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**The Cross-Dresser, the Thief, his Daughter and her Lover:
Queer Desire and Romance in Georgette Heyer's *These Old Shades***

In P.G. Wodehouse's *Right Ho, Jeeves* (1922), Bertie Wooster believes he has been asked by his aunt Dahlia to help her with two problems: to gain some needed funds for one of her pet projects and to help with his cousin's romantic difficulties. It quickly emerges that Wooster has completely misunderstood: it is not Wooster's help which Dahlia seeks, but that of his valet Jeeves. Wounded by this revelation, Wooster salves his sense of self-worth:

I remember reading in one of those historical novels once about a chap – a buck he would have been, no doubt, or a macaroni or some such bird as that – who, when people said the wrong thing, merely laughed down from lazy eyelids and flicked a speck of dust from the irreproachable Mechlin lace at his wrists. This was practically what I did now. At least, I straightened my tie and smiled one of those inscrutable smiles of mine. I then withdrew and went out for a saunter in the garden. (51)

The mention of Mechlin lace and the figure of the macaroni indicate that Wooster is referring to historical fiction set in the mid-eighteenth century. The figure of the macaroni, a man who dressed, spoke and behaved in a highly affected manner, was frequently satirised in eighteenth-century culture. The novel uses this brief mention of this figure of classed masculinity in the figure of the buck as ironic shorthand for Wooster's extreme ineptitude, which is the primary comedic directive of the episode. This lazy-eyelidded, Mechlin-lace-wearing figure is certainly significant because it indicates just how pervasive certain kinds of masculinity had become in the post-war period, both for authors of historical fiction, and for readers such as Wodehouse.

Wooster is, however, not surprisingly given his penchant for error, wrong in equating the macaroni with a buck. The epicene macaroni, often derided for effeminacy, can be read as posing challenges to the heterosexual imperative, while the figure of the buck is associated with hyper-masculinised action and authority. The macaroni and the buck figured in fictions of romance – and there are some overlaps with romance fictions but the latter did not begin to consolidate as a genre until the 1920s – from the eighteenth century onwards, but were particularly dominant in the popular fiction of the early twentieth century, with the popularity of Baroness Orczy's *Scarlet Pimpernel* play and novels and with Jeffery Farnol's Regency novels. In these texts, the buck, an authoritative, autocratic and sexually compelling member of the aristocracy, is often brought to some kind of emotional awakening through his relationship with a woman. The emotional and narrative arc associated with this awakening has a long history, from Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) through Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), to the works of Farnol and Orczy, and then repeatedly in multiple romance fictions of the twentieth century. But if we return to Wooster's inadvertent slippage between the macaroni and the buck, it is a salient idea that this emotional and narrative arc can be (queerly) complicated.

Queer complications, I will argue, are the stuff of a landmark work of historical fiction: Georgette Heyer's *These Old Shades* (1926), a historical novel set in the 1750s which depicts the social machinations of Justin Alastair, the Duke of Avon. Heyer's third historical romance (and sixth novel), it re-figures, re-names and re-purposes some of the characters and actions from her first novel *The Black Moth* (1921), including the seductively dangerous Hugh Belmanoir, Duke of Andover, with whom Avon shares a great deal.¹ *These Old Shades* proved a great success. Despite

¹The title refers to the poem partly reprinted as an epigraph in the first (and some subsequent) editions of the novel, Austin Dobson's "Epilogue" to his second series of *Eighteenth-Century Vignettes* (1896): "*Whereas with these old shades of mine,/ Their ways and dress delight me;/ And should I trip by word or line,/ They cannot well indict me....*" (347; emphasis in original).

being published during the Great Strike, with little possibility of advertisement, it was immediately successful and sold 190,000 copies in hardcover. It was reprinted in November 1926, and again in January, May, August and November 1927 (Kloester 93), and has remained in print since. Much of this success was owing to the figure of Avon, with his impeccable dress sense, his drawling verbosity, his ruthless pursuit of his enemy, and his relationship with the much younger, cross-dressing Léon/Léonie. The sexual tensions surrounding the characterization of Avon are multi-faceted, with the romance plot speaking to Oedipal structures. Indeed, in 1969, A.S. Byatt regarded the novel as “playing with her readers’ sexual fantasies” in providing “the faint *frisson* of danger which appeals to female masochism, and the appeal of achieving the impossible which (psychoanalysts would say) satisfies the Oedipal desires” (260).² This ‘impossible’ achievement is the unwitting emotional seduction of Avon by the twenty-year-old Léonie, whom he rescues on a whim from a Paris slum. She has lived as a boy for the past seven years and is presented to both Avon – and to the reader – as male. Employing her as his page, Avon takes her into society where he makes much of her violet eyes and Titian hair, which draws the attention of Avon’s long-standing enemy, the Comte de Saint-Vire, with whom she shares certain physical characteristics. Saint-Vire is ultimately revealed by Avon to be Léonie’s biological father and to have exchanged Léonie with the son of a peasant in order to steal the line of succession from his brother.

