Wallpaper Historicism

Chronotopic Regency romance, popular history and British cultural imperialism

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to discuss the ways in which mass-market historical romantic fiction (more specifically romantic fiction which takes place during the English Regency period) may contribute to the broader cultural markers for a given period of history. This conversation is situated within a broader context of historical fiction's role in the assembly of popular historicity through mass-market appeal, popular culture.

The thesis establishes modern Regency romance novels as descendants of the works of contemporary Regency author Jane Austen and are therefore understood as being relevant to Edward Said's 1993 discussion of Austen's work and cultural representations of empire in *Culture and Imperialism.* It also utilizes Bakhtin's concept of the literary chronotope to describe the manifestation of a purely fictional sense of space and time which takes on the appearance of historical setting, thus influencing popular conception of a simplified, distilled and sanitized version of history.

The thesis traces the development of the modern historical romance novel (and historical romance erotica) throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century. It follows the trends and changes of historical representations and political ideology through the genre's most significant influences from the early works of Georgette Heyer through the 1970s Bodice Ripper phenomenon and into the modern state of "BookTok" romance novels.

Keywords: *Romance novels, Regency, historical fiction, popular history, chronotope, Georgette Heyer*

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Introduction

This thesis aims to explore historical romantic fiction (and historical romantic erotica) as tools for cultural maintenance through their impact on popular history. Because popular mass-market romantic novels are a descendant from British romantic novels, primarily the Regency romance genre, they should be subject to the same forms of critique in regards to the role they may play in perpetuating cultural narratives. Utilizing Said's *Culture and Imperialism* as a frame, I explore the popular-mass marker romantic novel as cultural influence over popular conceptions of England's Regency period (1811-1820).

When discussing the topic of romance novels as a subject with friends and family, the conversation often led to the sentiment that whilst romance novels may be *worthy* of academic discussion they were not to be taken as seriously as proper literature. Due to the prevalence of these complaints, I began to take closer note of these conversations as a form of autoethnographic data. With participant permission I began to take note of these discussions both in person and online. As I intended to capture my experience having personal conversations, I decided not to have formal or informal interviews as I had concerns it would cause the people I was speaking to to attempt to sound more formal or academic.

I explore authors in different eras of Regency romance publishing from the original influences of Jane Austen to the meticulously researched Georgette Heyer and her contemporary imitators to the 1970s bodice ripper and into the currently evolving state of historical romance. Through each of these iterations there is a distinct frame set around how it negotiates with the historical Regency period and its fiction from a critical perspective.

First, I detail popular historiography and its relationship to personalized formations of the past. I then detail the boundaries of the romance genre, its role in escapism, and discuss the concept of the Regency romance specific "wallpaper historical" and its relation to popular

formation of aesthetically distilled, selectively accurate historical ideals. I also discuss the pathway from the contemporary Regency/Georgian novel into the 20th and 21st Century's rapidly growing and morphing historic regency romance genre.

As I am engaging in feminist discussions of the role pornography plays as a potentially problematic cultural object, I must make a clarification that the intention of the thesis does not demonize production or consumption of pornography in general. Negative discourses will be addressed–especially in discussion of the 1970s bodice ripper–but, this work discusses erotica as a neutral form of representational cultural expression and influence with important social and political implications.

Popular History

To explore historical fiction and historiography, we need to engage history as a narrative which is mutable through the form it appears within. In *Fiction for the Purposes of History,* Richard Slotkin argues the concept of 'history' is abstract and nonstatic:

> Events undoubtedly occur: the Declaration of Independence was signed on 4 July, 1776, yesterday it rained, Napoleon was short, I had a nice lunch. But to be construed as 'history' such facts must be selected and arranged on some sort of plan, made to resolve some sort of question which can only be asked subjectively and from a position of hindsight. Thus all history writing requires a fictive or imaginary representation of the past. (Slotkin, 2005, pg. 222)

This 'popular' approach to history as expressed–and constructed–through media focuses on "the ways in which the past is communicated to the present largely outside the academy and the institutions of state." (de Groot, 2012, pg. 121). De Groot argues that "the cultural representations of history are far more significant in the formation of the historical imagination

than 'actual' history.” wondering further, “might it be the case that, apart from certain indexes of pastness such as the built environment, landscape, possible museums and heritage sites, most global historical understanding comes from cultural manifestations?" (de Groot, 2012, pg. 122). Though popular history appears and is explored through many formats, the medium discussed most presently will be the historical novel (with occasional exploration of the historical novel and its adaptations)

Readers and authors champion the historical novel as a vehicle for learning "because historical fiction is written in a way to be easy and engaging to read, the dynamics between people come alive, leap off the page, and make the history effortless to learn and understand." (Rodale, 2015, pg. 201). This appeal to historical fiction as a means of accessibility encourages more reading of historical fiction in non-academic spheres. The novel also has the benefit as a site of political exploration and has "provided writers with ways of conceptualizing and challenging experience of nationhood, history, and selfhood [...] It is a mode of writing that has been fundamentally experimental and political” (de Groot, 2016, pg. 263)

The *ability* for cultural depictions to influence audience understanding of history is by and large a neutral concept. "The argument made most frequently on behalf of historical fiction is that, if responsibly done, it can be an effective instrument of popular education; or at least a means for stimulating interest in the study of history." (Slotkin, 2005, pg. 222). The concept is problematized when the popular history’s presentation is taken for granted as truth, even subliminally, and internalizes ideological narratives rooted in authors and readership.

Historical fiction readers encountering works during times of empire or exploitation, contemporary to the period or modern, are finding an element of escapism or fantasy within that narrative. As Said says, this does not make them inherently politically aligned with the historical

time period, however, there is a degree of nostalgia in the consumption of a lot of historical fiction:

> Many people in England probably feel a certain remorse or regret about their nation's Indian experience, but there are also many people who miss the good old days even though the value of these days, the reason they ended, and their own attitudes toward native nationalism are all unresolved, still volatile issues. (Said, 1994, pg. 17)

In the same vein Said affirms he has no intent to condemn the novels he discusses (Said, 1994, pg. 12), this thesis is at no point a condemnation of historical romance novels nor the people who read them. Rather it is an encouragement to remain mindful of the ideological implications made and perpetuated both by the novels' contents and the treatment of their potential as tools of cultural mythos making.

Relationships to "The Past"

History is a narrative construction making an attempt to contextualize and understand entire eras into language. Historical fiction in that sense familiarizes readers to the abstract concept of 'the past' into something concrete and tangible through expressing a representation audiences can relate themselves to. Through this process, centuries of time and billions of perspectives, decisions, mistakes and achievements are compiled into narratively recognizable and easy to follow-along understandings. This can be vaguely summarized in the oft-quoted "history is written by the victors".

Surviving primary accounts are maintained through networks of archives, personal family history (oral or documented) and contemporary fictional depictions which are all later reinterpreted by individuals whose only possible comprehension is rooted in the archival traditions of those who lived between the Then and the Now. Contemporary historical fiction may act as an educational aid in compiling and contextualizing a tangled ball of history,

restructuring it as “distillations, or simplifications, or a set of choices made by an author that are far less messy and mixed up than reality.” (Said,1994, pg. 68). The many varieties and the subgenres of historical fiction (including the historical mass-market romance) make the attempt to condense an entire period of empire into intertextual exchanges of information between the title and final page of a novel.

Historical fiction is not restricted to the classification of ‘victors’ for exploration and experimentation of history. Through its format, "the historical novel form has provided a means for writers around the world to experiment and mediate upon identity, colony, gender and selfhood." (de Groot, 2016, pg. 263). Fictional novels act as essential texts for exploring perspectives outside the mainstream, locating themselves as “intimate participants in the production and reproduction of the logical (or illogical) systems are matrices through which we are defined and define ourselves." (Fletcher, 2016, pg. 14)

The Romance Novel

According to the Romance Writers of America, a non-profit trade association who provide resources for professional romance writers, there are two non-negotiable elements which make up the romance novel: 1) A central love story and 2) An emotionally satisfying ending *(About the Romance Genre*, n.d.). The relationship between hero and heroine[1] which forms the central love story may have any number of hurdles from beginning to end, so long as the final destination of that ending is a happily ever after. Outside of this formula, romance novels may take on any variation in setting, length, time period, language, partnership(s), sub-genre, theme.

Although many popular romance novels fall into a conjoined series, a true romance *novel* plot revolves around a central love-plot and a *necessary* Happily Ever After. A novel can

[1] Commonly used terminology for the male and female protagonists.

be romantic in nature, documenting the trials and tribulations of a central love story, but a tragic ending for one or both hero and heroine will result in an immediate rejection from consideration as a *romance* novel. Pamela Regis' definitions are more rigid as to exclude other works of popular fiction which may have a romantic plotline but are what she calls "near miss[es]" (Regis, 2003, pg. 48) from a true romance novel. Regis, surveying 20th century romances broadens her similar definition to include eight *essential* elements to qualify: 1) An initially corrupting society to be reformed by the novel, 2) an encounter between the hero and heroine, 3) an acknowledged attraction, 4) a conflict which keeps them apart, 5) a moment of hopelessness ("the point of ritual death"), 6) new information which ends or overcomes the conflict, 7) declaration of love, 8) betrothal, Regis' term for the Happily Ever After (Regis, 2003, pg. 30). Each of these plot milestones are included to ensure the heroine's journey takes her "from encumbered to free" (Regis, 2003, pg. 30).

Regardless of how broad or narrow the chosen definition of a romance novel is, the diagnosis of a Happily Ever After is a universal requirement. As described by historical romance author Maya Rodale: "romance readers know that their romance absolutely will end happily, with the obstacles overcome, the couple in love, a bright future ahead of them, and all subplots and mysteries resolved." (Rodale, 2015, pg. 59). For this reason some readers reject famous romantic/love-plot novels such as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind (1936)* or Diana Gabaldon's wildly successful *Outlander (1991-)* series from consideration.

The romance genre (as it appears in modern day mass-market publications) has a long lineage dating back to the early days of the modern novel itself. When tracing the genre back to its origins "scholars of romance novels usually trace the foundational plots and characters of the genre back to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847)" (Teo, 2012, pg. 69-70). Culturally, the legacy of *Pride and Prejudice* dominates the image of not only romance novels, but of iconic love stories in

general. “Pride and Prejudice is the finest love story of the era – perhaps of any era – and it continues to exert an enormous hold on the popular imagination, for to “fall in love” today still means in many ways to fall in love like Elizabeth and Darcy.” (Morrison, 2019, pg. 94). The concept of lovers conquering hurdles which keep them apart–in this case, class issues between members of the British peerage–and ending happily ever after isn’t going anywhere.

