Love Makes the World Go Round (?)
The Romantic Novel as a Publishing Phenomenon

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The origins of the romantic novel are lost in the mists of time and folklore. The typical fairy tale has a happy ending—poor Cinderella marrying her wealthy and dashing prince is entirely the stuff of romantic fiction. In the Greek novels of the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD there are any number of lovers separated by doom and disaster, who are finally reunited in happy endings. Closer to our own time, Shakespeare’s plays, many of them derived from much earlier classical sources, feature the sort of themes which modern romantic novelists are happy to use. In The Taming of the Shrew, for example, the central couple meet, are attracted, squabble and end up in mutual amity. In All’s Well That Ends Well the poor, talented and socially upwardly mobile Helena acquires in Bertram the husband of her dreams.

But the front-runner for the title of father of the romantic novel is Samuel Richardson, the 18th-century printer turned writer. His Pamela and Sir Charles Grandison give lengthy accounts of wronged heroines whose virtue is rewarded with good marriages. Clarissa, in which the eponymous heroine was abducted and raped by Lovelace, the central male character, has a less happy conclusion: Its heroine dies as a result of her ill treatment. Then, as now, readers would have preferred a happy resolution of the story. Richardson was bombarded by letters and even stopped in the park by ladies who begged him ‘let not poor Clarry die,’ and who, demonstrating that many women like a hero who is somewhat of a rake, wanted Lovelace to marry the girl he had wronged.
Where Richardson led, many lesser talents followed. The circulating libraries in the latter half of the 18th century offered many light romances of the type enjoyed by Sheridan’s Lydia Languish. The marble-boarded volumes issued by the Minerva Press were enormously popular as were, towards the end of the century, the Gothic romances of Mrs Radcliffe and her fellows, featuring star-crossed lovers facing danger in picturesque foreign locations, often crumbling castles or ruined monasteries. Jane Austen mocked the genre affectionately in *Northanger Abbey*, when her heroine, Catherine Morland, was led astray by her excessive reading of novels of this type. But Austen’s own novels closely follow the pattern of romantic fiction, albeit with an underlying note of irony. Her heroines are poor but spirited, her heroes rich, proud and disinclined to marry. The conflict between the central couple is fast-paced and furious and the resolution of the story is always a happy one. Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy, Emma Woodhouse and Mr Knightley, are very close to modern-day romance in tone. So are many of Byron’s mean, moody and magnificent heroes. And the romantic tradition continued in the novels of the Brontë sisters, particularly Charlotte’s *Jane Eyre*, the classic tale of a downtrodden governess who finds happiness with her employer, and Emily’s *Wuthering Heights* with Heathcliff, a romantic hero who still successfully dominates female fantasies.

Throughout the 19th century, romance continued to appear in all guises and those at the top of the literary tree influenced the writers below them. Penny novelettes of the type in which the poor but honest village girl ended up marrying a duke circulated widely. Flora Thompson noted their popularity in *Lark Rise to Candleford*: ‘They did the women good, for, as they said, they took them out of themselves.’ The works of Marie Corelli, the noted queen of the 19th century romantic melodrama, certainly had that effect on her readers.

This curious situation, with romance simultaneously occupying the high and the low ground—the literary and the lowbrow—has continued in the present century. (Some romantic passages from D. H. Lawrence could be said to qualify for inclusion in both categories.) But whereas romantic love is an acceptable theme for a ‘literary’ author, it is often a source of ridicule in more popular, down-market fiction. E. M. Hull, author of *The Sheik* (published in 1919) and a number of other highly romantic novels, was one such author of purple prose. Her hero, the role model for many subsequent ‘desert sheikh’ romances, abducted the gently-born English heroine and rode off with her into the desert, where he raped her time and again. At first outraged, then subdued, she fell in love with her