»On Thursdays We Shoot«

Guns and Gender Binaries in Regency Romance Novels

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1. Introduction

As a genre, the romance novel and its offshoot, the Regency romance, differs from many other areas of popular culture on the simple basis that almost every stage of its life cycle is shaped exclusively by women. The demographics of both writers and readers of the romance novel skew overwhelmingly female, as do the people involved in acquisition and publishing. In a world in which especially prestige cultural production is dominated by men, the romance novel celebrates what could be termed a »feminist appropriation of the male gaze« (Allan 2016: 29). A gun-toting romance heroine is not intended to appeal to a male audience because, at only 16 percent in 2016, the male audience is almost negligible (»Romance Readers By the Numbers« 2016); she must appeal to the female reader instead. The goal of this analysis is to understand the function of a shooting heroine within the context of the historical romance novel, specifically with regards to how she is perceived both by the audience and intradiegetically by the hero. How does a genre that is so focused on the female perspective present a heroine with a gun? What are the implications of a heroine who shoots for the construction of gender roles within the historical romance?

Tessa Dare's *Spindle Cove* series of historical romance novels, which consists of five full-length novels and several novellas published between 2011 and 2016, centres on the fictional village of Spindle Cove on the southern coast of England. For the sake of investigating representations of women, guns, and women wielding guns, I will focus on three of the books and therefore three sets of paired protagonists specifically: *A Night to Surrender*'s Bram and Susanna, *A Week to Be Wicked*'s Colin and Minerva, and *Do You Want to Start a Scandal*'s Piers and Charlotte. Bram is an injured veteran who wants to set up a militia in Spindle Cove to prove himself still capable of active duty, a venture Susanna tries to prevent to protect the community. Colin, Bram's cousin, is a known rake (the Regency romance version of a playboy) and Minerva convinces him to take her to a geology conference in Scotland where she wants to present. Piers and Charlotte, Minerva's younger sister, are caught in what looks

like a compromising position and although Piers immediately offers to marry her, Charlotte is determined to prove their innocence so she can marry for love instead. The books are loosely connected by the village of Spindle Cove and the characters' connections to each other, but while they could be read out of context and there is no overarching plot, most romance readers will read every single book by authors they like, so it is a reasonable assumption to say that a significant percentage of people who read the last book in the series would also have read the preceding ones.

The central premise of the series, and its relevance for a discussion of representations of shooting women, is this: Susanna, daughter of the local gentleman, has transformed Spindle Cove into a haven for young ladies who want or need to escape society, overeager suitors, or incompetent physicians. As a child, she suffered both psychological and medical abuse at the hands of relatives who intended to »make [her] ready for society« (Dare 2011: 155), leaving Susanna with not only physical scars from prolonged and repeated bloodletting but also a mission to prevent ordeals like this from happening to other young women. By virtue of its sheltered location on England's southern coast and Susanna's social status, she has established Spindle Cove as »the seaside destination of choice for a certain type of well-bred young lady: the sort no one knew what to do with« (ibid.: 5). The village is an almost exclusively female domain as a consequence, a tight-knit community of women who enjoy being left mostly to their own devices. The reader is first introduced to Susanna and her mission in the first chapter of the first book in the series, in which a concerned mother with three daughters (two of them being Minerva and Charlotte) tours the village to assess it as a suitable place for her oldest daughter with asthma. The family are clearly given a performance of respectability to entice them, and both the Highwoods and the reader are told that the ladies of Spindle Cove follow a very specific schedule to keep themselves healthy and active: »Mondays are country walks. Tuesdays, sea bathing. Wednesdays, you'd find us in the garden« (ibid.: 20). And as Bram, an Infantry officer sent home from the front due to a leg injury, realises about halfway through his book: »On Thursdays…they shoot« (ibid.: 220). Shooting appears as an extraordinary and somewhat scandalous activity for young ladies but, as I will show, the shooting heroine is part of a broader trend within the historical romance that is closely tied to the subgenre's balancing act between history and fantasy.

2. The Regency Romance Novel as Historical Fantasy

The historical romance novel, and the Regency romance in particular, remains one the most popular subcategories in the romance genre. When asked, readers say they appreciate the historical romance as a way to learn about history in a way that they usually do not encounter in school or non-fiction, especially when it comes to everyday subjects like fashion, food, or social niceties – the lived reality of the time rather

than who was at war with whom and for how long (Hackett/Coghlan 2021: 2). There is a curiosity about the past as well as a nostalgia for a different time; in the days of online dating and hook-up culture, diving into a world where courtship consists of lavish balls and polite but charged conversation over tea satisfies a nostalgic longing for something the reader has never actually experienced, although, as I will show, the Regency period as depicted in Regency romance novels must more accurately be considered a fantasy world *based on* or inspired by the actual historical period (ibid.: 3). Additionally, the fact that the historical society depicted operates so differently to our own means that the characters and the story do, too; modern day protagonists do not share a Regency romance heroine's fear of being ruined because she was alone with a man or was seen to commit such unforgivable sins as showing her knees in public. Navigating the familiar romance plot in this foreign-to-us environment is appealing for the same reasons that people read other kinds of historical or even fantasy fiction.

