BLURRING BOUNDARIES:

PLEASURES OF POPULAR ROMANCE

by

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ABSTRACT

Immersed in the fantasy worlds of fairy tales and popular romance novels, this project explores the experience of reading for pleasure. Using the fairy tale, "Beauty and the Beast" as well as its retelling in popular romance format in Linda Jones' *Debuty and the Beast,* my work explores the tension and enjoyment of being a reader of romance while simultaneously internalizing the literary hierarchy that can relegate pleasure to the bottom of the value system. Ultimately, this thesis seeks out the places and times between the concrete, the literary seams amidst the defined limitations of what we think we know, and reexamines the value of pleasure and play for readers of the romance genre.

CHAPTER ONE
ONCE UPON A TIME: AN INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, a young woman faced a challenge worthy of any fairy tale…and if she passed all the tests that lay before her, romance would reign supreme; she would be crowned a master of her realm, and she would, of course, live happily ever after.

It is not a stretch to apply the epic stories of old to current time. I don't think I am alone when I tell you that I still get a little shiver of anticipation trailing up my spine when I hear the words "Once upon a time…" or "In a land far, far away…" Echoes of magic reach out from my childhood stories and tremble in the air, and it is easier than one might think to make "a time" now and a "far away land" the very ground you're standing on. Despite pretending that somewhere around adolescence marks the point of outgrowing fairy tales and their happily ever afters, it seems that such stories are not quite done with us. Not content to remain in their somewhat naively defined boundaries as "children's literature," fairy tales permeate our lives, from childhood and beyond. Maria Tatar suggests that fairy tales in their earliest form dealt with the "preoccupations and ambitions that conform to adult anxieties and desires" ("Annotated" xiii) providing stories a way to"[bring] myths down to earth and [inflect] them with human rather than heroic terms" ("Annotated" xii). Addressing the tendency to declare saccharine and sanitized fairy tales stories for children, Tatar reminds grownups that these stories once bridged the gaps in age to entertain and instruct whoever curled around the fireplace at the end of a long day's labor- from infant to father to crone and everyone in between

("Enchanted"). Unlike many of their Disney-fied counterparts, many of the classic fairy tales of today once dealt with dark themes of incest, forbidden desires, danger, suicide, murder, rape, and countless other "adult desires and anxieties." The language of fairy tales still infiltrates adult filters to haunt us- from the hopes for a "fairy tale wedding" or a "prince charming" to a kiss to wake up a "Sleeping Beauty," speakers assume listeners will understand the implicit message behind a few casual syllables.

Why do we still use the language of magic? And why do so many of our sayings and references to fairy tales deal with romance and relationships? The love of romance in fairy tales is not unrequited. In the $1.36 billion a year romance novel industry (RWA), dozens of titles are published annually with direct references to classic fairy tales, while hundreds more adapt the plot lines of Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, the Frog Prince, and others. What happens when a fairy tale becomes a romance novel?

In my thesis, I will continue a project that began twenty-two years ago when I picked up my first fairy tale and started to devour it as ravenously as the wolf must have eaten granny. Fairy tales were fascinating, rich worlds of magic, mystery, love, and happy endings. It seems like no big surprise then, that I picked up a romance novel at the age of twelve, and tumbled heels over head into worlds of magic, mystery, love, and always, always, a happy ending. While the realm of romance novels is a dwarves' diamond mine in itself, because of the limitations of a two-year project, I have focused my research on romance novels that self-identify as fairy-tale based. I have no interest in defending romance novels or fairy tales, or to tell other readers how and why to read like I do. Instead, I am using this opportunity of an obligated academic audience to rediscover

my love of stories and to explore why these stories have affected me so strongly. What are the connections between fairy tales for children and the fairy tales written for women? How do the stories translate? What do the readers of these stories return to time and time again, and why do both children's literature and romance novels form communities of readers that are delineated from other types of general readers? What does a romance reader experience when she immerses herself in the sensual world of fairy tales written for women?

Like many of the more recent scholars in the romance field, I began as a long-time romance reader, and my scholarship evolved from my love of the genre. I will approach this literature as an insider, a lover, and as an outsider, a probing academic attempting to understand and share a little of its mysterious complexities. Rather like the route of Little Red, this will be an expedition through a tangled forest of romance literature, where unforeseen dangers and dark epiphanies lurk, but this search through the wicked woods of romance will also reveal the beauty of these novels. While the path to my metaphorical granny's house might be twisted and meandering, even with a detour or two down the paths of pins and needles, my ultimate destination is a greater understanding of how female romance readers have navigated these adult fairy tales while focusing on the purpose and value of that journey for readers. My reading for this project spans from collections of fairy tales for children and academic collections of fairy tales for scholars to theoretical works on the power of fairy tales and romance scholarship. I have also structured my primary romance novels to design this project in a unique way: as a reader. While I have read widely in a variety of romance novel texts, I

chose a favorite story from the tales that are well-thumbed and on my keeper shelf, in order to explore the ideas of this project.

It is, in romance novel language, my most fervent desire that you, as a reader, will enter with me into this project, a realm that is, as some fairy tales say, “In a place, neither near nor far, and a time, neither now nor then…” (Jennings and Ponder). Among the questions asked in my research, this thesis seeks out the places and times between the concrete, the literary seams amidst the defined limitations of what we think we know, and reexamines the value of pleasure and play for readers of the romance genre. Together we will journey through such questions and, much like Bluebeard’s hidden room, we might find anything lurking behind a now seemingly locked door.

CHAPTER TWO
BREADCRUMBS: A FAIRY TALE PATH THROUGH THE ROMANCE NOVEL FOREST

With roots running deep into literary tradition, romantic stories have been tugging on heartstrings for centuries. “Romance, as a part of the human experience, has existed from the first time a pair of lovers gazed at each other with love-blinded eyes and saw the world around them not as it was but as they wanted it to be” (Ramsdell 3). From Penelope and Odysseus to Cupid and Psyche to Rapunzel and her prince, love, lust and attraction have always been a part of classic literature, myths, legends, and the machinations of the human mind. What distinguishes these stories from a paperback emblazoned with a shirtless, oiled Highlander? Probably less than you think.

The Romance Writers of America, an organization comprised of over 10,000 romance authors and industry professionals, defines a romance novel by two characteristics. First, the love story must be central to the book; the main plot must revolve around “two individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work” (RWA). There can be as many subplots, characters, and imaginative plot devices as desired, as long as the love story remains the driving force. Secondly, in order to be deemed a romance novel, there must be an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending. The lovers are always together at the end of the story, and their struggles, whether they are emotional, physical, mental, or otherwise, are rewarded by the promise of “emotional justice and unconditional love” (RWA). With such sweeping criteria, the world of romantic fiction is as vast as a fairy tale kingdom and with nearly as many subjects. The readers are the nobility of this kingdom, however, and it is the readers’ preferences and

demands that shape the current understanding of the genre. The romance reader is a powerful character in any analysis of romantic fiction, but there are many faces to this figure.

Romance readers are incredibly diverse. Although the core of American romance readership[1] is a group of 29 million regular readers (RWA), various independent publishing researchers[2] record a huge range of individuals reading romance. First of all, the romance genre is often considered to be a female genre, generally accompanied by perceptions of a reclining woman stuffing herself with bonbons and Harlequins (Long). In terms of this project, I have also primarily focused on the experiences of women readers. Unfortunately, not much has been done, in either academic research or in online reader communities, to attend to male readers who constituted nearly ten percent of all romance readers in 2008.[3] Lovers of the genre are spread through all ages, races, demographics, religions, education levels; in fact, the list of differences goes on and on. With 29 percent of Americans over the age of 13 reading at least one romance novel in 2008 (RWA), a cross-section of nearly a third of all Americans creates a difficult fan base to analyze. Because of the variety and immensity of romance reader background, academics and fans of the genre alike must be careful not to herald all-encompassing proclamations about romantic fiction, at the risk of a bloody and violent revolt.

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[1]This project will focus on reading experiences for American, female romance readers.
[2]The following is information on the RWA statistics provided in this chapter:
"RWA's statistics result from two studies commissioned by the association. One study—on the *sales* of romance fiction—is compiled by RWA from Simba Information (an independent market research firm that studies the publishing industry), R.R. Bowker's Books In Print, the AAP, and other named sources. This study is updated every 12 months. Another study focuses on reader demographics, book content, and book-buying habits. The 2009 survey was conducted by InfoTrends, Inc. This first version of this study was conducted in 1998. The follow-up surveys were conducted in Summer/Fall 2002 and Winter 2005" (RWA).
[3]I sense a dissertation project…

Instead, I believe, as both a scholar and a romance reader, that the most productive way to address these texts is to look for what is so alluring that the romance genre earned 1.36 billion dollars in sales in 2009 and outsold its nearest competitor by nearly twice the revenue (RWA).[4] This is not an excuse to avoid discussing the difficulties and problems within the genre, but to address my own reading choices in a spirit of critical celebration, a type of literary evaluation that works fluidly among self-identifiers such as critic or fan. This middle ground allows for an understanding of value that pleasure readers experience which is often different than what is traditionally imposed in a classic hierarchy of literary evaluation. Anne Kaler, romance reader and academic, tackles the unique viewpoint of analyzing texts that are beloved. “I’ve always liked stories…Because romance satisfied this hunger, I wanted to examine the cause of this satisfaction” (4). Again, the romance genre cultivates close personal relationships with its readers, responding and adapting to their needs, working to *satisfy* the reader.

The logistics of trying to please 29 million readers have led to the creation of a vast banquet of romantic fiction offerings. Part of the exciting nature of the genre is its adaptability in order to continue to fulfill readers’ desires. Like benevolent fairies, the publishing industry and romance authors continue to wave their literary wands and produce a dazzling array of books to satiate the appetites of millions of individual readers. Readers outside of the genre often neglect to take into account the miscellany that is available to be consumed through subgenres of romantic fiction as well as specific series romance lines.

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[4] According to Simba Information, religious and inspirational books were the second best-selling genre category earning $770 million.

Series or category romances are books written to precise publisher guidelines which dictate characteristics such as length, tone, and sensuality level. “Each category carries a promise to the reader, and those expectations are clearly stated in the guidelines” (“Category”). The Harlequin publishing house is the veritable royalty of marketing love; a company that, as their logo proudly proclaims, has been “providing 60 years of women with pure reading pleasure” (eHarlequin) and provides a cross-section of the current range of available novels in romantic fiction. As the leading publisher of series romance novels, Harlequin has become synonymous with romance novels in general, which imposes false boundaries on the genre that can trick the unwary into assuming all romance novels are the same. Instead, one might picture Harlequin as the experienced older lover with a myriad of tastes, willing to fit its skills to each individual reader to achieve ultimate satisfaction. Since its inception in 1949, Harlequin has shipped approximately 5.63 billion books (eHarlequin) to eager readers. Harlequin currently offers seventeen different subgenres of romance novels ranging from “Passion” to “Mystery” to “Chick Lit” to “Inspirational” (eHarlequin). Whether a reader wants a romance novel with horror elements, suspense, action, paranormal plot lines, science fiction tropes, or faith-based situations and characters, just to name a few common themes, there exists a subgenre in romantic fiction to slake that desire.

Once a reader has chosen a subgenre that she enjoys, Harlequin presents over 50 different lines of books to choose from, including such highly specific series as Harlequin NASCAR, which features the “rush of the race car circuit” along with the “thrill of falling in love” (eHarlequin). Harlequin continues to introduce new lines of books to

capture different segments of the evolving female audience ("Harlequin"). Based on continuing interaction with readers, "Harlequin often responds to shifts in readers' desires. Complaints are monitored ('Too many babies,' 'The hero shouldn't swear as much') and adjustments sometimes made. Whatever else it is, the romance genre is democratic. The writing is editor driven, and the editors are reader driven" (Gillmor). Beyond Harlequin, other publishing houses produce romance novels in series and also in single titles. A single title romance is a debonair, stand-alone book published independently of any specific line or series, not bound by specific publisher guidelines, and usually longer than a category romance (Kent 27). Together, series and single-title romance novels offer a fantasy for nearly every reader: paranormal, historical, romantic suspense, thrillers, tender romance, home and family, and many more, with ranging levels of sensuality to deliver the right story to the right reader, all of the time

Interestingly, as the genre expands and the level of eroticism changes on both ends of the spectrum, not even the RWA's standards can completely contain all aspects of the genre. Romance novelist Alison Kent may claim that "A romance novel without sexual tension is like a donut without the, well, the donut" (Kent 11), but there are as many different ways to address sexuality in romantic fiction as there are varieties of breakfast pastries. From smoldering glances to the light brush of a finger on the back of the neck, strong romance novels tease the reader into accepting the story, the characters, and to feel the character's attraction for one another. For many readers, the heat of rising sexual tension and the fulfillment of subsequent sexual encounters between the protagonists are a huge draw toward romance novels, but the genre supplies a veritable

smorgasbord of potential options ranging from the strict, no pre-marital sex “sweet” romances to erotica with graphic descriptions of multiple sex acts. While at one time, Harlequin decency codes[5] kept many romance novels on the market relatively sex free, changing social views of sexuality meant that the genre needed to evolve. In 1972, more sexually explicit romance novels emerged with Kathleen Woodiwess’s *The Flame and the Flower.* Breaking from the tradition of earlier romance novels that often featured wholesome heroines with worldly, rich heroes who might share a chaste kiss by the final page, the first “bodice ripper” took the reader into the bedroom with the protagonists for the first time in romance. In order to avoid societal restraints at the time, “forced seduction,” which sometimes was nearly indistinguishable from rape, became a way to include sexual activity in romance novels while retaining a heroine’s virtue. *The Flame and the Flower* sold over 4.5 million copies by 1978. Because of the huge popularity of Woodiwess’s debut novel and other romances in the same format, these bodice rippers became ways to answer demands for increased sensuality. However, many readers and writers, not to mention critics, grew more and more uncomfortable with this treatment of women, and by the mid-1980s, scenes of rape or forced seduction became increasingly scarce, in favor of more mutual developments of sexuality. “While contemporary authors acknowledge their foremothers of the 70s and early 80s, most are uncomfortable with the anti-feminist thrust of the older stuff” (Zaitchick), and overall, the genre has evolved to meet modern readers’ tastes of sexual relationships. As sensuality levels continue to evolve and stretch from inspirational romance that might culminate in love’s first kiss at

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[5] Mary Bonnycastle, wife of former Harlequin owner Richard Bonnycastle, implemented for the publishing company “what one colleague describes as a ‘decency code’ which caused them to reject some of the more sexually explicit…titles submitted for reprinting as Harlequins” (Regis 158).

the end of the book to erotic fiction romance, some novels have begun to introduce multiple sexual partners, moving beyond the stipulations of *only* two partners struggling to make a relationship work; although such novels still end with a hero and heroine's commitment to each other.[6] Two romance enthusiasts recently published a wish list for romance plots that have not been done yet which included suggestions such as "erotic inspirational romance" and "atheist romance" as well as "hipster romance, please. Intelligent, thin, toned, and confident dudes…who like concerts, bands you've never heard of, and staying up all night arguing about the economic analysis of food consumption" (Tan and Wendell 284). The kingdom of romance novels is expanding, conquering new territories as well as refurbishing old provinces, and the frontiers of the genre are only limited by the imagination of readers' fantasies.

