

Introduction

All fiction contains two primary impulses: the impulse to imitate daily life, and the impulse to transcend it.

Gillian Beer, *The Romance*

The “low modern” and the “popular modernist” are twin classifying categories, emerging in contemporary scholarship on the modernist era, that may help us to deepen our understanding of the most widely read British literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They offer a literary-historical register on which to record the social “pitch” or “range” of the era’s distinctive genres of popular fiction, and they bring new tones into our concepts of high modernism. In recent years, scholarship on the New Woman novel, detective fiction, the adventure romance, and literary experiments of content (as distinct from form)¹ has restored such middlebrow and lowbrow genres to their proper centrality in the history of fiction, and narrative generally, through the decades straddling 1900. As recently as the early 1990s, a scholar of British fin-de-siècle-through-1920s fiction could decry the “rigid demarcation between highbrow (James,

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Conrad, Lawrence, Joyce, Woolf), middlebrow (Wells, Bennett, Galsworthy, Forster) and lowbrow (names too numerous and repellent to mention)” and could observe that “[t]here are scrupulous and imaginative histories available which assess the first group critically, summarize the second sympathetically, and ignore the third.”² Fifteen years later, the editors of the volume *Bad Modernisms* noted that some scholars had transformed the term *modernist* “from an evaluative and stylistic designation to a neutral and temporal one” to go “beyond such familiar figures as Eliot, Pound, Joyce and Woolf” and to embrace “less widely known women writers” and “authors of mass cultural fiction.”³ Our knowledge of the vast body of popular fiction from this era is, in this sense, being democratized.

Nonetheless, some of the most popular British fiction of a century ago—especially the work of women romance writers—has yet to be understood in relation to modernist literary history. With the exceptions of Marie Corelli, Elinor Glyn, and E. M. Hull, about whom new scholarship has been emerging in the past few years,⁴ the most successful female romancers of Britain’s turn into the twentieth century have not yet received the kind of attention that their one-time cultural influence clearly merits. This would hardly have been surprising a few decades ago, but with the ascendancy of gender studies and cultural studies, such an oversight might seem noteworthy. Rather than attributing the lack of attention to any putative neglect on the part of scholars of the period—and thereby implying terms of value regarding the aesthetic and cultural and political dimensions, real or presupposed, of these women’s romances—I think it is probably safer to assume that we have not yet seen studies of many of these novelists and novels simply because there are so many of them to consider.

Indeed, where does one begin? My approach here is to examine a small group of romances, those that best exemplified the meteoric rise of the woman-authored love story in Britain. This study attempts to redress the “romance gap” in our literary-historical record; it analyzes the discursive woof and warp of once-best-selling texts and traces these threads outward, through the wider webs of social signification in which we situate high modernist narrative. Scrutinizing a set of best sellers by romancers from Mary Ward to E. M. Hull, I hope to respond to a challenge issued by and to twenty-first-century scholars of modernism: illumination of the cultural

continuities and frictions that result when the traditional criteria of literary modernism are brought to bear upon texts that are usually thought neither to be art nor to be about art.

My original impetus to approach the popular romances examined in this study was the simple fact that all were among the best-selling novels of their era, both in Britain and in the rest of the anglophone world. All but one of the eleven British-authored romances closely examined here appear in extant catalogues of best sellers in Britain and the United States from 1885 to 1925.⁵ A retrospective study published in London in 1934, Desmond Flower's pamphlet *A Century of Best Sellers*, offers an authoritative list; using as his criterion the sale of at least 100,000 copies, he catalogues one to four best-selling novels per year in Britain during the era straddling the turn of the century.⁶ Seven of the romances scrutinized in this book appear on Flower's list for their respective years: Ward's *Robert Elsmere* (1888), Corelli's *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895), Cross's *Anna Lombard* (1901), Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905), Glyn's *Three Weeks* (1907), Barclay's *The Rosary* (1909), and Dell's *The Way of an Eagle* (1912). I have also chosen to look closely at Ward's *Lady Rose's Daughter*, because it ranked among the top ten best sellers of 1903 and prompted the American *Literary News* to announce, "[I]t is estimated that Mrs. Ward will reap a tidy profit of over \$150,000 [\$3.75 million in 2010 dollars] on 'Lady Rose's Daughter.' No living author has ever received as much. . . . [T]here is no doubt that Mrs. Humphry Ward is the best paid of living novelists."⁷ Then there is Corelli's *The Treasure of Heaven* (1906), which was said to have sold 10,000 copies on the first day of its publication alone, largely because a rare photograph of its celebrity author appeared as the frontispiece.⁸ Finally, Edith Maude Hull's *The Sheik* (1919) originally sold over a million copies (Waller, 644) and in its film version of 1921 launched the short but incandescent career of Rudolph Valentino. Some of these figures come from lists that register the sales, not of novels alone but of top-selling books tout court—fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, religion, and so forth—in the individual years indicated. And so we begin with a simple but sociologically meaningful fact: between 1885 and 1925, these women-authored romances loom as a series of pinnacles along the highest plateau of popular British reading.