Although readers say they value historical accuracy in the romance novels they enjoy (ibid.: 2), this statement must be taken with several grains of salt. Georgette Heyer, the writer generally seen as having invented and popularised the genre of the Regency romance in the 1920s, was and is often lauded for her dedication to research and authenticity in her novels, although in actuality the accuracy of historical depiction in her texts is incredibly biased (Duvezin-Caubet 2020: 249). Heyer created a fantasy version of the Regency period in which she only included or portrayed what aligned with her personal beliefs and ideology: The Heyer Regency is almost exclusively populated by white characters and people of colour are featured only in the form of racist stereotypes; it is viciously antisemitic and homophobic. Heyer omitted any reference to or discussion of slavery or abolition efforts or the wave of legislations disenfranchising the poor. Her reputation of historical accuracy is largely based on detailed and meticulously researched depictions of fashion and vernacular, but because of her success both in life and after her death, the Regency romance has been intrinsically and indelibly shaped by her beliefs about what English Regency society *should* have looked like (ibid.: 248).

The Regency romance is therefore, at its core, a fantasy genre; based on the historical period much in the same way that George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-) is based on the War of the Roses, depicting a vicious struggle for the throne of a fictional kingdom that leads to war and widespread societal upheaval. The label »Regency romance« acts as a kind of shorthand to let the reader know what to expect and which rules to apply. Much of this has been born out of a shared mythology rather than historical fact, as a century of Regency romance writers have built upon and re-shaped the foundation introduced by Georgette Heyer. Jayashree Kamblé likens the way the romance genre has changed to a process evolution, with different traits acting as genes or alleles in a strand of DNA that determine the appearance of any given romance novel (Kamblé 2014: 14ff). Later authors would deviate

further from the strict period language that Heyer used in her writing, creating a faux-historical yet inherently modern vernacular, and the genre now frequently features heroines as well as heroes who lead lives that would not have been feasible during the actual historical period (Hackett/Coghlan 2021: 5). There has been a growing push to diversify the historical romance, from including working-class protagonists to non-white and queer ones, and generally depicting a broader, less polished version of society (Nankervis 2022: 350). One of the most common ahistorical aspects of Regency romance novels these days is often the heroine, whose conspicuously modern opinions about women's status in the world makes her stand out from both the lived reality of the women of her time and, frequently, the other female characters surrounding her. All this to say that for the purposes of this chapter, it does not really matter whether gentlewomen in 1813 England *actually* learnt how to shoot but whether the readers of the *Spindle Cove* series *think* they did. Here, too, genre conventions outweigh historical accuracy. The point is not that a trope is common within the romance genre as a whole, but how it is presented in the story as different from the assumed norm.

When it comes to shooting heroines, there are all sorts of reasons for why they possess this ability; maybe they are simply wild and unruly hoydens, what we would now call tomboys, maybe they are secretly running a criminal empire, maybe they have indulgent brothers or fathers. What I am interested in here is how this is framed within the narrative and especially in relation to ideas of gender roles: One of the major changes in romance novels since the 1970s has been a shift to include not only the heroine's perspective but also the hero's (Regis 2003: 111). While the heroine as an autodiegetic narrator and focaliser has not disappeared especially from contemporary romances, historicals – *Spindle Cove* included – generally alternate between hero and heroine. The question of reader identification in romance is controversial. Janice Radway's reader response study in the early 1980s seems to imply that readers do not want to only relate to but identify with the heroine (Radway 1991: 64), while Laura Kinsale argues that the heroine is merely a placeholder, a space for the reader to project into and imagine herself in her position without actually feeling *with* her (Kinsale 1992: 32) The shift to both protagonists as internal focalisers additionally introduces the question of whether female heterosexual readers can and want to identify with the male heterosexual romance hero as he considers his attraction to and desire of the heroine, which raises the question of cross-gender and cross-sexuality identification (Modleski 2008: xviii, Moody 2015: 114). Newer studies suggest that the best – if vague and perhaps unsatisfying – answer might be that it depends on the reader, the book, and the protagonists (Moody 2015: 110–114). Either way, the reader has access to both characters' thoughts and perceptions both about themselves and their counterpart, and therefore has more information than either of the characters. This allows the narrative to contrast conflicting points of view directly; rather than having to wait until the climax of the novel for the hero

to reveal his feelings and declare his love, the reader can follow his entire emotional arc in the same way she has access to the heroine's. The reader knows that the hero's coldness is a result of his loveless childhood, or that the heroine's reticence stems from a former unhappy relationship. This of course aids the anticipation of the inevitable Happily Ever After, but for the purposes of this analysis, it means that we can directly contrast the protagonists' reactions to deviations from the (artificially constructed) gender norms of the Regency romance.

