

Ireland and the Popular Genre of Historical Romance: The Novels of Karen Robards

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Abstract: *This essay looks at the interconnections between the cultural industry of popular romance and best-selling novels set in an Irish historical context. In particular, it examines two best-selling novels by North American author Karen Robards, which have not yet been examined in academia: Dark of the Moon (1988) and Forbidden Love (2013; originally published in 1983). Although this small selection constitutes only a preliminary study of an expanding popular genre, it is my hope that it will serve as a relevant example of how Ireland is exoticised in the transnational cultural industry of romance. Drawing on several studies on popular romance (Radway 1984; Strehle and Carden 2009; and Roach 2016), and on specific sources devoted to the study of historical romance, in particular when set in exotic locations (Hughes 2005; Philips 2011; Teo 2012; 2016), I intend to demonstrate how these novels by Karen Robards follow the clichés and conventions of the typical romances produced in the 1980s. As I show, the popularity that Robards' novels still enjoy reflects the supremacy of the genre and the wide reception of this kind of fiction in the global market.*

Keywords: *Cultural industry; popular romance; Irish context; market.*

Introduction

In her semi-academic, ethnographic study *Happily-Ever-After*, Catherine Roach (4) identifies romance as “the prime cultural narrative of the modern Western world”. This is a best-selling genre which dominates the publishing industry, particularly in North America and other Western European countries. It is generally a woman-centred genre, as most authors and readers are female (110). The basic plot of the (heterosexual) romance narrative revolves around a hero and a heroine, who fall in love, work through many trials and tribulations and end up happily. According to the webpage of The Romance Writers of America Association (RWA),¹ two basic elements must appear in all romance novels: 1) they should contain “a central love story”, and 2) they should have “an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending”. In traditional romances, “the heroine must be connected to one, and only one, man” (Ponzanesi 159), in contrast with other subgenres like chick lit, where heroines can have liaisons with more than one man. Typical “profile authors” are instructed online how to produce romance novels according to these rules and some fix guidelines. There are literary thousands of authors published by Mills & Boon (the main British publishing house of popular romance) and Harlequin (the North American equivalent), and the formula is provided in advance.

A common criticism popular romance has received is that it perpetuates patriarchal,

dominant structures in a number of ways. One of the questions that has troubled scholars most in this respect is the way/s in which romance writers maintain (or not) standard norms of femininity and masculinity, in their portrayal of love, sex and marriage. The cover design of these books, in their sensual depiction of exuberant, sexy women, sometimes passionately embraced by bare-skin hyper masculine men, illustrates the gender prototypes transmitted in these novels. For Roach (111), there seems to be a double standard in the portrayal of women: on the one hand, they are supposed to be compliant, young and sexy; on the other hand, they can be easily dismissed or shamed when they look too sexy or provocative. This ambiguity concerning gender representation is also identified by Radway (147) in her field-defining monograph *Reading the Romance*. Radway finds a contradiction in the female readership that usually consumes this type of novels. As she claims, whereas “the romance originates in the female push toward individuation and actualization of the self”, “that drive”, however, “is embodied within the language and forms created and prescribed by patriarchy”. In this sense, for this critic, romance seems to be articulated within the language of patriarchy and dominant social structures. Strehle and Carden (2009: xii) have also noted such contradictory and conflicting impulse in romances: while “the narrative ventriloquizes cultural values, perpetuating and naturalizing patriarchal models of gender that project women’s destiny and desirable end in the family”, it also “talks back, revealing women’s frustration, dissent, and potentially subversive responses to those patriarchal constructions”.

This essay examines this current controversy by analysing in detail two best-selling romance novels set in the background of Irish colonial history. It is impossible to cover in depth all the material being produced at the moment within the broad category of ‘Irish Romance’. The database *Goodreads*, for instance, features 72 titles under the category ‘Irish Heroes and Heroines in Contemporary Romance’.² Under the category of “Best Irish Historical Romances”, there are 95 titles.³ “Irish Romance” also features prominently in Harlequin with 96 titles; and there are 31 results for Harlequin publications featuring “Ireland” and ‘Historical Romance’.⁴ One of the best-known novelists of contemporary popular romance is Nora Roberts, who sometimes signs under the penname of J.D. Robb. Roberts has produced some romance novels where Irish heroes and heroines adopt a predominant role. Some salient examples are her *Irish Born Trilogy* (2009), which include *Born in Fire*, *Born in Ice*, and *Born in Shame*.⁵ My study offers an examination of literary portrayals of Ireland in popular romance by focusing on two novels by another bestselling author, Karen Robards. Although this small selection constitutes only a preliminary study of an expanding popular genre, it is my hope that it will serve as a relevant example of how Ireland is exoticised in the transnational cultural industry of romance.

