Safe Rebellions: Romantic Emancipation in the "Woman's Heritage Film"

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In a 2001 editorial in the *New York Times Book Review*, entitled "The Big Chill," the novelist Roxana Robinson lamented a cold spell in the world of literature at the expense of feeling. Modern and postmodern fiction, at least the kind that receives critical acclaim, such as the works of Cormac McCarthy, Don DeLillo or Joyce Carol Oates, she argued, chooses:

> alienation and irony, disaffection and distance, over passion and tenderness, engagement, anguish or rapture… The Brontës and Jane Austen, who wrote exclusively about women and the world of emotions, would have a hard time today making it out of the 'women's fiction' category. (Robinson, 2001)

Nonetheless, many prominent art-house cinema releases of the last two decades have been adaptations of nineteenth-century novels, among the most recent Terence Davies' film adaptation of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (2000), Merchant-Ivory's Henry James adaptation *The Golden Bowl* (2001) and Mira Nair's version of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (2004). In addition, period dramas based on original screenplays such as *Titanic* (1997), or television programs like the Victorian doctor series *Bramwell*, have enjoyed remarkable success. Frequently controversial, these films, loosely labeled heritage cinema, have been classified as a new genre that foregrounds lush period detail and bourgeois narratives. The heritage debate in Britain further critically addressed heritage cinema in various ways – for instance, in respect to its ideological representation of history, its articulation of postmodern nostalgia and its modes of literary adaptation (Vincendeau, 2001).

My purpose here is to show how what I will call the "woman's heritage film" – a particular kind of heritage film that has emerged within the context of postfeminist chick flick/lit culture in the 1990s – activates and seemingly reconciles often contradictory narrative trajectories within a pre-feminist historical setting to create postfeminist fantasies of romantic emancipation. The debates surrounding heritage cinema in the 1980s and early 1990s centered primarily on the politics of national identity, historical memory and cultural tradition expressed in an increasing body of films that staged period narratives, predominantly (but not exclusively) set in nineteenth century Britain. Andrew Higson explains:

> What we were interested in was how certain English costume dramas of the period seemed to articulate a nostalgic and conservative celebration of the values and lifestyles of the privileged class, and how in doing so an England that no longer existed seemed to have been reinvented as something fondly remembered and desirable. (Higson, 2003:12)

However, as Higson points out, "audiences who read such films in terms of youthful romantic love may simply not consider these films in terms of debates about heritage, tradition and the national past." Instead, following Claire Monk (Monk, 1995), many heritage films can be

"classed as a modern variant of the 'woman's film.'" (Higson, 2003: 167) Continuing along these lines, my principal interest in this discussion only concerns those heritage films – adapted from novels or based on original screenplays – that foreground female protagonists and combine questions of romance and self-realization (excluding other examples of the genre, for instance Martin Scorsese's Edith Wharton adaptation *The Age of Innocence* [1993] or Peter Weir's high seas drama *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* [2003], which partake in heritage traditions in other ways). Seen through this prism, I propose that what is at stake in the "woman's heritage film" for contemporary viewers is not so much heritage as postfeminism and its exploitation within popular culture.

A problematic term that invokes a range of diverse ideas, the notion of postfeminism in film and television studies has been primarily applied to romantic comedies, sitcoms and other female-centered dramas, popularly labeled chick flicks, which are often based on the best-selling chick-lit(erature) that simultaneously emerged in the 1990s. Following Tania Modleski's condemnation of postfeminism as a posture that ultimately undermines feminist activism against oppression (Modleski, 1991), many feminist scholars have read these articulations of postfeminism as problematic, arguing that many narrative elements predominant in these texts must be seen as a backlash against women's liberation from domesticity, particularly because of the films' focus on romance and their advocacy of its primacy over professional ambition. Others stress the fact that postfeminism commodifies female agency (Negra and Tasker, 2005: 108) or even point to the positive aspects of the postfeminism expressed, for instance, in action flicks that celebrate "grrrl power" and female autonomy. For the purposes of this discussion, I understand postfeminism along the lines of Catherine Orr, who argues that "postfeminism assumes that the women's movement took care of oppressive institutions, and that it is up to individual women to make personal choices that simply reinforce those fundamental social changes." (cited in Parkins, 1999: 377) Within this discourse, postfeminist dilemmas do not emerge from the perception of gender inequality, but from the difficulties that arise from wanting to "have it all" – professional success *and* emotional fulfillment – which I see as one of the central fantasies motivating the fictions discussed here.

And it is at this juncture where we can locate the intersection of historical fantasy and contemporary commerce. Heritage cinema today is certainly as much about American or French moviemaking (many heritage films are Miramax productions and heritage has enjoyed its own resurgence in France) as it is about British film as a national cinema; it is an internationally popular genre speaking with an art cinema accent (Vincendeau, 2001: xvii). Clearly, if the only audience available for these high-brow and Oscar-prone productions were the so-called Janeites (hard-core Austen fans) or Henry James enthusiasts – if they were indeed reliant on their audience being well-read or having a sound understanding of history – the success of a historical fantasy like *Titanic*, which is neither based on a classic novel nor overly concerned with avoiding anachronisms, could hardly be explained. And yet it is useful to include *Titanic* among "woman's heritage films" to elucidate the conventions these films mobilize, especially insofar as the film depicts the trials and tribulations of a proto-feminist heroine to entertain the postfeminist audience, a demographic group that, by and large, thinks of feminism as a historical struggle, a movement that precedes their own life experience.

