

Podleski, T.
From Loving with
a Vengeance

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THE DISAPPEARING ACT
Harlequin Romances

I

The success of Harlequin Enterprises, Ltd., which is based in Toronto, has been extraordinary.¹ Since 1958 when the first Harlequin Romance was published, over 2,300 titles have appeared. In 1977, Harlequin had 10 percent of the paperback market in North America, selling 100 million books on this continent and 50 million more in countries like Israel, Germany, and Holland. Although the United States is the chief market for Harlequins, the novels are now translated into sixteen languages.² Approximately 140 women write for the company, most of them British. The readership is, apparently, entirely female and comprises women of all ages.

Twelve new books appear each month, "all displayed on standardized racks in bookstores, supermarkets, drugstores, as well as chains like Woolworth. The series is backed by heavy TV ads that push the romances, not single titles—spreading costs over a series."³ As a result of this method of advertising, the company can sell its books more cheaply than other paperback companies (\$1.00 to \$1.50) and achieve a very low return factor: every novel becomes a best seller. Advertising and promotional gimmicks (such as putting Harlequins in boxes of detergent) account for part of Harlequin's success. But as Russell Nye points out, "It must be remembered that 98 percent of all books published each year are not best sellers, despite advertising budgets, and that if there is anything a publisher would like to know, it is why they are not."⁴ Clearly, the popularity of Harlequin novels indicates a degree

twentieth century and up to the present day. Cases discussed in the final pages of the book—which include a 1907 murder trial as well as popular media from the turn of our own century—demonstrate the ongoing cultural fascination with the shopgirl and suggest what we may still have to learn from her story.

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A television commercial for Harlequin Romances shows a middle-aged woman lying on her bed holding a Harlequin novel and preparing to begin what she calls her "disappearing act." I can't think of a better phrase to describe at once both what is laudable and what is deplorable in the appeal of such fiction. In one sense, of course—and this is the aspect critics of popular romances have spent most energy discussing—women should stop vanishing quietly behind the scenes and start making themselves more visible. This is unlikely to hap-

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Each book averages approximately 187 pages, and the formula rarely varies: a young, inexperienced, poor to moderately well-to-do woman encounters and becomes involved with a handsome, strong, experienced, wealthy man, older than herself by ten to fifteen years. The heroine is confused by the hero's behavior since, though he is obviously interested in her, he is mocking, cynical, contemptuous, often hostile, and even somewhat brutal. By the end, however, all misunderstandings are cleared away, and the hero reveals his love for the heroine, who reciprocates.⁶

This formula is, of course, as old as the novel itself. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, about a servant girl who marries her master, is, as many critics have observed, the "mother" of popular romances for women.⁷ Elements of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* can also be found in modern romances, although, as I will try to show, critics have probably overestimated the amount of female fantasy in the novel and underestimated the extent to which Brontë's novel attempts to undercut the fantasy. Finally, it has not been sufficiently recognized how much Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has contributed to the development of the formula. While there is no denying Austen's genius, we will see how she hit upon a perfect method of presenting feminine fantasy under the guise of "realism."

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The publishers offer the following guidelines to prospective authors:

Harlequins are well-plotted, strong romances with a happy ending.

They are told from the heroine's point of view and in the third person.

There may be elements of mystery or adventure but these must be subordinate to the romance. The books are contemporary and settings can be anywhere in the world as long as they are authentic.⁵

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Why is he so often angry at her? The second enigma, usually but not always implicit, concerns how the hero will come to see that the heroine is different from all other women, that she is not, in other words, a "scheming little adventuress." The two enigmas must necessarily be considered separately here, but it should be kept in mind that the narrative's peculiar power lies in its ability to solve them simultaneously.¹³

II

ENIGMA I: "Who are you?" she whispered, staring up at him, her pale fingers suddenly clutching his arm as if trying to convey that the question was important to her. Beneath the thin material of his shirt she could feel the hard muscles flexing, and a tremor shot through her. She couldn't remember whether he was friend or foe. He didn't appear to be either.¹⁴

In a perceptive article on Gothic novels for women, Joanna Russ claims that Gothics are written for women who are afraid of their husbands. She quotes an ex-editor of Gothics who is very frank about this point:

The basic appeal . . . is to women who marry guys and then begin to discover that their husbands are strangers . . . so there's a simultaneous attraction/repulsion, love/fear going on. Most of the "pure" Gothics tend to have a handsome, magnetic suitor or husband who may or may not be a lunatic and/or murderer.¹⁵

The basic premise of these "mystery" stories is that a good man is hard to detect; the solution usually involves the discovery that the man who had seemed most suspicious and unreliable is the real hero who has been in love with the heroine all along, and the man who had seemed above suspicion—"a man invariably represented as gentle, protective, responsible, quiet, humorous, tender, and calm"—is the villain who may even be revealed "as an insane mass-murderer of a whole string of previous wives."¹⁶

I suggest that the mystery of masculine motives is not peculiar to Gothic novels, but is central to most women's popular romances. Although the hero of Harlequins is not suspected of being insane or murderous he is more or less brutal and it is the function of the

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the commercials call "the wonderful world of Harlequin Romances." For this world, very like the real one, insists upon and rewards feminine selflessness. Indeed, as we shall see, the heroine of the novels can achieve happiness only by undergoing a complex process of self-subversion, during which she sacrifices her aggressive instincts, her "pride," and—nearly—her life. And a close analysis of the dynamics of the reading process will show that the reader is encouraged to participate in and actively desire feminine self-betrayal.

In quite another sense, however, women's longing to "disappear," their desire to obliterate the consciousness of the self as a physical presence—increasingly difficult to do these days when mass culture has turned women into delectable sights for consumption—surely cannot be completely condemned. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger, Marxist art critic, screenwriter, and novelist, has discussed the way in which the display of women in the visual arts and publicity images results in

a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.⁸

As we shall see, romances help readers, if only temporarily, to believe in the possibility of transcending the divided self so accurately described by Berger. Moreover, they help to convince women that the price of being taken care of does not have to be eternal vigilance; all women do not have to be like Jane Eyre who, because of the inequalities between her and Rochester, was unable to relax with him, forced to "cease" rather than "please" him, forced to keep him "excellently entertained" for fear he would tire of her. According to popular romances, it is possible really to be taken care of and to achieve that state of self-transcendence and self-forgetfulness promised by the ideology of love.

The complexity of women's responses to romances has not been sufficiently acknowledged. Instead of exploring the possibility that romances, while serving to keep women in their place, may at the same time be concerned with real female problems, analysts of women's romances have generally seen the fantasy embodied in romantic fiction

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Susan Brownmiller, on the other hand, denies women any share in the creation of their fantasies:

Given the pervasive male ideology of rape (the mass psychology of the conqueror) a mirror-image female victim psychology (the mass psychology of the conquered) could not help but arise. Near its extreme, this female psycho-sexuality indulges in the fantasy of rape. Stated another way, when women do fantasize about sex, the fantasies are usually the product of male conditioning and cannot be otherwise.¹⁰

While there is a great deal of truth in these remarks, Brownmiller's "reflection theory" of female fantasies is belied by the obvious male bafflement at female romantic expectations. As Greer's witty sketch of the adolescent "courting situation" shows, female desires, shaped by romantic fiction, are very much at odds with male ones; therefore, it would seem, "female victim psychology" cannot be classified as a simple "mirror-image" of the male ideology of rape.¹¹ My analysis proceeds from the belief that the truth lies somewhere between the positions taken by Greer and Brownmiller. Psychologist Clara M. Thompson described women's "masochism" as a "form of adaptation to an unsatisfactory and circumscribed life."¹² The notion of "adaptation" is an important one, for it implies some sort of activity on the part of women, not just passive acceptance. In exploring female romantic fantasies, I want to look at the varied and complex strategies women use to adapt to circumscribed lives and to convince themselves that limitations are really opportunities.

In order to account for the appeal of the rigid formula, it is useful to see in each Harlequin two basic enigmas: the first, which is more or less explicitly stated (and often constantly repeated), has to do with the puzzling behavior of the hero. *What does he constructively make the heroine's*

novels to explain such brutality in a lover. The very titles often indicate the basic conflict: *Enemy Lover*, *Beloved Tyrant*, *Fond Deceiver*, etc.¹⁷ And typically in the first meeting between hero and heroine, the man's indifference, contempt, or amusement is emphasized:

But now she was wet, cold and late and had had a severe fright on top of it. To crown it all the detestable man stood over her without offering to help her to her feet. He even looked as if he were laughing. It occurred to her that she must look ridiculous, like some collapsed puppet sprawled at the side of the road. (*Goblin*, 5-6)

Even so, with her inexperience, she bruised the fingers of one hand when they eventually achieved their object. The cry she gave was completely ignored, however, indeed she doubted if he even noticed it, and she stood with her bruised knuckles pressed to her mouth, looking at him reproachfully.

He examined his own vehicle for damage, but omitted to do as much for hers. (*Chateau*, 11)

All the while, without realizing it, she appeared to be amusing him no end. . . . His eyes licked over her, calculating, experimental, still brilliant with laughter. (*Lesson*, 28)

If he were a farmer he could be talking of some of his own livestock. (*Captive*, 37)

Greer is very far from the truth in claiming that these fictional heroes have been "invented." Clearly, they are here asserting their masculine superiority in the same ways men often do in real life: they treat the woman as a joke, appraise her as an object, and give her less attention than they give their automobiles. The element of fantasy in romance lies less in the character traits of the hero than in the interpretation readers are led to make of his behavior. For the reader, acquainted with the formula and hence in possession of what Wolfgang Iser calls "advance retrospection," is always able to interpret the hero's actions as the result of his increasingly intense love for the heroine.¹⁸ Knowing the hero will eventually imply or state that he has loved the heroine

There was an odd, disturbing look on his face that flicked tiny tremors down her spine, sent sharp warning signals along her nerves which she was rash enough to ignore. He enjoyed taunting and teasing, but it would mean little. Possibly the sudden spell of bad weather had stirred a devil in him. Many men looked for scapegoats when overworked. (*Captive*, 54)

The "odd, disturbing" looks men are shooting at women in every other line mediate between the heroine's worries (which, from a feminist point of view, may be perfectly justified) and the reader's interpretation of the male's behavior, which is seen as resulting from the hero's resistance to the increasing power of her charms. The vague language, then, has a precise function; more specific language would destroy the reader's complex relationship with the heroine—causing us either to identify with her too closely or to become too detached. In other words, since his look is so "odd," we do not view her persistence in blaming it on the bad weather and a bad mood as completely unwarranted, yet we can ourselves attribute it to happier causes unsuspected by the heroine.

Almost all of the possible reasons for men's mistreatment of women are suggested in one or another of the novels. They range from fairly charitable explanations: his temper really has nothing to do with me, but with the weather and the workload—an excuse which may be soothing in real life, but which, in the novels, is still very far from the heavenly truth—to explanations which posit the emotional inferiority of men—this allows women a measure of dignity and some superiority, but is hardly acceptable since their whole lives are supposed to revolve around men—to explanations which might, in another context, be considered profound. The most constant suspicion in the novels is that men are using sexuality to punish and humiliate women. "I doubt if you would be prepared for the retribution I would exact" is a favorite male line and should be interpreted as meaning he will unleash his pent-up sexual desire for the heroine.

Often, punishment miraculously turns into reward: "For an instant she thought he was going to hit her and then, fearfully, realized he was going to do something very different" (*Goblin*, 130). If kissing and hitting are so "very different," one wonders how the heroine could possibly mistake one for the other even "for an instant." The novels

hostility and derision to his inability to admit, perhaps even to himself, how much the sight of the woman "sprawled at the side of the road looking like a collapsed puppet" inflames his passion and rouses his admiration. Male brutality comes to be seen as a manifestation not of contempt, but of love.

This is an important function of the formula. It is easy to assume, and most popular culture critics have assumed, a large degree of identification between reader and protagonist, but the matter is not so simple.¹⁹ Since the reader knows the formula, she is superior in wisdom to the heroine and thus detached from her. The reader, then, achieves a very close emotional identification with the heroine partly because she is intellectually distanced from her and does not have to suffer the heroine's confusion. We shall see in Part III, however, that this mixture of detachment and identification creates special problems for the reader in that the heroine is virtuous only insofar as she remains ignorant and confused about the matters the reader clearly comprehends.

Since readers are prepared to understand the hero's behavior in terms of the novel's ending, some of the serious doubts women have about men can be confronted and dispelled. Many likely explanations for the contempt men show toward women, explanations which might be plausible enough in real life, come to seem like narrative snares—false clues—and the reader can enjoy outwitting the heroine by guessing the hero's true motives:

It was almost as if he was feeling vicious this morning. (*Enemy*, 94)

Men, in her experience, took a woman because she was convenient and a good worker far more often than because they had conceived a grand passion for her. It was enough for her if he did no more than that—of course it was enough. (*Bride*, 174)

Arrogant and ruthless, he would take anything he wanted, but it was doubtful if his own emotions could be touched very deeply. (*Chateau*, 105)

The nicest men in the world were horribly cruel. They took no great

perpetuate ideological confusion about male sexuality and male violence, while insisting that there is no problem (they are "very different"). The rapist mentality—the intention to dominate, "humiliate and degrade," which, as Susan Brownmiller shows, is often disguised as sexual desire—is turned into its opposite—sexual desire disguised as the intention to dominate and hurt.²⁰ The message is the same one parents sometimes give to little girls who are singled out for mistreatment by a bully: "he really has a crush on you." This belief is of course an enormously difficult one to sustain in real life, and romantic literature performs a crucial function in assuring us that although some men may actually enjoy inflicting pain on women, there are also "bullies" whose meanness is nothing more than the overflow of their love or the measure of their resistance to our extraordinary charms.

Thus, romances to some extent "inoculate" against the major evils of sexist society. Roland Barthes identifies inoculation as one of the principal figures of contemporary myth: "One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion."²¹ Although, as we have seen, Harlequin novels do not so much acknowledge evil as transform it, Barthes's insight has some validity. Men may appear moody, cynical, scornful, and bullying, but they nevertheless provide romance and excitement. Both heroine and reader are, in Barthes's words, "rid of a prejudice which costs us dearly, too dearly, which costs us too much in scruples, in revolt, in fights, and in solitude."²²

The cost of "revolt" is what romances stress most. Since in real life women are not often able to reinterpret male hostility in such a satisfactory way, the novels must somehow provide an outlet for female resentment. In Richardson's *Pamela*, Mr. B., after realizing he wants to marry Pamela and not rape her, writes to her of the effect her letters have had upon him:

Your Papers shall be faithfully return'd you, and I have paid so dear for my Curiosity in the Affection they have rivetted upon me for you, that you would look upon yourself amply reveng'd if you knew what they have cost me.²³

Mr. B.'s statement reveals more about his own inability to understand love as anything but a power struggle than it does about Pamela's feelings, for Richardson takes great pains to show that she is above all such unsaintly considerations. On the other hand, I intend to show that men may be correct in suspecting women of desiring to be "amply reveng'd."

The few analyses written about romances almost always mention the childish qualities of the heroine, but no one has noted the large amount of anger expressed by the child/woman, almost to the very end of the story. The heroines rebel against the male authority figure and at times wish to be able to compete with him.

She had the feeling that if she did move away from the tree he would make her sorry that she had done so. And yet she didn't mind that quite as much as she minded having to do what he told her. (*Bride*, 13)

The big bay had given up after its brief, helpless struggle. It stood quietly, received a few pats on the rump, some encouraging words, then Boyd Ballinger dismounted, a mere nothing in his point of view, but something quite remarkable to Rosslyn, who had a certain defensiveness about her lack of skill. (*Lesson*, 63)

Lucy drew a shaky breath and controlled the cascade of tears that threatened. She found she wanted to rage and scream as well as weep. She wanted above all to insult him as deeply and hurtfully as he had insulted her. (*Goblin*, 133)

The least liberty taken by the heroine is described as being performed "militantly," "defiantly," "rebelliously." But then comes the constant reminder of the impossibility of winning:

Stung by his detestable attack, Amanda retaliated wildly, aroused beyond the limits of discretion, wanting to hurt him as he hurt her, even while realizing the futility of such an endeavor. (*Captive*, 31)

If you can't lick them, you might as well love them. It means sacrificing your pride, betraying your true self:

"I love you," she said tremulously, assailed with a treacherous longing that swept aside any vestige of pride in the need to be held closely within

But the hero has to do his share of suffering too:

How it burned inside me, that delay, when I wanted so much to have you in my arms like this—I love you more than life. (*Today*, 186)

I can't bear it if you don't want me as much as I want you. (*Bride*, 183)

[O]ne wants either to dominate you or get down on one's knees and grovel at your feet. (*Enemy*, 158)

A great deal of our satisfaction in reading these novels comes, I am convinced, from the elements of a revenge fantasy, from our conviction that the woman is bringing the man to his knees and that all the while he is being so hateful, he is internally grovelling, grovelling, grovelling (it is not an either-or, as the "enemy lover" of our third quotation maintains, but both—and). It is this element of revenge which must prevent us from analyzing the novels according to the Freudian paradigm of the young girl's maturation process. A superficial analysis indeed reveals that most romances are concerned with girls "outgrowing" their resentment of the male and forming instead an erotic attachment to him. But this can come about only via a regression to an infantile fantasy. In most of the novels, the hero finally becomes aware of the heroine's "infinite preciousness" after she has run away, disappeared, fallen into a raging river, or otherwise shown by the threat of her annihilation how important her life really is. This is, as I say, a childish fantasy, but, as Karen Homey noticed, it is common to many women and it conceals a deep-seated desire for vengeance:

A wife who harbors suicidal thoughts because her husband does not give her all his love, time, and interest, will not notice how much of her own hostility, hidden vindictiveness, and aggression are expressed through her attitude. She will feel only despair because of her abundant "love," while at the same time she will feel most intensely and see most clearly the lack of love in her partner.²⁴

The "disappearing act" has long been an integral part of romances. Pamela's thoughts of suicide, motivated by the hope that Mr. B. might "perhaps, shed a few Tears over the poor Corse of his persecuted Servant," are ostensibly overcome by religious scruples; but it is precisely

subsequent departure) which brings him to acknowledge how much she means to him.²⁵ So Richardson has it both ways—the reader can absolve Pamela of vindictive feelings, and at the same time have the satisfaction of seeing her avenged.

Unlike Richardson, Charlotte Brontë shows acute awareness of the reality contained in the fantasy: that only by "killing themselves off" can women get men's attention. Trying to keep Mr. Rochester from treating her as a plaything, Jane Eyre must suppress her own desires and turn herself into a plaything after all:

The system thus entered on, I pursued during the whole season of Probation; and with the best success. He was kept, to be sure, rather cross and crusty; but on the whole I could see he was excellently entertained . . . Yet after all, my task was not an easy one; often I would rather have pleased than teased him.²⁶

Brontë can be credited with inventing many of the characters and situations of the popular romantic mythos, although, ironically, a close reading of Jane Eyre shows us that even as she created, she subverted them. Jane's running away after discovering the existence of Mrs. Rochester, for instance, does not have the effect of bringing Rochester to his knees (he has already been there); Jane flees not in order to be found, but to find herself, to achieve economic and moral independence.²⁷ She is running away from, rather than into the fantasy, since to stay with Rochester would mean going against the law and her own sense of right. Brontë has been blamed for "castrating" Rochester at the end when she has him maimed in a fire.²⁸ But "castration" generally plays no part in typical female revenge fantasies, which depend upon the man's retaining all his potency while loving and suffering desperately. He must need her in spite of all his strength, rather than because of his weakness. At most, Rochester's state reflects the sad—not triumphant—admission that a woman only achieves equality with—not dominance over—men who are crippled in some way. Since she cannot hope to aspire to their level, they must somehow come down to hers.

The Harlequin heroine's "disappearing act," then, is a way of channeling the anger and frustration expressed in the novels, and it is the

forced to undergo. For even the heroine's anger is constantly turned into a way of pleasing men, of keeping them, like Rochester, "entertained." Rebellion may be futile, but it can at least be cute; women can still be "beautiful when they're angry," if not effective:

"You don't sound sorry," said Lucy militantly, taking exception to the appraising look.

"I mean," he explained carefully, "that I'm sorry you're so—er—jumpy."

"Oh!" It was a squeak of rage. She whisked out of his hands.

He was shaking with laughter. (*Goblin*, 7)

On the one hand, as readers we identify with the heroine's anger and frustration. On the other hand, due to our adherence to the rules of the formula and our desire for a happy ending, a part of us wants the man to see the heroine as a pert, adorable creature rather than as a true rebel. Our conflicting emotions as readers would seem to point up a dilemma: the heroine's expression of resentment, which is the result of and only potential remedy for her belittlement, is felt to be the very means by which she encourages her own belittlement. This can only lead to self-hatred and to more anger against the man for putting her in such an impossible situation. But our awareness of these feelings is prevented because we are prepared for the termination of the process in its logical extension: the fulfillment of the fantasy of ultimate revenge through utter self-destruction.

It is crucial to understand the double-edged nature of women's revenge fantasies. As long as resentment is accompanied by self-denigration, Harlequin Romances can hardly be said to perform a liberating function. However, once it becomes clear how much of women's anger and hostility is reflected in (albeit allayed by) these seemingly simple "love stories," all notions about women "cherishing the chains of their bondage" become untenable. What Marx said of religious suffering is equally true of "romantic suffering": it is "at the same time an *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering."²⁹ In both religion and romance the fantasy of death and resurrection enables people to avenge themselves on the world while appearing fatalistic about their lot.

Our discussion thus far has resulted in a complete reversal of the usual psychoanalytical approach to women's sexuality. In applying the notion of wish fulfillment to women's dreams, psychoanalysts, notably Helene Deutsch, have found evidence of women's anxieties about rape (the manifest content) and have analyzed these anxieties as concealing the desire to be taken by force (latent content).³⁰ In looking at romance fantasies, on the other hand, we have seen that the desire to be taken by force (manifest content) conceals anxiety about rape and longings for power and revenge (latent content).

III

ENIGMA II: "*Miranda*," his voice was low as his hand slid under her hair, forcing her face up, "are you telling me the truth about yourself? Girls who wander as you do are not usually without some experience, but how could I ever be sure? You're young and seemingly innocent, yet how could I tell?" (*Captive*, 71)

Male popular culture is to female popular culture as "adventurer" is to "adventuress." If heroes must deserve the former title, heroines must take care not to earn the latter:

The quiet young school teacher hadn't known he was rich when she befriended the old recluse during his last illness. But his nephew, Angus, firmly believed that Tina was nothing but a scheming little adventuress. (*Enemy*, back cover)

While the novels are always about a poor girl finally marrying a rich man, preferably of the nobility, they must be careful to show that the girl never set out to get him and his goods. This is of course a simple reflection of the double bind imposed upon women in real life: their most important achievement is supposed to be finding a husband; their greatest fault is attempting to do so.

