

**Women's Historical Fiction "After" Feminism:  
Discursive Reconstructions of the Tudors in  
Contemporary Literature**

by

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## **Declaration**

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## **Abstract**

Historical fiction is a genre in a constant state of flux: since its inception in the nineteenth century, it has been shaped by cultural trends and has persistently responded to the way in which history is popularly conceptualised. As such, historical novels have always revealed as much about the socio-political context of their moment of production as they do about their historical settings. The advent of feminism was among the most significant movements which shaped the evolution of the women's historical novel in the twentieth century, prompting as it did a radical shift in historiographic methodology. As feminist discourse became embedded in popular culture in the latter decades of the twentieth century, this shift in turn allowed authors of historical fiction the opportunity to reconsider the ways in which women have been traditionally represented in both historical narrative and fiction. The historical novel thus became a site for exploring the female perspective of history, a perspective that had been denied or ignored by more male-centred historical narratives.

This dissertation will assess the impact wrought by the popularisation of feminist discourse on the genre of women's historical fiction during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. An examination of a selection of contemporary women's novels set during the Tudor era will prove particularly useful in executing this assessment, not least because of the Tudors' unprecedented popularity as the focus of literature and film in the last decade. More significantly, the women of this period have proven to be ideal subjects for their authors to imaginatively reconstruct in the mould of third wave feminist icons in the twenty-first century. By examining how Tudor women have been represented in the contemporary historical fiction of Jean Plaidy, Philippa Gregory, Mavis Cheek, Suzannah Dunn and Emily Purdy, this dissertation will demonstrate the ways in which popular feminist discourse has impacted on the development of women's historical fiction in the last century, focusing specifically on texts published within the last decade. Three key aspects of the genre will be assessed in detail in this regard: the author's self-conscious feminist intervention in the characterisation of her historical heroines; the shift in the narrative perspective adopted and the deployment of postmodern literary devices; and the representation of female sexuality. The evolution of the genre as a whole will also be examined in some detail, and the shifting parameters of modern feminisms will be interrogated in order to fully understand their manifestations in popular culture.

## Opsomming

Historiese fiksie is 'n voortdurend veranderende genre: sedert die ontstaan daarvan in die negentiende eeu is dit beïnvloed deur kulturele neigings en het dit aanhoudend bly reageer op die manier waarop die geskiedenis populêr gekonseptualiseer word. As sodanig het historiese romans altyd net soveel oor die sosiopolitieke konteks van hulle produksiemoment as oor hul historiese milieus onthul. Feminisme was een van die betekenisvolste bewegings wat gedurende die twintigste eeu die evolusie van die historiese roman vir vroue sou beïnvloed, en het sodoende aanleiding gegee tot 'n radikale verandering in historiografiese metodologie. Namate feministiese diskoers in die latere dekades van die twintigste eeu deel van die populêre kultuur geword het, het hierdie verandering op sy beurt die skrywers van historiese fiksie die geleentheid gegun om die maniere waarop vroue tradisioneel in sowel historiese narratiewe as fiksie uitgebeeld is, te heroorweeg. Die historiese roman het dus 'n terrein geword waarop die vroulike perspektief op die geskiedenis verken is, naamlik 'n perspektief wat deur meer manlik-gesentreerde historiese narratiewe ontken of geïgnoreer is.

Hierdie verhandeling sal die impak evalueer wat die popularisering van feministiese diskoers op die genre van historiese fiksie vir vroue gemaak het tydens die twintigste en een-en-twintigste eeue. 'n Ondersoek na 'n seleksie van kontemporêre vroueromans wat in die Tudor-tydperk afspeel, is veral nuttig in hierdie verband, onder andere as gevolg van die Tudors se ongekeerde gewildheid as die fokus van letterkunde en film in die afgelope dekade. Wat meer veelseggend is, is dat dit blyk die vroue van hierdie tydperk was ideale subjekte wat verbeeldingryk deur hulle outeurs gerekonstrueer kon word in die vorm van derde-golf-feministiese ikone in die een-en-twintigste eeu. Deur te ondersoek hoe Tudorvroue uitgebeeld is in die kontemporêre historiese fiksie van Jean Plaidy, Philippa Gregory, Mavis Cheek, Suzannah Dunn en Emily Purdy sal hierdie verhandeling die impak demonstreer wat populêre feministiese diskoers in die afgelope eeu op die ontwikkeling van historiese fiksie vir vroue gemaak het, met die fokus spesifiek op tekste wat in die afgelope dekade gepubliseer is. In hierdie verband sal drie sleutelaspekte van die genre uitvoerig geassesseer word: die skrywer se selfbewuste feministiese ingryping in die karakterisering van haar historiese heldinne; die verskuiwing in die vertellingsperspektief en die ontplooiing van postmoderne letterkundige tegnieke; en die uitbeelding van vroulike seksualiteit. Die evolusie van die genre as geheel word ook beskou, en die veranderende parameters van moderne feminismes word ondervra sodat hul manifestasies in die populêre kultuur ten volle verstaan kan word.

## Acknowledgements

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## **A note on the use of names and abbreviations**

During the Tudor era, the spelling of Christian names and even surnames was not standardised, and surviving documents show that historical figures such as Katherine of Aragon and even Anne Boleyn spelled their own names in a variety of ways over the course of their lifetimes. In much the same way, the authors of the various texts discussed in this dissertation have chosen different versions of these spellings to refer to the same characters; the name “Catherine”, for example, is spelled variably as Katherine, Katarine, Katharine, Catharine, Kathryn, and Catarina. In order to avoid confusion, I have chosen the most commonly-used spellings for each of Henry VIII’s six wives, and altered quotations accordingly to reflect this where necessary (except in the cases of novel titles, or where the alteration would impact on the meaning of the quotation). The six wives, in the order of their marriages, are thus referred to throughout as: Katherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Catherine Howard, and Katherine Parr.

Because I refer to several novels by the same authors throughout this dissertation, the titles of my primary texts have been shortened within the in-text citations as follows:

### **Chapter Two:**

*LT* – *The Lady in the Tower* by Jean Plaidy

*MMR* – *Murder Most Royal* by Jean Plaidy

*RWT* – *The Rose Without a Thorn* by Jean Plaidy

### **Chapter Three:**

*BI* – *The Boleyn Inheritance* by Philippa Gregory

*OBG* – *The Other Boleyn Girl* by Philippa Gregory

*QF* – *The Queen’s Fool* by Philippa Gregory

### **Chapter Four:**

*AW* – *Amenable Women* by Mavis Cheek

*QS* – *The Queen of Subtleties* by Suzannah Dunn

### **Chapter Five:**

*M&E* – *Mary & Elizabeth* by Emily Purdy

*TW* – *The Tudor Wife* by Emily Purdy



## ***Introduction:***

### **“Tudormania” in the twenty-first century**

We are obsessed with the Tudors.

Like many historical eras or major events – the Roman Empire, the French Revolution, the Victorian era, and the Second World War, to name just a few – the Tudors have faded in and out of fashion several times over the years, much like any fad that enjoys a brief surge of prominence in the Western popular cultural imagination. The last decade, however, has seen an unprecedented intensity of interest in the period on the part of the general public, an interest that shows no signs of abating. A flood of television series, films, and publications have appeared on the commercial market since the beginning of the millennium that have stoked public interest and established the Tudors as twenty-first century icons. Perhaps the most prominent among these new cultural representations have been the phenomenally successful Showtime television series *The Tudors* (2007 – 2010), as well as the two film adaptations of Philippa Gregory’s novel *The Other Boleyn Girl* (directed by Philippa Lowthorpe in 2003, and Justin Chadwick in 2008), the latter of which starred Hollywood heavyweights Natalie Portman and Scarlett Johansson. In 2013, a drama series based on another one of Gregory’s novels, *The White Queen*, was commissioned by the BBC and premiered in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Numerous films and television mini-series based on the life of Elizabeth I have been produced in recent years, including *The Royal Diaries* (2000), *Elizabeth I* (2005) starring Helen Mirren, and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007) with Cate Blanchett. Television specials, mini-series, and documentaries covering every aspect of Tudor life – from the Reformation to the workings of Henry VIII’s body – have aired

worldwide, including at least six produced by popular British historian David Starkey. In 2009, runway collections inspired by Tudor fashions were produced by designer powerhouses John Galliano, Dolce & Gabbana, and Chanel (La Ferla, “Tudormania”). Several tour operators in the United Kingdom now offer “Tudor tourism” packages to international and local enthusiasts. Hundreds of Tudor “fan sites” have been posted on the web over the last six years, some of which receive tens of thousands of visitors each month (Bordo 250). Indeed, it would seem that in the twenty-first century, “anything Tudor sells” (Lucie-Smith, “Appetite for the Tudors”).

Of all forms of commercial media, however, the Tudors have made their greatest mark on the publishing industry. The past decade has seen the publication of hundreds of books, both fiction and non-fiction, concerned with the reigns of one or more of the Tudor monarchs, most commonly that of Henry VIII or his daughter, Elizabeth I. These publications have included dozens of commercially successful biographies, marketed at and read by a general readership rather than academics and historians. Such biographies must compete fiercely for their share of an already-crowded market: many claim to have uncovered new facts about the lives of the most famous Tudor characters or adopt a neglected but rather obscure angle, such as Robert Hutchinson’s *Young Henry* (2011), which focuses exclusively on Henry VIII’s childhood and the early years of his reign. Others concern themselves with the stories of the more obscure players at Court, including *The Other Tudors: Henry VIII’s Mistresses and Bastards* (2009) by Philippa Jones, and Tracy Borman’s *Elizabeth’s Women: The Hidden Story of the Virgin Queen* (2009). Whatever the angle, the sheer number of biographies and historical texts available reflect an insatiable – and commercially viable – interest in the Tudor period. This is nowhere more obvious, however, than in the hundreds of Tudor novels that have been published in the wake

of the phenomenal success of Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* in 2001 – a novel which has sold millions of copies worldwide and proved popular in the most “unlikely” places, including Korea and Japan (Puente, “The Tudors’ popularity endures”). The Tudors have featured as central characters in works of a variety of genres, including historical (and even contemporary) romances, detective fiction, fantasies, Gothic horror novels, satires, and literary tomes. Hilary Mantel’s Tudor Court novels, *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012) – the first two volumes of a planned trilogy – have been met with enthusiastic critical acclaim, and both were awarded the Man Booker Prize.<sup>1</sup> Christopher Gortner and C.J. Sansom have both enjoyed on-going success with their Tudor detective series – Gortner with the *Elizabeth’s Spymaster* series (currently composed of *The Tudor Secret*, published in 2011, and *The Tudor Conspiracy*, released in July 2013) and Sansom with the *Matthew Shardlake Mysteries* (comprised of five novels published between 2003 and 2010). Henry VIII has even been transformed into a wife-devouring werewolf in A.E. Moorat’s Gothic parody, *Henry VIII: Wolfman* (2010).

Tudor fiction spans every conceivable literary genre, and collectively these works form a substantial body of literature. What is perhaps most striking, however, is the fact that in recent decades, the majority of these novels have been written by female authors. Indeed, even the most cursory assessment of Tudor-inspired literature suggests that the market is dominated by women authors producing works aimed explicitly at a female audience.<sup>2</sup> Gregory’s Tudor Court novels feature most

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<sup>1</sup> The double win meant that Hilary Mantel was the first woman and the first British writer to win the Prize twice. The BBC have bought the rights to the trilogy and a six-hour adaptation of the first two novels is planned for release in late 2013 (Brown, “Hilary Mantel”).

<sup>2</sup> A search for Tudor fiction on Amazon.com reveals more than sixty novels written by women published or scheduled for publication in 2013 alone, while in 2012, this number stood at over seventy. A similar search on the popular user recommendation website, Goodreads.com, produces over nine

prominently in this arena; her commercial success has, I would argue, inspired a multitude of other female writers to pen stand-alone works and novel series set during this period, including Suzannah Dunn, Diane Haeger, Darcey Bonnette, and Emily Purdy. The popularity of these novels has even prompted the republication of long out-of-print works by women writers from previous decades, who had turned their fascination with the period into works of fiction long before it was considered fashionable to do so. Most notable amongst these republished works are those of the prolific historical novelist Jean Plaidy, who produced a total of eleven Tudor Court sagas between 1949 and 1982.

The rapid and continuing growth in popularity of the historical fiction genre amongst female readers and writers has been acknowledged by critics such as Alison Light (60), amongst others. Diana Wallace has suggested that the historical novel has become “one of the most important forms of women’s reading and writing during the twentieth century” (ix). Wallace explains that this popularity is due in part to the exclusion of women from traditional historical narratives; modern female writers are now turning to the historical fiction novel as “a discourse within which women can be made central” (ix). Jerome de Groot, in his recent study of the historical novel, makes a similar argument, stating that the success of the genre “situates female historical fiction writers as ‘writing back’, bringing their subjects from darkness to light” (70). The women of the Tudor era are certainly amongst those subjects being brought to light by authors of historical fiction: Henry VIII, once the main focus of attention, has long since been eclipsed by the interest in his grandmother, mother, sisters, and daughters, and his ill-fated wives have become so prevalent as literary characters that

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hundred titles “shelved” or recommended by users as Tudor fiction, the vast majority of which were written by women and published within the last decade.

historian Retha Warnicke was prompted to coin the phrase “the Six Wives genre” (203) to refer collectively to the plethora of published works about them.

But what is it about the Tudors that so fascinates the general public, and women in particular? Historians, social commentators, academics, and reviewers alike have been proposing answers to this question since the success of *The Other Boleyn Girl*. In the wake of the extraordinary popularity of the Showtime series *The Tudors*, the “Tudormania” phenomenon has attracted even greater levels of critical interest. While Tudor history has always been institutionalised in the British education system, and indeed in British culture, interest in the lives of the Tudor dynasty has certainly not been a localised phenomenon: fascination with British royalty in general, and with the Tudor period in particular, can be witnessed on a global scale (Puente, “Popular Culture”). The intense interest in the British royal family has increased exponentially in recent years, attributed by many to the charismatic appeal of the new generation of royals. The wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton drew an estimated global television audience of two billion in April 2011, and in July 2013, the birth of their son, Prince George, sparked an unprecedented media frenzy (Winnett, “Watched Around the World”). In a culture defined by celebrity obsession (Smith, *The Public Woman* 17-8), fed by the rapid transfer of information on the internet and the ever-burgeoning appeal of tabloid journalism, the glamour of royalty has never been more alluring. Tudor novelist Christopher Gortner believes that

our obsession with the Tudors reflects the fact that they were, to a certain extent, the 16<sup>th</sup> century’s equivalent of our modern-day celebrities – physically beautiful, wealthy and powerful, jettisoning from palace to palace, bedecked in jewels and velvet, they strode across the stage of their Renaissance world wreaking havoc in their wake, enthralling, repelling, and entertaining their contemporary audience much as they entertain us today, hundreds of years later. (“Why We Love the Tudors”)

The notion that the Western world's fascination with the Tudors is linked with a celebrity-obsessed culture is echoed by several other social commentators: Irene Goodman, for example, argues that Henry VIII's reign "was not just an important historical event", but "also the stuff of juicy tabloid stories" (15). The story of Anne Boleyn's fall, she believes, "pushes all the right buttons" for a twenty-first century audience: "It has sex, adultery, pregnancy, scandal, divorce, royalty, glitterati, religious quarrels, and larger-than-life personalities. If Anne lived today, she would be the subject of lurid tabloid headlines: RANDY KING DUMPS HAG FOR TROPHY WIFE" (Goodman 15).

The tabloid-like "scandal" of the Tudors is another aspect of their story that many believe to be central to their allure five hundred years later. In the introduction to his biography, *Six Wives: The Queens of Henry VIII* (2003), David Starkey acknowledges the seemingly universal appeal of his subject, noting that the "Six Wives of Henry VIII is one of the world's greatest stories: indeed, it contains a whole world of literature within itself. It is more far-fetched than any soap opera; as sexy and violent as any tabloid; and darker and more disturbing than the legend of Bluebeard" (xv). The "soap opera" comparison is a motif that recurs regularly in discussions of the Tudors' representation in popular culture: Claire Ridgway, creator of the website *The Anne Boleyn Files*, argues that the Tudor era has "all of the ingredients of a good soap opera: goodies, baddies, romance, sex, violence, family dynasty, birth, death, murder, passion, betrayal, infidelity, hatred, suspense and cliffhangers. But it's a true story" (qtd in Puente, "The Tudors' popularity endures"). Similarly, Sarah Dunant refers to their story as a "sexy soap opera", arguing that "[g]iven the mix of lust, palace politics and violence that the dynasty offers, it's perhaps hardly surprising that it's the object of such a cultural feeding frenzy" ("Is

making the Tudors sexy a mistake?”). The reproduction of the Tudors as ‘real-life’ tabloid or soap opera celebrities in the twenty-first century has been further fostered by the burgeoning reality television market.<sup>3</sup> In *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010), David Shields argues that we are a culture obsessed with the consumption of ‘real events’ as commodified products, and that fiction is being increasingly marginalised in favour of “the reframing of the real” (53) or the seamless integration of ‘reality’ and art. The Tudors are ideal fodder for such a market, as their story satisfies the craving for ‘true life’ spectacle without sacrificing the drama of crafted fiction. The sexy, glamorous, and yet temporally alien setting of the Tudor Court is yet another characteristic cited by many as appealing to modern audiences. Stephanie Tracy believes that while the Tudors “have been so popularised largely because of the scandals that accompanied them”, there is also “something deeply romantic about the Tudor era”, with its “intriguing” and “danger[ous]” rituals of courtship and dazzling dresses (“Why do we love the Tudors”).

For these critics and commentators, the Tudors are simply tantamount to modern-day celebrities, familiar in their scandalous yet glamorous lives, made all the more fascinating by their unfamiliar clothes and lifestyles. However, in her 2013 publication *The Creation of Anne Boleyn: A New Look at England’s Most Notorious Queen*, cultural studies practitioner and feminist scholar Susan Bordo offers what I believe is a more perceptive and nuanced explanation for the Tudors’ popularity, particularly among the younger generation of women who devour the novels written about them. Focusing specifically on Anne Boleyn – by far the most well-known and, to the general public, most interesting of Henry VIII’s wives – she acknowledges that the “story of her rise and fall is as elementally satisfying – and scriptwise, not very

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Skeggs and Wood (2012); Holmes and Jermyn (2004); Huff (2006).

different from – a Lifetime movie: a long-suffering, postmenopausal wife; an unfaithful husband and a clandestine affair with a younger, sexier woman; a moment of glory for the mistress; then lust turned to loathing, plotting, and murder as the cycle comes full circle” (Bordo xiii). While this explanation contains the elements of those offered by many others, Bordo perceptively realises that scandal alone is not enough to sustain the intense level of cultural interest that the Tudors have roused over recent years. She argues that the Tudor women, and Anne Boleyn in particular, have been continually reinvented by successive generations according to dominant cultural ideas surrounding femininity and womanhood. As such, in media representations following World War II, Anne was “animated by the rebellious spirit of the sixties” (Bordo xiii), as typified by actress Geneviève Bujold’s portrayal of her in the 1969 Academy Award-winning film, *Anne of the Thousand Days*. Thirty years later, in the 1990s, she was reinvented in the mould of “the ‘mean girl’ and ‘power feminist’ celebration of female aggression and competitiveness” (Bordo xiii), epitomised by Philippa Gregory’s Anne in *The Other Boleyn Girl*. Since the turn of the century, Bordo argues, Anne has been brought to life in a new form by “the third-wave feminism of a new generation of Anne worshipers” (xiii). These women, according to Bordo, have been “inspired by Natalie Dormer’s brainy seductress of *The Tudors* to see in Anne a woman too smart, sexy, and strong for her own time, unfairly vilified for her defiance of sixteenth-century norms of wifely obedience and silence” (xiii).

Bordo’s observations bring to light some key points in understanding the appeal of Anne Boleyn in the twenty-first century, and her argument forms a sound basis for further extrapolating the appeal of the period more generally. Anne, along with her contemporaries and most significantly the *women* of her era, are not understood by modern audiences in terms of the scant and altogether bare historical



facts recorded about them, but through the mediated representations of them in popular culture. The portrayals of these women have, since their own time, been shaped by particular political agendas (Bordo 142-3) or changing ideas about womanhood, femininity and beauty (Bordo 164). Since our collective “knowledge” of the women of the Tudor era “has been built up around [the] imaginings” of them in popular culture (Bordo 52), it is inevitable that, in the wake of the momentous developments in the arenas of feminism and women’s equality, our understanding of them has shifted dramatically over recent decades. This shift, in turn, is linked with their enduring relevance: Bordo argues that their popularity is due in no small part to the adoption of Anne Boleyn as a third wave feminist icon by a generation of young women enchanted by the form that her reinvention has taken in recent novels, television series, and movies (244-5). The young girls and women she interviewed in the course of her research felt a sense of kinship towards Anne, revealing that they believed they could relate to her, and admired her for her ambition and strength: “without the word [feminist] itself – poison to many young women today – quite a few of my interviewees came pretty close to a classically feminist view” (253). Bordo observes that, to these women, the appeal of Anne Boleyn is rooted in what they see as “the many-sidedness of Anne’s personality, which resists definition as either flirt or ‘brain’, ‘feminine’ or feisty, mother or career woman, sexpot or ‘one of the guys’, saint or sinner. They identify passionately with, or aspire to, this many-sidedness; it’s what has made Anne a distinctly contemporary heroine for them” (255). One of Bordo’s interviewees in fact described Anne as “the original feminist” (256). If so, Bordo argues, “her feminism, for these girls, is clearly of the ‘third-wave’ variety – a woman of contradictions who cannot be ‘lassoed’ or ‘pigeon-holed’, who skillfully

walks the line between sexuality and sluttiness, girliness and brass, playfulness and power” (256).

Bordo’s research demonstrates that Anne Boleyn is not popular amongst modern audiences simply because she is fascinatingly scandalous. Rather, it is because – according to popular representations of her character – she resists the stereotypes and restrictions associated with her gender, despite the strictures of her historical moment. Bordo’s interviewees demonstrate a naively ignorant belief that the Anne Boleyn they see portrayed on their screens and in the pages of their novels is the “real” Anne, the one who lived and breathed in the sixteenth century. One young respondent passionately explained that Anne “was a modern-day girl in the wrong time period and people weren’t ready for that” (qtd in Bordo 255). Of course, the Anne we know today is a pastiche, constructed by the various representations of her in popular culture, and who, in all likelihood, bears little resemblance to the flesh-and-blood woman of five hundred years ago. But this, I would argue, is what makes her – and her female contemporaries – so indelibly fascinating in the twenty-first century: Anne, along with Henry VIII’s five other wives and two daughters, have been recast as characters who battle with the same challenges and conflicts within their identities as “woman” as do their modern female audiences. These women are no longer understood in terms of narrow stereotypes that limit and suppress the expression of their individuality: Katherine of Aragon is not simply a saintly, discarded wife but a strong and willful defender of her rights; Anne of Cleves is not an ugly, unwanted lover but an intelligent, shrewd negotiator; Catherine Howard is not an oversexed, empty-headed teenager but a vivacious young girl passionately in love for the first time; Mary I is not a misguided tyrant but a woman suffering from the deep-seated traumas of abuse and neglect. As Bordo concludes, modern writers

and audiences “have constructed an Anne who ‘empowers’ them [...]. This Anne winks at young women across the centuries and understands the challenges they face and the questions they ask” (256).

The Tudor women are uniquely suited within their historical moment for reinvention as feminist icons in the twenty-first century. In many respects, they were the first “modern” women in ways which are recognisable to present-day audiences: their understandings of love, femininity, and sex were continuously evolving (Nelson 1-8), and most significantly, the “Woman Question” – which asked, among other things, whether “a woman’s ideas were as worthy as a man’s” (Bordo 39) – was at the forefront of intellectual debate within the European Courts. Much like modern women, the women of the Tudor Court continuously negotiated the distinction between the female-relegated private sphere and the male-dominated public sphere, responding to the demands of both realms while at the same time either acquiescing to or resisting the gender constructs associated with feminine identity. Their marriages, their fertility, their actions were not simply domestic matters, but issues of national and international political significance. For Tudor women, the personal truly was political. The blurring or even elimination of the distinction between the private and public spheres was one of the main principles upon which second wave feminism was established; it is also a matter that third wave feminists have recognised as a source of anxiety and uncertainty for a younger generation of women, born after the political imperatives of the second wave had faded from popular discourse. It is this anxiety and uncertainty that is, I will show, one of the most prominent features of Tudor Court fiction in the twenty-first century.

The inferior status of women during the sixteenth century meant that their lives, for the most part, went unrecorded; despite their husband’s infamy and the

scandal of their stories, the same holds true for Henry VIII's brides. Over the centuries, writers have moulded these historical characters to suit their own narratives, to act as vehicles for their own motives, and to promote their own interpretation of historical "fact"; in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the women of the Tudor era have found new expression in women's historical fiction. As Karen Lindsey notes in the preface to her feminist-driven biography of the six wives, "[t]he ways in which successive generations of writers have interpreted these women's lives is almost as interesting, and as revealing, as the stories of the women themselves" (xxi). This revealing nature of the literary interpretations of the Tudor women, I will argue, accounts not only for the present popularity of the genre, but demonstrates the ways in which that genre has been shaped by a (sometimes latent) feminist consciousness. It should be noted at this juncture that the tendency of the publishing industry to "gender" fiction titles is problematic in that it limits readership, and perpetuates the stigma attached to "women's fiction" – which is often viewed as less important or critically significant than general or "literary" fiction (Wallace 8). While this on-going debate cannot be addressed in any significant detail within the scope of this study, it is necessary for my purposes to delineate *women's* historical fiction as opposed to more general historical fiction, in order to assess the relationship between feminist consciousness and the texts popularly read by women in the twenty-first century. For the purposes of this study, then, "women's historical fiction" is defined as historical novels authored by women and purposefully marketed at a female readership. Such titles have been identified by the use of so-called "chick-lit branding" in their production, evidenced by (often rather patronising) strategies such as "feminine" cover illustrations (Shipley, "The great chick lit cover-up"). Women's historical novels set in the Tudor Court, for example, typically feature an illustration

or photograph of a woman in period costume, stylised or flourished fonts, a pastel colour palette, and pull quotes comparing the novel to Philippa Gregory's works on the cover. Under this definition, works by authors such as Hilary Mantel and C.W. Gortner are excluded, as they are marketed towards a more general readership.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will explore the development of the historical fiction genre since its inception two centuries ago, demonstrating how shifts in the methodological frameworks and understandings of historiography have in turn impacted on the way in which that history finds its expression in fiction. To this end, it is necessary to consider some of the pertinent cultural, philosophical, and political movements which have contributed to the evolution of the genre, the most prominent among these being feminism and postmodernism. In doing so, I will demonstrate how writing by and for women has come to dominate the historical fiction genre, with the aim of exploring, in the remainder of this study, how feminism has provided modern audiences with the discursive means of imaginatively recasting the role of women in history.

The remaining chapters will examine texts set within the Tudor Court by authors who have proven, over the course of their careers, to be commercially prominent or prolific producers of women's historical fiction, as a means of exploring how the manifestations of feminist consciousness have impacted on different aspects the genre. In Chapter Two, I will assess three novels by Jean Plaidy, each of which was written at a different stage during her impressively long career in the twentieth century. This assessment will determine how the establishment of a formal feminist discourse towards the middle of the century, and the subsequent popularisation of this discourse within the public imagination, impacted on the author's characterisation of Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard, the perspective she adopted within these novels,

and her depiction of female sexuality. Jean Plaidy is one of the most important authors of women's historical fiction in the twentieth century, and of particular interest to this study because her long career spanned the decades surrounding the rise of second wave feminism in the Western world. A close analysis of the shifts in her approach to her female characters between her early and later novels reveals the influence of second wave feminist thought on her conceptualisation of her genre and of the roles available to women in history more generally. Her works provide a unique insight into the evolution of women's historical fiction in the twentieth century, which is when the genre and its authors first entered into a dialogue with the feminist movement.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five, meanwhile, will focus specifically on texts published in the twenty-first century. Philippa Gregory's novels will be examined in Chapter Three as examples of the author's self-conscious feminist intervention in the characterisation of her historical heroines. In addition, I will demonstrate how Gregory purposefully addresses issues of gender and the construction of gendered identities in her novels, and in doing so, resists the domination of the male perspective within historical discourse. Chapter Four will explore the intersections between postmodern and feminist approaches to historiography by showing how authors of women's historical fiction have (sometimes unconsciously) appropriated the narrative strategies of historiographic metafiction in order to articulate a feminist agenda. Suzannah Dunn and Mavis Cheek will both be examined in this chapter, with the aim of exploring the means by which a female perspective is privileged through the preoccupation with the process of the construction of historical narrative. Finally, Chapter Five will examine Emily Purdy's "bodice-rippers", with a focus on the

author's depiction of female sexuality, gender violence, and the establishment of sexual agency within her novels.

The analyses of the novels chosen for this study will demonstrate the ways in which feminism has contributed to the evolution of the women's historical novel in the twenty-first century. A consciousness of feminism and issues of gender, equality, and agency is patently manifest within these novels: while some authors, like Philippa Gregory, are self-consciously aware of their appropriation of feminist ideals, others simply reflect the ways in which feminist ideologies have become embedded and subsequently (and often unconsciously) reproduced within popular discourse. What these novels also demonstrate is the means by which a shift in the understanding of the role of women in history – facilitated by a feminist approach to historiography – has allowed for the reinvention of the women of the Tudor era, ensuring their continued and enduring relevancy in the popular imagination of the twenty-first century.

## *Chapter One:*

# **Contemporary feminisms and the evolution of the women's historical novel**

*[A]ll historical fiction is really contemporary fiction;  
you write out of your own time.*

*Hilary Mantel  
(qtd in Bordo 231)*

In the introductory chapter to her acclaimed part-autobiography, part-social commentary, *How To Be a Woman* (2011), Caitlin Moran bemoans the state of feminism in the twenty-first century:

feminism, as it stands, well... stands. It has ground to a halt. Again and again over the last few years, I turned to modern feminism to answer questions that I had but found that what had once been the one most exciting, incendiary and effective revolution of all time had somehow shrunk down into a couple of increasingly small arguments, carried out among a couple of dozen feminist academics, in books that only feminism [*sic*] academics would read, and discussed at 11pm on BBC4. (12)

Moran's dissatisfaction with "modern feminism" reflects the uncertainties, misunderstandings and even aversions surrounding feminism in both academia and the broader public in recent years. As early as 1989, Nicci Gerrard observed that feminism had become "so fragmented and dispersed that it [was] hard to perceive any sense of a common purpose" (5), and that while feminism had "enter[ed] the vocabulary of most people" it had also "relinquish[ed] its distinct identity" (6). In the latter years of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, then, feminism seemed to be faced with a kind of identity crisis: no longer defined by



the urgent political activism of the second wave,<sup>1</sup> it has apparently languished in a state of uncertainty, as academics and social and cultural commentators alike have attempted to pin down its shifting parameters.

Moran's declaration is an unnecessarily pessimistic one, however. While feminism may be a hotly contested field in the twenty-first century, it can hardly be described as stagnant. Twenty-first century feminisms are as multi-faceted and diverse as their predecessors; indeed, as Carisa R. Showden observes, "[f]eminism has always been many movements working for multiple ends" (167), and this remains true today. During the last few years in particular, the meaning of modern feminism has once again become a topic of ever-increasing interest in academia and the media, taking on as many labels as it has definitions: "postfeminism, power feminism, third-wave feminism, do-me feminism, libertarian feminism, babe feminism, I'm not a feminist, but... 'feminism'", to name a few (Showden 166). As Showden argues, "these 'new feminisms' [...] are not simply part of a backlash against feminism but are instead, in many cases, part of an ongoing contest over the meaning of feminism" (166). From 'grrrl power' in the 1990s to 'Girlie' feminism in the 2000s,<sup>2</sup> it would

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<sup>1</sup> Although its usefulness and appropriateness have been questioned by scholars, the 'wave' metaphor is still widely used as a shorthand to refer to the different 'movements' of Western feminism over the last 150 years. While their definitions are complex, the 'first wave' of feminism generally refers to the period of political activism primarily concerned with women's suffrage during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The 'second wave' of feminism is associated with the concerns of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s, which focused on women's empowerment and gender equality in the public sphere. The second wave is largely regarded as a politicised movement that prioritised collective consciousness and activism, and foregrounded issues such as sexuality, family, gender violence, representations of women in the media, reproductive rights and a myriad of other concerns. Third wave feminism will be discussed in more detail in this chapter. Angela McRobbie is amongst the scholars who are critical of the wave model, stating: "Not only does this feed into a linear narrative of generationally-led progress, taking the form of visible and coherent 'waves', permitting or pointing to occasional changes of direction, and moments of crisis, it also stifles the writing of the kind of complex historical genealogy of feminisms" (156). While her and others' criticisms are certainly valid, the 'wave' metaphor remains a useful and widely employed shorthand for distinguishing between particular periods of development in feminist theory.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'grrrl power', sometimes also referred to as 'girl power', is a form of power feminism that has its origins in the 'Riot Grrrl' underground feminist punk rock movement in the early 1990s, and was popularised in the mid-1990s by the British pop group, the Spice Girls. 'Grrrl power' advocates a

seem that feminism can take on almost any guise; Showden observes, however, that most of these ‘brands’ of “new feminism” fall under the rubrics of either “postfeminism” or “third wave feminism” (166). While these terms are often (erroneously) regarded as interchangeable by some academics and commentators (Showden 166), they represent two distinct branches of contemporary feminist thought, differentiated most patently in the degree to which they engage with contemporary culture and politics, and the level of optimism with which they regard the state of contemporary feminism.<sup>3</sup>

Postfeminism was a term first coined in 1982 by Susan Bolotin in her *New York Times* article, “Voices from the post-feminism generation”, in which she observed that young women were already beginning to distance themselves from the ‘feminist’ label. The original usage of the term implied, rather simply, the period or era following the ‘heyday’ of politicised second wave activism. As the decade progressed, however, the term postfeminism came to signify the ‘death’ of feminism (Gillis, Howie, and Munford xxvi), not merely a generational shift but a direct, targeted backlash against the principles of second wave feminism. For many feminist scholars, the most disturbing aspect of this backlash was the abandonment of collective, politicised activism for the benefit of all women in favour of a completely

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brand of aggressive confidence as a means of self-empowerment. ‘Girlie’ feminism, meanwhile, was coined by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards in *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (2000) to denote the reclamation of traditional femininity – associated with activities such as cooking and crafts, and a preoccupation with shopping, clothes and make-up – as a valid means of expressing gender equality. Both ‘brands’ of feminism have come under fierce attack in the media and by feminist academics.

<sup>3</sup> My discussion of recent developments in the field of feminist theory necessarily focuses on Anglo-American feminisms, as these are the developments that are most pertinent to my examination of women’s historical fiction set in the Tudor Court. All of the texts examined within this study were published by American or British authors, and obviously focus on a well-known period in British history. As such, Anglo-American feminisms and theories of popular culture are key to their analyses. This is by no means to discount the vital contributions made in the field of feminist theory by French scholars such as Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, as well as postcolonial theorists like Chandra Mohanty and Trinh T. Minh-ha. However, the developments in the branches of French and postcolonial feminisms, while significant to the feminist academy as a whole, are not pertinent to this particular study.

depoliticised interest in individualism. So-called feminists of the younger generation were, according to such critics, only interested in women's empowerment as far as their own personal gains were concerned, rather than in the broader interests of the collective. As the 1980s drew to a close, Gerrard observed that:

Post-feminism implies that feminism has done its job and is over. It includes feminism in its coinage but simultaneously denies it. It interprets feminism as a tool with which women have achieved certain ends, rather than an ever-evolving and dynamic process. [...]

Post-feminists are a product of the 1980s and are said to be quite different from pre-feminists: they are the fall-out from the fragments. For them, there are as many feminisms as there are feminists – and so the word's meaning implodes. [...] Their position is not political but anti-political – they have discarded the collective spirit for a liberated individualism. (7)

For most feminists, this brand of self-interested, even egocentric 'feminism' represented a perverse inversion of the celebrated slogan, "the personal is political". It was apparent to them that "feminism [had] evolved into a movement concerned with style over substance: the personal apparently [had] triumphed over the political" (Gorton 213).<sup>4</sup> In a landmark article published in *Time* in 1998, entitled "Feminism: It's All About Me!", Ginia Bellafante flagrantly declared the 'death' of progressive, politicised feminism, calling the postfeminism generation "quintessentially self-absorbed" (59) and bemoaning "the flightiness of contemporary feminism" (57). She goes on to assert that "feminism at the very end of the century seems to be an intellectual undertaking in which the complicated, often mundane issues of modern life get little attention and the narcissistic ramblings of a few new media-anointed

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<sup>4</sup> Joan Smith makes a similar declaration in *The Public Woman* (2013), insisting that "the personal has replaced the political" (21).

spokeswomen get far too much. [...] What a comedown for the movement”

(Bellafante 57).

Postfeminist scholars, then, generally concentrate on the decline of focused and collective political activism associated with the women’s movement and the promotion of gender equality, usually taking a pessimistic view of the ‘state’ of feminism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Angela McRobbie takes this criticism one step further in *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2009), arguing that postfeminism is characterised by a *deliberate and active reversal* of the achievements of the women’s liberation movement.

McRobbie states that by

[d]rawing on a vocabulary that includes words like ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’, [elements of second wave feminism are] converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in the media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism. These new and seemingly ‘modern’ ideas about women and especially young women are then disseminated more aggressively, so as to ensure that a new women’s movement will not re-emerge. (1)

McRobbie suggests that this process constitutes an “active vilification” of feminist principles “conducted mostly at the cultural level”, which acts as a “deterrent” (1) to young women. This, McRobbie asserts, results in their renunciation of feminism even as they *appear* to enjoy the fruits of gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Unlike many feminist scholars of recent years, McRobbie deliberately distances her commentary from association with the third wave: though she acknowledges that third wave feminism takes an “affirmative stance” through its main activities of “web-based activism and writing” (157), she is also critical of its “celebratory commercial values” (158) and its focus on popular culture (158-9).

McRobbie's observations on the manifestations of contemporary feminism are – typically of postfeminist scholarship – overwhelmingly and, I believe, unnecessarily pessimistic. However, her brief explanation of third wave feminism does astutely identify two of the key characteristics that set it apart from postfeminism, in her acknowledgement of its more optimistic stance and its affiliation with new technology. Third wave feminism has enjoyed a revival in interest and academic scholarship recently, and the vast majority of third wave scholars are rejecting the postfeminist idea that feminism is 'dead'. In the introduction to *Reclaiming the F Word: Feminism Today* (2013), Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune argue that “[i]f you listened to the myths circulating in the mainstream media, you'd have a fairly warped view of feminism. Feminism is pronounced 'dead' on a regular basis, especially by anti-feminist commentators eager to ram the final nail into the coffin, but also, sometimes, by established feminists” (1). It is interesting – and certainly significant – that Redfern and Aune refer to such views as “anti-feminist” rather than “postfeminist”, clearly establishing their position in relation to such arguments. Similar views are expressed by Sylvia Walby in *The Future of Feminism* (2011), in which she unequivocally states that “[f]eminism is not dead. This is not a postfeminist era. Feminism is still vibrant, despite declarations that it is over. Feminism is a success, although many gender inequalities remain. Feminism is taking powerful new forms, which make it unrecognisable to some” (1). From these brief extracts, it is evident that Walby, as well as Redfern and Aune, directly challenge the views of “established” postfeminist scholars such as McRobbie, arguing that although feminism has evolved, taking on “powerful new forms” that are expressed through different mediums, it is still a significant and formidable cultural (and academic) force.

The origins and definitions of the third wave are still a matter of contentious debate, but there is broad consensus that it arose out of contestations regarding the limitations of the second wave's solutions and its universalising of the category of "woman":

The concept 'woman' seemed *too* fragile to bear the weight of all contents and meanings ascribed to it [...]. The elusiveness of this category of 'woman' raised questions about the nature of identity, unity and collectivity. Appearing to undercut the women's movement, fundamental principles of the feminist project were hotly contested in the aftermath of the second wave of feminism. What we now understand as the third generation of feminism – the 'third wave' – emerges from these contestations – and the responses to them.

(Gillis, Howie, and Munford xxi-ii;  
emphasis in original)

Gillis, Howie, and Munford observe here that while the idea of a universal experience of womanhood was useful in mobilising political activism, it was also rather limiting in its understanding of the intersections between gender, race, class, religion, and other demographic contingencies. Third wave scholars responded to these limitations – often drawing on postmodern and post-structuralist frameworks – with “the self-conscious adoption and adaptation of third world feminism’s language and politics of hybridity, [...] and the critiques of essentialism and exclusion within second-wave debates, especially as developed by women of colour and lesbian feminists (including contemporary queer theory)” (Showden 181). Far from *rejecting* second wave principles – as postfeminist scholars often claim – third wave feminists “see their work as founded on second wave principles, yet distinguished by certain cultural and political differences” (Sanders 5). The third wave is thus a *continuation* and

*adaptation* of the second wave, necessarily developed in the context of an ever-changing global culture.<sup>5</sup>

While the concerns of class, race, sexuality, and other cultural contingencies are central to third wave theory, many commentators also argue that the third wave evolved out of the need to address the vastly different lifestyles and lived experiences of a younger generation of women. While the imposition of generational boundaries is an over-simplification of the progression from second to third wave feminism, the argument does hold merit: in the Foreword to *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* (2007), Imelda Whelehan describes her encounters with ‘third wavers’ who

spoke convincingly of the feminist generation gap creating an impasse where ‘younger’ women simply did not share the life experiences of their foremothers and felt policed by what they perceived as the rigid codes of feminist behaviour. Since the 1960s and 1970s, the world had changed beyond recognition for these young women and second wave feminism’s solutions would not allow them to navigate the complexities of their own lives. (xv)

Echoing McRobbie’s acknowledgement of the “web-based activism and writing” (157) that have been among the most significant developments within feminist practice over the last two decades, Whelehan goes on to explain that “the biggest changes to impact upon the possibilities open to third wavers have been technological ones. [...] It allows for a kind of DIY feminism that has become the trademark of the third wave” (“Foreword” xvi-ii). Whelehan’s “DIY feminism” evokes postfeminist criticisms regarding the self-interested individualism of contemporary feminism, and indeed, this is a criticism that is often levelled at third

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<sup>5</sup> Again, while postcolonial feminism has been a vital development in feminist studies, it is beyond the scope of this study to examine these developments in any significant detail.

wavers as well.<sup>6</sup> However, Whelehan – along with many other third wave scholars – does not necessarily equate “DIY feminism” with the depoliticisation of the movement, in direct contrast with or opposition to second wave tenets. Walby observes that “[n]ew forms of feminism have emerged that no longer take the form of a ‘traditional’ social movement, being institutionalised instead in civil society and in the state. These new institutionalised forms are less recognisable as feminist by those who are accustomed to thinking of feminism as merely visible protest” (2). Indeed, Showden argues that a greater degree of political engagement is what characterises the third wave’s rupture from its “early intermingling” with postfeminism (172). Niamh Moore echoes these sentiments, explaining that “postfeminism [is] seen as a manifestation of the end of feminism, and third wave feminism [is] regarded as suggesting a defiant insistence on the continuity of feminist politics” (125).

The third wave, then, is distinguished by its optimistic stance on the political possibilities offered by contemporary feminism, and its recognition that these possibilities are expressed in forms that may be unrecognisable to those who insist that ‘visible’ political activism is the only credible option. As already observed, third wavers typically define themselves in opposition to postfeminism, insisting that the third wave is a continuation and adaptation of second wave principles rather than an outright rejection of them.<sup>7</sup> For third wave scholarship (and, to a lesser extent, postfeminist analysis), popular culture is an area of crucial critical focus, and is

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Showden (172) and Walby (19).

<sup>7</sup> In the introduction to *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (1997), Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake explain that “[w]hereas conservative postfeminist thinking relies on an opposition between ‘victim feminism’ (second wave) and ‘power feminism’ (third wave), and suggests that ‘power feminism’ serves as a corrective to a hopelessly outmoded ‘victim feminism’, to us the second and third waves of feminism are neither incompatible nor opposed. Rather, we define feminism’s third wave as a movement that contains elements of second wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while it also acknowledges and makes use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures” (2-3).



usually approached as a site for the enactment of the promotion (or, occasionally, the denigration) of feminist ideals. In an article for the online journal *Genders*, Kathleen Rowe Karlyn argues that popular culture is central to the development of feminism in the twenty-first century, saying that “[i]f a productive conversation is going to happen among women of all ages about the future of the feminist movement, it will have to take place on the terrain of popular culture where young women today are refashioning feminism toward their own ends” (7). Numerous other third wave feminist scholars have made similar assertions about the importance of the critical study of popular culture: Gillis, Howie, and Munford acknowledge that “[c]ultural production has been identified as a key site of analysis and activity for third wave feminism” (xxix), while Ednie Garrison argues that “[t]he media is a central site of consciousness formation and knowledge production [...] and it plays an important role in the cultural knowledge production of feminist consciousness” (186). Showden dismisses claims that the media and popular culture are devoid of radical political potential, stating that “cultural politics is *real* politics” (167; emphasis in original). Redfern and Aune, meanwhile, explain in great detail why forms of popular culture take on such great significance to third wave scholars, as the pervasiveness of media images and narratives mean that they are crucial sites for the formation of gender identity:

Popular culture surrounds us. It’s in the images we see every day on billboards and television, the music videos we watch, the way people talk about men and women in school playgrounds, pubs and public transport. It tells us what it means to be a woman or a man, and it has real, practical consequences in our lives. [...] So, when contemporary feminists concentrate on popular culture, it’s not because they are unconcerned about ‘real’ material inequalities like poverty and violence. Popular culture is not trivial. It is an unavoidable part of people’s lives today and is inextricably linked to material forms of social injustice. (171-2)

The stance of all of these scholars with regard to the relationship between contemporary feminism and popular culture reveals that, in the twenty-first century, popular culture is a significant political realm in which issues of gender, equality, and empowerment are played out. Much feminist scholarship from the 1980s through to the present day has been dedicated to analysing images and narratives in popular culture, focusing particularly on how women and girls are portrayed: from so-called “Buffy Studies” – an entire field of research dedicated to the 1990s television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – to the critical analyses of gender representation in advertising, the discursive construction of “woman” in and by the media is an integral, if not central, aspect of academic and ‘popular’ feminism today. It is therefore essential to understand the interdependent relationship between modern feminisms and popular culture in order to critically assess the depiction of women in mainstream media, including contemporary women’s historical fiction.

As Redfern and Aune observe, the term ‘popular culture’ encompasses a vast range of widely-disseminated and pervasive media forms, from television shows and movies, to advertising, music, and magazines. This definition also naturally includes literature, and in particular, mass-marketed genre fiction.<sup>8</sup> The relationship between feminist scholarship and popular fiction was, initially at least, a difficult one: many second wave scholars equated “popular” with “selling-out” or the abandonment of political ideals, “losing substance; [...] taking fewer risks; [...] or relinquishing the female world” (Gerrard 2). For these critics, popular literature was unable to

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<sup>8</sup> The distinction between “genre fiction” and “literary fiction” has been a matter of debate both in the academy and the media over recent years. “Genre fiction” is generally understood to refer to popular or mainstream literature that falls into particular literary genres – for example, crime fiction, science fiction, historical fiction and romance – and are marketed as such, while “literary fiction” refers to more ‘serious’ works of literature that are considered to have greater intellectual merit than their generic counterparts. In recent years, however, this dismissive, critical attitude towards the merits and literary importance of generic literature has been challenged and widely rejected. Cf. Krystal (2012), Kelly (2013), Galbreath (2013).

accommodate feminism in any form. However, many contemporary scholars working today report that their first encounter with feminism actually occurred in relation to mass-disseminated media, including magazines, films, television shows, and novels: Hollows and Moseley describe this experience as “growing up with feminism in the popular” (1). In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, they elaborate, “most people’s initial knowledge and understanding of feminism has been formed within the popular and through representation. Rather than coming to consciousness through involvement in feminist movements, most people become conscious of feminism through the way it is represented in popular culture” (Hollows and Moseley 2). Hollows and Moseley’s observations reflect the fact that, in the years following the ‘heyday’ of politicised second wave feminism, feminist ideals were actively appropriated and, to some extent, commodified by producers of mass media. While the commodification of feminism was problematic for many critics,<sup>9</sup> it marked a shift towards a more incorporated, inclusive idea of feminism, particularly during the 1990s (Hollows and Moseley 3), when ‘girl power’ and representations of strong, independent women proved to be commercially viable images. The idea that feminism needed to “exist in opposition to consumer culture” (Hollows and Moseley 10-1) was gradually abandoned by scholars, who started to explore the ways in which texts of popular culture appropriate and redefine feminism and feminist politics.<sup>10</sup>

In *Into the Mainstream: How Feminism Has Changed Women’s Writing* (1989), Gerrard suggests that women’s popular fiction is an important site for the mass dissemination of feminist values:

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Gamman and Marshment (1988).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Gottlieb and Wald (1994) and Kirca (2000).

Women's writing, and feminist writing, is entering the mainstream – but that does not necessarily mean that it is discarding radical impulse for caution, nor that it is selling out. The integration is welcome precisely and paradoxically because it heralds a more genuinely radical direction – a broadening out from the literature of personal angst and domestic oppression. (13-4)

For Gerrard, then, the broader appeal of generic fiction provided a means for feminism to take on different, new, but no less important modes of expression.

Whelehan airs a similar view in *The Feminist Bestseller* (2005), arguing that feminist expression was not limited to the more 'serious' confessional novels traditionally associated with the women's movement and second wave feminism: "both feminist bestsellers of the 1970s and the bestselling genre loosely known as chick lit are in *dialogue* with feminism, the former directly – often through the avowed feminism of its heroines – and the latter more obliquely by the way its heroines often seem to be wrestling with a nascent feminist consciousness" (5; emphasis added).

It is this notion of a *dialogue* between popular women's fiction and feminism on which this study is based: while the heroines of the novels studied here are not always *consciously* created by their authors as feminist heroines, their characterisations and narratives nonetheless demonstrate a "nascent feminist consciousness". Moreover, the manner in which such characters are imaginatively recreated within their historical moments is enabled by the shift in historical consciousness brought about by the feminist movement. In order to facilitate a more thorough understanding of this shift and the changes it wrought on the popular genre of historical fiction, the following section will contextualise and closely examine the evolution of the genre and its relationship with feminism.

**The bearing of historiographic frameworks on popular historical fiction:  
history, feminism and the women's historical novel**

Though it is, over seventy-five years after its original publication, somewhat outdated in its definitions of historical fiction and conceptualisations of historiography, Georg Lukács's seminal work *The Historical Novel* (1937) remains the key text to which scholars in the field habitually refer. Lukács provides a comprehensive account of the establishment of the historical fiction genre, and postulates a detailed definition for what he calls the "classical form" of the historical novel. The genre, he asserts, arose out of the unique historical milieu following the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. The series of political and social revolts throughout Europe around the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw a major shift, he argues, in the conceptualisation of historiography and humankind's relationship to the historical process:

It was the French Revolution, the revolutionary wars and the rise and fall of Napoleon, which for the first time made history a *mass experience*, and moreover on a European scale. During the decades between 1789 and 1814 each nation of Europe underwent more upheavals than they had previously experienced in centuries. And the quick succession of these upheavals gives them a qualitatively distinct character, it makes their historical character far more visible than would be the case in isolated, individual instances [...]. [This in turn] must enormously strengthen the feeling first that there is such a thing as history, that it is an uninterrupted process of changes and finally that it has a direct effect upon the life of every individual.

(Lukács 23; emphasis in original)

Lukács terms this heightened sense of the historical process a "conscious historicism" (26), engendering the "concrete possibilities for men to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned, for them to see in history something

which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them” (Lukács 24). It was during this period, then, that the relationship between man and the greater machinations of history was foregrounded, and the concept of history as a continuous series of closely interlinked events constituting the rational, progressive development of humankind was established. Lukács draws on Hegelian philosophy to account for this formation of modern historical consciousness, which “sees man as a product of himself and of his own activity in history” (Lukács 28) and which foregrounds the notion of progress as “the product of dialectical conflict between social forces” (Wallace 11). History, then, was no longer dislocated from the present, but rather formed an integral component of man’s understanding of himself and the linear progression or development of his society. Contrary to Enlightenment philosophy, which posited the “unalterable nature” of man (Lukács 28), this new mode of conceptualising history asserted that this nature was, in fact, historically and socially contingent. This new, progressive historicism, together with the emergence of capitalist economic structures, formed the basis of the “unique historical moment” (de Groot 24) which produced the novelist who would become known as the “father” of the modern historical novel: Sir Walter Scott.

For Lukács, the appearance of Scott’s *Waverley* in 1814 marks the beginning of the historical novel’s zenith. This seminal work, he argues, was the product of the significant historical events which preceded it and the shift in the conceptualisation of historiography which resulted: “These events, this transformation of men’s existence and consciousness throughout Europe form the economic and ideological basis for Scott’s historical novel” (Lukács 31). Scott’s works, in turn, are the basis upon which Lukács forms the definition for his ideal or “classical” historical novel, which he characterises as an “artistic demonstration of historical reality” (Lukács 43). Lukács

lavishes praise on Scott's novels, lauding them for their realism, their conservatism, and their historical authenticity. These qualities, he argues, are the foundations upon which the classical historical novel are based, and remained the cornerstones of the genre for a century after the publication of *Waverley*. While novels with "historical themes" had appeared in decades and centuries before *Waverley*, these novels were "historical only as regards their purely external choice of theme and costume. Not only the psychology of the characters, but the manners depicted are entirely those of the writer's own day" (Lukács 19). Scott's novels are unique and certainly groundbreaking, in Lukács's view, because his characters exhibited the "historical peculiarity of their age" (Lukács 19): they are true to their historical context, representatives of their times who have "[grown] out of the being of the age" during which the novels are set (Lukács 39). Scott's historical novels are "the direct continuation of the great realist social novel of the eighteenth century" (Lukács 31), and Lukács links the privileging of the realist mode with the importance of historical authenticity and accuracy. For Lukács, then, the classical novel should reflect the past just as it happened, staying as true as possible to historical 'fact' in demonstrating how that past has shaped the way in which the present is experienced. What historical novels bring to their incantation of the past is the focus on the *interiority* or psychology of its characters, and the impact that great historical events have on their lives. The connections between personal consciousness and the machinations of history established in Scott's novels are "of decisive importance for the understanding of history" (Lukács 44) and reflect the dominant historical consciousness of the period. Whatever historical age or event the novelist selects as a setting, however, authenticity is crucial for Lukács, an authenticity which reflects "the quality of inner

life, the morality, heroism, capacity for sacrifice, steadfastness etc. peculiar to a given age” (Lukács 50).

