

## CONFESSIONS OF A HARLEQUIN READER: LEARNING ROMANCE AND THE MYTH OF MALE MOTHERS

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### I

Like most women, I think, I've read one or two Harlequins over the years when nothing else was available. All I saw, at first, were sexist, predictable, often poorly written stories with boorish heroes and embarrassingly childish heroines. They have a rigid formula which, unlike many other aspects, has remained unchanged over the years. In fact, the guide sheet for aspiring authors warns that the plot must not interfere with the romance and asks them to make their manuscript approximately (!) 188 pages in length. As one romance writer succinctly put it: "In the *Roman rose* the plot is always the same: attraction followed by repulsion; despair at the hero's indifference; jealousy; reconciliation on the last page."<sup>1</sup> That means the last page, literally. Never earlier.

Imagine my surprise when I first found myself actually enjoying a Harlequin. It was one summer when I stayed at a friend's cottage and it rained for days and days. I lay on a comfortable sofa, beside a warm wood stove and read what was available. The third Harlequin was a very different read from the first, and I found myself enjoying it. Once the pattern was familiar (it is so predictable that it's clear by the third book), it becomes interesting to see how each author works variations on a theme; however, there is much more involved.

Knowing the Harlequin formula made reading the books an emotional experience in such a way that I didn't begin to understand until much later.

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In this paper I will argue that the enormous emotional power of the Harlequin reading, and the romance fantasy in general, can be explained by the fact that the hero is in fact a mother figure for the reader/woman. When a reader knows the Harlequin formula she can identify the hero figure immediately, anticipate the pattern of events, and becomes involuntarily caught up in an extremely active and demanding psychological interaction with the text, one that has been called, without irony or exaggeration, "the Harlequin experience." Readers who don't know the formula do not and cannot participate in the same emotional and psychological way and have a very different reading experience that is much more dependent on the quality of the plot and the writing.

After I returned to the city and the pressures of thesis writing, I continued to read the occasional Harlequin; but I sometimes *chose* to read them when other books were available. At the time, I explained my pleasure in them by the fact that I was very, very busy and tired and needed a break. I didn't bake, garden, exercise, or do crossword puzzles or any other things that would make a welcome change from intellectual work. No wonder, I thought, that I like to sink into a mindless, predictable Harlequin world where you know exactly what is going to happen after only one or two pages.

Gradually, I began to read more and more Harlequins, until one day, when I found myself about to buy one, I began to suspect I was hooked. I reasoned that anyone who paid 95 cents or \$1.75 (or whatever it was back then) for the few often poorly written pages had to be hooked. So I vowed that I would never sink that kind of money into any habit, hoping in that way to limit myself to the occasional read. No sooner had I made my decision, than I discovered a second-hand store two blocks away from my place that sold ten Harlequins for a dollar! My resolve weakened, I became a customer and had to admit that I was a "Harlequin reader."

As soon as I realized this I "came out." As a feminist I know that the personal is political and that we must struggle individually to change ourselves as well as collectively to change society. Yet I didn't want to lose the strange comfort I found in Harlequins and I didn't feel they were terribly destructive or sinful. I could justify making Harlequins a non-struggle area of my life only if I genuinely felt they weren't so bad. Also, if they weren't so bad I had to be able to tell my friends that I read them. In any case, skeletons in the closet leave you awfully vulnerable, if not to blackmail then to terrible embarrassment, and I wasn't up to living with the risk. I didn't make a public announcement or send cards but I did drop it into conversations whenever I could. This wasn't easy to do, but it got easier as I developed arguments defining women's romantic fantasies as harmless (to others at least, if not themselves), human, and relatively innocent, especially when compared to the pornographic fantasies of men.

No feminist I told ever admitted to me that she read Harlequins or any other kind of romances; it may be alright to watch soaps but no one ad-

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mits to Harlequins. Not all women are Harlequin readers of course. But many read one or another form of romance novel. Even more have enjoyed such classics as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Rebecca*, *Gone with the Wind*, or the film *Moscow Does not Believe in Tears*. It must be a rare woman, heterosexual, or lesbian who does not know, if only from her teenage years, the attraction of the knight in shining armor who will take over her life, give it meaning and take care of all her troubles for ever after.

Yet the fact that the appeal of romance is at least recognized, if not shared by most women including feminists even when it is marginal to their lives and self-image, is not used as a resource by feminist analysts of Harlequins. This departure from one of the basic tenets of feminist research has, I think, weakened much feminist analysis of Harlequins.

Not surprisingly feminists find deeply negative messages in these books. The plots often seem to legitimize general male boorishness and lack of respect for women, to reinforce the sexual double standard, and to infantilize women who are usually younger, more innocent, lower in status, less well established, less sure of themselves, and more vulnerable than the hero. They tend to perpetuate the myth of women's powerlessness and necessary dependence on men. Their central presumption (with a few notable recent exceptions) is that contentment and meaning in life not only can but must be found in love and marriage.

Feminist critics have noted that these messages "betray complexities of life" and "approve and confirm the present structure of society,"<sup>2</sup> they "reinforce the prevailing cultural code [that] pleasure for women is men,"<sup>3</sup> and they are not radical critiques of capitalist patriarchy.<sup>4</sup> All of which are true but unidimensional, for these critics focus on what Harlequins do for capitalist and patriarchal ruling groups without addressing the equally important and more interesting question of what they do for women. For women not only *choose* to buy millions of these books, but have a large and direct input into their shape and content through Harlequin reader panels, survey research, and newsletters.<sup>5</sup> The popularity of Harlequin Romances is as much women's creation as it is Harlequin Enterprises'. In order to understand this we need to know not just how their explicit messages serve "the system" or what the words of the books say, but what they become for the women who read them (or, as some would say, "construct the experience as readers"!).

Some feminists have recently begun to treat the woman reader as an active subject and ask this question, but even they tend to treat her as someone completely different from themselves. Janice Radway, for instance, was among the first feminist writers on popular romance to accord the woman reader an active role in the process. On the basis of important original research, including in-depth interviews with readers, she criticizes other feminists for reading Harlequins as simply oppressive myths. But she does so in terms that emphasize the separation rather than connection between researcher and researched, arguing that we should not presume our "own

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reading [is] a legitimate rendering of the meaning of the genre for those who usually read it."<sup>6</sup> She describes the process of interpretation as: "Trying to render the complex significance of events and behaviours as they are experienced by members of a culture *for others not in or of that culture.*"<sup>7</sup> She also presents her findings as "the product of an interrogation of one cultural system by another carried out through the interaction of ethnographer and informant."<sup>8</sup>

There is no doubt that interpretation is necessary and that there are truths to be discovered that (we) readers have not articulated. There is also little doubt that the language of a scholarly paper or dissertation is not the same as that of Harlequins or of (we) Harlequin readers; it is necessarily a foreign or second language for women researchers, however proficient we may be. We should ascertain that our method does not deny us the use of our first and shared language as women, even when we use the second as well. For this shared language and culture is a resource we bring as women to our analysis of women, and romance is an area of our culture that must raise important personal questions for us as feminists, which, in turn, lends itself well to an interrogation from our own lives.

My experience as a feminist and Harlequin reader starkly raised the question "What do they offer me?" I began reading Harlequins before they were even slightly influenced by the values of the women's movement (see below), and as a feminist I often found their message/story offensive. I had to suspend or censor these judgement/feelings in order to enjoy the book. The fact that I could do this suggested that there was another level of meaning for me; something less explicit that appealed to me and presumably to other readers; something that could help to explain why this simple and threadbare formula should so attract women, and how women, who know the meaning to be false, can lose themselves in it; in other words, something that could begin to answer the question "What is the myth of romance for women?"

## II: The Hero as Nurturer

As I pondered this, I quickly realized that the hero in Harlequin Romances may be supercilious, arrogant, and patronizing but he is also and above all independent and self-sufficient. This point is often made in detailed contrast to "the other man" who is a common feature of Harlequins. These "other men" are weak, childish, dependent, sullen, and needy. They whine and pout and constantly demand attention and mothering from the heroine:<sup>9</sup>

Sullenly he pushed her hand away. Briefly Kelly was reminded of a little boy who had been thwarted in a game (Kelly's Man, Rosemary Carter, HP362: 5).

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This wasn't the Roger she knew — this man was a stranger, a petulant spoilt boy. Her own anger rising, she said the unforgivable thing. She said, "Roger darling, do grow up!" (*A Very Special Man*, Marjorie Lewty, 2282: 11).

"You're so relaxing Kate," he said happily once. "The one person in the world that I can always rely on completely to look after me. I don't know where I'd be without you" (*Dark Encounter*, Suzanna Firth, 2307: 7).

"Men like me can be lonely, they can sometimes long for a prop — someone near and dear to lean upon. I need you, so please don't be too long in agreeing to marry me." (Needless to say she didn't marry him. *Harbour of Love*, Anne Hampson, 2230.)

The refusal and revolt is sometimes explicit:

The first night ever he had stayed [at her apartment] Gavin had flaked out, with Elizabeth tucking him in like a baby. It even occurred to her then, that a large part of her affection for him was maternal. In many ways Gavin was a huge child, and he would probably require a lot of mothering. "I can't do it!" She said aloud in piteous resignation. (And she breaks off the engagement. *Broken Rhapsody*, Margaret Way, HP549: 102.)

The implicit contrast between these men and the hero is often made explicitly:

Ian was gentle, idealistic, a bit of a dreamer, with one foot in the past like herself. He needed someone practical and hardheaded to look after him; to see that he ate the right food at the right time and didn't spend too many hours bending over his work. Whereas Tearlach was tough and realistic and didn't need anyone to look after him (*Beyond the Sunset*, Flora Kidd, 1732: 131).

Nicholas was all the things she most detested — arrogant, conceited, domineering. She guessed he was self-sufficient and ruthless. But he was not childish (*Kelly's Man*, Rosemary Carter, HP362: 66).

Harlequins are also about *not* to having to mother men, and I think this strikes a strong and pleasurable chord with women who do so much of this. Not only are Harlequin heroes grown up (rare birds in women's experience),<sup>10</sup> they are sensitive and considerate and take care of the heroine — something so unexpected that the heroine frequently marvels about it: "What a strange man he was, she thought as she sipped her tea. She had just witnessed in him an unexpected sensitivity. Many men wouldn't even have noticed she was upset" (*The Icicle Heart*, Jessica Steele, 2297: 106). Whether remarked upon or not, Harlequin Romances are full of heroes who take care of heroines:

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"Let's go back to the house," he said, "before you catch cold!" (*Isle of the Golden Drum*, Rebecca Stratton, 1991: 144).

