

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

The Progress of Romance

The Politics of Popular Fiction

Edited by
Jean Radford



Routledge Revivals: History Workshop Series

The Progress of Romance

First published in 1986, the aim of this book is to present some of the changing thinking on popular writing to a wider audience in view of the enormous growth of mass culture after the war, but also to offer a historical perspective on a specific form of popular fiction: the romance. The essays collected here reflect diverse positions and methods in the current debate: sociological, psychoanalytic and literary. Some focus more on texts or readers, others concentrate on theoretical questions about narrative or ideology. All of the essays, however, view popular forms and their uses historical in historical context — rejecting the notion they are a contaminated by-product of industrialism.



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THE
PROGRESS of ROMANCE,
THROUGH
TIMES, COUNTRIES, AND MANNERS;
WITH
REMARKS
ON THE GOOD AND BAD EFFECTS OF
IT, ON THEM RESPECTIVELY;
IN A COURSE OF
EVENING CONVERSATIONS.

BY C. R. AUTHOR OF
THE ENGLISH BARON, THE TWO MENTORS, &c.
IN TWO VOLUMES.
VOL. I.

It hath bene through all ages ever scene,
That with the praise of armes and chevalrie
The prize of beautie still hath ioyned bene,
And that for reasons speciall privitee,
For either doth on other much relie:
For he me seemes most fit the faire to serve,
That can her best defend from villenie,
And she most fit his service doth deserve,
That fairest is, and from her faith will never swerve.

SPENSER'S Faery Queene. Book 4. Canto 5. Stanza 1.

PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR,
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Introduction

JEAN RADFORD

This is a time of renewed interest in all forms of popular culture. The need to understand different sources of pleasure and identification, whether in popular fiction or political populism, has led to a fresh and creative engagement with 'the popular'. What are the ways in which people's hopes and dreams, fears and fantasies, are invested in what they read and watch? And what needs, real or imaginary, are created and satisfied in the process? Suddenly, these questions have assumed a new importance.

Since the emergence of new technologies and changed patterns of work and leisure after the Second World War, 'mass' culture has grown enormously. The last decade of recession and unemployment has strengthened rather than weakened this trend, while the interaction between elite and popular art forms, between written and televisual productions, is now marked even in the 'highest' of literary forms. Since the 1970s crisis in literary studies in higher education, it is less and less possible to ignore 90 per cent of what is written and read, and gradually syllabuses are changing – in schools as well as in polytechnics and universities. While commercial interests have monitored these developments with some care, the *political* effects of popular cultural activity are now receiving increasing attention from cultural radicals, feminists,

2 Introduction

and all those interested in the way meanings and values are produced and lived.

Is there a distinctive aesthetics of popular culture, or are the popular arts simply degraded and naive forms of the fine arts? John Cawelti, in his influential study of popular writing *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*,¹ traces this question back to Plato's argument about the powers of rhetoric in *The Republic*, while claiming that it is still the starting point for current debates. Does popular culture embody traditions of resistance to the dominant culture, or is it merely a means of domination and control? 'Containment or resistance?' asks Stuart Hall.² Might 'the romance-reading clubs and fanzines springing up across the States . . . be the seedbed of a new subversive women's art form', as one feminist reviewer suggested recently? Or is it rather, as an exasperated voice in the same journal claimed, that 'trash is trash is trash'?³

The aim of this collection is to present some of the new thinking on popular writing to a wider audience, but also to offer a historical perspective on a specific form of popular fiction: the romance. It is hoped that essays on other forms of popular writing – notably crime and science fiction – will follow. It is also hoped that our discussions will feed into the larger theoretical project called for by Tony Bennett, one which would 'focus on differences between forms of writing, explaining these with reference to the historically specific materials and ideological constraints which regulate their production'.⁴ The emphasis of many of the contributions here is also on the *reproduction* of popular texts and the ideological constraints which regulate the ways in which readers can *use* those texts. This, as I argue later, we consider a crucial dimension in the analysis of popular culture.

Most of the essays here were originally presented at the first History Workshop Conference on Popular

Literature held at Ruskin College, Oxford, in May 1984. They reflect diverse positions and methods within the current debate: sociological, psychoanalytic and literary. Some focus more on texts or readers, others concentrate on theoretical questions about narrative or ideology. What they have in common is that each refuses the notion of popular writing as the contaminated spawn of industrialism, in favour of a historically specific understanding of popular forms and their uses.

