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lives, which have been controlled and dictated by their place in the social structure. If oppositional impulses or feelings of discontent such as those prompting romance reading can ever be separated from the activity that manages them in favor of the social order, it might be possible to encourage them, to strengthen them, and to channel them in another way so that this very real disappointment might lead to substantial social change.

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THE INSTITUTIONAL MATRIX:
PUBLISHING ROMANCE FICTION
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*The Institutional Matrix
Publishing Romantic Fiction*



Like all other commercial commodities in our industrial culture, literary texts are the result of a complicated and lengthy process of production that is itself controlled by a host of material and social factors. Indeed, the modern mass-market paperback was made possible by such technological innovations as the rotary magazine press and synthetic glue as well as by organizational changes in the publishing and bookselling industries. One of the major weaknesses of the earlier romance critique has been its failure to recognize and take account of these indisputable facts in its effort to explain the genre's growing popularity. Because literary critics tend to move immediately from textual interpretation to sociological explanation, they conclude easily that changes in textual features or generic popularity must be the simple and direct result of ideological shifts in the surrounding culture. Thus because she detects a more overtly misogynist message at the heart of the genre, Ann Douglas can argue in her widely quoted article, "Soft-Porn Culture," that the coincidence of the romance's increasing popularity with the rise of the women's movement must point to a new and developing backlash against feminism. Because that new message is there in the text, she reasons, those who repetitively buy romances must experience a more insistent need to receive it again and again.¹

Although this kind of argument sounds logical enough, it rests on a

series of tenuous assumptions about the equivalence of critics and readers and ignores the basic facts about the changing nature of book production and distribution in contemporary America. Douglas's explanatory strategy assumes that purchasing decisions are a function *only* of the content of a given text and of the needs of readers. In fact, they are deeply affected by a book's appearance and availability as well as by potential readers' awareness and expectations. Book buying, then, cannot be reduced to a simple interaction between a book and a reader. It is an event that is affected and at least partially controlled by the material nature of book publishing as a socially organized technology of production and distribution.

The apparent increase in the romance's popularity may well be attributable to women's changing beliefs and needs. However, it is conceivable that it is equally a function of other factors as well, precisely because the romance's recent success *also* coincides with important changes in book production, distribution, advertising, and marketing techniques. In fact, it may be true that Harlequin Enterprises can sell 168 million romances not because women suddenly have a greater need for the romantic fantasy but because the corporation has learned to address and overcome certain recurring problems in the production and distribution of books for a mass audience.² If it can be shown that romance sales have been increased by particular practices newly adopted within the publishing industry, then we must entertain the alternate possibility that the apparent need of the female audience for this type of fiction may have been generated or at least augmented artificially. If so, the astonishing success of the romance may constitute evidence for the effectiveness of commodity packaging and advertising and not for actual changes in readers' beliefs or in the surrounding culture. The decision about what the romance's popularity constitutes evidence for cannot be made until we know something more about recent changes in paperback marketing strategies, which differ substantially from those that have been used by the industry for almost 150 years.

Standard book-marketing practices can be traced, in fact, to particular conceptions of the book and of the act of publication itself, both of which developed initially as a consequence of the early organization of the industry. The output of the first American press, established at Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1639, was largely the ecclesiastical work of learned gentlemen of independent means who could afford to pay the printer to issue their books.³ Limitation of authorship to those with sufficient capital occurred generally throughout the colonies because most of the early presses were owned by combined printer-publishers who charged authors a flat fee for typesetting and distribution and a royalty for each book sold.⁴ Because it was the author who financed publication and thus shouldered the risk of unsold copies, the printer-publisher had relatively little interest in seeing that the book appealed to previously known audi-

ence taste. As a result, authors exerted almost total control over their works, which were then conceived as the unique products of their own individual intellects. Publication was concomitantly envisioned as the act of publicly issuing an author's ideas, an act that could be accomplished by the formal presentation of even one copy of those ideas for public review. In the early years of the printing industry, therefore, the *idea* of publication was not tied to the issue of sales or readership. As long as the work was presented in the public domain, it was considered published, regardless of whether it was read or not.

Of course, authors did concern themselves with readers, not least because they stood to lose a good deal if their books failed to sell. However, the problem was not a major one because the literate reading community was small and because publication itself was carried out on a local scale. The author very often knew who his readers were likely to be and could tailor his offering to their interests and tastes. Indeed, it was not uncommon for an early American writer to finance publication by soliciting contributions from specific, known subscribers whom he made every effort to please.⁵ It was thus relatively easy to match individual books with the readers most likely to appreciate the sentiments expressed within them.

Thus the concept of the book as a unique configuration of ideas conceived with a unique hypothetical audience in mind developed as the governing conception of the industry. Publishers prided themselves on the diversity of their offerings and conceived the strength of an individual house to be its ability to supply the American reading public with a constant stream of unique and different books. In addition, they reasoned further that because publishing houses issued so many different kinds of works, each of which was intended for an entirely different public, it was futile to advertise the house name itself or to publicize a single book for a heterogeneous national audience. In place of national advertising, then, publishers relied on editors' intuitive abilities to identify the theoretical audiences for which books had been conceived and on their skills at locating real readers who corresponded to those hypothetical groups. Throughout the nineteenth century and indeed well into the twentieth, authors, editors, and publishers alike continued to think of the process of publication as a personal, discrete, and limited act because they believed that the very particularity and individuality of books destined them for equally particular and individual publics.

Despite the continuing domination of this attitude, the traditional view of book publishing was challenged, even if only tentatively, in the early years of the nineteenth century by an alternate view which held that certain series of books could be sold successfully and continuously to a huge, heterogeneous, preconstituted public. Made possible by revolutionary de-

developments in technology and distribution and by the changing character of the reading audience itself, this new idea of the book as a salable commodity gradually began to alter the organization of the editorial process and eventually the conception of publishing itself. Although this new view of the book and of the proper way to distribute it was at first associated only with a certain kind of printer-publisher, it was gradually acknowledged and later grudgingly used by more traditional houses when it became clear that readers could be induced to buy quite similar books again and again.

The specific technological developments that prepared the way for the early rationalization of the book industry included the improvement of machine-made paper, the introduction of mechanical typesetting and more sophisticated flatbed presses, and the invention of the Napier and Hoe cylinder press. The inventions of the steamboat and the railroad and the extension of literacy—especially to women—combined to establish publishing as a commercial industry with the technical capacity to produce for a mass audience by 1830.⁶ What this meant was that commercially minded individuals began to enter the business with the sole purpose of turning a profit.

Lacking the interest of their literary conferees in the quality of the material they produced, men like the Beadle brothers, Theophilus B. Peterson, and later Street and Smith, determined to publish what the general American public wanted in the way of diversionary reading material. Their concern with profit further prompted the first literary entrepreneurs to search for ways to sell their books not merely effectively but predictably as well. These men reasoned that if they could take the traditional risk out of book publication by identifying their potential audiences more successfully, they might avoid the common losses that came with overproduction and poorly directed distribution. As a consequence, they experimented with many varied schemes, all of which were designed to establish a permanent channel of communication between the publishing house and an already identified, constantly available audience of readers. This view of the relationship between a publisher and a book-buying public was vastly different from the more traditional view held by men like Mathew Carey of Philadelphia and the Harper Brothers of New York.

