

Contrasting
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Both romance and anti-romance hold connotations of triviality and low-brow culture, reducing women to simplistic figures in which to indulge. Yet, for all their critical analyses, it seems inconclusive as to which genre is more sexist. This question may be addressed with reference to authorial intent, but, as Edward Said claims, 'the reader is a full participant in the production of meaning, being obliged as a moral thing to act, to produce some sense', indicating that both genres operate ideologically only to the extent to which the reader interpolates it. This essay will examine the theory that such readings of sexism depend on how the novels are received, using the idea of ethnographic consideration in order to study this. I will be dividing reception of these genres into the passive pleasure readers and the ironic or critical readers. *Spellbound* and *The Stud* exemplify the varied potential readings of the two genres. Both are primarily intended for fast-paced consumption by a mass audience, and are what Snitow describes as 'easy to read pablum'. Certainly, today's commodity culture has produced a certain depthlessness, reflecting Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of the culture industry churning out pseudo-individualised commodities to be consumed passively in leisure time. Romances are more obviously liable to be condemned by feminist criticism due to their female characters relying on men for fulfilment. *Spellbound* in particular may be thus condemned due to its references to the medieval era- an almost nostalgic allusion to a patriarchal period in which women had a stricter, more subservient role in romantic relationships. However, this essay will investigate the argument that anti-romance, despite its supposedly empowering message to women, is also sexist in its representation of how its women gain and maintain such power. Most obviously, anti-romance novels (*The Stud* being a particularly apt example <https://assignbuster.com/contrasting-spellbound-with-the-stud-as-examples-of-romance-and-anti-romance-fiction/>)

due to its male and female narrative perspectives) are able to alter Laura Mulvey's idea of the male gaze domination and the objectification of women in art . Though seemingly empowering for women previously subjected to the gaze (as Bryna is in *Spellbound* through the male narrative perspective as well as being the subject of both male characters' desires), it is clear through *The Stud* that the gaze is seemingly appropriate to the celebrity figure, meaning women as well as men are still objectified. In fact, both Bryna and Fontaine relish in the male gaze, though the former for matrimonial monogamy and the latter for power. Yet, both bear traits of sexism, as romance dictates that women centre their lives around finding a husband, while anti-romances gives the impression that identity correlates directly with appearance, indicating that women remain under superficial scrutiny in the modern world. Certainly, Tony criticises how Fontaine is ' a bit lacking in the tits and ass department' , despite succumbing to her dominance, which suggests that the male gaze will remain even with the new status of women. *The Stud* reduces woman's agency to superficial display of material prosperity. Yet, the females' skills revolving around consumption and celebrity image prove to be lucrative in the context of this contemporary world, and act as a source of economic power. This differs from the domestic sphere of feminine sentimentality; compared to the nineteenth century sentimentalism and domestic traditions, the sex and shopping novel permeates the convention of male writing representing public, rational social criticism, rather than relying on the domestic, emotional commentary in which women were considered to be concerned only with maternal and domestic yearnings. Through this genre, women are now positioned within consumer culture rather than relegated solely to the

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domestic realm. This may be viewed as an empowering new position for women as it not only places women in the public/business sphere of consumerism, but also depicts the male narrative of ambition and economic mobility. Aside from the overwhelming emergence in commodity culture, the anti-romance novel rewrites the American Dream narrative, appropriating it to the contemporary ability for women to have a self-made woman story, thereby refuting traditional representations of women. However, through this, characters such as Fontaine display essentially male characteristics of ambition, but also hedonism, excess, narcissism and the seeking for immediate gratification. The Stud also depicts a dependence on men as well as immorality and exploitation in regards to the way women achieve their wealth. This could be read, as Felski sees is, ' as a redress of past inequities' , providing the prospect for women to, in their own way, dominate. Alternatively, it may be regarded as hypocritical of criticisms made against men in patriarchal society, denoting the damaging effects of such a representation of women as encouraging the use of sexuality and appearance to gain economic and social mobility. Additionally, this representation retains the idea that women lack intellectual depth, and even this reliance on social manipulation and sexual exploitation is unstable; for example, Fontaine's husband, the reliant funding and prestige behind her extravagant lifestyle, leaves her. To this extent, the novel portrays the idea that women still have to sacrifice a part of themselves in order to gain success, just as Bryna sacrifices a lifetime for Calen. In this celebrity circle, it remains socially unacceptable to have a husband that is not deemed respectable. Furthermore, commodity consumption presents an opportunity for fulfilment, depicting how women are seduced by material wealth, just as <https://assignbuster.com/contrasting-spellbound-with-the-stud-as-examples-of-romance-and-anti-romance-fiction/>

