Romance and/as religion

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"Romance is the heart of life. Without it, the world would be a very small, sad place to live."[1]

Karl Marx famously stated that the "wretchedness of religion" was "at once an expression of and a protest against real wretchedness. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people" (131). Romance, too, has been described by sceptics as offering an addictive promise of escape from real-world troubles even as the genre offers quiet support for the political status quo. David Margolies, for instance, argues in "Mills & Boon: Guilt Without Sex" that "As in Marx's description of religion as an opiate and the heart of a heartless world, the romance offers escape from an oppressive reality, or justifies it as a vale of tears that women pass through to salvation" (12) and Bridget Fowler, in *The Alienated Reader: Women and Romance in the Twentieth Century,* draws on the same description, noting a "strong resemblance" between religion and

romance, in that just as the former is "the plane on which the masses express their true material and social needs," the latter is "also the 'heart of a heartless world'" (174-5). As Teresa L. Ebert explains in an essay for *Textual Practice*, such parallels are based on the sense that religion and romance both "explain the material by the immaterial and substitute a change of heart in the subject for the material transformation of objective conditions" (10). Like other forms of popular culture, Ebert writes, romance resembles religion in that they both "re-orient the subject but leave intact the objective social conditions in which she lives. They do this by supplanting social justice and economic equality with love, intimacy, and caring" (10).

This is, to be sure, only one of several possible accounts of either religion or romance. Scholars of religion and social justice movements in the United States have often discussed the central role of churches in fostering civic and political engagement, arguing that far from supplanting social justice work or dulling like an opiate, religion has been "an important domain for contesting market and state institutions" and a spur to "public and civic action" (Hondagneu-Sotelo 4-5). Likewise, although research is needed in order to determine the extent to which romance reading has the same practical effects, it is clear that, at very least, romance novels and novelists have raised public awareness of a range of social, political, environmental and health issues.[2] They have, moreover, frequently dealt with them in ways which do not imply that all injustices and traumas can be solved by true love alone—even as they treat true love in ways which imply a complex set of debts to, and reinterpretations of, religious discourse.[3] To understand the relationships between religion and popular romance thus demands an expansive, rather than reductive, set of approaches. This chapter surveys how romance scholars have discussed how religion, especially Christianity, can be read

as a romance; how Christianity and other religions have shaped the history of, and been represented in, the romance genre; and how the vision of love promulgated by the romance genre, even in ostensibly secular texts, can often be read as a religious or divine phenomenon: something *unconditional*, *omnipotent,* and *eternal*.

Religion as Romance

Although critics sceptical of the promises and effects of religion have tended to point out its parallels with romance in order to condemn the latter, there have been more positive assessments of the similarities between the central narratives of romance and Christianity, a religious tradition which "is easily read as a love story" (Roach, 171). In *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*, Catherine Roach deploys a "two-directional religious analysis" (172) to explore parallels between the underlying narrative of Christianity and what she sees as a singular "romance story" that pervades not only romance fiction, but all forms of popular media and culture. This "story" is, to be precise, an imperative—"Find your one true love and live happily ever after" (2)—and Roach argues that this great romantic commission maps neatly onto "the ideal relationship between the believer and the One True Love of Christ the Son or the Christian Father God, and then the believer's reward of life everlasting" (171). Roach sets aside the "chicken-and-egg" question of whether a belief in the healing "resurrection power" of love (172) comes to the romance story from Christianity, or whether this faith in love predates Christianity and has been baptized, so to speak, by later theology. Instead she makes synchronic, non-denominational claims such as "stories of the Christian God and romance intertwine easily because both entail belief in the divine power of love" (23) and "the love of a good woman, or good man, or God, or Son of God,

has the power to heal all wounds…to forgive all sins stretching back to the stain of original sin, to resurrect a dead man, to save a lost soul, to integrate false persona and true self, to make a real man—or real woman—out of you" (172): claims which align theological and secular, psychological discourses without addressing potential conflicts or tensions between them. Roach writes, that is to say, from a *functionalist* perspective rather than a theological one, leaving space for future research that disaggregates both the religious and romance sides of her analysis.

Roach is not the first romance reader, author, or scholar to perceive that "the mythic narrative of Christianity follows the pattern of the romance narrative" (Roach, 171). In a memorable passage from Lynn S. Neal's *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction*, Christian romance author Robin Jones Gunn makes a similar claim to explain the congruence between her evangelical faith and her chosen genre. "When I was young, as a teenager, I read a love story that changed my life," Gunn recalls telling a sceptical radio interviewer.

> "'In the first few chapters everything falls apart and you think they're never going to get back together again. And then, about three quarters of the way through, he does everything he can to prove his love to her and she still won't come to him and be his bride. But then in the last chapter he comes riding in on a white horse and he takes her away to be with him forever.' And the interviewer said, "Hmmpf, how could that change your life? It sounds like a formula romance novel.' I said, 'Really? I was talking about the Bible—white horse and everything.'" (183)

Like Roach, Neal comes to popular romance scholarship from the discipline of religious studies, but where Roach takes on "the romance story" and her own experiences as an "aca-fan" of the genre (including her efforts to write an publish romance novels of her

own, under the name Catherine LaRoche), *Romancing God* is a more narrowly focused ethnographic study of American evangelical women readers—mostly white, some African American—and their engagement with the subgenre of Christian popular romance fiction. Chapter 10 of this volume deals in depth with this subgenre; after offering a useful history of its publication in the United States, Neal turns to an in-depth exploration of "the ways readers *used* evangelical romance" as part of their "devotional lives," a use that "both configures and reflects their daily practice of religion" (10-11).

As Neal points out, there is substantial Biblical support for considering God to be "the ultimate lover" (Neal 159), from the love lyrics of the Song of Songs to the injunction in the first epistle of John (4:7-8) to "love one another: for love is of God: and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God [...] for God is love." Such passages are central to the understanding of Christianity which is shared by Neal's interview subjects, and the novels they read—which "narrate the power of God's love, not the force of his judgment"—help them to "realize and remember a romancing God" (159). Readers use the sentimental "religio-romantic" (39) framework supplied by fiction to interpret God's work in history and in their individual lives, and they study scripture through the interpretive lens that romance provides. Neal quotes several interview subjects, for example, who testify to the impact of reading Francine Rivers's *Redeeming Love*, a novel which transforms the brief, schematic Biblical treatment of the prophet Hosea and his wife Gomer into a sweeping romance between Michael Hosea and Angel (née Sarah) during the 19th-century California gold rush. "You know the story [of Hosea]," one tells her, "but it doesn't really hit you as loud in the Bible as it does in the book" (164). For such readers, Neal explains, "fictional devotion transforms healing into knowing, doubt into certainty, and a vague sense of God into a clear daily reality"

(166).

This romantic account of Christianity has had both theological and aesthetic critics, not least within American evangelical culture itself, but Neal is scrupulously non-judgemental. "Understanding this religio-aesthetic world, which lauds the very concepts that many disdain—mediocrity, predictability, utility, and sentimentality—forces us to re-examine our scholarly imaginations," she notes (195), and *Romancing God* offers a measured, reflective example of how this re-examination might proceed, not only in future work on the evangelical genre world she studies, but on readers and texts from other religious traditions. Does a comparable reading of religion as romance happen, for example, among the authors and readers of Islamic romance, which is increasingly published around the globe in both mainstream and web-based (e.g., Wattpad) publishing contexts?[4] Do Jewish romance authors and readers read scripture, post-scriptural source texts, or Jewish customs and observance through a romantic lens? Can something similar be seen in texts that draw on non-Abrahamic traditions—for example, in Buddhist or Hindu romances—and how might these differ, either in terms of the texts or their reception? These are questions that further research should address.

