



**Royal Biography Between the  
Lines: Georgette Heyer's Regency  
Romances and the Life of Princess  
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## Royal Biography Between the Lines: Georgette Heyer's Regency Romances and the Life of Princess Charlotte of Wales (1796-1817)

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**Abstract:** This article considers the topic of writing royal lives from an interdisciplinary perspective which embraces questions of popular history and particularly historical fiction. Georgette Heyer (1902–1974) was a highly successful novelist of the twentieth century whose large oeuvre of historical fiction remains popular and in print to this day. While her name has become synonymous with lightweight historical romantic fiction, particularly set in Regency England, Heyer was a committed researcher with frustrated ambitions to be recognised as a more serious historical writer but desire for financial security as well as the commercial instinct of her publishers pressured her to focus her energies on regular productions of her popular romantic novels. However, it will be argued here that an abandoned project to write a biography of Princess Charlotte of Wales found an outlet in what is virtually a paratextual biography between mentions in several of Heyer's Regency Romances and especially in references, direct and indirect, in her 1961 novel *A Civil Contract*. It will be argued that this case study should encourage more analysis of historical fictions in Royal Studies, but also that it could provide an inspirational framework for creative practice for scholars in the field seeking to write royal lives as novels in a format with potential for high impact and commercial appeal.

**Keywords:** royal biography; historical fiction; Georgette Heyer; Princess Charlotte; popular history

In the early days of the *Royal Studies Journal*, editors Elena Woodacre and Cathleen Sarti were careful to emphasise that “royal studies” as a scholarly field extended “far” beyond biographies of kings and queens.<sup>1</sup> This was a semi-defensive reaction to decades of dismissal of biography, and especially elite biography, as a serious historical scholarly undertaking. But biographical approaches remain core methodology (particularly in the historical branches of the discipline), and

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<sup>1</sup> Elena Woodacre and Cathleen Sarti, “Editorial: What Is Royal Studies?,” *Royal Studies Journal* 2, no. 1 (2015): 13–14.

examination of both the texts comprising, and reviews of, established and establishing series of royal “lives” for example demonstrates clear appreciation of the mode, alongside attempts to encompass more academic nuance through innovative and extensive research and historiographical engagement amongst royal studies scholars.<sup>2</sup> It has presented something of a conundrum to academic historians more generally that whilst biography has declined as a format for scholarly research output, there has always been a popular market for it, something of particular pertinence for this article as royal lives have been, and remain, particularly popular subjects. They have also been popular subjects for historical fictions, and thus royal studies has increasingly engaged with the topic of representations of historical royalty in popular culture.<sup>3</sup>

As Laura Saxton summarises, “accuracy” has been a “predominant focus” of discourse about historical fictions amongst scholars, but also in the media and in public audiences, reflecting a certain “unease in the melding of fact and fiction in the one narrative,” and with perceptions of “accuracy” in the portrayal of the past often translating into judgements on the quality of the fictional text.<sup>4</sup> Many historical novels, particularly of the “romance” genre, have come to be regarded as superficial in their approach to their historical setting, distorting (through ignorance or design) historical facts and personal reputations for the sake of commercial narrative. The names of prolific and successful historical romance authors such as Jean Plaidy and Georgette Heyer have become, Jerome de Groot has observed, “critical shorthand for sensationalism, romance and escapism,” as “explorers” and purveyors of history they have been “derided ... ignored

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<sup>2</sup> Key series here include both Yale and Penguin *Monarchs* series, *Rainhas de Portugal* and *Reis de Portugal*, and the emerging *Lives of Royal Women* series at Routledge. A look at the reviews section of any issue of the *Royal Studies Journal* is testament to the still lively interest in biographical studies in the field.

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Janice North, Karl C. Alvstad, and Elena Woodacre, ed., *Premodern Rulers and Postmodern Viewers: Gender, Sex, and Power in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Estelle Paranque, ed., *Remembering Queens and Kings of Early Modern England and France: Reputation, Reinterpretation, and Reincarnation* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Gabrielle Storey, ed., *Memorialising Premodern Monarchs: Medias of Commemoration and Remembrance* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); Valerie Schutte and Jessica S. Hower, ed., *Writing Mary I: History, Historiography, and Fiction* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); Megan L. Hickerson, “‘Anne Taught Him How to Be Cruel’: Henry VIII in Modern Historical Fiction,” in *Henry VIII and History*, ed. Thomas Betteridge and Thomas S. Freeman (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); Stephanie Russo, “The Literary Afterlives of the Tudor Consorts,” in *Tudor and Stuart Consorts: Power, Influence, and Dynasty*, ed. Aidan Norrie, Carolyn Harris, J. L. Laynesmith, Danna R. Messer, and Elena Woodacre (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Laura Saxton, “A True Story: Defining Accuracy and Authenticity in Historical Fiction,” *Rethinking History* 24, no. 2, (2020): 127–128.

or patronised despite their massive popularity” and “compelling narratives.”<sup>5</sup> In common with modern-day best-seller Philippa Gregory, Plaidy’s oeuvre tended towards novelisations of prominent historical figures, particularly royalty. Heyer also produced a handful of such works, but the historical fictions for which she became really, and lastingly, famous were her “Regency romances” of fictional aristocrats which have inspired in themselves a “persistent” and popular form of historical genre-fiction.<sup>6</sup>

Often associated with Mills & Boon, one of her early publishers, Heyer’s writing has been oft-dismissed as epitomising an approach to history in fiction writing which is “seductive” and appealing to the reader but essentially superficial, far-removed from proper, serious history, and something of a “guilty pleasure” for the serious-minded historian or literary connoisseur.<sup>7</sup> While this may be true of many of Heyer’s successors and imitators in (particularly “Regency”) historical romance, she herself took the historical research she used to underpin her writing very seriously. Furthermore, as both Kathryn Sutherland and Jerome de Groot have observed, while the Regency romance may not enjoy the critical literary clout of other forms of historical fiction, commercial success has meant that her works consistently “share space” with the shifting variety of bestsellers and new works on historical fiction shelves or pages of bookshops or websites.<sup>8</sup> Heyer therefore has an undeniably significant impact in conveying a sense of the past to a large

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<sup>5</sup> Jerome de Groot, “Walter Scott Prize For Historical Fiction: The New Time-Travellers,” *The Scotsman*, 28 February 2019, <https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/walter-scott-prize-historical-fiction-new-time-travellers-1715621>.

<sup>6</sup> Georgette Heyer, *The Conqueror* (London: Arrow Books, 2005); Georgette Heyer, *Royal Escape* (London: Arrow Books, 2001); Georgette Heyer, *The Spanish Bride* (London: Penguin Random House, 2011); Georgette Heyer, *My Lord John* (London: Arrow Books, 2001); Samantha J. Rayner and Kim Wilkins, “Introduction: The Persistence of Georgette Heyer,” in *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction*, ed. Samantha J. Rayner and Kim Wilkins (London: UCL Press, 2021), 1–13; Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2009), 58.