The ideological thrust of many of today's period romances stretches beyond the affirmation of modern social achievements or liberated sexual mores, as some critics have argued; nor are they limited to celebrating conservative values, as others suggest. The renewed interest in period romances ranging from literary adaptations (E. M. Forster, the Brontës, Jane Austen,

Henry James etc.) to historical fantasies (*The Piano* [1993], *Firelight* [1997], *The Governess* [1998], *Titanic*), speaks to an increasing commercial and artistic focus on female audiences. As the generic traditions of the "woman's picture" reemerge in films of the 1980s and 1990s, they frequently turn to the past to explore feminist concerns in regard to women's emotional and material lives and consistently depict female heroines who pursue emotional and sexual fulfillment while struggling to gain personal independence in a strictly patriarchal social environment. As Ginette Vincendeau points out, the cultural image of heritage films "is predominantly feminine" (Vincendeau, 2001: xxv).

The "woman's heritage film" can thus be generically categorized as a sub-genre of both the heritage film (not necessarily concerned with women) and the contemporary chick flick (not necessarily concerned with history) and works by evoking feminist politics and traditional models of romance for postfeminist spectators by simultaneously engaging in feminist history *and* in historical distortion in the service of romantic fantasy. Heritage critics have already pointed to the genre's ambiguous politics by indicating the ideological splitting between image and narrative the films engage in. While various story elements may include a socially critical view of the past by invoking feminist, socialist and post-colonialist discourses, the visual level of the *mise-en-scène* frequently works in the opposite direction. Here, "[a]t the level of the image," argues Higson, "an exclusive, elite, English vision of national heritage is displayed in all its well-tended finery" (Higson, 2003: 77). I would like to point to a similar tension within the narratives of the "woman's heritage film," insofar as they simultaneously accommodate feminist critique and romantic abandon. What may, in fact, be the genre's most problematic ideological move for women is its exploitation of a patriarchal, repressive social environment to generate sexual tension for the (frequently "impossible") romance. In generic terms then, "the woman's heritage film" may easily be classified as the melodramatic flipside to that other popular genre dedicated to female spectators and given to sentimental fancies, the romantic comedy. The "woman's heritage film" uses the pre-feminist past as the subject of historical dramas that center on the melodramatic and passionately romantic while engaging in a proto-feminist discourse. The romantic comedy takes on a postfeminist world in which the problems of the contemporary females, who are also trying to "have it all," are the source of humor.

In fact, some recent romantic comedies like *Clueless* (1995), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Alex and Emma* (2003) or *Kate and Leopold* (2001) literally rely on their heroines' recourse to period fantasy to fuel the romance in the postmodern present. As a case in point, *Kate and Leopold* suggests that the modern American woman's ideal spouse is really a nineteenth-century upper-class British male, indicating just how heavily "period" is read as "romantic," rather than "sexist," by today's postfeminist romance viewers. Here, the past is romanticized as vaguely superior to the present. Kate ultimately rejects the advances she has made as a twentieth-century career woman and instead chooses life as a nineteenth-century duchess, albeit an impoverished one, with her gallant 1873 suitor Leopold. The story conveniently concludes with Kate's arrival in the past. Along the same lines, the U.S. public television network PBS advertises its Masterpiece Theatre series, which features literary adaptations, with the slogan "Be more passionate!" rather than trying to appeal to possible spectators' interest in high culture and the literary canon.

What is of particular concern to me here is how the "woman's heritage film" attempts to articulate a double discourse – one of women's liberation and one of emotional fulfillment and sexual self-discovery – hence addressing contemporary female spectators on the level of both feminist politics and a feminine erotics. If genre cinema picks up on pressing social

tensions and then seeks (and fails) to overcome these conflicts through its generic narrative resolutions (or false happy endings), as Thomas Elsaesser and others have suggested (Elsaesser, 1995; Schatz, 1981), the "woman's heritage film" speaks to women's ongoing quest to lead emotionally and professionally fulfilling lives and articulates both feminist and romantic drives. By safely transferring this struggle to the past, however, it also makes a two-fold move typically associated with the rhetoric of postfeminism: it depicts feminism as "historical" and concentrates on the dual desire for sex and success. In other words, the "woman's heritage film" imports the postfeminist objective to "have it all" into the heritage film, creating postfeminist *her*stories and fantasies of romantic self-discovery by using the genre's inherent contradictions to heighten its eroticism, rather than encourage a feminist critique that is applicable to contemporary discourse.

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A more detailed look at three examples – Sandra Goldbacher's *The Governess*, Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park* (1998) and Neil LaBute's *Possession* (2002) – will illustrate how the "woman's heritage film" addresses feminist concerns but also incorporates conventions from the Gothic and contemporary romance fiction to appeal to their postfeminist constituency.

