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Diana Neely

Eastern Kentucky University, [diana\\_neely3@mymail.eku.edu](mailto:diana_neely3@mymail.eku.edu)

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EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

Who Says Women Can't Love and Empower?: How Representations of Women Have  
Progressed in Medical Romance Fiction

Honors Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the

Requirements of HON 420

Spring 2023

By

Diana Neely

Faculty Mentor

Dr. Susan Kroeg

Department of English

Who Says Women Can't Love and Empower?: How Representations of Women Have  
Progressed in Medical Romance Fiction

Diana Neely

Dr. Susan Kroeg

Department of English

**Abstract**

Throughout history, the representation of women in medical romance fiction has changed with the times. While an individual assumption can be pulled from different time periods, a chronological analysis of *Doctor Zay*, *Promise the Doctor*, *A Princess in Theory*, and *The Love Hypothesis* was conducted to show the changes of women's empowerment, but also how women's empowerment has stayed the same through the medical romance genre. A historical analysis was done to incorporate background information on what was going on during those times along with bridging the gap between the medical romance novels.

*Keywords:* Women's empowerment, medical romance novels, honors thesis, women representation, Harlequin romance

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## **Introduction**

Romance fiction has been around for a long time and has grown to be quite a popular genre. As a result, much scholarship has been devoted to the impact of romance novels, and the various ways they could be understood. However, there has been a lack of attention given to a specific subgenre of romance fiction: medical romance. Because of that, this paper will analyze four different medical romance novels in chronological order: *Doctor Zay*, *Promise the Doctor*, *A Princess in Theory*, and *The Love Hypothesis*. These four novels give clear examples for readers of how women in medical related fields can overcome challenges.

From a close reading of the four books analyzed in this paper, as well as the scholarship surrounding medical romance fiction, it is clear to see there is an obvious progression of the context and even style of romance novels between the 1880s and now. Even with these changes, however, it is clear that throughout time the medical romance genre has been concerned with empowering women. *Doctor Zay* does this through its gender reversal that showed women they could work at that time. *Promise the Doctor* demonstrates a very real situation and the struggles women went through in the nursing field. The modern medical romance fictions, *A Princess in Theory* and *The Love Hypothesis*, give clear examples of the challenges modern women face

being minorities in the STEM field. While they all are written at different times, with different styles and subject material, these books come together in their pursuit of empowering women.

### **The Romance Genre**

Before exploring how women have dealt with and overcome challenges in medical romance fiction, it is essential to understand what the romance genre entails. Many people broaden the idea of the romance novel by claiming that the romance novel is any book that gives the protagonist a particular love interest. Basically, any book that has a romantic element is stereotypically classified as a “romance” novel. This could not be further from the truth, and believing the stereotype makes it hard to understand what a romance novel is. One source that defines the romance novel is *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, by Pamela Regis. For Regis, the romance novel, “is a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (Regis 14). By using this definition, the scope of what is considered a romance novel becomes more narrowed. The definition indicates that the main focus of the novel is romance and not any side plot that may take place. This means that, if Regis is to be believed, the most important aspect of the romance novel is that it is singularly focused on romance, rather than being a book that has more than that going on.

It is also important to note that in Regis’ work when she refers to the hero and heroine, she refers to the heterosexual relationship between man and woman. This is not to say that the narrative elements mentioned do not apply to a homosexual relationship; however, for the scope of this research, only heterosexual relationships will be covered.

The relationship between hero and heroine is not the only distinctive element of romance novels. In the book, Regis goes into further depth on the elements of a romance novel that must

be considered, specifically eight narrative elements. The eight elements are a definition of society, meeting, attraction, barrier, point of ritual death, recognition, declaration, and betrothal. The romance novel's definition of society is, "always corrupt, that the romance novel will reform" (14). Regis goes on to further explain that the society is either "incomplete, superannuated, or corrupt" (31). This can be anything from the corrupted mafia genre to the oppressive society the heroine may experience in her career. Either way, the book must contain some form of a corrupt society that can be reformed to be considered a romance novel. As for the meeting, it is simply the interaction of the heroine and the hero. Regis mentions how some romance novels hint at potential conflict, but it is not always known. This meeting can be seen in a flashback, an accidental run in, or even an intentional pursuit. The importance is that the heroine and hero meet.

The third element is the attraction between the heroine and the hero. Regis describes the attraction as "based on a combination of sexual chemistry, friendship, shared goals or feelings, society's expectations, and economic issues" (33). The attraction is typically seen throughout the novel and is what helps overcome the barriers experienced by the heroine and hero. While modern novels depict the attraction in a more sexual way, it is still evident among more historical romance novels. The use of friendship or shared goals is what can be used to indicate the attraction between heroine and hero beyond physical attraction.

Next is the barrier, which Regis describes as "the reasons that this heroine and hero cannot marry" (32). She goes on to explain that this can be either an external or internal barrier that is keeping the two parties apart. The barrier is what the heroine and hero are trying to overcome throughout the novel. The barrier can be a heroine/hero's self-esteem, work conflict,



societal pressures, or past trauma. There are more, but these are just some of the examples that may be seen in the romance genre.

After barriers are the point of ritual death, which Regis says, “marks the moment in the narrative when the union between heroine and hero, the hoped-for resolution, seems absolutely impossible, when it seems that the barrier will remain more substantial than ever” (35). While the point of ritual death may literally be the death of some character (besides the hero and heroine) or sickness of someone, it can come about in other aspects of romance novels. Some examples of the point of ritual death could be potential harassment the heroine experiences, betrayal from the hero, or even miscommunication of love for another. The point of ritual death is like the peak of the barrier where it seems impossible to overcome within the heroine's eyes.

The next theme Regis points out, recognition, is the information that will help overcome the barrier (35). It is typically the heroine that recognizes this and can take the steps to overcome the barriers put in place. This can be seen as her overcoming her mental barriers or realizing her trust in the hero of the novel. With the recognition in place and barriers gone, the hero and heroine can move into the declaration of the romance novel.