<sup>7</sup> De Groot, *Historical Novel*, 53–54; Amy Street, “Georgette Heyer: Guilty Pleasures,” in Rayner and Wilkins, *Georgette Heyer*, 240–249; Diana Wallace, *The Woman’s Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900–2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), ix, 1–2, 5, 36, 78–79, 128, 152–153, 154, 157, 229, 236; Mary Fahnestock-Thomas, *Georgette Heyer: A Critical Retrospective* (Saraland, AL: Prinny World Press, 2001), 1–2, 270; Kecia Ali, “Author Studies and Popular Romance Fiction,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, and Hsu-Ming Teo (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 323–324, 326–327; Karin E. Westman, “A Story of Her Weaving: The Self-Authoring Heroines of Georgette Heyer’s Regency Romance,” in *Doubled Plots: Romance and History*, ed. Susan Strehle and Mary Panaccia Carden (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 165.

<sup>8</sup> De Groot, *Historical Novel*, 1–2; Kathryn Sutherland, “‘Where History Says Little Fiction Says Much’ (Anna Barbauld): The Historical Novel in Women’s Hands in the Mid-Twentieth Century,” in Rayner and Wilkins, *Georgette Heyer*, 17–18.

public audience, and it is worth noting that the “history” her readers encounter is one informed by historical research rather than merely details derived through imitation of inspirational historical literary texts such as the novels of Jane Austen. Although the main characters she created were fictional, the “world” they live in is not, with references to genuine commodities, experiences, places, and events of historical record. The characters also refer to, and even interact with, non-fictional historical figures. While many of these references are fleeting, they are often significant in conveying key plot points and, when pieced together from across the books, do render something of a miniature portrait of the character. Most especially there is in the background of Heyer’s Regency novels a recurring interest in the Prince Regent’s daughter, Princess Charlotte of Wales (1796-1817), which, when taken in conjunction with significant references to Charlotte’s life in her 1961 novel, *A Civil Contract*, amount to an indirect, almost paratextual biography of the Princess, even though she never directly features in the stories. In his seminal work, Gérard Genette defined a paratext as a “threshold,” an in-between space “surrounding” and “extending” a text, and constituting a “pragmatics” portal for “more pertinent” understanding and interpretation of that text.<sup>9</sup> As others have argued, these paratexts extend to the material form (“physical body”) of the text, and sometimes also beyond it in the form of supplementary material published separately (physically and/or chronologically); they may be presented, before or after (or in the margins of) the text; and they may be consumed, and subsumed, both “wittingly or unwittingly,” into readers’ impressions of the main text’s essential narrative.<sup>10</sup> Helen Smith and Louise Wilson have observed that paratexts “construct” *authors*, “mediating” between creator, text, “and the world in numerous inventive, complex, and unexpected ways.”<sup>11</sup> This article suggests that, consciously or not, Georgette Heyer used elements of the texts and subtexts of some of her Regency romances to convey the results of her research into the historical figure of the Prince Regent’s daughter, and that, taken together, and in combination with her full body of popular historical novels, these elements acted as paratexts to construct a substantial yet unwritten biography of the princess, indirectly relaying a story of Charlotte’s life to her readers, whether they recognise/d it or not.

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<sup>9</sup> Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, foreword by Richard Macksey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1–3.

<sup>10</sup> Helen Smith and Louise Wilson, ed., *Renaissance Paratexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), see particularly the editors’ “Introduction,” 1–14.

<sup>11</sup> Smith and Wilson, “Introduction,” 14.

As some professional and academic historians have begun to branch out into publishing not only popular “trade” histories, but also historical fiction, and with royal lives proving a high-profile and successful source of inspiration for such works, it will be argued here that this writing of royal lives *between the lines* should be of greater interest to scholars in royal studies, offering source material for the analysis of the legacies of royal lives in popular culture and public understandings of the past, but also offering a possible inspirational framework for the creative communication of academic research to general audiences in a format with potential for high-impact and commercial success.

### Writing Royal Lives: History and Fiction

In the nineteenth century, Trev Broughton reminds us, prominent and leading essayist Thomas Carlyle “practised biography and history as branches of the same endeavour” requiring “active research” and “encompass[ing] matters of evidence and interpretation, ... questions of moral agency and accountability,” and the interplay between an individual’s lifecycle and its wider social context.<sup>12</sup> When considering *royal* lives and the history of monarchy, as an institution and system of government, it remains, David Cannadine has observed, particularly easy to conflate the two. Cannadine however warns of “over-personalising” analysis in biographical approaches to the past and praises instead “a historical rather than biographical mode” of study as producing “the most interesting work.”<sup>13</sup> Both Cannadine and Elena Woodacre have highlighted that although biography has been the traditional form for writing royal history, modern scholars have sought a more “thematic” and contextual approach as being more nuanced and academically rigorous. This is particularly the case in the study of royal women, Woodacre noting that gradual recognition and development of “queenship studies” as an “academic” discipline in the late twentieth century were significantly influenced by attempts “almost [to] define itself against prosopographic progenitors,” but, as Lois Huneycutt and Theresa Earenfight have both emphasised, simultaneously attempts were being made to recover the detail of these women’s lives, largely neglected or dismissed by traditional recordkeeping and

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<sup>12</sup> Trev Broughton, “Life Writing and the Victorians,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture*, ed. Juliet John (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 49.

<sup>13</sup> David Cannadine, “From Biography to History: Writing the Modern British Monarchy,” *Historical Research* 77, no. 197 (2004): 298.

history writing.<sup>14</sup> At the turn of the nineteenth century, Jane Austen's heroine, Catherine Morland, famously said of "real solemn history,"

I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all—it is very tiresome.<sup>15</sup>

Biographers of royal women started to address this imbalance, uncovering and conveying to the public what Mary Spongberg describes as "an alternate feminine history of the nation through a focus on queens," and, Woodacre argues, laying the groundwork for the development of queenship studies.<sup>16</sup>

Recovering "hidden" histories has also been a theme in the writing of historical fictions. Authors of historical novels frequently describe their work as "filling the gaps" which are inevitable in the historical record because of the incompleteness and inconsistency of available surviving source material as remnants and representations of the past which the fiction seeks to reconstruct.<sup>17</sup> The precise blend of history and fiction in an individual historical novel varies, being along a scale Melissa Addey has described as ranging from "ventriloquism" (the most committed form of which uses only events, details, and crucially, speech noted in historical record), through "mosaic-making" where (varying-sized) fragments of historical record are artistically arranged and held together and/or completed with fictional elements, to the more metaphorical or fantastical writing

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<sup>14</sup> Elena Woodacre, "Well Represented or Missing in Action? Queens, Queenship, and Mary Hays," in *The Invention of Female Biography*, ed. Gina Luria Walker (New York: Routledge, 2018), 21–22; Lois L. Huneycutt, "Queenship Studies Comes of Age," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 51, no. 2 (2015), 9–16; Theresa Earenfight, "Highly Visible, Often Obscured: The Difficulty of Seeing Queens and Noble Women," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 44, no. 1 (2008): 86–90.