Art and the popular

As with social history twenty years or so ago, there is much unexplored territory for cultural history which includes the popular. (Cultural histories of art or literature which *exclude* it have of course been the staple diet for students of 'the Humanities'.) The objective is not to displace traditional histories of high culture, by a parallel and oppositional history of what has been left out from these, but to re-define the relationship between elite and popular art forms as different social developments within the same field.

The term 'popular' is itself a notoriously unstable category, one which has not only undergone changes in meaning since its derivation from the Latin 'popularis' (belonging to the people), but which is in its present usage ambiguous, having accumulated a number of contradictory senses of both a positive and negative kind. As Raymond Williams points out, 'popular' may mean: of the people as opposed to their rulers; well-liked or widely read; inferior or base; that which presents new or specialised knowledge in an accessible way.⁵ It can only be understood *in relation* to what it is being opposed to in a historically given instance; the popular or 'quality' press, popular or classical music, but also the *Popular Front* or a *popular*

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textbook. The categories high/low and popular/art are thus interdependent and shifting, so that what is being designated or distinguished changes from period to period according to a wider set of social practices and institutions. So, for example, what is popular in its own period may become Art in another, as Northrop Frye comments on literary history:

Spenser has acquired a reputation as a poet's poet and a storehouse of recondite allusion and allegory; but in his day *The Faerie Queene* was regarded as pandering to a middlebrow appetite for stories about fearless knights and beauteous maidens and hideous ogres and dragons, instead of following more sober classical models.⁶

With this example, the popular text survives by becoming included in a literary establishment or 'canon', changing its significance in doing so. Frye argues, indeed, that this is the *only* way in which popular art of one period can survive into another – a judgement which ignores the broader cultural continuities which may maintain the 'popularity' of a non-canonical text like *Pilgrim's Progress*. His formalist⁷ view also fails to take into account certain historical discontinuities, like the rediscovery of forgotten women's writing by feminist publishers today. This process has re-introduced various popular novels of the early twentieth century to relatively large numbers of later twentieth century readers, but their readership is based not on bringing Mary Webb or May Sinclair into the literary canon, but on the political interest in women's lives and writings generated by the women's movements in Britain and America. A dualistic model of canonical literature *versus* popular literature, even one which concedes movement between the two categories, is not able to explain the complex negotia-

tions and exchanges which take place over time.

But arguments which dichotomise Literature/the popular as a simple opposition have come under increasing challenge. Not merely because of the evident inadequacy of the popular=bad, escapist side of the antithesis, but also because the notion of 'Literature', as an order of 'timeless monuments' or eternal truths, has itself broken down. In the first half of the twentieth century, it was usual practice to measure popular culture against the threatened but still hegemonic values of the cultural elite. Q.D. Leavis, in her *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), argued that a once unified reading public which in the mid-nineteenth century had enjoyed both Dickens and George Eliot, had split into an educated and a general public – the one reading Henry James, the other Marie Corelli. She saw this 'impassable gulf' as the effect of the 1870 Education Act, the arrival of cheap editions and a general decline in standards in twentieth century Britain. There is no consideration of the cultural gains produced by increased access to education or reading; her survey of popular reading is geared to mobilise an 'armed and conscious minority' in defence of Literature and traditional culture against the threat not only of best sellers, but also of radio, cinema and advertising. In this story Literature becomes a heroic and embattled David fighting off the Goliath of mass media philistinism.

Twenty-five years later, Richard Hoggart, writing from different political allegiances (and after the 1944 Education Act), was more concerned with the effects of popular culture *on* the majority. Analysing the interplay between material improvement and cultural loss, Hoggart tries to alert his Never-Had-It-So-Good readers to 'the danger of reducing the larger part of the population to a condition of obediently receptive passivity, their eyes glued to television sets, pin-ups,

and cinema screens'.⁸ What both of these earlier critiques of popular culture have in common is that both employ a static and idealised concept of Literature as the source of supra-historical *value*. Literature is not only opposed to all other media forms, it is set up against and over all other forms of writing.