Avon reveals to Léonie, a quarter of the way through the novel (although the reader has known after just a sixth), that he has known her secret from the start and requests that she learn “to be – a girl” (99) in order to enter Parisian society, but this time as his ward. She learns ‘how’ to be a girl at Avon’s estate, from which she is kidnapped by Saint-Vire, from whom she is in turn rescued by Rupert, Avon’s younger brother. Avon’s brother and sister assist him in launching Léonie successfully in Parisian society, and her presence angers Saint-Vire, who fears the exposure of his machinations to secure the line of succession. Ultimately threatened by Saint-Vire with (erroneous) exposure as illegitimate, she runs away, enacting the “ritual death” which Pamela Regis has identified as a romance fiction staple that usually occurs “when the union between heroine and hero, the hoped-for resolution, seems absolutely impossible” (14). In a violent conclusion, Avon forces Saint-Vire’s hand, compelling him to kill himself publicly after Saint-Vire has given Paris society the proofs of Léonie’s legitimate birth. Avon tracks down Léonie and they declare their love for one another, before returning, wedded, to Paris. The narrative arc described by Léonie and Avon thus satisfies the desire of paternal seduction, with Léonie marrying her guardian father-figure. The father-daughter relationship is marked throughout: Léon says she is the daughter of the devil (31) and Avon’s nickname is Satan, he repeatedly calls her “child” and “infant” and she signs as “*Infant*” (306) the only time she writes her name. Lisa Fletcher argues that “[f]or Avon and readers alike, Léon’s femaleness is an “open secret.” In this context, the narrative pleasure of the “open secret” [...] is the pleasure of having known all along, having guessed the “truth,” or more specifically, having been able to “read” the markers of gender” (260). Fletcher regards this pleasure as “generic to romance” (60) and interprets Avon as the best ‘reader’ in the novel as he, at least according to his own claim, interpreted the markers immediately. I want to dispute this reading of Avon’s perceptiveness and challenge Byatt’s reading by drawing on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to identify in the novel a detailed account of male-male desire, one which can be seen as the real source of the novel’s “*frisson* of danger” and “appeal of achieving the impossible”, notwithstanding its ultimate resolution in heterosexual exchange.

² Byatt uses Oedipal here as shorthand for the Electra Complex. She cheerily imagines that “the charm of Justin Alistair and his reckless son, Dominic [as detailed in the sequel, *The Devil’s Cub*, which was published in 1932), accounts for the names of small sons of many of my contemporaries” (260).

The romance novel, from its incipient steps in the mid-eighteenth century through to its place as the cornerstone of Harlequin Mills & Boon Ltd.,³ is a genre that has heavily invested in heterosexual structures of desire. Fletcher observes that as the romance genre shifted its general focus from adventure to romance in the early twentieth century, the focus on the love story constituted the “beginning of popular historical romance fiction’s detailed and ongoing exploration of the patterns and privileges of heterosexuality” (50). But she also makes the point that while the “historical romance genre recites a familiar and powerful narrative of naturalization for heterosexual hegemony” it does not always do this “with ease” (50). A close examination of *These Old Shades*, I will show, reveals a hesitation about heterosexuality: romance can open itself up remarkably to a questioning of structures of heterosexual desire. In doing so, I ask questions about how desire functions in the romance novel, and, more crucially, about how these texts can be read as resisting, at least in part, that which has been traditionally understood as their *raison d’être* – the heterosexual imperative (and here I am only speaking about the traditional romance novel). Stephanie Burley claims that “[r]omance writers must rely on a series of disciplinary heteronormative literary conventions to write sexually exciting fictions” (131). A norm of the genre is that the romance novel ends in the resolution of the problems which impeded the hero and heroine’s emotional and sexual relationship. The resolution of the narrative tension caused by barriers to the union of the hero and heroine has historically been the backbone of the romance novel as it solidified from the 1920s onwards, drawing a great deal of emotional narrative power from the marriage plots of the nineteenth-century realist novel. However, Martin Hipsky has argued that prior to the “commodification via mass-market formulas [meeting-courtship-marriage]” in the 1930s, desire was “not primarily configured through a female character’s subjectivity” (7).⁴ This is crucial in considering how desire is structured in *These Old Shades* as, while the novel concludes with the marriage of Avon and Léonie, the substantial tension in the novel occurs in the meetings and exchanges between Avon and Saint-Vire, who both seek to control the secret of Léonie’s birth in order to harm one another.