The realism, political conservatism, and historical authenticity of Scott’s novels set the standard for the genre for the remainder of the nineteenth century, a period which many critics, including Lukács, demarcate as the most significant and exemplary in the genre’s history. Scott was credited with transforming the genre, infusing traits of the epic romance form with the more reputable realist mode; his novels were considered to have made “respectable the *denigrated, feminised* genre of romance by infusing it with the masculine, empirical essence of real history” (Russell, qtd in de Groot 20-1; emphasis added). Here, Russell’s diction calls attention to another key facet of the genre during the nineteenth century: its association with a masculine authorship and audience, and its resultant acceptance as a credible ‘literary’ genre. Though women writers were active in the genre during this time, it was considered to be a primarily male tradition, as only the masculine approach to “‘*real*’ history” was “enough to save literature from the clutches of female scribblers” (Wallace 9; emphasis in original). It was understood that women, who were excluded from the workings of ‘public’ history, were naturally incapable of producing the authenticity so vital to the classical historical novel; their contributions were largely dismissed or ignored due to the uncertainty over “whether they [were] properly ‘historical’” (Wallace 9). This narrow definition of the historical novel proper is regularly resurrected even late in the twentieth century by scholars such as Avrom Fleishman, who insist that “there is an unspoken assumption that the plot must include a number of ‘historical’ events, particularly those in the public sphere (war, politics, economic change, etc.)” and that “[it] is necessary to include at least one [real historical] figure in a novel if it is to qualify as historical” (Fleishman 3). Because



women were traditionally excluded from the events in the public sphere that Fleishman identifies, and so rarely feature as central historical figures, such definitions work to discount many historical novels written by, for, and about women.

The classical historical novel form, associated with nineteenth-century realism as exemplified by Scott, is thought by most critics to have declined in the early twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> However, Wallace argues that this “is actually the point where it changes direction and gains renewed vigour in women’s hands” (27). It is in the hands of women writers that the genre has been transformed into something very different to what Lukács envisaged and what contemporary scholars such as Fleishman persist in demarcating. Traditionally excluded from the “grand narrative” of history,<sup>12</sup> the women of this period inevitably had a very different relationship to and concept of the past, and their turn to the genre was driven by a unique impulse: to “[centre] the narrative in a female consciousness which is marginalised from the main trajectory of history” (Wallace 18). This “female consciousness” is not, however, what Lukács had in mind when he emphasised the importance of the individual’s historical consciousness in the classical historical novel. The concept of historiography suggested by the strictures of this form, Wallace argues, excludes women both as significant historical subjects and writers of historical fiction. Criticising his study for its “obvious gender blindness” (Wallace 11), she accuses Lukács of being “sublimely unaware” (Wallace 71) of the ways in which gender shapes the historical

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<sup>11</sup> The trajectory of the development of the ‘classical’ historical novel during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is rather complex and, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this study. Hugh Walpole’s 1932 essay, “The Historical Novel in England Since Sir Walter Scott”, provides a useful overview of the genre during this century.

<sup>12</sup> The terms “metanarrative” and “grand narrative”, used throughout this study, were coined by Jean-François Lyotard “to attack the presumption of historical progress, or indeed of historical development” (Thompson 15). The presumption of historical progress or development is underpinned by particular ideological and political assumptions that purport to be universal or objective, and are therefore incongruent with the postmodern approach to historiography.

consciousness. Lukács is concerned with how the greater machinations of the historical process impact on the personal lives and relationships of everyday people (Lukács 41) – a concern that women writers of the twentieth century came to share with Scott. However, those “everyday people”, for Lukács, Fleishman and others, are those who are in a position to act within the public realm, a definition which, for the most part, excludes the significance of women in the historical process. Lukács therefore suggests that “what matters [...] in the historical novel is not the re-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of *the people who figured in those events*. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led *men* to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality” (Lukács 42; emphasis added). The “gender-blindness” of which Wallace accuses him is evident not only in the diction he chooses to define the genre, but in the exclusion of any women writers as serious subjects for analysis within his study.

As demonstrated by Lukács and many critics who followed his example, the historical fiction genre has always been influenced by and responded to prevailing conceptualisations of historiography and the historical process. Scott’s realist classical historical novel was a product of man’s understanding of his position within and relationship to history; the women’s historical novel, however, reflects woman’s realisation that she is absent, hidden from or silenced by history. The catalyst that prompted this later shift occurred in the form of the two World Wars: during the decades from 1910 to 1950, women began joining the workforce and, later, even the war efforts in auxiliary roles at unprecedented rates (Goldin 741). This projection of women from the private to the public realm in vast numbers foregrounded an awareness of the role of women in the historical process. Moreover, the general disillusionment and crisis of historical consciousness that pervaded Europe during

these decades called into question the “interpretation [of] history itself [as] the bearer and realiser of human progress” (Lukács 27), a concept so central to Lukács’s understanding of the classical historical form. The realisation, then, that women were marginalised by the linear, progressive model of the grand historical narrative meant that the realist mode of Lukács’s classical historical novel was ill-suited to efforts in centring the female consciousness.

It is for this reason that Wallace foregrounds the Gothic as one of the most significant influences in the development of the women’s historical novel in the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> Though the Gothic enjoyed immense popularity in the second half of the eighteenth century – the decades immediately preceding Scott’s publications – most critics of the historical novel ignored or rejected its influence. Lukács summarily dismisses Ann Radcliffe, for example, as one of the “second and third-rate writers [...] who were supposed to be important literary forerunners of [Scott]” (Lukács 30), but who, in his view, are not worth considering because of their less rigorous, more ‘feminine’ approach to history – that is, their concern with romance and the supernatural, rather than the realist mode. However, for women writers of historical fiction in the early twentieth century wishing to foreground the female consciousness, the Gothic form was well-suited to challenging the ‘masculine’ model of progressive historiography, as it allowed them to interrogate “mainstream versions of reality and so-called ‘normal’ values” (Smith and Wallace 6). Though the Gothic’s association with romance usually means that this subversive potential is overlooked, Wallace argues that

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<sup>13</sup> The “Female Gothic” as a genre became a contentious category in the 1990s and early twenty-first century, though it is still largely recognised as a form which “articulated women’s dissatisfaction with patriarchal society and addressed the problematic position of the maternal within that society” (Smith and Wallace 1). Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace provide a comprehensive summary of the ways in which the Female Gothic has been utilised and conceptualised in their 2004 essay, “The Female Gothic: Then and Now”.

the transformation of history into romance allows the reinsertion of women's concerns. At its most extreme this can become the use of a historical setting as a 'pretext' to allow the imagination to rove, but while this kind of writing is often stigmatised as 'escapism', it has [...] subversive possibilities. [...] Women writers have used the Gothic precisely as a 'mode of history' because it expresses their complex and ambivalent relationship to history as both events and narrative. (20)

This "complex and ambivalent relationship to history" that was expressed in the nascent form of the women's historical novel in the first half of the twentieth century was a significant factor in the establishment of the genre. Though many writers chose to preserve some aspects of the realist mode of historical fiction – most of them avoiding, for example, the Gothic's preoccupation with the supernatural and mysterious – the historical sensibilities represented by the Gothic romance proliferate in the novels written by women during this period. These writers, such as Naomi Mitchison and Margaret Irwin, "eschewed the grand narrative of progress in favour of an emphasis on the marginal and discontinuous" (Wallace 129), thereby disrupting the form favoured by Lukács. This emphasis foregrounds the "exclusion of women from that historical narrative and their confinement to a cyclical repetition of victimisation" (Wallace 17). Women's historical novels of this period, then, were often concerned with exploring the ways in which women were oppressed, victimised and maltreated in the past, and in doing so implicitly commented on the continuation of this cycle in the present. The image of the "captive woman", borrowed from the Gothic form, proliferated in such works, and the implications of this symbol of victimisation will be explored in Chapter Two.

The exploration of gender issues in women's historical fiction during the early years of the twentieth century was not always a conscious exercise. Indeed, it would

be several years until the formulation of a feminist consciousness and historiographic methodology would come to be articulated within the genre. What writers aimed to do during this period, however, was to redress the absence of women, both within the genre and the grand historical narrative. Many of these novels demonstrate an intuitive awareness of the issues that would eventually prove most pertinent to the establishment of the second wave feminist movement, including sexual and domestic violence, agency, ownership of the body, and intellectual freedom. Just as Lukács's classical historical novel was a product of its particular historical moment, then, so too was the women's historical novel: it is no coincidence that the genre was adopted by female writers and readers during such a significant period in the history of women's rights. Wallace observes that the "appropriation of the form can be seen as the result of several factors: women's sense of their entry into history as citizens, the rise of the woman historian, and the emergence of university-educated women writers" (Wallace 27). The very establishment of the genre, then, is inextricably linked to the development of Western feminism, during a time when women were 'entering history' for the first time as enfranchised subjects. As a result, the historical novel has always been a form to which women have turned "as a way of making sense of history and their position within it" (Wallace 54). Wallace's insightful observations can be extended by examining the ways in which the formal establishment of second wave feminism towards the middle of the twentieth century served to provide authors with the framework and discourse with which to better articulate their historical consciousness.

While most feminist historians, including Gerda Lerner and Sheila Rowbotham, date the establishment of Women's and Feminist Histories as formal academic fields of interest to the early 1970s, the conscious focus on women as the

subjects, rather than objects, of history had already been in practice for decades by this time. In her seminal publication, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf recognises that women are “all but absent from history” (36), and calls for this male-centred version of history to be rewritten (37). She acknowledges that, given the lack of opportunities made available to women, it was impossible for them to have “taken part in any one of the great movements which, brought together, constitute the historian’s view of the past”, or even to have written their “own life” (37). Woolf is interested in the “[small] facts” of the lives of “average” women (37), the facts which were deemed too unimportant to be worth recording. Even before Woolf’s call for a revisionist history, however, women historians had begun to focus on the lives and contributions of women in the past: in 1919, for example, Alice Clark published *The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, an influential publication which examined women’s contribution to economic labour. Clark’s introduction to the volume, however, is telling of her approach to her subject:

Hitherto the historian has paid little attention to the circumstances of women’s lives, for women have been regarded as a static factor in social developments, a factor which, remaining itself essentially the same, might be expected to exercise a constant and unvarying influence on society.

This assumption has however no basis in fact, for the most superficial consideration will show how profoundly women can be changed by their environment. Not only do the women of the same race exhibit great differences from time to time in regard to the complex social instincts and virtues, but even the more elemental sexual and maternal instincts are subject to modification. While in extreme cases the sexual impulses are liable to perversion, it sometimes happens that the maternal instinct disappears altogether, and women neglect or, like a tigress in captivity, may even destroy their young. (1)

While Clark's introduction gestures towards an implicit understanding of gender as a historically contingent construct – a tenet upon which the second wave feminism would come to be established – the framework of her study is steeped in a traditional, 'masculine' perspective of historiography. Her efforts are laudable in that they foreground women in a landscape of history which has otherwise ignored their significance; however, her focus is on women's economic contributions and thus their presence in the public sphere. Moreover, she focuses on women not as agents of the historical process but as sites upon which that process exerts its influence: they are *changed by* historical forces, rather than the instigators of change. Her evocation of the image of a "tigress in captivity" echoes the motif of the "captive women" which, as previously mentioned, proliferated in both historical fiction and historical narratives of the first half of the twentieth century. It is interesting to note, too, how Clark's women are immediately established as unnatural in the sense that they have cast off their maternal instincts in order to participate in the male-dominated public sphere of economic production.

Clark is one of just a few scholars and historians who, during the early decades of the twentieth century, attempted to redress the absence of women in the grand narrative of history; she is also an example of a female historian who worked within the "definition of traditional history as not only male-orientated, but male-defined" (Lerner xxxi). Lerner, amongst others, argues that while these early histories were helpful in establishing women as legitimate subjects of historical focus, their tendency to foreground the subordination and oppression of women throughout history did little to emancipate them from the male-dominated grand historical narrative: "Essentially, treating women as victims of oppression once again places them in a male-defined conceptual framework: oppressed, victimised by standards

and values established by men. The true history of women is the history of their on-going functioning in that male-defined world *on their own terms*" (Lerner 148; emphasis in original). This "victim mode" of feminism was, for the most part, the dominant discourse in the first half of the twentieth century and was unmistakably politically motivated, geared towards mobilising women in the struggle for legal and economic equality. While undoubtedly effective in this regard, Lerner points out that applying this approach to women's history tells us more about the way in which women were defined by *men* than it does about women's contribution to history:

When all is said and done, what we have mostly done [...] is to describe what men in the past told women to do and what men in the past thought women should be. This is just another way of saying that historians of women's history have so far used a traditional conceptual framework. Essentially, they have applied questions from traditional history to women, and tried to fit women's past into the empty spaces of historical scholarship. The limitation of such work is that it deals with women in male-defined society and tries to fit them into the categories and value systems which consider *man* the measure of significance.  
(149-50)

What feminist historians realised, then, was that in order to do justice to women's history, the traditional frameworks of historiography – which had always favoured masculine definitions of history – needed to be challenged or even abandoned altogether in favour of a new conceptual approach. It was a slow process: history proved to be a "minority interest" for feminists in the first half of the twentieth century, "partly perhaps because of the necessary emphasis on political action rather than reflection or study" (Thom 34). The interest of second wave feminists in the



1960s, however, prompted a shift in the approach to the study of women in history that eventually resulted in the establishment of Women's and Feminist Histories.<sup>14</sup>

The development of these feminist-driven approaches to history were enabled by the prominence of Marxist socialist histories in the first half of the twentieth century. Rowbotham draws extensive links between Marxist conceptual frameworks and Feminist and Women's Histories, arguing that both challenge narrow definitions of historicity and historical progress by calling into question the nature of the histories produced by a reliance on "official" or traditionally accepted historical records, which exclude all but a particular sector of the population (Rowbotham xiv). The values which dictate such records privilege those at the forefront of historical change and are concerned with the exertion and transference of political power; as a result, both women and the proletariat are excluded or silenced, their importance and significance to the historical process diminished. Both social historians and feminists, then, "question traditional ideas of subject matter, suggesting the need to look at previously ignored dimensions of past experiences, that life in the home or factory ought to be as meaningful to history as military campaigns, acts of Parliament, or the evolution of great ideas about the Noble Savage or the death of God" (Scanlan 9). Such an approach, then, favours a reordering of historical values rather than efforts to reinsert "forgotten histories" into already-established frameworks. The publication of Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* in 1963 was hugely influential

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<sup>14</sup> Most feminist scholars differentiate between "Women's History" and "Feminist History" as distinct areas of study, where Women's History is the study of the role women have played in history while Feminist History accounts for the development of the feminist consciousness and the establishment of women's rights. This is not to suggest that the study of Women's History is an apolitical practice: indeed, its approach is usually strongly and overtly informed by feminist principles. Thom, however, argues that "[the] study of women in history – which was mostly initiated by feminism – has [become] detached from the political project of feminism as it has developed its own structures, its own leaders and bureaucracy" (45). While Women's History may not always be *overtly* politicised, however, the structures that Thom describes are enabled and shaped by feminist tenets.

in ushering in a new approach to historiographic methodology, as “[the] existence of historical work which was using Marxist ideas in a non-dogmatic fashion meant that there was a context in which to learn an alternative kind of history” (Rowbotham xv). It was within this context that the study of women in history was able to flourish and become “an essential aspect of the creation of a feminist critique of male culture” (Rowbotham xvii).

This is not to suggest that a single, universal or unified feminist approach to historiography existed. Rowbotham acknowledges that “[just] as there are several feminisms there are several feminist approaches to history” (xviii), and Thom concurs that feminist historians are all motivated by different agendas according to their particular “brand” of feminist politics (34). What their approaches all have in common, however, is the understanding of gender as a historically contingent construction, and the recognition that traditional modes of historiography are inadequate frameworks within which to explore the historical machinations and consequences of the imposition of this construction. Writing in 1979, Lerner asserts that

Women’s history has already presented a challenge to some basic assumptions historians make. While most historians are aware of the fact that their findings are not value-free and are trained to check their biases by a variety of methods, they are as yet quite unaware of their own sexist bias and, more importantly, of the sexist bias which pervades the value system, the culture, and the very language within which they work. (154)

Feminist historiography therefore prompted a shift not only in the approach to but in the *concept of* historicity, promoting a self-conscious awareness of the androcentric values which dictated the means by which we access the past. This meant a radical shift in the way in which issues such as agency and power were broached by

historians who were moving away from traditional preoccupations and preconceptions. Rowbotham, for example, reports that “[we] were always led to believe that women were not around because they had done so little. But the more I [researched], the more I discovered how much women had in fact done” (xvi). Lerner, meanwhile, found in the course of her own research that women “wielded considerable power” through their participation in “organisations, through pressure tactics, through petitioning, and various other means”, which led her to urge that “the ‘oppressed group model’” of historiography be discarded (11). Lerner thus identifies the most significant shift in the positioning of women within their historical contexts as a result of the establishment of second wave feminist historiography: the move away from the “victim mode” of representation to the exploration of alternative avenues of power available to women throughout history. As a result of this shift in perspective, it became “apparent that women had used forms of opposition which did not come within a strictly political definition” (Rowbotham xvi).

This shift in perspective, I would argue, was also the most significant impact that second wave feminism exercised on the historical fiction genre as a whole. As already discussed, women’s historical novels of the first half of the twentieth century sought to recover the existence of women within the traditional frameworks of historical value, redressing “the vastness of silence about women in the past” (Rowbotham xvi); by the 1980s, women’s historical fiction had begun to foreground the *lived experiences* and *perspectives* of such women, and to explore potential expressions of power and agency that had, as yet, not been afforded to them. This shift mirrored the change in priorities already observed in both the scholarly study of historiography and popular perceptions of what constituted history. Although Rowbotham’s focus is exclusively concerned with historiography rather than fiction,

her observations are telling of the preoccupations which compelled women historical novelists towards the end of the twentieth century:

The modern women's movement has produced an immense popular enthusiasm about women's history as part of the challenge to masculine cultural hegemony. History is part of the way in which we have been defined by men. [...] One [way in which this enthusiasm is expressed] is to identify romantically with women in the past. The strength of this impulse is that it is defiantly popular. It refuses to address itself to a limited audience. Its enthusiasm is important because it insists that history belongs to an oppressed group and is an essential aspect in the cultural pride of that group [...]. (xx)

This “defiantly popular” urge to “identify romantically with women in the past” is patently evident in women's historical fiction towards the end of the century, particularly in those novels which self-consciously advocate a feminist agenda. What this demonstrates, then, is that women's historical fiction is often politicised, as are most manifestations of popular culture. Because the historical novel is “a means by which the feminine experience is foregrounded in political and cultural history, [it] is therefore an important force in shaping women's consciousness” (Stubbs ix); in foregrounding the feminine perspective, the historical novel also reflects contemporary political and cultural preoccupations. It is widely acknowledged that historical novelists bring their own interests, perspectives, and politics to their historical subjects, and that these biases inevitably shape their narratives. Neil McEwan, for example, recognises that “we impose the present on our readings of the past, by natural inclination” (6), while Nicci Gerrard suggests that *all* novels “respond to and reveal the symptoms of an age, reflecting back to the reader the context in which she or he lives” (1). This understanding works to undermine and even negate Lukács's call for historical authenticity, insofar as it reveals the impossibility of

recreating an authentic historical interiority or psychology, uninfluenced by that of the author. Historical novelists of the late twentieth century are a generation of women raised during the heyday of women's liberation: they (often unwittingly) bring to their historical subjects a modern understanding of gender roles and performativity, oppression, sexuality, motherhood, and agency. Even novelists who are not self-consciously feminist in their motives are, in their choice to foreground historical women, inescapably predisposed to a feminist approach to historiography which privileges a gendered experience of a particular historical moment. Indeed, "[the] most triumphantly feminist literature [...] is that which has been occupied rather than preoccupied by feminism; shaped and permeated by a feminist consciousness, rather than trapped within an inherited feminist structure" (Gerrard 106). Whatever their ostensible political agenda (or lack thereof), by focusing on women, these novelists invariably seek to highlight the possibility of a "romantic identification" between their readers and the women of their historical setting. The implications of such an approach are further explored in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

### **Mainstream generic romance and the expression of feminine sexuality**

As the twentieth century progressed, women's historical novels proved to be a gradually more dominant force in the literary market, and were being produced in vast numbers for mass-market consumption by the 1970s (Radway 11). As already observed, feminism's influence on the conceptualisation of historiography and the understanding of the historical role of women had, by the middle of the century, begun to produce demonstrable effects on the genre of historical fiction, prompting writers to focus their efforts on recovering the female experience of their chosen

historical moments. For such writers, the goal was not only to bring to light the “forgotten” women of history, but to privilege their interiority and perspective, making them the subjects and agents of history rather than the passive – even hidden – occupants of their historical contexts. This reflected the new-found prominence, advocated by feminist scholars, afforded to the private realm of women within the traditionally public sphere of history. It may seem ironic, then – and indeed, this irony was noted by many critics<sup>15</sup> – that the rise of second wave feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s coincided with a development in the genre of women’s historical fiction that, on first examination, seemed to undermine and even resist the gains of the preceding decades. It was during the early 1970s that the genre found new expression in the rise of the popular paperback romance.

The paperback romance has, since its first appearance, been dismissed by critics and scholars as a low-brow commodification of culture that has little to offer in the way of literary value; the consumption of such novels is what Lillian S. Robinson has called “leisure activities that *take the place* of art” (77; emphasis in original). The unprecedented success of the paperback romance form was made possible by technological advances in the printing and publishing industries, as well as developments in marketing and distribution strategies (Radway 20), and meant that publishers began to favour “category books that could be written to a fairly rigid formula” (Radway 28), and that could be turned over rapidly to satisfy growing demands. It is the “formulaic” nature of such titles that proved irksome to many critics, despite being the characteristic of the form that most appealed to audiences. Paperback romances typically feature “plots centred about developing love relationships between wealthy, handsome men and ‘spunky’ but vulnerable women”

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Wallace (151), Gerrard (147), Radway (19).

(Radway 33). The culmination of the development of this heterosexual love relationship is a “happy ending” which sees the marital union of the heroine and the hero. Authors were (and to some extent, still are today) compelled to adhere to strict publisher guidelines which dictated, among other aspects, the characterisation of the protagonists and the nature of their romantic encounters, the progression of the plot and even the length of the novel itself (Snitow, “Mass Market Romance” 311). It was not long before these formulaic plotlines were applied to historical settings, combining elements of the contemporary romance with components associated with the swashbuckling adventures of traditional historical fiction (Hughes 13). “Setting [was] subordinate to plot” in these historical romances (Hughes 2), as they subscribed to the same principles that had ensured the success of their contemporary romance counterparts.

All categories of paperback romances – whether contemporary, historical, neo-Gothic, or otherwise – proved to be wildly popular with readers, and their success is well-documented: during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, hundreds of millions of these novels were sold every year (Snitow, “Mass Market Romance” 307). Though they have always been largely neglected as a subject of critical study, feminist scholars who *do* engage with these novels are often fiercely divided on the genre’s representation of women, feminine sexuality, female agency, and other issues associated with gender and patriarchy. Many scholars – particularly those working within second wave frameworks in the 1970s and 1980s – have argued that the formulaic plotlines, which favour the “happy ending” of heterosexual marriage and romantic love, reproduce and even endorse patriarchal structures, without critically engaging with or challenging heteronormative power relationships. Celebrated feminist commentator Germaine Greer is particularly harsh in her criticism of the

genre, claiming that such novels are written and read by “women cherishing the chains of their bondage” (202). Snitow, meanwhile, points out that many scholars believe that these “books are permeated by phallic worship” and glorify the “magic [of] maleness” (“Mass Market Romance” 309). Francesca Cancian argues that romance novels perpetuate what she describes as the “feminisation of love”, which in turn reinforces the rigidity of gender roles (199). Nicci Gerrard takes issue not only with the content but the mass market appeal of the paperback romance, pointing out that “[g]enre publishing attempts to popularise literature through labelling” and observing that “[t]he questions raised by the process of popularisation are grappled with by feminism as a whole. Does it bring with it a welcome and rich diversity of feminist thought and expression, or dilute the power and urgency of feminist concerns?” (118). She goes on to formulate the question that has proven to be at the heart of the feminist debate surrounding generic literature: “can a novel that is popular entertainment and is therefore confined by intrinsically conservative rules be converted to radical ends?” (Gerrard 119). Her conclusion echoes those of a slew of feminist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, as she asserts that “[the paperback romance] formula can appropriate some of the trappings of feminism, but it cannot really accommodate feminism. [...] As soon as [such novels] are appropriated by feminism they become something else – no longer the kind of book that sells in its millions to the kind of reader usually resistant to sexual politics” (Gerrard 131).

This reading, though once common, is somewhat over-simplified in its dismissal, however. Since the 1980s, the majority of critics have come to recognise the nuanced relationship that readers have with the genre and the manner in which it portrays women, agency, and sexuality. In her ground-breaking study, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984), Janice Radway



postulates that romance novels in fact provide a platform for readers to engage with complicated issues on both personal and social levels, and as such, have a profound influence on the formation of their identities (113). She reports that the romance readers she surveyed “insistently and articulately explained that their reading was a way of temporarily refusing the demands associated with their social role as wives and mothers. As they observed, it functioned as a ‘declaration of independence,’ as a way of securing privacy while at the same time providing companionship [within a community of readers] and conversation” (Radway 11). It is inaccurate and even offensive, she argues, to presume that readers identify with or wish to emulate the passive heroines who acquiesce to patriarchal ideologies; she asserts that “the satisfaction a reader derives from the act of reading itself, an act she chooses, often in explicit defiance of others’ opposition, lead[s] to a new sense of strength and independence” (Radway 15). While Radway favours a somewhat out-dated reader-response methodology, her approach set the tone for subsequent studies of the genre, which critically assessed the narrative discourses of romance novels and largely moved away from focusing on reader interaction, instead considering the novels as cultural artefacts in and of themselves. Such readings often find that paperback romances provide a platform for expressing frustrated needs for agency and power, and that the resolutions of such novels – which invariably feature the emotional fulfilment of the heroine – are indicative of readers’ *lack* of fulfilment within the domestic realm. The most significant element of paperback romances for many feminist critics working today, however, is the portrayal of feminine sexuality.

For academic and politicking feminists alike, control of the feminine body and the relationship of that body with sex and sexuality is an integral component of patriarchal structures, and the reclamation of sexual agency is vital to establishing an

independent and empowered feminine identity. Elisabeth Badinter is among the scores of second wave feminist theorists who argue that within sexual relationships, “women are always put in a position of submission or constraint” (77), and that “sex is the foundation of the oppression of women by men and [...] this explains their social inferiority” (75). It is unsurprising, then, that sex as the locale of power, and the implications of sexed roles of domination and submission, were – particularly at the height of the Women’s Liberation Movement – among the key issues upon which the tenets of feminism were established. For the first time, sex was no longer a tabooed topic for women; as Alix Kates Shulman pointed out in the early 1980s, “[u]ntil the radical feminists boldly declared [in the 1960s] that ‘the personal is political,’ opening for political analysis the most intimate aspects of male-female relations, women’s sexuality had not for decades been viewed squarely in its political dimensions as an aspect of the power relations between the sexes” (590). This “opening” of female sexuality as a politicised concern meant that sexual relationships came under scrutiny with regard to issues of agency and control. If it can be established, as many argued, that “[s]ince the beginning of time, it is men who have imposed their kind of sexuality on women” (Badinter 65), then what form does a self-determined, empowered, *female* sexual identity take on? How does feminine sexuality express itself independently of masculine imposition?

For women’s literature, the freedom to explore these issues had far-reaching implications, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. The “sexual revolution” of the 1960s, coupled with the focus on the feminine prompted by Women’s Liberation, meant that authors were freed from the constraints which had, in the past, rendered the explicit representation of (particularly female) sexuality taboo, especially within the mainstream market. The 1970s saw a drastic and indeed ground-breaking shift in

the landscape of women's literature in this regard: writing in 1980, Snitow observed that within the "history of fiction in English, it was only the day before yesterday that male novelists had the license or the desire to write about sex explicitly, seriously, as an experience in itself. It was only yesterday that [...] women novelists [...] could begin to think that they, too, had such license and such desire" ("The Front Line" 702). While this new-found freedom of sexual expression manifested itself in a multitude of ways, two main modes of articulation are discernable (and remain so in the twenty-first century). For writers in the "literary" genre of deliberately feminist-orientated fiction, and particularly within the so-called "confessional" novel, sexually explicit scenes became a common means of exploring issues of power within heterosexual relationships. It is common within such novels for characters to express a sense of profound disappointment with or lack of fulfilment in their sex lives, or for sex to be a means by which their partners dominate, exploit, entrap, and even abuse them. Some of these characters become involved in lesbian relationships which, in addition to (typically) proving more fulfilling and nurturing, exclude the potential of masculine domination and imposition entirely. For these novelists,<sup>16</sup> the demonstrable aim is to explore the very real issues surrounding sexuality, power, and abuse that were so central to the Western feminist movement.

A second, and perhaps more playful, mode of sexual expression also proliferated during this period in mainstream paperback romances: the representation of explicit sexual encounters meant to establish a fantasy space within which female sexuality could be explored.<sup>17</sup> Meant to titillate and arouse readers, erotic romances

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<sup>16</sup> Among the most significant and commercially popular of the novels written in the form of the feminist 'sexual confessional' are *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) by Rita Mae Brown, Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973), and *The Women's Room* (1977) by Marilyn French (Joannou 105).

<sup>17</sup> This significant turning point in the development of the paperback romance was marked by the publication of Kathleen Woodiwiss's novel *The Flame and the Flower* in April 1972. Set at the turn of

were, like their more chaste, “sweet romance” counterparts, less respected than more “literary” works; nevertheless, these novels played an equally important role in the formation and exploration of female sexual identity. Carol Thurston was among the first scholars to explore romance novels (as well as erotic historical novels) as specific locales for the enactment of sexual empowerment. She observes that “[m]ore and more explicitly articulated after 1972, female sexuality became increasingly complex in the most evolved erotic romances [...], and by 1982 it was generally being portrayed as inextricably intertwined with both economic and personal autonomy, and ultimately with a joyously feminine sense of self” (141). She argues that the popularity of erotic romance novels can be attributed to the “ways [in which] sex roles have been redefined” during the 1980s, and that these novels reflect the fact that “women have begun to challenge the power structure of patriarchal society, both economically and sexually” (Thurston 92). Certainly, the sexually adventurous, independent and often career-minded women who populate the romance novels of the 1980s were unique to their era, and reflected the shifts in sexual mores and social values of the previous two decades. While some critics were (and still are) inclined to argue that romance novels “assume and reproduce a normative gender hierarchy”, it is widely recognised that “they also undertake to mitigate its effects on the relatively disempowered feminine subject by stipulating certain conditions as necessary for the proper conduct of heterosexual relations” (Larcombe 3). In other words, women are rarely victimised or disempowered in these novels, and in many respects, the unrestrained expression of female sexuality is at the heart of their empowerment:

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the nineteenth century, *The Flame and the Flower* did not conform to the usual conventions of the historical romance, and was rejected by several publishers before being pulled from the “slush pile” of unsolicited manuscripts by an editor at Avon Books (Radway 33). At over six hundred pages, it was substantially longer than the typical paperback romance; more revolutionary, however, was its explicit and graphic portrayal of sex, sexual violence, and physical intimacy, which was as yet unheard of within the genre.

these heroines get what they want from life, relationships, and – most importantly – sex. Indeed, sexuality usually forms an integral part of the representation of feminine identity in the genre: Larcombe recognises that “[t]he contemporary romantic fantasy is of getting it all *as* a woman and, more particularly, of getting it all by be(com)ing a Woman” (45; emphasis in original) – discovering and, most importantly, enjoying her sexuality. Thurston concurs, arguing that even (and perhaps particularly) for the most sexually inexperienced heroine, sex is key to self-realisation; for this heroine, “[l]osing her virginity is a rite of passage, the dawn of a self-awareness that ultimately becomes a fully developed sense of herself as an individual, not defined by sex, marriage, or family lineage” (79).

Thurston was also one of the first scholars to undertake a thorough analysis of a sub-genre of the romance novel which likewise proliferated in the 1970s and 1980s: the erotic historical, also known as the “bodice-ripper” (a term deployed playfully or snidely, depending on the scholar’s perspective). The introduction of sex within historical milieus, particularly those in which strict sexual mores were traditionally believed to be recognised, proved to be a challenging exercise for authors, but at the same time offered further potential for the sexual empowerment of female heroines. The erotic historical novel of the 1980s portrayed “a female sexuality that was no longer repressed or made obtuse and mysterious through psychoanalytic symbolism and innuendo, forbidden to the heroine by the double standard” which celebrated male virility but forbade women from enjoying sex (Thurston 140). Thurston reports that the majority of the heroines in the novels she examined were “independent-minded and strong-willed women” who “refuse[d] to comply with the submissive behaviour expected of their sex” and relished their sexuality, often engaging in intercourse with several men over the course of the narrative (Thurston 72). The implications of the

portrayal of sex in these novels is significant, she argues: “they mark the first appearance of a large and coherent body of sexual literature for women, providing the opportunity to learn to use sexual fantasy and to explore an aspect of their identities that patriarchal society has long denied women” (Thurston 88).

Despite the reactions of some critics, then, the introduction of graphic sexual description in mainstream romance reflected some of the key preoccupations of the second wave feminist movement. Radway suggests that the feminist debates surrounding romance novels were “part of the larger struggle for the right to define and to control female sexuality” (17); among the romance readers she surveyed for her study, however, she observed that the inclusion of graphic sex allowed her readers to *reclaim* sexual discourse for *themselves*. Her readers expressed their distaste for “a sexual slang more commonly associated with male pornography” and were resistant towards what they described as “a man’s type of book” – in which the sex was crudely handled, clinical, and unromanticised (Radway 165). Radway concludes that readers did not enjoy novels which depicted women “as some men would like to see them” (Radway 166), and were therefore resistant to degradation and objectification. Through resisting sexual discourse which they specifically identified as masculine, romance readers were effectively reclaiming and “feminising” their sexuality. This is not to suggest, however, that the expression of women’s sexuality in paperback romances and, more specifically, erotic historicals is entirely unproblematic or even liberated from the heteronormative power relationships established by masculine sexual discourse. Authors frequently mishandle the transposition of contemporary sexual mores into a historical context, even in the twenty-first century, resulting in the disturbing reliance on the “rape fantasy” trope, the repression of female desire, and

the casually unaffected depiction of domestic and sexual violence. These apparently problematic manifestations will be further explored in Chapter Five.

It should be noted at this juncture that women's historical novels set during the Tudor period often complicate both the generic formula of the paperback romance and the depiction of feminine sexuality. The conventions of the romance novel dictate the inclusion of the traditional "happy ending". However, the historical reality of the Tudor women's stories means that this convention is inevitably abandoned.

Traditional history dictates that none of the women who usually inhabit the role of protagonist in Tudor novels enjoyed what romantic conventions would establish as a "happy ending" in heterosexual love, marriage and personal fulfillment: two of Henry VIII's six wives were humiliated and divorced; two were unjustly executed; and two died in childbirth.<sup>18</sup> Henry VIII's daughters, meanwhile, both had infamously unhappy and unfulfilling romantic lives. The impossibility of the conventional "happy ending" for these women's stories means that it is often difficult to definitively categorise Tudor Court novels, as they seem to straddle the generally perceived boundaries between "literary" and generic fiction. Historical romances frequently employ their setting merely as a backdrop to the action of the novel, to add a sense of exoticism and to titillate the reader with unfamiliar customs and costumes. Those romances which take as their subject real historical figures, however, often have more in common with literary fiction, in that they are usually less frivolous in tone and necessitate extensive research and scholarship. Nevertheless, because they are written for a female audience and therefore often acquiesce to the expectations and conventions of mainstream female literature, they also feature a strong focus on romantic love and sexual desire. More often than not, the development of a romantic

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<sup>18</sup> Though Katherine Parr survived Henry, she perished less than two years after his death giving birth to her philandering fourth husband's child.

relationship is central to the plot, though this romance is habitually thwarted and unfulfilled. Henry VIII is almost invariably cast as the “anti-hero” in these novels, an egotistical tyrant who foils the heroine’s romantic aspirations and the possibility for her fulfilment in love. Anne Boleyn, for example, is often depicted as being motivated in her ambitions for the crown only after her “true love”, in the form of an adolescent relationship with Henry Percy, is thwarted by the King’s desire for her. While in some of the novels Henry’s wives come to feel a kind of maternal affection for him, he is never their true romantic match, and their marriages are typically forged against their wills. As such, they are never afforded the personal fulfilment that is typical of the generic romance – that is, the kind of domestic fulfilment that many feminist scholars criticise as endorsing heteronormative power relationships and perpetuating the strictures of prescribed gender roles, as discussed previously. Despite this, these novels do not entirely escape such criticism, as they habitually tout true love and romance as the pinnacle of the feminine experience, portraying romantic love as crucial to the happiness and satisfaction of the heroine. The tragedy of the heroines’ stories often lies in their failure to accomplish a happy and fulfilling marriage with the partner they truly desire. The historical facts thus create a fertile generic tension in their fictionalised form, as the conventions of the romance can never be fully mapped onto the ‘reality’ of the heroine’s story.

Another complication arises in the form of the depiction of feminine sexuality, particularly within novels set during the Tudor period. Despite the extensive research often undertaken by authors of women’s historical fiction, and their commitment – as far as possible – to historical accuracy, only a handful of authors demonstrate a meaningful understanding of Early Modern sexuality and sexual mores, or indeed, even a particular interest in such an understanding. The study of the histories of



sexuality has, in recent decades, been established as a legitimate and active academic field. Critics have recognised that while historians once typically ignored sex as a “constant” biological process that is, in a sense, “outside [of] history” (Garton 1), it is in fact a crucial component of individual and societal identities, that are in turn historically and culturally contingent (Garton 229).<sup>19</sup> The investigation of Early Modern sexualities is proving to be a rich and diverse field for social historians and scholars alike. Melissa E. Sanchez, for example, has undertaken extensive research into the links between sexual and romantic discourses and political allegiances in the works of Early Modern writers such as John Milton and William Shakespeare. For the majority of writers of women’s historical fiction, however, Early Modern sexuality is reduced and over-simplified in terms of religious strictures; in this simplified understanding of Early Modern social conventions, extra- and pre-marital sex is frowned upon by society, and chastity and virginity are valorised in women. For many of the heroines in such novels, it is necessary to negotiate these repressive social mores in order to achieve a fully realised sense of self in the expression of their sexual desires; their “deviant” sexual behaviour is usually excused because they are truly in love with their partners. It should be noted that my study is not concerned as much with the accuracy or nuances of these novels’ portrayals of Early Modern sexuality, as it is with how these inaccuracies reveal shifts in our understanding of women’s agency in more recent decades. These texts frequently reflect a persistent guilt or anxiety surrounding female sexuality in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and historical anachronisms – such as the valorisation of individualism and the post-Freudian understanding of the origins of sexual desire – are useful to my analyses

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<sup>19</sup> The works of both Michel Foucault (*The History of Sexuality*) and Judith Butler (*Bodies That Matter* and *Gender Trouble*) have been instrumental in this understanding of the construction of gendered identities within specific cultural and historical contexts.

only in as far as they reflect these anxieties. These ideas will be further explored in Chapter Five.

**“A postmodern crisis”:**

**history, fiction, and feminism in the twentieth century**

Feminism undoubtedly had a profound impact on both the academic study of history and the development of the historical fiction novel (as well as literature more generally) in the latter half of the twentieth century. It has allowed us to reconsider the significance and role of women in historiography; by extension, it has also allowed authors to reposition women imaginatively within their fictional recreations of particular historical moments, and to offer their characters alternative avenues of empowerment, agency, and sexual expression. However, feminism was not the only movement in the second half of the twentieth century to have an impact on both the study of history and the genre of the historical novel: the influences of postmodernism also need to be taken into account in order to fully appreciate the developments in women’s historical fiction over recent years. The (initially) highly politicised ends of the feminist movement may not, at first, seem particularly congruent or even relevant to the artistic, cultural, and philosophical concerns of postmodernism, and Seyla Benhabib has observed that the two movements, while coetaneous in development, have an “uneasy alliance” (17). However, as the “two leading currents of our time”, it is inevitable that feminism and postmodernism share particular “modes of thinking about the future and evaluating the past” (Benhabib 17-8). Indeed, the feminist movement was, by no means, entirely separate or unrelated to the development of postmodern philosophy: the two are, in many respects, interdependent, and they

contribute to one another and overlap *particularly* in their theorisation of historiographic practices.

A somewhat problematic term in both academia and popular culture, postmodernism has come to signify, in its most general sense, a particular cultural or literary period – quite literally, that which has succeeded modernism (Smyth 9). However, as a signifier of a particular branch of philosophical thought or approach to academic study, its definition is less easy to delineate, and has proven to be a contentious issue amongst academics since its usage became popular in the 1970s. The term first appeared as early as 1934 in the work of Spanish writer Federico de Onís, who used it specifically “to describe a reaction to the artistic movement of the early twentieth century known as modernism” (Thompson 6). Broadly speaking, postmodernism in the late twentieth century encapsulates a questioning of the notions of truth, subjectivity and reality, and problematises the attempt to represent or reproduce reality. Postmodern theory is closely related to post-structuralism in that it argues that the scientific or objective representation of reality is impossible, eschewing the notion of universality in favour of relativity and the personal interpretation of one’s own reality. Developed by some of the most influential scholars of the twentieth century, including Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, and Roland Barthes, the effects of postmodern philosophy on *all* areas of intellectual thought have been profound: “Raising questions, as it does, about the ‘core’ subject of science, it inevitably scatters collateral challenges to all those subjects in the social sciences and humanities that have for so long aped the methodologies of science” (Southgate, *What and Why?* 3). Terry Eagleton argues that the impact on the humanities and arts has been particularly crucial, as it has “cast grave doubt upon the classical notions of truth, reality, meaning and knowledge, all of

which could be exposed as resting on a naively representational theory of language” (143). Though its definition has undoubtedly been in dispute, it would certainly appear that postmodernism’s “greatest impact has been in the areas of fictive representation, textual or visual” (Thompson 19).

Given its questioning of the notions of truth, reality and textual representation, postmodern theory has inevitably had a crucial impact on historiography and the academic study of history; some critics have gone as far as to suggest that the “postmodern crisis” is the most significant “philosophical challenge” that scholars in the field have ever faced (Southgate, *What and Why?* 1), and that “[h]istory is a concept that lives uneasily in a postmodern world” (Booth 46). Previously, the theorisation of historiography has been characterised by the belief that a complete, objective, and truthful account of past events is achievable, and that the universality of history can be relied upon. Beverley Southgate, a preeminent postmodern theorist in the field of historiography, explains how this notion of a universal history was discredited by postmodern philosophy:

in the context of historiography, postmodernism implies especially a challenge to those conventional certainties – such as ‘facts’, ‘objectivity’, and ‘truth’ – in terms of which much history has in the past been written (and read). The sceptical approach of postmodernist theorists questions the absolute validity of such concepts; it concludes that there can never be one single privileged position from which the story of the past can finally be told; it implies an inescapable and inevitable relativism in our own positions in relation to that past; so it requires that we see any version of history as nothing more than a tentative hypothesis underpinned by a possible unstated, but nonetheless specific purpose. (*What and Why?* 7)

Here, Southgate emphasises the subjective, individualised nature of historical narrative; further, she stresses the ideological implications inherent in any attempt to

construct a representation of the past. To write history is to impose on it a particular perspective and set of values, whether social, political, or cultural – and, as postmodernism recognises, it is impossible to achieve an entirely objective, universal historical narrative. Southgate argues that this recognition of the impossibility of universal truth has affirmed the plurality of history, as the “removal of ‘objective truth’ as a meaningful goal is counterbalanced by a perceived need for many different accounts of the past – none claiming any special privilege, but each providing some illumination from its own perspective” (*What and Why?* 8). The acceptance of the plurality of history has provided the opportunity for the establishment of “alternate histories” and reinterpretations of historical “fact” which resist the traditional notion of a “grand narrative” of history, and in turn has allowed the study of women’s history and feminist history to flourish.

The postmodernist approach to historical theory also emphasises the *constructed* nature of historical narrative. History has, since its beginnings, been conveyed in the form of a narrative or story: a sequence of events is composed in such a way as to invest its telling with meaning, significance and lucidity.<sup>20</sup> Hayden White, another respected postmodern theorist, explains that the urge to construct a narrative is a very natural human impulse (*Content* 1), but at the same time is problematic when applied to “real” historical events. He argues that “this value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (*Content* 24). It is impossible to construct a “neat”, coherent and meaningful historical narrative without imbuing that narrative with a “culture-

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<sup>20</sup> Like postmodernism, the modernist movement was characterised by a self-conscious rejection of realism and traditional narrative forms; unlike postmodernism, however, modernist theory is invested in the hierarchical, determinate nature of knowledge, and purports to be objective, universal and scientific in its approach. Modernism places a degree of trust in texts “that narrate the past” (Kantaris, “Avant-garde / Modernism / Postmodernism”).

specific” perspective (White, *Content* 10), one which privileges a particular, subjective point of view. In constructing a historical narrative, the historian or storyteller makes choices in framing that narrative, choosing a particular start and end point, emphasising certain events, personae or qualities, and compelling the listener or reader to accept a specific interpretation of its significance, even while purporting to be detached and impartial. All of these choices are, naturally, informed by the historian’s intent and ideological context. This postmodern extrapolation of historiography does, in fact, owe a large debt to protofeminist and feminist conceptualisations of the construction of history, which will be discussed shortly.

The narrative quality of history, its inherently subjective nature, and the notion of its being ‘authored’ bring to light its intrinsic similarities to fiction. In reconceptualising history as constructed and subjective, postmodern theorists draw attention to the “fictionality” of history, which does not result in the outright “rejection of history but [rather...] an understanding of it as fragmentary, plural and subjective, as a form of discourse which was constructed or emplotted (in White’s terminology) through narrative devices and rhetorical strategies in ways similar to fiction” (Wallace 180). It is because of this similarity that historical fiction has emerged as one of the most important forms of postmodern writing, one which simultaneously emphasises and destabilises the connection between fiction and history. Because both are “grounded in narrative, the two remain interdependent on one another. Historical fiction could therefore be viewed as the quintessential mode of postmodernism, in that it continually raises questions and concerns about the very fabric of the past and present” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 4). In addition, historical fiction is the ideal forum through which to explore postmodernism’s core questions about the notions of truth and representation: by self-reflexively constructing a

fictional text based in or around the events of historical ‘reality’, postmodern historical fiction in fact *undermines* claims to historical accuracy by focusing on the alignment between history and fiction. Linda Hutcheon points out that such fiction “suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological” (*Poetics* 93).

The similarities between the postmodernist methodological approach to historiography and the frameworks of feminist history are clear. Feminism’s challenging of the androcentric “grand narrative” of history has already been discussed in some detail; the recognition that the role and contribution of women in history is largely overlooked, and the insistence on the reconstruction of ‘alternate’, more inclusive versions of history, is closely aligned with postmodernism’s preoccupations. Moreover, feminist historians have demonstrated that the exclusion of women from the “grand narrative” of history is indicative of the patriarchal underpinnings of historiographic mediation – it is argued that “historians are all trapped, often unconsciously, within a linguistically confirmed conceptual and chronological framework that minimises the value of the ‘female’” (Southgate, *What and Why?* 98). Southgate explains that it is through the “insistence on the impossibility of *any* value-free account of history, that feminists have most profoundly challenged historiography, and it is here that they can be seen to confirm and contribute to the crisis of postmodernity” (*What and Why?* 98).

The construction of history is a gendered activity, and it is inevitable, therefore, that many feminist historians – like postmodern historians – distrust historical discourse or any claim to historical accuracy. Sherzer expounds on these similarities between the feminist and postmodern approaches to history:

one of the traits of postmodernism is decanonisation of all master codes, all conventions, institutions, authorities [...]. This general decanonisation is what feminism is all about, for feminist texts deconstruct women's oppression and displace the centre of attention away from men in favour of women's culture and possibilities. In this sense, then, a feminism text [...] can be nothing but postmodern. (156)

Given the alignment of concerns in their theorisations of history, postmodern and feminist historical fictions share particular preoccupations. Just as postmodern historical novelists destabilise the notion of historical accuracy, so do “contemporary women fiction writers use and reconfigure history in their work”, with the view to “deconstruct and reinterpret aspects of the historical process which have preciously silenced or been closed to their female subjects” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 1-2). The narrative strategies that are very particular to postmodern historical fiction, or what Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction,<sup>21</sup> often prove useful to feminist novelists writing in the genre; the effects they wish to achieve, however, are often slightly more complex.

Both postmodern and feminist texts seek to explore the intricacies of the notions of truth and representation, thereby undermining the “grand narrative” of history by constructing alternate, more inclusive versions of history. Feminist texts, however, seek to expose the “grand narrative” of history as inherently pervaded by patriarchal ideology. The alternate histories contained in these texts privilege the female perspective; in doing so, such writing “severs historical representations of women from a monstrous patriarchal hegemony and cures by giving women new plots” (Booth 54). The narrative devices typical of postmodern fiction – temporal distortion, narrative perspective, intertextuality, magical realism, achronology, self-

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<sup>21</sup> Hutcheon's theorisation of this genre, and its narrative strategies, will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five.



reflexivity – not only reveal the subjective and textualised nature of history, but expose the patriarchal structures upon which such histories have been constructed. Utilising postmodern frameworks allows feminist authors to affirm that “femininity (and gender) can themselves be historicised, and seen to be products of specific historical situations; which implies that they change over time – that they are contingent and could (and will) be different from what they now appear to be” (Southgate, *Postmodernism* 47). These texts therefore explore and reveal the processes of construction intrinsic to both gender and history.

Postmodern feminist authors of so-called “literary fiction” – Jeanette Winterson, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Margaret Atwood, amongst many others – are often more overtly and deliberately experimental in their exploration of gender and, in some cases, history. In many respects, authors of “genre fiction” such as romance and historical fiction are somewhat constrained by expectations that they write in the more traditional realist mode. Nonetheless, these authors are – whether consciously or unconsciously – influenced by (and simultaneously contribute to) postmodern conceptions of history, and employ common postmodern narrative devices in their implicit exploration of gender and femininity in their particular historical milieus. It is important to note at this juncture that one of the most significant critiques of postmodernism has focused on its supposed ineffectualness as a tool for political activism. Postmodernist philosophy is characterised by its insistence on relativism and plurality; this lack of commitment to certainties, however, undercuts the possibility of the “political [or ideological] legitimation” that activism requires (Jameson, *Cultural Logic* 263). Marxist scholars such as Fredric Jameson have, as a result, criticised postmodernism for its association with a form of bourgeois apathy, going as far as to suggest that “[p]ostmodernism, postmodern conscious, may then amount to not much

more than theorising its own condition of possibility” (Jameson, *Cultural Logic* ix). It is interesting, then, that authors of feminist historical fiction would deploy narrative devices usually associated with postmodern literature in order to achieve their politicised agendas. While it has been demonstrated that postmodernism and feminism share many of the same methodologies and concerns in their approaches to historiography, postmodernism’s lack of political commitment seems incongruent – in this regard, at least – with feminist fictions. However, as the analyses of the chosen texts in Chapter Four will demonstrate, many authors of women’s historical fiction have achieved some success in appropriating and politicising postmodern narrative devices as a means of conveying a feminist perspective of historiography.

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Historical fiction is a genre in a constant state of flux. Since its inception in the nineteenth century, it has responded to and even instigated cultural trends, and been shaped by cultural and political movements. The concomitant development of the feminist movement and women’s historical fiction as a distinct genre in the second half of the twentieth century has proven significant to scholarly research, and the recent interest in the women’s historical novel means that new studies in the field are emerging rapidly. As this chapter has discussed, several critics suggest that because women have traditionally been excluded from historical narratives, the women’s historical novel offers writers (and therefore readers) the opportunity to imaginatively recreate more inclusive versions of history, and to rescue the feminine perspective from a male-dominated discourse. Of course, the concept of a single or universal feminine perspective has been roundly criticised as a monolithic or essentialising

notion that disregards the significance of cultural formations of feminine subjectivity. However, far from positing a single or universal feminine perspective, contemporary Tudor Court novelists offer instead a *gendered reading* of a particular historical moment, while implicitly acknowledging that “even within specific historical contexts, there is no single feminine identity, but multiple feminine identities” (Hollows 34). This reflects a distinctly feminist consciousness, one that is immediately evident in Tudor novels, not only in the individualistic (and certainly vastly dissimilar) characters of Henry VIII’s wives and daughters, but in the different interiorities, traits, motives, and subject positions ascribed to the same character by various authors. What the remainder of this study will demonstrate is that, whether deliberately or intuitively, authors of women’s historical fiction in the twenty-first century have adopted a feminist consciousness through which to reimagine the role of women within their specific historical moment, to explore avenues of agency and empowerment previously unavailable to them, and to reflect on the anxieties of modern womanhood.

## *Chapter Two:*

# **“Captive women” and faltering feminisms: ambition, sexuality, and perspective in Jean Plaidy’s Tudor Court novels**

*These texts [...] seem to hold the seeds of an analysis of women’s predicament  
and a resistance to the prevailing ideology which would bear fruit  
in the women’s movement several years later.*

*Diana Wallace*

*(The Woman’s Historical Novel 100)*

Eleanor Hibbert is uniquely positioned as a subject of critical study in the field of women’s historical fiction. Her oeuvre comprises of works written over a period of nearly six decades, from the 1930s to her death in 1993, a period which also proved to be the most critical years in both the development of the genre and the coetaneous establishment of the second wave feminist movement. Moreover, Hibbert happens to be one of the most prolific writers of the twentieth century, with over two hundred novels published under various pseudonyms<sup>1</sup> and more than 100 million copies sold (Tod, *A Writer of History*). Hibbert’s novels invariably focus on the relationship between the external experiences and the interior lives of their female characters; she has been quoted as claiming that her preoccupation is with “women of integrity and strong character” who are “struggling for liberation, fighting for their own survival” (Lambert, “Eleanor Hibbert”). This preoccupation is evident across her entire body of

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<sup>1</sup> Hibbert published under no less than eight different pen-names, the most well-known of which were Jean Plaidy, Victoria Holt, and Philippa Carr. Her other pseudonyms include Elbur Ford, Kathleen Kellow, Ellallice Tate, Anne Percival, and her maiden name, Eleanor Burford. The use of different pen-names served its purpose in the marketing of her novels: readers came to expect a particular ‘brand’ or genre of novel according to the name it was published under, and very few readers were even aware that they were the same author.

work, including those novels written decades before the formal establishment of the feminist movement foregrounded such concerns in the popular imagination. A comparison of her earlier works with her later novels, then, provides insight into the way in which the characterisation of her women and her approach to gender issues shifted in response to the integration of the discourse of second wave feminism into Western popular culture. The progressive changes in her Jean Plaidy novels, in particular, highlight some of the most critical developments in the genre of women's historical fiction as a whole under the influence of feminist thought.