"Let's get these painkillers down, shall we?" . . . He held her firmly and gently while she swallowed the capsules. "You don't have to stay with me," she protested weakly . . . "I think I'll stay all the same" (*Blue Lotus*, Margaret Way, 2328: 175).

He walked to the sofa, picked up her shoes sitting on the floor beside it, and carried them back to the heater. "We'll get them warm before you have to put them on," he explained.

His thoughtfulness sent a warm glow of pleasure through her veins. That combination of indomitable strength and tender consideration was rare (*A Lyon's Share*, Janet Dailey, HP208: 49).

As he unwrapped the dripping oilskin, he said, "Now pop up and get into something dry while I make things ship-shape down here."

With a little sign of contentment Beverley climbed slowly upstairs. It was wonderful to have things taken completely out of her hands . . . When she came down again it was in warm dry clothes. The fire had been built up and the flames roared and in front of it was placed a basin of warm water.

As soon as he saw her Alex placed her firmly in the armchair, pulled off her slippers and placed her feet gently but firmly in the warm water (*Lord of the Isles*, Henrietta Reid, 2442: 92).

The same caring scenes are described over and over again in different books, by different authors, sometimes in almost the same words:

He came into the room bearing a bowl of warm water that smelled faintly of antiseptic . . . His touch was very gentle as he bathed her grazed hands (*Hotel of Aconandos*, Katrine Britt, 2449: 79-77).

His hands were so gentle as he bathed her face, she almost didn't notice the stinging pain. The water was exactly the right heat and he laced it with antiseptic (*Kiss of a Tyrant*, Margaret Pagiter, 2375: 179).

Some analysts read the Harlequin hero's involvement in domestic and nurturing tasks as a symbolic domestication of the male that is satisfying to women. Others have suggested that it symbolizes a power that women have won through love. There are surely elements of truth in both of these related points, but reflection on my own reading experience suggests that, more importantly, this theme provides the reader not only with an escape from the constant demand to physically and emotionally nurture others, but also an access to that same comfort, at least in fantasy.

Janice Radway's interviews revealed this so strongly that she identified it as the prime attraction of romance reading for women:

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Romance reading is both an assertion of deeply felt psychological needs and a means for satisfying those needs. Simply put, these needs arise because no other member of the family as it is presently constituted in this still-patriarchal society, is yet charged with the affective and emotional reconstitution of a wife and mother.<sup>11</sup>

Her findings support my own sense that part of what women find in the romance fantasy is someone "who will love them as they wish to be loved."<sup>12</sup>

### III: Domination, Infantilization, and Resistance

All this is true but it does not explain the undeniably negative and unpleasant behaviour of the hero which is often also a prominent theme. He can be domineering, patronizing, dismissive, arrogant, unpredictable, high-handed, bossy, incommunicative, bullying, aggressive, and he even occasionally uses force. There is also the even more unpleasant infantilization of the heroine. She often finds herself needing help, and she often reacts to the hero in silly and childish ways. Why is that an apparently necessary part of the formula?

When I first began to read Harlequins I couldn't understand the foolishness of it all. Both hero and heroine behave in unbelievably ridiculous ways, misunderstand each other all the time, and do things that in any other context would jeopardize any respect, and therefore concern, the reader might have. I thought I had solved the problem when I realized that it was quite a feat to keep two people who are meant to be together, who are deeply and madly in love, apart for 188 pages. The authors must have to resort to boorishness on the part of the hero and silliness on the part of the heroine to do this. But this is not the full explanation.

Ann Snitow<sup>13</sup> and others read the hero's bullying and the heroine's infantilization as a part of the general patriarchal message that women are not full people, are not to be taken seriously, are not responsible and are necessarily dependent on men. What, however, is in this for women? Some have suggested that portraying negative male behaviour helps women live with this behaviour in their own lives because in Harlequins there is always an explanation for the hero's coldness. Usually it has to do with his love for the heroine. He thinks she is in love with someone else, or is too young for him, or he has been deeply hurt by a woman in the past and is frightened of this dawning love.

It has also been suggested that the uppity, reactive, foot-stamping behaviour of the heroine may give women readers pleasure because they like to see heroines who can talk back to men and give them a hard time. Readers like heroines who do not try to please and impress men, who are, at least at first, indifferent to male opinion.

Certainly, the heroine is *never* looking for a man or thinking of marriage. If she is not indifferent to men and marriage, she has an absolute aver-

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sion. Early on she isn't interested enough to use feminine wiles, later she disdains their use. One explanation put forward for this is that the heroine's lack of interest in the hero is required by a traditional code that forbids "good" women to take an active part in initiating sexual relationships. But when I first began to ponder the heroine's unvarying initial indifference or aversion to the hero, it seemed to me that the heroine's lack of initiative is important not primarily because we are bound by an internalized patriarchal morality but because it indicates *genuine love* (whatever that is).

It is important to the reader, who knows that men are easy prey to feminine wiles, that the hero's interest in the heroine cannot be manipulated, that he is one of the rare men who is immune to the temptation of the surface appeal of even a stunningly beautiful woman. There is something very satisfying for the reader in a hero's love for an ordinary (though appealing) looking heroine when she has not set out to trap him while another, much more beautiful and sophisticated, woman has. This classic Harlequin scenario signals to the reader that we are seeing "true love." The heroine is loved for herself, warts, tantrums and all.

All these explanations of the appeal of the domineering hero and the infantile heroine are useful; and they are by no means mutually exclusive, but they remain discrete explanations of separate aspects of the formula. They do not, alone or together, provide an understanding of the tight, total Harlequin formula as the seamless whole that it is, and they cannot account for the overwhelmingly powerful emotional impact of "good"<sup>14</sup> Harlequins.

### IV: Emotional Power

I first became aware of how powerful the emotional experience of reading a "good" Harlequin is while I was staying at a friend's cabin. We were reading after dinner when someone rudely interrupted me to ask: "Angie, why have you got that silly grin on your face?" I had been reading a Harlequin and forgot where I was. I had even forgotten myself. I was, as so many readers have testified, in "another world." When readers say "I feel as if I am in a different world every time I read a Harlequin" and "Harlequins are magic carpets . . . away from pain and depression"<sup>15</sup> they are speaking the literal truth about their reading experience.

Readers also frequently and vehemently attest to the importance of a predictable plot, and their reading habits support their claim that this is essential. Despite the almost total guarantee of a happy ending many readers are hesitant to trust it and read the conclusion before they begin the book anyway. Kathleen Gillis<sup>16</sup> says this is because women are *tired* when they read the books and need something relaxing, predictable, and easy to read rather than challenging. Tom Henighen<sup>17</sup> ascribes this desire for a guaranteed happy ending to the middle class housewife's commitment to safe, "straight" love. He deplores her brainwashed willingness to be con-



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tent with tame and ritualized kisses before an inevitable happy ending. This is so boring to him that he fails altogether to consider that it might be exciting to women readers and instead presumes that it is the result of simple repression on their part.

In fact, a predictable plot and happy ending are important to the reader because they allow her to invest a lot more emotionally than she would otherwise be able to risk and therefore to experience the full power of the reading experience. The obvious question, of course, is where does this power come from? It is certainly not evoked by the words on the pages of the books. The quality of the writing, which varies enormously, cannot account for the unvarying power of the reading experience which must, then, be explained by the reader's interaction with and response to the author's (good or bad; successful or unsuccessful) presentation of the formula. The reader of Harlequins, although intellectually unchallenged, even passive, is enormously active emotionally.<sup>18</sup>

### V: Hero as Mother

Reflections on my own Harlequin reading, combined with a close textual study, leads me to believe that the emotional power of the romance fantasy in general, and the Harlequin formula in particular, largely results from the hero who, in fact, is a mother figure for women. When we read "good" Harlequins we are re-enacting the emotionally demanding ambivalence of our relationship with an unpredictable, tender, threatening, all-powerful mother.

'True Love,' as an unconditional love which comes unsought and unearned, that is, without the heroine actively seeking it and regardless of what she does to antagonize the hero, is like our dream of mother-love. The hero's nurturing and domineering behaviour, two aspects of the childhood experience of mothering, are presented as two constant and interacting themes, often evoked with symbols of mother and child in scenes which echo mother/child images, and involve explicit references to the male as caretaker/mother and the female as a motherless child.

The heroine is usually an orphan or someone who has been neglected as a child. Margaret Jensen, in a survey of 200 Harlequins, found that at least one-third of the heroines are orphans.<sup>19</sup> Most of the others only have a father or an uncaring and selfish mother or stepmother. The few heroines who have an intact family are thousands of miles away from them.

"My mother died when I was two, a road accident," Elyn said briefly, her smile fading (*Desert Flower*, Dana James, 2632: 22).

"My mother died when I was three, . . . I can't remember her" (*The Trodden Paths*, Jacqueline Gilbert, 2492: 79).

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Her parents had died within weeks of each other after a car crash and she was virtually alone in the world (*The Rainbow Days*, Jean S. MacLeod, 1719: 5).

Nicole had never been envious of anyone in her life, not even the girls whose lives held the one thing lacking in her own: a mother (*Walk in the Shadows*, Jayne Bowling, HP247: 19).

Her mother had died shortly after Stacey was born leaving her globe-trotting husband with the unfamiliar and frightening task of raising their child (*No Quarter Asked*, Violet Winspear, HP124: 6).

Often they long for the mothering they have missed:

Depression dropped over her like a dark mantle and suddenly all she craved was peace, an end to the hostility between them. She yearned to rest against him, and know him kind and compassionate, cradling and comforting her, giving her the understanding she had not known since her grandmother had died (*Wait for the Storm*, Jayne Bowling, HP505: 138).

She sat there for a long time, wishing desperately that she had someone to turn to for advice, to confide in, but there had been no one, not since her mother had died, and she suddenly felt as lonely now as she had done in those first terrible months of grief (*Summer Fire*, Sally Wentworth, HP456).

Tears filled her eyes as she tried to fight off the knowledge that all this beauty and security could have been hers. She could have grown up here, she could have swung in that swing that hung from the lower limb of the silver birch by the gate, as a baby she could have sat in the lovingly preserved high-chair in the living-room . . . she could have called this wonderful place her home (*Man of the High Country*, Mary Moore, 2349: 64).

Hence, of course the charges that Harlequin Romances deliberately infantilizes the heroine to reinforce the sexist message that women are childlike, vulnerable, and dependent. This is a damaging message that is no doubt conveyed by the books, but it does not explain why a childlike heroine is an unailing feature of the Harlequin formula<sup>20</sup> and why it is appealing to women.