In particular, I will look at the subgenre of historical romance⁶ by analysing two of Robards’ novels, *Dark of the Moon* (1988) and *Forbidden Love* (2013; originally published in 1983). This acclaimed novelist, born in Kentucky, has written more than 50 titles in the genres of historical romance and contemporary romantic suspense novels.⁷ Robards’ work has been translated into seventeen languages, and it has won multiple awards. *Dark of the Moon* and *Forbidden Love* were both originally published in the 1980s, but they are still available (and highly popular) in the market via online platforms such as Amazon Kindle and contemporary paperback editions. These novels have not yet been examined in academia, perhaps because they are considered ‘low brow’ popular literature.⁸

These novels by Karen Robards were produced and published in the 1980s, a period when popular romances became extremely popular, and there was an “‘Americanisation’ of the genre”, and “a massive expansion of Harlequin, Mills & Boon into markets all over the world” (Teo 107). Precisely because of this, *Dark of the Moon* and *Forbidden Love* follow the clichés and conventions of the typical romances marketed at the time. My study of these two novels is informed by several studies on popular romance (Radway 1984; Strehle and Carden 2009; and Roach 2016), and by specific sources devoted to the study of historical romance, in particular when set in exotic locations (Hughes 2005; Philips 2011; Teo 2012; 2016). In my analysis I intend to show how these novels aesthetize history and exotify Otherness and, in this process, they contribute to reinforce the hierarchies of power (between colonists and colonized, and men and women). Following the conventions of the typical Harlequin and Mills & Boon romances published at the time, Robards uses and reuses clichés in conventional ways, maintaining the binary polarities of colonial discourses intact. The effect is that certain identity myths related to conventional definitions of Irishness and Britishness are re-inscribed. On the other hand, Robards’ novels perfectly illustrate the contradictory nature of romance with respect to its representation of gender conventions: while they are ideologically regressive (in their perpetuation of some patriarchal models of femininity and masculinity), they can also be understood as transgressive (in their finding inventive ways for their female characters to achieve their sexual and social liberation).

2. Irish exotic landscapes and the motif of interethnic romance in popular fiction

As Teo (87-88) examines in her study of “women’s imperial romantic novels”, former British colonies (particularly India and Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa) started to be used by women novelists from the 1890s onwards, as “exotic backdrops” for the romantic plot of their stories.⁹ This motif of the “exotic romance”, as Philips (114-5) notes, became highly popular in the period after the Second World War, as observed in the kind of romances published by Mills & Boon, set in colonial settings as varied as “South Africa, Rhodesia, Malaya, the South Seas, Nigeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, New Zealand, Canada and Australia” (116). Ireland is not included as a colonial setting of the historical romances examined by Teo (2016) and Philips (2011) but it could have perfectly been included, as evinced by the large number of novels published by Harlequin, and Mills & Boon, in which Ireland provides the exotic context for the romantic plot.

Karen Robards’ *Dark of the Moon* and *Forbidden Love*, both historical romances set in Ireland, have their roots in this popular genre of women’s historical romance which flourished in the first half of the twentieth century and continues to the present day. As I argue below, *Forbidden Love* is a particularly interesting case in this respect, in its portrayal of interethnic love between an English lord and an Irish lass. As Jerome De Groot notes, postcolonial historical narratives sometimes appropriate “classic” imperialist tropes, such as for example the exotic adventure or romance between a colonizer and a native (2010: 170, 161-2). Hsu-Ming Teo (2012, 2016) has consistently studied such idealized portrayals of interracial romantic relationships, and the use that contemporary female authors make of typical Orientalist stereotypes from colonial romance narratives, particularly focusing on what she calls “narratives

of seduction” (2012: 3). Indeed, many Irish historical romances by female authors centre on the interracial romance between a British Protestant and an Irish Catholic character.

