

The Courtship Novel
1740-1820

A FEMINIZED GENRE

Katherine Sobba Green



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The Blazon and the Marriage Act BEGINNING FOR THE COMMODITY MARKET

INTRODUCED in Parliament in 1753, Lord Hardwicke's "Act for the better preventing of Clandestine Marriages" stipulated that marriages were to be performed by ordained Anglican clergymen in the premises of the Church of England, the banns to be called three times or a special license purchased from a bishop. Most crucially, parental consent for those under twenty-one was to be strictly enforced. The Hardwicke Act outlawed ecclesiastical suits brought on the basis of contracts *de praesenti* or *de futuro*; the ceremony, not the agreement, would be the test of English marriage. The centuries' old conflict over who properly held power over the marriage contract persisted, however.¹ Critics variously faulted the act for increasing parental power over daughters, for insuring aristocratic privilege and wealth, for preventing younger sons from marrying middle-class heiresses, for obstructing marriage among the poor, and for creating hardship for women who had been seduced.² Indeed, when Hardwicke himself referred to the law some nine years later in the case of the Earl of Buckinghamshire versus Drury (1762), he seemed to assume that the law had decided the power struggle in favor of parents, yet the list of motivations he attributed to them was no more than a summation of the previous debate: "There are many considerations, which may induce them, besides strict equality in settlements—inclination of the parties—rank and quality of the person—convenience and propriety in families—bringing together and uniting different parts of the same estate; all these are proper reasons."³ Making a rhetorical flourish for the purposes of the settlement case on which he was giving his opinion, Hardwicke's language starts in the direction of liberalism—"besides strict equality in settlements"—but returns immediately to the service of class endogamy: "rank and quality of the person—conve-

nience and propriety in families—bringing together and uniting different parts of the same estate.”

So complex and varied was rhetoric on either side of the bill that disentangling it yields few meaningful generalizations. But arguments from upper-class proponents did tend to invoke the terms of patriarchy while those of middle-class opponents called on the terms of commercialism. A similar divergence of views persists among latter-day historians. Lawrence Stone, Randolph Trumbach, Alan Macfarlane, and others have offered widely divergent interpretations of motives of proponents and opponents, of what was gained and what was lost, but they have tended to agree in viewing the new taste for companionate marriage as a primary motive for the passage of Hardwicke's Act in 1753. More recently, Erica Harth has objected that while romantic love was at issue, “it was neither the pivot on which the vote in the House of Commons turned nor the main concern. . . . For those in power . . . considerations of love and marriage were embedded in those of money and property.” Both sides claimed to be concerned for female virtue, but the virtue claimed by the bill's proponents was class determined, “directed at the propertied alone.” Bringing such diverse ideas as the free circulation of love and money and the protection of female virtue into cooperation, the Hardwicke Act, as Harth reads it, “was a victory for patriarchy and capitalism.”⁴

Protest against marriages of convenience, which continued after the “Act for the better preventing of Clandestine Marriages,” had of course begun much earlier, in, among other places, pamphlets addressed to the general public. Whether they collected advertisements for the lovelorn or advocated institutional reform, pamphleteers used catchphrases (“matchmaking,” “maneuvering,” and “marriage market” are examples) that carried overtones of class conflict central to the issue of how marriage should be regulated. In 1750 one such pamphlet, *A Serious Proposal for Promoting Lawful and Honourable Marriage*, began stylishly, its anonymous author prefacing the work with details of an aunt's courtship misfortunes. The young woman's guardian and matchmaker was “one of those wise People, who consider a Woman only as a Skin of Parchment, whereon to engross the Conveyance of so much Land to one's own Use; or as a stained Canvass, whereon to continue the Family Pictures; or as the most legal Method of strengthening and securing so much Interest in a Borough-Election.”⁵ The object of these denunciations was the aristocratic family, with its royal charter, country estate, and gallery of family portraits.