In fact, the emotional power of the "Harlequin experience" requires that the reader regress to childhood in order to relive the vicissitudes of the intense fear and love relationship with the mother. The heroine of a Harlequin usually does not know until the last page that the hero loves her. The other 187 pages take the heroine and reader for an emotional roller coaster ride focused intensely on:

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- the heroine's losing fight against inevitable unconditional love for and dependence on the hero/mother;
- her deep ambivalence toward the hero/mother with sharp swings between love and hate, admiration, and resentment;
- the thrilling highs when she is noticed and nurtured by the hero/mother;
- the terrible loss when she is not, and fears of loss and separation from him/her;
- the searing pain and jealousy of her sibling rivalry, a woman whom she thinks is preferred by the hero/mother;
- the constant and intense desire for comfort and security through loss of self and fusion with the hero/mother;
- the final ecstatic fulfillment of that wish.

All these components of the Harlequin formula are essential parts of the myth/fantasy of fusion with the mother. The emotional power of the tussles and antagonisms, tenderness and rivalry, closeness and distance of the protagonists come from the reader's reliving of the conflicted mother/child relationship in the secure knowledge of its eventual resolution.

For some, the addictive aspect of this reading may come because it provides only a false resolution. The resolution/fusion is always left to the last page of the book because it is the aim of the reading process,<sup>21</sup> but the comfort is tantalizingly brief, gone as soon as the book is closed. Continued release/comfort can only be gained by picking up another book.<sup>22</sup>

Certain types of activities, commonly shared by mother and child, appear frequently enough in different Harlequins to earn the status of themes. The hero and heroine shop for clothes for the heroine together; he comforts her when she has bad dreams; he scolds her for risking illness; he tucks her into bed and gives her medicine; he leads her by the hand; restrains her physically from running away, having tantrums and so on. The hero's maternal role is glaringly obvious in pervasive nurturing scenes like those cited earlier and below:

[H]e leaned over to see that her door was safely locked (*The Man on the Peak*, Katarina Britt, 2305: 144).

When she turned to go on, Judy discovered that Charles had come back and was waiting for her. As he saw she was ready to go on, he took her by the hand. Judy made no protest, glad of the assistance as the pull of the hill became even greater (*Spread Your Wings*, Ruth Clemence, 1195: 133).

It was exquisite relief when they sighted tents and Luke would swing her up into his arms and carry her to the camp fire, propping her round with blankets and sleeping bags for comfort (*Tiger Sky*, Ruth E. Iver, 2244: 115).

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"There, there my love. It's all right. Just a dream." And the arms lost their feeling of constriction as a gentle hand brushed the hair from Verna's sweat soaked brow (*The Sugar Dragon*, Victoria Gorden, p. 138).

Jason . . . took her into his arms, as gently as if she'd been a scared child. She clung to him, all the pent-up emotions and tensions of the day breaking in a storm of weeping. He held her closely, stroking her head soothingly without speaking (*Moorland Magic*, Elizabeth Ashton, 1741: 155).

Later in the dark hours, reliving her ordeal she cried out his name. He was beside her in a flash. She dreamed she was lying in his arms, and when morning came, she found her dream was real (*The Little Imposter*, Lilian Peake, HP206: 190).

With a tremendous effort she opened her eyes staring back at him. "It's a lovely feeling to know I'm safe. Thank you."

"Lie still. You're almost asleep." Strands of her dark red hair clung to her cheek and almost involuntarily he brushed them away. "Now, I don't want to hear another sound out of you," he commanded, as her eyes clung to him and her mouth trembled to say a little more. "Good night" (*Blue Lotus*, Margaret Way, 2328: 24).

The maternal role is also obvious in more impatient infantilizing interactions:

It seemed he was always speaking her name with a marked degree of exasperation (*Kiss of a Tyrant*, Margaret Pargiter, 2375: 160).

"Miss Hurst," he said, and she broke into a run, making for the stairs. But they were so far away and he was so quick in his pursuit of her, he had her by the wrist before she was half way across the hall (*Little Imposter*, Lilian Peake, HP206: 161).

He took her hand, then looked her over. "Look at you, girl. You're covered in sand!" He dusted her down, brushing the sand from her shoulders and arms, turning her and brushing her back and hips (*Ibid.*, p. 136).

He seemed so overpoweringly tall standing over her the way he was, and she was glad when he brought himself down nearer her level, squatting beside her on his heels, his eyes watching her quizzically (*Isle of the Golden Drum*, Rebecca Stratton, 2375: 160).

He lifted . . . the bulky parcel and walked out of the compartment without waiting to see if Judy followed him or not. After a seconds hesitation . . . [she] set off down the corridor after him, her high heels clicking twice to every step he took. Charles turned as she

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climbed out of the carriage and putting out a hand, helped her down (*Spreading Your Wings*, Ruth Clemence, 1193: 185).

The hero is often bossy and angry in contexts that echo parental discipline. He orders her for her own good; and he gets angry with her because he fears for her safety:

Antonio exploded into anger. "You have the impudence to call me stubborn, and yet you refuse to take the quickest and most comfortable way, even though you are soaked to your skin! *Madre mia*, Francesca, I shall soon lose my temper with you if you do not behave.

Francesca glared at him indignantly and would have objected, but he reached for her left hand and almost crushed her fingers with the hard strong pressure of his. Then giving her a slight shake as he drew her alongside him he started for the village, giving her little option but to go too, and making very little allowance for her shorter stride as she squelched along in her wet shoes (*Trader's Cay*, Rebecca Stratton, 2376: 132).

He took a step which brought him close and he stood over her, tall and lean and formidable." Are you going to do as you're told?" he enquired softly. "I mean what I say, Teri, I'll dump you in that bath, clothes and all unless you obey me" (*Enchanted Dawn*, Anne Hampton, HP132: 83).

He turned to stoop and drop a light kiss on the forlorn little mouth, and said abruptly "Is that tooth bothering you?" "A little bit," she evaded his searching glance . . . "You'd better make an appointment to have it seen to straight away," he said firmly. "Do that this morning." "Yes Jason," she nodded (*Miranda's Marriage*, Margery Hilton, HQ1742: 116).

"Don't interrupt me!" He shouted his voice hard as flint. "Now drop your stubbornness. Do as I say. Go and rest. It's an order!" With that he strode into his study and shut the door decisively (*Beloved Viking*, Suzanne Lynne, 2007: 123).

The hero's exasperation and anger sometimes extends to threats of violence, in some cases even to violence. Though violence does not feature in what readers have identified as "good" Harlequins.

His breath rasped in anger. "You knew you were going on a journey. Surely the sensible thing to do was eat if only a little. You really are the most irresponsible young woman I have ever known! You ought never to be let out on your own. I could spank you" (*The Spanish Grandee*, Katerina Britt, 1966: 106)

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"I could beat the living daylights out of you, so go easy, Stacey. What made you run away?" "I'm not running away," She wasn't aware of the tears running down her face, but she did know that she was trembling too hard to be able to speak clearly (*Kiss of a Tyrant*, Margaret Pargiter, 2375: 143).

The Harlequin heroine has extremely ambivalent feelings toward the hero/mother throughout the book. She is resistant to his authority and to her love for him: ". . . 'drink it quietly like a good girl' — he said. 'Must you talk to me as if I'm a child!' she flared. 'I didn't know I was,' he frowned . . ." (*Man in a Million*, Roberta Leigh, HP127: 120). It is clear from the beginning, however, that the struggle is against a more powerful adversary. The power is ultimately the hero/mother's to accept or reject the heroine/child and to command; this is an important given in the formula:

Kyle walked in, and his presence filled the room with sudden vibrant power. I can't fight him, Lola thought — but I'm going to try (*Kyle's Kingdom*, Mary Wibberley, 1836: 133).

Sloan only said her name but Stacey felt defeated: "All right I'll go," she capitulated nervously . . . She could be angry with him, shout at him, cry, argue, and defy him, but in the end it all boiled down to one thing — she obeyed him (*Kiss of a Tyrant*, Margaret Pargiter, 2375: 159).

The hero/mother is portrayed from the child/heroine's point of view as unpredictable and threatening, the heroine's anger, resentment and dislike vie with love for the upper hand. She wants her separate identity and her connection to the mother/hero. The heroine's emotions encompass the ebb and flow of this love/hate, trust/distrust, calm/storm, desire for and fear of separation:

He held out his other hand to her. She went to him and took it almost drowning in the flood of contradictory emotion he aroused in her — resentment, love, challenge, passion — and longing for the giving of his hand to mean more than it did, his fingers the merest light touch upon hers in a clasp which was only guiding her up the stairs (*Pact Without Desire*, Jane Arbor, 2299: 103).

Charles was always unpredictable. She stole a quick glance at his face. In the dim light from the dashboard it was anything but reassuring. Where had the tender lover of last night gone to? Judy sighed as she tried to remember all the wonderful words he had poured into her ears not twenty-four hours ago. It might just have been a dream (*Spread Your Wings*, Ruth Clemence, 1193: 74).

Never before had she been as aware of a man as she was of him: of his animal strength and the sheer physical magnificence of bone

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and muscle; of his sharp intelligence that one moment could wound and the next could warm (*Man in a Million*, Roberta Leigh, HP127: 123).

As always when they were alone together she had this feeling of completeness, of utter content, as though nothing in the world could hurt her — except himself (*Connelys Castle*, Gloria Bevan, 1809).

She recognized with astonishment that she could openly defy Luke, yell at him and let herself go, yet turn to him in need as if she had known him all her life (*Tiger Sky*, Rose Elver, 2244: 59).

Tania Modleski has also noticed the heroine's ambivalence, particularly anger and rebellion toward the hero in the Harlequin formula. She argues that the heroine's revolt is a fantasy outlet for female resentment, and that the life-threatening accidents which dog the heroine in another fixed component of the formula are the logical extensions of this resentment "in the fantasy of ultimate revenge through self-destruction."<sup>23</sup>

More commonly than not, Harlequin heroines suffer life threatening accidents. They are carried away by the tide, stranded in the desert, hit by falling rocks, cut by sharp knives, run over by cars — all of which serve to show how precious the women really are. Modleski calls these events "the heroines' disappearing act" and argues that they are the only safe way to channel the heroine's (and readers's) anger and frustration. It is true that the wish to harm the other by harm to the self is the fantasy of the powerless against the powerful. Interestingly, however, the original and primal experience of this fantasy is, for us all, in relation to our mother: "She'll be sorry she treated me like that when she finds I'm not here tomorrow"; "If I died tonight she'd be in agony of grief"; or "If she thought I were dying she'd realise that she loves me."