3. The Shooting Heroine and The Disbelieving Hero

The *Spindle Cove* series is of course far from the only iteration of the shooting romance heroine. In the second season of *Bridgerton* (2022), Shonda Rhimes' high-budget Netflix adaptation of Julia Quinn's *The Viscount Who Loved Me* (2000), which is the second book in the cult-classic Regency romance novel series of the same name, the relationship between the two protagonists changes significantly because of Kate's prior experience hunting with her father. Kate responds to Anthony's dismissal of her shooting skills with indignity: does he think she would »have trouble managing« because she is a woman (»A Bee In Your Bonnet« 8:49)? Anthony's response, disbelieving, laughing as he says it: »Ladies do not hunt« (»A Bee In Your Bonnet« 9:00). Of course, now she has to prove herself to him, and the time they spend together gives them opportunity to see each other outside of strict Society manners (and also, for Anthony to »teach her« how to aim). This is what the scene communicates to the viewer: Ladies are not supposed to hunt, Kate is a lady who hunts anyway, and it brings them closer together. In an emulation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Kate and Anthony's relationship dynamic is largely based on mutual dislike; they both think the other is stuck-up and arrogant, rude, entirely unsuitable as a companion to anyone. They usually only encounter each other in formal settings, where they are constrained by etiquette and their respective need to fit into the roles that society has assigned to them. On their foray out into the woods to hunt, Anthony is reluctantly impressed by Kate's knowledge, and Kate is forced to admit that Anthony is not as haughty and respectable as he comes across in company. The hunt is a bonding moment for them, with intense sexual tension and the understanding that despite all their perceived differences, they have shared interests they could potentially bond over. The fact that Kate has been hunting is not what ultimately brings them together as a couple, but it does facilitate a significant shift in their relationship. Where, previously, they were entirely at odds – Anthony wanting to court and marry her younger sister, Kate determined to prevent this because she considers him unsuitable and unlikeable – the hunt gives them a common goal at least for the moment.

Far more interesting, however, is the scene just preceding the actual hunt. It is Kate's sister Edwina who informs Anthony (and his brother Benedict) that Kate has been hunting before, and suggests that Kate should join the men on their excursion so she and Anthony can get to know one another better as potential future in-laws. In fact, she says that »Kate is an excellent shot« (»A Bee In Your Bonnet« 8:26) and asserts that she used to hunt frequently back in India, to which Anthony reacts with incredulity. He suggests that although she may have engaged in simple target practice, she would certainly be out of her depth on a stag hunt; Kate, immediately irritated, asks whether he thinks her incapable because of her gender and Anthony attempts to deflect, stating that ladies simply do not hunt as a matter of fact. There is an interesting duality in this scene: Although the audience and indeed the characters know that in this universe, a lady who hunts is indeed unusual and quite out of the ordinary, Anthony's disbelief and dismissive attitude are framed as sexist and unfair. By this logic, Kate *is* different, *and* the belief that a woman cannot shoot is wrong. Of course, it could be argued that Anthony's disbelief is indeed chauvinistic if he is of the general opinion that women cannot shoot because they are women, meaning he considers women as a group to be inferior in this regard. However, the fact that he remarks specifically that women simply *do not* hunt suggests that he is aware of a societal difference rather than a biological one, so he simply doubts that Kate, as a respectable young lady and daughter of a noblewoman, would have been taught to.

This apparent disconnect between the worldbuilding, which declares that women do not shoot, and the narrative positing that the assumption that women cannot shoot is silly and probably sexist is perhaps a symptom of just how artificial the Regency romance is. Despite the veneer of historicity, it is fundamentally a genre built on present-day ideas and expectations about women's gender roles, evolving over time to keep up with the time in which each novel is written to reflect the issues concerning women in their real lives, as a way to »observe one's own time historically« (Kamblé 2014: 42). A reviewer for *Vanity Fair* called the first season »wildly anachronistic« and »distinctly American in its conception of British mores« (Saraiya), which is an apt descIiption of not just this adaptation but perhaps also the appeal of the genre as a whole. Both seasons of *Bridgerton* sit firmly in the top 10 of most-watched seasons of Netflix originals series as of February 2023 (Solsman). *The Viscount Who Loved Me* does not contain the hunting scene; it was one of several changes made to update the source material and bring it to a new audience twenty years after the novel was originally written, such as the fact that the heroine's family is Indian in the show[1] but white English in the book (Valentini).