In place of matchmaking guardians, the pamphleteer outlines for “the Unmarried, of both sexes” a remarkably liberal scheme antipating today's computerized dating service. Public offices at opposite

ends of town will house files of eligible singles, “the Ladies' Office” near Temple-Bar and the Gentlemen's “near Charing-Cross. Labeled “Batchelor or Widower,” a sample file catalogues “vital statistics” for perusal. The registrant's age, height, complexion, and condition in life are recorded—the file providing the status terms “Esquire,” “Gentleman independent,” “Profession,” “Trade,” and “Calling.” Fortune may be measured “either in general (as) well to pass: moderate, good—or more particular, as . . . thought proper.” On looking over an opposite register, a gentleman or lady who approves “of any Description, and Circumstances, as there entered” may send a letter to arrange an interview. Initial meetings are to be held at guarded houses with no locks on the doors; ladies are to be permitted veils. But, aside from these gender distinctions, the proposal extends to both sexes, in an egalitarian way, the prerogative of choice and the disadvantage of commodification—the advantages of affective individualism and the requirements of a free market.⁶

In brief, the progress from the marked exploitation of the “Skin of Parchment” to the gender egalitarianism of the “registers” parallels in some measure the shift historians have taught us to expect of eighteenth-century nuptial patterns; coincidentally, the move from preface to proposal also adumbrates the shift outlined by Harth from the conservative language of land and privilege to the progressive language of trade. The pamphlet is suggestively bourgeois and feminist in its apparent focus. Behind the surface objectifications of the dating service (which, granted, resemble the calculations of arranged marriage) lie the very real advantages of choice—a prerogative that patriarchal exchange largely denied women of the nobility and gentry but which was generally fostered by capitalism and, more specifically, by the ideology of companionate marriage.⁷ Moreover, the eighteenth-century “dating service” codifies what Michel Foucault has termed a period fascination with “representations of representations.” Of the three epistemological domains Foucault attributes to the eighteenth century—grammar, taxonomy, and monetary exchange—the latter two are enlisted in the “dating service” registration.⁸ Registrants practice an auto-taxonomy, one category of which, “fortune,” refers to monetary exchange. In other words, as in today's cryptic personal advertisements, while registration insures choice, it also requires self-commodification, an attempt to measure one's own exchange value.

Setting aside for the moment apparent contradictions between taxonomy, monetary exchange, and eros,⁹ I want to look at the integral part commodification played in the representation of women in this period. Often, eighteenth-century England was anything but sympathetic to women's interests—objectifying, commodifying, display-

ing overt misogyny. But alongside the rakish encomia and early examples of fetishism that punctuated some texts was a form of tropic commodification that revealed women's disadvantaged positions within the male hegemony—a combination of taxonomy and monetary exchange to which I will apply the term *blazon*, borrowed from French heraldic usage. The blazon, as I will explain more fully later, describes a man or woman in terms of a normative taxonomy—beauty, fortune, family, education, and character. Like the *Serious Proposal*, the blazon operates subversively, deploying the languages of male hegemony, of landed interest and incipient capitalism, for feminist purposes. In other words, this trope, like the register houses of Temple-Bar and Charing-Cross, gestures toward a feminist concern with the prerogative of choosing a marriage partner.⁸

In the following discussion, I identify several instances of tropic commodification, selecting for more thorough analysis Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* and touching on the fact (to be developed later with regard to *Pride and Prejudice*) that the blazon became a standard element in Jane Austen's novels.

Richardson published his third and last novel, *Sir Charles Grandison*, in 1753, the year of Hardwicke's Marriage Act. For his heroine, Harriet Byron, whose story will end in a marriage of choice, the psychohistoric context of the 1750s provides a cluster of representations intimating as a feminist theme a woman's right to fall in love, to choose her own love object. The dynamic by which the text proceeds, a gendered dialogism, is well established in the first of its seven volumes. Richardson's presentation of Harriet, whose concerns rival Grandison's for the reader's attention, conveys a marked awareness of what it is to be a woman inscribed within patriarchy, menaced by reductive systems of representation. Consider, for example, Harriet's exchanges with Mr. Greville, one of her most persistent suitors.