Also, in this particular fantasy, power is not sought solely for revenge but also to be loved, to be treasured, and to feel one's worth to the other — hero/mother. It is no coincidence that the accidents in Harlequins, as in our childhood fantasies, lead to tenderness and nurturing and often, if not always, to avowals of love. The heroine's accident sometimes makes the hero aware of his love for her. It always and primarily gives her and the reader an occasion to revel in that love, concern, and care. The reader can regress to her powerful childhood needs and luxuriate in the wish fulfillment of childish fantasies:

She leaned forward, and at that moment a great wall of green, splintery glass towered over her as she was swept from the rocks and tossed over and over like a rag doll. She was gasping, fighting for breath. There was a roaring in her ears like a mighty wind. She couldn't breathe . . . couldn't breathe . . . Then she felt herself jerked upwards and she gulped in welcome draughts of air. A voice said: "Take it easy. I've got you. Just relax. . . ." Then a wave swept

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them both towards the shore, and Scott, picking her up like a child, held her in his arms and he strode up the beach and towards the Land Rover standing on the sand (*Hills of Maketu*, Gloria Bevan, 1309: 184-185).

Slowly consciousness returned and through the veils of mist that swirled before her eyes, she became aware that someone was holding her and touching her head with light, deft fingers to ascertain her hurt. She tried to see who it was, but her eyes would not focus and she closed them again dizzy and sick.

She leaned back thankfully against the stalwart shoulder supporting her, and felt the rough wool of a sweater against her cheek. The man shifted a little to ease her into a more comfortable position, and she felt, or thought she felt, his lips against her uninjured temple, while he murmured in a voice vibrant with anxiety: "Charity, are you all right? Little one. . . ."

She smiled faintly. There was only one person whom her rescuer could be, and she was intensely moved by the tenderness in that low murmur. This was love as she had dreamed of it, kind and compassionate, not fierce and demanding. She had not dared to hope he was capable of such gentleness (*Moorland Magic*, Elizabeth Ashton, 1741: 78).

It is not incidental, either, that the hero has then, like the mother, actually given the heroine life:<sup>24</sup>

Everything that had happened, being lost, then rescued in this beautiful, pitiless, wilderness was strange to her, but nothing more strange than being cradled in this imperious man's arms.

She sighed deeply and brushed the tears from her face. Her head fell back against his shoulder and her melancholy, deep blue eyes closed. He was strong, the strongest man she had ever known, and she owed him her life (*Blue Lotus*, Margaret Way, 2328: 25).

Here one almost expects the hero to begin breast feeding the heroine.

A rival for the hero's love is another constant in the romance formula. Ninety-eight percent of the Harlequins that Margaret Jensen surveyed had a female rival for the hero's love.<sup>25</sup> In earlier Harlequins, these are a whole species of extremely beautiful, manipulative women who pretend to be all heart and warmth to men but don't bother to hide their coldness, indifference, and cunning from other women. Your quintessential male-identified woman is revealed as follows:

"How clever of you," smiled Miss McGrath, and turned to the two men. It would always be that way Rachel knew instinctively. For Fiona McGrath was what is known as a man's woman (*The Other Linding Girl*, Mary Burchell, 1431: 81).



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Rosemary was not genuinely the quiet and womanly sort . . . Quiet perhaps. But remarkably resourceful in her sly and secret way. Going almost silently about her business, despising her own sex and preying on it (*Girl with a Challenge*, Mary Burchell, Harlequin Omnibus, 37: 242-243).

Felicia with her own sex made no attempt to be pleasant (*Blue Lotus*, Margaret Way, 2328: 114).

In more recent Harlequins, the other woman is much less likely to be a nasty, male-identified, woman-hating manipulator. She may be kind and friendly, warm, generous, and gifted, but still breath-takingly beautiful and a feared potential rival for the hero's love: "It would have been so much easier to feel right about her feelings for Travis if Miranda was a witch. But she wasn't. She was nice — and sweet — and offered the hand of friendship" (*Wonderers Dream*, Rita Clay, Silhouette, 1981[*date*]).

This, like other significant recent changes in Harlequin's content (such as heroines who are older, are not virgins, and will keep their careers after marriage)<sup>26</sup> is an interesting sign of the impact of feminism in this unlikely arena. More important for my argument, however, is the fact that none of these changes alter the basic dynamics of the Harlequin read. The unwitting, innocent, and even likable rival, is still a rival. Her presence and the hero's suspected love for her still puts the heroine through the tortures of the damned and allows the reader to relive her sibling rivalry in the security of a happy ending: "The pain of unrequited love was all the more unbearable because she loved him so desperately, and there was nothing she could do" (*The Man on the Peak*, Katerina Britt, 2305: 139-140). For we readers know all the time that, whether the heroine or even the hero know it or not, the hero is, or very soon will be, madly in love with the heroine: "His gaze went past the glittering figure [of the rival] to the girl in a simple flame colored dress who stood in the shadows" (*The Hills of Maketu*, Gloria Bevan, 1309: 164). This, of course, gives tremendous power to the heroine which a number of analysts have pointed out is pleasurable in itself to women in a male-dominated society. As Margaret Atwood has said:

Harlequins are about doing the best you can under the circumstances which are not dandy. Harlequins are about Beauty and the Beast. Harlequins are about lion taming: if you can't be a lion yourself you can at least domesticate one . . . Harlequins are, among other things, how-to books on the fantasy level, for women who experience daily their own lack of power.<sup>27</sup>

The tall, strong, commanding male learns that he needs the heroine although not, of course, in the same way as the weak, dependent other man who leans on her. The hero will never do anything to harm the heroine and he will do everything he can to make her happy because he loves her.

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Not unvaryingly, but often enough to be noteworthy, the heroine's new sense of power over the hero is noted explicitly:

"I will give it all up, if you wish;" he told her with such simple sincerity she felt ashamed of her lingering doubts. . . .

He, the most arrogant of the Valdivias, was allowing her to choose his destiny, placing his life, his future and his happiness in her hands (*Valley of Paradise*, Margaret Rome, pp. 187-188).

"And when you said you'd come with me, down here to find Fleur — to find Philips, I wasn't sure why you were coming, and it took all the strength of will I possessed to say I'd bring you with me, knowing I might have to beg you to come back with me."

"You'd have begged?" Her voice shook with the turbulent emotions that shook her like a physical shock, and Clary looked down at her with such fierceness in his eyes that she had to believe he meant it.

"I'd have begged," he said hoarsely, "if I had to, to get you back!" (*The House of Kingdom*, Lucy Gillen, 2026: 187.)

Janet Patterson has argued that, through the hero's love, the heroine/reader gains access to the male world in the only way open to her.<sup>28</sup> Tania Modleski and others have also noted the satisfaction for women in vicariously winning power over the male dominator.<sup>29</sup> This is no doubt true but it's not the whole truth.

The Harlequin world is a female world, not a male world. There is *no* male world in a Harlequin. The hero's world is one of beautiful furniture, comfortable beds, magnificent views, delicious and plentiful food, and fine weather; not competition, business, or public power. He, of course, has considerable power and stature in the public world but that is not what he represents in the Harlequins. What the heroine gains access to through him is beauty, ease, and luxury — creature comforts and, above all, security and a home for ever and ever. Her concern is not to impress the hero or to use him in her career; she is appreciative of women's skills and activities, and supportive of other women who support her in return, and her woman-identification may be explicitly contrasted to the male identification of the heroine's rival who uses and betrays women in her pursuit of the hero.

The heroine, for one reason or another, usually lives in the hero's beautiful and luxurious home. This, of course, provides lots of opportunity for contretemps, misunderstanding, tension, mutual awareness, and excitement. It also dramatizes the homelessness of the heroine who unflinchingly finds herself strongly, even violently attached to this place. The pain of having to leave his home often rivals the pain of losing the hero. The heroine will become totally lost and without a place in the world. The hero's home is her only home, she must be there; it is this home the hero represents, not the male world.

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From being a despotic employer he had become the man she loved, and loved without hope of requitement. Nor had she dreamed that Carne would come to be like a second home. She loved every stick and stone of the old grey house and its terraced garden, and to leave it and its owner was proving a wrench that seemed to tear her in two (*Moorland Magic*, Elizabeth Ashton, 1741: 162-163).

The power the heroine wins through love is also power with a difference. [S]he had the strange sensation of a switch of power, as though she were in command" (*Miranda's Marriage*, Margery Hilton, 1752), but she does not choose to command. Hers is not the power to do anything, but the power to abandon herself without risk; to lose herself in another, without any fear that she will be hurt or will suffer. It is the necessary condition for her fusion with the hero/mother and for a truly "happy" and unconflicted ending. She can become one with another and yet have her every wish granted. Paradoxically, the heroine/reader glories in her power because it enables her to luxuriate in a passivity that is anything but masochistic.

### VI: Sex and Romance

All these interactions, ins and outs, complications, and even routine daily activities are accompanied by enormously heightened sensual awareness. *Everything* is a thrill: a glance, a touch, a thought, angry or kind words, not to mention closer contact become one thrill after another. The heroine is portrayed in an almost constant state of emotional arousal often erotic, though, as we have seen anger, and resentment feature as well.

This has led some writers to presume that Harlequins are primarily about sex. Male analysts, for instance, have hypothesized that "Harlequin romances are essentially pornography for people [read women] ashamed to read pornography,"<sup>30</sup> or are safe scenarios of vicarious sexual adventure for people (women) without the courage to actually engage in the presumed desirable itself.<sup>31</sup>

Anne Snitow develops a more sophisticated analysis that tries to explain the attraction of sex (or pornography) for women rather than presuming it as these others have done. She argues that one content of pornography, though by no means the only content, in a patriarchal and misogynist society, "is a universal infant desire for complete, immediate gratification, to rule the world out of the very core of passive helplessness . . . . [P]ornography . . . reaches straight down to the infant layer where we all imagine ourselves the centre of everything by birthright and are sexual beings without shame or need for excuse."<sup>32</sup> In a sex divided and male-dominated society, says Snitow

we have two pornographies, one for men and one for women. They both have, hiding within them, those basic human expressions of

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abandonment I have described. The pornography for men enacts this abandonment on women as objects. How different is the pornography for women, in which sex is bathed in romance, diffused, always implies rather than enacted at all! This pornography is the Harlequin romance.<sup>33</sup>

Ann Douglas<sup>34</sup> and others have also written about romances as women's pornography and this approach has been widely influential among feminists. Despite the undoubted insights that some of these analyses have to offer, however, there is a deep flaw in an analytical approach which defines women's experience in terms of men's, even in its difference. A very important and hard-won tenet of feminist research and theory is that women's experience must be seen and defined *in its own terms* and not simply in comparison/contrast to men's. This is forgotten here, as it is all too frequently elsewhere, and the resulting insights are limited by the distortion of focus — a distortion which is immediately evident when we reverse the process and call pornography "men's Harlequins."