Jean Plaidy was the pseudonym under which Hibbert published her biographical historical novels, and was arguably the most successful of her 'brands'. The first, *Beyond the Blue Mountains*, appeared in 1947, and Hibbert continued to publish about two novels per year under the name, eventually amassing ninety Jean Plaidy novels over a forty-six year career (Walter, "Obituary"). The Plaidy novels have been described as "fictionalised English history, concentrating where possible on queens and princesses" (Walter, "Obituary"). They proved wildly popular with the general public and "received critical acclaim for their historical accuracy, authentic detail, and quality of writing" (Tod, *A Writer of History*). Women's historical fiction as a genre in its own right had, at the beginning of Plaidy's career, only enjoyed recognition for about two decades (Wallace 25); by the 1940s, in the midst of the Second World War, its popularity was starting to approach its peak in England, as readers turned to the genre "because it offered escape to another time" (Wallace 78).<sup>2</sup> The historical fiction of this wartime period is "sceptical and critical" (Scanlan 6), demonstrating a "greater consciousness of history or historical processes" (Scanlan 5),

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<sup>2</sup> Diana Wallace's assessment of women's historical fiction in *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900 – 2000* (2005) remains the most thorough account of the genre during the decades from the First World War to the 1960s, and I have therefore relied on her work extensively here. Wallace is also one of the only scholars to examine Plaidy's novels in any detail.

cognisant as authors and readers were of the formation of history during their own lifetimes. What is perhaps most notable of the novels produced during this period is that so many “concern themselves with the question of how private lives and consciousnesses intersect with public events; how it is that we experience our history” (Scanlan 6-7). This was a particularly pertinent issue for authors of women’s historical fiction: because women had been traditionally associated with the private or domestic sphere, they had largely been excluded from ‘public’ historical discourse, a perception which was exploded, as the previous chapter argues, following the First World War when women began “entering into history as enfranchised citizens for the first time” (Wallace 25). The intersection of the private and the public is a theme which permeates women’s historical fiction throughout the twentieth century, and one which had become firmly entrenched by the start of Plaidy’s career.

Within the context of post-war Britain, however, feminism as yet “lacked a coherent philosophy” (Baker 16): the tenets which would prove central to the movement in the decades which followed had not been formally identified, and, as a result, female authors of this period often lacked the tools or discourse to articulate fully what would later be termed a feminist agenda. This is true of Plaidy’s novels: while her works focus almost exclusively on female characters and the restrictions and limitations faced by women within her historical contexts, she frequently appears uncertain or unable to express the full extent of the implications of these restrictions, particularly early on in her career. She is certainly limited in her ability to explore alternative avenues of empowerment for her female characters within their historical contexts, as later authors such as Philippa Gregory self-consciously set out to do in

their novels.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, women's historical fiction of the 1940s *does* demonstrate a cognisance of issues of gender, both within the context of its historical settings and its moment of production: it is within "the 'escapist' historical fiction of this period that we can see the strongest traces of female rebellion against the limitations of gender roles" (Wallace 79). In a similar vein to many other authors of the period, the women's historical novel is thus "used by Hibbert to expose women's victimisation in history" (Wallace 149). Such novels, Wallace asserts, suggest a "subterranean current of resistance to the suppression which was entailed in women's wartime and post-war lives" (88). For Wallace, while this is not "precisely 'feminist', it certainly suggests a coded protest" (88).

The "coded protest" of the 1940s gradually became more explicitly articulated over the decades that followed. During the 1950s, women writers were using the historical novel form as a means to "explore the inadequacies and dangers of traditional constructions of masculinity, put into question by two world wars" (Wallace 101). Significantly, these defective constructions of masculinity were exposed in terms of their correlation to the oppression and victimisation of women, and into the 1960s, novels within the genre remained preoccupied with unmasking patriarchal structures and exploring how they are replicated within the relationship between the private and the public spheres (Wallace 130-1). It was during the 1960s that the motif of the "captive woman" became a recurring symbol for the literary expression of what Betty Friedan, in her seminal publication *The Feminine Mystique*, identified as "the problem with no name". The "captive woman" takes many forms, and she is not limited to the genre of historical fiction: she is the tragic heroine of the modern gothic, haunted by dark secrets within the confines of her lover's isolated

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<sup>3</sup> Philippa Gregory's self-conscious characterisation of her women as feminist heroines is explored in detail in Chapter Three.

mansion; she is the heroic but wretched princess held captive by jealous relatives; she is the frustrated contemporary artist restricted by the demands of her husband and children. Whatever form she takes, she is always imprisoned, if not physically then emotionally, intellectually, or spiritually, by virtue of the restrictions placed upon her because of her gender. She is a victim of her gender; or, more specifically, of the patriarchal values which undervalue and repress her, foisting upon her expectations and demands which feel unnatural and unjust. Wallace observes that the connection between this image of the captive woman and early non-fiction feminist texts, like *The Feminine Mystique*, suggests the importance of pulp or popular fiction as a means to “express dissent” and shape feminist thought within the general reading public (Wallace 139).

Wallace’s critique of the captive woman motif is limited to the Plaidy novels (and those by several other authors) published during the 1960s, but Plaidy’s use of this symbol – whether intentional or not – is evident in her earlier works as well. While recognising that her novels invariably subscribe to traditionally accepted historical accounts, rather than proposing radical rewritings of history, Wallace argues that

[d]espite their conservatism, Plaidy’s texts offer the historical evidence of women’s oppression across history. They suggest an implicit argument for many of the reforms for which second-wave feminists were to struggle: control of their own bodies, the right to sexual fulfilment, easier divorce and the right to retain their children, access to abortion and so on. This sense of oppression is expressed most vividly in the figure of the captive woman who is a recurring motif in both the biographical historical novel and the modern gothic [novels written under Hibbert’s pen-name Victoria Holt]. (Wallace 137)



Many of the themes Wallace recognises in Plaidy's later novels can be traced in her earlier works as well, including those which formed part of her series known as the "Tudor Saga". Comprising of eleven volumes, the series focuses on some of the most prominent women of the Tudor reign, from Henry VII's wife Elizabeth of York, to his granddaughter Elizabeth I. Katherine of Aragon – depicted as a strong, spirited woman forced to fight for her crown on several occasions – appears to have been a historical figure of particular interest to Plaidy, as she appears as a major character in over half of the novels in this series and is the protagonist of three. Nine of the eleven volumes were published during the 1950s and 1960s – at the peak of Plaidy's career – with two others appearing in 1949 and 1982 respectively. It is the earliest of these novels, *Murder Most Royal* (1949), which will be examined in some detail here, as a means of establishing a point of comparison with Plaidy's later works.

*Murder Most Royal*, the first of the Tudor Saga novels to be published (and the fifth in the series, if read chronologically), focuses on Henry's two most controversial queens, those who were executed for adultery: Anne Boleyn and her cousin, Catherine Howard. Plaidy's stance on their execution is clearly indicated by the novel's title, and she depicts them as the victims of a despotic monarch whose every whim must be indulged. The characterisation of the women, however, is not entirely uncomplicated: Plaidy grapples throughout the narrative, particularly in the case of Anne, with issues of ambition, empowerment, culpability, and sexuality. As I will demonstrate in some detail, Plaidy seems to condemn Anne for her ambition even while she portrays her as a victim. Nonetheless, the author does make several positive gestures towards the realisation of a protofeminist agenda,<sup>4</sup> not only in her focus on

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<sup>4</sup> The definition of the term "protofeminist" has been contested by some scholars, but is used throughout this chapter to indicate the anticipation of feminist principles before the formal establishment of the Women's Movement during the mid-twentieth century. Cf. Cott (1987) and Offen (2000).

the women involved in the Saga, but through her implicit commentary on the discursive nature of gender roles and the restrictions imposed by patriarchal structures. Both Anne and Catherine are archetypal captive women: their eventual physical incarcerations before their respective executions are literal manifestations of the imprisonment they have suffered throughout their lives in the lack of choices afforded to them as women.

Plaidy returns to the stories of Anne and Catherine some four decades later with the “Queens of England” series. *The Lady in the Tower* (1986), the story of Anne Boleyn’s rise to power and eventual downfall, offers much the same in the way of plot – but a differing narrative perspective – compared to *Murder Most Royal*, as does Catherine’s story, *The Rose Without a Thorn* (1993). It is revealing to note, however, what has changed – and significantly, what has *not* changed – in Plaidy’s approach to their stories and their characterisation in the intervening years, decades which saw some of the most radical and important developments in both the second wave feminist movement and the historical fiction genre as a whole. Anne’s protests against gender inequality, for example, become much more insistent and vocal in her later novel, as does her resolve to determine her own path in life. Even forty years later, however, Plaidy remains uncertain in her treatment of ambition, empowerment, and particularly sexuality, and persists in her motif of the captive woman. Collectively, however, these novels reveal not only the development of one writer’s career, but the impact of feminism on the evolution of the genre of women’s historical fiction as a whole.

### **Victims and villains: exposing gender roles in *Murder Most Royal***

*Murder Most Royal* is one of Plaidy's earliest and most ambitious novels, in terms of its scope and the rather extensive period of Henry VIII's reign which it covers. The novel commences during the early childhood of Anne Boleyn and, later, that of Catherine Howard, encompassing the remainder of their lives and detailing their formative years. The childhood experiences of Plaidy's characters are central to the reader's understanding of their motivations later in life. This is particularly true of Anne Boleyn, who is sent to serve Henry VIII's sister, Mary Tudor, in the French Court when she is just seven years old (*MMR* 4). Anne is a "precocious little girl" (*MMR* 1), described in terms of her 'unnatural' propensity to characteristics more traditionally ascribed to boys: the third-person narrator declares that Anne "would play to win; she would have her will. Quick to anger, she was ever ready to speak her mind, reckless of punishment; she was strong-willed as a boy, adventurous as a boy" (*MMR* 2). It is this precocious, 'boyish' child, already seen as 'peculiar' in the manner in which she resists her prescribed gender role, who comes to "premature womanhood" (*MMR* 22) in the notoriously licentious French Court: not in terms of her sexual initiation, but rather through her understanding of femininity. Her development in this regard flourishes under the tutelage of "the strange and fascinating Marguerite" (*MMR* 22), who takes an interest in the young Anne's education and development. Marguerite, King François's sister, is hailed as "one of the most intellectual women of her day" (*MMR* 14), in a court where "intellect was given the respect it deserved" (*MMR* 21). Anne is aware, from a young age, that it is Marguerite, rather than his "submissive" wife Claude (*MMR* 21), who exerts the most influence over François; Anne thrives under Marguerite's attentions and comes to

look on her as a kind of idealised model of womanhood. It is after this model that Anne wishes to mould herself: comparing Marguerite to her sister-in-law, the Queen of France, Anne observes that Claude is “submissive and uncomplaining – not a young woman enjoying being alive, but just a machine for turning out children. I would not be Claude, she thought, even for the throne of France. I would not be Katherine [of Aragon], ugly and unwanted Katherine of the many miscarriages. No! I would be myself... or Marguerite” (*MMR* 28). It is with Marguerite’s help that Anne fends off the unwanted advances of François, a man known for “taking [...] his sex as he took his meals” (*MMR* 14):

François himself had cast covetous eyes upon her, but Anne was no fool. She laughed scornfully at those women who were content to hold the King’s attention for a day. Marguerite was her friend, and Marguerite had imbued her with a new, advanced way of thinking, the kernel of which was equality of the sexes. ‘We are equal with men,’ Marguerite had said, ‘when we allow ourselves to be.’ And Anne was determined to allow herself to be. So cleverly and with astonishing diplomacy she held off François, and he, amused and without a trace of malice, gracefully accepted defeat. (*MMR* 24-5)

Marguerite, then, is Plaidy’s profeminist heroine, a role model for Anne’s developing sense of herself as a woman who has the right to be “equal with men”. It is interesting to note, however, that Anne’s most significant means of exercising this desire for equality is to deny the King of France her sexual favours.

Even as a child, Anne is acutely aware of the role that sex and desire plays in the balance of power between men and women. Plaidy does not shy away from dealing with the sexualisation of girl children during the Tudor period, as many contemporary authors tend to do: Anne has barely reached her teens when François casts his eye on her, and her sister Mary is described as “a woman already” at the age

of eleven (*MMR* 2). Mary's example comes to play a key role in the formation of Anne's sexuality, just as Marguerite's tutelage guides her understanding of her femininity. Anne is deeply disapproving of her elder sister's sexual escapades; she is distressed when Mary "return[s] to England from the Continent with her reputation in shreds; and her face, her manner, her eager little body suggested that rumour had not been without some foundation" (*MMR* 26). Plaidy characterises Mary as a slave to her sensual urges, an empty-headed bimbo who cares little for the consequences of her actions as long as her desires are satisfied: "[s]he looked what she was – a lightly loving little animal, full of desire, sensuous, ready for adventure, helpless to avert it" (*MMR* 26). This is certainly how Anne views Mary, and "it hurt Anne's dignity to have to acknowledge this wanton as her sister. [...] Anne set a high price upon herself; Mary, no price at all. [...] in her open mouth and her soft doe's eyes there was the plea of the female animal, begging to be taken. Mary was pretty; Anne was beautiful. Anne was clever, and Mary was a fool" (*MMR* 26).

Plaidy is at pains, then, to emphasise the differences between Anne and her sister, and she bases this contrast on the sisters' relationships with their sexuality. Mary is repeatedly depicted as animal-like in her powerlessness to suppress her urges, and as a consequence, she is looked down upon and disrespected by all around her. The repeated descriptions of Mary as "little" – often by her own sister, Anne – serve to infantilise her character, diminishing her status to that of a child despite her burgeoning sexuality. Anne, meanwhile, associates her modesty and sexual purity with her aspiration to be seen as an equal to men. Although she is described as "susceptible to admiration and eager to draw it to herself at every opportunity", her friendship with and mentorship under Marguerite "had made her value herself highly, and though she was as fond of amorous adventures as any, she knew exactly at what

moment to retire” (*MMR* 38). Plaidy cements this coquettish but sexually virtuous characterisation of Anne when Mary embarks on her affair with Henry VIII: Anne tells her brother that it “makes [her] sick” (*MMR* 49) to think of the honours and wealth that the King is heaping on the Boleyn family in return for Mary’s sexual favours, describing Mary’s behaviour as “degrading” (*MMR* 51). Again, it is significant that the denouncement of Mary’s behaviour is voiced by her own sister rather than the novel’s male characters, suggesting that the author is not attempting to undermine or treat ironically what is essentially a misogynistic attitude towards the expression of female sexuality.

Plaidy’s introduction of a profeminist role model in the form of Marguerite is tempered by this rather conservative, even prudish attitude she adopts regarding feminine sexuality, which is somewhat perplexing even in the context of the 1940s. The ideal of gender equality is reduced to women’s refusal to surrender sexually to men, which belies a post-Freudian understanding of female sexuality. Plaidy offers no other real alternative to achieving Marguerite’s ideal of equality between the sexes; indeed, the characterisation of Marguerite is in itself problematic from the perspective of ‘practical’ feminism, as she represents little more than a theoretical but rather bland and inauthentic archetype. She does, however, serve as a foil to the sexually adventurous, ‘wanton’ Mary,<sup>5</sup> and the contrast created between the two as role models for a young, impressionable Anne is significant to Plaidy’s establishment of Anne’s character and to the development of the relationship that is central to the novel’s narrative: that between Anne and Henry VIII. Anne’s disgust at Henry’s treatment of her sister (despite the fact that both Henry and Mary are quite satisfied with their

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<sup>5</sup> The contrast created between Marguerite and Mary is typical of the “traditional view [...] of the nature of women” during the Medieval period: Levin and Watson observe that “[t]he Church provided two models for women: Eve the temptress and Mary, the Mother of God; thus society viewed women as either pure and virginal or filled with the carnal lust of the deceitful Eve. In either case the culture stereotyped them” (qtd in Gregory, “Introduction” 19).

arrangement), and her attitude towards him as a result, is articulated in her first meeting with him, when he comes upon her unexpectedly during his visit to the Boleyn's family home at Hever: "[s]he, who knew so well how to play the coquette now did so with a will, for in this role she could appease that resentment in herself which threatened to make her very angry as she contemplated this lover of her sister Mary. Let him come close, and she – in assumed ignorance of his rank – would freeze him with a look" (*MMR* 55). Though she is not able to verbalise her anger, she expresses it in her feigned indifference towards him as she pretends not to know who he is, which rather ironically titillates him as he (fruitlessly) imagines how she will supplicate and beg for his forgiveness when she 'realises' who he is (*MMR* 57). Thus their relationship is established in the novel: Anne, rather daringly, claiming a position of power over him as she seeks to vent her anger over his sexual indiscretions, and Henry intrigued with her defiance, her "sauciness" (*MMR* 61), and her "unwomanly intellect" (*MMR* 58).

The rather cold, aloof manner that Anne adopts in the Court of Henry VIII is soon tempered, however, when she meets and falls in love with Henry Percy (*MMR* 69-70). Abandoning her pretences of coquetry and indifference, Anne is "filled with such a tenderness" (*MMR* 69) towards young Lord Percy that she reassesses her attitude towards men and romantic love. Plaidy is at pains to demonstrate that there is no 'taint' of ambition to call into question the authenticity of her feelings towards him: "[s]he learned of his exalted rank, and she could say with honesty that this mattered to her not at all, except of course that her ambitious father could raise no objection to a match with the house of Northumberland" (*MMR* 71). Their brief (and somewhat unconvincing) courtship is only afforded a few pages in the novel before it is cut short by the Lord Chancellor, Cardinal Wolsey, under orders from the King.

Despite its brevity, however, their thwarted romance forms the basis for much of Anne's motivations throughout the remainder of the narrative. Unaware of the King's intervention, she blames Wolsey for the lovers' disappointment, and vows to exact her revenge on him (*MMR* 85). Most significantly, however, her disillusionment renders her more susceptible, shortly afterwards, to accepting the King's promise to make her Queen. Her ambition to be crowned Queen of England is consequently framed as a kind of consolation prize to the contentment she is certain she would have enjoyed as Percy's wife; though she does not love the King, she has nevertheless vowed that she will never experience the "bitter" disappointment of love again (*MMR* 85), and thus finds herself "torn between love and ambition" (*MMR* 169) as the prospect of power is presented to her. In accepting the King's proposal, she concludes: "[l]ove, she had lost – the love she had dreamed of. Ambition beckoned" (*MMR* 169).

While Plaidy is sure to emphasise, on several occasions, that Anne is at first the unwilling recipient of Henry's attentions, it is ambition that eventually drives her forward. Anne is determined to direct the course of her own life, especially after the prospect of marriage with Percy is denied to her. She bemoans the lack of choices afforded to her as a woman, calling the men in her life "spineless" and declaring that, if she could, she "would choose [her] way, and [...] whatever [she] might encounter [she] would not complain" (*MMR* 139). She realises that Henry's desire for her – and her indifference towards him – places her in a position of power that she is quick to exercise: she "saw the intensity of his desire for her, and thrilled to it because, though he might not be a man she loved, he was King of England, and she felt his power, and she felt his need of her, and while he was in such urgent need it was she who held the power, for the King of England would be soft in her hands" (*MMR* 163). It would



appear, then, that Anne makes several positive gestures towards emanating her childhood profeminist role model, Marguerite; however, Plaidy soon prevaricates in this characterisation of her.

Writing before the formal establishment and subsequent popularisation of feminist discourse, which would provide later writers with a framework within which to explore female agency in any historical context, Plaidy is seemingly unable truly to endorse Anne's ambitions or the exertion of her power. The source of that power – her refusal to give in to Henry sexually – is soon negated, as the couple consummate their relationship.<sup>6</sup> Despite Anne's determination to dictate the grounds of their relationship and to retain some form of control and power over him, it is ultimately Henry who makes this pivotal decision, and Plaidy's choice of diction in this section of the novel suggests her inability to afford Anne any form of agency: “[n]ow she understood. The fight was over. He who had waited so long had decided to wait no longer” (*MMR* 199). Anne is later distraught over the fact that she has betrayed her earlier convictions regarding her sexuality, finding that “[s]ometimes her thoughts would make her frantic. She had yielded in spite of her protestations that she would never yield. She had yielded on the King's promise to make her Queen; her sister Mary had exacted no promise. Where was the difference between Anne and Mary, since Mary had yielded for lust, and Anne for a crown!” (*MMR* 210). Anne's ‘indiscretion’, then, renders her little better than her ‘animal-like’ sister, who is so thoroughly denigrated earlier in the novel.

Even Anne's conviction in her ambition for the crown wavers almost as soon as she commits to it. Before their relationship has even been consummated, Anne is

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Plaidy dates the consummation of Henry and Anne's relationship as early as 1528, several years earlier than most historians and novelists surmise the beginning of their sexual relationship. This would suggest that Plaidy was skeptical of Anne's ability to defy Henry's wishes for very long.

second-guessing her decision to accept his proposal, “because, though he was deeply in love with her, she was but in love with the power he could give her, and she was as yet uncertain that this honour was what she asked of life” (*MMR* 176). This uncertainty becomes a refrain throughout the remainder of Anne’s narrative: she is described as “wretched, longing now to turn from this thorny road of ambition” (*MMR* 196), reflecting “that she longed for a peaceful life and would have been happy had she married Percy” (*MMR* 250). Her ambition changes her character for the worse: unsure of her own happiness, “she had grown hard, calculating; she was not the same girl who had loved Percy so deeply and defiantly; she was less ready with sympathy, finding hatreds springing up in her, and with them a new, surprising quality which had not been there before – vindictiveness” (*MMR* 109-10). Even when she eventually achieves her ambition, she discovers that marriage and queenship in fact further negate her power, as she finds that she has to force herself to be submissive to her despotic husband out of a sense of self-preservation (*MMR* 339). As her marriage begins to falter, she reflects that her life would have been happier had she not given in to her ambitions. In a conversation with her friend Thomas Wyatt and her brother George, she observes that of their group of childhood friends, the *least* ambitious of them – the three girls, Mary Boleyn, and Mary and Margaret Wyatt – have in fact found the greatest happiness in life:

‘We hoped for too much,’ she said; ‘all of us except Margaret and my sister Mary and your sister Mary. They are the happiest ones.’

They could look at those three. Margaret who was happily married to Sir Henry Lee, Mary Wyatt who had no husband but a serene countenance, Mary Boleyn who had many lovers, not for gain but for pleasure. The ambition of these three was happiness; they had found it. For the other three [Anne, Thomas, and George], it had been power, and in a measure they had realised it too. There they were – Wyatt whose joy was in his verses and yet, being never

satisfied with them, they could not give him complete happiness; Anne who would be a queen and had achieved her ambition and now listened for some sign to herald in disaster, as she scanned people's faces and tried to read behind their eyes; George who through the fortunes of his sisters had come to fame. Three of those children who had played together – the ordinary ones who were not clever or brilliant, or made for greatness – had succeeded; it was the clever ones who had asked for much – though in a measure they had found what they desired – to whom failure had come. (*MMR* 430-1).

There is no hint of irony in Plaidy's condemnation of their ambition, and moreover, when Anne's downfall eventually does occur, she accepts it as her fault, thinking: "Jesus, forgive me. I was wicked. I was wrong... and now this is my punishment" (*MMR* 480). Later, she declares that she "should go to the block for [her] careless ambition, for [her] foolish vanity" (*MMR* 495). Even in this, however, Plaidy prevaricates: she persists in the motif of the captive woman, depicting Anne as a victim of Henry's despotism even as she is deemed responsible for her own demise. The author's equivocation is blatantly demonstrated in Anne's response to her friend Mary Wyatt's attempt to comfort her before her execution: "Ah, Mary, had I been good and sweet and humble as you ever were, this would never have befallen me. I was ambitious, Mary. I wanted a crown upon my head. Yet, looking back, *I know not where I could have turned to tread another road*" (*MMR* 493; emphasis added).

Plaidy appears to have difficulty, then, in expressing with any conviction her characterisation of Anne. She introduces Marguerite early on in the character's life as a protofeminist archetype, an example of an "advanced way of thinking" (*MMR* 24) after which Anne models herself, initiating her to the potential of equality between the sexes. Anne, however, interprets this equality as based solely on a woman's prerogative to deny men her sexual favours, to retain her modesty and virtue. While a woman's ownership of her own body and the right to sexual agency are certainly

laudable ideals, they are issues that Plaidy appears to have some difficulty in negotiating: it would only be decades after the publication of the novel that the expression of female sexuality would become foregrounded and openly debated in popular feminist discourse, with the publication of texts such as Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970). The only realised example of sexual freedom in the novel – embodied by Mary's uninhibited and indulgent enjoyment of her sexuality – is soundly condemned as base and animal, as clearly conveyed by the stark contrast between Marguerite and Mary as female role models. Marguerite – and by extension, Plaidy – offers no alternative to modesty and sexual virtue in the expression of feminine power and agency. Anne does in fact find that, initially at least, her denial of the King's urges is the source of her power over him. Her thwarted relationship with Percy strengthens her resolve to make her own choices and steer the course of her own life, and when the King offers her the prospect of queenship, she is seduced by her own ambition. Her power over the King is, however, short-lived, and despite her determination to remain in control of their relationship – and of her own body – it is the King who decides when their sexual relationship is initiated. Her agency is further eroded as she takes on the roles of wife and mother, as she finds herself having to suppress her temper in order to bear the humiliation that the King regularly metes out to her. Plaidy is even unsure of how much responsibility Anne should bear for her own downfall, hedging between portraying her as the victim and the architect of her own fate. Despite the gestures made by the author, particularly early on in the novel, towards a sympathetic portrayal of Anne as a protofeminist heroine, she ultimately seems uncomfortable with affording Anne too much power: she allows her to *appear* in control, to toy with the idea of ambition and sexual agency, but in truth she is simply a victim, another captive woman in a world ruled by man. The most

comfortable option for Plaidy, it would seem, was to frame Anne's narrative as a thwarted love story, and Anne herself as a tragic heroine.

Catherine Howard, Anne's equally ill-fated young cousin and Henry's fifth wife, is portrayed in a similar vein, although her characterisation is certainly less complex than Anne's. Like Anne's, Catherine's formative childhood years are important to the reader's understanding of her character and of her later relationship with the King, and Plaidy depicts Catherine's childhood at some length. Catherine is an amiable, pliant child, the "prettiest" of her siblings "yet somehow the most helpless. Gentle, loving little Catherine, so eager to please that she let others override her" (*MMR* 87). This feature of Catherine's personality comes to define her, and eventually leads to her downfall. Her story, too, is framed as a sincere romance thwarted by the will of the King. Her love for her cousin, Thomas Culpeper, is established during their childhood, as Catherine stays with his family after the death of her mother. Sweet, gentle Catherine bolsters young Thomas's burgeoning sense of manhood, as she willingly acquiesces to the role of hapless female. Her "clingingly feminine" manner "touched something in his manhood", and he finds that he takes "great pleasure in protecting her" (*MMR* 99). This desire to protect, Plaidy suggests, forms the basis of their romance. The author labours Catherine's portrayal as a helpless, feeble girl-child at this stage in the novel: she is "the perfect female, for ever stressing her subservience to the male, soft and helpless, meek, her eyes ever ready to fill with tears at a rebuke" (*MMR* 101). Certainly, Plaidy's portrayal of stereotypical gender roles is not without a touch of irony, but she stops short of explicit criticism, and Catherine's willing inhabitation of her role is treated with gentle, even sympathetic indulgence.

Catherine's acceptance and even enjoyment of her gendered role is linked to her burgeoning sexuality, even as a young child. It is rather dubiously suggested that "there was always in Catherine Howard, even when a baby, a certain womanliness" (*MMR* 100) that hints at physical sensuality. Catherine relishes her role as the hapless female as it allows her to indulge this latent sensuality; because she is "conscious of sex, and had been since she was a baby [...] she enjoyed Thomas's company most when he held her hand or lifted her over a brook or rescued her from some imaginary evil fate. When the game was a pretence of stealing jewels, and she must pretend to be a man, the adventure lost its complete joy for her" (*MMR* 103-4). Her childhood indulgences, though innocent, are a precursor to her sexual initiation when she is placed in the rather lax care of her grandmother, the Dowager Duchess of Norfolk. In the Duchess's home, Catherine is lodged in a room with a group of flighty, over-sexed older girls, all of whom are involved in illicit sexual affairs. Anxious that she might report their licentious night-time behaviour to their mistress, the girls plan Catherine's seduction in order to implicate her in their misconduct. They decide to "find a lover for her" (*MMR* 185), and contrive an affair between Catherine and her music teacher, Henry Manox, when she is only eleven years old.<sup>7</sup> Catherine proves "vulnerable" to their schemes "because her mind was that of a child, though her body was becoming that of a woman; and the one being so advanced, the other somewhat backward, it was her body which was in command of Catherine" (*MMR* 227). This is the excuse to which Plaidy repeatedly returns, as though Catherine needs to be pardoned for her sexuality: she is young, she is neglected, and she is exceedingly eager to please. Catherine becomes involved in the affair with Manox "because she

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, while most historians and novelists suggest that Catherine and Manox did not have full sexual intercourse, Plaidy implies that they did, in fact, consummate their relationship (*MMR* 227). However, Plaidy is exceedingly coy when it comes to depicting sex in her novels, so the extent of their relationship – and of Catherine's sexual initiation – is not entirely clear.

needed to love someone [...]. She enjoyed the sensational excitement of physical love in spite of her youth; but her love for Manox was not entirely a physical emotion. She loved to give pleasure as well as to take it, and there was nothing she would not do for those she loved" (*MMR* 289). When she is thirteen, her affections are transferred to Francis Dereham, a gentleman of her uncle's household who, the reader is told, is "genuinely in love with her" (*MMR* 329). Again, Plaidy seems compelled to suggest that her behaviour should be indulged, because she is young and in love, and the author's prudishness in dealing with the details of Catherine's affairs countermand any potential for eroticism in the novel.

Catherine, then, is a sexually active but not sexually *empowered* young woman. She enjoys her sensuality, but at the same time, she is not in control of it: she is the victim of her body's urges, the neglect of those entrusted with her care, and the manipulations of those who seek to exploit her sexuality. Like Mary Boleyn, Catherine is repeatedly infantilised, made to seem child-like despite her sexual experience, and her desires are depicted as base and feral: she is "a lusty little animal, irresistible to men because she found them irresistible" (*MMR* 399). Her sexuality is something which later comes to be a source of shame for her. When her grandmother informs her that a marriage is to be arranged for her with her childhood sweetheart, Thomas Culpeper, she feels as though "[a] childhood dream was about to come true" (*MMR* 554), but is simultaneously horrified as the implications of her past behaviour become clear to her:

If only she had not allowed herself to drift into that sensuous stream which at the time had been so sweet and cooling to her warm nature and which now was so repulsive to look back on. How she had regretted her affair with Manox when she had found Francis! Now she was beginning to regret her love for Francis as her grandmother talked of Thomas. [...] She cried herself to sleep, feeling

dishonoured and guilty, feeling miserable because she would have to go to her cousin defiled and unclean.  
(*MMR* 555-7)

Catherine's marriage to Thomas, of course, never occurs: soon after her conversation with her grandmother, she is sent to Court to serve the new Queen, Anne of Cleves, where she attracts the attentions of Henry and later becomes his fifth bride. She is advised against divulging her sexual history to the King, who believes her to be an unsullied sexual innocent. Catherine, rather naively, thinks that Henry is a kind-hearted father figure, and cannot understand why he is so feared: "[t]hey did not know the King, these people who were afraid of him. His Majesty was all kindness, all eagerness to make people really happy" (*MMR* 587). Her relative contentment with her marriage is marred, however, by her growing love for Thomas, who is in the King's service. Crucially, however, Plaidy asserts that their affair is an emotional rather than a sexual one,<sup>8</sup> as they never consummate their romance – "[s]ometimes he touched her fingers with his, but nothing more" (*MMR* 587). The reader is encouraged to sympathise with the lovers, who feel that "life had been cruel to them to keep them apart and bring them together only when it was too late for them to be lovers" (*MMR* 587).

Catherine's somewhat belated sexual discretion is not enough to rescue her from the same fate as Anne, and when her sexual history is eventually revealed to the King, he signs the orders of execution for his wife, her 'accomplice' Jane Boleyn, and her lovers, Thomas Culpeper and Francis Dereham. While Anne's depiction as the tragic heroine is somewhat ambivalent, Catherine's portrayal as a victim is

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<sup>8</sup> Plaidy is unique in this regard: the vast majority of both historians and novelists are confident (though sympathetic) in their assertions that Catherine and Culpeper were guilty of the adultery for which they were executed. By contrast, Anne Boleyn is very rarely depicted as being guilty of the charges brought against her, the notable exceptions occurring in Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2001) and Norah Lofts's *The Concubine* (1963).



unequivocal, as she is not guilty of the ‘crime’ of ambition; for Plaidy, Catherine’s youthful misconduct is more forgivable than Anne’s desire for power. The night before Catherine’s execution, her cousin appears to her in a dream, assuring her of her innocence:

Catherine could not be reassured, for it seemed to her that though she was innocent of adultery, she was in some measure to blame because of what had happened before her marriage. But her cousin continued to soothe her, saying: ‘Nay, I was more guilty than you, for I was ambitious and proud, and hurt many, while you never hurt any but yourself.’

She was comforted, and clung to her dream. She knew now that she, like Anne, was innocent of any crime deserving of death. Anne had been murdered; she was about to be. (*MMR* 638-9)

As the title of the novel suggests, Anne and Catherine are both victims of murder, of circumstances beyond their control. As she mounts the scaffold, Catherine “looked what she was, a very young girl, innocent of any crime, whose tragedy was that she had had the misfortune to be desired by a ruthless man whose power was absolute” (*MMR* 640). In Plaidy’s view, then, both women are ultimately the tragic victims of the despotic whims of Henry VIII.

If Plaidy’s characterisation of Catherine and particularly Anne is somewhat ambivalent at times, her portrayal of Henry VIII is unwaveringly critical. Although the author spends a considerable portion of the novel exploring the lives and motivations of her female characters, her focus on Henry’s psyche is central to her narrative and indeed to the reader’s understanding of the fate of all of the novel’s women. Her overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Henry is established by two dominant features of his characterisation: his conveniently pliable conscience, which he allows to direct his decisions, and his rigid adherence to gender roles and

stereotyping. At times, Henry is caricaturish in his folly, and his motivations and justifications for his actions are blatantly ridiculous. While Plaidy adopts a somewhat removed, third-person narrative voice in the novel, her attacks on Henry's character are so scathing that at times the reader is acutely aware that the façade of objectivity has been discarded. Though Plaidy is often hailed for her commitment to historical accuracy, her apparent aversion to Henry is frequently obvious as she vents her unadulterated opinion of him:

There was never a man less Christian; there was never one who made a greater show of piety. He was cruel; he was brutal; he was pitiless. This was his creed. He was an egoist, a megalomaniac; he saw himself not only as the centre of England but of the world. In his own opinion, everything he did was right; he only needed time to see it in its right perspective, and he would prove it to be right. (*MMR* 532)

This, then, is the man solely responsible for the ultimate fate of his wives: the murders of Anne and Catherine, the neglect and subsequent demise of Jane Seymour, the degradation and death of Katherine of Aragon, and the utter humiliation of Anne of Cleves. What makes this man all the more dangerous, in Plaidy's view, is his hypocrisy, as he is able to bend that "monster of cruelty" (*MMR* 58), his conscience, to suit his desires, no matter how unreasonable, self-serving, or brutal they may be. Plaidy labours this point throughout the novel, with frequent and rather painstaking demonstrations of Henry's thought process. Her use of irony is rather heavy-handed in such passages, for example when he convinces himself that he should divorce Katherine in order to marry Anne:

Henry was filled with self-righteous anger, for he wanted a divorce and he wanted it for the noblest of reasons... not for himself, but for the house of Tudor; not to establish his manhood and virility in the eyes of his people, not to banish an ageing, unattractive wife... not for these things, but

because he, who had previously not hesitated to plunge his people into useless war, feared civil war for them; because he feared he lived in sin with one who had never been his wife, having already lived with this brother. This, his conscience – now so beautifully controlled – told Henry.  
(*MMR* 128)

It is this “beautifully controlled” conscience that allows Henry to “not see himself as he was, but as he wished himself to be; and, surrounded by those who continually sought his favour, he could not know that others did not see him as he wished to be seen” (*MMR* 189). Anne’s ultimate downfall, Plaidy suggests, is brought about because she interferes with the workings of his conscience: through her eyes, Henry is able to see himself for who he truly is, and the reflection is a disturbing one. Anne “rebelled against his conscience; she looked at him too closely” (*MMR* 319); Henry rids himself of her on trumped up charges because “those great black eyes of hers seemed to look right through him and see more of his mind than he cared for anyone to see [...]. She was more clever than a woman ought to be!” (*MMR* 361).

This final statement reveals the second point on which Plaidy bases her scathing portrayal of Henry: his unyielding observance of gender roles, and his resultant chauvinistic attitude towards women. While Plaidy may not be able to realise the full potential of her profeminist agenda through the characterisation of her women, she is at least decisive in her criticism of misogyny. Again, her use of irony is heavy-handed as Henry frequently airs opinions such as “[women] all want to be forced [into sex]... every one of them” (*MMR* 33) – all but casting the King as a rapist – and “[a]ll women are much alike in darkness” (*MMR* 73). As he finds himself growing tired of Anne, much of the criticism he levels against her character is based on her tendency to overstep the boundaries of her gender role; although her intellect fascinates him early on in their courtship, he later asserts that “[w]omen should be

mEEK and submissive” (*MMR* 368), and that a woman’s “mission in life [should be] to please her lord” (*MMR* 363). He is attracted to Jane Seymour, Anne’s successor, because “[s]he’s all woman [...]. And that’s how a woman should be. Women are women, and men are men. When the one will dabble with that which is solely within the province of the other, it is a sad thing” (*MMR* 410). Given the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Henry, his sentiments regarding women are indicated as obviously repugnant, and are Plaidy’s most decisive gesture towards the expression of profeminist principles.

Plaidy therefore demonstrates a latent awareness in *Murder Most Royal* of some of the key issues which would become central to the Women’s Liberation Movement in the decades which followed the publication of her novel. The ideals of gender equality and female empowerment are clearly articulated in the characters of Marguerite and, to some extent, Anne Boleyn, and the author’s critique of patriarchy and misogyny are powerfully encapsulated in the character of Henry VIII. However, because the tenets of feminism had yet to enter the popular imagination, Plaidy appears to lack the discourse through which to realise these ideals fully. This is most obvious in her inability to endorse unreservedly her female characters’ ambitious natures, and her tendency to privilege traditionally ‘female’ characteristics of emotion, empathy, and a preoccupation with romance and nurturing. Moreover, Plaidy blatantly disapproves of or entirely avoids the expression of female sexuality throughout the novel.

The decades which followed the publication of *Murder Most Royal* saw dramatic shifts in the concept of womanhood within the popular imagination: the sexual revolution of the 1960s coupled with the formal establishment of second wave feminism meant that many of the issues that Plaidy appears to grapple with in this

early novel, such as female agency, ambition, and sexuality, were foregrounded within popular discourse. These issues thus form significant focal points of comparison with Plaidy's later works.

**'In their own words': narrative perspective, sexuality, and characterisation in**

***The Lady in the Tower and The Rose Without a Thorn***

During the later decades of her writing career, a marked shift occurred in Plaidy's approach to telling the stories of history's most famous (and indeed infamous) women. Plaidy's earlier works are known for their historical accuracy and their objective, third-person narration, a style she consciously adopted for readers who "wouldn't enjoy her more heavily plotted, romantic, and suspenseful Victoria Holt and Philippa Carr novels, which were written in the more intimate first-person narrative voice" (Tod, *A Writer of History*). However, for the eleven-volume "Queens of England" series, published during the 1980s and 1990s, Plaidy abandons her relatively detached narrative style in favour of the intimate first-person narration more familiar to readers of the modern gothic novels she wrote under the Holt pseudonym. In each of these novels, Plaidy adopts the voice of the Queen whose story she recounts, and her narrators are acutely self-conscious of this task of storytelling. In many instances, the narrator is looking back over her life as she contemplates her impending death, aware that she will be remembered by generations to come and eager to relate her perspective on her life and legacy. This shift in narrative perspective has a discernible influence on the reader's relationship with the novels' central characters: comparing the narrative voices of Plaidy's earlier novels with the modern gothics written under the Holt pseudonym, Wallace notes that Plaidy's use of

“third person or impersonal narration” means that the “reader is not invited to identify with the women from the past in such an intense way as the Gothics. The implication here is that the ‘history’ conveyed in the Plaidy novels is objective, hence the impersonal narrator” (136). The author’s use of the first person, by contrast, means that these narratives are “highly subjective, as the reader is trapped inside the narrator’s point of view” (Wallace 136). Extrapolating further from Wallace’s argument, it is evident that the author’s “Queens of England” series demonstrates an impulse to allow her subjects to write *themselves* back into history, to rescue their stories from an androcentric historical narrative and to provide an (imaginative) account of their lives in ‘their own words’.

Two of the volumes in this series, *The Lady in the Tower* (1986) and *The Rose Without a Thorn* (1993), revisit the stories of Henry VIII’s Queens that the author dealt with some forty years previously in *Murder Most Royal: Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard*. However, while *Murder Most Royal* is as much the story of Henry VIII as it is of his wives, the two later novels are firmly focused on their female subjects, offering the reader a more personal and intimate portrayal of their interior lives. In both instances, the narrative is framed by a prologue and epilogue which describes how, on the eves of their executions, both Anne and Catherine feel compelled to recount their lives and examine their pasts in an effort to understand how they have reached such ill-fortuned ends. In Anne’s prologue in *The Lady in the Tower*, significantly entitled “The Prisoner” and thus already hinting at the reestablishment of the captive woman motif, she desperately questions where she went “wrong” (LT 3) during her short career as Queen of England: “Somewhere along the years the fault lay with me. Where? I would seek it. It would occupy me in my prison. It would keep my thoughts in the past, away from contemplation of the fearful

future” (*LT* 5). Meanwhile, Catherine demonstrates a similar compulsion in *The Rose Without a Thorn*, although her lack of formal education means that unlike Anne, she is unable to pen her story herself: she entrusts the task to a “good friend” (*RWT* 2) known only as “The Scribe”. She tells this scribe that “[t]he desire has come to [her] to set it all down, to see it all in clarity, just as it happened [... in order to] discover where [she] might have saved [herself]” (*RWT* 1). The novel is therefore framed as a kind of confessional as she declares: “I shall tell you how it happened – scene by scene – and you shall write it down as it should be written, for you will know well how to do that. Then you will read to me what I have said, and I shall say, ‘Yes, that was how it was.’ And I shall say to myself, ‘This... or that... is the way I should have gone’” (*RWT* 2). Like Anne’s, then, Catherine’s retelling of her tragic story is a means of understanding the events that led up to her downfall, and more significantly, of identifying her own role in these events. It is revealing of the influences of the popularisation of feminist discourse that Plaidy has chosen this confessional form for the purposes of historical narrative in her later works. The confessional novel was an important sub-genre of feminist and women’s writing at the height of the second wave movement in the 1970s; this narrative form foregrounded “the central character’s understanding or knowledge of herself” (Joannou 104), and explicitly privileged female interiority and subjectivity as a means of resisting patriarchy or male-dominated discourse. The nameless scribe in *Rose Without a Thorn* acts as a symbol for Plaidy herself, and in both novels, the author positions herself as a mouthpiece in relating the ‘true’ stories of these women in their own words. In doing so, she offers a perspective that has hitherto been ignored by the male-centred grand narrative of history.

In both novels, but particularly in *The Lady in the Tower*, the narrator – and by extension, the author – is self-consciously aware of the process by which history is crafted, and of the position that she will occupy within the grand historical narrative. Anne, for example, refers to Court events that are “well known in history” (LT 64), and to how these events are “recorded by observers and repeated” (LT 70). Plaidy’s own historical research is revealed as she has her narrator quoting from the reports of foreign ambassadors (LT 283), although no explanation is provided as to how Anne would have access to such documents. Nevertheless, the author demonstrates a distinct awareness that historiography is a constructed narrative, a retrospective process of meaning-making that is likened to Anne’s own construction of the narrative of her life. This is demonstrated in Anne’s self-reflexive questioning of her past, in comments such as: “Looking back, I see my mistakes clearly – those impetuous steps which I had taken unheedingly all the way through to my dismal climax” (LT 235). “Looking back” becomes a refrain throughout her narrative as she seeks out the “signpost[s] which [she] ignored” (LT 223), which could have forewarned her of her own downfall. Certainly, Anne’s opportunity to recount her own version of her life is presented by Plaidy as her chance to ‘talk back’ to a version of history that has been limited by an androcentric focus, as Anne deliberately addresses traditionally accepted perspectives of her character: she bemoans being “looked upon [...] as some sort of siren possessed of evil powers which had bewitched [Henry]” (LT 204) and yearns for the opportunity to make known her side of the story. This sentiment is again expressed in the final lines of the novel, as Anne reflects on how her story will be construed by generations to come and speculates that “[p]erhaps [she] shall not be forgotten, but remembered as the Queen who was murdered because she stood in the way of one who had the power, cruelly and most



unjustly, to murder those who were an encumbrance to him” (LT 372). *The Lady in the Tower*, then, is very much Anne’s story, in that it defends her traditionally denigrated character and portrays her as the victim of a male-dominated society, in which she has no control over her fate or the way in which her story is enacted.

Despite the more intimate perspective afforded by the shift in narrative voice, then, Anne and Catherine are characterised in a very similar manner to their portrayal in *Murder Most Royal* in that both are depicted as the tragic victims of the whims of a despotic man. Much of their storylines and the key facets of their characters remain unchanged; while their narratives are more intimate, Plaidy has not gone so far as to recant her earlier account of their lives. Most significantly, in the case of Anne in *The Lady in the Tower*, the author’s uncertainty in allowing the narrator to exercise her ambition and agency persists, as does the motif of the captive woman. Anne is, however, decidedly more defiant than her counterpart in *Murder Most Royal*, and more active in her attempts to assert her will.

As they do in the earlier novel, Anne’s childhood role models in *The Lady in the Tower* prove to have a significant influence on the formation of her character, and particularly on her identity as a woman. The first of these role models is Mary Tudor, the King’s sister, an unapologetically subversive and spirited woman who contrives to hasten the death of her aging husband, the King of France (LT 21, 25), so that she may marry the man of her choosing. Mary’s defiance and her continual railing against the injustices perpetrated against her sex (LT 22-3) have a profound impact on Anne, who at this stage is not quite six years old; this impact is further reinforced under the subsequent tutelage of Marguerite, the sister of the new King of France. Marguerite is described as Anne’s “teacher and mentor” (LT 82), and, as she does in *Murder Most Royal*, she instils in Anne a sense of her own worth as a woman. In *The Lady in the*

*Tower*, however, Marguerite is a more convincingly developed character, no longer a bland archetype symbolically representing the empowerment of women and the equality between the sexes. Marguerite's influence on the Court and her brother is significant and palpable as she shapes France's political and religious policies; it is his profound respect for his sister that prompts King François's respect for all women, despite his philandering. It is also Marguerite who sparks young Anne's interest in European politics and the teachings of Martin Luther (*LT 57*), which has a significant bearing on her later career as Queen of England. Thus Marguerite provides Anne with a very real model of female empowerment; although it is her brother who wears the crown of France, his respect for and even reliance on her opinion, her formidable intellect, and her interest in "every new idea which was presented to her" (*LT 25*) mean that it is Marguerite who is truly the ruler of her country. She is portrayed in stark contrast to the female characters who adopt more traditional gender roles. Anne expresses her irritation with François's wife Claude, for example, for her quiet submissiveness: "there had been times when I had been inclined to despise her for her meek acceptance of her lot. After all, she was a king's daughter. Had I been in her place, I should have insisted on being treated with more respect" (*LT 54*). Marguerite's character, by contrast, is an example for Anne of a woman's ability to realise her agency and power with real effect.

Although Marguerite's characterisation as a protofeminist role model is certainly more effective in this later novel, Plaidy is unable to translate this characterisation into a more progressive depiction of female sexual agency; indeed, her representation of feminine sexuality is perhaps even more conservative in *The Lady in the Tower* than in her earlier novel. Marguerite is once again portrayed as a proponent of female virtue and chastity. Anne admires her for her "modesty", which

she accounts for as “due to her greater wisdom” (LT 58) compared to other women. Similarly to *Murder Most Royal*, it is the example of her sister Mary’s ‘wanton’ affairs that shapes Anne’s attitude towards her own sexuality: she describes her sister as “one of those women [...] whose main purpose in life seemed to be to satisfy her sexual desires” (LT 62), and is horrified at this “failing” in her (LT 62). When Mary embarks on an affair with François and several other men of the French Court, and subsequently earns herself a reputation as the “very willing little English mare” that “anyone could ride at any time it suited him” (LT 62), Anne is utterly humiliated, and turns to Marguerite for advice. Marguerite expresses her sympathy for both Boleyn sisters, and counsels Anne: “It is not that she has taken many lovers that is so disastrous; it is her manner of doing so. She blatantly enjoys it. [...] You will always remember your sister and never, *never* make the mistakes that she has” (LT 63-4; emphasis in original). Anne takes this advice to heart; in her effort not to “follow in Mary’s humiliating path” (LT 64) of enjoying her sensuality, she represses her sexuality entirely, later realising that “[she] was so anxious to show them that [she] was not like Mary that [...]she] developed into being sexually cold” (LT 75). Marguerite praises her for this, declaring that it shows that Anne has “a dignity and respect” for herself (LT 78). Anne thus comes to equate her sexual abstinence with her sense of self-respect and her esteem as a woman; she also comes to realise that her aloofness ironically enhances her appeal, and grants her a kind of power over her many admirers (LT 105). Such is the case with Henry, who – as he does in *Murder Most Royal* – remains in thrall of Anne’s refusal to grant him sexual favours. Anne is regretful when she is no longer able to delay the consummation of their relationship; because she is “not a sensual woman”, she “did not look forward to the consummation with any pleasure”, proclaiming that her “virginity had been [her] strength” (LT 266).

Despite all that she has learned under the tutelage of Mary Tudor and Marguerite, then, Anne's power is once again largely reduced to the repression of her sexuality.<sup>9</sup>

Plaidy's depiction of sexuality in this regard is certainly anachronistic: the notion of sexual repression is a thoroughly modern one which presupposes Freud's 'discovery', at the turn of the twentieth century, of the sexual unconscious and its relationship to identity, knowledge, and power (Foucault 5). Anne's attitude towards her own sexuality can be understood in terms of Foucault's "repressive hypothesis", which he outlines in *The History of Sexuality*, as it recalls the "modern prudishness" that he associates with the rise of the bourgeois society in the seventeenth century (Foucault 17). The "carefully confined" sexuality and "sterile behaviour" (Foucault 3-4) of which Foucault is so critical is embodied by Anne's character, demonstrating how Plaidy has transposed a contemporary sexual interiority into her historical setting. However, rather than appropriating sexual expression as a means of female empowerment – as the authors of erotic historicals or 'bodice-rippers' tended to do in the 1970s and 1980s<sup>10</sup> – Plaidy persists in depicting abstinence as the only means for her female characters to retain control and exercise power.

Despite the repression of her sexuality, Anne is, on the whole, a more defiant and wilful character in *The Lady in the Tower* than she is in the earlier novel, and is

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<sup>9</sup> There is little progress demonstrated in terms of Plaidy's depiction of feminine sexuality in *The Rose Without a Thorn*, too. Catherine's 'wanton behaviour' is repeatedly excused on the grounds of her youth and relative innocence, and she is frequently coerced or manipulated into sexual encounters. As she does in *Murder Most Royal*, Catherine eventually proves regretful of her past, describing herself as "degraded" (RWT 43) and suffering from "bitter humiliation" (RWT 44) over her sensual pleasures when her relationships disintegrate. During a period of imposed chastity, she finds that she prefers a "restricted life [...] being the young, innocent girl [she] could have been if [she] had never known those nights in the Long Room" (RWT 86). Plaidy appears to believe that her sympathetic portrayal of Catherine depends on the reader's understanding that she is not intrinsically lustful or sensual, but that she has simply been led astray. Catherine, like her counterpart in *Murder Most Royal*, is ultimately an innocent child subject to the will of others (RWT 172), the victim of the powerlessness of her gender. As her scribe succinctly comments on Henry's marital career in the final lines of the novel: for his wives, "[i]t was not a case of choosing, but being chosen" (RWT 260).

<sup>10</sup> The depiction of female sexuality in erotic historical novels will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

certainly more vocal and confident in voicing her dissatisfaction with her lot as a woman. Individuality and independence are ideals on which Anne places a high value, and, from an early age, she regularly rails against the limitations and lack of agency foisted upon her because of her sex. She expresses her irritation that women are seen as little more than “minions” (*LT* 91), and laments the fact that she, “who tried to regard [herself] as an individual, was nothing more than a pawn to be set on a checkerboard at the spot where [she] could be most useful to those who commanded [her]” (*LT* 82). Throughout the novel, she repeatedly reasserts her determination not to be treated as she sees women typically are, particularly with regard to the arrangement of her marriage; her commitment to the ideal of equality between the sexes is expressed in her forceful proclamation to her proposed husband, James Butler: “When I marry, it will have to be *my* will. [...] I have always believed that men and women should have freedom of choice in what concerns them most” (*LT* 117; emphasis in original). Later, after the birth of her daughter, she contemplates the laws of succession which would displace the baby Elizabeth in the event of the birth of a son: “I often thought of the injustice done to my sex. Why should not the child sleeping in the cradle be as great a monarch as any man?” (*LT* 304). Anne – and by extension, Plaidy – shows an even greater and more articulated awareness in this later novel, then, of the limitations enforced by prescribed gender roles, and of the injustices of patriarchal ideologies; she is certainly more confident and vocal in expressing her opposition to them, although perhaps restricted in her ability to *actively* challenge them.