In *The Governess* – based on a fictional Victorian diary Goldbacher wrote as a teenager – a young woman finds employment at a chilly estate in the Scottish Isle of Skye, made particularly strange by the fact that we discover her new workplace through her "foreign" perspective. As Andrew Higson points out, "Jewish filmmaker Sandra Goldbacher… brought [a] distinctive un-English, or at least non-mainstream English" viewpoint to the story (Higson, 2003: 29). Moreover, as Cindy Fuchs suggests, the fact

> that Goldbacher wrote Rosina's story herself… probably helps to disguise its revisionism. She's not tussling with revered works of art but with well-known conventions (marriage as the happy ending, devotion as the ultimate goal). It also helps that the love story… is entwined with at least two other plots, Rosina passing as gentile and developing as an artist. (Fuchs, 1998)

The film first introduces Rosina inhabiting a Dickensian *mise-en-scène* of lower-class London as she attends synagogue. Her gaze at the men below foregrounds her sexual curiosity, which continues in a later scene when she discusses the texture and taste of male ejaculate (it is like "semolina," a gentile dessert) stating that she would "like to see it, but not to drink it." Rosina's rather anachronistically liberated way of Jewishness thus helps the narrative to free her from the conventions of gentile Victoriana that stress sexual repression and the inability to express erotic desire directly. The heroine is radically modern and linked to the racial other, but caught in a world of social confinement.

The motif of female entrapment clearly draws on conventions from the Victorian Gothic novel, which typically depicts the trials of a heroine who suffers anguish and abjection at the hands of a tyrannical patriarch (Allen: 1995), a theme many "woman's heritage films" take up in a revisionist reworking of the Gothic. The films frequently position their heroines as initially controlled and confined by the men around them, as does the classical Gothic novel, only to later explode this framework in their unconventional and ambiguous resolution, which makes it useful to further place the films within the traditions of popular women's literature (Krenz, 1992: 3). Janice Radway's study of romance readers has shown that popular

romance narratives function as a wish-fulfillment fantasy that provides the heroine/romance reader satisfaction through "an exclusive and intense emotional relationship with a tender, life-giving individual." (Radway, 1984: 151) The historical romance novel explores these fantasies within the framework of the Victorian Gothic, but has been generically contemporized (Frenier, 1988; Jensen: 1984). Its tropes typically produce a story-line which features a twentieth-century female protagonist (a character, whose aspirations and attitudes reflect that of a woman informed by the discourses of women's liberation) who is trapped in the confining patriarchal space of the Victorian Gothic. Typically, the heroine eventually finds happiness in sexual fulfillment through the union with an understanding male character, who seems to be a twentieth century male displaced into the historical past also. The "woman's heritage film" employs similar strategies to make its protagonists appealing to a postfeminist audience.

In recent years, the debates surrounding heritage cinema have picked up on the genre's increasing engagement with revisionist history writing, particularly regarding issues of class, colonialism and feminism. Some critics even dubbed this second generation of heritage films "post-heritage" (Monk, 2001), while others continue to have misgivings about films that add a kind of Hollywood feminism to the script to sell an Austen adaptation to the postfeminist film-going public (Troost and Greenfield, 2001). Updating adaptations of the classics not only allows the import of popular narrative tropes and generic conventions in the effort to appropriate classic literature for a mass market (an attempt that failed commercially for many of these films), it also reflects the general postmodern tendency towards a critical view of history, which this kind of rewriting incorporates.

The trend to contemporize classic novels is particularly visible in Patricia Rozema's adaptation of *Mansfield Park*, arguably the most moralizing and repressive of Jane Austen's novels. Rozema takes numerous liberties with the literary original with a result that shows various parallels with original screenplays like *The Governess.* As Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield point out, most critics praised the "'contemporary resonances' and intelligence of the film (Holden, Ebert) although they conceded that the dramatic makeover of the main character and the eroticism would shock the purists." (Troost and Greenfield, 2001: 188) Rozema's Fanny Price is not only based on Austen's character, but is conflated with Austen herself (see Appendix One). Far from being the meek and moral poor relation in the novel, she has an independent spirit and aspires to be a writer herself; the writing we hear cited in the film is in fact based on Austen's own juvenilia.

Just like Rosina's arrival in Scotland in *The Governess*, Fanny's arrival at Mansfield Park is linked to the notion of otherness. En route from Portsmouth, young Fanny wonders about the horrifying noises coming from a ship anchored below. "Black cargo, Miss," explains the coachman and soon after we learn that Mansfield's riches derive from Sir Thomas's property in Antigua, where he is holding slaves. In fact, the Gothic secret of Rozema's Austen adaptation is not the inappropriate flirtation between Henry Crawford and Maria Rushworth that eventually leads to adultery, scandal, and ruin, but the brutalization and rape of Sir Thomas' slaves in Antigua, a theme only tangentially explored in Austen's novel. Indeed, Sir Thomas's part in the slave business, in tandem with his attitude towards women, make him an unappealingly racist patriarch rather than the moral compass of the novel. The identification between Fanny and Sir Thomas' slaves is further stressed when Sir Thomas concludes that Fanny's charms should be sufficient for "some young man of good standing to sit up and take notice" and decides to host a coming out ball for her (Fanny: "I won't be sold off like one of your father's slaves"). This further suggests that Fanny's refusal of Mr. Crawford's proposal

soon after the ball is an act of feminist resistance against marriage as a meal ticket, rather than Austen's character's incapacity to commit herself to someone whom she suspects to be of low moral character. "It ought to be not set down for certain," this contemporary Fanny argues, "that any man must be acceptable to every woman that he happens to like himself." The direct link the film makes between sexism and racism thus enables Fanny Price's resistance to marrying a man she does not love to be read as reflecting the attitude of a proto-feminist humanitarian, rather than that of the righteous and prudish moralist the novel celebrates.