To reveal the functioning of desire in *These Old Shades*, I draw on René Girard’s triangular model of desire in fiction, and Sedgwick’s revisioning of this model. Girard argues that the “*vaniteux* [vain person] will desire any object so long as he is convinced that it is already desired by another person whom he admires” (7). Girard postulates a triangle of desire, or rather what might be understood as a triangulated exchange, through which desire flows. The mediator is, for Girard, a rival for the object of desire – but a rival who is “brought into existence as a rival by vanity, and that same vanity demands his defeat” (7). In this model, two men are locked together through their desire for the same object – although it may only be one of the men who is aware of this triangle. It is the structure of desire which produces the triangle: “[j]ealousy and envy

³The British Mills & Boon was founded in 1908 and became associated with women’s romance fiction in the 1930s. From 1957 onwards, the company had an informal partnership with Harlequin, its North American distributor. In 1971, Harlequin bought Mills & Boon and the company is now a global publishing powerhouse focused on romance fiction for women. For more on the history of Mills & Boon in the early twentieth century, see Joseph McAleer (100-12).

⁴This refiguration of these structures of desire can be understood as part of a wider impetus in the 1920s and 1930s. Alison Light is firm that “[r]ather than seeing ‘masculinity’ or ‘femininity’ confined to discussion within different forms, we need to understand how it is constantly in the process of being revised and discussed across the range of popular genres, to understand the interrelationship of these genres, and their forms of differentiation from each other as well as their specific scope” (163).

imply a third presence: object, subject, and a third person toward whom the jealousy and envy is directed. These two ‘vices’ are therefore triangular” (Girard 12). Sedgwick eloquently revises Girard’s model, noting that these triangles identified by Girard are primarily realised in the form of two rival men and a woman, the object of their rivalry. Summarising this triangular structure of desire, she argues that, even in Girard’s work, this bond is “even stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choice, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved” (21). In her reading of William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* (1675), Sedgwick argues that, in the world of the play, “the ultimate function of women is [...] [as] conduits of homosocial desire between men” (99). She demonstrates how the text, visibly structured in terms of plot according to the terms and models of a particular kind of desire – heterosexual –, actually serves to disrupt and re-focalise the desire. For Sedgwick, to thus “draw the ‘homosocial’ back into the orbit of ‘desire,’ of the potentially erotic, [...] is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual” (1). As Judith Butler puts it, Sedgwick rewrote Girard to point out that such a rivalry, though explicitly about desiring a woman, is “implicitly a homosocial bond between two men” (112). In this article, I consider what happens when this bond is located within the heterosexual imperatives of the romance novel. I posit that we do not need to read against the grain, precisely, of this heterosexual imperative in romance fiction, but that we can use this model to explore how desire functions in these fictions.

Unspoken Desire and the Company of Men

In *These Old Shades*, the paramount emotional exchange is seemingly between Avon and Léonie; despite the novel’s brief attempt to create some romantic tension between her and Avon’s brother, Léonie’s treatment of Rupert as a (literal) sparring partner and his youthful instabilities mean that the only viable romantic exchanges are those between Léonie and her guardian Avon. This has particular resonance for Léonie as she remains resolutely the same – impish, dismissive of social conventions, unwelcoming of gender difference – whether in page’s garb or in court dress. Indeed, her ‘value’ for both Avon and her real father Saint-Vire is retained similarly through her cross-dressing experiences – while Avon and Saint-Vire may not initially *know* she is a girl (and this unknowingness is extended mercilessly by Avon), they both initially *suspect*, and then later *know*, that she is the key to Saint-Vire’s downfall – and this remains constant throughout, regardless of her appearance as boy or girl. That is, it is the secret of Léonie’s birth which binds the two men together erotically as their role in Léonie’s life is reversed and mirrored: the potential suitor functions as the father. While not dismissing the dominance of the relationship between Léonie and Avon, I argue that it is subservient to the erotically charged relationship between Avon and Saint-Vire and that Léonie’s purpose is to act as a receptacle for this exchange of male-male desire.

The queering possibilities of cross-dressing in the historical romance are well noted. Fletcher’s reading of *These Old Shades* highlights the transgressive possibilities of the relationship between Avon and Leon while Diana Wallace focuses on the erotics of masking/unmasking. Of note for both is how Léonie’s need to *learn* how to be a girl and Avon’s instruction of her “draws attention to both the ‘silliness’ of femininity and its constructed nature” (Wallace 39). While the cross-dressing allows moments of transgressive desire to enter the romance structure, this desire which is referenced is that of Avon for *Léon* (not Léonie). So for Fletcher, and also for Wallace, the heterosexual romance is complicated, however briefly, by the spectre of transgressive homosexual desire, which is physically represented through cross-dressing. I focus here on how the erotic male-male *frisson* provided by the ‘is-he/isn’t-he?’ of Léonie’s boyness and the ‘does-

he-know/doesn't-he-know?' of Avon's foppish scrutiny extends into the homoerotic relationship between Avon and Saint-Vire, Léonie's biological father.