Nevertheless, confined as she is to the conventions of the historical romance, Plaidy remains uncertain of the extent to which Anne should be allowed to exercise her ambition, despite her endorsement of Anne’s desire for respect, equality, and

empowerment. As in *Murder Most Royal*, Anne's ambition in this later novel is condemned rather than lauded, and once again her narrative is framed as a thwarted love story. She describes herself as "broken-hearted" (LT 131) when her marriage to her sweetheart, Henry Percy, is prevented, and once again vows to exact her revenge on Cardinal Wolsey for his interference (LT 134). Henry's attentions and vows of love are neither sought nor encouraged; indeed, she initially yearns for him to leave her unmolested, and has no ambitions to exploit his desire for her in order to further herself or her family (LT 155-6). When he follows her to Hever after she flees from Court, she realises that "he was not going to let [her] escape" (LT 175), and the notion of entrapment is sustained throughout her narrative, echoing the captive woman motif of Plaidy's earlier novels. When he offers her the prospect of becoming Queen, Anne is once again depicted as "dazzled" (LT 188), declaring that "a woman would be a fool to turn her back on such a glittering proposal" (LT 185) and viewing it as an opportunity to destroy Wolsey. Almost immediately, however – echoing her behaviour in *Murder Most Royal* – Anne questions the wisdom of her ambitious path: "always at the back of [her] mind was the thought that it might be better if the whole thing were forgotten" (LT 188). She confesses to the reader: "I looked upon my brilliant future as a kind of consolation prize. I had lost what I had most desired, and in place of love I had ambition. I could not be Henry Percy's wife – which in my heart I believed would have brought me the greater happiness – so I would be the Queen of England" (LT 233). Once again, then, ambition is the consolation prize for lost love; indeed, the ambition of queenship "had been forced upon [her]" (LT 236). During the long wait for Henry's divorce to be granted, she is "not sure which way [she] wanted to go. [She] was vaguely aware of a crown for which [she] was reaching... and on the other hand there was a delicious peace which seemed to [her] infinitely more

desirable” (LT 219) than the power and position she would hold as Queen. Again as she does in *Murder Most Royal*, when she achieves her ambition she finds it “an uneasy place” (LT 318) to occupy, and speculates that her less ambitious sister – who has found love and happiness in the arms of a less important man – was really the wisest of the Boleyn siblings (LT 351).

Despite her achievements, then, Anne does not find the satisfaction and happiness she is sure she would have enjoyed had she married a man she loved: ambition proves to be a poor substitute for ‘true’ love. By the novel’s end, Plaidy is once again uncertain whether to portray Anne as the tragic victim or the architect of her own demise:

When death is close, one thinks back over the past, and what looms large in one’s mind are the actions one regrets.

I wished that I had been a better person. I could see clearly now my folly at every turn. I am not sure whether any action of mine could have altered my fate. I was dealing with a man who was corrupted by the great power he possessed, a mean, selfish man, a monster of a man, a murderer.

I had never really wanted him. He had forced himself upon me. I had been enamoured of pomp and power, I admit. I had grasped at those things in life which had seemed the greatest prizes, for I had been blinded by the glitter of all that had been laid before me. I had been tempted, as Christ was by Satan, but I had not had the good sense to turn away from temptation. (LT 370)

Anne’s prevarication here reflects Plaidy’s own uncertainty: is it possible to portray Anne as a strong, wilful, and empowered woman who pursues her ambitions without suggesting that she ‘got what she deserved’ in the end? The safer option, it would seem – the option which ensures the reader’s sympathy remains unchallenged – is to once again depict Anne as a tragic heroine, a woman who had little control over her life and fell victim to a male-dominated system. In doing so, however, Plaidy fails to

fully realise the possibilities of agency and empowerment she constructs elsewhere in the text, and to utilise the discourse of popularised feminism that had been unavailable to her earlier on in her career.

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During decades between the publication of *Murder Most Royal* and the two later novels examined in this chapter, *The Lady in the Tower* and *The Rose Without a Thorn*, a new trend in the mainstream literary market saw a dramatic increase in the number of autobiographies and memoirs being published. Leigh Gilmore has dubbed this trend the “memoir boom”, and observes that “new English language volumes categorised as ‘autobiography or memoir’ roughly tripled from the 1940s to the 1990s” (Gilmore 128). This dramatic increase was facilitated, to a large extent, by a postmodern discourse – gradually incorporated into various forms of popular culture – which authorised a certain liberation from an empirical idea of objective truth. Consequently, as the notions of universality and certainty were challenged on an increasingly larger scale in mainstream art, literature, and philosophy, a new kind of ‘history’ was privileged, one which was to be found in the subjective experiences of the individual’s reality. The popularity of the memoir genre, Gilmore suggests, demonstrates a widespread interest in “private lives [as being] emblematic of unofficial histories” (128). In this sense, the “private lives” disclosed in memoirs and autobiographies were politicised, in that they explored the individual’s relationship to what had always been considered the public realm of ‘historical reality’. A similar process is at work in the genre of the feminist confessional: in its very subjective exploration of the implications of gender in both the private and public spheres, as



well as the relationship that exists between these realms, the confessional form represents an artistic manifestation of the second wave feminist slogan, “the personal is political”.

Plaidy’s later novels take the form of a hybrid genre that closely resembles both the memoir and the feminist confessional: they are fictionalised autobiographies which recount the personal experience of a particular historical moment, while at the same time exploring the private and public implications of the social construction of womanhood. The shift from an ostensibly objective, removed third-person narration to the more intimate and subjective first-person narrator is probably the most significant difference between *Murder Most Royal* and the two later novels. In the latter years of her career, the author appears to have abandoned the need for the façade of objectivity and embraced the opportunity to imaginatively recover a feminine perspective of historical events. The confessional style of these novels positions Plaidy as offering an account of her narrators’ stories ‘in their own words’; the reader, consequently, acts as the narrators’ confessor, entrusted with their highly subjective account, and is invited to empathise with and relate to their plights as captive women unable to escape the strictures of patriarchy. In addition, these later novels demonstrate an acutely self-conscious understanding of the process by which the grand historical narrative is constructed. Anne’s astute observation that “[o]ne does not always realise at the time what effect historical events have upon our lives” (*LT* 64) suggests Plaidy’s own awareness of the process of meaning-making inherent in the construction of any narrative, whether it be fictional or historical, and the consequences this has for the women whose stories are elided for being ‘less important’.

Despite this shift in narrative focus, however, there is in fact very little difference in terms of the characterisation of the two main protagonists between *Murder Most Royal* and the two later novels. Catherine remains the victim of her own naïveté, her base sexual desires, and the manipulations of those in positions of greater power; ultimately, however, she is the victim of a despotic monarch who is given free reign to exercise his cruelty and selfishness within a patriarchal framework. Anne, meanwhile, remains an ambiguous figure, seemingly deserving of punishment for her (wavering) ambition and desire for agency, but, at the same time, as much a victim as Catherine. Ironically, it is Marguerite – a minor character in both *Murder Most Royal* and *The Lady in the Tower* – who demonstrates the most convincing development as a protofeminist heroine, transforming from an archetypal but unconvincing proponent of gender equality to a true figure of female empowerment, at least in terms of her influence over the politics and religion of the French Court. Plaidy does not appear confident enough, however, to allow Marguerite's influence to translate into Anne's realisation of empowered womanhood. Even more perplexingly, the sexual conservatism of Plaidy's characters only intensifies in the later novels, with Anne lauded for being "sexually cold" while Catherine is depicted as a victim to her own body's "animal-like" desires.

This conservatism is a failing of Plaidy's that several critics have identified; Wallace, for example, notes that "[a]lthough Plaidy is concerned to demonstrate women's oppression within patriarchal structures (especially marriages), she is more comfortable valorising the emotional and 'feminine' woman than the woman who likes and uses power" (Wallace 139), or one who, even more scandalously, enjoys her own sexuality. This tendency to favour the depiction of 'emotional' women may be a result of her rather conservative subscription to the conventions of the historical

romance genre: all three of the novels are framed as thwarted love stories, with the motivations of her female protagonists largely reduced to their idealisation of ‘true’ love and romance. This, in fact, is a criticism that is frequently levelled against women’s historical fiction: that of “reducing women’s history to the personal” (Wallace 118) and focusing almost exclusively on romantic relationships and the details of the heroine’s costume. As Wallace goes on to observe:

[i]n Plaidy’s novels the shaping forces of history are reduced to interpersonal relations, particularly familial and sexual relations. Although in one sense this corrects the exclusion of these elements from ‘real solemn history’, it is equally reductive. ‘History’ is narrowed down to the family relations of Royalty. [...] Family or sexual relationships shape the form of the texts, and other historical events – political, social, religious, cultural – are introduced only as and when they immediately affect family members, often in language which is reminiscent of school textbooks. (137-8)

Though certainly reductive in the sense that Wallace critiques,<sup>11</sup> Plaidy’s novels should not be summarily dismissed in terms of their contribution to the imaginative recovery of women’s history and their implicit recognition of restrictive patriarchal structures. While her female characters may prove disappointing as protofeminist heroines, Plaidy demonstrates an awareness of the discursive and ultimately restrictive nature of gender roles, echoing a wider recognition of the issues which became the foundations of the feminist movement; such issues include the right to ownership of the body, the restrictions imposed by marriage and motherhood, freedom of choice and self-determination, and the desire to exercise power within both the private and public spheres. Moreover, Plaidy’s novels are soundly critical of

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<sup>11</sup> Patricia Stubbs makes a similar observation about women’s fiction more generally, stating that “[a]t its best [the women’s novel] explores private relationships and moral behaviour as an expression of external social and economic realities, but its central, its defining preoccupation, remains the elaboration of an intensely personal world of individual experience, the moral structure of which is built up around carefully organised patterns of personal relationships” (xi)

misogyny and overbearing patriarchy. In all three novels, but particularly in *Murder Most Royal*, Henry epitomises “[t]he self-righteous tyranny of patriarchal authority figures” which “result from the restrictions of a deforming model of masculinity” (Wallace 104). The author’s awareness of the destructive and limiting nature of gendered roles – for both men and women – is thus clearly demonstrated.

The developing concerns of the feminist movement are encapsulated in Plaidy’s earlier novel in the motif of the captive woman; the author persists with this somewhat outdated motif in her later works, suggesting that she was unable or perhaps unwilling to integrate and articulate the second wave feminist principles that naturally informed authors of later generations and which had, by the latter decades of the twentieth century, become embedded within the discourses of Western popular culture. The trajectory of her career and the changes (or lack thereof) in her approach to issues of gender and equality do, however, highlight some of the most significant developments within the genre of women’s historical fiction in response to the advent of second wave feminism: the characterisation of the feminist heroine and the avenues of empowerment made available to her within her historical context; the shift in the perception of historiography and the self-conscious awareness of the process of historical meaning-making; and the change in the attitude and depiction of female sexuality and desire. These issues will all be discussed in some detail in the chapters which follow.

### *Chapter Three:*

## **The Feminist Heroine and the resistance of male-dominated historical discourse in Philippa Gregory's Tudor Court novels**

*For women in particular, living in a society dominated  
by the power of men, survival itself is a triumph.  
Philippa Gregory  
("Foreword" viii)*

As an academic and self-identified feminist, Philippa Gregory is acutely aware that her own sensibilities and understanding of the position of women in history bear an indelible influence on her novels:

Indeed it seems to me that all historical fiction has two time frames revealed in the text: the fictional period which the author conveys more or less well, and the author's period which s/he reveals because the story is created in a consciousness which is determined by the time of the author. The story is not created in a time-free zone. It is created in my mind and my mind is that of a late twentieth century educated Western woman.

(Gregory, personal correspondence)

Gregory's comments here are revealing of her self-awareness as a writer; her background in academia means that she has engaged directly with theories of feminism and historiography, and she is therefore cognisant of their influences on both her own work and mainstream popular culture more generally. She is therefore unique (and of particular interest) among the writers studied in this dissertation in terms of how she resolves the tensions between genre conventions and her own political and intellectual dispositions. Gregory is one of the most prominent authors of

a generation of self-consciously feminist writers and historians who, from the 1980s onwards, have been concerned with the “recovery” or reconstruction of women’s history, using fiction as a means of imaginatively repositioning women within male-dominated historical discourse (Wallace 176-7). Such novels are usually centered around the experiences of a heroine whose understanding of her historical moment is informed by the tenets of contemporary Western feminism, often at the expense of historical credibility. Unlike the captive heroines of Plaidy’s era, the women of these novels play an active part in resisting male domination, to varying degrees of success. In many respects, they are extraordinary women who do not belong to the era in which they find themselves: as mouthpieces for their authors, they are transposed twentieth-century feminists whose observations of their historical contexts reveal the limitations and restrictions imposed by essentially misogynistic societal structures.

Gregory is no different in this regard: her historical novels invariably rely on the construction of a heroine whose perspective mirrors that of the author. She admits that “[s]ince [she] create[s] them (albeit using the historical record to give [her] some of their defining characteristics and behaviours) they are bound to contain [her] world view” (Gregory, personal correspondence). Committed as she is to historical accuracy, however,<sup>1</sup> and bound by the heteronormative ideals of the historical

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory’s dedication to ‘fact’ in her novels is a well-documented claim, repeated in the author biographies and author’s notes of her novels as well as in countless interviews she has given. It is also a claim which has incited the ire of historians and critics, who passionately refute the historical accuracy of her novels. Susan Bordo acknowledges that Gregory’s detractors range from being “politely critical to seething” (221), and observes that “[w]hat seems most offensive to historians are not Gregory’s distortions of fact, but her self-deceptive and self-promoting chutzpah” (226). Tudor historian and creator of the website *The Tudor Tutor*, Barb Alexander, echoes a similar sentiment in rather scathing terms: “Philippa Gregory likes to underscore her ‘attention to historical accuracy’ and her legions of fans often cite this assertion as a reason to believe what is in her novels is true, despite their being marketed as fiction. In my opinion, she isn’t upfront about what she means by ‘historically accurate’ in relation to her books. I also feel she is not upfront about her background, and that she adheres to a rather tenuous definition of ‘historian’” (Alexander, personal correspondence). The historical accuracy of Gregory’s novels is indeed dubious at times, but the analyses that follow are not concerned with attacking the novels’ adherence to ‘fact’. Rather, I am interested in unpacking the Western feminist discourses which inform Gregory’s works.

romance genre, the expression of the feminist agendas of Gregory's novels is often more complex than those of her contemporaries. Her treatment of the Tudor Court dramatises the performative nature of gender, while her feminist heroines are often surprising in their seemingly conventional, genre-bound characterisation.

Gregory's career as an author of historical fiction began in the mid-1980s, when she simultaneously completed her doctoral thesis at the University of Edinburgh on the popular fiction of eighteenth-century commercial libraries and started work on what became known as the Wideacre Trilogy. Published in 1987, the first novel of the series, *Wideacre*, is set in England during the eighteenth century and is primarily concerned with the inheritance laws that forbade property to be passed on to women. Its main character, Beatrice Lacey, is inherently corrupted by the misogynistic society that underestimates her abilities and value, and is driven to increasingly desperate lengths (including incest and murder) to maintain possession of her ancestral home after the death of her father. *Wideacre* was followed by the sequels *The Favoured Child* (1989) and *Meridon* (1990), which chronicle the struggles of subsequent generations of Wideacre women. Gregory's concern with the experiences of women during various historical (and contemporary) eras became established as a constant theme of her work throughout the 1990s, and the settings of her novels span several centuries. Her most commercially successful (and critically controversial) novel to date is *The Other Boleyn Girl*, the first of her Tudor Court novels, which revived interest in and, indeed, instigated a "virtual obsession" (Weir, *Mary Boleyn* 1) with the Tudor period during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Gregory went on to produce five additional novels in her Tudor Court series over the next seven years,

which spanned several generations of Tudor monarchs.<sup>2</sup> Read chronologically, the Tudor Court novels are: *The Constant Princess* (2005), *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2001), *The Boleyn Inheritance* (2006), *The Queen's Fool* (2003), *The Virgin's Lover* (2004), and *The Other Queen* (2008). Each of the Tudor Court novels – and indeed, all of the works in Gregory's oeuvre – is focused on the women of the period, rather than the arguably more well-known kings and male characters.

A recurring motif in all of Gregory's Tudor Court novels sees the Court being compared to a stage on which courtiers – and in particular, the female courtiers – are expected to perform a prescribed role. In each novel, Gregory uses this motif to emphasise the artificiality not only of court life, but of the gender role expected of women in this context. Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity provides a useful lens through which to understand Gregory's characters: in *Gender Trouble*, Butler famously postulates that gendered identity is “performative” and therefore conditional, expressed as “a stylised repetition of acts” that is learned through socialisation rather than occurring as a natural or innate inclination (Butler 140). Certainly, Gregory's female characters are “conscious always that [they] must play a part” (*QF* 4) on “the greatest stage in the kingdom” (*OBG* 180), and that this part is contingent on their sex. These characters typically evoke diction associated with play-acting and masquerading in describing their roles. In *The Other Boleyn Girl*, for example, Mary Boleyn describes the courtiers as “masquers forming a tableau” (*OBG* 231), observing that “[w]e all had parts to play, we all had costumes to wear, we all had to be as merry as we could be” (*OBG* 68) in their “unending public performance” (*OBG* 227). In *The Boleyn Inheritance*, meanwhile, Lady Browne observes that “[w]e are all actors here” (*BI* 83), and Gregory uses the image of young Catherine Howard

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<sup>2</sup> The reign of the first Tudor monarch, Henry VII, forms the setting of *The White Princess* (2013), part of Gregory's current Cousins' War series.



rehearsing her own execution to tragic effect (*BI* 505-6). Through such descriptions, Gregory emphasises the performative nature of their roles as both courtiers and women, thereby highlighting the artificiality of gender identity and the cultural, social, and historical contingencies upon which it is based.

This strategy is particularly evident in *The Queen's Fool*, where Gregory reworks the figure of the cross-dressing girl-page which, in Elizabethan literature, is “an important symbol of freedom from gender constraints” (Wallace 20). The story is told from the perspective of Hannah Green, a servant at Court during the reigns of Edward VI and Mary I. Hannah and her father are Spanish *marranos* who flee to England in order to escape the Inquisition, which saw Hannah's mother burned at the stake for heresy. In order to protect her from unwanted attention during their escape, Hannah dons boys' clothing, and continues to do so as they settle and establish a printer's shop in London. Hannah is described as “a hidden girl” (*QF* 9); her disguise enables her to live and work in the city with a freedom she would not be afforded as a girl. When she is taken by Robert Dudley, a patron of her father's shop, to work as his spy at Court in the guise of the young King's Holy Fool, she is able to continue her masquerade: in her “fool's motley” she is effectively “hidden” (*QF* 293) from particular scrutiny. Hannah finds that she comes to prefer her boyish disguise, because “masquerading as a boy [she can] hold [her] head up, and look around” (*QF* 72), rather than being forced to drop her gaze and adopt the submissive role of a woman. She comes to develop an “unnatural” (*QF* 356) sense of “unfeminine independence” (*QF* 383), determined as she is to “make her own fortune” (*QF* 16); for this reason, she resists the marriage that has been arranged for her with Daniel Carpenter, the son of another Jewish family, and insists that, given the choice, she “would not choose marriage at all. What is it but the servitude of women hoping for

safety, to men who cannot even keep them safe?” (*QF* 35). She tells her betrothed that marriage would be “too great a cost” for her: ““For you it is a good life, the home is made around you, the children come, you sit at the head of the table and lead the prayers. For me it is to lose everything I might be and everything I might do, and become nothing but your helpmeet and your servant”” (*QF* 37). However, she is eventually forced to flee the Court and England during Mary I’s reign for fear of her religion and background being discovered in the course of the Marian Persecutions, and she and Daniel marry in Calais. Hannah, finally forced to dress as a woman, finds she needs “constant tuition in how a young lady should behave” (*QF* 349), and quickly discovers that she is not “naturally gifted at housekeeping” (*QF* 349) or even “naturally maternal” (*QF* 402). Having to play the role of a woman is both physically and socially restrictive (*QF* 359), and she quickly loses patience with having to adopt a persona that does not come naturally to her.

The implications of Hannah’s “masquerade” as a boy can be understood in terms of Joan Riviere’s theorisation of femininity as a “mask” in her seminal essay, “Womanliness as Masquerade” (1929). Riviere argues that the behaviour associated with femininity is adopted as a kind of disguise or “mask” which functions “both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it” (Riviere, “Excerpts”). Conversely, Hannah adopts her boyish costume in order to protect herself from the vulnerability and scrutiny she would suffer as a girl, and finds that as a boy she is afforded freedom from the restrictions of the female gendered role. Moreover, when Hannah *is* forced to adopt the female gendered role, she finds that it does not come “naturally” to her (*QF* 349; 402), and proves difficult and even painful to maintain. Gregory thus employs this narrative device to highlight the instability of gender identity; as Wallace observes,

[t]he motif of masquerade, especially of a girl dressing in boy's clothing, is a recurring one in women's historical novels and it connects in an especially suggestive way to feminist theories of gendered subjectivity as socially, culturally and, above all, historically constructed. More than just glamour and sensuality, 'costume' suggests the transgressive possibility of flexible gender identity acted out through clothes. (21)

Gregory's feminist agenda is evident throughout the Tudor Court series, then, in her treatment of the Court as a 'stage' upon which gender is performed, and in her characters' frequent and explicit observations of the gender inequality inherent in their society.

More complex, however, is the characterisation of her feminist heroines, who frequently may not appear as such through less nuanced readings of the texts. Gregory has indeed been criticised by some reviewers as "one of those writers who can write in appalling, narrow stereotypes" which perpetuate the historical myths surrounding her characters ("Gabriella", "*The Boleyn Inheritance*"). The restraints of the historical romance genre impose certain conventions on her plots, usually in the form of a 'happy ending' for the protagonist, who eventually ends up settled in a heteronormative relationship. Even Hannah, in *The Queen's Fool*, eventually accepts her role as wife and mother and finds happiness and love in her marriage. The conventionality of some of her plots has resulted in many reviewers and critics summarily dismissing the feminist potential of her novels. However, while her historically lesser-known protagonists usually enjoy their 'happy endings', her choice of historical context means that the vast majority of her female characters suffer more tragic fates: Anne Boleyn, Catherine Howard, Katherine of Aragon, Mary I, and Jane Boleyn are just a few amongst those whose stories meet unhappy conclusions almost entirely because of their circumstances as women of a particular historical moment.

The deliberately constructed feminist heroines of Gregory's works are almost always more nuanced and complex in their characterisation than they first appear, and often have to be understood in the context of the novel as a whole in order to be appreciated. Gregory frequently *appears* to be perpetuating historically-contingent stereotypes even as she resists them; whatever her strategy in a particular novel, however, her narratives consciously rewrite a male-dominated historical discourse by privileging the *feminine* experience of a particular historical moment. Gregory's novels demonstrate the possibility of genre fiction to resist its own conventions even as it simultaneously appears to be satisfying readers' expectations, as she exploits the historical realities of her chosen contexts in order to subtly politicise her texts.

### **Ownership and the female body in *The Other Boleyn Girl***

Gregory's novels have engaged with Marxist Feminist critiques since the very beginning of her career. Wallace identifies the Wideacre Trilogy as being particularly aligned with Marxist economic interests, concerned as the novels are with the consequences of the dramatic shifts in agricultural practices and the introduction of "farming for profit" during the late eighteenth century (Wallace 188). Gregory implicitly likens these shifts to "the erosion of the traditional manufacturing base (steel, coal mining, shipbuilding, textiles) in the 1980s", demonstrating how "[b]oth shifts can be seen as being made at the expense of the most vulnerable people in society" (Wallace 188). Although the Wideacre novels are ostensibly romantic epics written in the form of the family saga, her political engagement with both the eighteenth and the late twentieth centuries is undeniable. Gregory herself has aligned her political interests with Marxist practices: she identifies E.P. Thompson's *The*

*Making of the English Working Class* as being especially influential to her understanding of British history, calling it “a tremendous book that sets the record straight from the class-dominated history that went before. This is our history – the history of the ordinary people – told by a passionate radical English Marxist writing at the height of his powers” (qtd. in Buckman, *The Dusty Shelf*). The idea of a Marxist-informed “working class history” is central to several of Gregory’s subsequent works, including *Earthly Joys* (1998) and *A Respectable Trade* (1992); through these works of historical fiction, Gregory presents the past as the “political and economic prehistory of the present” (Wallace 187).

Gregory’s Marxist economic concerns have given way in more recent years to her greater interest in notable historical women, who feature as the central characters of her subsequent novels. Since the turn of the century, her focus on historical heroines has inevitably led to an engagement with and analysis of the socio-political position of women during the historical periods concerned; this engagement, Wallace argues, “connects a Marxist analysis of the growth of capitalism to a feminist analysis of the relationship between women, property and ownership” (187). In other words, Gregory employs a Marxist discourse in her exploration of the relationships between men and women in her novels, often describing women in terms of commodities or property under the ownership of men. In contrasting her strong-willed, complex female characters with their objectification through “ownership” by men, Gregory offers a scathing critique of the patriarchal structures which constrained the women of the historical periods concerned (and, arguably, continue to constrain women into the twenty-first century). Though not examined by Wallace in any detail, the prominent use of a Marxist Feminist discourse is one of the most striking features of *The Other Boleyn Girl*. Throughout the novel, the Boleyn sisters (and indeed, it is implied, all

women) are used as tradable commodities by their family in their pursuit of ambition, wealth, and rewards: the Howard/Boleyn family essentially prostitute their daughters for profit. Indeed, feminist historians have suggested that the arrangement of marriages among the upper-middle class and the aristocracy during the sixteenth century was a kind of sanctioned prostitution, as “[m]arriage was above all a business arrangement [. . .]. Existing records of marriage negotiations often sound more like the buying and selling of some commodity” (Sim 4). Gregory chooses to exaggerate this practice somewhat in *The Other Boleyn Girl* to emphasise her feminist agenda: the Boleyn sisters are reduced by their family to nothing more “than counters to play in the marriage game” (*OBG* 517), and the “trade” of their women in pursuit of ambition is repeatedly referred to as “the family business” (*OBG* 200).

Mary Boleyn, the novel’s narrator and protagonist, is the most obvious “Boleyn pawn that must be played to advantage” (*OBG* 17). Mary is married at the age of twelve to a gentleman at Court, William Carey, and initially the Howard/Boleyn family is satisfied with this advantageous match. As soon as the King, Henry VIII, shows an interest in her, however, the family instruct her to put aside her marriage and concentrate her efforts on seducing the King, with the assistance of her siblings, Anne and George (*OBG* 18). Throughout this transaction, Mary is seen as little more than an enticing offer to the King by her family – when her father becomes aware of the King’s interest in her, Mary sees his “glance flick over [her], like a horse-trader assessing the value of a filly” (*OBG* 15). Her siblings encourage her to behave and dress suggestively, telling her that “[a] man likes a glimpse of what he’s buying” (*OBG* 56). As Mary’s seduction of the King progresses, she blandly observes that “[t]he first rent day came [. . .] when [her] father was appointed treasurer of the king’s household” (*OBG* 23). The trade of Mary’s body

clearly proves profitable for the men of her family, as the King continues to heap rewards on them. Mary's own brother observes that it is their "meal ticket and [their] fortune that [they] are sending to his bed, hardly a girl at all" (*OBG* 162).

The trading of women on the sexual market of the Tudor Court presupposes the compliance and obedience of women, a misrepresentation that Gregory is keen to emphasise. Mary's acceptance of the instructions of her male family members is taken for granted, with little regard given to her preference. She is reminded by her family that "all English women are required to do as they are bid, and look happy while doing it" (*OBG* 186). Her lack of choice is emphasised throughout, and even when her husband feebly admits to his reservations, she argues that she has "to do what [her] uncle and father tell [her]" (*OBG* 19). She does, however, have misgivings about her position, bemoaning the fact that she feels "like a parcel" (*OBG* 41) to be traded at the will of men, and expressing her irritation at the overbearing control of her family: on discovering that she is pregnant for a second time by the King, she is denied the pleasure of telling Henry herself, as her family "decided that news so momentous and so rich with the possibility of profit should come from [her] father to the king, that the Boleyns could garner full credit for [her] fertility" (*OBG* 141). Moreover, Mary is continually assured that she is doing the right thing in obeying her family and allowing them to profit from the exploitation of her body, and that she should disregard any moral qualms she may have (*OBG* 20). The absolute obedience and compliance of women, and their consequent lack of freedom of choice, assumes the existence of a naturalised patriarchal hierarchy in the novel. Women, as little more than commodities to be used for the advancement of their families, are deemed naturally inferior to men, and are constantly reminded of this fact. The power of men is absolute and beyond question; as the Boleyn girls' uncle, the Duke of Norfolk,

assures them: “[w]e men are not where we are today because of some sort of accident. We chose to get into great places of power, despite the desires of women; and we chose to use those places to make laws which will hold us there forever” (*OBG* 40-1). Later, he formidably declares that “[m]en still rule” (*OBG* 147).

Gregory emphasises the second-rate status of the women she describes as reinforced by the fact that they are viewed as dispensable or interchangeable. When the King’s interest in Mary wanes, Anne is offered up as a “fresh piece of goods” (*OBG* 80). Anne herself, driven by her own ambition as well as her family’s, accepts this trade, telling Mary that “[w]hat matters is that one of [them] catches the king. It hardly matters which one” (*OBG* 41). Anne, alarmingly pragmatic in her view of the “family business”, later observes:

There are dozens of us Howard girls, all with good breeding, all well taught, all pretty, all young, all fertile. They can throw one after another on the table and see if one is lucky. It’s no real loss to them if one after another is taken up and then thrown aside. There’s always another Howard girl conceived, there’s always another whore in the nursery. You were one of many before you were even born. (*OBG* 77)

This observation is reinforced when, following Mary’s replacement by Anne, she greets her father and for “a chilling moment” wonders whether he has forgotten her name (*OBG* 78). Later, when Henry rids himself of his wife and looks to be considering marriage with either of the sisters, Anne rather bitterly tells Mary that they “might either of [them] be Queen of England and yet [they will] always be nothing to [their] family” (*OBG* 242).

Yet Gregory offers a convincing critique of the patriarchal values that characterise the social mores of her historical setting. The tone of Mary’s narration is implicitly and, as the novel progresses, increasingly critical of the practice that



reduces the value of a woman to the potential profit that can be gained from the trade of her body, as will be demonstrated in more detail below. The true power of Gregory's critique, however, lies in the very story she has chosen to tell: as the narrative demonstrates, the Boleyn sisters (and in particular, Anne) were driving forces in changing the course of history, and capable of exerting political power that was ostensibly denied to them because of their sex. Clearly, the women of the novel are capable of – and successful in achieving – so much more than they are given credit for, and, in demonstrating this, Gregory eschews the underestimation of their power in society. Gregory's women are more than the “very toys of fortune” (*OBG* 267), to be used as pawns in the ambitious games of their fathers and husbands: they are powerful political and social players in their own right. The author ensures that her narrative is constructed in such a way that “the juxtaposition between the attitude of men toward women (as disposable and unnecessary) and the huge role of women in political history (quite necessary and hardly disposable) [is] very clear” (Buckman, *The Dusty Shelf*).

Gregory realises her feminist agenda in the complex characterisation of her two central characters, Mary and Anne Boleyn. The sisters act as foils to one another; as such, the reading of them as feminist heroines is somewhat complicated. Indeed, a less nuanced reading of the text may suggest that the Boleyn girls are quite the opposite of what one may expect from a feminist heroine: Mary Boleyn lacks worldly ambition and is more concerned with falling in love than social advancement, while Anne Boleyn, despite her undeniable ambition, is unsympathetically portrayed by Gregory as ruthless and cruel.<sup>3</sup> However, Gregory's characterisation of the sisters is

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Bordo is among the critics who challenge this characterisation of the sisters, posing the questions: “Sex is allowed but ambition isn't? What kind of feminism is this?” (221). Bordo's concerns are valid, but as I will demonstrate, Gregory's characterisation of the Boleyn sisters is more nuanced than this reading suggests.

more complicated than suggested by this over-simplified reading, and to understand her women fully as feminist heroines, it is necessary to consider the motivations behind their choices, and to appreciate the means that both sisters find and exploit to exercise some form of power in a male-dominated environment. Most importantly, it is critical to consider these characters as Gregory intended them: as dichotomous, a “dark mirror” (*OBG* 7) to one another’s characters.

Gregory has often laid claim to “rediscovering” Mary Boleyn, who had been largely forgotten in the spectacle of her sister’s better known story. In a recent biography of Mary Boleyn, historian Alison Weir rather grudgingly acknowledges that “she was regarded as little more than a footnote to history – in which obscurity she remained until the publication of Philippa Gregory’s novel” (*Mary Boleyn* 2). Mary’s story had, up to then, been reduced to the fact that she had been mistress to two of the most powerful monarchs in history – François I of France and later, Henry VIII of England – and as a result, was known to history simply as “a ‘great and infamous whore’” (Weir, *Mary Boleyn* 1). While Gregory’s novel has certainly rescued Mary from historical obscurity and provided a more balanced, nuanced portrait of her, Weir is critical of the novel, citing numerous historical inaccuracies and claiming that it perpetuates certain myths, thus giving readers “the wrong idea” about Mary (*Mary Boleyn* 2). Gregory does indeed choose to ignore a few of the more apparently unpalatable ‘facts’ about Mary: her (albeit brief) affair with François I, for example, is neatly overlooked, perhaps as a means of refuting her undeserved reputation as the most wanton woman that the notoriously licentious French Court had ever seen (*Mary Boleyn* 72). Indeed, Gregory appears to have consciously rejected common conceptions of Mary as a “generous, easy-going, warm-hearted but not very clever person, or ‘an obliging if colourless girl’” (Weir, *Mary Boleyn* 75) as

these character sketches are usually based on the assumption that she was as great a whore as her reputation suggested.<sup>4</sup>

Gregory does, however, give more prominence to Mary's role in the English Court than is usually afforded by historians and previous novelists. It is unlikely, for example, that both of Mary's children were fathered by the King,<sup>5</sup> or that their affair continued for several years, as it does in the novel. Indeed, the affair is likely to have been very brief, as Mary "attracted little or no attention at the English court" (Weir, *Mary Boleyn* 133). Gregory acknowledges that "most of her character is my invention – we simply don't know enough about her in historical terms" to definitively rule out any possibilities (qtd in Buckman, *The Dusty Shelf*). It is, perhaps, the relative obscurity of Mary Boleyn that suits Gregory's purposes so well: through her growth and development in the novel, she emerges as the true feminist heroine of *The Other Boleyn Girl*. It is Mary who outgrows her fascination with Court life and her family's ambition for social advancement, in favour of a fierce desire for independence; Mary who, by the end of the novel, refuses to be used as "a chattel to be put on a gambling table" (*OBG* 317) by her family. It is through Mary's character that Gregory voices her most fierce indictments of patriarchy:

‘It's still woman's work whether it's done in a great hall or in the kitchen,’ I said bitterly. ‘I know it well enough. It's earning no money for yourself and everything for your husband and master. It's obeying him as quickly and as well as if you were a groom of the server. It's having to

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<sup>4</sup> Despite this popular assumption, there is, in fact, no historical evidence to suggest that Mary Boleyn had other lovers apart from François I while serving at the French Court; most claims to the contrary can be traced to misconceptions by Victorian historians (Weir, *Mary Boleyn* 70; 75-6).

<sup>5</sup> There is no historical evidence to suggest that Mary's children, Catherine Carey (born in 1524) and Henry Carey (born in 1526), were ever acknowledged by Henry VIII as his own, as suggested in *The Other Boleyn Girl*. He did, however, acknowledge his illegitimate son with Elizabeth Blount, born in 1519: the boy was given the surname of Fitzroy, which means "son of the King". Most historians cite this as evidence that Mary's children were not fathered by Henry and assert that Mary bore him "no acknowledged child" (Weir, *Mary Boleyn* 137).

tolerate anything he chooses to do, and smile as he does it.' (*OBG* 237)

It is perhaps ironic, then, that Mary's growth as a feminist heroine is best demonstrated through her romantic relationships in the novel – her two marriages, and her affair with Henry.

Mary's first marriage, to William Carey at the age of twelve, understandably bears the hallmarks of her girlhood immaturity. Little is made of the marriage before it is put aside in favour of Mary's affair with Henry; when Anne asks her whether she likes married life, she simply (and rather guilelessly) replies, "[n]ot too bad. Nice clothes" (*OBG* 5). Her innocence and immaturity, caught up as she is in the ambitions of her family and the glamour of Court life, are reiterated by her husband's observation as she moves out of their home: "I will try to remember this day, and you looking like a child, a little lost among all these clothes. I will try to remember that you were innocent of any plotting; that today at least, you were more a girl than a Boleyn" (*OBG* 19). It is during her affair with Henry that Mary – a girl who, at fourteen, has already been married for two years – falls in love for the first time. It is a giddy, immature love, idealised in a way rather typical of romance novels; but it serves to vindicate Mary's actions in embarking on the affair. Despite the fact that she is ordered to seduce the King by her family, Mary in fact does so willingly as she is attracted to the King, in a sense rendering her father and uncle's wishes irrelevant: "I did not tell my father that I was half-delirious with pleasure at being courted by the most powerful man in the kingdom" (*OBG* 23). The courtship between Mary and Henry is, initially, quite genuine, and Mary describes "dancing with him as if he were an ordinary man and [she] little more than a kitchen maid at a country romp" (*OBG* 13). She is criticised by her family for not "play[ing] a clever game" but rather

“moon[ing] around like a lovesick girl at twilight” (*OBG* 26). What is emphasised is that Mary is not manipulating Henry, or even allowing her body to be used for her family’s profit: she is “a girl of fourteen in love for the first time” (*OBG* 45), and enters the affair with Henry willingly, for her own pleasure.

Early on during their courtship, Mary is sent to live at Hever, the family manor in Kent, for a period of several months – her family hope that removing her from Court for a time will further inflame Henry’s desire for her. While she is initially miserable, it is during her time in the Kent countryside, surrounded by prosperous farmlands, that Mary’s desire to become an independent woman of her own means, away from Court, is first established. In founding relationships with the local farmers, Mary develops “a growing sense that if [she] were never to go to court again, then [she] could at least be a good and fair landlord. [. . .] And [she] thought, even though [she] was no more than a young woman, [she] had done a wonderful thing [in assisting the local farmers]” (*OBG* 47-8). Her siblings mock her desires when she returns to Court, but she defends herself decisively: “‘I could be happy as a farmer,’ I said steadily. ‘I’m in love with the king – ’ I snatched a breath ‘ – oh, very much. But if it all goes wrong, I could live on a little farm and be happy’” (*OBG* 51). A key point in Mary’s characterisation is established here: while she is a passionate romantic, her happiness is *not* contingent on men, whether lover, brother, uncle, or father, nor on her life at Court. It is a desire that Mary repeatedly and ever more frequently returns to in her narrative, as she grows increasingly weary of her affair with Henry and with the artificiality of the Court.

Although the affair initially brings her the happiness and sexual fulfilment that was missing from her marriage, Mary takes no pleasure in being the King’s publically acknowledged mistress. She does not “revel in [the] ambition” so fundamental to her

sister and the rest of her family; her rapid rise at Court is terrifying to her (*OBG* 85). The constant pressure to perform a particular role exhausts her, and she “wish[es] with all [her] contrary heart that [she] was squire of Hever and not the pretend queen of a masquing court” (*OBG* 118). After the birth of her second child, a boy who is quickly taken away to the country so that she can continue to perform her duties as royal mistress, she realises she has fallen out of love with both Henry and her life at Court:

it was no joy to me. Somehow, when they had taken my baby away they had stolen away a part of me too. I could not love this man, knowing that he would not listen to me, knowing that I was not allowed even to show him my sadness. He was the father of my children and yet he would have no interest in them until they were old enough for him to use as counters in the game of inheritance. He had been my lover for years and yet it had been my task to make sure that he never knew me. (*OBG* 163)

Mary’s impatience with her role in the “family business” is significant by this point: she is increasingly resistant to acting as a “step” for their ambition (*OBG* 168), and repeatedly reiterates her wish to become a farm-owner, “free of the constant observation of the court” (*OBG* 213).

As Henry’s interest in her wanes, however, Mary is obliged to return to her husband, William Carey. During the intervening years, the cuckolded Carey has become increasingly bitter, although he has been “rewarded ten times over for doing nothing but looking the other way while the king takes [his] wife to his bed” (*OBG* 125). He seeks to reclaim ownership of her, and emphatically reminds her: “You are *my* wife. Everything that is yours is mine. Everything that is mine I keep. Including the children and the woman who carries my name. [. . .] You will bear whatever treatment I give you” (*OBG* 218-9; emphasis added). Mary, however, has developed

an intolerance for the despotic men who simultaneously benefit from trading her body and seek to shame her for it, and defends herself as best she can:

‘I’ve done nothing but obey my family and my king.’ My voice was steady, I did not want him to know that I was afraid.

‘And now you will obey your husband,’ he said, his voice all silk. ‘How glad I am that you have such years of training.’ (*OBG* 217)

Despite her brave words, Mary is fully aware of William’s power over her as her husband. Fearing that he may keep her from her children (as they carry his name and legally belong to him, despite being acknowledged as the King’s), Mary consents to return to his bed, but makes her aversion plain. Surprisingly, William does not force his conjugal rights, and when their sexual relationship is eventually renewed, it is at Mary’s initiation. Once again, she does not allow her body to be used against her wishes: just as her family does not exercise true control over her body during her affair with Henry, so too does she retain ownership of her body when she returns to her husband. Shortly after their physical relationship is rekindled, however, Carey contracts the dreaded “sweating sickness” and dies, leaving Mary a widow at the age of twenty (*OBG* 236). While Mary regrets his loss, she is not deeply aggrieved; the news of his death leaves her feeling introspective:

I thought of the man I had cuckolded and who, in the last few months, had become such a delightful lover and husband. I knew that I had never given him his due. He had been married to a child and left by a girl, and when I came back to him as a woman it was always with an element of calculation in my kiss. Now I realised that his death had set me free. [. . .] I might at last become a woman in my own right instead of the mistress of one man, the wife of another, and the sister of a Boleyn.

(*OBG* 237)

Once again, Mary returns to her desire to own and run a small manor farm: for her, this would mean the achievement of true independence, the ability to be her own woman and define her own identity beyond ‘belonging’ to someone else. It is while nurturing this aspiration that Mary meets William Stafford, and the central romance plot is introduced in the novel.

Mary’s feelings for Stafford develop slowly; she is resistant at first, as Stafford is a “nobody” in the service of her uncle’s household (*OBG* 265). Their ‘forbidden love’ initially seems to be the stuff of conventional romance plots, but it is in fact through the characterisation of Stafford that Gregory allows Mary to fully realise her desire for both independence and passionate love, reaffirming the protofeminist sensibilities of her heroine. From the start of their tentative courtship, Stafford encourages Mary to fulfil her own desires, even if these desires run contrary to those of her family; he urges her: “[w]hile your family is fixed on Anne, and her future is so unreliable, you could make your own future. You could make your own choice. [Your family] have forgotten to manage you for a moment. In this moment you might be free” (*OBG* 268). The notion of freedom is fundamental to Mary’s aspirations; however, she is resistant to his encouragement at first, dismissing the possibilities he suggests as she believes herself unable to break free of her family’s control. He persists, however, not in pursuing her sexually (as she is used to men doing), but in encouraging her to take control of her life and her children. He has little patience for her capitulations, and is frank with her in a way that she has never before experienced:

‘You told me very clearly that a woman has to do as her family bids her. Your family has bidden you to live apart from your children, even to give your son into your sister’s keeping. To fight them and to take your children back makes better sense than to weep. If you choose to be



a Boleyn and a Howard, then you might as well be happy in your obedience.’ (*OBG* 270)

Stafford also makes it clear, on several occasions, that he has rather unconventional views when it comes to marriage. He tells Mary that he would “like a woman who was free as a bird. [He] should like a woman who came to [him] for love, and who wanted [him] for love, and cared for nothing more than [him]” (*OBG* 268). As his interest in Mary becomes increasingly obvious, he declares that he “shall find a woman who would like to live in a pretty house amid her own fields and know that nothing – not the power of princes nor the malice of queens – can touch her” (*OBG* 294) – echoing, almost word for word, Mary’s desire to live self-sufficiently on a farm, away from Court and the controlling influence of her family. Throughout their slow courtship, Stafford repeatedly emphasises his aversion to more traditional models of marriage, where the wife is under the complete control of her husband and without the ability to exercise her own will.

While the influences of the traditional romance narrative are certainly present – Stafford is an unconventional (and forbidden) man who simultaneously offers Mary both freedom and security – Gregory eschews certain devices typically used in romance novels. The ‘rape fantasy’ is a device commonly used by romance novelists, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five, who eroticise the act of rape to feed women’s apparent desire to be dominated by insistent, desirable lovers, particularly when their own morals prevent them from consenting (even if they would like to).<sup>6</sup> Gregory sets up this familiar scenario between Stafford and Mary as their physical relationship progresses, but Mary’s moral principles prevent her from

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<sup>6</sup> Gregory also resists the eroticisation of rape in the second novel of the Wideacre Trilogy, *The Favoured Child* (1989). In this novel, the main character is raped by her brother; Wallace observes that “Richard’s rape of Julia is realistically painful (he breaks her wrist) rather than erotic, and an explicit attempt to dominate and control her. Gregory thus exposes the reality of the pain behind the rape fantasy of the erotic historical novel” (191).

consenting to full intercourse: “I knew myself to be pressing back like a whore, as if to beg him to do the deed, and do it without permission, for I could not say ‘Yes’. And God knew that I would not say ‘No’. [. . .] And every day I hoped, against myself, that today would be the day when I would whisper ‘Yes’ or that he would force me to it” (*OBG* 341). Stafford, however, does not “force” her, and this aversion to brutal dominance over women (and the ability to control his sexual desire) is central to Stafford’s character. He does not exert control or ownership over Mary’s body, even when she offers it; as Mary observes, “it was [her] desire which drove [them] onwards, not his” (*OBG* 335). Moreover, Stafford does not pursue marriage, leaving the choice up to Mary. He leaves her at Court, and after much soul-searching, Mary decides to follow him to his farm in Essex. The decision empowers her: “I was not nervous. For the first time ever I felt as if I had taken my life into my own hands and I could command my own destiny. For once I was obedient neither to uncle nor father nor king, but following my own desires. And I knew that my desire led me, inexorably, to the man I loved” (*OBG* 353). Mary willingly undertakes the journey to Stafford and offers herself to him; her second marriage is not arranged or foisted upon her. Most importantly, it is not done for the profit of her family, or even of her husband, who makes it quite clear that he is not interested in monetary gain from their union (*OBG* 359). During the course of her journey from Court to Stafford’s farm, Mary sheds her Boleyn identity by denying her family name (*OBG* 354), and in doing so symbolically releasing herself from their control. Gregory thus emphasises Mary’s freedom of choice, both in her sexual relations and in her movement to the country away from the patriarchal restrictions of the Court. It is this freedom that Gregory regards as central to her character’s feminist sensibilities, and which is a key manifestation of her Western feminist politics in the novel.

It is through her marriage with Stafford that Mary finally achieves her dream of running a small manor farm, independent from both her family and the scrutiny of the Court. As she adjusts to life on the Essex farm and learns how to complete menial household tasks, she reflects:

though I was tired at the end of each day I felt I had achieved something, however small. I liked the work since it put food on our table or pence in our savings jar. [. . .]  
[W]hen Megan [their servant] asked me did I not miss my fine clothes and fancy gowns at court, I remembered the endless drudgery of dancing with men I did not like, and flirting with men I did not desire, playing cards and losing a small fortune, and forever trying to please everyone around me. Here there was just William and I, and we lived as easily and as joyfully as two birds in a hedge – just as he had promised. (*OBG* 412-3)

While this portrait of English countryside living is certainly romanticised, what is important here is that Mary has *chosen* this life for herself: “I married once to oblige my family, I did as they bid me when the king looked my way, and now I want to please myself” (*OBG* 407). Marriage to Stafford does not symbolise her entrapment, but rather her means to the freedom and independence she has longed for. He comes to represent an ‘exit’ from the oppression of the Howard/Boleyn family. It should be noted, however, that Gregory’s emphasis on the notion of freedom is perhaps somewhat oversimplified, as Mary is never truly exempt from performing a particular gendered role. Like Hannah Green in *The Queen’s Fool*, Mary has in fact switched one performative role for another: while Hannah has to “learn” how to be a woman after discarding her androgynous disguise, Mary – while ostensibly free from the scrutiny she faced at Court – now has to adopt a different kind of feminine role in running a farm and household. She has to learn her new duties and the skills required of her in this role, “how to churn butter [...] and pluck a chicken” (*OBG* 412). She is

taught by a local farmwife, and admits that “it should have been easy and delightful to learn such important skills” but she “was absolutely exhausted by it” (*OBG* 412). No matter what the setting or the role, then, Mary finds the performance of womanhood draining; what Gregory chooses to highlight, however, is that Mary has *chosen* this particular feminine role rather than having it foisted upon her.

While Mary’s romantic relationships in the novel serve to demonstrate the development of her character’s feminist sensibilities, the catalyst for this development is undoubtedly the change brought on by motherhood. There is a clear turning point in Mary’s character after the birth of her first child: the end of her own childhood is symbolised, and her growth as a mature woman – and, more importantly, as a feminist heroine – is centred around a deep connection with her children. Indeed, one of the most distinct features of Mary’s narrative is her emphasis on the corporeal experiences of womanhood, giving birth, and maternity. Several critics have identified the prominence of the ‘female experience’ in women’s historical fiction as a reaction to the fact that the experiences of women have traditionally been left out of the historical narrative. By focussing on the bodily experiences of their female characters, authors are thus reinserting “women’s concerns” (Wallace 20) into our understanding of history. Wallace explains that this process forms part of the recovery, or imaginative reconstruction, of the “maternal genealogy” (x) of history, which has traditionally been suppressed. Wallace’s notion of a “maternal genealogy” is extrapolated from Luce Irigaray’s critique of patriarchy, which claims that it is vital,

if we are not to be accomplices in the murder of the mother, for us to assert that there is a genealogy of women. [. . .] Given our exile in the family of the father-husband, we tend to forget this genealogy of women, and we are often persuaded to deny it. Let us try to situate ourselves within this female genealogy so as to conquer and keep our identity. Nor let us forget that we already

have a history, that certain women have, even if it was culturally different, left their mark on history and that all too often we do not know them. (44)

The importance and power of women, and the figure of the mother, is a recurring theme for feminist historians and authors of women's historical fiction alike. The implications of the issue of motherhood are particularly significant for the feminist reappropriation of Tudor history, as the dramatic political and religious reformations that took place under Henry VIII's reign were largely prompted by the (in)ability of his wives to produce sons. The intersection between the personal and the political is clear in this regard, in that motherhood and fertility – issues that belong to the conventionally invisible maternal domestic space – accrue political meaning and public visibility.

In Gregory's novel, motherhood is lauded as the ultimate 'female experience', and is a source of strength and power: this is clearly demonstrated in her sympathetic engagement the more 'natural', maternal women of her narrative. The character of Katherine of Aragon is afforded this sympathetic treatment, and she emerges as a kind of idealised mother figure in the novel. Despite the fact that Mary conducts an affair with her husband, a strong bond develops between Katherine and Mary: Mary's love and respect for her is established from the outset (*OBG* 17), as is her reluctance to cause her any pain by seducing her husband. Katherine is repeatedly described as a "good" and "honest" woman (*OBG* 52) of "immense dignity" (*OBG* 81), and Mary goes so far as to name her daughter Catherine as a mark of respect for her Queen (*OBG* 124). The relationship between them is likened to that of a mother and daughter, and when Katherine is forced by Anne to leave Court, Mary misses her acutely: "[s]he had been like a mother to me when I had first come to court and I had betrayed her as a daughter will betray her mother, and yet never stop loving her"

(*OBG* 385). When Katherine's own daughter (also named Mary) is ill and the King tries to prevent them from being together, Mary expresses tremendous respect for the fact that "[s]he was risking everything to see her daughter" (*OBG* 285) – much in the same way as Mary would.

By contrast, Elizabeth Boleyn, Mary and Anne's mother, is depicted as a cold and distant figure in the girls' lives. She is a woman who looks upon her daughters only in "a rare moment of interest" (*OBG* 3), with little sympathy for their suffering. After Mary's children are taken away to live in the country, as per the tradition at Court, she seeks comfort and commiseration from her mother, to share her longing for her babies; Elizabeth, in response, looks at her as though she "were speaking another language altogether, something incomprehensible: Russian or Arabic. [. . .] the thought [of missing her children] was so strange to her" (*OBG* 157). Following Anne's downfall, Elizabeth deliberately distances herself from her three children in order to preserve her own position at Court, behaving "as if [they] had never been born" (*OBG* 495). Her behaviour is perceived as increasingly incomprehensible and unnatural by Mary, particularly after the birth of her own children; importantly, it aligns Elizabeth with the men in their family who are looking only to profit from the trade of the Boleyn sisters. This is made clear by her complete lack of concern (and even anger) following Anne's miscarriage (*OBG* 402), and her frustration with Mary's slow recovery after the birth of her second child, when she is unable to resume her physical relationship with the King fast enough for her family's liking: "‘You're so fat,' [her mother] complained. ‘And you're so . . . you're so dull, Mary'" (*OBG* 156). In this instance, Elizabeth actually uses Mary's children as a threat: "you have to be back in the king's bed by the end of this week, Mary. You do that or you'll never see your children again. D'you understand?" (*OBG* 159). The overwhelmingly

negative portrayal of Elizabeth Boleyn's character, then, is expressed in her 'unnatural' inability to bond with her children, and her willingness, like the men in her family, to use them as chattel for trade and profit. Indeed, these are the same characteristics that define Gregory's unsympathetic portrayal of Anne Boleyn.

