

*H-France Review* Vol. 8 (November 2008), No. 147

Diana Holmes, *Romance and Readership in Twentieth-Century France*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 154pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. £44.00. (hb). ISBN 978-0-924984-8.

Review by George Paizis, University College London.

Romantic fiction is the most popular genre among the most prolific readers of the reading public, women. It accounts for a huge proportion of the annual turnover of the publishing industry in the industrialised world. Romance dominates the whole breadth of the spectrum of fiction written, aimed at and read by women. At one extremity, the market is dominated by the international publisher, Harlequin, which sells its books in about one-hundred different markets to hundreds of millions of women. At the other end of the market, via the stepping stones of strongly romantic themes in middle-brow writing, romance also threads the writings of the intellectually accredited women writers. This is no recent phenomenon since the reading of romantic fiction and its harmful effects, especially on young women, have been commented upon ever since the early years of the nineteenth century.

Part of the series Oxford Studies in Modern European Culture, the aims of which are to provide both depth and breadth and study texts in an active relationship with their historical context, Diana Holmes's *Romance and Readership in Twentieth-Century France* is a history of the genre in France which also seeks to be a history of how romance has represented women's experiences and aspirations for a period that covers the long twentieth century. The author has already written widely on the changing position of women in French society and their literature and her scope ranges from before the *belle époque* via the interwar years to our times.[1] The result is a confident book written on the back of extensive research and teaching experience.

The narrative of romance fiction is driven by a central structuring device which involves two characters meeting, overcoming a series of obstacles and ending happily or unhappily (p. 6), usually together, and occasionally, apart. From the start, Holmes points out that the narrative is built on the centrality of contradictions "between a personal will to absolute fulfilment, and the intractability of the real" (p. 7); hence its usefulness in exploring the social condition of women. However, is the attraction of women to romance a reflection of their false consciousness, as feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer claim, or is there some reason for the elective affinity? [1] Holmes begins her explanation with an account of the relegation of women to a domestic position in the course of the nineteenth century, an occurrence that coincided with the feminisation and subordination of the genre. Nevertheless, she finds this "socio-historical argument" inadequate to explain the structural stability and pervasive popularity of the genre: we have now seen "dramatic improvements in women's status and opportunities, and the decline in the social and material necessity of marriage." The explanation must therefore be in the structure of women's psyche which is "somewhat different" to that of men (p. 14). Therefore, we find that in "patriarchal cultures ... a genre devoted to the narrative quest for a passionately intimate relationship with an adored Other, often as the cost of some loss of personal agency, should also be a 'feminine' genre" (p. 16). This explanation for the pleasure of the text for women has one major limitation as it implies that the huge number of readers embrace a narrative that ends ineluctably with their elevation to a subordinate condition. It is a reading of the romance that accepts women's allotted condition as given and the readers as trapped in a state of pleasurable confirmation; a strange conclusion

for those who believe in the possibility of women's liberation.

Romantic fiction has been like a bone between warring sides. Some pull it one way: its mythology and false promises of fulfilment in love serve to prepare women for a subservient role to a patriarchal order. An infantile psychological narrative that culminates in subservience to dominant males and provides the sugar on the bitter pill of oppression, it reproduces capitalist values and valorises the attributes and paraphernalia of wealth. On the other side are those who see it as the opposite: an empowering narrative where women nearly always come out top. Romance is a narrative that addresses women's experiences in society, a way for women to fantasise their real condition and rehearse positive solutions, even if only in fiction. In between, are those who see it as harmless escapism, a moment of pleasure from the chores and the grind of the quotidian. Some even see it as soft porn for women. The lines of division are sharp and to write about romance is to venture into a minefield of disagreement and ideological conflict.

