Happily Ever After...and After: Serialization and the Popular Romance Novel

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In 1982, none of the four romance novels that won a Golden Medallion, the top literary prize for romance fiction, belonged to a narrative series. In 2012, nine of the twelve romance novels that won a (renamed) RITA award belonged to a narrative series. This change in what kind of romance novels are deemed "outstanding" examples of the genre and receive top honors from the influential Romance Writers of America (RWA) is significant ("Rita Awards"). It points towards one of the most important yet understudied developments in the popular romance genre over the last thirty years: the growing interest in and eventual boom of narrative serialization. Although little is known about the history of serialization in romance novels, it is clear that the serial format has become increasingly prominent in the genre in the last few decades. Twenty-five years ago, between 1988 and 1992, seventeen percent of the RITA-winning romances belonged to a narrative series. A decade later, between 1998 and 2002, this number had risen to forty

percent. In the last five years (2008-2012), no less than sixty-three percent of RITAs were awarded to serialized romances.

The systematic rise of the serial narrative in the popular romance genre as reflected by the genre's award history seems to be reaching new highs in recent years. Not only did serialized romances set new records on the award circuit, but the format is scoring on bestseller lists as well. According to information provided by RWA, sixty-three percent of the top bestselling romances between 2007 and 2011 were part of a narrative series (Fry). Roughly eighty-five percent of the romance novels that appeared on the extended *New York Times* bestseller list in April 2013 similarly belong to a narrative series. Two of the most famous romance novels of the last decade, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2008) and E.L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), are likewise part of a narrative series. While the immense popularity of Meyer's and particularly James' serial work brings the boom of romance serialization into relief for a mainstream audience, these mega-bestsellers are part of a much wider development in the romance genre that needs our attention.

The unprecedented prevalence and popularity of romance novels that are part of narrative series raises a number of pressing questions. Some of these questions have to do with the very definition of the romance genre itself. Romance is a generic form defined by its happy ending, stakeholders across the board have argued. In a romance novel, the protagonists who meet, fall in love, and struggle to overcome the barriers between them are always rewarded with true love in the end. If this ending is a necessary feature of the genre, what does narrative serialization in a romance novel look like? Which narrative strategies are used in romance novels to create serial connections between different installments in a series while allowing the narrative to reach the definitive optimistic conclusion that seems to be its generic *raison d'être*? Are there limits to the degree of serialization that the genre can handle, and if so what are they? Other questions have to do with the reception of serialized romance novels. What is at stake in the use of narrative serialization for both the genre and its readers? Recent sales figures seem to suggest that romance readers have collectively fallen in love with romance serialization.

What about the series format might particularly appeal to the genre's predominantly female reader? Do serialized romances perhaps offer their readers something these booklovers cannot find elsewhere? And if this is the case, why has the genre really embraced serialization only in fairly recent times?

Answers to these and other questions about serialization in popular romance novels require a thorough examination of this phenomenon, which has so far been ignored by scholars. The current article aims to lay the foundation for such a more extensive scholarly exploration of the romance serial. It focuses in particular on the interaction between the opposing narrative dynamics that drive the romance and the serialized form and traces a number of different serialization strategies that are used in the romance genre. It argues that while serialization may stretch the romance's narrative possibilities to the breaking point, the serial form also offers the genre a new space in which to articulate romance fantasies that might particularly appeal to its contemporary reader.

Serialization and Romance: Opposing Narrative Dynamics

Narrative serialization refers to the phenomenon in which a narrative is originally published or otherwise released in separate yet successive parts, usually named installments or episodes (Hagedorn, "Doubtless" 28; Hughes and Lund 1; Hayward 3). As a narrative format, serialization is neither new nor rare. It is used frequently in a wide range of genres and media, including literature, film, television, radio, and comics. As a culture, we are thoroughly accustomed to dealing with stories that are narrated in materially separated parts. Serialization scholar Roger Hagedorn claims that "since the 19th century the serial has been a dominant mode of narrative representation in western culture – if not in fact the dominant mode" ("Technology" 5). As Hagedorn further argues, the widespread dissemination of serialization since the nineteenth century is related to the format's impressive commercial capabilities. Serialization is superbly suited to the commercial demands of modern mass-market culture

because it is, as Jennifer Hayward has pointed out, an "immensely effective means of catching and keeping an audience" (3). The forced interruptions in the serialized narrative create the demand they subsequently feed since they appeal to the reader's primordial narrative desire to know what happens next. This desire drives the consumption of the next installment in a process that, as contemporary soap operas illustrate, can be repeated almost *ad infinitum*.