At the heart of the Avon–Léonie–Saint-Vire erotic triangle that flexes throughout *These Old Shades* is the fact that Léon first meets both of these men whilst dressed, and living, as a boy (precluding, of course, Saint-Vire seeing Léonie when an infant). Their shared desire for Léonie is eroticised by the complex shared desire and fear she instills in both: Saint-Vire fears Léonie because she will provide the evidence of his wrongdoing, yet also desires to possess her in order to know that she is *really* his daughter; Avon desires Léonie because she is evidence of Saint-Vire's wrongdoing, yet also fears her because she might not actually be his daughter. For Sedgwick, "in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved" and the "bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent" (21). The problem between Avon and Saint-Vire dates back twenty years; as this is actually Léonie's age, she thus acts as a tangible reminder of this past. While both men move in Parisian society, depicted as largely predicated on gossip and scandal, there has been a curious forgetting of the reasons for conflict. Hugh Davenant, one of Avon's friends, does not know and has to ask Avon, who replies that "[i]t is a very old tale, Hugh; almost a forgotten tale" (25) while another friend, when answering Saint-Vire's questions about Avon, wonders at his interest: "In the recesses of Merivale's brain memory stirred. Surely there had been some scandal, many years ago?" (158). It is only at the end of the novel that "Paris began to talk, in whispers at first, then gradually louder, and more openly. Paris remembered an old, old scandal" (280). It is the unmentionable nature of this scandal which intrigues, that which is forgotten and unspoken. That which is unmentionable and repressed here are the desires binding Avon and Saint-Vire.

This scandal was propagated by Avon's desire to marry Saint-Vire's sister, to which Saint-Vire responded by coming to his "lodging with a large and heavy whip" (26). Avon says that "Henri was enraged; there was a something between us, maybe a woman – I forget" (26). Here the figure of a woman who had come between them before is not even worth remembering – what is provided in some detail is the physical exchange between Avon and Saint-Vire in which pleasures, phalluses and pinkings are exchanged: Avon has "the pleasure of cutting his face open with his own whip" (27) and "pinked him so well that he had to be carried home" (27). This act of penetration – a cutting of the face, which prefigures the final cutting of the face when Avon forces Saint-Vire to kill himself – feminises Saint-Vire by weakening him to the point where he has to be carried through the streets. Later Avon is received by Saint-Vire "reclining on a couch" (27) and threatening to have his servants whip him. The undercurrent of unspoken desires in this exchange is accentuated by Avon when he has to retell the story to another old acquaintance, Merivale. Avon sighs, saying that "I had best tell you the whole story" (180). As Avon has already indicated that Léonie is Saint-Vire's legitimate daughter, what precisely is left to be told is unclear. In any case, it is something that cannot be openly spoken and when they emerge from the library "Merivale's face was a study of mingled emotions, and he appeared to be speechless" (180). What has *not* been told to Merivale was Léonie's past life in the slum, either, as later in the novel he says that he knows "nothing of her life" (285). Avon says that Saint-Vire "has a secret which he suspects I share. But since it is a highly discreditable secret he would not like me to think that he had any knowledge of it" (209). The secret that is unspoken here can only refer to the unspoken desire which binds Avon and Saint-Vire, whose twenty-year passionate conflict is physically crystallised by the presence of Léonie.

Avon's exchanges with Saint-Vire are marked by passion, in contrast to his languid demeanor with all others and his chaste "grandfatherly" actions towards Léonie. While Jan Cohn argues that "sexual arousal in romance signals the beginning of the heroine's entrance into womanhood"

(28), and while the plot demands of *These Old Shades* insist that Léonie remains child-like in order to remain Avon's "infant" (he calls her 'child' 91 times and 'infant' 124 times; while he does also refer to his brother Rupert as 'child' on occasion, his infantilisation of Léonie is relentless), it is telling that the moments of passion are primarily reserved for the exchanges between Avon and Saint-Vire, whose name simultaneously evokes religious purity and masculine power. When Avon meets Saint-Vire, he exclaims "My dear Comte!" but his "hazel eyes mocked" and his "thin lips were smiling, but not pleasantly" (19). At other meetings, he bows to Saint-Vire, but "with the exaggerated flourish that made a thin insult of the courtesy" and a "slow and singularly unpleasant smile curved" his lips (36; 214). Similarly, Saint-Vire is brought to passion when in dialogue with Avon: his hands are "clenched on the table" (21) and later they shake so that he spills his wine (22; 216). Surprised by Avon's presence when he is trying to kidnap Léonie for the second time, he is physically moved: "The Comte jumped as though he had been shot [...] [and] tugged at his cravat as though it choked him" (214). He can hardly speak when confronted by Avon and Léonie together, his "voice scarcely above a whisper" (214) and he is "at a loss to know what to say" (215). Finally, when Avon presents him formally to Léonie for the first time (as Avon's ward, Mademoiselle de Bonnard, and not as Saint-Vire's daughter), he is overcome with emotion: "The Comte flushed dark [...] and muttered a few incoherent words" (215). Saint-Vire is rendered literally speechless by his encounters with Avon, his body not permitting the speaking, like the scandal which has been forgotten and then remembered, of the desires which are circulating in these exchanges.⁵

