

Michèle Roberts and Romance

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Since her debut novel, *A Piece of the Night* (1978), the first new book to be published by the Women's Press, Michèle Roberts has produced literary fiction that is avowedly feminist in impulse. However, her twelfth novel, *Reader, I Married Him* (2004), appears to mark a transition from feminist to feminine fiction, a form of writing epitomised by chick lit, and one preoccupied with femininity, 'the dark "Other" of feminism' (Hanson, p. 16). As the cover of *Reader* (approved by Roberts) indicates, the novel self-consciously draws on the conventions of chick lit; it features a cartoon-style drawing of a woman sporting the contemporary signifiers of patriarchal femininity, a handbag and high-heeled shoes. Alluding to the text that spawned the genre, one reviewer even describes Roberts's middle-aged protagonist as 'a menopausal Bridget Jones' (Ajay Close, p. 30). Like the re-publication of her third novel *The Wild Girl* (1984) as *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (2007) in the wake of Dan Brown's bestselling religious mystery *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), this apparent shift from feminist to feminine fiction (from a focus on 'wimmin' to 'girlz') could be interpreted as a cynical bid for commercial success. However, I propose that Roberts's latest novel expresses concerns central to her work – namely, a critical preoccupation with romance and a desire to challenge boundaries. Focusing on *Reader, I Married Him* and the three novels that precede it - *Fair Exchange* (1999), *The Looking Glass* (2000) and *The Mistressclass* (2003) - I argue that Roberts rewrites romance in order to stress both its perils and disruptive potential. Further, I propose that by highlighting the subversive appeal of romance, she recoups a denigrated feminine genre and the women who cherish it. Finally, I suggest that by drawing on literary and popular forms of romantic fiction, Roberts confounds the

categories that structure the literary marketplace, rather than attempting to shift her position in it.

Fair Exchange

Roberts has described *Fair Exchange*, her first historical romance, as an *homage* to Georgette Heyer, whose Regency romances she consumed avidly in adolescence. Like *These Old Shades* (1926), the prototype of the formula for which Heyer became famous (Hughes 39), Roberts's novel features a spirited protagonist, is set in eighteenth century France and England, and uses the plot device of infants switched at birth. Following Heyer, who is credited with transforming historical romance from an adventure story into a love story that appealed to women readers (Hughes 132), Roberts uses the genre to express specifically female concerns. Helen Hughes proposes that Heyer's work reflects on power relationships between men and women (17), stresses female vulnerability and articulates the impossibility of a woman's situation in a patriarchal world (118). Like Heyer, Roberts uses romance to explore women's anxieties about relationships with men.

While Roberts acknowledges her debt to the queen of Regency Romance, she also describes Heyer's influence as 'damaging' because her books offered a disempowering view of gender and heterosexual relations (Newman). As Hughes notes, although Heyer plays with gender roles, her heroines finally submit to the social conventions they contest and endorse the myth that romantic love is the source of female fulfilment (Hughes 122). Even after embracing feminism, this is a myth that Roberts struggled to escape. She confesses that she still experienced a 'strong drive' to write romance ('Write' 228) and, reflecting this, Rosie White notes that her early fiction never entirely escapes the romance plot (73). Because Heyer's novels damaged

Roberts, she ‘had to come back and deal with them’ (Newman), and she does this in *Fair Exchange* by rewriting romance.

Fair Exchange underlines the damage wrought by romance through its two female protagonists, Jemima Boote and Annette Villon, both of whom internalise the patriarchal ideals of romantic love. Jemima is modelled on Mary Wollstonecraft and, like her historical counterpart, falls prey to the seductive appeal of romance. Although Wollstonecraft challenged the ideology of separate spheres that equated men with sense and women with sensibility in her revolutionary polemic *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1794), passion overcame reason in her personal relationships with men, causing her profound suffering. After a torrid affair, she was abandoned by her lover, Gilbert Imlay, shortly after the birth of their daughter. Unable to accept this rejection, Wollstonecraft’s despair culminated in several suicide attempts.