Serialization's status as an exceptionally effective commercial tool makes romance's apparent historical reserve towards the form all the more remarkable. Romance is without question a thoroughly commercialized genre. Since the inception of the modern popular romance novel in the early twentieth century, romance publishers like Mills & Boon, Harlequin, Silhouette, Avon, and many others have all but perfected the art of commercial publishing. Driven by economic imperatives these companies have developed various strategies, including the "brand name publishing" (Radway 39) for which particularly Harlequin has become famous, to sell as many books as possible. Their efforts have not been in vain. Romance is the bestselling genre on the American consumer book market. It has annual sale figures averaging around $1.36 billion and reaches a readership of close to seventy-five million Americans ("The Romance Genre"). No other genre does better. Yet, if romance is a genre that understands the commercial currents of the publishing industry better than most, what factors might explain its historical reserve towards the commercially successful serial format?

Romance's initial hesitation towards narrative serialization has to do, I argue, with the opposing narrative dynamics that drive the romance and the serial forms. Romance is a generic form predicated on achieving narrative closure (Capelle 145; Pearce, *Romance Writing* 146). It reaches this closure in the happy end to the love story that is its main focus. This happy end – known in the romance community by the acronym HEA, which stands for Happy Ever After – is not a coincidental element of the genre, but is universally recognized as one of the romance novel's defining and distinguishing features (Regis 9). The serial, by contrast, is a narrative from defined by its lack of a definitive ending. It is predicated on the systematic and structural postponement

of a conclusive narrative resolution and, as Hagedorn argues, "purposely does not achieve closure" ("Technology" 7). Indeed, confirms Hayward, "the trope of refusal of closure...is an essential quality of the serial form" (141).

The challenge of integrating these two conflicting narrative currents is compounded by the crucial role each ending plays in the formats' respective commercial functioning. Romance scholars have long argued that the happy end is, as Lynne Pearce recently put it, "one of the most singular pleasures romance fiction trades in" ("Romance"). Janice Radway's famous ethnographic study of romance readers, *Reading the Romance* (1984), shines a more specific light on the central role of the happy end in the romance reading act (65-66). On the basis of reader interviews, Radway uncovers that the certainty of the happy ending enables romance readers to allow themselves to identify emotionally with the characters and thus to achieve the feelings of escape, relaxation, and happiness that they seek in the romance reading act. This positive experience in turn stimulates the consumption of more romance novels. The consumption of narrative serials, by contrast, depends on the form's lack of a conclusive ending. The "unresolved narrative tension" (Hagedorn, "Technology" 7) of the serial installment's always-provisional ending drives the reader's "desire to find out what happens next" (Hayward 3) – a desire that can only be satisfied by consuming the series' next installment.

The integration of romance and narrative serialization then poses a number of considerable challenges to both forms. Serialization has the potential to destabilize the romance form by subverting one of the genre's defining narrative features, the happy end. In this process, the romance reader's desire for closure is threatened by the serial's incessant delay of closure and the concomitant deferral of satisfaction. The romance novel's penchant for formulating a definitive narrative dénouement in turn potentially undermines the serial's characteristic resistance to ending and might wreak havoc on its typical interaction with its reader. Yet in recent times romance seems to have more than overcome these impediments to its marriage with serialization. The child of this unlikely union, the narratively serialized romance novel, has not only become almost omnipresent in the genre but also is one of its most successful commercial ventures yet. This raises interesting

questions. How do romance novelists handle the challenges inherent in the combination of romance and narrative serialization? And what, specifically, happens to the happy end in such narrative endeavors?

Types of Romance Series

Romance novelists have developed a number of different strategies to respond to the serial's impetus to postpone the happy end and materially separate it from the rest of the courtship plot. These strategies provide the basis for a first rudimentary typology of romance series in which I distinguish between three types: the character-based series, the romance-based series, and a hybrid form. Most of these types of serialized romance narratives do not strictly qualify as pure serials, but are more typically characterized as related forms of serialization such as the series or serialized series. The series is a serialized narrative in which installments share characters and a basic diegetic situation (Hagedorn, "Technology" 8); the serialized series is a series in which one narrative problem, usually a subplot, is left unresolved from one installment to the next (Freuer, qtd. in Hagedorn, "Doubtless" 39).