Romance novels and their readers can be a hard genre to keep track of, not only because of its many subgenres and communities, but also because there is *a lot of it.* In 2015 romance made up 29% of published fiction (Romance Readers by the Numbers, 2016). These numbers are also skewed by the prominence of self-publishing on various platforms, meaning a large number of publications may escape the statistics. For decades the romance genre has been one overwhelmingly read, written and published by women. A number of studies show women as the dominant readers of romance over the mass-market’s development in the 20th century into the 21st. The same Nielsen study showed 84% of romance readers identified as female (Romance Readers by the Numbers, 2016). Commissioned by the RWA, “The Romance Book Buyer 2017: A Study by NPD Book for Romance Writers of America” (*About the romance genre, n.d.*) identified 82% of the 2000 surveyed readers were female at an average age of 35-39 years old.

When tallying the purported dominance of the popular romance novel across publishing, finding relevant and accurate data is difficult. Many publicly available sources which make claims toward a 2020s rise in romance popularity or profit utilize data gathered during the 2010s, speculating toward an exponential increase in success. The RWA declares the romance genre as “booming” with sales making up 23% of the overall fiction market (*About the romance genre, n.d.*). The most recent data which they provide is the NPD survey from 2017.

One of the most commonly cited sources is a series of studies done by Dimitrije Curcic for WordsRated. Curcic’s data appears in locations such as the BBC, The Guardian, Forbes,

NPR (United States) and by dozens of blogs and/or newsletters from romance authors and readers alike touting the success of their oft maligned industry. However, Curcic's data is primarily sourced from surveys with little information on sample size or peer-review.

Given its prominence in popular discourse (often the root of claims romance is a "billion dollar industry", according to Curcic's data, in 2022 romance novels generated "over $1.44 billion in revenue, making romance the highest-earning genre of fiction." and contributed "to 66% of adult fiction growth" (Curcic, 2022).

More concrete publisher data is held behind high paywalls or restricted only to industry professionals. Diane L. Velasquez and Jennifer Campbell-Meier acknowledge this issue, stating "In the United States, the only statistics available freely are on websites. It appears that recent statistics may have been purchased by bloggers and used in content to drive traffic, but the source of the web data is often unclear." (Campbell-Meier & Velasquez, 2024, pg. 337). Their 2024 study attempts to quantify the booming success of the romance genre by analyzing trends of community requests for romance novels across library catalogs, limiting the data and isolating the data toward traditional publishing.

Finding more recent internal publishing statistics is not *entirely* impossible. Romance publishing juggernaut Harlequin Enterprises and its subsidiaries sold 131 million books in 2024 (Harlequin Enterprises ULC: A Global Success Story, n.d.). During the onset of COVID-19 pandemic and the various lock-downs which followed, fiction reading skyrocketed. The general cause of this phenomena roots itself in the belief that romance is a genre of escapism and stress relief, as will be discussed later. This and the rising dominance of online romance fiction fan-spaces create an image of a flourishing romance community.

Concerns of what exposure to the novel could do to the minds of its readers emerged alongside the rise of the popular novel itself. In a broader piece concerning the risks of female authors and readers, essayist William Rathbone Greg said in 1859: "We incline to think that a

far larger number of persons receive the bias of their course and the complexion of their character from reading books than from hearing sermons." (King & Plunkett, 1990, as cited by Rodale, 2015, pg. 8). Where stories of romance were concerned, the main danger surrounded what they could do to the expectations of love, marriage and partnership among their female readers. These concerns led a form of moral panic around the potential long-term risks posed by women's unfettered access to novels surrounding:

> The influence of the romantic experiences of fictional females on unmarried women readers was an especially sensitive point, as cultural watchdogs fretted that novel reading would lead not to the imitation of Pamela's virtue, but to unrealistic expectations about marriage. The perverted imagination would devolve to wasted lives and bitter disappointments. Novels threatened to make readers do too much, stirring up passions that could find satisfaction only in illicit sexual activity, and too little, inducing indolence and indifference to real life. (Keen, 2007 pg. 37)

These fears of the romance's supposed impact on It leads to a telling implication that in desiring the kind of love present in these stories, these readers are attempting the impossible. It was believed that "delusional hopes, corrupted desires, and a damaging unawareness of the real world were negative consequences of reading fiction according to novels' detractors." (Keen, 2007, pg. 45)

Romance Novel Criticism

In her 2003 work *A Natural History of the Romance Novel,* Pamela Regis claims romance novels to be the most popular yet least respected genre in publishing. This is a sentiment present in academic circles as well according to Jayashree Kamblé, the President of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance (*Officers*, 2025). She asserts that romance novels "are (when thought of at all) considered lacking in intellectual merit, stylistic

rigor, or innovation, and indistinguishable from each other." (Kamblé et al., 2021, pg. 1). Kamblé also states "the most enduring feature of romantic fiction (even before mass-market romance novels became a genre) is its history as a target of disapproval." (Kamblé et al., 2021, pg. 269). The earlier stated basic requirements have led to critics of popular romance to disparage the genre as being *too* formulaic and repetitive. This critique is as old as the genre itself.

Good vs. Bad

Most early conversations began with a necessary explanation of the potential merits of discussing romance novels at an academic level. This type of reaction was anticipated as I already felt the need to defend the concept of my subject. It was a commonly held assumption romance novels are 'bad books'. They are poorly written, poorly researched, unrealistic and repetitive to the point the genre becomes a monolith of trashy novels. Regardless of my assertion that being poorly written is not a prerequisite for popular mass-market romance novels, the comments remained a continuous part of the conversation.

One family member (W. Lauritzen, personal communication, August 6, 2025) whom I spoke to made an immediate distinction between 'good' and 'bad' novels, primarily basing her qualifications around the author's intention and authenticity. Comparing romance to other mass-market genres she argued,

> Of course there *is* a genre of romance novels that are just a cash grab. But that's also just like *every* James Patterson novel. It's just a 'people will buy this so here it is.' and there's a million of them. But then there's other romance novels which are what I'd call good (W. Lauritzen, personal communication, August 6, 2025)

When I asked her to clarify what made a novel 'good' she hesitated, saying:

> Is it good when it's in a school? Eh… It's good if it does what it's set out to do. Is it good if it makes readers feel something? Then it's a good book. Is it just to make someone

> horny? Then yeah it's a good book if it does its job. (W. Lauritzen, personal communication, August 6, 2025)

In disparaging the works of James Patterson, W. identifies an often gendered aspect of criticism against the romance genre. As romance is traditionally a ‘woman’s genre’ as Many have made the claim that romance fiction being critiqued more heavily than other mass-market genres is because of its devaluation as women’s literature. Linda J. Lee affirms that “many of the claims levied against it are also true of men’s formulaic fiction, such as detective novels.” (Lee, 2008, pg. 52).

On Romance Readers

For some, the image that remained of the average romance reader was of a hypothetical housewife with a guilty pleasure for schlocky smut in their free time. This impression held onto the impression of romance as something inherently guilty and to be kept secretive. The rise of BookTok (a fan space established on TikTok for creators and their audiences to discuss popular literature) has shifted this image toward a younger figure. Typical romance readers were now teenagers and young women fixated on sexually problematic series and obsessed with spice levels[2]. The anticipated gender of readers had not shifted with most addressing these hypothetical readers using she/her pronouns.

Another friend (G. Kaligian, personal communication, September 14, 2025), one who reads romance novels more regularly deliberately seeks out trending ‘BookTok Favorites’–primarily fantasy romances–in order to read them ironically, scrutinizing dialogue and common tropes. She made a distinction between the novels she seeks out (primarily those published in the 2010s-2020s) and traditional bodice rippers, clarifying she finds them “too cringe” to enjoy and was uncomfortable with the non-consensual nature of the explicit material

[2] The degree of explicit material between the hero and heroine within a romance novel. The more explicitly sexual the novel is, the higher its ‘spice level’.

in bodice rippers. She also cited a general disdain for the euphemistic language common in older romance novels, the prevalence of “member” to refer to a penis, to be more specific.

This is not to say she is engaging with romance novels *incorrectly.* Asserting ‘true’ romance readers must engage with the genre in a way which is undiscriminating with only the utmost respect creates an odd form of reverence, lending itself to readers becoming fiercely defensive of critique. Rather, the issue at hand lies with a refusal to critically engage with the content of mass-market historical romance *at all.* As said by Rodale

> Talking about romance as 'trashy' and 'commercial' reinforces the idea that the primary value of these books is the sales they generate, and not the ideas they champion, how the stories fit into larger cultural conversations, the thoughts the books provoke, or even the quality of writing. (Rodale, 2015, pg. 66-67)

Regardless of if an individual does or does not read romance, the rejection of the genre as having in substance–existing solely as mass-market fluff–denies cultural ideological significance within its content. Novels within the same genre “elaborate and maintain a reality they inherit from other novels, which they rearticulate and repopulate according to their creator’s situation, gifts, predilections." (Said, 1994, pg. 74). Historical romance’s continual operation in the curation of popular history continues these rearticulations with each iteration.

“Escapism”

The popular romance genre carries a reputation for escapist, comfort novels which whisk readers away from personal troubles within their everyday life into the high-drama–yet guaranteed safety–of romancelandia. This escapism does not only factor into interpersonal relationship troubles (or a lack there of) but also broader life struggles. In 2009 the Los Angeles Times referred to the genre as “recession-proof” due to industry success in the United States in spite of economic stagnation (Daum, 2009).

The enticing concept of escape has been tied to mass-market romances (historical and otherwise) in publication and advertisement for decades. According to Jane Radway in her 1990 study, “potential readers of Coventry Romances, for example have been told in coupon ads that ‘month after month Coventry Romances offer you a beautiful new escape route into historical times when love and honor ruled the heart and mind.’” (Radway, 1990, pg. 88). Publishing companies in the 1970s and 1980s–such as Harlequin Enterprises–utilized advertisements drawing a marketing correlation between exotic locations and historical romance along the same level. The exoticization of the location and historical time period was extended to the love affairs between ‘exotic’ heroes and heroines.

The escapism factor allegedly sought by romance readers crosses into discourse around popular historical fiction. When interpreting historical fiction as having easily retrievable worldbuilding, "perhaps historical product is comforting […] it takes us back to a place we recognize, or at least think we do” (de Groot, 2012, pg. 134).