After a careful research online in sites such as *Goodreads*, for instance, it is possible to find a long list of North American women novelists producing bestseller romances narrating a romantic liaison between an Irish Catholic girl (Irish lady/lass/or the typical rebel girl) and an English lord/colonist/soldier. Some illustrative examples are Kimberleigh Caitlin’s *Nightmylde* (1988); Kimberly Cates’s *Crown of Mist* (2014), *Briar Rose* (2015), *Lily Fair* (2015); Amanda Hughes’s *Beyond the Cliffs of Kerry* (2011, from the saga of ‘Bold Women of the 18th Century’); Patricia McAllister’s *Sea Raven* (2012); Susan Wiggs’s *The Maiden of Ireland* (2014); Christina Dodd’s *Priceless* (2008); Laurel McKee’s (aka Amanda McCabe) *Countess of Scandal* (2010, from the saga “The Daughters of Erin”); Ruth Ryan Langan’s *Captive of Desire* (2013); Emma Jensen’s *Moonlit* (2002); and Katherine Kingsley’s *Once Upon a Dream* (2013, from the saga “The Montegu Family”). Sometimes the interracial affair is reversed, when a British lady falls in love with an Irishman (either a rebel or a lord); with examples such as Laurel McKee’s *Duchess of Sin* (2010, from the saga “The Daughters of Erin”); Brit Darby’s *Emerald Prince* (2011); Tracy Anne Warren’s *The Wife Trap* (2006); and Jennifer Roberson’s *The Irishman* (2012).

Dark of Moon (1988) and *Forbidden Love* (1983) by Karen Robards also reinforce neo-colonial paradigms in their depiction of setting and love. To start with, both novels bear some of the legacies of the “imperial romantic fiction” Teo (2016) analyses, in their emphasis on a colonial setting which is clearly exotic and mysterious. As in popular historical romances, the important thing is not history itself. The past is just a pretext for the romantic plot to develop, and the landscape simply functions as a glamorous, simplified backdrop for the love story. In Robards’ novels, real historical figures appear from time to time, but merely on the periphery, rather than at the centre of the action. Secondly, the novels fit the publishing practices of the day, as they carefully follow the neo-colonial conventions of the kind of Harlequin, and Mills & Boon romance novels released in the 1980s. As I intend to show, the romantic motif of interethnic love is present in some cases and dominant tropes of colonialism are repeatedly perpetuated, particularly clichéd representations of evil British colonizers and patriotic rebellious Irish characters.

3. Karen Robards’ Irish historical romances

Dark of Moon (1988) is set in Ireland at the end of the eighteenth century, and it narrates the romance story between an orphan, rebellious girl, Caitlyn O’Malley, and Connor d’Arcy, Earl of Iveagh, an Irish nobleman. The novel follows the stock conventions of characters in popular romance fiction. The heroine Caitlyn is beautiful and seductive, and she is characterized by her youthful innocence and headstrong nature. At the beginning of the novel, she is actually a beggar and a thief, in the streets of Dublin, pretending to be a boy (cross-dressing is indeed a typical feature of historical romances) in order to protect herself from male “predators” who might sexually assault her, as it happened to her mother (20). At first, she seems to fit the stereotype of the wild Irish girl: defiant, rebellious and very stubborn: “She could no more stop the fierce flow of her Irish temper than she could hold back the fog that was beginning to thicken along the river” (9). As in the second novel analysed below, Caitlyn follows the stereotype of the “native” (as sensual, savage, and infantilized) portrayed in

conventional colonial narratives; Robards' fiction thus unconsciously replicates the "racist" tendencies of the traditional imperial romantic fiction analysed by Teo (97) from the beginning of the 20th century, in line with much popular romance fiction produced in the 1980s. Caitlyn's fiery temper, badly influenced by external circumstances, is however "tamed" by the male hero, a nobleman who rescues her from the streets. As in the case of Megan, from the second novel by Robards analysed below, Caitlyn's seemingly rebellious attitude is softened and her independence gradually endangered, as she reveals herself to be a girl longing for the security and protection of a man. When Connor discovers that Caitlyn is a girl, he gradually falls in love with her, completely surrendering to her irresistible physical appearance, which follows all the ideal conventions of feminine beauty: "a lovely young female" with a "heart-shaped face framed by disheveled masses of raven hair, the flashing sapphire blue of her eyes, the whiteness of her skin, the softness of her pink mouth. ... the roundness of her small bottom; the thrust of young tender breasts against the thin linen shirt" (159). At the end of the novel, and after many other tribulations, Caitlyn is abducted by Sir Edward, an "Anglo oppressor". Unable to defend herself, Caitlyn ultimately depends on Connor, who miraculously appears in the last pages of the novel to fight with Edward in a fair battle and defeats him (400-403), thus adjusting to the typical *deux ex machina* of traditional romances.