<sup>15</sup> Barbara M. Benedict and Dierdre Le Faye, ed., *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen: Northanger Abbey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 109–110.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Spongberg, "Memoirs of Queens and the 'Invention' of Collective Royal Biography," in Walker, *Invention of Female Biography*, 124–141; Woodacre, "Well Represented," 31.

<sup>17</sup> Bryony D. Stocker, "Don't Lie: A Methodology For Historical Fiction," *New Writing* 16, no. 3 (2019): 323–324, 326–329, 332; Melissa Addey, "Beyond 'Is It True?' The 'Playframe' in Historical Fiction," *New Writing* 18, no. 4 (2021): 425; Jessica S. Hower, "'All Good Stories': Historical Fiction in Pedagogy, Theory, and Scholarship," *Rethinking History* 23, no. 1 (2019): 99; "Philippa Fills the Historical Gaps," *University of Sussex: Broadcast: News Items*, 29 November 2012, <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/broadcast/read/16753>; Saul David, "Tall Tales From History: Are Historians Best Placed to Write Historical Fiction?" *Independent Online*, 13 August 2010, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/tall-tales-from-history-are-historians-best-placed-to-write-historical-fiction-2050891.html>.

of “the Magician” based in a historical setting but where the narrative is driven and accepted via conscious “suspension of disbelief.”<sup>18</sup> Novelists, critics and scholars alike have grown weary of critique of the genre, which over-relies on a pedantic but often largely superficial audit of “accuracy.”<sup>19</sup> As Addey points out, such criticisms overlook the fact that these novels are a “hybrid” genre, scholarly analysis of which should give equal-weight to the creative and/or literary elements involved as to the historical.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, as Jessica S. Hower has observed, the popular appeal of such works renders them potentially problematic, and logistically impossible, to ignore in the contemporary classroom, even at university level.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, both scholarly and popular readers do recognise and/or expect an “obligation” to the history inherent in the works, and even authors themselves have “internalised” this notion, laboriously and performatively explaining and demonstrating their commitment to research and fidelity to existing scholarship in detailed minutiae in their writing, in interviews about their practice, and most especially in paratexts such as their “Author’s Note.”<sup>22</sup>

These questions of research and “accuracy” have dominated formal scholarly engagement with historical fictions, as well as the self-fashioning of historical novelists in public forums in which they encounter, confront, and are confronted by, professional and academic historians. But historical fiction, even of the romance genre, can have a profound and acknowledged impact on the personal development of individual historians as researchers, representing and conveying, de Groot has argued, cultural “solidarit[ies]” which function as “creative” and “inspirational” loci for engaging with the past.<sup>23</sup> As traditional academic historians have sought to navigate the changing landscape of higher education and research funding, and meet demands for public outputs and impact beyond the academy, growing numbers have turned to more popular formats of communicating their research, including writing popular “trade” histories. But professional researchers

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<sup>18</sup> Addey, “Beyond ‘Is It True?’”

<sup>19</sup> Saxton, “A True Story,” 127–128; Hower, “‘All Good Stories’,” 82–83; Addey, “Beyond ‘Is It True?’,” 421–422; Stocker, “Don’t Lie,” 325.

<sup>20</sup> Addey, “Beyond ‘Is It True?’,” 421, 423, 430–431.

<sup>21</sup> Hower, “‘All Good Stories’,” 80–83, 104.

<sup>22</sup> Stocker, “Don’t Lie,” 330–333; Addey, “Beyond ‘Is It True?’,” 421–422, 425–426; Hower, “‘All Good Stories’,” 92–96; De Groot, *Historical Novel*, 4–9, 172; Elizabeth Ann Mackay, “50 Shades of Elizabeth; or, ‘Doing History’ in Pop Fiction,” in Paraque, *Remembering Queens and Kings*, 273–274; Katharine Harris, “‘Part of the Project of That Book Was Not to Be Authentic’: Neo-historical Authenticity and Its Anachronisms in Contemporary Historical Fiction,” *Rethinking History* 21, no. 2 (2017): 204–206.

<sup>23</sup> De Groot, *Historical Novel*, 67–69.



are also increasingly turning towards historical fiction as an alternative outlet which, though chasing some commercial potential, has been embraced as not only compatible with rigorous academic research and analysis, but intellectually stimulating for it. Historian Alison Weir, a well-established popular writer of non-fiction throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, has stated that she feels that writing a novel can allow for a meaningful exploration of a historical figure which goes beyond what is “permissible to a historian” providing an “illuminating” and “legitimate[ly] valu[able]” perspective on individual “motives and actions,” provided it is “based on sound research and educated guesses” and does not “simply indulge in flights of fancy.”<sup>24</sup> This commitment to some historical “truth” is for Weir a professional obligation but also a commercial imperative, as it conforms to audiences’ consolidating expectations of, and tastes for, the genre. In 2006, against a backdrop of an apparently emerging international “golden age” of popular “mass-media” history and a resurgence of the historical novel, Weir published her first novel, *Innocent Traitor*, a first-person narrative of the “nine-day-Queen,” Lady Jane Grey.<sup>25</sup> The “runaway success” of *Innocent Traitor* sparked inspiration in other scholars, and confidence amongst the publishing houses who actively encouraged historians with popular name-recognition “willing to give fiction a go.”<sup>26</sup>

A decade later, Miranda Malins turned first to fiction rather than academic monograph to publish the fruits of her doctoral research. While she sees herself very clearly “as a historian” first, “always star[ting] with [her] academic research,” and she is also working on a non-fiction trade book on the Cromwell family, she has first published two first-person narrative novels, *The Puritan Princess* (2020) and *The Rebel Daughter* (2022) about the daughters of Oliver Cromwell.<sup>27</sup> While Malins partly attributes her decision to pursue a non-academic and fiction audience for her research to a desire to “revive” public knowledge and history of the seventeenth century, she has also revealed that she was motivated by a desire to fill particular gaps in knowledge and that because the Cromwell

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<sup>24</sup> Weir quoted in David, “Tall Tales From History.”

<sup>25</sup> On an emerging “golden age” for popular history see David Harlan, “Historical Fiction and the Future of Academic History,” in *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 109–110. Weir’s novel was published as Alison Weir, *Innocent Traitor* (London: Ballantine Books, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> David, “Tall Tales From History.”