The film's introduction of these new elements, as well as the fact that not all heritage films are adaptations of renowned literary classics, underlines the genre's connection to those popular forms of writing just mentioned, the Gothic novel and historical romance fiction, which are also traceable in *The Governess*. In addition, the updating of characters nods to the advances of feminism and makes the protagonist more familiar to contemporary audiences. The heroines of the "woman's heritage film" often seem like time-travelers rather than historically authentic figures, which permits the simultaneous staging of idealization (via *mise-en-scène*, romance and eroticism) and critique (a proto-feminist discourse) to co-exist within the narrative. In *The Governess*, Rosina's refusal of a marriage of convenience after her father's murder at the beginning of the film immediately articulates her desire for a liberated modern existence. She dreams of a career as an actress, an aspiration unthinkable for a genteel Victorian lady in its transgressive desire for public self-display and commercial availability, yet a familiar fantasy for contemporary teenagers brought up in of today's celebrity culture, making Rosina both "different" (in the context of the historical setting) and thoroughly recognizable (to today's viewers). Hoping to help support her family on her own, Rosina in fact becomes an actress in life once she secures employment as a governess in Scotland by posing as the gentlewoman Mary Blackchurch. *The Governess*' heroine is an imposter, akin to the postfeminist spectator herself, only superficially familiar with nineteenth-century upper-class codes of behavior, taking on what seems to be the world of the Brontës with a confidence and attitude many modern readers may secretly have desired for Jane Eyre. Indeed, the Cavendish household is ripe with familiar Victorian characters replete with a silly mistress, a lively young charge, a wayward son expelled from Oxford, and an intriguing lord of the manor engaged in mysterious scientific experiments (of course, semolina is served as soon as the heroine arrives). Once Rosina/Mary enters the world of gentile Victorians, *The Governess* takes full and deliberate recourse to various literary blueprints referring to the Brontës and other Gothics. But, the film is also actively engaged in rewriting the Gothic heroine as an active seeker of both sexual and scientific knowledge.

Sexuality and the exotic are conflated and often facilitate escape within these fictions. In Jane Campion's *The Piano*, for instance, which Goldbacher cites as an inspiration for her film (Kaufman, 2003), both romantic protagonists are exoticized through their difference – Ada through her elective mutism and her lover Baines through his association with the Maori people. In *The Governess*, the heroine's difference is used in a similar fashion, facilitating her emotional, professional, and artistic journey. At the same time, romance and professional or artistic aspirations are often linked thereby coupling feminist ambition with female self-realization and erotic desire. We soon learn that what is at stake in *The Governess* is nothing less than visual representation itself, as the enigmatic Charles Cavendish is involved in early photography. Yet Cavendish is unable to fix his images on paper for more than a few hours. It is Rosina's participation in his work, and their simultaneous love affair, that begins both her professional training as well as her emotional and artistic development. It is she who discovers the right solution for the fixation process – while celebrating a Jewish Passover

ritual in her chamber, no less – changing Cavendish's ephemeral images into lasting artifacts. And it is she who sees the potential of photography as an artistic medium. Staging Biblical scenes or posing nude for her lover's camera, Rosina becomes an artist as she becomes a woman. "You taught me to be an inventor," she marvels, "I feel like I could do anything. I want to invent a way of fixing this moment forever."

The twinning of desires articulated here (the desire for professional accomplishment *and* the desire for lasting love) in fact regularly appears in the "woman's heritage film." Patricia Rozima's *Mansfield Park* equally stresses the importance of romance and eroticism and represents Austen's world as full of sexual tension and carnal desire. The introduction of the Crawfords at Mansfield Park foregrounds the family's gaze at the newcomers, as Rozema's ironic camera slowly pans up and down Henry and Mary Crawford's elegant figures. Mary Crawford's suggestive statements ("And which of you gentlemen might I have the pleasure of making love to?"), her subsequent erotized rehearsal of *Lover's Vows*, and her undressing of a rain-drenched Fanny in the cottage, all speak to the prominence of sexual desire in *Mansfield Park*. "Attractive young people with no work to do," suggests Rozema, "would be physically aware of each other." (Allen, 2000) Along the same lines, Rozema's Fanny Price is a sexual subject whose attachment to her cousin Edmund seems much more important than her disapproval of Henry Crawford's personality. That means that her insistence in rejecting Mr. Crawford's proposal is not motivated by moral rectitude, but the desire for lasting passion and a fulfilling romantic relationship which she doubts the flighty Henry can offer in the long run. Fanny's sister Susie's response to hearing that Crawford is a bit of a rake ("yes, *please*!") further supports the idea that rakishness could be sexy as long as the rake's romantic desire is firmly and unquestioningly focused on the heroine.