1 Despite the show's ostensibly »race-blind« casting and references to Indian culture in the second season, *Bridgerton* generally refuses to engage with the implications of colonialism;

Tessa Dare's *Spindle Cove* series was published in the early 2010s, roughly midway between the publication of Julia Quinn's *Bridgerton* books and the Netflix adaptation. In the world of Spindle Cove, when Bram finds out about Susanna's proficiency with a weapon in *A Night to Surrender*, he realises that they are not, in fact, complete opposites whose constant clashes are simply the natural consequence of their positions and genders. For one, he is immediately humbled. Although he knows that her father is a famous innovator of firearms, Bram expects her to be scared of handling one because she is a woman; he intends to humiliate and frighten her in public, and begins to explain how a flintlock pistol works in deliberately patronising tones. She plays along for the moment, feigning ignorance, and then proceeds to show off her proficiency with great effect to everyone watching:

> »›This is a flintlock,‹ he said, ladling out his words in slow, patronising increments. ›The ball shoots from this barrel, see? Here is the trigger, in the middle. And the other end fits against your shoulder, like this.‹
> ›Is that so?‹ she said wonderingly. She reached for the weapon. ›May I try?‹
> ›Slowly there.‹ He moved behind her. ›I'll show you how to hold it.‹
> ›That won't be necessary.‹ She smiled. ›Your instructions were so lucid and crisp.‹« (Dare 2011: 111)

She then proceeds to clean and load the gun in record time, leaving Bram not only reluctantly impressed but aroused by her competence, and he realises with annoyance that he feels closer to her now, knowing that they most likely shared the experience of being taught to shoot by their fathers (ibid.: 111f.). At this point the reader, like Bram, has no idea what Susanna is capable of, so the reveal comes as a surprise to both. The choice of point of view here emphasises that Bram is being deliberately cruel, rather than simply ignorant; while assuming that a woman would not know her way around a firearm would be reasonable within the framework of the genre, he is explicitly trying to humiliate her in public. Out of all the *Spindle Cove* novels, *A Night to Surrender* is the one that is most explicitly framed as a battle of the sexes. Bram and his male companions are trying to assemble a militia and find that the village is so completely run by women that the remaining men are seemingly hopelessly unmasculine, while Susanna desperately wants to protect the female sanctuary she has built. In the end, their success comes out of working together, the village ladies assisting the men in their efforts while Bram and Susanna settle their differences and fall in love.

What makes the *Spindle Cove* series stand out from other examples of the shooting heroine trope is that it is not just Susanna who knows her way around a pistol

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there are no references to the British occupation of India and the Sharmas are not shown to face racism within English society.

but all the Spindle Cove ladies. The series has a running joke about the schedule they follow, repeating in each of the three books I discuss: »Mondays are country walks. Tuesdays, sea bathing. Wednesdays, you'd find us in the garden. ›And on Thursdays […] they shoot‹« (ibid.: 220). There is a whole community of women traipsing about in English society of this universe who have spent time in the village and therefore know how to handle all sorts of projectile weaponry. Susanna has »always believed a woman should know how to protect herself« (ibid.: 222), and as the daughter of the local nobleman who deliberately cultivated the village's reputation as a safe haven, she herself is fiercely protective of the women who come to her for refuge. So although, in the context of this series, shooting women are still presented as unusual, the audience, after this reveal in the first book, knows that this is the norm for Spindle Cove ladies, and so do some of the heroes. Colin, in *A Week to be Wicked*, uses this knowledge to win a bet at a fair when he presents Minerva as nothing more than a well-brought up young lady who is also half blind, although he knows very well that the proposed challenge is an easy game for her because he came to Spindle Cove with Bram.

> »The men had a good laugh amongst themselves as Colin drew her forward, to the shooter's mark.
> ›Colin, what were you thinking?‹ she whispered, trembling. ›What am I to do?‹
> ›You're going to shoot, of course. And you're going to hit the target, dead centre.‹« (Dare 2012: 249)

Here, the joke is not on either of the main characters but on everybody else, and the reader is in on it: how silly of these country folk to think a woman cannot shoot.