<sup>27</sup> Quotation from Miranda Malins, “Miranda Malins: Author’s Platform,” *Aspects of History*, <https://aspectsofhistory.com/author-interviews/miranda-malins/>. The two works are published as Miranda Malins, *The Puritan Princess* (London: Orion, 2020); Miranda Malins, *The Rebel Daughter* (London: Orion, 2022).

women's presence in the sources "is usually at the margins," "fiction [represents] a better vehicle for exploring their experiences and relationships." When asked for advice for budding historical fiction writers, Malins encourages them to embrace research but cautions that when it comes to "balancing the history and the plot: try and get the first right but prioritise the second ... readers enjoy learning something but they turn the pages for the story." Thus she herself finds first-person writing a useful tool in achieving this balance where she gains some creative freedom from exploring her characters' internal perspective and can abandon the omniscience of a third-person storyteller or non-fictional historian.<sup>28</sup> The Cromwells, like other elite and royal figures, make prime fodder for the historical novelist because they are close to, and potentially experienced, even influenced, significant and well-documented historical events but, particularly in the case of women, specific details of their involvement may be poorly or ambiguously documented. Royalty therefore can make popular and effective subjects for the "fictional biography," and authors have discretion as to the amount of research and degree of artistic license they are prepared to undertake. Those from a traditional scholarly background, particularly if still pursuing a portion of their career in academic circles, naturally gravitate towards more direct "ventriloquising" novels, but too strict an adherence to "fact" can be problematic for storytelling, even if, as in Malins's case, the subject selected is a lesser known and less-explicitly documented life. This is because, as Julia Novak observes, there is an inherent "tension" between meeting literary, genre, or commercial expectations of plot and character development and restrictions imposed by certain inflexible points of historical record such as familial and marital situations, and particularly death.<sup>29</sup> Such limitations can of course be overcome by abandoning fidelity to the historical sources but that is not realistically palatable to the scholarly researchers and authors turning their hand to fiction, nor to many of their readers' particular expectations of their work—after all, historical fiction is often celebrated (in some circles even justified) by the notion that it is a "gateway" to history "proper," inspiring readers to conduct further research and explore related non-fiction. Another course is to write a purely fictional story and character with the research used to recreate a genuine historical setting around it. But for royal studies scholars venturing into fiction this approach too has significant limitations if they wish to

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<sup>28</sup> Mark Turnbull, "Fiction Book of the Month: Miranda Malins on The Puritan Princess," *Aspects of History*, [https://aspectsofhistory.com/author\\_interviews/miranda-malins-interviewed-by-mark-turnbull/](https://aspectsofhistory.com/author_interviews/miranda-malins-interviewed-by-mark-turnbull/); Malins, "Author's Platform."

<sup>29</sup> Julia Novak, "Nell Gwyn in Contemporary Romance Novels: Biography and the Dictates of 'Genre Literature'," *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 8:3 (2014): 373–390.

include significant details of the chief subject(s) of their research, as any fictional characters may need to be inserted into a narrative of significant historical record, or perhaps the nuance of the research may be lost in the reduction of the genuine historical figure to a superficial walk-on role. The remainder of this article will outline a potential alternative approach to this problem of balancing fact and fiction which could be found by drawing inspiration from the work of Georgette Heyer, and specifically her Regency romances.

### **Genre Fiction, Heyer, and History**

Georgette Heyer was born in 1902 and grew up in London, with a hiatus of some time in Paris cut short by the First World War. Initially educated at home by her cultured and intellectually engaged parents, she finished her education at school during the war. The eldest child, and only daughter, she did not attend university, but she shared with her father an interest in literature and in history, and, following an introduction in 1919 through one of his acquaintances, she formed an informal but active literary coterie with Joanna Cannan and Carola Oman, both daughters of Oxford dons a couple of years her senior, who became lifelong friends.<sup>30</sup> Like Heyer, who married Ronald Rougier in 1925, both Cannan and Oman married but used their maiden names for their extensive published works. Cannan published particularly fiction, mostly of the “pony” or “detective” genre, but Oman, the daughter of renowned military historian, Sir Charles Oman, wrote a mixture of contemporary and historical fiction, as well as historical non-fiction and biography for both adults and children. She and Heyer were particularly close, “habitually” reviewing each other’s ideas and proofs, fact-checking work, commenting on character and style, supporting each other in navigating publishers, and even working together when Heyer enthusiastically accepted Oman’s invitation to compile the index for her 1942 history, *Britain Against Napoleon*.<sup>31</sup> Carola Oman’s work, particularly her historical works, were popular and critically acclaimed, and included copious work on historical royal lives with novels about Mary Queen of Scots, James IV of Scotland, Bonnie Prince Charlie, Richard III, Princess Amelia, Empress Matilda, and Alfred the Great, as well as non-fictional

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<sup>30</sup> Joan Aiken Hodge, *The Private World of Georgette Heyer* (London: Arrow Books, 2006), 1–7; Jennifer Kloester, *Georgette Heyer: Biography of a Bestseller* (London: William Heinemann, 2011,) 35, 40–42, 75–76, 112, 129.

<sup>31</sup> Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 54, 118–119, 148; Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 219, 227. Carola Oman, *Britain Against Napoleon* (London: Faber and Faber, 1942).

biographies of Henrietta Maria, Elizabeth of Bohemia, and Mary of Modena.<sup>32</sup> Heyer actually published her first work before either of her friends and was commercially very successful, but while she was a consistent supporter and admirer of Oman's, Heyer's biographers have detected some long-term frustration at her own comparatively unfulfilled desire for "literary kudos" and public acknowledgement and acclaim as a serious historical writer.<sup>33</sup> As the main breadwinner in her marriage, and with the additional pressures of supporting not only her son but also her mother and younger brothers following her father's sudden death in 1925, Heyer ultimately prioritised the financial rewards and commercial enthusiasm of her publishers in writing a steady stream of historical romance (following the success of her first novel, *The Black Moth* [1921]) and fashionable detective fiction (beginning with *Footsteps in the Dark* [1932]). Although she has become associated in popular and critical mindsets with Mills & Boon, who have themselves become known for the high-volume publication of lower-brow and lightweight "historical" romance novels including many of Heyer's later imitators, Heyer herself published with them only once, with her third novel, before their list took this particular direction, and uniquely experimenting with a pseudonym. So in fact, as her most recent biographer, Jennifer Kloester observes, "Mills & Boon never actually published a novel by 'Georgette Heyer' and may not even have known that 'Stella Martin' was really the up-and-coming-author" of her first two novels published by Constable and Hutchinson respectively.<sup>34</sup> In pursuit of quality in her own work, Heyer looked down on the "melodramatic," "salacious," and "illiterate" imitations of her work by writers such as Barbara Cartland, while she herself drew on and consciously referenced the literary greats, including especially Burney, Austen, and Shakespeare, in demonstration, as Elizabeth Barr has argued, of "cultural literacy," "a way of putting her work in conversation and on a level

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<sup>32</sup> Carola Oman, *The Road Royal* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1924); Carola Oman, *King Heart* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1926); Carola Oman, *Over the Water* (London: Hodder and Staunton, 1935); Carola Oman, *Crouchback* (New York: Holt, 1929); Carola Oman, *Princess Amelia* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1924); Carola Oman, *The Empress* (London: Hodder and Staunton, 1932); Carola Oman, *Alfred, King of the English* (London, 1939); Carola Oman, *Henrietta Maria* (London: Hodder and Staunton, 1936); Carola Oman *The Winter Queen*, (rev. ed., London: Phoenix Press, 2000); Carola Oman, *Mary of Modena* (London: Hodder and Staunton, 1962).