The title of this book proclaims the intention to relate the genre and its history to the life of its readers and it spans a wide period. Furthermore, in order to extend its appeal, all quotations and book titles are translated. Lecturers might be eager, therefore, to order this book for the library as it promises to address the questions, Why has romance been so popular for so long? Why is it favoured by women writers of all degrees of the intellectual ladder? Has it changed over the last one hundred years and if so, why? What is the nature of its appeal to readers? How does it engage them? Does it have noxious effects? What does it tell us about society? These are all meaty questions. In the Introduction, Holmes quotes approvingly Rita Felski to the effect that literature is not a self-referential system nor something that passively reflects reality but "a medium that can profoundly influence individual and cultural self-understanding in the sphere of everyday life, charting the changing preoccupations of social groups through symbolic fictions by means of which they make sense of experience" (p. 4).<sup>[2]</sup> Holmes chooses key moments in the development of the genre, looks at some salient social trends and selects texts that received critical or commercial success to illustrate or complexify what was happening and what was being imagined.

Beginning with the romance before World War I, Holmes describes how it reflected the massive changes that were taking place in society in the train of economic and hence social developments. On the one hand, were the new opportunities that came with unprecedented openings for employment for women, education and mobility; on the other hand, was resistance to this change, not only among the old forces of reaction—the Church and the Army—but also the crisis in values that this opposition brought in its wake for women. The crisis of faith was intensified by "the blatant contradiction between the founding beliefs of the Republic, and its discriminatory practices, [which] fuelled and provided a language for feminist protest" (p. 22), a conflict based on the contradiction between women's aspirations and what society was prepared to allow them.

However, though the educational and technological opportunities were great, the huge increase in the circulation of fiction for the mass of women did not reflect the ideological conflict. Literature for the masses remained unabashedly centred on "love, desire, romance, and marriage" (p. 24). It was a literature of exotic escape and of sensation with easily readable narrative signs and transparent characters that ended happily. In parallel, there existed the "moral romance" the job of which was to propagate a more clearly moralising mission among women. In the opposite corner, and selling to a different readership, was the feminist romance that was written for newly empowered, if not enfranchised, middle-class women. This narrative conflict was underpinned by the question of whether love and emancipation could be reconciled. Later, this dilemma is reflected in the novels of Colette (*La Vagabonde*, 1910, and *L'Entrave*, 1913), in which the heroine chose a glorious independence in the first, and a "shackled, secondary role," (p. 42) in the second.

The next chapter looks at the scene from the interwar years to the Liberation of France in 1944. This period was characterised by a greater presence of women in the world of work, the economic crisis of the

1930s, the Popular Front, and the reactionary politics of the Vichy Régime. During this period, romantic fiction was dominated by the output of Delly, a brother and sister collaboration that produced about two novels per year, for about forty years. These novels are characterised by an extreme conservatism from both the feminist and the social point of view yet were extremely and enduringly popular. Holmes explains why so many women read books that apparently were against both their gender and class interests by saying that “romance functions as a symbolic display and explanation of a process commonly experienced by many women” (p. 54). Resistance is displayed when the hero challenges the heroine’s freedom to follow her moral or religious convictions. There were also other novelists who wrote romances with more contemporary subject matter, such as Max du Veuzit and Magali, but the overall themes of the novels of the period were “largely conservative in intention providing the fantasised reconciliation of women’s subjective desires with the circumscribed destinies allotted to them in a society that remained strongly patriarchal” (p. 69).

The 1950s was another period of economic expansion and saw the appearance of such periodicals as *Elle* that sang the praises of work and of *Le Deuxième sexe* (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir. Nevertheless the mass market continued to be dominated by Delly and Max du Veuzit and continued to be so until well into the 1970s. The primacy of the family and a stable marriage continued to provide the “eternal verity” that underlay all appearances of career and independence. In contrast to this trend in the mass market, Holmes looks at Simone de Beauvoir’s *Les Mandarins* (1954) and Françoise Sagan’s novels as examples of romantic fiction for the thinking public. In the latter’s books, although the world of the public sphere is still dominated by the male protagonist, the heroine reflects the changing mores of the time—of self-sufficiency and emotional non-commitment—though this independence is posited as ultimately unfulfilling.