In *Fair Exchange*, Jemima’s relationship with Paul Gilbert mirrors Wollstonecraft’s unhappy liaison with Gilbert Imlay. Although Jemima is characterised by reason – ‘She had chosen well, she thought, a friendly man whom she liked’ (189) – she finds herself overwhelmed by emotions that ‘entered her and took her over’ (189). Like Wollstonecraft, Jemima casts aside politics for passion: awaiting Gilbert’s delayed and indefinite arrival, she passes the time ‘pretending to write a political memoir and scribbling a romance in secret instead’ (186). Disappointed by her lover, Jemima gives her romantic heroines ‘more adventures than she had had herself and less misfortune’ (186-7), confirming Janice Radway’s contention that the appeal of the genre lies in its ability to satisfy emotional needs not met in women’s intimate relationships with men (Radway 94, 96). As Roberts explains in her Preface to *Madame Bovary* (1857), romantic fiction simultaneously articulates and appeases female discontent: although it may enable women to explore

anxious questions, it tends to ‘offer sentimental and reassuring answers’ (Preface, *Madame Bovary*, viii). Jemima thus demonstrates that romance can function as a dangerous political sedative that maintains the patriarchal status quo.

However, despite their similarities, Jemima is not Wollstonecraft and avoids the painful fate of her historical counterpart. Wollstonecraft’s appearance in the novel emphasises that the two figures are not the same. Indeed, by naming Jemima after the prison warden in Wollstonecraft’s final (unfinished) novel *Maria* (1798), who distrusts romantic fiction (in contrast to the eponymous heroine), Roberts points to the importance of resisting romance. Resistance is also signalled by the marginalisation of Jemima’s lover and foregrounding of her relationships with women: her childhood friend, Fanny, Annette (the novel’s other protagonist) and her daughter. Furthermore, scenes of courtship and seduction are occluded until the end of the narrative, when they are related in retrospect, confirming that Roberts is less concerned with romance than its damaging effects. As Jemima’s life does not feature the suicide attempts that have defined Wollstonecraft as a tragic victim of a failed romance, and ends with her discovering a ‘new cheerfulness’ (241), Roberts celebrates her protagonist’s sexual passion whilst saving her from the romantic delusions that almost destroyed the founding mother of modern feminism.

Roberts’s desire to rewrite romance is also evident in the parallels between *Fair Exchange* and Wollstonecraft’s *Maria*. Following the affair with Imlay, Wollstonecraft poured her torment into this highly autobiographical novel, in which excessive sensibility leads the protagonist, incarcerated in a madhouse by her cruel husband, to mistake a fellow-prisoner for the hero of the romances she has read, and thus take as her lover a cad who later betrays and deserts her. *Fair Exchange* echoes the central theme of *Maria* in its condemnation of the patriarchal structures that

‘preserve women as commodities in a system of exchange between men’ (Neill 110), and both texts contain characters called Jemima and Maria, feature incarcerated women who become friends, feckless men who seduce and desert their lovers, and fathers who hide children from their mothers. Although incomplete, Wollstonecraft sketched several possible conclusions to *Maria* before her death, all unhappy. However, ‘The End’ is followed by a longer passage which offers an alternative, more positive, denouement: Jemima reunites Maria with her long lost daughter, who has been ‘secreted’ by her husband, inspiring Maria to live rather than die. Similarly, at the end of *Fair Exchange*, Jemima has a daughter she thought dead returned to her when it is revealed that Gilbert and his friend Saygood swapped their daughters and that Jemima is the biological mother of Annette’s daughter, Caroline. By embracing this conclusion, Roberts illustrates the central tenet of Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s *Writing Beyond the Ending* (1985), that women writers resist the restrictive resolutions of the romance plot, subverting a literary tradition in which, for women, death is the only alternative to marriage.

The Looking Glass

The Looking Glass continues to explore the damaging effects of romance on women whilst rewriting literary and popular fictions, this time, *Madame Bovary* and *The Little Mermaid* (1836). This novel relates the stories of five women, all connected to the poet Gerard Colbert, based partly on Gustave Flaubert. Like *Madame Bovary*, *The Looking Glass* highlights the perils of romance but, as Sarah Falcus has shown, Roberts rewrites Flaubert’s novel by revising the fate of his protagonist. Isabelle, Colbert’s mistress, closely resembles Louise Colet, Flaubert’s lover and model for Emma Bovary. There are numerous parallels between the two women but, just as

Jemima is not Wollstonecraft, Isabelle is not Emma. When Colbert ends their affair, Isabelle declares, having read *Madame Bovary*, 'I had decided on a better fate for myself. I chose a happy ending, not a tragic one' (184). When she starts work, Isabelle relinquishes her romantic ideals. She has 'little time for being in love' and no longer thinks of Colbert as 'the hero, the prince who would ride up and rescue me' (191; 193). In contrast to Emma, who is destroyed by romance, Isabelle finds happiness in economic and emotional independence.