Léonie's place in these exchanges is often ambiguous. She knows nothing of her personal history and in keeping her in the dark, Avon maintains her as an inactive member of the triangle, which allows Avon to prolong his relationship with Saint-Vire. Avon's ambiguity towards Léonie is evident in his hesitation over the place she occupies in his household. When Davenant asks "You surely do not intend to adopt the child?" (5), Avon first replies that "He – er – adopted me." But when pressed as to whether or not Avon is going to make him his son, Avon says "A child from the gutter? He shall be my page" (5). It is only after Avon has confirmed that she is a girl that he thinks of adopting her. He initially tells the Cure De Beaupré, who stood *in loco parentis* to Léonie during her childhood, that he has "some vague notion of – ah – adopting her. As my ward, you understand. Oh, she will be chaperoned, of course!" (76). The hesitation – Avon having to rehearse the initial letter of 'adopting' before committing to taking the place as her father – is erased by the end of the conversation with De Beaupré in which, for the first time, the details of Saint-Vire's theft in replacing his daughter with another's son, are largely confirmed. It is only once Avon is sure of Léonie's lineage – and her power as a weapon against Saint-Vire – that he is able to confirm his place as her father-figure: "If she is indeed what I think her I am going to restore Léonie to her family. How grateful they will be! If not –' He paused. 'Well, I have not considered that possibility. Rest assured that I shall provide for her.'" (81). There is no possibility, of course, of *all* her family being grateful, considering that her father erased her from existence in the first place – so Avon means to restore her to a family he is defining *without* her father, but at the same time restoring her to her family name, the patronymic which is 'owned' by her father, but which he has denied her both literally and metaphorically.

⁵ At one point, it is revealed that it is Saint-Vire, not Avon, who is incapable of *not* speaking of Léonie: "It was Saint-Vire who spoke of the boy. It seems there is some mystery attached to him, is it not so? A nameless page!" Avon asks this person to tell Saint-Vire that the "page has a very good name." (38). Here Saint-Vire is unable to *name* the child he fears yet desires, but at the same time he is also unable to stop speaking of the same. Avon's threat to Saint-Vire emphasises the importance of the patronymic and it is after this threat that Saint-Vire attempts to take Léon for the first time, under the guise of sending a friend to purchase the page for said friend's wife.

This illicit desire is furthered in the text by the ways in which Léonie is represented as both a jewel and a weapon. Indeed, her first appearance in the novel is when she is “shot like a cannonball from a dark alley” (1) and hurls herself upon Avon. He initially mistakes her for a footpad, before his attention is caught by the combination of his/her “[g]reat violet-blue eyes” (2) and “copper-red curls” (3). She/he is then substituted for a jewel when he offers a diamond pin to her brother in order to purchase her, “body and soul” (4). Léonie is taken to Versailles, dressed in black velvet. Avon looks him over and then sends his valet to find a sapphire chain. He makes a gift of this to Léonie – throwing it “over [his] head so that it lay across his breast” (45). While he/she may now be worth a chain of precious stones, it is also notably a chain and Avon chooses to “give you that chain as – er – hire” (46). He/she initially rejects this categorisation, saying that “I would work myself to death for you, but payment – *no!* [...] // I served you for love, and – and out of gratitude, and – you give me a chain! As if – as if you thought I should not continue to work well for you without payment!” (46-7). In response, Avon forces Léonie down: “Under the steely pressure Léon came to his knees, and stayed there, eyes downcast. The chain was flung over his head.” (47). Léonie is brought to her knees numerous times throughout the novel, sometimes by Avon’s direct force (12; 47) and sometimes as a means of marking her subservient to his will (which occurs eight times), but always implying fellatio, particularly as she is often kissing his hands and wrists when on her knees. The illicit and unnatural desires (within the heterosexual structures of romance) being enacted are referenced by Davenant who says that seeing “that child at your feet fills me with disgust” (43). To complicate this, the overtones of prostitution – hire, rather than payment for her employment – highlight Léonie’s precarious position in the male exchange of desires that dominates the novel. It is textually appropriate that when she runs away from Avon and Saint-Vire, her sapphire chain, marking out her function in the narrative, is the only object that she takes with her.

It is Saint-Vire who (unnaturally) enacts the (unnatural) desires of Avon when he abducts Léonie. His purpose is unclear: if she is a threat to his theft of the succession, then he should kill her immediately but he keeps her alive (although, he believes, sedated). Saint-Vire does to Léonie what Avon wants to do (and these shared desires for her are acted out by Saint-Vire when the coach crashes and he is thrown violently on top of her [185]). But to complicate this, while Saint-Vire does this to his *actual* daughter, the passions that give rise to this are created by the desire between Saint-Vire and Avon. Elaborating on Sedgwick, Butler argues that the third component of the triangle of desire becomes “representative of both men’s desire, the place where those desires meet, and where they fail to meet, a place where that potentially homosexual encounter is relayed, suspended and contained” (112). This black hole that is the object of desire is literalised by Saint-Vire’s abduction. He is cast as a sexual predator, as Léonie muses: “mayhap he does not want to kill me. But if he does not [...] can it be that he elopes with me? No, that is not possible, because he believes I am a boy” (183). Léonie is wrong – he does not believe she is a boy – and Avon having not provided her with her own history as the daughter of Saint-Vire means that she would never be able to grasp Saint-Vire’s actual interest in her. She is thus tossed back and forth between the two men as they seek to know precisely what the other knows.