The extent of the gap between these two views of the publishing process can be illustrated easily by considering the two most commonly employed schemes used by literary entrepreneurs of the mid-nineteenth century to rationalize their production. In commodity exchange, which is exactly what these men were proposing, the producer attempts to convince the largest number of individuals to part with relatively small amounts of capital in return for some specially designed thing. Unless that producer wishes to go out of business rather quickly after having initially

supplied the available audience, it becomes necessary to extend demand for the commodity either by enlarging the purchasing public or by convincing it to consume that commodity repetitively. Although the early commercial publishers attempted to do both, they tended to concentrate their efforts on the task of inducing repetitive consumption, either by closely duplicating earlier literary successes or by establishing newspaper-like subscription operations.

The first technique—the imitation of an earlier bestseller—led to the practice of publishing particular types or categories of books such as the domestic novels associated with Peterson or the dime-novel Westerns created by the Beadle brothers after the initial success of Ann Stephens's *Maisie*.⁷ Peterson and the Beadles reasoned that once they had loosely identified an actual audience by introducing it to buy a specific kind of book, it would not be difficult to keep that audience permanently constituted and available for further sales by supplying it with endless imitations of the first success. Although a good idea, the technique failed as often as it worked. Because they lacked a formal way of maintaining contact with the audience they created, these publishers simply had to trust that continuous feeding would mean continuous buying. Furthermore, Peterson and the Beadles could determine audience preference only experimentally by issuing new material in the hope that some of it would ferret out new readers and thereby enlarge the market as needed. Nevertheless, in relying on repetitive formulas as a result of their primary interest in profit, they managed to create America's first mass-produced fiction in book form. We will see that the contemporary romance is nothing more than a highly sophisticated version of this prototypical category literature and that its publishers are, if anything, even more interested in profit than were their nineteenth-century counterparts.

Just as contemporary romance publishing is guided by this entrepreneurial vision of the book as an endlessly replicable commodity, so also does it rely on another distribution practice engineered in nineteenth-century America specifically to rationalize the sale of books. In depending heavily on highly predictable subscription sales to distribute their romances, Harlequin Enterprises and Silhouette Books, in fact, have merely realized the potential of a scheme adopted first in American book publishing in 1839 by New York journalists, Park Benjamin and Rufus Wilmot Griswold.⁸ At first looking only for a way to enlarge newspaper sales, these two journalists created a "story" newspaper called *Brother Jonathan* whose pirated British serials, they hoped, would appeal to a larger audience than did the usual daily fare of political and criminal news. Although *Brother Jonathan* was essentially a magazine, it qualified for free distribution through the United States mail as a newspaper because Benjamin and Griswold deliberately combined their serials with a minimum of "news."

As a consequence, they managed to keep their prices well below those of the competing magazines that were the traditional channels for story and novel distribution.

The venture prospered so well that the newly enlarged serial audience often refused to wait for the concluding installments in *Brother Jonathan*. Many readers chose instead to purchase the complete novel in book form issued, of course, by a traditional printer-publisher. To combat their own self-subversion, Benjamin and Griswold then created the "supplement," a complete novel printed on cheap paper, priced at fifty cents, and disguised, still, as a newspaper. This all-important disguise permitted the inexpensive circulation of the *Brother Jonathan* supplements through the mail to an audience of permanent subscribers. Despite the disguise, however, these supplements were really the first mass-marketed paperbound books to be distributed in the United States.

Unfortunately for Benjamin and Griswold, other newspaper publishers caught on quickly and soon began to issue their own paperbound extras. The ensuing competition lowered prices even further, placing books well within the financial reach of a significant portion of the American population for the first time. Traditional book publishers, to be sure, were dismayed by this challenge to their control of book distribution. In retaliation, they, too, began issuing cheap reprints at twenty-five cents and then, later, at twelve and a half cents. By 1842, book charges had dropped so low that Bulwer's newly published *Zamoni* could be purchased from one of three sources for as little as six cents.

The situation did not improve for trade publishers until 1843 when, with the book market apparently saturated, the postal service ruled that the supplements could no longer be carried at newspaper rates. This decision effectively closed off the first real channel for mass distribution of books ever used in America. Deprived of its way to reach its thousands of readers regularly but cheaply, *Brother Jonathan* collapsed almost immediately; its many imitators disappeared soon thereafter. During their short lives, however, they had performed the important function of proving that a large and diverse audience, sometimes the size of thirty thousand individuals, could be persuaded to buy not only a single novel but the *regularly issued* fictional offerings of a single firm. They demonstrated, in fact, that it was possible to make book sales predictable and more profitable if one could establish a permanent conduit between a publishing source and a consuming audience and keep that conduit constantly filled with material that would continue to satisfy individual readers.

Despite the disappearance of the story newspapers, the new reading audience continued to support the sale of cheap books, which never again disappeared totally from the American book market. In fact, the story-paper public and its newly discovered appetite for book-length reading

matter seems to have prompted what William Charvat has called "America's first great literary boom."¹⁹ Running its course between 1845 and 1857, this boom was characterized by the fission of literary production and publication into two distinct practices.¹⁰ The first, which was modeled after the category and story-paper concept of filling a permanently open channel of communication, aimed to sell remarkably similar novels and gift books to the same audience over and over again. The second, governed by the more traditional notion of book production as a discrete event initiated by an author, aimed to constitute for each work a temporary audience of like-minded individuals for whom the work had been theoretically conceived. Because few editors and publishers fully understood the revolutionary implications of the first procedure, both practices were often carried out within the same firm. Thus the goals of maximizing sales and pleasing already-identified audiences were imposed tacitly on writers who could never have appealed to a mass audience even if they had so wished. Hawthorne, Melville, and James were only a few of those who suffered as a result of this early conceptual confusion in the publishing industry.

Nevertheless, while it is true that cheap books never disappeared completely from the American publishing scene after the creation of the supplements, mass-produced and mass-marketed literary fare constituted only a very small portion of book production for almost the next one hundred years. Publishing continued to be dominated by the ideas and practices of the literary gentlemen in part because it was difficult to put the new commercial schemes into practice on a large scale. Publishers had not yet developed systematic ways to survey public taste, and they were often forced to experiment and to rely on intuition. Moreover, distribution networks themselves were inadequate, not only because the few book outlets that existed were concentrated on the East Coast but also because the newspaper and magazine distribution systems were localized and fragmented. Even if book publishers had learned to rely parasitically on the distribution networks of the few national magazines, which had, after all, relatively constant readerships, it is doubtful that the size of the audience they could thus have reached would have been large enough to make a book-production venture profitable. The mass-market portion of the industry languished, consequently, even throughout the first third of this century. It revived only with the invention of even more efficient presses and with the creation of more extensive and effective distribution networks.¹¹

The first production scheme designed specifically to mass produce cheap paperbound books and to utilize the magazine distribution system was not mounted until 1937 when Mercury Publications created American Mercury Books. In fact, according to Frank Schick, American Mercury

was the first paperbound book series to employ magazine distribution successfully.¹² Packaged to look like magazines, these books were sold at newsstands and, like periodicals, remained available only for a month. American Mercury's practices, which stressed the ephemerality of this literature, clearly differentiated this publishing venture from more traditional book production, which continued to focus on the establishment of a line of diverse books of lasting worth to be kept constantly in print on a backlist and in stock at the better retail establishments. Although the company at first published a variety of titles, by 1940 the editors had decided to concentrate on mysteries in the interest of establishing better control over their market. The new series, called *Mystery Mysteries*, differentiated its remarkably similar covers and titles by numbering each book for the reader's convenience.