Gregory's decision to portray Anne in a negative light is, in itself, an unusual approach. The trend in recent biographies and fiction has, almost without fail, tended to be more sympathetic: her most influential modern biographer, Eric Ives, goes so far as to suggest that "Anne deserves to be a feminist icon, a woman in a society which was, above all else, male-dominated, who broke through the glass ceiling by sheer character and initiative" (xv). Gregory has been criticised for choosing Mary, rather than Anne, as the feminist heroine of her novel, with one reviewer accusing her of having indulged in the "ugly stereotypes that surround Anne – the 'bitch', the 'slut' – instead of exploring the possibility of a more nuanced, sympathetic woman" ("Gabriella", *The Other Boleyn Girl*). To suggest that Gregory's portrayal of Anne is *not* nuanced, however, is to misread the complexities of her characterisation as a foil to Mary. Mary's power as a feminist heroine is derived from her strong ties to motherhood (and thus an imaginatively reconstructed matrilineal genealogy), her desire for independence from the rule of men, and the fact that she maintains control and ownership of her body throughout the novel, despite the manipulations of her family. Anne, by contrast, achieves none of these virtues so lauded in the character of Mary. The sisters are characterised in a kind of dichotomy: they are intimately linked to one another, but at the same time are each other's mirror opposites in every respect, from physical appearance to temperament and desires. Anne herself observes to Mary: "I shall be dark and French and fashionable and difficult and you shall be sweet and open and English and fair. What a pair we shall be" (*OBG* 7). This 'mirrored'

contrast – and their powerful connection to one another – is emphasised in their brother George’s nicknames for them: “Annamaria” for Anne, and “Marianne” for Mary.

Gregory’s Anne is vain, prone to outbursts of physical violence, vindictive, and a master manipulator. Indeed, she is ambitious; but it is not her ambitions that Gregory implicitly criticises, rather the means she uses to achieve those ambitions. Like the men in her family, Anne uses her body for profit and to improve her social standing. While Mary maintains ownership of her body, Anne willingly trades herself, using her sexual appeal to achieve her desires; as Mary grows weary of the fact that she is always on public display at Court, Anne revels in it. Mary repeatedly comments on Anne’s deliberate exhibition of herself, describing her “deliciously self-conscious way of walking. She moved as if every man in the world was watching her. She walked as if she was irresistible” (*OBG* 169). Anne also uses her sexual favours as a form of currency with the King, refusing to consummate their relationship until she has been sufficiently rewarded. Eventually, after Henry creates her the Marquess of Pembroke,<sup>7</sup> Anne realises that he will need sufficient repayment for the honour: “He’s given me the title of Marquess and the lands, I cannot keep saying no [to consummating their relationship]” (*OBG* 325).

Moreover, Anne’s ambitions fail to bring her the happiness that Mary finds in the realisation of hers. The constant need to maintain the façade she establishes in her seduction of Henry exhausts her; Mary observes that “Anne wore herself to a shadow trying to be merry. At night she would lie beside [her] in the bed and even in her sleep [she] would hear her muttering, like a woman quite insane. [. . .] She started to drink wine in the morning” (*OBG* 300). Her ambition is repeatedly likened to insanity

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<sup>7</sup> Anne Boleyn was the first woman in English history to be granted a peerage in her own right.



(*OBG* 109; 181; 227; 390; 444) as she resorts to increasingly desperate lengths to secure her position in Henry's affections and on the throne, and Mary even suspects her of murdering her enemies at Court (*OBG* 282). Readers with any knowledge of history will know that Anne's ambition eventually results in her execution and that of five other men, including her brother George; Gregory suggests, however, that by supplanting Katherine, Anne not only brought about her own demise, but further damaged the already precarious position of women in Tudor society. In a triumphant letter to Mary, Anne claims that she has "overturned the order. Nothing will ever be the same for any woman in this country again" (*OBG* 214) – by securing a proposal from Henry, Anne clearly believes that she has achieved a coup on behalf of women. As Mary wryly reflects, however, "she was right. Nothing would be the same for any woman in this country again. From this time onwards no wife, however obedient, however loving, would be safe. For everyone would know that if a wife such as Queen Katherine of England could be put aside for no reason, then any wife could be put aside" (*OBG* 214-5). A similar reason is cited for the public's hatred of Anne: "the women have a stubborn liking for the old queen. They say if the King of England puts a loyal honest wife aside because he fancies a change, then no woman is safe" (*OBG* 305). Clearly, these are not the actions of a feminist heroine, and Anne is contrasted starkly with the dignity and power of Katherine, who in defending her marriage "was speaking out for the women of the country, for the good wives who should not be put aside just because their husbands had taken a fancy to another, for the women who walked the hard road between kitchen, bedroom, church and childbirth. For the women who deserved more than their husband's whim" (*OBG* 247). Gregory endows Mary with her own feminist understanding of this historical moment when Mary recognises the cost of Anne's actions as further eroding the value

of women in a patriarchal society, exacerbating their disempowerment in making them dispensable at the whim of their men.

Gregory also dissociates her reimagining of Anne from the notion of a reconstructed matrilineal genealogy that is so central to the characterisation of Mary. While Mary revels in motherhood and the almost corporeal bond she has with her children, Anne's inability to understand these bonds and, indeed, her "terror" (*OBG* 387) at the prospect of giving birth are depicted as grossly unnatural (betraying, perhaps, the author's rather essentialised understanding of 'natural' femininity). Gregory seems to be suggesting here that Anne's femininity – the core, corporeal experiences of being a woman – has been sacrificed by the means she chooses to realise her ambitions. For Anne, her body is little more than a tradable commodity, to be used by the King for his sexual fulfilment and for bearing his heirs; through its trade, Anne means to profit in terms of status and power. In this way, she is aligned with the men in her family (as well as her mother) who view the female body as little more than chattel. While Gregory's characterisation of Mary challenges the misogynistic discourse of commodification used to define her body and her worth, Anne allows and even actively exploits it. This particular characterisation of Anne – the distancing of her character from the 'natural', corporeal experiences of womanhood – is most obvious in her attitude towards motherhood and children. Anne, unlike Mary, subscribes to the belief that a woman's worth is tied to the biological functioning of her body, to the extent that she is unable to assimilate the more abstract or emotional implications of motherhood; she is cruel and dismissive of the aging Queen Katherine, derisively mocking the older woman's inability to produce a living male heir (*OBG* 7). Her attitude echoes Henry's reaction when Katherine tells him that she is menopausal and no longer able to bear children: he is

disgusted that she would admit to this “without a moment’s shame!” (*OBG* 112). Mary, in response, silently observes that it “was not for [her] to tell Henry that there was no shame in a woman of nearly forty ceasing her bleeding” (*OBG* 113), and his reaction exposes the links between a woman’s ‘worth’ and her ability to produce children, particularly within the nobility and aristocracy.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Katherine’s inability to produce a male heir is the chief reason why Henry eventually decides to seek the annulment of their twenty-year marriage.

While for Mary, the value of childbirth lies in the emotional bonds she develops with her children, Anne uses her body’s ability to produce potential heirs as a kind of currency with the King, much in the same way she trades her sexual favours. She is entirely unable to understand Mary’s attachment to her children; when Mary tells her that having a baby is “as if [she] suddenly know[s] what the purpose of life is” (*OBG* 127), her sister is bemused and unsympathetic: “Anne looked rather blank. ‘It’s just a baby,’ she said flatly. ‘And chances are she’ll die’” (*OBG* 128). She assumes that Mary must be disappointed that her first child with the King is a girl instead of the much-anticipated boy; Mary, meanwhile, falls “completely and utterly in love with [her baby] and [cannot] for a moment imagine that anything would have been any better if she had been a boy” (*OBG* 122). Anne herself is horrified when her first child with the King is a girl, and the baby Elizabeth is all but forgotten in her family’s disappointment: “Anne is in despair, and no-one has looked at the baby but the king and he held her for a few moments only” (*OBG* 388). Even the birthing process itself is a trial for Anne, as the midwife warns Mary that her labour is

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<sup>8</sup> Gregory does not exaggerate the importance ascribed to this biological function in her Tudor Court novels; several historians have noted that childbirth “was seen as the most important function of a Tudor woman” (Sim 16).

progressing badly because “[s]he’s fighting it” (*OBG* 386), thus further emphasising Anne’s ‘unnatural’ relationship with her body.

Ironically, Anne eventually finds herself in a similar position to Katherine, as her inability to produce another living child after Elizabeth results in the rapid erosion of her power at Court and her worth in Henry’s eyes. Moreover, her inability to carry another baby to term is seen as “proof of sin” (*OBG* 402), and used as evidence against her when she is brought to trial for treason. As Anne becomes increasingly desperate to maintain her power, she continues to exploit her body in ever more drastic ways. Convinced as she is that Henry is incapable of siring a healthy son, she goes so far as to seduce her brother George in an effort to fall pregnant and carry a baby to term; she tells Mary that she went on a “journey to the very gates of hell to get [the child]” (*OBG* 450), and when this pregnancy also results in a miscarriage, the aborted foetus is described as a “monster” (*OBG* 472). When her position at Court is at its most precarious, Anne tries to use her daughter as a defence against accusations of infertility and witchcraft (*OBG* 497), as if the perfection of the child’s body validates Anne’s own worth, but never shows any tenderness towards the toddler herself. She even goes so far as to adopt Mary’s son by Henry against Mary’s will in an attempt to secure power; the relationship between the sisters is deeply fractured by Anne’s selfishness in claiming Mary’s rights to her own children, and Mary herself is “shaken by the depth of [her] hatred” (*OBG* 244) for Anne. Here again we find that it is not Anne’s ambition that Gregory is criticising so much as her *means* of achieving that ambition. While Anne uses her body – and the bodies of her daughter and sister – to realise her aims of power and status, it is her body’s inability to perform the biological imperatives so prized in a patriarchal environment that eventually brings about her downfall.

In discussing the enduring relevance of the stories of notable historical women, Gregory emphasises the importance – for both these women and their modern readers – of maintaining “a sense of self intact”, and argues that “to be a woman, in any society, is to face a constant struggle between the desire to express oneself and the compelling requirement to conform” (“Foreword” viii). Gregory’s Anne willingly conforms to and even exploits the misogynistic social frameworks which position women as tradable commodities and reduce their value to the biological functioning of their bodies; she belongs to the male-dominated discourse of history that the author is in fact actively resisting through her emphasis on the feminine experience of a particular historical moment. For this reason, Gregory presents an unsympathetic portrayal of Anne, despite contemporary trends which favour her as a feminist heroine. Instead, the character of Mary Boleyn is better suited to Gregory’s agenda of imaginatively recreating a ‘feminine history’, or rediscovering a matrilineal genealogy (in much the same way she claims to have “discovered” Mary herself). Preoccupied though she is with romance, men, and children, by maintaining ownership of her body and exercising what little agency she is afforded despite the will of her family, Mary emerges as the true feminist heroine of Gregory’s novel. In hailing Mary’s agency, Gregory foregrounds some of the most significant issues associated with second wave feminist politics, not least of which emphasises a woman’s right to control her own body.

### **Resisting female stereotypes in *The Boleyn Inheritance***

As already noted earlier in this study, traditional historical discourse tends to present the wives of Henry VIII in terms of reductive stereotypes. David Starkey, remarking

on the popularity of the Tudor period in the contemporary imagination, suggests that “among the women (at least conventionally told), there is almost the full range of female stereotypes: the Saint, the Schemer, the Doormat, the Dim Fat Girl, the Sexy Teenager and the Bluestocking” (xv). While it has been common practice among many romance writers to exploit and further propagate these stereotypes in order to profit from their readers’ conventional ‘knowledge’ of the Tudors, others have attempted to rescue these women from the essentially misogynistic historical discourse that has so reduced and damaged their characters, and, by extension, the character of ‘woman’. Fictional reconstructions of such characters often provide a more well-rounded, sympathetic understanding of the positioning of these women in their particular historical moment, while at the same time resisting male-dominated historical discourse.

Gregory does just this in *The Boleyn Inheritance*, her fifth Tudor Court novel that is chronologically sequential to *The Other Boleyn Girl*. The novel is a first-person narrative split between the perspectives of three protagonists: Henry’s fourth and fifth queens, Anne of Cleves and Catherine Howard, and Jane Boleyn, widow to George Boleyn and sister-in-law to Anne. Arguably, these three women have suffered the most damaged or demeaned reputations of the Tudor era: Anne of Cleves is the infamously rejected bride who “revolted” Henry and was forever thereafter known as “the Flanders mare” (Weir, *Six Wives* 396); Catherine Howard, the King’s child-bride, has become legendary as “an empty-headed wanton” (Weir, *Six Wives* 3); and Jane Boleyn, “the infamous Lady Rochford”, is almost universally reviled as a vicious traitor whose eventual execution was a “much deserved, if belated, retribution for giving false testimony against her own husband and sister-in-law” (Fox 315). While Gregory’s characterisation of the three women evokes some aspects of these meaner

stereotypes, her narrative reveals them to be the products of a male-dominated, patriarchal environment that complicates the expression of their sexuality. Like Plaidy, Gregory applies a twenty-first century understanding of the relationship between sexuality, agency, and identity to her reconstruction of her historical setting; her depiction of sex and sexuality is further informed by her feminist politics. While the notion that sex is indelibly linked to personal identity is certainly anachronistic to the Early Modern period, Gregory's appropriation of this understanding is purposeful in constructing a feminist reading of her characters' inner lives. In doing so, she engages with some of the most significant issues surrounding modern sexuality in light of Western feminist philosophy and psychology. Each of her three characters has a problematic relationship with sex borne from their abuse at the hands of the men in their lives, and Gregory depicts much of their 'reviled' behaviour as a direct result of this abuse; each of the three protagonists is, in some way, a product of a misogynistic society which simultaneously reveres and fears feminine sexuality.

The character of Catherine Howard is probably the most obvious example of Gregory's approach in this regard. Gregory claims to have been drawn to her character specifically because of the damage her reputation has suffered: "You don't have to be a feminist to object to one modern historian's description of Catherine Howard as a 'stupid slut', but if you are, it makes it more annoying. I am both a feminist and an historian, and I object very much" (Gregory, "Background"). In many respects, Gregory's Catherine is typical of the archetypal "Sexy Teenager" (Starkey xv) with which she has popularly become associated; Gregory does not invert this stereotype or deny the transgressions that led to Catherine's downfall, as many contemporary writers have resorted to doing in an attempt to portray a more sympathetic assessment of Catherine's story. Instead, the author's defence of her is

far more subtle: the emphasis in this novel lies in Catherine's youth, relative innocence, and naïveté, while her sexual indiscretions and desperate desire to be loved, admired, and appreciated stem from parental neglect and sexual abuse during her childhood.

*The Boleyn Inheritance* depicts Catherine as a rather vapid, materialistic, and superficial girl. As a repeated refrain at the beginning of several of her chapters, Catherine assesses her current state by asking: "Now let me see, what do I have?" (*BI* 10). The repetition of this question is indicative of her use of her material possessions as a means of gauging her happiness, and also to chart her rise (and eventual fall) in the Tudor Court. Like her cousin Anne Boleyn in *The Other Boleyn Girl*, Catherine uses her body and sexual favours as a kind of currency, but where Anne profits in the form of power and prestige, Catherine is content with material gifts of dresses and jewels (*BI* 93). Even in her early teens, Catherine is skilled at the game of sexual manipulation: she states that she "know[s] what a man wants, and [she] know[s] how to play him, and [she] know[s] when to stop too" (*BI* 12). Again, as it is with Anne Boleyn, Catherine's family have no qualms about using her body for their own gain, and a conversation between Jane Boleyn and their uncle, the Duke of Norfolk, is revealing of the casual dismissal of her worth:

'She is very skilled. She appears completely sweet and very innocent, and yet she displays herself like a Smithfield whore.'

'Charming indeed. Does she have ambitions?'

'No, only greed.' (*BI* 161)

Even Anne of Cleves, who is otherwise the most tolerant of Catherine's flaws, describes her as a "foolish, frivolous little thing" (*BI* 189).



Despite the apparent propagation of the less flattering stereotypes associated with Catherine, however, Gregory's brief but telling focus on Catherine's upbringing ensures that her portrayal of Henry's fifth queen is far more nuanced than the depictions of her that are usually proffered by novelists and even biographers. While ostensibly not attempting to excuse Catherine's behaviour or liability, Gregory effectively demonstrates that her Catherine is a product of a patriarchal environment that positions her as little more than a sexual plaything. From an early age, she learns that what little power is available to her is garnered through exploiting male desire. Under the guardianship of her grandmother, the Dowager Duchess of Norfolk, Catherine suffers from parental neglect as a child, being just one of many Howard children and wards left to run amok in her household. Catherine's parents play no role in her upbringing: her mother is dead and her father "barely remembers [her] name" (*BI* 39). Her grandmother shows little interest in Catherine and wilfully turns a blind eye to her misbehaviour. As a result, Catherine develops an intense and insatiable need for attention and approval; a need that she quickly discovers can be fulfilled through the attentions of men.

Gregory demonstrates that these attentions are not, however, straightforwardly fulfilling to her female characters. While Catherine has no shortage of 'suitors' in her grandmother's household, her first sexual encounters are not actively sought or even invited. The reader quickly comes to realise that Catherine has suffered from various forms of sexual abuse from an early age, to the full knowledge of her grandmother. Under the inspection of her uncle, her grandmother describes her as a "very knowing child" while giving her "a hard look to remind [her] that nobody wants to know what [she] learned while in her care" (*BI* 53). As she feigns innocence, Catherine reflects: "I was seven years old when I first saw a maid bedding a pageboy, I was eleven when

Henry Manox first got hold of me. How did she think I would turn out?” (*BI* 53). This exposure to sex as a child, and indeed her own premature sexualisation, is enormously influential in the development of Catherine’s burgeoning sexuality. Her relationship with Henry Manox is certainly problematic in that he is older, more experienced and, as her teacher, in a position of power and authority over her. Moreover, her early encounters with Manox – when she is eleven and he is twenty – are traumatic and damaging; Catherine recalls that “when he first kissed [her she] didn’t even like it very much, and begged him to stop, and when he put his hand up [her] skirt [she] was so shocked [she] screamed aloud and cried” (*BI* 12). Catherine herself is somewhat dismissive of the encounter and certainly is not cognisant of the damage it has caused, or of the fact that Manox has flagrantly exploited his authority in order to abuse her when she is still a child. Later, when King Henry takes Catherine for his “child-bride” (*BI* 344), his attentions are again portrayed as a form of abuse by a man in a position of authority: as a sickly, decaying man of nearly fifty, his sexual obsession with a girl young enough to be his granddaughter is perverse, and his advances are certainly not welcomed by Catherine. As he gropes her in full view of the guests at their wedding breakfast, Jane Boleyn observes: “Anyone who was not profiting from this mismatch wedding would find it disgusting to see such a pretty child dished up for such an old man. Anyone speaking honestly would call it a sort of rape. Fortunate then, that there is no-one here who would ever speak honestly” (*BI* 301-2). Once again, Catherine is subject to a form of sexual abuse by a man whose authority and power over her effectively render her helpless, and those meant to protect her once again neglect to do so – indeed, her family actively encourage her exploitation for their own gain.

It is unsurprising, then, given her upbringing, neglect and lack of moral guidance, that Catherine develops into a naïve, somewhat self-obsessed and over-

sexed teenager. However, Gregory tempers this portrayal by emphasising Catherine's youth, extreme naïveté, and essentially kind-hearted nature. Catherine rarely grasps the gravity or significance of the situations in which she finds herself; for example, when Francis Dereham contrives to bring her before the altar in her grandmother's chapel in order to perform a wedding ceremony, Catherine is caught up in the romance of the moment, feeling that it "is as good as a play", but does not fully understand what he is doing (*BI* 27). At the age of fifteen, she is certainly unready and ill-equipped to rule over the Tudor Court as Queen of England. Again, it is Jane who recognises the ill use of Catherine by her family, even as she profits from it: she admits that "she is too young to be a good queen. She is too young to be anything but a silly girl" (*BI* 301). By the time she weds the King, Catherine herself is "torn between terror and excitement at the thought of being his consort and his queen" (*BI* 258), and concedes that "[e]verything is happening whether [she] want[s] it or not." (*BI* 290). In her naïveté and good-natured innocence, however, she has an uncanny ability to convince herself that she is not unhappy or in danger; she endures the King's attentions kindly, describing him as a "sweet, doting old man" (*BI* 230) whom she wishes to please not only because she can profit from it, but because she feels sorry for him. She quickly takes strain, however, when she cannot live up to his expectations, as the very qualities that attracted him in a mistress now irritate him in a wife (*BI* 365). Enduring sex with her obese, diseased, and impotent husband becomes increasingly taxing, try as she might to conceal her unhappiness: "Nobody must ever know that I am so disgusted that I could vomit, nobody must ever know that it almost breaks my heart that the things I learned to do for love are now done to excite a man who would be better off saying his prayers and going to sleep" (*BI* 313). Gregory demonstrates that Catherine's very nature, her desire for romance, appreciation, and

attention, means that her indulgence in an affair with Thomas Culpeper is inevitable. Her uncle observes that “a girl of fifteen is going to fall in love, and never with a husband of forty-nine” (*BI* 346), while Jane recognises that “she is quite besotted with him and for a moment [she] remember[s] that [Catherine] is not just a pawn in [their] game, but a girl, a young girl, and she is falling in love for the first time in her life” (*BI* 372). Again, Catherine’s extreme youth and innocence are emphasised. It is this innocence that Jane and Norfolk exploit in engineering her affair with Culpeper, in the hopes that she will fall pregnant with a child that they can pass as the King’s heir. Gregory is at pains to demonstrate that Catherine does not have the cunning or audacity to initiate the affair herself: she is, once again, the sexual pawn of those in a position of authority and power over her.

Ultimately, despite her flaws, Catherine is a victim of sexual abuse, neglect, and the exploitation of authority. As she stands accused of adultery and faces the ultimate punishment – execution – she is bewildered that she faces being “cruelly judge[d]” for her “childhood errors [committed] when [she] was nothing but a little girl with poor guardians” (*BI* 451). However, she is not the first of Henry’s queens who proves to be a victim of her own distorted sexuality and blighted upbringing. Gregory demonstrates that Anne of Cleves was also the victim of abuse by men – but of a very different nature. Historians often summarily dismiss Anne of Cleves as the least influential of Henry’s wives, despite the fact that hers was the only other marriage, apart from Katherine of Aragon’s, that was arranged for political strategy. Henry was reputedly so disgusted with his fourth wife that their union was annulled, unconsummated, just six months after their wedding. Many historians have since accepted Henry’s denouncement of her looks, personal hygiene and intellect; Gregory has, however, expressed her irritation with this approach:

Historians suggest that Anne of Cleves survived by good luck and her own stupidity. They suggest that she was insensitive to the insult of divorce and settled down to be the King's sister so cheerfully that he forgave her the failure of their marriage. Reading the records with more sympathy, and with a feminist perspective, I suggest that she knew very well how to manage a domestic tyrant: having suffered from a drunk and perhaps delusional father and a powerful brother. I think she understood the dangers of Henry's temperament before his more familiar court did so. Then, I think she set her sights on simply surviving the dangers that opened before her.

*(BookBrowse.com interview)*

Gregory's Anne, then, is a consciously feminist rewriting of the traditional stereotype with which she has been associated, one which, like Catherine Howard, traces her supposed failings as a queen to sexual abuse and ill-treatment by men during her childhood.

From Anne's very first chapter in the novel, her desperation to escape the home and authority of her brother is made plainly evident. As a young girl, Anne witnesses her father descend ever-further into madness, until he is locked away by her brother; she is "dumb with horror" (*BI* 5) at her brother's actions, and quickly discovers that she, even more so than her two sisters, is to suffer under the "tyranny of fraternal attention" (*BI* 6). Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Anne is subject to repeated and brutal physical, verbal, and emotional abuse at the hands of her brother, borne from a complicated and twisted combination of repulsion towards and desire for her. The Duke's intense need for control over his sister is characterised by distinctly sexual undercurrents: though Anne claims that he "never wanted [her] as a man wants a woman" (*BI* 127), she also acknowledges that he "had a horror of [her] body, a horror and a fascination" (*BI* 127). At the prospect of her departure for

Henry's Court, the Duke is painfully conflicted, simultaneously desirous to be rid of her and distraught at the thought of her being under the control of another man:

He is going to miss me. He is going to miss me like a master misses a lazy dog when he finally drowns it in a fit of temper. He has become so accustomed to bullying me, and finding fault with me, and troubling me in a dozen small daily ways, that now, when he thinks that another man will have the ordering of me, it plagues him. (*BI* 19)

However, emphasising Gregory's interest in and critique of the patriarchal ownership of women's physicality, it is not the idea of another man exerting his authority over her that most "plagues" the Duke, but rather the thought of a man enjoying her body. Before her departure, Anne overhears a discussion between the Duke and their mother, in which the Dowager Duchess makes a casual remark concerning Anne's virginity and ability to provide the King with "carnal pleasure" (*BI* 19). The Duke is mortified at his mother's words:

'I cannot bear the thought of her...' He breaks off. 'I cannot stomach it! She must not seek him out!' he hisses. 'You must tell her. She must do nothing unmaidenly. She must do nothing wanton. You must warn her that she must be my sister, your daughter, before she is ever a wife. She must bear herself with coldness, with dignity. She is not to be his whore, she is not to act the part of some shameless, greedy...' (*BI* 20)

As he becomes speechless with fury and horror, his mother placates him with a promise to remind Anne of her modesty and strict upbringing before her departure. Later, she calls Anne into her chambers to berate her – despite the fact that she has done nothing to deserve chastisement – for "lack[ing] the proper traits of a woman: submission, obedience, love of duty" (*BI* 22). As a kind of pre-emptive punishment,

she orders Anne (a grown woman in her mid-twenties) to strip to the waist to be beaten with a rod. As she leans half-naked over a chair, she is acutely aware of her brother, who has concealed himself in the next room; the scene is oddly erotic, as she realises that “if [her] brother chooses to look through the half-open door he can see [her], displayed like a girl in a bawdy house” (*BI* 23). As she leaves the room with her thighs bloody from the beating she has received, she catches sight of him through the open door, and sees that “his face [is] filled with a desperate need” (*BI* 24). The image of Anne’s “bloody thighs” suggests that she has, in a symbolic sense, lost her ‘virginity’ in this encounter: her innocence has been sacrificed, Gregory implies, to the abuse she has suffered, and severely damaged her relationship to her own sexuality. In this sense, Anne’s abuse at the hands of her family members is equated to a kind of rape. It is significant that Anne’s mother is the one who metes out this punishment: Gregory is dramatising the extent to which women in the novel are complicit in their own subjugation.

Anne thus leaves for England as a woman whose development, both emotionally and sexually, has been blighted by her brother’s twisted desire to possess her in every way, a representative desire of paternal ownership. Her strict, sexually repressive upbringing has taught her to fear her own sexuality, as she associates it with her brother’s abuse and tyranny; she thus comes to the marriage bed profoundly “afraid of the mystery of male desire” (*BI* 232). Indeed, on the night of her wedding, as she waits for Henry to consummate their marriage, she is plagued by thoughts of her brother, and lies “as [her] brother would want [her] to lie, like a frozen moppet” (*BI* 127). It is significant that her brother’s authority so preoccupies her in her marriage bed, and she reflects that the Duke

wanted me as if he would dominate me completely. [...] I learned to use silence and endurance as my greatest weapons against him. His threat and his power was that he would hurt me. My power was that I dared to act as if he could not. I learned that I could endure anything a boy could do to me. Later, I learned that I could survive anything that a man might do to me. Later still I knew that he was a tyrant and he still did not frighten me. I have learned the power of surviving. (*BI* 127)

Anne's power as the feminist heroine of Gregory's novel is established here; so too is the realisation that she has "exchanged one difficult man for another. [She] shall have to learn how to evade the anger of this new man, and how to survive him" (*BI* 128). This interchangeability is significant, in that emphasises Gregory's depiction of the male characters as embodiments of a larger patriarchal society. Unsurprisingly, given the combination of her sexually repressive upbringing and her musings on the authority and domination of men even as she lies in her marriage bed, Anne is not receptive to Henry's clumsy groping; she believes that any pleasurable reaction will leave him thinking that she is wanton. He eventually gives up and the marriage remains unconsummated, leaving Anne confused, rejected and hurt: she later admits that the "burden of this insulting misery night after night is utterly defeating [her], it is humbling [her] to dust. [She] wake[s] every morning in despair; [she] feel[s] humiliated, though the failure is all his" (*BI* 190). She has "become an object of disgust, just as [she] was in Cleves" (*BI* 195). Henry's continued rejection of her further compounds the already-complicated relationship Anne has with her sexuality as a result of her brother's abuse.

While her brother's interference in her life continues to plague her – the Duke fails to send her a competent ambassador or the documents necessary to refute any doubt over the validity of her marriage – it becomes plainly evident that Anne has, for the most part, simply passed from the hands of one tyrant into those of another.



Gregory suggests that the principal cause behind Henry's rejection of Anne stems from a disastrous first meeting between the two. In a fit of romanticised chivalry, Henry disguises himself as a commoner and unexpectedly bursts into Anne's chambers while she is *en route* to London from Cleves. Not knowing who he is, she is horrified when an overweight, stinking, sweaty older man plants a wet kiss on her lips. Jane Boleyn is witness to the scene between them:

She pushes him away, two firm hands against his fat chest, and her face, sometimes so dull and stolid, is burning with colour. She is a modest woman, an untouched girl, and she is horrified that this man should come and insult her. She rubs the back of her hand over her face to erase the taste of his lips. Then, terribly, she turns her head and spits his saliva from her mouth. [...] He stumbles back, he, the great king, almost falls back before her contempt. Never in his life has a woman pushed him away, never in his life has he ever seen any expression in any woman's face but desire and welcome. He is stunned. In her flushed face and bright, offended gaze he sees the first honest opinion of himself that he has ever known. In a terrible, blinding flash he sees himself as he really is: an old man, long past his prime, no longer handsome, no longer desirable, a man that a young woman would push roughly away from her because she could not stand his smell, because she could not bear his touch. (*BI* 77-8)

Their relationship is never able to recover from this unfortunate encounter, and this, Gregory suggests, is the ultimate reason that Henry rejects Anne. The author is, however, at pains to point out that this theory is her own invention and not based on documented historical 'fact': "[w]orking as a novelist, rather than an historian, and imagining this scene and Henry's behaviour, it seems [...] plausible that a vain narcissistic man like Henry might be shocked to his very core to be rejected by his chosen bride" ("Background"). It is therefore Henry's "grievously wounded vanity" (*BI* 515), and *not* Anne's supposedly well-documented stupidity and undesirability, that leads to the dissolution of their marriage. By imaginatively recreating her

character, Gregory thus rescues Anne's reputation from the damage caused first by Henry's brutal assessment and rejection of her, and later by the acceptance and perpetuation of this assessment by traditional (male-dominated) historical discourse. For this scene, Gregory, disguising Henry as a commoner, quite literally strips him of his raiments of power, just as she holds them up to be scrutinised and undermined metaphorically.

In all other respects, Anne is presented as an exemplary queen and a model feminist heroine. She is overwhelmed and thrilled by the warm reception she receives from Henry's subjects (*BI* 74), and resolves to be "a good queen and an honest queen [...] for them" (*BI* 97). She also takes an active interest in the welfare of her three stepchildren (*BI* 98). Her marriage represents a form of escape from her brother's tyranny which she fully intends to exploit, and her determination to fulfil her potential is distinctly informed by Gregory's feminist consciousness in its expression: "I want to have a chance to be the woman I can be. Not my brother's creature, not my mother's daughter. I want to say here and grow into myself. [...] I want to be a woman in my own right" (*BI* 114). When it becomes clear that Henry means to be rid of her, however, she is gripped with fear, and realises that Henry is yet another man whose authority she needs to escape. As the inquiry into her marriage is initiated, she once again asserts her desire to be 'her own woman':

I think this will be my last night on earth and I regret more than anything else that I have wasted my life. I spent all my time obeying my father and then my brother, I squandered these last months in trying to please the king. I did not treasure the little spark that is me, uniquely me. Instead I put my will and my thoughts beneath the will of the men who command me. [...] If God spares me I shall try to honour him by being me, myself; not by being a sister or a daughter or a wife. (*BI* 272)

Anne has the wisdom to accept the terms of annulment offered to her by the King, and her life is indeed spared. While she laments the fact that she will never be wife and mother, she also acknowledges the freedom this affords her, knowing that “it may be a better thing to be a single woman with a good income in one of the finest palaces in England than to be one of Henry’s frightened queens” (*BI* 304). Though she cannot truly “trust” or “celebrate” her “escape” from Henry while the King still lives (*BI* 493), she has, by the end of the novel, achieved her desire to be ‘her own woman’: “I shall live my own life and please myself. I shall be a free woman. It is no small thing, this, for a woman: freedom” (*BI* 514). In achieving her independence and freedom from male tyranny, then, Anne emerges as the true feminist heroine of *The Boleyn Inheritance*. In allowing her wit, fierce intellect, and ambition, Gregory effectively overturns the reputation and qualities traditionally ascribed to her by historians: she is not simply a guileless, unattractive, and unwanted bride, but a damaged yet fiercely independent woman.

While Gregory resists the stereotypes surrounding Anne, her depiction of Jane Boleyn is, in many respects, less flattering in this regard. Jane is almost universally reviled in historical narratives, both fictional and biographical. Her role in the downfall of two of Henry’s queens has made her an easy target for blame and criticism; in her more sympathetic portrayal of Jane’s life, biographer Julia Fox explains that “[a]s the years passed, her posthumous reputation, already tarnished by her relationship with Catherine, deteriorated further: a myth evolved, seeing her execution as a much deserved, if belated, retribution for giving false testimony against her own husband and sister-in-law” (315). This observation is particularly true of historians and novelists who, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, have been more inclined to sympathetic portrayals of Anne Boleyn, and therefore find

a convenient scapegoat in Jane. Such portrayals depict Jane as a ruthless, heartless and brutal traitor to her family. While Gregory's portrayal is less extreme, she does not attempt to defend Jane's actions and involvement in the downfall of Anne Boleyn, Catherine Howard and even Anne of Cleves; she does, however, present a more nuanced characterisation of a deeply disturbed and damaged woman. Like Catherine Howard and Anne of Cleves, Gregory's third protagonist suffers abuse at the hands of the men in her life, most notably her husband George and her uncle by marriage, the Duke of Norfolk. The form of abuse she suffers is, perhaps, more subtle and complicated than that borne by the other two women, but it is nevertheless a determining influence in her behaviour. Gregory explains that, in researching Jane's character, it became evident "that much of her behaviour could be explained by the influence of the many complicated conspiracies of the Tudor Court as well as a voyeuristic and perverse sexuality" ("Background").<sup>9</sup> It becomes clear that these two factors – her role in Norfolk's conspiracies and the sexual perversions she develops during her marriage with George – are the most crucial to her characterisation in the novel.

At the novel's start, several years after her husband's and sister-in-law's executions, Jane is a "woman of nearly thirty years old, with a face scored by disappointment, mother to an absent son, a widow without prospect of re-marriage, the sole survivor of an unlucky family, heiress to a scandal" (*BI* 2-3). Desperate as she is to return to Court, she is also haunted by the memories and "ghosts" of what came before (*BI* 136); her memories of Anne and George reveal Jane's intense jealousy of their close relationship, and her lingering pain over her unrequited love for her

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<sup>9</sup> Again, it must be noted that Gregory applies a modern understanding of sexuality – and in this case, perversion and voyeurism – to her evaluation of sixteenth-century history. While certainly anachronistic to the Early Modern period, it serves her purposes in reappropriating that history to construct a feminist rereading of the inner lives of her characters.

husband. Though she repeatedly deludes herself into believing that her role in bringing about their downfall was for the good of the family as a whole (*BI* 70), her real motivations are clear: her feelings of rejection, belittlement, and jealousy, her anger at being excluded from the Boleyn siblings' clique and "only ever a sister-in-law" (*BI* 71), for never being wanted or appreciated (*BI* 179). Jane laments the fact that she was never appreciated, especially by her husband:

We might have grown old together, he would have prized me for my advice and my fierce loyalty, I would have loved him for his passion and his good looks, and his wit. He would have turned to me, in the end he would surely have turned to me. He would have tired of Anne and her temper. He would have learned that a steady love, a faithful love, a wife's love is the best. But George died, and so did Anne, both of them dead before they could learn to value me.  
(*BI* 225)

In addition, she resents George for what she perceives as his sexual perversions, and the damaging impact these perversions have had on her own sexuality. Aware of the fact that George does not desire her, she recalls resorting to a series of increasingly demeaning sexual acts in order to fulfil both his and her own desires; these actions further degrade her and deepen her feelings of guilt: "God forgive me for having my head turned and my heart turned so I liked nothing more than to lie in his arms and think of him with another woman – jealousy and lust brought me so low that it was my pleasure, a wicked sinful pleasure, to feel his touch on me and think of him touching her" (*BI* 124-5). Her betrayal of Anne and George, in providing the evidence that eventually condemns them, is thus a kind of sadistic revenge, a way for her finally to be noticed and, in some twisted sense, appreciated by him. However, Gregory's portrayal of Jane reveals that her actions are not simply an expression of a rejected woman's wrath: George's mistreatment and neglect of his wife results in her

suffering from a form of mental instability that borders on sociopathy. Furthermore, her guilt and preoccupation with the past over the course of the novel exacerbate her mental fragility, and leave her open to manipulation by Norfolk.

Jane's ties to Norfolk are established early on in the novel: in her mind, they are the surviving members of the Boleyn/Howard family and have a duty to maintain their reputation as one of the most prestigious families at Court. It is also clear that Norfolk played a crucial role in guiding Jane during the downfall of George and Anne; she trusts him implicitly, as he "saved [her] from a traitor's death once, he told [her] what [she] should do and how to do it" (*BI* 15), and she seems to believe that he genuinely cares for her. Norfolk, however, is only interested in Jane as far as her usefulness in the game of Court politics. Her position as lady-in-waiting to both Queen Anne and Queen Catherine means that she is ideally placed as a spy and, should the King require it, witness against her mistresses. Her own deeply-rooted sense of self-preservation, as well as her need to be noticed and appreciated, means that she is easily manipulated in this regard. When the King is seeking to be rid of Anne of Cleves, Jane is resigned to the fact that she will be required to supply trumped-up evidence against her, and that this evidence may result in the execution of another queen:

I have not yet been told what evidence I shall give, just that I will be required to swear to a written statement. I am beyond caring. I asked the duke my uncle if I might be spared and he says that on the contrary I should be glad that the king should put his faith in me again. I think I can say or do no more. I shall give myself up to these times, I shall bob along like a bit of driftwood on the tide of the king's whim. I shall try to keep my own head above the water and pity those that drown beside me. And, if I am honest, I may keep my own head up by pushing another down, and snatching at their air. In a shipwreck, it is every drowning man for himself. (*BI* 267)

Later, when it seems that the King is incapable of impregnating Catherine and the Duke of Norfolk orders Jane to encourage and facilitate the affair between Culpeper and Catherine in order to “get [their] little bitch serviced and in pup” (*BI* 371), Jane acquiesces, despite being fully aware of the consequences for Catherine should she be caught having an affair. Jane realises that ensuring Catherine falls pregnant will further her own ambitions, as Catherine’s son would be both Jane’s kin and the heir to the English throne; furthermore, Jane’s voyeuristic fetish – which took root during her marriage to George – is gratified by spying on them during their trysts.

Norfolk’s interest in Jane is not – as she believes – a result of familial concern for her, but of his desire to exploit her potential to further his own ambitions. As a woman, her compliance is almost guaranteed, as her welfare is entirely dependent on the generosity of the men who have authority over her (*BI* 109). Norfolk is able to control her with the promise of arranging another marriage for her (*BI* 408): her “work” in doing what Norfolk commands will ensure her “reward” (*BI* 413). When Catherine’s affair is discovered and it becomes clear that Jane will stand accused of treason alongside her, Norfolk discards his responsibility for and association with Jane without qualms, derisively mocking her and taking pleasure in forcing her to confront her own faults:

‘You never took the stand to save [George]. You took the stand to save your title and your fortune, you called it your inheritance, the Boleyn inheritance. [...] You sent them to their deaths, a savage death, for being beautiful and merry and happy in each other’s company and for excluding you. You are a byword for malice, jealousy and twisted lust. [...] Your love is worse than hatred. [...] Don’t you see how evil you are?’ (*BI* 457)

Here, Norfolk’s accusations reflect how Jane has typically been portrayed by (male-dominated) historical discourse. Gregory does not attempt to refute her actions or

even redeem her character – her characterisation of Jane, while not flagrantly critical, reveals her to be selfish, narcissistic, jealous, and uncompassionate, with a strange and hungry enjoyment of violence and brutality (*BI* 153). What Gregory does demonstrate, however, is that Jane was not alone in her actions, nor was she wholly sane. As a woman of her particular historical moment, she is essentially controlled by the men who have authority over her well-being, in this case her uncle the Duke of Norfolk, and the King. Moreover, Jane’s mistreatment, abuse, and neglect by her husband leaves her particularly vulnerable to manipulation, as she desperately seeks the appreciation and involvement denied to her in her marriage. By the end of the novel, Jane’s already-fragile mental stability is fractured by the immense guilt and regret that overwhelms her (*BI* 508); her madness, however, does not save her from the scaffold, where she dies “with innocent blood on [her] hands” (*BI* 512).

All three of Gregory’s protagonists, then, suffer from some form of abuse at the hands of the men who have authority over them – not least of whom is Henry himself. All three women are products of the patriarchal environment which produced them; Jane sums up the position of all three most perceptively when she acknowledges the role that Anne of Cleves will have to play as wife to the King:

She will have to learn to obey him. Not in the grand things, any woman can put on a bit of a show. But in the thousand petty compromises that come to a wife every day. The thousand times a day when one has to bite the lip and bow the head and not argue in public, nor in private, nor even in the quiet recesses of one’s own mind. (*BI* 125)

Gregory effectively demonstrates that each character, restricted as she is by her position as a woman of a particular historical moment, is subject to the control, manipulation and abuse of men. In so doing, Gregory reveals that history’s judgement



of these women – their reduction to crude stereotypes – is unjust, and she resists these stereotypes (and the male-dominated historical discourse that propagated them) by presenting more nuanced portrayals of all three.

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Reflecting on her career as an historical novelist, Gregory reveals that

I started this work thinking that I was finding exceptional women who survived and indeed pursued their ambitions successfully in a society which forbade their engagement with power. Then I found another exceptional woman, then another – I had to adjust my ideas to recognise this. How many exceptions do I find before I start to doubt the rule that women are barred from power and that this has the effect of disempowering them? Is it perhaps the case that even though women are formally banned from power we see them again and again finding levers of power that work, and living powerful and active lives following their own agenda? Maybe I am finding this because it exists, not because I imagine it, not because I am a feminist, maybe it is just the case. (Gregory, personal correspondence)

Gregory clearly reveals her approach to her historical subjects as being informed by a Western feminist consciousness: she seeks to demonstrate how her heroines are able to exercise some form of agency and power in an environment which seeks to restrict and control their identity. The characterisation of her heroines is complex and often even ambiguous; though Gregory is working within the restrictions imposed by both the genre and the setting of her novels, her feminist agenda finds expression in various, sometimes surprising, mechanisms.

In each of the novels of the Tudor Court series, Gregory employs the motif of the masquerade to demonstrate the instability of gender identity: her Tudor Court is a stage on which gender is performed, as each of her female characters are acutely

aware of the sexed role they are expected to perform. For most of her characters, this prescribed role is unnatural, artificial, and affected, emphasising the social, cultural, and historical contingency of the notion of gender. In this sense, femininity is a mask that her female characters don, a learned performance rather than a natural proclivity.<sup>10</sup> Whether it is expressed in the clothing they wear or the coquettish, submissive behaviour they affect, femininity is assumed or discarded for a specific purpose – be it for protection from unwanted attention, as is the case of Hannah in *The Queen's Fool*, or for the reward of wealth or power, like Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard.

Gregory's most effective intervention, however, is in the complex characterisation of her feminist heroines. These heroines exploit what power and agency they are afforded by a patriarchal society; they often play an active role in resisting male domination, and show a nuanced, feminist understanding of their repressive environment that is often incongruent with the time period to which they belong. It is through the expression of her heroines that Gregory's own feminist perspectives are manifested: as she herself admits, because her characters are of her own creation, they inevitably share her world view. All of Gregory's Tudor Court novels are primarily concerned with privileging the *female experience* of a particular historical moment, and detail events such as childbirth and motherhood which are otherwise ignored by male-dominated historical discourse. In emphasising the female experience, Gregory self-consciously recovers a matrilineal genealogy that simultaneously resists reductive female stereotypes and provides a more sympathetic understanding of the positioning of women in their particular historical moment, one

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<sup>10</sup> While the notion of a rich, subjective interiority that is 'masked' by social display or performance is rooted in the Early Modern period, Gregory's specific and deliberate dramatisation of the split between the inner and outer lives of her characters is informed by an Anglo-American feminist understanding of individual agency. Gregory's purpose here is to emphasise the unstable nature of the construct of gender.

which may be anachronistic but which is revealing of Gregory's politics. Gregory's women are products of both their time and the author's own: they are exploited, manipulated, abused, neglected, and undervalued, but they are powerful.

## *Chapter Four:*

# **(Un)silenced women: the deployment of postmodern narrative strategies in the realisation of feminist agendas in the novels of Suzannah Dunn and Mavis Cheek**

*Postmodern fiction does not 'aspire to tell the truth' [...] as much as to question whose truth gets told.*

*Linda Hutcheon  
("Pastimes" 491)*

Informed by the recognition that women have been largely excluded or silenced by traditional historical narratives, feminist historians have sought to reinsert the female perspective into mainstream historiography, and to challenge the traditionally accepted – but essentially patriarchal – view of women's role in history. This renegotiated discourse, which places women as the focus of historical study,<sup>1</sup> prompted a radical shift in historiographic methodology in the latter half of the twentieth century. Feminism is by no means the only force which contributed to the reconceptualisation of history in recent decades, however: as discussed in some detail in Chapter One, the feminist approach to the reconstruction of historiography is closely aligned with the historiographic frameworks established by postmodern philosophers. Both movements share a “distrust of the authority of historical narratives” (Hamilton 189), and reveal them as being imbued with the social, political, and cultural ideologies which informed their construction. In postmodern

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<sup>1</sup> Southgate has noted that “[s]uch counterbalancing histories are obviously no less biased than those of the past, but the bias is admitted and the ideological standpoint clarified” (*What and Why?* 96).

and feminist texts alike, the notion of history as an objective, unbiased, and universalised account of the past is undermined, and the subjective, individualised nature of historical narrative is foregrounded. Both approaches to historiography eschew the acceptance of the “grand narrative”, replacing it with the notion of the plurality of history and the positing of multiple “alternate histories” which emphasise the individual, highly subjective experiences of a particular historical moment.

Under the coetaneous influences of both postmodernism and feminism, the restructuring of historiographic discourse and the acceptance of the plurality of history have afforded authors of contemporary historical fiction the platform from which to imaginatively recreate fictionalised “alternate histories”. The reconstruction of particular historical moments is often effected to different ends in postmodern and feminist historical fiction: whereas postmodern texts problematise the abstract notions of truth and reality, feminist writings primarily seek to expose the patriarchal values upon which the “grand narrative” is founded. In doing so, writers of women’s historical fiction “reassess not only their own position in history but also the nature of that history’s right to represent the ‘truth’” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 3). The similarities in their approach to the concept of history has meant, however, that writers of both postmodern and feminist-influenced historical fiction often employ distinctly similar narrative strategies. Even women’s historical novels that are not overtly motivated by a feminist agenda are enabled in their expression by the shift in historiographic methodologies associated with both postmodernism and feminism. This shift is articulated in the novels’ focus on introducing imaginatively reconstructed female perspectives on their particular historical moments. In order to understand the ways in which authors of women’s historical fiction in the twenty-first century have appropriated and repurposed postmodern narrative devices, it is

necessary to assess some of the most common of these strategies and the purpose of their deployment in postmodern historical fiction.

The tensions created by the postmodern approach to history have proven to be an important preoccupation for scholars of historical fiction, Linda Hutcheon perhaps the most prominent among them. Hutcheon acknowledges that

Recent postmodern readings of both history and realist fiction have focused more on what the two modes of writing share than on how they differ. They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalised in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent, either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. (“Pastimes” 474).

These similarities, of course, serve only to emphasise the *fictionality* of historical narrative itself: de Groot argues that the “central paradox of historical fiction” is its “consciously false realist representation of something which can never be known” (113). De Groot also contends that “the type of novel which gestures towards ‘historical’ authenticity, but which consciously deploys fictional tropes to attain that quality, in some ways must demonstrate the gap between written text and truth” (111). Thus Hutcheon and de Groot both recognise the *self-conscious, self-reflexive* engagement of postmodern historical fiction with issues of truth and representation. While historical “accuracy” and “authenticity” have traditionally been of critical importance to historical fiction, the postmodern historical novel “consciously deploys fictional tropes” (de Groot 111), drawing attention to them to emphasise a self-conscious fictionality and thereby highlighting the impossibility of rendering an “authentic” representation of reality. Such novels therefore tend to abandon realist

modes of writing in favour of more experimental, *avant-garde* narrative strategies; others, however, adopt a more traditional realist mode that is often quite subtly disrupted by self-reflexive gestures towards their own construction. What postmodern historical novels all have in common, however, is an acknowledgement of the destabilisation of the notions of historical “truth” and “fact”, and an awareness of the constructed, narrativised nature of both history and fiction.

Hutcheon coined the term “historiographic metafiction” to refer to novels that, in some way, respond to the “postmodern crisis” in both history and fiction. She explains that this term signifies a mode of fiction writing that is “intensely self-reflexive but that also both re-introduce[s] historical context into metafiction and problematise[s] the entire question of historical knowledge” (“Pastimes” 474). Such novels, then, not only question the possibility of authentically representing reality, but undermine any claim to historical accuracy and authenticity. In doing so, they raise several issues regarding the relationship between historiography and fiction, including those “surrounding the nature of identity and subjectivity; the question of reference and representation; the intertextual nature of the past; the ideological implications of writing about history; narrative emplotting; and the status of historical documents, not to mention ‘facts’” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 486) – all of which are central concerns of postmodern philosophy. This emphasis upon the relationship between historiography and fiction is achieved through the deployment of narrative strategies and devices such as intertextuality, pastiche, parody, irony, temporal distortion, multiple or unreliable narrators, and even magical realism, all of which foreground the novel’s self-conscious engagement with historiography and representation. In this way, historiographic metafiction can be seen as entering into a kind of postmodern dialogue with history, acknowledging its reliance on the existence of a historical

reality while at the same time denying the possibility of accurately rendering that reality. In addition, such novels will highlight the subjective and interpretative nature of historiography and draw attention to those systems of representation which purport to facilitate our understanding of reality.<sup>2</sup>

The use of intertextual, extratextual, and paratextual devices is perhaps one of the most effective ways in which this engagement with postmodern historiography is achieved. While these devices are by no means recent innovations in historical fiction, they are used to very specific ends in the postmodern context: that is, not only to “frame the narrative but also [to] invoke questions of authenticity, directing the reader to consider how historical evidence is presented to make a particular case” (de Groot 121). The use of intertextuality is particularly common in this regard: historical novelists typically incorporate historical texts in their own narratives, usually in the form of quotations, and often with the intent of undermining or challenging the commonly-supposed context or meaning of that text. This strategy assumes or relies on the reader’s knowledge of the original text, and serves to “de-realise these texts [...] by making them part of a fiction” (Keans qtd in Wallace 144). Other common, and often less subtle, strategies include the conventions of the Author’s Note, foreword, Post-Script, or afterword, and even the inclusion of footnotes within the text of the novel itself. Typically, this kind of authorial intrusion serves to alert the reader to the interpretative, fictional context in which the historical “facts” of the novel are embedded. In turn, this (sometimes unintentionally) emphasises the alignment between and integration of fact and fiction, thereby undermining the notion

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<sup>2</sup> Historiographic metafiction, unlike more generic historical fiction, has received a considerable amount of critical attention, most of which focuses on some of the most famous names in literature. The most well-known examples of historiographic metafiction include John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996), Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1980), and Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1980).



of historical “fact” and raising questions surrounding the issues of representation and interpretation.

An exemplary, and very early, use of this paratextual narrative strategy is evident in Norah Lofts’s *The Concubine* (1963). While in many respects, this novel bears similarities to the more traditional realist historical novels of the preceding decades, it also exhibits the beginnings of a gradual shift in the genre towards the more self-reflexive, self-conscious treatment of history which characterises historiographic metafiction. Lofts’s novel chronicles the life and eventual downfall of Anne Boleyn; its third person narration continually shifts in focalisation throughout the course of story, so that the reader is afforded the perspectives of not only Anne, but Henry VIII, Cardinal Wolsey, Mary Boleyn, Anne’s maidservant Emma, and several others. The employment of multiple narrative perspectives is, in itself, a common postmodern device in historiographic metafiction, a means by which to highlight the plural nature of history; however, it is Lofts’s use of quotations from historical documents throughout the novel which proves particularly effective. Each chapter of the novel is headed by a title which indicates the setting (including, amongst others, the Boleyns’ family homes in Blickling and Hever, as well as various royal residences such as Hampton Court, Whitehall and Greenwich) and date of that particular section of the narrative (spanning the period between October 1523 and the day of Anne’s execution, 19 May 1536). In addition to this, Lofts includes with every chapter an epigraph taken from various biographies and historical documents. The sources she utilises for these epigraphs range from modern biographies to contemporary letters and ambassadorial reports, and vary in their reliability. Among

them are George Cavendish's *The Life of Cardinal Wolsey*,<sup>3</sup> Gareth Mattingly's *Catherine of Aragon* (1941), Agnes Strickland's seminal *Lives of the Queens of England* (1840–1848), court records and ambassadorial reports, vaguely referenced “Letters and Papers of the reign of Henry VIII” (Lofts 26), and entirely unreferenced quotations attributed to the likes of “Sir Thomas Wyatt” (Lofts 62). Each epigraph relates, in some way, to the content of the chapter which follows it: a chapter focalised by Mary Boleyn, for example, is preceded by a quotation from the Strickland biography, which declares that “Mary was the fairest, the most delicately featured, and the most feminine of the two [Boleyn sisters]” (qtd in Lofts 51). Other epigraphs simply preempt the main plot points of that chapter: for example, a quotation ascribed simply to “Sir Thomas Wyatt” reports that “[Henry VIII] in the end fell to win [Anne] by treaty of marriage, and in his talk on that matter took from her a ring, which he ever wore upon his little finger” (Lofts 62), and the chapter which follows is a reconstruction of this incident.