In the 1960s, the Women’s Liberation Movement questioned the hegemony of the model of heterosexual marriage as well as male dominance. This was the time when there was a growth of women’s experimental, realist or autobiographical writing, where the traditional relations between the sexes were challenged. Not only did marriage figures begin their long-term dip in society but romance ceased to be seen as the natural solution. The works of Marie Cardinal and Régine Desforges trumpet the possibility of finding happiness in the relationship with other women as well as in heterosexual love. This trend was extended by the appearance of widely-read lesbian romances. In the next and final period examined by the book, lesbian romances began to sell in the mass market, in series just like Harlequin. They went further still, and the subject of inter-racial relations was also broached, yet in a novel form that was similar to Harlequin romances. Paradoxically, this was also the period when Harlequin entered the French market and finally displaced the traditional romances (Delly, du Veuzit etc) that had continued to enjoy strong sales since the war years.

The last chapter, “Love in a Postmodern Age,” is dominated by a discussion of this phenomenon in the light of the question why there remains “the persistent popularity of romance, in an age where marriage is no longer assumed to be woman’s only proper destiny” (p. 118). To answer this question, Holmes looks at Harlequin romances and what has been said about them. She rejects the explanation that Harlequin is the equivalent of Coca Cola—something that is consumed but is basically bad for the reader from both an anti-capitalist and feminist perspective. However, she concedes that they do valorise wealth, social privilege and “eroticise male power and female submission” (p. 120). Holmes does not believe that these books promote false consciousness. Rather, she argues that these romances provide “a fictional space where women can address fears and anxieties raised by the conditions of their lives, and define positive values by imagining pleasurable solutions” (p. 120). What accounts for the unchanging elements of the narratives is the psychoanalytic interpretation, the successful resolution to the female Oedipal drama. The hero is finally tamed and softened. The narrative represents the pleasure of reliving the “happy version of a fundamental drama of identity” (p. 123)—fulfilment by achieving both unity and maintaining separation. In so far as they are quests for unity with the other, they accentuate the gender difference between male and female just as they fantasise the trappings of wealth, the context

in which the romance is conducted. Furthermore, these texts serve to defend “sexual intercourse as necessarily also emotional intercourse.” The formula can be extended to lesbian or inter-racial love stories, which demonstrates that in itself, it is not necessarily conservative. These are narratives of transcendence as they offer “a glimpse of how relations with the other may be” (p. 139).

Enjoyable to read as Holmes’s book may be, there are nevertheless some questions that remain annoyingly unanswered. The analysis of these books is not informed by an analysis of how the texts work, as texts of fiction. Rather the reading that underlies all the texts is a literal reading. Where this approach proves insufficient, as in the case of the mass market romances, Holmes calls it a pleasurable fantasy. However, it is incontrovertible that these mass market books also deal with real social evolution, reflecting real changes that take place in the life of the women readers. But if this is the case, what is the relationship between the fantasy and the reality?<sup>[3]</sup> Related to this distinction, the Holmes’s argument is based on a division of the field between the “popular and the literary romance,” the difference lying in the degree of resolution that they provide. The popular, typically the Harlequin romance, “provides an imaginary experience of needs happily fulfilled, whereas the literary novels may explore the needs and desires in their tension with reality, and without offering solutions” (p. 129). But if we transpose this distinction to the readership of these novels, then does it mean that the mass-market readers are trapped in reading fantasy or propaganda, while the other readers enjoy texts that explore the contradictions in the real? The sophisticated readers enjoy reading about the “is,” while the masses read more about the “might” and the “should.” If Holmes had introduced the notion of false consciousness, the uncritical adoption of ideas by the exploited and oppressed that are against their class (and gender) interests, it would have fit uncomfortably well in her analysis: Romance is the opium of the (mass female) people. Yet what is valuable is not romance as fantasy or as an inverted image of suffering, but a way of looking at romance as a protest against suffering and subordination.

#### NOTES

[1] Diana Homes and Carrie Tarr, *A ‘Belle Epoque?’ Women in French Society and Culture, 1890-1914* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006)

[2] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: McGibbon & Kee, 1970).

[3] Rita Felski, *Beyond a Feminist Aesthetic: Feminist Literature and social Change*, (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989).

[4] An illuminating discussion of the relationship between fantasy and reality, the question of point of view, as well as the nature of the narrative structure and happy ending in mass market romances is to be found in Jayne Ann Krentz, ed., *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

George Paizis  
University College London  
g.paizis@btinternet.com

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical

Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of *H-France*. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172