

Chapter 5

Strange Stirrings, Strange Yearnings: *The Flame and the Flower*, *Sweet Savage Love*,
and the Lost Diversities of Blockbuster Historical Romance

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PRE-PRINT MANUSCRIPT:**PLEASE CITE AND QUOTE THE PUBLISHED VERSION**

Betty Friedan opens *The Feminine Mystique*, that iconic feminist text from 1963, with this memorable passage: “The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States.”¹ Nine years later, in Kathleen Woodiwiss’s iconic historical romance novel, *The Flame and the Flower*, the phrase “strange stirring” recurs. Pregnant heroine Heather gazes on her new husband, the sleeping, naked Brandon:

His body lay bare to her gaze now, but she did not turn away though her face flamed with her own temerity. Instead she let her eyes roam over him slowly and with much interest, satisfying her curiosity. There was no need of others to tell her what she could see herself—that he was magnificently made, like some wild, grand beast of the forests. Long, flexible muscles were superbly conditioned, his belly flat and hard, his hips narrow. Her hand, slim and white, appeared out of place upon his brown and hairy chest.

¹ Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. 1963. Reprint with an Introduction by Anna Quinlan (New York: Norton, 1997), 11.

Disturbed by the strange stirring within her, she eased from him and moved toward her side of the bed. She turned away, trying not to think how her eyes had lingered on his body, and she saw a leaf fall to the floor of the balcony. She huddled under the covers, wishing she were as warm-blooded as the man beside her.²

Thus begins not only Heather's erotic awakening, but the sweeping plot arc that will carry this couple from the callous, almost casual sexual assaults that Brandon inflicts on Heather in the novel's first chapter, to the mutual love and focus on female sexual pleasure that marks its conclusion.

Woodiwiss's use of Friedan's evocative phrase "strange stirring" may well have been entirely unconscious. But the unconscious is a wily thing, and those two words had been quoted and discussed and argued over by American society for nearly a decade when they show up in Woodiwiss's novel. If Friedan's diagnosis of the "strange stirring" in American women augured the coming Second Wave feminist movement, the "strange stirring" that Woodiwiss describes in Heather was, likewise, a harbinger, signaling the emergence of a new subset of the romance novel, the "women's historical romance" or "erotic historical romance" or "bodice-ripper" as the American media eventually dubbed it, which would reshape the landscape of American publishing across the 1970s. How can we productively relate the first "strange stirring," that of domestic dissatisfaction, with the second "strange stirring," that of sexual curiosity? (The leaf that falls outside Heather's window near the end of the passage we've quoted isn't literally a fig leaf, but it might as well be.) And what are we to make of the fact that Heather's "strange stirring" occurs just two chapters after she has been raped by the same man she now peruses "with much interest": an assault which was not masked in erotic or romantic terms, but presented as "burning

² Woodiwiss, Kathleen. *The Flame and the Flower* (New York: Avon, 1972), 107-8.

pain” and “endless weeping”?³ Forty-two years and one or two waves of feminist thinking later, how can scholars begin to reread, not just this particular novel, but the whole subgenre that it inaugurates, the one that Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan have named the “rapetastic” romance?

This chapter can sketch only a preliminary answer to any of these questions—indeed, to be honest, what we can offer in these pages is as much a polemical call to arms as it is an academic argument. It is long past time for scholars of popular romance fiction, and of American culture more generally, to take seriously the work of Kathleen Woodiwiss and Rosemary Rogers and the other original Avon Ladies (Laurie McBain, Joyce Verrette, Johanna Lindsey, Shirlee Busbee, and the inimitable Bertrice Small), and to read their novels as situated within and responding to the same historical moment as foundational feminist thinkers (Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Germaine Greer, Gloria Steinem, and Susan Brownmiller) and foundational sex-positive authors (Betty Dodson, Nancy Friday). We do *not* mean that the novels should be treated as primary sources that prove the arguments laid out in the secondary source feminist manifestos of the 1970s. Quite the contrary. Rather, we must examine both the novels and the manifestos as primary source representations of the cultural conversations of the 1970s about gendered oppression, rape culture and practice, female subjectivity, and women’s sexual pleasure.

To do so, we will have to get not just “beyond heaving bosoms,” as Wendell and Tan recommend in their book of that name, but beyond the sweeping myth about the “rapetastic” genre of the “bodice ripper” that scholars and readers, bloggers and journalists have all perpetuated about these romances. This myth obscures the differences between what once were recognized subgenres within the women’s historical romance, and also the marked contrasts between particular authors and novels—contrasts which were by no means unnoticed by critics

³ Woodiwiss, 30.

and readers at the time.

The discovery, publication, and impact of *The Flame and the Flower* remains, in Eileen Fallon's words, "the stuff of publishing legend."⁴ One "sultry August weekend in 1970"⁵ Avon editor Nancy Coffey brought the novel's unsolicited manuscript home, reading it as part of the publisher's search for paperback originals that might compete with the paperback reprints of older bestsellers offered by other houses. "She couldn't put the damned thing down, she couldn't get it out of her head, and eventually she persuaded the company to publish it as an Avon Spectacular," Alice K. Turner would explain in a breathless *New York* magazine retrospective, "The Tempestuous, Tumultuous, Turbulent, Torrid, And Terribly Profitable World of Paperback Passion."⁶ Promoted and advertised as though it were already a proven bestseller, *The Flame and the Flower* was "convey[ed] directly to its natural drugstore, chain-store, subway-riding paperback audience rather than going through the usual farce of snide notices from ex-English major critics."⁷ The strategy worked, the novel drew "thousands of fan letters"⁸ and by the time of Turner's article in 1978, Woodiwiss's debut novel had been through forty printings, with 2,655,000 copies in print.⁹

⁴ Fallon, Eileen. *Words of Love: A Complete Guide to Romance Fiction* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1984), 53.

⁵ Fallon, 53.

⁶ Turner, Alice K. "The Tempestuous, Tumultuous, Turbulent, Torrid, And Terribly Profitable World of Paperback Passion." (*New York Magazine*, February 13, 1978), 49.

⁷ Turner, 49.

⁸ Turner, 48.

⁹ Turner, 49.

In both journalistic and more scholarly accounts, the success of *The Flame and the Flower* led promptly, almost inevitably, to the discovery, publishing, promotion, and success of a second novel, Rosemary Roger's *Sweet Savage Love* (1974), and thence to the emergence of a new subgenre. Turner's account gives the relationship between the two novels a Biblical cadence, as though we were reading a series of begats. "And in due course," Turner intones, "*Sweet Savage Love* arrived, addressed 'To the Editor of *The Flame and the Flower*.' And Ms. Coffey announced at the next editorial meeting, 'I hate to tell you, but I think we've got another one.'"¹⁰ Thirty years later, in *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, Wendell and Tan echo the story, although they update the style. *The Flame and the Flower* "is, in many ways, the Platonic ideal of the bodice ripper," they explain. "The heroine's bodice is, in fact, ripped; the hero is appropriately arrogant and hard-edged before being brought low by the power of love; swashes are buckled, buckles are swashed; villains are suitably hideous; and the adventure runs at quite the fever pitch."¹¹ The Woodiwiss novel "spawned countless books that followed, with various degrees of success, that particular formula, such as Rosemary Rogers's infamous *Sweet Savage Love*."¹²

It is worth noting that Turner calls the genre she's discussing the "Women's Historical Romance," not the "bodice ripper." Indeed, the latter term never occurs in her article, which says instead that "the Erotic Historical, the Sweet Savage Romance, or, irreverently, the Hysterical Romance" are terms of art readers might want to know (48).¹³ The first print use of "bodice

¹⁰ Turner, 49.