The Regency Romance Genre

The RWA states that “romance novels may have any tone or style, be set in any place or time, and have varying levels of sensuality—ranging from sweet to extremely hot. These settings and distinctions of plot create specific subgenres within romance fiction.” (RWA). Regis’ interpretation of the genre follows effectively the same understanding. As a subgenre, the RWA currently classifies a historical romance novel as any romance novel set prior to 1950. (About the Romance Genre, n.d.)

In some conversations discussing the thesis subject the person I spoke to asked for further clarification of what a Regency historical novel *was.* Rather than explain the political situation or naming the general years in which the subgenre takes place (a more abstract

descriptor for those less familiar with British history), the quickest way to explain was to appeal to popular historical depiction. A quick reference to *Pride and Prejudice* or the *Bridgerton* series was enough to conjure images of ballrooms, empire waistlines and Colin Firth's Mr. Darcy[3] slowly emerging from a lake.

The Regency romance subgenre has a laundry list of genre conventions which entirely structure the popular image of the Regency period, as will be discussed further in the section on chronotopes. In classic examples of the subgenre, characters speak with a distinct dialect and well-defined set of social etiquette rules which dictate the ways in which the hero and heroine navigate their journey towards a Happily Ever After.

Traditional Regency romance novels take place in England broadly during the early 19th Century, overlapping into the late reign of King George III as the autonomous sovereign and even the early Victorian period (1837-). Lovers in Regency romance navigate the social expectations of their period, navigating the well-established code of social etiquette. This society's expectations plug in nicely to the requirements of romance novel's general definitions. The end goal toward some type of 'Happily Ever After' a successful marriage, more ideally to the highest rank of peerage possible. In many Regency romance novels, it is acknowledged that the securing of a 'love match' found on the marriage-mart is a desirable end result of the otherwise necessary task for daughters to find suitable husbands. That is to say, marrying someone you so happen to be in love with.

Despite making up a small, highly privileged percentage of the population, one or both of the hero and heroine in Regency romance is a member of the British aristocracy. The historic members of polite society –anachronistically referred to by Georgette Heyer as the 'Upper Ten Thousand'–are "above all [...] intensely class-conscious" and "lived a privileged, self-indulgent

[3] Refers to the1995 adaptation series directed by Simon Langton. The 2005 film adaptation directed by Joe Wright was also an immediate reference. Those familiar with both adaptations often had *very* strong opinions on which one was superior.

life;birth and family were vital to social acceptance, and social behavior was determined by a complex set of rules of varying flexibility, with different codes of behavior for men and women." (Kloester & Tavendale, 2010, pg. 2-3). Rodale, who has authored a number of Regency romances herself describes the period as "a fun era because there were so many rules of social interaction and courtship to flaunt–or observe." (Rodale, 2015, pg. 205).

Aristocracy were a *gossipy* group, "constantly abuzz with the latest on-dits, discussing every sordid or delicious detail of the newest infidelity, elopement, illegitimate offspring, bankruptcy, social faux pas or other dishonourable act" (Kloester & Tavendale, 2010, pg. 103). Their fictional counterparts are no exception. The role of gossip runs society, impacting everything from what parties and clubs one can attend to who may be able to marry whom. In Regency romance the term which is used most often to describe this complex blend of gossipers and social regulators is *"the ton".*

Regency Romance and Popular History

It is perhaps an understatement to say the Regency romance subgenre is having its day in the sun of mainstream attention. From critically acclaimed Hollywood adaptations to physical tourism, England's Regency period proves to have a very profitable legacy. To producers, artists, filmmakers, historians, politicians and investors these financial successes confirm "that this conceptualization of an airbrushed Austen-like past and national identity was desired by a wider public." (de Groot, 2016, pg. 228). Just as the genre's legacy owes much to Jane Austen, the United Kingdom's cultural tourism industry has just as much to thank her for.

Jane Austen has grown beyond a legacy as an influential author into "a tourist industry and staple of film and her works still sell extremely well." (de Groot, 2016, pg. 227). Jane Austen's home and locations mentioned in her works have become tourist hubs. Following this

tradition, the birthplace and childhood home of Georgette Heyer received an English Heritage blue plaque in 2015, designating it as another place of pilgrimage for Regency fans.

Some readers even participate in fully immersive role playing experiences inspired by a love of Regency fiction. In September of 2025 the Jane Austen Centre held the annual Jane Austen Festival in Bath, England. (Rustomjee, 2025) The festival, running since 2001, was especially significant in 2025 as it celebrated the 250th anniversary of Jane Austen's birth. In celebration of her cultural legacy, over 3,000 people descended upon the city in full Regency costume (a required dress-code for special events) participating in city walks, lectures, workshops and a grand ball. The Centre's website features detailed information on historical clothing, etiquette and dance styles to ensure its guests are best prepared to slip into the Regency period. (Jane Austen Festival 2025, n.d.)

Engaging in the first person with cultural understandings of the Regency period–especially when the events are explicitly in the style of fictional writing–in such a tangible way may be informed by and therefore reinforcing collective understanding. A tactile, tangible relationship with historical fiction media "allows the controlled entry of the past into the contemporary moment. It is a creation of a kind of relationship that familiarises and makes human the chaos of the past." (de Groot, 2016, pg. 112). The way readers enjoy finding materials to connect themselves to favorite and comforting historical media reinforces and validates impressions.

Period dramas, community role-playing and contemporary mass-market historical novels construct a narrative around what life looked, sounded, felt like and how Regency high-society behaved. This cultural representation is studied, repeated and internalized into a crystalized cultural legacy. The British cultural industry is not only capitalizing on narratives but is also an ideological method of packaging, commercializing a version of history itself. The version of

British history which sells “enshires particular erroneous myths about historical identity” (de Groot, 2016, pg. 223).

Historical fiction characterizes, packages, and sells a specific vision of the time period it depicts both in what is included and excluded from the frame. "These settings are lush landscapes and rich houses, the actors talented, the costumes gorgeous, the dialogue sharp; there is nothing nasty or unexpected, no real poverty or grinding historical reality". (de Groot, 2016, pg. 227). As outlined by Said, the works of Jane Austen have a clearly defined connection to cultural imperialism. It is important that the works of 20th and 21st century which were inspired by her legacy be investigated for similar connections. “We cannot afford to dismiss twentieth- century and current reinterpretations of Regency romance if we are to fully understand how Austen is being read in modern spaces, and this includes the issue of who is being read alongside Austen.” (Hernandez-Knight, 2021, pg 3).

There is no grand, big-bad evil plot to create mass-market romance novels with hidden imperialism agenda. Rather, “in reading a text, one must open it both to what went into it and to what its author excluded. Each cultural work is a vision of a moment, and we must juxtapose that vision with the various revisions it later provoked (Said, 1994, pg. 67).

There are a variety of reasons historical romance is as popular as it is among readers. Discussing historical fiction with a friend (P. Hartley, personal communication, September 4, 2025) who reads historical fiction frequently, she sees the context of history as plot device, shaping the narrative,

> I think it adds a lot to the tension and enjoyment of a work when it's clearly well-researched, when it considers actual societal implications of actions taken by its characters. But it's not completely necessary, it's there to create a story, not to be a historical account.

Adhering to a semblance of historical ‘accuracy’ is important to many readers of not only romance but of historical fiction in general. During that same conversation P. Hartley agreed with the sentiment: “To be fair- sometimes an egregious inaccuracy can ruin a book. You need some level of what people are familiar with, historically, to keep them engaged.”(P. Hartley, personal communication, September 4, 2025).

Historical Accuracy vs Authenticity

In the discourse which surrounds historical fiction media “the terms ‘accuracy’ and ‘authenticity’ are regularly used interchangeably and typically refer to a text’s adherence to established – or agreed upon – historical fact." (Saxton, 2020, pg. 128).

Referring to historical narratives as being accurate or inaccurate frames history as a binary network of true and untrue rather than as a textured landscape of contradicting information. Reaffirming the language to be used in discussions of historical fiction as *authentic* helps communicate popular history as something which is informed by held cultural understandings of history not something which is factually correct or incorrect. Authenticity is *involved* as “the audience, who must be convinced that a fiction is plausible, have an active and participatory role in determining whether they find a representation to be authentic." (Saxton, 2020, pg. 141) Hernandez-Knight argues authenticity is politically contextual and leads to the rejection or inclusion depending on “how uncomfortable certain audiences are made by the choices.” (Hernandez-Knight, 2021, pg. 6)”

Historical Verisimilitude

A number of concepts contribute to (or take away from) a reader’s ability to remain in the illusion of accuracy. Various historically associated objects and cultural references become icons of a period, immediately triggering a public perception. The appearance of costuming or

props may clue readers in on when or where the narrative might be. White powdered wigs, trojan armor and biplanes are unlikely to appear in the same periods or locations in traditional historical fiction. Alternatively, providing the location and period in the novel's initial pages allows audiences to anticipate and perhaps look forward to elements which will appear later on in the narrative. Many historical romance novels choose to place the location and year in which the novel begins with the first chapter, acknowledging potential large time skips along the way with subsequent chapter titles.

Namedropping a real historical figure or introducing them as a full fledged character flags a specific time period, no matter how dedicated an author is to make the historical figure's characterization believable or accurate. Even a character praising a contemporary artist, writer or poet from their period in passing locates the narrative to their lifespan. When aristocratic Regency characters from fictional estates recognize historical aristocrats as peers it not only creates an impression of informed historical knowledge but identifies the characters own status and position within Regency society.

Even when the inaccuracies of certain historical indicators are more publicly known to be inventions of pop culture–such as the appearance of horned helmets–they may still generate the easily retrievable image of Scandinavian Vikings.

Another way historical fiction sells itself on authenticity is through its use of language. As historical fiction genres construct themselves, dialects and language are constructed alongside them until the two become difficult to detangle. In order for novels to capture a sense of linguistic realism, characters must often adopt the lexicon of contemporary novels. Author David Mitchell refers to this dialectical authenticity as 'Bygonese'. Authors craft dialogue which *feels* older. To a historical romance reader, terms like 'thy' and ' "Bygonese provides a convention for writing dialogue that feels real in the absence of recorded voices from pre-modern eras against which we can measure the accuracy of the spoken word." (Saxton, 2020, pg 132). One way a

Regency historical novel may be most stylistically authentic is to write dialogue which feels straight from the pages of Austen or Byron. Utilizing stylistic language may be a way for an author to flex their literary familiarity with the period. Some authors may use a blend of modern language with identifiable bygonese in order to convey tone and humor in a more comfortable way.

The Wallpaper Historical

Historical romance readers have their own–often derogatory–term for when a romance novel appears inauthentic to the historical period, dialect or persons represented: the Wallpaper Historical. The term seemingly stems from online forum and blog discussions from the early 2000s although the original posts which may have coined the term are no longer available. (Vivanco, 2006; Candy, 2006). However, any reader who commonly engages with the romance fiction community will quickly find this piece of jargon across various social media platforms.