After this, usually as the plot of the romance novel thickens, is the heroine/hero's declaration of love for each other. Speaking to this, Regis says, “The scene or scenes in which the hero declares his love for the heroine, and the heroine her love for the hero, can occur anywhere in the narrative” (34). The declaration is typically the verbal acknowledgment of the mutual love between the heroine and the hero. Regis goes on to explain that the placement of the declaration can influence the plot of the romance novel. It can make the novel a “love at first sight” situation or even a progression of growing love among the characters.

The betrothal is the final element of a romance novel, which Regis describes as “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” (37). The betrothal at the very least ends with an engagement or some clear indication that the heroine and hero end up together. There is not necessarily a proposal or wedding scene in the book, but there is an indication of a permanent unification between the heroine and the hero. Regis clarifies that romance novels are supposed to end in marriage or some kind of promise of marriage. Only with this, in Regis’ eyes, can the romance novel be truly romantic. She says, “Courtship couples become betrothed— that is the action that leads to the universally endorsed happy ending... This shift from a statement of theme love (‘love relationship’) to a designation of narrative elements makes the identification of romance novels straightforward” (22). Even Monica Harris, who wrote “Guide to the Evolving Genres of Women’s Fiction,” agreed with the notion that the heroine and hero should end up together. She said, “Its most important element is that the hero and heroine wind up happily ever after together. The thrill for the readers is that they can follow the couple through their ups and downs to a final destination where the two profess their true love for each other” (14).

Regis’s definition of romance novels may also help understand why women enjoy reading them. *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance* edited by Jayne Ann Krentz can give a perspective on why women may enjoy reading romance novels. Within the book, Susan Elizabeth Phillips wrote a section titled “The Romance and Empowerment of Women.” Phillips does make the point that romance novels are entertaining and provide a sense of escape from reality, but she says that romance novels provide more than just an escape. Phillips says, “Instead, the fantasy these novels offered me was one of command and control over the harum sacrum events of my life—a fantasy of female

empowerment” (Phillips 55). Romance novels can provide women with a sense of control in a world where so much can be against them. By having a heroine who is physically weaker than a dominating hero but is still able to “tame” him shows that her intelligence, courage, and love can humanize him. While not every romance novel depicts this exact image of hero and heroine, it still gives a basic understanding as to why women may find enjoyment and satisfaction from reading the romance genre.

Building on this, “There are Six Bodies in This Relationship: An Anthropological Approach to the Romance Genre” by Laura Vivanco and Kyra Kramer is able to support the claims made by Phillips about the heroine being able to “tame” the hero. The article discusses the different “bodies” that are represented within the romance genre. They argue that there are six bodies: the physical body, social body, and socio-sexual (political) body of the man and woman in the relationship. With the socio-sexual body, Vivanco and Kramer mention how the hero is unable to resist the heroine. It says that the heroine possesses, “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’” (Vivanco and Kramer 9). This goes back to what Phillips said about the sense of women’s empowerment evident with the heroine being able to humanize the hero and fall in love.

Knowing that women are the main audience for romance novels, one can look at “Why Women Read Fiction: The Stories of Our Lives” by Valerie Grace Derbyshire to help explain why this is true. Derbyshire reviews Helen Taylor’s book, *Why Women Read Fiction: The Stories of Our Lives*, and while she may disagree with certain aspects of Taylor’s work Derbyshire does say that it is a great piece for people to read. Taylor said that the main idea

behind why women read romance fiction was that “each work of fiction takes a different shape in the hands of its specific reader, and satisfies our need for escape, comfort, solace, or inspiration in different circumstances” (qtd. in Derbyshire 2). This shows that women read fiction for different reasons, but each one provides some type of value, whether that be comfort or inspiration. Many people assume that romance fiction is only read for an escape from reality, but this shows that there is more depth behind reading romance novels and the satisfaction it can bring women. The article quotes Taylor as saying, “you don't put your life into your books. You find it there” (5). Romance novels are able to provide more than just a relationship between two characters, they can show women feelings they did not realize they had about society or provide them with a sense of victory as it did for Susan Elizabeth Phillips.

### **Medical Romance Fiction**

With the romance novel more narrowly defined, a careful analysis of a specific subgenre of romance can take place. For this paper, that subgenre is medical romance fiction. This is because medical romance fiction provides a unique opportunity to also view how women are empowered in fiction. This is not to say other subgenres lack women empowerment, but that medical romance can bring a different and unique perspective. To fully grasp this idea, it is important to have an understanding of what encompasses the medical romance subgenre and the history behind it. “Racing Pulses: Gender, Professionalism and Health Care in Medical Romance Fiction” by Agnes Arnold-Foster discusses medical romance novels. According to Arnold-Foster, the medical romance genre stems from the ‘Doctor–Nurse’ romances that became popular in 1948 due to the formation of the National Health Service. Now that sub-genre has

grown to contain more forms of medical romance within it, including some from STEM (Arnold-Foster 157).

One aspect of medical romance novels that makes them a good place to discuss romance themes is that medical areas provide a strong place for romance. Arnold-Foster points this out when she writes, “The movement (in hospitals) in and out of people and feelings was restricted; the boundaries between love, life, and labor were blurred and emotions were intensified” (165). This demonstrates that medical areas can foster romance in a uniquely strong way. They create an environment that amplifies the emotions present within. This makes them a great setting for romance novels, especially Harlequin medical romances, which traditionally are short romance stories that emphasizes the ‘Doctor–Nurse’ relationship.

The article goes on to discuss how the medical romance genre has grown further to inhabit a continuation of working women instead of having the heroine be a nurse just to marry, specifically within Mills & Boon publishing company, which focuses on British romance imprints. It states, “Throughout, various Mills & Boon heroines found value in work and their professional identities. Indeed, as Dixon argued, ‘Mills & Boon heroines have always worked; the romances have consistently had a work ethic for both male and female characters’” (170). The incorporation of working women shows the expansion of women’s empowerment seen throughout medical romance genres. It shows women working in mentally and physically straining fields that, in modern times, can be heavily male-dominant (excluding nursing). Some examples are women as doctors, women as nurses, or even women in other STEM fields. By promoting working women in romance novels, people can see the extent to which love and work can co-exist while also bringing to light issues of the time.