Ostensibly, then, these epigraphs serve to reinforce and validate the historical authenticity of Lofts's text: by including them and integrating them so closely within her chapters, she is, in a sense, proving that her story remains as close to historical “fact” as possible. However, on several occasions (particularly in the latter half of the novel), the narrative is incongruent with the chapter's epigraph, or offers a differing perspective from or context in which it can be understood. In addition, the sources of the quotations are themselves often highly suspect or blatantly biased: George Cavendish, for example, was Cardinal Wolsey's loyal gentleman-usher and well known for his bitter resentment of Anne's role in the Cardinal's downfall; meanwhile,

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<sup>3</sup> George Cavendish's manuscript was thought to have been completed in 1558 – almost thirty years after the death of Wolsey – but was never published in his lifetime. A disputed version of the text was published in 1641, while the supposedly genuine and more widely-circulated version appeared as late as 1810, some 250 years after it was supposedly first written. Lofts does not indicate to which version of the text she refers in her novel.

“The Spanish Ambassador” referred to as the author of several of the epigraphs is Eustace Chapuys, a fierce proponent of Katherine of Aragon who was openly contemptuous of Anne. Naturally, neither of these men could be expected to express an objective or impartial opinion of Anne, or of Henry’s attempts to divorce Katherine. Moreover, Lofts’s use of biographies from vastly different time periods (from contemporary sixteenth-century manuscripts, to Victorian volumes and early twentieth-century texts) is in itself problematic; as previously discussed, historians themselves are engaged in the subjective process of construction, selection, and interpretation, and their historical narratives are imbued with the politics and ideologies of their particular context. The interspersed use of such vastly different sources highlights the subjective nature of *all* the historical, supposedly impartial texts Lofts invokes ostensibly to validate the accuracy of her narrative. Their close integration in the text of the novel creates an alignment between “fact” and fiction, further undermining the notion of historical authenticity and emphasising the constructed, narrativised nature of both the novel and the historical texts utilised. Hutcheon identifies this use of “paratextual conventions of historiography” as a common feature of historiographic metafiction, as a means to both “inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations” (“Pastimes” 491).

The most interesting feature of Lofts’s novel, however, occurs when she openly departs from the constraints of recorded or commonly-accepted “fact” and offers her own interpretation of Anne’s downfall. Although most post-Victorian historians agree that Anne was innocent of the charges of treason and adultery levelled against her, Lofts suggests that she was, in fact, guilty – but not in a way one might expect. In this version of events, Anne is driven to commit adultery on several

occasions out of desperation to fall pregnant with a son; she is concealing her latest miscarriage, knowing that the King will see it as a sign that their marriage is cursed and seek to be rid of her. She stages a series of masked balls, during which she forbids the revelers to remove their disguises, and several dozen of her ladies pay her the compliment of imitating her dress and mannerisms while in costume (Lofts 261). Her true identity thus concealed, she secretly seduces a number of unsuspecting courtiers in an effort to fall pregnant. This scenario is entirely the author's invention; the epigraph which precedes this chapter, attributed simply to "Your Author", declares: "I do not say that this is how it happened; I only say that this is how it could have happened" (Lofts 259). In placing her own epigraph in the same position as those taken from historical documents and supposedly accurate historical narratives, Lofts further emphasises the alignment between fact and fiction in her novel, suggesting that her version of events is equally valid or plausible as those proposed or "reported" by historians. Her choice of phrasing implicitly acknowledges that historians – like authors – offer a particular, subjective interpretation of the historical evidence available to them. Lofts's version of Anne's adultery can neither be proved nor disproved on the basis of such evidence; she simply proposes another possibility, an alternate history.

This commitment to exploring the plurality of history is a key feature of postmodern historical fiction, which by its very definition demonstrates "a resistance to old certainties about what happened and why; a recognition of the subjectivity, the uncertainty, the multiplicity of truths inherent in any account of past events" (Rozett, "Constructing a World"). It should be noted, however, that this is the point on which (particularly postmodern) historical fiction is most often criticised. Claims of historical inaccuracy are frequently (and rather paradoxically) levelled against works

of fiction; reviewers and critics alike are inclined, even in the twenty-first century, to condemn an author for straying outside of the bounds of “fact”, and some scholars have gone as far as to denounce the entire genre as having nothing “useful and truthful [to say] about the past” (Litt 112). Such criticisms, in fact, entirely miss the point of postmodern historical fiction: in offering alternate histories or reinterpretations of historical fact, it does not seek to undermine or even replace the “grand historical narrative”, but rather to challenge the *notion* of a totalising grand narrative. Indeed, it may be argued that this openness to speculation and the exploration of alternative possibilities is one of the strengths of fiction over traditional historiography. While some fictions may test and even break the boundaries of credulity, they are nevertheless enabled by and further bolster postmodern historical methodology.

The use of intertextual, paratextual, and extratextual elements in historical novels serves to highlight another important postmodern concern: the intrinsic textuality of history. In invoking historical documents, the author reminds the reader that the past can only ever be “known” through mediated accounts: events are invested with meaning and coherence only through the process of selection and interpretation undertaken by an historian. This foregrounding of the process of selection and interpretation, according to Hutcheon, is another typical feature of what she calls historiographic metafiction, which “acknowledges the paradox of the *reality* of the past but its (only) *textualised* accessibility to us today” (“Pastime” 483; emphasis in original). The mediated accessibility of history is closely related to Roland Barthes’s postmodern understanding of language as a system of representation: he argues that the

only feature which distinguishes historical discourse from other kinds is a paradox: the 'fact' can only exist linguistically, as a term in a discourse, yet we behave as if it were a simple reproduction of something on another plane of existence altogether, some extra-structural 'reality'. Historical discourse is presumably the only kind which aims at a referent 'outside' itself that can in fact never be reached. (153-4)

Historical narrative – or discourse, in Barthes's words – can therefore be considered as a textual representation or reconstruction of the past, rendered immediately problematic by the ideological implications of representation and the impossibility of achieving an "authentic" reconstruction. Historical texts – and, by extension, historical fiction – are inevitably products of their social and cultural circumstances, and are in turn interpreted and decoded by historians or authors who are subject to their own ideological context. Louis Montrose, one of the first theorists to make use of the phrase "textuality of history", explains that

we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question – traces whose survival we cannot assume to be merely contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of preservation and effacement; [...] those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as the "documents" upon which historians ground their own texts, called "histories." (qtd in Oppermann, "Interplay")

The mediation, reconstruction, and re-presentation of our historical knowledge, then, is a central preoccupation of many novels in the genre of historiographic metafiction. The relationship with postmodern philosophy here is clear: in employing narrative devices such as intertextuality, such novels engage with the problematic issues of

representation and mediation, and in turn destabilise the notions of historical truth or accuracy.

Postmodern historical novels are by their very nature intensely self-reflexive. Typically, they are characterised by “intrusions by authors commenting on their own practice and proceedings, or enacting in their texts problematic relations between language, fiction and reality” (Stevenson 22). They demonstrate an awareness of the mediated process by which our histories are constructed; they acknowledge the problem of the linguistic representation of reality and the impossibility of achieving “true” accuracy or authenticity. Through deploying narrative devices such as pastiche, parody, irony, temporal distortion, decentering, dislocation, multiple or unreliable narrators, and intertextuality, postmodern historical novels destabilise the previously unchallenged relationship between history and fiction, often rejecting the “grand narrative” of history in favour of alternate histories and interpretations. De Groot asserts that the “decentering of the central master narratives of historical fact has allowed authors to explore a variety of issues, from the problem of unreliable narratives [...] to marginalised and hitherto unwritten histories” (112). It is in the privileging of these “marginalised and [...] unwritten histories” that the postmodern historical novel has proven to be of critical value to feminist authors, readers and historians.

The novels which will be critically analysed in this chapter are ostensibly concerned with recovering the “unwritten histories” of their female subjects, and with providing a voice to characters who have been silenced or marginalised by an essentially misogynistic “grand historical narrative”. Both Dunn and Cheek implicitly demonstrate a postmodern understanding of historiography; more significantly, however, their novels are informed by their compulsion to resist and challenge the

patriarchal underpinnings of traditional historical discourse. In each of their novels, history – and the historical women that populate their narratives – is used as a means of revealing the damaging and oppressive nature of patriarchy, and to demonstrate (with questionable success) that these concerns are still relevant to the lives of their twenty-first century readers. Drawing on the similarities between the postmodern and feminist approaches to historiography, Dunn and Cheek appropriate and repurpose narrative strategies more commonly associated with historiographic metafiction in order to achieve their feminist agendas. In many respects, their aims are similar to Gregory's, in that their main concerns focus on providing more complex characterisations of their historical women. In doing so, they are rescuing these characters, either from obscurity, or from the crude stereotyping that has been imposed on them for centuries and unjustly reduced their historical significance. While Gregory achieves this primarily through the construction of a seamless and intimate first-person narrative, Dunn and Cheek both call attention to the mediated, textualised nature of history in order to destabilise the traditionally accepted “grand narrative”.

**Juxtaposing “fact” and fabrication:**

**Suzannah Dunn's *The Queen of Subtleties***

Although it is not overtly experimental or *avant-garde* in its execution, the influence of the postmodern approach to historiography is clearly evident in *The Queen of Subtleties* (2004). Suzannah Dunn employs several postmodern narrative strategies more commonly associated with historiographic metafiction in the construction of her interpretation of the events surrounding the downfall of Anne Boleyn. In doing so, she



not only engages with issues of truth, representation, textuality, and plurality, but achieves her goal of reconstructing a matrilineal genealogy – in this case, quite literally. Dunn was conscious of her feminist motivations in writing this novel: “I did very much grow up in that literary tradition, as it were, of trying to give a voice to those who [...] haven’t traditionally had a voice or are ‘silenced’; that is [a] conscious [choice]” (Dunn, personal correspondence). Her deployment of postmodern narrative devices, then, serves to bolster this agenda by revealing the highly subjective, interpretative nature of historiography. What an analysis of this novel reveals, however, is that a tension is inherently created in attempting to align the politics of postmodernism and feminism: while second wave feminism is indebted to the idea of a unified subject, a “true voice” that can be recovered and written back into history, postmodernity rejects the ideas of a unified subject, authenticity, and monolithic truth. In appropriating the narrative strategies associated with postmodern fiction, then, Dunn is in fact simultaneously recasting their ideological orientation.

Dunn started her writing career in the 1990s, and during this decade published a total of five contemporary novels and two collections of short stories; *The Queen of Subtleties* is her first historical novel, and marked what for her was a surprising turn in her career. She has, on numerous occasions, commented on the fact that historical fiction was – and to a large extent, remains – “an alien world” to her, but that she was inexplicably drawn to writing the story of Anne Boleyn (Dunn, personal correspondence). While she originally planned to focus her novel entirely on Anne’s story, it was on the advice of her agent that she decided to “come at the story sideways” – he urged her not to “just re-tell history”, but to “tell it differently, through someone else’s eyes, someone unexpected” (Dunn, personal correspondence). Dunn eventually incorporated both her own desire to tell Anne’s story and her agent’s

insistence that she find an innovative approach by splitting the narrative between two protagonists: the novel is made up of alternating sections of excerpts from a fictionalised letter that Anne writes to her daughter, Elizabeth, on the eve of her execution, and the first-person narration of Lucy Cornwallis, a working-class confectioner employed in Henry VIII's kitchens. Although they depict the same events, the two sections of the narrative feature very little overlap, and the protagonists have almost no interaction with one another; however, the juxtaposition of their stories creates a tension between the notions of "truth" and fiction typical of postmodern historical novels.

The inclusion of multiple points of view is a commonly-used postmodern narrative device which emphasises the subjective nature of the historical narrative. Hutcheon identifies this strategy as a key feature of historiographic metafiction, in that it results in the "problematized inscribing of subjectivity into history" ("Pastime" 486), thereby undermining the notion of historical "fact" and calling into question the ability of authors and historians alike to represent reality. In other words, the use of multiple viewpoints emphasises the subjective and interpretative nature of narrative construction, whether it be historical or fictional, reminding the reader of the social, political, and ideological context of that construction. Utilising the discourse evoked by Hutcheon, several other scholars have asserted that this strategy has proven particularly useful for feminist historical authors: Wallace, for example, observes that "multiple or unreliable narrative viewpoints [are] often used by women writers to disrupt any view of history itself as unitary and closed" (18); Booth, meanwhile, suggests that these kinds of "intertwined narratives [...] propose that many categories, including gender and identity, are much more fluid and varied than the normative narratives about them suggest" (45). The constructs of gender and femininity,

therefore, are just as unstable and historically contingent as the notion of historical “truth”, dependent as they are on their ideological context and subjective interpretation.

Dunn’s use of multiple narrative perspectives is particularly interesting in this regard. Like the majority of historical novelists, Dunn makes use of an “Author’s Note” at the start of the novel to directly address her readers and to distinguish between what can be considered as historical “fact” in the novel, and what aspects of the narrative she has imaginatively embroidered. The juxtaposition of her two narratives – one being based, as she claims, wholly on fact, while the other is almost entirely fabricated – is emphasised here:

A ‘Mrs Cornwallis’ is recorded as having been Henry VIII’s confectioner, and the only woman in the household’s two hundred kitchen staff. All that is known of her, apart from her surname and job, is that the king eventually gave her a fine house in Aldgate in recognition of her services. All other aspects of the Lucy Cornwallis character and her story in this novel are fictional, as are those of her close colleagues. [...] All events recorded or referred to in the ‘Anne Boleyn’ sections of the novel aim to be historically accurate, with three small exceptions: the motto embroidered on the king’s jousting costume for Shrove Tuesday, 1526, was not in fact ‘No Comment’ but ‘Declare je nos’ (‘Declare I dare not’); Anne’s uncle, the Duke of Norfolk, not Sir Henry Norris, broke the news to her of Henry’s serious fall in the spring of 1536; and the aunt with Anne in the Tower was not the Elizabeth who had been Duchess of Norfolk, but another one.

(*QS* “Notes”; n.p.)

Dunn goes on to explain her usage of the diminutive forms of certain characters’ names in order to distinguish between those that share the same first name, and even goes as far as to mention her decision to change the name of Anne’s pet dog. Already, then, Dunn is at pains to draw the distinction between fiction and “fact” in her novel, between what she has constructed and what she asserts can be based in reality. The

painstaking detail she provides regarding the changes she has made to Anne's story – none of which are particularly pivotal to the plot – implies that the reader can assume the remainder of the story is, in fact, entirely historically accurate, at least as far as Anne's sections are concerned. However, the reader is immediately alerted to the inherent irony of this implicit claim of historical accuracy: the intensely personal nature, in the form of an exploration of interiority and motives, of both Anne's and Lucy's sections deliberately reinserts and emphasises the subjectivity of their stories; as Wallace points out, the “first-person narrative structure of [many women's historical novels] dramatises [...] the subjective nature of historical narrative itself” (17). This is particularly true of this novel, where Dunn has interwoven an historically “accurate” narrative in the form of Anne's story with the entirely fabricated narrative of Lucy Cornwallis. The claim of historical accuracy in the Anne sections is therefore immediately undermined.

The decision to include Lucy Cornwallis as one of the novel's protagonists is itself motivated by a postmodern approach to historical narrative. Willie Thompson explains that the interest of postmodern theory in the plurality of history and the subjective, exclusionary nature of the “grand historical narrative” meant that postmodern historians (and authors) were driven to reconstruct the histories and perspectives of those who had traditionally been silenced, including women and the working classes; this kind of “social history was soon taken up and applied to the travails of all sorts of suppressed, disregarded, despised groups, individuals and collectives – it brought a new perspective to the history of women and was the wellspring of feminist historiography” (Thompson 22).<sup>4</sup> Wallace concurs, and argues

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<sup>4</sup> Willie Thompson identifies the first “social history” of this nature as E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, published in 1963 (22).

that this postmodern approach to historiography has been particularly useful to feminist writers, as “the historical novel has allowed them to invent or ‘re-imagine’ [...] the unrecorded lives of marginalised and subordinated people, especially women, but also the working classes” (2). The privileging of such a viewpoint, “through the eyes of some of the most oppressed and disenfranchised people in society”, is what Wallace refers to as “history seen from below” (161),<sup>5</sup> and is of crucial importance to postmodern historians and feminist authors alike.

The isolated and vague record of “Mrs. Cornwallis”, the King’s confectioner and the sole female member of his kitchen staff (*QS* “Notes”; n.p.), has therefore proved to be an intriguing and fruitful source for Dunn. Mrs. Cornwallis, as she is depicted by Dunn, is a character who has been silenced not only by virtue of her gender, but by her ‘inferior’ class, and the author felt that her story would prove an effective counterpoint to Anne’s in the novel. Dunn explains that “[i]t struck [her] that the confectioner would’ve been a woman in a man’s world, which is what [she’d] always felt Anne to have been” (Dunn, personal correspondence). The similarities between Anne and Lucy are repeatedly established throughout the narrative: they are, for example, the same age (*QS* 126), and Lucy repeatedly compares their positions or tries to imagine herself in Anne’s circumstances. Despite this, their characters are vastly different: whereas Anne is assertive, ambitious, and passionate, Lucy is fairly passive, temperate, and self-deprecating. Far from thinking of herself as unique and special for being a “woman in a man’s world”, Lucy appears to be accepting of her subservient position and does not aspire to more (*QS* 70). Acutely aware of her own

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<sup>5</sup> The term “history from below” was also employed by Lukács to describe the perspective adopted by historical novels which are narrated “from the standpoint of popular life”: he argues that the “indirect contact between individual lives and historical events is the most decisive thing of all. For the people experience history directly. History is their own upsurge and decline, the chain of their joys and sorrows. If the historical novelist can succeed in creating characters and destinies in which the important social-human contents, problems, movements, etc., of an epoch appear directly, then he can present history ‘from below’” (285).

insignificance in the grander context of the royal household, she is often overcome with the sensation that she is going to “disappear” (*QS* 226). She is, initially at least, an emotionally deadened character, devoid of any personal interests; this changes over the course of the narrative as she develops a close friendship and eventually falls in love with Mark Smeaton, a musician in Anne’s household. Lucy eventually realises that her love is unrequited: Mark thinks of her as no more than a friend, and is in fact in love with Anne, his Queen and mistress. It is at this juncture that Dunn introduces the plot point which transforms the unknown Mrs. Cornwallis into a character of historical significance: when Mark admits his feelings for Anne, Lucy (somewhat inexplicably) encourages him to “declare [himself] to her” (*QS* 228). She also gives him an exquisite sugar-spun rose, which she has been painstakingly crafting for months as a love token for him, and urges him to present it to Anne as a gift (*QS* 228). Mark follows her advice, and the following day, he is arrested and tortured into confessing to an affair with the Queen. It is on the basis on this evidence – which Lucy is, in some way, responsible for instigating – that Anne, Mark, and four other men are charged with treasonous adultery and subsequently executed. In an unsuccessful attempt to save him, Lucy insists on a meeting with Thomas Cromwell, the King’s chief minister, and claims that Mark is her lover (*QS* 231), thereby destroying her own reputation at Court. By the novel’s close, Lucy – much like Anne – is devastated, desolate, and alone.

Dunn’s strategy here – privileging the perspective of a minor historical “bystander” and investing that character with major historical significance – is common to all of her works of historical fiction.<sup>6</sup> Discussing her choice of narrators,

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<sup>6</sup> Dunn has written three other historical novels, all of which are set in the Tudor Court and feature a minor historical character or “bystander” as the protagonist whose actions, in some way, have significant historical consequences. In *The Confession of Katherine Howard* (2010), the narrator is Cat Tilney, a close childhood friend of Catherine Howard, who is coerced into providing the evidence upon

she explains that “in order to be given ‘a voice’ in a novel, they do have to have a role – [they] can’t just be observers – which is where the fiction comes in” (Dunn, personal correspondence). Dunn’s insistence on investing these minor characters with an historically significant role re-establishes, in turn, the value of those deemed too unimportant to be recorded by history. Rather than acquiescing to the outmoded historiographic notion, critically assessed by Booth, that “women – ordinary women – are ahistoric” (50), Dunn populates her novels with “ordinary women” whose actions and lives have major historical impact, despite going unrecorded in the “grand historical narrative”. In doing so, her women become the *subjects* rather than the *objects* of history; while her fictional histories are imaginatively reconstructed and, it could be argued, not based on “fact”, her novels are certainly informed by a revisionist approach to historiography, in that they privilege the perspective of those previously deemed insignificant to history.

Dunn’s focus on the history of an “ordinary”, working-class woman is contrasted starkly (and thus further emphasised) by her choice of a second protagonist: Anne Boleyn, a woman whose life has been the subject of intense scrutiny over the course of several centuries. While the Lucy Cornwallis sections of the novel are narrated from a deeply personal, first-person perspective, Dunn goes even further in highlighting the subjective nature of her narrative by presenting Anne’s sections in the form of a letter she writes to her daughter, Elizabeth, the night before she is executed for treason. The letter tells the story of her life from her own perspective; it is, in many respects, a defence of her reputation and asserts her

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which Catherine’s conviction and execution is based. In *The Sixth Wife* (2007), the protagonist, Catherine, Duchess of Suffolk, embarks on an affair with the husband of her best friend Katherine Parr, Henry VIII’s widow. Katherine’s discovery of the affair utterly devastates her and is cited by the narrator as the reason why Katherine dies (ostensibly of a broken heart) following the birth of her daughter. Finally, in *The Queen’s Sorrow* (2008), the narrator – a Spanish sundial maker in the service of Mary I’s husband, Philip – becomes a close confidante of the Queen’s, and his conversations with her inadvertently lead to the execution of his lover.

innocence of the crimes for which she is being executed. Anne is acutely aware of her position as an historical figure: she makes repeated references to how her life will be interpreted and how she will be remembered by future generations. Dunn's characterisation of Anne is thus distinctly postmodern in its construction, in that she orientates her life towards the text it will become, dissolving the difference between a true and a represented self. Of particular concern to her is how she will be remembered (if at all) by her daughter:

Elizabeth, you'll be told lies about me, or perhaps even nothing at all. I don't know which is worse. You, too, my only baby: your own lifestory [*sic*] is being re-written. You're no longer the king's legitimate daughter and heir. Yesterday, with a few pen-strokes, you were bastardised. Tomorrow, for good measure, a sword-stroke will leave you motherless. [...] You won't remember how I look, and I don't suppose you'll ever come across my likeness. Portraits of me will be burned. You'll probably never come across my handwriting, because my letters and diaries will go the same way. Even my initial will be chiselled from your father's on carvings and masonry all around the country. (*QS 1*)

Anne's fear of being erased – quite literally – from memory and history is significant here. Concerned as feminist historians (and authors) are with the recovery of a matrilineal genealogy, the literal loss of her mother at the hands of her father has been an aspect of Elizabeth Tudor's life that has proven to be of particular interest: “[i]n contrast to the figure of the all-powerful father, the powerlessness of the ‘murdered’ mother, silenced within the patriarchal power structure, is literally enacted in Elizabeth's life through the beheading of her mother, Anne Boleyn” (Wallace 98). Here, Dunn recognises the pervasive power of the patriarchal system which dictates who will be remembered in history and, significantly, *how* they will be remembered. Anne is aware that the “story that everyone [will tell] is that Henry divorced his long-



suffering, sweet-natured, middle-aged queen for me, a younger woman, a dark-eyed, gold-digging, devil-may-care temptress. The truth is more complicated” (*QS* 9). The “truth” she refers to here is her, Anne’s, truth – her version of her own life, her interpretation of the circumstances that led to her downfall. Her letter to her daughter is her attempt to include *her own* truth among the many versions of her story that will proliferate after her death. The highly subjective nature of history is highlighted here: the “truth” is not a simple matter of objective historical representation, as Anne recognises, but rather plural and multi-faceted, a matter of interpretation, selection, and intention.

Anne’s letter to her daughter, as well as her references to the destruction of her portraits, diaries, and even her initials carved into the brickwork of the royal palaces, highlight another crucial characteristic of postmodern historiography: the textual, material nature of our access to the past. As discussed, the construction of history is very much dependent on the textual interpretation of historical evidence; because almost all of Anne Boleyn’s possessions were destroyed or lost following her execution, it is nearly impossible to construct an accurate characterisation of her in “her own words”, as it were, meaning that history’s impression of Anne is mediated by the opinions and motivations of others. In choosing to write Anne’s sections of the novel in the form of a letter, Dunn therefore simulates the creation of the textual evidence upon which historical interpretation is based. Moreover, this particular format addresses the philosophical shift brought on by feminism concerning what can and cannot be regarded as a legitimate source of historical evidence. Traditionally, the androcentric approach to historiography – concerned as it was with the public sphere, rather than the private or domestic – excluded documents such as personal letters and journals as legitimate historical sources. These documents were deemed irrelevant as

“the personal story is not a history according to those in control of the definitions” (Booth 49). As I have argued, however, feminist approaches to reconstructing history are concerned with re-establishing the subjective (and ostensibly “feminine”) perspective within the “grand historical narrative”. Dunn’s use of the letter format, then, is informed by a feminist approach to historiography in its privileging of what has traditionally been considered (and dismissed) as a “feminine” source of historical evidence.

The epistolary mode itself is a genre traditionally associated with women and the feminine. At the peak of its popularity in the eighteenth century, the epistolary novel came to be associated with a kind of middle-class, domestic interiority particular to women writers, affording them certain modes of expression that “society would not otherwise have allowed” (Hamamsy 153). The novel of letters confronted the “question of identity [...] to do with a whole gender’s choice to speak, instead of being silent, and to subvert, instead of being subservient” (Hamamsy 153-4). It was therefore ideally suited as a medium for unmediated expression and confession, and regained popularity as a feminist genre in the latter half of the twentieth century (being similar, in many respects, to the feminist confessional novel), ensuring its continued association with the “personal, feminine, and [...] interiority” (Gilroy and Verhoeven 10). Employed as a means of narration in historical fiction, the epistolary mode is particularly interesting, as letters occupy a liminal space between the private and public spheres (Gilroy and Verhoeven 15), and thus provides insight into how the public or political context informs the private or interior life of the writer/narrator. In Anne’s sections in *The Queen of Subtleties*, this is demonstrated in her awareness of her subject position as a woman, and her constant frustration at being underestimated because of her gender. Unlike Lucy, who accepts her ‘inferior’ standing more

passively, Anne resists being demeaned; the intimate atmosphere created by the epistolary mode allows her to vent her resentment and celebrate her achievements in a manner that would otherwise be silenced or condemned in the public sphere of the Tudor Court. Recalling Henry's courtship of her, for example, Anne is resentful of her body being "bought" by his gifts: "Of course I had to thank him for every one of them. But I hated it. With every ounce of sugar and gold, he must have felt that he was putting down another payment. And I wasn't for buying" (*QS* 11). She is also aware of the fact that, despite his claims that he is in love with her, he places his own feelings and needs far above her own (*QS* 106). Despite her subordinate position, however, she is fiercely ambitious: recollecting her early desires to become Queen, she declares that "this was [her] country and [she] had plans for it, along with the guts to see them through" (*QS* 23). She is delighted when Henry decides to create her the Marquess of Pembroke in her own right, as a "peerage would set [her] up perfectly, with rank and riches. [She'd] be equal to anyone. Any man" (*QS* 167). Throughout the letter to her daughter, she is at pains to encourage Elizabeth to value herself and refuse the submissive role expected of her as a woman. She urges her to be "strong" and "educated" (*QS* 3), and although she ironically believes that Elizabeth – as the bastardised daughter of an executed queen – will live a "life in obscurity", she hopes that she will "be [her] mother's daughter and hold [her head] high" (*QS* 311). She also reassures Elizabeth that she was not disappointed by her sex when she was born, despite "what people might tell [her]" (*QS* 210), and reinforces her sense of self-worth by declaring that "a tough woman is worth several men" (*QS* 211).

Anne's letter to Elizabeth, then, firmly establishes her as the strong-willed, ambitious mother responsible for producing one of England's most successful monarchs – Elizabeth I. Moreover, by allowing her the candid intimacy of the epistle,

Dunn provides Anne with the platform from which to add her own “truth” to the many versions of her life story, highlighting the highly subjective and interpretative nature of historical narrative. It is significant that the letter is addressed to her daughter: Anne is determined that Elizabeth should appreciate her own history, evoking the notion that the establishment of a matrilineal genealogy is crucial in resisting patriarchal strictures (Booth 49), as the transmission of history directly from woman to woman here precludes mediation. Towards the end of her final section, Anne expresses her concern that her daughter will never know her, but consoles herself that “[a]s long as [her friend] Marge manages to smuggle this [letter] away from here, Elizabeth *will* know [her mother]” (*QS* 311; emphasis in original). Here, Anne’s letter is presented to the reader as a kind of lost historical artefact. The epistolary mode thus performs two, interdependent functions: it accommodates the feminist agenda of Dunn’s novel, as well as emphasises the textualised, material nature of historiography. The second of these functions is informed by a postmodern understanding of history and further bolsters Dunn’s feminist agenda: just as history is textually constructed, so too is gender a constructed category that is historically contingent and subject to change (Southgate, *Postmodernism* 47). Anne’s awareness of her ‘inferior’ position as a woman in a patriarchal context reveals that gender itself can be historicised, and is therefore subjective and unfixed rather than a natural construct.

Dunn’s goal in revealing gender as an unstable and historically contingent, culturally-determined construct extends to her use of several other narrative strategies, some of which may not be associated with the postmodern, but all of which are aimed at establishing the relevancy and similarities of the lives of her sixteenth-century characters to her twenty-first century readers. The use of first-person narrative in

Lucy's sections and the epistle for Anne's sections, for example, creates an atmosphere of intimacy and familiarity that recalls the feminist confessionals popular in the 1970s and 1980s. First-person narration is also commonly used by contemporary historical novelists to involve the reader with the novel's characters on a more personal level, and to lessen the alienating effect of the temporal distance created by an unfamiliar setting. Perhaps the most blatant (and somewhat jarring) strategy, however, is Dunn's use of modernised, updated, and even colloquial language. Rather than affecting an "authentic" Tudor discourse, Dunn intentionally adopts a contemporary vocabulary for her narrators in an attempt to make them more accessible to her readers. She explains:

Anne Boleyn was the modern girl of her generation. She was confrontational and outspoken, and her language so shocking on occasions that ambassadors would flounce offended from her presence. She was notorious, "in-yer-face". Well, I'm not going to convey that with the odd 'Christ's foot', am I? My job as a novelist – my job above everything as a novelist – is to convey a character: I need the reader to really know what Anne was like, to be there, not viewing her down the wrong end of a telescope as someone skipping about in a big dress, having hissy fits. She was far, far more powerful than that. My argument is this: we don't know how people spoke in those days. We know how they wrote – or how some of them wrote – but in no way is that ever the same as how people speak. [...] I am not claiming that the Tudor nobility spoke as I have them speak in my novels; I'm just saying that we don't know how they spoke, so I have license, in my novels, to have them speak as I wish. (qtd in O'Reilly)

Dunn's aim in modernising the language used by her sixteenth-century characters, then, is to ensure that her readers are able to relate more easily to them, to understand their dispositions and concerns in relation to their own. This strategy in fact defies the tenets of postmodernism, which eschew the notion of universality, but Dunn's purpose here is to prompt the reader to understand that the characters' struggles –

particularly those related to patriarchy and resisting their subject positions as women – remain relevant in the twenty-first century. This is further achieved by Dunn’s use of present tense in Lucy’s sections, a deliberate strategy “which transforms ‘then’ into ‘now’ and suggests a continuum of oppression of women through time” (Wallace 178). Despite this claim to creative “license”, however, the use of colloquial discourse is not always effective. Rather than making her characters more authentic, they often appear stilted and their use of modern language seems self-conscious and forced. Anne, for example, curses prolifically, refers to herself as the King’s “new bit on the side” (*QS* 22), and later, when she sees Mark looking depressed, asks him: “What’s up?” (*QS* 289). While it is, as Dunn rightly points out, impossible to reconstruct a truly authentic Tudor discourse, her awkward deployment of modern language actually proves to be irksome and alienating. It does, however, serve to draw particular attention to the author’s use of intertextuality.

Similarly to many postmodern historical novelists, Dunn regularly evokes particular speeches or events that are commonly cited as historically verified and easily recognisable to the reader. In more traditional historical novels, authors do this as a means of “authenticating” their narrative; as a postmodern narrative strategy, intertextual references usually serve to emphasise the textuality of historiography. Hutcheon asserts that intertextuality is “typical of postmodern fiction [as a means] of literally incorporating the textualised past into the text of the present. Postmodern intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present for the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 486-7). In Dunn’s novel, the colloquialisation of her intertextual references underlines the interpretative and subjective nature of their evocation. An example of this is evident when Anne recalls the way in which her

brother describes Katherine's testimony when she is called to defend her marriage before the papal legate, a scene which has been re-reported on countless occasions and which is regularly incorporated into fictional reconstructions of the time period concerned:

She [Katherine] said [to Henry], I've never lied to you. You know that. Never. Not about anything. This is the truth about your brother and I: we never slept together. Tell me, Henry, what it is that I've done to turn you against me. Tell me, please. I have no one but you; I am a foreigner alone here in this country of yours. I have loved you all our married life, and I will love you – devotedly – until I die. We have had children together, Henry, and lost all but one of them. Don't do this to me. Don't throw me away. Then she curtseyed low to him, and signaled to her usher, who stepped forward, took her arm, and together they retreated as they had come. [...] At the time, I was appalled by the scene that my brother described to me.  
(*QS* 98)

Dunn has deliberately updated the language Katherine reportedly used in court,<sup>7</sup> including the use of several colloquialisms, though the result is somewhat jarring. Here, Anne reinterprets an event that was, in turn, related to her by her brother; its retelling is informed by the prejudices and perceptions of both parties (particularly in this highly subjective context). Similarly, the version of Katherine's speech that the

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<sup>7</sup> Katherine's speech was quite considerable in length and has been fully recreated by historians and biographers from reports by witnesses. It was considered one of the most significant moments of her life, when she openly defied the king's wish to divorce her and reaffirmed the legitimacy of her twenty-year marriage and her daughter. Dunn's evocation of Katherine's testimony is adapted from the following extract: "Sir, I beseech you for all the love that hath been between us, and for the love of God, let me have justice. [...] Take of me some pity and compassion, for I am a poor woman and a stranger born out of your dominion. I have here no assured friends, and much less impartial counsel. [...] Alas! Sir, wherein have I offended you, or what occasion of displeasure have I deserved? [...] This twenty years or more I have been your true wife and by me ye have had divers children, although it hath pleased God to call them out of this world, which hath been no default in me. [...] When ye had me at the first, I take God to be my judge, I was a true maid without touch of man. And whether it be true or no, I put it to your conscience. [...] If there be any just cause by the law that ye can allege against me, either of dishonesty or any other impediment to banish and put me from you, I am well content to depart to my great shame and dishonour. And if there be none, then here, I most lowly beseech you, let me remain in my former estate." (Tremlett 309-11)

reader may be familiar with as historically “accurate” has itself gone through several retellings, re-reportings and reconstructions, each of which is in turn shaped, influenced, and informed by the context in which it is reported. What the reader may accept as historical “fact”, then, is inevitably steeped in the ideological context which produced it – a characteristic of historiography that is recognised by postmodern philosophy.

*The Queen of Subtleties*, therefore, employs several narrative strategies typically associated with postmodern historical fiction to convey its feminist agenda. Dunn’s decision to incorporate and interweave the stories of two women – one, an unknown, briefly recorded working-class kitchen employee, the other, one of the most notorious and well-known women in British history – creates a juxtaposition between the notions of “fact” (in the form of Anne’s story) and fiction (that of Lucy) that echoes the postmodern destabilisation of the categories of historical “fact” and “authentic” representation. The inclusion of multiple narrators (a common device used in historiographic metafiction) also underlines the subjective, plural nature of historiography. Moreover, Dunn’s decision to privilege the personal, subjective perspectives of two women – one of whom is a member of the working class – reveals a feminist impulse to recover a matrilineal genealogy, providing a voice to those previously silenced by the “grand historical narrative”. The epistolary format of Anne’s sections also evokes the material, textual nature of history, another postmodern concern, which is further supported by Dunn’s inclusion of modernised intertextual references and paratextual elements such as the “Author’s Note”, epilogue, and bibliography. Dunn’s use of postmodern narrative strategies may not always be congruent with the novel’s feminist politics; her insistence, for example, on ‘modernising’ the language of her characters in order to make them relatable to her



twenty-first century readers suggests the assumption of an inherent universality of the state of ‘woman’, a universality that postmodernity (and third wave feminism) would conventionally resist. Her appropriation of postmodern devices, then, in some instances re-orientates the politics of postmodernism to achieve a reconstruction of history more closely aligned with second wave feminism. In doing so, Dunn has provided her (fictional) Anne with a platform from which to add her own version of the “truth” to the plethora of other interpretations of her life.

### **The “sisterhood” of unappreciated wives:**

#### **Mavis Cheek’s *Amenable Women***

Mavis Cheek’s novel *Amenable Women* (2008) shares many of the same concerns as *The Queen of Subtleties*. Similarly to Dunn’s, Cheek’s postmodern approach to historiography is executed with the aim of highlighting her feminist agenda; both novels also feature narrative strategies more commonly associated with historiographic metafiction, without being overtly experimental. Though it is not, in the strictest sense, a work of historical fiction, Cheek’s novel explores the implications of the textual nature of history and employs multiple narrative viewpoints as a means of “disrupt[ing] any view of history itself as unitary and closed, and offer[ing] alternative interpretations of the grand narratives of English history” (Wallace 104). Its primary concerns, however, are to expose the patriarchal ideologies which underpin those “grand narratives of English history”, and to privilege a feminine perspective in both the construction and focus of an alternative or counter-history. Like *The Queen of Subtleties*, *Amenable Women* self-consciously restores the maligned reputation of one of Henry VIII’s wives – in this case, his fourth

wife, Anne of Cleves, who was to be remembered in later centuries as the notorious “Flanders Mare”.

*Amenable Women* is set primarily in the present day and is the story of Flora Chapman, a benign woman in her fifties whose charismatic husband, Edward – a popular and much-loved resident of their small English village – dies suddenly in an accident. Having lived largely in the shadow of his popularity and supposed brilliance for decades, Flora finds that widowhood is perversely liberating. Exploiting her new-found freedom, she decides to complete the history of their village that Edward had been in the process of writing at the time of his death – not so much as a tribute to his memory, as others (including her daughter, Hilary) assume, but rather in fulfilment of her own interest in the project. The history had, in fact, been her idea, which Edward had commandeered: Flora recalls that she had “thought long and hard about her retirement before deciding that she would have to do something. Something big. ‘I’d like to find out the history of this village,’ she said to Edward. ‘Particularly this house.’ To which he said, ‘Good idea.’ And commenced to do so himself” (*AW* 23). Flora was entirely excluded from the project, as Edward hired a young woman (with whom Flora later discovers he was having an affair) to assist him. Edward’s dismissal of her interest and ability to contribute is symptomatic of the state of their marriage: charming, strikingly attractive Edward perpetually eclipses his wife, who is considered by everyone, including her husband and daughter, as “quiet and dull and unadventurous” (*AW* 24). Flora views the completion of the history, then, as a means of finally distinguishing herself, hoping that “when it [is] done she might be hailed, after all, as the brilliant, clever Flora Chapman whom nobody had quite realised was so scintillatingly talented” (*AW* 48).

Cheek contrasts Flora's imaginative feminine sensibilities with her husband's dry 'masculinist' approach to fact and detail. As she works her way through Edward's research, she discovers that his history is staid, dull, and unimaginative. She observes that her husband "was a stickler for truth" (*AW* 48), and that his village history reveals him "at his worst" (*AW* 45): pretentious, uninspired and "dry-as-dust" (*AW* 48), preoccupied more with buildings and renovations than with what Flora considers to be the real interest of history – people. For Flora, history is only worthwhile if it is allowed to "live", as "[t]hat was what history did for you if you let it – it allowed you to feel the warm breath of the past" (*AW* 51). Edward demonstrates no patience for mysteries or anomalies: he is only concerned with what can be verified, empirically proven, observed with no margin for conjecture. His village history is thus a reflection of his personality, as Flora declares that he "was never one to listen to the other side of an argument" (*AW* 7). She, on the other hand, "prefer[s] to speculate" (*AW* 6) – a quality that her husband disdained, but one which she resolves to reintroduce to the village history.

Flora's memories of her husband and the incomplete village history he has left behind reveal another, more disturbing aspect of personality: his archaic and deeply misogynistic attitude towards women, including his wife. In Edward's opinion, Flora, as a woman, should not work nor participate in public life – she "should really be at home in a pinny" (*AW* 20). Edward demands compliance and docility from his wife, and Flora is all too aware that he "did not want a partner – he wanted a handmaid" (*AW* 24). He typically undermines and dismisses women, a tendency which extends to his construction of the village history, as he is all but indifferent to its most famous resident: Anne of Cleves. Anne is briefly mentioned by Edward in a paragraph concerning the history of the local manor house, Hurcott Hall: it was part of the

divorce settlement granted to her by Henry VIII,<sup>8</sup> and Anne frequently stayed there in the years following the divorce. Flora is incensed by Edward's description of Anne, who he writes was "sometimes known rather amusingly as the Flanders Mare on account of her exceeding ugliness" (*AW* 46). This portrayal of her recalls the very first occasion on which Flora heard of Anne of Cleves, from an aunt who claimed that Henry "couldn't stand the sight of [her]" because she was "[l]arge, plain and stupid" (*AW* 15). In addition, the derisive reference to Anne as the "Flanders Mare" is reminiscent of Edward's "pet" name for Flora: "Bun Face" (*AW* 16). The similarities are significant for Flora, and she is maddened by the knowledge that "Edward went to his death thinking it was perfectly acceptable to find the term 'Flanders Mare' amusing. Mind you, he had also gone to his death thinking it was perfectly all right to call his wife Bun Face" (*AW* 46-7). As she embarks on the revision of her husband's village history, Flora develops an almost immediate affinity for Anne: the similarities between the two women are emphasised throughout the course of the narrative, as both have been eclipsed by more charismatic, powerful husbands; both are seen as dull, unattractive, and not particularly intelligent; and both are undervalued and unappreciated by Edward. As such, Flora comes to think of Anne "almost as an old friend, or at least an ally. A Flanders Mare and a Bun Face" (*AW* 48).

The kinship and sympathy she feels towards Anne establishes the feminist thrust of the narrative. As a wronged wife herself, Flora is determined to rescue Anne's reputation, certain that she deserves more credit than she has been afforded; in the process of doing so, editing and supplementing Edward's village history, she also hopes to establish her own worth, independent of her husband. After all, Flora reasons

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<sup>8</sup> While Anne of Cleves was granted the ownership and income of several estates throughout England upon her divorce from Henry VIII, Hurcott Hall and the surrounding village of Hurcott Ducis are fictional creations by Cheek.

that “[b]adly done-by women down the centuries may as well stick together” (*AW* 166). After travelling to Paris to view Anne’s portrait at the Louvre, the connection between the two women is further strengthened, as Flora’s reaction to the painting is surprising visceral: “Flora knows that something has happened between her and the painting of Anna of Cleves – a connection, a bond” (*AW* 133). Upon overhearing a tour guide maligning the portrait’s subject, she comes to Anne’s defence with surprising vehemence, explaining that she feels compelled to “speak [up] as her sister” (*AW* 140). While Flora herself observes that this reference to sisterhood is “strangely outmoded” (*AW* 161), it does serve to evoke a very particular brand of second wave feminist discourse, and emphasises Flora’s sentiment that their bond is based on their shared burden of being considered the weaker, less valued gender under a patriarchal value system.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Flora’s claim to a shared sisterhood with a woman who has been dead for five hundred years (in addition to the similarities between them, emphasised throughout the novel) suggests that women *continue* to be devalued in the twenty-first century. Just as Dunn attempts to establish the relevancy of history to the lives of her contemporary female readers by using updated language in *The Queen of Subtleties*, so too does Cheek make these connections by Flora’s repeated observations about “how little has changed” (*AW* 47). For Flora, then, an appreciation for (a feminist-orientated, revised) history has the potential to empower and unite women, to become a relevant force in their lives; as she revises Edward’s manuscript, conducting extensive research of her own into Anne’s life, she realises that “the hearts and hearts’ desires of people did not change down the centuries. [...]

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<sup>9</sup> Hilary Mantel’s review of the novel states that the book’s subtitle is “A novel of sisterhood and survival” (Mantel, “The Flanders Nightmare”). This subtitle has been excluded from the 2009 paperback edition, perhaps because its overt evocation of second wave feminist discourse proved off-putting for contemporary readers.

For Flora that was what lifted history out of the dry dullness – the human connection – and it was what Edward chose to ignore” (*AW* 204).

Although Flora’s proclamation may appear to be somewhat naïve and idealistic, it reveals both the postmodern and feminist foundations of Cheek’s approach to history in the novel. Edward’s manuscript version of the village history is symbolic of the traditional, “grand narrative” of history: though it purports to be empirically sound and intrinsically teleological, it is in fact imbued with the misogynistic underpinnings of its ideological context. Edward’s manuscript, like the “grand narrative” of history, is distinctly androcentric in its viewpoint. Upon the death of its author, Flora seeks literally to rewrite this history, introducing the speculation and mystery in relation to which Edward was so resistant. Flora’s brand of “speculative” history – her defiance of Edward’s closed, empirical interpretations – is postmodern in its methodology; moreover, she employs this approach to challenge the patriarchal values inherent in his writing. Her revision of Edward’s manuscript, then, echoes the process of historical revision prompted by the feminist approach to historiography. The resistance towards androcentrism and misogyny has been crucial to this approach: “feminists could argue that male centrality affected not only the structures of historical narratives but even the language in which the stories were told; male dominance extended yet more widely and more deeply” (Southgate, *Postmodernism* 47). The subsequent shift in the methodological orientation of historiography was labelled as distinctly feminine (Southgate, *What and Why?* 98), as opposed to “masculine” or traditional history, and is echoed in Flora’s (feminine) revision of Edward’s (masculine) manuscript. She is particularly concerned – as feminist historians are – with altering the misogynistic language Edward uses to describe Anne: upon discovering that the term “Flanders Mare” was not, as

commonly believed, coined by Henry VIII himself, but rather by a seventeenth-century historian (*AW* 176), she takes great pleasure in “strik[ing] it out of the manuscript on every single occasion”, noting as she does that Edward “enjoyed using the term [...] as often as he could” (*AW* 179).

Restoring Anne’s reputation – and in doing so, establishing her own – becomes Flora’s main motivation in revising Edward’s history. Her decision to visit Anne’s portrait at the Louvre in turn introduces a somewhat surprising narrative device: Cheek, quite literally, grants Anne a voice in her own story through the animation of her portrait. Anne of the portrait does not speak to Flora directly; instead, Cheek dedicates entire chapters to Anne’s inner monologue, in which she offers her version of the events surrounding her marriage and divorce and comments quite extensively on the reputations of other well-known women of her era, including Elizabeth I, Mary I, and Jane Seymour. As a means of explaining this turn to magical realism in the novel, Cheek “quotes” extensively from an extracted lecture that Flora reads on her way to the Louvre:

*Certain portrait painters breathe life into their work. They create the speaking likeness, the likeness that is called, in old parlance, ‘very lively’, meaning lifelike. [...] But a lively portrait is not simply a clever illusory likeness captured in paint or pencil, it is a portrait that has captured the indefinable essence of the subject’s human qualities – where the artist’s eye and the artist’s understanding of psychology combine in a likeness that is only a moment away – a breath – from stepping out from the frame. When – if – they do step out – the viewer is sure that he or she will know them. (*AW* 121-2; italics in original)<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> The extracted lecture is referred to as “Wilfred Clement’s extracted 1958 lecture on the Northern tradition in portraiture: *Holbein, the English Face and the Anna portrait*” (*AW* 121). Cheek does not provide bibliographic details for this lecture anywhere in the novel and an extensive search has not revealed any other reference to this lecture. It would appear that Cheek has written this fictitious extract herself; indeed, its content appears to suit her purposes in the novel a little too conveniently. Like Dunn, Cheek has *created* a “historical” document as a means of authenticating her narrative – the self-conscious reference to an intertextual source is a commonly-employed narrative strategy in historiographic metafiction.

Anne's portrait is, quite literally, a "speaking likeness" – one which is very aware of how she has been remembered and portrayed by history, and is anxious to refute the "fool's nonsense [that] has been invented over the centuries" about her (*AW* 143). Her greatest concern is in denouncing the "so-called Gracious Prince, Henry, [who] made a mockery of every woman he encountered" (*AW* 187) – it is because of Henry's arrogance, she feels, that her reputation has been maligned. She is not unique in this regard, however: surrounded by portraits of other famous queens and female aristocrats, she is part of a "gallery of wronged and redoubtable women" (*AW* 199) who have all, in some way, been victimised by a misogynistic historiography.

Though undoubtedly effective in providing Anne with a voice, Cheek's talking portrait has been met with mixed reactions by critics. Hilary Mantel found it to be a "bizarre and alarming turn" in the novel: though she admits that "Cheek is right to point out that the misogyny of historians has informed our view of [Anne]", to have her "yapping from her frame for page after page, to no enlightening effect, dissipates the interest of the puzzle she presents" ("The Flanders Nightmare"). Sue Magee, meanwhile, was "surprised" to have "enjoyed the 'voice' given to Holbein's portrait of Anne", judging it to be a "well-handled [device that] meant that a Queen dead for some four hundred years played a real part in the story" ("Review"). Though the chapters narrated by Anne are rather precious and heavy-handed in their execution, they do effectively reinforce the novel's primary concern: Anne's reputation is restored by the privileging of her *own* perspective on her life, and the infamous "Flanders Mare" is revealed as the construct of a misogynistic history. Cheek's novel, then, is informed by the postmodern understanding of the plurality of history, and an awareness of the ideological underpinnings of any historical narrative.



The prominence afforded to Anne's portrait in the novel also highlights another postmodern concern: that of the innate textuality of history. Anne's portrait is an example of an historical artefact that can be read and interpreted: "[Anne's] waist was dainty and neat, her crossed hands elegant, which belied her being called large, bony and masculine by one sneering historian. If they ever looked at this portrait they looked without seeing" (*AW* 129). Flora "reads" Anne's portrait with a particular intent, searching for evidence that refutes the reputation she seeks to challenge – just as the "sneering historian" she refers to "reads" it with the purpose of bolstering that reputation. Similarly, Cheek reiterates this shift in the interpretations of Anne by quoting from a series of biographies and historical documents at the very beginning of the novel. Contemporary sources dated from 1539 – before Anne's arrival at the Tudor Court – describe Anne's "beauty", declaring that "the face of the young lady appeared sufficiently lovely to decide Henry on accepting her" (*AW* n.p.). Henry VIII himself is then quoted as declaring, on the morning of his wedding, that "if it were not to satisfy the world, and my realm, I would not do that which I must do this day for none earthly thing" (*AW* n.p.). Finally – following this denouncement by Henry – Cheek quotes Hume's 1905 biography, *The Wives of Henry VIII*, which claims that Anne's "frame was large bony and masculine and her large, low-German features, deeply pitted with the ravages of smallpox were the very opposite of [...] beauty [*sic*]" (*AW* n.p.). The use of paratextual elements is, as already discussed, a postmodern narrative strategy which highlights the textual, interpretative nature of history; here, Cheek traces the development of Anne's slandered reputation through the evocation of textual sources. The inclusion of Henry's alleged insult, placed as it is as the "turning point" in Anne's portrayal from a beautiful, desirable bridal

candidate to a repugnant, rejected wife, echoes the portrait Anne's claim that Henry's disappointment in her was the cause of her denigration.

Cheek's feminist agenda, then, lies in providing a "voice" to Anne of Cleves, in an attempt to overturn her disparaged reputation. In achieving this, her novel also reveals the misogynistic underpinnings of the historical narrative that perpetuated this reputation. Here, Cheek demonstrates a postmodern understanding of historiography, in that her novel is preoccupied with the process of the construction of that historical narrative. Edward's staid, empirical methodology in writing the village history is associated with a masculine, teleological historical narrative that is innately patriarchal and androcentric in its viewpoint. Flora, quite literally, revises this outmoded history with a speculative approach that, rather than being closed and exclusive in nature, is open-ended, inclusive, and inquisitive, and is associated with the feminine. This process of revision in the novel echoes the changes in historiography and historical methodology wrought by both postmodernism and feminism: the traditional "grand historical narrative" has been destabilised by challenges to the notions of truth, reality, objectivity, and universality, and in turn exposed as ideologically imbued and severely limited. Historiography has subsequently come to be understood as plural, subjective, and interpretative in nature, and revised to include the histories of those who have traditionally been silenced. Indeed, the motif of the silenced woman is one which recurs repeatedly in *Amenable Women*: Anne, for example, refers to herself as being "voiceless" (*AW* 182), while Flora is forced, throughout her marriage, to "hold her tongue and put up with it" (*AW* 18). Through Flora's revisionist history, however, both women are emancipated from the crushing authority of their husbands and afforded the opportunity to tell their own stories and establish their worth.

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Although both *Amenable Women* and *The Queen of Subtleties* are informed by the authors' feminist agendas, their resolutions remain questionable. *The Queen of Subtleties*, for example, often emphasises rather than resists the powerlessness of its female characters in their historical context. Though Anne Boleyn is ambitious and independent, she is unable to overcome the authority of the men in control of her life, while Lucy Cornwallis reverts to her passive, downtrodden state by the end of the novel. The conclusion of *Amenable Women* is even more troubling. While the reader may assume that the title should be interpreted in an ironic or even critical sense, it is clear by the novel's close that the amenability of its female characters is in fact being lauded. Anne of Cleves, for example, is willingly "docile" (*AW* 280) in exchange for her handsome divorce settlement; she happily claims that "[she] was single, free and independent. All [she] had to do was curtsy and smile. It was easy enough" (*AW* 284). Flora echoes these sentiments when she declares that "dignity and docility [are] the way forward" (*AW* 45). Despite her determination to make a name for herself by completing the history, she eventually relinquishes all credit to her late husband in order to appease her daughter (*AW* 320), glumly reflecting that she "will remain undiscovered" and her name will be forgotten by history (*AW* 338). Like Lucy Cornwallis, she abandons her hopes and ambitions by the novel's close and returns to a life of obscurity and passivity.