Dark of the Moon recycles many exotic myths of Ireland as the Emerald island, offering cliché Hollywood scenarios of an idealized Irish countryside, clearly counteracting the starving, nightmarish urban scenes of Dublin in the initial chapters. The reader is made to identify with the protagonist, as she leaves "the confines of Dublin" for the first time and is captivated by "The sight of emerald hills undulating toward the blue horizon in every direction" (25), gazing "with wonder" by "the beauties of nature" (25). The castle where some of the action is set is described as a magnificent fortress "Situated at the top of an emerald hill", looking "down toward the steep banks and swift-flowing waters of the River Boyne" (29). Nevertheless, although the background is exotic, the novel does not provide any deep elaboration of Ireland's geographical landscape. As Teo (2016: 107) explains in relation to other historical romances produced at the time, "[l]ocations, customs, idioms and some forms of culture can be 'exotic', but the same types of plots and protagonists" can "appear in Harlequin Mills & Boon novels anywhere in the world". Philips (116) also notes how the exoticism of Mills & Boon novels published during the second half of the 20th century is "largely generic rather than geographically specific". For both critics, the exotic romance novels of the 1970s and 1980s are largely formulaic and indeed, Robards' novel fits in this framework perfectly well. In *Dark of the Moon*, Ireland is described in clearly generic ways and the different regions, cities or towns of the country are not discriminated throughout the novel. In this sense, Robards follows the tendency of the exotic romances published at the time; the colonial setting is presented as a locus of mystique, and the geographical component is not elaborated upon. This simplifying description of landscape is a common feature of all romantic historical fiction, as Hughes (2005: 2) notes, because in these novels "Setting is subordinate to plot".

Clichéd descriptions of colonial relationships are also replicated with astounding clarity throughout the novel. Robards adopts the point of view of the female protagonist, describing the world from a clearly anti-British viewpoint. As one of the starving beggars surviving in the slums of Dublin, at the time of the Penal Laws when the Protestant dominated Ireland, Caitlyn is marked by "Generations of racial hatred" (11). When she meets Connor for

the first time, she mistakes him for British and Protestant:

Scorn twisted Caitlyn's mouth into a sneer. Obviously the gentleman was new come from bloody England, one of the hated Ascendancy, and none had thought to warn him not to venture into the city's dangerous Irish quarters. ... The Irish hated the English from birth onward. It was bred in blood and bone. (3)

Caitlyn repeatedly refers to Connor in the initial pages as "Sassenach" (22), which in Gaelic means 'Saxon'. The English are described largely in the novel as "butchers" (7), "bloody Orangemen" (13), a "hated" race oppressing the Irish (12), "brought over from England and set firmly into place by the bloody butchery of Oliver Cromwell (curse the name) some hundred years before" (8). This simplistic vision of the British colonists also extends to the Irish native population. Caitlyn is conscious of how she appears to the eyes of the British, for whom "the Irish were heathen peasants of inferior culture and intellect, barely above the beasts in the fields" (8). The colonial experience is thus described, almost entirely, from Caitlyn's limited perspective, and Robards makes no attempt to debunk stereotypes.

The novel is not only controversial in its reinforcement of neo-colonial paradigms, but also in its depiction of the gender hierarchies of power. Connor also follows the archetype of the male hero in romance, the traditional "alpha hero": "the patriarchal ideal of a man who is socially and culturally dominant, physically large and powerful, handsome or at least striking in his looks, capable of violence, rich and successful, self-confident and tending to arrogant" (Roach 132). The hero in Robards' novel is a wealthy, aristocratic gentleman, handsome, strong, powerful, and authoritarian (13). From the very beginning, he adopts the protective role of the father with Caitlyn although he later falls in love with her. We also learn that he is the legendary "Dark Horseman", "Ireland's boldest high-wayman" (3), who "robbed only the rich Anglicans of the hated Ascendancy" in order to share it "with his starving countrymen" (4). At the end of the novel, he is raised as an Irish hero. His words, just before he is about to be executed, epitomize all the traditional values of Irish patriotism (faith, loyalty, and undying resilience): "My friends, I stand before you today condemned to die, accused and convicted of crimes against God and man. ... Aye, your blood, and the lifeblood of Ireland! Ireland, my country – and yours. An Irishman I was born, and as an Irishman I will die, and proudly too. ... I wish for you, my Ireland, and for you, my Irishmen, *slantegéal*" (395). By using the forbidden Gaelic language for his farewell, Connor provokes an insurrection among the fellow countrymen gathered there which eventually saves him.

Following the conventions of romance, the ending of this novel offers an emotional resolution for the main characters. After overcoming many difficulties and conflicts, both characters are finally bonded by love, and, as typical in the novels by Robards, this is materialized in terms of marriage and motherhood. The gender disparity portrayed before (between a vulnerable female character and a dominant, authoritarian man) seems to be temporally dissolved, as the "alpha hero" is tamed by means of love: "I love you, my own. Forever'. His words were as solemn as a vow... 'I cannot survive without ... you'" (407). In this sense, Connor (although still dominant) appears as attentive and sensitive (even submissive) to the needs of the female character. On her part, Caitlyn secures her happiness in the company of a man who will protect her forever: "This was her Connor, her wonderful, handsome Connor.