To emphasize the significance of this particular editorial decision to concentrate on a single literary subgenre, it is worth pointing out that the American Mercury venture was really the first mass-distribution scheme to perfect the category method of production, which has been labeled by literary sociologist, Robert Escarpit, as "semi-programmed issue."¹³ In noting the problem of locating a real audience of readers for a particular book within the modern, anonymous, reading public, Escarpit has observed that "[n]o one publishing a book can foresee exactly how much attention potential readers will give it."¹⁴ Furthermore, because the publisher "cannot establish a programme" for a book because "he cannot determine the stages and limits of its distribution," Escarpit reasons that publication must be thought of as "non-programmed issuing."¹⁵ Having made such an assertion, however, he subsequently admits that the problem is often ingeniously circumvented by semiprogrammed issue whereby books are "distributed within a small circle [of regular readers] whose requirements are known and whose preferences have been thoroughly established."¹⁶ Determinations of this sort are made most often, he points out, in connection with related fan magazines that foster the creation of a generic formula or orthodoxy. Semiprogrammed issue differs, then, from the kind of publishing operation run by Peterson and the Beadles only in its utilization of more formalized and hence more reliable ways of determining audience preference.

The publishers of American Mercury Books were attempting exactly this sort of controlled production when they made the decision to restrict their list to a single type of fiction. They hoped thereby to sell their paperbacks in large quantities to readers who already knew their mystery magazines. Those magazines enabled the editors to take note of reader opinion and to gauge preferences that they then sought to march in their manuscript selection. In effect, American Mercury tried to control both its audience and the books produced especially for that group. Despite this

successful formalization of category publishing, the relatively small size of the American Mercury venture has prevented it from being credited with the mass-market paperback revolution.¹⁷ Although that honor is usually awarded to Robert de Graff for his founding of Pocket Books in 1939, his scheme introduced no new conceptual innovations to the industry.¹⁸ Like the editors at American Mercury, de Graff thought of the book as a commodity to be sold, relied on the magazine system of distribution, and gradually turned to category publication.¹⁹ Still, it was de Graff's ability to institute this system on a large scale that set the stage for the romance's rise to dominance within the mass-market industry. To understand exactly how and why the romance has become so important in commodity publishing, it is necessary to understand first how the economics of paperback publishing and distribution created the industry's interest in the predictability of sales.²⁰

In the years immediately preceding de Graff's entry into the field, major improvements had been made in both printing and binding techniques. The invention of magazine rotary presses made high-speed production runs possible and profitable. Although the new machinery was very expensive, the cost was born largely by the printers themselves who were, by tradition, independent from publishing firms. Because the printers had to keep the costly presses operating twenty-four hours a day to guarantee a return on their initial investment, they pressured de Graff and his competitors at Avon, Popular Library, and Dell to schedule production tightly and regularly. This practice led to a magazine-like monthly production schedule similar to American Mercury's, a practice that fit nicely with de Graff's intention to distribute his books through the magazine network. The regularization of production further enabled the printers to buy large quantities of paper at lower rates without also having to pay to store it indefinitely. The publishers benefited in turn because they could sell their books at much lower prices.²¹

Surprisingly enough, the invention of synthetic glue also helped to add speed to the publication of the mass-market paperback.²² Traditional book binding is accomplished by hand or machine sewing of folded signatures of paper to create the finished book. Even when carried out mechanically, the process is both expensive and time-consuming. "Perfect" binding is an alternate procedure in which single leaves of paper are gathered together, cut uniformly, and then glued to the spine of the cover. The first adhesives used in the process of perfect binding were animal glues that were not only slow to dry, but once dried, were so inflexible that bindings often cracked, releasing individual pages. The glues made it necessary for a printer to obtain sufficient storage space for drying the perfect-bound books. The invention of quick-drying synthetic glues eliminated most of these problems. Fast-setting adhesives necessitated assem-

bly-line procedures that simultaneously accelerated the whole production process and obviated the need for costly storage. The new binding machines were expensive but, once again, the printers shouldered the enormous costs and passed much of the benefit on to the publishers.

Together with the rotary presses, then, perfect binding and synthetic glues made possible the production of huge quantities of books at a very low cost per unit and contributed to the acceleration and regularization of the acquisition and editorial processes. The consequent emphasis on speed caused the paperback publishers to look with favor on category books that could be written to a fairly rigid formula. By directing their potential writers to create in this way, mass-market houses saved the time and expense of editing unique books that had as yet not demonstrated their ability to attract large numbers of readers.

The particular step taken by de Graff that made this production of vast numbers of books financially feasible was his decision to utilize the extensive magazine distribution network that had developed during the past thirty years. De Graff reasoned that if he was actually to sell the large quantities of books he could now produce so effortlessly, he would have to place books in the daily paths of many more Americans. Because he was aware of the relative lack of bookstores in the United States and of the general population's feeling that those establishments were intimidating and inhospitable, he concluded that books would have to be marketed somewhere else if they were to be sold on a grand scale. He turned to the American News Company, which had a virtual monopoly on the national distribution of magazines and newspapers, because it counted among its clients many thousands of newsstands, drugstores, candy stores, and even food outlets. De Graff felt sure that if confronted with attractively packaged and very inexpensive books at these establishments, the American magazine reader could be persuaded to become a paperback book purchaser. The phenomenal sales of his first ten titles proved him right.²³ Despite the advantages it offered, however, magazine distribution also posed substantial problems. De Graff and his early competitors soon discovered that few of their new book retailers knew anything about books. Uneasy about purchasing materials they might not be able to sell, these individuals at first resisted efforts to get them to stock paperback books. To overcome their hesitation, de Graff and his counterparts at other houses proposed that the entire risk of unsold books be shouldered by the publishing firms themselves. As a result, they permitted all retail outlets to return any unsold books or to certify that the books themselves had been destroyed.

The returns policy had the desired effect in that it convinced retailers that they could not be harmed by stocking paperbacks, but it proved extremely troublesome to the publishers themselves. Because they had no

way to track simultaneously progressing returns and new print orders or to shift the returns from one outlet to another, many publishers found themselves sending a book through a second printing to accommodate demand, only to discover later, after all returns were completed, that eventual total sales were less than the first print order.²⁴ The resulting over-production was very costly and caused the mass-market publishers to search for ways to make book sales more predictable. It was thus that category literature suggested itself as a means of gauging how a new version of an already-proven type of book might perform in the market.

It might accurately be said that the high cost of paperback book production increased the importance of the ability to predict precisely the pattern and extent of sales. A subtle but nonetheless powerful inducement to identify and fulfill audience expectations was therefore built into the mass-market editorial process because editors became responsible for acquiring titles that would make money. Category literature became a useful tool for publishing houses whose success depended on their ability to predict demand so exactly that the product not only sold but sold in the identical quantities projected at the beginning of the entire process. Because of the cost of overproduction, a sense of the size of the potential audience, an understanding of the preferences of its individual members held in common, and the ability to embody those preferences in a product they would buy became essential to the editorial process. Success, in effect, became a function of accurate prediction. That prediction was ultimately dependent on the capacity to control the interaction between an identifiable audience and a product designed especially for it.

