# ROMANCE: THE ONCE AND FUTURE QUEEN

*by John Cawelti*

***Foredestined!** A silken fervor caressed them, a flame consuming beautiful Star Lamont and dashing Captain Troy Stewart in a wave of ripening desire beneath the southern sky.*

***Foresworn!** Across a fiery landscape scorched by the fury of slave revolt and the tumult of war—across the oceans and across the years—theirs is a story of surpassing grandeur, from a moment's shipboard encounter through a lifetime of everlasting love.*

***Forever!***

Everywhere one turns these days the paperback stalls sport torrid scenes of dashing Regency gallants and aggressive, wind-blown ladies embracing hungrily on the storm-swept moors. We are in the midst of a tremendous revival of romantic fiction—the last thing one would have expected from this supposedly cynical, alienated age.

The statistics are striking. Harlequin Books, a paperback series devoted entirely to romance, increased U.S. sales from 14,000 in 1966 to 50 million in 1976. (That same year, Rosemary Rogers' *Wicked Loving Lies* led the Avon Books list with over 3 million copies in print.) By 1977, the Harlequin series alone numbered more than 2,000 different titles. Barbara Cartland, who has contributed more than 200 books (*Punishment of a Vixen,* 1977; *The Temptation of Torilla,* 1977) to the romantic flood, likes to speak of the present not as the age of anxiety but the era of romance.

A romance is a special kind of love story presented in a characteristic style and from a particular point of view. In a way, it is the feminine form of the epic, for where the epic uses what Matthew Arnold called the "grand style" to sing of war and adventure, the romance applies that style to love, courtship, and marriage. Like the epic poet, the romance writer works within a highly formalized tradition that rests on familiar conventions of plot and style—florid language, pseudopoetic rhythms, appeals to destiny, and repetitive epithets ("beautiful Star Lamont"). Everything is larger than life.

The romance is above all a woman's story, the one literary form in which the protagonist and point of view are always feminine. (One exception to this general rule, Erich Segal's 1970 best seller *Love Story,* probably owed much of its extraordinary popularity to the way Segal departed from the romance tradition in this respect while nevertheless remaining faithful to the basic formula.) This feminine perspective explains why, despite its popularity, the love story has been given so little scholarly attention: Most scholars have been men.

Contemporary portrayers of the tender passions can trace their craft back in an unbroken line to at least the middle of the 18th century. By contrast, the Western did not begin until James Fenimore Cooper's first "Leatherstocking" novel in 1823, while there was nothing that could really be called a detective story until Edgar Allen Poe's Dupin tales of the 1840s. Science-fiction enthusiasts claim an ancestry going back to ancient times, but the earliest fantasy with most of the characteristics of modern SF was Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* of 1818. The spy thriller is of even more recent origin, emerging around World War I.

### Unedifying Parallels

At least three general categories can be distinguished within the mass of "romantic fiction."

In the Gothics, a plucky heroine is beset by mysterious attackers, fortune hunters, insanity, amnesia, ghosts, or any of numerous other perils before finally being united with the hero. The queen of this genre is Mary Stewart, a topnotch popular writer who ranks with Agatha Christie and Helen MacInnes.

The Harlequin-type romances, on the other hand, are generally peopled by clean, delightful young men and women; even the jealous woman is usually generous and understanding. The characters are incontrovertibly moral; sex before marriage is unthinkable.

Finally, there is the recent phenomenon of so-called "women's fiction" that exploded with the 1972 publication of *The Flame and the Flower* by Kathleen Woodiwiss. In contrast to the Harlequins, these books are set in the past, and are brim-