Despite many heritage films' tendency to adjust to contemporary viewers' preferences, many critics have seen the genre as essentially affirmative of high culture codes, validating a cultural fluency in the vocabulary of the Western canon in times when the so-called cultural elite no longer has assured access to the financial privileges once understood as going along with a college degree in the liberal arts (Hipsky, 1998: 98). As a result, the films have been linked to Fredric Jameson's notion of postmodernist nostalgia (Jameson, 1991), which reflects the conservatism of the present and indicates a backlash against the advances made by the sexual revolution and women's emancipation. In Britain especially, heritage cinema and television of the 1980s were identified with Thatcherism and its conservative social values, prompting the British heritage debate (Vincendeau, 2001: xix). Moreover, because many heritage films, including those discussed here, draw on British literature or are at least set in historical England, discussions of this genre in Britain frequently center on questions of British national identity and the representation of British history. Clearly, all period films – both literary adaptations and costume dramas based on original screenplays – speak to a contemporary concern with the past. Yet as historical dramas are nostalgic for a traditional and arguably more "decent" universe, they are simultaneously celebratory of modernity's break from its constraints. "Any fetishization of Victorian luxury on film, let alone any latent idealization […] of the period's orderly erotic value system," argues Garrett Steward, "must be matched by a distancing of the age's blinkered stabilities sufficient to return viewers to the present with equanimity." (Steward, 1995: 154-5) Costume dramas' representation of history as visual spectacle further points to the genre's aesthetics of display, selling visual pleasure through the opulence and texture afforded by the baroque depiction of period cinematography and luxurious historical fashions, a kind of cinematic antiquing. In addition, the international appeal of this cinema, especially in the United States, speaks as much to a romantic

anglophil(m)ia directed at the past as it speaks to modernity and its perceived "Americanization" of the present.

The best illustration of this tension, perhaps even to describe the overall impetus driving "the woman's heritage film," is Neil LaBute's adaptation of A.S. Byatt's 1990 novel *Possession*. Without being interested in the obvious difference between novel and film, it is significant that the film turns one of the protagonists into an American. In fact, LaBute casts both leads playing contemporaries with Hollywood stars, Aaron Eckhart and Gwyneth Paltrow, who are contrasted with the British cast of Jennifer Ehle and Jeremy Northam as the Victorian lovers. Thus it is the contemporary "Americans," unable to make modern love work, who search for romance in the historical archive, where it seems poetry and romantic abandon were still possible. In the modern present, argues LaBute:

> we end up repressing ourselves. The number of choices available to us today makes us just balk. We think 'Oh God, what do you mean there's no…I can do whatever I want?' And that makes us self-regulate. And yet in that Victorian society these characters have to search for a way to express themselves, which leads to a physical passion. (Grisby, 2002)

LaBute's *Possession* self-consciously foregrounds the postmodern fascination with historical romance and identifies present-day frustrations with emotional alienation and romantic instability as the engine behind the "woman's heritage film."

LaBute's characters seem indeed motivated by a Jamesonian postmodern nostalgia as they begin their historical inquiry. However, their romantic notions about the past are soon neutralized by their discoveries. In *Possession*, we encounter Roland, a young American academic in London interested in the work of Victorian poet Henry Randolph Ash. Roland is doubly distanced from the possibilities of true, Victorian-style romance in terms of both gender and nationality (American, male). Various interactions suggest the assumption that "Americanness" and genuine romantic access are incompatible. Literary professor Morton Cropper, the only other American in the film, for instance, rapaciously pursues any available Ash-documents for his collection in New Mexico, seemingly more interested in the acquisition and literal export of British poetry than in the preservation of its spirit. Roland's romantic alienation further precedes his discovery of Ash's secret romance. "I'm off women," he tells his friend, who pragmatically replies, "yes, but that's no reason to be *off* women," underlining the contemporary atmosphere of conflicted gender relations and its emphasis on the unproblematic separation of sexual acts and emotions. As Daniel Zalewski's *New York Times* review points out, the central paradox of both Byatt's novel and LaBute's script is how two Victorians can find it easier than the moderns to risk everything for love, concluding that what "*Possession* wisely suggests is that sex and romance have become depressingly demystified in our obsessively analytical age." (Zalewski, 2002)

Victorian passions enter the narrative when Roland accidentally discovers an unsent love letter drafted in Ash's hand and proceeds to find out whether the married Ash had a previously unknown affair. To help him, he recruits Maud Bailey, a feminist scholar specializing in the work of Christabel LaMotte, whom Roland suspects to be Ash's "dark lady." Maud, whom her ex-lover Fergus Wolf describes as a "regular ball-breaker," shares Roland's romantic apprehensions. While both uncover a Victorian romance where, in Christabel's words, "no mere human can stand in a fire and not be consumed," they seem to be terrified about falling in love themselves. Significantly, Maud's cool reserve and

concomitant withdrawal into the world of literary analysis ("I can be a touch empirical sometimes") is placed in opposition to the Victorian Christabel LaMotte. Christabel paints and writes poetry, yet most importantly, she allows herself to be wooed by words and meaningful glances rather than dissecting them. Indeed *Possession*'s structuring pairs of opposition, that of poetry versus analysis, of Victoriana versus postmodernism, literalize the impetus behind the contemporary penchant for the "woman's heritage film": a longing for access to romance and passion unmarred by postmodern distance and its cynical attitude towards the world of emotions.