Although Neal briefly mentions historical precedents for contemporary evangelical culture's model of a romantic God, neither she nor Roach discuss when or how this romantic vision of Christianity evolved, and neither explores the history of romantic love in terms of its incorporation of Christian language and ideals. Such topics have, however, been treated at length by others, and two turning points seem of particular note for the study of romance fiction from a religious perspective: the emergence of "*fin' amor*, or, literally, 'refined love'" (May, 119) in Western European writing of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; and the exaltation of marriage by the Protestant Reformation.

(For an extended discussion of romantic love in popular romance, see Chapter 20 of this volume.)

Religion and Romance: a Shared History

In *Love: a History*, British philosopher Simon May writes that in the poems and prose that describe *fin 'amor* we find a "revolutionary thought: a single human being might be worthy of the sort of love that was formerly reserved for God" (129). As Rosemary Radford Reuther explains, although

> Christian ascetics since Origen had labored to distinguish the spiritual love of God from sexual passion [...], from the twelfth century, the two had begun to flow into each other. Poets of secular love had adopted elements of religious language, while contemplative writers, such as Richard of St. Victor, recognized that sexual passion and spiritual love passion, though morally opposite, were psychologically similar. (180)

The roots of Roach's "two-directional analysis," in which the love of God and the love of a good man or woman are not only functionally indistinguishable, but also often share the same discourse, may thus lie in the *fin 'amor* revolution—as, perhaps, does the romance genre's faith that love "tempers pride, harsh judgment, and the violent outbursts of a reflexive defensiveness," instilling in their place such qualities as "compassion, mercy, understanding, and kindness" (Roach, 169). In the *fin 'amor* tradition, after all, to love another person properly is to transform the self through the cultivation of "'courtly' dispositions of service and courtesy, patience and proportion" and thus join, whatever one's social class, "the nobility of the heart" (May, 128).

To cultural historian William M. Reddy, the crucial revolution of *fin 'amor* (or, as he spells it, *fin'amors*) lies less in its focus on a human beloved than in its attitude toward sex. "Certain twelfth-century aristocrats and their imitators insisted that sexual partnerships became a source of moral improvement and transcendent joy if they were founded on 'true love' (*fin'amors*)," he writes in *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900-1200 CE*. Although scholars differ on the sources of this transformation, Reddy observes that there is "general agreement that this positive vision of sexual partnerships was something entirely new in Western literature and that such been constantly with us ever since" (41). Rather than trace this vision to Muslim or pagan sources, as others have done,[5] Reddy attributes it to an aristocratic revolt against Gregorian church reformers who "systematized in an extreme form the doctrine that sexual appetite was an outgrowth of original sin" (87) and thus brought what had previously been a marginal ascetic strain in Christian thought into central institutional prominence. Against this account of all sexual impulses as tainted by sin, even within marriage (43), champions of *fin'amors* riposted with the claim that true love was "so holy…that any sexual enjoyment that furthered love's aims" was thereby rendered "good and innocent" (44). For Reddy, this new "love doctrine" thus begins as a form of "covert religious dissent" (44), blossoms into a "full-blown shadow religion with a morality and a ritual all its own" (167), and lingers on in the "typical Western configuration of 'romantic love,'" in which true love not only stands in "in sharp contrast to sexual desire" considered as mere lust or appetite, but also offers the key to "mastering and purifying desire" into something sacred and worthy of praise (45).[6]

Although Reddy devotes only a few pages to the afterlife of *fin'amor* in modern romantic love culture—he discusses its echoes in films from the 1990s and early 2000s (380-86), and makes a brief but provocative argument for reading *fin'amor* as an instance of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls "queer performativity" (387)—the links between this turn in religious history and the development of popular romance fiction have been discussed at greater length by Joseph Crawford. In *Twilight of the Gothic: Vampire Fiction and the Rise of the Paranormal Romance, 1991-2012*, Crawford notes that the "appearance of the aristocratic cultural ideal of *fin' amor*, 'fine' or 'courtly' love, which postulated the then almost unheard-of idea that, under the right conditions, love between men and women could potentially be a morally or spiritually ennobling force," was not simply concurrent with "the rise of the heroic romance as a literary genre in twelfth-century France," but a crucial factor contributing to the popularity of this genre—which, in turn, became identified with the love-ideal it espoused. ("So thorough did the identification of this new code of courtship with this new form of writing eventually become," Crawford explains, "that, when we wish to refer to intense and ennobling love-relationships today, we no longer speak of *fin' amor*: we refer, instead, to 'romantic love'" [11-12].) The opening chapter of Crawford's study, dryly titled "The First 800 Years," tracks the emergence, dismantling, and return of fiction in which "'romantic love' went alongside 'romantic adventure' and 'romantic enchantment'": a combination so enduringly popular that "when we consider the modern literature of supernatural-themed romance fiction, our first question should not be how stories of love and the supernatural came to coexist within the same genre; rather, we should investigate how it came to pass that, after five centuries of unity, they ever came to be separated" (12-13).

We must be careful not to overstate the similarities between these early

"romances" and the modern romance novel. Although both may insist on love as "a morally or spiritually ennobling force" (Crawford 11), the former offered no guarantee that its lover-protagonists would end up alive and together, while in modern romance novels the Happily Ever After (HEA) or at least Happy For Now (HFN) ending "is inherent from the very beginning of the story, as part of its narrative structure" (Roach 173). This generic emphasis on successful courtship points to the second turning point in the history of romantic love and religion: the Protestant Reformation.

As Stephanie Coontz observes in *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, "many scholars trace the celebration of married love and companionship to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century" (123), and although it may be argued that the Reformation merely "accelerated" a "trend toward idealizing marriage" (Coontz, 132), it is clear that the relative value of marriage and celibacy played an important role in religious debates of the time:

> Protestants bitterly opposed the papacy's policies and pronouncements on marriage. […] Catholics were wrong, they said, to call marriage a necessary evil or a second-best existence to celibacy. Rather, marriage was "a glorious estate." […] Faced with these attacks, the Catholic Church stiffened its position on the spiritual superiority of celibacy. In 1563 the Council of Trent declared: "If anyone says that the married state excels the state of virginity or celibacy, and that it is better and happier to be united in matrimony than to remain in virginity or celibacy, let him be anathema." (Coontz, 132-4)

Although "these differences meant less in practice than in theory" (Coontz, 134), the Catholic Church continues to uphold the ideal of priestly celibacy and it is still possible to find traces of Reformation-era debates over the relative statuses of celibacy and

marriage in twenty-first century popular romance fiction. Nettie, the heroine of Piper Huguley's *A Treasure of Gold*, is initially convinced that she will never marry because she is "someone who has been set apart from others [...]. If I were in the Catholic faith, I would probably be someone who would join a convent" (97). In response Jay, her hero, asks "Do you really believe that is what God wants of you? He wants you to live and to share in his gifts. One of his greatest gifts is the love between a man and a woman" (98). Given that it concludes with Nettie and Jay's wedding, the novel would appear to endorse the opinion that marital love is a greater gift than celibate religious life, a denouement that may lend support to Jayashree Kamblé's assertion that the "structures of feeling and being" in the romance novel are "ineluctably grounded" in a "Protestant ethos" (Kamblé, 131).[7] (Some counter-examples to Kamblé's argument will be discussed below.)