¹¹ Wendell, Sarah, and Candy Tan. *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels* (New York: Fireside, 2009), 11.

¹² Wendell and Tan, 11.

¹³ Turner, 48.

ripper,” according to the OED, would not come for another eighteen months, and although both that first use (in the *New York Times*) and the one that quickly followed (in the *Chicago Tribune*) take pains to explain that the phrase was already circulating “in the trade,” there was little consensus.¹⁴ *People* dubbed the books “erotic gothic” (Dec. 27, 1976), *Time* preferred “costume epic” (Jan. 17, 1977; Darrach 100), and the *Wall Street Journal*, in a front-page story, cast its vote for “bodice-buster.”¹⁵ Whatever the term, however, there was and is still widespread agreement that sexual violence was a hallmark of the genre. “Our heroine does not merely lose her virtue,” Turner explains; “she is almost invariably abducted, raped, ravished, indentured, bonded (sometimes branded), enslaved, prostituted, and betrayed in a dozen different ways.”¹⁶ “Honestly, ‘sweet, savage love’ serves as a neat encapsulation of the older style of romances,” Wendell and

¹⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary dates the first print use of “bodice ripper” for a romance genre to a *New York Times* book review from September 2, 1979; in it, Vanessa Royall is described as “enjoying a good reputation and lucrative income as the author of the sort of breathless historical romances . . . that are known in the publishing trade as bodice-rippers.” The same rhetorical gesture occurs in the *Chicago Tribune* at the end of that month, where Joseph Epstein laments that “serious books cannot avail themselves of the flash or luridness of dust-jacket art of the kind used, say, by the sort of gothic novel that in the trade is known as ‘a bodice-ripper.’” The term may have been used in the publishing industry by the fall of 1979, but precisely what it referred to—the cover? the “breathless” content?—was evidently still not settled.

¹⁵ Stephen Grover, “The Bodice-Busters: A Sure-Fire Formula for Literary Success.” *Wall Street Journal*, November 5, 1980, 1; 14.

¹⁶ Turner, 48.

Tan concur, since in them, “it was well-nigh de rigueur for the heroine to be raped by the hero.”¹⁷

We find a remarkable agreement, then, between the early journalistic account of the Women’s Historical Romance and the more recent one written by crucial figures in the American romance blogosphere: an agreement not just about what was “de rigueur” in “these novels,” but about the comfortable convergence between the Woodiwiss and Rogers volumes, such that they are spoken of as a pair. The phrase “romances like *Sweet Savage Love* and *The Flame and the Flower*,” as *Beyond Heaving Bosoms* puts it, comes readily to the lips of romance readers, reviewers, and bloggers, and scholarship has often followed suit. Sometimes the two books are even conflated. Literary historian and theorist Anne Williams sagely observes in *Art of Darkness*:

¹⁷ Wendell and Tan, 12. According to Carol Thurston’s painstaking tally of fifty-two “erotic historical romances” published between 1972 and 1981, slightly more than half the heroines (54 percent of them, to be exact) of are raped in the course of the novel (78). That said, Thurston continues, “in only 18.5 percent of the stories is rape portrayed as a sexual act—the ‘rape fantasy’—an act of seduction in which the heroine ultimately finds pleasure and even reaches orgasm” (78), and in “nearly three quarters” of the novels that include rape of any kind, “the hero expresses the belief that the victim suffered a physical and psychological assault that was not her fault—a decidedly contemporary point of view” (78). Corpus selection and analytical bias are always an issue in such statistical claims, but the overall picture here bears little resemblance to the “rapetastic” myth. The vast majority of these narrative rapes were full-on violent representations of patriarchal dominion over the heroine, whether by the hero or by others, with “contemporary” anti-rape discourse, largely an outgrowth of second-wave feminist thinking and activism, making its way not just into the novels, but into the mouths of their heroes.

a Poetics of Gothic that “the publication of Rosemary Rogers’s *The Flame and the Flower* in 1974 marked the end of the 50s Gothic craze and the ascendancy of the ‘bodice ripper.’”¹⁸ To be sure, this slip comes in a footnote; the main text of the study gets the attributions right. Yet it still suggests that, whether to Williams or to her copyeditors, on some level, the two books are really one, and the one thing they are is a “bodice ripper.”

To shake off the power this literary historiography has over us, we might begin by asking how closely, in fact, *Sweet Savage Love* really followed the model of *The Flame and the Flower*. In a 2012 interview, the editor who first read them both, Nancy Coffey, recalled that her own initial impression was of difference, not similarity. Despite how the manuscript was addressed, Coffey did not think that Woodiwiss’s readers would like the Rogers volume. It was too sexual, too violent, too far removed from what ends up, in Woodiwiss’s hands, a rather sweet and redemptive narrative. Although Turner quotes Coffey as saying “we’ve got another one,” the editor suspected at the time that that there would be very little overlap between the novels’ readerships (interview). Indeed, although they’re both historical novels with an early rape of the heroine, and although Rogers gives a nod to the earlier text in her heroine’s surname—could it really be a coincidence that she’s named Ginny *Brandon*?—the books mostly offer a series of sharp contrasts.

In *The Flame and the Flower*, the hero and heroine are in each other’s company for almost the entire book. They have sex only with each other; indeed, after Brandon forces Heather, he spends the next year celibate, restored to a flustered, unhappy state of metaphorical virginity and unable to muster attraction to anyone else. (The virginity motif isn’t particularly subtle: “He

¹⁸ Williams, Anne. *Art of Darkness: a Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1995), 159.

felt as if he were again a virgin,”¹⁹ Brandon notes with alarm a few chapters after the rape, he finds himself “blushing like an unsullied virgin!”²⁰ shortly thereafter, and so on.) After a year of both lusting after Heather and learning to appreciate her worth, the impulse to assault her again crosses his mind. “Damn, it’s come to rape,”²¹ he muses naked in front of a mirror—but this time the thought fills him with wistful regret, spurring him into a memorably overwrought soliloquy:

He sighed heavily. “I had such thoughts of tender tidings sweetly exchanged between us. But now I must lie upon my bed of thorns or none at all and to have nothing of her frightens me more than the battle yet to come. But perhaps this moment yet to be will lead to more fertile ground between us and we might sometime hence share tender passion more bent of love.”²²

Meanwhile, in a soliloquy of her own, Heather runs through a series of possible responses to his desire. “No longer am I frightened nor just a girl,” she reflects, deciding first to “fight and claw and scratch and keep my thighs closed tightly until my strength has been exhausted,” none of which she did in the initial terrified rape scene.²³ A moment later, she changes her mind. “He is my husband and father of my child. He owns me and I am the one without right to hold myself from him.”²⁴ Yet if Heather is no longer a frightened girl, she is just as certainly not submissive chattel—and Woodiwiss interrupts her heroine’s second, submissive thought with an assertive

¹⁹ Woodiwiss, 165.