Although Falcus focuses on Isabelle, Emma's romantic inclinations are also shared by Millicent, Colbert's English governess. Through Millicent, Roberts demonstrates that romance upholds patriarchy by equating femininity with silence, submission and suffering. Like Emma, Millicent's view of life is shaped by romantic fiction: she 'weave[s] her life into a shining love story like a cobweb spangled with rain' (158). Romance obscures her vision and Millicent, like Emma, idealises her lover: 'I can't imagine why I once thought him ugly...Now I think him beautiful' (127). Reflecting Carol Thurston's observation that the traditional romantic heroine is quiet and unable to express her emotions (38), Millicent loses the ability to speak in the presence of the poet: 'I could hardly form an opinion let alone shape it into words; I felt tongue-tied and stammering' (144). Furthermore, for Millicent, romantic love means self-denial: 'I love him and that's got to be enough. I must not ask for anything back' (127). Moreover, romantic love is masochistic; after cutting her hand Millicent cherishes her wound because 'It throbbed and stung, just like love does' (130). Millicent also confirms Radway's assertion that 'Passivity is at the heart of the romance experience' (97). Once dismissed from the Colbert household, she refuses to relinquish her romantic fantasies: 'She existed in a kind of dreamy state, constantly re-imagining her next meeting with the poet, and the beautiful consequences which

would ensue' (264). Only once Millicent is awoken from her paralyzing romantic dreams does she fulfil her own dream of becoming a poet.

If *The Looking Glass* rewrites *Madame Bovary*, it simultaneously revises Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, whose protagonist epitomises the self-sacrificing romantic heroine. Reflecting their internalisation of romantic myths, each of Colbert's three lovers implicitly identifies herself as a mermaid. Millicent describes herself, slipping and slithering down the pebbles on the beach as 'transformed; another creature' (140), and Isabelle dreams of swimming up the river to Colbert's house 'disguised as an eel or a carp or some such' and 'landing flop! on his carpet' (188). Although Genevieve, Colbert's housekeeper, compares herself to a mermaid most often she also articulates a desire to revise dominant narratives: 'I began ferociously to tell myself a story about a mermaid; only this time she would not die; she would escape; she would dive into the depths of the sea and hide there' (84). Genevieve resists the grand narrative of romance, realizing 'I was not condemned to repeat the mermaid story from now till eternity. I could grow up; I could move; I could get away' (89). However, highlighting the power of patriarchy, initially she replays the story that she seeks to rewrite. Like the Little Mermaid, Genevieve leaves home to live with a man who does not love her and gives up language: 'Words were something I seemed to have left behind' (149). The danger of identification with the mermaid is underscored by Genevieve's plan to drown herself: 'Sooner or later the mermaid had to return to the sea, which was her only true home' (250). However, after leaving Colbert and relinquishing her romantic fantasies, Genevieve no longer identifies with the archetypical romantic heroine: 'the mermaid had gone. She had swum off and I was left alone...with a feeling of lightness' (270). The retreat of the mermaid signals her rejection of romance and the possibility of happiness.

Like the Little Mermaid, Genevieve has no mother, and the heroine's motherless state offers an insight into the powerful appeal that romance holds for female readers. Radway proposes that despite its preoccupation with men and marriage, romance represents an unconscious quest for maternal nurturance (124). Her thesis draws on the psychoanalytic work of Nancy Chodorow, who employs a feminist interpretation of Freudian object relations theory to analyse how the patriarchal context of mothering shapes female development. Chodorow argues that the daughter's intense identification with the mother leads to incomplete separation from her in the oedipal stage, producing a continuing need for maternal nurturance and a desire to regress into infancy and reconstruct the lost intensity of the mother-daughter bond (Radway 136). Radway proposes that through its promise of 'utopian bliss' romance offers women a means of recovering the mother (100), of re-establishing the blissful pre-oedipal union between mother and child (151; 156), and thus satisfies desires that heteropatriarchy either represses or dictates must be met through men (140). Roberts echoes Radway in her view of romance as a quest narrative in which the heroine searches for the 'lost mother' ('Write' 227). 'The hero', she claims, 'symbolizes the mother' ('Write' 227), and she compares the blissful kiss that typically draws the romantic novel to a close with 'the ecstatic pleasure of the tiny girl sucking on her mother's milk' (FSG 16). Likewise, Roberts connects the pleasures of reading romance with maternal nurturance in her description of romantic fiction as 'good milk' (FSG 54).