The character-based romance series is structured around a group of recurring characters (siblings, colleagues, friends, inhabitants of a small town, etc.). Each installment in the series features the complete romance narrative of one member of the group. The narratives are connected to each other via the recurring characters and sometimes via non-romance subplots. The type's defining serialization strategy is to locate the serial elements not in the romance plot but elsewhere in the narrative. This allows for the inclusion of the HEA in each individual installment in the series. While the character-based series avoids the serial urge to separate the happy end from the rest of the narrative, it incorporates the series' typifying narrative dynamic by leaving other narrative questions unanswered. The reader thus experiences the sense of closure she seeks in the romance reading act, even as her desire to know what happens next (and thus to consume the next installment in the series) is stimulated by other narrative elements that are left unresolved.

Unlike the character-based series, the romance-based series typically focuses on a single couple. The courtship narrative between this couple is developed over the course of multiple serial installments and usually does not reach the phase of the definitive romantic commitment that the HEA heralds until several installments into the series. This end to the romance narrative does not necessarily put an end to the series, which can go on to relate the couple's subsequent adventures. Romance-based serialization differs fundamentally from character-based serialization in that it serializes the romance narrative itself. The happy end is postponed beyond the material boundaries of the single narrative, which is highly problematic for a romance novel. But this postponement is temporary, not indefinite (as the true serial form would require). In the eventual narrative articulation of the happy end, the series as a whole offers the romantic closure that some of its single installments purposely withhold.

This type of series takes up a peripheral position in the romance system. The generic identity of many novels in such romance-based series is fuzzy. It tends to oscillate between romance, urban fantasy, and mystery. The novels are often primarily advertised as belonging to a genre other than romance. In bookstores and libraries, for example, they are usually placed in the fantasy, mystery, or science fiction section, which implies an exclusion from the romance category that is shelved elsewhere in the same space. Yet many of these series seem to be widely read amongst romance readers. They are frequently discussed on romance review websites and in the genre's most important magazines such as *RT Bookreview* (previously *Romantic Times*). Some of these novels are nominated for romance awards such as RWA's prestigious RITA's. Institutional recognition inscribes these novels in the romance genre even though the individual narratives frequently lack a crucial ingredient of the genre. Romance-based serialization is then pushing the definitional boundaries of the romance genre and represents the conceptual limits of what romance novels can handle in terms of serialization.

The hybrid form of romance serialization, finally, combines the strategies of the other two types. It is a narrative that is formally structured around a group of recurring characters with each installment focusing on the courtship plot of one

member of the group (with another member or an outsider). Yet each installment also includes the narrative representation of substantial romantic events between at least one couple that is formally the romantic focus of another installment in the series. Hybrid romance series combine, in a way, the best of both worlds. They circumvent the problem of lack of closure by doubling (or even tripling) the romance narrative and articulating an HEA to one romance narrative in each individual serial installment. Yet they also serialize the romance narrative – postpone the happy end beyond the material boundaries of a single narrative – and in doing so presumably appeal more strongly to the romance reader's desire to know what happens next.

Even though serialized narratives by definition resist ending, the romance genre has clearly devised a number of serialization strategies that allow for the narrative articulation of the Happy Ever After. Yet while the HEA moment is included in nearly all serialized romance novels, the functioning of this HEA changes in important ways in the serialized romance narrative. The HEA essentially does not function as an end to the narrative in romance series. That is, the happy end does not put a stop to the representation of the narrative world. This fictional world continues to be represented, either in the same installment or in subsequent installments in the series, beyond the moment of the Happy Ever After. In the representation of this new phase of the romance narrative, which I call the "post-HEA," serialization most importantly impacts the romance genre and develops some of the characteristics that might account for its massive popularity.

The Post-HEA

The post-HEA is an aspect of the romance narrative that is not (or only very minimally) depicted in non-serialized romances. These romances end on the Happy Ever After, which is constituted by the moment the protagonists have overcome all barriers standing between them, declared their love to each other and enter into a committed and happy romantic relationship (Regis 14). Although some romance novels include brief epilogues in which the couple is portrayed in their joyous post-HEA state of committed

romantic coupledom, generally the romance novel spends remarkably little time narratively depicting the romantic love and happiness that is teleologically pursued throughout its courtship plot. Traditionally, the HEA then functions more as a narrative promise than a narrative actuality. It implies romantic love, stability, and happiness for its protagonists, but it does not include extensive actual representations of this happiness.