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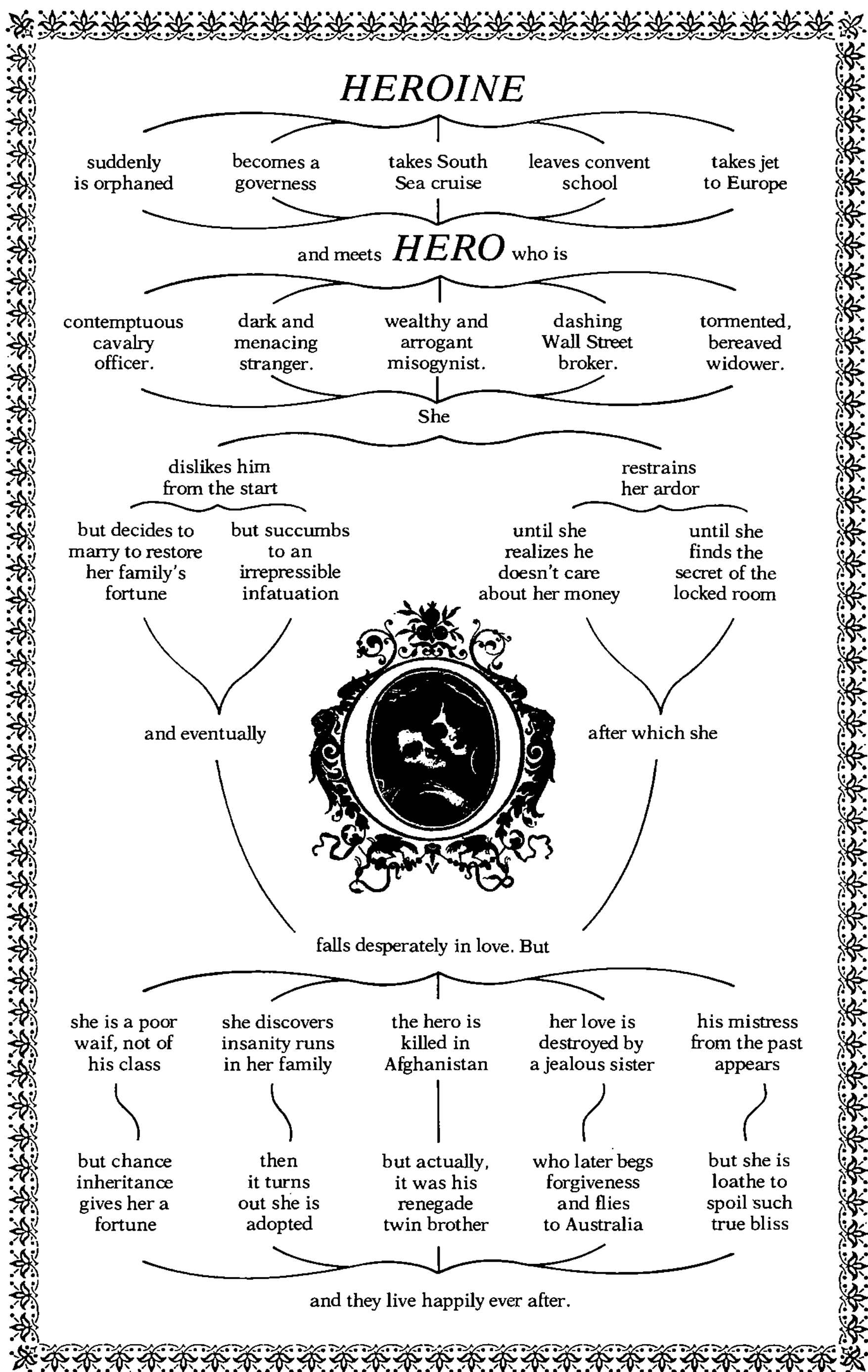
ming with rape, adultery, and prostitution—but, oddly, of a rather romantic, idealized kind.

The less edifying male analogue to romantic fiction is pornography, and the historical parallels between the two are striking. Just as the romance tradition originated in the 18th century with writers like Samuel Richardson, so the first modern pornographic work, *Fanny Hill,* was written in the same period and reads in many ways like a burlesque version of Richardson's *Pamela.* The Gothic romances of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, like those of Mrs. Radcliffe (the most popular novelist in England in the 1790s) and "Monk" Lewis, developed the motif of the alien seducer, which was soon reflected pornographically in *The Lustful Turk* (1828). In the 20th century, the proliferation of styles of romantic fiction has been paralleled by a similar elaboration of the types of pornography—thanks in part to the erosion of "anti-smut" laws. At the present time, romance and pornography are among the healthiest segments, in commercial terms, of the American publishing industry.