Romance novels are often considered to be fairy tales for adults, stories of love, adventure and happily ever afters. The flexibility of both of the romance novel story form, what I would go so far as to label the ability to play within the genre, is one of the most important parallels between fairy tales and romance novels. This link binds together children's texts and adult female texts in an interesting way, allowing a sense of play, control, and freedom for many readers. In *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, Jack Zipes addresses how fairy tales are adapted to each new group of readers as generations pass. One of the greatest complaints against romance novels is that they are simply the same story told again and again, a genre of "hackneyed revisions of old tales" (Kaler 3). Yet Zipes emphasizes that the imitation of stories and the repetition of formula is "*not* [a] simple

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[6] While many romance authors are pushing the limits of the one male, one female love story arc, including same-sex couples, multiple partners, even mixed species relationships in the case of some paranormal, for the ease of discussion in this project, hero and heroine will refer to male and female protagonists.

copying mechanism" (11, emphasis in original). Instead, Zipes tells us that familiar stories such as fairy tales are "remembered, interpreted, adopted, and reproduced to contribute to the formation of a community and culture" (11). Just as fairy tales adjust in each retelling based on the storyteller's feeling that the story has relevancy in a certain sociocultural context (Zipes 11), so do romance novels utilize a particular, familiar set of conventions as a constant in an otherwise dynamic, highly flexible, and adaptive genre.

Likewise, fairy tales adapt themselves to fit the needs of their readers, to fit the needs of what is being communicated. Certain identifiable signifiers link the story to its predecessors, for example, skin white as snow and lips red as blood, connecting the story to a rich history of other readers and tellers of the fairy tale. Because of these conventions that evoke a sense of familiarity in the listener or reader, a sense of having heard the tale before, an author or teller is free to adjust less recognizable elements to tailor the story to its current audience.

Similarly, in romance novels, there is a way of codifying language, using specific romantic conventions in order to link the story to the larger body of work. This process, which allows members of the romance reading community to identify certain tropes of a romance novel, is then criticized as "telling the same story over and over." Much like a child will ask for a favorite story to be read again and again, so do some critics believe that every romance novel is the same story garbed in various costumes. Writing about fairy tales, Hans-Heino Ewers claims that "specific short literary forms…are stored in the minds of an extremely broad range of social and other circles and in fact are part of everyone's basic communicative equipment" (107). However, some of the scorn of

certain types of formulaic texts seems to stem from their very accessibility. Because the basic plot or story is so easy for most people to grasp, such as the concept of a happy ending, the nuances and adaptability of the texts can be overlooked by readers other than the devoted followers of the literature. Additionally, Zipes' investigation of fairy tales' evolution and longevity hint at an important cognitive process happening in the repetition and "retelling" of a story. Rather than a simple copy, each new retelling of a familiar story undergoes important adaptations, minutely changing the tale to fit the needs of the new reader. This type of reading process puts the power in the hands (or rather the eyes) of the reader by the same process Zipes describes as happening in fairy tales. The literary fairy tale "is not static but is certainly marked continually by recognizable recurring motifs, topoi, and conventions" (15), and the paradox becomes that the "fairy tale creates disorder to create order" (15).

In other words, the romance novel, like the fairy tale, uses both its conventions and its adaptability in order to create a story that reaches out to a specific community of readers. These tropes present a sense of familiarity and the adaptability from a fluid text; unbound by concrete word order, can create a reflection of the current social and cultural temperature in order to relate to a particular audience. The formula of genre fiction "no matter how many social and psychological functions [it] fulfills…will probably never survive unless from time to time it… revitaliz[es] its conventions and stereotypes to express contemporaneous concerns" (Cawelti113). Both romance novels and fairy tales rely on a seemingly paradoxical combination of established formulas and conventions, as

well as the readers' and authors' authority to change the tale, to tweak the story to resonate with the desires of present-day audience.

Maria Tatar, chair of Folklore and Mythology at Harvard University, probes deeper into how certain stories satiate the desires of a young audience in *Enchanted Hunters* (2009), and her analysis weaves the threads of fairy tales and romance novels together even further. The customs of fairy tales that have such a strong impact on its child hearers and readers are often mimicked in the adult fairy tales of romance novels. Tatar describes how children's stories are "deeply invested in creating sensory stimulation that enlivens, animates and transforms, the authors of children's books stockpile arsenals of beauty and horror to construct 'peak experiences'…the goal is ecstasy, but the path to luminosity often winds through dark streets filled with gloom and terror" (Tatar 12). Both fairy tales and romance novels pay careful attention to creating a sensual world comprised of detailed physical description. This creates a "visceral excitement" (13), enabling the reader to engage in "mimetic imagination, the capacity to enter into a fictional world and make it feel real" (13). The reader is allowed and encouraged to enter into the world of the story, and the detail paid to the surroundings allow a reader to more easily move into the story land, "giving them the feeling that they have actually entered another world and are navigating it *with* the protagonist, but not…as the protagonist. They are like participants, to be sure, but more like witnesses who watch events unfold and read the minds of the characters experiencing them" (19). By smelling, tasting, seeing, hearing, touching, and in the case of romance novels, very much *feeling* what the characters in the text are experiencing, both fairy tales and

romance novels' characteristic attention to the sharing of sensory details allows readers, not to escape or have vicarious lives of glamour and excitement, but to know "the unmediated delight of encounters with other lives" (18). Tatar tells us that "for children, reading becomes less a refuge from life than a quiet sanctuary, a chance to meet characters worth observing and to witness how they manage the conflict, peril, and adventure that are often—thankfully—missing from real life" (18), and this same sanctuary is offered for readers of romance.

This raises the question, what is different in other forms of literature? Do other genres or types of texts not offer the same sanctuary? While any text can offer this type of sanctuary and contact for readers, some don't, many aren't supposed to, a few choose not to, and even if the invitation is extended, there is no guarantee that a reader will accept. What then sets the readers of fairy tales and romance novels apart? What distinguishes these readers and their interactions with their stories from another reader? Tatar suggests that the process of imitation by children of their favorite characters, the little girl who shuts her eyes and purses her mouth for Sleeping Beauty's kiss, the boy whose stick becomes an ax to slay the wolf, or for my younger self, a great deal of leaping about trying to fly like Peter Pan, is "less about identification than about testing and trying out different roles and possibilities" (22). In other words, the reading of characters that may not be morally upstanding or even particularly admirable to a reader are not serving as placeholders for the reader to "insert self here" but are a way to push the margins that begin to define us as human beings.

Tatar writes that "as we grow older, we begin to draw boundaries and develop the sense of critical detachment that makes it harder to inhabit a fictional world" ("Enchanted" 22). Many readers of romance novels, like the child readers Tatar describes, spend time puzzling out books with each other, in online forums and communities. These women are not necessarily discussing the literary merits of symbolism, although that can and does happen, but, through the simpler narrative form, are able to examine the characters, the story, and engage in a willing suspension of disbelief. Readers manipulate the borders of their adult identity, entering story worlds and exploring how a naïve Victorian heiress or a worldly pagan courtesan or even a brooding, grey-eyed Viking experiences the trials and pleasure of a different world. Many romance readers accept the invitation to play, engage, and enter into a sense of absorption that has been relegated, even by Tatar, to the world of children. This sense of play is not recognized as a traditional literary value but can lead toward a new middle ground that both engages and informs, a system of textual identification that demands investment, engagement, and critical thought. This space between draws a trail between child and adult, teller and listener, author and reader, and it is being formed in a genre that simultaneously holds out the familiar and the strange, and leaves it to the reader to choose her path.

CHAPTER THREE
THE GOLDILOCKS SYNDROME: A READER'S SEARCH FOR "JUST RIGHT"

According to Romance Writers of America, 74.8 million Americans read at least one romance novel in 2008, and these are just the books that have been titled or labeled in marketing materials as "romance" by the publisher (Danford). This well-hidden obsession has translated to $1.36 billion in revenue in 2009 and holds the largest share of the consumer book market (RWA). Yet despite facts and figures proclaiming, not only the popularity, but also the diverse cross section of the population that read in the broad world of romance novels, rumors abound all things related to a Fabio-graced cover. From sexually deprived middle-aged homemakers to slaves of oppressive texts to addicts of emotional porn, romance readers have got as bad a reputation as the boy from the wrong side of the tracks. With pervasive stereotypes about romance readers, novels, and authors, there is a sense that the neatly labeled hypothetical box marked "Romance Novels" will easily contain a group of texts and individuals that can be condensed to one lump sum and locked in some witch's tower, away from further academic scrutiny.

However, dashing rebels with pen and computer have confronted the stereotypes and sweeping generalizations. Beginning with Janice Radway's 1984 text, *Reading the Romance,* the fundamental and often quoted premise of romance novel analysis, romance novels started to earn enough interest to become texts deemed worthy of study. As the genre evolves and expands, and as both readership and revenue continue to grow, a handful of readers, authors, and critics have been eyeing romance with scholarly lust, begging for the chance to bare the genre and discover its secrets. In the tradition of

romance scrutiny, literary and trained scholars are not the only people who have been undressing the issues in romance. After a wave of literary criticism addressing romantic fiction in the 1980s and early 1990s,[7] romance authors responded with a collection of essays exploring their own understanding of the genre in *Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women* (1992). In the inquiry into romance novels, the apparent gap between examiner and reader has never been very wide. *Teach Me Tonight* (2006) and *Romance Wiki* (2006) are two online communities that specifically feature work which crosses the boundaries of critic or fan and produces authors who are both lovers and scholars of the romance genre. *RomanceWiki* includes an entire section devoted to romance study, including partial lists of college professors and intellectuals who write romance,[8] hundreds of articles and books devoted to the evaluation of the genre, as well as recently published multimedia works and graduate work on romantic fiction. Other online communities that provide fan forums and information specific to the romance novel industry are the Harlequin publishing online forums as well as the Smart Bitches, Trashy Books website. As the distinctions between critics and lovers grow hazy, the romance industry is letting down its hair and continuing to reevaluate the tidy boundaries that have boxed in its readers and texts. As bell hooks, author and social activist writes, “The essence of true love is mutual recognition- two individuals seeing each other as they really are” (183). Despite a passion for romance novels, or perhaps because of it, many readers are facing their choice of reading material with open eyes, ready to see the romance genre more fully, both the positive and the negative. There are many writers

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[7] Janice Radway, Carol Thurston, Jan Cohn, and Tania Modleski offer a representative sample of some of the work being done on romance novels in the late 80’s and early 90’s.

[8] The list includes over 45 authors.

and critics who are willing to discuss the problems in romance, and issues do exist. Romance has a dark history of domineering males and submissive females, rape, power struggles, and many other troubling subjects, but in addition, there are numerous constructive and enlightening elements of the genre that often get lost in the controversies.

So in the spirit of true, clear-sighted love, I will toss my admittedly short and fairly glossy locks somewhere above my alabaster shoulders and say it proudly: I read romance novels, a lot of them. The role of the romance reader is a complicated one, and it begins from the first time a reader picks up a book. My story begins with a green cover peeking out from the shelf, half hidden behind a battered copy of *Lord of the Flies* and a few Readers' Digest condensed books. It might have been the flowing calligraphy in gold embossed letters spelling out *Devil's Daughter* or the insert picture featuring a golden haired beauty with ample assets in the arms of a dangerous looking man with heavy black brows, but I reached for this mysterious manuscript, my first romance novel, with nail-bitten, twelve-year-old hands. From the first page, Catherine Coulter, author of over 50 single-title romance novels, created a world of dark conflict, sweeping passions, and obviously, the redeeming powers of love. At the time, I skipped to the multiple page descriptions of the dance as old as time, but as I grew older I began to read romance novels from cover to cover, relishing a story in which love is rewarded and the last page coaxes out a reader's smile at the promise of happily ever after.

Even while I bit greedily into these stories of romance, I was still aware that this sort of material was not to be flaunted proudly in school halls or in front of grannies.

Gorging myself on any reading material I could find meant two things to my parents and educators. First, that I would read anything regardless of its "appropriateness" for my age and mind, and subsequently, that my reading needed to be guided and monitored in order that I did not, in my naivety, find myself sick with the sweet fluff of pleasure reading and unable to stomach the hearty nourishment of classic, literary reading. This public concern for my bookish well-being led to an early understanding of nuances in the world of stories. When I misbehaved, as all interesting heroines do, my parents would take away "pleasure reading" as a punishment. Therefore, I understood from an early age that enjoying books, reading beyond necessity and requirement, ostensibly offered something different than the books I was told would be "good for me." While what exactly was different and dangerous in my reading of romance novels was unclear, my hierarchy of reading was being formed, as it is for so many others.