Like the archetypal romantic heroine (and like Jemima in *Fair Exchange*), Genevieve is an orphan thrown into an unfamiliar environment and emotional isolation when she moves to a new town. However, rather than meeting a man, Genevieve finds a longed-for mother-figure in her employer, Madame Patin. She

compares her arrival to birth - 'I fell down that last stretch of road as though I were being born' (11) - and soon experiences the emotional and physical satisfaction of mother-love: 'This was what it must be like to have a mother, I thought, this loving her and being allowed to be near her' (34). The imagery she employs to describe her joy evokes the bliss associated with the maternal breast: 'goodness and plenty in the land of milk and honey...paradise' (44-45).

Madame Patin's name, which evokes the slang for 'French kiss' (*rouler un patin*), indicates that the mother is implicated in romance. Furthermore, whereas the romantic heroine longs to be rescued by a lover, Genevieve longs to be saved from a lover by her mother, suggesting that she is the real object of desire. When Madame Patin marries, Genevieve reluctantly becomes embroiled in a sexual relationship with her husband and longs for her surrogate mother to end the affair: 'I longed for her to rescue me' (77). Upon discovery, Genevieve flees, only to be rescued by Colbert and become his lover. However, water imagery suggests that Colbert functions as a male mother through whom Genevieve seeks to assuage the loss of maternal love. Radway proposes that the goal of romance is oceanic merging with an other (153), a metaphor that evokes the semiotic, the pre-oedipal realm that Kristeva defines in terms of fluidity and associates with the 'mother's body' (27). Genevieve uses sea imagery to articulate sexual desire: 'Something powerful, a tide of wanting, was drawing me towards him and pushing me back, forward and back, like the rhythm of the sea itself, the waves falling urgently onto the beach...I thought I might turn to water' (144). The oceanic metaphor Genevieve employs to describe her relationship with Colbert echoes that used to convey the happiness inspired by Madame Patin: 'It went on moving up and down inside me, like the waves swelling and breaking on the beach' (34). Sea imagery thus suggests Colbert's status as a mother substitute.

Child-like hunger and cave imagery indicate that Colbert functions as a mother substitute not only for Genevieve but also for his other lovers, Millicent and Isabelle. Radway proposes that the romantic heroine desires to be nurtured as an infant by its mother (146), and, like Genevieve, who is a 'hungry child' in Madame Patin's presence (40), Millicent feels 'childish' with something inside her 'starving and shouting' (104), and Isabelle wonders if it is 'childish' to seek in her lover the satisfaction she does not find in her husband (186). Caves and mothers are linked by Genevieve's desire to live with Madame Patin 'at the bottom of the sea in a cave made fast with coral and guarded by dragons' (66), a home reminiscent of that inhabited by the pagan mother goddess, Cybele. Colbert is implicitly compared to Cybele, traditionally represented by a black stone set in a silver statue, when Isabelle imagines their affair 'like a silver statue hidden in a cave' (186). The symbolic significance of caves suggests that when Millicent sits in a cave with Colbert on the beach the desire she feels for him is an unconscious expression of a desire for her mother, to whom she eventually returns. Underlining that the mother is the primary object of desire in romance, the novel ends with Genevieve likewise preparing to return to Madame Patin, her surrogate mother. By bringing to the fore female desires that Radway suggests are submerged in romance, Roberts challenges the commonly held view that women read romantic novels because they are 'weak and silly' (Preface viii), and suggests that the appeal of the genre lies in its ability to give covert expression to taboo female desires.

The Mistressclass

In *The Mistressclass*, Roberts turns her attention to one of the ur-texts of romantic fiction, *Jane Eyre* (1847), and examines the historical figures upon whom the

archetypal romantic couple (Jane and Rochester) are modelled: Charlotte Brontë and her Belgian teacher, Constantin Heger.¹ Inspired by Brontë's letters to Heger, the novel offers a fictional account of their relationship. As well as reimagining Brontë's romantic life, Roberts intersperses Charlotte's unsent letters to Heger with a parallel narrative about a contemporary love triangle that rewrites *Jane Eyre*.