### The Enchanted World

Parodied, ridiculed, or sullied, the romantic formula has nevertheless proved surprisingly durable over the centuries. Whatever the specific genre—Gothic, Harlequin, or "women's fiction"—the story usually begins with the heroine suddenly being thrust into a new situation. This can be a new job or a long voyage. It can be the consequence of death in the family. For Sara Claremont in Roberta Leigh's *Too Young To Love* (1977), it begins with news of her father's remarriage: to a "young and unknown fashion model called Helen who had come to promote British fashions at the Embassy and had also, it seemed, promoted herself to its Ambassador." This initial change of situation pushes the heroine into a state of affairs that is new, uncertain, and fraught with possibilities. The new world the heroine enters might be called the romantic or "enchanted" world, a place where evil and danger lurk—but also where people fall deeply and permanently in love.

*Be it a brooding Gothic, a pristine Harlequin, or X-rated "women's fiction," the romance generally begins with the heroine forsaking her old life for an "enchanted world." There she meets her ideal lover. One plot line works to keep the lovers together; another works to keep them apart—until the last few pages.*


HEROINE
suddenly is orphaned
becomes a governess
takes South Sea cruise
leaves convent school
takes jet to Europe
and meets HERO who is
contemptuous cavalry officer.
dark and menacing stranger.
wealthy and arrogant misogynist.
dashing Wall Street broker.
tormented, bereaved widower.
She
dislikes him from the start
restrains her ardor
but decides to marry to restore her family's fortune
but succumbs to an irrepressible infatuation
until she realizes he doesn't care about her money
until she finds the secret of the locked room
and eventually
after which she
falls desperately in love. But
she is a poor waif, not of his class
she discovers insanity runs in her family
the hero is killed in Afghanistan
her love is destroyed by a jealous sister
his mistress from the past appears
but chance inheritance gives her a fortune
then it turns out she is adopted
but actually, it was his renegade twin brother
who later begs forgiveness and flies to Australia
but she is loathe to spoil such true bliss
and they live happily ever after.

Here she encounters the hero—invariably older and more experienced than the heroine, as well as handsome, courageous, daring. He is frequently also wealthier and of higher social standing. Often the hero's easy superiority strikes the heroine as a mark of vanity and arrogance—the first of many misunderstandings. Here is how the hero is introduced in Sella Frances Nel's *Destiny Is a Flower* (1973):

> He was tall and slim-hipped, resilient grace being apparent as he slipped his thumbs into the waistband of tan whipcord slacks and surveyed her, almost contemptuously.

If this seems somewhat reminiscent of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice,* that is not surprising. Austen's novel (1813) is one of the archetypal models for romance fiction.

From the moment of the initial meeting, it is clear that the hero and heroine are ideally matched and strongly attracted to one another. Before long, however, circumstances will conspire to keep them apart. These circumstances usually occupy the entire middle section of a romance and are the chief source of suspense and uncertainty. They invariably involve elements of suspicion, mystery, or unfaithfulness. In Phyllis A. Whitney's *Lost Island* (1970), for example, the heroine has borne the hero a child as a result of a youthful affair. Unfortunately, the hero thinks the child was actually mothered by another woman, his present wife. Though still in love with the heroine, he feels morally obligated to his wife.

### Avowals in the Graveyard

The culminating moment of a romance comes when, obstacles surmounted, the heroine and hero avow their love and make plans for marriage. After much suspense, danger, and misunderstanding, the final avowal—as in this typical passage from Sara Craven's *A Gift for a Lion* (1977)—symbolizes a complete and permanent relationship:

> She was really crying now, regret for her own foolishness and lack of trust mingling with relief that she had been so disastrously wrong.
> "Ah no, *cara*." There was no mistaking the tenderness in his voice. "The time for tears is past. I ask you again, Joanna, will you be my wife?"

Many of these final avowal scenes take place in settings with traditional associations of magic and enchantment—caves, dark

## ERASTUS BEADLE AND THE DIME NOVEL

*Mass-market fiction was born in 1860 in New York City when publisher Erastus Beadle introduced the first in his series of (literally) "Dime Novels"—primarily Westerns and adventure tales for boys. Under the inspired guidance of editor Orville J. Victor, Beadle's total sales between 1860 and 1865 approached 5 million copies; within a decade, thousands of titles were in print. As historian Henry Nash Smith noted in his 1950 classic,* Virgin Land, *"an audience for fiction had been discovered that had not previously been known to exist." Said Smith:*

Victor's contribution to Beadle's success was the perfection of formulas that could be used by any number of writers, and the inspired alteration of these formulas according to the changing demands of the market. Victor was what would now be called a born "mass" editor; that is, he had an almost seismographic intuition of the nature, degree, and direction of changes in popular tastes.