Among Protestants, as Ian Watt explains, "the assimilation of the values of romantic love to marriage [...] occurred particularly early in England, and was closely connected with the Puritan movement" (Watt, 155). Puritans considered "sensuous delight in the body of one's spouse [...] an essential element of the comfort which marriage must provide" (Leites, 388) and over time their "conception of marriage and sexual relations generally became the accepted code of Anglo-Saxon society" (Watt, 137). The author Samuel Richardson "played an important part in establishing this new code" (Watt, 137): a significant fact for the history of the romance novel since Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) is often discussed as a progenitor not only of the novel in English, but specifically of the romance novel.8 In this context, it is worth noting that Richardson "regarded himself as a moralist first, committed to the social as well as spiritual reformation of his readers," writing a novel rather than a conduct manual in order to

"'steal in' doctrines of Christianity 'under the fashionable guise of an amusement' (Houlihan Flynn ix-x). Jane Austen, who has been described as "the mother of the romance novel" (Tyler 240), also "stole in" such doctrines and did so with such skill that Richard Whately, who would later be appointed Anglican Archbishop of Dublin, "extolled Austen's novels in the *Quarterly Review* (1821) for rendering moral lessons and Christian principles more instructive by unobtrusively conveying them through lifelike characters and everyday settings rather than by making them "too palpably prominent" (Liebenow 121).

Pamela and Austen's novels would nowadays be shelved as "literature" rather than as "popular romance" but across the 19th century Christianity was an important element of popular fiction as well. As Rachel Anderson notes in her pre-history of modern popular romance, *The Purple Heart Throbs: The Sub-Literature of Love*, "God was still very much in evidence in all forms of popular fiction in the 1850s" (20) and she quotes an 1897 *Publisher's Circular* declaring that "Of all forms of fiction, the semi-religious is the most popular" (141). Although in "the later years of the century the great tide of religious fervour was beginning to ebb" (22), it never entirely receded, Anderson observes; for example, Florence Barclay's deeply religious romance novel *The Rosary* (1909) "was said to have been read and wept over by every housemaid in the British Isles" (121).

Although Anderson's history recounts a gradual de-Christianization of popular romantic literature, this does not equate to a secularization. Periodic flare-ups of an "erotico-spiritual religious revivalism" (151) punctuate her narrative, so that even during a decade like the 1930s in which "the majority of romantic novelists … showed little interest in God" this shift did not remove religion from romantic fiction. Rather, religion

in romance "shook off even the pretense of Christianity and appeared in its true light as a religion of erotic love," in which "the state of *being in love* became for the romantic heroine what the state of grace is to the Christian" (205). Anderson does not take this "religion of love" particularly seriously: she pokes fun at "heroines' vaguely Christian feelings" and the way that "in times of elation or distress, romantic characters still resorted to prayer, though to whom or to what they prayed is generally left unspecified" (207). Yet even these comments allow us to view with some skepticism claims by scholars about the lack of religiosity in later romance—as when Batsleer et al, for example, sharply contrast Barclay's *The Rosary* with modern works in terms of the earlier novel's deployment of religious ideas and discourse.[9] Indeed, if religiosity is muted in the majority of romance novels published since the 1940s, this may have less to do with the tenor of the times than with the contingencies of mass-market publication, as when Alan Boon, of the romance publisher Mills & Boon, declared that "As a minor line of policy, we have sought to avoid 'red-rag' controversial problems – two of which traditionally are politics and religion" (McAleer, 190).

In Anderson's account, then, religion in romance persists, but in a watered-down form, declining from doctrinal specificity to an uncontroversial, vaguely upbeat form of romantic uplift. "There are today [in the early 1970s] still some novelists who admit freely to specific Christian beliefs which they try to incorporate into their novels," she concludes, but "the majority of today's romantic novelists are far less specific about the motivating ideals behind their work," so that "their ideals tend to be undefined spiritual qualities" (275). Yet the strand of romance writing which explicitly interweaves romantic love with substantive and quite specific theological material continues, and not only in the evangelical Christian "inspirational" romance subgenre discussed in Chapter 10. The

work of Alex Beecroft, an "asexual, queer positive" Christian romance author who writes romances featuring pairs of male protagonists, offers a case in point. As Eric Murphy Selinger has argued, Beecroft's breakout novel *False Colors* deploys carefully-chosen scriptural echoes and Christian tropes in defense of embodied same-sex love, including precisely the Biblical quotes and arguments that were raised at the 2007 Church of England synod, a year before the novel's publication, to push for the inclusion of queer Christians in church life ("Redeeming M/M Love"). Beecroft has also described receiving "an amazing couple of emails" from a man who had used another novel, *Captain's Surrender*, "to reassure his friend, who was coming to the realization that he was gay, that this didn't mean he was also damned. My writing saved a man from despair and from losing his faith" (Beecroft, "Alex Beecroft"). More work needs to be done to identify and analyse modern romance novels containing strong religious elements which are published by presses or imprints which are not dedicated solely to publishing religious fiction—and, in addition, to novels whose religious elements are not those derived from Protestant Christianity.

Studies of Anglo-American popular romance fiction tend to emphasize the genre's Protestant foundations, but other forms of Christianity have also found a home in the genre. Scholars of post-Civil War Spanish literature have explored its *novelas rosas*, romance novels in which the heroines tended to share "key attributes with the docile, passive feminine model nurtured by the Catholic Church" (O'Byrne, 44) under the Franco regime. Diana Holmes' *Romance and Readership in Twentieth-Century France* offers an extended discussion of "Marie Petitjean de la Rosière (1875-1946) [...who] published her first romantic novels in the early 1900s" and whose "brother Frédéric (1876-1949) acted as her business manager, adviser, and general collaborator,"

joining with her as co-author under the *nom-de-plume* "Delly" (Holmes, 49). "In the 1930s and 1940s," Holmes writes, "Delly was already a brand name, the guarantee of a page-turning, pleasurable read that was nonetheless entirely in line with Catholic, conservative values. […] Delly novels express the values of the conservative, Catholic French Right" (Holmes 49-50). To date there has been little research into English-language Catholic romance authors, but one novel by Meriol Trevor, better-known for her work in other genres (including a biography of Cardinal Newman) is discussed in Janice Radway's influential *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, and Lynn S. Neal's *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction* includes quotations from an interview with another Catholic author, Peggy Stoks, who sees her fiction as an opportunity "to explain the Catholic faith to my Protestant brothers and sisters" (111). The blockbuster popularity of Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series has been the occasion for a good deal of scholarship on the relationship between these novels and Meyer's faith community, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Margaret Toscano offers a nuanced account of Stephanie Meyer's "subtly subversive" engagement with Mormon faith and practice in *Twilight* (21), situating her work at the crossroads between "19th-century Mormon culture with its emphasis on heterodox theology and 21st-century Mormon culture with its struggle to conform to conservative American politics and orthodox Christian values" (22). Much more could be done with the ways that other branches of Christianity appear in popular romance, since Quaker characters, Amish characters, and Russian Orthodox icons have all made notable appearances in the genre.[10]

In addition to romances which express, more or less explicitly, a range of types of Christianity there are those which are built around other faiths. In the 1850s and 60s,

for example, the German-Jewish reading public could find stories in which "falling in love with a future mate typically went hand in hand with falling in love with Judaism itself" (Hess 119) in the pages of the *Jüdisches Volksblatt*. Works of popular romantic fiction were also written in Ladino (the language of Sephardi Jews, which is very similar to medieval Castilian/Spanish) and published in Istanbul between 1930 and 1933; the Sentro Sefaradi de Estambol is currently republishing sixteen of these, making them available for future study (Gerson Şarhon). Turning to Islam, in twenty-first-century Indonesia, "popular literary tastes have [...] shifted to Islamic novels. This began with the resounding success of the novel *Ayat ayat cinta* (Verses of love, 2004) by Habiburrahman El-Shirazy" (Rani, "Islam, Romance," 60) in which "the love conflicts of the protagonists have as their moral anchor an Islamic moral scheme" (Rani, "Islam, Romance," 71). The Indonesian Islamic romances were "well received in Malaysia, and can be said to have catalysed the emergence of similar novels" there (Rani, "The Conflict of Love and Islam," 418). Muslim romantic fiction is also flourishing in Nigeria (Whitsitt). English-language Jewish and Muslim romances also exist, but not in great numbers and they have yet to receive sustained critical attention; one notable exception is Layla Abdullah-Poulos's essay "The Stable Muslim Love Triangle – Triangular Desire in Black Muslim Romance Fiction," a groundbreaking study of how this emerging textual corpus combines "Islamic, Black American, and American notions of love, courtship, and sexual dialogue" (2).