<sup>33</sup> Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 114, 194, 291, 317; Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 67, 154, 178.

<sup>34</sup> Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 67–68; Jay Dixon, "History of English Romance Novels, 1621–1975," in Kamblé, Selinger and Teo, *Research Companion to Popular Romance*, 41. Sarah H. Ficke, "The Historical Romance," in Kamblé, Selinger and Teo, *Research Companion to Popular Romance*, 120. It is worth noting that Mills & Boon actively pursued Heyer's market and clearly referenced her work in marketing regency romances in their own catalogue which probably fuelled casual assumptions about the genre as a whole and associations of Heyer's work with the brand. (Wallace, *Woman's Historical Novel*, 152).

with those who are acknowledged as great writers ... [and] attempt[ing] to raise the cultural value of her work in her own eyes and in the eyes of literary critics” and wider readers.<sup>35</sup>

Beyond *literary* credentials though, Heyer’s reaction when she began to review Cartland’s work, having been notified of the latter having potentially plagiarised her, as Kloester observes, demonstrated how seriously she took the *historical* nature of her writing, concluding that Cartland must have stolen her work. While it was not implausible that a writer might have acquired knowledge of historical details “as [Heyer] did [her]self, from original sources,” “no novelist” who had done their own research “could possibly have fallen into the gross errors that bespatter Miss Cartland’s pages.” The juxtaposition of “special knowledge” (all of which Heyer could “point out” in her own previously published work) with “blatant” inaccuracies and anachronisms demonstrated, Heyer argued, “abysmal ignorance” of the history.<sup>36</sup> She prided herself on her own thorough research. As well as the quality of her writing, she also trusted Carola Oman to read for historical accuracy, was outraged by assumptions of her ignorance, and frustrated and embarrassed by the rare occasions when a mistake was made.<sup>37</sup> *The Black Moth* had been written when Heyer was still a teenager, originally begun as a project to entertain her convalescing brother. It conformed to the contemporary genre of adventure romance, and had an eighteenth-century Georgian setting and sold quite well, but for her second novel, *The Great Roxhythe*, she was more ambitious and threw herself more concertedly into researching the historical setting, inserting her fictitious titular Marquis into the Restoration Court of Charles II.<sup>38</sup> Recognising that the research required for another more serious historical novel would slow the production process, and in pursuit of more timely financial reward, for the next decade she experimented (rather less successfully) with contemporary fiction

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<sup>35</sup> Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 284; Elizabeth Barr, “‘Who the Devil Wrote That?’ Intertextuality and Authorial Reputation in Georgette Heyer’s *Venetia*,” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, 3:2, (2013), <https://www.jprstudies.org/2013/06/who-the-devil-wrote-that-intertextuality-and-authorial-reputation-in-georgette-heyers-venetia-by-elizabeth-barr/>; Kim Sherwood, “Pride and Prejudice: Metafiction and the Value of Historical Romance in Georgette Heyer,” in Rayner and Wilkins, *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction*, 75–87; Lisa Hopkins, “Georgette Heyer: What Austen Left Out,” in *After Austen: Reinventions, Rewritings, Revisitings*, ed. Lisa Hopkins (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 61–79; Stacy Gillis, “Manners, Money, and Marriage: Austen, Heyer, and the Literary Genealogy of the Regency Romance,” in Hopkins, *After Austen*, 81–101; Lisa Hopkins, “All’s Well That Ends Well: Shakespearean Echoes in Heyer’s Regency Novels,” in Rayner and Wilkins, *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction*, 147–161.

<sup>36</sup> Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 281–285.

<sup>37</sup> Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, xv–xvi, 37–39 118–119; Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 142–143, 295–296, 352–353.

<sup>38</sup> Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 50, 55–57.

and produced several further eighteenth-century romances focused on fictional adventure stories in the historical setting which cemented her reputation as a bestseller. But she did intersperse them with novels set in other periods which required more significant research and, Kloester argues, considering her lack of formal or professional training in historical study and research, this experience laid the foundations for the development of “her own methods of rummaging in the past,” particularly her eye for “ephemeral detail,” and the establishment of her own research library of sources for future research.<sup>39</sup>

In 1931, Heyer published the first of the handful of novels she wrote featuring a genuine historical figure as protagonist. Impressed not only by her friend’s now established reputation as a writer of quality historical fiction, but also by her dedicated research methods of immersing herself for long periods of time in contemporary sources, she dedicated *The Conqueror* to Carola Oman. Based on the life of William I of England, this was the most ambitious of her novels so far in terms of the historical setting, and years later she would remember the immense amount of work it had taken. Even in the midst of the project she had worried that the publisher and the public would not take to the book, concerned that the story, weighed down by the complex setting and extensive research into unfamiliar historical details, might have become “as heavy as lead.”<sup>40</sup> But while modest in comparison to some of her other works, the book was a success, reprinted numerous times, later selling film rights, and garnering acknowledgement in review for the “incredible amount of historical research” and the historical “authenticity” created by the “mistress of her craft.”<sup>41</sup> With a keen interest in the details of military history in her research process, and with widespread cultural apprehension of the approach of war in the late 1930s, Heyer’s next two novels centred on non-fictional historical figures both had wartime settings. *Royal Escape* was a return for her to the life of Charles II but, venturing further back into his youth and the days of the British Civil Wars, is a recounting of the famous and well-documented escape of the twenty-one year old king from his defeat at the Battle of Worcester in 1651.<sup>42</sup> In her recent study of fictional representations of the Civil Wars, Farah Mendlesohn described the novel as “more interested in the human person

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<sup>39</sup> Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 60, 76–77.

<sup>40</sup> Heyer, *The Conqueror*; Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 24–27; Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 111–112, 114.

<sup>41</sup> Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 171, 321. Jennifer Kloester, “The Conqueror—A Deep Dive into History,” <https://jenniferkloester.com/the-conqueror-a-deep-dive-into-history/>.