Even those who are entrusted with the keys to the kingdom of books feel this tension that arises "because deep-down many librarians think of reading as a ladder with popular fiction at the bottom and literary fiction and canonical texts at the top" (Ross, *Metaphors*). This innate suspicion of pleasure reading demonstrated by the authorities around me fractured my reading experience, divided it into separate and not equal categories, and forced my romance reading, quite literally, into the closet, under the bed, or locked in the bathroom. Sociologist Elizabeth Long asserts that "reading for pleasure still lingers, in connotation at least, in a realm of leisured bourgeois private time that is female" (13). The implication of the "self –induced pleasure" (13) of reading as both female and private invaded my own practices. Unaware as of yet, what exactly

differentiated pleasure books from other types of reading, but intrigued by the very idea that these books contained forbidden material supposedly beyond my age, I spent the next few years hiding my affair with romance novels. I sensed that out of all the genres and stories I read, these little paperbacks were somehow the worst of the lot, the magic beans that looked pretty but were nothing but a trick to steal my time and my mind.

My inherent understanding of a sense of suspicion of formative sexuality was not unique. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Michel Foucault writes that the sexuality of children was viewed "at the same time 'natural' and 'contrary to nature'" and that "this sexual activity posed physical and moral, individual and collective dangers" (104). Such concerns about the sexual activities of children lead to authorities "tak[ing] charge…of this precious and perilous, dangerous and endangered sexual potential" which would lead to "the war against onanism" (Foucault 104). In other words, the public condemnation and censorship of a personal sphere of enjoyment stemmed from a complicated view that sexuality was natural, but unnatural and *dangerous* in specific contexts and for particular people, namely those who are considered unable to recognize the value of their own potential. The inherent fear that is revealed in the passage is also focused around the self-gratification of the children in that by a practice such as masturbation, the "sexual potential" of a child becomes "endangered," justifying the scrutiny and direction of his or her behavior. The intermingling of fear, desire, monitoring, sexuality, secrecy, private practices, pleasure, condemnation, and judgment expressed in Foucault's analysis relates to my experience of being encouraged to read specific, appropriate and *safe* texts. Pleasure reading such as

with romance novels could, in fact, ruin or waste my potential mental acuity. This type of reading was dangerous in the wrong context or the wrong hands, and my inherent understanding of the tensions surrounding the pleasure of these sexualized texts coached the ways that I would read my romance novels during my adolescent years- secretly, hidden, and with pleasure, not only in the text itself, but in the very sense of a subversive behavior that was done for my own gratification.

Even before a romance reader is fully conscious of the somewhat suppressed disdain of her choice of reading material, the doubtful mentality penetrating the world of pleasure reading and invading the romance genre influences the reading experience. Although "the social sources of literary judgment have been so lost in time, so buried in reaffirmation across generations, that they are altogether obscured" (Long 120), the mistrust of reading as a source of entertainment can be noticed in old literary debates. Because the hallmarks of romance stories reach so far back into our literary history, one only needs to cast a cursory glance around in order to find stress between pleasure and enlightenment. In her famous essay, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (1856), George Eliot, with biting humor, lampoons the superficiality of romantic novels written by women. According to Eliot, the novels are written by privileged, spoiled women who record their flourishes with "violet-coloured ink and a ruby pen" (Eliot qtd. in Weisser 302). Eliot tells us these flighty women do not even have the excuse of economic necessity for their writing, as these authoresses are "inexperienced in every form of poverty except poverty of brains" (qtd. in Weisser 303). That Eliot considers the impoverished minds of the authors to blame for these texts is abundantly clear. The texts

themselves are lacking in any "verisimilitude in their representation" (303) and perhaps most exasperating for Eliot, the novels and their authors become ambassadors of female intellect as seen in her claim that "the average intellect of women is unfairly represented by the mass of feminine literature" (Eliot). Eliot's frustration with this specific type of female novelist reveals the complicated nature of reading debates.

As a female novelist, Eliot is obviously not criticizing all female authors. Instead, she is recognizing and creating differentiations in purposes and quality of novels. Susan Ostrov Weisser offers this illuminating prelude to Eliot's essay. "The context in which Eliot wrote, mid-century England, was one in which female authors had a great deal of difficulty being taken seriously. For this reason Eliot wished to dissociate the nobility of purpose in the best writing from the frivolity of romantic writing by women" (301).[9] From both Weisser's reading of Eliot's essay as well as Eliot's own condemnation of "silly novels," it becomes evident that the "frivolous" writing contained in the type of books we should avoid has long carried the stereotype of being fantastical, or in Eliot's own words: "improbable…unfaithful…very little like [reality]" (305). Eliot's essay divulges a core concept that has carried over into today's debates concentrated around the reading of romance novels. Fantasy, the seeming disconnectedness from the realities of the human condition, is less noble a literary pursuit than the purpose of those novels that are more grounded in "verisimilitude."

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[9] While this thesis is not focused on the history of the popular/literary debate in reading, the economic reality and struggle of female authors in both Eliot's time as well as before and since should be considered when reading criticisms of romantic works and other works by female authors. The struggle to simply be taken seriously as an author as a female romance novelist today raises troubling questions about both the evolution of perceptions and current views of female authorship.

The skepticism of romance novels, texts that seemingly float free of reality, has in modern language led to concerns about escapism, trashy reading, wishful thinking, and worries that, as was insinuated to me as a young reader, enjoying such fantasy books too much could lead to being unable to appreciate the supposedly more noble purposes of lofty literary texts. For romance novel readers, such suspicions have been publicized as incredibly unflattering stereotypes. Over a hundred and twenty years after Eliot's essay, librarian Rudolph Bold outlines his understanding of a contemporary romance reader in the tellingly named, "Trash in the Library" for a 1980 article.

> She's a 200-pound lady with a bad complexion, a husband who philanders, and kids who never shut up. She didn't graduate from high school, had to get married, and can't afford a psychiatrist, and so she must continue to live in a world she never made and doesn't much like. For her there is the escape of reading…those paper-backed romantic nirvanas that sell themselves in supermarkets and bus terminals. And along with other house-bound housewives, maiden aunts, retired telephone operators...she escapes for an hour or two each day. (1138)

With such an archetype set up for a young romance reader, no wonder I ducked into the closet to read my romance novels! Like the crones of fairy tales, no longer useful to the world, asexual, removed to a cottage to disconnect from reality, muttering over bubbling cauldrons and cackling over useless magic texts, Bold's article paints romance readers as miserable excuses for humanity, ugly, unloved, unhappy, whose only chance for sanity is offered by the conniving books that "sell *themselves"* (1138, emphasis added). Interestingly, Bold identifies the romance reader in cahoots with the text itself, giving the

text a sense of autonomy and power. In Bold's model, the texts are seducers, lettered Lotharios and inked sirens, who call out to lonely women, already fattened for the feast, and as true wolves of pen and paper, ravage the already simple, barely educated minds of romance readers. The reader, overcome by the persuasive powers of the paperbacks, is reduced to the same "condition of passive receptivity" (Snitow qtd. in Weisser 315) that some romance critics have attributed to the heroines of the novels. Reminiscent of the sexualized children of the Foucault model, the female readers that Bold sketches are unaware of the risky consequences of their acts of reading. In this article, these women readers naively indulge in dangerous reading acts offered by prostituting texts that sell the promise of a few moments of pleasure and escape at a cost of the entire intellect.

This female reader is a character that Bold expects his audience to know. Bold addresses his essay to the literati, those above the "sweating, stupid masses" (1138), and tells his compatriots not to turn their noses up at Harlequins and other romance publishers, but to stock their shelves for these pleasure readers that shuffle through their library doors because "we cannot exclude the possibility that osmosis might act on them while they are in the library and they may in a moment of weakness seek out literature of better quality" (1139). Not to mention that while conceding that popular romance is comparable to "Nancy Drew for the menopausal set," Bold tells his audience that if not for Harlequins these women would be alcoholics, sex addicts, and spending thousands in therapy (1139). Bold asks his fellow librarians if it isn't better to cater a bit to these readers out of the goodness of human charity since "if standards are lowered by pandering to the less gifted" at least "at the same time good may also be done" (1139) by

offering escape from the dredges of a wasted life. Bold ends his essay by urging his readers to "practice a humanistic tolerance… and include in our public those of 'lower' taste as well as those intellectual wastrels who prefer lazing in the backwaters of low quality literature" (1139). Although written thirty years ago, this stereotype of the passive, numb female reader who requires authoritative guidance to mitigate the potential pitfalls of romance novels still permeates cultural perceptions of romance readers, along with an understanding of the very act of reading romance to be a waste of intellectual rigor and an indicator of "lower taste."

Nearly three decades after Bold's rather limited portrait of a romance reader, authors Candy Tan and Sarah Wendell address the continuing misconceptions of the average romance fan in *Beyond Heaving Bosoms* (2009), a guide to the romance genre by romance readers. As readers themselves, Tan and Wendell frame a remarkably similar typecast of just who picks up those bodice-rippers in the supermarket:

> She's rather dim and kind of tubby—undereducated *and* undersexed—and she displays a distressing affinity for mom jeans and sweaters covered in puffy paint and appliqued kittens. So even though repeated surveys conducted by independent research reveal that an astonishingly diverse and often affluent population reads romance novels, in popular depictions, we're all the same. (Wendell and Tan 4)

Such universalizing stereotypes allow a sense of safely delineating and identifying such women, readers who enjoy and return to sexualized texts, readers who have become sexualized. The stereotype that defines the romance reader is imbued with sexual

speculation, and such comments invoke a repulsive and problematic figurehead for female sexuality.

Literary critic, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, tells us, "In this century…sexuality has been made expressive of the essence of both identity and knowledge" (Sedgwick 26), and in the case of romance novels, the sexuality of the stereotyped romance reader reveals a rather terrifying construction of identity pieced together by bits of the maiden, the mother, and the crone of fairy tales. Desperate for love, for escape, for sex, and yet curiously childlike, with no choice in the question of marriage, staying confined to the house, and remaining under-educated, all of these qualities seem to suggest that the conception of the female romance reader is mired in a curious limbo state between sexual desperation and perpetual childishness epitomized by kitten and paint-splattered sweaters. The stereotypes that are attached to romance readers conceal their individual identities under a universalizing blanket of recognizable physical and personal traits, blocking the nuanced view of the actual diversity of the individuals who read romance novels, making us "all the same." The result of such a widespread stereotype seems to put female romance readers in the place of the sexualized children of Foucault's text, who are naturally drawn to sex with an unnatural or inappropriate desire, and therefore must be monitored and guided by an authoritative hand for their own good.

The complicated issues surrounding romance novels as well as how the texts influence their much maligned readers have not been resolved. In recent issues of *Library Trends,* contributors continue to question the purpose and place of pleasure reading much as Eliot did in the 19th century. With a history as "guardians of public taste" (Ross 633,

Reader), librarians like Bold are still very much engaged in the understanding of the place of pleasure in textual domain and sometimes even provide the authoritative hand to direct the issue. Historically, Catherine Ross demonstrates that librarians have been especially concerned with the well-being of women and children, further establishing the child/woman connection highlighted in romance reader stereotypes, who may fall prey to the harmful effects of reading popular fiction if left to their own desires among the stacks (Ross 633, *Reader*). "The fact that the reading experience can be intensely pleasurable was scarcely a commendation, for solitary pleasure itself has long been viewed with suspicion" (Ross 633, *Reader*). Unfortunately, the same pressure that influenced me to hide my unworthy reading materials from public view, to engage in private and secretive reading practices, also condemns the solitary pleasure that these books then offer. The silencing result of the larger cultural perceptions of romance fans often leads to readers unwilling or ashamed to discuss or show their passion for romance novels, depriving such readers of potentially more comprehensive and powerful positions within the romance community. Due to the understanding that larger society considers her reading material trash, her favorite authors empty-headed, and she, as a reader, likely unintelligent and unloved, such a reader is simultaneously being considered suspicious for her "solitary pleasure." These tensions between secrecy and disclosure as well as public and private spheres as well as equally "epistemologically charged pairings" (Sedgwick 72) such as adult/child, sexual/asexual, etc., infiltrate the habitual romance readers' experiences. Because of these seemingly opposing categories, a habitual romance reader often feels the censoring public negativity of the stereotypes, explicitly attacking her and her texts,

and yet is encouraged by those same pressures to stay silent in order to avoid judgment for sharing her reading choices.

Specifically addressed from lovers of the romance genre to other readers, the opening sentences of Tan and Wendell's book speaks directly to the conflicts that a romance reader participates in every time they read. "No, no, don't hide your romance novel. You don't have to wrap it in a quilted cover or slide it in between the pages of *The New Yorker*. We know you're smart. We also know you like romance novels" (Tan and Wendell 1). Tan and Wendell, before they do anything else, feel it necessary to offer a space for conversation for their readers, a chance to speak without the stereotypes that this chapter has explored. Their choice of words is revealing as they ask their audience not to hide, to come out the locked bathrooms and closets of my own adolescence, to pull lusty novels from behind their newspaper guises, to "throw a party for the genre—to celebrate its soaring successes as well as its appalling excesses" (Tan and Wendell 1). In other words, Tan and Wendell present romance reader the opportunity to address the difficulty and even the shame enforced by stereotypes of solitary, pleasure reading and to become aware of the censorship by instigating and inviting public disclosure in an affirming space of other romance readers.