Her husband, the father of the child she carried. Her heart swelled... As long as she had Connor, the rest of the world faded into shadow” (407).

When analyzing this typical conventional ending of romances, Roach (2016: 6) offers a positive reading of the literary genre, and highlights its “reparative” aspect in its portrayal of love as a mode to achieve women’s freedom and challenge the male status quo. Although the ending does not fundamentally challenge the dominance of the male world and the external system of gender inequality, the typical “alpha hero” of heterosexual romance novels is in a way queered, by willing, in the end, “to make himself emotionally and physically vulnerable” to the heroine (Roach 2016: 133). In this sense, “Love emasculates the hero” (ibid); in other words, it diminishes the codes of patriarchal masculinity. From this perspective, then, the ending of *Dark of the Moon* could be identified as a “reparation fantasy”, as Roach (179) calls it. At the end of Robards’ novel, the battle of the sexes seems to be resolved: Caitlyn is depicted as Connor’s emotional superior, while he – on his part – loves her with tenderness, loyalty and devotion.

From this perspective, then, the genre of romance could be read as “radical in its liberating potential”, because it always ends with “good women getting what they want. Not dead or damaged or left behind, but winning, every time, with all their needs met” (Roach 193). Nevertheless, a completely different interpretation of the genre can be offered if we consider that patriarchy, as an overall system, still remains in place at the end of these narratives. In *Dark of the Moon*, Caitlyn ends up happy only because she is under the protection and control of a man. Furthermore, the emotional resolution that Robards offers for this character sustains the dominant models of social ordering for women, structured around the family, marriage, and the strictly defined gender role of motherhood, following the tendencies of the popular fiction published at the time by Mills & Boon and Harlequin.

The second historical romance chosen for detailed examination is *Forbidden Love*, also by Karen Robards. Originally published in 1983, this novel has been reissued many times, and it can also be read, as most romance bestsellers, as an audiobook. As in *Dark of the Moon*, this novel follows all the stock conventions of characters in terms of gender, as most Harlequin, Mills & Boon novels from the same period. Once again, the male character is the classic “alpha hero”. Justin is the Earl of Weston; a Protestant landowner of a large estate in Ireland. He is almost 20 years older than the heroine. He is unhappily married, as his wife only wants his money and title and there is no affection at all between them. Justin is superior in terms of age and class; he is an arrogant, sexy hot-tempered heterosexual man. From the very beginning, he is described as looking “furious, and dangerous” (21). He is the heroine’s “guardian” and thus, he stands “in place of her father”, having “absolute authority over her” (21). The main female character, Megan Kindead, also follows all the stereotypes of the traditional heroine in popular romances. As in the previous novel, she is first described as a sexy, rebellious, wild Irish girl: “a bewitching little creature, quite apart from her physical beauty”, “a fiery, raven-haired, violet-eyed temptress” (30). At first, Megan appears as a “hoyden” (3), running away from the selected, exclusive schools she is placed in by her guardian. But, again, we gradually learn that this rebellious attitude is just a form of defence. Megan became an orphan when she was 5 years old; she is the illegitimate child of Justin’s sister in law, Moira, “an Irish peasant who earned her bread singing” (5). Justin uses all his power and male superiority throughout the novel to ‘tame’ Megan, making explicit that he “will not tolerate insolence or disobedience”

(48). If he needs to recur to violence, he does so, as when he delivers “three stinging slaps to her backside” (51). Megan ultimately surrenders to him utterly, and this is clearly observed in the graphic sexual scenes of the novel, in which Robards uses animal imagery in order to suggest the heroine’s total submission. Megan is repeatedly possessed by Justin “Like a small animal blindly seeking warmth” (130). Because of her sense of loneliness and her feeling that no one has cared about her, she desperately yearns to attract Justin’s love and attention, and thus she becomes highly dependent on the hero from the very beginning of the novel.