²⁰ Woodiwiss, 182.

²¹ Woodiwiss, 391.

²² Woodiwiss, 391.

²³ Woodiwiss, 390.

²⁴ Woodiwiss, 390.

realization. “This”—a sexual marriage to Brandon—“is what I’ve wanted and yearned for,” Heather abruptly admits to herself. “This is what I’ve planned for, worked to have.”²⁵ When hapless Brandon enters the bedroom, he is flustered to find his wife neither resistant nor grimly submissive, but seductive, even aggressive in her sexuality. “She slipped her hand behind his neck and drew him down to her,” Woodiwiss writes, and Heather whispers to her flummoxed husband, “It took you long enough, my darling.”²⁶ A page later, as their orgasms subside, Heather jokes that “had I known before what it was like, I would have demanded my rights”²⁷: a neat reversal of her husband’s earlier patriarchal rhetoric.

From this pivotal love scene onward, Heather’s sexual desire for Brandon, her enthusiastic consent to sex with him, and her complete satisfaction by him are never in doubt. She throws herself into sexual exploration within the marriage “with an abandon that left her radiant,”²⁸ we are told; their lovemaking is variously tender and rough, with the latter scenes echoing and transforming the earlier assault, now restaged as a source of pleasure for her,²⁹ to the point where she can even “slyly” joke with him about the rape, in the novel’s closing pages, as part of their erotic banter.³⁰ “It’s always an adventure, going to bed with you,”³¹ she tells her husband dreamily, and the structure of the novel transvalues the opening rape from a horrific

²⁵ Woodiwiss, 390.

²⁶ Woodiwiss, 392.

²⁷ Woodiwiss, 394.

²⁸ Woodiwiss, 409.

²⁹ Woodiwiss, 410.

³⁰ Woodiwiss, 480.

³¹ Woodiwiss, 442.

misunderstanding—Brandon thinks she’s a prostitute playing a game of resistance to arouse him—into a sort of fortunate fall. “He snatched me away from a nightmare and gave me joy,” she tells a friend late in the novel,³² with Woodiwiss deftly substituting the etymological root meaning of “rape”—from the Latin *rapere*, says the Oxford English Dictionary, meaning among other things, ‘to carry off, snatch away’—rather than the expected, more purely sexual and legal term. (Woodiwiss is not known for her subtlety with language, but this is a truly artful moment, and deserves our recognition.)

The transformative and recuperative story arc of *The Flame and the Flower* is utterly lacking in *Sweet Savage Love*. Well before our central couple meet, we see the novel’s hero, Steve, have rough, ambiguously consensual sex with Sonya, the sexually frustrated stepmother of the heroine, Ginny. Initially Sonya takes the initiative, ripping his shirt (not he her bodice) and reaching down to “uncover” him, but Sonya’s brief “cry of despair” as he penetrates her and her tears of shame afterwards trouble the scene.³³ She subsequently “despised herself and hated him,”³⁴ we’re told, yet she continues to both crave and enjoy sex with Steve: a pornographic paradigm of female ambivalence, body set against mind, which will haunt the novel as a whole. When Steve and Ginny first meet, he gropes her—as in Heather’s case, he thinks she’s a prostitute sent up to him—but he stops when she slaps him, the slap itself filling Ginny with “savage pleasure.”³⁵ When they meet again, the novel repeatedly emphasizes both her virginal

³² Woodiwiss, 412.

³³ Rogers, Rosemary. *Sweet Savage Love* (New York: Avon Books, 1974), 25-6.

³⁴ Rogers, 27.

³⁵ Rogers, 71.

curiosity and her desire for Steve as a man who is “honest with women,”³⁶ refreshingly frank about his lust. Ultimately, in a long, sensual scene, Ginny asks Steve to take her virginity, which he is happy to do.³⁷

Where, then, do things go wrong? Just a few pages after sleeping with Steve, Ginny finds herself, like Sonya, self-divided and self-chastising:

A grimace of distaste pulled at the corners of her mouth. Oh, God, she was no better than he, than any loose woman who had no control over her own baser emotions! How easily she had given herself to him—another conquest in a long line of them, no doubt. Well, he would not find her as easy again—not him, nor any other man.³⁸

Where Woodiwiss repeatedly emphasizes Heather’s *innocence*, both before and after the rape, Rogers emphasizes Ginny’s *ambivalence*, her bodily desire and sexual agency at odds with her socially-mandated desire to see herself as different from other, less-refined women (“any loose woman”; “a cheap dance-hall girl,” as she thinks of herself a few pages later), and from the world of sexual frankness associated with Steve’s working-class masculinity (“she was no better than he”). Having aspired in her youth to the sexual freedom of a “courtesan” and not the burdens and strictures of marriage,³⁹ Ginny recoils from the way that her sexually-liberated version of herself has begun to be realized, and she is repulsed by the “strange yearning”⁴⁰ that her mind, full of proprieties, has been unable to control. (That “strange

³⁶ Rogers, 137.

³⁷ Rogers, 163.

³⁸ Rogers, 171.

³⁹ Rogers, 172-3.

⁴⁰ Rogers, 171.

yearning” bears comparison to Heather’s “strange stirring,” a point we will return to in our conclusion.)

Ginny does her best to reinscribe herself into social norms by shunning and declaring her hatred of Steve and by cozying up instead, without desire, to the hapless and proper Carl Hoskins—a turn which Steve misreads as a new sexual interest on her part. Rogers aims for us to read the heroine’s “scorn and rejection”⁴¹ of Steve as a sort of false consciousness, as false as his own disgusted assumption, for most of the novel, that having lost her virginity Ginny has become an easy, promiscuous, and hypocritical woman.⁴² The shocking thing about Steve’s first rape of Ginny, then, a few chapters later, is that Rogers presents it to us not as a psychological assault, and not as a turning point in their relationship, but as an obvious, even inevitable instantiation of this love-hate, *odi-et-amor* relationship. It’s a moment of somatic *honesty*, in which Ginny’s body “betrayed her” by responding in a way that her conscious mind refuses to do⁴³: a hoary pornographic trope which the novel returns to again and again (“her body was a traitor to her mind”⁴⁴ we read again almost a hundred and fifty pages later), but one which is entirely absent from *The Flame and the Flower*. (To borrow terms from twenty-first century romance scholar Angela Toscano, a pioneer of the narratological—rather than sociological—study of rape in the genre, the Woodiwiss novel features a “Rape of Mistaken Identity” while the Rogers deploys the

⁴¹ Rogers, 224.