This fundamentally changes in the serialized romance narrative in which the fictional universe must be extensively represented after the happy end of at least one (and often multiple) couple(s) has been reached. In narratively actualizing – i.e. depicting – the post-HEA, the serialized romance novel broaches a new aspect of the romance narrative and creates, as it were, a new narrative space in the romance genre. In this space, the romantic fantasy that lies at the very heart of romance's generic project is articulated and depicted in a manner and to an extent that is not possible in the non-serialized romance novel. It is the representation of this romantic fantasy that accounts at least in part, I argue, for the popularity of narrative serialization in the romance genre. Both readers and writers of the genre seem to appreciate the opportunity to explore in detailed and concrete ways the fantasy of committed romantic love around which the genre's core narrative always revolves.

Romance readers have long expressed the desire to be able to look beyond the happy end and have access to the fictional couple's life after the climax of the Happy Ever After. In Janice Radway's ground-breaking ethnographic study of romance readers, which was conducted at the end of the 1970s, her interviewees repeatedly brought up their wish to see "some detail about heroine and hero after they've gotten together" (66), which they classified as the third most important ingredient of a successful romance novel. Many romance authors, including stars like Nora Roberts, Julia Quinn, Nalini Singh, and others, likewise report receiving plenty of requests from readers for more story material about characters after the happy end (Roberts, "Frequently Asked Questions"; Quinn, "Dear Reader"; Singh, "Behind the Scenes"). Whereas the non-serialized romance novel can only assuage this desire in a very limited manner (by e.g. including a brief epilogue), the

post-HEA scenes in serialized romance narratives provide the romance genre with a means to address this desire in a much more systematic and extensive way.

Grappling with Issues in the Post-HEA

The post-HEA is a very interesting narrative space. It is developing into a fictional locus in which the romance genre is expressing in new and previously unavailable ways the romantic fantasy and ideology around which it revolves. In doing so, analyses of post-HEA scenes reveal the genre is not merely representing a clear-cut, pre-fixed fantasy of a romantic Happy Ever After, but actively exploring and negotiating what such a fantasy might look like beyond the climactic yet inevitably formulaic moment of the HEA. In these representations, the genre frequently addresses issues that are of particular interest to its female community of participants and that it has been grappling with for quite some time. Two such issues that are prominently addressed in many if not all post-HEA scenes are the nature of the romantic love achieved in the happy end and the potentially problematic gender politics underlying the traditional HEA.

Representations of the post-HEA unavoidably require the genre to clarify the meaning of the happy end. A central question in this discussion regards the sustainability or durability of romantic love and romantic happiness. Is the romantic union that is reached in the HEA sustained in the post-HEA? Do the characters remain as happy as they are in the climax of the happy end? Or does the post-HEA revisit the sense of romantic struggle that characterizes the pre-HEA romance narrative and plunge its characters into new forms of romantic uncertainty? A second issue revolves around the romance novel's gender politics, specifically its ideological interpretation of female identity. Feminists have historically been very critical of the gender politics underlying the traditional happy end. Scholars like Nancy K. Miller, Janice Radway, and Rachel DuPlessis have all argued that the HEA imposes problematic restrictions on the development of female identity because it supposedly reduces female subjecthood to the one-dimensional identity a woman takes up in her romantic, sexual, and

biological relation to a man. Radway's claim that this kind of loyalty to the ideology of heterosexual romantic coupledom makes romance novels anti-feminist and complicit in sustaining the patriarchal project has proven particularly influential. In post-HEA scenes, contemporary romance authors take the opportunity to address these concerns and delve deeper into the question of female agency.

Contemporary romance authors do not formulate one and the same response to the questions raised by and in the post-HEA. To the contrary, representations of the post-HEA, and thus interpretations of the HEA, may differ quite a bit from author to author, series to series and even novel to novel. While the genre currently produces far too many serialized romance novels and thus post-HEA scenes to trace and map all of these representations within the scope of a single article, the range of possibilities can effectively be illustrated by comparing the post-HEA scenes of two of the genre's biggest stars, Nora Roberts and J.R. Ward, whose post-HEA representations contrast in interesting and revealing ways.