Even when she questions Avon about why Saint-Vire took her, he jocularly replies that was “[d]oubtless because of your *beaux yeux*” (290), both not telling her the truth and also raising the spectre of illicit desire yet again. This marking of Léonie’s value is vital in the novel’s key scene of sparring between Avon and Saint-Vire. Having kidnapped Léonie (dressed as a boy when he takes her) – who escapes with the help of Rupert – Saint-Vire tracks her down to a small village inn. In the meantime, Avon has found her and Rupert and has requested that she dress as a girl again and that she pretend to not know Saint-Vire if he appears. Saint-Vire does and is shaken, as noted, by Avon’s presence, saying that “I come to retrieve some – property – I lost” (215) which

he says is “one of those jewels that contain – a flaw” (216). Avon replies by saying his property was “stolen from him” (215) and that he holds it in trust, adding that he hopes that Saint-Vire’s does not contain this flaw. He goes on to confuse the exchange further, asking “So it was a jewel? Now that which was stolen from me is in the nature of a weapon” (216), before assuring Saint-Vire that he will do his utmost “to restore your – jewel, I think you said it was? – your jewel to you.” (216). The passage of verbal arms between the two ends with Saint-Vire erotically grasping his whip and “wrenching the lash between his hands” (218). The sexual connotations of the masculine weapon – particularly the choice of sword throughout the novel and Avon’s teaching of Léonie how to swordfight *after* she has learnt how to act like a woman, resulting in her nearly pinking him (134), just as he pinked her father – and the feminised jewel – with the mystery of Léonie’s birth largely resting upon the truth of her own genitalia – reiterates Léonie’s function as this object of fear and desire.

The tense triangle of desire between Léonie, Avon and Saint-Vire is further marked by the uncanny doubling of Léonie and Saint-Vire: Avon desiring Saint-Vire and his female double, which speaks to Butler’s formulation of the men in the Sedgwickian triangle sending and receiving “some aspect of himself” in circulating the woman in question. Avon had been previously attracted to Saint-Vire’s sister, who, although described latterly as “that red-haired shrew”, was “really very lovely” (26) when younger. It is also made clear that Léonie does not look anything like her mother, who is dismissed as “curds and whey” (51) and a “puling, sighing woman with no charm and less beauty” (52). Rather, it is the doubling of Léonie and Saint-Vire which serves as a channel for Avon’s desire. Throughout the novel, a number of people are struck by the similarities between Saint-Vire and Léonie. Her biological mother and father recognise her nearly immediately (though do not speak of it), and it is the manner in which she serves as an uncanny reminder of a hidden secret that follows her throughout the text. Merivale says that “she reminds me strangely of someone, but who it is I cannot for the life of me make out” (155). Rupert remarks that Saint-Vire is “the living spit of Léonie” (159). Later, Saint-Vire’s brother (the one from whom he has stolen the succession), is shocked when he sees Léonie and Saint-Vire together: “But look at her! [...]It is Henri! Henri to the life now that I see them side by side!” (275). These confusions over identity run throughout the Avon–Léonie–Saint-Vire axis. Indeed, Léonie, who of all should know her father-figure(s) the most, mistakes them for one another at a key point. When she and Rupert have escaped from Saint-Vire and shelter in a small inn to help Rupert recover from a gunshot wound, she looks out and exclaims “Rupert, ‘tis he! *Mon Dieu, mon Dieu*, what are we to do?” (195) But Léonie is mistaken (and the chapter title refers to this – “Of a Capture, a Chase and Confusion”) – this is not Saint-Vire but Avon, who has come to retrieve his stolen property. The confusion that circulates between Avon and Saint-Vire with regards to Léonie is crucial in emphasizing how Léonie’s significance is marked by a destabilizing of the heterosexual imperative of the romance plot.