How to get your heroine from loneliness and penury to romance and riches, without making her appear to have helped herself along or even to have thought about the matter, is an old problem for novelists.³¹ These feudal notions, as Ellen Moers points out, were later to be rejected by Austen³²; but they are still the staple of Harlequin Romances, for in a society where wealth and virtue are seen as causally connected, the woman can admire the latter and so not be thought a scheming little adventuress in acquiring the former:

No good either to dwell on her previous conviction that they hadn't a thing in common. She loved him in spite of that, and she had certainly come to respect him. To respect his concern for his employees, his kindness in helping the small farmers among his neighbours, who were less fortunate than he was.

Compare to the words in this Harlequin romance:

Even his autocratic manner she had come to accept as an inevitable result of his birth and background. It no longer jarred on her as it had done in the beginning. (*Sherriington*, 101)

We are now in a position to understand why Fielding's accusations against the romantic heroine might seem warranted. The novels inevitably convey a contradictory message which the reader cannot possibly internalize without feeling manipulative, for we are repeatedly shown that although it is socially, economically, and aesthetically imperative for a woman to get a husband and his money, she achieves these goals partly by not wanting them. In order for this to work in real life, pretense and hypocrisy must be practiced.

And there is still another reason why we might be inclined to assent to Fielding's criticism. Since we know the heroine must wind up with the rich, lordly man, we feel pleasure in those episodes which further the desired and expected ending. We tend to doubt from the beginning the heroine's avowed dislike of the hero, and, moreover, we are pleased whenever her expressions of this aversion have effects contrary to what she intends—that is, whenever they excite the hero rather than alienate him. As we saw in our discussion of resentment, we consider most of the heroine's emotions as important only insofar as they subvert themselves. No wonder that to some readers the whole process can feel like deception and hypocrisy.

It is easy to see why the heroines must have certain character traits. For instance, they must be shown to be "prejudiced" like Elizabeth Bennet or in other words self-deluded.³³ This enables a couple of problems

of literary heroines by their judges, the critics. Richardson's *Pamela* is a case in point. Richardson, of course, had been extremely careful to show that Mr. B. constantly accuses Pamela of "artfulness" in order to advance his own artful plans and to fob off his guilt onto her. In *Shamela* Henry Fielding could, nevertheless, dismiss the evidence, acquit Mr. B., and indict Pamela—the exact literary equivalent of judges siding with rapists against the victims.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, a novel which is centered around the contradiction between economic necessity and the feminine ideal, has been more successful in eluding such outright censure. Nevertheless, Austen is not totally successful in extricating her heroine from what Ian Watt has called "the duplicities involved in the feminine role."³¹ Elizabeth Bennet at first dislikes Darcy for the very character traits which result from his richness and nobility: his pride and aloofness. In Harlequin Romances, too, the heroines are usually "determined to hate" the hero for his impossible arrogance, a quality he possesses only because of his economic security—unlike the rest of us, he bows to no man. The woman's determination to hate the hero at once absolves her of mercenary motives and becomes the very means by which she obtains the hero's love, and, consequently, his fortune. Elizabeth's "playful" tone in a speech near the end of the book shows her desire to defy the truth even as she utters it—an example, perhaps, of "irony as evasion," to paraphrase Marvin Mudrick:

The fact is that you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking and looking and thinking for your approbation alone. I roused and interested you, because I was so unlike them.³²

(Unlike the scheming little adventuresses.) Elizabeth's feelings undergo a decisive change when she realizes that Darcy's wealth in fact constitutes much of his superiority:

As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people's happiness were in his guardianship!—

How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow!—How much of good or evil must be done by him! . . . she thought of his regard with

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Compare to the words in this Harlequin romance:

Even his autocratic manner she had come to accept as an inevitable result of his birth and background. It no longer jarred on her as it had done in the beginning. (*Sherriington*, 101)

We are now in a position to understand why Fielding's accusations against the romantic heroine might seem warranted. The novels inevitably convey a contradictory message which the reader cannot possibly internalize without feeling manipulative, for we are repeatedly shown that although it is socially, economically, and aesthetically imperative for a woman to get a husband and his money, she achieves these goals partly by not wanting them. In order for this to work in real life, pretense and hypocrisy must be practiced.

And there is still another reason why we might be inclined to assent to Fielding's criticism. Since we know the heroine must wind up with the rich, lordly man, we feel pleasure in those episodes which further the desired and expected ending. We tend to doubt from the beginning the heroine's avowed dislike of the hero, and, moreover, we are pleased whenever her expressions of this aversion have effects contrary to what she intends—that is, whenever they excite the hero rather than alienate him. As we saw in our discussion of resentment, we consider most of the heroine's emotions as important only insofar as they subvert themselves. No wonder that to some readers the whole process can feel like deception and hypocrisy.

It is easy to see why the heroines must have certain character traits. For instance, they must be shown to be "prejudiced" like Elizabeth Bennet or in other words self-deluded.³³ This enables a couple of problems

If a woman is chiefly deceiving herself about the nature of her feelings, she can't be accused of wilfully deceiving others. And, due to the uncertain state of her emotions, she can act inconsistently, thus presenting herself to the man as a charming enigma, without being suspected of deliberately trying to stir up his interest. Further, the subversion of the heroine's negative reactions to the hero can appear as a process of self-discovery and growing self-awareness, not self-betrayal.

Therefore, the heroine's extreme youthfulness must also be stressed; and this is in contrast to the "other woman" of the novels—the real scheming adventuress—who is usually around twenty-nine and thus young enough to be a threat but too old to possess the necessary innocence. A heroine must not even understand sexual desire, for knowledge entails guilt; but since she is a child and knows not what she does, she can do a lot and be excused: she can arouse the hero by her appealing looks and her "spunky" and whimsical behavior:

Zachary shook his head from side to side. "Jenny, Jenny," he chided gently. "You confound me. Half child, half woman—you employ contrary tactics, the consequences of which you're at a loss to understand," he concluded wryly. (*Haven*, 126-27)

Along with making the heroine young, the novels often place her in circumstances where she can work on the male's sexual desires and yet not be held responsible for "the consequences." One of the authors' favorite devices is to make the heroine sick, or even unconscious. That way, she can parade around in pajamas or even be stripped and changed by the hero. In *Hold Me Captive* Amanda falls from the second story of a house into a snow bank, faints, and is taken home by Jason, who, thinking she is a boy, removes her wet clothes, and is pleasantly undeceived. At the end he admits the sight aroused him:

You had me well nigh distracted that night when you first came to Merington, soaked with snow and rain. You were unconscious, but I thought I'd never seen anything so lovely, so desirable. (*Captive*, 185)

It is hard not to laugh at this near necrophilia, but it does reveal the impossible situation of woman: to be alive and conscious is to be suspect.

Every precaution is thus taken to make us trust in the heroine's absolute innocence. We see that the woman wasn't being deceitful.

she was merely young, sick, and confused ("I] have reason to bless God," says Pamela, "who, by disabling me in my Faculties, enabled me to preserve my Innocence").³⁶ By the end of the novel she will have grown up into a healthy adult woman who has achieved self-knowledge. But the reader's own guilt feelings are no doubt intensified; for how, when the novels make so clear what a woman needs and should want; how, when the characters are so unambiguously marked as good or evil, can we keep reading and still believe we could remain confused and self-deluded (let alone young)? The novels can be said to generate their own contradictions, resolvable only temporarily, only in the process of another novel reading.

It should be obvious by now that the heroine's extraordinary innocence cannot be explained solely in terms of some sort of feminine ideal. Rather, what Harlequins are read for is the way they deal with the contradiction between the ideal situation and real life, in which women are presumed guilty (of plotting their own rapes, of scheming to get a husband) until proven otherwise. This is even less tolerable than it might at first seem, for once women are aware of being suspected, they must try to make themselves look innocent, and, of course, in manipulating appearances, they forfeit the very possibility of innocence. Matters are further complicated by the fact that men are always surveying and inspecting women. Harlequin heroes are constantly sizing up the heroine, who, like a woman walking past a construction site, is uncertain how to comport herself:

Laughter glittered unmistakably in his eyes and lent a suggestion of cruelty to his wide and rather sensual mouth as he looked at her, and she felt a warm flush of colour in her cheeks as she lifted her chin. It was not easy to meet the mockery in his eyes, but she held his gaze determinedly and with far more boldness than she felt. (*Chateau*, 26)

"Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at," as Berger points out in his study of the nude in art history.³⁷ And, we might add, as women watch themselves they are at every moment incurring guilt, proving themselves to be the "narcissists" they are often accused of being. Women can be artless and demonstrate this artlessness only in the absence of men. Unfortunately, men are the

resolved by making men into eavesdroppers: Mr. B. in the closet observing Pamela's "artless prattling"; Rochester disguised as an old woman fortune-teller prying out the secrets of Jane's soul; Harlequin heroes in doorways, behind bushes, in nearby rooms listening, looking, and, finally, loving.

The man-in-the-closet plot device has undoubtedly served to aggravate women's split consciousness. As readers we are at the same time with Pamela in her supposed isolation, and with Mr. B. watching and judging her. We possess the guilty knowledge that Pamela must lack; we experience a split consciousness in order to be reassured that a whole one is possible. Ultimately, romances help instill in women a sense of the impossibility of ever achieving self-forgetfulness. When men are not around is precisely when they should be present, when we perhaps vaguely wish for their presence, and when we watch ourselves as if they were present.

Women's longing to be swept away, so frequently expressed in Harlequins, must be understood in light of the foregoing discussion. The heroine's extreme passivity, like her innocence, can only be completely accounted for when we realize to what extent the ideal of feminine passivity conflicts with the constant mental activity women must generally engage in. Recall Jane Eyre never being able to relax in Rochester's love, but always watching herself being watched by him so that she can keep him "excellently entertained." Or consider the experience of Doris Lessing's *Martha Quest* in the act of lovemaking, one of the (to men) ultimate acts of "self-transcendence":

She was ready to abandon herself, but he continued to kiss her, murmuring how beautiful she was. Then he smoothed her skirt up to her knee, and stroked her legs, saying over and over again, in a voice troubled by something that sounded like grief, that her legs were so lovely, she was so lovely. Her drowning brain steadied, for she was being forced back to consciousness. She saw herself lying there, half-exposed on the bed; and half resentfully, half wearily, partook, as he was demanding of her, in the feast of her own beauty. . . . [S]he was conscious of every line and curve of her own body, as if she were scrutinizing it with his eyes.³⁸

Compared to this, Harlequin heroines appear almost psychically

It was breathtaking. It was frightening. A radiant entity with a will and life of its own. For a brief second Rosilyn grasped at the fact that there are forces beyond one's control. She accepted it as something inexorable, against which she had no defense, not even if she possessed all the wisdom of the world. She had lost her breath and presently she would lose all sense of herself. (*Lesson*, 85)

Furthermore, as Mr. B. rightly observes, you do not "forfeit your Innocence, if you are oblig'd to yield to a Force you cannot withstand."³⁹

But in order to convince the reader that self-forgetfulness can be achieved at the same time that male desires are being met, the novels once again force the unwanted self-consciousness onto the reader. To understand how this works, we need to examine the narrative point of view. The epistolary form of the novel, used by Richardson, made it impossible to show simultaneously the effect of Pamela's charms on Mr. B. and Pamela's ignorance of those charms. For Pamela herself had to tell us what Mr. B. had been seeing from the closet. Fielding's suspicion of Pamela, then, is understandable because in order to tell her own story, she came to possess the very knowledge she should never have acquired. The third-person point of view, which the Harlequin Publishers require writers to use, appears to eliminate this problem. The prohibition against first person narration is therefore comprehensible, even though most of the writing is what Roland Barthes has called personal narration:

some narratives, or at least some episodes can very well be written in the third person, although their real stance is nevertheless the first person. How are we to decide? All one has to do is to rewrite the narrative (or the passage) from the he to the I: as long as this operation does not entail any alteration of the discourse other than the change of grammatical pronouns, we can be certain that we are still in a person system.⁴⁰

One of Barthes's commentators gives the following examples: "he entered a tobacco shop' can be rewritten as 'I entered a tobacco shop,' whereas 'he seemed pleased at the distinguished air his uniform gave him' becomes an incongruous 'I seemed pleased at the distinguished air my uniform gave me,' which implies a schizophrenic narrator."⁴¹

Now when we apply these concepts to Harlequins, they make a great

deal of sense. Most of the writing is "personal," third person. As hardly any critical distance is established between reader and protagonist, and few doubts about the heroine's thoughts and feelings are introduced, women can freely view the fantasy as their fantasy. The novel becomes an expression of their own hopes and fears. But generally the third person must be used, for at certain points the writing necessarily becomes "apersonal," precisely those points at which the woman's appearance is noted:

He lifted her, sweeping her up in his arms and carrying her out through the door, up the wide staircase to his room. She had never been here before. He threw her down on the bed and she felt herself pinned beneath the weight of his heavy body. She had no idea how lovely she looked with her hair loosened and dishevelled, her tremulous lips, the high flush on her soft white skin. She heard Jason's breath drawn sharply above the thudding beat of her heart. And then his lips were on hers again, his hands sliding to the warm skin on her back, up and around. She was lost, submerged, floating in a world where time ceased to count. (*Captive*, 174-75)

Here we are, back in the closet. We cannot say, "I had no idea how lovely I looked," without implying a "schizophrenic narrator." But, since almost all of the writing is meant to draw us into the fantasy, since almost all of it lends itself to rewriting (to substitution of the "I"), we can't help but incorporate to some extent these occasional "apersonal" moments into our experience of the fantasy. The reader herself becomes the "schizophrenic," in the sense excellently described by Berger: "The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight."⁴² The problem is actually one that has long been intuitively recognized. For instance, much of the humor in the early satires of women's novels—like Austen's youthful work *Love and Freindsip*—arises from the simple substitution of the "I," for we then see how readers' identification with the heroine turns feminine virtues into their opposites: innocence becomes guile; selflessness becomes insensitivity and self-absorption. The disappearing act, then, may be a temporary success, but it is an ultimate failure. In the end, women readers reemerge feeling more visible—and hence more entitled—than ever

Many of the concepts we have had recourse to in explaining romances fit neatly into Berger's two categories of the feminine consciousness:

<i>SURVEYOR</i>	<i>SURVEYED</i>
Intellectual distance, detachment	Emotional identification
Reader's superior knowledge due to formula	Heroine's necessary ignorance
Reader's mental activity (reading & observing)	Passivity and self forgetfulness of the heroine
Apersonal narration	Personal narration

Our analysis of Harlequin romances yields fresh insight into some Freudian concepts popular culture critics routinely apply to formula literature. The theory of repetition compulsion—"the idea that art derives from some persistently disturbing psychic conflict, which, failing of resolution in life, seeks it in the symbolic form of fantasy"—has often been invoked to explain readers' addiction to formula literature.⁴³ We have seen that Harlequins, in presenting a heroine who has escaped psychic conflicts, inevitably increase the reader's own psychic conflicts, thus creating an even greater dependency on the literature. This lends credence to the other commonly accepted theory of popular art as narcotic. As medical researchers are now discovering, certain tranquilizers taken to relieve anxiety are, though temporarily helpful, ultimately anxiety producing. The user must constantly increase the dosage of the drug in order to alleviate problems aggravated by the drug itself.

Our analysis also provides insight into the reasons why the "hysterical character" in our society is more often feminine than masculine. In an essay on femininity and hysteria, Howard M. Wolowitz describes the hysteric as one involved in a process which "leads further and further away from the self becoming the basis for gratification and experience into a sense of emptiness, experiential deficiency and a wish to regress back into the dependency of early childhood as a haven."⁴⁴ A typical patient explains her way of relating to the self:

[She] realized that she constantly saw what was happening to her while it was happening, as if...

Radway, J. Reading the
From Romance

CHAPTER SIX

Language and Narrative Discourse: The Ideology of Female Identity

When the Smithton women insist that romantic fiction is fantasy and their reading activity simple escape, they seem to state the obvious. Indeed their assertion appears only to corroborate the familiar assumption in popular-culture study that because it is stereotypical, repetitive, and unrealistic, popular literature must be more closely related to fairy stories and myths than to "serious" considerations of pertinent human problems.¹ The Smithton readers' added assertion that they do not expect their own lives to resemble the lives of romantic heroines suggests further that they do not apply the principles of organization of the fantasy world to their own nor do they learn how to get more from their own relationships through romance reading. And yet, the group's equally insistent emphasis on the romance's capacity to instruct them about history and geography suggests that they also believe that the universe of the romantic fantasy is somehow congruent, if not continuous, with the one they inhabit. One has to wonder, then, how much of the romance's conservative ideology about the nature of womanhood is inadvertently "learned" during the reading process and generalized as normal, natural, female development in the real world.

It would be easy enough to dismiss the Smithton readers' conflicting beliefs about the realism of the romantic fantasy by attributing them to a

others were reading, thus guaranteeing not only an audience, but one whose stereotypic, prescribed responses could be utilized as a guide to feeling her own reaction.⁴⁵

It is easy to see that romances not only reflect the "hysterical" state, but actually, to some extent, induce it.

But it would be pointless to end with a resounding denunciation of popular novels and their readers—a conclusion encountered all too often in studies of popular fiction. An understanding of Harlequin Romances should lead one less to condemn the novels than the conditions which have made them necessary. Even though the novels can be said to intensify female tensions and conflicts, on balance the contradictions in women's lives are more responsible for the existence of Harlequins than Harlequins are for the contradictions. Wolowitz ends his study of the hysterical character by pointing out that the "psychodynamics of the hysteric are uncomfortably close to the dynamics of the idealized normal feminine personality."⁴⁶ And if, on the one hand, the novels actually contribute to women's problems, on the other hand, a study of the romances shows cause for optimism. It is no mean feat for a grown woman to make herself disappear. As Freud frequently noted, an enormous amount of psychic energy is expended when an individual strives to attain a passive state. The reader of romances, contrary to the arguments of many popular literature critics, is engaged in an intensely active psychological process. The energy women now use to belittle and defeat themselves can be rechannelled into efforts to grow and to explore ways of affirming and asserting the self. Moreover, the very fact that the novels must go to such extremes to neutralize women's anger and to make masculine hostility bearable testifies to the depths of women's discontent. Each novel, as we saw, is as much a protest against as an endorsement of the feminine condition. Finally, not all the female longings and desires expressed in Harlequins are regressive. Indeed, many of the contradictions I have discussed in this chapter derive from the attempt to adapt what for women are utopian ideals to existing circumstances. The desire to perform a disappearing act suggests women's suppressed wish to stop being seen in the old ways and to begin looking at their lives in ways that are perhaps yet to be envisioned.

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lack of literary sophistication. Such a move, however, would once again deny the worth of the readers' understanding of their own experience and thus ignore a very useful form of evidence in the effort to reconstruct the complexity of their use of romantic fiction. It seems advisable, then, to treat their contradictory beliefs as evidence, at least, of an ambivalent attitude toward the reality of the story. The women may in fact believe the stories are only fantasies on one level at the very same time that they take other aspects of them to be real and therefore apply information learned about the fictional world to the events and occurrences of theirs. If they do so utilize some fictional propositions, it may well be the case that the readers also unconsciously take others having to do with the nature of the heroine's fate as generally applicable to the lives of real women. In that case, no matter what the women intend their act of reading to say about their roles as wives and mothers, the ideological force of the reading experience could, finally, be a conservative one. In reading about a woman who manages to find her identity through the care of a nurturant protector and sexual partner, the Smithton readers might well be teaching themselves to believe in the worth of such a route to fulfillment and encouraging the hope that such a route might yet open up for them as it once did for the heroine.

In an effort to assess the nature of the connection between the world of the romance and the world inhabited by the Smithton reader, I would now like to look more closely at the language and the narrative discourse of these stories and the kinds of activities and responses they elicit from their readers. Although it is true that romance reading evokes a process of identification whereby the reader responds to events lived through by the heroine, this is not the only level at which the reader reacts. The act of romance reading must first involve any reader in a complex process of world construction through which the reader actively attributes sense to the words on a page. In doing so, that reader adopts the text's language as her own and appears to gesture toward a world she in fact creates. Because the process must necessarily draw more or less on the language she uses to refer to the real world, the fictional world created in reading bears an important relationship to the world the reader ordinarily inhabits. The activities of reading and world construction, then, carry meaning for the reader on a purely formal level in the sense that they repeat and reinforce or alter and criticize the nature of the world as the reader knows it.

In discussing the character of this text-reader interaction in the reading process, Terry Eagleton has observed that texts "do" things to the people who read them.² "What they bring about," he adds, "is not something that happens after we have finished reading them, like joining a picket line or being kinder to one's children, but is effected (if at all) by and in the reading."³ This occurs, he maintains, because literary signs do not simply

denote things in some objectively given and immediately present world but because they represent language. In doing so, they refer to an imaginary act of speaking or writing about an equally imaginary world that is itself brought into being and conceptually organized in the very act of commenting about it.⁴ It might be said, then, that the language of the literary text imitates not the world but an ideological speech act that takes a world as its object. A literary text can be said to operate on the reader in the sense that she must treat it as a set of instructions directing her to adopt the position of an imaginary speaker or writer who uses words as if there were indeed just such a universe already "out there" about which she might tell this story.

Traditional popular-culture criticism has assumed that the world "out there" is a fantasy world bearing little resemblance and no applicability to the reader's own. Kay Mussell, for instance, has asserted categorically that "popular fiction is not *realistic*, is not intended to be by its authors, and is not desired to be by its readers."⁵ Romance writers and readers, however, seem to disagree. Phyllis Whitney advises prospective writers that if they cannot afford a research trip to an exotic locale, they can just as easily rely on library books or locations they are familiar with in their own lives.⁶ Careful descriptions of real places, she observes, can be transposed automatically into the settings for a story. Whitney assumes, as do the Smithton readers, that the romantic universe is identical to the universe inhabited by real women. Thus the question of the romance's mimesis is a good deal more complex for the women who write and read these books than it might first appear to a critic accustomed to Henry James or William Dean Howells.

It is certainly true that, when prompted, the Smithton readers are perfectly willing to admit that the romantic stories themselves are implausible because the characters are "better" than real people and because events resolve themselves unambiguously. Nevertheless, they also believe implicitly in the accuracy of the fiction's rendering of the material world. Indeed, it is precisely because their faith in this verbal transcription of the "real" is so complete that they are able to file away verbal assertions about historical customs and geographical locales as "facts" and "knowledge" about this world and its history. Their faith in the realism of the contemporary romance is, in actuality, a function of the peculiar way the language is organized by the author and then actively construed by them as readers.