Both authors' insistence on "updating" or modernising their historical characters may also be read as problematic or incongruent with their deployment of postmodern narrative strategies. As already discussed in some detail, postmodern theory eschews the ideas of totality, universality, and truth; both Dunn and Cheek,

however, seek to emphasise the similarities between their sixteenth-century characters and their twenty-first century readers. Their focus on interiority and subjectivity is aimed at encouraging their readers to recognise themselves in the novels' characters, to draw parallels between their lived experiences despite the temporal distance between them. In turn, this suggests a kind of universal feminine subjectivity that spans a period of several centuries, one which is so familiar to a modern reader that they are easily able to relate their own situation to that of a Tudor woman. This is particularly evident in Cheek's novel, through the constant comparisons drawn between the characters of Anne of Cleves and Flora Chapman. Paradoxically, then, Dunn and Cheek actually use postmodern narrative devices in a way that *undermines* postmodernism's insistence on historicised relativism and plurality. However, as already demonstrated, this particular strategy, common to both authors, is deployed not only as a means of providing previously silenced female historical figures with a voice, but also as a means of encouraging female readers to recognise that patriarchy and gender oppression remain very real concerns, even in their contemporary context.

Despite their questionable success, the feminist agendas of both authors are unmistakable. While their settings differ, each novel is intent on restoring the reputation of one of Henry VIII's queens by providing a platform from which that queen can tell her own story of the failure of her marriage. In doing so, both reveal that their reputations – their memories in the “grand historical narrative” – have been established (and, indeed, perpetuated) by a deeply misogynistic ideological context. Henry's queens are acutely aware of their disadvantaged historical positioning, and conscious of the fact that their perspective will be lost or silenced by a historical narrative that privileges the patriarchy. The queens' narratives are, in both instances, counterbalanced by the story of an “ordinary” or “ahistoric” woman (Booth 50), who

fully expects to be forgotten as insignificant or unimportant. All four women in these novels have, in some way, been silenced, maligned, forgotten, or discarded by a “grand historical narrative” steeped in a patriarchal ideology that undermines their value, importance, and significance.

Both Dunn and Cheek demonstrate a postmodern understanding of historiography in their novels, which they deploy in an effort to achieve their feminist objectives: by “interrogating the male-centred past’s treatment of women at the same time as seeking to undermine the ‘fixed’ or ‘untruthful’ nature of the historical narrative itself”, these authors successfully “create their ‘own’ (counter-)histories” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2-3). Their use of multiple narrative points of view and their emphasis on interiority and subjectivity highlight the tension between “fact” and fiction typical of historiographic metafiction; this, in turn, reflects the “postmodern crisis” in historiography brought on by the problematising of the notions of truth, objectivity, and universality. Reflecting this awareness, both *The Queen of Subtleties* and *Amenable Women* are preoccupied, in some way, with the *construction* of historical narrative, with the perspective from which that narrative is told. By privileging a female perspective, these novels expose the androcentric orientation of mainstream history, and seek to revise this history by positioning women as the subjects rather than the objects of historiography. The novels’ particular approaches also emphasise the textual, material nature of history, deploying devices such as paratextuality and intertextuality to expose the interpretative (and therefore plural) nature of historiography. Most importantly, however, they resist the patriarchal underpinnings of their historical contexts, and in so doing establish that gender – like history – is an unstable cultural construct.

## *Chapter Five:*

# **The erotic politic: madness, desire, and powerlessness in Emily Purdy's bodice-rippers**

*Feminists early on rejected the simplistic assumption that sexual liberation equals women's liberation. [...] But while a fully developed sexuality does not predict a conscious sense of self, it is difficult to imagine that such a self could be achieved without it.*

*Carol Thurston  
(The Romance Revolution 140)*

The introduction of sexually explicit content in women's historical fiction in the latter decades of the twentieth century marked one of the most significant developments within the history of the genre. The establishment of the erotic historical or "bodice-ripper" as a prominent sub-genre in the flourishing romance market during the 1970s (Hughes 13), as discussed in detail in Chapter One, was a clear indication for many scholars that "the fundamental power relationship between men and women [had] begun to change, or at least to be challenged" (Thurston 86). The heroines of this new category of women's historical fiction were rarely depicted as the hapless or powerless victims of their historical circumstances; they were, as Carol Thurston observes, "overtly rebellious" (87), powerful, adventurous, and feisty, challenging gender stereotypes and the imposition of male dominance. For these heroines – who demonstrate a thoroughly modern, post-Freudian understanding of sexuality and desire – sexual fulfilment is essential to the realisation of the self, their concept of womanhood, and the achievement of independence.

The establishment of erotic historicals and romance novels as sites for the expression and exploration of female sexuality was, to a large extent, enabled by the sexually permissive culture fostered by the ‘sexual revolution’ during the 1960s. It was also closely linked with the declaration by feminists, in the same decade, that the “personal is political” – a sentiment which was aimed, amongst others issues, at dismissing the taboos and mysteries surrounding female sexuality and scrutinising its relationship to identity, power, and agency. The relationship between feminism and sexuality has, admittedly, “been a troubled one”:

Feminist theory’s contribution to the analysis of sexuality has been profound, revealing sexuality as a site for the production of gender and the operation of power. But feminism’s analysis of sexuality has also been fraught. The sex wars of the 1980s divided feminists into those who framed sexuality primarily as a site of danger and oppression for women and those who saw sexuality more ambivalently, as also a site of pleasure and liberation.  
(Cossman et al. 617)

The attitude of feminist scholars towards the depiction of sexuality in romance novels and erotic historicals has been similarly divided: some believe these novels offer an important means for readers to explore and test their own sexualities and enjoy vicarious sexual gratification, while others argue that the genre perpetuates heteronormative, and essentially patriarchal, ideals of romantic love. Whatever the approach, it is clear that the politicisation of sexuality has foregrounded concerns surrounding its depiction in mainstream or mass-market fiction.

Ariel Levy is one of the most prominent feminist scholars to address the depiction of female sexuality in popular culture forms in the twenty-first century. In her seminal publication, *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005), she criticises the hypersexualisation of Western culture which, she argues, perpetuates the

objectification of women through its assimilation of pornographic tropes in the popular imagination. This oversexed cultural environment, which she dubs “raunch culture” or “raunch feminism”, is a result of “the conflicts between the women’s liberation movement and the sexual revolution [... which] were left unresolved” (74). Levy argues that raunch culture has damaged societal perceptions of female sexuality, and even rendered women implicit in their own objectification; she describes this culture as normalising the belief that “*everyone* who is sexually liberated ought to be imitating strippers and porn stars” (Levy 27; emphasis in original), resulting in an entire generation of women “who make sex objects of other women and of ourselves” (Levy 4). For Levy, then, female sexuality has been reduced to a kind of performative and essentially artificial expression, in much the same way as gender is identified as a kind of performance by Judith Butler. Feona Attwood concurs, observing that while women’s sexuality is being celebrated in popular culture (xix), that sexuality has also become defined in very narrow terms, and public sexual display is presented by Western popular culture “as the source of women’s pleasure and power” (xix). Both Attwood’s and Levy’s comments reveal that within the Western popular imagination, female sexuality and the notion of empowerment – so central to second wave feminist discourse – have become fused in a sense that has, in fact, been actively resisted by second wave feminist activists. Raunch culture accommodates the expression of female sexuality only in terms of overt or public display, even if that display is self-consciously adopted or performed; this performance, in turn, is touted as empowerment or liberation, even as it objectifies women’s sexuality. The emphasis on the public display of female sexuality is, Attwood argues, “connected to the ways in which the boundaries between the public and the private are changing in our culture” (xv).



The commercialisation of sexual desire and, more specifically, female sexuality is becoming increasingly mainstream; this has never been more obvious than in the wake of the phenomenal success of E.L. James's erotic novel, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011). The novel, which is the first installment of a trilogy, sold more than seventy million copies in the first eight months after its publication, and James was subsequently named the top-earning international author of 2013 by *Forbes* (Bercovici, "World's Top-Earning Authors"). The portrayal of female sexuality in *Fifty Shades* is troubling: although its protagonist, the sexually repressed and naïve college graduate, Anastasia Steele, finds fulfilment in her physical relationship with the elusive Christian Grey, that relationship is predicated on her acceptance of a submissive role in his sado-masochistic sexual fantasies, a role which she is not entirely comfortable inhabiting. Anastasia's expression of her sexuality is thus confined to the parameters defined – quite literally in a legal contract – by her male partner, rather than by her own desires. Despite James's limitations in her portrayal of female sexuality, however, the success of the novel – which was specifically marketed to women – indicates that the taboos surrounding women's erotic fiction are diminishing. Some scholars have argued that although the sexual objectification of women remains a pervasive trend in Western popular or raunch culture, the popularisation of women's erotica is a positive development. Erotica, it is suggested, plays an important role in allowing women to form a liberated sexual identity and to conceptualise themselves as sexual beings, and in the articulation of the sexual self (Wilson-Kovacs 158). In her survey of women's erotica, Dana Wilson-Kovacs reports that erotic novels are viewed as a more socially acceptable form of pornography for women (156), and that women's preference for erotic reading materials "depends on the way it allows them to secure a private environment where they can escape

domestic, sexual and emotional duties and focus on the self” (160). Wilson-Kovacs’s findings echo those of Janice Radway, some two decades earlier, which suggested that romance novels provided readers with the opportunity to temporarily escape societal expectations and explore their own fantasies (Radway 11). Indeed, as a body of sexually explicit literature produced by women writers for a specifically female audience, erotic fiction offers the potential to reject the imposition of masculine sexuality and fantasy.

The way in which female sexuality is expressed within erotic historicals is therefore a crucial issue to consider, as these novels necessarily negotiate the tension between a discourse which promotes the sexual objectification of women, so pervasive in Western popular or raunch culture, and the possibility of the uninhibited expression of female sexuality. While extremely popular with readers in recent decades, the depiction of the increasingly adventurous, independent, and sexually ferocious heroines of bodice-rippers has frequently proven challenging to historical authenticity.<sup>1</sup> These heroines are frequently “untimely” in their observations and actions (Thurston 144); their sexual behaviour and indeed their attitudes towards their own sexuality are liberated and even overtly feminist in orientation, and more often than not incongruent with the perceived mores of their historical contexts. As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, however, it is typical of authors to transpose their own, very modern and feminist-orientated, sensitivities onto their heroines. Historical context very rarely proves to be a constraint in this regard: the heroines of these novels often function as social commentators, denouncing the gender-based injustices and inequalities of their own eras. In so doing, they also reveal (whether intentionally

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<sup>1</sup> As mentioned in Chapter One, the analyses of the novels in this section are not concerned with the accuracy of the authors’ understanding and depiction of sixteenth-century sexuality. Rather, the texts’ exploration of the relationships between sexuality, agency, and power will be discussed as revealing of the attitudes and persistent anxieties surrounding female sexuality in the twenty-first century.

or inadvertently) how patriarchal structures continue to be reproduced in the modern society inhabited by the author and reader. Far from imposing restrictions on the potential for exploring feminine sexuality, the novels' historical settings afford authors the opportunity to do so more freely, as the temporal distance of their setting means that it is 'safer' for them to challenge contemporary social mores (Wallace 6-7). Wallace argues that the temporal distance created by historical fiction acts "as a kind of screen or mask which allow[s] the writer to tackle taboo subjects" (51), including rape, violence, and abuse, in a way that resonates with modern readers but does not stray outside the rather rigid conventions of the romance genre.

Whether authors are intentionally tackling difficult issues or simply hoping to titillate readers with explicit sexual content, erotic historicals from the 1970s right through to the twenty-first century have certainly demonstrated that historical settings need not be restrictive, and it is commonplace for authors to transpose a "post-1960s sexual permissive back into a pseudo-historical context" (Wallace 156). This has proved to have an important function, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, as a kind of antidote to anxiety and uncertainty surrounding shifting sexual norms; according to Thurston, the erotic historical romance at this time "served as a kind of testing ground for women readers struggling to find new ways of seeing and thinking about themselves and their place in the world" (Thurston 87). This is, of course, not to suggest that the representation of feminine sexuality in erotic historicals has proven entirely unproblematic, or that many of the criticisms levelled against the genre are without merit. While such novels certainly provide a fantasy space for the exploration of sexuality, and many readers have reported that they offer a form of sexual release (Snitow, "Mass Market Romance" 314-5), in some instances the conventions of the genre produce a skewed or imbalanced representation of the relationship between

gender, power, and sexuality. Most frequently, this is reflected in the intrinsic linking of sex with 'true', heterosexual love. Sex, most of these novels suggest, is only genuinely satisfying when the woman is in love with her partner (though not necessarily the other way around), and the ideal ending for any heroine is marriage (Larcombe 42). It is on this basis that many feminists criticise the genre for endorsing patriarchal, heteronormative values. In addition, erotic historicals often portray feminine sexuality as fraught with anxiety, guilt, and shame, which becomes problematic when no resolution or alternative is offered by the text.

Even more problematic, however, is the 'resolution' offered in the form of the 'rape fantasy' or 'forced seduction' tropes. As I have noted, the inclusion of explicitly sexual content became increasingly common in women's historical fiction during the late 1970s and 1980s; however, anxiety and shame persisted in relation to the unrestrained expression of female sexuality, and often proved difficult for authors to navigate effectively. Novels of this era typically feature an inexperienced, naïve heroine (who is almost invariably a virgin at the beginning of the narrative) who is seduced, often against her will, by a more experienced, forceful hero. The relationship between the hero and heroine is usually characterised by a marked imbalance of social power that extends to their sexual relationship.<sup>2</sup> The heroine is often portrayed as resisting the seductions of the hero, not because she does not desire him, but because social convention and prescribed female morality dictate that she should not sully the 'purity' of her virginal state, or shame herself by even admitting to her desires. As a means of negotiating the restraints of the heroine's morality, writers during this period frequently evoked the tropes of 'forced seduction' or the 'rape fantasy': the heroine,

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<sup>2</sup> The imbalance of power between the hero and heroine takes many possible forms; most commonly, it is based on unequal social or economic footing, with a common storyline featuring a servant or ward falling in love with and/or being seduced by her employer or benefactor. Interestingly, this trope is resurrected by E.L. James in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, albeit in a contemporary setting.

restricted from openly admitting to her desires, protests against the hero's advances in an attempt to maintain her virtue; her resistance is (correctly) interpreted by the hero as veiled consent, and he forcibly, often violently, initiates intercourse; the heroine, despite her initial protests, finds intense pleasure in their encounter and almost invariably achieves orgasm. Because she did not initiate sex or even explicitly consent to it, however, she has not transgressed any moral or social mores and is absolved of guilt. Moreover, she is usually further pardoned by the fact that she is in love with her rapist, and though he may at first be motivated purely by lust, by the novel's close he has realised that he returns her feelings and the two are married, thus conforming to the conventional happy ending of the romance novel. It is this 'resolution' that is so clearly problematic to a feminist reading of the genre, as the 'happy ending' anticipated by the reader appears to excuse or absolve the perpetration of gender violence, while simultaneously endorsing the repression of female sexual expression.

The rape fantasy or forced seduction plot was reused so frequently during the 1970s and 1980s that critics were prompted to conclude that "one of the few instances in which society seems able to condone sensuality in a woman is when she is 'taken' and overwhelmed by the male. It is under these circumstances, in which the male assumes total responsibility for the figurative rape, that a woman can shed her guilt about enjoying sex" (Haskell, qtd in Thurston 78). That this plot was so common in the *historical* romance genre in particular is significant, as it indicated that many women were still suffering from uncertainty and anxiety concerning their sexual identities following the sexual liberation of the 1960s: the historical setting of these novels negated any questions about the role of women in sexual relationships, as the "unliberated' position of women [in these contexts...] excuses them from responsibility for what happens to them" (Wallace 156). This plot formulation could

also be viewed as a conservative reaction to the growing empowerment and sexual liberation of women following the popularisation of the second wave feminist movement and the sexual revolution. That heroines had to be sexually pure – and thus morally irreproachable – was symptomatic of the persistent tendency to stereotype and condemn women according to their sexual practices, placing them in the category of “Eve the temptress, or Mary the Virgin” according to whether they ‘restrained’ their impure sexual impulses (Gregory, “Introduction” 19). In order to portray a female protagonist as sympathetic and appealing to (apparently conservative) readers, and yet still sexually active and fulfilled, eliminating the issue of consent proved useful for many authors.

As the 1980s progressed, however, readers increasingly expressed their discomfort with the rape fantasy trope and proved “anxious to distinguish some practices in the genre from what they [understood] as ‘real rape’” (Philadelphoff-Puren 32). In response, the “model of romance [...] in which a woman who says ‘no’ really means ‘yes’” (Philadelphoff-Puren 36) was less frequently utilised. Many feminist scholars took this as an indication that women were becoming more comfortable with their sexuality and rejected heroines who willingly surrendered their sexual agency, as “the woman who ‘succumbs’ in such circumstances does not have a self-empowering view of her own sexuality” (Wells 45). The heroines of this new generation of bodice-rippers enjoyed their sexual freedom and were less likely to have qualms about expressing their desires. Again, however, the historical setting of these novels provided a certain amount of safety in that they did not pose a *direct* challenge to contemporary social mores. Although the rape fantasy trope is no longer evoked in erotic historicals as frequently as it once was, the debate surrounding forced seduction and ‘rough romance’ is still frequently reignited amongst critics, reviewers, and

readers: while some argue that the ‘realistic’ depiction of rape and domestic violence is important for the sake of historical “authenticity” (Vanak, (“Should rape be allowed?”), Larcombe and Philadelphoff-Puren are among the critics who assert that the issue of consent serves to *highlight* the imbalance of power between the sexes. It would seem, then, that the *context* of gender-based violence in historical fiction is significant in terms of a feminist reading; the implications of context will be explored in some detail in the discussion which follows on Emily Purdy’s novels.

Whatever the context, the depiction of explicit sexual content in erotic historicals functions symbolically in several respects. Changing attitudes towards sexuality and, in particular, female sexuality during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s are certainly reflected in the less restricted portrayal of sex in these novels; for many readers, even in the twenty-first century, they serve as a fantasy space within which their sexuality can be explored and tested, while simultaneously providing a form of sexual release. The historical settings of such novels do not pose constraints on the behaviour or attitudes of their heroines – on the contrary, erotic historicals are frequently populated by independently-minded, sexually adventurous women, who challenge traditionally accepted gender roles in terms of heterosexual relationships and indicate that “we are seeing a change in the traditional meaning of feminine” (Thurston 76).

For too many of these heroines, however, their sexual desires are fraught with guilt, shame and anxiety, and the balance of sexual power is frequently not in their favour. While the genre has, naturally, evolved over the last decades of the twentieth century, we find that in the twenty-first century, heroines are still battling with the acceptance of their desires and the formation of their sexual identities. Many authors continue, however unintentionally, to reproduce patriarchal structures which impose a

masculine understanding of sexuality, without allowing their heroines the opportunity to freely, and without censure, explore the pleasures of their own bodies. These novels frequently deploy pornographic sexual tropes which emerged in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and which are often associated with male sexual fantasy. In doing so, they evoke the hypersexualised discourse of raunch culture identified by Levy, and subsequently objectify rather than liberate the expression of female sexuality.

One author who fails to successfully negotiate the tensions between the expression of female sexuality and the strictures of patriarchal culture is Emily Purdy,<sup>3</sup> a young American writer who has penned six erotic historicals, four of which are set in the Tudor Court: *The Tudor Wife* (2010), *Mary & Elizabeth* (2011), *A Court Affair* (2012), and *The Fallen Queen* (2013). Purdy's heroines are all highly sexed, often strong-willed women, who nevertheless have complicated relationships with their desires, and the inclusion of sex in these novels is frequent, often explicit, and invariably complicated by fierce power struggles. The women who populate Purdy's narratives are damaged, complicated, often unlikeable creatures; all of them battle, in some way, to come to terms with their sexualities, usually with little success. Their frustrated efforts to express and fulfil their desires result in the manifestation of mental instability, and though Purdy is often presented with the opportunity to explore the psychological nuances associated with abuse, she fails to do so with any real effect. Moreover, Purdy's evocation of contemporary sexual tropes emphasises the performative nature of female sexuality, and narrowly defines that sexuality as acquiescing to male fantasy and satisfaction. Her novels are an example of the pervasive, but damaging and inaccurate, equation of the overt and public expression

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<sup>3</sup> Emily Purdy is the pseudonym under which the author Brandy Purdy publishes her novels in the United Kingdom.



of female sexuality with the feminist discourse of empowerment and liberation, an assumption that is all too pervasive in Western popular culture of the twenty-first century.

**The Virgin Mary and the Great Whore's daughter:  
the relationship between sexuality and power(lessness)  
in *Mary & Elizabeth***

As the title suggests, *Mary & Elizabeth* is the story of Henry VIII's surviving daughters, each of whom would eventually rule England after his death. The novel is split between the two women, with alternating chapters narrated in the first person by each in turn. In a similar vein to many feminist historical novels, *Mary & Elizabeth* is preoccupied with the recovery of the matrilineal genealogy of its female characters. For Mary and, in particular, Elizabeth, their connections and relationships with their mothers represent facets of their identities that they were never given the opportunity to realise fully as adults: Mary was banned from contacting her mother, Katherine of Aragon, several years before her death, and Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn, was executed under her father's orders before her third birthday. Despite – or perhaps *because* of – the absence of their mothers, both women recognise the importance of their maternal heritage, identifying themselves as their mothers' daughters far more frequently than they evoke their more powerful father. Their mothers prove to be sources of comfort and inspiration for them both during difficult times: Elizabeth, for example, feels a deep connection with her mother when she is imprisoned in the same room in the Tower of London where her mother spent her last days, and draws comfort from this (*M&E* 254). Mary, meanwhile, remembers the bravery of her

mother and grandmother when she is forced to fight for her rightful claim to the throne:

I thought of my mother and grandmother, both of whom had donned armour at one time or another during their valiant lives, and I vowed that I would not shame myself and would prove myself worthy of them. [...] Every step of the way, I knew I was not alone; I felt as if my mother and grandmother, the strong Spanish warrior queens, were riding right alongside me, in spirit, in proud armour and conviction, once again. (*M&E* 185-6)

The strength of their mothers, then, proves to be a significant influence for both sisters, and this influence is perhaps most evident in their attitudes towards men, sex, and marriage.

Purdy's characterisation of Mary and Elizabeth suggests that they are modelled after their mothers in their demeanours, and their mothers' calamitous marriages inevitably colour their attitudes towards the institution. While Mary learns the art of unbending and even masochistic stoicism in the face of suffering from her mother, Elizabeth draws on her mother's strength of character, independence, and nerve during her adolescent and adult years. The maternal legacies they inherit are dramatised in their final words to each other: before Katherine of Aragon is separated from Mary, she advises the girl that "God only tests those he cherishes, in order to strengthen them and their virtues" (*M&E* 20). Elizabeth, meanwhile, frequently recalls her mother's parting counsel, just days before her execution: "*Never surrender!*" my mother said to me that day, an adamant, intense ferocity endowing each word. "Be mistress of your own fate, Elizabeth, and let *no man* be your master!" (*M&E* 30; emphasis in original). As the narrative unfolds, it is clear that both women have taken their mothers' words to heart, developing skewed and severely damaging attitudes towards men, marriage, and their own emerging sexualities as a result.

Of the two women, Elizabeth is the most profoundly marked by her mother's demise and her father's string of unsuccessful marriages. Her childhood innocence is abruptly shattered when, not long after her mother's death, she overhears two chambermaids gossiping about the details of the execution; she flies into a fit of rage and, though still a child, makes the vow that would come to define her adulthood:

That was the last time I let my emotions get the better of me; it was also the last time I mentioned my mother. I put my doll [made by her mother] away, at the bottom of a chest, tenderly and lovingly wrapped in a length of red silk with a lavender and rose petal sachet, and vowed never to surrender and never to forget. I would never give any man the power to act as a living god and ordain my fate. (*M&E* 32)

Purdy casts this resolution as essential to the reader's understanding of Elizabeth's character, and reiterates it on several occasions throughout the early sections of Elizabeth's narrative. When her father's new wife, Jane Seymour, dies in childbirth, her "mind forge[s] a new link in the chain between surrender, marriage, and death – childbirth", which she comes to regard as "another peril that [comes] when a woman surrender[s] and put[s] her life in a man's hands" (*M&E* 32). Through Elizabeth's early childhood traumas, Purdy thus establishes the association of female powerlessness and marriage, an association which is reaffirmed when Elizabeth's third stepmother, Catherine Howard, meets the same fate as her mother: "I saw again how men and sex and marriage had destroyed another woman who was close to me" (*M&E* 35). Elizabeth bears witness to the degradation of an admired woman yet again when she finds her father has signed a death warrant for her fourth and favourite stepmother, Katherine Parr, whom she describes as her "saviour" (*M&E* 36). Though Katherine is able to convince Henry to let her live, the incident leaves an indelible impression on young Elizabeth:

I would never forget how close she came to danger, or the power of life and death my father had to wield over her as her sovereign lord, husband, and master. Or the shame that she, one of the torchbearers of enlightenment and reformation, must have felt to have to lower herself in such a manner and humbly declare womankind, whose champion she was, weak and inferior, and that God had created women to serve men, and no female should ever presume to contradict, question, or disobey her husband, father, brother, or indeed any male at all. (*M&E* 37)

Purdy therefore labours the fact that by the time she reaches puberty, Elizabeth associates marriage and sex with the subservience, debasement, humiliation, and even peril of women; she realises that in order to retain her independence, dignity, and strength, she must reject the expectations traditionally associated with her gender. For her, this means resolving never to marry or become sexually involved with a man, as doing so equates to surrendering power and control over herself and submitting to patriarchal possession.

Elizabeth's intellectual resolve to resist her prescribed gender role is brought into conflict with her sexual awakening at the hands of her new stepfather, Thomas Seymour, when she moves in with her stepmother following the death of her father. The move marks the novel's shift into an erotic mode. Purdy casts Seymour as the stereotyped hero-villain of the erotic historical romance: he is described as

rash and reckless, hotheaded and handsome, [... with a] winning smile and ready laugh. Handsome beyond words and measure, with sun-bronzed skin, wavy auburn hair, a long luxuriant beard, twinkling cinnamon-brown eyes, and a voice like a velvet glove on bare skin [... he] wielded his charm like a weapon. Every woman who crossed his path seemed to succumb to that charm. (*M&E* 54)

Further descriptions routinely characterise him as "a handsome knave, a reckless rascal" (*M&E* 60); Elizabeth, like most initially naïve bodice-ripper heroines, finds

his rakish charm and devastating good looks utterly irresistible. Upon their first meeting, she is struck by the powerful physical reaction he evokes in her: in a rather clichéd scene that proves typical of Purdy's vapid writing, she is rendered speechless by the intensity of her desire, and her body responds to him of its own volition:

The moment I saw him my heart felt a jolt as if it had been struck by lightning and unaccountably I began to blush and tremble. I could not speak; my lips could not form the words to utter even a simple greeting. [...] and then... *he kissed me!* Long and lingeringly upon my lips, he kissed me! I surprised myself, even as I knew I should shove him away and slap him for his impertinence, and instead I wrapped my arms around his neck and clung to him.

(*M&E* 55; emphasis in original)

Elizabeth's desire is, at first, tempered by two complicating factors: her love for her stepmother, Katherine, whom she does not wish to betray; and her recognition, despite her desire, of Seymour's true character. Though Elizabeth is only thirteen, sexually inexperienced and in many respects utterly immature, the pragmatic sense of self-preservation that comes to characterise her adult nature is already forming.

Regarding her desire for Seymour, she finds that she is

acutely aware that a war was raging inside me. My mind saw full plain that this man was a braggart and a fool, a complete stranger to common sense, who thought himself above and exempt from all the rules. But he was a handsome knave, a reckless rascal, with a winning smile, and a way with him that made me want to fall at his feet and offer myself to him like a pagan sacrifice. I felt my body, and my heart, lurch and tremble, wanting to be possessed by him, while my mind tried to pull them back, as if it were yanking on the reins of a runaway horse. (*M&E* 60)

Elizabeth herself is not, at this stage of early adolescence, portrayed as fully cognisant of the implications of her desires, despite her earlier resolutions concerning marriage and sex. Significantly, however, Purdy is already establishing the grounds on which

sexual relationships exist in her novel: Elizabeth's choice of diction, her desire to be "possessed by him" (*M&E* 60; emphasis added), indicates an imbalance of power predicated on sexual intercourse. Sweetly innocent Elizabeth, whose knees tremble at the sight of Seymour and whose body is, for the first time, responding in ways over which she has no control, is instinctually aware that a sexual contract with Seymour would imply surrendering a form of ownership of her body to him. Though she is conscious of the foolishness of her sexual desire, it has nevertheless rendered her powerless.

Purdy evokes a very particular sexual trope in the older man's seduction of the young virgin, a trope that hinges on the imbalance of power between the sexes. Seymour initiates a gradual and seemingly playful sexual courtship of his thirteen-year-old stepdaughter, and Elizabeth observes that he "behaved like a boisterous young swain hellbent on wooing and winning [her]" (*M&E* 67). He begins to visit her in the early morning, while she is still in bed; on the first occasion, he appears disguised as a gardener, declaring that he has "come [...] to tend [his] rosy buds" before touching her naked body (*M&E* 67). This is the start of an ostensibly good-humoured game that is, in fact, a calculated seduction of the girl who is second in line to the English throne. Seymour gradually becomes more daring in his molestations, and Elizabeth finds herself continually "caught between resistance and surrender" (*M&E* 68), a scenario recalling the forced seduction trope of early erotic historicals. Their warped courtship is characterised throughout in terms of unequal gender relations, and habitually hindered by Purdy's laboured and awkward attempts to adopt a sixteenth-century vernacular:

Sometimes he would come to me naked and bare-legged  
beneath his garnet velvet dressing gown with his cock  
protruding like a cannon at the ready to introduce to my

eager, inquisitive hands and hungry mouth, *to make me believe that I had some heady, intoxicating power over him.*

I tried, albeit half-heartedly, to resist and do the right thing. [...] I forced myself to show more restraint and donned a proper form-concealing white linen nightgown or gossamer-thin cobweb lawn night-shift to tantalisingly veil my burgeoning woman's body, so that he would tease me out of it, shouting, 'Be gone, virtuous raiments!' *and chastise me for my false modesty and pull me naked and squealing across his knees to spank my bare bottom until it bore a matching set of smarting red handprints and he could truly say, not just in jest, that he had left his mark on me.*

(*M&E* 73; emphasis added)

This passage reveals that Seymour's power over Elizabeth works on two levels. He exploits her sexual desire to his benefit while allowing her to believe that she holds some form of power over him, indicating a calculated, conscious manoeuvre on his part: he uses sex and desire to position himself as the one in control, simultaneously robbing Elizabeth of agency over her own desire. Secondly, his farcical disciplining of her is a perversion of his role as her stepfather and protector, which in itself places him in a position of power over her; her arousal simply compounds her powerlessness. Though he does, at first, refrain from full intercourse with Elizabeth, it is Seymour, and not Elizabeth, who dictates the terms of their sexual relationship, as Elizabeth is barely able to stop herself from succumbing to him. She readily admits: "it was all I could do not to fall at his feet and pull up my skirts and open my legs, begging him to take me. At such times, I was as shameless as a bitch in heat" (*M&E* 74).

The eventual consummation of their relationship, when Elizabeth is fourteen, proves to be a defining moment for her character and a traumatic initiation into womanhood. Again, it is a calculated manoeuvre for Seymour: he performs a kind of perverse marriage ceremony between them, "[slipping] a ring onto the third finger of [her] left hand, the one upon which tradition and custom decreed a woman should

wear her betrothal ring” (*M&E* 107), before blindfolding her and leading her to a secluded corner of the garden, where he – not Elizabeth – initiates intercourse. The moment of penetration shatters the illusion of their game-like courtship for Elizabeth:

I gasped at the brutal assault of pain. I had expected only pleasure, rolling, intense waves that would engulf and threaten to drown me in the love that Tom and I made together, not this sharp stab that at once made me think of the Hungarian prince infamously called Vlad I had learned of, who delighted in torturing his victims by having them impaled upon stakes so that the weight of their bodies would drag them down the wooden shaft in a slow and agonising death. The pain shook me so I cried out.

I tried to push him away, but Tom, intent on his own pleasure, groaning and thrusting, his fingertips digging bruisingly hard into my naked hips, was oblivious to my pain and distress, and continued to hold tight. [...]

I found the act itself curiously hollow. Though his seed had filled me I felt empty inside. *Is that all there is to it?* I wondered. Was there to be no pleasure for me?

Instinctively, I knew that everything was different now. When Tom looked up at me and smiled I had the distinct feeling that I was no longer the centre of his attention but merely an afterthought.

When he reached out for me I leapt back. As suddenly as it had flared up, the flame of passion had burnt out, and I had lost all desire for his touch. I gathered up my skirts and ran as fast as I could, fleeing from the infatuation – I knew it would be a lie to call it love – that had almost devoured and destroyed me. (*M&E* 108-9; emphasis in original)

The violent diction and imagery Purdy evokes here equates sexual union with rape, even though the sex is consensual. Despite the fact that Elizabeth is aware of Seymour’s authority over her, the hollowness of the sex act makes her feel complicit in her own state of powerlessness. Seymour’s ‘possession’ of her is no longer an erotic fantasy, but a painful and appalling reality, and the mock-wedding ring he places on her finger before they consummate their relationship suddenly “[burns] like a red-hot brand, marking [her] as Tom Seymour’s property, like a prized piece of cattle” (*M&E* 110). Seymour’s lack of concern for her pleasure and the shock of



physical pain, rather than gratification, prompt her to draw comparisons with victims of torture, and the trauma of the loss of her virginity not only “cures” her of her passion for Seymour but forever colours her perception of sexual relationships. She observes: “Tom himself would cure me of all my dreams and delusions about love and passion [...] and leave me lying shattered at his feet, a weak and foolish woman enslaved and entirely in his power” (*M&E* 87).

Purdy persistently evokes the discourses associated with forced seduction and rape fantasy to describe the relationship between Elizabeth and Seymour, continually emphasising the imbalance of power between them. In Purdy’s favour, Elizabeth no longer *desires* Seymour’s advances after they consummate their relationship, which distances the text somewhat from the typical rape fantasy trope, but she remains in a powerless position as a woman. When Elizabeth attempts to reject him, he resorts to physical force in an effort to re-establish his hold over her:

Even as I fought to free myself, Tom clutched me close to his chest and pressed his lips hard against mine in a bruising kiss, such as a man gives to prove himself the master and the woman his chattel or slave, bound to serve and obey.

My fists pummelled him, and I struggled to break free, but he only held me tighter and kissed me harder, determined to conquer me, to prove his supremacy, his masculine right and power over me. (*M&E* 111)

Seymour has achieved the ultimate conquest in sexually possessing the heir to the English throne; Elizabeth, however, is unwilling to be possessed. Seymour’s power is no longer based on Elizabeth’s desire for him, but rather exists by virtue of his sex, his “masculine right” to cast himself as her “master” (*M&E* 111). Because she no longer wishes to be sexually involved with him, however, Elizabeth resists his claim of ownership over her. Her resolve is cemented by Seymour’s reaction when their embrace is interrupted by Katherine, who is heavily pregnant: he desperately tries to

convince his wife that Elizabeth seduced him, casting Elizabeth as a “harlot” and a shameless sexual predator (*M&E* 112), and shattering the relationship between the two women. For Elizabeth, this devastating climax colours her already-painful initiation into womanhood and her attitude towards romantic relationships: “What a fool I had been, as is, in that moment I realised, any woman who puts her trust in a man. Love is just a lie men tell that women want to believe, and sincerity is the liar’s dressing gown” (*M&E* 112).

Purdy’s evocation of the rape fantasy or forced seduction plot is complicated in its execution. While Seymour’s molestation of his young stepdaughter is erotically charged and clearly meant to titillate the reader, Purdy seems acutely aware of the problematic nature of the skewed power relations inherent in his seduction. After the consummation of their relationship, Elizabeth’s infatuation is shattered – an inversion of the traditional rape fantasy plot in erotic historicals, which usually depicts the victim falling in love with her rapist. While Purdy’s inversion of this plot may be viewed in a positive light from the perspective of a feminist reading of the text, Elizabeth’s subsequent repression of her sexuality – which implies that she blames herself for Seymour’s actions – complicates this reading. Elizabeth’s traumatic sexual awakening, and her accompanying belief that sex and desire render women powerless, prompts her to recommit to her decision against any further romantic involvement with men. This, she determines, is the only way in which she can retain full agency and control over her life. She symbolically reclaims her virginity, adorning herself in white clothing and pearls (both of which symbolise sexual purity) and leaving her hair unbound in the style of a virgin girl. Her conviction that sex “enslaves the female and empowers the male” (*M&E* 149) even prompts her to ‘de-sexualise’ her own body, erasing any traces of femininity in an attempt to avoid being

objectified and ‘owned’ by men: “I vowed to always keep my body straight and slender, to never let it grow womanly and round with the curves that bespoke fecundity” (*M&E* 149). She refers to her virginity as something that was “taken from [her]”, rather than willingly abandoned, and commits to never “surrender[ing]” to marriage (*M&E* 149). As she later insists to Mary: “England is the only lover and husband I shall ever have. I will *never* accept any other!” (*M&E* 332; emphasis in original).

While denying herself any sexual pleasure, Elizabeth discovers that her sexuality can, in fact, be used as a weapon to her own advantage. With her Catholic sister on the throne of England, Elizabeth – a confirmed Protestant – is acutely aware of the ever-present threat that she will be burned at the stake as a heretic. For her fanatical sister, famously dubbed “Bloody Mary” by the people of England, this would not only mean the fulfilment of what she believes to be God’s work, but also the elimination of a popular rival for her throne; indeed, Mary is perpetually on the brink of signing Elizabeth’s death warrant. Elizabeth realises, however, that she has an unlikely ally in Mary’s husband, Prince Philip of Spain. Philip’s attraction to Elizabeth is immediately apparent, and while he remains enamoured with her, he will not allow Mary to order her execution. Elizabeth has learned from her bitter experience with Seymour that sexual attraction can tip the balance of power, and in this instance, she is fully prepared to wield that power to her own benefit.

In describing Elizabeth’s first encounter with Philip, Purdy demonstrates how the restraint of her sexuality has allowed her to maintain control of her own person. No longer a naïve, lovesick adolescent, Elizabeth is a pragmatic and, in many respects, formidable woman. Her insight into the power of sexuality and her keen

perceptive abilities allow her to take on the role she feels would prove most beneficial to her when Philip strides confidently into her room:

I dropped at once to my knees, the virgin supplicant begging mercy of the mighty monarch; I knew instinctively that these were the roles and that was the game we would be playing tonight.

[...] Suddenly, he pulled me close, tight against his chest, and his lips came down over mine, in a bruising and crushing conqueror's kiss.

Though I wanted to push him away, to spit in his face, kick and slap him, and rake my nails down his face, I forced myself to close my eyes and go limp in a swoon of surrender [...].

He leaned down and pressed a lingering kiss onto each of the exposed half moons of my breasts, then turned on his heel and strode purposefully out with all the confidence and supreme arrogance of a man who has come to conquer and succeeded... or so he thinks he has.

When he was gone, I sat up, threw my pillow at the door through which he had gone, and laughed till tears rolled down my face at the overweening vanity and arrogance of the man. He actually thought he had staked his claim to me as Spain had to the New World! Did he *really* think he could conquer me and treat me like a puddle at his feet? Oh yes, he did!

'Oh, Philip, Philip,' I sighed through my convulsive glee, 'you don't know me very well, and you *never* will, you will never see the *real* me until it is too late! You are *not* my master, or England's master, and you *never* will be either!'

(*M&E* 320-1; emphasis in original)

Elizabeth's dealings with Philip are a kind of parody or inversion of her earlier relationship with Seymour: she is now the one in the position of power, as Philip's desire for her allows her to manipulate and control him. Just as Seymour allowed her to believe that she had some form of power over him (*M&E* 73), so too does Elizabeth allow Philip to imagine that he has "conquer[ed]" her (*M&E* 320). Elizabeth has thus become the one to exercise her sexuality as a form of authority, thereby upsetting the traditionally accepted balance of power between the genders – as she so perceptively observes in this passage. Her adoption of the role of "virgin supplicant" establishes

female sexuality as a kind of performance to be executed for the enjoyment or manipulation of men, rather than a natural desire to be fulfilled to the satisfaction of the woman herself. The similarities between this scenario and her relationship with Seymour suggest that, according to Purdy, the expression of sexuality must always cast one party in the role of the victim, as the balance of power in this regard can never be equal between man and woman. In order to remain in control, rather than experience objectification, Elizabeth, as the woman, must abandon the prospect of her own sexual fulfilment.

Elizabeth's maturation from childhood to adulthood in the novel is intricately bound to her sexual initiation, and the foundation of her character as an adult is the trauma of her first sexual experience. Her decision to shun any further romantic involvement with men necessitates the development of her fiercely-guarded independence and strength of character; after her disappointment in Seymour, she declares: "I realised now that the only person I could truly trust and depend on was myself. I must learn to stand and walk alone" (*M&E* 147). This, it is intimated throughout the novel, is the reason why Elizabeth eventually proves to be such a powerful and successful monarch; her sister Mary's lack of strength and self-assurance, meanwhile, is depicted as her downfall. While the first half of the novel details Elizabeth's sexual initiation, the second half is focused more explicitly on Mary's rather belated sexual awakening. Mary's character is a consummate foil to Elizabeth's: she is feeble in both mind and body, fanatically religious, naïve to a fault, haplessly needy and, by the novel's close, suffering from severe mental instability. In many respects, she is childlike in her thoughts and behaviour. While Elizabeth's sexualisation at a young age propels her somewhat prematurely into womanhood and forms the impetus for her maturation as a strong-willed, powerful, but self-

consciously sexually repressed adult, Mary experiences sexual arousal for the first time at nearly forty, and her chaste state prior to this constitutes a kind of perpetual childhood. When she does eventually marry and experience a sexual relationship, she is wholly unprepared to deal with its implications.

Mary's character is driven by an almost overwhelming need to be loved, appreciated and wanted by those around her. The first chapter in the novel written from her perspective is led by the epigraph: "*All I have ever wanted was to be loved, to find on this earth a love as true and everlasting as God's*" (M&E 7). This desire proves to be the motivating force behind the majority of her actions. The first chapter dealing with her character is a lengthy, detailed description of her early childhood, before her father met Anne Boleyn and initiated the split with her mother, Katherine of Aragon. She remembers her childhood as a time when she "walked in love" (M&E 7), adored by her devoted mother and showered with affection by her powerful father. His attentions, however, were not to last: "Those were the happy days before the sad years of ignominy and disgrace, penury, and disdain, the callousness and cruelty he learned under the tutelage of The Great Whore, Anne Boleyn" (M&E 13). Henry's rage at Katherine's refusal to quietly retire and leave him free to remarry taints his relationship with their daughter and, shamed by the stigma of her sudden bastardy, Mary is stripped of her title and banished from Court. Her father's betrayal wounds Mary deeply, leaving her profoundly disillusioned: "I *never* thought the love he felt for me then would ever diminish or die. I thought my earthly father's love, like our Heavenly Father's love, was permanent, unchanging, and everlasting" (M&E 11; emphasis in original).

Significantly, then, Purdy depicts both Mary and Elizabeth's formative adolescent years as being shaped by overwhelming disappointments in men,

disappointments which prove to be drastic influences in their adult lives. While Elizabeth's disillusionment with romance leaves her with a stronger sense of resolve, however, Mary's disappointment in the impermanence of paternal love has a severely damaging psychological impact, which is further compounded by her frustrated desire to marry and have children. In her desperation to be loved and needed, she wants "more than anything to be a wife and mother" (*M&E* 16), but given her uncertain status as a royal bastard, no marriage is arranged for her during her youth or early adulthood. Given her desperation to be loved, Mary, unlike Elizabeth, does not reject or resist the behaviour and social standing prescribed for her by traditionally accepted gender roles: she accepts fully the 'weaknesses' of her sex, subscribing to the belief that she needs a man (in the form of a father or husband) to rule over and protect her.

Accordingly, Purdy indulges in some of the uglier stereotypes of female behaviour in her characterisation of Mary, depicting her as weak, emotional, and habitually irrational. Thus, unlike many contemporary authors such as Philippa Gregory and Suzannah Dunn, who consciously seek to convey more nuanced, complex female characters, Purdy rather simplistically associates outmoded stereotypes with an 'authentic' portrayal of historical women. Mary's hackneyed bouts of melodrama and hysteria, Purdy's narrative seems to suggest, are not only *expected* of a woman of the sixteenth century, but constitute the behaviour to which she was in fact naturally inclined. On one occasion, for example, fearing that she may be assassinated by an anti-Catholic faction during the reign of her Protestant brother, she begs the Spanish ambassador to plan her escape, resorting to tears and pleading the ineptitude and helplessness of her gender: "I beg you to help me [...]. I am like a little ignorant girl [...]. Quaking with tears, my knees gave way, and I collapsed sobbing at Ambassador van der Delft's feet" (*M&E* 152). Despite the desperation of

her pleas, however, when the ambassador's men arrive to smuggle her onto a boat anchored off the English coastline, she is hysterical in her indecisive turmoil:

He found me in quite a state. A raging fever of commingled uncertainty, anticipation, and dread plagued me, made all the worse by a raging throbbing megrim and a queasy stomach that felt all aflutter and made me nervous of my dignity and bowels. Before, I had been so convinced that leaving was the right thing to do, but now I was not sure, an inkling of doubt tugged at my mind. [...] I wept and wrung my hands; I did not know what to do. (*M&E* 153-4)

When the delay caused by her indecisiveness scuppers the escape plan, she reacts with more hysteria: "Now that the chance was lost I longed to turn back the clock and seize it. [...] '*But what is to become of me?*' I cried after them, but they never looked back or answered, and instead left me weeping on the floor, [...] keening with despair, repeating over and over, '*But what is to become of me?*'" (*M&E* 156-7; emphasis in original). Her histrionics and her seemingly natural inhabitation of the role of poor, helpless female – indeed, her characterisation in the vein of the worst kind of female stereotype – is unpalatable and even annoying to the twenty-first century reader.

Certainly, Mary's rather flat characterisation is a sign of rather poor authorship, but it does establish the streak of emotional irrationality that comes to define Mary's dealings with her husband, Philip of Spain, later in the novel. Though she claims to have long-since abandoned any dreams of marriage and motherhood by the time she ascends the throne in her late thirties, Mary is certainly keen to seize the excuse of the need for a royal heir, and arrangements for her marriage commence soon after her coronation. She wistfully declares: "If only I could have a child of my own, then my happiness would be complete!" (*M&E* 198). Her dealings with her Council are, however, fraught with difficulties, as they undermine her rule and prove



resistant to the idea of a foreign prince presiding as her consort. She attempts to assert her wishes from the very beginning of her reign: “The first time I met with my Council, I knew that as one lone woman against so many men, seasoned statesmen all, I must not let my nervousness and weakness show; I must prove to them that I was strong enough to hold, and control, the reins of power” (*M&E* 194-5). Despite this, her councilmen speak to her “patiently, almost condescendingly, as if [she] were an ignorant little girl” (*M&E* 195). She also proves vulnerable to the influences of the new Spanish ambassador, Renard, who skilfully manipulates her into defying her Council and insisting on Philip as her bridegroom. Renard plays to the weaknesses she has already demonstrated are inevitable because of her sex by reassuring her: “if you accept his proposal, the burdens [of governing the realm] will be lifted from your shoulders; you will be relieved of the pains and travails which are meant to be a man’s work and not the profession of ladies” (*M&E* 208). Mary herself expresses the desire for a consort, undermining her own ability to rule purely because she is a woman: “I had always desired a man stronger than myself, a pillar of strength I could lean on whenever I had need, a man who would be to me like the shell that protects and shelters the snail’s vulnerable flesh” (*M&E* 193).

While it could be argued that the author intends her modern readers to appreciate a sense of irony or even amusement in such outmoded comments, the potential for such an understanding is undercut by the awful truth of Mary’s words – she is, in fact, too weak and hysterical to rule her country effectively. Had strong-willed, level-headed Elizabeth uttered such sentiments, their irony may have been more effectively conveyed. By applying them to Mary, however, the stereotype of the weak, hapless woman in need of a male saviour is reinforced rather than challenged. Mary’s characterisation in this vein is further emphasised by the rather belated

realisation of her latent sexuality. When Renard brings her a portrait of Philip to consider, her reaction is predictably melodramatic and romanticised, given the author's propensity for clichéd and rather cringe-inducing description:

Beneath my velvet skirts, I felt my knees tremble and go so weak that I had to grope behind me for a chair [...]. He was the sun and the moon all at once, and I *knew* that he would be the whole world to me.

My face burned with a red-hot blush as I felt the most exquisite little tingling, the like of which I had never felt before, between my legs, accompanied by a sudden burst of warm wetness. This, I rather poetically fancied, was what a rose must feel like before it first unfurled its petals in full bloom to the morning dew.

(*M&E* 207; emphasis in original)

The (im)balance of power is immediately established even before Philip reaches English soil, then: he is “the whole world” to Mary, and her infatuation with him is linked to the sexual arousal evoked not only by his appearance, but by the promise of marriage, love, companionship, and devotion that he represents in Mary's mind. While it is rather odd that Purdy expects her readers to accept that, at the age of thirty-eight, Mary has never once experienced sexual arousal, her loss of control here reinforces the author's association of sex and powerlessness already established by Elizabeth's experiences with Seymour. Mary's arousal serves to signal the end of her perpetual childhood and the belated onset of womanhood.

Unlike Elizabeth, however, Mary's sexual initiation further undermines her agency and sense of self. Her propensity for irrational hysteria is accentuated by her infatuation with Philip, and further erodes the confidence of her Council and Court. When her Council advises against the marriage, Mary flies into a fit of rage:

Unable to control the storm of emotion raging inside me, I ran from them, sobbing loudly, stumbling over my skirts, and nearly colliding with the wall, in my wild, tear-blinded

haste. Behind me I knew they were murmuring and shaking their heads, no doubt comparing me to a greensick girl in the throes of her first love, but I could neither help nor change what I felt. The truth was, hurtling over the bounds of reason and common sense, I had fallen in love with a painted face in a gilded frame and a paragon spun from the good reports of others, a man I had never even met, and I could not bear the thought of losing the chance to be with him and belong to him. (*M&E 227*)

Mary's overwrought tantrums, which she insists are out of her control, are troubling in a grown woman, much less a queen charged with the governance of an entire realm. Her actions become increasingly unreasonable in her desperation: she spends hours every day staring at Philip's portrait (*M&E 227*); she orders that children be whipped and imprisoned for playing a game in which Philip is hanged (*M&E 276*); she prostrates herself at the feet of the Spanish ambassador to assure him that she would lay down her life for the safety of Philip (*M&E 277*); she eventually takes to her bed, refusing to eat or sleep, declaring: "Only Prince Philip can cure me!" (*M&E 277*). When she eventually hears that Philip has agreed to set out for England, and their marriage ceremony is conducted by proxy in his absence, her delight is childlike – perhaps even a little unhinged – in its expression: "I felt like dancing. I wanted to swirl and spin and show the whole world my betrothal ring and shout out so everyone could hear me, 'I am a married woman! Praise God, I am a spinster no longer!' I felt like doing it, so I did" (*M&E 283*). Here, Purdy suggests that – although she is the crowned Queen of England – Mary's sense of self is inextricably linked to the role of wife, as the women of her era, in Purdy's view, are usually defined in relation to their husbands.

Before Philip has even arrived on English soil, Mary – already prone to bursts of irrationality and hysteria – increasingly loses her sense of self-control. The prospect of marriage, and the love of a devoted husband, promises to assuage the

disappointments of her childhood. Her unrealistic expectations are a cause for concern for Elizabeth, who observes that “still she was trying to turn back time. [...] Her expectations of happiness are] a child’s memory, not an adult’s reality. It was a portent [...] of the blindness of her madness” (*M&E* 223-4). This wilful blindness leaves her vulnerable to manipulation and control by men: first, by the Spanish ambassador Renard, to whom Mary – his senior in rank and authority – is pathetically deferential, and later by her husband Philip, who demands her subservience as a wife. Much to the disquiet of her Court and Council, Mary publically declares that she will submit to the authority of her husband, and in a typical display of uncontrolled excitement, when Philip arrives at Court and she lays eyes on him for the first time, Mary is quick to declare her subservience: “before I even realised what I was doing [...] I hurled myself onto my knees before him and took his hand in mine and, staring up at him in unabashed adoration, with eyes that proclaimed ‘I will worship you; I will be your slave!’ I brought it to my lips in a kiss of hungry devotion” (*M&E* 294). Again, Mary is driven by her desperate desire for love to prostrate herself before a man; Philip, motivated only by his own ambition, is shameless in his manipulation as he reinforces his authority over her, and this becomes most plainly evident in his treatment of her in the confines of their private rooms.

Once again, Purdy persistently defines sex in terms of power(lessness). Rather bizarrely, then, Mary and Philip’s sexual relationship is compared to a military operation, both in its clinical execution and in Philip’s assumption of the role of commander. Their wedding night – Mary’s first experience of sexual contact – reveals the balance of power between them and is worth considering in some detail. After stripping her with brisk, dispassionate precision – Mary notes that he is “disturbingly skilled at navigating the manifold intricacies of a woman’s attire” (*M&E* 299) – he

becomes irritated with her tearful embarrassment and “shame” in standing naked before him: “Repeatedly, I moved my arms to try to cover myself, to shield my breasts and privy parts, but each time Philip stopped me, making me stand with my arms straight at my sides, ‘like a soldier,’ he insisted, ‘arms down, back straight, head up!’” (*M&E* 300). Before they consummate their relationship, he forces her – naked and vulnerable – to declare once again her absolute submission and subservience as his wife:

Like a general issuing orders to a mere footsoldier, Philip pointed at the floor. ‘Down,’ he said, and when I hesitated, he added, ‘kneel.’

Trembling, I sank to my knees and gazed up at him questioningly, though his image was blurred by the tears that filled my eyes.

‘Before she was a Queen of England, your mother was a Princess of Spain,’ my husband said to me. ‘I want you to tell me what she taught you about wifely obedience.’

‘I was raised to regard a husband as his wife’s lord and master, as Christ’s earthly representative, and she is to honour and obey him as such.’ I recited the long-ago but well-learned lessons of my childhood. ‘A woman is clay in first her father’s and then, upon her marriage, her husband’s hands; and he is the sculptor who will mould and shape her and make her his creation, whatever he wants her to be. A woman without a husband is incomplete. When she is blessed with the gift of a husband she should give him her complete devotion and do whatever he asks or commands of her. His every wish and whim is law to her.’