Writers on Victor's staff composed at great speed and in unbelievable quantity; many of them could turn out a thousand words an hour for 12 hours at a stretch. Prentiss Ingraham, whose father wrote *The Prince of the House of David,* produced more than 600 novels, besides plays and short stories. He is said to have written a 35,000-word tale on one occasion in a day and a night. Fiction produced in these circumstances virtually takes on the character of automatic writing. The unabashed and systematic use of formulas strips from the writing every vestige of the interest usually sought in works of the imagination; it is entirely subliterary. On the other hand, such work tends to become an objectified mass dream, like the moving pictures, the soap operas, or the comic books that are the present-day equivalents of the Beadle stories. The individual writer abandons his own personality and identifies himself with the reveries of his readers. It is the presumably close fidelity of the Beadle stories to the dream life of a vast inarticulate public that renders them valuable to the social historian and the historian of ideas.

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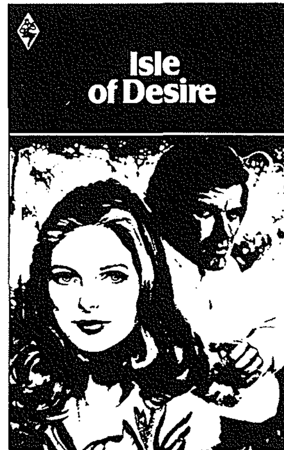
forests, twilight graveyards, midnight beaches—but now the aura of enchantment can be carried over into the light of the day. Often this is done quite literally with two avowal scenes, one in the enchanted place where the lovers' total passion for each other is revealed, and another, later, in a more ordinary place where all misunderstandings are resolved.

When this double avowal appears, the enchanted scene




*Both* Pride and Prejudice *(1813) and* Isle of Desire *(1977) spring from a common romance tradition, a point emphasized by modern packaging.*

often contains a final misunderstanding that threatens to keep the lovers apart, though they now know that they will be satisfied only with each other; in a poignant interlude, they vow eternal fidelity. Then the final misunderstanding is resolved and the enchanted world rejoins the ordinary world—forever. For even if we know that enchantment is the most ephemeral of phenomena, it seems above all the task of romance to deny this knowledge.

### Great Expectations

That, at least, is one basic function of romance. There are others. For instance, the romance also addresses itself to two problems that have traditionally been a part of many women's experience: the legal, economic, and psychological vulnerability that, until recent years, all but the most fortunate women have shared; and the tension between dependence and independence.

Women have always had to cope with the ambiguities of their identities as women and as individuals. Traditional customs and values have dictated that a woman establish a dependent relationship with a male—preferably a husband—and that she find identity in that dependence. As an individual, however, she seeks independence and personal accomplishment. The formulaic structure of romance works to embody a resolution of

this ambiguity by creating a perfect balance. In *Indigo Nights* (1977), Olivia O'Neill spells out this "balance" in a neatly contractual fashion:

> "Will you promise to take me with you wherever you go?"
> "Undoubtedly."
> "Allow me to run my own household and speak to the servants in their own tongue?"
> "Willingly!"
> "And dress as I like?"
> "How can I stop you?"
> "And give me"—she hesitated, blushing a little—"half a dozen children who look just like you?"

Several other factors are involved in the remarkable persistence of the romance tradition. First of all, romances present an idealized picture of basic mores. With their portrayal of an exciting courtship leading to a perfect marriage, they help younger women find relief from the confusions of adolescent sexuality while holding out the hope of a permanent and secure love relationship. Romances also convey some sense of the deep significance of the marital choice, thus helping to perpetuate the patterns of monogamous marriage and domesticity. For older women, romances are perhaps more a mode of escape or accommodation, even a palliative for the dashed expectations raised by romantic fiction in the first place. As feminist critics have pointed out, romances may be supporting cultural stability at a high price: the fostering of excessive expectations about sexual roles and relationships. They are no doubt right. And if current notions of masculinity and femininity, now under heavy feminist attack, change a great deal, the romance may change as well. If it doesn't, it may find itself going the way of the Norse saga or the nickelodeon.