Because the authors represent acts of designation that are familiar in form and substance to those ordinarily employed by the Smithton women, the texts appear to the readers to be about their own world. In adopting the romance's signifying intention, then, the Smithton women simply duplicate in imaginative experience a relationship to the world that they live daily. To understand just why this occurs and how it might later affect

the reader's attitude toward behavioral propositions about the romantic action itself, it will be necessary to trace the interaction between textual properties and reading strategies.

Any cursory glance at a popular romance reveals that the form uses few linguistic techniques capable of thwarting a reader's efforts to "discover" immediately the sense of the story's words. The contemporary romance's prose is dominated by cliché, simple vocabulary, standard syntax, and the most common techniques associated with the nineteenth-century realist novel. Quick reader comprehension is therefore made possible by the resolute familiarity of the romance's language. Although it is true that readers never discover meanings "in" or behind the words they find on the page but actively attribute significations to the verbal structure from their own linguistic repertoire, it is nonetheless clear that Dot and her women read the romantic text *as if* such simple discovery of meaning was possible. In fact, the above-mentioned linguistic techniques all maintain the illusion that language is a transparent window opening out onto an already existent world because the readers themselves treat these linguistic features in a particular way. Their crucial interpretive strategy is itself governed by a set of assumptions about language and meaning that the women take entirely for granted.

Dot displays these assumptions herself in her newsletter when she praises "well-written" romances. Of Kim Hansen's *Rebecca McGregor*, for instance, she once observed, "a very well written book set in Australia."⁷ Dot did not intend to use this term, however, as a literary critic might, to single out the writer's unusual abilities at description or at finding unique ways to reorder perception. Rather, she employed it to refer to Hansen's ingenious plot. Dot is not interested in the skill with which the author uses language because she is looking first for variety in the things to which that language refers. In explaining specifically why she awarded five stars to *Rebecca McGregor*, she made it clear that she believes that success in writing has nothing to do with elegant phrasing or the quality of perception but is a function of the uniqueness of the characters and events, intended by the most familiar of linguistic signs. This helps to explain why, when asked to comment on what establishes the book as a well-written one, Dot did not mention Hansen's literary style but launched enthusiastically into a summary of her plot: "To be quite frank, the cover was just not that enticing. Ah, it was almost drab. It was the story's line—this was in Australia. It starts from the man's point of view and he comes over from England to make his fortune because . . . he's been accused of theft in a job; he was working in a bank. And he was engaged. And when he was accused of theft, the engagement was broken off and he left." Dot seems to judge writing solely on the basis of the efficiency with which it gets its job done, that is, tells the story. Dot treats language, then, in

utilitarian fashion as a tool for accomplishing some purpose.⁸ In sum, it "says" things.

If this representative comment about a well-written romance is an accurate indication of her reading behavior, Dot seldom attends consciously to the material presence of an author's words as she reads. In fact, during the entire time we talked about romances, on only three occasions did she remember and direct my attention to an author's felicitous phrasing. For Dot, words are not entities that can be manipulated to mean, in new ways, nor are they things requiring conscious attention or interpretation on the part of the reader. Because words have meanings, in the sense that they contain or possess them, she understands them to refer definitively to actions, places, and events completely separate from the words that merely describe them. Moreover, Dot's readers are even less likely than she to comment on the language of a romance. They think of the terms "good" and "bad" as evaluations applicable only to the quality of the story a particular novel tells. No matter how often I asked readers to clarify the difference between a well-written book and a poorly written one, I always received an answer dealing with the exceptional nature of a plot or the likeable personality of the heroine or the hero.

Dot and her readers all come to the romantic text, then, with the understanding that its language is there to describe, in simple and unambiguous terms, events that for all intents and purposes were "completed" just before the fictional narrator described them. They assume that, as in the real world, fictional events are distinct from the words and verbal statements that can be used to designate them. In addition, these women also believe that the author herself provided the meaning of the story for her readers by expressing it in words. They believe that meaning is in the words, only waiting to be found. Reading is not a self-conscious, productive process in which they collaborate with the author, but an act of discovery during which they glean from her information about people, places, and events not themselves in the book. The women assume that the information about these events was placed in the book by the author when she selected certain words in favor of others. Because they believe words are *themselves already meaningful* before they are read, Dot and her friends accept without question the accuracy of all statements about a character's personality or the implications of an event.

It should, however, be pointed out here that what the women really do when they read is to link or associate linguistic signifiers with meanings they understand or take to be their necessary significations. They rely on standard cultural codes correlating signifiers and signifieds that they accept as definitive. It has simply never occurred to them that those codes might be historically or culturally relative. Thus the romantic heroine becomes *their* version of an "independent" and "intelligent" woman. Nei-

ther Dot nor her women doubt the capacity of language to describe and designate external reality adequately. When they encounter familiar words, epithets, and modes of designation in a book, they automatically attribute to these signs the sense they have always had for them previously, assuming all the while that this sense is natural, immutable, and unproblematic. Because Dot and her friends believe that words always say what they mean (how could they do otherwise if indeed they contain their meanings?), they never question those words and thus do not become conscious of what they themselves attribute to them as inert verbal signifiers. Although they actively construct the heroine and the significances of her story, they are not aware of this at all. They assume instead that this is the way she and her world "really" are.

It might be said accurately, then, that Dot and her customers carry over to the activity of reading the very same principles and procedures of the empiricist epistemology that guides their activities in the world they believe to be "real." They view objective reality as a thing distinct and fundamentally different from language, which is itself nothing more than a system of names for that which truly exists. When these women encounter these same names in fiction, they deal with them as they would had the words been uttered in their presence by a speaker using them to indicate and describe the world at which both were together present. They treat that language, therefore, as if it simply designated a world entirely congruent or continuous with their own. Because they are not aware that this simulacrum is itself constructed by the language, just as they are not aware that the world they inhabit is in part a creation of the codes used to articulate it, they freely assimilate the fictional world to their own, assuming, in effect, that all imaginary worlds "naturally" resemble the world with which they are so familiar.

Despite the importance of these assumptions and the reading behavior they prompt with respect to the final construction of textual meaning, it should be pointed out again that these interpretive strategies are not alone responsible for the creation of the fictional world that so closely resembles the one inhabited by the reader. Because romance authors share the same assumptions about language and meaning, they write texts designed to be read in this straightforward manner. The characteristic verbal structure of the contemporary romance thus conveniently lends itself to this kind of interpretation by refusing to present the reader with anything capable of disorienting her or of forcing her to attend differently to the substance and organization of signs that cannot be taken so easily as simple, referential gestures.

Perhaps the most striking linguistic feature of the contemporary romance is its constant use of an exceedingly simple syntax that yet manages to mark itself as "literary." This syntactic simplicity effectively insures that

individual signs can be understood immediately by even an inexperienced reader. The efficacy of the language's referential function is therefore never called into question. However, even though romances rely heavily on simple subject-verb constructions, most also exhibit a marked tendency to lapse into the passive voice. When they do so, they often seem to be straining after an identifiably "literary" effect because they combine it with subordinate clause constructions, elaborate similes, and rhetorical flourishes.

In opening a book, for example, whose very first sentence explains that "Somewhere in the world, time no doubt whistled by on taut and wide-spread wings, but here in the English countryside it plodded slowly, painfully, as if it trod the rutted road that stretched across the moors on blistered feet,"¹⁰ the reader cannot help but know immediately that she has been transported out of her daily world into an imaginary realm existing only between the pages of a book. The verbal structure obviously does not repeat the simple patterns of daily speech. Yet the sentences immediately following this opening contradict or, better yet, *balanz* that effect by focusing attention on the spatial and temporal particularity of the moment. The author's insistently referential discourse deliberately emphasizes the historical specificity of the scene, which was first introduced, even before that "literary" opening cited above, as "June 23, 1799": "The hot sweltering air was motionless; dust hung above the road, still reminding the restless of a coach that had passed several hours before. A small farm squatted dismally beneath the humid haze that lay over the marsh. The thatched cottage stood between spindly yews and, with shutters open and door ajar, it seemed to stare as if aghast at some off-color jest."¹¹

This peculiar blend of a deliberately referential language with the signs of "the literary" serves the dual purpose of signaling "escape" while suggesting to the reader that the imaginary world is congruent with her own and, therefore, dominated by events that might well occur in a life such as hers. This hybrid opening is characteristic of romantic fiction. Unlike the fairy tale that calls attention to its fantastic shape with the opening, "Once upon a time," which establishes a mythic space incalculably distant from the real world, the popular romance simultaneously collapses the distance between its fantasy world and the real world slyly admits their disjunction. It thus demonstrates that the story is realistic even though it is also a literary fiction.¹² The discourse of each book ingeniously informs the reader that its story will provide the escape into the imaginary realm she so desires even as it instructs her about strange and unknown facts concerning the history of her own. The opening paragraphs, then, conveniently proclaim the book's ability to fulfill the two essential functions of romance reading and establish a conflicted or ambivalent feeling about the essential reality of the about-to-be-told tale.

wifery, dominated as it often is by shopping trips, homemade wardrobes, and reliance on magazines like *Family Circle* and *Good Housekeeping* for tips about replicating *Vogue* couture on a tight budget.

A similar sort of descriptive detail also characterizes the mention of domestic architecture and home furnishings in romantic fiction. If the novels are set in the historical past, the narrator's eye lingers lovingly over the objects and accoutrements of preelectrical living. If the story's setting is contemporary, brand-name appliances, popular furniture styles, and trendy accessories such as "lush" green plants, macramé wall hangings, and silk flowers typically populate the heroine's apartment. Both kinds of descriptions assert tacitly that the imaginary world of the novel is as real as the reader's world because it is filled with the same, solid, recurring profusion of commodities. The emphatic massing of detail in the following characteristic passage reveals little about character or mood. It seems to exist only to call attention to itself as a descriptive litany:

The large den was paneled with rich walnut wood. Sunlight filtered through the sheer curtains over the windowed door opening onto the rooftop of the penthouse apartment. The walls gleamed with a natural luster. Few books lined the shelves which ran floor to ceiling in one corner of the room. The volumes it contained were devoted to weapons and hunting and were worn from frequent handling. Mostly the shelves held souvenirs and photographs of a hunter posed beside his kill. A mounted wolverine prowled an upper shelf while a lacquered coiled rattler threatened the unwary from its shelf nearer the floor.¹⁵

This deceptively casual but absolutely necessary description of the domestic environment is a variation of a literary practice that Umberto Eco has aptly named "the technique of the aimless glance."¹⁶ In analyzing the discourse of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels, Eco has noted that Fleming suspends his narration in favor of a "minute and leisurely concentration" on "descriptions of articles, landscapes, and events apparently inessential to the course of the story."¹⁷ Not only are the descriptions characterized by "high technical skill which makes us see what he is describing," Eco writes, "but they are inevitably focused on the obvious and the usual rather than on the exotic or unfamiliar." In attempting to explain this extreme preoccupation with "the already-known," Eco suggests that "Fleming takes time to convey the familiar with photographic accuracy because it is with the familiar that he can solicit our capacity for identification." He continues that "our credibility is solicited, blandished, directed to the region of possible and desirable things. Here the narration is realistic, the attention to detail intense." Eco concludes, finally, that Fleming's

Despite its willingness to acknowledge stylistically that its tale is a fantasy, the popular romance also goes on to exhibit a marked attention to the material details of the world in which that fantasy is set. The effect is so overpowering that the technique may well persuade the reader that the tale need not be considered a fantasy at all. The romance's consequent equivocation about its status as myth or realism could conceivably be the mark of its authors' and readers' deep-seated unwillingness to admit that the perfect union concluding the story is unattainable in life. If so, it is possible that while learning about the material world through romance reading, the Smithton women also actively extrapolate information gained about relationships and apply that information to their own lives.

Although the romance's mimetic effect can be traced to several linguistic devices, one of the most crucial is the genre's careful attention to the style, color, and detail of women's fashions. Extended descriptions of apparel figure repeatedly in all variations of the form, but they are especially prominent in gothics and long historicals. However, even the shorter Harlequins and Silhouettes make use of pared-down descriptions that still manage to evoke the aura of the female world. While relatively short, the following is a characteristic fashion vignette:

Onwardly, she must look much as they did. She had worn a simple white silk brocade of her own design, and with it the set of diamonds and sapphires on the silver filigree chain which she had completed recently. In her small ears were sapphire studs, and on one finger an immense sapphire ring. The white and silver set off her dark curly hair and luminous gray eyes. Leah, her abigail, had set her hair in a high pile with long curls to her neck. Some stray tendrils drifted about her ears, and she brushed them back nervously.¹³

The clothes described in these passages almost never figure significantly in the developing action. Instead, the plot is momentarily, often awkwardly, delayed as the narrator accidentally notices seemingly superfluous details for the reader. The details, however, are not really superfluous at all. They are part of an essential shorthand that establishes that, like ordinary readers, fictional heroines are "naturally" preoccupied with fashion. Romantic authors draw unconsciously on cultural conventions and stereotypes that stipulate that women can always be characterized by their universal interest in clothes. However, at the same time that the fictional characterizations depend on these previously known codes, they also tacitly legitimate them through simple repetition, thereby justifying the readers' own likely preoccupation with these indispensable features of the feminine universe. The final effect of endless attention to "pink-striped shirt waists," "sandy-tweed jackets," "long-sleeved dresses," "emerald-green wrappers,"¹⁴ may be the celebration of the reader's world of house-

minute descriptions function as a "literary evocation" of the familiar world inhabited by the reader.¹⁸

Romantic fiction also employs the technique of the aimless glance. The genre's characteristic attention to the incidental features of fashion and domestic interiors clearly serves to duplicate the homey environment that serves as the stage for female action in the "real" world. However, it is not true, as it is with the thriller, that such leisurely concentration is never devoted to the exotic, the faraway, or the unknown; nor is it true that such descriptions fail to operate as encyclopedias for their readers. In fact, romantic authors often squander lavish amounts of space on the descriptions of foreign environments and historical customs that are very likely not already known except in the most skeletal way by the reader. Furthermore, as has been pointed out before, the readers themselves "frame" or type these descriptive passages as valuable "information" and "instructional" material that can be stored as "knowledge" for use at a later date. It seems likely that romance readers find it easy to dub these simple descriptive assertions about the past or places they have never seen as "fact" because those other descriptions of a familiar domestic environment are so evocative of the world they inhabit. The success with which the ordinary is typically mimed in the romance thus seems to confer factual status on all of its other verbal assertions as well. Thus when the romance reader encounters a sentence that takes the form of syntactic assertion, even if she has never seen the place it refers to or the object or custom it describes, she simply assumes that what it claims is true; she accepts it as fact.

Again, one is prompted to wonder whether the same process of "infection" is operating with respect to the romantic story.¹⁹ If romance readers believe assertions made about subjects they know nothing about, perhaps they also believe in the possibility of a romantic relationship they have never experienced. Before speculating on whether this is the case, however, I would like to look a little longer at some of the romance's other linguistic techniques that also foreground language's referential function and thus stress the centrality of story to the romance-reading experience.

Quick reader comprehension and visualization are further guaranteed in the romance by repetitive use of the same, limited vocabulary. Romantic authors endlessly repeat descriptive phrases both within a single novel and from book to book as well. For instance, despite important differences, the Regency, the gothic, the historical, and the contemporary all characterize their romantic heroes as "passionate," "hard," "mocking," "indifferent," "moody," "masculine," "magnetic," "fierce," "ruthless," and "overbearing." Marked redundancy and intertextual repetition are characteristic of romantic fiction. Such a recurring vocabulary inevitably creates stock descriptions and formulaic characterizations that reconfirm reader

expectations over and over again.²⁰ The redundancy of the discourse permits the reader to get by with a minimal amount of interpretive work after her initial encounter with the romantic form. Each subsequent appearance of the first stock adjective can invoke the entire characterization and trigger the reader's usual emotional response as a result of its prior formulation with an entire set of descriptions and reactions in earlier acts of reading. There is little need for that reader to attend to the nuances of any particular novel in order to understand the nature of the story. Her energy is reserved, therefore, for the more desirable activity of affective reaction rather than prematurely spent on the merely intermediary task of interpretation.²¹

Romances further obviate the need for self-conscious interpretation by almost never assuming that their readers are capable of inferring meaning, drawing conclusions, or supplying "frames." Typically, after describing a verbal response that any reader can infer is prompted by anger, the writer confides redundantly, "she was angry." Repetition is the rule, not the exception, governing these novels. Even in passages obviously intended to evoke a mood, romance writers cannot resist the temptation to assist the reader in her interpretive efforts. For instance, the gothic writer, Phyllis Whitney, manages to suggest a mood in the first three sentences of the following passage, only to close off speculation about its exact character with her last assertion: "The room was so still that a bit of charred wood falling in the grate made an explosive sound and Mignonette's putt was like a kettle boiling. Booth shrugged and sat down, dropping again into the shadows. Letty's crochet needle paused in mid-air. Hortense clasped her fingers tightly together in her lap. Tension crackled in the room."²²

It is important to point out here that these practices are not cited as evidence of the lamentable quality of writing in popular romantic fiction. Indeed, this writing can be judged harshly only if one agrees with Henry James that all fiction ought to demonstrate with subtlety rather than tell overtly.²³ Romance readers, of course, do not; for them, redundancy and overzealous assertion perform important and particular functions. Together, these functions combat ambiguity, imply that all events are definitively comprehensible, and reassure the reader that whatever minimal inferences she might construct, they will be adequate and accurate. In short, these techniques cancel the anxiety and contingency prompted by the fact that reading is a temporally open-ended act, just as they guarantee that even the laziest and most unimaginative reader will know not only what is occurring but what it means as well.

By masking the interpretive character of the act of reading, the redundant and simple language of the romantic novel minimizes the labor the reader contributes to the production of the story. This particular linguistic practice then insures that reading will be marked not as "work" but as

"pleasure" by the women who indulge in it so frequently. They seem to be at least partially aware of this, for in discussing the novels of Jane Austen, several of the women admitted that although they liked her heroines and found her stories intriguing, they could read her only if they were not tired, if they were alone, or if they were willing to pay particular attention to her verbal structures. "Her sentences are so confusing," Joy lamented, "that I really have to work at it to understand what she's saying. I can't read her and do something else at the same time. It's hard work."

In fact, all of the linguistic practices discussed thus far mask the reader's active collaboration in the production of textual meaning. The simple syntax, elementary realism, repetitive vocabulary, and authorial interpretation characteristic of romantic fiction together create a verbal structure that can be "decoded" easily and quickly on the basis of previously mastered cultural codes and conventions. Because the prose is so familiar, individual words or signs appear to make their meanings immediately available to any reader operating according to certain procedures and assumptions. Consequently established as the passive recipient of previously selected meanings by these features, the reader is never forced to recognize that it is indeed she who actively supplies the significance of the words she encounters.

Moreover, this kind of language use enables the reader to maintain her illusory view of herself as the simple recipient of the story because it limits the actual labor she must perform to that of simple memory.²⁴ In order to make sense of its individual signs, more complex sentences, or even of its entire fictional events, the reader need only recall what such units usually mean in ordinary daily discourse. Because words are rarely employed in unfamiliar ways, because syntax is almost never deformed for "poetic" or shock effect, because events themselves are always interpreted redundantly in conventional ways by a trustworthy narrator, the reader is never required to forge new interpretive conventions or to construct consciously a theory about character motivation. Neither is she encouraged to view the fictive analogues of real human activity in a new or unusual light. Reading the romantic novel is an event that is dominated by the typical reader's unconscious but nonetheless active recall of learned cultural conventions, but because the reader herself does not recognize those conventions, she continues to view that event as a simple matter of receiving that which is already fully there in the text.

If the reading habits of the Smithton women are any indication, the language of the romantic novel can be said to function as an instrument for the transfer of meaning, which writers and readers seem to believe pre-exists both the decision to communicate and the activity of reception. Words, phrases, and sentences do not themselves become the object of attention but exist as a channel or conduit through which the reader gains

access to the truly important, the meanings that constitute the romantic story of the lovers. Romance writers and readers alike understand the purpose of the text to be the romantic tale itself, just as they conceive the activities of writing and reading as a *storytelling* cycle. From the perspective of its participants, then, romance reading might be characterized as the reception of a completed tale offered to a reader by a writer who not only "speaks" the same language but similarly understands the conventions of romantic storytelling and the significance of romance as an archetypal event in a woman's life. This form of interaction between two parties who are established as equals creates the illusion of a spontaneous, unmediated communication between individuals capable of telling and receiving a story about themselves whose meaning is not only unambiguous but *already known* by both parties because they have "heard" it before.

Popular romances, as they are habitually read and understood by the Smithton readers, it seems, resemble the myths of oral cultures in the sense that they exist to relate a story already familiar to the people who choose to read them. Although romances are technically novels because each purports to tell a "new" story of unfamiliar characters and as-yet-uncompleted events, in fact, they all *retell* a single tale whose final outcome their readers already know. The peculiar, but nonetheless crucial, fact that these novels are consumed repetitively by the same readers guarantees that the first recurrence of a familiar phrase, stock description, or stereotypical event in a novel still partially unread will inform the reader that the fate of these "new" lovers is as immutable and irreversible as the already completed and fixed destiny of any mythical deity. As Umberto Eco has observed with respect to myths, the accounts "greatly favored by antiquity [were] almost always the story of something which had already happened and of which the public was aware. One could recount for the *n*th time the story of Roland the Paladin, but the public already knew what happened to the hero."²⁵ Therefore, the act of retelling that same myth functioned as the ritual reaffirmation of fundamental cultural beliefs and collective aspirations.²⁶

If this phenomenon of repetitive reading is accorded the importance it deserves, it becomes clear that romantic novels function for their reader, on one level at least, as the ritualistic repetition of a single, immutable cultural myth. However, one must also recognize that the Smithton women do not simply reencounter the story of a single heroine-hero pair because the romantic myth is itself disguised in the form of the realistic novel. In fact, the women believe the books they buy *are* novels, which is to say, stories about unknown and distinct characters whose fates are not yet determined but whose individual development can be observed in the working out of a narrative. Not surprisingly, then, when asked specifically to describe the "typical romantic heroine," all of Dot's readers insist that

the task is impossible because the heroines "are all different." The Smithton women also refuse to admit that the books they read have a standard plot, although as noted in Chapter 3, they will go so far as to categorize them as "romances" because all are stories about a "man and woman meeting, the obstacles to their love, and their final happy ending." The women even claim that they most value unpredictable plots because they create the excitement and tension associated with not knowing what will happen.