In fact, the erotics played out through temporal displacement, their very situation in historical periods associated with strong patriarchal oppression allow fantasies of a semi-masochistic nature to be played out in stories in which restriction is followed by sexual liberation and pleasure. Many of these films, just as the Victorian Gothic and the historical romance novel, use the corset as their metaphorical center: either implicitly in the figuration of the female heroine encased in patriarchal bindings, as is the case in the Victorian Gothic; or explicitly, in the sexual dramatizations of the "bodice ripper." The corset, then, is a garment that relieves historical heroines from facing Bridget Jones's modern movie dilemma of having to choose between thong and body shaper as the most flattering choice of underwear for the occasion, serving as a literalized patriarchal constraint and bondage lingerie at the same time. "You like pain?" asks the heroine of Gore Verbinski's Disney-ride-inspired Hollywood blockbuster *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003), "try wearing a corset!" In other words, while the subtext of the "woman's heritage film" is informed by a feminist critique of patriarchy, it simultaneously uses its representation of the historical repression of women to heighten the sexual tension of the narrative. Its romantic conclusion is one of sexual release within monogamous heterosexuality in an a-typically equal relationship (the one special person is found), not one of political emancipation. The formula driving these fictions therefore doesn't lie in their historicism, but is guided by the notion that societal oppression and hidden passion are two antagonistic forces that are conducive to romantic ecstasy, a notion that is clearly problematic within a feminist discourse (see Appendix Two).

It is important to note here that many "woman's heritage films" are also directed by women (among others Jane Campion, Sally Potter, Gillian Armstrong, Patricia Rozema, Sandra Goldbacher and Mira Nair) (see Appendix Three). In choosing classical female writers like Austen or the Brontës as inspirations, these directors are clearly involved in the feminist project of making women's artistic heritage visible. Yet at the same time, their emotional involvement with Victoriana goes beyond a feminist agenda of this nature. The films' lacey eroticism does not only enable critique but also emotional yearning by feeding a nostalgic desire for the intrigue of the forbidden fascinations of the Gothic. The "woman's heritage film" therefore tends toward the conflation of various paradigms resulting in costume dramas where feminist concerns regarding the writing of female histories, as well as women's fantasies of sexual fulfillment in narratives of historical displacement, are articulated. This allows the tensions between feminist politics and feminine erotics that have informed women's fantasies and feminist critical thinking over the last century to self-consciously reemerge in works that inject a critical feminine perspective, grounded in a postmodern investigation of female agency and desire in history, into the romance.

Particularly, the films' endings serve to illustrate this double engagement. While having discovered her art, Rosina fails on the emotional level in *The Governess*. Unlike in *Kate and Leopold*, the modern woman and the Victorian gentleman prove to be incompatible. While Rosina dreams of a joint photography studio in Paris, the married Cavendish is frightened of

his "foreign" lover's passion. His refusal to let her operate the camera herself becomes symbolic of his claim of dominance in the relationship. The heroine's desire for equality (she corrects Cavendish when he imagines naming his invention the "Cavendish method" by suggesting the "Cavendish-Blackchurch method") brings about the angry rejection of her lover. The erotic portrait Rosina eventually takes of a naked, sleeping Cavendish is a twofold transgression in Victorian power relations, both in emphasizing Rosina's erotic gaze at a passive male object of desire and in suggesting her professional competence, if not her artistic superiority. This immediately prompts Cavendish to terminate the relationship. In a sadistic final gesture, Cavendish stages a demonstration of his ultimate authority within the patriarchal setting of nineteenth-century Scotland. When he presents his discovery of photography to an expert, he calls for Rosina only to introduce her as "Miss Blackchurch, my daughter's governess," deliberately taunting the young woman with her double exclusion.

But *The Governess* also insists on its heroine's final triumph. Angry and heartbroken, Rosina returns to London, but not before giving in to the erotic advances of Cavendish's smitten teenage son Henry. As in many heritage films, progress and passion belong to the young, pointing to a teleology of social evolution that will ultimately bring about the present day viewer and modern cinema, while engaging in the fantasies of Romanticism (see Appendix Four). Along these lines, Rosina turns to the future with Cavendish's precious photographic equipment in hand. She leaves behind a photographic close-up of her eyes gazing directly at the observer, a gesture that allows the heroine to reclaim her power through the look. In a reflective epilogue, we see Rosina in charge of her own photographic studio and learn that she has become famous for the portraits she has made of the Jewish people. Rosina has loved and lost, but found both her artistic voice and financial independence in the process. Victorian romance, mystery and passion give way to an autonomous, modern existence likely to satisfy the postfeminist viewer on either level.