These gender conventions are also mixed by colonial clichés. From the very first page, the author makes explicit that the setting of the novel is Irish, although this setting is described on highly generic, stereotypical ways. The second paragraph, for instance, invokes stereotypes concerning the Irish weather (the “inclement weather” as the hero is exposed “to the rain and wind” in Galway) and the Irish temper (“the predictable unpredictability of all things Irish”, 1). Most of the novel occurs in the hero’s imaginary Irish estate of Maam’s Cross Court, an idyllic, pastoral setting. This exoticism is also enhanced by other features, such as the editorial notes on the back cover, which announce that the novel is “Set against the lush green hills of Ireland”.¹⁰

As read in the synopsis of the book, Justin “was her guardian, absentee landlord of her neglected life”. The male character occupies the role of protector (“guardian) and also of colonial superior, as “absentee landlord”, the sixth Earl of Weston. The cross-racial love story portrayed (between an English landlord and a wild Irish girl of “questionable birth”, 6) is also symptomatic of the flourishing subgenre of exotic romance analysed above. Although Robards’ novel provides an exotic flavoring to the romantic relationship (by setting it in a colonial background), it does not dwell too much on issues of race and ethnicity, in order to avoid the political and ideological controversy these texts would provoke in the time of their composition. When commenting on the exotic romances produced during the second half of the twentieth century, Philips (129) claims that “these narratives were shaped by a colonial frame which was uneasy about a new Commonwealth and which could not entirely accept the demise of empire”. Given the anxiety of such political climate, exotic romances at the time did not dwell too much on the problematics involved in colonial, interracial affairs. Such anxiety is also identified by Teo (2016: 106) when commenting on the postwar Mills & Boon romances set in the former colonies:

in the era of civil rights, apartheid in South Africa and southern American sensitivities about Jim Crow practices, writers from Britain and the Commonwealth who wished to be published by Mills and Boon and distributed to North America by Harlequin ... found themselves forbidden to touch on the subject of race, let alone interracial relations. Much as he liked romances set in Africa, Alan Boon preferred characters to be white or ‘uncoloured’.

Even though in *Unforbidden Love* the relationship is one between a Protestant landlord and an Irish girl of lower social state, such interracial affair is simply hinted at, and is not elaborated upon.

As a novel which closely follows the conventions of such popular romances from the 1980s, *Forbidden Love* can be regarded as a highly controversial text in terms of its representation of gender. One of the main criticisms this novel has received is that it reproduces with graphic detail the hero’s misogynist views of women, and this has aroused certain controversy, as

observed in some negative reviews from *Goodreads*. Throughout the novel, Justin insults Megan repeatedly. When she becomes pregnant of Justin's illegitimate child, and in order to ensure the baby is not treated as a bastard child, she decides to marry another man. Justin reacts angrily, insulting Megan repeatedly as a "little bitch" (219, 258, 293), a "vicious, immoral little slut" (301), and making chauvinist remarks of the sort: "Kiss me back, you little bitch, or I'll take you here and now" (273). At a particular moment, the hero even gets abusive, almost raping the heroine, "making a whore of her", and reducing her "to the status of animal" (222-4). Justin prevents her marriage because he is jealous and thus, he abducts her. The novel is not only full of rape forced seduction scenes, but there is also a violent slapping at the end, which eventually provokes Megan to run away, fall from a cliff and lose her child accidentally (336-37).

From this perspective, then, Robards' novel can be read questionably, as an exercise of patriarchy in its preservation of dominant structures of power. Indeed, *Forbidden Love* perpetuates damaging stereotypes of gender. While the male hero in these romances is "hyper-masculine, uncommunicative, and brutish", the female protagonist appears as "submissive and dull, intent only on winning and wedding a man" (Strehle and Carden xvi). Nevertheless, it is plausible to interpret this literary text from the perspective of Roach's theories in *Happily Ever After*, where as we have seen, she reads the romance story in popular culture in more subversive ways than those traditionally perceived by critics such as Radway (1984) and Strehle and Carden (2009). One traditional element of popular romance novels is that the female protagonist tends to be sexually satisfied by the right male lover. In this respect, as Roach (31) explains, the romance genre has evolved in conjunction with changing norms for gender and sexuality. The fact that female characters are embracing their sexuality in these novels demonstrates the rapid evolution of the genre of romance, mirroring "shifting sexual norms for women" (80). The author finds "these changes in such areas as the novels' levels of explicitness, their underlying attitudes towards sexuality and sexual diversity, and the consensual sex practices in the books" (80). In this respect, Roach makes the controversial remark that "Romance fiction is pornography" (84) and that it fits within "the label of feminist porn" (94), by depicting "not simply sexual activity" but also "women's sexual satisfaction". The female characters, the author continues, "*like* sex in romance novels. Their desire is taken as a good – not a shameful – thing" (94).¹¹ Their female authors, on the other hand, are offering a feminist challenge by "writing lusty sex scenes" and speaking openly about sex (100).

From this perspective, then, the novel under consideration can be understood as an exercise of feminist challenge. Robards' romance narrative is challenging, and 'feminist', we could argue, in its portrayal of a woman, Megan, who openly challenges patriarchal scripts for normative feminine sexual passivity. Megan is portrayed, from the very beginning, as a sexually desiring character. When she sees Justin naked on the bath, she suddenly discovers her "woman's hunger – and ... needs" (synopsis). The novel narrates with graphic details Megan's bodily awakening, as "it yearned for him fiercely, with an instinctive knowledge that transcended the innocence of her mind" (80). She is overwhelmed by sexual desire just as Justin is, and she eventually becomes the perfect "warm passionate bed partner, accepting and returning caresses with joyful abandon" (89). Megan is initiated "into the rituals of lovemaking" by Justin and she becomes the best lover of all (ibid). Robards describes how Justin leisurely explores her body with his mouth and his hands, provoking intense female orgasms (145-7). The novel, then, clearly illustrates Roach's remark that "Romance leads to great sex, especially

for women” (Roach 25).

The novel can also be read subversively if we consider its optimistic ending, as the heroine wins in the end, achieving success in her life. Justin gets an annulment from his wife, and he is able to marry Megan. The hero becomes vulnerable at the end, as he is finally conquered by love, even though he previously “did not believe that such a state (falling in love) existed” (121). As is customary in romances, Justin proclaims his unconditional love for the heroine (348-350). He openly repents for all the mistakes he did in the past, admitting that they were the result of jealousy and his inability to control the intensity of his love. Furthermore, Justin becomes a man utterly dependant on Megan’s affection: “he wanted no woman but his wife, which was the best justification for marital faithfulness he knew. She had cast a spell over him, his violet-eyed little witch, and she still held him hopelessly in her thrall” (367). The hero has eyes for no one but Megan. This follows the pattern of traditional romances, where “the autonomous ‘alpha’ man leaves behind the self-sufficiency and rugged individualism associated with masculine economic ideals and adopts more feminized traits of sociability, empathy, and interdependence” (Roach 2009: xxxi), while the female character is radically empowered by appropriating “the currencies in which men trade: money, sex, and wit” (ibid). This reversal of gender roles is clearly observed in this novel. The heroine in the end finds fulfilment in passionate sex, love, marriage and maternity, as she provides her husband with seven children (374). In this respect, although the novel ends up visualizing women’s freedom within the constraints traditionally dictated by patriarchy (family, marriage and motherhood), as is customary in the romances produced in the 1980s, the heroine finds some form of gender reparation as the hero becomes emotionally submissive to her.

4. Concluding remarks

Written within the conventions of the popular romance novels published by Harlequin and Mills & Boon in the 1980s, Robards’ novels replicate old patterns of femininity and traditional gender roles. As we have seen, patriarchal heteronormative relationships and social structures such as marriage and motherhood are not interrogated but maintained. There is a subversive element in them, however, and this is their subversive depictions of sex and female lust, and their representation of happy, satisfied women in the end.

The novels by Karen Robards, then, clearly reflect the ideological and social attitudes prevalent at the time of their composition. Since then, popular romance has undergone various transformations. Although the genre continues being highly ‘formulaic’, it seems that there is now a larger subgeneric diversity and hybridity. As noted by Gilmartin (2015), popular romance is much more complex nowadays, as the genre has moved on from the stereotypes, stock conventions and simplified motifs of the kind of Harlequin, Mills & Boon novels produced in the 1980s: “Readers demand more depth than ‘boy meets girl’”, and this at times involves deeper reflections on “historical context, social issues” and more in-depth portrayals of “characters struggling with personal challenges.”” On the other hand, there seems to be a higher demand in the market of more varied forms of erotic romance such as less conservative sexual practices, non-heterosexual storylines, and gay and lesbian romances (Roche 80, 109).

Nevertheless, the popularity that Robards’ novels still enjoy nowadays still reflect the supremacy of the genre and the wide reception of this kind of fiction in the global market. The

fact that these novels remain at the top of the reading list of Irish historical romance indicates the prevalence of certain expectations by the average reader of the genre. In spite of the changes commented above, Hughes (3, 17) notes in her analysis of historical romance throughout the period from 1890 to 1990 that the genre has remained “remarkably conservative” in nearly a hundred years, and “the messages of the texts” are largely “back-ward looking”. The reason for this relatively unchanging nature, this critic continues, is that this genre has traditionally been devised as a way of “normalizing traditional attitudes and patterns of behavior when rapid changes in society seemed to threaten the status quo” (133).

Interestingly enough, there are very few contemporary Irish women writers writing the typical historical romance analysed in this essay. As Cremin (60-1) notes in the context of the Irish literary scene, “it is surprising that female authors aiming for the mass market eschew the historical romance, the gothic thrillers, the family sagas and the bonk-buster and instead concentrate overwhelmingly on contemporary narratives”. Indeed, the female names traditionally associated with popular fiction in Ireland – most notably Marian Keyes, Patricia Scanlan and Maeve Binchy – produce narratives “in a style that aims to be self-consciously modern” in an attempt to “grapple with the contemporary social and economic realities of women’s lives” in Ireland (61-2). This absence of Irish literary voices within the category of popular historical romance, however, seems to be changing. In 2015, for instance, four Irish authors were on the shortlist for the 2015 Romantic Novel Awards (RoNAs), out of a total of 36 writers nominated for the awards (Gilmartin 2015). Three of the Irish nominees were debut authors, shortlisted in the historical romance category: Susan Lanigan’s *White Feathers*; Stephen Burke’s *The Good Italian*; and Hazel Gaynor’s *The Girl Who Came Home*. In a future investigation, it would be interesting to note whether these authors rely on the traditional tendencies of historical romance analysed in this essay, or whether, by contrast, their fiction resorts to different textual strategies in their description of gender relations and their recreation of Ireland’s past.

Notes

- 1 The research for this essay was conducted in the framework of the research project "Politics, aesthetics and marketing of literary formulae in popular women's fiction: History, exoticism and romance" (grant reference FFI2016-75130P), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. I would like to acknowledge the support of Paloma Fresno Calleja, the Chief Researcher of this project, who read drafts of this paper and suggested changes.
- 2 The webpage of this professional trade organization is <<https://www.rwa.org/romance>> (accessed November 16, 2017). The British association, equivalent to this one, is the Romantic Novelists' Association (RNA). Its website is <<http://www.rna-uk.org/>> (accessed November 16, 2017).
- 3 See <https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/85908.Irish_Heroes_and_Heroines_in_Contemporary_Romance_> (accessed September 25, 2018).
- 4 See <https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/17267.Best_Irish_Historical_Romances> (accessed September 25, 2018).
- 5 See <<https://books.harlequin.com/search?w=%20romance%20ireland&view=grid> and <<https://books.harlequin.com/search?w=historical%20romance%20ireland&view=grid>> (accessed September 25, 2018. Most of these books can also be accessed through the website of Mills and Boon (<<https://www.millsandboon.co.uk/>>).

- 6 In these novels, the female protagonists follow the stock conventions of romance characters. Whereas in *Born in Fire* “The eldest Concannon sister, Maggie is a reclusive, stubborn, and free-spirited glassmaker—with a heart worth winning”, in *Born in Ice* Brianna Concannon is described as “A lover of hearth and home”, “a practical and nurturing innkeeper—whose heart is an open door...”. (<http://www.noraroberts.com/book-detail/?isbn=9780425233542> accessed November 16, 2017).
- 7 Historical romance is just one subgenre of romance novels. There are many others, such as contemporary set-romances, romantic suspense, gay and lesbian romance, science fiction romance, and paranormal romance, among others (Roach 2016: 6-7).
- 8 While Robards’ recent work falls into the category of contemporary romance and romantic thriller, the novels she published in the 1980s and early 1990s were mostly historical romances. Most of her historical romance novels are set in Regency England and – following the conventions of the genre – portray love in a social aristocratic world: *Shameless* (2010), *Irresistible* (2002); *Scandalous* (2001), *Loving Julia* (1986), and *Amanda Rose* (1984). *Dark of the Moon* and *Forbidden Love* are the only novels set in Ireland, although Irish characters appear occasionally in her work, as in *Dark Torment* (1985), which tells the story of Dominic Gallagher, an Irish-born convict falsely accused and evicted to Australia.
- 9 Indeed, the genre of romance has been stigmatized as ‘trash literature’. Frantz and Murphy Selinger define this genre as “the despised and rejected ‘other’ of modern literary writing” (2012: 3).
- 10 For a thorough examination of the interplay between colonial discourse and romance, see also Pong Linton’s seminal 1998 study.
- 11 On the other hand, the first mature encounter between the hero and the female protagonist happens in stereotypical ways as well, at a typical Irish gathering in a room filled with loud music and wild dancing: “Ever one of the thirty-odd people in the room appeared to be drunk. They were dancing wild Irish dances, with much foot-stomping and hand-clapping. A rag-tag band of minstrels played long and hard. ... the tune they played was a rollicking Irish reel” (11).
- 12 In any case, as Roach (2016: 98) rightly notes, the genre is still dominantly conservative, in its portrayal of women who reach orgasm almost exclusively by means of phallic-centered scenes which involve penis penetration, and not through any other means (clitoris stimulation, for instance). Robard’s novel *Forbidden Love* is an interesting exception to this, as there are many scenes in which Megan achieves orgasm by other means.

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