Arnold-Foster concludes by saying, “This article has argued that Mills & Boon writers and editors wanted to create authentic portrayals of love and romance, authentic portrayals of healthcare and its professionals, and authentic portrayals of women and their work. They crafted emotionally rich worlds where women found meaning in both romantic relationships and their jobs, and attended to the blurred lines between personal and professional lives” (177). Medical romance is able to inspire women when they read about others in their field. Romance novels can be an escape from reality for some, but it is also important to read about relatable characters, so creating authentic portrayals of women in the medical profession can make women empowered through their reading while also enjoying the love that is unfolding before them.

Another aspect of medical romance fiction that is important to look at is the accuracy of terms mentioned throughout the writing. In “Passionate Virtue: Conceptions of Medical Professionalism in Popular Romance Fiction” by Jessica Miller, the author talks about the importance of having accurate terms present within the medical romance subgenre. The article says, “Bioethicists who analyze popular medical narratives often evaluate their significance in terms of ‘accuracy,’ that is, their ability to mirror the realities of bioscience, health care, or medical technology” (72). While medical accuracy is by no means a set requirement for medical romance fiction, it does help tie the story together along with encouraging women in the medical field to read with excitement that terms they use will be included in the novel. It helps balance the novel between reality and fiction, allowing readers to submerge themselves in it while feeling connected to the novel.

A central theme of medical romance fiction is the work/love relationship between the protagonists of the novel. For medical romance fiction, particularly Harlequin books, a central

plot driver has to be how the protagonists interact at work. This is pointed out well by Jessica Miller, who writes that (in medical romance), “the couple’s working relationship must propel the romantic relationship” (74). This provides an extra layer to the traditional romance novel. In medical romance fiction, there is an additional plot point. The characters are not just wrapped up in their love; instead, this love must contend with how the characters behave in their workplace, creating a much greater depth of the story.

Now, with an established understanding of how the medical romance genre was depicted in the past, a deeper understanding of medicine today is needed to see the other ways medical romance fiction responds to issues in today's time. STEM stands for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. While none of these may inherently say medical, STEM does fall into the medical area due to the science aspect, which allows scientists to study medical issues and help further medicine as a whole. While medicine is a large part of STEM, the obvious bias that women experience is also a major issue that occurs. “The Challenge of Gender Bias: Experiences of Women Pursuing Careers in STEM” by Nayeli Stopani Barrios, Jessica Becker, Elise Murphy and Larissa Sanches shows some of the modern issues that women struggle with while pursuing a field in STEM. The issues discussed are the salary gap, parental expectations, race, and harassment. When it comes to the salary gap it says, “A paper published by the Pew Research Center concluded that, in STEM fields, men earn 40% more than women” (Barrios). This gap prevents women from being able to pay off their debts quickly which is an issue briefly mentioned by the heroine in *A Princess in Theory*. Another issue in STEM is the parental expectation. “Women are often forced to choose between being an important contributor to the STEM field and being a mother, while men are allowed to be both without having their professional commitment or parenting abilities called in question” (Barrios). This shows the

added pressure that mothers or mothers-to-be face in STEM. It is expected of women to drop their careers to raise children even if that is not what they had planned. As for race, the scholars mentioned a specific issue called “Prove It Again,” which is when men are hired or promoted based on their potential whereas women are hired or promoted based on ratings of their current performance and historical success. This shows that women have to work harder to show what they are capable of to their supervisor. The final area of concern is harassment. The article says, “harassment often plays out in the context of power hierarchies; persons of higher professional rank and power are more able than persons of lower professional rank and power to use their professional power in ways that meet the definition of workplace harassment” (Barriers). People higher up in the power hierarchy are able to abuse their power with the expectation that no repercussions will come their way. As discussed later on, this bias is evident in *The Love Hypothesis*. Along with all of the present biases discussed, the essay “Mapping Gender Equality in STEM from School to Work” by Andaleeb Alam also offers up the idea that the gender norms and stereotypes discourage women from pursuing a career in STEM because of the idea that it is not meant for them, but only for men.

### **Analysis of *Doctor Zay***

*Doctor Zay* is a novel written by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps in 1882. In the novel, Waldo Yorke, a patient of Doctor Zay, ends up falling in love with Dr. Zaidee Atalanta Lloyd. He got into an accident and she was the one to take care of him. Yorke was initially surprised to have a woman as his doctor, but eventually realizes her medical experience. Through his treatment Yorke began to fall in love with Zay. When Yorke expressed his love for Zay, she was reluctant to marry him for fear of no longer being able to be a doctor and she also deemed it



unprofessional to marry a patient. Yorke left for Boston to continue to get better without Doctor Zay around. He eventually returned to her when he was all better and told her he loved her again. Zay reciprocated feelings, but still thought it was a bad idea. In the end, Doctor Zay agreed to marry Yorke, but demanded that she remain a doctor after the two are married. Yorke agrees that he could not imagine it any other way.

The key narrative elements from this work to understand how women are empowered are barriers, declarations, and points of ritual death. Multiple barriers are brought up between Doctor Zay and Yorke. The most prominent is that Yorke was Doctor Zay's patient and was unstable for a while. This barrier caused Yorke to be in and out of health for a while and caused Doctor Zay to maintain professional boundaries with her patient. Once Yorke started to get better, he began to form feelings for Zay, but her professional boundaries remained steadfast. With the progression of Yorke's health, he declared his feelings for Zay, but she did not reciprocate due to the unprofessionalism of the matter. Another barrier that was evident throughout is the gender role reversal between Mr. Yorke and Doctor Zay. Since the roles were not typical for the time, it caused some tension at the beginning of the novel, especially with Mr. Yorke's shock at having a woman as his doctor. Once the initial shock worn down, Mr. Yorke became more comfortable with the idea of Doctor Zay as his doctor, but he constantly referred to her as being cold and not showing feelings.

Both of these barriers stayed in place for a while, even after Mr. Yorke had left, which led to the point of ritual death. The point in the novel that it seems like there is no overcoming the issues is when Mr. Yorke leaves. He tried to convince Doctor Zay to be with him and admitted his feelings, but she would not be swayed to pursue a relationship. This leads to Mr.