Non-Abrahamic belief systems also make an appearance in romance fiction, and these are a fertile ground for future scholarship. For example, the *Heart Sutra* is quoted and repeatedly referenced in Sherry Thomas's *My Beautiful Enemy*, and Eric Murphy Selinger has argued that Buddhism plays as central a role in that novel as the Bible does

in Francine Rivers's *Redeeming Love*; however, the imprint of Buddhism on the work of other Buddhist-identified romance authors (e.g., Jeannie Lin) has yet to be investigated.[11] Allusions to Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, and Krishna make similarly brief but significant appearances in the Indian-born American author Sonali Dev's *A Bollywood Affair*, as does one to Ganesha in Sandhya Menon's *When Dimple Met Rishi*, and whether these gestures reward theological reading or are exclusively points of cultural reference needs to be addressed. Nora Roberts, a hugely popular late-twentieth and early twenty-first century author, includes explicitly spiritual elements in some, though not all, of her works, and as Christina Valeo points out, when she "turns to magic, she often uses Pagan belief systems like Wicca" (237). Much more might be done with the role of Wicca in Roberts's work and in books by the erotic romance author Joey Hill, who credits an embrace of "the Wiccan faith" in her twenties as a signal moment in her development as an author.[12]

Romance as Religion

Alongside texts which suggest that romantic love can lead to, or develop alongside, spiritual growth in one particular religious tradition—and, conversely, those which suggest that a particular tradition provides the appropriate discourse, imagery, or conceptual framework to understand the protagonists' love—it has also been suggested that in many romance novels love itself functions as a religion. "Although they may no longer believe in God, readers do still believe in love," Anderson writes (262), and these readers are not alone. As levels of religious belief have declined in the West, philosopher Simon May explains, human romantic love has been "widely tasked with achieving what once only divine love was thought capable of: to be our ultimate source of meaning and

happiness, and of power over suffering and disappointment. Not as the rarest of exceptions but as a possibility open to practically all who have faith in it," with the consequence that romantic love "is now the West's undeclared religion - and perhaps its only generally accepted religion" (1).[13] The "romance narrative," Roach elaborates, "is mythic or religious: it often functions as a foundational or idealized story about the meaning and purpose of life. According to this story, it is love that gives value and depth to life" (Roach, "Getting" [unpaginated]). Indeed, "as popular romance scholar Eric Selinger puts it, love or marriage can come to function as that which we 'believe in,' as 'a source of meaning and purpose and value…as a priority that determines other actions and beliefs'" (Roach, *Happily*, 169).

Selinger's source for this claim—which Roach draws on as well—is Robert M. Polhemus's *Erotic Faith*, a study of love in literary fiction from Jane Austen to D. H. Lawrence and (in the coda) Samuel Beckett which has recently proved influential in the study of popular romance. Polhemus defines "erotic faith" as "an emotional conviction, ultimately religious in nature, that meaning, value, hope, and even transcendence can be found through love—erotically focused love, the kind of love we mean when we say that people are in love" (1); across the nineteenth century, he argues, "novels were to erotic faith what Bibles, churches, and chapels were to Christianity" (4), promulgating "the grand matrimonial ideal of a union that would be erotic, romantic, nuptial, moral, and spiritual too" (22). This new ideal has its roots in older Protestant claims about the value of marriage, but only in the early nineteenth century do historians find that "human affections were beginning to be placed above religious ones," so much so in fact, that "the personhood of the loved one, by the 1830s, had become a powerful rival to God as the individual's central symbol of ultimate significance. (Lystra, 241-42).

The term used by Victorians to discuss this emerging rivalry between the human beloved and God was "idolatry." "For Victorian Protestants," Kathleen Vejvoda explains, "this term meant more than simply the worship of graven images: it became the privileged term for denoting any devotion to a person, thing, or idea that hinders or supplants one's relation to God. It is this more inclusive meaning that especially fascinated the Victorians, and which, in the form of human idolatry, became the focus of so many marriage-plot novels in the period" (241). Evidence of this period concern can be found in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), where Jane acknowledges that for a time her love for Mr. Rochester was dangerously, sinfully excessive:

> My future husband was becoming to me my whole world; and, more than the world: almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those days, see God for his creature: of whom I had made an idol. (277)

Subsequent events force her to acknowledge the primacy of God over the demands of the human beloved: a resolution of the rivalry that *Jane Eyre* shares with twentieth- and twenty-first-century inspirational romance novels such as Francine Rivers's influential *Redeeming Love*, in which both hero and heroine "must learn to keep their earthly love in proportion to their relationships with God" (Gordis, 333), since only "once the relative place of God and earthly spouse" (Gordis, 336) has been established can the novel's marriage plot be resolved.

A different resolution to the potential conflict between religion and romantic love can be found in the work of the immensely prolific Barbara Cartland, who "began incorporating a spiritual dimension in her fiction" in the 1930s and who depicted

romantic love as a conduit to the divine. Although her "novels promoted conservative Christian values", they also

> promoted what she referred to as a "religion of love," a concept she explained as a theo-philosophical concept in her many non-fictional books. The myth that Cartland cultivated in her novels was that we are saved from our material-physical prison by love. […] A key notion in Cartland's romantic universe is the idea of the "Life Force" […] which upholds the human spirit and brings men and women to a realization of their inner selves. The "Life Force" infuses romantic love with divinity and brings the individual into unity with a higher principle. (Rix, paragraph 3)

Decoupled from "conservative Christian values", a Cartland-like "religion of love" continues to be found in a wide range of popular romance novels, notably in the way that depictions of physical attraction and bodily affection are infused with the language of spirituality. A "focus on the ineffable" typifies the genre, Jayashree Kamblé argues, pointing out "its foundational notion of soul mates and of spiritual unions (often certified when couples experience simultaneous orgasms), and […] the primary importance it gives to the verbal expression of love in sanctifying a marriage of bodies as well as of the spirits 'in' them" (150). Kamblé sees this insistence on the verbal and the spiritual as evidence that the genre prioritizes "the spirit over the body," and she notes that "romance readers frequently argue that sexual descriptions in novels are only important and acceptable if they reinforce an extra-physical bond (150-151). Characters in romance novels sometimes espouse what sound like similar views. In Roseanne Williams' *Love Conquers All* (1991), Ty and Rianna feel that, because of familial

opposition, their relationship can only be a temporary one but, after they have intercourse for the first time,

> "I've never felt the oneness I feel," he said. "Not until now with you."
>
> "Me too. Until now I thought it was a myth."
>
> "Staggers the mind, doesn't it?"
>
> She nodded. "And the body."
>
> "And the heart. […] And the soul […] What we have here is more than a fleeting thing […] What we have here is…"
>
> "Don't say it, Ty," Rianna warned him softly.
>
> "We already said it without words," he murmured […] "We can't take it back. We're falling." (177)

Without that feeling of "oneness" that brings mind, body, heart, and soul into alignment, this passage suggests, the lovers' connection could only be, at best, a "fleeting thing." Now that such a union and alignment have been accomplished, however, their bond is something out of "a myth": that is, it marks an irruption into the merely human realm of something transcendent and, for the moment, too sacred and too powerful to name ("Don't say it, Ty.") What they "have here" is not simply human love, then, but a love divine: the kind that is another name for God in Christian tradition ("God is Love," 1 John 4:8; 1 John 4:16), and the kind that can appropriately serve as a guarantor or ground for being. An exchange in Madeleine Ker's *Danger Zone* (1985) makes this theological connection clear. "You're my whole life […]. I'd have nothing without you. Be nothing," she tells the hero. "That's what love is," he replies (184).