In comparing myths with the literature of the modern world, Eco has observed further that "the 'civilization' . . . [of the latter] offers a story in which the reader's main interest is transferred to the unpredictable nature of *what will happen* and, therefore, to the plot invention which now holds our attention. The event has not happened *before* the story; it happens *while* it is being told and usually even the author does not know what will take place."²⁷ Romances seem to function as novels do, then, because in beginning a new one, the reader appears to accompany just-met acquaintances on a journey whose final destination is unknown at the moment of embarkation. Thus the act of reading a romance that is constructed like a novel is fraught with the excitement of open-ended potential and simultaneous novelty marked by the threat of the unknown. The conventions of the novelistic discourse itself seem to be at odds with the reassuring redundancy of the prose just as they apparently contradict, even if they cannot fully undermine, the security provided by the reader's prior acquaintance with the romance as a fixed myth embodied in other nearly identical "novels."

The romance-reading experience, in short, appears to provide both the psychological benefits of oral myth-telling and those associated with the reading of a novel. This dual functionality was illustrated graphically by Ann when she remarked that before she began to rely on Dot's advice about romances, she always read the first and last pages of every book before she decided to purchase it. She read the beginning, she explained, to make sure the "story got off to a fast start" and to see if she could predict what its resolution was likely to be. If she could not, she assumed the book would be exciting. She read the ending, she added, to see that the author had not "pulled any dirty tricks" by ending the lovers' tale unhappily. Ann explained that she simply did not want "to get involved with the characters" if she was destined to feel sad when events did not turn out as they should. She sees no contradiction in desiring an unpredictable plot and wanting to know how it ends before she reads it through.

While her behavior and reasoning may sound idiosyncratic, they are not. Despite the fact that seventeen of the forty-two Smithton women said they "never" read the endings of romances before they begin the

whole book, twelve responded that they "sometimes" engage in this behavior, five maintained that they do it "often," and eight replied that they "always" read the endings first. In all, twenty-five (60 percent) of this group of readers find it at least occasionally necessary to counteract the novel's power to threaten them with the contingency of the unknown.

Although this widespread need to learn of the ending first could be interpreted as evidence that the text's stock descriptions and clichés do not identify individual books as a retelling of the basic romantic myth, this seems inadequate, finally, as an explanation. The very same women who need reassurance about particular endings also become angry when they discover that a book they thought was a romance on the basis of its cover and narrative opening turns out to be something else. In this instance, the conventions seem to operate as claimed by establishing certain expectations that the story will proceed and end in the prescribed manner. If the romance's stereotyped, formulaic conventions operate as signals to at least some of the readers that the book in question is another adequate retelling of the romantic myth, it becomes necessary to ask why so many of the others still need to reassure themselves about the nature of each particular ending. The Smithton women themselves have provided no further explicit information about why they want to read stories pretending to witness as yet uncompleted and unique events and also simultaneously desire to know beforehand that those very same events have indeed concluded and that the outcome is properly and reassuringly fixed. By turning once again to the texts themselves, perhaps accurate inferences can be made about the likely effect particular textual features have on the reader. Of special relevance here are the popular romance's delineation of character and its typical narrative structure.

As most major commentators on the novel have observed, one of its principal characteristics is its pretense that it chronicles the life of a unique individual whose very particularity resembles that of all the other discrete individuals thought to comprise the social universe.²⁸ Unlike the mythic or allegorical character who embodies a limited set of laws understood to be the symbolic summary of his or her already completed destiny, the novelistic character is intended to appear as a complex, human figure whose often contradictory traits and motives are a function of the need to deal expeditiously with an entirely contingent and particular reality that is itself not only incomplete but unpredictable as well. In the words of Eco once again, "the character of a novel wants . . . to be a man [*sic*] like anyone else, and what could befall him is as unforeseeable as what may happen to us."²⁹ Every version of the form is "novel," then, precisely because it eschews "traditional" plot and "typed" characters in favor of a detailed rendering of the responses made by a singular, apparently "real"

too aggressive to be believable. As Maureen remarked, "We know how men react to that kind of behavior. No real woman would ever think of trying to get away with that. She'd get hurt."

In claiming here that Dot and the other women accept romantic characters as "real" because they are convinced by the narrative's display of their individual particularity, it may seem to be contradicting data cited in a previous chapter suggesting that many readers do not believe characters in romances resemble those people they have met in their own lives. Indeed, twenty-two (52 percent) of the Smithton women did claim that the characters in romances "are not at all similar" to "the people [they] meet in real life," although twenty (48 percent) still maintained that the fictional characters are either "somewhat similar" (eighteen; 43 percent) or "very similar" (two; 5 percent) to people met in real life. I wondered enough about the apparent contradiction to question the women about the opposition between their constant references to "believable" characters and their answers to the questionnaires. They very readily explained that they had taken the question literally to mean that they ought to compare the fictional characters to actual people they meet or know. They did not understand the query as an abstract question about categorical similarities between novelistic figures and real human "types"; hence, the high proportion of apparently negative answers about the realism of fictional characters. In fact, those answers indicate only that romantic characters are often not like people the women already know or are likely to meet. It seems worth quoting one of the relevant exchanges at some length here, for it demonstrates clearly that although the women acknowledge that the romantic hero and heroine are idealized figures, they want very much to be convinced that such individuals are plausible if not really possible:

Interviewer: One of the answers I got on the questionnaires back from everybody—if you remember, there were questions like, "Is the heroine like you or is the hero like men you've known in your life?" Nearly everybody said "not at all like" or "only slightly like." . . . I was talking to Maureen today and she's writing a book, and she was talking about making the characters real, like ordinary people with regular emotions and that seems like it conflicts somehow.

Dot: It would. I'm sure it does. But it's kind of like going to a movie and seeing all these characteristics in a hero that you would like. Well, for that time, that is a real man; that is a real person and embodiment. And I guess the actors go to a great deal of trouble—at least they say they do anyway—to get into the character, as it were. As it is written, in making this a really believable character. When I

individual to the unique conjuncture of events and characters encountered solely by him or her. As Ian Watt has demonstrated, this is accomplished stylistically by lavishing space and attention on personality and consciousness as well as on the particularism of individual circumstance.³⁰ Characters in the novel are distinguished, finally, by a unique and persistent identity as well as by the unfamiliarity of their situations.

Given their experience with novelistic renderings of character and contingent event as specific and precise as those of George Eliot, Henry James, or William Faulkner, it is not surprising to note that most literary critics who even bother to mention popular literature dismiss the characters that inhabit its forms as formulaic, stereotypic, and reminiscent of morality plays or myth. Popular authors are routinely accused of simplifying complex moral problems because they embody them in a conflict between characters who are simplistically good and purely evil. Although the virginal heroines and mysteriously masculine heroes populating romances understandably appear to be mere abstract types to those accustomed to Isabel Archer and Gilbert Osmond, they are not perceived as such by women who read nothing but romances. Not only do the Smithton readers assert that all romantic heroines are different, but they can demonstrate quite adequately that, in fact, they are distinguished clearly in their minds by the peculiarity of their circumstances and by the specificity of their responses to events.

Very often during the group interviews, for example, one of the Smithton readers would recall a favorite title that several others could not remember having read. Those who had read the book immediately tried to refresh the memories of their sister readers by briefly summarizing the plot. These plot summaries proved especially intriguing because they inevitably began "that was the one where she . . ."; the speaker always finished with the heroine's response to one of the hero's comments or actions. Although the women almost never remembered the names of principal characters, they could recite in surprising detail not only what had happened to them but also how they had managed to cope with particularly troublesome situations. Dot's tendency to evaluate the "believability" of characters and events, then, is wholly in keeping with her customers' demands that character motivation be realistic and convincing. When she recommends Roberta Gellis's *Siren Song* (1981) because "the characters are wonderfully human with a full range of emotions, desires, and thoughts,"³¹ she is indicating to her readers that this book, despite its adherence to the requirements of the fantasy or myth, will be satisfying because its characters will make that fantasy appear "real" and, therefore, possible. It is not surprising that the Smithton women reserve their greatest scorn for novels with heroines whom they consider either too meek or

say this [the hero] is not my husband, it's not my husband! I wasn't kidding. There's no way that these heroes emulate my husband at all. And I don't know that I could live with the hero in here.

Susan: Maybe you could say it's a dream person that you wish . . .

Dot: Yes!

Susan: was real. You know, everybody has in their mind a certain type of person. And you know no person could possibly have all the good qualities you would like to have in your husband. Maybe you would say in your mind, this is a perfect character. This would be my hero-type.

Sally: There is no such person.

Dot: You know, I often tell my children, "In life there's what you want and there's what you get—no—there's what you dream about, there's what you really want—and then there's what is laid out there for ya!"

Interviewer: Okay, I think I understand better. So they're motivated like normal, real people. . . .

Dot: Right, right.

Interviewer: But they're not specifically like real people you've known.

Dot: Right.

All: Yes.

Fictional characterization, it would seem, is successful for these women because it manages to convince them that even though they know the characters are more perfect than they or their husbands can ever hope to be, they are yet entirely persuasive and believable as possible human individuals. The women can thus believe in them *and* in the verity of the happy ending that concludes the story.

This implicit faith in the reality of the romantic novel's world may explain the need to know from the beginning how a particular story will be resolved. The Smithton women trust the mimesis to such a degree that they truly seem to believe in the ominous contingency of the heroine's situation. Even though most of them have read hundreds of other romances before, they are so completely taken in by each book's claim to its status as a novel that they are not at all willing to trust those purely discursive markers that otherwise identify the tale as a romance and establish the expectation that it "ought" to end in a certain way. In effect, the Smithton women want to participate in the ritualistic reaffirmation of a fixed myth, but they also want to be convinced that it is not merely a twice-told fairy tale but the fortuitous working out of one more individual woman's problems.

The peculiar narrative structure of the popular romantic novel also

seems to satisfy this desire to believe that what they know is myth or fantasy is also possible because it happens in an obviously "real" world, in a plausible manner, to quite believable people. The very plausibility of those events is in no small way a function of the popular romance's typically novelistic rendering of time.³² Unlike earlier literary traditions that relied on "timeless stories to mirror the unchanging moral verities,"³³ the novel insists, in its portrayal of chronological causality, that the historical past is the condition of the present. Its preoccupation with the development of its characters through time is the logical consequence, then, of this characteristically "modern" view.

Although the story told by all romances can be considered a myth because every book is dominated by the same set of events resolved in an identical way, each individual romance nonetheless insists in its very first paragraph on the temporal specificity of the tale it is about to relate. Romances do not begin by placing their characters in the timeless, mythical space of the fairy tale. Rather, they are remarkably consistent about relying on one of two specific techniques to inform the reader that fictional time operates as time does in the real world. One of these techniques insists that the novel's time is merely the historical antecedent of the reader's time. Historical novels employing this technique begin, as do *The Flame and the Flower*, *The Proud Breed*, and *The Sea Treasure*, by making specific reference to the historical date on which the story begins. This strategy tacitly avers that the heroine, who also typically appears in the first paragraph, was a real figure who inhabited the reader's world at an earlier moment in its single, continuing history. It should also be noted, however, that while such dating places these stories in the past and suggests that the events have already been completed and resolved, the narratives progress as if those events are occurring concurrently with the account of them. This practice preserves the illusion of threat and contingency that accompanies any story whose outcome is unknown.

Historical novels that do not rely on this technique of specific dating still manage to fabricate a parallel universe by pretending that both the narrator and the reader are about to witness a story already in the process of unfolding. This is accomplished by opening the tale in medias res as the heroine or hero performs some action while simultaneously contemplating another event that at least preceded it. By referring strategically to the past and the present moment in the same paragraph, the text suggests that the heroine, like the reader who is opening the book, is a product of her past and awaits the unfolding of her future. She is established, therefore, as a historical being who exists in time and in the "real" world. Such deliberate use of the conventions of the realistic novel thus denies that the romance is only a timeless fairy tale existing solely within the reader's imagination or between the pages of a book. In fact, these explicit ref-

reader's hypothesis. In most cases, competing possibilities are allowed to open up only for a few paragraphs. Soon after the initial warning to the reader, the dreaded event occurs, only to be interpreted immediately by the narrator or by one of the witnesses. In Phyllis Whitney's early gothic, *Thunder Heights*, the reader is asked to focus on the mysterious "accidental" death of the heroine's mother. The heroine naturally refuses to believe that her mother was thrown from her horse on a mountain path. Midway through the narrative, she stumbles upon a riding crop in a ravine below the bluff that others claim was the scene of her mother's fall. Initially, because she cannot imagine whom the crop belongs to, the reader is prompted to provide the very obvious answer. Lest she guess wrong, however, Whitney closes off potentially infinite speculations, narrowing them down to only one: "She realized suddenly that the sorry object she held in her hand was a woman's riding crop. To whom had it belonged, and how had it been lost in so odd a place? At any rate, she would carry her find home, clean it up and polish the silver. Then if it didn't look too bad perhaps she could carry it when she went riding. Undoubtedly, someone at the house would know to whom it had belonged. Her mother, perhaps?"³⁴

If this is not definitive enough, Whitney provides further corroboration only eight pages later when the heroine's Aunt Letty identifies the crop as her sister's. Her redundant elaboration serves a triple purpose. It reassures the reader that she has indeed projected the proper "solution" to a minor narrative problem. It contributes simultaneously to the essential mystery at the heart of this characteristic plot by adding to the suspense about the actual circumstances surrounding the death of the heroine's mother. Finally, this manner of narrative disclosure also suggests tacitly to the reader that just as she "knew" the answer to this problem so does she know the answer to those crucial, still unanswered questions about the hero's love for the heroine and her ability to realize her individual identity.

This internal narrative structure contributes to the reader's ability to maintain a kind of dual consciousness about the status of the story she is reading. On the one hand, the repetitive posing of new, unsolved narrative problems permits the text to continue the illusion that it is revealing events only as they occur. In thus successfully managing the reader's activity so that she will feel constantly in the dark about what will happen next, the device insists on the book's status as a novel about new characters in a new situation, the resolution of which cannot be foreseen. At the same time, by constantly confirming the projections she cannot help but make, the narrative structure reassures the reader not only that she is making sense of the story properly but also that at each stage along the way she always already knows the answers. The narrative structure tacitly hints, then, that even though it appears to be a novel, it is, in actuality, just

erences to time and to the familiar objects of the real world help to dissolve the very materiality of the book itself by conjuring for the reader people who are as real as she and events that may not have happened to her but, given their plausible "ordinariness," certainly still could.

The romance's depiction of familiar temporality, like its "realistic" character portrayal and its simple miming of a world filled with domestic commodities, acts to undermine the reader's knowledge that she is indeed reading another romance and therefore has already heard *this* story before. Given their assumptions about language, their interpretive strategies, and their trust of assertion, it should not seem surprising, then, that some of the *Smithton* women are so convinced by these discursive practices that they actually feel the need to reassure themselves that the ominous future threatened in the opening pages will not materialize in so disastrous a form. By reading the ending first, they confirm for themselves the story's formulaic and, therefore, mythic status, a status that is established for other readers by the characteristic, clichéd markers of the romantic myth. These less trusting readers simply have to work a little harder to reassure themselves at the outset that the tale really is completed. Having done so, more completely to the act of experiencing that real, open-ended future than its realistic discourse projects. By assenting to the reality of that future, they can then believe fully in the reality of the happy ending when it finally does appear.

Another narrative technique employed by the romance suggests that the typical reading experience is oddly conflicted in the sense that the reader holds an ambivalent attitude toward the reality status of the story. This technique suggests that readers both believe in the threat of the unknown as it opens out before them and demand continual reassurance that the events they suspect will happen, in fact, will finally occur. Like most narratives, the romance proceeds by setting up an initial situation whose very instability raises multiple possibilities of future resolution. The reader is invited to project these possible endings through suggestions made by a narrator or by the heroine herself. These potential endings are then kept consistently before the reader by the seemingly endless repetition of threats to the heroine's virginity or life. While this initial situation contains an unresolved problem, however, secondary narrative puzzles are presented and subsequently solved within a very short amount of reading time. The reader is asked by the text to supply a narrative projection that is then confirmed almost immediately by actual events or corroborated by a character in the story.³⁴

Consider, as an example, the romance's treatment of foreshadowing, which typically reduces to a minimum the space between the initial hint of ominous happenings and the actual event that inevitably confirms the

another version of the mythic story whose ending the reader already knows.

The romance's peculiar narrative strategy seems to encourage the reader in her desire to have it both ways. She can read the story as a realistic novel about what might plausibly occur in an individual woman's life without having to face the usual threat of the unknown. This is possible because all contingency is erased by the narrative's continuing reassurance that it reveals nothing that is not previously anticipated. Romance writers, in effect, supply a myth in the guise of the truly possible. It is precisely because the romance's surrounding universe is always portrayed so convincingly that romance readers might well be persuaded to believe that the romantic action itself is not only plausible but, like the already known ending, also inevitable. Reading in that case would be, as the women have said, a ritual of hope. Repetitive engagement in it would enable a reader to tell herself again and again that a love like the heroine's might indeed occur in a world such as hers. She thus teaches herself to believe that men are able to satisfy women's needs fully.

It should also be pointed out, however, that in participating in this "mixed" discourse with its contradictory suggestions about the contingency of human life on the one hand and its predetermined nature on the other, the *Smithton* women unconsciously perpetuate a familiar, ideological argument about female identity and freedom. Because romances are always novel-like narratives of the yet-to-be-determined destiny of *different* heroines, they suggest to the reader that all women, like the heroine about whom she reads, are unique individuals who live in ignorance of their own future and who are quite capable of living original existences. Simultaneously, however, the narrative's more surreptitious hints that this heroine's unforeseen destiny will prove to be just like that of her fictional sisters imply that such freedom is an illusion because, in fact, women live lives characterized by identical conclusions. Although they possess novel personalities and participate in some unprecedented events, women in romances, like mythical deities, are fated to live out a predetermined existence. That existence is circumscribed by a narrative structure that demonstrates that despite idiosyncratic histories, all women inevitably end up associating their female identity with the social roles of lover, wife, and mother. Even more successfully than the patriarchal society within which it was born, the romance denies women the possibility of refusing that purely relational destiny and thus rejects their right to a single, self-contained existence.

The conflicted discourse of the romance suggests, finally, that with respect to women at least, surface differences mask a more fundamental identity. By insisting so successfully on its superficial but nonetheless effective mimesis, the romance suggests to the reader that the heroine is as

individual as she and that, like events in her own life, those in the heroine's are merely chance occurrences that develop because she happens to be in a certain place at a certain time. The heroine's happy union with the hero is presented, consequently, not as a functional necessity dictated by the needs of social and political institutions but as a combination of luck and individual choice. The reader is invited to see her own fate in the same light as a freely chosen course of her own making.

However, even as the narrative conveys its overt message that all women are different and their destinies fundamentally open, the romance also reveals that such differences are illusory and short-lived because they are submerg'd or sacrificed inevitably to the demands of that necessary and always identical romantic ending. Paradoxically, the inexorability of the romance's *mythic* conclusion might be said to reproduce the "real," not because all women actually find perfect fulfillment in romantic love but because the conclusion's repeated overpowering of the heroine's individual difference by her enthusiastic assumption of an abstract, unvarying role parallels a situation that women find difficult to avoid in actuality. Its vociferous defense of human individuality and freedom notwithstanding, American society is still remarkably successful at exacting the necessary compliance from its female members. Through the use of rigid socializing procedures, instructional habits, and formal and informal sanctions against deviance, the culture persuades women to view femininity solely in terms of a social and institutional role that is essential to the maintenance of the current organization of life. Therefore, while the act of romance reading is used by women as a means of partial protest against the role prescribed for them by the culture, the discourse itself actively insists on the desirability, naturalness, and benefits of that role by portraying it not as the imposed necessity that it is but as a freely designed, personally controlled, individual choice. When the mythic ending of the romance undercuts the realism of its novelistic rendering of an individual woman's story, this literary form reaffirms its founding culture's belief that women are valuable not for their unique personal qualities but for their biological sameness and their ability to perform that essential role of maintaining and reconstituting others.

CONCLUSION

If in concluding these chapters, the reader remains unsure as to whether the romance should be considered fundamentally conservative on the one hand or incipiently oppositional on the other, that is not surprising. Until now, I have deliberately refrained from the formulation of a definitive conclusion. Indeed, the picture that emerges from this study of the romance-reading phenomenon is less distinct, though not less complete, than previous investigations of other mass-produced literary forms. Although the indistinctness is perhaps frustrating because it hinders the elaboration of a single conclusive statement about the meaning and effect of the romance, it is also an indistinctness born of ambiguity resulting from the planned superimposition or double exposure of multiple images. Those images are themselves produced by the several perspectives brought to bear upon the complicated, polysemic event known as romance reading. The indistinctness is not, then, simply the result of a faulty focus in a singular, comprehensive portrait of a fixed and unified object, the romantic text.

Had I looked solely at the act of reading as it is understood by the women themselves or, alternately, at the covert significance of the romance's narrative structure, I might have been able to provide one clear-cut, sharp-focus image. In the first case, the image would suggest that the

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CHAPTER 5a

Madonna

Madonna, who has been a major phenomenon of popular culture throughout the late 1980s, is a rich terrain to explore. Her success has been due at least as much to her videos and her personality as to her music—about which most critics are disparaging. It is also significant that her fans and her publicity materials, along with journalistic reports and critiques, pay far more attention to what she looks like, who she is, and what she stands for than to what she sounds like.

In this chapter, then, I concentrate on Madonna's appearance, her personality, and the words and images of her songs, for these are the main carriers of her most accessible meanings. This is not to say that her music is unimportant, for it is the music that underpins everything else and that provides the emotional intensity or affect without which none of the rest would matter to her fans. But it does point to the fact that the pleasures of music are remarkably resistant to analysis, and are equally difficult to express in the words and images that are so important in the circulation of culture.

Before her image became known, Madonna was not a success: at the start, at least, her music was not enough on its own to turn her into a major resource of popular culture. In the autumn of 1984 she was signed to Sire Records, which is "where Warner Brothers put people they don't think will sell" (*Countdown Magazine Special Annual* 1985: 2). She got some dance club play for "Borderline" and "Holiday," but the *Madonna* LP was selling only slowly. *Like a Virgin*, her second LP, had been made but not released. Warner Brothers then gave Arthur Pierson a tiny budget to make a rock video of "Lucky Star." He shot it in an afternoon against a white studio

backdrop, and the resulting video pushed the song into the top ten. The *Madonna* album's sales followed suit, and *Like a Virgin* was released for the Christmas market. Both LPs held the number one position for a number of weeks. The film *Desperately Seeking Susan* was released in March 1985, which added an adult audience to the teenage (largely female) one for the songs and videos. The film worked to support the videos in establishing the "Madonna look," a phrase that the media repeated endlessly in 1985 and one that Madonna capitalized on by establishing her Boy Toy label to sell crucifix earrings, fingerless lace gloves, short, navel-exposing blouses, black lacey garments, and all the visual symbols she had made her own.