In *Do You Want to Start a Scandal*, the hero, Piers, is a spy attending a house party on a government mission, and his first encounter with the heroine leads to the two of them being caught in what looks like a compromising situation embracing behind a curtain, where in reality they were hiding from a pair of »mystery lovers« who entered the room just as Charlotte tried to explain to Piers that her mother was intent on encouraging a relationship between them. This book centres on a mystery plot, as Charlotte considers herself a rather good sleuth and is determined to uncover the identities of the »mystery lovers« to prove that nothing untoward happened between her and Pier, and Piers initially dismisses her assertions as the whims of a flighty young woman. He knows that she lived in Spindle Cove for a while but cut off his valet's account of the ladies' activities after Wednesday (Dare 2016: 27), and readers who have read the previous books in the series get to cackle knowingly at his moment of realisation when Charlotte recognises the model of his pistol and begins to talk shop. He quickly makes the connection between the village of Spindle Cove and her unexpected (to him) expertise when he realises that shooting is part of the Spindle Cove schedule (ibid.: 88). The moment is part of Piers' growing understand-

ing that despite her youth and her gender, Charlotte is not only pretty and endearing but also smart and capable and would make an extremely valuable partner in his line of work.

For both Piers and Bram, learning that their heroines know their way around a firearm is part of learning to see them as equals, partners worth consulting and respecting, valuable allies as well as objects of desire. Although Piers is far less hostile to and dismissive of Charlotte from the beginning than Bram was with Susanna, he does not consider her an equal partner but, the morning after they were discovered behind the curtain, simply sweeps in and tells her to »[g]o upstairs and rest. […] I'll take care of everything« (ibid.: 32), declaring that they will be married and dismissing her concerns that neither of them would find happiness that way. He is surprised to find that she is determined to uncover the identity of the mystery lovers and even more surprised to realise that her methods have potential: »It wasn't a disapproving look. Piers was impressed. He knew she was clever, but he wouldn't have expected her skills of deduction to be quite this keen« (ibid.: 71).

Despite the gradual evolution that the romance novel genre has undergone over the last half-century, the gender roles, as these examples have demonstrated, are still quite firmly entrenched in the dynamic between hero and heroine. Although heroines are no longer simpering misses who cannot fend for themselves, and heroes have left their days of unbridled sexual aggression and animalistic possessiveness mostly behind, the majority of romance novels still position the hero as the more dominant and sexually experienced partner (Wendell/Tan 2009: 21, 37). The heroine, no matter how fiercely independent she presents as, is generally the nurturer in the relationship and usually not the pursu*er* but the pursued. There is more variation in this now than there used to be in the 1970s and 80s, and this dichotomy is less pronounced today than it was even ten years ago, but by and large these roles remain in place. But the historical romance novel inhabits that in-between space where it not only evolves with the times but is also firmly, inextricably linked to the past. No matter the advances made for women's rights or the latest discussion of gender inequality in the »real world«, the historical romance novel purports to portray a fixed moment in time; the Regency stays the Regency, and, as I explained earlier, much of the appeal of the subgenre comes from the opportunity to explore a society that functions differently than our own under the guise of historical accuracy, however flawed. It is one thing for a romance novel to feature a heroine who conquered the rules of that society against all odds because she is in some way special – often as a statement about the misogyny at the heart of them – but to remove or fundamentally alter those rules would reduce the setting of the Regency romance to an aesthetic backdrop only. So, although we now know, of course, that the only thing preventing a young woman from becoming a masterful shot or fabulously wealthy businesswoman is, bluntly put, the patriarchy, the fact remains that most women in

Regency London were not either of those things, and aristocratic young ladies were much more likely to learn embroidery than artillery.

4. Bridging the Distance: Permissible Transgressions Against the Gender Binary

As such, within the Regency romance, there is an emphasis on the firm line between the male and female, based on both conceptions of the historical reality (Hughes 2015) and the genre's positioning of the marriage plot as the perfect union between idealised representations of a man and a woman. The primary conceit of the romance novel is that perfect femininity, represented by the nurturing heroine, will overcome and tame the hero's extreme masculinity so he can become the perfect romantic and sexual partner (Regis 2003: 112). The idea that the lives of men and women had few and specific overlaps is part of the worldbuilding; the restrictions of high society dictating who can talk to whom in what context, the thrill of characters taking the risk to break those rules, and the fantasy of what the lives of wealthy lords and ladies looked like are important aspects of the genre's appeal (Hackett/Coghlan 2021: 1). The codes and conventions in mainstream romance are intensely cis-heteronormative especially in their focus on marriage and reproduction (Duvezin-Caubet 2020: 244); although lesbian pulp romances have a similarly long history as Mills & Boon, the incorporation of queer romance novels into the catalogues of mainstream publishers, with authors such as Cat Sebastian writing exclusively queer historical romances, is a relatively recent phenomenon (ibid.: 244).