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The challenges here, for literary historian and cultural theorist alike, are to identify and to interpret continuities of form and content: what do these books share that is distinctive to their historical place and time? How should they be fitted into longer-term literary history, and how are they—as prime samples of “the low modern”—to be understood in relation to “high modernism”? If there exists such a phenomenon as “popular modernism,” do these romances qualify for that term? The singularities of each of these romances are considerable and must be respected; the cultural conservatism of Ward’s *Lady Rose’s Daughter* or Barclay’s *The Rosary* may seem, for example, to occupy an ideological pole opposite the sexual emancipation we may ascribe to Cross’s *Anna Lombard* or Glyn’s *Three Weeks*. Nevertheless, illuminating generalizations are suggested by the material and are necessary to any investigation that would, in the words of one leading scholar of fin-de-siècle popular culture, “go beyond empiricism and the mere notation of particulars to the construction of meaningful structures, connections, and arguments.”⁹

What are the commonalities? Like the feathered dinosaur, these texts embody a phylogenetic chimera in the evolution of the romance mode. This study illustrates how these romances share a preoccupation with psychological transcendence, or affective transports, expressed in representations that both embedded the historical legacy (the “DNA”) of the romance mode and constituted embryonic, historically new instances of the emergent cultural form that would come to be called the “romance novel” of the later twentieth century. Some of the popular romances under scrutiny here may be considered proto-women’s romances, in the later acceptance of that mass-cultural, airport-rack term. (And some were indeed sold, in inexpensive editions, in the railway stalls of their own day.) Up to the twentieth century, the term *romance* had broadly denoted any narrative of love and adventure that entailed elements of the counter-real, such as magic, spells, enchantment, or the supernatural. By the 1920s, that now familiar subgenre of the romance that we call the mass-market “romance novel” had emerged as a flourishing genetic variation, complete with a suggestive cover illustration. This new species of romance narrative would come to be characterized by two criteria: it was a work of prose fiction telling the story of the courtship and betrothal of

one or more heroines, and it was a product of the culture industry—specifically, of marketing to adult female demographics.¹⁰ A fresh offshoot of the centuries-old tradition of romance narrative, it grew rapidly, developing into a product for which the publishing house or imprint—particularly Mills and Boon from the 1910s forward and Avon and Harlequin from the 1930s and '40s—was at least as significant as the individual author (with celebrated exceptions, such as Barbara Cartland and Georgette Heyer). At the same time, twentieth-century novels—say, the works of C. S. Lewis or J. R. R. Tolkien—that would have been called “romances” by the lay reader in any earlier era were eventually slotted into differently marketed categories, with different generic labels, such as “science fiction,” “fantasy,” “mystery,” and so forth.