A concert tour started in April (in the foyers, of course, items of the Madonna look were for sale) and an old film, *A Certain Sacrifice*, that never made cinema release was dug up for the home video market. Also dug up and published in *Playboy* and *Penthouse* were old art school nude photos, and at the end of 1985, her wedding to Sean Penn became a world wide multimedia event, despite its "secret" location. In other words, she was a fine example of the capitalist pop industry at work, creating a (possibly short-lived) fashion, exploiting it to the full, and making a lot of money from one of the most powerless and exploitable sections of the community, young girls.

But such an account is inadequate (though not necessarily inaccurate as far as it goes) because it assumes that the Madonna fans are merely "cultural dopes," able to be manipulated at will and against their own interests by the moguls of the culture industry. Such a manipulation would be not only economic, but also ideological, because the economic system requires the ideology of patriarchal capitalism to underpin and naturalize it. Economics and ideology can never be separated.

And there is no shortage of evidence to support this view. Madonna's videos exploit the sexuality of her face and body and frequently show her in postures of submission (e.g., "Burning Up") or subordination to men. Her physical similarity to Marilyn Monroe is stressed (particularly in the video of "Material Girl"), an intertextual reference to another star commonly thought to owe her success to her ability to embody masculine fantasy. In the *Countdown* 1985 poll of the top 20 "Sex/Lust Objects"

Madonna took third place and was the only female among 19 males (*Countdown*, December 1985:35). All this would suggest that she is teaching her young female fans to see themselves as men would see them; that is, she is hailing them as feminine subjects within patriarchy, and as such is an agent of patriarchal hegemony.

But, if her fans are not "cultural dopes," but actively choose to watch, listen to, and imitate her rather than anyone else, there must be some gaps or spaces in her image that escape ideological control and allow her audiences to make meanings that connect with their social experience. For many of her audiences, this social experience is one of powerlessness and subordination, and if Madonna as a site of meaning is not to naturalize this, she must offer opportunities for resisting it. Her image becomes, then, not a model meaning for young girls in patriarchy, but a site of semiotic struggle between the forces of patriarchal control and feminine resistance, of capitalism and the subordinate, of the adult and the young.

The field of cultural studies, in its current state of development, offers two overlapping methodological strategies that need to be combined and the differences between them submerged if we are to understand this cultural struggle. One derives from ethnography, and requires us to study the meanings that the fans of Madonna actually do (or appear to) make of her. This involves listening to them, reading the letters they write to fanzines, or observing their behavior at home or in public. The fans' words or behavior are not, of course, empirical facts that speak for themselves; rather, they are texts that need "reading" theoretically in just the same way as the "texts of Madonna" do.

This brings us to the other strategy, which derives from semiotic and structuralist textual analysis. This involves a close reading of the signifiers of the text—that is, its physical presence—but recognizes that the signifieds exist not in the text itself, but extratextually, in the myths, countermyths, and ideology of their culture. It recognizes that the distribution of power in society is paralleled by the distribution of meanings in texts, and that struggles for social power are paralleled by semiotic struggles for meanings. Every text and every reading has a social and therefore political dimension, which is to be

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found partly in the structure of the text itself and partly in the social relations of the reader and the way they are brought to bear upon the text.

It follows that the theory that informs any analysis also has a social dimension that is a necessary part of the "meanings" the analysis reveals. Meanings, therefore, are relative and varied: what is constant is the ways in which texts relate to the social system. A cultural analysis, then, will reveal both the way the dominant ideology is structured into the text and into the reading subject, and those textual features that enable negotiated, resisting, or oppositional readings to be made. Cultural analysis reaches a satisfactory conclusion when the ethnographic studies of the historically and socially located meanings that are made are related to the semiotic analysis of the text. Semiotics relates the structure of the text to the social system to explore how such meanings are made and the part they play within the cultural process that relates meanings both to social experience and to the social system in general.

So Lucy, a 14-year-old fan, says of a Madonna poster:

She's tarty and seductive . . . but it looks alright when she does it, you know, what I mean, if anyone else did it it would look right tarty, a right tarty you know, but with her it's OK, it's acceptable. . . . with anyone else it would be absolutely outrageous, it sounds silly, but it's OK with her, you know what I mean. (November 1985)

We can note a number of points here. Lucy can only find patriarchal words to describe Madonna's sexuality—"tarty" and "seductive"—but she struggles against the patriarchy inscribed in them. At the same time, she struggles against the patriarchy inscribed in her own subjectivity. The opposition between "acceptable" and "absolutely outrageous" not only refers to representations of female sexuality, but is an externalization of the tension felt by adolescent girls when trying to come to terms with the contradictions between a positive feminine view of their sexuality and the alien patriarchal one that appears to be the only one offered by the available linguistic and symbolic systems. Madonna's "tarty" sexuality is "acceptable"—but to whom? Certainly to Lucy, and to girls like her who are experiencing the problems of establishing a satisfactory

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sexual identity within an oppressing ideology, but we need further evidence to support this tentative conclusion. Matthew, aged 15, not a particular fan of Madonna, commented on her marriage in the same discussion. He thought it would last only one or two years, and he wouldn't like to be married to her "because she'd give any guy a hard time." Lucy agreed that Madonna's marriage would not last long, but found it difficult to say why, except that "marriage didn't seem to suit her," even though Lucy quoted approvingly Madonna's desire to make it an "open marriage." Lucy's problems probably stem from her recognition that marriage is a patriarchal institution and as such is threatened by Madonna's sexuality; the threat of course is not the traditional and easily contained one of woman as whore, but the more radical one of woman as independent of masculinity. As we shall see later, Madonna denies or mocks a masculine reading of patriarchy's conventions for representing women. This may well be why, according to *Time* (May 27, 1985), many boys find her sexiness difficult to handle and "suspect that they are being kidded" (p. 47). Lucy and Matthew both recognize, in different ways and from different social positions, that Madonna's sexuality can offer a challenge or a threat to dominant definitions of femininity and masculinity. "Madonna's Best Friend," writing to *Countdown Magazine*, also recognizes Madonna's resistance to patriarchy:

I'm writing to complain about all the people who write in and say what a tart and a slut Madonna is because she talks openly about sex and she shows her belly button and she's not ashamed to say she thinks she's pretty. Well I admire her and I think she has a lot of courage just to be herself. All you girls out there! Do you think you have nice eyes or pretty hair or a nice figure? Do you ever talk about boys or sex with friends? Do you wear a bikini? Well according to you, you're a slut and a tart!! So have you judged Madonna fairly?

Madonna's Best Friend, Wahroonga, NSW. (*Countdown* December 1985: 70)

Praising Madonna's "courage just to be herself" is further evidence of the felt difficulty of girls in finding a sexual identity that appears to be formed in their interests rather than in the

interests of the dominant male. Madonna's sexualization of her navel is a case in point.

The most erogenous part of my body is my belly button. I have the most perfect belly button—an inny, and there's no fluff in it. When I stick a finger in my belly button I feel a nerve in the centre of my body shoot up my spine. If 100 belly buttons were lined up against a wall I would definitely pick out which one was mine. (*Madonna: Close up and Personal*, London: Rock Photo Publications, 1985)

What is noticeable here is both her pleasure in her own physicality and the fun she finds in admitting and expressing this pleasure: it is a sexual-physical pleasure that has nothing to do with men, and in choosing the navel upon which to center it, she is choosing a part of the female body that patriarchy has not conventionally sexualized for the benefit of the male. She also usurps the masculine pleasure and power of the voyeur in her claim to be able to recognize her navel, in all its proudly proclaimed perfection, among a hundred others. Madonna offers some young girls the opportunity to find meanings of their own feminine sexuality that suit them, meanings that are "independent." Here are some other Madonna fans talking:

She's sexy but she doesn't need men . . . she's kind of there all by herself. (*Time* May 27, 1985: 47)

She gives us ideas. It's really women's lib, not being afraid of what guys think. (*Time* May 27, 1985: 47)

The sense of empowerment that underlies these comments is characteristic of her teenage fans. A group of "wanna-bes," fans dressed in their own variants of Madonna's look, were interviewed on MTV in November 1987 during Madonna's "Make My Video" competition. When asked why they dressed like that, they replied, "It makes people look at us" or "When I walk down the street, people notice." Teenage girls, in public, are, in our culture, one of the most insignificant and self-effacing categories of people; the self-assertiveness evidenced here is more than mere posturing, it is, potentially at least, a source of real self-esteem. The common belief that Madonna's "wanna-bes" lack the imagination to devise their own styles of

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same program, control over the look is not just a superficial playing with appearances, it is a means of constructing and controlling social relations and thus social identity. The sense of empowerment that Madonna offers is inextricably connected with the pleasure of exerting some control over the meanings of self, of sexuality, and of one's social relations.

But, like all pop stars, she has her "haters" as well as her fans:

When I sit down on a Saturday and Sunday night I always hear the word Madonna and it makes me sick, all she's worried about is her bloody looks. She must spend hours putting on that stuff and why does she always show her belly button? We all know she's got one. My whole family thinks she's pathetic and that she loves herself. Paul Young's sexy sneakers. (*Countdown Annual* 1985: 109)

Here again, the "hate" centers on Madonna's sexuality, expressed as her presenting herself in whorelike terms, painting and displaying herself to arouse the baser side of man. But the sting comes in the last sentence, when the writer recognizes Madonna's apparent enjoyment of her own sexuality, which he (the letter is clearly from a masculine subject, if not a biological male) ascribes to egocentricity, and thus condemns.

Madonna's love of herself, however, is not seen as selfish and egocentric by girls; rather, it is the root of her appeal, the significance of which becomes clear when set in the context of much of the rest of the media addressed to them. McRobbie (1982) has shown how the "teenage press" typically constructs the girl's body and therefore her sexuality as a series of problems—breasts the wrong size or shape, spotty skin, lifeless hair, fatty thighs, problem periods—the list is endless. The advertisers, of course, who are the ones who benefit economically from these magazines, always have a product that can, at a price, solve the problem.

This polarization of Madonna's audience can be seen in the 1986 *Countdown* polls. She was top female vocalist by a mile (polling four times as many votes as the second-place singer) and was the only female in the top 20 "Sex/Lust Objects," in which she came third. But she was also voted into second place for the Turkey of the Year award. She's much loved or much

dress and merely follow her like sheep ignores the point that in adopting her style they are aligning themselves with a source of power.

The "Make My Video" competition showed how frequently the pleasures offered by Madonna to her fans were associated with moments of empowerment. In the competition fans were invited to make a video for the song "True Blue," and MTV devoted 24 hours to playing a selection of the entries. Many of the videos played with the theme of power, often at an unachievable, but not unimaginable, level of fantasy, such as one in which schoolgirls overpowered and tied up a teacher who denigrated Madonna; only by admitting her brilliance was he able to earn his freedom. Another took power fantasy to its extreme: it began with home-movie-type shots of two toddlers playing on a beach; the girl is suddenly wrapped up in a towel in the form of the U.S. flag, while the boy is wrapped in one in the form of the hammer and sickle. The video shows the American girl and Russian boy growing up in their respective countries, all the while telephoning and writing constantly to each other. Eventually she becomes president of the United States and he of the USSR, and they prevent an imminent nuclear war by their love for each other.

Another, less extreme, video made much closer connections between the empowered fan and her everyday life. The heroine sees her boyfriend off at a train station, then turns and joyfully hugs her female friend waiting outside. They dance-walk down the street and shop for clothes in a street market. At home, the friend dresses up in various Madonna-influenced outfits while the heroine looks on and applauds. Each outfit calls up a different type of boy to the door—all of whom are rejected, to the delight of the two girls. The heroine's boyfriend returns, and the final shot is of the three of them, arms interlinked, dancing down the street—then the camera pulls back to reveal one of the rejected boys on the friend's other arm, then continues pulling back to reveal in sequence each of the rejected boys hanging on her arm in a long line. The video shows girls using their "look" to control their relationships, and validating girl-girl relationships as powerfully, if not more so, as girl-boy ones.

In this video, as with the live "wanna-bes" interviewed in the

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hated, a not untypical position for a woman to occupy in patriarchy, whose inability to understand women in feminine terms is evidenced by the way it polarizes femininity into the opposing concepts of virgin-angel and whore-devil. Madonna consciously and paradoxically exploits these contradictions:

"When I was tiny," she recalls, "my grandmother used to beg me not to go with men, to love Jesus and be a good girl. I grew up with two images of women: the virgin and the whore. It was a little scary." (*National Times* August 23/29, 1985: 9)

She consistently refers to these contradictory meanings of woman in patriarchy: her video of "Like a Virgin" alternates the white dress of Madonna the bride with the black, slinky garb of Madonna the singer; the name Madonna (the virgin mother) is borne by a sexually active female; the crucifixes adopted from nuns' habits are worn on a barely concealed bosom or in a sexually gyrating navel. "Growing up I thought nuns were very beautiful. . . . They never wore any make-up and they just had these really serene faces. Nuns are sexy" (Madonna, quoted in the *National Times* August 23/29, 1985: 9).

But the effect of working these opposite meanings into her texts is not just to call attention to their role in male hegemony—a woman may either be worshipped and adored by a man or used and despised by him, but she has meaning only from a masculine-subject position. Rather, Madonna calls into question the validity of these binary oppositions as a way of conceptualizing woman. Her use of religious iconography is neither religious nor sacrilegious. She intends to free it from this ideological opposition and to enjoy it, use it, for the meanings and pleasure that it has for her, not for those of the dominant ideology and its simplistic binary thinking:

I have always carried around a few rosaries with me. One day I decided to wear (one) as a necklace. Everything I do is sort of tongue in cheek. It's a strange blend—a beautiful sort of symbolism, the idea of someone suffering, which is what Jesus Christ on a crucifix stands for, and then not taking it seriously. Seeing it as an icon with no religiousness attached. It isn't sacrilegious for me. (*National Times* August 23/29, 1985: 10)

The crucifix is neither religious, nor sacrilegious, but beautiful: "When I went to Catholic schools I thought the huge crucifixes nuns wore were really beautiful."

In the same way, her adolescent girl fans find in Madonna meanings of femininity that have broken free from the ideological binary opposition of virgin: whore. They find in her image positive feminine-centered representations of sexuality that are expressed in their constant references to her independence, her being herself. This apparently independent, self-defining sexuality is as significant as it is only because it is working within and against a patriarchal ideology. And the patriarchal meanings must be there for the resisting meanings to work against. *Playboy* (September 1985), on behalf of its readers, picks up only her patriarchal and not her resistant sexuality:

Best of all her onstage contortions and Boy Toy voice have put sopping sex where it belongs—front and center in the limelight (p. 122)

But even as it recognizes Madonna's patriarchal sexuality, *Playboy* has to recognize her parodic undermining of it, the control she exerts over the way she uses the dominant ideology but is not subjected to it:

The voice and the body are her bona fides, but Madonna's secret may be her satirical bite. She knows a lot of this image stuff is bullshit: she knows that you know. So long as we're all in on the act together, let's enjoy it. (p. 127)

Some of the parody is subtle and hard to tie down for textual analysis, but some, such as the references to Marilyn Monroe and the musicals she often starred in, is more obvious. The subtler parody lies in the knowing way in which Madonna uses the camera, mocking the conventional representations of female sexuality while at the same time conforming to them. Even one of her ex-lovers supports this: "Her image is that of a tart, but I believe it's all contrived. She only pretends to be a gold digger. Remember, I have seen the other side of Madonna" (Prof. Chris Flynn, quoted in *New Idea*, January 11, 1986: 4).

Madonna knows she is putting on a performance, and the fact that this knowingness is part of the performance enables the viewer to answer a different interpellation from that proposed by the dominant ideology, and thus occupy a resisting subject position. The sensitive man watching her "Material Girl" performance knows, as she does, as we might, that this is only a performance. Those who take the performance at face value, who miss its self-parody, either are hailed as ideological subjects in patriarchy or else they reject the hailing, deny the pleasure, and refuse the communication:

The *National Enquirer*, a weekly magazine devoted to prurient gossip, quotes two academic psychiatrists denouncing her for advocating teenage promiscuity, promoting a lust for money and materialism, and contributing to the deterioration of the family. Feminists accuse her of revisionism, of resurrecting the manipulative female who survives by coquetry and artifice. "Tell Gloria (Steinem) and the gang," she retorts, "to lighten up, get a sense of humour. And look at my video that goes with Material Girl. The guy who gets me in the end is the sensitive one with no money." (*National Times* August 23/29, 1985: 10)

Madonna consistently parodies conventional representations of women, and parody can be an effective device for interrogating the dominant ideology. It takes the defining features of its object, exaggerates and mocks them, and thus mocks those who "fall" for its ideological effect. But Madonna's parody goes further than this: she parodies not just the stereotypes, but the way in which they are made. She represents herself as one who is in control of her own image and of the process of making it. This, at the reading end of the semiotic process, allows the reader similar control over her own meanings.

Madonna's excesses of jewelry, of makeup, of trash in her style offer similar scope to the reader. Excessiveness invites the reader to question ideology: too much lipstick interrogates the tastefully made-up mouth, too much jewelry questions the role of female decorations in patriarchy. Excess overflows ideological control and offers scope for resistance. Thus Madonna's excessively sexual pouting and lipstick can be read to mean that she looks like that not because patriarchy determines that she should, but because she knowingly chooses to. She wears

religious icons (and uses a religious name) not to support or attack Christianity's role in patriarchy (and capitalism) but because she chooses to see them as beautiful, sexy ornaments. She makes her own meanings out of the symbolic systems available to her, and in using *their* signifiers and rejecting or mocking *their* signifieds, she is demonstrating *her* ability to make *her own* meanings.

The video of "In the Groove" demonstrates this clearly. The song is the theme song of the film *Desperately Seeking Susan*, and the video is a montage of shots from the film. The film is primarily about women's struggle to create and control their own identity in contemporary society, and in so doing to shape the sort of relationships they have with men. The viewers of the video who have seen the film will find plenty of references that can activate these meanings, but the video can also be read as promoting the Madonna look, her style. She takes items of urban living, prizes them free from their original social and therefore signifying context, and combines them in new ways and in a new context that denies their original meaning. Thus the crucifix is torn from its religious context and lacy gloves from their context of bourgeois respectability, or, conversely, of the brothel; the bleached blonde hair with the dark roots deliberately displayed is no longer the sign of the tarty slut, and the garter belt and stockings no longer signify soft porn or male kinkiness.

This wrenching of the products of capitalism from their original context and recycling them into a new style is, as Chambers (1986) has pointed out, a practice typical of urban popular culture:

Caught up in the communication membrane of the metropolis, with your head in front of a cinema, TV, video or computer screen, between the headphones, by the radio, among the record releases and magazines, the realization of your "self" slips into the construction of an image, a style, a series of theatrical gestures.

Between what is available in the shops, in the market, and the imprint of our desires, it is possible to produce the distinctive and the personalized. Sometimes the result will stand out, disturb and shock the more predictable logic of the everyday. . . .

The individual *constructs* her or himself as the object of street art,

as a public icon: the body becomes the canvas of changing urban signs. (p. 11)

In this street-produced bricolage of style, the commodities of the capitalist industries are purified into signifiers: their ideological signifieds are dumped and left behind in their original context. These freed signifiers do not necessarily mean *something*, they do not acquire new signifieds; rather, the act of freeing them from their ideological context signifies their users' freedom from that context. It signifies the power (however hard the struggle to attain it) of the subordinate to exert some control in the cultural process of making meanings.

The women in *Desperately Seeking Susan* who are struggling to control their social identity and relationships are participating in the same process as subcultures are when they recycle the products of the bourgeoisie to create a style that is theirs, a style that rejects meaning and in this rejection asserts the power of the subordinate to free themselves from the ideology that the meaning bears.

Madonna's videos constantly refer to the production of the image; they make her control over its production part of the image itself. This emphasis on the making of the image allows, or even invites, an equivalent control by the reader over its reception. It enables girls to see that the meanings of feminine sexuality *can be* in their control, can be made in their interests, and that their subjectivities are not necessarily totally determined by the dominant patriarchy.

The constant puns in Madonna's lyrics also invite this creative, productively relation to the text. Puns arise when one word occurs in two or more discourses, and while the immediate context may give one priority, traces of the other(s) are always present. The pun never makes a final, completed sense of the relationship between these various discourses—it leaves them at the stage of collision and invites the reader first to recognize the pun and second to produce her or his sense out of this meeting of discourse. Within a pun, the play of contradictions and similarities is remarkably free and open. "Like a Virgin" opens with the following lyrics:

I made it through the wilderness
 Somehow I made it through
 Didn't know how lost I was
 Until I found you
 I was beat
 Incomplete
 I'd been had, I was sad and blue
 But you made me feel
 Yeah you made me feel
 Shiny and new

Like a virgin
 Touched for the very first time
 Like a virgin
 When your heart beats next to mine
 Gonna give you all my love boy
 My fear is fading fast
 Been saving it all for you
 'Cause only love can last.

In *Understanding Popular Culture*, Chapter 5, I note how the semiotic excess of puns makes them particularly common in popular culture. Madonna's lyrics are no exception. Woven through these lines are puns playing with at least four discourses—religion, particularly religious love, sexuality or physical love, romantic love, and a discourse of street-wisdom, of urban survival. Thus, *made it* has the street-wise meaning of survived or came out on top, but also the sexual meaning of sexual conquest and, in its association with *wilderness*, echoes of Christ's survival and resistance of temptation. It is absent from the discourse of romantic love. *Wilderness*, too, is, in the religious discourse, the wilderness of the New Testament, but it is also the wilderness of contemporary urban life without true romantic love, the secular equivalent of religious love. So we could continue. *Lost* is sexually "lost," a loose woman whose experience is only of sex, not of romance; it is also lost in the streets, and has echoes of Christ or the Israelites lost in the wilderness. *I've been had* similarly has a street-wise and a sexual meaning. So by the time we get to *virgin*, the word has become a semiotic supermarket—the religious virgin, the sexual virgin (which the singer clearly is *not*), the emotional romantic virgin, (which, like the religious virgin, she *is*), and

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as (apparently) helpless a victim as the stereotyped female tied to the railroad track in many a silent movie. But the last shot of the video shows her in the driver's seat of the car, a knowing, defiant half smile on her lips, with the boy nowhere to be seen. This narrative denial of female helplessness runs throughout the performance as a counter-text to the words of the lyric.

So when she sings, "Do you want to see me down on my knees? I'm bending over backward, now would you be pleased," she kneels on the road in front of the advancing car, then turns to throw her head back, exposing her throat in the ultimate posture of submission. But her tone of voice and her look at the camera as she sings have a hardness and a defiance about them that contradict the submissiveness of her body posture and turn the question into a challenge, if not a threat, to the male.