Yorke's inevitable departure. With Mr. Yorke's return, the point of ritual death is able to be overcome. Doctor Zay's declaration for Mr. Yorke came much later, but once she admitted her feelings, the barriers between her and Mr. Yorke began to crumble.

These three narrative elements demonstrate that *Doctor Zay* is a medical romance novel and it helps show the storyline that could cause women to feel empowered throughout it. The barrier was essential to talk about because it shows areas that could have been considered controversial during the time of the writing and it also brings in an element of internal struggle that a lot of women could relate to. The point of ritual death was important because it shows the difficult times that can still exist within the time period of the story. It brings a realistic element to the writing to help women know that the story is something that could happen. The declaration was important because it shows that despite the unconventional nature of *Doctor Zay* at that time, women were still able to have a happy ending while pursuing careers. These three elements bring women on a journey that allows for hope and promise for a better future to occupy their minds while reading the story. It empowers women by helping them expand their minds on the possibility of love and career coexisting for a woman.

With the romantic elements of *Doctor Zay* stated, the historical context for those elements can be explored. First among these contexts is bias, which is found within the novel. It comes up first when Mr. Yorke mistakes Doctor Zay for a nurse. Mr. Yorke asks Doctor Zay, "You are my nurse?" and she responds by saying "I take care of you tonight" (Phelps 40). Doctor Zay was hesitant to share with Mr. Yorke that she was the doctor because she knew how shocking it would be for him. Mr. Yorke was already in a fragile position and Doctor Zay did not want to do anything to make it worse. Before Mr. Yorke finds out that Doctor Zay is the doctor,

it is evident that many of the characters dance around the subject of the doctor's gender. Mrs. Butterwell is even hesitant to mention pronouns that would cause Mr. Yorke to think his doctor was not a man. This shows how rare and shocking during the late 1800s for anyone other than a man to be a doctor. It is also mentioned how the majority of Doctor Zay's patients are either women or children. This shows how women and children feel safe with her, but not necessarily men.

With the bias present inside *Doctor Zay* shown, the historical framework for the book should now be understood. This is because a work like *Doctor Zay*, which was written so long ago, requires some historical context to get the most out of it. While *Doctor Zay* may have been a little ahead of its time by presenting a female doctor, it was not far off of what was coming in the future. "The History of Women in Surgery" by Debrah Wirtzfeld gives a good background on female surgeons that can help further explain the historical progression of female doctors. Wirtzfeld says, "The history of women in surgery in Western civilization dates to 3500 BCE and Queen Shubad of Ur. Ancient history reveals an active role of women in surgery in Egypt, Italy, and Greece as detailed in surgical texts of the time" (Wirtzfeld 317). This shows that there is history to female surgeons and that the idea of a woman being a surgeon is not completely unheard of, but that idea declines over the years until women in North America start to try to go to school to be doctors as well. Even then, women still struggled to find residency education after finishing medical school. While Doctor Zay may not have been a surgeon, this still shows the difficulty and rarity it was for women to become doctors. This, when taken with the article, "Women Scientists In America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940" by Clare Fellman provides some extra information about the legitimacy of Doctor Zay being the doctor. The article says, "By the 1880s and 1890s women had achieved real success gaining entrance to graduate schools

and they had even received advanced degrees in scientific fields” (277). *Doctor Zay* was written in 1882, which would have been the time where women were just starting to go to graduate school, but it was still early enough to not be too common. *Doctor Zay* is only the second American novel to feature a woman physician as its central character, and the first to show a successful one according to Timothy Morris in “Professional Ethics and Professional Erotics.” This article states that the relationship between Mr. Yorke and Doctor Zay has “an air of fantasy to it in 1882” (Morris 142), but also indicates other areas where female physicians are present. It brings a balance that allows readers to relate to it during that time, but also understand the unrealistic element that it is touching upon. *Doctor Zay* helped women imagine a future where women’s work in the medical field, combined with marriage and family, would be more possible.

Another important aspect of *Doctor Zay* that helps demonstrate why it is a good example of how women are empowered in medical romance fiction is the disposition of the author, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Most significantly, the fact that Phelps had a passion for this sort of writing. “*Doctor Zay* and Dr. Mitchell: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s Feminist Response to Mainstream Neurology” discusses Phelps’s growing passion for medical fiction and her desire to understand it more. It says that Phelps interested herself in the medical education and practice of women, befriending and consulting several women physicians, in her writing “advanced compelling critiques of the medical profession and its treatment of women” (Swenson 4). Phelps educated herself on medical knowledge and real life experiences of other women physicians, which helped her in her writing of *Doctor Zay* and other medical romance fictions.

Another area Phelps pushed in her writings was her desire to showcase a feminist woman for her audience to read about. Pointing towards this, scholar Elizabeth Stuarts says “During all this time her commitment to feminism grew ever stronger. She wrote numerous articles on the subject for *The Independent* magazine” (Stuart 73). This shows Phelps’s passion for feminism and her want to tell others about it. She was able to do that and empower women through the novels she wrote and characters she delivered in her stories such as *Doctor Zay*.

### **Analysis of Promise the Doctor**

Now to bridge the historical gap between *Doctor Zay* and *Promise the Doctor*, a look at “Interchange: Women’s Suffrage, the Nineteenth Amendment, and the Right to Vote,” published in the *Journal of American History*, is needed. The gap between *Doctor Zay* and *Promise the Doctor* is roughly 84 years, so it is beneficial to look at the historical events that took place in between the times. The main difference is that women gained the right to vote along with the continuation of the talk of women’s suffrage. The *Journal of American History* says, “A second theme that characterizes the direction of scholarship over the decades is the continuity of the struggle for women’s rights in the aftermath of suffrage victory in 1920” (Interchange 665). This shows that even though women gained the right to vote, there was still much to expand upon when it came to the empowerment of women. This idea did not just magically disappear in the gap, but it just grew more and provided more context to the discussion about women's empowerment.