Love Divine

On a structural level, it might well be said that the romance genre itself would "be nothing" without the exaltation of romantic love which gives meaning and purpose to its plots. Simon May has argued that in Western culture romantic love has been given characteristics "properly reserved for divine love, such as the unconditional and the eternal" (4) and credited with the power to "redeem [...] life's losses and sufferings" (2). Even when they are not made explicit, these are precisely the kinds of claims about the power and durability of romantic love which are embedded in the deep structures of the genre. John Cawelti's early description of romance as a genre founded on the "moral fantasy" of "love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties" speaks to this structural role of love divine (41-2), and we can hear it in the theological discourse embedded in the Romance Writers of America definition of the genre. "In a romance," the organization declares, "the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love" (Romance Writers of America). Sidestepping the question of precisely who or what will reward the lovers—karma? Christ? the conventions of the genre?—this definition insists that the universe of any romance novel will be a providential one, and its deployment of the phrase "unconditional love" as part of the lovers' reward for their "risk and struggle" signals that a divine or religious type of love is now seen as definitional of the genre, at least in its North American context.[14]

Although there are many qualities that might be attributed to romantic love as a religious (or divine) phenomenon, then, three seem particularly common in romance novels and in the scholarship on them: romantic love is said to be *unconditional*, *omnipotent,* and *eternal*.

Unconditional

In *The Glass Slipper: Women and Love Stories*, Susan Ostrov Weisser notes the enduring popularity (not least in popular romance novels) of the idea that romantic love should be "entirely unselfish, about caring and *caritas* for the individual" (174). Weisser's immediate pivot from "caring" to "*caritas*"—the Latin word used to translate the Greek *agape*, and not etymologically related to "caring"—signals her sense of the religious roots of this love ideal, which she understands to be "based on the Christian ethos that the spirit is higher than the flesh, that 'real' love of any kind is measured by the degree of concern for the other, not intensity of passion" (Weisser 175). May, too, traces the idea that "genuine love" is unconditional to Christian tradition, summarizing the (in his mind flawed) logic of the ideal this way:

> (i) God is, by definition, absolutely sovereign. Nothing beyond God can therefore condition his acts of love….
>
> (ii) All genuine human love depends on, and is to imitate, God. […] Therefore:
>
> (iii) All genuine human love must be unconditional. (236)

Although neither Weisser nor May subscribes to this love ideal—May because it is "fundamentally untrue to the nature of human love" which, "like everything human, is conditioned" (237); Weisser because it masks a pernicious set of gendered power dynamics (see 174-5; 120)—their analyses speak to the way that depictions of love as unconditional inscribe religious values into both explicitly Christian and ostensibly secular popular romance texts.

For the evangelical romance readers studied by Neal, God "romances humanity through his presence, guidance, and most especially his unconditional love" (166), with human love and marriage offering a local instance and reflection of "the greater

unconditional love of God for humanity" (167). Novels such as Francine Rivers' *Redeeming Love* show what this love can look like in action, not only in terms of the unconditional love of God for the book's traumatized and self-loathing heroine, but in the way that this divine love is bodied forth on the human level by the novel's hero, Michael, who loves and forgives his wife no matter her past or present transgressions (165). Yet what Michael displays and explains as an *imitatio dei* differs more in idiom than in kind from the vision of "what love was all about" that is articulated by the heroine of Jane Arbor's secular Mills & Boon novel *Golden Apple Island* (1967):

> You disapproved, even were shocked by some traits in your woman … in your man. You saw their faults, suspected their weaknesses, quarrelled with their difference from you. But loving them, you forgave them everything; they had only to need you and you would run [to them]. (92)

Although Arbor does not quote or allude to scripture to prove that love forgives everything, as an evangelical novelist might (see, for example Proverbs 10:12 or 1 Corinthians 13:7, although translations differ), her description of what it looks and feels like to love unconditionally resonates with the descriptions offered by Neal's readers of how God loves them, reassured by Christian romance fiction that "God would not forsake [them] no matter what, that 'no matter no matter where I go, no matter what happens, he is going to be there'" (166).

In secular romance novels, unconditional love may be offered as something that characters must learn to "believe in" in order to achieve their happy ending, both in the secular sense of a belief that it exists, or *can* exist, and in the theological sense of a creed to which they subscribe. In Jennifer Crusie's *Anyone But You* (1996), for example, the novel's hero, Alex, its heroine, Nina, and Nina's best friend, Charity, are all convinced

that being loved depends on meeting some set of conditions: attractiveness, youth, social status, career, and the like. Charity writes a bitterly satirical book about her dating life, and when a local book group reads it in manuscript, the group's leader, the happily dating seventy-five-year-old Norma, critiques the way that the manuscript's protagonist kept "making conditions for herself. If she lost ten pounds, the relationship would work. If she wore the right clothes, the relationship would work. She never believed any of the men could love her for herself, no matter what she looked like or what she said. […] She didn't believe in unconditional love" (116). The scales having fallen from her eyes, Charity brings Norma's lesson to Nina. "You don't believe that Alex could love you because you're forty years old and your face has some wrinkles," she tells her friend. "Norma hit it right. You don't believe in unconditional love" (119). Charity continues to repeat this message—literally using the same words, "you don't believe in unconditional love" (174)—until the novel's final chapter, when Nina finally accepts the critique, internalizes the lesson, and admits to herself (speaking to her dog, Fred) that "Alex loves me unconditionally… I know that. There is no doubt in my mind. It's just my ego in the way" (178).

In Crusie's novel, "unconditional love" is treated as a secular, psychological term, not a matter of theology. The first character said to bestow "unconditional love" on anyone is Fred, Nina's dog (19), not God the Father or Christ, and Norma, who brings up the term at that pivotal book group meeting, is a model of feminine muscularity, elegance, and upbeat sexual agency, not a Michael Hosea-like figure of faith. In this secularity, Crusie perhaps takes her cue from Erich Fromm, whose *The Art of Loving* she has recommended to aspiring romance novelists ("Emotionally Speaking"). Fromm briefly equates unconditional love with God's grace, particularly as this is understood in

Protestant thought (62), but he mostly takes a psychological approach to the ideal, describing it as "one of the deepest longings [...] of every human being," not least because it assuages concerns that other kinds of love might raise. "To be loved because of one's merit, because one deserves it, always leaves doubt," Fromm writes: "maybe I did not please the person whom I want to love me, maybe this, or that—there is always a fear that love could disappear. Furthermore, 'deserved' love easily leaves a bitter feeling that one is not loved for oneself, that one is loved *only* because one pleases, that one is, in the last analysis, not loved at all but used" (Fromm 41-42). These are precisely the worries about conditional love that Crusie's characters must overcome. Yet even as she sticks to Fromm's more secular analysis, Crusie tips her hat to the deeper religious history of unconditional love by having the character named Charity—as in "faith, hope, and charity," from the Latin *caritas*—be the character to take up and preach Norma's gospel. (As May notes, Christian traditions are sometimes "preserved and even intensified in our secular age" [236].)