The puns in "Burning Up" are more subdued and less balanced than those in "Like a Virgin," though they also play with the two discourses of the sexual and the religious. The sexual may be given a greater emphasis in the text, but the discourse of religion is not far below the surface as Madonna sings of kneeling and burning, of her lack of shame and the something in her heart that just won't die. This yoking of sexuality and religion appears to be performing the traditional ideological work of using the subordination and powerlessness of women in Christianity to naturalize their equally submissive position in patriarchy, but, as in "Material Girl," the text provides the reader with ample opportunities to undermine the dominant ideology while wryly recognizing its presence in the representation, for again the representation of women's sexuality includes the means of that representation and therefore questions its ideological effectivity. The introductory sequence exhibits this clearly. In the 33 seconds before Madonna is shown singing, there are 21 shots:

- (1) female eye, opening
- (2) white flowers, one lights up
- (3) female mouth, made up (probably Madonna's)
- (4) blue car, lights go on
- (5) Madonna in white, lying on road
- (6) male Grecian statue with blank eyes

the naive virgin who has "been had" and "lost" in the streets. *Touched* also has religious meanings of "laying on of hands" or "blessing," physical ones of sexuality, emotional ones of true love, and street-wise ones of near madness or loss of control.

The relationship between these discourses is open, unresolved and requires active, productive readers. The similarities and differences among religious love, romantic love, sexual experience, and street-wisdom are left reverberating and active, not closed off. There is no final meaning that supports romantic love and invalidates street-wisdom. One cannot simply conclude that street wisdom and physical sexuality are rejected, and romantic and religious love affirmed. Romantic love may be placed in a negative relationship to sexuality and urban survival, or it may be a development out of them, a growth for which they provide the soil. Puns do not preach: they raise issues, questions, and contradictions, and invite the imaginative participation (and therefore pleasure) of the reader in their resolution.

The form of the pun always resists final ideological closure: the potential meanings provoked by the collision of different discourses is always greater than that proposed by the dominant ideology. Thus, "Boy Toy," the name Madonna has given to her range of products and the media apply to her, can be read as *Playboy* (September 1985) does when it calls her the "world's number one Boy Toy" (p. 122) or "The complete Boy Toy" (p. 127). In this reading Madonna is a toy for boys, but the pun can also mean the opposite, that the boy is the toy for her, as she toys with the men in "Material Girl." This is the reading that Madonna herself prefers when she says:

I like young boys—15 or 16 year olds are the best. I like them smooth and thin. I want to caress a nice smooth body not a hulk. *Madonna: Close up and Personal*, London: Rock Photo Publications, 1985)

The video of "Burning Up" is built around puns, parodic excess, and contradictions. The narrative shows Madonna in a white dress lying writhing on a road, as she sings of her helpless passion for her uncaring lover who is driving toward her in a car, presumably to run over her. Her love for the boy makes her

Madonna 111

- (7) goldfish in bowl
- (8) close-up of male statue, eyes light up
- (9) midshot of statue, eyes still lit up
- (10) extreme close-up of eye of statue, still lit up
- (11) chain around female neck, tightened so that it pinches the flesh
- (12) blurred close-up of Madonna, with the chain swinging loose
- (13) laser beam, which strikes heavy bangles, manaclelike on female wrist
- (14) laser beam on goldfish in bowl
- (15) Madonna removing dark glasses, looking straight at camera
- (16) Madonna sitting on road
- (17) Madonna removing dark glasses
- (18) Madonna lying on her back on the road
- (19) the dark glasses on the road, an eye appears in one lens, greenish electronic effects merge to realistic image of eye
- (20) Madonna sitting on road, facing camera
- (21) close-up of Madonna on road, tilting her head back

This sequence has two main types of image, ones of looking and ones of subordination or bondage. Traditionally, as the eyes of the Greek statue tell us, looking has been a major way by which men exercise power over women, and the resulting female subordination is shown by Madonna's submissive postures on the road. The goldfish caught in the bowl is an ironic metaphor for the woman held in the male gaze. But the laser beam is a modern "look," impersonal, not the traditional male eye beam, and this can cut the female free from her bonding manacles, free the goldfish from the bowl. Similarly, Madonna's singing frees the chain that has previously been tightened around her neck. Later in the video, as Madonna sings of wanting her lover, and wanting to know what she has to do to win him, she tightens and then loosens the same chain about her neck; the next shot is a collage of male eyes, into which Madonna's lips are inserted as she sings. The pattern is repeated; her performance shows how women can be free from the look and the power of the male. Removing the dark glasses as she looks at us is a sign of her control of the look: we see what

she allows us to. The glasses replace her lying on the road, but instead of her apparent submissiveness, they gain an active, electronic, all-seeing eye. Similarly, the video of "Lucky Star" opens and closes with Madonna lowering and raising dark glasses as she looks at the camera, again controlling what we see. In "Borderline," the male photographer is a recurring image, as Madonna parodies the photographic model she once was while singing of her desire for freedom. The resulting photograph is shown on the cover of a glossy magazine (called *Gloss*) being admired by men.

Madonna knows well the importance of the look. This is a complex concept, for it includes how she looks (what she looks like), how she looks (how she gazes at others, the camera in particular), and how others look at her. Traditionally, looking has been in the control of men; Freud even suggests it is an essentially masculine way of exerting control through an extension of voyeurism, but Madonna wrests this control from the male and shows that women's control of the look (in all three senses) is crucial to their gaining control over their meanings within patriarchy.

The ideological effectivity of this is evidenced in a student essay:

There is also a sense of pleasure, at least for me and perhaps a large number of other women, in Madonna's defiant look or gaze. In *Lucky Star* at one point in the dance sequence Madonna dances side on to the camera, looking provocative. For an instant we glimpse her tongue: the expectation is that she is about to lick her lips in a sexual invitation. The expectation is denied and Madonna appears to tuck her tongue back into her cheek. This, it seems, is how most of her dancing and grovelling in front of the camera is meant to be taken. She is setting up the sexual idolization of women. For a woman who has experienced this victimization, this setup is most enjoyable and pleasurable, while the male position of voyeur is displaced into uncertainty. (Robyn Blair, 19-year-old fan)

The look (in all senses of the word), meanings of self and of social relations, and power or powerlessness are inter-determined concepts—each one requires the other two to complete it. Madonna offers her fans access to semiotic and social power; at the basic level this works through fantasy,

which, in turn, may empower the fan's sense of self and thus affect her behavior in social situations. This sort of empowering fantasy is pleasurable to the extent that it reverses social norms, and, when the fantasy can be connected to the conditions of everyday life—when, that is, it is a relevant fantasy—it can make the ideal into the achievable. The first two fan videos described above may be wish-fulfillment fantasies, but the third brings the fantasized ideal within reach of the everyday. The first two evidence the desire for empowerment; the third explores ways of achieving it. Fantasy is not adequately described by writing it off as mere escapism; it can, under certain conditions, constitute the imagined possibilities of small-scale social change, it may provide the motive and energy for localized tactical resistances. Chapter 5b explores further the positive potential of fantasy; for the moment, we need only to note that Madonna's popularity is a complexity of power and resistances, of meanings and countermeanings, of pleasures and the struggle for control.



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Dahl & del Lagrace
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Femmes of Power

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femmes of POWER

Exploding Queer Femininities

**DEL LAGRACE VOLCANO
& ULRIKA DAHL**

ULRIKA DAHL

Introduction

I want to liberate femininity from its history – in my mind, in my body and in my communities. I want to liberate it from the hands of the privileged who withhold access to it, and use it as an excuse to oppress others. I want to demolish its reputation as cause for violation. And I want to take it from under the pestle of the dyke community and celebrate it as a radical expression of queerness. TARA HARDY 2000:181

Dear Femmes of Power,

As I write this, I think about how many of you have described your first femme moments, your first passions and performances, or when you first deliberately indulged your queer femininities. It's exhilarating and a little terrifying. In a heterosexist world that continues to tell us that femininity is the ultimate available object for universal consumption and contempt, taking a stand on and through (queer) femininity, as we all do and know, is both intense pleasure and clear and present danger. Who will understand and who will misread? Neither femme nor femme-inist theory, you have all reminded me, is easy or natural. To us, femininity is neither phallic fantasy nor default, it's beyond surface and it certainly does not passively wait to come alive through a (male) gaze. Fiercely intentional, neither objects nor objective, we have stuff to get off our chests. But speaking bittersweet truths to power takes both busty bravery and some serious padding.

Some may say I am a bad scientist. I am indeed





both object and subject of my own research. My bleached blonde Northern Swedish ambition lacks the requisite scientific objectifying distance and to me, the personal is still political.

Like Tara Hardy in the opening quote, I join a long legacy of femme writers who want to liberate femininity from its heterosexist history, in ourselves as well as within our communities. This is – thank you, Joan Nestle and Amber Hollibaugh – our persistent and dangerous desires. However, just because my gaze in the mirror is not distant does not mean it's narcissistic. You, my queer sisters, are spectacular and you have taught me that there are many ways to walk in the world as a femme-inine subject. Every conversation we've had and photo we've made with you – and there are over sixty of you, from twelve different cities and seven countries – contains amazing life stories and speaks of situated stakes. You are all larger than life in your love, your bodies, your desires and your activisms. This book is not a single, linear narrative or literal translation of the multiple and exploding meanings of femininity modelled and made by you. These are love letters and celebrations.

As a femme I have found and formed my own femme-inine identity/theory through connection, vintage and trade. I reject the imperialist fantasy of scientific 'discovery' and question a capitalist consumption logic that feeds on always inventing something new. I was raised by feminist anthropologists, and yes, I write with ethnographic attitude, but above all, as this book shows, the power and pleasure of femme lies in generous and generative mirroring and copying, imitating and citing. So let's call ourselves contributors to what Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh [2002] have called *Femme Science*. The femme scientist, they declare in their legendary *Fem(me) Manifesto*, is in the third phase of research. She is past objectivity and explanation, she has an explicit goal, even as

she uses the force of the oxymoronic and the paradoxical. Importantly, the femme scientist solicits collaboration, which is what I have done with you. To me you are all articulate and brilliant theorists of the pleasures and pains of femininity. Together we give a cheeky red painted middle finger to Big Science and its urge to discover, reduce, label and patent. Why? Because the femme-inine principle reminds us that world needs political fictions as much as it needs theoretical systems and because you are all visionaries.

GRRLS, I HAVE TO SAY, I've lost count of the number of times I've been asked to define what femme is. Like you, I might be able to if I was to speak only for myself, but femme never sits still and she is always in relation. It's true, many of us will say we can recognise each other, not only adjusting outfits in the ladies room or on the arms of the people we desire, but also on the streets and in bars, even when we are not read as queer.

Few of you have wanted to nail down what enables us to do so, but one thing is clear: it's not as simple as a question of polish or length of nails.

You may transition into femme-ness, earn your reputation, tune into the frequency, be born a (drag) queen, be seen only in the eyes of your lover or, as Reina Lewis put it, be 'raised to cleanse, tone and moisturize', but you all are proud, fierce and intentional. The Atlanta Femme Mafia declares: 'femme is an umbrella under which we find solace, not an exclusionary or restrictive predetermined formula', and like our cover girls from London's Bird Club say: 'anybody can be a Bird'. Refusing to create one master theory of queer femininity is thus an act of resistance and solidarity.

A lot of mascara and ink has been spent conceiving passionate poetic theory about what the world looks like through a femme figure and most



of it, like femininely coded labour, is that of love: underpaid and undervalued. That is, femme has not been central to neither feminist nor queer theory. As a 'professor' entangled in fishnets and networks and committed to femme-inist citational practice, I here point to some femme tales in the form of a bibliography rather than through aca-

The Femme-inist Ethnographer @ Work, San Francisco 2006 | previous spread: The 3 Faces of Morgana Maye, San Francisco 2006

ademic aerobics. In this book I want the show to be yours. Your lived theories emerge at the intersection of movements of queer activism and feminism, anti-racism and fat activism, transactions and sexual politics. You went back into the closet and come out of do-it-yourself traditions, you play dress-up, ooze from biomythographical poetry and explode off stages in queer subcultural Meccas. You celebrate and channel great heroines and icons of femininity – not because you are duped by advertising but because who tells us more about



the changing value and meaning of femininity than the mass-produced and reproduced pin-up? Who is better equipped to give the world a theory of sexual politics than those who make a living from it? You show that most blondes have dark roots, that making an income on sex can mean many things and that when the pin-up is allowed to speak, she straddles stacks of feminist theory. I am doing femme theory, not only for my own pleasure but because produced and performed, sincerely ironic and deadly serious, femme pulsates

in my dreams, in my bulimic wounds, my dirty tricks, my dress-up box, my feminist politics, my perverse desires and, most of all, in my longing for queer sisterhood.

Liberating femininity from its history in our bodies and communities is easier said than done and we are used to being misread and unseen. Each time I've questioned myself and this project, it's the bravery of what you have shared and taught me, the privilege of working with all of you, the endless conversations we've made together, and

how each meeting has been so incredibly important, that has kept me going. Your willingness to get in front of Del's camera and be poster girls for this particular daily (r)evolution makes the world of difference to all who never dare or want to. In Del's images and in our encounters, femme is more than a visible declaration of identity. As a gesture, a posture, a gaze and a spirit, I've seen femme reflected in your eyes and in the eyes of lovers and kin (my own and yours, and sometimes, yes, we've shared them). You have been fatally sharp reflections in dressing room mirrors, at times in the corner of my eye, and as Canadian femmes Anna Camilleri and Chloe Brushwood Rose [2002] note, sometimes it's in a femme's look away that she appears. As Turner, femme-identified FTM in Atlanta knows, there have been moments when I have not recognised you. I will keep looking and I hope you will find me too.

Visible and invisible, tangible yet intangible, brand new and age old, there is no universal recipe for making a femme or queering femininity. Rather, as you all show, femme is at once a private matter of space, a local business and a transnational community project. Your stories point to the need for both queer reading skills and cultural literacies in the particular histories which you live in, cite, disrupt and explode from.

Itziar Ziga, Barcelona 2007 | Stockholm Pride Femme Workshop 2006



Biological clocks or not, femmes honour our mothers and commit blasphemous loving twists on our pasts and what was passed on. Refusing to pick sides, you have commitments to multiple communities and legacies, be you Bengali, Chicana, White Scandinavian, Desi, Black, Jewish, Irish, Lankan, Guyanese, Basque or German. Our experiences of exile and passing, migration and diaspora across borders and in/between both majoritarian and queer communities, differ greatly and remain the femme movement's most important sites of continued interrogation.

Together you show that femme is in between both sheets and streets, in the borderlands, and this offers hopes of possible partial connections – even as we remain painfully aware of the heightened border policing in the world and of our communities. Femmes in times of (sex) war can all choose to be

on the side of struggle and to show up to be counted.

THIS BOOK IS a testimony of a particular queer kinship route. In an era of increasing airplane pollution and virtual community-making and self-promotion, activists and dissidents have many ways to find and keep up with fellow travellers with similar tastes and tales. Most of you I've met because Del and I are particular kinds of nomadic subjects who have had the privilege of making home, love and community in many places over the past decade. As the writer of these love letters,

it matters that I was raised speaking Swedish and ethnographically trained in English. These stories, like most things that I am and do, have emerged in/between two languages that feel equally native and alien and they, like our meetings, have often required multiple translations – and at times, translators. The portraits here are in many ways fragments of the chosen family album of two Euro queers in collaboration and occasional conflict. Del and I have followed threads and crumbs, hooked and hustled, we have listened to the wise words of community elders and outspoken critics.

While we are both deeply marked by our status in relation to the US and by our partial belongings to (albeit) different generations of queer America, this dying empire is neither the sole origin or the ultimate measuring tape for femme. If anything, our 'T' time with the Queens and Kings of England and the Serpent's Tail that whipped us into shape have made us decide not to put the US and American queer politics at the centre of this book. Amidst a great range of queer urban Meccas in the so-called land of the free, we could only make pilgrimages to three: San Francisco, Atlanta and New York. Among both American sisters and Eurobabes alike it's very clear that 'femme' is neither simply French for 'woman' nor is it only or simply code for feminine lesbians. But the Paris Fem Menace uses a different (American) spelling than I do and we all know that the term femme and the meaning of queer femininity have different and



diasporic histories in Germany and Spain, than it does among the descendants of those who once left and went west or whose ancestors were forced to. As a new generation of Swedish and Danish queers both embrace and reject the identity politics that seemingly arrived with the queer 'American' theory that was supposed to deconstruct it, queer femininity carries different meanings to Andy and Signe, Sofie and Jun, including those who pronounce it 'famme', or use it as an adjective rather than a noun. Some of you do not use the term femme at all to describe yourselves.

My writing in this book – an array of letter styled portraits, interviews and clustered themes, rather than a linear ('scientific') narrative – is a strategic choice. It's inspired by the tradition that *Femme 2006: Conversations and Explorations* proposed. Attending this San Francisco conference of workshops and performances, created by a coalition of North American

femme activists with very limited resources, was for me an important part of this journey. *Femme 2006* aimed 'to create a Femme-positive environment and to honour differences'. The goal of this gathering of over 400 femmes and our allies was 'to create a space to explore the complexities of Femme identity, including (but not limited to) questions of privilege, invisibility, intersecting identities, class mobility, aging, and the differences between femininity and Femme identity', which is what I've tried to do as well. As you all note, ours is not a unity

through sameness (classic identity politics), but rather strategic solidarity through points of connection and collaboration. We share activist legacies of empowerment, attend to relations of power and dare to have a vision for a future of feminism.

In addition to my dialogic and thematic accounts, Inge 'Campbell' Blackman, Pratibha Parmar, Lois Weaver, Itziar Ziga, Krista Smith and Amber Hollibaugh, all of whom have also been important dialogue partners in this project, offer 'key-notes' on particular themes. We are, in short, honoured and inspired.

Anna Camilleri and Chloe Brushwood Rose declare that 'what cannot be seen, what cannot be held or pinned down, is where femme is – she can not be domesticated' [2002:11]. Indeed. Here femme is not 'represented' as stable or coherent. Rather yours are exploding and unruly queer femininities. To that end, I present femme as a queer and feminist *figuration*. As my teacher, hopeful feminist theorist Donna Haraway, has argued, a *figuration* can be 'a mode of theory when the more "normal" rhetorics for critical analysis seem only to repeat and sustain our entrapment in the stories of established disorders' [2004:47]. A genre rather than a gender (as Dandy theorist Jami Weinstein puts it), femme is in a state of becoming, emerging from the stories we tell, the artifacts and technologies we employ, the desiring

Signe Flynsk, København 2007 | Reina Lewis,
London 2007



bodies we live, from our citational practices and the representations we make. Collecting both hopes and fears, showing possibilities and dangers, here femme is rooted in your stories because as Haraway reminds us, 'stories are always more generous and capacious than ideologies' [2004:3]. Together we show that the femme figuration is a non-linear political fiction, at once literary and imagined, material and embodied.

TO ME, DEAR FEMMES, you are all theorists and prophets, within yourselves, your work and your relationships of diffuse and enduring solidarity. Behind the blusher and the rhine-stoned specs, with all our wrinkles and stretch-marks that prove our growth, femme-inist vision is sharp but not dystopic. Our chosen costumes refuse the yes/no of subversion or not, free or unfree, because femme is, as Tina d'Elia puts it, the third eye. In the tradition of the guerilla girls, the subjects of this book infiltrate the over-saturated world of feminine advertising and sissy bashing. Yes, we wear lipstick because it makes us feel better and we are willing to share. Like eternal tricksters straddling impossible dichotomies, we continue to take up space with our desires, sincere ironies and refusals to be either/or.

In queering femininities you all go beyond the radical individualism of identity politics. Playing with, rather than fully rejecting the 'dominant ideology' of femininity, means engaging in what queer scholar Jose Esteban Munoz [1999] calls a

strategic act of disidentification. By neither assimilating in its structure nor strictly opposing it, femmes try to 'transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance' [1999:11–12]. In bodies marked, adorned and adored, as a figuration, exploding femininities are always in relation, situated, but accountable for and speaking from more than our self-appointed positions; we each have our own location in worlds and histories, including those of feminisms and queer communities.

Like all size queens, I like it big. No matter how huge our dreams for this book, these are partial perspectives and there are obvious absences. You, dear femmes, do not 'represent' all corners of the world, not even of the western world, let alone the metropolises we so often celebrate – nor have you been asked to. This book comes out of conversation and exploration and it highlights some of the subjects, stories and stakes we've encountered on this journey, but far from all. Like a figurative cat's cradle game, we've made some patterns that can be passed on and reconfigured. Remember, there is no manual, no entrance exam or dress code, but that because we have each other far beyond this book, we are able to live in this world. *Femmes of Power* is about us and for everyone, but makes no claims to be the ultimate representation of femmes or what it means to queer femininity.

Femme science, Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh argue, 'is addressed to the future, a future where femininity as we know it ("normal", ego-less, tolerant of, and therefore complicit with, deception) will have been completely superceded' [2002:168]. This is our contribution. Now, dear Femmes of Power, allow me to introduce you to each other, and all of you to our readers. I hope

that all gendered beings (regardless of queer credentials) everywhere can find points of connection, dare to see yourselves in these fragments of femme and continue to explode the meaning of femininity.

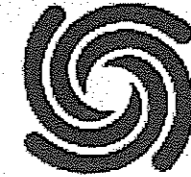
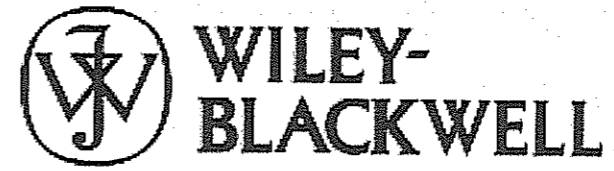
Femme Luv and respect always,

Ulrika

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My enduring gratitude to Del LaGrace Volcano, for friendship, wisdom and collaboration and to the *Femmes of Power* for doing this with us. I am blessed and full of love for my family, friends, lovers, allies, colleagues and students whose faith, support and critical engagement has sustained me for many years. Special Thanks to Jami Weinstein for queer partnership and dandy brilliance; to Lena Sawyer, Josephine Wilson, Krista Smith, Rosie Lugosi, Amber Hollibaugh, Devrim Mavi, Indra Windh, and Campbell Ex for ideas and feedback on writing; to Elina Grandin and Anna-Maria Sörberg for outstanding form and loving management, the queerest eye and all your time; to Cherry Smyth for excellent editing and *Serpent's Tail* for amazing patience; to Tiina Rosenberg, Nina Lykke and especially Judith Halberstam for early encouragement and continued support; to the organisers and participants of the Femme 2006 conference for femme vision. Lastly and most of all: To all femmes, past and present, for your inspiration, courage and work in this world, every day. I honour you.