Like the two novels that precede it, *The Mistressclass* stresses that romance engenders masochism in, and antagonism between, women. Charlotte is passionately in love with Heger, her 'master' (3). His mastery is professional and personal: she is his pupil and longs to be his mistress. The dangers of dependence are clear when Charlotte tells Heger that she cannot write because 'you are not close to me, to inspire me and argue with me and spur me on' (7). In contrast to the needy Charlotte, Heger, like Rochester, is 'cool and impersonal' (44). He is also cruel and Charlotte cherishes the pain that he inflicts: 'I treasured every savage and satirical rebuke you scrawled in my margins' (3-4). She longs to be in his presence, even though it is 'torture' because, as Madame Heger informs her, 'real love involves real pain. It must hurt or it's not love' (41; 182).

Both the nineteenth century and contemporary narratives illustrate that romance divides women against each other. Charlotte and her sister Emily compete for Heger's attention just as modern-day sisters Vinny and Catherine vie for Adam, who moves from being Vinny's boyfriend to Catherine's husband. Like Charlotte, Catherine and Vinny are both happy to adopt the role of mistress. Vinny longs to be Adam's lover (even though he is married to her sister) and Catherine is content to be

¹ Roberts's novel challenges Lyndall Gordon's view that Brontë begins *Jane Eyre* having 'worked off the Brussels experience' in *The Professor* (1846) (p. 144), and does not return to her preoccupation with Heger until *Villette* (1853), 'her most autobiographical treatment of their relationship' (p. 110), by suggesting that *Jane Eyre* is shaped as much by Brontë's passion for her tutor as the novels that deal with the relationship more directly. Despite her assertion that *Jane Eyre* does not draw on the Brussels affair, Gordon concedes that Rochester resembles Heger (p. 148).

thought to be intimately involved with father-in-law: 'People assumed she was his mistress and she let them' (245). All three women are willing to embrace a disempowering role: while 'master' suggests control and authority, 'mistress' denotes a man's lover, illustrating that female identity is defined in relation to men.

Whilst critical of romance, Roberts again reveals its appeal by presenting Heger as a male mother. The motherless Charlotte expresses her desire for nurturance and implicitly casts Heger in a maternal role: 'The language that links us is an invisible, living cord....If I were not connected to you by that cord then I should die' (3). She later compares herself to a child seeking parental approval: 'I yearned to remain in your presence, to please you in every possible way, and never to arouse your wrath' (43). Charlotte's longing makes it clear that romantic love and fiction express a desire for mother-love: 'I had no mother. No mother I could know or remember...I stoppered up my child-self; all its longings. Only in reading and writing could they emerge and live freely. Only when I met you and began to love you. Then out they leaped' (77).

As well as highlighting the subtext of romance, Roberts rewrites the rules of the genre when Charlotte transfers her affection from a master to a mistress. Heger is usurped by an alternative mother-figure, George Sand (a fictional version of the nineteenth century cross-dressing French author who paved the way for other professional women writers). Having been nursed back to good health and encouraged to write by her new surrogate mother, Charlotte tells Heger, having 'gnawed at the half-eaten crusts on the floor under your table like a ravening dog' (77), Madame Sand 'fills me up with good things' (232). Once she acquires the maternal nurturance she seeks, Charlotte is 'cured' of romantic love and ready to 'write another novel'

(235; 293). Having renounced her desire to be Heger's mistress, she is able to write her 'masterpiece' (67).

Like Charlotte, Vinny and Catherine are motherless and mourn the maternal nurturance they once enjoyed. Having her hair washed in a salon reminds Catherine of being in the bath with Vinny as a child and she feels 'soothed' (21), 'comforted' (22), and 'cossetted' (23), sensations akin to those experienced in the womb or at the maternal breast (23). Dozing on a train, Vinny becomes 'a baby again, held on mum's lap...she could have as she wanted', an experience that brings 'sweetness and bliss' (126). When she wakes with the realization that her mother is dead, 'Tears wanted to spill' (127). For both sisters, romance, in the form of *Jane Eyre*, offers emotional compensation for the loss of mother-love.