⁴² Over a hundred and fifty pages after their first sexual intercourse, for example, Steve is still galled by his sense that “he’d relieved her of her virginity and taught her that sex was enjoyable—and she’d promptly turned around and sought further enjoyment in numbers” (379).

⁴³ Rogers, 226.

⁴⁴ Rogers, 361.

“Rape of Possession”⁴⁵ motif.)

If the sexual arc of the Woodiwiss novel runs from rape to mutual pleasure, then, the arc of the Rogers runs from body-mind division to an erotic and romantic wholeheartedness, and it takes much, much longer to get there. Over the course of *Sweet Savage Love*, Steve repeatedly rapes Ginny, using not just her inevitable orgasm but the fact of their former consensual sex against her. Once given, he assumes, consent can never truly be taken away; unlike the rapist-turned-virgin Brandon, Steve feels entitled to force Ginny whenever he chooses. A modicum of respect slips into their relationship when, during one assault, Ginny knifes Steve, filling him with “puzzled wonder” but “no anger.”⁴⁶ Quite the contrary: “I still want to make love to you,” he quietly tells her, and in a remarkable scene, she accepts, his blood dripping down on her breasts as they have sex.⁴⁷ But although Steve proposes that they not “underestimate each other anymore” after this encounter,⁴⁸ Ginny remembers the words more with fear than with contentment,⁴⁹ and Steve’s new estimation of her does not entail emotional commitment or sexual exclusivity. Brandon may lose interest in all other women after raping Heather, but Steve continues to engage in frequent consensual encounters, both casually and as part of long-term relationships. Both men may be forced into marrying their respective heroines, but only one ditches his bride to sleep with another woman on his wedding night.

⁴⁵ Angela R. Toscano, “A Parody of Love: the Narrative Uses of Rape in Popular Romance.” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 2, no. 2 (2012), unpaginated.

⁴⁶ Rogers, 307.

⁴⁷ Rogers, 307.

⁴⁸ Rogers, 310.

⁴⁹ Rogers, 361.

The motif of physical separation between hero and heroine becomes crucial in the final third of *Sweet Savage Love*. Public history (the overthrow of Emperor Maximilian and the restoration of the Mexican Republic) keeps the protagonists apart for many chapters at a time, as does Steve's imprisonment, with Ginny sure he's been killed by a firing squad. This separation delays the resolution of the Steve-Ginny love plot, but it does not lessen the novel's fascination with violence, sexual and otherwise. After sleeping with Steve's captor, Colonel Devereaux, to save Steve's life—the first sexual encounter in the novel that is described with revulsion, as Heather's rape had been, and the moment when Ginny first admits to herself how much she loves Steve and how much she has “really wanted him”⁵⁰ every time—Ginny finds herself enduring chapter after chapter of rape and forced prostitution, eventually stabbing her prime tormentor, the sexual sadist Beal, and finding some succor (if not happiness) as the consensual mistress of the gracious French officer Michel. Steve, in turn, gets whipped, branded, shackled, imprisoned, homosexually molested (though not raped), and staked out in the blazing sun for ants to consume, sure all along that Ginny has laughingly betrayed him to this fate. Even when the two are reunited, violence marks their relationship. Ginny knife-fights Steve's lover, Concepción, to claim him for herself; when her declaration of love enrages him, she taunts him that he can't scare her any longer, holds a knife to his throat, and demands her “rights” from him, ordering him to strip⁵¹ and “forc[ing] him to admit he wanted her.”⁵² “You see how easy I am to rape,”⁵³ he

⁵⁰ Rogers, 501.

⁵¹ Rogers, 638.

⁵² Rogers, 640.

⁵³ Rogers, 640.

muses afterwards, ruefully acknowledging that precisely because she's become such a "bitch,"⁵⁴ he's met his match, a woman "almost as depraved as [he]."⁵⁵

Others before us have noted how different these novels are: differences that ripple outward into the contrasting subgenres that each founds. For example, Kristin Ramsdell's *Romance Fiction: a Guide to the Genre* (2012)—a third edition of her detailed advisory volume for American librarians—distinguishes between the Sensual Historical and the Sweet / Savage Historical subgenres of the "Hot Historical Explosion" of the 1970s, with Woodiwiss and Rogers as a representative figure for each.⁵⁶ Writing at the end of the 1980s, Carol Thurston marks the same distinction, contrasting what we might think of as a *romance*-centered romance novel, hinging on the development of the hero / heroine relationship, with a sort of *female-picaresque* romance novel, one which might be threaded on a heterosexual romance plot, but whose primary focus is the testing and resilience of the heroine. "Woodiwiss's books," Thurston writes, "focus unremittingly on the developing physical and emotional relationship between heroine and hero, while Rogers's stories 'travel'—from England, France, Spain, and Tripoli to Texas, Louisiana, and Mexico—with the heroine experiencing a variety of adventures and men, leaving the reader near exhaustion."⁵⁷ Push back a few years more, and the distinctions grow even more granular. In 1981, *Publishers Weekly* enumerated three varieties. Some readers might choose the "sensual historical" embodied by *The Flame and the Flower*, which is primarily distinguished by the

⁵⁴ Rogers, 640.

⁵⁵ Rogers, 643.

⁵⁶ Kristin Ramsdell, *Romance Fiction: a Guide to the Genre* (2012), 189.

⁵⁷ Carol Thurston, *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 50.

“unfailing fidelity of the heroine for the hero—and exclusive sex between them.” Others might prefer the “romantic historical” novel: a text which might well be marketed in a similar style, and exhibit a comparable heft (Anna Lee Waldo’s *Sacajawea* weighs in at just over a thousand pages), but which distinguishes itself by being “scrupulously researched” with “a literary prose style and considerable historical accuracy” that set it apart from its lower-brow cousins. Finally, alongside the “sensual” and “romantic” historical novel readers will discover books where the heroine has “explicit sex with the hero and additional male characters; graphic sexual variations; abuse and/or rape; and no guarantee that the heroine will end up with the first man” she has sex with. Only this third type is labeled by *Publisher’s Weekly* as a “bodice-ripper.”⁵⁸

One final piece of evidence from the 1980s bears remembering. In *Reading the Romance*, her pioneering ethnographic study of a group of white, middle-aged Midwestern American romance readers—many of them born before or quite early in the Baby Boom,⁵⁹ whose preferred form of recreational reading was the then decade-old genre of the blockbuster historical

⁵⁸ Eileen Fallon, *Words of Love: A Complete Guide to Romance Fiction* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1984), 63.

