippers were also highly critical of the way that society treated victims of sexual assault, a projection back in time of the current societal values. In *The Women of Eden,* the examining doctor proclaims to a policeman that "It was a most nonviolent rape" (262). He waves away any concerns with the disturbingly still relevant sentiment of 'she was asking for it' by being too independent and headstrong (263). Charity Woodstock in *This Loving Torment* laments that "no one even cared that she had been raped" (18) and is only further dismayed when later her rapist is believed when he proclaims false innocence (37).

Trauma of Rape

"Bodice-rippers" weren't content to comment only on rape and the disappointing way society treated its victims. Though a few of the earlier ones were worryingly quick to wave away the complications of sexual assault (see *Skye O'Malley* or *Love's Tender Fury* to name two key examples), by approximately eight years after the publication of *The Flame and the Flower* the genre had evolved enough to acknowledge that not only was rape a violent attack, it was one that left scars both physical and mental upon the victim. In Bartlett's *Courtly Love* Serena suffers from shock after a near-rape (279), while Harris's *Women of Eden* took a much deeper dive into the psyche of a traumatized woman. Mary believes that she is "ugly and soiled" after the rape, praying that she can find rest from "the hideous odor that always accompanied her nightmare, the sensations which still descended without warning and left her terrified" (292). Interestingly, the 1970s weren't a time of revolution only

for women, but from people suffering from mental illness as well. The first antipsychotics were being discovered alongside new treatments for and acceptance of disorders of the mind. 1980, the year of *Women of Eden*'s publication, was the same year as the term post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was first accepted by the American Psychiatric Association (Kolk 19). Mary's symptoms, of having vivid nightmares of her attack and finding herself assaulted by memories of it seemingly at random, could be taken directly from the diagnostic pages of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. In this bodice-ripper from 1980, there is a surprisingly modern open acknowledgement of the lasting trauma of rape; of how even fellow rape victims were timid to come forward to comfort Mary (258); of how the nightmares couldn't be erased simply by the love of the hero, especially in moments of sexual arousal (428); of how the scars of the "violent attack" might fade over time but would never fully leave her, even "in spite of the richness of Burke's love for her" (492).

All of these separate points combine to reflect an important shift in the portrayal of rape in literature, which coincided with the changing cultural views of sexual violence at the time. Victims then, as they are now, were "saddled with the stigma of being tainted" (Higgs). The bodice-ripper heroine showed readers that their lives and future relationships didn't need to be ruined by rape, that they were in fact still capable of loving and of being loved. Again, this is not to say that inclusion of rape isn't problematic, but these novels were a product of the times long before the "Me, Too" movement; one could argue that without the early attention brought to rape--

imperfect as it may be--brought about during this time there may very well have never been such a movement. To state that readers could only remain interested in these stories because they "agree with the idea of rape and abuse as love" is to discredit them (Castagna and Radespiel 322). There is no doubt that this is a violent, despicable act which drives a wedge between the main characters that takes over two hundred pages to resolve. These are not stories about rape, as Faust suggested, but are instead about the "overcoming" of it (Thurston "Popular Historical Romances" 45). Despite their pasts, heroines and heroes were able to grow beyond trauma to find happiness in mutual pleasure and love with one another. Women may have read stories with rape in them because for a time that was all that was available--and, since it was a trope that worked, writers and publishers continued to push it--but by the late 1980s readers were pushing back, voting with their feet as it were by seeking out novels that didn't leave as much room for question. As the cultural distinction between rape and sex became clearer, romance novels did what they do best and evolved with the times, leaving behind the more problematic aspects of the bodice-rippers while carrying forward the positive.

In the End…

With the value of hindsight, it can now be seen that books such as these were filling a gap between the "two impossible paradigms" of conservatism and sexual revolution. As Faircloth points out, "the sexual revolution was a process, not a coup, and the attitude that good girls kept their legs crossed tight didn't disappear overnight." For second-wave feminists to assume that revolution could only look one

way instead of another was a critical flaw on their part. Kinsale suggests that "feminism may have taken something of a false step with many women when the more zealous constituents of the movement insisted upon placing 'femaleness' in direct opposition to 'maleness'... A large number of women simply never did require a devaluation of male characteristics. What they savor instead is the freedom to expand into all the aspects, feminine and masculine, of their own being" (40). The language of romance novels more easily helped women understand the transition and that it was okay to begin to explore their own sexuality. These novels sought to find a "hybrid solution" between the "first feminists" who tried to force men to conform to "a single standard that formerly applied to women" and the "New Left" who tried to "force women to adopt the standards that suited men" (Faust 153). Woodiwiss, the mother of "bodice-rippers", openly disagreed with the ERA and women's movement, citing that "I enjoy being a woman, and it seems like some liberated women want to take over the positions of men, and I don't really have any desire to." She did admit that "I guess I'm liberated in the fact that I'm willful and I have a mind of my own and I'm not really put down by what men think" (Fairchild). Her quieter form of unintentional liberalization would be one of the driving forces that pushed the women of America forward. They were not simply a "soft option for women who prefer not to be aware of the problems that feminists [were] confronting head on" (Faust 156), but rather "agents of social change" (Thurston "Popular Historical Romances" 44).