Generally, the term “wallpaper historical” describes the idea of a novel using the Regency as a costume or set dressings–like wallpaper covering a backdrop–instead of prioritizing historical accuracy to the letter. They may feature unintentional anachronisms, the incorrect use of title or status and the grave crime of saying doorknob instead of doorhandle in any work taking place before 1871. Alternatively, a wallpaper historical may interrupt a scene, suspending the action in order to go into great lengths to explain each and every layer of era-appropriate undergarment or discuss the complex happenings inside the House of Lords. However, to the critical reader, the novel's use of dialogue which they consider too modern is enough for them to flag it as wallpapering.

A 2006 blog post from the blog *Smart Bitches Trashy Books* (A blog which continues to operate in 2025) points to the wallpaper historical issue being the fault of the author. The post quotes author Lydia Joyce:

> I think the wallpaper effect happens most often because many writers use other romance books as their primary research tool, with a secondary reliance upon books like What Jane Austen Ate… They've read tons of historical romance and love the genre, and so they think they really know the time period. Unfortunately, if I restrict my reading to those kinds of sources, the experiences of my characters will rarely deviate from what I've already read because that's as big a world as I could understand. Hence a derivative story with no historical substance and characters that might be my next door neighbors in fancy clothes. (Lydia Joyce, as cited by Candy, 2006)

Maya Rodale, another romance author writing in 2015 chooses to focus the issue on the *reader*. Described in *Dangerous Books for Girls,* Rodale and her fellow historical romance authors have coined the phrase "Regency Police" to describe this type of reader "who will slam an author in reviews for writing 'wallpaper historical' or getting small details about corsets and carriages wrong, which therefore ruined *the entire book* for them." (Rodale, 2015, pg. 199). She raises concerns that the Regency Police's harsh metrics bar authors from exploring anything lying outside expectations of authenticity from decades of intertextual worldbuilding.

> We reinforce this notion of Regency until it feels like gospel true fact that readers write angry reviews when anything strays from it. Even if it is an actual fact. [...] It applies to race. It also applies to our understanding of 'propriety' and 'sexy times' and the use of the word *fuck* (Rodale, 2015, pg. 204-205).

Both claims acknowledge the feeling of "authenticity" in identifying a wallpaper historical. Candy acknowledges enjoying the occasional historical but preference for novels which "get the feel right" (Candy, 2006). Rodale's concerns focus on the harm of romance fans limiting what they are willing to view as truly historical. Some romance authors include bibliographies or acknowledge their own academic degrees at the beginning or end of their novels to validate themselves against accusations of lacking adequate research.

Regardless, the discourse which surrounds the concept of “wallpaper historicals” is relatively abstract and its boundaries quite arbitrary. Early online discussions of the wallpaper romance point to it as a negative critique on a historical romance novel’s quality (Candy, 2006). This criticism echoes the thoughts of iconic 20th century historical romance writer Georgette Heyer on her contemporary authors whom she believed had been emulating her work without adequate historical research–as will be discussed further on.

As significant as the issue is across online spaces and publishing, the concept of wallpaper historicals lays the groundwork for discussions of historical fiction discourse about the Regency period, and how that frames concepts of “accuracy”. The issue of accusations of Wallpapers is that they place focus on what should or should not be present in depictions of Regency era England because something–or someone–should not be there. It is important to recognize that these works are *interpretive*, no matter how much research is conducted. Jane Austen wrote contemporary social commentary whereas Regency romance authors write their works reflecting a *genre-fied* interpretation of late 18th Century and early 19th century fiction. Even the intensely researched works of Georgette Heyer, commit the offense of “wallpapering” to some degree, as will be discussed later on.

Chronotopes

Regency historical fiction as a genre is operating not in a period of historical time (the British Regency era), rather the characters exist in a conceptual space wearing the dressings of history. Structuring this conceptually is possible through Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope as explored in The Dialogic Imagination (1985).

Coined (in relation to literary theory) by Mikhail Bakhtin in his essay, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” (originally written in 1937), the Chronotope articulates the relationship between time and space as it appears within a novel. Bakhtin appropriates the

mathematical concept of space-time in Einstein's Theory of Relativity, utilizing it to “express the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space)” (Bakhtin, 1985, pg. 84). Chronotopes functioning in historical fiction operate as the tool which creates the detangling of messy historical time into something solid.

An element in which the interactions of ‘time-space’ operate differently in the standard romance novel is the ability to suspend disbelief in a ‘love at first sight’ scenario. When a novel adheres to a romantic chronotope, we as readers suspend our belief in standard, linear time so far as to rationalize an understanding of love at first sight–or in some cases *loathing* at first sight which is followed by falling madly in love soon after. This restructuring of time continued into the 1970s bodice ripper trend as well. Bodice ripper heroines heal and recover from their abuse *remarkably* quickly within the context of the novel. This arrangement–as it literally divorces the world of romance from real-world linear time–is a factor in the criticism of romance as "unrealistic".

Within the literary chronotope, time begins, passes and ends in the context which is relevant to the plot. Likewise, the locations which exist only exist to serve that narrative purpose as well. Within the Regency romance chronotope, the period and reality of Regency England are only relevant to the way they operate together from the build-up to the hero and heroine meeting until their Happily Ever After through which the chronotope has served its purpose and the novel ends. The temporal series of events–which can potentially be outlined by Regis’ eight essential elements–generates the plot. Each moment of the hero and heroine’s life is not documented, nor is every step they take, every room they enter and everywhere they have been and ever will go. The chronotope abridges all of those moments into ones which most conveniently serve the plot. It is for this reason that Regency romance presents *very* specific moments of constructed time wearing the dressings of recognized popular history.

Within the “time-space” of Regency romance, historical fiction makes the abstract concept of time in a historically abstract space–summarized as “the past”–into a concrete and understandable space with historical lore and plot expectations. Regency romance authors have formed a literary playground for their heroes and heroines to play cat and mouse within. The space is shared at an intertextual level across the genre and repeats itself with every iteration. It is through these expectations that feelings of authenticity are generated and repeated, beginning in its most modern state in the works of Georgette Heyer. As the world of the romance novel only exists in service of getting the hero and heroine together, this evolved world of historical verisimilitude lends itself toward being dismissive of historical ‘ugliness’.

Regency

The chronotope of the Regency romance genre in part creates a sense of history which surrounds the Regency period, more accurately the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The British Regency period took place between 1811 to 1821 during the literal regency of the crowned prince in which future King George IV in lieu of his father, King George the III’s illness. Regency/Georgian era England changes through Regency Romance fiction, evolving into a new emotionally and erratically charged space of elegance, social ruin and happily ever afters.

The plotlines follow members of upper-class society navigating a rigid set of social conditions, mutually agreed upon as authentic among Regency writers and readers. What structures these qualities as a part of the genre’s *chronotope* are the ways in which the narrative and characters within it operate because of their constructed location as they move towards a desired Happily Ever After.

The chronotopes of Regency Romance fiction shape character behaviors into recognizable social codes and forms of etiquette. The behaviors exhibited by heroes and heroines in modern regency romance is shaped by the time-space conditions their narrative

places them in. The social etiquette driven narrative conflicts which draw readers toward the Regency period (for historical and/or erotic reasons) are built from the bones of spatial/temporal configurations.

In the Regency chronotope the concept of *the ton* escapes its historical meaning and instead forms into a character of its own. It transitions into an entity to seek the approval of in order to avoid social ruin, a condition which could entirely bar heroes–though more direly, heroines–from any chance of Happily Ever After. This entity-ton allows for dramatic irony as readers anticipate the risk of impending ruin at times when the hero and heroine may be caught alone and unchaperoned.The way that *the ton* is referenced casually within the genre as a universal, shared bit of worldbuilding can lead to the common misconception that it refers to anyone who lives within the area of Mayfair, perhaps another bit of historical jargon used by the upper-class to mean “town”.

The ton, originating from the french term *“le bon ton”,* is used alongside another phrase–the *beau monde*–to reference members of society who are able to adhere to these social codes seamlessly. It is both a group of people and a performance to accomplish. Without *the ton’s* approval, ruin is guaranteed. Lisa Fletcher (2016) compares the way a character behaves in order to impress society in historical romance to Judith Butler’s concept of performativity and behavioral regulatory practices. The anxiety to impress *the ton* and avoid its ire in order to gain social success–and a happily ever after–is the central concern, especially for *heroines* as the punishment of scandal is a heavily gendered one. Whilst exterior historical events of real-world Regency history may impact the plot–consequences of the Napoleonic Wars or risk to the wealth of hero characters with financial investments in the colonies–within the Regency chronotope itself it is the approval of this society in *this* time and place which matters.

This performance and the ability to remain within *the ton* is a vital element to the ‘happily-ever-afters’ of the romantic hero and heroine. Successfully navigating London’s social season is the gateway toward finding a proper spouse of good breeding and social status, maintaining titles and financial security for your issue and if you’re *lucky*, secure a love match. The risk of ruin acts as a primary way to motivate/move the plot.

These bones establish a diagnostic in which ‘this book is a Regency Romance novel because the characters are in this place and this time and behave in the way that we have identified Regency Romance characters do.’ This identification is what forms feelings of genre authenticity. It is also important to go further and say ‘this book is a regency romance novel because the characters are in this place and time and behave the way we have identified *people in the Regency period* do.’ According to de Groot, “The dramatic representation of the past can emphasize a comfortable, easy set of recognizable 'heritage' tropes; at the same time it can also be problematic or challenging." (de Groot, 2016, pg. 223). The literature informs broader estimations of genuine behaviors. The dangerous social scandals of Regency romance can impose misconceptions about the realism of characters from different classes, ethnicities or sexualities being able to achieve happily ever afters as not ‘historically accurate’.

Readers do have access to artifacts of romantic life in the Regency period which back up our ideas and expectations of fictional behaviors. Museums and archives display invitations to Almack’s Assembly Rooms and letters describing the social importance of obtaining one. We know what undergarments ladies in the Regency period did–and did not–wear. However, it is their recurring appearance across a genre which continuously reproduces itself in the image of the works which came before it that keeps these cultural artifacts at the forefront of approximation of the ‘Upper Ten Thousand’s’ daily life.