These erotic exchanges between Avon and Saint-Vire are enacted in blood, crucial in a narrative which hinges on the theft of patrilineal succession via bloodlines. When Rupert tells Avon that he wants Saint-Vire’s blood (for shooting him in the shoulder when he helped rescue Léonie), Avon says “I am before you, my dear, by some twenty years” (202), referencing both his first physical exchange with Saint-Vire and the age of Léonie. His desire for Saint-Vire’s blood is actualised by Léonie, who, when kidnapped, bites “him till there was blood” (200). Here the bloodlines are restored – that which is stolen from Léonie is taken back by her. In a reversal of the expectations of the abduction narrative – that Léonie be raped and/or killed by her abductor – it is Léonie who erotically draws blood on behalf of Avon. Even when Saint-Vire is not present in the novel, he dominates much of Avon’s thoughts as the latter persistently retells his history. Such exchanges are often erotically charged with double entendres; for example, when explaining to Davenant his reasons for buying Léon, he says that “Titian hair has ever been one

of – my – ruling passions”, his eyes “glint[ing] for a moment” before they are “swiftly veiled” (9). There are passions here, in the plural, for the Titian hair that both Léonie and Saint-Vire possess.

The final exchange between Avon and Saint-Vire is marked by a violent erotic. Avon attends a salon at which various people are presenting their literary work. He tells the story, a “fairy tale” (318) of the enmity between two brothers and the substitution of a boy for the daughter of the first-born. This is a tense, drawn-out scene in which he does not reveal the names of those involved, but where the identities of those involved are slowly guessed by the audience. Avon has no written confirmation of what he believes to be Léonie’s birth although he produces a document which contains, he claims, a confession by her adoptive mother which he obtained from De Beaupré. He finishes the story with the implication that Saint-Vire induced Léonie to kill herself through shame: “He threatened, messieurs, to expose her in the eyes of the world as his bastard [...] He told her – he was her father, messieurs – that he would do this that her guardian be ruined socially for having dared to foist his base-born light-o’-love into Society.” (326) Saint-Vire has kept his counsel throughout Avon’s revelations, despite the clear suspicions of all those who hear. Crucially it is Saint-Vire’s wife who betrays his secret finally, collapsing at the thought of her daughter’s death, yet also stating the truth that Léonie “is not *dead!*” (327; emphasis in original). Saint-Vire’s theft is ultimately proven by his own partner in crime: “She cried out then, and Saint-Vire, since she had thus betrayed him, shot himself.” (333) Saint-Vire cries out, in the moment of *grand mort*, Avon’s name, “Devil! Devil!” (328).⁶ With this, the erotic exchanges with Saint-Vire are completed and Avon can return his energies to the fulfillment of the heterosexual demands of the romance plot.

In *These Old Shades*, a passion is reserved for male-male relationship and often given oblique priority over the ‘central’ (for a romance narrative) male-female relationship. It is only through the absolute removal of one of the men that the heterosexual relationship can move forward to its genre-appropriate conclusion of betrothal. This literalises the ways in which Léonie functions solely as an item of exchange – she is exchanged by Saint-Vire for a male child when a baby, acquired as a “new possession” (4) by Avon, kidnapped by Saint-Vire, rescued by Rupert and then married by Avon. Avon’s personal history has been built upon a crossing of swords and intentions with men over women and it is no surprise that his house has “crossed swords above the doorway” (130). These bonds between men are normalised in Avon’s discussion of his father’s relationship with Saint-Vire’s father: they “‘not been the best of friends. Again a woman; I believe my sire won the encounter’” (26). The notion of predictability suggested by the remark “[a]gain a woman” is indicative of the frequency with which this erotic triangle has marked Avon’s life, as he admits he was “bred up in vice from his cradle” (336). It is significant that this woman is homogenised here – “[a]gain” – as it is one anonymous woman of an anonymous multitude: it is only the exchanges between men that have erotic currency. Sedgwick argues that we should view the erotic triangle not “as an ahistorical, Platonic form, a deadly symmetry” but rather as a “sensitive register precisely for delineating relationships of power and meaning” (27). In the re-casting of this erotic triangle between Avon–Léonie–Saint-Vire, this register is queerly attuned. That is, in marrying Léonie, Avon receives some part of Saint-Vire, both metaphorically in marrying his daughter, and literally in marrying his female doppelganger. Indeed, as Sedgwick notes, “in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal

⁶ Léonie had previously asked Avon to kill Saint-Vire and he had refused (202). Later, when told that her father is dead, killed indirectly by Avon, Léonie is in what Avon terms “unholy ecstasy” (332). This is tellingly similar to the “unseemly joy” Avon discerns when she believes she has bested him in fencing: she “danced in her excitement. ‘Monseigneur, I have killed you! You are dead!’” (134).

power” (25; emphasis in original). As Avon had previously indicated, “[o]ur paths seem fated to – er – cross, my dear Comte” (215) and in the consummation of the heterosexual imperative of the romance plot, this is literalised by the crossing of Avon with Léonie.