Looking at the historical impact of bodice-rippers is all well and good, but they are also useful as artifacts of their time that help modern readers to understand the

struggles and feelings of women of that time period. Romance author Sarah Maclean argues that "romances have shifted with society since the 1972, and those shifts map to the different waves of feminism" (Faust). By following the trends of the romance community, one can easily see the current discussions being reflected in the popular culture, especially as they pertain to women. Nowhere is this more true than with the "bodice-rippers", which began being published at a time when the cultural discussion of sex was changing. To continue to discount these books is to continue to discount the millions of women who devoured them.

Progressive Doesn't Mean Flawless

While this paper has sought to argue that so called bodice-rippers were in many ways ahead of their time, they were also very much a product *of* their time and many have not aged well into the twenty first century. There is no arguing that there are aspects of the novels that are problematic, to say the least. While Castagna and Radespiel's article does make some worrying generalizations about bodice-rippers based largely on their analysis of a single author and single series, they accurately point out that Rosemary Rogers' "Steve and Ginny" trilogy, of which *Sweet Savage Love* is the first, handles the perpetual rape of the heroine with disturbing flippancy (307). Steve abuses Ginny mentally, emotionally, and physically throughout the novels, apparently never reaching the realization of many other bodice-ripper heroes that these things don't gel with the concept of love. Rather than the usual pet names, he persists in calling Ginny "bitch," a "slut," and a "whore" while teasing her about the idea of his raping her (310). This kind of insensitivity to problematic tropes

unfortunately isn't uncommon. These include violence, other than rape, against women by male characters (including the heroes), violence against children, blatant racism, incest, torture, and a worrying tendency for authors to show in graphic detail just how evil their villains can be. Because rape in these stories is so unfortunately common, the only way many writers seem to know how to emphasize just how bad the bad guys are is to ramp up the atrocities. In *Skye O'Malley*, for example, the main antagonist for the latter half of the book not only rapes the main character vaginally and anally but goes on to rape a child and then attempts to encourage a dog to follow suit. Mercifully the last is stopped just before beastiality could be added to the above list of grievances, yet the fact that such a scene exists in one of these novels points to a growing need of sensationalism within the community. *Skye O'Malley* was written in 1980, after the crest of the bodice-ripper wave had already crashed and readers were moving away from that particular sub-genre. Romance novels were already evolving, changing with the times and the women who read them. Many fans read Loretta Chase's excellent *Lord of Scoundrels,* in which the heroine responds to the hero's flippant disregard for her reputation in his sexual advances towards her by shooting him in the arm, as a sign that the era of the bodice-ripper was well and truly over (Faircloth). In today's romance novels, if the writer themselves doesn't catch problematic tropes their readers are quick to do so. Within the sphere of romances, discussions about rape, dubious consent, and rape fantasies continue to be talked about with a freedom that isn't found in mainstream media, including the fact that these issues are more complex than they might seem on the surface. Far from burying

the past, modern readers and critics alike need to embrace bodice-rippers, warts and all, as being significant milestones in literature and the women's movement alike.

The women of these books were a reflection of the women of the times, struggling to overcome seemingly impossible situations in order to find happiness for themselves in all aspects of life: mentally, spiritually, physically, and sexually. That they found this happiness in marriage to a man who not only loved them but respected them is in no way anti-feminist. These heroines chose to love and be lived in equality with, rather than servitude to, their husbands. Far from seeing this independent streak as a bad thing and trying to train it out of them, their husbands valued them all the more for it. Mavreen expresses this frankly in her self-titled novel, stating for the reader that the reason she loved Gerard was because, unlike all other men, he didn't seek to "dominate her proud spirit, to bring about her surrender to a will other than her own" (Lorrimer 633). Far from oppressing women, these books were a way for them to see they deserved more not only in life but in love as well. The quiet feminist language of equality spoke out loudly to women from places often associated with their oppression, such as grocery store checkouts and other stores frequented by housewives and mothers. The groundswell that would push women forward came not only from radical literature passed around on college campuses, but from unassuming paperbacks with gaudy covers that only a woman would be foolish enough to read, much less take seriously. And take it seriously, they did.

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