Making the claim that the commonality of Regency romance authors to make the same genre-specific references to locales or activities as entirely isolated discoveries from years of

private research would be foolish. Of course authors of the same meticulously crafted intertextual genre would make the same historically recognizable references. Because dance cards' frequent appearance at every ball, they are now an authentic part of the chronotope's worldbuilding, it is unnecessary to fact-check for its accuracy or explain the specifics of how they work in one of the thousands of balls depicted across the genre. The accuracy was determined and researched by earlier authors, now it is simply a given fixture.

It is, however, in this same vein that the naturalization of societal structures may continue unnoticed in the way Said describes in Culture and Imperialism. Passing comments on the sources of privilege rooted in colonial exploitation, violence and coerced labor exist in the space that is 'over there'. In its modern representation "the empire functions for much of the European nineteenth century as a codified, if only marginally visible, presence in fiction, very much like the servants in grand households and in novels, whose work is taken for granted but scarcely ever more than named, rarely studied [...] or given density." (Said, 1994, pg. 63). Unnamed servants as set dressings whose sole narrative purpose is to insure the wealthy and aristocratic characters can navigate the novel's plot line unhindered by minor inconveniences (the ones which don't lend themselves to furthering the love plotline) take for granted their theoretical personhood.

Modern romance follows the traditions of characters of peerage, benefactors of the wealth made possible by the extensions of themselves and privilege due to titles and land ownership. For peerage who claim wealth due to the benefits of British international expansion, their power is one which "requires overseas sustenance" (Said, 1994, pg. 89) including the implementation of coerced labor, an aspect which does not fit into the rose-tinted airbrushed, escapist lens of mass-market historical romance.

Dukes are so prominent within the Regency romance chronotope as they are the highest level of British peerage. Like *Mansfield Park's* Thomas Bertram,these Dukes as members of

English peerage gain their power and wealth from implied or explicit wealth gathered from colonies and/or the exploitation.. The appearance of enviable wealth as the economic factor in a heroine's Happily Ever After "are made because they *can be,* because British power (and not just the novelist's fancy) made passing references to these massive appropriations possible" (Said, 1994, pg. 66). The Regency chronotope's guarantee of invisible privilege is built and repeated constantly until it is the predominant portrayal of privilege within the period.

Outside of marrying a member of royalty, becoming a Duchess is the highest level of social status and wealth women on the marriage mart are likely to acquire. This impressive wealth is acquired and maintained through inherited aristocracies, successful international business ventures and landownership, including vast estates in both Mayfair and the countryside to return to once the social season comes to a close. Because of all of these factors, the Regency romance genre has an *overabundance* of dukes.

When considering a work as historical fiction a conversation begins concerning 'historical accuracy'. This idea of accuracy quickly becomes a murky and mutable concept because, "as the name of the genre indicates, historical novel/fiction includes a strong, inventive component which, by its character, precludes a historical novel from being as objective, factual, accurate, etc., as a relevant work of history." (Bemben, 2024, pg. 206)

Historical fiction exists as a method to reframe and restructure the past as a form of narrative expression with varying degrees of authenticity. Regardless of its verisimilitude, historical fiction is at all times operating as a representation within the social, temporal and political positionality of the author. Readers are intelligent and "apprehending a narrative does not denote that we simply take it in as it is, but, in the process of understanding it, we create its construct in our minds." (Bemben, 2024, pg. 212) Regency romance must be discussed as a sum of its parts. They are historical novels with the notions and impacts of formulating popular history *and* they are romance novels with the potential to create "dangerous expectations".

Setting the Frame: Georgette Heyer and “Doing Regency”

Heyer’s Research

When discussing the rise and development of the 20th century Regency romance, it is paramount to discuss the life and works of the woman responsible for it all, Georgette Heyer. Heyer is the mother of the modern-day Regency romance novel in its current state and her influence can be felt even in its most recent iterations. Heyer’s success as an established publisher of historical romance is made clear through the high demand of her work: “To emphasise how prolific she was, by 1964 Heyer had 32 books in print out of the 44 she had written to that point; six of the 44 were the suppressed early novels.” (Rayner, 2021, pg 7)

Heyer’s body of work is framed as complementary to Regency-contemporary Jane Austen, a clear influence. Frequently referred to as ‘next-best thing’, “her work is often recommended for fans of Austen, despite the fact that Austen was writing in her own time as a social commentator and Heyer is writing historical fiction that is firmly more romance-plot based, than social commentary of any kind.” (Hernandez-Knight, 2021, pg. 2). The concept of her works being as close to Regency history as possible was paramount to Heyer’s successes. Her self-proclaimed desire to uphold historical accuracy was the root of her extraordinary attention to detail as “in Georgette’s view, writing historical fiction did not lessen an author’s responsibility to the reader to provide an accurate and convincing account of her chosen slice of a particular period” (Kloester, 2011, pg. 284-285). Her fiercely protective attitude toward accuracy lends itself to her reputation as an example of pure history. Heyer preferred to use primary resources when searching for phrases and etiquette of the period and made use of Jane Austen’s letters and journals for inspiration. It would be oversimplifying to accuse Georgette Heyer of writing with the intention to emulate Jane Austen’s novels, however, Austen was undoubtedly one of Heyer’s favorite and most respected authors (Kloester, 2011, pg. 353). The behavior of her

characters are felt through the genre to this day: “Heyer’s heroines, though young and inexperienced, are far from submissive, tending instead to be quick-witted and witty, independent-minded, enterprising, and articulate.” (Thurston, 1987, pg. 37)

The very existence of her personal library has become a part of Heyer’s legacy, inseparable from the discussions of the ‘value’ of her work. Her reputation as a meticulous researcher has a near mythic status now, giving her novels verisimilitude of accuracy to the letter. “Her private research library comprised around a thousand volumes. [...] Heyer copied the information yielded index cards, which were collected in a series of binders; of these, 15 have survived.” (Rayner, 2021, pg. 189) However, personal upbringing and biases appear–as I argue they would in any work of fiction–across her work.

Heyer’s life influences and interest in the life of the Regency Upperclass is not limited to an early interest in Jane Austen. Her interest stems from a more personal connection to the political environment she grew up in. Heyer was born in Wimbledon, England in 1902 and published her first novel, the *Black Moth* (1921) at the age of 19. Her first Regency work, *Regency Buck* was published in 1935 amidst In *Georgette Heyer: Biography of a Bestseller,* Jennifer Kloester argues Heyer’s childhood was “replete with stories in which the consistent moral and message was that class will cling to class and breeding will always tell. These were themes that she would use repeatedly throughout her writing life. The ideas and attitudes in the novels she read reflected those of a highly structured, class-oriented society, proud of its Empire and sure of its place at the centre of the civilised world.” (Kloester, 2011, pg. 16).

There is potential for harm in uncritically aligning Georgette Heyer’s work as functionally as similar to the works of Jane Austen as one can get. The primary concern comes from ignoring moments in which Heyer’s personal politics and positionality cements itself into Heyer’s historical fiction and rolls into the assumptions of research based accuracy. The elements of Regency history Heyer elects to include in her works set a precedent that is uniquely hers. As

Said discusses “In reading a text, one must open it both to what went into it and to what its author excluded. Each cultural work is a vision of a moment, and we must juxtapose that vision with the various revisions it later provoked (Said, 1994, pg. 67). It is not merely research she is presenting, it is *which* research she presents and how she chooses to do so.

Heyer’s Selective Accuracy

The praise of Georgette Heyer’s meticulous attention to detail can be challenged in her limited representations. Her Regency novels primarily focus on the social aspects of life during the period as *she* chose to represent it. Heyer world builds a historical reality of her own. According to Lisa Fletcher: “reviewers and critics commonly describe Heyer's novels as historically accurate, yet remark that the world they portray is definitively 'Heyer's'; her books offer both 'accuracy' and 'artifice.'" (Fletcher, 2016, pg. 57).

Heyer’s work often steps slightly out of the narrative to flaunt her own historical expertise. For example, early in *Frederica* (1965), Heyer details the ticket cost of a ticket to “Merlin’s Mechanical Museum (open every day from eleven until three)” as well as the contents of a Pocket Guide to “the Temple of Concord, erected there as part of the pageantry of the Peace celebrations in 1814” (Heyer, 1965, pg. 18) To a reader this affirms Heyer is knowledgeable enough on the period to make concrete references the world the characters inhabit.

One example of Heyer’s very selective accuracy, “While Heyer’s historical research is well documented in terms of uncontroversial content (dress, colloquial speech, the topography of London) it is less apparent in the novels whether she had access to material on the extent of the sexually transmitted infections that were endemic in Regency sexual life.” (O’Brien, 2022, pg. 5) The iconic contemporary example of the Regency Dandy, Beau Brummel[4] (one of several

[4] Appears in *Regency Buck (1935)*

genuine historical figures who appear as characters in Heyer's work) died of tertiary syphilis in 1840 (Kelly, 2006, pg. 333). This is in no way making the claim that Georgette Heyer had a moral obligation to give her heroes and heroines syphilis. However, syphilis *is* a part of the reality Georgette Heyer presents, yet in her developed world magnifying glass is never pointed in its direction.

References to sex workers appear as one of several ways Heyer's work confirms her heroes are or have been sexually active."The habitual association of upperclass males with courtesans is presented as a lighthearted matter, a way of characterizing the maturity and worldliness of the romantic heroes" (O'Brien, 2022, pg. 7). The archetypal stock character of 'the rake' appears with this type of hero.

Heyer, her disciples and her imitators

Heyer had very clear opinions on other authors she considered to have mimicked her work with little attention to historical research. "The best evidence for this is provided by her incensed reaction to the plagiarism debate during the 1950s and 1960s with fellow writers Barbara Cartland and Kathleen Lindsay, both of whom had attempted, rather ineptly, to copy her period idiom, among other features." (Rayner, 2021, pg. 188) In all fairness to Heyer's anger, Barbara Cartland in particular was not particularly discrete in 'borrowing' bits and pieces of Heyer's work. "Among Cartland's more obvious 'borrowings' were several names from Friday's Child, including Sir Montagu Revesby, altered to 'Sir Montagu Reversby'; Hero Wantage, now 'Harriet Wantage'; Viscount Sheringham was 'Viscount Sherringham', while Lord Wrotham remained 'Lord Wrotham'." (Kloester, 2011, pg. 282)

In a *scathing* 1950 letter to her lawyer, Geoffrey Drury, Heyer ripped into Cartland's work for a blaring lack of proper research:

> With regard to the idioms, cant terms, and certain descriptions of costume, a novelist who showed throughout her books the erudition that one might have supposed to be necessary for the employment of these, could successfully claim to have culled them, as I did myself, from original sources. But no novelist who had found, through research, the rather recondite bits of period colour (so to speak) could possibly have fallen into the gross errors that bespatter Miss Cartland's pages. She is not only slightly illiterate: she displays an almost abysmal ignorance of her period. Cheek by jowl with some piece of what I should call special knowledge (all of which I can point out in my books) one finds an anachronism so blatant as to show clearly that Miss Cartland knows rather less about the period than the average schoolgirl, and has certainly never read enough contemporary literature to put her in possession of the sudden bit of erudition that every now and then staggers the informed reader. I am firmly of the opinion that if she were asked to state the source of any one of the archaisms, or recondite details, which she inserts into her books she would be unable to do so — since it is unlikely that she would cite me as her authority. (Klouser, 2011, pg. 285)

In a sense, Heyer's complaints are functionally very similar to the online discourse on wallpaper historicals 50 years later. Valid accusations of plagiarism aside, her argument that Barbara Cartland's imitations and lack of research have led to the creation of a historical novel of lesser quality. Not only are Cartland's works wearing the wallpaper of Regency history, they're wearing *Georgette Heyer's* Regency history.