From the first letter in this epistolary novel, the reader is enlisted as Harriet's co-conspirator against a form of male consumerism—in this case, against the phallogentric rhetoric and the scopic system associated with the rake.⁹ Enclosed with Lucy Selby's letter to Harriet is one borrowed from Mr. Greville—a description of "the celebrated Miss Byron" written for his friend, Lady Frampton. The conflicting requirements of making Harriet the subject (or more significantly, the object) of a letter ostensibly directed to Lady Frampton, yet meant to be read by Harriet, is too complex even for an accomplished rake. The double-voicedness of Greville's encomia marks his protested appreciation of Harriet's mind: "You know I have vanity, Madam: But

lovely as Miss Byron's person is, I defy the greatest Sensualist on earth not to admire her mind more than her person. What a triumph would the devil have, as I have often thought, when I have stood contemplating her perfections, especially at church, were he able to raise up a man that could lower this Angel into Woman?"¹⁰ The libertinism he tries to suppress beneath the honorable surface of courtship is as legible as the passages of the letter he ineffectually tries to cover over with lighter ink. Greville's "contemplation," his gaze, he confesses as the devil's work, and with Harriet, Richardson's reader would feel the threat of sexual appropriation.¹¹

While Greville claims to admire Harriet's mind, it is after all her person he contemplates. Most interesting for our purposes here is the rakish consumerism of his description: "Let me die, if I know where to begin. She is all over loveliness. . . . Her Stature; shall I begin with her stature? She cannot be said to be tall; but yet is something above the middling. Her Shape—But what care I for her shape? I, who hope to love her still more, tho' possession may make me admire her less, when she has not that to boast of?" (1:11). Through the next two pages, the movement from anatomizing description to anticipated possession fetishizes, morselizes Harriet into "complexion," "forehead," "cheek," "mouth," "nose," "chin," "hair," "neck," "arm," and "hands," replicating the terms of male desire. Unable to see Harriet as whole, self-expressive sexual being, Greville diverts his taxonomic attention to her "parts."¹² In a later scene, when Harriet tells Greville she has never "seen the man to whom I can think of giving my hand," he will rave, "By heaven you have. . . . You shall give it to me!—And the strange wretch pressed it so hard to his mouth, that he made prints upon it with his teeth" (1:101). Harriet's presence converts Greville's desire for the fetishized hand into a lack at once gustatory and sexual: "'And Oh!' said he, mimicking (and snatching my other hand, as I would have run from him) and patting it, speaking thro' his closed teeth, 'You may be glad you have an hand left. By my soul, I could eat you'" (1:101).

In his letter, however, Greville is less passionate, more deliberate, eventually trying to recuperate his laudatory excesses within a second semantic system, the language of exchange appropriate to arranged marriage. He hopes to marry Harriet under terms that had obtained largely unquestioned for the middle and upper classes through the first two decades of the eighteenth century. But at the time he prepares his brief in this novel of the 1750s, arranged marriages and the marriage markets that promote them have become targets for parody. This second system of representation, also taxonomic, grows not from a

rakish consumerism but from a consumerism nevertheless—that of patriarchal exchange; its terms are not psychosexual but socioeconomic.¹³

Reminiscent of the pamphleteer's register entry, Greville's socioeconomic appraisal of Harriet, in the passage I will quote shortly, is a blazon.¹⁴ The term is borrowed from the Renaissance, recalls Julia Kristeva in *Desire in Language*. One of several deviations along the novel's trajectory, the blazon comes "from the fair, marketplace, or public square. It is the utterance of the merchant vaunting his wares or of the herald announcing combat. Phonetic speech, oral utterance, sound itself, become text: less than writing, the novel is thus the transcription of vocal communication." These "laudatory utterances" give direct information on war or, more to the purpose here, on the quality and price of merchandise in the marketplace. Kristeva's discussion of Antoine de La Salle's fifteenth-century prose narrative emphasizes the referentiality of early blazons: "The culture of exchange, definitively imposed by the European Renaissance, is engendered through the *voice* and operates according to the structures of the discursive (verbal, phonetic) circuit, inevitably referring back to a reality with which it identified by duplicating it (by 'signifying it')." After the early Renaissance, however, the blazon loses its univocity; it becomes multireferential—hence, ambiguous. Kristeva applies the argument to the heroine of de La Salle's *Jehan de Saintré*, whose "treachery skews the laudatory tone [of the blazon] and shows its ambiguity." That is, de La Salle's heroine, introduced in glowing terms at the beginning of the narrative, is later shown not to measure up to her blazon; she is, in fact, not the faithful lady of her lord. To put it simply, the advertisement is a scam.¹⁵