⁵⁹ Dorothy (“Dot”) Evans, the bookstore owner who put Radway in touch with her customers, was “forty-eight years old at the time of the study,” Radway reports (57), which means she was born around 1932. The ages of the other Smithton readers are not stated directly. However, the vast majority had at least one child eighteen years old or older, and since the “mean age at marriage was 19.9 years” (57) this suggests that many of the women were in their late thirties when Radway met them, putting their birth in the early 1940s. See Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984; reprint with a new Introduction, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

romance—Janice Radway notes how differently the Smithton readers speak of Woodiwiss’s and Rogers’s novels. Woodiwiss is loved, so much so that the Woodiwiss-style sensual historical romance provides Radway with her structural model for what one chapter calls “The Ideal Romance.” Rogers, by contrast, is “universally detested,” her work seen by the Smithton women as “‘trashy,’ ‘filthy,’ and ‘perverted.’”⁶⁰ *Sweet Savage Love* was not reviled per se—most of the women, Radway writes, “confessed that they liked [this] first novel”—but Rogers’s subsequent novels serve as “perfect examples of bad romances,” illustrating the structural features which constitute the “garbage-dump” romance or “The Failed Romance.”⁶¹ How do the structures differ? The “Ideal Romance” features a “sparse, tightly organized narrative core” that highlights the hero and heroine “gradually and inexorably” moving toward coupledness; indeed, writes Radway, such a romance “appears to be about the *inevitability* of the deepening of ‘true love’ into an intense conjugal commitment.”⁶² The “Failed Romance,” by contrast, is “characterized by a rising and falling action that seems to parallel the couple’s alternating connections and separation,”⁶³ an exhausting inner “travel” that matches the outer one noted by Thurston.⁶⁴ Thematically, then, “failed” romance novels “take as their principal subject the myriad problems and difficulties that must be overcome if mere sexual attraction is not to deteriorate into violence, indifference, or abandonment.”⁶⁵ The final union of the hero and heroine fails to satisfy the

⁶⁰ Radway, 69. See also Thurston, 51, for a similar judgment.

⁶¹ Radway, 160.

⁶² Radway, 162.

⁶³ Radway, 162.

⁶⁴ Thurston, 50.

⁶⁵ Radway, 162.

Smithton readers, Radway hypothesizes, because the “interim paths” of the narrative steer too far from the “ameliorable internal problems” faced by the couple for those problems to feel believably resolved.⁶⁶ Both types of novels, the critic insists, may feature difficult or painful “events,” including sexual violence. Ultimately “it matters less what events are used,” writes Radway, and more whether these “events” are used in a particular way by the narrative.⁶⁷ For the romance to be “ideal,” or anything like it, the dangerous “events” must be embedded in a structurally, ideologically, and emotionally reassuring narrative.

Thirty years on, it’s clear that *Reading the Romance* was researched and written at a crucial turning point in American romance history. Researched in “middle America” in 1980, published in 1984, Radway’s study captures the period when Woodiwiss-style “sensual historical” was beginning to prevail over the true “bodice ripper” in the evolution of American romance: a triumph so decisive, in fact, that the latter subgenre has effectively disappeared from the romance market, although its moniker remains. Even self-consciously retro twenty-first century novels, books which deliberately court the “bodice-ripper” label—Australian novelist Anna Campbell’s controversial Avon debut, *Claiming the Courtesan* (2007), that featured a mind-body split in the heroine that hearkened back to Rogers, comes to mind⁶⁸—generally stick to the structural, emotional, and ideological model of the sensual historical, in which, as Radway puts it, problems are “ameliorable,” mutual fidelity is assured, and a crescendo of “mutual appreciation” provides the soundtrack to the happy ending.⁶⁹ It seems no coincidence that the shift

⁶⁶ Radway, 171.

⁶⁷ Radway, 184.

⁶⁸ Campbell, Anna. *Claiming the Courtesan*. New York: Avon Books, 2007.

⁶⁹ Radway, 170.

inadvertently captured by *Reading the Romance* occurs during the years when the Romance Writers of America is founded (1980) and begins to hold its annual conferences (the first is 1981): events which bring editors, agents, and authors together, and which therefore lend themselves to an increasing self-consciousness and epitextual standardization of the genre, a clarification of what popular romance “really is” in the eyes of key industry participants.

“During the seventies,” Thurston explains, “readers had become not only fans but critics, and they objected more and more to rape and violence” and to “the long separations lovers were subjected to during their wide ranging adventures,”⁷⁰ characteristic features of the Rogers-styled “bodice ripper” rather than the “sensual historical.” Thurston quotes an unnamed romance editor at the first RWA conference, who tells the assembled authors that readers now, in 1981, want “No more rape!” Keeping our terminology clear, we might see this transition as a market-based selection of the “sensual historical” romance over the “bodice ripper” in the evolution of the broader, overarching genre of American women’s historical romance: a selection that has led not only to the ecological marginalization of rapist heroes, with a few notable exceptions (some literal, some metaphorical),⁷¹ but perhaps also, in the process, to the sidelining of other tonal, structural, and ideological possibilities within the genre. The grand, teleological narrative that carries romance forward from a “rapetastic” past to a more egalitarian, feminist present elides the fact, for example, that at least some of those earlier romances were, for example, far less committed to telling a “central love story with an optimistic, emotionally satisfying ending” than

⁷⁰ Thurston, 51.

⁷¹ Wendell and Tan, for example, point out the resurgence of “forced seduction” and forced transformation motifs in paranormal romance, where they play a similar structural role to the rapes in earlier historical romances.

the RWA's current definition of the genre now demands. American popular romance once flirted with stories where heroines had extended sexual and amorous relationships, sometimes quite happy ones, with men other than the hero, as in Bertrice Small's sprawling *Skye O'Malley* (1984), a blockbuster far more in the Rogers vein than the Woodiwiss. (Small has explained that she wrote her first novel, *The Kadin*, as historical fiction *tout court*; in a very real sense it only became a "historical romance novel" by virtue of its being published, after years of rejections, by Avon.) Likewise, as Ginny's knife-fighting in *Sweet Savage Love* suggests, the actual "bodice-ripper" subgenre tended to be at home, not just with anger and violence, but specifically with *female* anger and violence—a motif that we now associate primarily with paranormal romance, rather than the historical—while Ginny's ambivalent journey from an unsettling "strange yearning"⁷² to a "depraved" sexual self-confidence⁷³ finds its home now mostly in erotic romance and erotica proper.

Pam Rosenthal calls the "bodice rippers" and their sensual historical sisters "the sexual radical fringe of romance."⁷⁴ "It was during the first decade or so of Second Wave feminism that women were encountering fictions of extreme sexuality," she explains: "Not stuff you actually wanted to do, but portrayals of states of mind." In a 2010 discussion of "Imagining Sex," Rosenthal—a RITA-award winning historical romance author who is also, as Molly Weatherfield, the author of two celebrated volumes of metatextual BDSM erotica, *Carrie's Story* and *Safe*

⁷² Rogers, 171.

⁷³ Rogers, 643.

⁷⁴ Pam Rosenthal, "A Generation of Erotic Romance. History Hoydens, November 5, 2010; accessed June 30, 2014. <http://historyhoydens.blogspot.com/2010/11/generation-of-erotic-romance.html>.

Word—notes that the seventies’ novels opened a “conversation in the romance world about sexuality and its complexities,” including “issues of power and pleasure,” that has continued to the present. Then, as now, that conversation was not limited to the world of romance. A “parallel discussion,” Rosenthal observes, “was happening among feminists at the same time”: feminists whom she worked and argued and sometimes marched with in the Bay Area; feminists whose work she read and recommended to others as a bookseller.