The Book and the Body: Claiming Pleasure in Reading

After my first taste of romance novels, I experienced a very visceral enjoyment in such texts that I continue to feel as an adult- a physical reading that can be described in terms such as "bit, "gorged" and "relished." However, I was also aware of the

perceptions that dominate this chapter, that often "the pleasure reader is judged and found wanting—he or she is faltering purpose, easily distracted, lazy and apt to be seduced from the goal of education" (Ross 640, *Reader*). In this quote, the pleasure reader in general, not simply the feminized romance reader, has been singled out for his or her faults in highly personal terms. The personality of the individual, not simply the actions of a reader, is lacking any commendable qualities. In the realm of pleasure reading, the attacks are decidedly personal. Additionally, Ross's statement reinforces the fascinating concept that the pleasure reader is "apt to be seduced." This emphasizes that for certain types of readers, not only can the pleasure be physical, grounded in the body of the individual, but that the text itself has power over those who read for pleasure. In the world of the romance fantasy,[10] the texts themselves have power over us, the power to sell themselves, to seduce us, and to form a relationship with their readers.

Marina Warner further explores the disgrace that surrounds a reading relationship where the reader succumbs to the pleasures of text. Investigating reading experiences of fairy tales and fantasy, she writes, "The escapism implied by such wishful thinking made liking fairy tales slightly shameful…the taste for them revealed lack of intellectual—and perhaps moral—fibre" (xvii). While Eliot denounces frivolous romances for their "improbable" and unreal aspects, Warner demonstrates that such misgiving applies to other types of fantasy literature beyond the romantic. "Escapism" and "wishful thinking" imply looking beyond reality, moving into the realm of fantasy, and it is this yearning

[10] I do not want to simply use pleasure reader and romance reader interchangeably. Throughout this thesis, hopefully it is clear that I consider a habitual romance reader to almost always be a pleasure reader. However, a pleasure reader does not have to be a romance reader, and in fact, should not be limited by genre.

that can lead to a sense of embarrassment for the reader and a social appraisal of that reader as both lacking mental and moral sharpness. Warner also records the movement to understand fantasy literatures as feminine and secretive when she states, “Boys might surrender to pleasures fairy tales offered before they were taught otherwise, but they soon sternly put them away. Fairy tales offered gratifications that were already, at the age of eleven, considered feminine: dreams of love as well as the sweets of quick and capital revenge; they became part of the same private world of growing up female” (xvii). In a distinct pairing, Warner demonstrates the linking of childlike fantasy, the sort of dreaming that boys are “taught” to “put…away,” with female desire, a “private” and secret world that is part of “growing up” as a woman, in which the reader “surrender[s] to pleasures…offered” by stories. Warner’s pinpointing of a societal movement to couple children and women with the sort of fantasy thinking that Eliot once reproached for its inconsequential existence connects these concepts back to the gendered and sexualized stereotypes of romance readers.

Growing up, as a female and as a secret lover of romance novels and other literatures that offered me “gratifications,” the tensions that have been explored in this chapter manifested in my personal reading experiences. The act of reading romance novels became an act of secret defiance marked by the visceral pleasure, excitement, and enjoyment I pulled from the text as well as an understanding that my reading behaviors were perceived as childlike, shameful, and unprincipled. This understanding was heightened by the fact that I physically hid in order to read my romance novels. For years, this particular reading habit was very much the “private world” that Warner

references, hidden away from prying eyes, indulged in alone. Nearly a decade after I was first initiated into the world of popular romance, I had my first conversation with another romance reader. Once I had reached out, emerged from under my bed and pulled my romance novels from their hiding place at the back of my closet, I found that others before me had made this journey from the solitude of reading, and I discovered a new sense of subversive pleasure by openly acknowledging reading material I knew was viewed as disgraceful. Even at a time I felt I could not speak to strangers about my romance reading, I felt a kinship with those who also loved my beloved genre. In her 2005 thesis, Tania Fera VanGent labels the world of romance fiction "a true sisterhood" (113) which has "been speaking to women for centuries" (113), and while this very well may be true, I felt for the first time as if *I* was part of the conversation.

Although I eventually did discover this community of romance readers, the process of moving from a private to public reader meant that I still had to overcome my sense of embarrassment at reading "trash" and very much felt societal pressures to keep this reading habit hidden. In order to share my reading habit with other romance readers, I first had to reevaluate and reshape my own hierarchy of reading, recognizing pleasure as a valuable product of my reading choices. In a late 1980s study of pleasure reading and its value, psychologist Victor Nell claims that his "intentions are neither highbrow nor lowbrow, because the two classes of reader…do not exist" (4), and instead proposes that "a humility that derives from the realization that elite and lowbrow minds share a multitude of drives and gratifications, in literature as in life, might be more appropriate, and would certainly be more productive" (5). In essence, Nell proposes moving past the

hierarchy that has influenced scholarship and cultural understanding of reading processes to work from similarities as well as "gratifications," a term that focuses on pleasure as a potentially fruitful aspect of a reader's experience.

In a variety of ways, romance readers work to indulge in individual pleasure within the larger social perception of "trashy books." Nell points out participants in his study "rate[d] nearly half of their pleasure reading as aesthetically worthless in society's eyes if not their own" (242). The complex reality appears to be that modern readers must learn to navigate their own way through the strain of valuing texts that are deemed worthless by external judgments that have become internalized (Nell 242). The stress experienced by this process shows up even in celebrations of romance novels by its readers, such as in Tan and Wendell's blog title: "Smart Bitches, Trashy Books." Not every romance reader will successfully create a personal hierarchy of reading in order to value the novels that bring them pleasure, but Nell's study of a group of romance readers reveals that this development may not always be necessary. In a complicated maneuver that recycles the concept of "lowbrow" texts, some readers believe "the 'trash' judgment absolves them of the responsibility…to do [the] reading job properly…[The] reading matter supplies a standard of enjoyment, but it is also rubbish of which whole pages can be skipped. This license-to-disdain adds to the reader's sense of control and freedom" (Nell 243). In such cases, a romance reader does not generate a new understanding of the value of her novels, but simply uses the existing system to her advantage to add to her pleasure in reading the texts. A romance enthusiast must synthesize the influences of outside assessments with her personal beliefs about her choice of reading material and

will do so in different ways. Therefore, a romance reader functions as what sociologist Long identifies through reader response theories as a "'resisting reader' who is a woman…the individual reader bring[ing] a social identity to her encounter with the text" (2). Again, the reader of romance feels the paradoxical links between social and private reading practices, but may navigate these waters to gain control over her own reading experiences. This strain can also manifest as the connotative understanding that "reading requires social control lest it take over from more worthy pursuits" (Long 13). Even when encouraged to an illicit affair because of public condemnation of romance novels, even when a reader isolates herself from the available communities that offer a new kind of social identity as a group of "resisting readers," Nell's readers demonstrate that one can still gain satisfaction from the very act of being outside of understood social reading practices.

If an individual reader chooses to transition into participating in the affiliation of romance readers, the romance "sisterhood" not only embraces and reaffirms fellow readers but turns the tables on those who judge romantic fiction without first and foremost considering themselves readers of the genre. Jayne Krentz, romance novelist and author, writes in the introduction to *Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women* that "No one who reads or writes romance expects to be able to teach critics to appreciate the novels" (1). Krentz places the reader in the role of authority, and with an audience of romance readers to support her, she claims that critics, non-readers, are missing something pivotal in the study of romance fiction. Readership and claiming the role of reader is the ticket into this community with its rich and vast resources. When romance

readers blur the line between fan and academic analysts, focusing on their own reading choices with a judicious eye, as this thesis attempts to do, the value of romance novels shifts into focus. From a reader's perspective, pleasure in a text, rather than being suspect, raises the central questions that are being addressed in this project. Why do I enjoy these texts so much? What is the appeal? What do I gain? Rather than working from traditional models of romance evaluation that seem to begin with a low-brow, negative connotation and then attempt to discover value, this thesis works from the joy these texts offer me as an individual reader and move to discover the complexities of that pleasure activity.

From fairy tales to romance novels, readers are warned that those who nibble too much on sweet pleasures of fantasy literature can end up as Hansel and Gretel, trapped in the sugar-coated cottage, unable to move beyond its walls. When it comes to the world of feminine fantasies in texts, re-examining the oversimplified dichotomies that this chapter has explored, delineations which have separated pleasure and "noble" purposes in reading and designations of literature or trash, creates a new way of approaching romance novels. Somewhere between critic and lover, between literary and popular, between beauty and beast, the space between these apparent dichotomies open a new place for exploring the value of these text

CHAPTER FOUR
PLEASURE IN THE JOINING:
REEXAMINING THE SEAM OF READER METAMORPHOSIS

Why are romance readers called back to these formulas of a happy ending, and what pleasure do they offer that keeps these women so spellbound? bell hooks writes that "[the idea of romantic love]'s destructiveness resides in the notion that we come to love with no will and no capacity to choose. This illusion, perpetuated by so much romantic lore, stands in the way of our learning how to love" (hooks 170). Unfortunately, readers and critics have bought into this destructive spell as well, acting as if fairy tales and romance novels are proverbial Pied Pipers, pulling naïve readers in, away from reality, against our wills. I have claimed that mysterious and dark magic is at work in my love of romance novels; I am "spellbound," caught beyond all reason with no way to resist. Unfortunately, hooks calls the bluff and reminds us that we choose our loves, be that a handsome hero, a resourceful princess…or romance novels. The romance reader balances precariously between many dichotomies in her reading experience. She must navigate literary value systems from both society and her own understanding of enjoyment; she decides what constitutes trash and literature, and she must decide how to read, how to present herself as a reader, what to conceal and what to show, how she experiences pleasure on a spectrum spanning from childlike and uninformed to adult and erotic, and these are merely a few specific dichotomies that I have chosen to address from my personal understanding as a reader and scholar.

After researching this project, I am convinced that the romance genre is characterized by dichotomies, and that in the act of choosing to continue reading, a

romance reader, whether consciously or no, is reassured by the level of choice that the romance genre offers her. She alone is the authority in what she will read, and her desires and fantasies are important enough to be recreated by someone else for her pleasure. The romance enthusiast's concurrent experiences of control and willing loss of that control become part of the excitement of the genre. Victor Nell informs us that pleasure reading takes skill, demands the efforts and attentions of a reader who is confident in her ability to transform "black squiggles on the white page…still as the grave, colorless as the moonlit desert" (1) into something "extraordinary" (1) and that in return, this skilled reader can experience "a pleasure as acute as the touch of a loved body, as rousing, colorful and transfiguring as anything out there in the real world" (1). In one of the most fundamental pairings in the romance experience, the reader is necessary to breathe life into the text and is rewarded by the story's response, an eager lover with the skill to bring a reader under its spell. "Unlike dreams, book fantasy can never become overwhelming…Moreover, the pace at which this bidden book-dream unfolds is entirely under the reader's control" (Nell 226). In the world of romance, stories do have power over readers, a power that is only unleashed if the reader chooses to bare the pages. Pleasure reading straddles the boundaries of being both "a spectator and a participant activity" (Nell 3) and what differentiates romance novels from other texts is the attention that is paid in the book itself to the resolution of dichotomy. As readers experience, through the fictional characters and situations, the pleasure in the transformation, they are also navigating similar separations in their reading experiences, seeking a pleasure that exists in texts at "the site of a loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the dissolve which

seizes the subjects in the midst of bliss" (206). Although the romance novel ends with an unceasing pleasure, a happily ever after that will never end, the reader's reality is that such a resolution is unattainable as a constant. "The pleasure of the text is like that untenable, impossible, purely *novelistic* instant so relished by Sade's libertine when he manages to be hanged and then to cut the rope at the very moment of his orgasm, his bliss" (Barthes 406, emphasis in original). Barthes is describes the blurring of borders, a place that is only achievable in text, a novelistic ideal that is created from not only pleasure but pain, death and reaffirmation of life simultaneously. The pleasure of the text emphasizes these moments between, balancing there for no more than a fraction of a moment, enough to send the thrill of pleasure and impossibility down a reader's spine, and leave them yearning for a return to that sensation. Romance novels focus on the resolution of dichotomies as a way of reminding readers of possibilities that exist beyond the limits of our own reality. In her critical idiom on the Romance, Gillian Beer identifies the potential for creating a "dreaming space" that "amplifies our experience" (Beer 9). While Beer is primarily addressing the literary romance of chivalric texts and its evolution, her understanding can be applied to romance novels as well, working outside of their ideal worlds by spilling over into our actuality.

Romance novels are not the only texts that have the power for this dreaming space. With a similar focus on ideal worlds and their attention to readers' desires, fairy tales can suggest how scholars and readers in a less-than-ideal reality might be able to address romance novels in new, productive ways. The scholarly focus on the uses of children's stories has been much more thoroughly surveyed than that of women's

romance fiction. Bruno Bettelheim's 1975 book exploring how children use fairy tales is considered a cornerstone text in fairy tale scholarship. The stories' applicability in the "reality" of children's lives is commented on by Maria Tatar, twenty eight years later, when she asks, "What better tool [than fairy tales], as Bruno Bettelheim has suggested, for learning how to navigate reality and for figuring out how to survive in a world ruled by adults" ("Hard Facts" xviii)? As Bettelheim explicitly states his "interest in fairy tales is not the result of such a technical analysis of their merits. It is, on the contrary, the consequence of asking myself why, in my experience, children—normal and abnormal alike, and at all levels of intelligence—find folk fairy tales more satisfying than all other children's stories" (6). As with my thesis project, Bettelheim privileges reading experiences and *satisfaction*[11] as a valuable source of information to better understand a type of stories. Claiming that "explaining to a child why a fairy tale is so captivating to him destroys, moreover, the story's enchantment" (Bettelheim 18), Bettelheim places authority into the reader's hands, allowing individual interests to create a path through the story. Furthermore, "with the forfeiture of this power to enchant goes also a loss of the story's potential for helping the child struggle on his own, and master all by himself the problem which has made the story meaningful to him in the first place" (18). Bettelheim's choice to emphasize on the tale's purpose for the individual, its ability to "enchant" and be "meaningful," reflects the personalized and pleasurable power of the story.

[11] A satisfaction that is echoed by Anne Kaler's romance reading experiences in Chapter 1. "Because romance satisfied this hunger, I wanted to examine the cause of this satisfaction" (Kaler 4).