While the modern heroine is permitted to have »unfeminine« traits, such as a persistent desire to be considered a full human being or riding astride, she is not an unfeminine character (Vivanco/Kramer 2010: 6). For one, these traits no longer read as masculine or deviant by a modern audience; we recognise that they are remarkable within the frame of the historical romance, but our response is to criticise the system, not the heroine. If the heroine is considered an outsider because she spends her free time studying botany instead of watercolour painting, we, as modern, enlightened, feminist readers understand this to be a very silly reason to ostracise somebody, and that women should be able to pursue whatever hobbies or career paths they choose. Giving a heroine an »unfeminine« trait is only a challenge to the system within the narrative, but does not question or interrogate the *readers'* world because the parameters of permissible male and female behaviours that a 21st-century reader is familiar with do not align with those of the Regency romance. Masculine traits like shooting, fishing, and science therefore serve to make the heroine more attractive to the reader as a relatable character, because the feeling of being ostracised remains a common one, fuelled by patriarchal beauty standards and gender roles. A twenty-first-century woman would not be content to sit and embroider all

day while her father decides she should marry a complete stranger, so the heroine shouldn't either (Kinsale 1992: 32) – which is not to say that *all* heroines have ahistorically modern attitudes to women's rights. However, especially when reading a cohesive series like *Spindle Cove* where the characters are all connected, it becomes apparent that while the heroine is not only allowed but encouraged to break out of perceived gender roles, both »historical« and modern, she is not *un*feminine. The hero never considers her to be too transgressively masculine and in fact often still specifically thinks of her womanly attributes when he considers his attraction to her – her figure, her softness, her submission to his strength or experience, while the heroine considers him in terms of both physical and sexual power. When a protagonist's appearance is described from the other sex's point of view, that description is »often overlaid by references to their socio-sexual bodies« (Vivanco/Kramer 2010: 4), emphasising their role in the heterosexual relationship the narrative is building towards, i.e. getting married and having children.

This is especially noticeable in scenes relating to kissing or sex. Here is a scene from *Scandal* in which Charlotte has just unsettled Piers by teasing at his hair, and he leans into her:

> He allowed every part of their bodies to meet – the bony prominences of hips, the softness of bellies, the resistance of breast against muscle. The pounding of hearts and the mingling of breath.
> He pressed the full length of his body to hers – every lean, hard, red-blooded, masculine inch of him. Wanting her to feel him, to know the size and shape and strength of his body. (Dare 2016: 103)

This scene exemplifies how male and female are portrayed as stereotypical opposites in romance novels: there is the masculine, which is »hard«, »masculine« and overall dominant, and the feminine, which is soft and malleable and submissive. Where romance heroes in the 1970s and 1980s were generally sex-crazed, domineering caricatures of hypermasculinity (now referred to as Alpha Heroes), the hero figure has mellowed out significantly since then (Wendell/Tan 2009: 24f), but although the heroines absolutely do hold power in these exchanges, the spectre of the Alpha Hero still haunts the genre. Although not as pronounced, the contrast between »stern, sexual man and nurturing, receptive woman« (Kamblé 2014: 111) manifests in the ways attraction and sexuality are framed as expressions of gender: Charlotte notes that Piers makes a »masculine sound« of approval at her scent (Dare 2016: 121), and perhaps there is no better encapsulation of the sexual dynamics at play than this scene from *A Week to be Wicked:*

> »Why would you do that with *me*? A simple kiss was enough. What could you be thinking?«

> »What indeed.« He pushed a hand through his hair, more than a little offended at her accusatory tone. »I'm male. You rubbed your… femaleness all over me. I didn't think. I reacted.« (Dare 2012: 46)

The assumption here is that the mere fact that Minerva is a woman causes such a strong reaction in Colin that he simply had to escalate from a simple kiss to a passionate one, simply because he is a man. He did not assault her and the preceding exchange makes it clear that Minerva enjoyed the kiss, but biology took over and he just could not help himself. While Dare's heroes are not aggressive or violent in their sexuality, they are definitely *more* sexually aggressive than the heroines, usually the one to initiate or escalate intimacy, and the party with actual sexual experience where the heroines are appropriately unkissed or at the very least unbedded, as the genre conventions demand (Wendell/Tan 2009: 37). It is the hero's role to be assertive and strong and the heroine's to be at least a little overwhelmed, even if she is not cowed by him in other aspects of their interactions. The fact that the Spindle Cove heroines are in many respects unusual, in their confidence and self-assurance as well as their ability to shoot which they learned in the titular community of women, does not change their role in the pre-defined romance novel relationship structure.