Serialization in the Oeuvres of Nora Roberts and J.R. Ward

Nora Roberts, one of the most successful romance authors of all time, is often credited with being instrumental in popularizing the serial form in the romance genre, particularly the category format (see e.g. Gelbman 31). Roberts started writing serialized romance novels in the early 1980s, long before the format was established in the genre. Since that time she has published many dozens of romance series, which have appeared in a wide variety of romance formats and subgenres. She is particularly well known for her family series, her contemporary and paranormal trilogies and the open-ended *In Death* series she pens under the pseudonym J.D. Robb. Roberts has always chosen to represent the post-HEA fairly extensively in her serial work, even when this was still a rarity in the genre. Over time, her narrative focus on this phase of the romance story has only increased. In some of her later serial work (particularly many of the paranormal trilogies she

published in the 2000s), post-HEA characters are nearly as prominent as pre-HEA characters. To date, the author's most extensive exploration of the post-HEA is featured in her on-going *In Death* series in which thirty-four of the series' thirty-seven (and counting) installments are formally situated in the post-HEA of the primary couple.

J.R. Ward belongs to a younger generation of romance novelists. She is the author of the immensely successful *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series, a RITA-award winning eleven installment (and counting) paranormal vampire romance series that is considered somewhat of a phenomenon in the romance community. Originally launched in 2005, the series quickly became a "word of mouth bestseller" (Frantz) that readers frequently describe as very addictive. Although later installments haven't always been well received by romance reviewers, the series' latest outing, *Lover At Last*, debuted at number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list in April 2013, indicating the series' unabated popularity with readers. Much like Roberts, Ward delves deep into the post-HEA in her serial work. The *Black Dagger Brotherhood* is a hybrid type of romance series focused on a large cast of primary characters. Each novel develops a multitude of different plotlines, which allows Ward to depict her characters in a variety of ways and situations both before and after their HEA.

A comparative analysis of the Nora Roberts's and J.R. Ward's respective post-HEA representations reveals an interesting conceptual inverse between the two authors. While Roberts' post-HEA scenes can be characterized as generically conformist but ideologically progressive, Ward's post-HEA representations conversely qualify as generically progressive but ideologically conservative. The inverse between these positions illustrates the kind of work the post-HEA can do for the romance genre and its community.

Nora Roberts: The Romantic Fantasy That Does it All

Nora Roberts's post-HEA scenes are generically conformist in that they substantiate the traditional interpretation of the happy end. That is, they portray the romantic union

reached in the HEA as both lasting and consistently very happy. Roberts's post-HEA characters never break up nor do they ever fundamentally question their romantic commitment to each other. Their relationships are explicitly portrayed as happy, healthy, and passionate.

The sexual chemistry between post-HEA characters is palpable, even when the characters have been together for decades (see e.g. Justin and Serena MacGregor in *The MacGregor* series). In line with the genre's conventions, this inexhaustible sexual connection is constructed as a signifier of the characters' deep emotional commitment to each other. This commitment is not only consistently displayed by the body but also verbally articulated; public or private declarations of love between post-HEA characters abound in Roberts' serial novels (see e.g. *The Winning Hand* (1998), *Valley of Silence* (2006), *The Pagan Stone* (2008), and all *In Death* novels). This transformation tends to create a sense of ease and emotional balance in post-HEA characters that stands in unarticulated contrast with the feelings of romantic turmoil and struggle that overwhelm the pre-HEA couple with whom they often share the page.

Roberts's emphasis on romantic happiness in the post-HEA does not mean that these are blissful, static universes in which the characters do nothing but bask in the happiness of their love. To the contrary, Roberts consistently depicts post-HEA characters as people whose lives entail much more than this relationship alone. This fact is especially true of the female characters who are depicted in a wide variety of roles. In Roberts's contemporary romance series, women often combine a demanding job with family, romance, and friendship. In series such as *Dreams* (1996-1997), *Keys* (2003-2004), *In the Garden* (2004-2005), and *The Bride Quartet* (2009-2010), the heroines are friends who run a business together. Post-HEA scenes depict the characters engaging in these friendships and professional identities, even as they become mothers, run their household, and continue to enjoy an active romantic relationship with the post-HEA hero. Roberts' post-HEA heroines are often professionally successful. Their businesses thrive, they are promoted or they enjoy other forms of professional recognition. This professional success does not impede motherhood or domestic happiness; many of Roberts' post-HEA heroines are depicted as happy working moms who

enjoy a very satisfying if hectic family life (see e.g. the *Chesapeake Bay* [1998-1999] and the *In the Garden* series). They also continue to develop meaningful bonds of friendship with other women. Series such as *The Circle Trilogy* (2006), *Sign of Seven* (2007-2008), and *Inn Boonsborro Trilogy* (2011-2012) feature plenty of scenes in which pre- and post-HEA female characters engage with each other without the presence of men.