This favoring of individual experience, satisfaction and pleasure has been a source of tension for readers throughout my research. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's classic essay "Contingencies of Value" (1983) investigates the reasons for such issues. Smith writes "that the entire problematic of value and evaluation has been evaded and explicitly exiled by the literary academy" (Smith 1). While Smith understands that literary interpretation is the foremost way of addressing texts in the academy, she asks for and outlines a new way of understanding text, a "well-developed noncanonical theory of value and evaluation" (Smith 7). Her model of a new evaluation system, much like this project, concentrates on the values of the text, addressing ways in which satisfaction and individual readers can add to our understanding of textual meaning, rather than remaining "at best suasive and commendatory, at worst simply the emotive expressions of personal sentiment, and in any case neither reflecting nor producing genuine knowledge" (Smith 3). Although she never uses the term "pleasure," Smith's attention to the "fluctuating or shifting system" constituted by each individual reader's "needs, interests, and resources-biological, psychological, material, and experiential" (12) guides us to a way of viewing personal reading experiences as a productive addition to the way we study text. Much like Bettelheim and Nell place the power of the story in the reader's hands, so too does Smith address the potential and importance of the diversity of literary experiences. In fact, Smith articulates that the "most fundamental character of literary value…is its mutability and diversity" (10). The adaptability and attention to the reader that has been demonstrated throughout this thesis suggests that the world of pleasure reading and the pleasure readers have already begun to create the system that Smith discusses; an

evaluation system that reinforces the significance of a reader's "tastes and preferences," their "tendency to find more satisfaction of a particular kind in one rather than another," as well as individual "needs, interests, and resources" (Smith 16). Smith points toward the creation of a critical inquiry that would allow pleasure and satisfaction to not simply be included in academic conversation, but also function as a useful, integral part of a fuller, more nuanced understanding of literary merit. For Smith, as for romance readers and other pleasure readers, pleasure as part of a reading experience can offer avenues into a better and more holistic understanding of the fluctuating, mutable, and varied world of literary value.

Perhaps by the very vice of being such "popular" literature, texts like romance novels allow a reader to "delight" in the story and permit the stories to retain the potential for helping readers focus on whatever aspects seem most relevant, rather than having the texts' value already laid out for them. This theory is supported by the lack of children's access (and interest) to critical texts about the fairy tales they read, as well as romance readers' response to academic criticism of their novels. Romance readers do read academic criticism, but then actively engage those critical texts in a discussion in which they, as the readers, retain the power to decide what is of value. In this process, the community of readers is the authority on the texts and encourage, within that community, individual tastes and value gleaned from romance novels. Just as fairy tales are not concerned with outer reality, but inner response of the individual (Bettelheim 25), the communities of romance readers or children understand themselves to be the authorities. These readers respond, if necessary, to outward criticisms, as in the case of romance

novels, but respond by creating texts (or theses) from romance writers and readers countering or supporting critical claims. In other words, these reader communities' interactions with critical analysis suggests strongly that criticism is not for the readers and that there is the space for more research to be done stemming from readers' value systems and satisfaction as Smith suggests.

Looking more closely at Bettelheim's text reveals yet again the tricky nature of managing the dichotomies that mark reading experiences. Critical readers in such a model must transcend identifiers such as child or adult, critic or lover, intellectual and emotional satisfaction, and again this middle ground becomes a place for new insights into the study of certain types of literature. This intrinsic suspicion of stagnant oppositions, the loss of potential to transform, is seen in both folkloric tales and in the dedication of romance novels to overcome such mortal limitations of understanding. Robert Bly and Marion Woodman, in their lyrical analysis of the Russian fairy tale "The Maiden King," grapple with the story's ability to overcome the limitations that we must use in reality in order to base our understanding of the world. While it seems obvious that there is more to existence than child or adult, spiritual or physical, animal or human, male or female, academic or pleasure reader, and the list continues on, we build our knowledge around such dichotomies to have a starting place. Bly suggests that the trouble comes when we rely too much on these opposites and not enough on the nuances, the middle ground. In his analysis of "The Maiden King," Bly ponders these questions as the young hero Ivan faces Baba Yaga, the dangerous Russian hag, who has just asked him a pivotal question, "Are you here of your own free will or by compulsion, my good youth"

(Bly and Woodman 53)? Although seemingly innocuous, this question contains within it the crux of the dichotomy question; “if you, as Ivan, give a simple answer, she eats you, and you deserve it” (Bly and Woodman 54). What Bly is pointing out is the tension that rests within the use of dichotomy. While they do have their place in our reality and while they are a necessary part for building an understanding of the world, if overused, if misused, then a metaphorical death—of the intellect, of the imagination, of possibility—is a just punishment. In romance novel terms, if a character is so undeveloped as to see the world in black and white, he or she is unworthy of love, and can never transform. In the fairy tale realm of the animal bride and bridegroom, Boria Sax also addresses this difficult problem by writing, “Even if we decide that the contrast between humanity and nature is ultimately an illusion, a false dichotomy, the enormous importance of the notion in cultural history remains” (Sax 20). We cannot simply pretend that dichotomies do not exist or that they are false constructs. This is a simple answer; Baba Yaga eats us, and we deserve it. Sax reminds us that outside of the fairy tale world, outside of the romance novel kingdom, we must continue to deal with what our predecessors have passed down to us, which in this case, is an overly simplified binary conception of the world that is now an intrinsic part of our reading experiences.

Bly continues to analyze this question in terms of the fairy tale, because in a fairy tale, in an ideal world, dichotomies are unnecessary and in fact, the hallmark of an unevolved mind. “Baba Yaga’s area is the territory of truth. The difficulty lies in how to say the truth about complicated things, which is essential if you plan to survive her world” (Bly and Woodman 54). Once more we see a text asking questions about the

seam between oppositions, breaking down boundaries in a way that is novelistic, and this process also can challenge the reader, as Baba Yaga challenges Ivan, to ask if we are ready for change, if we are ready to be transformed (Bly and Woodman 55).

In the case of the Beauty and the Beast tale in romance novels, the question is being posed in a slightly more subtle way. The "difference…between the two partners in tales of animal brides or grooms is a symbol, and amplification, of the difference in gender, a barrier between human beings that renders communication both more difficult and more intriguing" (Sax 22). Perhaps the fantasy of the book is like the animal bridegroom, a difference from the experienced reality that renders the space between fantasy and reality both more difficult and more intriguing. It draws attention to the difference while also providing the breakdown of that gap. It offers an optimistic viewpoint of the merging of fantasy with reality. It reassures the reader that the fantasy and the reality are not mutually exclusive. In the very practice of reading romances, a genre fraught with potential dichotomous pitfalls, we are being asked if we can see beyond our own limitations, beyond the simple answer. If we cannot, the world of dreaming spaces most likely has nothing to offer us.

The reading process of romance novels permits readers to navigate the tricky, dark waters of human experience in a safer context than the world outside of books. When Tatar tells us that fairy tales "bring myths down to earth and inflect them in human rather than heroic terms," she reminds us that the tales communicate at a level that is graspable by children. In a similar process, romance novels take human relationships to mythic proportions. Just as fairy tales allow for children to fall into a "reality that is

familiar in the double sense of the term—deeply personal and at the same time centered on the family and its conflicts rather than on what is at stake in the world at large" (xii), romance novels center on the struggles inherent in creating a new family unit. This unit consists of a central couple, making the problems of love the most important aspect of individual experience, more so even, than the world at large, although often romance novels reflect the current beliefs, happenings, gender roles, etc. of their setting. Romance novels put the magic back into love stories, just as fairy tales put a touch of reality into the fantastical tales of magic and adventure; both processes serve to connect their readers to a literary world that is "alive and pulsing with vitality and variety…exactly what keeps life pulsing: anxieties, fears, desires, romance, passion, and love" (xiv), a mutable and diverse literary world that breathes. Rather than drawing clear boundaries between child and adult or magic and reality, both fairy tales and romance novels serve to foster connections for their readers, offering "opportunities to talk, to negotiate, to deliberate, to chatter, and to prattle on endlessly…and from the tangle of that talk and chitchat, we begin to define our own values, desires, appetites, and aspirations" (xiv). Romance novels, essentially reworked fairy tales, and sometimes self-identified fairy tales, and the classic fairy tales themselves reveal readers' "deepest desires as well as [their] most profound anxieties…and remain in [the folkloric bloodstream] through stories that find favor with a community of listeners or readers" (xiii). Through exploration of romance novel fairy tale, in conjunction with scholarship on fairy tales and children's literature, an intrepid reader or scholar can begin to puzzle out reflections of some of those desires and anxieties, the processes by which these stories adapt themselves to new generations of

readers, and begin to understand what fairy tales, romance novels, and other texts of ideal worlds are offering to their lovers.

CHAPTER FIVE
A BEAUTIFUL BEAST:
THE EROTIC POTENTIAL OF "DREAMING SPACE"

What is it about the beasts? In folk and fairy tales, animal lovers abound…from a slick frog squirming into the princess's bed to a great white bear who carries a maiden astride his broad back to a hedgehog who punishingly pricks a young girl until she bleeds, these creatures permeate tales for youth. Wolves watch Little Red strip slowly before the fire; dark eyed women discard smooth grey seal skins to dance naked upon the beach, and half-fish, half woman sirens lure men to their deaths with seductive songs. That these stories are repeated, adapted and shared indicate that somewhere, deep in our modern culture, there exists a longing for these beasts. And perhaps none is so desired than Beauty's Beast…the epitome of all the animal lovers, a creature so far from humanity that he has neither a man's name nor a beast's type to rely on. He is simply the Beast, and he, above all, reminds mere mortals with a dark growl that there is more to life than humanity and reaches out a paw to show us the way.

While for most people, the connection between humans and beasts may only be deemed as safe in children's literature, these human/animal creatures, trapped in a liminal state that only increases their hypnotic allure over the human imagination, are breaking free of their neutering restraints and forcing their way back to the forefront of our minds. These beasts, a union between the familiar and the exotic, are rising before a modern audience and demanding that we take a look inside ourselves; when a slow caress in the dark comes from a beast by day or a young girl falls in love with a coarse-haired monster ...are these things for children or for all of us?

The Beast and I have a history. He enchanted me as a child through the Disney movie, perhaps because his idea of a gesture of love came in the gift of a towering library filled floor to ceiling with books, passages to knowledge and adventure, and thrilled my young heart. Or perhaps because he looked a bit like a teddy bear with teeth, and his growling dialogue was reminiscent of a big dog that would love and protect me, as well as engage in long conversations, and I really wanted a magical pet as a little girl. There were many reasons why this creature entranced me, and the pattern didn't stop at a children's movie. The Beast was more than animal, more than human, and I was hooked on the potential of such a creature. Maybe that is why when I picked up my first romance novel, a bodice ripper in the tradition of the 1970s romance novels, replete with scowling dark heroes and innocent, fiery young heroines, I felt a strange pull in my belly as the familiar became strange. I thought I knew the outlines of this story, where concepts of beauty and love can tame the beast, but this glossy little paperback was doing it differently. Gone were the sweeping waltzes across a ballroom, the soft look in the eye, and a song from an animated teapot pronouncing love. Instead, there was rampant, hot desire, as if sex and wanting were more imperative to love than the gift of a library. Skeptical, but intrigued by these translations of my beloved beast, I dove in, navigating the currents of desire and virtue, sex and love, until I recognized the book: it was a story about boundaries blurred, where both the man and the woman are changed by their experiences, and in the end, are better for it. It seems that in these novels, Beauty did not tame the Beast at all. In fact, beauty and the beast were the same, seeking balance and healing for whatever scars stood in their way. In these books, love tamed humanity,

smoothing away its rougher edges and leaving behind happiness.

I moved easily from children's stories to romance novels, which is no real surprise. Such wonder tales in the tradition of *The Beauty and the Beast* were once a powerful way of sharing fears and desires with all ages of people. As Maria Tatar stresses, these were stories that addressed the "preoccupations and ambitions that conform to adult anxieties and desires" ("Annotated" xiii). Even with a tendency to lump saccharine and sanitized fairy tales together as stories for children, Tatar reminds grownups that these stories were meant to appeal to all ages, and once bridged the gaps in age to entertain and instruct whoever curled around the fireplace at the end of a long day's labor- from infant to father to crone and everyone in between. Today, if we search for the powerful beasts that once frightened and enticed humans in myths, folklore, and fairy stories, we might most often find them relegated to the realm of children's fairy tales, but that does not mean they only exist in Disney movies and storybooks. These creatures, sensual, virile, terrifying, may have been hidden away in stories, shielded by realms of magic and mysticism, whispered in bedtime tales to children, and then, most often, pushed away in the minds of adults- but they are more pervasive than that. As I discovered, these stories, much like the beasts they contain, don't deal well with being neatly dropped into categories like children's stories. The tropes of these wonder tales don't stop being relevant at puberty. Is it really any surprise that my first foray into romance novels was at twelve? I doubt I could have seen the beasts and beauties in the paperbacks before that point, but when I was ready, they appeared.

If these beastly tales are not confined to children then what is so desirable about

these animal/human connections? What do they offer romance readers? And finally, what does the insatiable hunger for these stories of healing and boundaries crossed suggest about the romance community in general?