Left analysis of popular culture in the 1960s and 1970s initially took up the Leavis/Hoggart opposition and tried to re-work it in materialist terms. Literature and the popular were re-defined in terms of their relation to ideology and ideological assumptions about class and gender, but Literature remained the privileged term as in bourgeois criticisms. The underprivileged term (the popular) served, as Virginia Woolf said about women's relation to men, as a looking-glass possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of Literature at twice its natural size. For Literature is seen as operating transformatively on ideology, producing a 'knowledge' of it, whereas popular fiction merely reproduces and transmits that ideology. (Thus Balzac's *Comédie Humaine* explores royalist ideology, but Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* simply passes it on.) In the realm of Literature, the text's internal operations guarantee to some extent the deconstruction of the ideological, whereas the formulaic structures of popular fiction 'naturalise' the ideological discourses they contain, thus delivering 'uniform, unambiguous and non-contradictory'⁹ messages. In other words, formal and aesthetic effects are granted to Art literature but denied to the popular.

These Left critiques, whether Lukácsian, Frankfurt or Althusserian, tend to corroborate the distinctions formed in traditional literary criticism: as Tony Bennett points out, the same body of canonised texts are approved, but for different reasons, and the rest – lumped together as a residue – disapproved; there is the same obsessive concern with the problem

of value; and a similar fetishism of the text and textual readings. Non-canonical texts are collapsed back into their conditions of production, and the effects of popular texts are read off from their ideological content. Often, this is particularly the case with discussions of women's popular writing; there is a slide into Left moralism and puritanism about the 'self-indulgence' of 'habitual reading for entertainment'.¹⁰ These left-wing strictures come close at times to the conservative laments of Leavis and earlier critics of the popular. There is little real engagement with the question:

If, as is frequently argued (for instance in Mills and Boon's own publicity), romance fiction is pure escapism, then why should a housewife, clerical worker or a schoolgirl escape from a world economically and psychologically dominated by men into fictional fantasies of the same thing expressed sexually?¹¹

Furthermore, the Literature/popular opposition distorts the way in which writing is historicised. Though the historical relativism of the terms elite/popular is of course argued by Marxists, some critics allow high cultural forms a continuous development, but dogmatically deny this to popular arts: 'The commodity production of contemporary or industrial mass culture has nothing to do, and nothing in common, with older forms of popular and folk art,' writes Fredric Jameson in his essay 'Reification and utopia'.¹² The emergence of commodity production and a market economy clearly has major implications for the text-reader relationship. But this is as true for literature as 'art' as it is for the popular art forms.¹³ The real difference, of form and function, between pre-industrial and post-industrial popular art cannot, it seems to me, be

explained by this simple reference to the economic. Nor can they be understood in isolation from the 'high' art forms with which they interact so intimately.

Romance as genre

It is possible to argue about 'romance', as Raymond Williams has about 'tragedy', that the only continuity is in the term: that there is no historical relationship between Greek 'romances', medieval romance, Gothic bourgeois romances of the 1840s, late nineteenth century women's romances and mass-produced romance fiction now – except the generic term. In so far as genres are contracts between a writer and his/her readers, these contracts, and the conventions which go with them, obviously differ according to the conditions of class, ideology and literacy in different social formations. Yet it is also possible, I think, to give some weight to the claim that romance is one of the oldest and most enduring of literary modes which survives today.

As Margaret Williamson argues in her essay on Greek romance, romance evolved in some sense as a *popular* alternative to the major genres of Ancient Greece (though it was also an element in major literary modes like the epic). A non-mimetic prose narrative focusing on emotion, it began when the split between public and private worlds began, when the 'subject' of the Greek *polis* devised new forms in which to speak their 'subjectivity'. Of course, its uses cannot be read off from or confined to this point of origin (suggestive though it is for modern romance forms), and the contribution to this volume by Anna Clark makes a rather different case for 'seduction' romances of nineteenth century England.