The parallels between these discussions haven’t always been so clear; indeed, as a rule, feminism and the blockbuster historical romance novels have been seen as in tension with one another, or on a collision course. Nancy Coffey recalls that the Hearst Building was picketed by feminists because Avon, owned by Hearst, was “publishing such dreck,” work that was, in the protesters’ eyes, profoundly damaging to women.⁷⁵ “What does it all mean,” Turner muses, a little smarmily, in 1978, “this fantasy of ravishment and degradation which appears to have overtaken the women of the liberated seventies?” As late as 1990, feminist scholars JoAnn Castagna and Robin L. Radespiel would still comfortably excoriate the “glorification of male aggression as an intensifier of female sexual pleasure” in a genre which, in their account,

⁷⁵ The protest doesn’t seem to have been covered in the news, but it’s well documented that the National Organization for Women picketed the Hearst Building in San Francisco in 1968, to protest the San Francisco Chronicle’s sex-segregated want ads, and activists led by Robin Morgan (who later coined the slogan “pornography is the theory; rape is the practice”) occupied the offices of Grove Press in 1970 to protest both its resistance to unionization and its publishing of what one pamphlet called “humiliating, degrading, and dehumanizing” material. A protest of Avon in New York is hardly unlikely. See Stephanie Gilmore, *Groundswell: Grassroots Feminist Activism in Postwar America* (110) and *Perversion for Profit* (220).

“portrays rape as romantic and rapists as heroes,”⁷⁶ and they worry about what the popularity of the “bodice rippers,” especially Rogers’s novels, reveals about their audience. “In order to remain interested in the novels, on some level they must agree with this ideology,” they declare,⁷⁷ adding that “it is no surprise to us that *Sweet Savage Love* was published at the same time as *Against Our Will*.”⁷⁸

Castagna and Radespiel present this juxtaposition as though its meaning were self-evident. Rogers’s sweeping, epic novel is a symptom of rape culture, while Susan Brownmiller’s sweeping, epochal examination of rape culture offers the diagnosis, or the cure.⁷⁹ Readers can see eye to eye with the novelist in “Making Rape Romantic”—thus the title of the scholars’ essay—or they can side with the anti-rape theorist and activist; after all, Castagna and Radespiel aver, “where feminist analyses define rape as an assertion of an unacceptable male fear and hatred of women, bodice rippers offer an understanding of rape as the ultimate measure of male love and

⁷⁶ JoAnn Castagna and Robin L. Radespiel, “Making Rape Romantic: A Study of Rosemary Rogers’ ‘Steve and Ginny’ Novels.” In Katherine Anne Ackley, ed., *Women and Violence in Literature: an Essay Collection* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1990), 299.

⁷⁷ Castagna and Radespiel, 321-2.

⁷⁸ Castagna and Radespiel, 322.

⁷⁹ Although Castagna and Radespiel do not actually pursue a close reading of 1970s historical romance fiction through Brownmiller’s ideas, and although we have not done so here, the project might be fruitful. Heather’s need to pair up with Brandon to avoid assault by other, worse men, for example, resonates with Brownmiller’s theory that protection from rape (or, at least, rape by other men) lies at the origin of heterosexual coupledness.

commitment,” two incompatible, mutually exclusive conceptual frameworks.⁸⁰

There are, however, several problems with this analysis. First, the general claim that “bodice rippers” represent rape as love or the measure of love falls apart when you test it against the narrative deployments of rape in particular texts. The claim is demonstrably false as a reading of *Sweet Savage Love*, in which Steve’s rapes of Ginny are presented as acts of punishment and assertions of his male power over her (including his power over her sexual response), but never as the measure of his love—and in which, one must note, many men other than Steve commit rapes, not just of Ginny, but of many other women, named and nameless, such that rape is portrayed as a pervasive act of brutality by men against women *as a class*, as well as an act of sexual domination by one individual man, the hero, against a particular woman. Indeed, the “ultimate measure of male love and commitment” in *Sweet Savage Love* is Steve’s return to Ginny at the end of the novel having finally faced up to and acknowledged his own sexual victimization, at the hands of an “effeminate young doctor” in prison.⁸¹ In a repulsive but revealing twist, we are invited to rejoice that the doctor, a smirking caricature, has been murdered in revenge by one of his later victims, with the strong implication that the doctor was, himself, anally raped by his killer, his throat slashed by the edge of a bottle whose top was snapped off, the prison guards chuckle, “up *there*.”⁸² Rape in *Sweet Savage Love* thus turns out to be, at least sometimes, a measure not of love but precisely of “fear and hatred”⁸³ both of women *and* of effeminacy in men; it is, in fact, a defining feature of patriarchal power over both sexes, a

⁸⁰ Castagna and Radespiel, 322.

⁸¹ Rogers, 678.

⁸² Rogers, 691.

⁸³ Castagna and Radespiel, 322.

structural insight that is far closer to Brownmiller's than the scholars' account would allow.

The same resistance to romanticizing rape can be found in *The Flame and the Flower*. Brandon, you'll recall, first rapes Heather as part of what he assumes is a sexual game being played by a prostitute and himself as her client. He thinks they are playing a game like the one that Eric Berne, in the bestselling *Games People Play* (1964),⁸⁴ called "rapo": a game that had been seen as so remarkable and unobjectionable when Berne's book was published, less than a decade before Woodiwiss's novel, that advertisements for *Games People Play* in *The New York Times*, the *New Republic*, and the *Saturday Review* all cheerfully trumpeted his analysis of this game as a titillating highlight. "Rapo" was, they smirked, "our subterranean, national sex game—the unspoken call to arms that silently goes forth each night across the land."⁸⁵ In the Woodiwiss novel, by contrast, rape is no game, nor is it the "ultimate measure of male love and commitment."⁸⁶ The fact that Brandon rapes Heather several times at the start of the novel is a *barrier* to love and commitment, not a measure of it, and Woodiwiss casts his thought of assaulting her just before the novel's pivotal sex scene ("Damn, it's come to rape"⁸⁷) as a stumble or failure on his part, a recursion to the gender norms that he had been slowly leaving behind.

Brandon victimizes Heather at the start of the novel, and almost does it again halfway through, because he has internalized what the novel presents as patriarchally-warped notions of female sexual coyness and male sexual authority, notions which the novel itself implicitly critiques. (It's not a trivial matter that Brandon names the act of forcing sex on his wife, in that

⁸⁴ Eric Berne, *Games People Play*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1964.

⁸⁵ See, for example, *Saturday Review* 48.2, 1965: 15.

⁸⁶ Castagna and Radespiel, 322.

⁸⁷ Woodiwiss, 391.

second scene, as “rape”; in every state in the union, when the novel was published, he could have forced her without the assault being classified, legally, as a rape.) The novel is not about “making rape romantic,” then, but rather about the utopian hope that romance—including happy, mutual, exuberant sexual love—can still be found in the face of a culture of rape: a romance which takes the form of a cleansed or purified heterosexuality, one from which the memory of rape has been so thoroughly healed and rewritten as to be all-but unrecognizable. Woodiwiss is not, by any means, a radical feminist author, but she clearly wants to free both her heroine *and her hero* from the mind-forced manacles of what second-wave feminists were then just beginning to label “rape culture.”