Carnal Desire: Eroticizing Animal/Human Relations

The basic animal bridegroom story is well-known, archetypal even for those who have not heard the tale. Marina Warner identifies the motif as "a founding myth of sexual difference" (274), although the themes offer much more to explore than sexual differences. While the theme is ancient, many scholars cite a section of Apuleius's 2nd century A.D. tale, *The Golden Ass* as the earliest forerunner of the Beauty and the Beast tale in Western literature (Warner 274). In this text, a frightened young woman has been snatched away by bandits on her wedding day. In order to console her, an old woman shares the story of Cupid and Psyche to "put away all thy sorrow and revive thy spirits" (Apuleius 185). Psyche is the youngest daughter of a king. She is so renowned for her beauty that people worship her as the new Venus and ignore the goddess's temples. Enraged, Venus bids her son Eros to cause Psyche to fall in love with the vilest of creatures, "one all the world would find dreadful" (Wolkstein 115). When Psyche's father goes to the Oracle to find out the fate of his youngest daughter, he is told she must marry a monster, "a bridegroom…not of mortal seed" (Wolkstein 116), a beast. So Psyche marries, accepting her fate with courage and berating her parents for their fear of the unknown. After reciting her vows, she is transported to a beautiful palace where invisible hands do her bidding, and her husband visits her only at night. As in the more modern

tale, it is eventually the jealousy of her sisters at their youngest sibling's fortune that causes Psyche to fear and injure her husband with the hot, spurting oil of a lamp. She undergoes many trials under Venus's command, the older goddess being the powerful figure to be appeased in this tale. After seizing her "own manly spirit" (Wolkstein 136), Psyche triumphs and Eros is returned to her. Jupiter, king of the gods, sanctions their marriage proclaiming that Eros's "wildness [will be] fettered with the knot of wedlock" (Wolkstein 146) in a marriage of equals. The story ends with the fruit of Eros and Psyche's marriage, a daughter: Pleasure.[12]

In offering this story of "the unknown…seen from Psyche's point of view," the old crone inducts the young woman into a feminine community of knowledge, presenting a way to counter the fear of "the beast" which "stood for the crucial choice in a growing woman's life: to leave family (as the word implies, the familiar) for the unknown and unfamiliar" (Warner 276). As later retellings and mutations of the story indicate, the female undertaking of the exotic and strange "inspires powerful and contradictory passions, which 'Beauty and the Beast' explores" (Warner 276). For a young woman in 2nd century A.D. the ultimate reward of Psyche's perseverance and patience is the reward of Cupid, love itself, and as the name of their daughter indicates, Pleasure springs from their marriage as well. As the tale of Beauty and the Beast has adapted to fit the needs of its audience, the tension and consequences of traversing the space between the familiar and unknown continues to be central to the story.

The version of *Beauty and the Beast* that is most familiar to an American audience today was written by a former governess, Madame Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont,

[12] Eros and Psyche's daughter is named Voluptas. It is typically translated as Bliss, Joy, or Pleasure.

in 1756 and published in young women's magazines (Warner 292). Beauty is the daughter of a merchant, not a princess or nobility, which is seen as a shift from most fairy tale heroines. The youngest of three daughters, Beauty is not only lovely, but "far more charming" than her "vain and proud" sisters (Tatar, "Annotated" 61). She reads "good books," "speaks with such compassion to the poor. And she is so sweet and sincere" (62). When her father loses his fortune unexpectedly, the family retires to the country where Beauty works hard to make the most of her new, simple life. After some time, her father receives news that some of his wealth may have been restored as a lost ship with his merchandise has just arrived at a port. While the older sisters begged for "dresses, furs, laces and all kinds of trinkets" (63) Beauty asks only for a rose so that she does not burden her father with excessive demands. In the way of fairy tales, vague and insurmountable problems plague the poor merchant with his ship, and on his return journey, having regained none of his wealth, he gets lost in a swirling snowstorm, ending up on the doorstep of a warmly glowing castle. Steaming food is laid out on the table, a merry fire crackles in the hearth, and a bed is turned down in a guest room as if waiting for him. Tentative of the liberties he is taking, but chilled to the bone and exhausted from his trials, the merchant dries his snow-drenched clothes, eats a bit of the food, and falls asleep.

The next morning the merchant, still alone in the castle, gratefully retrieves his horse and prepares to leave the castle grounds, but sees a rose blooming on an overarching arbor of roses. Remembering Beauty's simple request, he plucks a single rose, and immediately a great, roaring beast appears. The man nearly faints at the sight of

the terrible beast, who snarls, “I have saved your life by giving you shelter in my castle, and you repay me by stealing my roses, which I love more than anything in the world” (Tatar, “Annotated” 65). In payment for the offense, the beast demands either the man’s death or one of his daughters in his place. Embracing the chance to say goodbye to his family, and with no intention of letting his daughters die, the merchant agrees to the deal, promising the return in three days. When Beauty hears what her request has cost her father, she defies her father’s wishes and goes in his place to die. Instead, the Beast tells her that she is “the only mistress here” (71), and despite finding the Beast “very ugly,” Beauty soon finds herself forgetting his ugliness when she thinks about his “tender heart” (71). His tender heart, however, is not enough to convince Beauty to accept the Beast’s nightly marriage proposal. A relative peace grows between the Beauty and the Beast, and the peace blossoms into friendship. When Beauty finds out that her father is sick, she requests a week’s time to spend with him and nurse him back to health. Reluctantly, as without her the Beast is sure he “will die of grief,” but unwilling to cause Beauty any pain, he agrees to let her go. She discovers that her sisters are married; the eldest to a remarkably handsome man who is “so enamored of his own looks that he spent all day in front of the mirror” (Tatar 74) and the other to an extremely intelligent man who “used his wit only to enrage everybody, first and foremost his wife” (74). Bitterly jealous at Beauty’s fortune and happiness with the Beast, the sisters plot to keep her past a week.

Overjoyed at her sisters’ simpering affections, Beauty stays a few days past her promised seven days and dreams of the Beast, alone and dying in the garden. Weeping, Beauty proclaims, “He is kind. That is worth more than anything else. Why haven’t I

wanted to marry him?...I may not be in love with him, but I feel respect, friendship, and gratitude toward him" (75). With those tepid but sincere words, she wishes herself back to castle, finds the Beast dying and, in anguish, realizes she does feel more for him than simple friendship. As love spills through her grief, a radiant flash splits the night and when Beauty looks for her "dear beast" she sees instead a "young prince more handsome than the day was bright" (Tatar 76), and Beauty marries her human Beast to live in perfect happiness.[13] The focus on Beauty's goodness in this version of the tale can obscure the power of the Beast character, but the incredible proliferation and adaptation of the story since Beaumont's version do not so lightly dismiss the Beast.

The Beast himself is the essence of the dichotomy of human and nonhuman, the knowable with the fantastic, the mundane and the extraordinary. He is desirable because in his combined elements of human and animal, the mind of a man in the body of the beast, the Beast is the fundamental representation of murky bonds between the familiar and unknown. Like Beauty, readers must overcome their first aversion to the monstrous form, triumph over their distaste of the savage part of their own nature. As the strange becomes familiar, as Beauty comes to accept the Beast, he becomes a source of fascination for her, and for the reader. Folklorist Boria Sax identifies this animal bridegroom fascination with the blurring of boundaries. "Just as marriage between two people unites their families, so marriage between a person and an animal in myth and

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[13] The many adaptations of the Beauty and the Beast motif indicate its hold over the human imagination. The motif of the animal lover has appeared in film, books, songs, comic books, short stories, television, and theater. Permeating almost every media form available and appearing around the globe, my personal list of notable versions include: Jean Cocteau's 1946 film, Disney's 1991 film, Angela Carter's short stories *The Tiger's Bride* and *The Courtship of Mr. Lyon,* the 1987-1989 television show *Beauty and the Beast,* Donna Napoli's young adult novel *Beast,* and the romance novel featured in this thesis, Linda Jones's *DeButy and the Beast.*

fairy tale joins humanity with nature" (Sax 25). When Beauty saves the Beast from death through her realization that she loves him, saying, "the anguish I am feeling makes me realize I can't live without you" (Tatar, "Annotated" 75). At this point, readers can feel the joining of human with the beast, a reflection of the inner struggle to unite those internal elements of the human consciousness. Greta Garbo reportedly shouted at the end of Jean Cocteau's 1946 film version of Beauty and the Beast, "Give me back my Beast!" but the Beast has never left, only been transformed.

Boria Sax tells us that the animal lover story is cyclical, because the beast returns to its original form (204), and this idea appears in the stories related in this project. The Beast was once a man, and Cupid takes the figurative guise of a serpent and then that of an invisible stranger before he once again can be seen as the God of Love. But if we look at this concept further what emerges? Cupid and Psyche's love is made much richer, more complex by the fact that both have grown and changed, and the God of Love is now a husband. And it may be wistful, the same type of wistfulness expressed in erotic retellings when I wish for at least one last dark growl from my Beast, but these characters retain something from their journey, their transformation. Perhaps then, the story is not always cyclical because each character has become more: more interesting, more alluring, more desirable. They are potential fulfilled, and instead of a cycle ending, the transformation moves us, the readers, to reexamine our own limits, to complicate the simple answer. In the "Beauty and the Beast," the savage and the civilized are reconciled and this connection is erotic, requiring intimacy and knowledge of all parts of the self so that even when the beast turns into a man, he can never be just a human. Perhaps what is

most enticing about this story is that the animal side of human nature is retained as a part of the whole, not separate from humanity, but a different aspect of it. He is the Beast, no matter what his outer shell, forever, integrating wildness into civilization, bringing the something more back into the human realm. Eroticism rests in the fact that once one has loved or been beloved by a beast, one can never be ordinary; once integrated with wildness, characters of fairy tales and romance novels find pleasure and joy in that joining. By accepting the full and intricate aspects of their natures, the bestial and the human, these characters have become more than human; they have become extraordinary.

Romancing the Beast: How (and Why) the Motif Works in Romance Novels

It is no wonder that there exists a fear of the beasts. Relegating most of such creatures to children's literature shields them in the effect of magic, of fairies, of the unreal. Limiting the beasts to bedtime stories may seem to neuter their erotic and dangerous potential. After all, children do not seem concerned by the threat that these creatures, predatory, masquerading as human and parodying civilized ways at times, can present to our adult identities. How can we love the beasts, be attracted to their wildness, and still be human? Tatar tells us that "childhood books are sacred objects. Often read to pieces, those books took us on voyages of discovery, leading us into secret new worlds that magnify childhood desires and anxieties" ("Annotated" xi). However, I believe that our childhood stories illustrate human desires and anxieties. As children's author Philip Pullman once said, there are some themes that are just too large for most adult literature (Pullman). One of those themes is the erotic connection between humans and beasts.

Adults shy away from this topic; after all, bestiality is a social taboo that is very rarely challenged. But children, as well as those who read beyond the page, understand that bestiality is not what texts like *Beauty and the Beast* are dealing with at all. While part of the erotic connection is reflective of an un-fragmented human consciousness, at peace with elements of both the intellectual and the physical-the human and the beast potential within us all- these stories offer many nuanced meanings, leaving it to the reader to create their understanding of the story's meaning.

Not all adult texts shy away from the sensuous potential of the beast. In fact, readers of romance novels seem to have little problem navigating the murky boundary waters of dichotomies. The motifs of the animal lover appears in novels for adults as well, permeating the romance novel genre with werewolves, vampires, dragons, and other non-human creatures who cast an erotic lure over their human mates. While many romance novels will adopt explicit Beauty and the Beast themes, more complexly, romance novels almost always feature heroes or heroines who, out of touch with humanity, must overcome their physical, emotional, spiritual or sexual scarring, to live and to love. For romance readers, the appeal of the beast/human story is disseminated throughout the romance genre in a myriad of ways. As discussed in chapter two, the Romance Writers of America claims that only two basic elements tie together the 9,089 romance novels released in the United States in 2009: "a central love story and an emotionally-satisfying and optimistic ending" (RWA). With these hallmarks of the genre in mind, romance writers utilize their freedom to write stories that span from time-travelling paranormal texts to sweet, love's first kiss modern novels all under the wider

umbrella of romance. Sometimes, the beast is marked as specifically nonhuman; he or she is a creature, a shifter, an animal. The beast may be human but is marked with something that holds him or her apart- a disfigurement, physical scarring, or as is the most common in romance novels, a sense of emotional wounding, unfit and unable to love- the most beastly quality of all, when it comes to romance. So while many romance novels don't specify an animal lover, the trope is still there. This character is inhuman, unconnected to the one thing that can redeem the most banal human or the most savage beast: love. The emotional journey that such a character takes to balance his or herself is what usually constitutes the novel. In other words, the "beast" character is almost as common to romance novels as a happy ending, and the challenges of becoming the best version of one's self, whether that be through humanizing influences, the promotion of animal nature, or a combination of these elements, is what most romance novels center around. Warner tells us that "more so than the presence of fairies, the moral function, the imagined antiquity and oral anonymity of the ultimate source, and the happy ending (though all these factors help towards a definition of the genre), metamorphosis defines the fairy tale" (xx), and the process of metamorphosis of heroes and heroines is equally as important in romance novel genre. And if it just so happens that the process of compromise and breaking down the boundaries that hold our hero and heroine apart happen to be symbolized through the intimacies of both physical and emotional joining…well, these beasts have a heady dose of animal magnetism that makes that joining a little more than pleasant- for their partners and for the readers.