In addition, the best-selling romances of 1885–1925 offer representations of interiority paralleling the more self-conscious forms of psychic intensity explored in works of certain anglophone modernists: Mansfield, Woolf, Lawrence, the Rebecca West of *The Return of the Soldier*, and the Joyce of “The Dead” and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In their analogous representations of interior states, we may perceive a zone of convergence between these cultural expressions of “low” and “high” modernity.¹¹ Here my epigraph, an axiom from Gillian Beer’s work on the romance mode,¹² is instructive and provides the widest conceptual horizon of this study as a whole. While these British women’s romances assay to represent, especially in their climactic scenes, states of psychic transcendence, the modernist texts in question figure the quest for psychic transcendence that encodes the ultimate unattainability of that goal. The former narratives, though they often include episodic adventures, primarily offer interiorized, psychologized romances of the development of secular love or self-transformation; the latter narratives offer intermittent intensities of psychic questing that cumulatively constitute what I propose to call the romance of interiority. Both sets of narratives can be conceived as self-consciously resistant to or reactive against the representational modes of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century high realism. If Beer is right and “all fiction contains two primary impulses: the impulse to imitate daily life, and the impulse to transcend it” (*Romance*, 10), then these women romancists and certain high modernists, I argue, together partook in the latter impulse—and for reasons specific to their shared historical moment in the development

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of capitalist society. My theoretical frame is informed by the recent discoveries and insights of feminist studies of modernism, and of gender-studies approaches more generally. That said, my readings of these texts draw on an eclectic array of literary and cultural critics, some of them theorists who might, I freely admit, appear contradictory in other contexts—from Gillian Beer to Pierre Bourdieu, from Rita Felski to Northrop Frye, from Jenny Sharpe to Harold Bloom, from Q. D. Leavis to Fredric Jameson. However, the various romance and modernist narratives at hand call for nuanced interarticulations and seem to me to legitimate such a bricolage of analytic resources; this discursive terrain resists the potentially foreclosing claims of any single theoretical master narrative.

The *low modern* and the *popular modernist* are recently emerging terms through which we may deepen our understanding of some of the most widely read literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even as we adjust our constructions of high modernism accordingly. In what follows, I rely more on the former notion, “low modern,” than the latter, “popular modernist,” because I do not want to be misunderstood as attempting to reinvent such figures as Marie Corelli and Elinor Glyn as modernist writers. They are, I argue, distinctly modern; but I am not claiming that these writers belong to a (conceptually expanded) literary modernism from which they have allegedly been excluded in previous literary histories. Instead, this book is intended to contribute to the ongoing project of a more respectful, responsive understanding of a phenomenon in popular fiction whereby English-language romances of the period 1885 to 1925, especially those by certain women authors, were sold to and were read by more people than ever before in history. In investigating this series of representative writers and narratives, I hope to demonstrate a generic evolution—to show how both the traditional romance mode and sublimations of high Romanticism blossomed into unprecedented forms. Herein lies the general link to high modernism, a broad connection that is more a matter of heretofore-unnoticed homologies than of a putative continuum or spectrum between popular and high modernisms. I reconsider both well-known and less-familiar writing by Mansfield, Lawrence, Joyce, West, and Woolf to explore how these modernist writers incorporated elements of the romance mode and a related neo-Romanticism into

their innovative fiction and (in the cases of West and Woolf) literary criticism.



In the chapters that follow, I begin with the complex definitions and institutional contexts of the entity designated by the term *romance*, as it was understood during its efflorescence over this forty-year period in British cultural history. Chapter 1, “Contexts of Popular Romance, 1885–1925,” offers an overview of the romance mode through its seven centuries of tradition in British literary practice, with attention to its symbolic gendering and relation to the later modes of realism, melodrama, and the “sentimental” novel. I examine the institutional structures of the literary field emerging by 1885, and through a short look at the representative career of Elinor Glyn, I suggest how the evolving interrelations among a dominant realism, a renovating romance mode, and an emergent modernism force us to scrutinize our received notions of “high” and “low” forms through the period. Prior to the Great War, as literary historian Clive Bloom records, almost all popular novels were “designated with the vague title of ‘romance,’ which had not itself become a term used exclusively for women’s fiction.”¹³ Nonetheless, amid these shifts in the literary field, what we today refer to as the “women’s romance” started to take shape. Although the nineteenth century certainly witnessed its share of sensation fiction, adventure romances, domestic romances, sentimental novels, and (in George Eliot’s notorious designation) “silly novels by lady novelists,” not until the first decades of the twentieth did the vast category of novels by women writers begin to precipitate, in a calculatedly marketable form, this new and tremendously successful genre of fiction.