Mafia Femme Aly, 'Have Love Will Travel',
San Francisco 2006



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 A S S O C I A T I O N

The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women

Author(s): Lila Abu-Lughod

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the romance of resistance: tracing transformations of power through Bedouin women

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introduction

One of the central problematics in the human sciences in recent years has been the relationship of resistance to power.¹ Unlike the grand studies of peasant insurgency and revolution of the 1960s and early 1970s (for example, Paige 1975; Scott 1976; Wolf 1969), what one finds now is a concern with unlikely forms of resistance, subversions rather than large-scale collective insurrections, small or local resistances not tied to the overthrow of systems or even to ideologies of emancipation. Scholars seem to be trying to rescue for the record and to restore to our respect such previously devalued or neglected forms of resistance.

The popularity of resistance provokes a number of interesting questions which cannot be considered at length in this paper. First, what is the relationship between scholarship or theorizing and the world-historical moment in which it takes place—why, at this particular time, are scholars from diverse disciplines and with extremely different approaches converging on the topic of resistance?² Second, what is the ideological significance in academic discourse of projects that claim to bring to light the hitherto ignored or suppressed ways in which subordinate groups actively respond to and resist their situations?³ In this article I want to consider a different question: what are the implications of studies of resistance for our theories of power?

For at the heart of this widespread concern with unconventional forms of noncollective, or at least nonorganized, resistance is, I would argue, a growing disaffection with previous ways we have understood power, and the most interesting thing to emerge from this work on resistance is a greater sense of the complexity of the nature and forms of domination. For example, work on resistance influenced by Bourdieu and Gramsci recognizes and theorizes the importance of ideological practice in power and resistance and works to undermine distinctions between symbolic and instrumental, behavioral and ideological, and cultural, social, and political processes.⁴

Despite the considerable theoretical sophistication of many studies of resistance and their contribution to the widening of our definition of the political, it seems to me that because they are ultimately more concerned with finding resistors and explaining resistance than with examining power, they do not explore as fully as they might the implications of the forms of resistance they locate. In some of my own earlier work, as in that of others, there is perhaps a

Resistance has become in recent years a popular focus for work in the human sciences. Despite the theoretical sophistication of many anthropological and historical studies of everyday resistance, there remains a tendency to romanticize it. I argue instead that resistance should be used as a diagnostic of power, and I show what the forms of Awlad 'Ali Bedouin women's resistance can reveal about the historically changing relations of power in which they are enmeshed as they become increasingly incorporated into the Egyptian state and economy. [resistance, power, Bedouins, women, the state, Egypt]

tendency to romanticize resistance, to read all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated.⁵ By reading resistance in this way, we collapse distinctions between forms of resistance and foreclose certain questions about the workings of power.

I want to argue here for a small shift in perspective in the way we look at resistance—a small shift that will have serious analytical consequences. I want to suggest that we should use resistance as a *diagnostic* of power. In this I am taking a cue from Foucault, whose theories, or, as he prefers to put it, analytics of power and resistance, although complex and not always consistent, are at least worth exploring. One of his central propositions, advanced in his most explicit discussion of power, in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, is the controversial assertion that “where there is power, there is resistance” (1978:95–96). Whatever else this assertion implies, certainly Foucault is using this hyperbole to force us to question our understanding of power as always and essentially repressive. As part of his project of deromanticizing the liberatory discourse of our 20th-century so-called sexual revolution, he is interested in showing how power is something that works not just negatively, by denying, restricting, prohibiting, or repressing, but also positively, by producing forms of pleasure, systems of knowledge, goods, and discourses.⁶ He adds what some have viewed as a pessimistic point about resistance by completing the sentence just quoted as follows: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (1978:95–96).

This latter insight about resistance is especially provocative, but to appreciate its significance one must invert the first part of the proposition. This gives us the intuitively sensible “where there is resistance, there is power,” which is both less problematic and potentially more fruitful for ethnographic analysis because it enables us to move away from abstract theories of power toward methodological strategies for the study of power in particular situations. As Foucault (1982:209, 211) puts it when he himself advocates this inversion, we can then use resistance “as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their points of application and the methods used.” We could continue to look for and consider nontrivial all sorts of resistance, but instead of taking these as signs of human freedom we will use them strategically to tell us more about forms of power and how people are caught up in them.

In the ethnography of the Awlad 'Ali Bedouins that follows, I want to show how in the rich and sometimes contradictory details of resistance the complex workings of social power can be traced. I also want to show that these same contradictory details enable us to trace how power relations are historically transformed—especially with the introduction of forms and techniques of power characteristic of modern states and capitalist economies. Most important, studying the various forms of resistance will allow us to get at the ways in which intersecting and often conflicting structures of power work together these days in communities that are gradually becoming more tied to multiple and often nonlocal systems. These are central issues for theories of power which anthropologists are in a unique position to consider.

forms of resistance/forms of power

I will be taking as my case the changing situation of women in a Bedouin community in Egypt's Western Desert, not because I want to make an argument about women in particular, but because first, few studies of resistance have focused on women; second, gender power seems to be one of the more difficult forms of power to analyze; and third, the circumstances of doing fieldwork in a sex-segregated society are such that I have more of the kind of rich and minute detail needed for this sort of analysis from women than I do from men. The group of Bedouins I will be discussing are known as Awlad 'Ali and are former shepherders settled

along the Egyptian coast from west of Alexandria to the Libyan border. Although sedentary, they describe themselves as Arabs and claim an affiliation with the Bedouin tribes of eastern Libya. They insistently distinguish themselves from the rural and urban Egyptians of the Nile Valley.⁷

By way of introduction to them, I should confess my own involvement in a complex romance of resistance. Since pastoral nomads have reputations in popular and anthropological literature as proud and free, those who go to study them are often attracted by these qualities. Nevertheless, I was not prepared for the specific forms Bedouin resistance was taking when I arrived in the late 1970s to begin fieldwork. For example, when I returned from my first trip back to Cairo after having officially moved into a household, one of the first bits of news the women and girls gave me was that in my absence they had been visited by the local head of the Egyptian security police. The women were furious and protective, describing how they had refused to let him search my suitcases; they told me that they had lied to the government son-of-a-dog, as they called him, by saying I had locked the suitcases and taken the keys. A couple of months after I had begun living with them, my host disappeared for a while. It turned out that he had been taken in for questioning about political ties to Libya and hashish smuggling; people reacted only by denouncing the Egyptian government for harassment. Over the years that I lived with them, I got used to finding pistols under my mattress and rifles in my wardrobe, to attending feasts to welcome home people who had been imprisoned for smuggling and crossing borders, to knowing young men who disappeared into the desert with the herds to avoid conscription into the Egyptian army, to hearing people talk about how to hoodwink officials or avoid paying taxes, and to knowing individuals such as the man whose temporary insanity took the form of a terror that the government was looking for him and would take him away because he had failed to register the death of a child whose name was still on his family identity card. This was not the diffuse kind of resistance by independent nomads that I had fantasized about but, instead, particular resistances to the specific ways—inspection, conscription, detention, control of movements, registration, and taxation—in which the Egyptian state was seeking to “integrate” the Bedouins of the Western Desert into its domain at that time.

But what of women? Although I did not begin with any sort of interest in Bedouin women’s resistance, I discovered various forms. I want to turn to these forms of resistance to show how through them we can begin to grasp more clearly the traditional structures of power in this community. I will describe four types of resistance associated with women. Then I will go on to discuss some important transformations of both resistance and power in the larger world into which Bedouins are being incorporated.

The first arena for resistance, one I have described elsewhere (Abu-Lughod 1985), is the sexually segregated women’s world where women daily enact all sorts of minor defiances of the restrictions enforced by elder men in the community. Women use secrets and silences to their advantage. They often collude to hide knowledge from men; they cover for each other in minor matters, like secret trips to healers or visits to friends and relatives; they smoke in secret and quickly put out their cigarettes when children come running to warn them that men are approaching. These forms of resistance indicate that one way power is exercised in relation to women is through a range of prohibitions and restrictions which they both embrace, in their support for the system of sexual segregation, and resist, as suggested by the fact that they fiercely protect the inviolability of their separate sphere, that sphere where the defiances take place.

A second and widespread form of resistance is Bedouin girls’ and women’s resistance to marriages. Indeed, one of the major powers families, and especially elder male relatives like fathers and paternal uncles, wield is control over the arrangement of marriages. Despite their apparent power, actual marriage arrangements are always complicated and involve many people, especially mothers and female relatives. Mothers sometimes successfully block marriages their daughters do not want, even though fathers or other male guardians are supposed to have control. For example, on my last visit to the Bedouin community I found out that my host’s

eldest unmarried daughter had just narrowly avoided being married off. Her father had run into some friends in the market and they had asked if their sons could marry his daughter and niece. Marriages are normally arranged between allies, friends, and kin, and to refuse someone without a good excuse is difficult. He had agreed to it and then returned home to inform his wife.

She reported to me that she had been furious and had told him she refused to let her daughter marry into that family. They lived in tents in the desert and her daughter, who had grown up in a house and did not have many of the old Bedouin skills like taking care of tents or milking sheep, would find it a hard life for which she was not prepared. Moreover, the family that had asked for her was in trouble. The reason they lived in tents was that two of their members had gotten into a fight with someone and accidentally killed him. According to Bedouin customary law, they had had to seek refuge with another family, leaving behind their homes and land. They lived in fear, knowing that the kinsmen of the man they had killed would want revenge. My host’s wife did not want her daughter to be a widow. So she refused. Her husband got angry, she told me, and he said, “What am I supposed to tell them? I already agreed.” He then marched off to talk to his niece’s mother, to enlist her support. But she too refused to let her only daughter marry into that family. The women suggested that he inform the men to whom he had promised the girls that the girls’ male cousins had decided to claim them. This is a cousin’s right, so he was able to save face and, indeed, the marriages never went through.

When men are stubborn, however, or are so caught up in strategies and relations of obligation with other men that they will not or cannot reverse a decision, the women may not succeed. Yet even then, they do not necessarily remain silent. One woman whose daughter was forced to marry a cousin sang a song as the groom’s relatives came to pick up her daughter for the wedding:

You’re not of the same stature as these
your true match is the man with the golden insignia . . .
intī mā gadā hādhōl
gadāk bū dabābir yilihban . . .

The song taunted them with the suggestion that her daughter was more worthy of an officer than of the poor man who was getting her.

Neither are unmarried girls always silent about their feelings about marriages. Girls sing songs as they get water from the wells and publicly at weddings. Among the songs I heard about the men they did not want to marry were the following:

I won’t take an old man, not I
I’ll give him a shove and he’ll fall in a ditch
mā nakhudshī shāyib nā
nzuggū yāga^c fil-ganāh

I don’t want the old fez on the hill
what I want is a new Peugeot
lubt il-^cilwa nā mā nrīdū
wuddī fi bājō jdīda

God damn the uncle’s son
Lord don’t lead me near no blood relative
yikhrib bēt wlad il-^camm
rabbī mā ygarrib lā dam

Significantly, the young women singing these songs were objecting in particular to older men and their paternal cousins, two categories of men who tend to have binding ties on their fathers that would make their marriage requests hard to refuse.

The most interesting cases are those where women themselves actually resist marriages that have been arranged for them. Their retrospective narratives of resistance were among the most popular storytelling events I heard. The following one was told to me and a group of her daughters-in-law and grandchildren by the old matriarch of the community in which I lived. The events must have taken place at least 60 years ago. She began by explaining that the first person

to whom she was to have been married was a first cousin. His relatives had come to her household and conducted the negotiations and had even gone so far as to slaughter some sheep, the practice that seals the marriage agreement. She went on:

He was a first cousin, and I didn't want him. He was an old man and we were living near each other, eating out of one bowl [sharing meals or living in one household]. They came and slaughtered a sheep and I started screaming, I started crying. And my father had bought a new gun, a cartridge gun. He said, "If you don't shut up I'll send you flying with this gun."

Well, there was a ravine and I went over and sat there all day. I sat next to it, saying, "Possess me, spirits, possess me." I wanted the spirits to possess me; I wanted to go crazy. Half the night would pass and I'd be sitting there, until Braika [a relative] came. And she'd cry with me and then drag me home by force and I'd go sleep in her tent. After 12 days, my cousin's female relatives were dyeing the black strip for the top of the tent. They were about to finish sewing the tent I'd live in. And they had brought my trousseau. I said, "I'll go get the dye for you." I went and found they had ground the black powder and it was soaking in the pot, the last of the dye, and I flipped it over—Pow!—on my face, on my hair, on my hands until I was completely black.

My father came back and said, "What's happened here? What's the matter with this girl? Hey you, what's the matter?" The women explained. He went and got a pot of water and a piece of soap and said, "If you don't wash your hands and your face I'll . . ." So I wash my hands, but only the palms, and I wipe my face, but I only get a little off from here and there. And I'm crying the whole time. All I did was cry. Then they went and put some supper in front of me. He said, "Come here and eat dinner." I'd eat and my tears were salting each mouthful. I had spent 12 days, and nothing had entered my mouth.

The next afternoon my brother came by and said to me, "I'm hungry, can you make me a snack?" I went to make it for him, some fresh flatbread, and I was hungry. I had taken a loaf and I put a bit of honey and a bit of winter oil in a bowl. I wanted to eat, I who hadn't eaten a thing in 12 days. But then he said, "What do you think of this? On Friday they're doing the wedding and today is Thursday and there aren't even two days between now and then." I found that the loaf I was going to eat I'd dropped. He asked, "Well, do you want to go to so-and-so's or do you want to go to your mother's brother's?" I said, "I'll . . ." There was an eclipse; the sun went out and nothing was showing. I said, "I'll go to my maternal uncle's." I put my shawl on my head and started running. I ran on foot until I got to my uncle's. I was in bad shape, a mess.

She then went on to describe how her uncle had sent her back, with instructions to his son to send greetings to her father and to ask him to delay a bit, perhaps she would come around. She continued,

So I went home. After that I didn't hear another word. The trousseau just sat there in the chest, and the tent, they sewed it and got it all ready and then put it away in their tent. And autumn came and we migrated west, and we came back again. When we came back, they said, "We want to have the wedding." I began screaming. They stopped. No one spoke about it again.

This old woman's narrative, which had two more episodes of resisted marriages before she agreed to one, follows the pattern of many I heard—of women who had resisted the decisions of their fathers, uncles, or older brothers and eventually won. Her story, like theirs, let others know that resistance to marriage was possible.

A third form of Bedouin women's resistance is what could be called sexually irreverent discourse. What I am referring to are instances when women make fun of men and manhood, even though official ideology glorifies and women respect, veil for, and sometimes fear them. In this irreverence one can trace the ways the code of sexual morality and the ideology of sexual difference are forms of men's power. Women seem only too glad when men fail to live up to the ideals of autonomy and manhood, the ideals on which their alleged moral superiority and social precedence are based, especially if they fail as a result of sexual desire. Women joke about certain men behind their backs and they also make fun of men in general ways. For example, in a tale I recorded in 1987, a man with two wives is cuckolded by the younger one but foolishly rewards her and punishes his obedient and faithful senior wife. The folktale has many messages, but one of them is certainly that men are fools whose desires override their supposed piety and undermine their overt demands that women be proper and chaste. The kind of power this tale attempts to subvert and thus diagnoses is the power of control over women's sexuality that the Bedouin moral system entails.

Bedouin women's resistance also takes the form of an irreverence towards the mark of masculinity and the privileges this automatically grants. For example, Bedouin men and women

avow a preference for sons, saying people are happier at the birth of a boy. And yet in one discussion, when I asked what they did when a baby turned out to be a boy, one old woman said, "If it's a boy, they slaughter a sheep for him. The boy's name is exalted. He has a little pisser that dangles." And all the women present laughed. Another woman, commenting on the ending of a folktale she had told about the meanness of sons and the compassion of daughters, an ending in which the mean son was asked to slaughter a ram and produce its womb, explained,

You see, the male has no womb. He has nothing but a little penis, just like this finger of mine [laughingly wiggling her finger in a contemptuous gesture]. The male has no compassion. The female is tender and compassionate [playing on the double meaning of the Arabic root *raḥama*, from which the word womb (*riḥm*) and the word compassion (*raḥma*) are formed].

Here the usual terms are reversed and the male genitals are made the sign of a lack—the lack of a womb. An even clearer example of women's irreverence is a folktale I heard women and girls tell to children, which went as follows. There were an old woman and an old man who traveled into the desert and set up camp in a lonely area where there were wolves. They had brought with them seven goats, a cow, a donkey, and a puppy. The first night a wolf came to the tent. He called out to all of them "Ho!" and then demanded, "Give me someone to eat for dinner tonight!" So the old man and woman gave him a goat.

He came the next night and called out the same thing, asking, "Who will you give me to eat for dinner tonight?" They gave him another goat. This went on night after night until the old couple had given the wolf all seven goats, the donkey, the cow and the puppy. Then they realized that they had no more animals to give him and that he would eat them. The old man said to his wife, "Hide me in a basket we'll hang from the tentpole. And you, hide in the big urn." So she hung up the basket with the old man in it and she hid inside the pottery urn.

When the wolf came that night, no one answered his call. He came into the tent and sniffed around. Then he looked up. Now, the basket had a tear in it and the old man's genitals were showing—they were dangling out of the hole in the basket. The wolf kept jumping up, trying to bite them. The old woman watching this started laughing so hard she farted. This split open the urn she was hiding in, and the wolf ate her. Then he nipped at the old man's genitals until he pulled down the basket and ate the old man too. And then he went to sleep in their little tent.

The last time I heard this story, the group of women and girls with whom I was sitting laughed hard. The storyteller teased me for having asked to hear this story, and her final comment was, "The old woman was laughing at the wolf biting her husband's genitals." There is rich material for a Freudian analysis here, and there is no doubt that male fears of castration and of being cuckolded could be read in this folktale and the one mentioned briefly above. The messages in both are complex. Yet it is important to remember that it is women who are telling the stories, women who are listening to them, and women who are responding with glee to the things men dread.

Folktales, songs, and jokes among women are not the only subversive discourses in Bedouin society. Those I have just described, though, indicate the significance of the ideology of sexual difference itself as a form of power. In my book (Abu-Lughod 1986) I analyzed what I consider to be the most important of the subversive discourses in Bedouin society—a kind of oral lyric poetry. This is the fourth type of resistance. These poem/songs, known as *ghinnāwas* (little songs), are recited mostly by women and young men, usually in the midst of ordinary conversations between intimates. What is most striking about them is that people express through them sentiments that differ radically from those they express in their ordinary-language conversations, sentiments of vulnerability and love. Many of these songs concern relationships with members of the opposite sex toward whom they respond, outside of poetry, with anger or denial of concern.

I argued that most people's ordinary public responses are framed in terms of the code of honor and modesty. Through these responses they live and show themselves to be living up to the moral code. Poetry carries the sentiments that violate this code, the vulnerability to others that is ordinarily a sign of dishonorable lack of autonomy and the romantic love that is considered immoral and immodest. Since the moral code is one of the most important means of perpetuating the unequal structures of power, then violations of the code must be understood as ways of resisting the system and challenging the authority of those who represent and benefit from it. When examined for what it can tell us about power, this subversive discourse of poetry suggests that social domination also works at the level of constructing, delimiting, and giving meaning to personal emotions.

The Bedouin attitude toward this type of poetry and toward those who recite it returns us to some of the central issues of power and resistance. Like wearing veils, reciting poetry is situational; poems are recited mostly in situations of social closeness and equality. The only exceptions to this in the past were wedding festivities, which, not surprisingly, dignified older men avoided. This avoidance, along with people's opinions that this type of poetry was risqué and un-Islamic, suggested their uneasy recognition of the subversiveness of the genre. On the other hand, among the Bedouins with whom I lived, poetry was cherished.

This ambivalence about poetry suggested to me that certain forms of resistance by the less powerful in Bedouin society could be admired, even by those whose interests the system supported. I argued that this attitude was connected to the Bedouin valuation of resistance itself, a valuation associated with the larger political sphere and men's activities, whether traditional and tribal or current and government-directed. It is a value in contradiction with the structures of inequality within the family, where gender comes into play. Women take advantage of these contradictions in their society to assert themselves and to resist. But they do so, most clearly in the case of poetry, through locally given traditional forms, a fact which suggests that in some sense at least, these forms have been produced by power relations and cannot be seen as independent of them. I take this as a good example of what Foucault (1978:95-96) was trying to get at in suggesting that we not see resistance as a reactive force somehow independent of or outside of the system of power.

The everyday forms of Bedouin women's resistance described above pose a number of analytic dilemmas. First, how might we develop theories that give these women credit for resisting in a variety of creative ways the power of those who control so much of their lives, without either misattributing to them forms of consciousness or politics that are not part of their experience—something like a feminist consciousness or feminist politics—or devaluing their practices as prepolitical, primitive, or even misguided? Second, how might we account for the fact that Bedouin women both resist and support the existing system of power (they support it through practices like veiling, for example), without resorting to analytical concepts like false consciousness, which dismisses their own understanding of their situation, or impression management, which makes of them cynical manipulators? Third, how might we acknowledge that their forms of resistance, such as folktales and poetry, may be culturally provided without immediately assuming that even though we cannot therefore call them cathartic personal expressions, they must somehow be safety valves?⁹ I struggled with some of these dilemmas in my earlier work and I find them in the work of others.

With the shift in perspective I am advocating, asking not about the status of resistance itself but about what the forms of resistance indicate about the forms of power that they are up against, we are onto new ground. In addition to questions such as whether official ideology is really ever hegemonic or whether cultural or verbal resistance counts as much as other kinds, we can begin to ask what can be learned about power if we take for granted that resistances, of whatever form, signal sites of struggle. The forms I have described for Bedouin women suggest that some of the kinds of power relations in which they are caught up work through restrictions on movement and everyday activities, through elder kinsmen's control over marriage,

through patrilineal parallel cousin marriage, through a moral system that defines superiority in terms of particular characteristics (like autonomy) that men are structurally more capable of achieving, through a set of practices that imply that maleness is sufficient justification for privilege, and through the linking of sets of sentiments to respectability and moral worth. These are not the only things at work—there are also such things as elder kinsmen's or husbands' control over productive resources, things which may or may not be resisted directly. But to discount the former as merely ideological is to fall into the familiar dichotomies that have kept people from looking at the most significant aspect of this situation: that power relations take many forms, have many aspects, and interweave. And by presupposing some sort of hierarchy of significant and insignificant forms of power, we may be blocking ourselves from exploring the ways in which these forms may actually be working simultaneously, in concert or at cross-purposes.

transformations of power and resistance

The other advantage of using resistance as a diagnostic of power is, as I argued at the outset, that it can help detect historical shifts in configurations or methods of power. In this final section, I want to turn to the ways in which Bedouin women are living a profound transformation of their social and economic lives. From a careful look at what may initially appear to be trivial matters, something important can be learned about the dynamics of power in situations where local communities are being incorporated into modern states and integrated into a wider economy.