Overall, Roberts's post-HEA depictions strongly make the point that the establishment of the romantic union in the HEA does not automatically mean that women cannot develop other aspects of their identities. Instead, Roberts's serial narratives systematically insist that when the romance narrative goes on beyond the point of the HEA, it can then allow for multiplicities in terms of female identity. Roberts's post-HEA heroines juggle a multitude of different roles and take up agency in a wide variety of situations, including the romantic, the professional, the domestic, and the social spheres of life. This multiplicity of identity is not achieved at the expense of romantic happiness. To the contrary, Roberts's post-HEA heroines are active romantic agents who maintain a satisfying and exciting romantic and sexual relationship with their partner, but the heroine's identity is never reduced to this role alone. The romantic fantasies that Nora Roberts articulates in the post-HEA scenes of her serial narratives then clearly subscribe to the ideology of romantic coupledom that the romance genre as a whole supports, but equally strongly insist that this ideology is not limiting to women, but empowers them.

J.R. Ward: Romance Outside the Comfort Zone

J.R. Ward develops a very different interpretation of the post-HEA. The most striking characteristic of Ward's post-HEA representations is that they occasionally include temporary fractures of a romantic union established in a happy end narrated earlier in the series. Wrath and Beth, Vishous and Jane, as well as John-Matthew and Xhex are *Black Dagger Brotherhood* couples who break up after their relationship was seemingly definitively established in an earlier happy end. These break-ups are due to the re-emergence of the barrier. Wrath and Beth continue to struggle with his desire to fight despite his blindness,

Vishous and Jane break up when she believes he has cheated on her to indulge in his BDSM-related desires, and John-Matthew and Xhex split up because he cannot deal with her need to risk her life in battle. The solutions formulated to these barriers in the earlier narrative are recanted in later novels and these couples spend part of their post-HEA in a state of romantic unhappiness. Yet this unhappiness, like the breakup that causes it, is always temporary. Within the same narrative as the one in which the fracturing of the union occurs, this fracturing is always resolved. The barrier is overcome again and the characters re-enter the romantic union. This leads to a new "second" happy ending that is at once a kind of intertextual reiteration of the couple's original happy end and a doubling of the HEA of the primary romance narrative in the same novel.

This kind of representation of romantic happiness in the post-HEA is unorthodox, to say the least. It subverts two conventional promises of the HEA: that the romantic union is lasting and that it is happy. Neither of this is true in Ward's post-HEA universes. Romantic unions can run into trouble early on in the relationship, and characters can be deeply unhappy about their romantic life in the post-HEA. With these representations, Ward is then pushing the boundaries of the romance genre. She explores and represents a kind of romantic fantasy that clearly lies outside the genre's comfort zone. Yet while Ward appears to be happy to push the generic envelope, she is careful not to transgress the genre's limits completely: the romantic union is always reinstated within the same installment as the one in which it is fractured. This is evidence of Ward's continued commitment to the ideology of lasting romantic love and coupledom that lies at the heart of romance's generic project.

Ward's willingness to push conventional boundaries is not sustained in the gender politics that the narratives develop. The author's representation of female identity in particular is conservative in that it bears out much of the critical concerns raised by feminists three decades ago. In *The Black Dagger Brotherhood*'s post-HEA scenes, female characters are given substantial roles only when they are acting as heterosexual romantic agents. Although the narratives provide brief references to other social and professional roles these characters supposedly take up off-

screen, female characters are rarely portrayed performing these identities on the page. Mary and Marissa are two examples of post-HEA Ward heroines who all but disappear from the narrative scene once their romance story arc is over. While the narratives tell us both women become friends with the other women in the group and dedicate themselves to their jobs after their HEA – Mary is a counselor and Marissa runs a shelter – the characters are rarely if ever actually portrayed in these roles. Instead, they only enter the narrative scene when they interact with their heroes. While Ward's narratives then make token gestures towards the idea of multiplicity of post-HEA female identity, this idea is never really sustained or substantiated in the narrative action.