In *Mansfield Park*, Maria's appeal to her brother once her transgression with Henry is discovered – "Don't look at me like this, Edmund, Rushworth [her husband] is a fool and I can't get out. I can't get out" – is one of the most poignant feminist statements in the film. It echoes the theme of the starling trapped in its cage from Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, which Fanny is discovered reading earlier (Troost and Greenfield, 2001: 198). Getting out, the film suggests, is impossible in Austen's pre-feminist England. This is also shown through the respective fates of Fanny's mother and her sister Lady Bertram (both played by Lindsay Duncan to emphasize the point). The latter ends up in poverty for marrying for love, while the former, who married for money, spends her days in laudanum-induced oblivion. The film's overriding moral indignation, however, shifts from the sexual infidelities of Maria and Henry towards Sir Thomas and his involvement in both sexism and racism, in other words, towards systems of domination privileging dead white males.

Furthermore, the romantic conclusion of Rozema's postfeminist *Mansfield Park* self-consciously invokes the power of literature and erotic fantasy. In Austen's text, Edmund gets over Mary Crawford when he begins to wonder "whether a very different kind of woman might not do just as well," a triumph of good sense over irrational infatuation. The film, however, must invoke another kind of fiction. "I've loved you all my life," Edmund finally declares, "as a man loves a woman, as a hero loves a heroine, as I've never loved anyone in my entire life," making it clear that his previously dormant passion for Fanny has now been fully awakened. The film's conclusion further speaks to postfeminist viewers' fantasy of "having it all." *Mansfield Park* does not end with a wedding, but with the acceptance of Fanny's stories by a publisher willing to print her "effusions of fancy by a very young girl in a

style entirely new," brought about with Edmund's support. Much as at the end of *The Governess*, Fanny receives artistic recognition, but, unlike Rosina, she also wins the man she loves. As the couple stroll towards their new home in the cozy parsonage, the film not only situates happiness in middle-class comforts, but suggests that women's self-realization comes from a combination of romantic fulfillment and professional, preferably artistic, success.

Fanny Price's triumph results from her ability to transcend class boundaries and defy patriarchal expectations, thus enabling erotic self-determination and professional/creative accomplishment. Troost and Greenfield conclude:

> If marriage for social position is failed liberation then writing in this film, can be seen as a truer form of liberation for a nineteenth-century woman. A marriage consonant with such ambitions can contribute to such liberation, something Austen herself could not achieve but her fictional counterpart can. (Troost and Greenfield, 2001: 201)

After all, postfeminist spectators would rather imagine themselves as Jane Austen than as Fanny Price, if only Austen's biography included a happy marriage.

Finally, Neil LaBute's cross-cutting between past and present in *Possession* literalizes the dual concerns of "the woman's heritage film" by identifying the past with romance and the present with individualism (which invokes both alienation and sexual freedom). While the Victorian poets, paralleled with the moderns in flashbacks, express their feelings in passionate lovemaking, the contemporary scholars make an awkward attempt at sex that ends prematurely. "Freud!" jibes Roland, "On the other side of attraction lies repulsion. Or was that Calvin Klein?" The fear of "being burnt up by love" thus imposes internal limitations on the moderns' capacity for passion, while the Victorians struggle with constraints that are predominantly external. If the price for modernity's lack of conventional sexual boundaries is suspicion, loneliness and alienation, *Possession* certainly does not reward its Victorians for their romantic transgression, but seeks out an even harsher punishment. Ash feels morally and socially obligated to remain with his frigid wife, which means that Christabel pays dearly for her few weeks of ecstasy. Her presumably lesbian lover Blanche commits suicide following Christabel's change in affections, burdening Christabel with lifelong feelings of guilt. As moderns, we are expected to repeatedly and speedily "get over" the end of relationships; in Victorian terms, the flipside of passion is ruin and even death. Christabel's pregnancy means she must abandon Blanche to return to her family, where her illegitimate daughter can be hidden among her sister's offspring. Unlike Henry Randolph Ash, whose emotional torments give birth to some of the most admired poetry in Britain, Christabel's days are henceforth spent penning poems seen as marginal ("terrible, sentimental stuff") unloved by a daughter uninterested in her spinster "aunt," thus condemned to angrily living "a long life out in a dark room."

In *Possession*, Christabel's attempt at romantic and artistic self-realization, which, as we have seen, is the postfeminist fantasy that drives the "woman's heritage film" can only be realized over several generations. Even if LaBute sees Victoriana as tragically romantic, it is only partially romanticized and never idealized. Further, unlike Byatt in the novel, he is primarily concerned with the contemporary states of impassive alienation. We are after all returned to the world of Don DeLillo and Joyce Carol Oates, or even the world of LaBute's earlier film *In the Company of Men* (1997), where genuine affection seems shockingly absent. Symptomatically then, the "woman's heritage film" focuses as much on revisionist

representations of women's history as they point to modern alienation; not only to a British heritage but to an uncomfortable "Americanized" present. That said, it is in the here and now where his *Possession* ultimately locates its moments of hope. If Christabel's poetry was previously deemed insignificant by the patriarchal British cultural establishment, it is now rediscovered by feminist English scholar Maud Bailey (who turns out to be the great-granddaughter of the doomed Victorian couple). And it is the eventual union between the British Maud and the American Roland that enables the couple's professional success through their discovery of the poets' relationship, once again manufacturing a happy ending that combines romance with professional achievement.