The open eroticization of the Beauty and the Beast fairy tale in romance novels is more intricate than simply plugging in a few sex scenes in the middle of a fairy tale, and part of that eroticization comes from the readers' power to choose individually what constitutes erotic. "Determining when something is erotic is not merely a matter whether or not it describes something sexual, but rather, if it can integrate a satisfaction of personal desires and fantasies with descriptions of that which is sexually arousing" (Stryker 52). Therefore, the romance novel discussed in this chapter was selected because, like the fit of a glass slipper, it is just right for me. This section will focus on Linda Jones' 2002 romance novel *DeButy and the Beast*, which is, in many ways, a traditional retelling of *Beauty and the Beast* and which contends with many of the tensions that this thesis has addressed. A beast, with an ugly temper and very little restraint, frightens away almost everyone who dares to broach its lair. A young Beauty, lured by the thought of fulfilling a father's dreams, agrees to live with and attempt to tame the beast. At first resistant of the Beast's charms, although secretly fascinated, the two form an unlikely alliance before falling in love, and the Beast is transformed into a wife to be proud of… Yes, you read that correctly; the female is the fearful beast in this story while the intelligent young scholar, Julian, is the beauty. Anya Sedley, trained lover and king's mistress on a pagan island, is rediscovered by her family after being declared dead twelve years before. Julian, enticed into the marriage by the promise of financial support for his research by Anya's grandmother, is shocked by his new wife's behavior; she allows her emotions to run free, says whatever comes to mind, wears little but strategically placed scarves around the house, and is inherently and unashamedly

sexual.[14] Although Anya is identified explicitly as the Beast of the tale, author Jones reveals that both characters are incomplete. While Anya is a sexual "love goddess who knows nothing of true love" (Jones 148), Julian is a scholar who is resistant to the intimacies of sex, continually lecturing Anya on the same theme:

> 'We as civilized human beings should be above our baser instincts. We should be able to control our desires and put the energy within us to work in better, higher ways.'
>
> 'That is bloody stupid,' Anya said with a grin. (Jones 16)

Anya disregards Julian's beliefs about sex in order to seduce him, believing that this will give her control over him. Julian attempts to change Anya into a proper 19th century woman in order to collect payment from her family and embark on scholastic research around the world, leaving his young wife behind. Neither is balanced individually, and neither character wishes to change. The willing metamorphosis of the individual then, as seen through both the hero and heroine's viewpoints, become central to the erotic nature of the romance novel motif. The romance novel's path will follow the evolution of the characters as they overcome their personal limitations and look beyond

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[14] The book jacket provides a bit more background information about this particular tale:
"The Beast of Rose Hill
The Victorian splendor of the Sedleys' manor was a startling incongruity next to its half-naked heiress, but Julian was not surprised; he'd heard rumors of Anya's behavior since her shipwreck with pirates in the Caribbean. The young woman had been made a deity—a love goddess, no less!—by a tribe out there, and changed. She had returned an animal: lusty and domineering with no restraint at all. Yet if he were to tame her, he'd hold the key to his dreams.
& DeButy
Anya found herself grateful. The suitor her grandmother had provide—the next man to attempt to reform her, to break her to polite North Carolina society—lived up to his name. He *was* a beauty. But he also claimed celibacy was the way to productivity and health! The man was sick—even if he did have a good heart. Well, Anya had the cure. She would marry him, let him go about changing her…then, when Julian least expected it, she'd show him just how wild she really was" (Jones).

their own selfish motivators to achieve the fantasy: a true union, marked by the ability to love and be loved.

In the case of *DeButy and the Beast*, as is common in contemporary romance novels, a reader is invited to watch the story unfold through both Julian and Anya's perspective as the narrator often speaks from one or the other characters' viewpoint. Readers do more than simply read that Anya and Julian change their understanding of each other and themselves in a magical metamorphosis better than any Disney version; the story opens its arms to embrace the reader, to pull her in, to invite her to take part in the process of transformation through the thoughts and feelings of the main couple. Both Julian and Anya are stubborn in their desire to triumph- he through physical distance and intellectual companionship and she through physical seduction- yet they both wistfully acknowledge their own shortcomings as the novel progresses. For example, the reader understands through Julian's inner monologues that he considers his wife to be "an utterly primitive female… more animal than human" (Jones 53). Her behavior shocks the prim man who finds it shocking that Anya says "whatever came to her mind, no matter how inappropriate it might be" (Jones 53), and poor Julian is more than a little disturbed by Anya's natural and potent sensuality. Anya "was not ashamed. She was never ashamed" (Jones 53), and for self-conscious Julian this is the most frustrating aspect of his wife's character. Despite his extensive understanding of Anya's shortcomings, Julian's awareness of both Anya's charm as well as his own inadequacies becomes apparent in the continuation of his thoughts. "In a very small, very reluctant way, he envied her that freedom…to truly dismiss the cares and expectations of the civilized

world. She was fascinating. Seductive. Free. She was everything Dr. Julian DeButy was not" (Jones 53). The vulnerability inherent in Julian's beginning to understand that he himself is missing something is the first breath of transformation that the hero will undergo. And, of course, Anya herself cannot be immune to this transforming process either.

Anya is just as attuned to Julian's faults as he is to hers. She notices that he "did not know what it was like to be honest with his own desires, to speak without reserve, to follow the call of his heart and his body" (Jones 150) and that his "bloody stupid" ideas concerning sex are nothing but a containing mask for something much more primal. Almost immediately in the book, Anya challenges her new husband, saying, "'You think I am the beast, but be warned. There is a beast waiting within you. It sleeps deep and quiet, but it is there. I see it. It has fangs and claws and it is hungry'" (Jones 34). Readers understand that there is no clear line between beauty and beast in this text, but rather these two people who seemingly represent antithetical views are more complex than a simply stereotype. As Julian contains a beast inside him, so does Anya contain the potential to be more than the Beast of Rose Hill within her, although she is afraid that she will never be able to overcome the boundaries that limit her to nothing but an animal. Like Julian, Anya also must experience her own vulnerability in order to change. The pivotal moment for her is after she begins to love Julian for more than his "startling physical beauty" (Jones 15) and sees proof of "a kindness, perhaps… a good heart" (Jones 15) in the man that she has married. As she admires her husband, she speculates that:

> A man like Julian DeButy would never love the Beast of Rose Hill…According to the pamphlets Julian read, the ideal woman should be meek, pious, and not too smart. She should be content to immerse herself in domestic duties, and she should have no personal desires—sexual or otherwise… What hogwash. Anya was not that woman and never would be… (Jones 89)

For Julian and Anya, a large part of their insecurities are inspired, not by their partner's comments, but by their own understanding of what the larger community demands. If we listen closely, we might also hear echoes of the stilted interchanges between systems of canonical, academic literature and pleasure readers. Am I good enough? Is this good enough? Why and what are these limitations in my study? Who is judging me? What are they saying? How does that impact me, my experiences, my pleasure? Romance novels and the academy have a rather beastly relationship, but of course, in the blurring realms of the romance genre, neither can be completely whole without the awareness and recognition of value in the other. For Julian, he is limited by the "cares and expectations of the civilized world" (53) just as Anya is alienated from society represented in pamphlets that exclude her from the concept of an "ideal woman." However, the difficult process of redefining oneself outside of the accepted conventions of society are what ultimately will allow both Julian and Anya to fulfill their potential to be more than what they seem. Again, the Beauty and the Beast motif is marked by this attention to transformation, the development of a space in which it is possible for each character to move from an unlovable extreme to a synthesized being worthy of happiness.

While this dreaming space, this place to imagine an alternate way to exist as an individual is important, it is not enough to fulfill the emotional obligations of a romance novel which demands a more permanent solution. Julian and Anya must find a way to integrate the multiple aspects of their personality, to recognize and assimilate the "mutability and diversity" (Smith 10) of each other, not simply switch roles or adopt another neatly defined stereotype. When Julian breaks a promise to Anya through uncontrollable circumstances, and she, fearful of being hurt, decides to leave him, Jones creates a brief space in which Julian and Anya do simply switch roles. Anya, dressed conservatively as "the proper wife he had taught her to be" (Jones 309) in an attempt to resist her own natural impulses to forgive Julian, sees her husband:

> As she had never seen him. The beast she had always known lurked within him had been released. His hooded eyes were dark and dangerous, and his long, wild hair fell about tensely squared shoulder… 'Good morning,' he growled.
>
> 'Good morning,' she said, her own voice sweet and tame. (Jones 310)

However, this fleeting indulgence in another aspect of one's personality, wild Anya as "sweet and tame" and straitlaced Julian as a "beast" with "dark and dangerous" eyes and "wild hair" who growls his greetings, does not meet the qualifications of transformation that is so erotic in the potential to be more than human and more than beast, in Barthes's literary seam.

Anya and Julian crave belonging, searching for their places in the world around them, and as they change, as margins of beast and beauty blend and merge, the importance of that process is explicitly remarked upon. In romance novels, sex is often

portrayed not just as the satisfaction of physical desires, but through careful attention to the emotions of both partners, as a profound intimacy as well, literally a part of "making love." After Anya and Julian finally consummate their marriage and begin to break down the physical obstacles between them, the author guides the reader to the same conclusion her characters are drawing. "His soul and hers changed as he made love to her. Their very souls mingled, as deeply as their bodies did" (Jones 179). Julian and Anya are more than lovers, much, much more. As Anya realizes that "every day Julian seeped a little deeper into her soul, became more a part of her" (Jones 198) the reader is reminded that this muddling of margins in the romance novel does not merely affect a person's identity, but clears the way for belonging to someone and someplace, untethered by arbitrary demarcation lines. "With him she experienced something she had never expected, a powerful joining that went beyond the physical. She did not have to tell him, she suspected. He knew" (Jones 327-28). As Julian and Anya grow as characters, challenging each other, readers begin to realize along with the characters that a transformation, a blurring of boundaries is underway. "[Anya] was not the same, and neither was [Julian]. She had been alone all her life, but now she knew that she would never be alone again" (Jones 198).

In other versions of the tale, this concept manifests itself as the Beast craves the unaffectedness of natural order. He knows that he does not belong in either the human world or the animal kingdom, and the root of his desperate kidnapping of a woman lies at the heart of his desire to rid himself of his middle-ness. While seemingly contradictory, a character who wishes to rid himself of the complications of navigating the middle

ground, the Beast's predicament speaks to how difficult it is to maintain the seam. Even in the impossible realm of fairy tales, maintaining balance, navigating in between dichotomies is fraught with difficulty. In the fairy tale, the thing that the Beast loves most is a simple rose. Anything else can be taken from his palace but a rose, as the material splendors of his wealth are not what he craves, but simple, natural beauty. The rose itself symbolizes the effortless perfection of synthesis and balance in the symmetry between the beauty of the petals and the danger of the thorns. The beast treasures its unaffectedness, its simplicity, the unawareness of its own perfection. The Beast is like Ivan, trembling before Baba Yaga, afraid to make the wrong move, to be only beast or only man, to answer too simply and lose everything. The rose has no responsibility for its decision, but a beast that is more than an animal, is subject to the same heavy weight that humans are, a self-awareness of the potential for change. Our Beast warns us of the difficulties of traversing the dark path between oppositions and yet, by virtue of his happily ever after, challenges us to still engage our own possibility.

Once one has loved a beast and been beloved by a creature more than human, both characters are transformed. As one character proclaims to Anya and Julian as they marry again at the end, as equals, "'Marriage is a wonderful thing…It is a gift to find the one person in the world who is yours in heart and soul and body. The one person in the world who completes you. Apart, you are fine, but together… together you are better" (Jones 350). Not only are Anya and Julian better together, through the transformation of loving and being loved, they are at home in themselves, complete as individuals, and free to start an ideal joining.

This intricate metamorphosis is not simply a switch from one extreme to the other. Julian does not simply become an animal while Anya becomes a celibate scholar. After Anya has made love to Julian, she calls him "my beautiful beast" (Jones 186), but both of these characters overcome the parameters of a simple distinction and become, instead, more than animal, more than human, more than a Beauty and a Beast. They become beautiful beasts. The reader is privy to this transformation in Julian and Anya that results in the containment of all elements, a fullness that is almost uncontainable in its exuberance, a completeness that does not and cannot exist in real life- a fantasy that is essential of romance novels.

Of course not all romance novels achieve this type of synthesis, nor is this synthesis always what readers have demanded. However, what is important to take away from the popularity of the Beauty and the Beast trope is the attempt for synthesis, however it is defined for the reader. Marina Warner writes that in fairy tales, "exchanges between voice and text…continually take place, adding, enriching, adapting, changing, in ceaseless permutation of motifs and pattern" (Warner xxii) in a system that seems rather similar to Barbara Herrnstein Smith's model of literary value. Similarly, each generation of romance novels adapts to contemporary needs and fantasies through the constant adaptation of romance tropes. While a past generation's fantasy may not fulfill a modern reader's needs, the mutability of romance novels responds to the changing desires of the reader, an exchange that, in itself, reinforces the power of balance in the romance novel genre.

Fantasy is at the core of the romance novel, and it is important to stress that fantasy works in both fairy tales and romance novels. Jayne Ann Krentz stresses that "when it comes to romance novels critics worry about whether the women who read them can tell the difference between what is real and what is not" (Krentz 2). Romance writers and readers enter into a dualistic way of reading, knowing "what every romance writer and reader also know: unreality is the name of the game, and in this unreal world everything must come out right in the end" (Malek qtd. in Krentz 76), but also that in this controlled fantasy, a reader is "empowered to rise above every limitation, every obstacle, every worry that confronts" (Phillips qtd. in Krentz 58) and be seduced by the knowledge that in her fantasy, she is in control.

As discussed previously, romance readers can identify and narrow their reading tastes to specific choices in the wide world of romance, whether that is through subgenres, particularly delicious authors, recommendations from other readers, or subject matter. Romance readers, in part because of the wide variety of choice in the genre, are able to tailor their reading tastes to exact themes and subjects, always with the promise of emotional satisfaction.[15] After choosing a romance novel that appeals to my interests, much like the first blush of physical attraction, I have certain expectations that I expect to be met. If I am not engaged, I put it down and try again and the variety of themes, sensuality levels, and tones discussed in Chapter Two allow me to design my own path through the romance novel forest. The reader is in control, from what texts she chooses

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[15] While I read widely in romance, I am drawn to specific subjects and themes that I use to find romance novels that will likely appeal to me. Like other readers have identified, I also follow particular authors that I enjoy regardless of the themes as well as use recommendations from those authors in order to find romance novels that might be "just right" for me.

to invest her time into to how she reads her novels to what she gets out of them. And speaking as a romance reader, if I'm not being emotionally satisfied that book doesn't get long to change my mind. I am actively a part of the formation of the story so if I am not responding as the reader, the novel isn't doing its job. Like Anya, I know what I want, and I expect to get it.