Category or formulaic literature—has been defined most often by its standard reliance on a recipe that dictates the essential ingredients to be included in each new version of the form. It therefore permits an editor to direct and control book creation in highly specific ways. It is worth emphasizing, however, that category literature is *also* characterized by its consistent appeal to a regular audience. Indeed, Escarpit's treatment of formulaic literature as "semi-programmed issue" is helpful here because it acknowledges its status as a unique mode of literary *production* and thus highlights the fact that such publishing enables the firm to control its audience as well. Whereas fully programmed issue is characterized by the conscious creation of literary material for an already formally identified audience, usually through the mechanism of advance subscription, semi-programmed issue involves the selection of texts from a large variety of offered material with the idea that those texts will be distributed to informally identified readers whose requirements and preferences have been determined partially in advance. The determinations are usually made on the basis of audience response to specialized magazines or newsletters devoted to the subject that constitutes the "content" of the category.

Not only does this kind of semiprogrammed production obviate the need to set print orders solely on the basis of blind intuition, but it also reduces the difficulties of designing a proper advertising campaign. By relying on the subscription lists of related periodicals and on sales figures of earlier offerings in the genre, category publishers can project potential sales with some certainty. At the same time, they can use the periodicals for a specific advertising strategy and thus avoid the difficulty and expense of mounting a national effort in the hope of ferreting out the proper audience by chance. As Escarpit has observed, semiprogrammed issue "from the publisher's point of view . . . is financially safe."²⁵ At the distribution level, moreover, category publishing takes on the appearance of a subscription sale because each dealer knows the usual number of copies he sells and can order fairly accurately.²⁶

To understand the importance of the fact that category publishing makes book advertising manageable, it is necessary to know that publishers have argued for years that books cannot be marketed or advertised as are other commodities. Because every book is individual and unique, the industry has maintained, all publishers must "start from scratch" in the effort to build an audience for them. Benjamin Compaine, for instance, has commented acidly that "the toothpaste equivalent [of what publishers attempt] would be if Lever Bros. came out with a different brand each month, changing the flavor, packaging and price, with each new brand having a maximum potential sale to only 4% of the adult population."²⁷ Assuming, therefore, that the discreteness of books necessitated that each be advertised individually, publishers concluded that the enormous expense of advertising an entire month's offering ruled out the process entirely. Furthermore, because they believed that the variety of books offered by each firm made the creation of a single image of the house impossible, they also concluded that potentially less expensive national advertising of the house imprint would do nothing for the sales of individual books. Thus the publishing industry's advertising budget has been remarkably small for many years. The situation did not change until the 1970s when corporate takeovers of independent houses by large communications conglomerates resulted in the infusion of huge amounts of capital, some of which was directed to advertising budgets. However, before explaining how and why this has occurred and its relevance for our investigation of the romance, it is necessary to return to the early years of the third paperback revolution to trace the growing importance of the romance genre within the mass-market industry.

Although the early paperback publishers relied initially on proven hardcover bestsellers to guarantee large sales, they soon found that an insufficient number of these were available to supply the demand for cheap, paper-covered books. Wary of producing huge quantities of a title that

had not yet demonstrated its salability, these mass-market houses slowly began to rely on books that were examples of categories already proven to be popular with the reading public. The trend really began with the mystery or detective story that developed as the first dominant category in modern mass-market publishing.²⁸ The genre was particularly well suited for semiprogrammed issue because the writer-publisher-audience relationship had been formalized in the 1920s with the establishment of the pulp like *Black Mask*, *Dime Detective*, *Detective Story*, and *Detective Fiction Weekly*.²⁹ They helped to establish a generic orthodoxy which would then guide continuous novel production in hardcover format. Paperback mystery publishing developed simply as an extension of an already established literary practice.

Unfortunately, mystery popularity declined throughout the 1950s. Although the genre occasionally gained back the readers it lost, several publishers nonetheless began to look elsewhere for new material that they could sell on an even more regular and predictable basis.³⁰ Troubled by this variability in mystery sales, Gerald Gross at Ace Books recalled the consistent reprint success of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. Wondering whether its long-standing popularity (it had been published first in 1938) indicated that it struck a universal chord in female readers, he attempted to locate previously published titles resembling du Maurier's novel, which he hoped to issue in a "gothic" series. He settled upon Phyllis Whitney's *Thunder Heights*, which he then published in 1960 as the first title in his "gothic" line.³¹

Whitney had already written several similar novels published apparently because Appleton editor Patricia Myrer also recognized their similarity to *Rebecca*. In an interview, Myrer has stated that "this [1955] was a time when mysteries were not selling well. . . . Women didn't want to read Mickey Spillane. . . . I believed they wanted to read emotional stories about a woman in peril."³² On the basis of her intuition, she established herself as Whitney's literary agent and as Victoria Holt's, whose similar novels had met with considerable success in England. It is no accident, then, that at the same time that Gross was issuing *Thunder Heights* at Ace, Doubleday was also releasing Holt's *Mistress of Melym*, which quickly developed into a bestseller. When it was reissued as a Fawcett Crest paperback only a year later, it performed even more successfully. Eventually, *Mistress of Melym* sold more than a million copies. When other publishers caught on, the boom in gothic sales began.

Since Myrer, Gross, and other gothic publishers were not simply inserting mass-produced reading matter into a previously formalized channel of communication as had been done with paperback mysteries, it is necessary to ask why they were almost immediately successful in establishing the gothic romance as a particular category and in creating a growing demand

for new titles. Their success cannot be attributed to the mere act of offering a new product to an audience already identified and therefore "controlled" by the fact of its common subscription to the same magazines. Although confession and romance periodicals had been supplying love stories for faithful readers since their first appearance in the 1920s, these pulps were designed for a working-class audience. Because book reading has always been correlated with high education and income levels, it seems probable that the gothic's extraordinary paperback success was the result of the publishers' ability to convert and then repetitively reach middle-class women. Although one might suspect that these publishers relied on the middle-class trade magazines—such as *Good Housekeeping* or the *Ladies' Home Journal*—to identify and retain its new audience, in fact, this does not appear to have been the case. Publishers used very little advertising to promote the sales of the early gothics.

What, then, accounts for the immediate success of the category? The achievement has much to do with the special characteristics of its audience, that is, with the unique situation of women in American society. The principal problem facing the publisher in a heterogeneous, modern society is finding an audience for each new book and developing a method for getting that book to its potential readers. By utilizing the magazine distribution network, paperback publishers substantially increased their chances of finding buyers. But the use of this network proved especially significant for those paperback houses that were newly interested in female readers because it made available for book distribution two outlets almost always visited on a regular basis by women, the local drugstore and the food supermarket. Even the growing number of women who went to work in the 1960s continued to be held responsible for child care and basic family maintenance, as were their counterparts who remained wholly within the home.³³ Consequently, the publishers could be sure of regularly reaching a large segment of the adult female population simply by placing the gothics in drug and food stores. At the same time, they could limit advertising expenditures because the potential or theoretical audience they hoped to attract already had been gathered for them. The early success of the gothic genre is a function of the de facto but nonetheless effective concentration of women brought about by social constraints on their placement within society. This concentration had the overall effect of limiting their diffusion throughout social space. In turn, this limitation guaranteed that as a potential book-buying public, American women were remarkably easy to reach.