Research remains to be done on "unconditional love" in popular romance fiction. Does unconditionality work as a defining quality for love in purely secular romance contexts, or does it always bring with it a trace of religious reference and discourse? Has the feminist critique of unconditional love been incorporated into popular romance? If so, how is it addressed? Do romance novels ever extol the value of *conditional* love, which in Fromm is co-equal with unconditional love, since both are necessary elements in a "mature" version of the emotion? And although "unconditional love" is part of the RWA definition of the genre, is this a transnational ideal, or more specifically an American one?

Omnipotent

The very structure of popular romance, in which obstacles are always overcome, tends to represent love as omnipotent, or almost so. The nature of the "barrier can be external, [...] internal, [...] or both" (Regis 32) but in many cases it takes the form of a protagonist's seemingly unshakeable conviction that they are unworthy of love. As Polhemus has noted, however, "Men and women in the hold of erotic faith feel that love can redeem personal life and offer a reason for being" (1) and such protagonists therefore eventually recognize that they can indeed by redeemed by love.

In *Anyone But You*, redemption comes when characters come to believe that they can be (and are) loved unconditionally, regardless of their age, appearance, or economic status. They are saved, we might say, not by works but by faith, albeit faith *in love*; that said, there is little in the plot that emphasizes the grandeur or extremity of love's saving power. To see love's omnipotence in action, it helps to consider the most extreme form of the redemption plot, in which the power of love is demonstrated via the redemption of the seemingly unredeemable: "the demon lover [...] the subject who lives imprisoned in the blighted landscape of his own mind, who is doomed only to repetition and a desire for death until his possible redemption by the utterly unique moment of love" (Lutz, ix). As Deborah Lutz explains in her loosely-Heideggerian study *The Dangerous Lover: Gothic Villains, Byronism, and the Nineteenth-Century Seduction Narrative*, the one who loves such a figure partakes of love's omnipotence, in that she

> can grasp the power of impossibility; she can make the world possible by being, herself, the plenitude, the immanent meaning of existence for him. The hero's belief in his brilliance, his superior, misanthropic position above all others and

> their run-of-the-mill lives, is so very believable to the heroine that to change this decimation to plenitude becomes her reason for being. (5)

Rather than debunk or critique the appeal of this love plot, for example on feminist grounds, Lutz offers a critical idiom sympathetic to its larger-than-life, even mythic stakes: meaning and nihilism; hope and despair; being and nothingness.

In most romances the "demon lover" is not, literally, a demon but it is common to find him "described as a devil, a demon, a tiger, a hawk, a pirate, a bandit, a potentate, a hunter, a warrior. He is definitely *not* the boy next door" (Barlow and Krentz, 19). As romance authors Linda Barlow and Jayne Ann Krentz have observed,

> The concept of being forced to marry the devil [...] resonates with centuries of history, myth, and legend. Both reader and writer understand the allusions. [...] Both reader and writer also have a vast acquaintance with the devil-heroes who appear in romance novels, since there is a time-honored tradition of heroines sent on quests to encounter and transform these masculine creatures of darkness. (18-19)

The most vivid instances of this plot will perhaps be found in paranormal romances and romantic retellings of myth, since here we can find demons, "devil-heroes," and assorted lords of the dead represented quite literally. Yet even when the "devil-hero" is specified as such merely by association or allusion, the mythic contours of the plot will often be apparent. In Laura Kinsale's *Flowers from the Storm*, Eric Murphy Selinger has thus argued, the author repeatedly associates the novel's hero, the Duke of Jervaulx, with Milton's Satan, not least by having heroine Maddy muse that he "chose to reign in Hell, *like Satan in the poem*" (Kinsale, 391, Selinger's emphasis). As the novel ends, Maddy revisits and mulls over this connection, calling the Duke "a star that I could only look up

and wonder at" and concluding that she is "glad thou fell, and I can hold thee in my hands" (526). Selinger teases out the implications:

> The religious myth implied is as remarkable as it is heretical. In Kinsale's revision of *Paradise Lost*, Satan and Eve, not Adam and Eve, become the original romantic couple. Jerveaulx/Lucifer's "fall" into the hell of Blythedale is a *felix culpa*, since only in his fallen state can he tempt and seduce Maddy/Eve, thereby saving her from meekness and solitude. The "fall" of Maddy/Eve becomes a sensual incarnation, since only when her spirit is fully and erotically embodied can she save Jerveaulx/Satan, her tempter. ("How to Read," 40)

In this novel, then, the omnipotent power of love lifts up the fallen, redeems the captive, transvalues terms like "wickedness" and "falling," and levels hierarchies, including the one that distinguishes popular from literary texts.

In a brief, lyrical essay on the "demon lover" as a romance hero, author Anne Stuart discusses two aspects of this fantasy's appeal. One is a fantasy of female power, since the heroine of such a novel takes a hero "capable of killing, of destroying everything" and "lead[s] him into the light," thereby proving herself to be "very brave, very sure, very worthy" (87). Behind this, however, lies a fantasy about the power of love itself. "The bond between heroine and hero is more than romantic, more than social," Stuart insists. "It is a spiritual, intellectual, sexual bond of the soul, one that doesn't end with till death do us part. It is a bond that surpasses death and honor and the laws of man and nature" (86). The fact that this bond surpasses *honor* as well as death and nature hints at some of the research questions that have yet to be addressed when it comes to love's omnipotence. How do romance authors and readers negotiate the tension between the "moral fantasy" of "love triumphant" in romance (Cawelti 41) and

other moral questions or duties, such as whether there are some crimes or dishonorable acts that place a protagonist outside the reach of love's salvation? What might Anna G. Jónasdóttir's and other feminist analyses of "love power" reveal about the practical and purely human acts through which Omnipotent Love is made manifest in romance narratives, and about who is charged with performing them, book by book?[15] And how might the representation of love as omnipotent in popular romance respond to the loss of faith in romantic love described by Allan Bloom, Vivian Gornik, and others as a signal feature of modern literature and culture?[16] (Does the presentation of love as omnipotent speak to a continuing faith, or to an anxiety being assuaged? The answer may well vary from author to author, text to text, and context to context.)

Eternal

To conclude her encomium to omnipotent love, Anne Stuart observes that the kind of love she is describing is one in which "eternity comes into play, changing a simple meeting of minds and bodies into something that transcends time and space" (87). The omnipotence of love here shades into another, related, equally theological quality: the ideal of Love Eternal.

Lynne Pearce argues that it is because "what we think of today as specifically *romantic love*" draws on the model of spiritual love (*agape*) that, "despite the persuasiveness of the psychoanalytic models, Western culture still clings to the notion that 'true love' is both durable and non-repeatable: it is, by definition, an emotion that *stands the test of time*" (Pearce). Romance novels use a variety of strategies to mark the love between their protagonists as "true" in this time-defying sense. The betrothals, weddings, and children that often appear at the end of a novel with a traditional

"happily ever after" (HEA) ending are institutional and familial structures that represent futurity, and even those novels which offer instead no more than "a casual understanding that the romantic partners will stay together and give the relationship a try (the 'HFN' or 'Happy for Now')" (Selinger and Gleason 7) often supply symbolic substitutes for these more formal structures, as when the hero of Victoria Dahl's *Start Me Up* asks the heroine "will you let me move temporarily into your town and take you out to dinner a few times a month so you don't forget me this winter," only to hear back from her, "Aren't you going to get down on one knee [as in a wedding proposal] while you ask that?" (366). Futurity, that is to say, takes many forms, but the happy ending of a romance novel seems always to involve the protagonists remaining together and in love.

