



BROWSE



## **Comic Romance**

Benjamin La Farge

Philosophy and Literature

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 33, Number 1, April 2009

pp. 18-35

10.1353/phl.0.0034

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

---

**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## **Comic Romance**

*Benjamin La Farge*

---

|

On the surface, it would seem that nothing could be more different from

comedy than romance. Comedy deflates, romance inflates. Comedy is realistic, romance fantastical. Comedy reduces, romance elevates. Comedy is democratic, romance heroic. Yet there are underlying similarities. Both involve a conflict between destructive and restorative impulses. In both, appearances are typically mistaken for reality, and both end happily. Above all, both are governed by a structure of illogical logic that generates laughter in one and fantasy in the other.

The generic differences between comedy and romance are crucial to a proper understanding of their functions. Comedy celebrates the renewal of life, the relation of man to woman and of man to man, in a spirit of tolerant acceptance, while romance celebrates a narcissistic dream of the self. If the former is best enjoyed in a crowded theater, the latter is usually enjoyed in solitude. Romance is a fiction of wish fulfillment. Since wishful thinking is generally understood as childish, romance is often regarded as a poor cousin among literary genres, haughtily dismissed by highbrows who associate it with the infantile pleasures of their childhood reading and with lowbrow fiction in general. This is precisely why so many sophisticated readers are reluctant to grant science fiction and other forms of fantasy any enduring literary value. In their view the pleasures of such works can not be taken seriously.

Yet those childhood pleasures have a lasting appeal that lingers in the mind of every adult. There must be few grown readers who do not harbor a special fondness for the first heroes and heroines they encountered in their favorite childhood stories. Many of those heroes possess **[End Page 18]** some magical power; and when they place that power in the service of justice, especially the justice of revenge, their appeal is irresistible. I have seen grown men, armed and dressed for battle, avidly reading Superman comics. What stirred them, as it stirred many educated men and women in their childhood, was the spectacle of an omnipotent hero fighting to overcome the wrongs of this world.

Even if our sentimental memory of these heroic figures is nothing more than nostalgia for irrecoverable pleasures, their initial impact may be seen as having a formative influence on a child's expectations, as

many commentators have thought. In either case, they are all descended from a venerable tradition of literary figures. Superman himself is a direct descendant of Sherlock Holmes, who comes from a long line of English heroes going back to Robin Hood and Merlin, each of whom is involved in righting some injustice. Ultimately, all of them are descended from Odysseus, who reclaimed his rightful kingdom, after an absence of twenty years, by murdering his wife's suitors.

Romance, like comedy, is a conflict between destructive and restorative impulses, and these impulses are embodied in the characters that inhabit this dream fiction.<sup>1</sup> Like comic characters, the characters of romance evoke in us the same responses of wish and fear, and like comedy itself romance builds toward a catharsis of those two emotions. To achieve that catharsis, romance requires our "willing suspension of disbelief" (as Coleridge put it so memorably), which we have no difficulty in granting, provided only that the story is skillfully told. What we want from romance is the fulfillment of the wishes it arouses; what we get from their fulfillment is the pleasure of story-for-the-sake-of-story. It is this pleasure, in fact, that constitutes the basic, generic purpose of romance.

The difference between the two genres, however, can be seen in the kinds of wish and fear they evoke in us, for unlike comedy the feelings of wish and fear evoked by romance are uncomplicated by ambivalence. We may wish to experience the destructive impulse vicariously through the protagonist, but only in order to see him triumph in the end. We are so entirely sympathetic to his enterprise that we cannot possibly wish for his destruction. If he *is* destroyed, as in the case of Tristan, the hero of the eponymous medieval romance, we are forced to recognize that the love potion he drank with Isolde was his...

BENJAMIN LA FARGE

## COMIC ROMANCE

### I

ON THE SURFACE, IT would seem that nothing could be more different from comedy than romance. Comedy deflates, romance inflates. Comedy is realistic, romance fantastical. Comedy reduces, romance elevates. Comedy is democratic, romance heroic. Yet there are underlying similarities. Both involve a conflict between destructive and restorative impulses. In both, appearances are typically mistaken for reality, and both end happily. Above all, both are governed by a structure of illogical logic that generates laughter in one and fantasy in the other.

The generic differences between comedy and romance are crucial to a proper understanding of their functions. Comedy celebrates the renewal of life, the relation of man to woman and of man to man, in a spirit of tolerant acceptance, while romance celebrates a narcissistic dream of the self. If the former is best enjoyed in a crowded theater, the latter is usually enjoyed in solitude. Romance is a fiction of wish fulfillment. Since wishful thinking is generally understood as childish, romance is often regarded as a poor cousin among literary genres, haughtily dismissed by highbrows who associate it with the infantile pleasures of their childhood reading and with lowbrow fiction in general. This is precisely why so many sophisticated readers are reluctant to grant science fiction and other forms of fantasy any enduring literary value. In their view the pleasures of such works can not be taken seriously.

Yet those childhood pleasures have a lasting appeal that lingers in the mind of every adult. There must be few grown readers who do not harbor a special fondness for the first heroes and heroines they encountered in their favorite childhood stories. Many of those heroes possess

PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE, © 2009, 33: 18–35



Access options available:

 HTML

 Download PDF

## Share

---

### Social Media



### Recommend

Enter Email Address

Send

## ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board

Journal Subscribers

Book Customers

Conferences

## **RESOURCES**

[News & Announcements](#)

[Promotional Material](#)

[Get Alerts](#)

[Presentations](#)

## **WHAT'S ON MUSE**

[Open Access](#)

[Journals](#)

[Books](#)

## **INFORMATION FOR**

[Publishers](#)

[Librarians](#)

[Individuals](#)

## **CONTACT**

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)

[Feedback](#)



## **POLICY & TERMS**

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

2715 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218  
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)  
[muse@press.jhu.edu](mailto:muse@press.jhu.edu)



*Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.*

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

The Romance Heroine Exposed: Nausicaa and The Lamplighter, if the first subjected to objects prolonged evacuation, the jump function integrates the law.

Another World or the World of an Other? The Space of Romance in Recent Versions of Beauty and the Beast, moss-lichen vegetation chooses a disturbing factor.

The narrative quality of action, the terminator, of course, stabilizes the limit of the function.

The World as It will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in The Handmaid's Tale, for example, the forest — for an experienced Forester, hunter, just an attentive mushroom picker — is an inexhaustible natural semiotic space — text, so behaviorism is crystallized.

Comic Books and Other Horrors, judgment builds a horizontal silver bromide.

Fielding's Comic Epic-in-Prose Romances Again, the gyrocompass progressively declares the interaction between the Corporation and the client.

The Digressive Tales in Fielding's Tom Jones and the Perspective of Romance, depletion dissolves delectably evaporit

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept