

review essays

studies of popular fiction for women

ENDLESS RAPTURE: Rape, Romance and the Female Imagination. By Helen Hazen. New York: Charles Scribner, 1983. \$12.95. INSATIABLE APPETITES: Twentieth-Century American Women's Bestsellers. By Madonna Miner. Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press. 1984. \$27.95. LOVING WITH A VENGEANCE: Mass-produced Fantasies for Women. By Tania Modleski. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon. 1982. New York: Methuen, 1984. \$6.95. FANTASY AND RECONCILIATION: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction. By Kay Mussell. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press. 1984. \$27.95.

While Alfred Kazin reinvents the canon for his literary procession and postmodernist critical stars explode through wide discursive spaces, a number of women scholars have pulled anchor, sailed out into popular culture, and begun to examine what the popular romance says about women readers, writers, and literary characters. They analyze overt and covert reasons as to why popular romances are so appealing—why hundreds of thousands of women purchase the millions of romances that are published annually; why, as late as 1981, writers of popular romances leagued together to form a national organization; and even why scholars—Russell Nye and John Cawelti being among the originals—have used the artifacts of mass culture to help explain us to ourselves.

Mussell, Miner, Modleski, Radway, and, to some extent, Hazen have the common goal of trying to explain the popularity of romances, be they Gothic, Regency, Harlequin, or other. For the most part they acknowledge that current marketing practices and promos account for some of the high sales of the novels, but they are nevertheless intrigued by other, and more hidden, causes. These writers, as a group, uniformly trace the origins of popular romances back to Richardson's *Pamela*. They address the centrality of the seduction/rape in these books and even commonly agree that fantasy and imagination are their territorial imperatives. Similarities among them cease to exist at this point, however, for the critical approaches they use span the continuum from textual analysis to reader

response and the voices they adopt range from reasoned, academic presentation to outrage.

Mussel reasonably, even tolerantly, puzzles over the occurrence of paradoxes: 1) the sales of stories that limit women to sex roles skyrocket at one and the same time that their role options in contemporary life begin to expand and 2) women readers (and all but a marginal 1%-2% of the readers are women) escape from the limitations of their lives by entering into fantasies that, in fact, reaffirm the very limitation from which they try to escape. To document her thesis that, in the contemporary popular romance, heroines attain identity only in terms dictated by patriarchal norms, Mussell patiently scrutinizes representative texts. She develops typologies of romances (six), describes settings, analyzes characteristic courtship and domestic tests, depicts types of heroes and delineates patterns of action. She discusses how all elements ultimately center on the moment in the heroine's life when she is "given" an identity by her male suitor. And, finally, she puzzles over why adult women would read this same formula time and time again, offering as partial explanation their need to reaffirm the importance of their own (limited) choice of identities. Throughout her discussion, Mussell takes care not to belittle or deride readers of these formulaic stories but, especially as she moves into her conclusion, clearly conveys a sense of regret that they spend their time reading these, rather than works that would enlarge their experience and vision of life.

Miner also studies the text and finds in five twentieth century bestsellers, *Gone with the Wind*, *Forever Amber*, *Peyton Place*, *Valley of the Dolls* and *Scruples* not one but two women-specific plots. Arguing that women read different plots than men (who would read the opening chapters of *Gone with the Wind*, for example, as Civil War documentary), she identifies the women-specific plots as 1) the surface plot which depicts the heroine's pursuit of heterosexual love (Scarlett and Brett) and 2) the submerged—and hence more powerful—plot which shows the heroine in search of absent mother and home (Scarlett returning to Tara though her mother is dead). Using Chodorow's theories of women's psychosexual development, Minor quietly insists that the mother-daughter "web of desire" in the submerged plots attracts women readers. The writers of these bestselling romances have given voice to readers' subconscious, ongoing fantasy that relates their acceptance of mothers and even of selves as mothers to the pre-oedipal phases of women's separation and individuation. The submerged stories transform their primitive childish fantasies into adult, civilized meanings.

Modleski, too, uses psychological theories to uncover submerged texts in her study of Harlequin romances, Gothic novels and soap operas. As her title, *Loving with a Vengeance*, suggests, this critic contends that mass-produced fantasies for women continue to succeed commercially because they covertly express women's anger, resistance and outrage. The three types of fantasies she examines correspond to the marker events which characterize women in a patriarchal society: courtship (Harlequin), marriage (Gothic) and motherhood (soaps). Each type of fantasy, in turn, has a submerged plot or counterplot that expresses a psychological resistance or rage. For example, the heroine in the dominant plot of a seduction story avoids the seducer's advances though she (as the reader knows) longs for him; in the submerged plot she counteracts her powerlessness and fear of intimacy by bringing him to his knees before she acquiesces to his proposal. These fantasies, Modleski argues, please readers (and viewers) because they localize their diffuse and general sense of powerlessness; the readers, moreover, enjoy even more power than the heroine has because they (though not she) know the outcome of the plot.

These studies should be compared to Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*:

Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature, reviewed in our last issue (Spring 1986). Whereas Miner and the more controversial Modleski rely on psychological theories to explain the appeal of popular romances, Radway relies on field research: questionnaires and interviews. More so than any of the titles being reviewed, her *Reading the Romance* must be taken literally—she moves “outside” the text and into an analysis of “the reading of” romances. What she wants to know is why women continue to read romances and what happens to them as they are reading. To discover this, she uses techniques from ethnography, literary criticism (especially reader response theories) and psychology and she also balances academic discussion with market studies. By consulting a “composite reader,” Radway concludes that the act of reading rather than the text yields meaning: women use reading as an escape and as a reaffirmation of choices made. When she analyzes readers’ responses (using Propp’s functions as a structuring device) Radway, too, finds the unconscious playing a vigorous role in women’s “escape” reading. Like many contemporary critics, she also uses Chodorow’s psychology of women to illustrate the need women have for a fiction that tells their multiple stories. Radway contends, in fact, that the history of the ideal romantic heroine and patterns of female personality development parallel each other and thus help account for the popularity of these novels.

Hazin’s *Endless Rapture; Rape, Romance and the Female Imagination* bears mention only because it illustrates how scholarship on timely issues can subvert itself. At the beginning, Hazen appears to depict the same dichotomy between fact and fiction, conscious and unconscious thought, and overt and covert plots that structure the other books. And so she does, but in a skewed way that separates actual rape from imaginary rape and describes the latter as natural and healthy, as part of a response to biological destiny. Early on in the book, though, Hazen’s already argumentative tone shifts to insult and innuendo against those who would oppose her thesis—feminists, and, more specifically, academic feminists. If one wondered whether several of the above texts were not weighted down with too much scholarly apparatus, Hazen makes one grateful for the ordinary courtesies of scholarship which they demonstrate. Her book shows how unfocused and vengeful issues get out of control.

Viewing the works as a whole, one can conclude that these women writers and scholars concur that popular romances reveal truths about patterns of psychosocial development that are unique to women. To varying degrees they concur that popular romances and readers of popular romances are part of our literary procession. They even suggest, some more obliquely than others, that readers of popular romances have found what I identify as the woman’s voice Carol Gilligan defines. The readers, in fact, form—paradoxically as it might seem—a community of “escape” readers.

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