I will make three observations about resistance, based on recent fieldwork. The first concerns the fate of traditional subversive forms. Some of these, such as folktales, seem to be dying out as Egyptian television and radio usurp young people's interest.⁹ Others, like the kind of poetry described above, are being incorporated into other projects and appropriated by different groups. I had thought, when I left Egypt in 1980, that this form of poetry was also disappearing. In recent years, however, the new popularity of semicommercial, locally produced cassettes has given traditional Bedouin poetry new life. At the same time, though, its social uses are changing. As I have shown elsewhere (Abu-Lughod *In press*), these poem/songs, always before recited equally by women and young men, are becoming in their new form an almost exclusively male forum for resistance. Older women continue to sing the songs or to reminisce about how they used to sing them, but the major public occasions for singing have disappeared and young women do not develop the skills or habit of reciting them. Women and girls avidly listen to these low-budget commercial cassettes but they do not record them because no modest woman would want her songs played in front of strangers or would be willing to sit in a recording studio with strange men.

As women seem to be losing access to this mode of resistance, it is becoming increasingly associated with young men, who use it to protest or resist the growing power of older kinsmen. The Bedouins' involvement in the market economy has enhanced and rendered more inflexible the power of these older kinsmen in two ways: first, monetarization and the privatization of property, especially land, give patriarchs more absolute economic power; second, as hierarchy in general is becoming more fixed and wealth differences between families are growing more extreme, the tribal ideology of equality which limited the legitimacy of domination by elders is eroding. The shifting deployments of this poetic form of resistance are related to and reveal these complex changes.

The second observation about resistance is that new signs of women's resistance to restrictions on their freedom of movement are beginning to appear. On the one hand, I witnessed a number of arguments between older women and their younger nephews and sons about how harshly these young men were restricting the movements of their sisters and female cousins.

Among themselves and in the presence of the young men, the older women expressed outrage and recalled the past, when they had freely gone off to gather wood and draw water from wells, occasionally on the way exchanging songs and tokens of love with young men. For the first time in 1987 I also heard adolescent girls and young women complain that they felt imprisoned or that they were bored. On the other hand, I noticed increasingly frequent incidents of young wives or unmarried girls having to defend themselves, usually again with the support of their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, against slanderous accusations, generally initiated by their male kinsmen, that they had been seen some place where they had no permission to go or talking to boys outside the family. This resistance to the restrictions on movement and the smears of reputation intended to enforce them do not index any new spirit or consciousness of the possibilities of freedom on the part of women. Rather, I would argue, they index women's sense of the new forms of the powers of restrictions which have come with sedentarization and the consequently more extreme division between men and women. In the span of the present generation the Bedouins have settled and built houses in permanent communities. Surrounded by neighbors who are not kin, in a social world where there has been no dilution of the modesty code, women have ended up having to spend far more time out of sight or veiled than they did in the desert camps; they are now subject to surveillance whenever they step out.

Third, a new and very serious form of resistance is developing in the women's world, one that—unlike the two just discussed, which widen the gap between women and men—pits young women against older women and indirectly against their fathers and uncles, while putting them in alliance with young men of their own generation. These generational conflicts involve a deceptively frivolous issue: lingerie. Nine years ago I witnessed the following incident. Two of the adolescent girls in our community had bought negligees from a peddler. (Bedouins usually just sleep in their ordinary clothes.) The girls' grandmothers were furious, and they threatened to set the negligees on fire if the girls did not sell them back. When the old women had some visitors, the old women demanded that one of the girls bring out her nightgown to show them. The women all touched it and pulled at it, and one old grandmother in the midst of hilarity put the sheer lime-green gown over her layers of clothing, danced around the room and made for the doorway, as if to go out and show the men. She was pulled back.

By 1987, it had become almost routine for brides to display nylon slips and negligees with their trousseaus. Most adolescent girls bought such items for their marriages, and their older female relatives would no longer try so hard to thwart them. Now the frontier has shifted to bras, cosmetics, and bobby pins. In the household in which I lived, for example, many of the tensions between one of the daughters and her mother were over the homemade bra the girl insisted on wearing. Her mother was scandalized by the way it drew attention to her chest, and she frequently criticized her. The daughter persisted, as Bedouin children nearly always do in the face of parental pressure, retaliating by criticizing her mother for having so many children and running such a chaotic household. In her resistance to her mother's imposition of older Bedouin standards of modesty can be seen the beginnings of a crucial—and ironic—transformation of Bedouin life.

What the older women object to in the purchase of lingerie is not just the waste of precious money on useless items, but the immodesty of these emergent technologies of sexualized femininity to be deployed in the pleasing of husbands. Not that *they* had not worked to remain in their husbands' good graces; they had fulfilled their duties in maintaining their households and their moral reputations. But they had relied on their kinsmen for assurance of good treatment and redress of mistreatment by husbands. They had gained their right to support through their status as kinswomen or mothers and through the work they contributed to the extended household. What wealth women would get they got at marriage and after that, everyone had much the same things, grown, raised, or made in the household. Members of this older generation, at least as I saw them, were often dignified in comportment, but at the same time they were

usually loud, sure of themselves, and hardly what we would consider feminine. Some Bedouin men also commented on this.

Young women, in resisting for themselves the older women's coarseness by buying moisturizing creams and frilly nylon negligees are, it could be argued, chafing against expectations that do not take account of the new set of socioeconomic circumstances into which they are moving. Some of the girls with whom I spoke still, like their grandmothers, want to resist marriages. They do not object to the fact that marriages are arranged for them, but they do resist particular matches, mostly those which do not promise to fulfill certain fantasies. What they say they want, and often sing about in short public wedding songs, are husbands who are rich (or at least wage-earning) and educated (or at least familiar with a more Egyptian way of life), husbands who will buy them the things they want—the dressing tables, the beds, the clothes, the shoes, the watches, the baby bottles, and even the washing machines that mean the end of backbreaking outdoor work. Sedentarized and more secluded, these girls aspire to be housewives in a way their mothers never were. Their well-being and standard of living now depend enormously on the favor of husbands in a world where everything costs money, where there are many more things to buy with it, and where women have almost no independent access to it. That women's resistance to unfairness in the distribution of purchased goods, from blankets to bars of soap and boxes of matches, causes the most frequent conflicts in most households confirms this; men's powers now importantly include the power to buy things and to punish and reward women through giving them.

As the veils they wear get sheerer and these young women become more involved in the kind of sexualized femininity associated with the world of consumerism—even if it is only the comparatively small-time world of five-dollar nightgowns and 15-cent nail polish—they are becoming increasingly enmeshed in new sets of power relations of which they are scarcely aware. These developments are tied to their new financial dependence on men but at the same time are directed pointedly at, and are a form of resistance to, their elders of both sexes. If resistance signals power, then this form of resistance may indicate the desperation with which their elders are trying to shore up the old forms of family-based authority which the moral code of sexual modesty and propriety supported.

Like the older forms of women's resistance described earlier, these young women's forms are also culturally given, not indigenously as before, but rather by emulation of and borrowing (not to mention buying) from Egyptian society. These resistances are again, therefore, neither outside of nor independent from the systems of power. Nevertheless, what is peculiar to these new forms of resistance is how they travel between two systems and what this can tell us about relations of power under such conditions. For instance, along with the lingerie and cosmetics goes a pleasure in listening to Egyptian rather than Bedouin songs, following Egyptian soap operas on the radio, and watching Egyptian television. Their mothers impatiently scold the young women for wasting their time with that Egyptian trash, and some old Bedouin men refuse to allow televisions in their homes at all. These Egyptian songs and stories, like the lingerie, are oppositional within the young Bedouins' strategies of resistance to their elders, but unlike the old forms of Bedouin poetry or even folktale, they are not oppositional discourses within their original social context, which is the context of middle-class Egyptian urban life, a way of life whose debts to the West are manifold and whose penetration by the state is pervasive.

Ironically, in taking up these Egyptian forms and deploying them against their elders, these young Bedouins are also beginning to get caught up in the new forms of subjection such discourses imply. These new forms are part of a world in which kinship ties are attenuated while companionate marriage, marital love based on choice, and romantic love are idealized, making central women's attractiveness and individuality as enhanced and perhaps necessarily marked by differences in adornment (hence the importance of cosmetics, lingerie, and differentiation in styles and fabrics of clothing). The contrast between this world and the Bedouin world is captured wonderfully in an incident I remember from some years ago. An elderly aunt

visiting the household in which I lived jokingly teased her nephew, my host, who was an extremely important man in the community. She said he lived a dog's life. There he was with three wives, all good Bedouins. His house was a mess, his clothes were wrinkled, and not one of these women would budge when he called. Her son, on the other hand, had just married an Egyptian girl and he was living well these days. His bride, she reported, put on nice clothes whenever he came home, brought him special foods, and even ironed his handkerchiefs. Everyone present laughed at the time. Yet now young Bedouin women would be less scandalized by such behavior and may even be moving toward it.

Even more telling is what is happening to weddings. As I have argued elsewhere (Abu-Lughod 1988), these are important sites for the production and reproduction of Bedouin sexuality and social relations. Weddings too are becoming a point of conflict for young and older women. While older Bedouin women are scandalized by the practices of Egyptian weddings, today's adolescents are intrigued by them and try to emulate what aspects of them they can. Older women find shocking the fact that an Egyptian bride comes dressed in makeup and fancy clothes and sits in public with her groom in front of the mixed-sex gathering of guests. They are even more disturbed by the idea that she goes willingly to be with him privately at night to have sex.

They find Egyptian weddings distasteful because, much like our own, these weddings construct the couple as a separate unit of private desire, distinct from their families and gender groups. For Awlad 'Ali, proper weddings must center on a public daytime defloration that is part of a dramatic contest between kin groups and between men and women. This central wedding rite, enacted in a homologous fashion on the bodies of the bride and groom and on the collective bodies of the gathered kin and friends, produces a sexuality that is public and focused on crossing thresholds, opening passages, and moving in and out as a prelude to the insemination which should eventuate in the birth of children for the groom's kin group. Through songs about the families of the bride and groom and about the investment of others in the bride's virginity, and even through the ritual movements themselves, the identification of individuals with their kin groups is reinforced. For example, a bride is brought from her father's household completely cloaked in a white woven cloth that belongs to the girl's father or some other kinsman. Protected and hidden by her kinsman's cloak, she is brought out of her father's domain and carried to that of her husband's kin group. In the past, she remained under her father's cloak until the defloration. Nowadays the woven blanket is usually removed once she gets to her marital room so that the other women can view the coiffed young bride made up with cheap smudged lipstick and cakey white face powder and wearing a white satin wedding dress and makeshift hair ornament. This change in the ritual clearly reflects the new importance of individual attractiveness.¹⁰

Bedouin weddings also once played out a contest between men and women as groups. There is still a formulaic struggle between the groom and his age-mates, on the one hand, and the bride and the women who surround her when the groom comes to the marital chamber to take her virginity, on the other. But older women deplore a change in weddings that has altered the balance of this ritual contest. It used to be that the night before the wedding a young kinswoman of the groom would go out to dance amidst a group of young men. Veiled and girded in the same kind of white woven men's cloak that the bride would arrive in the next day, she would be serenaded by the men and would dance with a stick which the men tried to grab from her. Representing the bride and all women, the dancer enacted a challenge to men by inciting desire but eluding capture. Now all that is left is the men's invasion of the women's world on the wedding day, when the groom as hunter takes his feminine bride as prey. Young people would prefer to dispense even with this remnant of the public rites of defloration that link the groom and bride to their respective gender groups.

In resisting the axes of kin and gender, the young women who want the lingerie, Egyptian songs, satin wedding dresses, and fantasies of private romance their elders resist are perhaps

unwittingly enmeshing themselves in an extraordinarily complex set of new power relations. These bind them irrevocably to the Egyptian economy, itself tied to the global economy, and to the Egyptian state, many of whose powers depend on separating kin groups and regulating individuals. For the Awlad 'Ali Bedouins the old forms of kin-based power, which the resistances described above have allowed us to see clearly, are becoming encompassed and cross-cut by new forms, methods, and sources of subjection. These new forms do not necessarily displace the old. Sometimes, as in the case of the demands of sexual modesty and settling down, they run along the same tracks. Sometimes, as in the case of older men's greater control of resources and precedence in the political realm, they just catch up the old forms into larger, nonlocal networks of economic and institutional power, something which gives them a new kind of rigidity. Some, however, like the penetration of consumerism and the disciplines of schooling and other institutions of the state, with their attendant privatization of the individual and the family, are altogether new and just add to the complex ways that Bedouin women are involved in structures of domination.

Although their elders are suspicious of many of these new forms, the young women (and young men, I should add) do not seem to suspect the ways in which their forms of rebellion against their elders are backing them into wider and different sets of authority structures, or the ways in which their desires for commodities and for separation from kin and gender groups might be producing a kind of conformity to a different range of demands. This raises a final question: do certain modern techniques or forms of power work in such indirect ways, or seem to offer such positive attractions, that people do not as readily resist them? There is some evidence for this, and it is a question worth exploring comparatively.¹¹ In the case of the Awlad 'Ali Bedouins, though, there seem to be new forms of resistance to just these kinds of processes. If that is so, then such resistances can be used as diagnostics as well.

One sign that these new forms of subjection are felt as such is that among those Awlad 'Ali who have become most involved with and have had most contact with secular Egyptian state institutions (especially schools) and cultural life (especially through television, radio, fashions and consumerism)—those Awlad 'Ali living in major towns and the city of Marsa Matruh, for example—there has been a growing interest in the Islamic movement. These Awlad 'Ali signal their participation in the movement by adopting Islamic dress, engaging in Koran study, and changing their behavior, especially toward members of the opposite sex. If within the Arab world generally the Islamic movement represents a resistance to Western influence, consumerism, and political and economic control by a Westernized elite, within the Awlad 'Ali community it serves as a perfect response to, symptom of, and therefore key to understanding the kinds of contradictory sets of power relations in which the Awlad 'Ali are currently caught. For young Bedouin women and men, it is a kind of double resistance to two conflicting sets of demands—the demands of their elders and the system of face to face kin-based authority they represent, on the one hand, and on the other the demands of the national westernized and capitalist state in which, because of their cultural differences, lack of education, and lack of ties to the elite, they participate only marginally. For young women, adopting modest Islamic dress has the added advantage of allowing them to distinguish themselves from their uneducated sisters and their elders while leaving them irreproachable in matters of morality.¹²

Like the other forms of resistance discussed above, participating in Islamic movements is a culturally shaped and historically specific response. It could not have been taken up by individuals in this community to resist the situation they found themselves in at this juncture unless it had already developed in Egypt and elsewhere in the 1980s. It is easy to see as well how rigidly fundamentalist practices involve participants in yet a third set of disciplines and demands and tie them to new transnational structures—of religious nationalism in the Islamic world—that are not isomorphic with the transnational structures of the global economy.

This may seem like boxes within boxes within boxes. But that is the wrong image. A better one might be fields of overlapping and intersecting forms of subjection whose effects on par-

ticularly placed individuals at particular historical moments vary tremendously. As I have tried to show, tracing the many resistances of old and young Awlad 'Ali, men and women, and those from the desert and the town, gives us the means to begin disentangling these forms, helps us to grasp the fact that they interact and helps us to understand the ways in which they do. It also gives us the means to understand an important dynamic of resistance and power in nonsimple societies. If the systems of power are multiple, then resisting at one level may catch people up at other levels.

This is the kind of contribution careful analyses of resistance can make. My argument in this paper has been that we should learn to read in various local and everyday resistances the existence of a range of specific strategies and structures of power. Attention to the forms of resistance in particular societies can help us become critical of partial or reductionist theories of power.¹³ The problem has been that those of us who have sensed that there is something admirable about resistance have tended to look to it for hopeful confirmation of the failure—or partial failure—of systems of oppression. Yet it seems to me that we respect everyday resistance not just by arguing for the dignity or heroism of the resisters but by letting their practices teach us about the complex interworkings of historically changing structures of power.

notes

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¹Terms like voices, subversion, dissidence, counter-discourse, and counter-hegemony as well as resistance key this interest and circulate through such widely diverse enterprises as French feminist theory (for instance, Kristeva 1981; Moi 1986:163–164) and social scientific studies of specific subordinate groups. Among the latter figure studies of resistance among working-class youths in England (Willis 1981), slaves in the American South and on the plantations in the Caribbean (Cronon 1982; Gaspar 1985; Genovese 1974, 1979; Levine 1977), poor Southeast Asian peasants (Scott 1985; Scott and Kerkvliet 1986; Stoler 1985; Turton 1986), subaltern groups in colonial India (Guha 1983a, 1983b), marginalized black peasant workers in rural South Africa (Comaroff 1985), Bolivian tin miners and Colombian plantation workers (Nash 1979; Taussig 1980), and various groups of women both in this country (for example, E. Martin 1987; Morgen and Bookman 1988) and elsewhere (Ong 1987).

²This question has begun to receive some attention within and outside of anthropology. Marcus and Fischer (1986), Jameson (1984), and Haraway (1985) are especially concerned with the development of postmodernist theory in the postcolonial age of late capitalism. Foucault (1980:116) argues that the task of analyzing the mechanics of power "could only begin after 1968, that is to say on the basis of daily struggles at grass roots level, among those whose fight was located in the fine meshes of the web of power." I would credit a number of social-political movements, including feminism, with shaking the hegemony of Marxism as radical discourse and opening up possibilities for rethinking power and resistance. Scott (1985:29) traces his own concern with everyday resistance more narrowly to his disillusionment with socialist revolutions.

³O'Hanlon (1988) asks this question with regard to the *Subaltern Studies* group, and Rosaldo (1986) has made an interesting argument linking Evans-Pritchard's admiration of Nuer indomitability to his role as anthropologist in a colonial setting.

⁴Jean Comaroff (1985:263), for example, explicitly rejects the conventional divisions between the symbolic and the instrumental or religion and politics (distinctions, she argues, made by ethnocentric social science and Third World revolutionary intellectuals alike). James Scott (1985:292) refuses to accept the distinction between "real" and "unreal" resistance, defined in terms of the oppositions between individual and collective, self-indulgent and principled, or behavioral and ideological. Another kind of attempt to get at the complex forms of domination is the move in Marxian scholarship to explore more fully the Gramscian notion of hegemony, which, at least according to interpreters like Raymond Williams (1977:108–114), not only rescues ideology as a part of the apparatus of domination but actually breaks down the distinction between cultural, social, and political processes.

⁵For a lucid discussion of the problems with humanism in the historiographical project of those, like Guha (1983a, 1983b), involved in *Subaltern Studies*, see O'Hanlon's (1988) sympathetic critique. Some of her points apply as well to other projects on resistance.

⁶A particularly clear statement of his view of power as productive is the following: "What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression" (Foucault 1980:119). His position on resistance is more ambiguous. Despite his insistence that resistance is always tied to power, he occasionally implies the persistence of some residual freedom (Foucault 1982:225).

⁷I went to live in one small Bedouin community first in 1978, and I have returned several times since, most recently for fieldwork in 1987, on which the analysis in the final section is based.

⁸Among the many problems with this last idea is that it assumes society is a machine and understands human actions as functions in this machine rather than recognizing that society is nothing but the collective practices of the people who compose it, a view developed most systematically by Bourdieu (1977).

⁹Messick (1987) analyzes the dissolution of a North African women's alternative, if not subversive, discourse brought about by the capitalist transformation of weaving.

¹⁰One wonders also what effect the images of coiffed and groomed Egyptian urban women that young Bedouin men see on television, or of the Egyptian girls they flirt with in school, have on their desires.

¹¹Bourdieu (1977, 1979) and Foucault (especially 1977), among others of course, offer useful ways of thinking about the effects of new forms of power associated with modern states in a capitalist world because they attend to the microprocesses that affect individuals in seemingly trivial ways. Mitchell (1988) considers the effects of such political transformations in Egypt specifically.

¹²See El-Guindi (1981) and Hoffman-Ladd (1987) for more on women in these movements.

¹³Feminist theory has been especially receptive to the notion of multiple forms and sites of resistance because it has had to face the obvious inadequacy of any current theories about domination in accounting for gender power, the complex field of forces that produces women's situations and the manifold and subtle forms of their subjection. See B. Martin (1982) for an extremely helpful discussion of these issues.

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The Tragedy of Central Europe
By Milan Kundera, Translated from the French by Edmund White

1.

In November 1956, the director of the Hungarian News Agency, shortly before his office was flattened by artillery fire, sent a telex to the entire world with a desperate message announcing that the Russian attack against Budapest had begun. The dispatch ended with these words: "We are going to die for Hungary and for Europe."

What did this sentence mean? It certainly meant that the Russian tanks were endangering Hungary and with it Europe itself. But in what sense was Europe in danger? Were the Russian tanks about to push past the Hungarian borders and into the West? No. The director of the Hungarian News Agency meant that the Russians, in attacking Hungary, were attacking Europe itself. He was ready to die so that Hungary might remain Hungary and European.

Even if the sense of the sentence seems clear, it continues to intrigue us. Actually, in France, in America, one is accustomed to thinking that what was at stake during the invasion was neither Hungary nor Europe but a political regime. One would never have said that Hungary as such had been threatened; still less would one ever understand why a Hungarian, faced with his own death, addressed Europe. When Solzhenitsyn denounces communist oppression, does he invoke Europe as a fundamental value worth dying for?

No. "To die for one's country and for Europe"—that is a phrase that could not be thought in Moscow or Leningrad; it is precisely the phrase that could be thought in Budapest or Warsaw.

2.

In fact, what does Europe mean to a Hungarian, a Czech, a Pole? For a thousand years their nations have belonged to the part of Europe rooted in Roman Christianity. They have participated in every period of its history. For them, the word "Europe" does not represent a phenomenon of geography but a spiritual notion synonymous with the word "West." The moment Hungary is no longer European—that is, no longer Western—it is driven from its own destiny, beyond its own history: it loses the essence of its identity.

"Geographic Europe" (extending from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains) was always divided into two halves which evolved separately: one tied to ancient Rome and the Catholic Church, the other anchored in Byzantium and the Orthodox Church. After 1945, the border between the two Europes shifted several hundred kilometers to the west, and several nations that had always considered themselves to be Western woke up to discover that they were now in the East.[1]

As a result, three fundamental situations developed in Europe after the war: that of Western Europe, that of Eastern Europe, and, most complicated, that of the part of Europe situated geographically in the center—culturally in the West and politically in the East.