Heyer's Legacy

Bianca Hernandez-Knight argues Heyer's pedestal as the untouchable 'mother of regency historical romance' opens potential for readers new to the world of Regency romance to "pick up a book and immerse themselves in this space without realizing the foundational

problems the genre has been trying to work itself away from, namely the problematic prejudices that Heyer brought to the table." (Hernandez-Knight, 2021, pg. 6)

In one of her most applauded works, *The Grand Sophy* (1950), Heyer introduces the character of Mr. Goldhanger, a Jewish moneylender who is extorting heroine Sophy's young cousin Hubert at an exorbitantly high interest after illegally lending him money. The premise has obvious similarities to William Shakespeare's Skylock from *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1600). Heyer's addition of a character so indistinguishable from Shylock–a character so ubiquitous with antisemitic stereotypes–as a plot complication is distinctly antisemitic.. Heyer fixates on Goldhanger's body, calling him "a thin, swarthy individual, with long greasy curls, semitic nose, and an ingratiating leer" (Heyer, 1965, pg. 256). When Goldhanger invites Sophy into his home to discuss Hubert's debt, Heyer notes that "the instinct of his race made him prefer, whenever possible, to maintain a manner of the utmost urbanity" (Heyer, 1965, pg. 258).

With the support of the Heyer estate, a 2023 republishing of *The Grand Sophy* revised the novel's most egregious antisemitism (Alter, 2023). This included changing Mr. Goldhanger's name to the less glaringly racist but still suggestive "Mr. Grimpstone". The new name was suggested by Jennifer Kloester to follow Heyer's tendency to use English village names for her characters. Regardless of Grimpstone's new namesake being location based, in 2023 the name feels closer resemblance to the–also antisemetic–goblin names and characterization in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series.

Attempting to further mask the original publication's antisemitism, the 2023 edition also removed references to Goldhager/Grimpstone being Jewish, pivoting instead to characterize him as a lecherous conman financially taking advantage of others. The image of scheming moneylenders is so culturally tied to antisemitism the edits render the character from explicitly Jewish to Jewish-coded.

The erasure of Heyer's bigotry from her writing in the form of revisionist publications is profits based, intending to protect the marketing image of a long deceased white woman because it "helps keep Heyer in print for modern audiences" (Alter, 2023, quoting Kloester). Reading Heyer with a critical lens–and being *open* about the necessity to do so–is important to maintain in further regency romance circles/fandom spaces. Without setting such a precedent, "the risk is that an uncritical consumption of Heyer alongside Austen in ways that exclude historical context, invisibly confirms white supremacy." (Hernandez-Knight, 2021, pg. 3)

Barbara Cartland

The source of Heyer's ire, Barbara Cartland's impact on Regency romance fiction is too significant to not make further mention of her. If Georgette Heyer's stylistic legacy is well understood within Regency fiction circles, the work of Barbara Cartland may have escaped containment and contributed to much of "the most tenaciously held stereotype of the popular romance novel, heroine, and author today." (Thurston, 1987, pg. 37).

Over the course of her career between the years Dame Barbara Cartland (DBE) (1901-2000) published an astonishing *723* novels with dozens of manuscripts published posthumously (*Biography of Dame Barbara Cartland*, n.d.). Aside from her socialite status, Cartland had familial connections to 20th century aristocracy through her daughter's marriage to the father of Princess Diana. This heightened her social profile even more. Similarly to Heyer's sentiments on contemporary feminism, Cartland expressed her own "nineteenth-century views on the 'proper' role of women. 'Equality with men is rubbish,' she proclaimed in a 1983 interview. 'It's a mistake for women to take men's jobs; men don't like women over them.'" (Thurston, 1987, pg. 44). Cartland's heroines were virgins, a non-negotiable factor throughout her work. She referred to erotic novels as "terrible, disgusting" and accused them of "helping perverts". (Parry & Haseler, 2025)

The Bodice Ripper and the Eroticization of History

Identifying Erotica

Over the course of the popular romance novel's development the role pornography may play in the genre has been a subject of debate. During the mainstream development of the bodice ripper, a great deal of effort was made to distinguish erotic romance fiction from pornography–an effort which continues today. The presence of erotic novels and the controversy they cause did not magically appear with the bodice ripper craze. One of the earliest English novels, John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*[5] (1748) was a pornographic novel. While not a romance novel by modern standards "we can see here the emergence of the narrative model that would eventually be co-opted by writers of love stories and adapted to form the modern erotic romance novel." (McAlister, 2022, pg. 217)

Marketing erotic novels as being functionally distinct from pornography–and understanding more mainstream visual pornography as a medium exclusively for men–creates a new industry. It is an industry which markets itself as feminist, more socially accepted, and one which is reclaiming/'rescuing' sexuality from contextually perverse, predatory and exploitative male sexuality. The argument essentializes sexuality along a binary which it then capitalizes on. As stated by Jane Juffer: "It is precisely the erotica's claims to aesthetic status in relation to subjectivity that legitimates it in a manner that guarantees accessibility in a very material way. Women's erotica has become an increasingly mainstream category for large publishing houses, distributors, and chain bookstores because of the genre's insistence on its literary nature and its appeal to women as a class of readers within the home." (Juffer, 1998, pg. 29) For the sake of this thesis, the terms pornography and erotica will be used interchangeably in relation to explicit romance fiction.

[5] Also known as *Fanny Hill* after the book's titular character.

De Groot discusses historical pornography in his discussion of popular history consumption, framing it as a “kind of nostalgia marketing of the historical body” (de Groot, 2012 pg 148). Bodies and aesthetics from history are isolated and commodified for pleasure/fetish. The placement and framing of individual bodies, cultures, aesthetics and moments when connected to pornographic representation communicates a position between the reader and the fetishized object.

Commercialization and Fetishization of History

Bodice Rippers are a relevant part of this discussion because of the role erotica plays in the modern romance novel publishing sphere. The inclusion of explicit material may at times socially lower erotic romance novels to lowerbrow/smut but does not absolve it from ideological expressions with clear relationships with cultural ideology. This expression is present within both sexual politics from the 1970s into the 2020s but also with expression of racism and Orientalism within these texts. Fans of historical erotica against a Regency/Victorian backdrop may be experiencing a nostalgia for different historical sexual contexts. 19th century historical pornography “produce[s] a desire for a time when sex was indeed more private, where there were more rules to follow [...] it was easy to be naughty and still share your secret with a community of like-minded readers” (Juffers, 2016, pg. 146).

Rise of the Bodice Ripper

Explicit and erotic romance novels did not begin with the bodice rippers of the 1970s; however their prominence exhibited a clear change in the dominant cultural image of the romance novel. “Early romances featured restrained sexuality, with timid and passive virginal heroines” (Lee, 2008, pg. 54), a difference from the much bolder bodice ripper heroines.

As significant as it is to identify a bodice ripper, it is also essential what is *not* a bodice ripper. Equating all historical romance novels with bodice rippers is dismissive of the genre's complexities. Not all romance novels are bodice rippers, despite the common use of the phrase as synonymous with romance novels overall.

The traditionally understood source of bodice ripper craze was the 1972 publication of *The Flame and the Flower* by Kathleen Woodiwiss. Woodiwiss' novel–and its subsequent financial success– revolutionized the Regency romance genre. The state of the early bodice ripper fad is captured by Alice K. Turner in the 1978 New York Magazine article "The Tempestuous, Tumultuous, Turbulent, Torrid, and Terribly Profitable World of Paperback Passion". Turner's language to describe the genre is almost as flowery and over the top as the prose within the novels themselves:

> The *Historical Romance*, aka the Erotic Historical, the Sweet Savage Romance, or, irreverently, the Hysterical Romance. This is the Main Event, the Big Time, this year's Super-Rich Double-Whipped Frostie with nuts and sprinkles and a cherry on the top. This is where calories count, the dollars double, the profits proliferate as prodigiously as the prose of the cover copy (A. Turner, 1978, pg. 48)

Tuner's article sees the return of Barbara Cartland to the conversation as a harbinger of the explosion of salacious mass-produced products to come over the next decade: "A few years ago, when the period's dowager regent, Georgette Heyer, died, gloom fell over Regency readerland, but a new queen has risen, phoenixlike–the formidable Barbara Cartland, […] a lady whose instincts for publicity might have awed Prinnie[6] himself." (A. Turner, 1978, pg. 46). And mass-produced they were. According to Thurston, "romance editors later admitted that in 1978 and 1979 they were buying every (erotic) historical manuscript they could get their hands on." (Thurston, 1987, pg. 67). She also states:

[6] A contemporary nickname for King George IV.

> After the Equal Rights Amendment (first introduced in the early 1920s), women were ready and waiting for what came to be known far and wide as ‘bodice rippers,’ a tongue-in-cheek sobriquet said to derive either from the bodice-ripping sexual encounters described in these stories or the hyperventilation women suffered while reading about them.” (Thurston, 1987, pg. 19).