Ann Snitow's recognition of the total immersion/arousal of the Harlequin reading experience is acute, but there is an obvious problem in defining pornography apart from its two most noteworthy, and in fact defining, features: explicit sex and the degrading use of women as objects. For our purposes, a more important limitation of Snitow's approach is her own, and others', presumption that Harlequins are about sex even when it is often not "enacted at all" and even though women readers state over and over again that "the books are not about sex but about romance and cite in conversation their preference for novels that lack explicit sexual description."<sup>35</sup>

Analysts who have presumed that Harlequins are about sex have had to deal with readers' claims of lack of interest and with the fact that, though there is constant portrayal of erotic arousal, there is relatively little explicit sex. They have posited as explanation women's lack of sexual courage, their repression due to patriarchal double standards, and lack of social approval of female sexuality, along with their fear of pregnancy in a society in which women are economically and socially dependent on men.

They have not, however, thought to ask whether the arousal and emotional intensity might not come from the dynamics of the fraught hero/heroine relationship itself rather than from the "diffused" sex. Does the sex and sexual excitement perhaps stand for, mirror, and heighten an emotional intensity that is not about heterosexual sex at all? Ann Snitow notices that "the romantic intensity of Harlequins — the waiting, fear, speculating — are as much a part of their functioning as pornography for women as are the more overtly sexual scenes."<sup>36</sup> She does not realize, however, that the power of the male presence comes almost entirely from this intense pattern of "waiting, fear, speculating." The romance is that pattern and not the sexual scenes such as they are. The final scene is always

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a declaration of love, a resolution of the emotional see-saw consisting of fears of separation and loss, not a sex scene.

Janice Radway found that "the hero's protective concern and tender regard for the heroine": is the main thing for readers who care little whether it is portrayed in sexual terms as long as it is "extensively described."<sup>37</sup> I would argue that this care and attention is in itself erotic to the heroine and to the reader. Certainly the two themes of nurture/security, and erotic and emotional excitement are closely intertwined in the romances.

He was an exciting person to be with — she couldn't ignore him — he was so vital, so attractive, so-so-so comforting somehow (*Rata Flowers are Red*, Mary Moore, 1578: 77).

Joan curled tighter in his arms, those strong arms that would always protect her and thrill her with their caress (*Alyson's Share*, Janet Daily, HP208: 185).

Radway recognizes a psychological component to much of women's romance reading when she connects the requisite infantilization of the romantic heroine with women's "unconscious wish . . . to experience again . . . that primary love the infant received at the breast and hands of her mother."<sup>38</sup> But she does not see, as Snitow does, that the emotional impact comes primarily from powerful infantile desires rather than from the undeniable need of women for nurture that she has given central role in her analysis.<sup>39</sup>

The erotic power of the hero is achieved because he is the mother; he offers the complete gratification of safe total, passive surrender in the following forms: the excitement of security:

Julie did not know how to answer him but she made no effort to pull away again. His strong arms around her made her feel more secure than she had felt in a long time. But as his hand moved soothingly across her back, the vague longings he had always aroused in her blazed into disturbingly intense desires. Suddenly the sense of security combined with an almost irresistible feeling of dangerous excitement (*Roses and White Lilies*, Donna Alexander, McFadden Romances, 98: 67).

The sensuality of nurture:

She held out her hand and he came back and took it in his hand. "You're cold," he said. She said, "Warm me," and he sat down on the bed beside her and held her against him, gently stroking her back and shoulders. Dora snuggled closer, warmed and comforted by the feel and the smell of his smooth skin under the rough bathrobe, while a sweet sensuous languor was draining her consciousness. Her eyes were closed, her lids and limbs were heavy. She murmured, "Hold me," as though she was warm so long as his arms

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were around her, and then the velvet darkness covered her like a lover, and she slipped into a deep and dreamless sleep (*The Black Hunter*, Jane Donnelly, 2187: 159).

The firmly established subconscious identification of the hero as mother provides heightened erotic intensity to mundane activity as well as to sexual encounters.

They walked slowly back to where Helen had left her beach robe. Picking it up Leon held it for her to put on and then, turning her round, he began to fasten the buttons . . . "Hold your chin up." Helen obeyed, blinking rapidly at him as the sun became hurtful to her eyes. His hands touched her throat, he shook his head slightly and gave her an almost tender smile, "I'd kiss you if we weren't being watched," he said, and then, more briskly, "Come, child, its time for tea (*Gates of Steel*, Ann Hampson, HP1: 100).

Strength and tenderness, harshness and gentleness, control and indulgence are erotic in themselves, echoes of the early contradictory experience of the mother:

Suzanne lay against him painfully aware of the strength and tenderness in his arms (*The Man on the Peak*, Katerina Britt, 2305: 84).

He drew her close and once again she felt his great tenderness, and his strength (*Gates of Steel*, Anne Hampson, HP1: 190).

She now sensed in him, the male strength mated with a devastating tenderness (*Northern Sunset*, Penny Jordan, HP508:130).

Nevertheless it is security, belonging and comfort that is the aim of it all, and is, paradoxically, exciting, emotional, and erotic. The resolution of the separation from the mother, the rediscovery of original, sensual and complete fusion is the climax of the romance. The heroine will live happily ever after in the womb provided by the hero. In romantic fantasy loving is mothering; to be loved is to find a mother. The powerful presence of the lover evokes the mother who is everything to the child and the reader's regression to this emotional state is what gives the image of the hero power.

Throughout the book the heroine longs for this release, fears its loss with her separation from the hero, and resents his power over her:

Awakening to sunlight and warmth, she realized that Raoul's personality was powerful enough to enrich everything around her. Listening to the birds in the curly-roofed leaves, she revelled in a feeling of being protected, free from all fear and hurt, although she knew it was sheer fantasy (*Man on the Peak*, Katerina Britt, 2305: 143).

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He was so efficient, so reliable, and for a moment Teri allowed herself the pleasure of dwelling on having him for a husband. He would be there always to smooth her path, to treat with amused contempt the problems which from time to time must assuredly come their way. He would be her prop, her secure anchor, her haven in all storms (*Enchanted Dawn*, Annetta Hampson, HP132: 180).

The reader is able to indulge in all the heroine's heightened fear, joy, anxiety, hope, and disappointment because she knows there will be a happy ending. The heroine will, on the last page find her home, a place in which to belong, peace, and security ever after:

She had come home, home to Flint and the safe harbour of his love where she and he would dwell in simplicity and peace. The End (*Harbour of Love*, Anne Hampson, 2230: 186).

She didn't question his understanding but merely sighed happily as she read her future in his eyes and gave herself up to the matchless sensation of being cherished. The End (*Walk in the Shadows*, Jayne Bowling, HP247: 192).

He drew her up into his arms again, while outside the moon clothed the moor and slopes with silver and inside the thick walls of the old house, silence brooded and the shadows gathered in the corners. They were no longer menacing, they represented home and were the promise of deep content (*Moorland Magic*, Elizabeth Ashton, 1741: 190).

### VII: Mother — Resource or Neurosis?

My reflections on Harlequins over the years have benefited from a diverse and growing feminist literature attesting to the psychological and social importance of women's relationships to our apparently all-powerful and unpredictable mothers.<sup>40</sup> This is a prominent theme in much experiential/descriptive writing. Jane Lazarre, for instance, notes that the mother-daughter relationship is the most compelling topic of study for the students in her women's studies courses. In writing about relationships within the women's movement Mickey Spencer and her collaborators found "that mother and daughter roles affect many — perhaps most — relationships among women, regardless of blood ties or group size." Feminist writers, film makers, and critics again and again evoke their relationship with their mother when reflecting on their relationship to the female subjects of their work, and feminist literary critics have come to recognize the importance of mother-daughter relationships as they are lived and written about by women authors.<sup>41</sup> It is also an important theme in more theoretical work.<sup>42</sup> Mary O'Brien, for instance, has argued that women's integrated experience of birth as a continuity of mediated labour provides

the material basis for a female consciousness rooted in a discontinuous experience of reproduction through the alienation of their seed.<sup>43</sup>

Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, and Jane Flax, all, in different ways, explore the social consequences of men and women's different psychological experience of being mothered, respectively, by other and same sex mothers. Chodorow and Flax suggest, for instance, that women, unlike men, develop their sense of self and their relationship to the world and others through a continuous identification with the mother which gives women the basis for a less separative, more relationally defined and connected sense of self than men. Thus women's experience of self and the world is very different from the competitive and dualistic male sense which has been called "the human condition" and which shapes all patriarchal cultures and values. This gives women special emotional, interpersonal and social awareness and capabilities, but it also makes it more difficult for us to forge a strong and secure separate identity.<sup>44</sup>

Much feminist psychoanalytic literature considers men and women's experience of sex, love, and romance in the psychological context of the mother/child relationship. Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Harsock, and Isaac Balbus all include an examination of this part of life in their more general social analyses.<sup>45</sup> Other relevant work includes Diane Hunter's argument that transference wishes link the "unconscious meanings in the doctor-patient relation to the universal craving for the omnipotent mother of early infancy." Louise Eichenbaum and Susan Orbach discuss the lifelong yearning for "mother's support and care [by women who] from girlhood to womanhood . . . live with the experience of having lost these aspects of maternal nurturance," and Ruth Wodak's psycholinguistic findings demonstrate that the "quality of the [mother-daughter] relationship does not depend on social class, . . . [but is] a structurally necessary emotional constellation in women which surpasses the barriers of class time."<sup>46</sup>

This convincing theoretic and empirical testimony to the importance of the mother in women's lives and psychological development lends support to my view that the Harlequin hero is a mother figure. It does not, however, lead me to believe that women's relationship to our mothers' *causes* Harlequin reading, or that Harlequin reading is the result of widespread psychological difficulties of separation among women. Some readers are no doubt addicted and they may be driven to Harlequins by a need to relive an unresolved relationship with their mother or to escape from an uncomfortable separate identity.<sup>47</sup> My own experience, however, and that of many other readers who have shared their experiences with me have convinced me that the vast majority of readers read Harlequins because of social rather than psychological needs.

The powerful early emotional experience of our relationship with our mothers is a *resource* women can call on through Harlequins to provide a much needed escape. For most women, it is not the source of the need for escape. In pointing to the psychological component of the Harlequin



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experience I am not suggesting that our relationship to our mothers leaves women incomplete or needy in a general sense. I am arguing, rather, that this relationship provides an emotional experience powerful enough to block out the present when women *choose* to regress to it. Most of us choose to do this because our present circumstances are enormously strained, not because we are driven by some persistent psychological need. When our circumstances improve our use of escape through romance ceases.

In my own case, I began reading Harlequins when I was writing my Ph. D. thesis — a time of great pressure when I could not justify taking any time for myself. I got no relief, for instance, from going for a walk or to a movie with friends because I felt that I shouldn't be there. I would, on occasion, find myself longing for a Harlequin because I could count on more sure and total escape from pressure with Harlequins than any other form of leisure and could provide. After I completed my thesis I no longer felt that longing to escape into a Harlequin, no longer felt the immense pleasure/relief when reading them, and gradually stopped.