If Castagna and Radespiel’s account of rape in the “bodice rippers” falls apart when we look closely at these individual novels, what of their account of romance readers? Did readers really have to choose between feminism and the blockbuster historical romances? An essay in *Time* magazine, at the start of 1977, jokingly suggested that “author Rogers seems to think that regular ravishment can raise a woman’s consciousness. ‘I’m tired of being raped,’ Marisa announces at last on page 654. ‘Don’t I count as a person?’”⁸⁸ We’re meant to find the page number amusing, as though any actual consciousness-raising novel would strike such questioning, critical notes both earlier and more often. (Think of Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room*, the bestselling middlebrow feminist novel published later that year.) Yet when the *Time* magazine columnist notes that “Avon’s editors believe the question [Marisa’s “Don’t I count as a person?"] echoes a cry from the hearts of millions of American wives and mothers,” he undermines his own smarminess, offering a bit of contemporary evidence for the compatibility between romance and feminism that one of those wives and mothers, romance reader and future

⁸⁸ Brad Darrach, “Rosemary’s Babies,” *Time*. January 17, 1977: 100.

romance author Susan Elizabeth Phillips, would also attest to in retrospect. In an essay from the early 1990s, Phillips writes that she and a female friend, “the most outspoken feminists in our neighborhood,” felt “no conflict between our feminist views and the content of the books we were reading” in the 1970s, all of them blockbuster historical romances.⁸⁹ If we reread these novels with an eye to where and when and how feminist discourse enters them, even simply as an overdue objection to mistreatment, we may well find more of it than we expect. (In *Sweet Savage Love*, for example, Steve’s rapes of Ginny are never directly critiqued, but late in the novel Ginny objects quite bitterly and pointedly to the hero’s sexist assumption that he needs to “forgive” her for having been raped by others and forced into prostitution, thus “making her pay,” as he ultimately realizes, “for the very crimes that had been committed against her,” by others and by himself.⁹⁰)

In closing, let us offer two suggestions as to how future work on the blockbuster historical romances might better proceed. First, these novels need to be *re*-read in a context that includes, yes, Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will*, but also the rest of the varied and volatile media landscape that dealt with sex and women’s lives. We cannot claim that historical romance novels trafficked in “rape fantasies,” for example, without comparing the representations of nonconsensual sex in these books with the way such sex appears in *My Secret Garden* by Nancy Friday, the groundbreaking compendium of female sexual fantasies published in 1973, the year between *The Flame and the Flower* and *Sweet Savage Love*, and in the contemporaneously- emerging world of

⁸⁹ Susan Elizabeth Phillips, “The Romance and the Empowerment of Women.” In *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, edited by Jayne Ann Krentz, 53-59. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 66.

⁹⁰ Rogers, 680.

female-authored slash fiction, much of it, as Edi Bjorkland has noted, delighting in scenes of male-male sexual violence.⁹¹ Many mainstream literary and middlebrow bestsellers of the early 1970s also depended on rape as a plot device,⁹² as did popular novels in other genres, from thrillers to science fiction and fantasy. Were the romance versions actually different, or have they simply been treated differently? We do not yet know.

Nor have scholars yet addressed how the treatments of sex, violence, and love in the blockbuster romances compare to their treatments in film and television. The years that brought readers Woodiwiss and Rogers also brought groundbreaking “made-for-TV movies that offered ‘serious’ treatment of sex-themed social issues, most notably CBS’s *Cry Rape!* (27 November 1973) and NBC’s *A Case of Rape* (20 February 1974)”⁹³⁹² as well as almost two-dozen plots involving sexual assault on 1970s daytime soaps, including *All My Children*, *Another World*, *Days of Our Lives*, *The Doctors*, *Guiding Light*, *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*, *One Life to Live*, *The Young and the Restless*, and, most famously, *General Hospital*, where Luke’s rape of Laura in 1979 provoked fans to cry “Rape me, Luke! Rape me” at actor Anthony Geary at an

⁹¹ Edi Bjorkland, “Attraction and Rage: Pain and Violence in Women’s Recent Underground Fiction.” In Katherine Anne Ackley, ed., *Women and Violence in Literature: an Essay Collection*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1990. 255-298.

⁹² Elaine Showalter, “Rethinking the Seventies: Women Writers and Violence.” In Katherine Anne Ackley, ed., *Women and Violence in Literature: an Essay Collection*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1990. 237-254.

⁹³ Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 29.

appearance in Fort Worth, Texas the following year.⁹⁴ “Before the feminist anti-rape movement successfully intervened in public discourses of rape,” Elana Levine has argued, rape plots in daytime dramas were “sympathetic to the victim (as opposed to blaming her for ‘asking for it’),”⁹⁵ but they generally presented the act as “shameful, but not violent or criminal” on the part of the rapist, and “hurtful but not especially damaging or enraging” on the side of the victim.⁹⁶ In these “old-fashioned” rape plots, as Levine calls them, sexual assault was portrayed “more as an unfortunate expression of an individual’s intense emotions than as a socially sanctioned wrong deeply rooted in a patriarchal disregard for women”⁹⁷; this as opposed to the stark portrayals of criminal injustice, including ill-treatment by the criminal justice system, in the contrasting “social issue rape plot” dramas that emerged as the decade went on.⁹⁸ “Conceptions of rape as an act of sexual passion and as an outpouring of hostility coexisted,” Levine writes, capturing an “ongoing ambivalence in American society’s attitude toward rape in the wake of the sexual revolution and the anti-rape movement”⁹⁹ and contributing to the production of a third category, the “ambiguous rape plot”¹⁰⁰ in which the conflicting narratives of passion and hostility were deliberately intertwined so that writers and viewers could untangle, revisit, and repeatedly reinterpret them as the plot of the show moved forward. In a sentence, Levine notes the contemporaneous popularity

⁹⁴ Levine, 246.

⁹⁵ Levine, 220.

⁹⁶ Levine, 216.

⁹⁷ Levine, 220.

⁹⁸ Levine, 232.

⁹⁹ Levine, 232.

¹⁰⁰ Levine, 238.

of romance novels with rape plots, but she quickly drops the subject; her threefold conceptual model might well prove fruitful in a more sustained comparative investigation.