<sup>42</sup> Heyer, *Royal Escape*.

rather than the details of the conflict.”<sup>43</sup> While there is certainly some truth in this, nevertheless Heyer approached the project with her usual diligence in research, reading copious accounts of characters and period, and travelling along the route of Charles’s convoluted six-week pursuit of a vessel to evacuate him to the safety of exile in France, stopping at many of the places he sheltered during that time.<sup>44</sup> Although the subject matter lent itself particularly to her creative exploration of her character’s experience of these documented events, the novel’s opening chapter takes the writer into the midst of a well-researched and painstakingly detailed description of the military action on the streets of Worcester, and the King’s flight from them, on September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1651.<sup>45</sup>

*Royal Escape* sold well in both Britain and America, and Heyer’s next exploration of a real historical character as her hero actually became her next historical novel, *The Spanish Bride* (1940). A return both to her most familiar historical period, and more clearly in the romance genre, the couple at the centre of *The Spanish Bride* were not royal, but British Army officer, Harry Smith, who served in the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812 and later became governor of the Cape Colony, and his wife Juana, an orphaned teenager who he married within days of encountering her during the 1812 sack of Badajoz, and who remained at his side with the Army for the remainder of his service in the Peninsula campaign.<sup>46</sup> Research for this project was a long-term endeavour, with Heyer apparently first exploring the idea of a novel about Smith in the early 1920s. It had also been progressed not only through accumulation of earlier research into the Regency period more generally, but by her dedicated research for her penultimate historical romance, *An Infamous Army* (1937), another detailed recreation of the military history and genuine characters of the Napoleonic Wars, but centred around the romance and experiences of fictional protagonists.<sup>47</sup> Researching the wars, she read contemporary accounts and diaries, and was clearly influenced by the works of Charles Oman on the period, Wellington, and particularly the Peninsular campaign, and she even solicited his help with “an obscure

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<sup>43</sup> Farah Mendlsohn, *Creating Memory: Historical Fiction and the English Civil War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 73.

<sup>44</sup> Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 46. On the influence of background concerns about the potential for war in Europe at this time on Heyer’s writing and publication plans see Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 185–188, and Vanda Wilcox, “Georgette Heyer, Wellington’s Army and the First World War,” in Rayner and Wilkins, *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction*, 162–186.

<sup>45</sup> Heyer, *Royal Escape*, 1–13.

<sup>46</sup> Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*.

<sup>47</sup> Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 60; Georgette Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, (London: Arrow Books, 2004).

reference.”<sup>48</sup> Her efforts garnered her recognition as an expert from her closest readers and not only did Carola Oman ask her to compile her Napoleonic index, but her publisher, A.S. Frere of Heinemann, asked for and welcomed her advice on one of his other author (Richard Aldington)’s biography of Wellington, describing her as “a deeply read authority on the subject” and “great friend” even “pupil” of Charles Oman.<sup>49</sup> *An Infamous Army*, and particularly its description of Waterloo, also became recommended reading at Sandhurst.<sup>50</sup> Always seeing her “real work” as her historical writing, and desirous, but not particularly hopeful, of popular and critical acclaim for this work, Kloester cites *An Infamous Army* and *The Spanish Bride* as the novels “that mattered to [Heyer] most.” She was disappointed with their reception, despite decent sales and good reviews, saddened by the apparent commercial dismissal of her more serious historical work in comparison to the more genre-conforming romances, and frustrated by her publisher’s failure to capitalise on the promotional opportunities of the 150<sup>th</sup> Napoleonic anniversaries.<sup>51</sup>

Heyer’s final project fictionalising a biography of a genuine historical figure was the most ambitious, a return to a medieval setting, this time a Lancastrian trilogy. She worked on this for decades but never completed it; ultimately, only a first volume covering the early life of Henry V’s brother John, Duke of Bedford was published posthumously by Heyer’s family as *My Lord John*.<sup>52</sup> She created a personal archive of notebooks of medieval research notes, index cards of key historical figures from John’s lifetime, relevant maps, family trees, and heraldic devices. She also travelled to relevant historical sites.<sup>53</sup> It was an immense project, and one which she recognised really needed several devoted years of uninterrupted work, but she never achieved this focused time as she continued to produce her regency novels to generate regular income and commercial interest. Research for *Lord John* continued in between other projects and generated a “tremendous” volume of notes and words, but the manuscript, though ever-growing, was never finessed, and both Heyer’s biographers have noted that though her research was admirably extensive she never truly mastered the medieval setting.<sup>54</sup> In contrast, her eighteenth- and nineteenth-century research had become so embedded that she was able to produce her signature authentic

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<sup>48</sup> Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 43–44, 48; Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 167–170, 174, 195–196.

<sup>49</sup> Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 263–265.

<sup>50</sup> Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 43, 170.

<sup>51</sup> Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 176, 192, 195, 205, 241, 354–355; Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 170.

<sup>52</sup> Heyer, *My Lord John*.

<sup>53</sup> Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 67–70.

<sup>54</sup> Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 71–75; Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 314–317, 384–385.



settings for her novels relatively rapidly and with great success, and from the late-1930s, with only a handful of exceptions (including *Royal Escape* and *My Lord John*), her historical outputs concentrated on the Regency period with which she has become so associated.

The first Regency novel was *Regency Buck*, published in 1935.<sup>55</sup> This novel was not based on a real historical figure (the couple at the centre of the romance as well as their immediate family are entirely fictitious), but Heyer, reaching new depths of research for *Regency Buck* compared to her earlier Georgian novels, was pleased with the results, and delighted to receive “the biggest compliment” from Carola Oman (someone who really “kn[e]w enough history” to judge), who “ask[ed] me whether I had found it in some unknown memoir, and ‘lifted’ it for my book.”<sup>56</sup> In terms of the development of the Regency romance genre both in her own work and her imitators and followers, *Regency Buck* was clearly significant in terms of not only setting but also characterisation, but for its author it was not so far removed from her more serious historical work.<sup>57</sup> She was frustrated by her publisher’s “apathy” in promoting the book, feeling that they undersold what was “a darned good book ... accurate down to the smallest detail, & [with] popular appeal,” allowing it to be outstripped in sales and recognition by an inferior imitation by *Times Literary* writer, David Leslie Murray, published the following year.<sup>58</sup> As happened on occasion with her biographical historical fiction, attention to historical details has seemed to some to “weigh heavily on the narrative” in this novel, as she tried to cram in and display her wealth of period knowledge with the apparent “excitement” of “discovery” of the budding researcher, and unlike the other non-biographical romances, as well as a detailed and authentic sense of the materials, places, and culture of Regency high society, many of the supporting cast of characters in *Regency Buck* are genuine historical figures, sometimes speaking their own reported words.<sup>59</sup> Such figures who significantly interact with and converse with Heyer’s fictional protagonists include leading dandy, George “Beau” Brummell (1778–1840), patroness of Almack’s, Lady Jersey (1785–1867), and, significantly for this piece, several members of the royal family. While in Brighton, the novel’s heroine, Judith Taverner, frequents the Royal Pavilion and is an object of interest to her host there, the Prince Regent, until this familiarity culminates in the aging prince’s unwelcome

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<sup>55</sup> Georgette Heyer, *Regency Buck* (London: Arrow Books, 1999).