romance heroines are seduced by men. For example, Fontaine makes up with Benjamin because she simply must have the fur coat she wants him to buy her in order to impress her social circle. Thus, the sex and shopping novel applies similar social constraints and pressures to that of patriarchal society, and arguably harsher constraints than the world of romances like *Spellbound*, whose female protagonist at least has the potential for a compassionate relationship. Nonetheless, Kay Mussell remarks that romance novels fail 'to elaborate mature and triumphant models for female life beyond marriage, motherhood and femininity', just as *The Stud* fails to elaborate models for female life beyond consumer and celebrity culture. Therefore, it is evident that both genres establish constraints upon women. In her article, Regis writes that 'canonical romance writers have employed [romance form] to free their heroines from the barrier and free them to choose the hero'. There is emphasis throughout the article on women's free choice, yet romances such as *Spellbound* establish the hegemonic ideology of monogamous marriage and the vital need to find a man to complete one's life, and thus refuses to provide other options for female fulfilment. Douglas corroborates this, claiming that courtship in romance novels is reduced to 'coupling in the wary primitive modes of animal mating', thus providing limiting horizons for women. As Modleski sees it, romances encourage the reader 'to participate in and actively desire feminine self-betrayal', as indeed Bryna waits and relies on Calen for one thousand years with no question of this commitment begged from the reader. On the other hand, a significant aspect of the sex and shopping novels such as *The Stud* centres around the idea that women can enjoy free sex without shame, but in doing so it negates any emotional connection and reduces it to hedonistic

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insignificance. Thus, both portrayals are limiting in portraying female fulfilment. In addition, the lack of depth and complexity in the writing style of both texts further indicates a lack of intelligence as a vehicle for women, both in terms of the characters presented and the metatextual concept of low-brow popular fiction associations. In *The Stud*, the emphasis on glamour and materiality serves to highlight the retaining of femininity of women in a masculine role of dominance and economic autonomy. However, to a critical rather than a pleasure reader, this may portray the postmodern view of the social construction of gender, drawing on Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity as a social construction. To this extent, the overtly camp aesthetic of the lifestyle and characters in the novel serves as a form of ironic resistance of hegemonic gender roles. Andrew Ross asserts that in camp presentation the exaggeration of the characterisation helps undermine and challenge the accepted normality of essentialist gender roles, linking to Robertson's ideas on gender parody as a means of critique. Considering this, one might look to the Brechtian technique of *verfrumdungseffekt*, as the exaggerated characterisation of the camp aesthetic estranges the audience in order to give them detached judgment of dominant gender roles. However, with ethnographic consideration, it is clear that the majority of the anti-romance audience are passive, pleasure readers, meaning one must assume that most would not read this deeply. As Robertson remarks, 'camp is a reading/viewing practice which, by definition, is not available to all readers; for there to be a genuinely camp spectator, there must be another hyperbolic spectator who views the object 'normally''. This again asserts the idea of a divided audience between the Adorno's idea of 'passive dupes' and the critical readers. Moreover, as a piece of popular culture, one should