5. Conclusion

A heroine who breaks out of the mould she is assigned by virtue of her gender and time period is appealing to modern audiences, who are comfortably disconnected from the perceived reality of 19th-century aristocracy, because although they enjoy the fantasy of it they cannot imagine being satisfied with the life the Regency romance heroine is supposed to have. At the same time the framework has to stay intact so as to maintain the fantasy, which is what leads to the phenomenon of ahistorical historical as described earlier. The emphasis on the differences between the sexes is a necessary characteristic of the genre because the central fantasy relies on the hero being a »spectacular representation of masculinity« (Radway 1991: 128) that appeals specifically to female readers, and yet it has to be disrupted in order to facilitate the actual story. Regency romances exist on a wide spectrum of how much the courtship between the characters deviates from the perceived norm, but of course a relationship that happens entirely the way it is »supposed to« does not make for a riveting novel. So the heroine goes on a hunt with the hero, or asks him to take her to a geology conference in Scotland which she has submitted a paper to under the guise of being a man (Dare 2012: 213), or promises to solve a mystery so they will not be forced to marry against their will, bringing the two of them together in ways not intended by the world they live in. In both *A Night to Surrender* and *Do You Want To Start A Scandal*, the heroine enters the hero's professional world: Susanna in-

terferes with and then aides Bram's plans to return to military service and Charlotte proves herself a capable and keen detective to Piers, who is essentially a secret agent. *A Week to be Wicked* follows the protagonists' journey from Spindle Cove to Scotland, where Minerva desperately wants to present a fossil she has found – a deliberate reference to Mary Ann Mantell and Mary Anning, who discovered similar fossils in the 19th century (Dare 2012: 355, author's note) – at a geology conference which she, as a woman, would not ordinarily be allowed to attend. The heroes do not enter the heroine's world in return. Bram does not learn about medicinal plants for Susanna, Colin does not become a geologist, and a significant part of what makes Piers attractive is his way of taking charge and firmly pulling Charlotte into his control. Once again, the heroine is permitted and encouraged to enter the male sphere – for example, Minerva being turned away from the geology conference on the basis of her sex is presented as explicitly discriminatory and outrageous, although it would have been historically accurate (ibid.: 333ff.) – but the heroes do not interfere with the female domain in any way. They do not cook or do needlework or spend time raising children. They may hover over and nurse the heroine if she is ill or injured, and they certainly attend to her needs and strive to protect her, but this is the full extent of their venture from the masculine path. While the heroine is encouraged by the narrative and begrudgingly allowed by the hero to break out of the binary of Regency romance gender roles, the hero is not; his only real transgression against the image of ultimate masculinity is essentially a capability to feel deeply and care about the heroine. The boundaries between male and female, masculine and feminine are not actually broken down, only made selectively permeable to the heroine so she can more effectively appeal to both the hero and the reader.

It must also be considered that Dare's style of romance novel is as much romantic comedy as it is period drama, so although guns and shooting do play a notable role in the series, guns are only ever fired at inanimate targets. A teenage boy is seriously injured in *Night to Surrender* when a cannon test goes wrong, but nobody actually gets shot. In *A Week to be Wicked*, Colin is briefly taken captive by highway robbers and Minerva rescues him by holding the man set to guard him at gunpoint; while she demonstrates competence and courage, it is Colin who directs her in what to do as she is clearly overwhelmed by adrenaline, and Colin who bashes his captor over the head (ibid.: 178ff.). Even tied to a tree and scared for his life, he takes charge of the situation and then admonishes Minerva for disobeying his orders and coming back to save him. In this instance the heroine's expertise does facilitate her saving the day, but she does not get to swoop in and take over.

However, it would be incorrect to claim that Dare's heroines are entirely under their heroes' control. The central appeal of the romance novel lies not only in finding a man to fall in love with but in that man falling in love with the heroine in return and, critically and crucially, explicitly acknowledging his love and the power that she has over him. The climax of the romance novel plot is the declaration that the protag-