Since *Promise the Doctor* is an example of a Harlequin romance, it is significant to understand what a Harlequin romance novel is, especially since these books have been and are very popular. “The Disappearing Act: A Study of Harlequin Romances” by Tania Modleski

dives into the history of Harlequin romance and what they are. Harlequin Enterprises is based in Toronto, Canada and was 10% of the paperback market in North America in 1977. At that time, there were approximately 140 women writers with a readership of women of all ages (Modleski 437). As for today, the Harlequin website says, “Harlequin publishes more than 100 titles a month, in both print and digital formats, in 17 countries and 16 languages” (Harlequin Company). This shows the continuing popularity of Harlequin books. Modleski goes on to define Harlequins by specific guidelines: "Harlequins are well-plotted, strong romances with a happy ending. They are told from the heroine's point of view and in the third person. There may be elements of mystery or adventure, but these must be subordinate to the romance. The books are contemporary and settings can be anywhere in the world as long as they are authentic” (Modleski 437). The guidelines that make up a Harlequin can easily be fit into Regis eight narrative elements making it the perfect example of romance fiction.

Another unique aspect of the Harlequin romance novels is an idea found in “Man Change Thyself: Hero Versus Heroine Development in Harlequin Romance Novels” by Maryanne Fisher. Fisher argues that there was intentionality behind overly describing the hero and under-describing the heroine. Fisher says, “The lack of provided details enables readers to imagine themselves more easily as the heroine. The descriptions that are included make her seem realistic, at least physically. Thus, readers can vicariously live through the romance, putting themselves in the shoes of the heroine and yet imagining the hero in precise detail” (311). With the vague description of the heroine, it makes it easier for the reader to place herself in the story. Fisher goes on to say that the vague description also helps to prevent a contrast effect to occur between the heroine and other female characters discussed in the novel. This helps empower women because it allows for them to be able to relate to the story in an easier manner. By being

able to insert themselves in the story, they are able to feel the emotions of the romance novel better and decide whether it enlightens a passion within themselves.

This is an idea furthered by author Janice Radway in “Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context.” Radway, writing about how text (Harlequin books) and context (readers) relate to one another, discusses how readers interact with the books they read. She says, “Literary meaning is the result of a complex, temporally evolving interaction between a fixed verbal structure and a socially situated reader” (Radway 55). In this statement, Radway points out the same sort of phenomenon hinted at by Fisher. All novels, but especially Harlequin ones, rely on cooperation between the text and the reader where readers see themselves and their circumstances in the characters. This is an important aspect of Harlequin novels that needs to be kept in mind because it helps women to see where their lives are being empowered by relating to the romance story being told.

One last aspect of most Harlequin novels comes from the layout of the cover art. Many romance novels show covers from plain discreet covers to very sensual covers, but Harlequins have a specific type of cover art. Maryanne Fisher says in “Evolutionary and Sociocultural Themes in Cover Art on Harlequin Romance Novels: A Temporal Analysis,” in the 1960s cover art, “Characters do not touch and their attire reflected the styles popular among those with middle-class to upper middle-class socioeconomic status, matching the demographics of the intended audience or feeding the fantasy of upward social mobility” (Fisher 9). This description is accurate for *Promise the Doctor* (1966), which features a man and woman, separated, and wearing medical clothing.

*Promise the Doctor* is a Harlequin medical romance novel written by Marjorie Norrell in 1966. *Promise the Doctor* is an example of a Doctor-Nurse relationship with Joy, the protagonist being the nurse, and Quentin, the love interest, being the doctor. In the story, Joy inherited one of her late patient's estates which she is instructed to take care of and never sell. Joy ends up meeting Quentin on her first day in town and their attraction appears to be immediate. Despite this attraction, Joy thinks Quentin is falling in love with her sister because they spend a lot of time together. In reality, Quentin is trying to help Lana walk again because he knows it will ease Joy's mind. Once they overcome this misunderstanding, the two end up engaged. This romance novel also included a lot of love stories from side characters including Lana falling in love and Joy's mother falling in love.

Bias presents itself in several ways within the story. The main bias that Joy is faced with is worrying about her image, which was a big issue for women and nurses since reputation was important. At one point a young man offers to teach her how to drive, but Joy declines to avoid any potential backlash that could come her way. This instance shows Joy's worry about what people will think or gossip about her if she is seen in public driving with a young man. Joy did want to learn, but she knew the whispers that would happen if she was seen learning from a young man. Because of that, she knew that it would be a better idea for her to just take classes to learn.

Three key narrative elements of this text that demonstrate the empowerment of women are meeting with attraction, barriers, and betrothal. Joy's meeting with Quentin was impactful because of the immediate attraction they felt toward one another. Joy said that when she was to meet her husband, she knew it would feel different. The book said, "and suddenly, as their



glances met and locked, it seemed that an electric current had passed between them” (Norrell 46). She experienced that feeling with Quentin, but due to the barriers this feeling took long to pursue. The barriers in place were miscommunication between Joy and Quentin. The main miscommunication was Joy thinking Quentin was falling for her sister, but in reality, he was just trying to help take care of her. Quentin knew Joy well enough to know that she would always look out for her family first, so Quentin wanted to make sure Joy had no worries if she decided to marry him. This miscommunication caused Quentin to think Joy never wanted to marry anyone though, because when he asked Joy about marriage she said she had never given it any thought, even though she was lying. Eventually, Joy realizes that Quentin did not have feelings for Lana after expressing her sadness for him with Lana’s engagement. Quentin realizes the miscommunication that took place and this leads to him clearing the air and the betrothal taking place. With the realization of their love, they ended with an engagement.

Analyzing these particular narrative elements highlights how *Promise the Doctor*, as a medical romance novel, empowers women. The attraction felt between Joy and Quentin showed that romance could blossom at anytime. This empowers women because it shows that no matter where one is in their career, they can find love at any point. There is no perfect time frame or set time period to wait, instead it will happen when it is supposed to. The barrier was an essential part to the story because it brought in the realistic element of miscommunication that occurs within romantic relationships. Many women can, in some way, relate to feeling misheard by or not understanding the actions of their romantic interest. As for the betrothal, it brings a promise of commitment. This empowers women because it presents the light at the end of the tunnel. Despite the difficulties, confusion, and drama that happened, Joy was able to end up with the man she loved and still maintain a strong passion for being a nurse.