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not necessarily read such text socio-politically. Indeed, Susan Sontag remarks that the constructed and stylised manner of the camp aesthetic, by its very nature, is apolitical, the point being its utter frivolousness and not its ability to critique. It is certainly difficult to read such a text as a serious social critique, especially considering the authors. Authorial celebrity and homology, exemplified by Jackie Collins and Nora Roberts, provides evidence for their novels being a celebration rather than critique of this lifestyle and position of women. Certainly, sex and shopping novels almost instruct the reader on social mobility within the lifestyle of the rich and the famous, and the intertextual evidence of authors' own celebrity depicts an encouragement for the values displayed in the novels. For example, Collins socialises within real-life celebrity circles, and makes a living on revealing secrets to the population on chat shows and online forums. This denotes a voyeuristic fascination rather than distanced critiquing; it seems to aim for readers to live out their fantasies through the characters. This celebratory representation appears to condone a new definition of femininity, though that definition still includes engendered roles, as men are needed to fund women and provide them status. In order to determine the effects of such representations, one has to ethnographically evaluate how such texts are received. Both *The Stud* and *Spellbound* represent mythic genres that depict exceptional, extraordinary heroines. The pleasure here is from viewing this extraordinary femininity, and thus does not denote commentary of social reality. Indeed, this follows Robertson's logic of 'the pleasure of masquerade', that is distanced from reality. As Adorno and Horkheimer would see it, the readers of romance and anti-romance 'seek novelty, but the strain and boredom associated with actual work leads to avoidance of

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effort in that leisure time which offers the only chance for really new experience. As a substitute, they crave a stimulant'. In this way, the readers are not necessarily expected or expecting to directly refer to reality when reading these texts. As Douglas sees it, romances 'are porn softened for the needs of female emotionality', and *The Stud*, while not passionately or explicitly sexual, acts as a form of female pornography in its titillation of female power and dominance. In either case, the categorisation of 'pornography' indicates a lack of realism, and more an indulgence for reason of pleasure, rather than reflections on reality. However, the potential for real-life association would be more plausible in *The Stud*, which may be read as a vision for a desired reality because the descriptions of commodity culture are very much existing and prospering, as well as the authors indulging in that very lifestyle and almost encouraging it. Meanwhile, the fantastical world of *Spellbound* exemplifies the reader's escape into a mythic world and is not expected to reflect reality. It seems, then, that anti-romance's close correlation with real-life makes it more demeaning in its reflection of reality, as opposed to an escapist's utopian sensibility that does not necessarily reflect real-life desires. Nonetheless, romances may be seen, as Regis asserts, as an 'enslaver of women', implying that romances have hegemonic repercussions in the real world of restricting female aspirations to heterosexual, monogamous wifehood. This subjective inconclusiveness directs us to Roland Barthes, whose 'Death of the Author' voices the concept that it is for the reader to find meaning, relegating authorial intent and majority reception to irrelevancy. To this extent, the reader is free to produce any reading of the texts; despite the lack of intention, there still exists the potential for any implicit meaning to be found, thus negating any

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possibility of conclusively determining which genre imparts the more damaging representation of women. Overall, considering both the authorial intent and the mass reception of these novels, the bourgeois idea of cognitive connection to culture is seemingly unfitting to a study of popular fiction; instead the focus is on pleasure, not critical analysis. As Andrew Britton explores the concept of Hollywood blockbusters, so too is popular music to be 'consumed' rather than 'read' with the postmodern logic of spectacle over content. Undoubtedly, such forms of 'art' are created chiefly for the marketplace, and thus do not deliberately operate ideologically. However, if one were to read such texts as indicators of the female role, it seems evident that, despite its feminist intention of empowering women, the anti-romance genre, exemplified by *The Stud*, signifies an equally restricting and demeaning representation of women as may be seen in romance novels; it merely appropriates concerns of finding a male to the ascertaining of wealth and status through manipulation and exploitation, both reducing the female to two-dimensional life aspirations. Bibliography: Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (Stanford University Press: 2002). Adorno, Theodor, *Essays on Music*: Theodor W. Adorno, (London: University of California Press, 2002). Barthes, Roland 'The Death of the Author' in *Image, Music, Text* trans. By Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977). Britton, Andrew, *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, edited by Barry Keith Grant, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009). Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Collins, Jackie, *The Stud*, (London: Mayflower Books, 1970). Doane, Mary Ann, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). <https://assignbuster.com/contrasting-spellbound-with-the-stud-as-examples-of-romance-and-anti-romance-fiction/>

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