Many women have told me that they, too, have had a "Harlequin period" which gradually came to an end. On hindsight it was a time of particular pressure — for instance, when they were mothering young children,<sup>48</sup> under pressure as an adolescent or in the final year of university. Other women who are intensely pressured and starved for nurture all their lives remain dependent on Harlequins all their lives.

The lack of resources, time, and money for leisure away from home; the lack of social and personal acceptance of women's visibly leisure; the nature of many women's lives in which work and responsibility are a constant 24 hour reality, where there is no private place away from these; and the emotional deprivation almost all women suffer in a heterosexually structured society where women are care providers, rarely receivers, and where most women can expect no mothering or nurture after early adolescence, all combine to explain why the fantasy of mothering in the guise of a romantic hero is the predominant form of escape for women.

If even the most emotionally and materially privileged women are deprived of and hunger for mothering, how much more acute the need is for many more women in less than optimum circumstances:

- 1) When I was maybe eight or so, I went to live with my oldest brother. I had to clean the house and do all the hard work there . . . I used to sit in that house and dream about how some day some wonderful man who looked like a prince would come and take me away, and how we'd live happily ever after.
- 2) Things were so ugly in my family — my father drunk and in a rage, hitting one of us or beating my mother up. My mother worked most of the time . . . She'd come home and fix supper, then we'd all sit around and wait. Finally, Mom would give us

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kids our supper. Eventually my father came home, and if he was drunk, he'd storm around. Maybe he'd knock the pots off the stove and make a holy mess. Or maybe he'd take out after my mother.

When I think about it now, it sounds crazy, but honestly, the worse things got at home, the more I used to dream about how I was going to marry some good, kind wise man who would take care of me and how we'd always love each other and be happy.

These quotations from Lillian Breslow Rubin's account of working class family life in *Worlds of Pain* show the roots of romance fantasy in deprivation.<sup>49</sup>

The fantasy is available free in our own heads, or very cheaply in Harlequins, and it can be indulged at home, even by women with no time and no power, if they are prepared to read after working a 16 hour day when everyone is out or in bed — which many do.

More important for women whose pressures are never ending and who cannot even justify to themselves (let alone others) taking time away, Harlequins provide certain and total escape for the two hours it takes to read them. When asked why they read Harlequins some readers answer quite simply, "It beats tranquilizers or alcohol" — an eloquent testimony to the desperation of their lives and to their self-knowledge. Because we can literally lose ourselves in the early relationship with our mother it becomes the ideal vehicle of escape, a catapult into another world that is as reliable as drugs. This more than anything else is the reason that Harlequins are such a standby for women who desperately need escape.

The child/parent relationship in Harlequins is so evident that many writers, without seeing that the hero actually is the mother, have remarked on various parallels. Jill Tweedie, for instance, has interpreted the romantic hero as a father figure:

In my youth, men of the ilk of Max de Winter (Rebecca) (and all his other ilks back to Mr. Rochester and beyond) were generally accepted as love-object, not in spite of but *because* they were old enough to be our fathers and so, to all intents and purposes, were our fathers. And unless we get that straight those personal traits that would be off-putting in a young man only contributed to our turning on . . . . Whatever he did, kind or cruel or rather rude, had to be accepted as a child accepts the vagaries of God the Father . . . . A child's need to be loved is too overwhelming to permit demands on the beloved; the most that could be hoped for was a careful accommodation to paternal whims. We aimed to please.<sup>50</sup>

Ann Snitow notes that what Joanna Russ observed about the heroines of gothic romances — that "they are loved as babies are loved, simply because they exist" — is true of Harlequin heroines as well.<sup>51</sup> Janice Radway

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also notes that “[B]y emphasizing the intensity of the hero’s uninterrupted gaze and the tenderness of his caress at the moment he encompasses his beloved in his still always ‘masculine’ arms the fantasy . . . evokes a period in the reader’s life when she was the center of a profoundly nurturant individual’s attention.”<sup>52</sup> The idea that the Harlequin hero is a mother figure has almost without exception “clicked” with women readers in public talks I gave. They respond far more often than not with an excited “Ah, yes!” or “Of Course!” People who don’t know the books but read a few to check out the idea have been convinced.

This leaves the complex question of why women would fantasize a mother figure as male. It is beyond the scope of this article to offer any but initial observations on this point, but one obvious reason may be that in a patriarchy only men have enough social power to represent the powerful mother figure. Paradoxically, female figures other than mythical ones, do not have the necessary power and resources to stand for the mother.<sup>53</sup> Also, it may be less threatening psychologically to lose oneself in the other sex where persisting difference from the heroine makes the loss of self in fusion less absolute. The maleness of the hero/mother makes him different, also from the feared mother in a way that may further attenuate the threat of fusion. Both these factors may make it easier for women to play with that fusion psychologically.

The erotic aspect of the desire for and experience of fusion with the mother is also much more acceptable in a heterosexually defined and enforced culture when she becomes a male figure. The masculinizing of the mother thus decreases the threat of her attraction for vulnerable women in a patriarchal society. Needless to say it also masks and tames powerful female focused desires in a way that transforms them into a male focused mythical mainstay of patriarchy — the myth of male mothering.

## VIII

If it is true that women turn to reading romance because our lives are so often barren of nurture and so pressured that we need to feel mothered and we need a quick and guaranteed escape; and if it is true that romance serves both these needs because the romantic hero is a mother figure — what can feminists learn from all this?

First, it shows how important it is to fight the double standards of a culture that devalues women and all that is female if we are to successfully analyze and transform our culture. Formula romance, by far the largest segment of the formula book market, has until very recently been ignored by students of popular culture who have given loving attention to westerns, mysteries, detective stories, ghost stories, and (worse) adventure stories. What writing there is about formula romance is far more critical than writing about other formula forms which are more easily accepted as temporary escapes for otherwise busy, intelligent, well-rounded people who are gener-

ally in touch with reality. The "Harlequin reader" outranks bingo player, soap watcher, prostitute, and housewife as a negative stereotype totally defining a woman by one activity or aspect of her life. Readers of westerns are not commonly supposed to live in expectation of a stage coach at the door but Harlequin readers are presumed to believe in the Harlequin world and to live in daily expectation of the hero's arrival. In fact, Harlequin readers are as diverse a group and have as good a grasp on reality as any other formulae reader.<sup>54</sup>

Other negative presumptions drawn about women from Harlequins also turn out to be false. Women are not masochistic and are not reading Harlequins because they enjoy being dominated. The notion that romance is a female neurosis, or even that the female condition is neurosis also proves untenable when we see that romance works as an escape because women use their relationship with their mother as a resource for regression, not because women are actually as male-centred or as successfully brainwashed to believe in salvation through men as might appear at first sight to be the case.<sup>55</sup>

The limits of analyses that do not challenge androcentric expectations and values also become clear. The presumptions that Harlequin romances are 1) power fantasies for people so crushed that they can't even fantasize power, or 2) sex fantasies for people so repressed they can't even fantasize sex, or 3) substitutes for fantasies about individual success of people so limited that they cannot even imagine personal achievement, are insulting.

As soon as we allow women *specific* desires and interests we can see that they are also incorrect. The popularity of Harlequin Romances suggests that most women are not primarily interested in and do not gain satisfaction from power over others or the power to aggress;<sup>56</sup> that most women's erotic pleasure, desire, and potential does not find itself primarily in phallic focused intercourse outside of intimacy, nurture, care, and security;<sup>57</sup> and most women's sense of self and fulfillment requires a rich world of interrelationship and interdependence.<sup>58</sup> Intimacy, security and interrelationship are major turn-ons for women.

It is true that women are largely powerless in patriarchy and are excluded from successful participation in the public world, and our sexuality is far more heavily repressed and denied than men's. Nevertheless, by definition, fantasy involves imagining what is desirable but unattainable or non-existent. Only an exaggeratedly derogatory view of women could underlie the suggestion that we cannot even imagine what we truly desire. If women as a group deeply wanted power over men, or competitive individual success, or easy uninvolved sex with many partners, I'm sure we could fantasize it. In fact, some of us do some of the time — witness the S & M fantasies that apparently please some women; but these fantasies do not constitute major themes in female popular culture because they are not central to women's desires.

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To say that Harlequins are no worse than male forms of popular culture (in fact, more benign), that the readers are not necessarily pathetically repressed and masochistic, and that the books must be understood as the product of women as well as Harlequin Enterprises, is not to glorify Harlequins or to imply that they are harmless.<sup>59</sup> Regardless of the positive changes in more recent Harlequin plots as a result of the influence of the women's movement, the plots *do* often infantilize women, justify domineering behaviour from men, and imply that the most glorious destiny of a woman is reciprocal love with a man. Even the least objectionable on these grounds are, in fact, a form of escape which mystifies and hides powerful female connections and female focused needs in a way that is imminently compatible with patriarchy. Harlequins disguise women's powerful homoerotic bond with their prime caretaker and deny women's practical sisterhood of survival. Understanding the deeper psychological dynamics of romance fantasy and checking the androcentric double standards too often involved in its analysis does not change the fact that, while Harlequins help women survive, they do so in the service of what Janice Raymond has called hetero-reality.<sup>60</sup> They are not the simple unidimensional tool of patriarchy that they appear to be on the surface — but they *are*, nevertheless, a tool of patriarchy.

It would be much better if women did not read Harlequins. However, understanding that formula romances are partly women's creation and help women survive makes the question of how we should relate to them as feminists much more difficult. These romances do not deeply influence most adult women's sense of reality and they do not actually lead most women to expect salvation from men or to rely on men. Most adult women who read Harlequins have a pretty good grasp of reality and what their needs are. Women don't look to these books for help in understanding their lives, but for one of the few available sources of escape and comfort. It is hard to see any benefit in denouncing or denying this relief to women.<sup>61</sup>

Harlequin's popularity will decrease as we manage to bring help and support to women and to change social structures in ways that reduce women's stress and our enormous need to escape. Meanwhile, I think one effective way we can combat their popularity is by getting the message out as widely as possible that it is, in fact, women who mother, not men. The little support that women do get actually comes largely from women — sisters, mothers, neighbors, and friends — not from men. Yet the dominant patriarchal ideology is so strong that it hides this from us. In my own pre-feminist days I never named, and therefore never saw, the support I got from other women and the love I felt for them. The sisterhood I was actually living, if only in truncated form, remained invisible to me. Yet I know, from teaching women's studies classes as well as from my own responses, that women are open to recognizing the truths about their lives

when they are articulated — especially when those truths are affirming women and our strengths and connections.