The popularity of gothic romances increased throughout the decade of the 1960s. While American college students were beginning to protest American involvement in Vietnam and a gradually increasing number of feminists vociferously challenged female oppression, more and more

women purchased novels whose plots centered about developing love relationships between wealthy, handsome men and "spunky" but vulnerable women. The audience for gothics grew to such proportions that by the early 1970s works of top gothic authors outsold the works of equivalent writers in all other categories of paperback fiction, including mysteries, science fiction, and Westerns. A typical Whitney or Holt paperback issued by Fawcett began with a first printing of 800,000 copies. Although most of the category's authors sold nowhere near that number, when taken together the gothic novels released by no less than eight paperback houses constituted an enormous total output.

At the peak of their popularity, from about 1969 to 1972, gothics were issued at the rate of thirty-five titles a month, over four hundred per year.³⁴ In the peak year of 1971, gothics constituted 24 percent of Dell's paperback sales. At that time, Dell was publishing four to five titles every month.³⁵ This extraordinary sales success of gothics established them as a true cultural phenomenon and qualified them for endless analysis and satire in the news media. Many articles on "How to Write a Gothic" can be found in the Sunday supplements and popular magazines of the period, attesting to widespread awareness of the phenomenon, if less than universal approbation of it.

The increased publicity notwithstanding, sales of gothic romances dropped off gradually between 1972 and 1974. Returns increased to such an extent that many houses cut back their gothic output. When asked to explain the decline in popularity, former publishers of gothics equivocate. Some feel that the market had simply been saturated, while others suspect that the growing visibility of the feminist movement and increasing openness about female sexuality led to a greater tolerance if not desire for stories with explicit sexual encounters. All seem to agree, however, that the nature of romance publishing changed dramatically in April 1972, when Avon Books issued *The Flame and the Flower* by Kathleen Woodiwiss.

Because Woodiwiss had sent her unsolicited manuscript to Avon without the usual agent introduction, it landed on the "slush pile," usually considered an absolute dead end in contemporary publishing. Inexplicably, it was picked up by executive editor Nancy Coffey, who was looking for something to get her through a long weekend. As she tells the story, she could not put the manuscript down. She returned to Avon enthusiastically determined to get the book into print. Coffey eventually convinced others and the book was released in April as an Avon Spectacular. Although Woodiwiss's novel, like the gothics, followed the fortunes of a pert but feminine heroine, it was nearly three times as long as the typical gothic, included more explicit descriptions of sexual encounters and near rapes, and described much travel from place to place. Despite the differ-

ences, it ended, as did all gothics, with the heroine safely returned to the hero's arms.

A paperback original, *The Flame and the Flower* was given all the publicity, advertising, and promotion usually reserved for proven bestsellers.³⁷ Such originals had been issued continuously in small quantities throughout the early years of mass-market history, but concentration on them was not widespread for the simple reason that it cost more to pay out an advance to an author and to advertise an unknown book than to buy reprint rights to an already moderately successful hardback. Avon, however, under the direction of Peter Meyer, had begun to experiment with originals and different advertising campaigns in the mid-1960s.³⁸ When Coffey agreed to publish *The Flame and the Flower* without previous hardcover exposure, she was simply following a practice that had become fairly common within her firm. The house's extraordinary success with Woodiwiss's novel soon caused industry-wide reconsideration of the possibilities of paperback originals as potential bestsellers. When Avon followed this success with two more bestseller romances in 1974, the industry was convinced not only of the viability of the original but also of the fact that a new category had been created. Within the trade, the genre was dubbed the "sweet savage romance" after the second entrant in the field, Rosemary Rogers's *Sweet Savage Love*.³⁹

Once Avon had demonstrated that original romances could be parlayed into ready money, nearly every other mass-market house developed plans to issue its own "sweet savage romances," "erotic historicals," "bodice-rippers," or "slave sagas," as they were variously known throughout the industry. Virtually all recognized, as Yvonne McManus of Major Books did, that "Avon [had] smartly created a demand through heavy advertising and promotion." As she commented further, "it . . . invented its own new trend, which is clever paperback publishing."⁴⁰

Although a few houses have developed bestsellers in the "sweet savage" category, Avon has been most successful at identifying the house imprint with this kind of romance and has established close ties with its audience by compiling a mailing list from its fan letters. Several publishers have attempted to develop other sorts of romances with the idea of creating a series or "line" that they hope to associate in readers' minds with the house name. The creation of "line" fiction is one more example of the familiar attempt to identify a permanent base audience in order to make better predictions about sales and to increase profit. The growing proliferation and success of such schemes, often modeled after Avon's informal techniques or the more elaborate operations of Harlequin Enterprises, makes them an extremely important development in romance publishing specifically and in mass-market paperback publishing generally. Before assessing several of the most important of these, it will be helpful to

mention two further developments, one in general publishing, the other in bookselling, that help to explain why so many paperback houses not only have found the romance market attractive but also have been able to appeal to it successfully.

The most significant development in American publishing in the twentieth century has been the assumption of control of once privately owned houses by vast communications conglomerates. Begun in 1960 with the Random House "absorption" of Knopf and continued in 1967 when the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) purchased Random House, the merger trend has left only a few houses intact.⁴¹ In 1967, for instance, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) acquired Holt, Rinehart and Winston and then later purchased Praeger Publishers, Popular Library, and Fawcett Publications. Xerox has assumed control of Ginn and Company, R. R. Bowker, and the trade periodical, *Publishers Weekly*. Dell is owned by Doubleday and Company, as is the Literary Guild. Gulf and Western has acquired both Simon and Schuster and Pocket Books.⁴² Although by no means exhaustive, this litany at least makes clear that the first impact of the merger trend has been the union of hardcover and mass-market paperback companies within a single corporate structure. Despite the fact that most individual houses have retained editorial control over what they produce, it is also apparently true that greater attention is paid to their profit-and-loss statements by corporate headquarters than the houses used to devote to them themselves.

It is not hard to understand why "attention to the bottom line" has begun to dominate the publishing process when one considers that despite increased profit consciousness within the mass-market segment of the industry, publishing remained a small, informally organized business well into the 1970s.⁴³ Once referred to as "seat-of-the-pants" publishing by its critics and supporters alike, the American industry continued to make decisions about manuscript selection, print orders, and advertising campaigns on the basis of editors' intuitions, ignoring the availability of the computer and the development of sophisticated market-research techniques. Much of the reluctance to adopt these highly mechanical procedures can be traced to the lingering vision of publishing as the province of literary gentlemen seriously devoted to the "cause" of humane letters. Editors worried that if profit became the principal goal, publishers would be reluctant to sponsor the first novel of a promising young writer because its financial failure would be virtually guaranteed.