Finally, scholars need to think more, and more subtly, about the ways in which the blockbuster historical romances offered fictions of sexual awakening, both for their characters and for their readers. These awakenings may happen in the contexts of gender oppression and sexualized violence, but they are never reducible *to* oppression or violence: an important distinction, given the debates over female sexual fantasy and lived experience at that time and in ours. In a famous passage from *Against Our Will*, for example, Brownmiller declares, in categorical italics, that “*the rape fantasy exists in women as a man-made iceberg,*” and “*It can be destroyed—by feminism.*”¹⁰¹ Less famously, a moment later, she mourns the impact that this internalized “man-made” context has had on women’s erotic imaginations: “Rarely have we been allowed to explore, discover and present what might be some workable sexual daydreams, if only we could give them free rein,” she writes. “Rather, our female sexual fantasies have been handed to us on a brass platter by those very same men how have labored so lovingly to promote their own fantasies. Because of this deliberate cultural imbalance, most women, I think have an unsatisfactory fantasy life when it comes to sex.”¹⁰² Her conclusion is striking: “Fantasies are important to the enjoyment of sex, I think, but it is a rare woman who can successfully fight the culture and come up with her own non-exploitative, non-sadomasochistic, non-power-driven imaginative thrust. For this reason, I believe, most women who reject the masochistic fantasy role

¹⁰¹ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1975), 322.

¹⁰² Brownmiller, 323.

reject the temptation of all sexual fantasies, to our sexual loss.”¹⁰³

As we have argued repeatedly in this essay, neither *The Flame and the Flower* nor *Sweet Savage Love* can be described as a vehicle for “rape fantasy” without doing violence—in the case of Woodiwiss, considerable violence—to the actual text of the novels. That said, both novels do offer striking portrayals of the attractions and perils of sexual fantasy for women, and of more broadly of women’s acknowledging their “strange stirrings” and “strange yearnings” in the context of patriarchy. As these phrases suggest, both Heather and Ginny start out estranged from their own desires. Not *ignorant* of them—both experience sexual curiosity early on, both in looking at men’s bodies and in auto-erotic contemplations of their own physical beauty—but estranged from them, unwilling or unable to own them completely. A psychoanalytic critic might see this inability as structural and inevitable, a function of the nature of desire itself, but in each of these novels, a new connection to her own “strange” sexuality dawns in the heroine after she loses her virginity. For Ginny, the connection is disturbing, and she does her best to repress it, rejecting Steve and this part of herself, only to have that repressed sexuality forced on her by Steve, again and again, as though he can force her to own and accept it. (Only the rapes by Steve fit into this plot arc in the novel; neither rapes by other men, nor dutiful sex with them, plays any part in Ginny’s awakening.) If this is a sexual fantasy, it is, as Sallie Tisdale explains, “the dream of being dominated by sex itself—being forced, as it were, by the intensity of the sex to submit to and accept sex, be bound by sex, mastered by sex,”¹⁰⁴ and it’s suggestive that Ginny’s ultimate acceptance of “sex itself” comes not in a scene with Steve, or any other man, but when she is

¹⁰³ Brownmiller, 324.

¹⁰⁴ Tisdale, Sallie. *Talk Dirty to Me: An Intimate Philosophy of Sex* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 221. This passage is quoted by Rosenthal in her “Imagining Sex” talk.

dancing “like a Mexican gypsy”¹⁰⁵ in the closing pages of the novel, with self-delighting erotic abandon.

As for Heather? Let us return to the curious passage where we began, the one where, pregnant, newly married, Heather she gazes on her sleeping husband:

His body lay bare to her gaze now, but she did not turn away though her face flamed with her own temerity. Instead she let her eyes roam over him slowly and with much interest, satisfying her curiosity. There was no need of others to tell her what she could see herself—that he was magnificently made, like some wild, grand beast of the forests. Long, flexible muscles were superbly conditioned, his belly flat and hard, his hips narrow. Her hand, slim and white, appeared out of place upon his brown and hairy chest.

Disturbed by the strange stirring within her, she eased from him and moved toward her side of the bed. She turned away, trying not to think how her eyes had lingered on his body, and she saw a leaf fall to the floor of the balcony.

She huddled under the covers, wishing she were as warm-blooded as the man beside her.¹⁰⁶

The simplest way to read this scene is as one of sexual curiosity about Brandon’s “superbly conditioned” physique, and although Heather looks away before her gaze reaches his phallus, we’re reminded of the contradiction it—and he—embodies, as both the perpetrator of rape and, potentially, the provider of pleasure. Yet the falling leaf that rounds out the scene is not simply the symbolic fig leaf that once covered Brandon but is now fallen away, baring him to her inspection; it’s also, presumably, the fig leaf that covered Heather’s own sexuality, which she

¹⁰⁵ Rogers, 701.

¹⁰⁶ Woodiwiss, 107-8.

begins in this scene to explore. That plot arc ends when she is, herself, fully sexual, “as warm-blooded as the man beside her”: a woman able to enjoy the bedroom “adventure”¹⁰⁷ that is made possible once rape and the threat of rape, at least by Brandon, have been expelled from the novel by Heather’s willingness to own and act on her desires. This is, to be sure, a utopian scenario—but it is also a profound and provocative one, based on the hope that what Brownmiller calls “workable sexual daydreams”¹⁰⁸ can be found by passing *through* the oppressive dynamics imposed by patriarchy, rather than by proving oneself the “rare woman who successfully fight the culture”¹⁰⁹ and start from a clean political and erotic slate.

Heather’s progress invites the reader to follow—and, as subsequent history shows, millions of readers accepted the invitation. We can claim too much for this “romance revolution,” which brought female sexuality into mass-market consumer culture without, one might argue, causing the sorts of radical social transformations that Brownmiller and others hoped to see. But we can also claim too little. In the twenty-first century, American romance is replete with framing devices which prepare readers for sexual daydreams of every variety: paratextual lists of the kinks and scenarios to be explored, which serve double-duty as sales pitches and trigger warnings. Within the texts readers now find negotiations over safe words, hard and soft limits, and other contractual motifs associated with BDSM power exchange, as well as the simple, transformative question “what are you into?”¹¹⁰ Online romance analysis, discussion, and review sites regularly light up with critically-savvy debates over the enduring presence of nonconsensual (noncon) and

¹⁰⁷ Woodiwiss, 442.

¹⁰⁸ Brownmiller, 323.

¹⁰⁹ Brownmiller, 323.

¹¹⁰ Victoria Dahl, *Real Men Will* (Ontario: Harlequin, 2011), 261.

dubiously consensual (dubcon) sexual material in the genre. Even in relatively tame romances, characters anticipate what the narrative refers to, with a wink, as “bodice ripping.”¹¹¹ Each of these changes is due, at least in part, to the publishing and cultural changes sparked by the women’s historical romances of the 1970s.

Stephanie Coontz has written of the “shock of recognition” and “overwhelming sense of relief” experienced by many readers of *The Feminine Mystique*, women surprised and gratified to “learn that they were not alone in their feelings” of isolation and alienation¹¹²—and also in what Friedan called, in her opening paragraph, “a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning....”¹¹³ The women’s historical romances of the 1970s likewise testified to the shared, communal nature of “strange stirrings” and “strange yearnings,” both in the erotic realm and in the gender-political world where love and romance must find, however awkwardly, a home.

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¹¹¹ Susan Elizabeth Phillips, *Natural Born Charmer* (New York: Avon, 2008), 227.

¹¹² Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 20.

¹¹³ Quoted in Coontz, 19.

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