Reading Romance

Long dismissed as formulaic and drawing too powerfully and affectively on sentiment, the romance novel has unsurprisingly become associated with women readers and women authors. Speaking more generally about the gendering of genre, Rita Felski argues that, at the end of the nineteenth century, “previously value-neutral terms such as ‘sentimental,’ ‘melodramatic,’ and ‘romantic’ acquired increasingly negative, feminine, and old-fashioned connotations as labels for those texts which sought refuge from the critical understanding of reality in the form of beautiful illusions and exaggerated displays of feeling” (117). While the days of seeing popular fiction as formulaic and irrelevant for critical practice are largely over, there is still a tendency to use a popular novel as an *example*, rather than as the object of study itself (indeed, this is partly owing to the tendency of the middlebrow to open up the dialogue with literary fictions, but to police the boundaries with popular fictions). While a popular novel may not display innovations in form and style, rarely do many novels of any kind. To expand upon this, I want to return to the question I raised briefly above, that of whether Avon knows Léonie’s secret from the outset. Fletcher, as I have noted, argues that Avon does know, citing the tropes of romance fiction as evidence for this. However, the balance of evidence in the text indicates that Avon does not know. Though he tells Davenant and Léonie separately that he has known “from the first” (88; 331), he indicates, in his re-telling of her history the night he causes Saint-Vire to kill himself, that he “slowly pieced the tale together” (323). He uses the male pronoun to refer to the cross-dressed Léonie, even when she is asleep (and elsewhere he carefully monitors Davenant’s correct pronoun usage) while he warns Léonie at the outset that he will discard her if “it should chance that [he is] after all of no use” (42). Here the expectations surrounding genre can be challenged as the trope of the all-knowing male hero of romance fiction is shown to be much less trustworthy – both in terms of what he says but also in terms of how he functions – than might be anticipated.

In discussions of formulaic fiction, there is much talk of the reader ‘knowing the codes’ – so in *These Old Shades*, the reader should *obviously* know Léonie is a girl from her outset, despite her male dress, *because* she has Titian hair and violet eyes. I am similarly wary of this figure of the reader – too-often highly-fixed and defined – who is used as a way of producing meaning in discussing ‘formulaic’ fiction. Catherine Belsey argues that the romance “is widely held in contempt in Western culture,” despite drawing “its definitions of desire from that culture itself.” She goes on to note that if “the metaphors are overworked until they become virtually invisible, if the ideas are commonplace, that is because they are commonly recognized” (32). I largely agree with the notion of common recognition of certain metaphor (or tropes) but challenge the implicit figure of the reader which is gestured towards here. Scott McCracken has wryly noted that while “the modern reader is presented by the defenders of modernity as a critical self, the reader of popular fiction has not, historically, been given such a glowing report” (7). This argument is not concerned with providing a history of the trope of Titian hair and violet eyes in fiction, romance or otherwise (certainly these can be traced back to Victorian melodrama and the Gothic novel), but it is important to recognise that not only was there a first time that these tropes appeared in fiction, there is also a first time for *each reader*, and that the readers of popular fiction do not experience the texts in a uniform and homogenous manner. The reader of romance fiction is not created a veteran reader and to assume this implies that the tropes of this genre are very easy to absorb because of its supposedly formulaic and insignificant nature. This

brings us to Felski's proposition that "we need to take more seriously the distinctive and determining, rather than simply determined, nature of generic forms such as romance and melodrama in shaping the culture of modernity" (144). In moving beyond expectations delineated by genre and by the figure of the reader, we can examine this determining and meaning-making capacity of popular fiction. I have here argued for approaching a popular novel as *producing* meaning which is contradictory and ambiguous

I want to finish with a nod to that moment of confusion which Wooster produces in his elision between the macaroni and the buck. Combining these two figurations – foppish and effeminate, and authoritative and physically active – which are bound by masculinity and aristocratic privilege, Wooster gestures towards the queer possibilities of heterosexual romance. Avon is both macaroni and buck, in his attention to dress, in his affectations and in his physical strength and authority, and he simultaneously has a place in both a queer and a heterosexual romance. But while *These Old Shades* concludes with the marriage of Avon and Léonie, I have shown the dangers of relying on tropes when thinking about popular fiction. In short, romance is not always what it seems to be in the romance novel. For example, in one passage, Rupert describes Avon as "pleasant enough [...] but he's queer" (156) while elsewhere when Saint-Vire first sees Léonie, Davenant turns and asks if he is "wondering at Alastair's page? A freak, is it not?" (19). It is left ambiguous whether Davenant means Léonie specifically or Alastair's deployment of her. The terms 'queer' and 'freak' were beginning to solidify in the early twentieth century as shorthand for 'homosexual': the Marquess of Queensberry referred to the 'Snob Queers' in 1894, for example, and 'freak' was first used in 1896 to refer to homosexuality. In this way, then, the homosocial is spoken aloud in the novel, in a way that the precise nature of the original exchange between Avon and Saint-Vire cannot be spoken. Butler notes that, for Sedgwick, "the homosocial bond [does not come] at the expense of the heterosexual", but rather that "the homosocial is articulated precisely through the heterosexual" (112). While *These Old Shades* ends with the presentation of Léonie by Avon as his Duchess, it is male-male desire which has (queerly) driven this romance plot to its 'natural' conclusion of marriage.

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