Both sisters identify closely with *Jane Eyre*. Catherine teaches the novel and Vinny knows it 'almost by heart' (49). Even though she claims not to believe in romantic love, which is a 'delusion, a snare. Bourgeois ideology' (124), Vinny is subsumed with romantic desire. She holds the lilac she has picked like 'a bride' and compares its scent to 'the wafts of perfume drifting through the garden of Thornfield on that Midsummer's Eve' when Mr Rochester tells Jane that he loves her (51-2). Vinny also 'wishes she were the sort of woman you meet in novels, who just radiates a soft feminine sexuality that has the hero madly in love with her within three seconds' (115), and her name, which Catherine truncates to 'Vin', suggests that she functions as Plain Jane's modern double: 'Vin *de table*, Catherine labelled her: Vin *ordinaire*' (175). Catherine's yearning for a romantic hero suggests that she likewise identifies with Bronte's romantic heroine: 'Charlie might not scowl like Mr Rochester but he would do' (62).

However, as the narrative progresses, Catherine and Vinny become as disillusioned and resistant to romance as Charlotte. Parallels between Catherine and Mrs Dalloway, both middle-aged women who wander through London buying flowers in preparation for a party, emphasise that Roberts, like Woolf, opposes the traditional romance plot. DuPlessis argues that in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) Woolf displaces romance from the center of the narrative and from this point on it never again appears in her work ‘assumed or unquestioned’ (47-8). Vinny’s rejection of romance is anticipated by an allusion to another novel by Woolf. Towards the end of *Orlando* (1928), Woolf’s eponymous protagonist sees an incomplete sign that reads ‘Amor Vin-’ (212). Vinny’s name echoes this sign, likewise fracturing, and rendering meaningless, the romantic motto ‘Amor vincit omnia’ or ‘love conquers all’ (DuPlessis 62).

Vinny’s scepticism towards romance is expressed through her growing dissatisfaction with fairy tales. Reflecting Radway’s observation that romances are like fairy tales (109), Vinny initially views life through a fairy tale lens: she describes herself and Catherine as ‘Babes in the Wood’ (107), the setting of their holiday home in France as ‘fairytale’ (128), and Adam as ‘the prince in disguise’ (128). Later, however, Vinny rejects fairy tales and the simple binary oppositions that underpin them: ‘Who were those two sisters in that French fairy tale? Rose Red and Snow White. One good and one bad. One feminine and one not....Was that the right story? No, Vinny shouted to herself: too simplistic’ (139-40). Vinny’s desire to rupture the binary oppositions that define women as good or bad and position them as rivals is reflected in her twin kinship with Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason, Rochester’s first wife. Like Bertha, Vinny is described as a ‘madwoman’ and ‘monster’ (105; 224), and fantasises that she is an ‘arsonist’ (176). This dual identification echoes readings of

Bronte's novel that suggest Bertha represents the socially unacceptable side of Jane (her sexual desire and rage) but also subverts the traditional construction of women as antagonists.

Vinny's rejection of narratives that construct women as rivals (like *Snow-White and Rose-Red*) allows the novel's various love triangles to be redrawn: the triangle in the modern-day narrative (Vinny-Adam-Catherine) reflects the triangle that Charlotte transposes from her life (Charlotte-Heger-Heger's wife) to her fiction (Jane-Rochester-Bertha). Initially, Vinny and Catherine are set against each other in the same manner as Jane and Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. However, whereas Bronte has Bertha fall to her death, so that Jane and Rochester can marry, Roberts has Adam fall from a bridge. Although he does not die, the removal of Adam enables Catherine and Vinny to renew their relationship, suggested by the possibility of a travelling to India together. As Roberts's woman-centred title indicates, the lesson that women learn in *The Mistressclass* is not to seek fulfilment in romantic relationships with men.

Reader, I Married Him

As the cover and title indicates, *Reader, I Married Him* blends canonical nineteenth century romantic fiction, epitomised by *Jane Eyre*, with its contemporary offspring, chick lit: a modern form of romantic fiction that follows the comic misadventures of a single, professional, young woman as she struggles to find Mr Right. While alluding to Bronte's classic, the novel simultaneously invokes Gillian Beer's influential study of Austen, Bronte, Eliot, and Gaskell, which bears the same title. Despite Beer's interest in romance, in her capacity as a 2002 Orange Prize judge she denounced chick lit and celebrated the demise of writing by women that deals with romantic

love.² By embracing chick lit, Roberts offers a playful retort to Beer's literary double standard whilst continuing to explore the seductive power of romance.