In a similar way, when Richardson raises the crucial issue of marriage in *Sir Charles Grandison*, the blazon, which appears to be as straightforward a taxonomic representation as the gentlemen's and ladies' files referred to earlier, actually implies an ambiguity, an inadequacy of the sign. As I use the term here, the eighteenth-century form of blazon describes a man or woman in terms of a normative taxonomy—physical beauty, fortune, family, education, and character. The blazon alludes both to a system of patriarchal exchange and to the bourgeois marketplace, referring to exchanges made by giving "equal value," by aligning equivalent male and female blazons. It also gestures toward irreconcilable tensions, rife in contemporary prose—in the journals and in the preface of the *Serious Proposal*—that only wanted to be incorporated into the novel. The point is that Richardson was writing at a time when it was impossible to raise the question of marriage without also raising the issues of interest versus love and

parental authority versus female autonomy. All of these were implicated in the blazons, which drew at once on what Harth terms the conservative language of land and privilege" and the "progressive language of trade."

Thus, Greville's case for marriage with Harriet reveals its inadequacy not only through its fetishism (or "flattery," as Harriet will term it) but also through its reliance on the blazons associated with arranged marriages, with the commodification of women within the system of patriarchal exchange. Greville's outdated ploy is to weigh his own blazon, his own register entry, as it were, against Harriet's: "And ought I to despair of succeeding with the girl *herself*? I, her Greville; not contemptible in person; an air—free and easy, at least; having a good estate in possession; fine expectancies besides; dressing well, singing well, dancing well, and blest with a moderate share of confidence; which makes *other* women think me a clever fellow. She, a girl of twenty; her fortune between ten and fifteen thousand pounds only; for her father's considerable estate, on his demise, for want of male heirs, went with the name; her grandmother's jointure not more than 500 £. a year" (1:11).

In market terms, Mr. Greville would be a catch for Miss Byron, and he knows it. Yet the blazons (his and hers) become ambiguous or inadequate when read in the context of a fuller understanding of her character. In his own words, Harriet "can hardly find room in her heart for a particular love . . . till she meets with one whose mind is near as faultless as her own" (1:10). Moreover, Greville has already alluded to Harriet's privileged autonomy of choice, which must convert his use of the blazon to an empty form. Harriet's grandmother and aunt will not interfere with her choice, will not exchange her: "The approbation of their Harriet must first be gained, and then their consent is ready" (1:11). Significantly, Harriet's female relations speak the newer language in which autonomy of choice becomes privileged—an epistemology in which Greville's signifiers, "person," "air," "fortune," suffer a radical loss of exchange power. Greville is unsuited by a semantic position he can quote but does not comprehend: love is ineffable, irreducible, to the materiality either of a market economy or of patriarchal exchange. Moreover, the blazon signals an irreducible conflict between liberalism, which presupposes individual access to the marketplace, and feminism, which denies the applicability of market terms to women.

Through Greville's rhetorical facility, Richardson complicates and marks his representation of Harriet Byron, applying at least two systems of objectification and commodification—the psychosexual language of rakish consumerism (fetish), and the socioeconomic lan-

guage of patriarchal and bourgeois consumerism (blazon). The female novelists who followed Richardson adopted the second system of objectification, the blazon, generally shaping it into a formal introduction of their heroines, a programmatic headline that their texts subsequently revised or erased.

Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778), for example, introduces its heroine as having "a virtuous mind" and "a cultivated understanding." An early letter of Mr. Villars's completes the blazon: "This artless young creature, with too much beauty to escape notice, has too much sensibility to be indifferent to it; but she has too little wealth to be sought with propriety by men of the fashionable world."¹⁶ Evelina is the "only child of a wealthy baronet, whose person she has never seen" and who may never "properly own her" (18-19). To some degree, Villars's reservations about sending his ward to town signal his pessimistic assessment of her against the London marriage market. Yet, his is a benevolent objectification, beyond desiring to keep her with him, to preserve her from the corruptive influences of the city, he simply wishes to spare her pain. Eventually, the novel will invalidate Villars's doubts about his ward's marriageability. Even before her birth, mystery is publicly resolved and she becomes an heiress, and despite her social awkwardness and rude bourgeois relations, Evelina gains the aristocratic Lord Orville's "disinterested attachment." Thus, the initial measure taken of her, the blazon, is revealed as insufficient by the events that follow in Burney's novel. Villars's objectification, though benevolent, is misguided; tropic commodification cannot assess Evelina's desirability within companionate marriage.

If Burney implies that Villars's social perspective is too limited, then other novelists will go further, vilifying parents or guardians and tracing a generational conflict between adults who adhere to the outdated system of patriarchal exchange and daughters who embrace the newer freedoms of companionate marriage. Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen's immediate predecessor in the nineteenth century, titles one of her novels *Manservant* as a corrective for matchmaking parents.¹⁷ Her best courtship novel, *Belinda* (1801), all but erects the shop and hangs the shingle "husband wanted" in the first twenty pages. Belinda is the sixth niece of modest fortune her aunt has taken to market: The aunt is a "catch-matchmaker," the phrase implying that Mrs. Stanhope specializes in marrying her nieces above their expectations—in unions where there is an inequity of status or fortune. With such language as "hawked" and "puffing" marking the resemblance between Mrs. Stanhope's matchmaking methods and the crassest

mercantile practices, Edgeworth recognizes that the motto *creant emptor* is as applicable to marriage as to other enterprises.

Belinda is "handsome, graceful, sprightly, and highly accomplished; her aunt had endeavoured to teach her that a young lady's chief business is to please in society, that all her charms and accomplishments should be invariably subservient to one grand object—the establishing herself in the world."¹⁸ The blazon marks Belinda's destiny, according to patriarchal exchange and her manipulative aunt, yet what follows gestures toward Belinda's resistance to being inscribed in a narrative concluding in her establishment: "Mrs. Stanhope did not find Belinda such a docile pupil as her other nieces, for she had been educated chiefly in the country, she had early been inspired with a taste for domestic pleasures, she was fond of reading, and disposed to conduct herself with prudence and integrity" (1). Edgeworth's beginning forecasts a generational conflict, and thereafter Belinda resists her aunt's lessons. In the course of the novel, the marriage-market blazon, if not erased, is at least revised; Belinda successfully resists her aunt's machinations and finds, through her own integrity, love (and a good establishment) with Mr. Hervey.

By the second decade of the nineteenth century, the blazons that introduced heroines were being overhauled because they were recognizably anachronistic or so hackneyed that they could no longer be taken seriously. In *The Heroine* (1813), Eaton Stannard Barrett revives the intertextual tradition of the quixote, drawing on eighteenth-century fiction to travesty the literary conventions associated both with the courtship novel and with the earlier excesses of romance. His Cherry Willoughby ludicrously colludes in her own objectification, assessing her suitability for a heroine's role:

That I am not deficient in the qualities requisite for a heroine, is indisputable. I know nothing of the world, or of human nature; and every one says I am handsome. My form is tall aerial, my face Grecian, my tresses flaxen, my eyes blue and sleepy. Then, not only peaches, roses and Aurora, but snow, lilacs, and alabaster, may, with perfect propriety, be applied to a description of my skin. . . .

There is but one serious flaw in my title to Heroine—the mediocrity of my lineage. My father is descended from nothing better than a decent and respectable family. He began life with a thousand pounds, purchased a farm, and by his honest and disgusting industry, has realized fifty thousand. Were even my legitimacy suspected, it would be some comfort; since, in that case, I might hope to start forth, at one time or other, the daughter of some plaintive nobleman, who lives retired, and occasionally slaps his forehead.¹⁹