‘And will you honour the teachings of your childhood?’ Philip asked.

‘Yes,’ I nodded, swallowing down my tears, ‘yes, I will.’

‘Then I think we shall do well together.’ (*M&E* 300-1)

Philip evokes Mary’s cherished memory of her mother, as well as her devotion to her religion, as a means of ensuring her subservience, and it is significant that he does so at this particular moment, as they are about to consummate their marriage. He goes on to criticise Mary for being too soft, sentimental, and emotional, with which she readily agrees (*M&E* 302). Thus assured of her submissiveness, he commands her –

much to her confusion and horror – to perform oral sex on him while he admires himself in the mirror, a manoeuvre meant not only for his gratification but to ensure that she is further degraded. Here, Philip asks Mary to kneel down to him again, in a manner that replicates her former attitude when promising her devotion to him. Thus the novel's replication of Mary's physical posture further conflates and emphasises sex and power:

‘Come here and kneel down,’ he directed, ‘here, before me, beneath the table but not so far that you cannot reach me.’

‘But... *why?*’ I asked, my brow furrowing with confusion. I did not understand what he wanted of me.

‘Because I am your husband and that is what I have told you to do, and it is your duty to obey, not question,’ Philip answered sternly. ‘I am your husband, yes?’ And at my nod, he continued. ‘And as such I am like Christ on earth to you?’ he asked, and again I nodded. ‘Then come here, kneel down, and worship me, Mary!’ he ordered. ‘Worship me on your knees! Worship me with your mouth! [...] Henceforth, my seed will be to you like mother's milk is to a baby. I want you to suckle greedily, as hungrily as an infant. And I will look at myself in the mirror and together what my eyes see and what your mouth does will give me *great* pleasure. Then when I am ready to spend myself I will look down at you. I want to watch you swallow every drop, and then beg for more, grovel, kiss my feet, and beg and plead as if your life depended on it, and, perhaps I will be generous and grant your request.’ (*M&E* 302-3; emphasis in original)

Mary, then, is expected not only to acquiesce to his demands, but to be grateful for his attentions, and to treat him as she would a deity. In his authoritative ‘seduction’ of her, a demand for a performance that he will direct and she will not question, the relationship between female powerlessness and sex is not only reinforced but further heightened, as Philip uses sex to degrade, diminish, and humiliate her.

Despite this, Mary discovers pleasure in sex, suggesting that Purdy does in fact submit to the power of the rape fantasy trope. Frightened at first by Philip's demands, she flees into her private chapel, where he follows her and roughly drags

her back, throwing her down onto the bed. The scene which follows is disturbingly reminiscent of the eroticised rape scenes that were typical of historical romances in the 1970s, in which the heroine finds unwilling gratification in her violation:

So enraptured was I by his touch that I quite forgot the shocking peculiarities and violence that had preceded this. Then his hand rose up to cover my mouth, to stifle my scream, as I felt a sharp pain like a lance being driven into my womanly parts. [...] Suffice to say that in my beloved's, my husband's, arms I discovered to my astonishment, and immense delight, that my body, which myself and others had so often thought of as a wizened old maid's perpetually pure, chaste, and virgin carcass, had been made for love. [...] I could not get enough of his touch [...]. I lost myself in his embrace and found a new part of me I never knew existed. (*M&E* 303-4)

Mary's overwhelming desire to be loved – by anyone – coupled with her relief that she is not a “wizened old maid” are certainly significant factors in her pleasure. It is interesting, however, to draw comparisons between the first sexual experiences of Mary and Elizabeth, particularly as such comparisons are naturally prompted by the similarities in their descriptions of the actual moment of penetration. Elizabeth's resistance to submission and possession by a man means that the sex act is devoid of pleasure for her, despite the fact that she willingly submits to it; Mary, meanwhile, finds that her body responds gratifyingly despite the violence that precedes the loss of her virginity, thereby underlying her willing subservience and acceptance of her supposed powerlessness as a woman. For both sisters, however, the loss of their virginity marks the realisation of womanhood, indicated here by Mary's assertion that she “found a new part” (*M&E* 304) of herself. Sex and romantic involvement with men, therefore, play significant roles in determining the women they are to become: for Elizabeth, it necessitates the development of her self-reliance, strength, and

independence, while for Mary, it underlines her subservience and acceptance of her womanly ‘weaknesses’.

As Mary’s marriage progresses, so too does her mental deterioration. Her infatuation with Philip leaves her demeaned, hysterical, and often unintelligible; Elizabeth frequently compares her needy behaviour with Philip to that of a “beggarmaid” (*M&E* 326) or an “eager dog scampering to lick her master’s face” (*M&E* 352), and cringes to see her “weeping, whining, and grovelling for scraps of affection from her cold-hearted husband’s table” (*M&E* 344). Apart from her determined prosecution of Protestants,<sup>4</sup> Mary neglects the governance of her realm and, when Philip leaves her Court to fight a war abroad, she becomes listless and morose, and spends her days and nights in continuous worship of her husband’s portrait (*M&E* 360). Her madness culminates in two hysterical (phantom) pregnancies – physical manifestations of her desperate desire for love – and her eventual demise. On her deathbed, she laments her failure to achieve happiness in life, telling her servant, Susan: “All I ever wanted was to be loved, to find on this earth a love as true and everlasting as God’s, but I have failed, and not through lack of trying; I prayed every day for someone to love me” (*M&E* 371). She dies in the midst of a vision of the babies she wished she had borne in her lifetime.

While Mary has always been childlike, naïve, and emotional as an adult, it is her marriage to and infatuation with Philip, and his continual disregard for and humiliation of her, that are responsible for her eventual downfall. Though her sexual

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<sup>4</sup> In the novel, Mary’s prosecution of Protestant heretics is depicted as symptomatic of the madness brought on by her desperation to be loved. At the beginning of her reign, she is dubbed “Merciful Mary” by her subjects (*M&E* 200), and she declares that she is determined to be remembered by this designation after her reign. However, following the failure of her pregnancy, Mary convinces herself that God is “withholding [her] miracle” because she has failed to re-establish the Catholic religion in England (*M&E* 339). She believes that God will reward her with a baby if she rids England of Protestant heretics and, in her desperation for the love of a child, embarks on the campaign of terror that would earn her the nickname “Bloody Mary”.



awakening marks the symbolic end of her perpetual childhood, just as Elizabeth's loss of virginity propels her into adulthood, Mary's realisation of womanhood is characterised by her acceptance of the subservience and obedience expected of her sex. While Elizabeth resists these aspects of her gender role, and consequently develops into a mature, self-assured adult, Mary's 'womanhood' in fact resembles a kind of second childhood as a result of her failure to assert herself. Elizabeth recognises this when Mary, in the final days before her death and deeply distressed by Philip's abandonment of her, turns to her for comfort: "[Mary was] clinging tight to me as if she were a brokenhearted child, which, I realised then, in a way, for all her forty-one years, she was" (*M&E* 359).

Strong, confident Elizabeth is clearly touted as the true feminist heroine of the novel, particularly in comparison to the childlike, tragic character of her sister: she is independent, unwilling to submit to the authority of men, powerful, and self-assured. As demonstrated, these characteristics develop largely as a result of her mother's downfall, her father's treatment of his wives, and her own traumatic sexual awakening. While her strength of character is laudable in many respects, the novel's depiction of her sexuality – and of sex more generally – is troubling. Although Elizabeth draws power from exercising her sexuality, as demonstrated in her manipulation of Philip, she no longer derives any pleasure from it after her encounter with Seymour. The women in the novel cannot enjoy their sexuality without consequence: sexual desire is equated with a loss of power, and a woman who 'succumbs' to intercourse becomes the possession of her partner. There is no possibility of mutual sexual gratification afforded to the novel's female characters, where neither partner occupies a position of authority over the other. Elizabeth is forced to quash her naturally passionate and sensuous nature if she wishes to remain

independent and in control; even when her sensuality is briefly reawakened by an encounter with her childhood friend, Robert Dudley, the memory of the powerlessness she felt when succumbing to Seymour sends her running from him:

as his lips moved down my throat, leaving a trail of hot kisses, and his hands reached beneath my petticoats, I felt a sudden inexplicable chill. My eyes shot open wide, and a silent scream filled my lungs, for over [Robert's] shoulder I saw the grinning ghost of Tom Seymour.

A frost instantly killed my reborn passion. (*M&E* 272)

Though she at first willingly engages in the tryst with Dudley, sex and powerlessness are so closely intertwined that one cannot exist without the other for her; there is no possibility of enjoying sex while still remaining in a position of agency and control.

The heroine that emerged in the bodice-rippers of the late 1970s and 1980s was almost invariably a strong, independent, and adventurous woman who, no matter what the social dictums of her era happened to prescribe, enjoyed her sexuality. Often, these heroines were depicted as powerful *because* they enjoyed sex with whomever they chose and *particularly* because they chose to subvert the expectations of chastity and modesty associated with their gender. Far from enjoying their sexuality, however, Purdy's women are characterised as victims of their own bodies, unable to control their arousal or their impulses. As demonstrated, both Elizabeth and Mary repeatedly find themselves overcome and helpless when they are sexually aroused; as a result, they are shown as vulnerable to manipulation and complicit in their own powerlessness. Even Katherine Parr – a woman described by Elizabeth as a champion of womankind (*M&E* 37) – is reduced to a giddy and girlish parody of herself when she falls in love with Seymour (*M&E* 66); Elizabeth observes that her stepmother risks “losing herself and drowning” in her lust (*M&E* 60). Despite Katherine's admirable sense of self, her attraction to Seymour leaves her vulnerable to

his ambitions and looking foolish, as Seymour later brags to Elizabeth: “She had never known a *real* man, lusty, young, and vigorous between her thighs, and I gave her that. I was doing her a favour! She was ripe for it, *begging* for it, hot as a bitch in heat!” (*M&E* 127; emphasis in original). Like Mary, then, Katherine’s enjoyment of sex with her husband simply serves to underline her vulnerability and powerlessness, and opens her to ridicule and derision.

Elizabeth’s decision to forgo sex and romance in order to prevent losing control of herself again is tested on several occasions, and she frequently feels as though she “were a woman torn apart by wild horses, forever at war between the burning desires of [her] body, the crypt-cold reason that ruled [her] head, and the icy fear that came with the red-hot passion of surrender. [... She] would always be a soul in conflict, torn between weak and blissfully womanly surrender and absolute control” (*M&E* 273). For Purdy’s women, then, the only way to *enjoy* sex is to accept the role of the subservient female, to allow themselves to be possessed and controlled by their sexual partners. Elizabeth, who is unwilling to accept the ‘weaknesses’ and vulnerabilities ascribed to her gender, is therefore denied any pleasure in sex. Even when she assumes power through exercising her sexuality, in her manipulations of Philip, she does so by performing the role of the powerless “virgin supplicant” (*M&E* 320), controlled by the urges and impulses of her body. Purdy’s failure to afford her female characters both power *and* sexual enjoyment simultaneously serves to frustrate a feminist reading of the text. Though it could be argued that her novel uses sex to amplify the imbalance of power between men and women, particularly in the milieu of the sixteenth century, Purdy’s predecessors firmly established that the sexual mores of a particular era need not be so restrictive in the realm of fiction; moreover, Purdy appears to employ cliché and stereotyping as a substitute for historical authenticity,

rather than attempting to engage in any way with the politics of sixteenth-century sexuality. It is a weakness that can also be observed in Purdy's earlier novel, *The Tudor Wife* – where it produces a very different and arguably more disquieting effect.

**“It is always the woman who is at fault and never the man”:<sup>5</sup>**

**rape, brutality, and violence in *The Tudor Wife***

*The Tudor Wife* is narrated in the first person by the character of Jane Boleyn, wife of George Boleyn and sister-in-law to Anne Boleyn, and chronicles Jane's experiences in the service of five Tudor queens, ending with her execution for treason alongside Henry VIII's fifth wife, Catherine Howard. Like Philippa Gregory's characterisation of Jane Boleyn in *The Boleyn Inheritance*, Purdy's Jane is by no means entirely sane. Her violent outbursts, intense jealousies, bouts of hysteria, and unrestrained irrationality punctuate her narrative, and she is a difficult narrator for the reader to sympathise with. Jane's actions, like Mary in *Mary & Elizabeth*, are largely motivated by her desire to be loved, to earn the recognition and affection of her husband, and to mother a child. As such, George Boleyn's neglect of and open contempt for her prove deeply psychologically wounding, and Jane focuses her vengeful jealousy on her sister-in-law, Anne, with whom she believes George has an unnaturally close and perhaps incestuous relationship. As the novel progresses, that intense jealousy exacerbates her madness and prompts her to provide the evidence used to condemn her husband, Anne, and four other men to death. Several years later, when she is in the service of Catherine Howard, she recognises in the young Queen a kindred but similarly unfulfilled desire to be loved and appreciated, and adopts her as “the

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<sup>5</sup> A comment made by Anne Boleyn to her brother George in *The Tudor Wife* (TW 185).

daughter [she] had always wanted but never had” (*TW* 329). Catherine and Jane prove to have more in common than a mutual desire to be cared for, however: for both women, sex becomes indistinguishable from love, a poor substitute for the sincere emotional intimacy that they crave, and their sexual encounters with men – far from being satisfying or fulfilling – are a source of degradation and humiliation.

In much the same way as she does in *Mary & Elizabeth*, Purdy equates romantic love and sex with powerlessness for her female characters in *The Tudor Wife*. Jane frequently describes her love and lust for her husband in terms of how powerless it renders her, and how possessive and clingy it prompts her to be. Their marriage is arranged by their parents, but is in no small way encouraged by Jane’s potent infatuation with George; early on in their courtship, she proclaims: “Surely my heart must have shown upon my face when he turned a welcoming smile in my direction. [...] Love was the master and I was the slave!” (*TW* 13). She is overjoyed when their marriage finally takes place after extended negotiations between their families, describing herself as “radiant with delight” at their wedding and eager “for the moment when [she] would be left alone with him behind the velvet curtains of [their] marriage bed” (*TW* 53). She is soon frustrated, however, when their physical intimacies do not equate to emotional intimacy:

He was kind, very kind, but maddeningly aloof. Indifference stared back at me from behind his luminous, wine-glazed brown eyes. How could he be so close to me and yet so far away? We were like two people facing each other across a great chasm where the bridge had collapsed. But only I wanted to cross over; George was content to stay on his side. [...]. For a moment I thought I spied something akin to irritation in his eyes, but otherwise he was unmoved by my passion. [...] How many ways can a husband tell his wife that she means nothing to him without actually saying the words? (*TW* 53)

The disappointment of their wedding night proves to be the pattern of their marriage, as George remains distant and is aggravated by Jane's increasingly hysterical neediness. George declares himself trapped "in this bitter parody of a marriage", and finds Jane's "love as stifling and oppressive as a tomb" (*TW* 68-9). Jane, meanwhile, is humiliated by her husband's whoring, affairs, and rumoured relationships with other men (*TW* 67). On the rare occasions that he visits their marital bed, his attentions are perfunctory, swift, and devoid of emotion, and he habitually leaves his wife weeping, unsatisfied, and desolate. On one occasion, George is helped back to his bed in a drunken stupor by a male friend, and Jane is disgusted to see her husband's clumsy attempts to engage the friend in sex; once he has left, however, she quickly takes advantage of his state of arousal, in a peculiar reversal of the generic rape fantasy, running her hands over his naked flesh and expressing her delight when "he [does] not resist" (*TW* 98). Though George is all but comatose, his body responds to her touch, and "with an exclamation of triumph" she initiates sexual intercourse, "forcing him" to touch her and delighting in his almost-unconscious reactions (*TW* 97-9). Rather than increasing her agency, however, her forced seduction of her husband only serves to underline her powerlessness in their relationship. When the "harsh sunlight of full morning brought unwelcome truths", and George realises who he has spent the night with and exclaims: "Good God, Jane, was that you?" (*TW* 99). Jane reacts as though he has "struck" her (*TW* 99); the intimacy she has placed so much value in is debased, and her husband dismisses her with no show of emotion. She is utterly degraded; this latest humiliation proves to be a breaking point for her, as her vindictiveness towards her husband and his sister rapidly escalates after this encounter.

Significantly, despite the fact that Jane herself is the narrator of the novel, it is suggested that she is by no means a blameless victim of her husband's maltreatment: she is vindictive, resentful, and occasionally abusive herself, and while the author never explicitly states as much, the implication is that she deserves George's abuse. Jane frequently berates herself for aggravating her husband, asking: "Why did I provoke him? Why did I let my own tongue betray me?" (*TW* 120). Despite George's unrelenting humiliation and degradation of her, he is in many ways portrayed more sympathetically than Jane, as he is, after all, bound to a woman whom his friends decry, in sexist terms, as a "[h]arpy, shrew, termagant, scold, bitch" (*TW* 94). George himself openly demeans her and blames her for his treatment of her: "you find fault with nearly all of me," he tells her, "and heap scorn and jealousy upon everyone and everything that pleases me. You harp and badger, weep and shriek, jeer and cling, until it is all I can do not to strike you. And that displeases me; that I should be roused to the brink of such an ugly thing!" (*TW* 68-9). With no hint of irony or critique, given her consistently sympathetic portrayal of George, Purdy seems to suggest here that should he be driven to beat his wife, it would be an inevitable and, disturbingly, justified reaction to her behaviour; George is in fact positioned as the victim here.

George is not the only male character who rejects Jane and exacerbates her mental instability by rendering her powerless. Her desperation for any form of physical and emotional intimacy leaves her vulnerable to manipulation: when Thomas Cromwell, acting on the King's orders to find the means to rid himself of Anne, realises that Jane may be able to provide him with the information he needs, he plays on the weaknesses he has observed in her in order to gain her trust. He sympathises with her when she is excluded, as usual, from the intimacy between George and Anne, and although Jane has always "hated him", she immediately responds to "that

loathsome creature, that oily, poisonous toad of a man, [... who gives her] exactly what [she] needed” (*TW* 253-4). Cromwell’s sympathies are part of a calculated seduction, and as he whispers in Jane’s ear lurid descriptions of the kinds of punishments he believes Anne deserves, she responds just as Cromwell knows she will:

The next thing I knew we were in his bedchamber. As he deftly peeled each garment from me, pausing to kiss the curve of a shoulder, the crook of an elbow, [...] showering me with such pleasant little attentions that no man had ever before given me, he condoled with me, and consoled me, layering my soul with the balm of sympathy. [...] As he laid bare my body, I in turn laid bare my heart, pouring into that cunning weasel’s ear all my bitterness, hate, jealousy, and spite. (*TW* 254)

Jane returns to Cromwell’s bed every night, relishing his attentions and sympathies, feeling appreciated and cared for as she never has in her marriage. In return, she helps him build his case against Anne, claiming to believe, all the while, that her actions are justified and that George will be spared. Once their trial is concluded and Anne, George, and their ‘accomplices’ have been sentenced to death, Jane returns once more to Cromwell’s bed, but he receives her “coldly”, and she is shocked when he dismisses her: ““You can go now, Lady Rochford; our business is concluded. [...] You have served your purpose and are of no further use to me”” (*TW* 286-8). Once again, Jane has invested her desire to be loved and appreciated in a sexual relationship that ultimately leaves her feeling humiliated, used and unfulfilled.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ironically, after years of fruitless marriage to George, Jane’s affair with Cromwell leaves her pregnant, and even as she deals with the execution of her husband and sister-in-law, the rejection of her lover, and the abrupt replacement of Anne with the king’s new wife, her hysteria is compounded by the cruel inversion of what was once her greatest wish: “Jane Seymour took Anne Boleyn’s place on May 30, and on May 31, I went mad. That morning I stopped making excuses, tallied up the facts, and admitted that I was carrying the Devil’s child” (*TW* 313). After numerous failed (and increasingly hysterical) attempts at inducing a miscarriage “to rid [herself] of Cromwell’s creature” (*TW* 313), she is



Purdy's skewed portrayal of the relationship between intimacy, sex, and power is extended to the other major female characters in the novel, who are habitually sexually degraded by and cast as powerless in relation to their men. Like Jane, Catherine Howard – the fifth queen Jane serves and the girl who becomes a surrogate daughter to her – attempts to satisfy her need for emotional intimacy with sexual relationships. Purdy's depiction of Catherine's character is similar to Philippa Gregory's in *The Boleyn Inheritance*, in that she seems to suggest that Catherine's premature sexualisation while under the lax care of her grandmother amounted to child abuse, and is the cause of her skewed relationship with her sexuality. Catherine tells Jane stories about how, from the age of five, she witnessed the sexual exploits of her dormitory mates and was taught by them to pleasure herself and others, and Jane is distressed to hear of "the innocent child thrust into a world she was far too young to understand" (*TW* 369). After a series of disappointments in the men who have professed to love her, and with whom she has been physically intimate, Catherine is, by her mid-teens, profoundly disillusioned: Jane compares her to a "jaded, melancholy whore who has seen too much" (*TW* 374), and Catherine declares with some certainty that "[t]here's no such thing as love [...]; it's just a dream we all aspire to, and the stuff of songs and stories that fuel our hopes and longings" (*TW* 374). Again, like Jane, Catherine has found that her sexual relationship with her husband is a source of humiliation and degradation, rather than fulfilment. Henry is, at forty-nine, old enough to be his young bride's grandfather; she paints Jane a "grotesque picture" of what she must "endure" (*TW* 378) in his bed, as she tries to please an impotent, obese old man reeking from the open wound on his leg. She describes her humiliation when he insists on performing oral sex on her: "Cat would brace her

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heavily sedated and restrained for the duration of her pregnancy, and refuses any contact or involvement with the child after his birth.

hands against the headboard and in silence weep with shame and something more disturbing... the slow, deep sensual stirrings sparked by that old man's fat pink slug of a tongue slithering around her privy parts" (*TW* 379). Like Elizabeth's in *Mary & Elizabeth*, Catherine's body is depicted as betraying her, and her humiliation is compounded by the fact that she finds unwilling pleasure in Henry's attentions – despite her physical aversion to him. Catherine is therefore portrayed as powerless not only in relation to her husband, but as the victim of her own sexual urges, which shame rather than satisfy her.

Catherine's affair with Thomas Culpeper, though initiated by her and ostensibly more fulfilling than her relationship with her husband, proves to be a further source of degradation for both Catherine and Jane. Culpeper, Jane observes, "loved no one but himself. To him, honour was the stuff of sermons and something the minstrels sang of, not a principle to live by" (*TW* 334). Despite his sexual intimacy with Catherine, his feelings for her are clearly insincere, and he is frequently cruel or cold towards her. His attitude towards her casts her as his sexual plaything, and she is only of value to him insofar as she satisfies his desires. Catherine, meanwhile, seems unable to enjoy her exploits with Culpeper unless they have an audience (as she did during her affair with Francis Dereham years before, when she would invite the ladies she served with to watch as they had sex). She insists that Jane remain in the room with them when Culpeper visits her at night, much to Jane's distress: "I sometimes wondered if she derived some sort of cruel pleasure from making me stay, making me watch as she flaunted her beautiful young body and revelled in her lover's touch, all the while knowing that no man had ever loved or lusted after me the way they did her" (*TW* 388). Similarly, Catherine insists that Jane remain in the room to witness her bizarre sexual encounter with her husband's former

wife, Anne of Cleves.<sup>7</sup> The brief affair between the two women seems to serve little narrative purpose other than to reinforce what Purdy depicts as the sexual depravity that eventually leads to Catherine's downfall. Nevertheless, Catherine's need for an audience suggests the performative nature of her sexuality, as public display seems to be the only mode of sexual expression available to her; moreover, the details of her lesbian encounter with Anne of Cleves are more suggestive of the imposition of male fantasy than they are of the unrestrained exploration of an alternate female sexuality. Purdy demonstrates a very narrow understanding of female sexual expression in this regard, one which recalls Levy's description of the public performance of female sexuality typical of twenty-first century raunch culture. As such, Catherine – ostensibly the most sexually fulfilled and uninhibited character in the novel – is essentially objectified by the means through which she expresses her sexuality.

Purdy's portrayal of consensual sex, then, is fraught with skewed power relationships, manipulations, and the debasement of its female characters. What is more overtly problematic for a feminist reading of the text, however, is the manner in which the frequent occurrences of sexual and domestic violence are described. There are at least four incidents of violent rape and numerous mentions of domestic violence (perpetrated by both sexes) in the text, and their inclusion is often casual or incidental to the narrative. Jane, for example, comments in passing that Thomas Boleyn frequently beats his adult daughters, describing him as being "liberal with his blows, which he dealt swiftly and without remorse" (*TW* 44). She frequently resorts to physical violence herself, beating her servants viciously when she is enraged;

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<sup>7</sup> Like Elizabeth in *Mary & Elizabeth*, Anne of Cleves suppresses her sexuality in order to achieve a degree of agency she is not, as a woman, otherwise afforded. She tells Catherine that she was forced into the marriage with Henry by her brother, and when she heard of her new husband's marital history, she resolved to ensure that he found her sexually unappealing. Following their wedding, she refuses to bathe, and eats onions and drinks beer to make sure that her breath is foul. Her efforts have the desired result, as Henry – unable to rouse himself to consummate their marriage – offers her a generous annulment settlement in order to be rid of her (*TW* 355-7).

interestingly, her bouts of violent behaviour are always in reaction to cruel treatment or neglect by men, usually her husband (cf. *TW* 92-3; 119; 230). However, while violence in the novel is accepted and even, to a certain degree, expected in men, in Jane it is touted as marker of her unstable mental state. After she lashes out at one of her husband's friends, for example, George tells her: "It is being bruited about that you are touched by madness, Jane. If you continue in this vein, you must not look to me to contradict them" (*TW* 119). Later, when Jane is imprisoned in the Tower of London for her role in Catherine's treasonous love affair, she is subjected to torture of a brutal and even sexualised nature in an attempt to 'exorcise' this madness:

With painful cuppings and blisterings, douches alternately scalding hot and icy cold, and powerfully strong purges intended to make me puke and shit out my demons, they tried to restore my sanity, but only succeeded in pushing it further away.

They twisted my nipples with hot pinchers, and wrapped my body in cold, wet sheets, and placed me deep in the dark, dank bowels of the Tower where no one could hear my screams. They put leeches on my breasts and between my legs, letting them suckle until their shiny black bodies grew fat on my nether lips, then they plucked them off and sprinkled my wounds with salt. (*TW* 401)

Jane's 'madness' is closely linked to her sex in this passage: the hysteria she demonstrates after her imprisonment (which sees her screaming at the ghosts of Anne, George, and the others she has sent to their deaths) is 'treated' with the violent attack on her sexual organs. It could be argued, then, that the novel's depiction of gender-based brutality is in fact an insightful portrayal of the psychology of violence, particularly in the historical context of the novel's setting: Jane, disempowered as a woman who is emotionally abused by her husband, expresses that sense of disempowerment by meting out physical abuse on those who are even lower on the social hierarchy – her servants. Her propensity to physical violence is interpreted by

her sixteenth-century contemporaries as a form of psychosis, and is in turn ‘treated’ with further brutality. While her ‘therapy’ is plainly portrayed as archaic and even barbaric, however, the author’s treatment of her narrator’s interiority is not sufficiently nuanced to support this complex interpretation of her violent outbursts. Jane is not a sympathetic character: as previously discussed, the reader’s empathy is firmly directed towards George and the other ‘victims’ of her vindictive jealousy, while Jane’s outbursts are represented as irrational reactions to what she should accept as her lot as a woman. While there is potential in Purdy’s narrative for a more perceptive exploration of the psychology of an abused woman, the characterisation of her narrator fails to achieve such depth: Jane’s madness, while *exacerbated* by her husband’s abuse, is not a *reaction* to it. The author does not offer sufficient insight into Jane’s psychology for her reader to understand her instability in any other light.

Purdy’s failure to convey an empathetic understanding of the victims of violence in her novel extends to those women who are raped in the course of the narrative. As I have mentioned, there are at least four instances of violent rape (as opposed to forced seduction or rape fantasy) in *The Tudor Wife*, three of which are perpetrated by the King,<sup>8</sup> and the most graphic of which depict the rape of a wife or lover. Jane bears witness to the rapes of both Anne Boleyn and Jane Seymour in quick succession, when she conceals herself in a cupboard to spy on Anne and peers through a keyhole when the King is closeted alone with Jane Seymour. Anne’s rape is the more brutal of the two: desperate to fall pregnant in order to secure her position on the throne after Henry has lost interest in her and no longer visits their marital bed,

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<sup>8</sup> The fourth instance of rape is briefly mentioned by Jane and is perpetrated by Catherine’s lover, Thomas Culpeper. Jane reports that the “court had been rife with the tale of his rape of a park-keeper’s wife”: when she refused his overtures, Culpeper “had his companions hold her down” while he raped her and, when he was interrupted by a passer-by who tried to intervene on behalf of the woman, he stabbed the man through the heart, killing him. Because Culpeper was a favourite of the King’s, Henry pardoned him of the crimes, “dismissing it all as just a youthful escapade” (*TW* 335). Ironically, the King later sentences Culpeper to death for a consensual affair with his wife.

Anne devises an alluring and explicit tableau to perform in front of the Court, ostensibly to provide the evening's entertainment but more significantly in the hope of reigniting Henry's sexual interest in her. As she dances seductively in a revealing costume, with her skin painted gold, Henry becomes enraged and takes to the stage to throw her roughly over his shoulder:

'If you dare cavort like a whore before my court, then, by Heaven, I shall treat you like one!' he roared as he left the stage. Anne did not struggle or protest; instead she went limp and let him carry her away.

[...] Henry kicked the door [of Anne's bedchamber] open, splintering wood and breaking hinges. He dumped Anne on the bed, and grasped her gown and tore it off her shoulders, all the way down to her waist, revealing that she had also gilded her nipples.

'Harlot's tricks!' he cried, pinching and twisting them savagely. Anne yelped in pain and Henry slapped her.

[...] 'Please, my lord, not like this!' Anne cried.

'Shall I take you like the bitch you are? Would you like that?' Henry grasped her hips and turned her, positioning her on all fours. 'Are you in heat, my bitch?' His meaty fingers dug into her cunny. Heedless of Anne's cries, he pulled her back against him and ground his loins hard against her buttocks. 'That performance you gave tonight would certainly suggest you are! So I shall do what you want and mount you!'

[...] Anne screamed as if she were being torn asunder. Instantly he clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her screams, and continued to thrust into her, stabbing hard and deep, ignoring the tears that poured over his fat pink fingers.  
(*TW* 215-6)

Throughout her ordeal, Anne cries out in pain and begs him to stop, while he continually suggests that she has simply gotten what she wanted. The brutality of the act is not enough for Henry: his goal is Anne's emotional as well as physical degradation. As he rapes her, he tells her: "Do not think for a moment that this pleasures me any – you disgust me!" (*TW* 217). When it is over, he uses her hair to wipe the blood and semen from his genitals; as he leaves her, weeping and bloodied,

Jane reports: “At the door he paused and tore off one of the gold medallions that decorated his doublet and threw it at her. ‘Here!’ he spat contemptuously. ‘I always pay my whores!’” (*TW* 218).

Henry’s rape of Anne marks a dramatic shift in his character, which the narrative suggests is a result of Anne’s failure as a wife and lover. Some time before this scene, Jane taunts a vulnerable, clearly distraught Anne with stories of her husband’s cavorting and whoring, and even reports that he has resorted to the rape of another woman:

have you not heard William Webbe’s complaint? Assuredly you must; it’s common knowledge. He was out riding near Eltham Palace one Saturday, with his sweetheart sitting before him in the saddle, nestled lovingly against his chest, when lo and behold, who should appear but the King! Without a by-your-leave, he nudged his horse alongside and leaned over to sample the wares. He kissed her, right there in front of her betrothed, and then, liking it so well, he scooped her off Master Webbe’s saddle and onto his own, and galloped off to the castle to ravish her at his leisure! It was hours before he sent her back, walking bandy-legged with her privy parts swollen and aching and a bloodstain on her petticoat! (*TW* 186-7)

The image of Henry that Jane depicts here is at odds with the romantic, chivalrous, and gentle King that Henry is portrayed as at the novel’s start. This change in character, the reader is led to understand, has been brought about by Anne’s manipulations. At the beginning of their courtship, Anne is the unwilling object of Henry’s rather sweet, naïve wooing; however, she quickly realises the potential benefits of her position of relative power as the unattainable but greatly desired and worshipped paramour. Jane describes her as “scorching with ambition” (*TW* 83), caring little for Henry in her resolve to become Queen. Anne is “aloof, toying with him like a cat plays with dead things” (*TW* 70). As she determinedly keeps him at

arm's length, refusing to give in to him sexually, the balance of power in their relationship tips in her favour, and she remains the one in control. After several years of her cat-and-mouse game, however, she begins to realise that Henry's patience is depleting, and decides finally to give in to him in order to refocus his waning interest. She plans an elaborate seduction, commissioning black satin sheets for her bed to hide the fact that there will be no "virgin's bloodstain" visible the next morning (*TW* 142). Despite her efforts, however, she is palpably aware of the King's disappointment when they finally consummate their relationship after seven years of courtship. She confides in her brother: "To admit it would hurt his pride, but I saw it in his eyes tonight, the question: Is that all there is? [...] All these years he has been consumed with desire for me, dreamed of possessing me, but no mortal woman could ever hope to measure up to such dreams, such fantasies!" (*TW* 145). The mystery of Anne's sexuality is what has kept Henry so intrigued for so many years, and what has allowed Anne a sense of power and agency, but as Jane observes, once Henry "possesses" her sexually, she is "robbed [...] of her mystique; now she was just another woman, like all the rest" (*TW* 147). Henry is no longer in her thrall and aware, suddenly, that he has been manipulated and denied the power he believes is due to him not only as a monarch, but also as a man. Though she earns a brief reprieve during her pregnancy, her failure to produce the promised male heir compounds Henry's sense of betrayal, and their relationship deteriorates rapidly.

Henry's rape of Anne, then, is a means for him to reclaim symbolically the sexual power of which she 'robbed' him during their courtship. Even before this breaking point in their relationship, Anne is aware of Henry's lack of regard for her, and of the link between sex and his perception of her as his wife: she tells her brother that "[o]nce a woman surrenders herself to a man, even though that is what he wants



her to do, he instantly loses all respect for her” (TW 184). This lack of respect, and his anger at what he sees as her manipulations and failures as a wife, come to violent fruition during her rape, as his loathing of her is expressed in the violation of her body. While the brutality of Henry’s degradation, both physical and verbal, of his wife is certainly shocking to the reader, Jane’s narrative does not portray Anne as the blameless victim: in many respects, it is suggested, Anne has simply ‘gotten what she asked for’, even what she deserves. Her seductive tableau was, after all, designed to arouse Henry, and by behaving so lewdly in front of his Court, she had already degraded *herself* to the point where it is reasonable that she should be treated like a whore. Moreover, the rape could be construed as her punishment for using her sexuality to exert power over the King. Anne is depicted as being responsible for this dramatic shift in Henry’s character, as her sexual manipulations and unfulfilled promises have changed him from a gallant, courtly knight to a debased, disappointed man who needs to reclaim his power. Jane’s hatred for Anne is deep-seated, and even the violence of the rape does not move her: she expresses no reaction to what she has seen, allowing the reader to remain emotionally removed from the brutality she has witnessed through the novel’s narrator and suggesting that this cold reaction to sexual violence is adequate. The reader is left with the disturbing depiction of a woman completely unaffected by the brutal violation of a fellow woman (who is her sister-in-law, no less).

Jane adopts a similar response (or lack thereof) when she witnesses Henry raping another woman shortly after Anne: this time, his new sweetheart, Jane Seymour. Though Anne falls pregnant following her rape,<sup>9</sup> her position is not secured by the renewed promise of an heir, as she had hoped, and Henry continues his

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<sup>9</sup> Fittingly, the baby conceived of the rape is “a monster much malformed” (TW 235), and is later miscarried by Anne.

courtship of his new lover. Anne is enraged to discover that Jane Seymour is wearing a locket with Henry's portrait concealed within and rips it from her neck, breaking the skin where the chain cuts into her throat (*TW* 222). Henry insists that Jane Seymour is left in the care of his doctor, and hovers anxiously as she is given "a small dose of poppy syrup to help her rest and numb the pain" (*TW* 223). When the doctor leaves Henry alone with the patient, who is slipping in and out of a drugged sleep, he takes the opportunity to fondle and molest her:

He leaned over to caress her brow and face, letting his hand trail slowly down, gliding over her neck, carefully bypassing her injury, and down, over the exposed upper portions of her breasts, bared for the first time before the eyes of a man.

Jane Seymour moaned and her eyelids fluttered but did not open as he leaned forward and pressed a kiss, chaste at first but then more ardent, onto her pale pink lips. Her arms rose then, seemingly of their own accord, and went round his neck and her body arched up to meet his.

He was upon her in a trice, fat fingers fumbling to lift her skirts and unlace his codpiece. [...]

Jane Seymour mewed like a frightened kitten when he entered her, and her arms and legs tightened around him as he thrust and grunted his way to satisfaction, sounding for all the world like a greedy pig at trough. (*TW* 223-4)

Though Jane Seymour's body responds to Henry's caresses seemingly of its own accord, her heavily drugged state clearly precludes her willing consent. Henry is aware of this – Jane describes how, after the rape, he sits down to "wait for her to wake and realise that she had left maidenhood behind her" (*TW* 225) – but is more than willing to take advantage of her indisposition to get what he wants from her. Unlike her feelings towards Anne, Jane has no animosity towards Jane Seymour, but nevertheless watches unmoved once again while Henry violates another woman. Perhaps more disturbing, however, is Jane Seymour's reaction when she regains consciousness and realises what Henry has done. The King is unapologetic for his

actions, and simply implores her not to cry; she responds by saying: “How can I not? When all that I held most dear – my virtue, my honour – is lost? My father, my brothers, the court, they shall all think me a wanton!” (*TW* 225). Jane Seymour, then – the victim of rape – shoulders the responsibility for the consequences of what has happened to her, and rather than reproaching Henry for violating her, she is simply concerned about the implications for her reputation at Court. Henry is entirely absolved of any responsibility in the eyes of both Jane Seymour and Jane Boleyn: once again, Jane’s narration provides no insight into her feelings about what she has witnessed, and Henry’s actions are implicitly condoned because he was spurred by Jane Seymour’s unconscious responses to his caresses. Like Anne, Jane Seymour simply got what she was asking for; no suggestion of a more complex explanation is offered, and no criticism – implied or otherwise – is levelled at Henry, beyond the unflattering descriptions of his physicality. In both instances, the victim is implicitly blamed for her rape: Anne because of her desperate, ‘lascivious’ behaviour in dancing seductively before the King and Court, and Jane because her body unwittingly responds to Henry’s touch.

Interestingly, Jane Seymour’s rape is similar in its premise to Jane Boleyn’s seduction of her drunken husband earlier in the novel. In both instances, the indisposed partner is taken advantage of as their bodies respond unconsciously to sexual stimulation. Perhaps the most striking similarity, though, is that in both instances, the woman – whether she is the seducer or the unwitting victim – is left humiliated and degraded after the encounter. No matter what the situation, then, for the women of the novel, sex inevitably leads to humiliation, degradation, and powerlessness. Several key characters in the novel look to physical intimacy as a means of providing the love and acceptance they so crave; typically, however, the

men they turn to use sex (consensual or otherwise) to establish their dominancy and, in many instances, to mete out further abuse. Despite this, the actions and even violence perpetrated by the men in the novel are always implicitly condoned, while the women are depicted as somehow to blame. While Purdy's narrative has offered ample opportunity for her to explore the complexities of gender-based violence and abuse, she fails to do so to any significant effect. While the author must be credited (in this instance, if not others) with avoiding more traditional plot representations of the romance genre devices of forced seduction or rape fantasy, her depiction of violent rape is equally damaging from the perspective of a critical feminist reading, as she evokes the harmful trope which suggests that the victims deserved or were in some way responsible for their violation. As a female author writing for an audience of women in the twenty-first century – when questions, debates, and uncertainties surrounding gender-based violence are as pertinent and troubling as they have ever been – her failure in this regard is all the more disturbing. As I have argued, historical fiction authors are not bound by the sexual and social mores of their settings, particularly when faced with pertinent social issues: that Purdy has forgone the opportunity to provide an empathetic and nuanced understanding of domestic and sexual abuse is profoundly disappointing.

\* \* \*

It is inevitable that comparisons are drawn between the novels of Philippa Gregory and Emily Purdy: in many respects, both authors unfold their narratives in similar ways (particularly in their characterisation of Jane Boleyn), and their female characters are frequently abused, maltreated, or neglected by the men who profess to care for them. As I have demonstrated in Chapter Three, however, Gregory's women

– despite their maltreatment – are portrayed as powerful, finding the means to assert their agency and determine the paths of their lives. Purdy’s women, by contrast, demonstrate no such ability unless, as in the case of Elizabeth, they deny their sexuality. The women of Purdy’s novels battle unsuccessfully to establish fully-integrated sexual identities, and their frustrated, unfulfilled desires manifest as madness, instability, and hysteria. For Elizabeth, Mary, Katherine Parr, Jane Boleyn, and Catherine Howard, sex is inevitably and inextricably linked with humiliation, degradation, and debasement: while all experience the undeniably powerful stirrings of sexual desire, none are able to satisfy those desires while maintaining agency over their bodies or the expression of their sexuality.

For feminist scholars and authors alike, sex has always been a volatile locale for the establishment and challenging of power between the sexes. Thurston explains that

[i]n *Ways of Seeing*, Jon Berger (1973, 47) examined the nude in art history and concluded that “men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.” At about the same time, a host of feminists were pointing out that this pervasive and long-standing unilateral arrangement alienated women from their own sexuality – that female sexuality was culturally defined as the capacity to arouse desire in someone else, thereby disenfranchising women from one of the most fundamental and inalienable human rights. (Thurston 139)

For the proponents of erotic historicals, the inclusion of explicit sexual content in novels aimed at a female readership provides the ideal fantasy space in which the nuances of such a specifically female sexuality can be explored and tested, removed from the pervasive influence of masculine imposition. Many authors – including, amongst others, Philippa Gregory and Suzannah Dunn – have seized this opportunity enthusiastically, exploiting the opportunities afforded by the setting of their novels

not only to titillate and arouse their readers, but to address more serious issues of abuse, rape, and violence. Whatever their purpose, within many of these novels “a decidedly feminine perspective [on heterosexual relationships is] endorsed and celebrated: terms and conditions for heterosexual exchange are explicitly explored from the female subject’s point of view” (Larcombe 2). Written for women, by women, and about women, these novels are unique in their positioning within the literary landscape in that they boast the potential for the absolute exclusion of male-centred, patriarchal expressions of sexuality.

As demonstrated, however, the tension created by this potential for the uninhibited exploration of female sexuality and the inevitable evocation of modern sexual tropes, many of which objectify women, is not always negotiated successfully. While the restrictions of the historical setting are not necessarily preclusive of more liberal expressions of sexuality, the conventions of the romance genre often dictate formulaic plotlines which closely align sexual fulfilment with ‘true’, heterosexual love and romance, and which demand their culmination in a traditional marriage between the heroine and her lover. In addition, the deployment of pornographic tropes associated with twenty-first century raunch culture imposes a narrow definition of female sexuality on their texts, objectifying that sexuality by portraying it as a form of public display even while suggesting that its expression is a means of empowerment. Whether intentionally or not, many authors reproduce masculine sexual fantasy and patriarchal mores which are endorsed rather than challenged; for others, such as Purdy, patriarchy is exposed but no feasible resolution or alternative is offered to the imbalance of power which exists between the sexes. Purdy’s novels suggest that, in order to enjoy sex, women need to submit to the role of subservience expected of them, or resort to exploiting that sexuality in a form of public display with the sole

purpose of pleasing or manipulating men. Indeed, it is not possible for Purdy's characters to fulfil their desires while simultaneously achieving self-realisation and -determination. While this aspect of her writing may be interpreted as a critique of sixteenth-century constructions of gender, Purdy fails to engage with the issues she raises in any significant or insightful way; instead, her engagement with the construction of gender is limited to the evocation of awkward clichés and gross stereotypes that she appropriates without irony as a means of suggesting historical 'authenticity'. Presented with a very real and valuable opportunity to explore the psychological implications of gender-based violence, Purdy again disappoints, reverting instead to clinical recounts of abuse which frequently absolve the perpetrator of guilt. Though her women are sexualised, they never enjoy any form of agency or control: without exception, sex *always* places her female characters in a state of powerlessness. Purdy's novels are an example, then, of how the women's historical novel may reinforce gender inequality rather than adopting the liberatory feminist discourse of the author's historical moment.

## *Conclusion:*

### **The women's historical novel "after" feminism**

From its inception in the early nineteenth century, the historical novel has always revealed as much, if not more, about the socio-political context of its moment of production than it has expressed about the historical period of its setting. Most significantly, the genre as a whole has, since the publication of Walter Scott's *Waverley* in 1814, mapped the developments in our conceptualisation of the relationships between the individual, society, and the notion of history. Georg Lukács argues that the very establishment of the genre was enabled by the political upheavals in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which forever altered the individual's understanding of his (and, significantly, it was *his*) position within the historical process. For nearly a century, the genre was almost exclusively associated with a male authorship and audience, history traditionally being considered the domain of men. The advents of the two World Wars radically altered this perception, as women joined the workforce in great numbers and began to participate – *visibly* and significantly – in the public realm of men for the first time. As Diana Wallace has observed, it was during this period that the historical fiction genre passed into the hands of female authors (27), and came to reflect the way in which women understood their relationship to and position (or lack thereof) within the grand narrative of history.

The evolution of women's historical fiction over the last century has been shaped by diverse socio-political forces and various trends in popular fiction, both literary and generic. As this study has demonstrated, the women's historical novel in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is a hybrid form which has developed from an



amalgamation of elements from various other genres, the most significant of these being mainstream romance fiction, Gothic literature, and the postmodern novel (or historiographic metafiction). Undoubtedly, however, by far the most significant influence on the genre and its reception has been the feminist movement. The development of Women's and Feminist Histories as formal fields of academic research positioned women, for the first time, as the subjects rather than the objects of history, as active participants in the historical process rather than passive bystanders. Scholars working within these fields established a discourse which altered the androcentric definition of historiography, and emphasised a more inclusive approach which recognised the role and contribution of women in history. As feminist discourse entered the realm of popular culture, it enabled authors of historical fiction to reposition their heroines imaginatively within their particular historical moment, and to explore avenues of power and agency which had previously been inconceivable. The historical novel thus became a site for exploring the female perspective of history, a perspective that had been denied or ignored by a male-centred "grand historical narrative".

Feminism is no longer considered fashionable by a younger generation, born after the political imperatives of the second wave had faded from prominent public view. For many young women today, the notion of a "feminist" evokes the image of a militant, angry, man-hating radical whose demands for equality are no longer relevant in the twenty-first century. It is an image with which young women avoid association, but it is also one which grossly misrepresents the ways in which the movement has evolved in recent years. The commodification of feminism and the integration of feminist discourse into mainstream popular culture has meant that, ironically, the commercially successful image of an empowered, independent woman has become

divorced from her origins in the movement: as Susan Bordo has observed, young women today often relate to and endorse media images of strong women without necessarily associating their feelings with a feminist impulse (253). It is this construction of an empowered, self-sufficient, and self-actualised woman that has, however, become a key figure in many women's historical novels, however anachronistic she may seem in her historical setting.

In their introduction to *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction* (2012), Katherine Cooper and Emma Short argue that the compulsion of authors to “[restore] female figures to their place in history” can be “viewed as a feminist intervention” in both the genre and the popular conception of women's role in history (3). The simple act of privileging a women's perspective of a particular historical moment represents the most significant and progressive impact of feminism on the genre. Moreover, the depiction of the historical heroine as an active contributor to, rather than a passive victim of, the historical process demonstrates the utilisation – whether deliberate or unconscious – of the discursive framework established by a feminist approach to historiography. Like any discursive structure, the deployment of such a framework reveals the relationships of power inherent in its construction: in exploring the position of women within particular historical moments, women's historical novels also reveal the patriarchal ideologies which oppressed them, and foreground the social and historical contingency of the category of gender. As authors such as Philippa Gregory and Hilary Mantel have readily admitted, the perspective of historiography conveyed in their novels is inevitably informed by their own contexts as women writing at a specific moment in history. As such, the transposition of a feminist-inspired consciousness of issues of gender and sexuality is unavoidable and, certainly for the purposes of this study, one of the most fascinating aspects of the

genre. This by no means suggests that the advancement of a feminist agenda is always a deliberate move on the part of authors of women's historical fiction. The manifestation of a feminist consciousness within these novels does reveal, however, how deeply embedded feminist discourse has become within the popular imagination.

It is the exploration of this dialogue between feminist discourse and popular culture that has formed the basis of my study. With this in mind, the close analyses of texts set during the Tudor era has proven particularly useful in assessing the impact of feminism on one of the most prominent genres within mainstream literature. The sheer number of novels, television series, and films set during the reigns of Henry VIII and his children demonstrates how entrenched these historical figures have become in the popular imagination. That the women of this era – Henry's six wives and two daughters – have eclipsed the King in their popularity as historical characters is in itself telling of our preoccupations in the twenty-first century. For the most part, Tudor women are no longer portrayed in terms of crude and reductive stereotypes which, more often than not, cast them in terms of their (perceived) sexuality and relationships with men. Anne Boleyn is no longer a promiscuous temptress who got what she deserved, and Katherine of Aragon is more than just a passively stoic and pious woman past the prime of her life. The vast majority of female authors today are creating more nuanced, complex, and sensitive characterisations for their heroines, ones which show a sophisticated understanding of issues surrounding gender and the constructions of femininity.

Significantly, such characterisations reflect a patently modern psychology and an awareness of the ways in which readers conceive of womanhood in the twenty-first century. In an interview with Susan Bordo about her role as Anne Boleyn in the enormously popular television series, *The Tudors*, Natalie Dormer expressed her

dissatisfaction with the way in which her character was portrayed by the show's male writers: "Men still have trouble recognising [...] that a woman can be complex, can have ambition, good looks, sexuality, erudition, and common sense. A woman can have all those facets, and yet men, in literature and in drama, seem to need to simplify women, to polarise us as either the whore or the angel. That sensibility is prevalent, even to this day" (qtd in Bordo 214). While her comments, which reflect her own, very personal experience of the television and literature industries, are rather generalised and disregard some of the more sophisticated portrayals of women produced by male authors, her attitude towards the fictional constructions of historical women is significant in two respects. Firstly, it demonstrates a resistance towards the reductive stereotyping of women in popular culture, a resistance which is certainly informed by a feminist consciousness and which has been increasingly prevalent among audiences and critics alike for several decades. Secondly, the conceptualisation of "woman" as a "complex" being, one who can be whatever she wants to be – sexy, ambitious, intelligent, motivated, witty – speaks to a particular brand of third wave feminism that has become the dominant discourse in the new millennium. It is within this vein that the women of the Tudor era have been recast in recent decades, and it is the idealisation of this particular expression of womanhood that has ensured the enduring popularity and relevancy of characters such as Anne Boleyn and Elizabeth I.

This dissertation has examined in some detail the three most prominent and demonstrable manifestations of the influence of feminism on the genre of women's historical fiction: the deliberate characterisation of the overtly feminist historical heroine, the shift in the perspective adopted and the deployment of postmodern narrative devices, and the representation of female sexuality. The blatantly feminist

consciousness or interiority demonstrated by many of the heroines of modern historical fiction, while anachronistic, allows authors to actively resist the dominance of a male-centred historical discourse. It also provides a form of social commentary that exposes the patriarchal foundations not only of historical discourse, but of the novel's historical setting, while at the same time gesturing towards persistent inequalities that exist in the reader's own time. Because women were "[p]ushed to the margins of the literary and historical canon up until the latter third of the twentieth century", it is through "reclaiming historical events and personages as subjects and participants in contemporary fictional accounts that women writers can begin to assert a sense of historical location" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2). This impetus is further enabled by a shift in narrative perspective: while the majority of historical novels in the first half of the twentieth century were written in the ostensibly "objective" third person, almost all women's historical novels published today are written in the first person, allowing historical heroines to tell their story "in their own words". This emphasis on subjectivity is closely linked with a postmodern understanding of historiography, which favours plurality over universality, and foregrounds the mediated textuality of history.

What has proven to be a more disappointing revelation in the analyses of the novels studied in this dissertation is a persistent sense of anxiety and repression regarding the expression of female sexuality. For many feminist critics, the introduction of sexually explicit content in romance novels and erotic historicals signaled a more liberal attitude towards women's explorations of their own sexualities – these novels were viewed from this perspective as fantasy spaces providing the opportunity for vicarious sexual gratification. What this study has revealed, however, is that this is not always the reality in modern historical fiction. While the historical

heroines of the “bodice-rippers” examined in Chapter Five frequently demonstrate a post-Freudian understanding of their sexual desires, these desires are often fraught with anxiety, and their expression is often met with violence as a form of punishment. In these novels, “eroticism is defined in terms of female powerlessness, dependency, and submission” (Phelps 22), and frequently linked with mental instability. Moreover, the treatment of rape and domestic violence – issues which remain immensely important in the twenty-first century – is unsophisticated and even damaging in these novels. While feminism has certainly played a role in foregrounding female sexuality and affording explicit sexual content a place in women’s literature, it seems that its nuanced and sensitive portrayal is not yet a common reality.

Despite the claims of scholars who label themselves as “postfeminists”, the feminist movement is certainly far from “over” – postfeminism will only ever be truly possible when society is “postpatriarchy”. While it may not be widely recognised as such by a younger generation, feminism has become deeply embedded in the discourse of popular culture, and its tenets are patently manifest in mainstream media. As this dissertation has demonstrated, this is true of the women’s historical novel which, though largely neglected by scholars,<sup>1</sup> is one of the most influential genres of women’s literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Though they have been “frequently dismissed as romantic, escapist or historiographically naïve, women’s historical fiction often constitutes a radical rewriting of traditional, male-centred historical narrative” (Waters 176). As such, the value of women’s historical novels as an imaginative form of revisionist, feminist-centred history should not be

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Wallace’s study of the development of the genre in the twentieth century, and the collection of essays edited by Katherine Cooper and Emma Short, remain the only extensive undertakings of the study of modern women’s historical fiction.

underestimated. It is within the pages of these novels that women have finally found their history.

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