Despite a gap of 84 years between their publication, it is clear to see that *Doctor Zay* and *Promise the Doctor* share similar themes. The three most prominent themes are the barriers, images of themselves, and passion for their work. The barriers in these two novels represent shared themes because both Joy and Doctor Zay have personal ethical issues related to their careers that are keeping them from pursuing their romantic relationships. Doctor Zay's moral issue is not wanting to indulge in a doctor-patient relationship as she deems it unprofessional. She already understands how little respect she gets as a female doctor and does not want to make the scrutiny worse by having an inappropriate relationship. As for Joy, her personal ethical issue is not hurting her sister's feelings by entertaining a relationship with a doctor. Joy loves her sister enough to suppress any romantic feelings she may have for Quentin. With respect to image, Doctor Zay and Joy encounter similar issues. For Doctor Zay this stems from one of the main barriers in her relationship, which is her not wanting to jeopardize people's view of her as a doctor, especially since she is a woman and already receives judgment for it. For Joy, she worries about the gossip that could happen if she is seen with a man. The last area that these two heroines share is a passion for their work. Doctor Zay and Joy love what they do and find great fulfillment in their occupations. If Doctor Zay was forced to choose between her career and marriage, she would pick her career every time. In the book, it says that her mom had died from some illness, which led to her wanting to be a doctor and help save people. For Joy, she talks about how much she loves being a nurse. At one point, a girl comes to Joy for advice about becoming a nurse and she says, "And I'd like to congratulate you on your choice of career. It's a wonderful job, and very rewarding" (Norrell 139). This shows that while Joy may not get paid a lot for what she does, she still finds satisfaction in the work that she does.

## **Analysis of Modern Medical Romance Fiction**

As the medical romance fiction progresses to modern time, it is important to look at the changes in history that occurred to lead up to modern day. “Experiencing Second-Wave Feminism in the USA: by Sari Biklen provides helpful details that indicates some of the changes occurring in between the publication of *Promise the Doctor* and *A Princess in Theory*. The article discusses some of the areas that the first and second wave of feminism differed, specifically with how second wave feminism narrowed its focus to certain areas such as workplace discrimination, race, and sexuality. While Biklen touched on the importance of feminism, she also mentioned how women still need to challenge each other. She said, “In second-wave feminism, the few, and isolated venues for the co-creation of knowledge slowed feminist scholars’ efforts to know and critique each other’s work and to frame intersectionalities of race, gender, class, and sexuality” (Biklen 464). This shows that while it is important to support women and fight for their rights, it is also important to push each other towards bettering the future instead of being stagnant in what one may view as right or wrong. This added knowledge shows that the progression into modern day romance began to change its focus on feminism to include more and to grow. Through the progression of the medical romance novels, women should read them with an appreciation of the progress that has been made in society but should by no means be satisfied with the idea that there is no more progression. The continuation of representing women through the medical romance novels will empower women to further the narrative of continuous improvement from society.

For another look at filling the gap between time periods, “Women and War: Women’s Rights in Post-Civil War Society” by Mehmet Gurses, Aimee Arias and Jeffrey Morton offers more to the situation. The article discussed how wartimes ended up improving women’s rights

and “weakening the prewar patriarchy” (Gurses et al 236). It says, “This effect, which is more visible in empowering women politically, is primarily a result of the duration of the civil war and having a favorable international political environment” (236). This indicates that the world was changing positively for women and combined with the realization from the previous paragraph, it demonstrates that there is still much about women’s empowerment in medical romance fiction to discuss, which is why a jump to the future is needed.

*A Princess in Theory*, written by Alyssa Cole in 2018, is a romance novel about Naledi Smith and Prince Thabiso. Naledi was orphaned as a child and never experienced a stable living environment since she went from one foster home to another. She was pursuing a graduate degree in epidemiology while waitressing when she met Prince Thabiso. Prince Thabiso was searching for Naledi because before her parents left their home, the (fictional) African country of Thesolo, Thabiso and Naledi were betrothed. When Thabiso does find Naledi, she does not recognize him. Nor does she know why her parents left Thesolo, since they died when she was so young. Thabiso tries to get to know Naledi without her viewing him as a prince, but she eventually figures out his true identity and is hurt. Thabiso convinces Naledi to come back to his country as her betrothed for the summer, so she can work on her practicum and try to cure the mysterious disease that has hit certain members of the community. While in Thesolo, Naledi grows closer to Thabiso, forgives him, and is able to figure out that it is her uncle who was poisoning people (Naledi’s grandparents) for power. The book ends with Naledi going back to the United States to continue her education, but still remaining betrothed to Prince Thabiso.

One way of reading *A Princess in Theory* is through the lens of psychological ideology, which is the idea of “blaming women for everything from children’s misbehavior to the alarming

state of Western civilization” (Eisenmann 139). Linda Eisenmann’s “Educating the Female Citizen in a Post-War World: Competing Ideologies for American Women, 1945-1965” demonstrates the ideology that, essentially, blames women for everything. While this idea became prominent after World War II, it is a theme that can be seen even among some of the more recent medical romance fiction, such as *A Princess in Theory*. In her work environment, she was expected to do her work, but also that of her male coworker, and if anything was wrong, it was deemed her fault.

As for the bias present, it is clear to see the discrimination in Naledi’s work environment. “The Challenge of Gender Bias: Experiences of Women Pursuing Careers in STEM describes a specific type of bias called the “prove it again” bias. This type of bias is more prominent against women of color where, in order to get a promotion, the woman has to prove herself over and over, whereas the man is promoted based on the expectation that he will do well. Naledi experiences this with her male boss. He constantly gaslights her and makes her do his extra work because he knows she will do it. He makes her feel guilty when she tries to say no and makes her feel like this is what she has to do in order to excel.