By having his heroine catalogue her own qualifications, Barrett complicates the blazon. In fact, Cherry's self-portrait combines fetish and blazon—anatomizing the heroine's physiognomy ("my form is tall and aerial, my face Grecian") as well as detailing her socioeconomic bargaining position (her family is "decent and respectable"; her fortune, fifty thousand pounds). Paradoxically, the portrait also enlists her naïveté—she knows "nothing of the world, or of human nature." Yet this is patently untrue, for in Cherry's self-objectification we can read her understanding of the upper middle-class position her father's "disgusting industry" and her own legitimacy determine for her. In Barrett's representation, Cherry self-reflexively questions her blazon even as she utters it, understanding its program as something to be overturned. Cherry's self-commodification depends on a rather sophisticated rhetorical strategy, a double displacement, for at the same time that the author is glancing at older conventions of romance, he is parodying the more recent blazon, itself an ironic rendition of the "register" entries of patriarchal exchange.

Barrett's *Heroine* was almost certainly in Jane Austen's mind when she revised *Northanger Abbey* (1818) for publication in 1816 or so, for like Barrett, while she makes a parodic reference both to romance and to the courtship novel, she employs the blazon as her beginning. Asserting her inability to list Catherine's qualifications or perfections, the author catalogues her deficiencies, taking for granted her readers' familiarity with at least part of the long tradition of courtship novels, against which her blazon reverberates as a divergent voice: "No one who had ever seen Catherine in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine." At ten, Catherine has "a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features," and while her looks have "improved" by seventeen, Austen continues to remind her readers that Catherine's beauty falls short of heroic standards. Fortune and family are quite modest commodities for this "heroine" and, by courtship conventions, Catherine's education is deficient. Here is a young woman who is "fond of all boys' plays" and rejects the usual female accomplishments of gardening and music; her writing, French, and accounts are undistinguished. By fifteen, "in training for a heroine," Catherine has no objection to books "provided they were all story and no reflection." Summing up Catherine's character, Austen emphasizes its normalcy and shortcomings: "Her heart was affectionate, her disposition cheerful and open, without conceit or affectation of any kind—her manners just removed from the awkwardness and shyness of a girl; her person pleasing, and, when in good looks, pretty—and her mind about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is."²⁰

Catherine is about to enter her courtship period, and though "she had reached the age of seventeen, without having seen one amiable youth who could call forth her sensibility; without having inspired one real passion" (4), her trip to Bath is meant to provide her such experiences. The blazon at the beginning of the novel encourages Austen's readers to judge Catherine's chances on the market, much as Mr. Dashwood, in *Sense and Sensibility* quantifies Marianne and Elinor, predicting by the hundred pounds how well they will marry.²¹ Austen insists that Catherine, whatever her allegiance to novels, is not a heroine who can be objectified—commodified—but an individual whose personality and flaws merit our attention.

Through their blazons, Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* and subsequent courtship novels gesture toward a semantic field increasingly at odds with marriage practice in England. As places of departure in the novel, blazons exemplify what Edward Said has to say about some "beginnings," that "the truth . . . can only be approached indirectly, by means of a mediation that, paradoxically, because of its falseness makes the truth truer. . . . a truer truth is one arrived at by a process of elimination: alternatives similar to the truth are shed one by one."²² On the surface, the blazon—the taxonomy of beauty, fortune, family, education, and character—essentializes the heroine's role; within the socioeconomic semantic stratum of patriarchal exchange and the commodity market, the blazon is the heroine's truth. Much as women have internalized a male scopopic perspective, so female novelists internalized this form of tropic commodification. As taxonomy, the blazon replicates the reduction of women to cyphers in the manipulations preceding arranged marriage. But as part of the heroine-centered courtship novel, this beginning, this program, necessarily stands under erasure by the remainder of the text. From the feminist semantic field to which the courtship novel belongs, the blazon implicates a partial truth in need of revision, a representation of woman as object, commodity, ready for exchange. The two dozen novelists (most of them women) who wrote courtship novels between Richardson and Austen, between 1740 and 1820, supplied what for them was a truer truth, a representation of woman as a subject whose prerogative it was, within the new nuptial ethic, to choose her own marriage partner—to say with Richardson's Harriet Byron the words that so infuriated Sir Hargrave Pollexfen: "You do not . . . hit my fancy—Pardon me, Sir" (*Grandison*, 1:84).