The one-dimensional interpretation of post-HEA female identity that is developed in Ward's series is all the more pronounced because it contrasts with the representation of some pre-HEA female characters. Heroines like Xhex and Payne, for example, are fairly extensively portrayed in their gender-defying professional identities – Xhex is an assassin, Payne a fighter – before they romantically commit to their heroes. This representation is functional in the romance narrative, where it is part of the barrier between the hero and the heroine. Once the heroines are settled into a romantic relationship these representations cease and the professional life of these women effectively stops being part of the series' fictional word. It is revisited only when it re-emerges as a romantic barrier, as it does for Xhex and John-Matthew in *Lover Reborn*. This representation of women then effectively suggests, as early critics of the romance genre feared, that the only noteworthy or interesting aspects of a woman's life and identity are those parts that in some way relate to her heterosexual relationship with a man.

The Inverse Between Roberts and Ward

The inverse between Nora Roberts's and J.R. Ward's post-HEA representations is worth reflecting on further. At first sight, Ward might appear to be pushing the envelope much more than Roberts – and in terms of the conventional narrative constraints of the romance genre this is certainly the case – but in ideological terms Roberts' post-HEA

scenes might eventually prove to be more disruptive of interpretations and ideological positions traditionally associated with the genre. Roberts' post-HEA representations clearly make the point that the HEA does not automatically equal a one-dimensional interpretation of female subjecthood, as early feminist critics argued. Ward's post-HEA scenes, however, reversely indicate that disrupting the romantic union of the HEA (which the non-serialized romance novel cannot do) does not automatically equal multiplicity of female identity either, as feminist critics might assume. The inverse between Ward and Roberts then indicates that the relation between gender politics and the ideology of romantic love that is pursued in the popular romance genre is much more complex than is often assumed.

This complexity has always latently been present in the genre, but is articulated much more explicitly in the new narrative space of the post-HEA. This space brings out into the open differences of interpretation and opinion in the romance genre and its community that in non-serialized narratives are allowed to remain (much more) implicit. The post-HEA space is particularly suited as a canvas for such ideological and narrative discussions because it is not strongly policed by generic conventions that determine or constrain the concrete representation of romantic happiness after the happy end. It is a relatively free and open zone in which each individual romance author is allowed to formulate her own specific interpretation of romance's defining Happy Ever After-ending, as Ward and Roberts clearly do. That these interpretations differ is, I argue, not so much a problem as it is a strength in the current constellation of the genre because the heterogeneity that is articulated here is part of the appeal of the serialized romance novel for its contemporary female reader.

Conclusion:
Expanding the Grand Narrative of Romantic Love

The boom of narrative serialization has the potential to be somewhat of a game changer for the romance genre. The incorporation of serial dynamics into the romance form is not only pushing the genre's traditional narrative boundaries but also opening up a new narrative space in

which the genre is articulating its core romantic fantasy to previously unprecedented extents. These articulations are adding an important new topic to the broader conversation that is taking place amongst the predominantly female members of the genre's community. Whereas this conversation has long focused almost exclusively on how romantic love is developed, it is now transforming to include discussions of how romantic love is sustained.

This is an aspect of the grand narrative of romantic love that is often overlooked or ignored in our broader cultural conversations about love. NPR contributors Glen Wheldon and Stephen Thompson recently observed that "the part of love that does not get depicted enough is the act of staying in love" (Holmes). In the same vein, cultural critic Lisa Appignanesi has pointed out that "[c]ontemporary literature, like the media, is far richer in evocations of the battlefield of marriage, it routs, betrayals and humiliations...than in portraits of loving, settled [romantic] states" (186). As a culture, we do not formulate many accounts, fictional or otherwise, of the "loving, settled states" of romantic love that are part of day-to-day life. Even in the popular romance novel, a genre known for its feel good character and (exceedingly) optimistic portrayal of romantic love, such depictions are relatively rare because the genre is traditionally pre-occupied with the narrative that precedes this state.

In the post-HEA scenes of serialized romance narratives, "the act of staying in love" comes into full narrative focus. This manifestation provides the romance genre and its community with the opportunity to engage in a number of internal debates that are, unlike many other debates in our society, dominated by female voices. These debates pertain to the narrative possibilities and limits of the romance generic form itself as well as to the diverging ideological positions with regards to gender, sexuality, and female identity that can simultaneously be taken up within the genre. Notwithstanding the relatively wide range of these discussions – illustrated in this article by the only preliminary discussions of serialized romances by Nora Roberts and J.R. Ward – as a whole these debates remain consistently framed by the romance genre's fundamental commitment to the ideology of romantic love itself.

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