In recently assessing the impact of corporate takeovers on publishing, Thomas Whiteside has observed that the "business was indeed riddled with inefficiency."⁴⁴ "Sluggish management, agonizingly slow editorial and printing processes, creaky and ill-coordinated systems of book distribution and sales, skimpy advertising budgets, and . . . inadequate systems

of financing," he claims, "prevented many publishers from undertaking major long-range editorial projects that they knew were necessary to their companies' future well-being."⁴⁵ Traditionally a low-profit industry, trade-book publishing was also characterized by widely varying profits because each house's fortunes fluctuated rapidly in concert with its failure or success at selling its monthly list. When the corporate managers of the new conglomerates began to scrutinize the houses' financial practices and performances, they were appalled. Most responded by forcing the publishers to adopt the procedures long familiar to the corporate world: "efficient accounting systems, long-range planning, elimination of waste, and unnecessary duplication of services."⁴⁶

Although it seems obvious that conglomerate control has had the effect of forcing trade publishers to do away almost completely with "mid-level" books—those that perform only moderately well in both the market and in critical opinion—it has had the additional effect of providing the paperback houses with large sums of money. This has enabled them to pay huge fees for the reprint rights to bestselling novels; it has also permitted them to devote a great deal of financial attention to planning category sales by commissioning market-research studies and to the advertising of the new "lines" created as their consequence. The logic behind this kind of financial maneuver is grounded on the assumption that if paperback sales can be made more predictable and steady, the newly acquired mass-market section of a conglomerate can be used to balance out the necessarily unpredictable operation of the trade process. "The hardcover publishers," Whiteside explains, "calculated that by adding a paperback branch to their corporate organizations they could smooth out some of the ups and downs of their business, making up on the swings what they might lose on the roundabouts."⁴⁷

Corporate takeovers have had the effect, then, of adding to the pressure on paperback houses to devote increasing amounts of time and money to category sales.⁴⁸ At the same time, because reprint rights have grown enormously expensive, it has been necessary for them to place even more emphasis on the acquisition of original manuscripts.⁴⁹ To avoid the difficulties of training inexperienced writers and the expense of introducing their works on an individual basis to new audiences, paperback publishers have consequently tended to seek out originals that fit closely within category patterns. They believe it is easier to introduce a new author by fitting his or her work into a previously formalized chain of communication than to establish its uniqueness by locating a special audience for it. The trend has proven so powerful, in fact, that as of 1980, 40 to 50 percent of nearly every house's monthly releases were paperback originals.⁵⁰ The conglomerates' quest for financial accountability has had another effect besides that of increasing the emphasis on category publishing with its

steady, nearly guaranteed sales. Their overwhelming interest in predictability has also helped to forge an important link between the now more profit-minded paperback houses and the increasingly successful bookstore chains, B. Dalton, Bookseller, and Waldenbooks. Together, these two developments have led to even greater industry interest in romantic novels and the women who purchase them.

Owned by the Dayton-Hudson department store chain, B. Dalton opened its first store in Edina, Minnesota, in 1966.⁵¹ After exploring the future of bookselling in the United States, the parent chain had concluded that Americans would continue to increase their education level, their desire for knowledge, and their need for books. Cognizant also of the lack of book outlets throughout the country and of their concentration on the East Coast, Dayton-Hudson proposed, therefore, to make books available to more Americans by establishing fully stocked bookstores in suburban mall locations near mid-size cities.

The company began by designing impressive stores with parquet floors and leather armchairs, but it soon discovered that the "hands-off" atmosphere did not prove inviting in a mall location. In short order, it switched to the "jazzy" approach for which it is now well known. Dalton introduced angled book racks to force browsers to pass more shelf space than usual, raised the light level, dangled cheerful signs from the ceiling about the pleasures of book-reading, and added the point-of-purchase displays so common in supermarkets. The company hoped that the resulting clutter would increase impulse buying. As a Dalton promotion executive explained to Thomas Whiteside, "[W]e look for multiple purchases all the time. We work the impulse areas very hard. We use table displays and dump bins . . . for bestsellers, and you have to walk by different displays of the same books two or three times when you go through the store."⁵²

Dayton-Hudson's move has undoubtedly helped to sell romance fiction. As Dalton opened more and more outlets—nearly all in shopping-mall locations—throughout the 1970s, it obligingly increased the number of potential outlets likely to be visited on a regular basis by American women. Richard Snyder, president of Simon and Schuster, has commented on the connections between the growth of the chains, their female clientele, and changing publishing practices. His remarks are worth quoting at length:

In my opinion, what is really changing the face of publishing in America is not the conglomerates but the giant book chains. It's not that as publishers we get the advantage of big accounts with the chains; it's the fact that the chains serve a different community of book readers from any that the book business has ever had before—book readers with different tastes. The elitism of the book market

doesn't exist anymore. A lot of publishers are having great difficulty dealing with that. The minute you get into the suburbs, where ninety percent of the chain stores are located, you serve the customers, mainly women, the way you would serve them in a drugstore or a supermarket. You have new dynamics coming into play, affecting what people buy and affecting publishers who wish to satisfy the needs of these customers.⁵³

Not only do the chains make books even easier for American women to obtain, but they also set up their stores so that the experience of buying a book in a bookstore seems no more threatening or out-of-the-ordinary than that of picking up a paperback while waiting for groceries to move down the conveyor at the market. Although publishers will not release figures about the percentage of romances sold in the chains or in other kinds of retail outlets, it seems clear that when more than 1,200 Dalton or Walden bookstores have opened in the last fifteen years in suburban shopping malls,⁵⁴ we ought to acknowledge that the romance's extraordinary popularity is a partial function of its increased incidence *and* accessibility to the audience for which it has been created.

Dalton's computerized operations have also worked to benefit romance publishers if not romance readers as well. Every outlet is tied to a central computer at corporate headquarters in Minneapolis, which registers all weekly receipts by author, title, and by more than one hundred subject categories.⁵⁵ Every store is then ranked by sales performance within each category. Dalton's managers can predict both individual outlet and general-category sales with astonishing success. In fact, they have one of the lowest returns rates in the industry. Moreover, Dalton's accuracy in ordering has taught many publishers to rely on its original order to set the size of further printings and even to make editorial decisions about the kinds of manuscripts that satisfy a given audience's preferences.⁵⁶ Through Dalton's feedback procedures, which are given great credence by the industry not only because of their accuracy but because Dalton's share of any given house's monthly releases is often close to 10 percent, readers can indirectly affect the editorial selection process and "force" publishers to take their tastes into account. This kind of corrective cycle seems to have led to a better, although by no means perfect, fit between the romance audience's desires and the books the audience is given by the industry.

Furthermore, because Dalton's computer can keep track of slow-moving items, since all books are given a code and followed for sales performance, the company is able to determine very quickly which books have not pleased their typical audience. These can be removed promptly from the shelves and replaced with other potentially more successful items. The entire procedure leads to rapid turnover in B. Dalton stock, just as it

places a high premium on fast-moving titles. While this might seem detrimental to both reader and publisher at first glance, because books are not kept on hand long enough for readers to find them, in the case of the romance it works to both their advantages. Romance readers apparently read more titles than do other category readers over a similar period of time,⁵⁷ and thus the rapid turnover in Dalton stock well satisfies these readers.

As a result of all these practices, it seems clear that the approximately 500 Dalton stores represent a significant increase in potential purchase outlets for publishers who desire to make contact with the romance audience. In fact, Dalton and Walden stores together now account for one-fifth of all trade-book and mass-market paperback sales.⁵⁸ Growing chain domination of bookselling activity in the United States should be added, then, to the list of material factors contributing to the extraordinary popularity of romance fiction in the 1970s.

Several publishing houses have further perfected sales techniques for delivering category fiction to the right public. These techniques are even more sophisticated than those employed by Avon. The obvious lead in this trend has been taken by the Canadian firm, Harlequin Enterprises, whose incredible financial success has recently spawned many imitators of its operations. That operation is a highly sophisticated version of semi-programmed issue whereby books are produced especially for an already identified, codified, and partially analyzed audience. In fact, Harlequin operates on the assumption that a book can be marketed like a can of beans or a box of soap powder. Its extraordinary profit figures convincingly demonstrate that books do not necessarily have to be thought of and marketed as unique objects but can be sold regularly and repetitively to a permanent audience on the basis of brand-name identification alone.⁵⁹

Like most mass-market paperback houses, Harlequin began as a reprint operation in 1949, issuing cheap versions of material it had purchased from a wide variety of sources. In its early years, the company published mysteries, adventure stories, Westerns, cookbooks, and, apparently, even some pornography, in addition to the romances it bought from the British firm of Mills and Boon.⁶⁰ In 1954, Mary Bonycastle, the wife of the company's founder, noticed that the Mills and Boon romances seemed to be doing exceptionally well. Although she suggested that the firm concentrate on stories that ended happily and were in good taste, the decision to focus production on romance fiction alone did not occur until 1957.⁶¹ Harlequin became a public company in 1968 upon the death of its founder. By 1971, the Canadian reprinter had enjoyed such success with its romances that it was able to merge with its early supplier, Mills and Boon. In 1977, Harlequin hired W. Lawrence Heisley, a Harvard M.B.A. and self-described "soap salesman" for Proctor and Gamble.⁶² Heisley de-

signed and perfected the marketing techniques responsible for Harlequin's current success. Prior to his takeover, the company marketed few books in the United States, sold just under 19,000,000 copies, and netted only \$10,000 on sales of \$7.7 million.⁶³ Within a year, profits had climbed to \$1.6 million. Within eight years, its sales had increased 800 percent. Phyllis Berman has estimated that in 1977, when Harlequin's sales totaled \$75 million, its profits were probably about \$11 million. That year, Harlequin accounted for 10 percent of the United States paperback market. In addition, the company distributed more than 100,000,000 copies of its titles over North America. By 1979, the total distribution figure had risen to 108,000,000 copies, largely because the books were being issued in ninety-eight countries around the world. Harlequin now claims that it "enjoys a regular readership of over 16 million women in North America" alone.⁶⁴ Even if these figures are inflated, it seems clear that a substantial measure of the romance category's popularity and visibility must be attributed to Harlequin's unusual but highly successful marketing strategies.

Those strategies, it should be pointed out, are unusual only because Heisey has applied them to bookselling. In actuality, they are little different from the techniques that have been employed for years in various consumer-product industries. Discounting the traditional wisdom of the publishing business, Heisey set out in 1971 to prove that books could be sold like any other commodity. *The qualities of the product itself*, he argued, *are unimportant in designing sales campaigns*. Of greater significance is the ability to identify an audience or consuming public, the discovery of a way to reach that audience, and, finally, the forging of an association in the consumer's mind between a generic product like soap, facial tissue, or romantic fiction and the company name through the mediation of a deliberately created image.⁶⁵ Heisey began by conducting market research on the audience for romance fiction.⁶⁶ Not only did he identify and locate his readers in order to design specific strategies for contacting them, but he also sought to discover their motives for reading and their preferences in characters and plot in order to incorporate them all in a carefully elaborated advertising appeal.

Heisey decided that the audience could not be reached successfully through traditional book outlets. He proposed to concentrate sales in supermarkets and to expand the company's subscription service. He designed book covers and advertising materials to feature the Harlequin name more prominently than either book titles or authors' names and made extensive use of television promotion. In this way, he was able to spread advertising costs across the entire series, thus avoiding the expense of creating a different audience for each title. To introduce his carefully standardized product, which he also assumed created reader addiction, he even went so far as to include sample copies in boxes of Bio-Ad laundry

detergent and, in another gimmick, to offer one title for fifteen cents.⁶⁷ The latter was part of a 1973 campaign to capture a million new readers for the company's romances.⁶⁸ Heisey also promoted the subscription service within the books themselves by listing other titles on the inside front cover and suggesting that readers who had missed them write for a free catalog. Thus he acquired names and addresses for the service, which then attempted to sign readers up on a permanent basis. Together, the strategies proved so successful that even now they are the basis of the company's approach.

That approach is still dominated by subscription sales, although the books are also distributed in more than 100,000 supermarkets, variety stores, and drugstores throughout the United States alone.⁶⁹ Harlequin now issues twelve romances a month—six each in its standard "Romance" category and in the "spicier," more sexually explicit "Presents" series. Readers may contract to receive either or both of these Harlequin lines. When they do, they get their books earlier than if they wait for them to appear in the stores, though they still acquire them at newsstand prices as a consequence of Harlequin's absorption of the shipping costs. Because the subscription lists and market-research analyses have helped the company to predict sales with great precision, Harlequin is rarely saddled with overproduction costs. Whereas other publishing houses distribute 12,000 copies of an average paperback and expect 35 to 40 percent of the first run to be returned, Harlequin generally prints 500,000 copies, of which less than 25 percent are ever returned.⁷⁰ Indeed, some dealers report selling 80 percent of their allotment within ten days.⁷¹ Heisey has observed that while "other companies print ten books to sell six, [Harlequin] prints[s] seven and a half" to sell those same six.⁷²

Once ignored within the industry, Harlequin is now followed with care by book people who have little respect for the company's editorial product but who would dearly love to duplicate its financial success. In fact, many houses have acted deliberately to establish their own "lines" of romance fiction. Ray Walters, who writes regularly about paperback publishing for the *New York Times Book Review*, has commented that this trend seems to have begun when the findings of the Yankelovich, Skelly and White reader survey became generally known in 1978. Just as publishing executives discovered that three-fifths of the American book-reading public was composed of women under fifty, he writes, "reports started circulating along Publishers' Row about the extraordinary success being enjoyed by the 'contemporary romances with exotic settings' produced by ... Harlequin Enterprises."⁷³ Newly impressed by the size of the female audience and by Harlequin's ability to take advantage of its purchasing capacity, Fawcett, Dell, and Warner each proceeded to duplicate the Harlequin approach by presenting romances as products in a specially de-

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signed series or line. In explaining the reasoning behind Dell's move, company executive Ross Claiborne has identified the particular aspect of the Harlequin phenomenon that has impressed the industry most. "The Harlequin figures from Harlequin are so staggering," he admits, "that every publisher is dying to get in. It's a small investment and few books are returned. Clearly, it's a license to print money."⁷⁴

Although Dell was the first to launch a Harlequin-type line with its "Candlelight Romance" series, which first appeared in May 1979, it did not back the new venture with the same kind of market-research effort mounted by the Canadian firm.⁷⁵ Dell merely proposed to imitate Harlequin's packaging and advertising rather than its expensive processes for determining and satisfying reader tastes. Fawcett, on the other hand, entered the contest for the female audience by duplicating both Harlequin's research techniques and its marketing strategies. All aspects of its "Coventry Romance" line were researched and pretested before the series' appearance in November 1979. Conducted by its advertising agency, Grey 2, Fawcett's reader studies were designed to discover preferences not only for certain kinds of characters and plots but also for likely imprints and possible advertising campaigns.⁷⁶

The company began, for instance, with five possible choices for the series imprint—including Regent Court, Clarion, Corillion, Sovereign, and Coventry—which it then pretested in focus interviews with potential readers to determine the kinds of associations and expectations each imprint conjured up for them. Because they understood that the success of brand-name category publishing is entirely dependent on the ability to establish an exact congruence between what the audience anticipates from a product and what the product actually delivers, Fawcett executives wanted to avoid creating expectations they did not intend to fulfill. As Vice-President James Young has explained, "The most important aspect of this test was to check if the imprint resulted in any misassociations regarding the content and genre. As a result of consumer testing, Sovereign was scrapped because of its high association with kings and queens, Corillion conveyed antebellum South, Regent Court also conjured up kings and queens plus legal associations, Clarion seemed to have no clear associations."⁷⁷ In the end, the most compelling reason for choosing the name Coventry was that readers attached no misassociations to it. It also seemed to help them correctly identify the probable period of the novels and the kinds of characters they were likely to contain.

Because Fawcett also wanted to determine why people read romances, one segment of the focus interview asked women to draw pictures of romance readers. When most of those pictures emphasized happy, smiling women who were reading even as they engaged in other activities, the company decided to center its advertising campaign around television

spots and newspaper displays depicting women reading "Coventry Romances" while happily tending to their families and homes. In effect, Fawcett installed the reader-consumer at the heart of the entire publishing enterprise, including both the marketing and editorial aspects of the process, as Harlequin had before it. Authorial initiative and decision-making power were curtailed by both Harlequin and Fawcett as much as they had been encouraged earlier by more traditional trade houses. Concomitantly, the principal activity of these publishers changed significantly from that of locating or even creating an audience for an existing manuscript to that of locating or creating a manuscript for an already-constituted reading public.

The next series or line venture in the romance field was an elaborate and carefully conceived imitation of the Harlequin system. It testified to the then almost total acceptance of category publishing as a potentially lucrative operation and of commodity packaging as a way of achieving mass sales. Sponsored by Simon and Schuster, Silhouette Books were almost identical to their Canadian cousins. In fact, this particular venture was directed in its early stages by P. J. Fennell, previously Harlequin's vice-president of marketing and sales in North America. Fennell has indicated that, like Dell, Simon and Schuster decided to enter the competition for the female audience because it believed the market was "under-utilized" and therefore could support several new competitors. As Fawcett had, however, Simon and Schuster also understood the crucial importance of market research for this kind of category publishing. The key to building brand-name loyalty, Fennell has observed, is the ability "to deliver exactly what the customer expects." He adds, "Readers of books of this kind ask not, 'Have I heard of this book?' but, 'Did I enjoy the last dozen Silhouettes I read?'"⁷⁸

To insure that all Silhouettes do indeed appeal to their audience, Simon and Schuster went further even than Harlequin or Fawcett in its conferral of status and power upon the reader, at least within the publishing process. Not only did the company initially survey potential readers in Dallas, San Diego, and Oklahoma City to help develop an imprint, standard plots and characterizations, and advertising approaches, but it has also established a system whereby all books were to be pretested before publication by two hundred readers from a preselected group.⁷⁹ Those readers were queried about plot and character and asked to answer open-ended questions about "the overall quality of the book." When any book was given a low rating, it was removed from the list.

In creating this process, Simon and Schuster shrewdly combined a limited-subscription editorial operation with the mass-distribution characteristic of semiprogrammed issue. By consulting a group of representative readers and accepting its judgment, the firm programmed its publicative readers and accepting its judgment, the firm programmed its publicative

tions as completely as possible to serve an already constituted desire and taste. It was then free to distribute the resulting product in large quantities, knowing full well that it would probably find the audience represented by that small group. In effect, Simon and Schuster learned to avoid the very difficult problem of finding a real audience to match the theoretical one that usually guides the publication process through its early stages. Richard Snyder recently admitted that the desire for predictability prompted the creation of these procedures when he commented to *New York Times* reporter Michiko Kakutani, "We didn't want to leave anything to the guesswork that usually goes on in publishing."⁸⁰

Indeed, while the recent history of paperback publishing has been dominated by the rise to prominence of the blockbuster bestseller, it has also been characterized by this slow but inexorable transformation of the business from a relatively small, informally run enterprise still focused on the figure of the author and the event of book reading into a consumer-oriented industry making use of the most sophisticated marketing and advertising techniques to facilitate simple commodity exchange. The extraordinary popularity of the romance is in part a function of this transformation, since those very techniques have been applied most energetically to this kind of category literature. Although publishers cannot explain adequately why marketing research was applied to romances rather than to spy thrillers or Westerns, it seems likely that the decision was influenced by two factors.

First, female readers constitute more than half of the book-reading public.⁸¹ More money is to be made, it seems, by capturing a sizable portion of that large audience than by trying to reach nearly all of a smaller one. At the same time, women are remarkably available as a book-buying public in the sense that their social duties and habits make them accessible to publishers on a regular basis. The possibility of easy and extensive distribution to an audience inadvertently gathered for them by other forces thus tends to justify the mass production of romances.⁸² Currently, one-quarter to one-third of the approximately 400 paperback titles issued each month are original romances of one kind or another.⁸³ Almost all of the ten largest paperback houses include a fair proportion of romance fiction as part of their monthly releases. In addition, Harlequin now claims that its million-dollar advertising campaigns reach one out of every ten women in America and that 40 percent of those reached can usually be converted into Harlequin readers.⁸⁴ The huge sales figures associated with romance fiction seem to be the result of this all-important ability to get at a potential audience.

Second, romance novels obviously provide a reading experience enjoyable enough for large numbers of women so that they wish to repeat that experience whenever they can. To conclude, however, that the increasing

domination of the paperback market by the romance testifies automatically to some greater need for reassurance among American women is to make an unjustified leap in logic. It is also to ignore the other evidence demonstrating that the domination is the consequence of a calculated strategy to make the largest profit possible by appealing to the single most important segment of the book-buying public. The romance's popularity must be tied closely to these important historical changes in the book publishing industry as a whole.

Nonetheless, that popularity is also clearly attributable to the peculiar fact that much of book reading and book buying in America is carried on by women. Many observers of women and book publishing alike have concluded that middle-class women are book readers because they have both the necessary money and the time. They have the time, certainly, because, until recently, social custom kept them out of the full-time paid labor force and in the home where their primary duties involved the care and nurture of the family and, in particular, children. Because children are absent from the home for part of the day after the first several years, the reasoning proceeds, their mothers have blocks of time that can be devoted to the activity of reading.

Although not all women readers are represented by these conditions, it seems highly likely that they do provide the background for the majority of women who are romance readers. Actual demographic statistics are closely guarded within the competitive publishing industry by executives who often insist that romances are read by a broad cross section of the American female population. Still, both Harlequin and Silhouette have indicated repeatedly that the majority of their readers fall within the twenty-five to forty-five age group. If this is true, the meaning of the romance-reading experience may be closely tied to the way the act of reading fits within the middle-class mother's day and the way the story itself addresses anxieties, fears, and psychological needs resulting from her social and familial position. It is to these questions that we must turn in the following chapters, keeping in mind all the while that burgeoning sales do not necessarily imply increasing demand or need. Publishers and the profit motive must be given their due in any effort to explain the popularity of the romance or to understand its significance as a historical and cultural phenomenon. It should also be kept in mind that despite its relative success at gauging general audience interest, semiprogrammed issue cannot yet guarantee perfect fit between all readers' expectations and the publisher's product. In fact, we will see in the following chapter that the continuing discrepancy between the commodity offered by publishers and the desires of their customers has prompted the creation of at least one service designed to help readers choose books from monthly publishers' lists that they consider only partially acceptable.