As with love's omnipotence, love's eternal quality can be most vividly displayed in paranormal romance, in which many protagonists have extended lifespans. Anne Stuart, whose essay on the demon lover was quoted a moment ago, has even written one paranormal romance, *Dark Journey* (1995) in which the hero is Death itself. By embracing him (both literally and metaphorically) the heroine chooses "The endless night that held nothing but him" (107) and as "he kissed her. Forever was just beginning" (108). As Isabel Santaulària has argued, however, even a paranormal romance ending featuring a vampire hero "capable of turning the proverbial 'eternal love' into a real possibility" can "problematise the eternal togetherness at the core of romance fiction's resolutions" (Santaulària 119; 124). In her essay "The Fallacy of Eternal Love," Santaulària analyzes the ending of Linda Lael Miller's *Forever and the Night*, in which the vampire regains his humanity before marrying his human heroine. Although she can no longer remember him in his previous state and is clearly happy in

her marriage and very much in love with her new husband, she does recall what she believes is a dream of a vampire. To Santaulària this would appear to symbolise the fact that, "even when partners decide to cling together for life, they soon enough become aware of a mismatch between the romantic ideal and the actual person in the everyday once the initial fascination begins to wear off" (125). The promise of *eternal* love, then, remains attached to the fictive or dream world—the world of romance—even within the larger boundaries of this particular romance novel, which suggests a metafictional critique of the genre's promise elsewhere.

In *Revolutions of the Heart: Gender, Power and the Delusions of Love*, Wendy Langford gives what we might read as an extended version of this critique. "One striking feature of romantic love," she writes, is that

> while it appears as a coherent 'life narrative', perhaps especially for women, this coherence is at once everywhere disrupted by a hiatus. This intervenes, for example, in the form of a popularly assumed distinction between the 'falling in love' stage and some later stage of love. One is never quite sure how the latter arises from the former, except that 'you have to work at it'. The dislocation is present too in romantic fiction, which almost invariably leaves the heroine poised at the 'threshold' of her new life. This convention in turn reflects the 'happily ever after' closure of fairy-tales. Meanwhile, established love relationships are generally considered quite apart from romance. (64)

Langford's assessment of the conclusion of romances is broadly correct, but there are also some romances which depict the rekindling of a failed or failing relationship. Perhaps these may be read as indications of popular romance's conviction that the emotions of the "falling in love" stage never entirely disappear and that even when the

initial, transfiguring light of love within a relationship appears to have been extinguished, it may in fact remain as a banked fire. As romance reader and reviewer Sarah Wendell argues,

> while many romances are the depiction of falling in love once and for all, treating your personal romance as a repeated courtship keeps that relationship happy and healthy.
>
> Is the never-ending courtship present in romance novels? Well, it's not exactly present in a single novel—but it is present in the entire genre, one happy courtship after another. (182)

What Langford describes in temporal terms as a "hiatus" might thus also be conceived of as a lacuna or slippage between what David Shumway describes as the discourse of *romance* (which leads up to the closure of the happy ending, with the promise of eternity) and the discourse of *intimacy* (which purports to describe the dynamics of existing relationships, happy or not). The practice that Wendell describes of "treating your personal romance as a repeated courtship" would thus seem to be a mechanism whereby the "intimacy" model tries to incorporate recurrent moments of or sojourns through "romance."[17]

Romance novels have long featured epilogues as a way to represent protagonists enjoying the "happily ever after" of their love stories. More recently, An Goris has observed, a new compositional structure has emerged. In "character-based romance series," readers are given the opportunity to read about "a group of recurring characters (siblings, colleagues, friends, inhabitants of a small town, etc.)," and although each novel "in the series features the complete romance narrative of one member of the group" (Goris) the reader will be able to catch glimpses of former protagonists enjoying

their "happily ever after" even as the current protagonists work towards their own.18 But these novels do not always represent a simple recurrence or extension of romantic happiness. Rather, Goris explains, "in narratively actualizing – i.e. depicting – the post-HEA, the serialized romance novel broaches a new aspect of the romance narrative and creates, as it were, a new narrative space": one in which the genre's longstanding focus on questions of how romantic love develops can widen to include questions of "how romantic love is sustained," and at what costs.

Goris focuses in depth on two authors who work in serial forms, Nora Roberts and J. R. Ward, but the questions she raises about the post-HEA are applicable to the many other romance novelists who now write in series, and they suggest that the more-than-human "love eternal" that has long defined the genre now exists alongside, or in contrapuntal tension with, an interest in love as a time-bound, quotidian practice.

Conclusion

Book after book, popular romance reaffirms its belief in love's power to create lasting happiness. Each novel is an affirmation which does not lose but rather gains power with repetition, and reading popular romance fiction through a religious lens enables one to look at the enduring issue of repetition in the genre—repeated plots and character types; the repeated act of romance reading—in new ways. Künne thus suggests that "reading romances can be considered as taking part in the reenactment of the mythical commemoration of the ritual of the Sacred Marriage" (265); on a more quotidian level, one might think of repetition in popular romance as being akin to that to be found in the compiled stories of the lives of saints, founders and early followers of a religious sect which are read by believers to maintain and strengthen their own faith.[19]

This latter interpretation, which explains both the similarities between romances and the generally exceptional nature of their protagonists, also explains the apparent inconsistency identified by Susan Ostrov Weisser:

> while our egalitarian idea of romantic love implies that everyone deserves and can get love, love stories present a different picture: the ones who are lovable and are loved [...] are also represented as a privileged class, to be imitated or at least envied. (11)

If love is a modern religion then it is perhaps only to be expected that its stories will depict the most exceptional love-stories: many belief systems claim to provide the key to everlasting life and happiness to all but, nonetheless, hold up certain particularly holy individuals as examples to be admired and, where possible, imitated.

Some devoted adherents of the belief-system encoded in romance fiction bear witness to it in para-texts and other non-fiction pieces of writing. Tara Taylor Quinn, an author with Harlequin romance, has blogged about the day she

> had an opportunity to have a one on one, private conversation with one of Harlequin's highest executives. We were talking about the higher purpose of our books. The ultimate task we face, and the reason we do what we do – to offer a message of hope to the world. [...]
>
> On a surface level, Harlequin books are pure entertainment. But to so many, they are so much more. [...] In a world where so much feels hopeless, they are pure hope.
>
> No matter what the genre, from clean to racy, from fanciful to hard hitting suspense, these books all have one thing in common. Every single one of

> them ends in an uplifting way. Because in the end, love is real. And it IS the strongest, most enduring entity of all. ("Tuesday Talk Time")

An author biography for Bobbi Smith, meanwhile, states that she

> is a firm believer in the power of love. Love, she feels, does indeed make the world go round. It is the perfection of human nature and our true reason for being. [...] Love gives us the strength to keep on going against the most insurmountable odds. Love alone provides the nourishment for the soul. [...] Love is pure, selfless, and everlasting. Love is timeless, transcending all barriers, touching our hearts even across vast distances and untold years. Love does indeed conquer all. To be loved is to live happily ever after, and that is Bobbi Smith's wish for you. (376)

Smith's encomium to love brings to mind St Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 13 about the ways in which love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. [...] And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." Smith is far from the only author whose statements about love recall a religious creed, in which the believer lists the articles of their faith. Jennifer Crusie once explained that she wrote romance fiction because "I truly do still believe in the existence of unconditional love, I still believe that it's what holds humanity together, and I absolutely believe it's the best of all possible things to write about" ("Why I Know," 226). Similarly, Susan Elizabeth Phillips avers that "although I'm not conventionally religious now, I very much believe in redemption. I believe that love is the most powerful force. All that sappy stuff, I believe with all of my heart" (Selinger, "An Interview," 9).