Another aspect of Cole’s fiction that needs to be considered is the fact that some scholars have considered it to be political. This is shown by a statement made by author Nicole Jackson. Jackson, discussing Cole’s work, says, “What Cole demonstrates in her activism and in the breadth of her catalog is that there must always be room for as much love, in as many forms as possible, to achieve the full scope of any happily ever after” (Jackson 11). This shows the complex nature of Cole’s writing. For her, the romance novel is more than just a story. It is

something that can convey a much deeper and more important meaning, which is seen when she gives Naledi a life where she struggles, but still perseveres to reach her goal of curing diseases.

Three key narrative elements of this text that demonstrate the empowerment of women are attraction, recognition of feelings, and betrothal. From the moment Naledi and Thabiso met, the attraction they had for each other was eminent. Naledi talked about her attraction to Thabiso from the moment she saw him and without fully knowing who he was, her physical attraction to him was strong. Thabiso's attraction for Naledi was reciprocated and it continuously brought them together through the novel. With the strong connection between Naledi and Thabiso, it led to their recognition of feelings for each other. Through overcoming barriers and their point of ritual death, Naledi and Thabiso recognized their feelings for each other, which led to the outcome of their betrothal. They had the unique position of already being betrothed before meeting as adults, but did not confirm the betrothal till the end. Thabiso asked Naledi to come to Thesolo for the summer and gave her the freedom to leave at the end if she wanted, but Naledi decided to remain betrothed to Thabiso even though she did go back to the United States to continue her education.

These three narrative elements show that *A Princess in Theory* is a medical romance novel as well as the ways it is able to empower women. For attraction, it is similar to the same reasoning as *Promise the Doctor*, even though Naledi was stressed with her study of epidemiology, she was still able to experience a connection with Thabiso. As for the recognition of feelings, there is something special that happens when two people are able to be vulnerable within themselves. Naledi radiated strength throughout the whole novel, especially when she was able to recognize those vulnerable feelings that she felt. To be a woman in science does not mean

one has to remove emotions from themselves to remain professional; the story instead reveals that the two can coexist within a woman's life. With the betrothal, it brings a more modern aspect to commitment. While Thabiso and Naledi are engaged, Naledi feels no pressure to stay with him in his country before completing her education. This empowers women because it shows that nothing should keep them from going after the education or career they want, at least no person should stop them.

The changes over time in medical romance fiction demonstrate differing aspects of women's empowerment. One of the most obvious differences is the sexual intimacy that is seen within *A Princess in Theory*. The physical connection between Naledi and Thabiso is one that is not seen between Doctor Zay and Mr. Yorke or Joy and Quentin. With Doctor Zay and Mr. Yorke, there is not even a shared kiss between them. At the end of *Doctor Zay* it says, "He held out his arms... With a swift and splendid motion she glided across the little distance that lay between them" (Phelps 258). This is the extent of the physically intimate experiences between Doctor Zay and Mr. Yorke. Doctor Zay treats Mr. Yorke so she obviously touches him to make sure he is ok, but those instances are not in a romantic sense. Joy and Quentin end up kissing at the very end of the novel, but that is their first kiss shared. Naledi and Thabiso, on the other hand, have multiple sexual encounters throughout the novel and other intimate moments. The comparison of sexual encounters versus the lack thereof helps show how these relationships progressed differently throughout. The inclusion of sexual intimacy for Naledi and Thabiso adds a new depth to the connection evident among the characters. The level of intimacy is also understandable based on the time periods the novel was written and showcases levels that were appropriate for each time period. Maleah Fekete in "Confluent Love and the Evolution of Ideal Intimacy: Romance Reading in 1980 and 2016" discusses the change on sexual intimacy present

in romance novels. The author says, “Yet while these core narrative elements appear largely the same, the romance novels preferred in 2016 include significantly more sexual content. Building off prior research, I argue this increase in sexual content not only evinces increased female sexual liberty, but also has important implications for the meaning of intimate relationships” (Fekete 9). The author goes on to talk about how early novels showcase only emotional connections while contemporary romance novels put an emphasis on both emotional and physical connections. The presence of both emotional and physical connections within medical romance novels empowers women because it lets them know that there is a sense of vulnerability and togetherness when connecting with someone on multiple levels. Women have no reason to feel ashamed of their emotions or physical desires because it is what will allow for a more meaningful connection to occur.

In addition to changes in sexual intimacy, romance relationships sometimes develop more quickly in modern romance novels. This is shown between *Doctor Zay* and *A Princess in Theory*. With Doctor Zay and Joy’s relationship, the connection formed seemed to go at a slower pace. While Joy did feel an immediate attraction to Quentin, it took a while for a real connection between the two to be seen. As for Doctor Zay and Mr. Yorke, their barriers prevented them from being able to draw upon a strong connection quicker. For Naledi and Thabiso, their physical relationship helped quicken their connection, but it was not the only factor that helped contribute to the bond they formed. Along with living near each other for a while and Thabiso asserting himself, it helped build a visible connection between the two a lot sooner. “Mind, Body, Love: Nora Roberts and the Evolution of Popular Romance Studies” by An Goris, uses Nora Robert’s work to show the progression of connection between mind and body as love is formed between two characters. She argues that the body realizes its desire and ability to love



before the mind is aware of what is happening, but after acceptance, the body and mind can connect to form love. This type of dynamic is what causes Naledi and Thabiso to have a quick connection with their bodies realizing a desire for one another at first and then their minds being aware.

The last change that was seen is the fairytale element that is seen in *A Princess in Theory*. The whole prince and princess idea brings a more unrealistic aspect to the story, but the balance of her work and personal life makes the story one that is still relatable. In Cole's dedication, she says, "For all the people who were told they couldn't be princesses: you always were one" (Cole). Cole wanted to write a fairytale to showcase a Black princess, which is a form of representation that many women of color lack. By making this story a fairytale, Cole is empowering women by showing that women of color deserve recognition from all aspects of life, whether it be the real world or fairytale medical romance novels. As for *Doctor Zay* and *Promise the Doctor*, they can be argued to have unrealistic elements, but are less fairytale-like. For the time period, being a female doctor was unheard of and as for *Promise the Doctor*, it would be rare for a nurse to inherit a whole mansion.