Reader focuses on Aurora, whose romantic inclinations are signalled by her identification with the heroines of her 'favourite novels' (24), the classic romantic narratives that form the basis of Beer's study: 'I felt like Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, when, after her dreary courtship by Casaubon, Will Ladislaw suddenly comes into her life' (49); 'I translated. Like Anne Elliott in *Persuasion*, at the concert in Bath, I gave just the gist of the speech' (169); 'Like Mr Darcy watching Elizabeth cry in *Pride and Prejudice*, he [Frederico] observed me in a compassionate silence' (184). As DuPlessis points out, these are all novels in which the heroine's quest for self-realization is ultimately subordinated to the marriage plot (7). Like the novel that has come to define chick lit, Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), which draws on Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) (the first book that Roberts ever bought), and like its sequel, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (1999), which parallels the plot of Austen's *Persuasion* (1818), Roberts's allusion to nineteenth century novels suggests that, despite the changes wrought by feminism, modern relationships between men and women remain largely unreconstructed in the personal sphere.

Initially, *Reader* appears to adopt the typical features of romantic fiction. In the exotic setting of Italy, Aurora pursues her passion for the handsome Father Michael, a man who bears all the hallmarks of the romantic hero: 'mysterious' (37), 'unattainable' (131), and macho – he rides a Harley Davidson and wears 'Eau Sauvage' aftershave (45). The dangers of romance are highlighted when, dancing with Michael, Aurora, who normally prefers 'to act rather than reflect' (156), relinquishes control and allows herself to be 'swept away' (131). Illustrating that romance

² See Angelique Chrisafis, 'Women's writing leaves sex behind', *The Guardian*, 10 June, 2002, p.5

eroticises male dominance and female submission, Aurora exclaims, ‘Born along by his strength, all I had to do was yield, follow. It was blissful!’ (130-1). The blindness engendered by romantic love is underlined when swollen mosquito bites prevent Aurora from opening her eyes and when she picks up the wrong spectacles and, blinded by love, she fails to see that the hero is a rake incapable of offering her love, care and commitment.

However, inspired by *capriccio*, a form of landscape painting that involves the playful transgression of norms, Roberts subverts the conventions of chick lit by reinventing the romantic heroine. As her name (meaning ‘dawn’) suggests, Aurora is a new kind of heroine. In contrast to the calorie-counting, thirty-something Bridget Jones, the middle-aged Aurora is a woman of appetite: offered three different specialities in a restaurant, she tells the waiter, ‘I’ll have the lot’ (93). Roberts also debunks a stock romantic device. Aurora regards Father Michael’s appearance in Italy while she is on holiday there as a ‘coincidence’ (50), but it transpires that he is an undercover detective pursuing her on suspicion of murder. Thus, running into each other is ‘Not synchronicity after all’ (227). Subverting the traditional male role, Father Michael turns out to be less a hero than a villain. Quashing all hopes of romance, he callously informs Aurora that he only slept with her to elicit information and she later witnesses him picking up a prostitute.

In the manner of many romances, *Reader* presents its heroine with two potential partners and Federico, the feminine museum director, functions as an alternative hero. Following the formula of romance, in which a misunderstanding keeps the true lovers apart, Aurora initially discounts Federico as a romantic prospect on the grounds he is gay. However, Roberts subverts the conventions she invokes by turning the gay male friend, a stock chick lit character, into the hero, albeit one who

resists dominant definitions of gender. In *Food, Sex and God* (1998), Roberts proposes that part of the unconscious appeal of romance lies in its subversion of gender roles: ‘Under its cloak of convention, the romance allows for some disruptive goings on, for the fixed categories of gender to lurch about a little’ (16). Like Rochester, whose ‘rampant masculinity’ is undercut by his cross-dressing (*FSG* 16), Frederico is an ambiguously gendered hero. He has some of the hero’s typically masculine features: like Rochester or Darcy, he is ‘standoffish’ (73), and like Father Michael he too wears ‘Eau Sauvage’ (115). Yet, in contrast to the classic hero, Frederico is ‘no mystery’ (122), and possesses several feminine characteristics. He is emotionally articulate, he can put ‘feelings into words’ (207), has ‘Masculine intuition’ (207), and is ‘oddly nervous’, rather than sexually dominant, in the bedroom (209). These feminine attributes subvert the ‘extremes of sexual difference’ on which traditional romance is based (DuPlessis 5), and undercut what Imelda Whelehan terms the ‘emotional separatism’ of chick lit (*Bridget* 68), epitomised by Bridget Jones’ favourite advice manual, John Gray’s *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1993). Roberts further feminises her hero, and makes explicit the subtext of the classic romance narrative, when Frederico offers the motherless Aurora maternal nurturance: after a series of missed lunches, he feeds the ‘hungry’ heroine (206). The importance of the mother is signalled by the opening words of the novel - ‘My mother’ (1) – and the theme of the male mother is underlined by the revelation that Aurora’s step-mother, Maude, is a man.