This evolution in the categories of popular fiction by women is the subject of the book’s second chapter, “Mary Ward’s Romances and the Literary Field.” Here I bring Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of literary production and reception to bear on the spectacular early success and later decline of the romance-writing career of Matthew Arnold’s niece, Mary Ward. Her transatlantic phenomenon, the best-selling *Robert Elsmere*, offers the single most famous exhibit of the late-Victorian religious romance. The pained agnosticism of its

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eponymous hero provoked sober public commentary from none other than the former prime minister William Gladstone. Ward's trajectory on the literary field tells a representative story about the receding of religious and moral didacticism in novels written by and aimed primarily at women, even as it illustrates the complex interplay of economic, ideological, and aesthetic factors in the immediate precursors of the commercially conceived paperback romance of the twentieth century.

By the later years of Mary Ward's career, in the period of the Great War, developing romance genres had acquired market designations. Some of these—such as “the country novel,” “the city novel,” and “the society novel”—have since fallen out of general use, while others—such as detective fiction, mystery novels, and family sagas—marked categories destined to survive into the boom of so-called genre fiction in the later twentieth century. From a deeper historical perspective, there also persists, amid this early twentieth-century proliferation of subgenres, a mutating line of continuity between “old-world” significations of the term *romance*—those that originated with the medieval Arthurian legends, Malory, and Renaissance figures such as Sidney and Spenser—and the meaning understood to subtend the contemporaneous romance subgenres. This is the subject of chapter 3, “Marie Corelli and the Discourse of Romance,” in which I offer readings of three of Corelli's novels published between 1895 and 1914. Corelli's fictions critique aspects of cultural modernity perceived to be dehumanizing, as well as defend the role of the romance form as a timeless purveyor of eternal human truths. Through both the voice of her omniscient narrators and the voices of her heroines and heroes, Corelli devises romances *about* the romance mode. Insisting on the mode's continuity with English Romanticism, she proposes the resurrection of allegedly traditional values in what is perceived to be an increasingly hostile and hypersecularized twentieth-century modernity. In relation to other representational modes, these novels (along with the rest of Corelli's oeuvre) may be said to represent the revenge of the romance on high realism—a deeply spiritualized counterblast to, in particular, the cultural consecration of naturalist fiction in the late Victorian and Edward eras. Paradoxically, too, these tendentious romances anticipate and refract certain of high modernism's emergent attitudes toward cultural modernity.

By the first decade of the 1900s, fellow women romance writers had become less concerned than Corelli with the alleged antagonism between realism and the romance; some of the most successful were grafting realist features to the romance frame. My fourth chapter, “The Women’s Romance and the Ideology of Form,” explores three Edwardian romances via that modal synthesis. Three best-selling novels—the Baroness Orczy’s *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, Florence Barclay’s *The Rosary*, and Elinor Glyn’s *Three Weeks*—demonstrate how the Edwardian romance carries the vestiges or residues of religious and socially hierarchical themes from previous eras: the binary of good versus evil, the near-mythical characters, the idealized and inspired environments, and the quest for transcendence. In varying ways, these texts illustrate that those residues continued to color the mutating romance form, even as that form soaked up the freshly secularizing and psychologizing tinctures of twentieth-century modernity. Close readings of these texts by Orczy, Barclay, and Glyn illustrate how they embody twentieth-century tendencies in the historical romance, the religious romance, and the erotic romance. I also elaborate further in this chapter on the affinity between the newly secularized women’s romance and an emerging modernism. In ambivalent response to the dispiriting verisimilitude of such realist texts as those of Bennett and Galsworthy, the most popular romances of the Edwardian decade often attempted both to counter a naturalistic pessimism with romantic idealism and to represent male-female intimacy more honestly and “realistically” than in previous romance literature. In so doing, many early twentieth-century romances share with an emergent modernist fiction the quest for the readerly experience of transcendence through representations of characters’ psychic interiority, especially via secular conceptions of the forces of the unconscious.