<sup>56</sup> Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 145.

<sup>57</sup> Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 40; Laura J. George, “Judith Taverner as Dandy-in-training in Georgette Heyer’s *Regency Buck*,” in Rayner and Wilkins, *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction*, 53.

<sup>58</sup> Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 162, 171.

<sup>59</sup> George, “Judith Taverner as Dandy-in-training,” 58, 62, 71; Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 39–40.

amorous advances, from which “she made a feeble attempt to disengage herself from his hold, and then, for the first time in her life, quietly fainted away” into the arms of the mortified Prince.<sup>60</sup> Several of the Regent’s brothers also appear in the story and become acquaintances of Judith’s. The Duke of Cumberland is with his brother at Brighton, whilst the Dukes of Clarence and Cambridge are encountered in London at the Chapel Royal, and the Duke of Clarence (who historically became King William IV upon his eldest brother’s death in 1830) strikes up an acquaintance with her, even pursuing marriage with the fictional heiress.<sup>61</sup> Judith also becomes acquainted with the Duke of York, who is a “particular friend” of her guardian and ultimate love interest, Lord Worth and who is amongst the guests of a House Party she and Worth attend at Belvoir Castle, the real home of their real historical hosts, the Duke (1778–1857) and Duchess (1780–1825) of Rutland. The princes’ wives, the Duchess of York, The Princess of Wales, and Mrs. Fitzherbert (as well as another of their brothers, the Duke of Sussex), do not appear, but do get passing but loaded mentions laden with brief but significant historical detail.<sup>62</sup>

As Laura J. George observes, *Regency Buck* was somewhat experimental for Heyer in terms of developing her historical work. Though the research laid the foundations for her subsequent long catalogue of Regency romances, she would abandon “historical figures hav[ing] extensive speaking roles” in the later ones, particularly once her next two Regency works, *An Infamous Army* and *The Spanish Bride* were completed. But significant real figures did continue to appear (and get referenced) in the period backgrounds of the other books.<sup>63</sup> The more significant the precise periodisation to the setting of the novel, the more significant were these appearances, in Heyer’s own words during the composition of *An Infamous Army*, the more dedicated she was to working out “which historical characters must drift through” her narrative.<sup>64</sup> Although she experimented with it a couple of times in the earlier part of her career, for the most part Heyer did not write sequels for her historical romances, the fictional aristocratic families at the heart of her novels were not revisited, and the heroes and heroines of the different novels do not generally encounter each other moving in society. Again, this seems to be a decision she came to as she developed the genre, as the notable exception is *An Infamous Army*, which revisits the protagonists of *Regency Buck* a couple of years later, but also revolves around the romance

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<sup>60</sup> Heyer, *Regency Buck*, 244, 246–251, 275–284.

<sup>61</sup> Heyer, *Regency Buck*, 80–82, 112, 168–176, 178, 206, 244, 251, 277.

<sup>62</sup> Heyer, *Regency Buck*, 81, 93, 112–113, 150–152, 154, 275–276.

<sup>63</sup> George, “Judith Taverner as Dandy-in-training,” 70.

<sup>64</sup> Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 174.

of Worth's brother with a granddaughter of those of one of her earlier Georgian novels, *Devil's Cub* (1932), itself a sequel of her early bestseller, *These Old Shades* (1926). But the characters of the Regency novels all inhabit the same world, and so the recurring appearances of the *historical* figures turned *them* into markers of period authenticity, and also familiarity and consistency across the novels for the (many) return readers and fans. Though she became an expert on Regency history and culture, Heyer's ambitions towards recognition as a serious historical writer like her friend Oman, rather than merely romance novelist, were not fulfilled. However, while her trickier and frustrated medieval project on John of Lancaster remained on the backburner only to be published incomplete and posthumously, the degree of her immersion in regency research did provide an indirect outlet for a different, consciously, if reluctantly, abandoned project—a biography of Princess Charlotte of Wales.

### **Heyer's World-Building, Princess Charlotte, and *A Civil Contract* (1961)**

Princess Charlotte was the daughter of George IV, and as, throughout her lifetime, the only legitimate grandchild of George III, she was the anticipated inheritrix of the British throne, and a significant public figure of the regency period.<sup>65</sup> Financial pressures, and apparent lack of enthusiasm from her publishers forced Heyer to abandon the project.<sup>66</sup> But her research was not wasted, but rather got absorbed into and enhanced the meticulously-researched and reconstructed historical “world” which her fictional characters inhabited, with references to Charlotte's life appearing in several of the Regency romance novels. Unlike other real figures who recur in the novels, Charlotte is never a speaking character who directly interacts with the novels' protagonists, but, as a figure of significant contemporary public interest, Heyer's characters do consume news, gossip, and anecdotes of her. Some of Heyer's references are direct, but fleeting, even superficial. In *Lady of Quality* (1972), Oliver Carleton mentions the royal family's apparent internal dynamics to his niece and ward, Lucilla, describing how “Princess Charlotte addresses all her uncles – and, for anything I know, her aunts too – by their Christian names, and even the youngest of them is older than I am!”, to which Lucilla retorts, “dismiss[ing] Princess Charlotte summarily[,] ‘Oh, well, I daresay things are different for princesses!’”<sup>67</sup> In *Regency Buck*, she gets another

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<sup>65</sup> For the most recent account of Princess Charlotte's life see Anne Stott, *The Lost Queen: The Life and Tragedy of the Prince Regent's Daughter* (Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2020).

<sup>66</sup> Kloester, *Georgette Heyer*, 181, 190, 194.

<sup>67</sup> Georgette Heyer, *Lady of Quality* (London: Pan, 1973), 88.

cursory mention, though this time retrospective knowledge of the eventual succession lends paratextual depth of historical detail to the plot, as Clarence dismisses Judith's concerns that the Regent would oppose their potential marriage on the grounds of her non-royal status saying,

I do not know why he should oppose it ... There's Charlotte to succeed him, and my brother York before me. You may depend upon it he thinks the Succession safe enough without taking me into account.<sup>68</sup>

The implications of Charlotte's position in the succession were a public preoccupation throughout the Regency period. The estrangement of her parents, which was already known to preclude the birth of a brother to supplant her in the line of succession, or indeed the addition of any siblings to it, had, in the previous decade, led to the so-called "delicate investigation" into her mother's sexual conduct, as well as protracted battles over her access to Charlotte during her childhood and education, and was by the period covered in Heyer's novels a public spectacle. Visiting the opera, the protagonists of *A Civil Contract* in their box on the same side of the theatre as the Royal Box find themselves "admirably situated" to witness the Princess of Wales's "revenge" on her husband for her exclusion from the official royal peace celebrations of 1814,