Mass produced bodice rippers could be recognized on a shelf from across the room, with their dramatic clinch covers of scantily clad couples embracing one another against various serene backdrops. This was the era of Fabio, credited as appearing as the model hero on 466 covers (Fisher & Meredith, 2022, pg. 170). Publishers recognized that “sex equaled sales, so conveying some idea of a book’s story line quickly became less important than advertising some form of distilled passion—hence “the clinch” popularized by The Flame and the Flower” (McKnight-Trontz, 2002, pg. 30)

> So rapidly did erotic content in the historical novel become the norm that unless novels are categorised in the ‘Sweet’ or ‘(religious) Inspiration’ subgenres, romance readers of the late twentieth and twentyfirst centuries generally expect plenty of sex in their historical romances, whether or not such portrayals are ‘accurate’ or ‘authentic’ representations of the period. (Fresno-Calleja & Teo, 2025, pg. 2)

The emergence of bodice rippers rapidly changed the classic romance style established by Georgette Heyer. Bodice Rippers of the 1970s typically forgo the strict historical authenticity mandated by Heyer and her apostles in exchange for more ‘exciting’ plotlines full of passion, aggressive heroes and Thurston argues this shift correlated to a cultural shift in reader interests due to a changing sexual cultural:

> Arriving just when more and more women were beginning to outgrow the submissive and childlike heroine of the regency and domestic romances, these stories and others like them caught the imagination of readers with their obstreperous and rebellious women, all

> fighting for equal respect, fair treatment, and some measure of independence, no matter how “upstream” all that might be for the time in which they lived. (Thurston, 1987, pg. 67-68)

The hero and heroine of Bodice Rippers’s encounters are extremely explicit with a sharp turn from a chased romance to an expectation of non-consensual/assault oriented explicitly sex scenes. For many feminist critics of mass-produced paperback romance novels “it is generally argued that the romance novel contributes to reaffirm the domestic, subservient role of women in a patriarchal society.” (Thurston, 1987, pg. 70). Moral concerns on what reading bodice rippers might do to the state of modern feminism and a woman’s own conception of sexuality echoes early moral concerns of what early romantic novels might do to women’s expectations in a marriage. Rather than expressing what female readers should not be encouraged to expect within a marriage, this feminist critique seeks to incentivise that the modern woman is deserving of a safe and happy marriage. This evolution of concern highlights contemporary political impact on the ideological responses of romance.

The most identifiable quality of the bodice ripper is a plotline trend of the heroine falling in love with her abuser (the hero). This is not a new concept whatsoever to fiction. William Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew* did this concept 400 years prior to *The Flame and the Flower*’s publication. *However*, there are notable changes in the manner of publication and accessibility with the advent of the cheap paperback and cultural aftermath of the post-sexual revolution attitudes toward explicit literature.

The Sheik

While not a bodice ripper by standard definitions, *The Sheik* (1911) follows the storybeats of what would *evolve* to become the historical bodice ripper 60 years after the novel’s publication. The primary similarity lies in the narrative of forced seduction turning to passionate,

undeniable love. The inclusion of *The Sheik* in this thesis is to correlate its cultural significance with the presence of orientalist and pro-imperial narratives in the 1970s' bodice rippers.

To use jay[7] Dixon's plot summary: "The Sheik recounts the story of an upper-class Englishwoman who, while traveling in the Sahara Desert, is abducted by a handsome Bedouin sheik with whom she falls in love, despite being repeatedly raped by him. The brutish hero eventually learns to love her self-sacrificially, while she in turn discovers at the end of the novel that he is not Arab after all but, rather, the half-Spanish son of a Scottish earl." (Dixon, pg. 34).

E. M. Hull's choice of hero foreshadows the presence of the 'exotic' and hypersexualized foreign hero. As noted by Teo in *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels,* Said's *Orientalism* (1979) makes brief mention of the exoticizing sexualization of the Middle East "Why the Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies, is something on which one could speculate". (Said 1979, pg. 188). *The Sheik* is nowhere near the origin story of orientalist fixation on middle eastern men and sexual domination *but* the novel's eponymous Sheik (Ahmed Ben Hassan) is a figure of note in cementing a proto-bodice ripper hero as a household name. According to Ellen Turner, "Barbara Cartland echoes this sentiment in the preface to her [1977] abridged version of the novel: 'We all saw ourselves in the role of Diana Mayo, we all longed to be abducted into the desert and to be forced by all sheer violence into obedience by an all-conquering male.'" (E. Turner, 2014, pg. 199). Cartland, while not an author of explicit bodice rippers, clearly possessed the same erotic fixation on orientalist hypersexualization of Arab men.

[7] Stylized as "jay Dixon"

The Bodice Ripper as an Imperialist Export

While traditional authors like Georgette Heyer and Barbara Cartland were both English, bodice rippers are a primarily American genre in writing and publication. As the subgenre developed and crafted its own cultural identity and signifiers. “Although the British-authored “sheik novel” had run out of steam by the 1930s, the 1970s saw a revival of the subgenre, particularly in the form of the newly emerging, female-authored, erotic historical romance novel (also known more disparagingly as ‘bodice ripper’) produced primarily in the United States.” (Teo, 2012, pg. 3). Historical television programs (costume dramas) interface with history as a commodity in the same respect as is described above (*Pride and Prejudice*). The depictions of British colonial history acts as a culture export, adapted by American artists and producers in a specific reflection of Englishness:

> The commodified historical product is traded from one nation to another, and the desire for that commodity springs from its iterative fetish power within the cultural, social and imaginative economy. Hence, the American television channel PBS presents English costume drama about the English past as serious, authoritative, classy (“Masterpiece Theatre’). The historical product is sold as something that is improving, and will make the viewer more complete and properly educated. This is powerfully combined with nostalgia, and a sense of inclusion in a conversation about the past. (de Groot, 2016, pg. 124)

The female protagonist's journey operates like a personal Grand Tour in which she explores the New World, adventures into erotically charged, orientalist depictions of colonized India and the Middle East. This behavior shifts her role toward a form of masculinity expressed in adventure fiction "In British adventure fiction, masculinity is defined through nationalized actions like conquest or colonization, and national identity is defined through the possession of those

masculine traits." (Ficke, 2015, pg. 516). The mobility of the bodice ripper heroines–who are more closely akin to protagonists in adventure novels–get the luxury of seeing the world. This distinguishes them from earlier English Regency romance novels in which much of worldwide travel is limited to the hero. It is in this luxury that the bodice rippers begin to resemble less of the domestic social commentary present in emulation of Austen and begin looking far more akin to 19th century British adventure novels. Despite the travel's coercive nature–through kidnapping, assault, forced marriage and/or mistaken identity–it encapsulates a transition to an entirely different format for cultural imperialism in the historical romance genre.

Financial Successes of the Bodice Ripper

Alice Turner's article details the publishing success of the erotic historical romance phenomenon into a "multimillion-dollar inferno" (Turner, Alice K, 1978, pg. 49).

> Plot: Typically torrid cover copy titillates the reader with promises of 'seething passions unleashed,' etc. The actual plot is always a picaresque adventure which carries the heroine across a lot of landscape, uniting her with the hero, after many mishaps, in a fiery inferno of consuming passion. The back cover carries geographical and historical information. (A. Turner, Alice K., 1978, pg. 47).

In the article she details the new elements dominating popular romance and tallies the most successful novels by copies sold. I have filled in the details of the hero and heroine for some:

The Flame and the Flower (Kathleen Woodwiss (Avon, 1972) 2,655,500 copies

- **Heroine**: Heather Simmons, 18 year old british orphan
- **Hero**: Brandon Birmingham, ship captain and plantation owner from Charleston, South Carolina. mistakes Heather for a sex worker and results in her initial assault.
- **Plot Details:**
    - Period: 1799

Savage Surrender (Natasha Peters (Ace, 1977) 1,300,000 copies

- **Heroine**: Brenda Denise Pfleugger, 17, pioneer's daughter, family killed by American Major Joseph Partain
- **Hero**: Striped Eagle, 25, North American indigenous man, rescues Brenda after Partain's attack
- **Plot Details:**
    - Period: 1840

Wicked Loving Lies (Rosemary Rogers (Avon, 1976) 3,100,000 copies

- **Heroine**: Marisa, wealthy british woman
- **Hero**: Dominic Challenger, bastard pirate
- **Plot description on Harlequin:**
    - "From the safety of a sheltered convent to a sultan's harem, from the opulence of Napoleon's court to the wilds of the new frontier, Marisa and Dominic brave all that they encounter in this thrilling age: intrigue, captivity and danger. And above all, an enduring passion that ignites into an infinite love."

Love's Tender Fury (Jennifer Wilde [Pen name of male author, T. E. Huff] (Warner, 1976) 2,500,000

- **Heroine**: Marietta Danver, white english woman sold into slavery
- **Hero**: Derek Hawke, former english aristocrat, now a slaveowner in American colonies (1770) who purchases Marietta as an indentured servant
- **Plot Details:**
    - Era 1770s.

The Flame and the Flower

The novel, set between 1799-1801, begins in England but takes place primarily in Charleston, North Carolina after a lengthy ship journey. The hero of the novel, Brandon Birmingham owns a cotton plantation named Harthhaven. The son of former members of the British aristocracy who left England to pursue wealth in the then-British colonies, he makes the majority of his wealth through exporting cotton to England. It is during a trip to London that he encounters Heather Simmons. After narrowly escaping an assault attempt, Heather is mistaken for a sex-worker by Brandon's crew and is kidnapped and assaulted by Brandon. The results in an accidental pregnancy which leads to the marriage of Heather to Brandon.

Heather's half-Irish heritage is frequently mocked and cited as the root of all her rage at the violences she experiences. Another character, Henry, seeks adventure and riches by sailing with the British Tea Company. He tells Heather, "When I return from the Orient, I'll be gettin' a full three an' a half shares. Why, Heather, do you know I'll come back a wealthy man." (Woodiwiss, 147). The lore around Brandon's immense financial success due to enslaved labor is passively explained to the reader one paragraph after Brandon's first assault against Heather.

Slavery is primarily discussed in relation to Heather's initial imprisonment, marriage and further abuse by Brandon. She is frequently threatened with violence if she does not do what she is told including bathing and dressing him. The word "slave" appears 13 times throughout the novel and is most frequently used to apply to Brandon's initial treatment of Heather or to the enslaved people owned by *other* plantation owners in the area which surrounds Harthhaven. Meanwhile, "servant" appears 84 times, a little under half of which refer to the enslaved characters of Hearthhaven plantation. Brandon is still referred to as "Master Brandon" or "Master Bran". Throughout the novel Woodiwiss is making an effort to distance the reality of Brandon as a slave owner as much as possible.