A sense of the complexity of the Harlequin phenomenon can help us resist any tendency to too easily echo the patriarchal contempt for women who read them. It can help us use this distorted, but nevertheless real, expression of female popular culture to learn more about women's desires, needs, and strengths, as well as weaknesses. Harlequins are obviously not an autonomous cultural form and are therefore limited as a source of information about autonomous women's needs. But they are still better for this purpose than entirely male defined and controlled institutions and cultural forms. Used in conjunction with research and reflection on other aspects of our lives, and with feminist theory, Harlequins should provide useful new questions for research and throw additional light on questions we are already examining in different contexts.

For instance, the books' international, cross cultural, cross racial, and cross class appeal lends support to the view that despite the obviously important diversity among women, much of what it means to be a woman is shared at a very deep level.<sup>62</sup> Also, suggestions by feminist theorists that women's sexuality and sense of power and relationship to the world are different from men's seem to be born out by Harlequins.

Harlequin romances reveal female needs for nurture that should not be dismissed as mere products of women's dependence and neurosis. They suggest that escape from our oppression as women does not lie simply in denying our eternally giving mothers and our needs for nurture in an identity as 'free spirits' who do not nurture. It requires, instead, the much more complex and difficult struggle:

to accept and integrate and strengthen both the mother and the daughter in ourselves, [this] is no easy matter, because patriarchal attitudes have encouraged us to split, to polarize, these images, and to project all unwanted guilt, anger, shame, power, freedom, onto the 'other' woman. But any radical vision of sisterhood demands that we reintegrate them.<sup>63</sup>

The psychological dynamics of the "Harlequin experience," in fact, lend weight to the growing sense among feminists that our relations with our mothers and our children, and women's needs for mutually "mothering" behaviour are central areas for feminist reflection and struggle.

Revaluing women's relational and connective capacities and world view, and recognizing the concomitant vulnerability of our separate sense of self leaves us with the enormous task of redefining and creating, in our personal lives and in society as a whole, new reciprocal, mutually affirming and interdependent definitions and expressions of strength, autonomy, justice, power, and eroticism. The mother-daughter relationship, and the "mothering" needs and abilities of women are (like Harlequins) both a resource and a barrier in this struggle:

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It was too simple, early in the new twentieth-century wave of feminism, for us to analyze our mothers' oppression, to understand "rationally" — and correct — why our mothers did not teach us to be Amazons . . . . [Yet] there was, is, in most of us, a girl-child still longing for a woman's nurture, tenderness, and approval, a woman's power exerted in our defense, a woman's smile and touch and voice, a woman's strong arms around us in moments of fear and pain . . . . It was not enough to *understand* our mothers; more than ever, in the effort to touch our own strength as women, we *needed* them. The cry of that female child in us need not be shameful or regressive; it is the germ of our desire to create a world in which strong mothers and strong daughters will be a matter of course.<sup>64</sup>

If the Harlequin hero is a mother figure, the Harlequin phenomenon, paradoxically, testifies to this longing among women for women, and its political importance. It also suggests that the female bonding and friendship that must be central to any transformation of the patriarchy has hidden expressions even in the most unlikely of patriarchal institutions.

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### Notes

1. "Hints from the heart on romance writing," Tatiana Tolstoi, *The Guardian Weekly*, June 27, 1982.
2. Audrey Claire Swafield, "Paperbacks Promoting Passion! What is Harlequin Really Presenting?" *Canadian Woman Studies* III, 2: 6.
3. Ann Barr Snitow, "Mass Marketing Romances: Pornography for Women is Different," *Radical History Review* 20 (1979), p. 150.
4. "The reader is not made aware that her solution is, in actuality, the problem. [S]o . . . . no questioning of, or action against, the capitalistic structure that puts her place outside the mode of production, will take place." Audrey Claire Swafield, op. cit., p. 5.
5. In 1982 Harlequin Enterprises sold 218 million books in twelve languages in 98 countries. In Canada twenty eight percent of the paperbacks sold were Harlequins. Romances of all kinds, taken together made up fifty percent of paperback sales in the U. S. From Margaret Jensen, *Love's Sweet Return: the Harlequin Story*, (Toronto: Women's Press, 1984), p. 34.  
Harlequin's exhaustive market research, pre-testing, and reader surveys are described fully by Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).
6. Janice Radway is one of the few analysts of Harlequins who stresses, as I do, the importance of women's active role in interpreting the text "whose literary meaning is the result of a complex, temporally evolving interaction between a fixed verbal structure and a socially situated reader." "Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context," *Feminist Studies* IX, 1 (Spring 1983), pp. 54-55. Her study provides valuable data from women themselves about how they see their Harlequin reading. This information is enhanced by her sensitive interpretation which I refer to later.

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Where I differ from Radway is her presumption that feminists make up an entirely different "interpretive community" than Harlequin readers, that there is no overlap that can be called on to aid analysis. She says that "we have no evidence that we even know how to read as romance readers do" (*Reading the Romance*, p. 11). I argue, on the other hand, that feminist analysts, as women, potentially share an interpretive community with readers which we could explore and use as a resource (though not the only resource) in analysis. The lack of reference to certain aspects of their experience (as much as the false generalization of other aspects of their experience that Radway has criticized) is a weakness in feminist analysis of Harlequins.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
9. Harlequin's two main lines are the classical Harlequin Romance and a series of slightly longer format books with the same basic formula called Harlequin Presents. Books in both series are numbered. I have included the identification numbers of the books, and in order to distinguish books from the Harlequin Presents series from those in the other series I have put HP before the numbers of the former.
10. Harlequin heroines and writers seem to agree: "Experience had taught Chloe that ordinary men were a sadly selfish bunch. So she conjured up an ideal. He would have to be rich and generous; tall, dark, and handsome; kind to children and animals. And he would possess a sense of humour. She and her sister had a good laugh over the requirements. They both knew full well that such a man could never really exist: At least that's what Chloe thought — until she met Benedict Dane . . ." (*A Very Special Man*, Marjorie Lewty, 2282: 9).
11. "Women Read the Romance," op. cit., p. 61.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
13. Ann Barr Snitow, op. cit.
14. By "good" Harlequins I mean those in which the formula is used to maximum impact. Janice Radway has documented the important point that, contrary to the presumptions of most analysts of Harlequins, formula books are not all the same to the readers. They are not interchangeable. Readers have preferences and distinguish between "good" and "bad" samples of the genre. She has also done valuable work in identifying, through detailed questionnaires, the characteristics of "good" Harlequins.  
This part of her work (see Chapter 4 of *Reading the Romance*) is particularly interesting to me because my preferences agree so closely with those of the women she interviewed. Her findings provided support for my sense that my own experience as a reader is comparable to that of others and can serve as a source of insight into the "Harlequin experience" in general.
15. These are two quotations from Harlequin publicity material. Their gist is reported over and over again by women interviewed about their experience of Harlequin reading. See, for instance, comments by readers interviewed by Claire Harrison for the CBC Ideas series "Love at First Sight: Romance Novels and the Romantic Fantasy." Transcript available from CBC Transcripts, Box 500, Station A, Toronto, M5W 1E6.
16. Cited by Claire Harrison, *ibid.*
17. As interpreted by Claire Harrison, *ibid.*
18. Janet Patterson is another one of the writers who recognizes that "women are not consumers but active readers; novels are not commodities but cultural experiences" (23) and asks "why women want to read Harlequins" (22). She is the only writer I



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know who has dealt with the emotional nature of the Harlequin experience and the power of the ritualized repetitive experience in her answer to that question. See Janet Patterson, "Consuming Passion" *Fireweed* 11 (1981), pp. 19-33.

19. Margaret Jensen, op. cit., p. 88.
20. Childlike moments/allusions persist in those recent "successful" Harlequins which downplay women's dependence and inequality in general.
21. Janice Radway's survey of the reading habits of forty-two regular romance readers confirms that the impact of the plot requires the shaping of the final resolution/fusion and that the satisfaction attained is only momentary. Most readers read the books from beginning to end at one sitting. "Once immersed in the romantic fantasy [they] do not like to return to reality without experiencing the resolution of the narrative . . . . [Their ingenuous strategies] for avoiding disruption or discontinuity in the story betoken a profound need to arrive at the *ending* of the tale and thus to achieve or acquire the emotional gratification they already can anticipate" (*Reading the Romance*, op. cit., p. 59).
22. Over half the women Radway surveyed read more than sixteen hours a week and another 24 percent between eleven and fifteen hours a week (*ibid.*, p. 59). One-third read from five to nine romances weekly, another fifty-five percent completed between one and four romances weekly. She interviewed regular customers at a romance bookstore so her sample is probably skewed toward the heavier readers. According to Rosemary Griley in *Love Lines: The Romance Readers Guide to Printed Pleasures*, (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1983), cited by Margaret Jensen, op. cit., p. 142, "light" readers of romance read up to 25 books a month and "heavy" readers devour eighty or more books a month. The "heaviest" reader that Margaret Jensen interviewed read sixty Harlequins a month and the "lightest" reader read two per month (op. cit., p. 143). Most read between twelve and sixteen per month and would therefore qualify as "light" readers. Other sources confirm that romance readers are generally not occasional readers. See Yankelevitch, K. Skelly and White, *The 1978 Consumer Research Study on Reading and Book Purchasing*, (Darien, Conn.: The Group, 1978), prepared for the Book Industry Study Group, and cited by Radway, *Reading*, op. cit.  
While there are clearly women who are addicted to Harlequins, whose reading habits are excessive their number can be grossly overestimated if one forgets that it takes only from one and a half to two hours to read the books. Four or five books a month amount to between six to ten hours a month — not a large commitment of time when compared to other leisure forms such as fishing or watching TV sports.
23. Tania Modleski, "The Disappearing Act: A Study of Harlequin Romances," *Signs*, V, 3 (1980), p. 442.
24. "The fact that she owed her life to Luke Van Meer didn't tie her to him" (*Tiger Sky*, Rose Elver, 2244: 47).
25. Margaret Jensen, "Women and Romantic Fiction: A Case Study of Harlequin Enterprises, Romances, and Readers," Ph.D. Dissertation, McMaster University, 1980, cited in Radway, *Reading the Romances*, op. cit., p. 122.
26. For a description of those changes see Gail Hamilton, "Romancing the Bookshelf," *Resources for Feminist Research*, XIII, 3 (November 1984): 46-4, and Margaret Jensen, *Love's Sweet Return*, op. cit., Chapter 6, "Strange Bedfellows: Feminism and Romance."
27. "The Story of Valerie Vapid," *Broadside* VI, 4 (February 1985), p. 10.