Janice Radway focuses on a group of romance readers' own perception of their reading practices and based on the self-awareness of these readers was able to draw conclusions about the process of romance readers in *Reading the Romance*.[16] In particular, Radway explores on the relationship of Dot, a sought-after bookseller and romance reader, with her romance reading customers, the "Smithton women." Dot functions as an intermediary, as individual readers seek her advice about romance novels. Radway identifies the ability to choose from a wide array of novels as a practice that allows the Smithton women "to take back some measure of control from the publishers by selectively choosing only those books they had reason to suspect would satisfy their desires and needs" (49). The individual reader's freedom to read within the genre according to her own tastes is reflected in Dot's explanation of her advice. "I would never want to take from the ladies the right to choose their own reading materials, only to suggest from my own experience" (Radway 52). Although the romance novel genre shares distinguishing characteristics that have already been discussed, the power of the

[16] Janice Radway's 1984 study of a group of romance readers is often cited as a seminal text in romance novel scholarship for its willingness to challenge widely held beliefs about romance novels and those who read them. In her 1991 introduction to the second edition of the text, Radway addresses the fact that while "romance reading was seen by the women as a way of participating in a large, exclusively female community" (11), the Smithton readers are a group formed around conceptions of identity as wives and mothers first. While this group does offer interesting and relevant insights into romance novel reading, the years of the study as well as the specificity of the group analyzed should be recognized as only a part of the whole romance readings experience, much like this project.

individual's experience in reading romance, from offering advice to choosing the best texts for oneself is another integral aspect of the romance reading experience.

As Dot functions for the Smithton readers, romance readers also turn to favorite and trusted authors to guide them down the right romance path. Like fairy godmothers, a wise romance author can point a reader down the correct trail through recommendations on forums, in online chats, websites, conferences, or even through the new authors' romance covers through short endorsements by an established writer. The close bond between writer and reader is established "partly because [writers] are readers themselves" (Krentz 4). This does not mean that writers pander to some sort of universal female fantasy in hopes of selling a widely popular romance novel. Instead, "in romance the success of an individual author is not based on how well she writes by conventional standards, but on how compellingly she can create her [own] fantasy…[romance writers] must recreate their own vividly imagined fantasies first and then hope and pray that there will be large number of readers who will also enjoy that particular fantasy" (Krentz 4). In the romance community, the sisterhood is comprised of readers, first and foremost, sharing their own fantasies with others.

Romance readers know what we want; we demand it of our books, and our authors do their best to deliver- the reader has the power in the romance world, and we demand our fantasy be fulfilled if only in a few hundred pages of text. As romance author Susan Elizabeth Phillips writes, "Is the romance writer guilty of distorting reality? Of offering women a false view of their own power in the world? Guilty as charged, and thank God" (qtd. in Krentz 58). After all, "creating a fantasy world is one of the primary

functions of all popular fiction. The mystery novel gives us a world of perfect justice, the western a world with no moral ambiguities. And the romance novel gives us two empowered and integrated human beings" (Phillips qtd. in Krentz 58). As a romance reader we *choose* to seek out the possibility of satisfaction, to enter into unreality and enjoy a world in which balance is possible, where integration is the goal, and where the Beast becomes the perfect balance between civilized and savage.

Off the Page: Exploring the Power and Pleasure of the Story: Angela Carter's book of short stories, *The Bloody Chamber,* was core to my interest in this project, specifically "The Tiger's Bride," a sensual and evocative story. After a series of bad hands in cards, a father gambles away his beautiful daughter to The Beast, a lord of the region. The Beast is an awkward, lumbering fellow dressed in old finery and wearing a mask with a man's face painted on it. The Beast requests to see the girl nude, after which he will return her untouched to her father along with a small fortune. She consistently denies him, until the day the Beast strips before her of all the masks of humanity. A great tiger stands before the girl, and she returns the intimacy by removing her clothes as well. The story ends with the girl broaching the Beast's chambers, naked but for a pair of diamond earrings created from his tears. He licks her skin and "each stroke of his tongue ripped skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world…My earrings turned back to water…I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur" (Carter 67).

In Carter's short story, the girl is human, then an animal, but so much more than that. All these skins of a life, all the layers of meaning in texts, readers, and their experiences are ripped away in the world of fairy tale and romance novels. We have the

opportunity in such dreaming spaces to reimagine what is into what it could be, or perhaps even to see our own realities in another way, each skin revealing something more than what we could understand before. Scholars and authors alike suggest that fairy tales and fantasy stories can awaken dangerous feelings in readers. As adults, it can be easy to "forget [fairy tales'] power…to construct the adult world of reality" (Tatar, "Annotated" xii). But perhaps it is easier to forget the power of wonder tales than to address the sense of something missing or something off-kilter in one's self and experiences. Terri Windling, acclaimed author in the fantasy genre, believes "the Animal Bride or Bridegroom, the Beast, the Other from the heart of the woods — they re–unite us with a world we've lost, re–awakening the wild within us" (Windling). Writers of romance novels and tellers of fairy stories tear down the shield propped up against a frightening and exhilarating possibility: nothing separates us from the animals, except our own fallacies. If, as author Angela Carter did, we were to peer through the sticky gossamer threads of our own webs, we might see a world where the long swipe of a rough tongue against our cheek reveals our own glistening fur, and we pad away on soft paws. We may see a fairy tale, magic, or we catch glimpses of ourselves fully once again, as we become one with our allegorical beasts, but in this world of romance novels, we have an explicit invitation to return again, to reimagine once more, to continually reenter the tiger's den and reevaluate our fantasies, to continually adapt and change.

Is it any wonder that early myths such as the story of Cupid and Psyche are mentioned in scholarly works on animal brides and bridegrooms in fairy tales? After all, the mysterious night visitor who gave Psyche her Pleasure was none other than a god, the

beautiful Cupid, masked in daylight as a winged serpent. Likewise, these fantastical beasts in fairy tales and romance novels are more than human, moving beyond the paltry self- imposed limitations of mortal boundaries. The existence of such powerful beings, creatures who refuse to be categorized and delineated, can cause a sense of suffocation, an acute awareness of the difficulty of maintaining multi-dimensionality in our own lives that is so easily sustained between the covers of books.

This yearned-for balance of the Beast that makes him such an erotic draw is firmly rooted in fantasy. Does that take away from the value of exploring a world where the resolution of dichotomies is possible? Does it denigrate the experience of responding emotionally to the pleasure of seeing integration of male/female, civilized/savage, physical/emotional, etc.?

Perhaps the value in fairy tales and romance novels is that such stories provide a space for wonder, a place in which readers can "remake the world in the image of desire" (Beer 79), a place for the individual reader to take what he or she needs at that particular time. Warner points to the achievement of fairy tales in creating an atmosphere that can "disrupt the apprehensible world in order to open space for dreaming alternatives" (xx). Stories based in such fantastical ideas as beasts turning to humans, love triumphing over all obstacles, or even just attaining an equilibrium between raging dichotomies and contradictions do not need to be realistic in order to be valuable to a reader. In fact, it is the very disconnect from the realistic world that may offer readers a place to imagine, to dream, and to feel as if they have a choice in constructing the world around them. The pressure to get something from our texts can battle the desire to simply enjoy, although

there really is not anything simple about receiving pleasure through a story.

The fantasy of fairy tales and romance novels encourages pleasure but allows the reader the space, the 'dreaming alternative,' to picture the daily actualities of life in a new way, *if the individual chooses to do so.* "The dreaming gives pleasure in its own right, but it also represents a practical dimension to the imagination, an aspect of the faculty of thought, and can unlock social and public possibilities" (Warner xx). Warner begins to address the struggle to metamorphose pleasure into practicality, to create inroads between enjoyment and usefulness, but her claim can be improved by Roland Barthes' understanding of the potential that is to be found in compromise. "There are two edges, the *compromise they bring about*, are necessary. Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flow, which becomes so" (Barthes 406, emphasis in original). In terms of romance novels this quote can illuminate the concept that the process of settling into one side or the other, in the case of fairy tales and romance novels dismissing them as pure escapist fantasy or forcing universal meaning in order to make them didactic, is neither practical nor productive. Instead, Barthes inspires another look at the seam between our dichotomies, the space between alternatives, the Beast in metamorphosis, to look for a type of necessary pleasure: a pleasure that is robust and offers individual readers more fruitful spaces to dream of possibilities. It is tragic that "the thrust towards universal significance has obscured the genre's equal powers to illuminate experience embedded in social and material conditions" (Warner xxii). If we replace "the genre's" with "story," it becomes clear when blanketing stories with wide sweeps of universal meaning, the result is a devastating loss of the dreaming spaces that

allow individuals to respond to texts and possibly create, from those seams between other understandings, powerful connections and deeper understanding of the world around them.

CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:
IT'S NOT JUST KIDS, CRONES, AND HOUSEWIVES WHO NEED HAPPY ENDINGS

Working on this thesis has led me down paths of pins and paths of needles. The love that sparked this project, my love for the romance genre, took many dark turns along the way. I became suspicious. My pleasure in entering worlds of love, romance and adventure became demanding. Instead of diving headfirst into those worlds of romance novels, I would gaze at them suspiciously, holding them an arm's length away, asking, "What aren't you telling me? What are you doing that I don't understand? What can I learn from you and your behaviors? Who else are you seeing, and are you doing the same things to them that you once did for me?" But as any good heroine knows, the path to emotional fulfillment can never be too easy, and now, my puppy love stage with romance novels is over to be replaced by a deeper, more appreciative understanding of this genre.

So what do romance novels do?

They allow me to celebrate what is valuable to me, a time before fear and frenzy, a time before political correctness and proper expression of desire, a time beyond toothpaste smears in the sink. The books I seek out affirm my own desires for a space when life and love were slower and simpler, and love and life could be caught and captured in a jar like lightening bugs to be admired for their beauty and mysteriousness. Romance novels allow me to look at my reality with eyes opened to possibility rather than practicality. These little glossy novels call me to dream of a world where delights and terrors soar and then resolve in happy endings, where epic love and adventure are

only a page turn away, and where life itself is imbued with the fantastic. These books remind me that the myth of me waits for my certainty of reality, practicality, correctness to crumble so that the petty divisions of child and adult, male and female, beast and human can collapse and I can loved and be beloved, myself and not myself, in the world but not of it. Romance novels remind me what it is to be a reader, a dreamer…to find joy in the potential and to become a beautiful beast for one ephemeral moment. That is what these novels do for me. Their stories of redemption, healing, and compromise inspire me to enjoy the dreaming, the tension between our dichotomies, and, most importantly, to peer deeper into that pleasure.

It is idealistic and unrealistic to imagine a world where these universals could apply to every romance reader. The kingdom of readers is made up of diverse subjects who demand many different things from their books and applying universal mandates would end in ruin. However, what can be concluded, and what I hope this thesis project has demonstrated, is that the romance reading experience is a fruitful ground to ask new questions of readers, to explore untapped potential. In this world, when curiosity seeks out what is locked behind a mysterious door, critics and lovers alike have the opportunity to experience the pleasure of new knowledge, then shut the door, and return once again, in a ceaseless permutation of new possibility.

Additionally, while I believe romance reading is mired in dichotomies, there is no simple resolution for these issues in our real world. Instead, I believe we should look to the dreaming spaces opened up by the genre where contemplating numerous, even contradictory possibilities is no longer impossible. I believe that this dreaming space will

allow for new ways of thinking, seeing, and analyzing texts, from a place where pleasure and literary value, like Anya and Julian, are not quite as different as they first appear. In her critical idiom, Gillian Beer illustrates this concept more clearly when she writes:

> Because romance shows us the ideal it is implicitly instructive as well as escapist. By removing the restraints of rationalism it can reach straight to those levels of our experience which are also re-created in myth and fairy tale…The rhythms of the interwoven stories in the typical romance construction correspond to the way we interpret our own experience as multiple, endlessly interpenetrating stories, rather than simply as a procession of banal happenings. (9)

In the same way, romance novels offer the encouragement to move beyond banal happenings, routine scholarly inquests, or mindless consumption of novels, and coyly flash glimpses of possibility. Obviously this is not a path that everyone will undertake, nor should they, but the beauty of fairy tales and romance novels, of stories, is that they "leave all decisions up to us, including whether we wish to make any at all" (Bettelheim 43). Such texts make us both subjects and authority, and, if we are willing to take it, suggest new ways of approaching old questions. To work from pleasure, to analyze a text with a history as a lover, requires a reexamination of the tools at our disposal. This type of analysis, this critical celebration requires new kinds of thinking, writing, and language, and a fresh type of analysis that looks to the seam, that embraces the dichotomous nature of reading materials, and discovers how it is productive.

Without dreaming spaces, Beauty is nothing but a pretty face; the Beast never moves past a feral snarl, and, with their transformations incomplete, love is not enough.

The seams between provide a place for fantasy and reality to rendezvous, a moment between that is only sustainable fleetingly, allowing readers and individuals the chance to look beyond the beastly surface of ink and paper and to see stories as “magical shape-shifters, dancing to the needs of the audience” (Warner xxiv). These adult fairy tales, in their dedication to looking among the possibilities, creating characters that are transformed between the covers of books, offer a unique way of satisfying the greedy demands of their ravenous audience. They offer a happy ending that lasts until the book is closed with a reader’s sigh, a bit of joy in fantasy realized, and they offer a place where dreaming of something more is a worthwhile and imperative pursuit. In the hazy moment of the last word of a well-crafted romance novel, before my mind returns to this reality, in the trembling, toe-curling and joyous sensation of surrender to a novelistic pleasure, I too transform, for the space of a breath, beyond myself, beyond reading limitations, beyond the dichotomies of my reality and into a beautiful beast.

It is customary to end a fairy tale journey with a universal phrase, a “happily ever after” or “to the end of their days,” but in this case, these farewells are not enough. This journey has not ended. Marina Warner writes, “The happy endings of fairy tales are only beginnings of the larger story” (xxv) and so it is with the happy endings of romance. Instead, it seems much more appropriate to leave you with a different sort of closing, a traditional phrase with a new twist, a temporary farewell that mirrors the journey of this project, the spirit of exploration, and the understanding that, as an unfinished tale, it is up to both writer and reader to continue the journey that reading requires of us:

This is my story, I’ve told it, and in your hands (or paws) I leave it.

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