Roberts’s resistance to the tropes of romantic fiction is underlined by the novel’s conclusion: Frederico does not propose. Whelehan notes that ‘feminist fiction takes its heroines out of marriage into singledom, [whereas] chick lit moves in the opposite direction’ (*Feminist* 4). While the chick lit heroine is desperate to marry, the

thrice-married Aurora finally escapes the romantic myth that ‘a woman’s greatest happiness lies in love and marriage’ (Jones 198). *Reader* draws to a close with the lovers temporarily parting, rather than uniting, and ends with murder rather than marriage: Aurora shoots Michael and confesses, ‘Reader, I murdered him’ (229). The figure on the cover of the novel may be adorned with the trappings of hegemonic femininity but, anticipating Roberts’s departure from the conventions of gender and genre, she also holds a gun.

By the end of the novel, Aurora has learned to be wary of romance: ‘A warning bell clanged in my memory. Hastily I promised myself that this time I would be careful, at the beginning, not to become too romantic’ (224). As her attitude to romance changes so does her attitude to sex. In contrast to Bridget Jones, who seeks commitment rather than casual sex, Aurora abandons her belief that ‘You were only supposed to have sex if you were married’ (33). Further, while chick lit tends to be coy about sex (Whelehan, *Feminist* 206), Roberts offers a candid representation of the pleasures of the flesh. In her essay ‘Write, she said’, Roberts states that she wants to counter the myth that romance is to women what pornography is to men by joining the two genres (‘Write’ 233). *Reader* goes some way towards achieving this aim and, in doing so, challenges the ‘literary separatism’ that chick lit endorses (Whelehan, *BJD* 68). In contrast to Mills & Boon novels, in which orgasms are ‘always vaginal, always single, simultaneous with the man’s and experienced in missionary position’ (Jones 210), Roberts offers a woman-centred representation of sex that counters the myth of the vaginal orgasm and affirms female sexual pleasure: ‘He pulled off my knickers, slid his fingers in, found my clitoris, circled it’ (213). *Reader, I Married Him* may not be quite the ‘lesbian sado-masochistic romantic pornographic epic’ that

Roberts once said she wanted to write ('Write' 234), but it does transform chick lit into what might be better termed 'clit lit'.

Roberts's interest in romance reflects her socialist as well as her feminist sympathies. Aware from an early age that romance is regarded as 'trivial and banal' ('Write' 222), and that 'trash' is a term used to describe not only romance but also, implicitly, its (overwhelmingly female) readership (*FSG* 15), Roberts learned to hide her shameful desire for romantic fiction, which she consumed in secret. As Karen Westman notes, historical romance is regarded as 'bottom of the literary pit' and Heyer as 'Jane Austen "lite"' (Westman 165-6). By claiming writers like Heyer and Wollstonecraft as twin influences, Roberts situates herself in a specifically female literary tradition and erodes the boundary between high and popular culture. The suggestion that literary, mass-market and middlebrow romance explore similar concerns exposes the arbitrary nature of literary value, confirming Pierre Bourdieu's contention that cultural capital (forms of knowledge that confer power and status) works to reify class difference and legitimate the dominance of the ruling elite. By blending allusions to canonical and non-canonical texts, Roberts subverts the distinctions that maintain class hegemony and that shape the literary marketplace.

In conclusion, like the anonymous aphorism 'It begins when you sink in his arms and ends with your arms in his sink', Roberts demystifies romance, revealing that it upholds patriarchy. Yet, while she shows that romance is complicit with the dominant order, Roberts also illustrates that it gives unconscious expression to a transgressive desire for the mother. By rewriting romance, Roberts brings the subversive potential of the genre to the fore and subverts the social and literary hierarchies that affirm the value of canonical texts like *Jane Eyre* but dismiss the popular romances they inspire, and the women who read them. As her most recent

fiction demonstrates, it is only by revising romance (and the values of the literary market) that women can live - and read - happily ever after.

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