onists cannot and do not want to live without each other (Regis 2003: 30). All three of the heroes discussed in this analysis start their stories either not believing in love itself or believing that they specifically cannot attain or do not deserve it, and so the focus of their arc is realising that they not only care about their heroine but love her so fiercely they cannot live without her. The highway robbery forces Colin to acknowledge how much he cares about Minerva's safety (Dare 2012: 164), Piers experiences a moment of terror when he cannot wake Charlotte and is reminded of finding his mother's body as a child (Dare 2016: 293), Susanna suffers life-threatening complications after a fall and Bram begs her not to leave him (Dare 2011: 349). There is an exchange of power in this – the hero transfers his own happiness almost entirely to the heroine and her response to his declaration. If she rejects him then, the implication is that he will be crushed and spend the rest of his life pining after her. This is often referred to as the hero being »tamed« by the heroine; by virtue of her own superior womanhood, however it manifests, the heroine is so compelling and attractive to the hero that his inner alpha wolf wants nothing more than to wag his tail and curl up at her feet (Regis 2003: 112). This, and the emphasis on the male versus the female in passages relating to sexuality, should be considered in the context of what Wendell and Tan – with deliberately light-hearted crudeness – describe as the »Mighty Wang and Magic Hoo-Hoo«, a twin phenomenon in which the heroine's true sexual awakening can only be facilitated through contact with the hero's »Mighty Wang« (Wendell/Tan 2009: 86) and the hero's previously womanising ways will be immediately cured by the heroine's »Magic Hoo-Hoo« (ibid.: 45f). The purpose is twofold: one, to demonstrate that hero and heroine are truly made for each other and nobody else. Although they do need to undergo a certain amount of character development and overcome the barriers, both internal and external, that initially keep them apart (Regis 2003: 32), within the episteme of the romance novel there is never any real doubt that they will be in a happy, loving, and committed relationship by the end of the book and this is reaffirmed by narrative arcs both in the sexual and the non-sexual storyline (which can but do not have to run parallel to each other) which symbolise the protagonists' connection.

The second aspect of this narrative of taming is what Catherine Roach calls the »deep work« that romance novels do for their readers (Roach 2010: 2). By pairing a modern, independent heroine with a hero who is alpha enough to pose a threat and act as a representation of the oppressive force of the patriarchy but does not actually undermine her personhood, the reader gets to vicariously experience the fantasy of conquering the patriarchy by making the hero absolutely devoted to the heroine, who can be read as a reader insert (ibid.: 9). Even now that romance heroes have evolved to be downright fluffy compared to the Alpha Heroes of the 1970s and 1980s, the fantasy of conquering the patriarchy by conquering a man remains. Therefore the heroes have to make concessions if they want to attain and keep their heroines: much like *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mr Darcy had to prove to Elizabeth Bennet that he was

not as cold and arrogant as she thought him to be, Bram gives up on his fervent desire to return to active military duty and accepts a position in intelligence instead. For both Colin and Piers, this beat involves acknowledging the heroine's agency and expertise and throwing their weight behind her aspirations in support. This is part of the taming fantasy and another way in which the heroine does exert power over the hero, whether she makes explicit demands that he needs to fulfil in order to satisfy her or not. To become the partner she needs, wants, and deserves, the hero must acknowledge his shortcomings, affirm the heroine's agency, and demonstrate that he will do whatever it takes to be with her (Regis 2003: 112). Through all this, however, the hero never has to lose or compromise on his masculinity. In these three Spindle Cove novels, all three heroes suffer from weaknesses they consider unmanly – Bram with his disabling injury, Colin's night terrors, Piers' trauma related to his mother's addiction and death – but the heroines' help consists of validating their fears and anxieties and assuring them that they are no less of a man for having suffered. Taming the hero has nothing to do with unmanning or feminising him but instead shaping his masculinity into a less aggressive and more devoted version; we want masculine men, the romance novel says, but we want them to be kind and devoted partners who care about us as people. Because romance readers still live in a patriarchal world, they want to read stories that recognise the narrative imposed on them by the patriarchy while also in a way refusing to accept it (Roach 2010: 2), even though the genre falls short of actually challenging the institution of marriage as a patriarchal structure.

The *Spindle Cove* heroines and their expertise around firearms illustrate one of the shortcomings of the romance genre and its potential for feminist discourse. For all its value in centring women's experience, its potential for empowerment, and the efforts of small-press and independent writers to diversify and challenge the genre, in its current state popular romance remains at heart a conservative genre perpetuating cis-heteronormative ideals of marriage and family. While *Spindle Cove* is undoubtedly critical of the time it supposedly depicts and calls the reader's attention to many of the ways in which women in the early 19th century were disadvantaged, it does not extend this critique to the present in which it was written. The heroines know how to shoot but do not use this to reverse the power differential between them and the heroes and their ability to defend themselves remains largely abstract and symbolic. Dare portrays heroines with interests and skills considered unfeminine for the Regency period who do not challenge modern gender roles, and classically masculine heroes who appreciate the heroines' unconventional character traits because they contribute to the romantic relationship between them. In a way, the fact that they are proficient with guns but do not actually use them to defend themselves or attack anyone in this series is a metaphor, too: the series calls attention to the constraints and inequalities of a patriarchal society but stops short of interrogating the institution of heterosexual marriage and hegemonic ideas of male and female

roles within heterosexual relationships that is still central to the genre of popular romance. The shooting woman thus remains a historical fantasy that caters to contemporary tastes for escapism, a palatable challenge to an ostensibly long-defeated system of patriarchy that romance readers in the 21st century can comfortably enjoy without having to confront the constraints of their own lived reality.

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