Some literary theorists, Northrop Frye for example, have attempted to find an underlying structural unity

for different forms of romance, defining it as the literature of wish-fulfilment and claiming that it represents the intrusion of the 'it might have been' into the 'it was'. While the actual world keeps these two, like dreaming and waking, work and play, in continual antithesis, the popular appeal of romance, he says, is that it dissolves the boundaries between the actual and the potential, offering a vision of 'the possible or future or ideal'.¹⁴ While the nature of that 'possible' or 'ideal' will vary with the varying ideological conditions, this utopian vision is, claims Frye, what makes this peripheral and undervalued form so paradoxically central to what writing and reading have to offer. One of the most forceful of the structural theorists of genre, Frye also makes a strong claim for the role of popular forms like romance in literary history. They provide a repertoire of devices from which new formal developments emerge. It was from popular theatre rather than neo-classical drama, he says, that Marlowe and Shakespeare developed, and it was popular ballads and broadsides of the eighteenth century that anticipated the Songs of Innocence and the Lyrical Ballads. 'In prose,' he continues, 'the popular literature signalling such new developments has usually taken the form of a rediscovery of the formulas of romance.'¹⁵

These theoretical arguments about the continuities or discontinuities of romance or tragedy (indeed of history itself) are necessary but not perhaps sufficient. It is in the detailed historical accounts of the *transformations* of codes and conventions that these questions will be clarified. For if generic forms are, as I argued earlier, signals in a *social* contract between writers and readers, changes in these conventions will be regulated by transformations at other levels of social relationships. Thus for cultural historians, the study of genres may provide a mediation between literary history and social history – one which enables us to break out of

the 'splendid isolation' in which traditional histories of literature are confined.

Put another way, to see modern romances as genealogical upstarts, or the bastardised offspring of originally noble forbears, is to reproduce a fantasy of the decline-and-fall type, but does *not* help to explain the evolution of cultural forms. But we can instead ask why the romance has moved from being about a male subject to being about a feminine one;¹⁶ or in what way the tests and trials faced by the hero of medieval romance differ from the obstacles and trials through which the heroine of contemporary romance must typically pass to achieve her object; or how it is that the 'magic' which in earlier romances rescues the hero from false Grails becomes in *Jane Eyre* a supernatural voice which unites her with her 'true' destiny; and why that magic/supernatural/Providential force is in today's romance represented as coming from *within*: as the magic and omnipotent power of sexual desire. A structural and semantic reading of these changing codes necessarily engages with questions of gender, ideology and change.

Thus to approach romance as genre is not to lay claim to some ahistorical quiddity, but may, on the contrary, be to tackle the question of its historical functions. It will, perhaps, be objected here that this has always been the fate of popular fiction: that whereas genre is a backdrop for 'high' cultural productions, genre analysis has dominated the study of popular writing. Among the contributors to this collection, for example, Alison Light has argued that genre study is used to reify popular writing into *en bloc* categories where Barbara Cartland is synonymous with Mills & Boon (or Agatha Christie with Raymond Chandler), regardless of the fact that different and sometimes antithetical readerships are involved. Whilst agreeing that items in popular genres need individualis-

ing – her analysis of du Maurier's *Rebecca*, 'Returning to Manderley: female sexuality and class',¹⁷ is a brilliant example of this practice – I'd personally still wish to argue the usefulness of seeing popular texts in relation to genre:

So generic affiliations, and the systematic deviation from them, provide clues which lead us back to the concrete historical situation of the individual text itself, and allows us to read its structure as ideology, as a socially symbolic act, as a prototypical response to a historical dilemma.¹⁸

A somewhat different and more synchronic approach to the genre question is adopted in John Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, which several contributors here refer to. Cawelti compares the dominant forms of contemporary popular fiction, and identifies the following features of romance: (a) the centrality of the love relationship with adventure/incident as subsidiary elements (whereas in the thriller/adventure story, incident is central and love element subsidiary or illustrative); (b) in women's romance, the major relationship is between heroine and hero, whereas in male-directed genres it is between hero and villain; (c) most contemporary romance has a female protagonist, whereas most adventure stories star a male protagonist; (d) romance depends on a special relationship of identification between reader and protagonist whether the narration is in the first or the third person. These points are useful, I think, not only for contemporary romance writing but in thinking through the romance element in the mainstream novel.

When Clara Reeve's *The Progress of Romance* first appeared in 1785, she was concerned to argue the antiquity and universality of romance *against* the newly emerged novel form. For although the Romantics