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Along these lines, what makes the "woman's heritage film" so appealing to audiences of the 1990s and beyond, is its simultaneous articulation of strong emotion and sexual passion and the staging of women's proto-feminist history, however anachronistic. There can be little doubt that the directors/screenwriters of these texts, through the revisionist re-writing of the classic or Gothic novel and the contemporary Harlequin romance, seek to add a critical feminist layer to the work; an element not present in the earlier generic forms. More important to these texts than a representation of a historical past, then, is the fictive creation of an arena of social *o*ppression and sexual *re*pression, which is particularly suited for the exploration of discourses of emancipation, emotion and eroticism. Contemporary viewers do not suffer the same sexist oppression the heroines of these dramas encounter, but certainly understand disappointed desire as a modern frustration. Yet instead of addressing the complications of modern love that many young women perceive as postfeminist, the "woman's heritage film" provides two different fantasies at the same time. On the one hand, it provides the joy of seeing a romantic historical heroine struggle and often win against the odds, a proto-feminist fantasy. On the other hand, it offers the pleasure of romantic and sexual fantasy, which is enhanced through the repressive social background of the historical diegesis and thus links them to the literary bodice rippers of popular fiction. Viewing a modern Victorian Gothic or an Austen, Brontë or Henry James adaptation in many ways assures audiences that they have come a long way. Indeed, what seems to make these pictures so popular, especially for female audiences, is that they talk about a time before the first wave of feminism. They show us heroines who struggle for liberation *as* they are pursuing romance, wanting to "have it all." In other words, through displacing the desire for both gender equality and sexuality onto historical periods commonly associated with overt domination – rather than with today's more complicated forms of gender relations – contemporary period romances locate gender struggles in the past, while allowing for a nostalgic sense of eroticism through emphasizing the sensuality of the periodic *mise-en-scène* and the thrill of forbidden pleasures. As *Pirates of the Caribbean* screenwriter Terry Rossio has pointed out, the producers saw the film as a "very classic, Jane Austen-style bodice ripping romance," underlining the popular conflation of classic literature with sex (Denby, 2003: 95). The return of historical designs in wedding fashions articulates similar fantasies. After all, never does today's modern girl look more like a historical heroine than when wearing a period inspired wedding gown, momentarily living the ultimate heritage fantasy yet painfully aware of contemporary divorce statistics.

The question remains whether these narratives also elide socially critical components by rendering feminist struggles as historical, and by using women's history of oppression as a tool for creating sexually charged fantasies of romantic passion, which allows for a variety of contradictory readings regarding the genre's position within a framework of feminist politics.

These tensions resonate with the general confusion over the characteristics of postfeminism. "For some," explains Diane Negra, "postfeminism constitutes a playful and empowering new phase in feminism's relationship to popular culture; for others, it is another means through which feminist cultural politics may be diluted and misappropriated by the mainstream media." (Negra, 2004) To be sure, the "woman's heritage film" offers safe rebellions that in no way challenge the contemporary status quo. After all, if all it takes for *Titanic*'s Rose Bukater to become a liberated women is to sleep with a bohemian artist, we are confronted with a challenge that can be easily performed by any not-too-rebellious co-ed today, presumably without any serious repercussion or political effect. That said, the "woman's heritage film" celebrates strong, passionate, independent-minded women who strive for self-realization in the private and public spheres of a diegetic world that is as repressive as it is romantic. The films' attitude towards the past as romantic fantasy remains ambiguous. Seen through LaBute's eyes, the more you learn about the Victorians the less you like them, despite their romantic appearance. Victorian passions may make for ready box-office profits, while postfeminist audiences happily leave behind the patriarchal historical framing that makes them possible. The "woman's heritage film" allows them to do so without providing a sense of continuing struggle. On the other side of attraction lies repulsion.

Appendices

Appendix One

Kenneth Turan's review of the film suggests that "with its self-effacing heroine and deeply moral concerns, *Mansfield Park* is Jane Austen's unlikeliest candidate for screen success," arguing that the novel is unappealing and could only work for modern audiences as rewritten from a feminist perspective. (Turan, 1999)

Appendix Two

On a discussion of scenarios related to these issues in women's popular literature, see: Tania Modleski (1982) *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books; and Jan Cohn (1988) *Romance and the Erotics of Property*. Durham and New York: Duke University Press.

Appendix Three

On women's participation in heritage film production, see Higson's "Table on the Contributions of Women to the Writing, Producing, or Directing of 'British' costume Dramas of the 1980s and 90s" (Higson, 2003: 268).

Appendix Four

Devoney Looser sees a similar move in Ang Lee's Austen adaptation *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), where the hope for a more feminist future lies with Margaret's (the youngest sister's) generation. See Devoney Looser (1998) Feminist Implications of the Silver Screen Austen, in Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield (eds.), *Jane Austen in Hollywood* Lexington: UP Kentucky, p. 165.

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