The final novel to be discussed is *The Love Hypothesis* written in 2021 by Ali Hazelwood is a romance novel between Olive Smith, a third year PhD candidate, and Adam Carlsen, a well-known professor. Olive Smith wanted to show her friend that she had moved on from this guy she went on a date with, so she ended up kissing Adam Carlsen. Olive and Adam decide to fake a date because it benefited the other in some way. Olive was able to show her friend she was in a relationship and Adam was able to offer the Board that he was committed to staying at the school, so they would give him his grant money. In the process, they end up falling for each

other. Olive also struggles with her pancreatic research because she needs a new lab in order to continue the research. The man she was going to work with ends up only offering her his lab because of her association with Adam and because he was expecting something intimate in return. Olive eventually tells Adam and the situation is able to be resolved with Olive getting a new lab location and her and Adam ending up together.

Before diving into the narrative elements, it is important to understand the bias within *The Love Hypothesis*, which is harassment. Olive is sexually harassed by the man whose lab she is supposed to use. It says, “Had he really done that? Tried to kiss her?... [Tom said] You don’t think I accepted you into my lab because you are good, do you? A girl like you. Who figured out so early in her academic career that fucking well-known, successful scholars is how to get ahead” (Hazelwood 229). This goes to show that Tom did not respect Olive and her medical advancement and only accepted her into his lab for the intimate benefits he was hoping to gain from her. When Olive threatened to tell on him, Tom told her nobody would believe her who has little credibility over him. This shows a very prominent issue that many women face in the STEM field today. While many may not get sexually harassed, there is still the issue of discrediting women for their work simply because they are female.

Three key narrative elements of this text that demonstrate the empowerment of women are the definition of society, meeting, and barriers. Definition of society plays a big role in the establishment of the romantic pursuit between Olive and Adam. In *The Love Hypothesis* the society that is set up in the book is one focused on male dominance and education. This environment makes Olive’s pursuit towards finding a lab for her pancreatic cancer study more difficult and she finds it difficult for her male peers to treat her fairly. The environment set up

makes Adam a unique exception because it shows his care and understanding of Olive's struggles. As for their meeting, a flashback is used, but it is one that only Adam recalls for the longest time. This shows Adams prolonged care for Olive since he remembers her before they even became acquainted. The two face many barriers, the biggest one being their inability to acknowledge the growing feelings they have for each other and the constant miscommunication present.

These three narrative elements show that *The Love Hypothesis* is a medical romance novel and capable of empowering women. For the definition of society, Hazelwood sets up a relatable society and one that is sadly true. It brings to light an issue that many may wish to ignore instead of fight head on. The use of the society shows women that they are not alone in their struggle when being in male dominant professions. The flashback was able to bring a different presentation of the meeting between characters, which shows women that there is no right or wrong way to go about romance. It may not be conventional, but it does not make it wrong, instead it should pursue women to go after what they want. For the barriers, it empowers women by encouraging them to express themselves, even if it may be scary. Olive and Adam eventually shared their feelings, but the story could have gone a lot differently if they were able to do it sooner. Women should feel no pressure to suppress their feelings, especially if they think sharing their emotions will resolve a solution.

The changes that occur between *The Love Hypothesis* and the earlier medical romance fictions show the difference in women's empowerment during the time periods. One specific change between *The Love Hypothesis* and *Promise the Doctor* is the dynamic between a male versus a female dominant field. It is clear to see changes within the environments for Olive and

Joy. For Olive, the novel makes it a heavy point to show that she is one of very few women in her field. Only one female professor/advisor is mentioned and very few female students are mentioned compared to the men. This shows the lack of representation that is present for other women in STEM to see. For Joy, she was in a field that was solely for women at that time. The nurses and others even called them Sister because all the men working at the hospital were typically doctors. The dynamic shift of environments shows that the way women have been represented has slowly shifted to show women in all kinds of fields and not just ones that are expected of them.

Another change that has occurred is the idea of women having to choose between a career and marriage. For Doctor Zay, that was one of her fears that she talks about often to Mr. Yorke. She felt like she would have to pick one or the other and she would pick her career every time. For Joy, she never mentions an issue between her career or commitment to a relationship, but when she is talking to Quentin about her future, he appears disappointed by the idea of Joy potentially becoming an Assistant Matron. That is seen in this exchange, when Joy says, “I might try for Assistant Matron somewhere in the future...” and Quentin responds, ‘I see.’ He was silent for a few moments then, taking out his cigarette case and lighter, he lit two cigarettes and passed one to her, drawing deeply on the other before he spoke again” (Norrell 154). While this was a concerning issue for the time, it is an issue that Olive never brought up. At no point did Olive, or Naledi in *A Princess in Theory*, feel like they would have to give up their career for a relationship with someone.

From a close reading of the four books analyzed in this paper, as well as the scholarship surrounding medical romance fiction, it is clear to see there is an obvious progression of the

context and even style of romance novels between the 1880s and now. Even with these changes, however, it is clear that throughout time the medical romance genre has been concerned with empowering women. *Doctor Zay* does this through its gender reversal that showed women they could work at that time. In *Promise the Doctor*, it demonstrates a very real situation and the struggles women went through in the nursing field. In the modern medical romance fictions, *A Princess in Theory* and *The Love Hypothesis*, they give clear examples of the challenges modern women face being minorities in the STEM field. While they all are written at different times, with different styles and subject material, these books come together in their pursuit of empowering women.

## **Conclusions**

To conclude, four medical romance novels were discussed along with the historical context that occurred before, during, and after the novels. The four novels examined were *Doctor Zay*, *Promise the Doctor*, *A Princess in Theory*, and *The Love Hypothesis*. These novels were able to showcase the progression of women empowerment through time by addressing relevant problems for each of their times. For *Doctor Zay* the empowerment of women through a gender role reversal was seen since it was a rarity for that time. *Promise the Doctor* empowers readers by letting women during that time see that women could work and pursue a relationship to have a fulfilling life. For *A Princess in Theory*, women's empowerment can be seen by showing women of color persevering through many difficulties while telling the story of a princess. *The Love Hypothesis* empowered women by letting them know that they do not have to fight against the miso of a male dominant field alone. While the message of women's empowerment may not be the same for all, they each represented women in appropriate ways for their time period.

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