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28. "One of the specifications of the Harlequin guidelines is an exotic setting . . . . *The exotic setting is the male world*. Clearly the setting is exotic socially and sexually as much as it is geographically ("Consuming Passions," op. cit. p. 27, emphasis in the original). But the "exotic" setting is *not* exotic. She is out of her depth but enormously and absolutely at home. It is *her* place, essentially domestic and offers comfort and security and peace if she could only stay there" (p. 28).
29. "A great deal of our satisfaction in reading these novels comes, I am convinced, from our conviction that the woman is bringing the man to his knees and that all the while he is being hateful, he is internally groveling, groveling, groveling." Tania Modleski, "The Disappearing Act: A Study in Harlequin Romances," *Signs*, V, 3 (Spring 1980), p. 441.
30. Peter Parisi, lecture delivered April 6, 1978, Livingston College, Rutgers University, cited in Snitow, op. cit., p. 151.
31. Tom Henighen cited by Claire Harrison, op. cit.
32. Snitow, op. cit., p. 154.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Ann Douglas, "Soft Porn Culture," *New Republic*, August 30, 1980.
35. Radway, *Reading the Romance*, op. cit., p. 104.
36. Snitow, op. cit., p. 157.
37. Radway, *ibid.*, p. 105.
38. Radway, *Reading the Romance*, op. cit., p. 145.
39. In contrast to my own understanding of the romance fantasy as essentially a psychological fantasy of mothering, Radway sees it as an expression of women's struggle "toward individuation and actualization of self . . . embodied within the language and forms of patriarchy . . . [that is] a particular kind of female self, the self-in-relation demanded by patriarchal parenting arrangements" (147).  
Therefore, she notices the reader's "wish to be protected by an all-powerful parent" (254), only in passing, and deals with it as one part of her fantasy reliving of "a woman's journey to female personhood *as that particular psychic configuration is constructed and realized within patriarchal culture*" (138, emphasis in the original), rather than the central dynamic that I argue it is.
40. For a review of this literature and its significance see Marianne Hirsch, "Mothers and Daughters," *Signs* VII, 1 (1981), p. 200-222; and Heather Jon Maroney, "Embracing Motherhood: New Feminist Theory" in *Feminism Now: Theory and Practice*, eds. Marilouise and Arthur Kroker *et al.* (New World Perspectives, 1985), pp. 40-64.
41. Jané Lazarre, "Restoring Lives at City College," *The Village Voice*, XXVII, 20 (May 18, 1982), pp. 5, 32; Mickey Spencer *et al.* "Mother/Daughter Roles in the Feminist Movement," *Quest* V, 3 (1978), pp. 71-80; the relationships of feminists to the female subjects of their work is examined in *Between Women: Biographers, Novelists, Critics, Teachers, and Artists Write About Their Work on Women*, eds. Carole Ascher *et al.* (Boston: Beacon, 1984). Marianne Hirsch, op. cit. reviews literary literature.
42. For a fuller discussion of this literature see my monograph *Feminist Radicalism in the 1980s*, (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1986).
43. Mary O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction*, (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1981).

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44. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, (University of California Press, 1978); Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1977); Jane Flax, "The Conflict between Nurture and Autonomy in Mother/Daughter Relationships and within Feminism," in *Feminist Studies* IV, 1 (1978), pp. 171-189. This socio-psychoanalytical work has been very influential and its insights have been used in formative feminist analyses of such diverse topics as war and peace, philosophy, bureaucracy, patriarchy, power, politics, and revolution. See, for instance, the forthcoming special issue of *Atlantis* on peace studies, eds. Barbara Roberts and Michlene de Seve; Jane Flax, "Political Philosophy and the Patriarchal Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Epistemology and Metaphysics," in *Discovering Reality*, eds. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, (Reidel, 1983); Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex and Power*, (Essex: Longmann, 1983); Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," in *Feminist Studies*, VI 2 (Summer 1980); Isaac D. Balbus, *Marxism and Domination*, (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1982).
45. All op. cit., note 55.
46. Diane Hunter, "Hysteria, Psychoanalysis and Feminism: The Case of Anna O," in *Feminist Studies* IX, 3 (Fall 1983); Louise Eichenbaum and Susan Orbach, *Understanding Women: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Approach*, (Basic Books, 1983); Ruth Wodak, "The Language of Love and Guilt: Relationships Between Mothers and Daughters from a Socio — and Psycholinguistic Point of View," in *Resources for Feminist Research* XIII, 3 (November 1984), pp. 21-25.
47. The relationship with the mother has been identified by feminists as the source of some of women's neurotic behaviour in heterosexual love relations. See, for instance, Ilene Philopson's claim that "a daughter who has experienced faulty maternal empathy can gain self-worth through acting as an extension of her mother . . . [and as an adult], can choose a love object who [*sic*] she views as omnipotent . . . and achieve self-valuation through her identification of 'fusion' with this person." "Heterosexual Antagonisms and the Politics of Mothering," in *Socialist Review* 66, Vol. XII, 6 (November-December 1982), pp. 55-77.
48. It seems that Harlequin Enterprises knows this, for their marketing strategy includes free distribution of Harlequins to new mothers in hospital.
49. Lillian Rubin, *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working Class Family*, (Basic Books, 1976), pp. 40-41. The same deprivation and its link to romantic fantasy is evident in such other accounts of working class family and community as in Basil Henriques et al., *Coal is Our Life: An Analysis of a Yorkshire Mining Community*, and Meg Luxton, *More Than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home*, (Toronto: Women's Press, 1980). The women interviewed by Janice Radway mentioned in *Reading the Romance*, op. cit., and Margaret Jensen, op. cit., themselves give eloquent direct testimony to this.
50. Jill Tweedie, "Beautiful and Doomed," *The Guardian Weekly*, (March 28, 1982).
51. Ann Snitow, op. cit., p. 154, citing Joanna Russ, "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic," *Journal of Popular Culture*, VI, 4 (Spring 1983): 666-691.
52. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance*, op. cit., p. 84. (See note 40 for a brief indication of the role Radway ascribes to this evocation of infancy in her overall analysis of Harlequin reading.)
53. It would be interesting to see if romance fantasy generally plays a different role for lesbian than for heterosexual women. If my analysis is correct, it may be that romance fantasies play a less important role for lesbian women both because, paradoxically,

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a female "hero" is a less convincing representative of the powerful mother, and because more lesbian than heterosexual women may have mutually nurturing relationships.

I have lesbian friends who read Harlequins, which is in itself an interesting indication that they are about something more than heterosexual love and sex. Further research on lesbian women's relationship to romance would doubtless provide valuable insights into the romance phenomenon.

54. Profiles of romance readers from different surveys vary somewhat but all indicate that "[the readers] mirror the general population in age, education, marital, [employment], and socio-economic status." Carol Thurston, "The Liberation of Pulp Romances," *Psychology Today*, (April 1983), pp. 14-15. (Bracketed word added on the basis of information from other surveys.)
55. This helps make comprehensible the fact that women brutalized by men often read romances or even begin to read them when things get bad. They are under no illusion that real life or real men in any way resemble the Harlequin world or the Harlequin hero. The comfort from escape is nevertheless enormous because it does not depend on any expectations of a male saviour or male comfort.
56. For feminist theoretical literature which supports the notion that women have a special relationship to power see: Nancy Hartsock, op. cit.; Berit As, "A Materialist View of Men's and Women's Attitudes Towards War," *Women Studies International Forum*, V, 3: 355-364; and articles in *Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism and Non-Violence*, ed. Pam McAllister (New Society Publishers, 1982); Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," op. cit.
57. The theoretical study of women's specific sexuality is less developed than the study of our specific relationship to the world and to power. But circumstantial evidence from a number of sources supports the implications from Harlequins that intimacy, nurture, and security are central to women's erotic pleasure. When Ann Landers asked her readers "Would you be content to be held close and treated tenderly and forget about 'the act?'" of the 72 percent of the 90,000 women who responded said "Yes" and 40 percent of these were less than 40 years old.  
Those with the inveterate androcentric assumption that men's experience and desires are necessarily women's have predictably presumed that these women are all very sad cases of repression or stunted sexual development or have never experienced the "real thing." At a certain point, however, it becomes perverse not to use women's responses to understand women's desires. Once we do this we are led unavoidably to the question of whether sex and the erotic are the same for men and women.
58. The theoretical bases of women's more connected sense of self and the world and greater capacity for mutually affirming interdependence are described by Mary O'Brien, Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, and Jane Flax (all op. cit.). Influential studies of this specific female experience and its psychological and social importance have been done by Jean Baker Miller, toward a *New Psychology of Women*, (Boston: Beacon, 1976) and Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
59. Some writers who rightly challenge the extremely negative stereotyping of Harlequin readers and point out that we are active participants in the process and not mere passive victims, have moved from this to a representation of Harlequins as more benign than I think is warranted. See, for instance, the defense of Harlequins and Harlequin reading in Margaret Jensen, op. cit.; Tatiana Tolstoi, op. cit.; Emily Toth, "Who'll Take Romance?" *Women's Review of Books*, 1, 5 (February 1984), pp. 12-13; Gail Hamilton, op. cit.

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60. Janice G. Raymond, *A Passion for Friendship: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection*, (Boston: Beacon, 1986).
61. Unless you are of the school that believes the objective should be to make life as difficult as possible for as many women as possible so eventually "they" will rise up — a sort of feminist version of the hope with which some leftists have been watching the cost of the recession on ordinary people, waiting for the time when the "crisis of capitalism" becomes its collapse and things get so bad that people finally rebel and the revolution arrives!  
There is a hint of this position in some of the critiques of Harlequins that suggest that they offer an escape which prevents women from struggling to change their lives. It seems, however, that women's lives are hard enough even with Harlequins. A social critique and a commitment to social change seem to come when women get the support that gives us the power and the space to question and to act. That should surely be what we are aiming to provide, not additional pressure.
62. The dominant patriarchal cultures in Arab countries and in Japan, for instance, do not encourage romantic fantasy or the myth of male mothering, and yet women in these countries try and the Caribbean seem to find them enormously satisfying.
63. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. (New York: Bantam, 1977), p. 257.
64. Adrienne Rich, op. cit., p. 225. There is, in fact, a well developed feminist practice which recognizes our relationships with our mothers and our relational needs as both barriers and resources which must be consciously embraced and transformed in our personal/political struggle for a more human and freer world. See also: Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," op. cit.; *Between Women*, op. cit., especially the chapters by Bell Gale Chevigny, Jane Lazarre, Jane Marcus, Sara Ruddick, and Martha Wheelock; Jane Lazarre, op. cit; Baba Copper, "Mothers and Daughters of Imagination," *Trivium*, 11 (Fall 1987), pp. 8-20; Judith Arcana, *Our Mothers, Ourselves*.