Do *all* romances, then, express a quasi-religious belief in romantic love? The generalization may be misleading. Even if there is something providential about the

structure of the romance novel, with all things conspiring, eventually, to bring about the HEA, love is only one of many values espoused by the genre, and not all novels or novelists give the demands of romantic love a higher priority than the demands of other goods, such as honour or duty to country. In contrast to Anne Stuart, who has extolled a love that "surpasses death and honor and the laws of man and nature" (86), Jo Beverley observes that "beliefs about heroism, about honor, shape my characters' dilemmas," and that love, even "true love," does not get the last word.

> If [...] I believed that the search for true love overrides all other values, then Deirdre in *Deirdre and Don Juan* would not have had a problem. As soon as she realized she was in love with Lord Everdon, she would have kissed goodbye to the man she had promised to marry. However, she and Howard Dunstable had exchanged promises and her given word was more important to her than self-gratification. (33)

Perhaps what one can say with certainty about all romances is that they provide a space in which authors and readers can explore religious and philosophical questions about morality, life's meaning and purpose, and the nature of love. More scholarship is needed to address in detail the substance of these explorations, the compositional means with which they are undertaken (plots, allusions, iconography, post-HEA scenes, etc.), and the relationships between the explorations of such questions in romance and those to be found in other forms of fiction and popular culture.

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[1] Romance author Judi McCoy, quoted in *Romance Today: An A-to-Z Guide to Contemporary American Romance Writers* (Charles and Mosley 266).

[2] See, for example, Crusie Smith ("Romancing Reality"); Jensen makes a comparable argument in *Love's $weet Return: The Harlequin Story* (64).

[3] For more on the depiction of social issues and practical responses to them in romance fiction see Vivanco, 54-60.

[4] For more on the emergence of Muslim romance fiction in online platforms, see Parnell.

[5] For a useful overview of this history, see Lazar; a recent in-depth discussion of possible Muslim influence can be found in Menocal.

[6] For an extended treatment of how 19th and 20th century Catholic and Protestant theologians and public figures brought this re-evaluation of heterosexual sexuality into mainline Christian thought, see Gardella.

[7] We have elided here Kamblé's assertion that this is specifically a "*white* Protestant ethos" (131) not least because both Huguley and her characters are African American, which may complicate Kamblé's claim. Kamblé's chapter on "Race and Religious Ethos in Romance Novels" focuses on a particular construction of the relationship between (racialized) body and spirit in white-authored texts, drawn in large part from Richard Dyer's *White: Essays on Race and Culture*; although she discusses South Asian romance author Nalini Singh in this chapter, she does not take up African American romance fiction—nor, indeed, texts by white authors whose representations of body and spirit might not fit Dyer's conceptual model, from John Donne to Alex Beecroft.

[8] Pamela Regis argues that Richardson "brings the courtship plot, which is to say the romance novel, into more than prominence. He makes it famous" (63).

[9] "The novel is shaped by a religious dualism between soul and body, transcended by the effects of prayer and by the supernatural power of religious-erotic music," they explain, and "it is this religiosity, with its unequivocal representation of divine intervention in the love affair, which distances *The Rosary* most clearly from contemporary romance" (Batsleer, et. al., 90).

[10]Quaker characters (who may or may not be accurately portrayed) feature prominently in Laura Kinsale's *Flowers from the Storm* and in *False Colors* by Alex Beecroft. A Russian Orthodox icon is of central importance in *Lord of Scoundrels* by Loretta Chase. So-called "Amish romances"—that is, romances with ostensibly Amish characters—have received extended scholarly treatment by Weaver-Zercher.

[11] For Selinger on Thomas, see "Use Heart in Your Search"; for Lin as someone who grew up Buddhist, see Lin, "On Core Themes" and "Jeannie Lin Tells Us."

[12] The subject of Wicca comes up in several interviews with Joey Hill, often as part of the context for her work in the erotic romance subgenre: e.g., in answer to the question "What brought about the incorporation of more explicit erotic elements, and why are they integral to your work?" Hill notes that one crucial step was when she "embraced the Wiccan faith in my mid-twenties," in part because she "loved the idea of sex being used to raise spiritual energy in the Great Rite" ("An Interview"). On a related note, in "Medieval Magic and Witchcraft in the Popular Romance Novel," Carol Ann Breslin observes that the heroines of many romances set in the Middle Ages, "Through their magic, their potions, and their spells […] seek to restore, heal, and promote peace and love for their own hearths and their nations" (78) and, moreover, that although in such settings one might "expect the Church to be at the center, pursuing and condemning the practitioners of witchcraft and magic", generally "there are no interventions by Church officials" (84). While Breslin speculates that this absence perhaps reflects "the modern de-emphasis on religion and church" or could be the result of the authors' decision "to create a landscape where women of special gifts and powers can work out their destinies unencumbered by the structures of patriarchy" (84), Breslin does not go as far as to suggest that they could be expressions of faith in an alternative belief system such as Wicca.

[13] It should be noted that this development is not entirely without precedent given that "medieval courtly love borrowed the sentiments and language of Christian discourse, particularly mystical discourse. Moreover, something of the humanly erotic also remained within sublimated mystical discourse, fusing the two experiences and making it more difficult to distinguish one from the other. This paved the way for romantic love, the descendent of courtly love, to contain the possibility of this deeper theological meaning and religious experience within it" (Raghu 18).

[14] For arguments concerning whether "unconditional love" is a Biblically-grounded concept, see May (95-118). In popular culture, the equation of unconditional love with God's love for humankind was given memorable (and, indeed, danceable) articulation in Donna Summer's reggae-inflected 1983 hit "Unconditional Love," whose lyrics glossed "unconditional love" as the way to love "just like Ja do": a "non-reacting, everlasting" enactment of what the song calls "*agape* love."

[15] For an introduction to Jónasdóttir's work and some of its implications, see the essays gathered in *Love: A Question for Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Jónasdóttir and Ann Ferguson.

[16] See Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, and Gornick, *The End of the Novel of Love*.

[17] For an extended discussion of Shumway, see Hsu-Ming Teo's chapter in this collection.

[18] Goris, An. "Happily Ever After ... And After: Serialization and the Popular Romance Novel." *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900-present)* 12.1 (2013). <http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2013/goris.htm>.

[19] Künne, Regina. *Eternally Yours: Challenge and Response: Contemporary US American Romance Novels by Jayne Ann Krentz and Barbara Delinsky*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2015. Another religious parallel has been suggested by Roslynn Voaden, who sees similarities between the

romance genre's "focus on a woman's brief moment on the threshold" and medieval women mystics' "unitative visions, where the visionary yearned to be united with" Christ and is "eternally positioned in that moment of consummation" (79-80). Voaden, Rosalynn. "The Language of Love: Medieval Erotic Vision and Modern Romance Fiction." *Romance Revisited*. Ed. Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey. New York: New York UP, 1995. 78-88.