The forces of the unconscious are also on prominent display in British imperial romances, though often in ways that are unintended by their authors, as discussed in chapter 5, “The Imperial Erotic Romance.” The masculine adventure romances of the British fin de siècle through the 1920s, such as the popular works of Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling, have long been noted to feature orientalist or primitivist versions of the non-European Other. But how do these cultural projections appear in the most popular imperial romances by women—in Victoria Cross’s *Anna Lombard*, Ethel Dell’s

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The Way of an Eagle, and E. M. Hull's *The Sheik*? Like their masculinist counterparts, these romances do not schematize the forces of good and evil simplistically along racial lines, yet they do deploy the associated tropes of the "dark races" to conjure representations of uncivilized brutality. At the same time, these texts' anxious cathexes on racial identities elaborate new discourses of desire. The narratorial anxiety that the female protagonist may be raped by the "native" male is balanced, as on a knife-edge, with the libidinality of the encounter with a romanticized, "primitive" masculinity. Generating the story line is a complex of tensions between a self-willed British woman and an exoticized man; as in the traditional romance form, resolution arrives with the lovers' achievement of transcendence through one another, but here that consummation features the safe dissolution of the threatening, nonprotective side of masculine violence—which has been troped as racially Other. In light of postcolonial theory (I rely most on the work of Jenny Sharpe and Robert J. C. Young), we discern in these texts an ambivalent fascination with the "ungovernable" Indian or Arab male. The economies of desire circulating through these novels' "exotic" locales anticipate the metaphors of erotic *agon* and romantic transport in the Harlequin- and Mills-and-Boon-style romances of the mid to late twentieth century. At the same time, as I show at the end of the chapter, Cross, Dell, and Hull share continuities with the modernist primitivism of Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, two of Lawrence's novels, and the journals and stories of Mansfield.

The argument of chapter 6, "Modernism and the Romance of Interiority," is that high modernism and popular romance fiction may have actually served similar psychic functions for their early twentieth-century readers, and that just as significant as the formal differences between these literary modes may have been their shared differences from the "high realism" inherited from the nineteenth century. This section takes as its opening exhibit an early short story by Katherine Mansfield, "The Tiredness of Rosabel." Written on the eve of modernist experimentation in British fiction, Mansfield's narrative offers a rich vignette of a day in the life of a shopgirl in a London millinery. The text combines elements of three literary modes—realist *mise-en-scène*, romance fantasy, modernist interiority—as it poignantly and self-referentially depicts the consolations of romance narrative amid the boredom and unfulfillment

of everyday life in urban modernity. Mansfield's story anticipates how both the early twentieth-century romance and modernist fiction rely on the pleasures and mysteries of the quest for transcendence to enchant their subject matter and their reading audiences and in so doing offer a powerful contrast to the sober demystifications of realist and naturalist literary practice. In contrast to the social diagnoses of literary realism—intended to awaken, educate, even galvanize readers into action—the metaphors and symbols of both modernist and popular-romance narratives may have acted therapeutically upon the anxieties and longings that readers' quotidian social experience either actively engendered or did little to allay or satisfy.

I conclude the chapter by positing that popular romance fiction offered its substitute fulfillments unself-consciously, whereas some of the modernist narratives of Mansfield, Joyce, Lawrence, West, and Woolf treat the very problem of a social realm in which the mass-cultural compensations for and diversions from readers' social alienation should have to exist at all. Yet these modernists may be said to offer parallel compensations of their own, which, if considerably more intellectual in their complex symbolic systems, also succeed because of their psycho-emotional appeal, their affective—as opposed to abstract or “cerebral”—consolations, avowals, even affirmations. Lest we think that such an association flatters popular romance, we might consider its converse, the fact that modernism has itself been accused of an escapism not dissimilar from that of the romance, through a “perfected poetic apparatus” that “must be realistic in order in another moment to recontain that realism which it has awakened.”¹⁴ For all its utility and rationalism, for all its acuity and candor, literary realism alone was not—is not—enough for many readers. Through their venerable but renewed, humble but idealist means, the romance writers considered here followed the same directive as the high modernists: the imperative to loft us, however fleetingly or intermittently, into a refashioned symbolic order that would bridge us across the pain of the historical Real.