During one scene, a few days after their forced wedding day, Brandon takes Heather to a french dressmaker. The dressmaker, Madame Fontaineau objectifies Heather's body for nearly a full page of dialogue. In describing the experience, Woodiwiss directly compares Heather's treatment to the experience of a slave market:

> She felt like a slave being sold to a man—this man—for the purpose of giving him pleasure. One could expect to be pinched and examined any moment. But it was her body Madame Fontaineau spoke of so freely, not a slave's. The woman had no right to degrade her or her person in this manner. A woman's body was something sacred, something private, to be given respect and not sullied by those who would make it so. It

> was not meant for a slave's block, to be sold nor bartered. (Woodiwiss, 1972, pg. 157-158)

For much of the novel, the black men, women and children enslaved by Brandon are primarily referred to as "servants". The book's second half begins with Heather and Brandon's arrival in North Carolina, framed as an exciting space, recently freed from British colonial rule. Upon arriving at Harthhaven, the plantation owned by Brandon, Heather is amazed at the amount of land and grandeur of the home itself. She is "filled with a calm contentment and a new trust in the future" (Woodiwiss, 1972, pg. 251) by the fact that she and her child will live in the comforts provided to her as members of Brandon's family. Hatti, an older enslaved woman characteristically follows the 'Mammy' archetype and is likely named as an intertextual reference to the archetype's most iconic appearance: the character Mammy in the film *Gone with the Wind*[8], played by actress Hattie McDaniel. Woodiwiss also uses racial slurs liberally when describing the black characters in prose.

With its unprecedented profit as a romance novel, *The Flame and the Flower* uses violent history as its backdrop for the establishment of a highly lucrative genre of historical fiction.

The RWA Racism Scandal

Over the last few years, the Romance Writers of American have had a series of scandals involving allegations of institutional racism, eventually culminating in the United States based non-profit organization filing for chapter 11 bankruptcy in May 2024.

In 2019, a complaint for harassment was filed against Regency romance author Courtney Milan and at the time chair on the RWA Ethics Committee. Milan, who is Chinese

[8] The relationship between Rhett and Scarlett can also be considered a prototypical relationship of the bodice ripper.

American, was accused of harassment and bullying after she called out another author's repeated anti-asian racism in her novels. Milan was censured and removed from her position. Her removal sparked massive controversy across RWA membership and readerbase. It led to massive controversy with the romance community, accusations of internal corruption and repression of marginalized voices as well as calls for the resignation of most if not all members of the RWA board of directors.

The International Association for the Study of Popular Romance released a statement compiling the allegations against the RWA and announced intentions to distance itself financially from the RWA and stated:

> So far in this matter RWA has not just failed, but failed wrongly. We ask for better from them, and will try to do better ourselves. We hope all organizations, including RWA, are able to embrace policy and practice that sees and represents all of their talent."

Alyssa Day, romance author who once served on the RWA's national board of directors claimed Milan's removal "demonstrated a reprehensible, systemic pattern of racial discrimination within the organization that has existed for many years." (Day, 2020).

According to the RWA bankruptcy court filing, as reported by John Seewer of The Associated Press, the RWA's membership had decreased 80% since the 2019 Milan scandal. Later in the claim, the RWA credits their financial issues are 'predominantly due to disputes concerning diversity, equity, and inclusion' issues between previous board members and others in the romance writing community."

Inclusive Spaces

Acknowledgement of the historical romance chronotope existing as a fantasy-space exposes both space for critique and for the potential exploration of the genre as a place of exploration for groups historically excluded from Regency romance spaces.

Some romance authors, like *Bridgerton* author Julia Quinn, recognize their work as something more adjacent to fantasy romance than historical fiction. In an interview with The Guardian discussing the Netflix adaptation (2020-) of her books, Quinn references the impact of the "historical accuracy police" with similar complaints raised by Rodale:

> Previously , I've gotten dinged by the historical accuracy police. So in some ways, I was fearful – if you do that, are you denying real things that happened? But you know what? This is already romantic fantasy, and I think it's more important to show that as many people as possible deserve this type of happiness and dignity. So I think they made the absolutely right choice, bringing in all this inclusivity. (Flood, 2021)

These complaints increased rapidly with the release of the *Bridgerton* adaptation series and its approach to inclusive casting. "Some fumed about the corsets, others commented on the music. But mostly, the discussion focused on the Black Queen and the unprecedented large number of Black and other non-white actors." (Posti, 2024, pg. 123). Though occasionally identified as such, *Bridgerton* doesn't participate in "color-blind casting", rather over its 3 seasons and 1 spin-off prequel it has developed an alternate history to the Regency period in which more diverse narratives can be explicitly explored.

The backlash against *Bridgerton's* development of an alternate version of Regency history came from multiple sides. Some critics expressed disapproval at the creation of 'unrealistic' and 'historically inaccurate', whilst others raised concern the development of more inclusiveness would merely increase romantic erasure of the injustices being committed against colonized people during the 19th century. Piia K. Posti calls this a strain "created between the fictional drive and the ideological drive of inclusivity in period drama casting." (Posti, 2024, pg. 128).

Conservative backlash against diverse representation in historical fiction is obviously politically minded. However, the rage against 'inaccuracy' is not only because the complaining

party is expressing contemporary bigotry. They are expressing a refusal to normalize the appearance of diversity in their own conceptualization of history. In *Consuming History,* de Groot discusses the political backlash against Sarah Water's 1998 novel (and its 2002 screen adaptation) *Tipping the Velvet,* a historical novel which depicts a queer relationship in 1890s England provoked "backlash in the press and public" (de Groot, 2016, pg. 230) from those uncomfortable with a queering of the historical romance genre. The "an urge to remarginalize the lesbian identities articulated in the text, (de Groot, 2016, pg. 231)" communicating that the appearance of queerness was unacceptable within the historical romance content.

Rejection of queer content in historical media exists as a manifestation of personally held homophobia *and* an anxiety surrounding their own culturally constructed sense of history. The ability for conservatives to construct and protect an idealized version of history requires a denial of those elements having ever existed within a perfect abstract of "the past when everything was better than it is now". There is a nostalgia for the past as it was told and how they imagine it to be. The past is less sinful, less morally corrupt, less "woke". The past is stronger, more masculine, more orthodox, Greater.

The dominance of *Bridgerton* combined with long-term romantic fixation on Austen adaptations spawned discourse around alternative and speculative history across period dramas and historical fiction. Dubbed the "Bridgerton Effect", the show's explosive success launched thousands of conversations about the role of inclusivity in Regency material with some craving even more.

Wallpaper Feminism

More predominantly is a shift in the political ideology expressed by various characters leaning into more modern forms of feminism and anti-racism than traditionally present. Explorations of women's rights, critiques of patriarchy and the potential spaces for women's

agency in contemporary 19th century novels are present in 19th century contemporary literature–including Austen's. However, they are not expressed in a recognizable form of feminism expected during the late 20th Century into the 21st.

Romance novels as a space for female authors and readers to explore anachronistic forms of feminism is not new to the genre. As discussed earlier, bodice rippers allowed a space for women of the 1970s and 1980s to explore sexuality. Through cheap, formulaic literature women could find "a safe place for women to explore their desires, free from the risk of rape, guilt, judgement, slut-shaming, disease, unplanned pregnancy, or regret." (Rodale, 2015, pg. 24)

Regency romance novels in which characters express tenets of 1st, 2nd or 3rd wave feminism are technically anachronistic in a period before the modern feminist movement developed. Authors like Sarah MacClean have written a number of heroines who exhibit *very* modern forms of feminism. The heroine of her debut novel, *Nine Rules to Break When Romancing a Rake* (2010), Lady Calpurnia Hartwell wrestles with her perfect reputation within the *ton* and potential of having lived a very boring life. She, pushing against gendered expectations and at risk of total societal ruin, compiles a check-list of activities women are barred from doing but the men of society can do without scandal (or are encouraged to do so). She then commits herself to accomplishing all nine things on her list. Not only is "Callie" behaving outside of the expected female role of society, she is doing so as it is inherently "unfair" that men are allowed to behave in ways women cannot.

Development Toward Inclusive Works

During our conversation historical romance, P. Hartley discussed ways in which the world built by Regency romance chronotopes opened the door to explore diverse perspectives :

> I personally really love historical romance, especially queer historical romance. I think it explores really fun romantic scenarios in terms of power dynamics and secrecy. (P. Hartley, personal communication, September 4, 2025)

Opening the traditional Regency romance genre into a more inclusive space to explore the perspectives of new storytellers and characters embraces what some would accuse as “wallpaper” due to modulations in expectation. Many “BookTok” Regency historicals receive forms of “wallpaper” criticism.

Modern “wallpapers” (published during the 2010s into the 2020s) can be identified by a gradual loosening of the Heyer-speak style into a more casual dialect. The spatial-temporal elements which enable these “fun romantic scenarios” are preserved in the evolving world of Regency romance. Ballrooms, Regency dress, rules and regulations of *the ton* and the scandals within. It is who resides within these spaces and how they are able to uniquely navigate it which is being introduced.

The 2025 Janeites of the Jane Austen festival did not do so blindly to the opportunities presented to find themselves and welcome others into the space. For her article, Leah Rustomjee spoke to attendees on their personal experiences finding community within the greater Regency space (Rustomjee, 2025):

> For Elizabeth, originally from Zimbabwe, Austen’s message of perseverance particularly resonates. “I grew up in a colonial era, it was difficult, but for me Austen’s novels helped me realise that everyone has a place in the world and that you do matter even if you’ve been told something different,” she says.

The “Bridgerton Effect”’s influence on Regency fan culture is identified clearly. Multiple BookTokers were interviewed, identifying a cultural change in fandom spaces:

> “Things are changing for the better as more and more people see themselves represented,” says Lex, wearing a dandy outfit that feels more aligned with how they identify today.

Rustomjee spoke to artists in attendance who emphasized their love of “Vintage fashion not vintage values”

> “I miss the artistry and craftsmanship of the era. There was an appreciation and knowledge of art and culture that just doesn’t exist today.”

Identifying progressive spaces within the Regency historical fan spaces does not absolve the still existing problems of racism, classism, homophobia and transphobia still present due to gatekeeping. However, blindly presenting all readers, writers and artists who contribute to Regency cultural spaces does a great disservice to Regency fans everywhere.

Conclusion

Popular history and the way it is expressed generates newly crafted images of periods of history, inaccessible to some either through centuries of being erased from mainstream historical narratives. The use of fiction to aid in an increase of visibility is not inherently amoral or a uniquely new phenomenon. Accusations of ‘historical inaccuracies’ rooted around the Regency romance chronotope as established by Georgette Heyer and the authors who came after her calls into focus problematic elements of Heyer’s own presentation. As de Groot puts it: "Popular culture is in a state of constant contention and evolution, and the representation of the historical is part of this development. Heritage consumerism might well be a problematic, potentially destructive force, but, at the same time, these historical products bear with them a potentiality for reading against the grain or introducing new ways of conceptualizing the self and

social knowledge; and in this they might be valuable for their defiance and dissidence" (de Groot, 2016, pg. 6)

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