... sweeping into the box directly opposite his while 'God Save the King' was being sung ... [and] present[ing] such a striking figure that she attracted the attention of nearly everyone but her Royal husband ... a storm of clapping broke out in the pit. It was directed pointedly at the Princess ... the prolonged clapping made [the Regent] turn, and bow graciously—but whether he bowed to the audience or to his wife was a question hotly argued but never decided.<sup>69</sup>

*The Spanish Bride* meanwhile describes the Prince's "relief" when his wife decided to go abroad hoping "to prevent her ever returning ... [for between] her peculiar personal habits [and] questionable [morality] ... , the subversive influence she exercised on the Princess Charlotte, and the deplorable way she had fallen into of appearing in the opposite box to him at the theatre," spreading "scandalous" accounts of their wedding night, and even apparently casually "bastardizing [Princess Charlotte] by announcing she had always considered Mrs Fitzherbert to have been [George's] only wife," she was a "serious

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<sup>68</sup> Heyer, *Regency Buck*, 171.

<sup>69</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract* (London: Arrow Books, 2005), 190.

embarrassment” to the Prince Regent personally and the royal family more generally. Beyond this she had threatened the security and popularity of his position, for “the British public, moved by the spectacle of a deserted wife, took Caroline to its great throbbing heart, and actually hissed him when he made a public appearance.”<sup>70</sup> Heyer makes repeated references in her works to the physical and moral degeneration of the Prince from charming and “handsome” young “Prince Florizel” to middle-aged Regent, and as well as referencing his failings as a husband (and son), in *A Civil Contract* she also specifically mentions his being “an unkind father” who “treat[ed] his only child with boorish roughness.”<sup>71</sup>

Charlotte’s adolescence coincided with her father’s elevation to the regency and so the decision of her future husband was under his purview without any authoritative interference from the King and Queen. As future queen, the subject of Charlotte’s marriage was one of both dynastic importance and public interest. In *Bath Tangle* (1955), Serena Carlow and her stepmother, Fanny, receive the news of the Princess’s engagement to Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg in one of the regular letters of political news received from an aunt in London, and for Fanny “nothing could be more interesting than the approaching nuptials of the heiress presumptive to the throne.”<sup>72</sup> Charlotte’s engagement and then marriage to Leopold occurred in 1816 when the Princess was twenty years old. She was by this time a symbolically and ceremonially visible, but socially isolated and secluded, figure in London society. Heyer tells us that Fanny, a countess just a few years Charlotte’s senior “was not acquainted with the Princess, who had been kept very close,” and that Jenny, the newly-wed viscountess heroine of *A Civil Contract*, is “disappointed” by the Princess’s absence from court and from festivities at Carlton House, for, as Jenny explains to her sister-in-law, “she’s going to be Queen one day, isn’t she? Stands to reason anyone would want to see her!”<sup>73</sup> One reason for her seclusion had been her refusal to accept an earlier match her father had arranged for her with the Prince of Orange.

The selection of a husband for a prospective queen regnant has traditionally been dynastically challenging and politically controversial.<sup>74</sup> In 1813, potential domestic

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<sup>70</sup> Heyer, *The Spanish Bride*, 355–356.

<sup>71</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 131–132.

<sup>72</sup> Georgette Heyer, *Bath Tangle* (London: Pan, 1967), 66, 71.

<sup>73</sup> Heyer, *Bath Tangle*, 67; Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 129, 211.

<sup>74</sup> For a brief discussion of this see Sarah Betts, “What’s in a Name? Dynasty, Succession and England’s Queens Regnant (1553–2016),” in *The Routledge History of Monarchy*, ed. Elena Woodacre, Lucinda H. S. Dean, Chris Jones, Russel E. Martin and Zita Eva Rohr (London: Routledge, 2019), 489–492, 494.

matches for Charlotte with either her father's cousin, the Duke of Gloucester, or with the new Duke of Devonshire were rumoured. Gloucester was twenty years the princess's senior and later married her aunt Princess Mary, but Devonshire, who had inherited the dukedom in 1811 was in his early twenties and one of the country's richest landowners, his family were highly influential in Whig politics, and his mother had been a friend and favourite of the Prince of Wales. Devonshire and Charlotte were regular dance partners and their friendship was high-profile enough that Heyer's hero Freddie Standen in *Cotillion* (1953) confidently states it to be "common knowledge [Devonshire] tried to fix his interest with the Princess Charlotte," but the Regent turned against the relationship and discouraged his daughter from bestowing public attentions.<sup>75</sup> The Regent instead turned his attentions to the Orange match, and the negotiations between the two houses, and then internally between father and daughter, form the most significant body of direct mentions of Charlotte's life in Heyer's work. The intended groom was the son and heir of William VI, Prince of Orange (from 1815 King William I of the new Kingdom of the Netherlands), who ultimately succeeded him as King William II. The young prince had spent much of his youth in exile in Prussia and England, studied at Oxford, and served in the British Army under the Duke of Wellington, becoming one of the Allied commanders at Waterloo. Back in the 1930s, in setting the scene of *An Infamous Army*, Heyer had devoted some pages to the exposition of the position and characters of the prince and his father, who her characters discuss at some length, and the prince is a recurring character in the novel.<sup>76</sup> Set in 1815, Heyer describes him here as "a hopeful young man of engaging manners, and a reputation for dashing gallantry in the field" and mentions his recent engagement to Princess Charlotte, as well as its ending in his "appear[ing] a trifle ridiculous in English eyes" after "that strong-minded damsel" abruptly broke it off.<sup>77</sup> *Bath Tangle* also makes reference to the "considerable stir" Charlotte caused in breaking the engagement, and the unfolding of the engagement and then its disintegration and the subsequent quarrel with her father are the subject of recurring remark, gossip and excitement in *A Civil Contract*, acting as an important marker in establishing the dating of the novel's plot narrative, which is unusually precisely tied to historic events.<sup>78</sup> Even in *An Infamous Army*, which does not dwell on the betrothal, nor especially upon the Princess herself, it is implied that the

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<sup>75</sup> Stott, *The Lost Queen*, 129–130; Georgette Heyer, *Cotillion*, London: Pan, 1966, 181.

<sup>76</sup> Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 1–9.

<sup>77</sup> Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 8.

<sup>78</sup> Heyer, *Bath Tangle*, 66; Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 91, 129–30, 164, 195, 210–211.

arrangement was purely political rather than one of personal attachment, for it is noted that its ending “did not seem to have cast any sort of cloud over the Prince [of Orange]’s spirits.” Indeed, the Prince did swiftly find an alternative bride in the Tsar’s sister, Anna Pavlovna, whom he married in early 1816, while in *Bath Tangle* Charlotte’s Orange engagement is compared unfavourably with that to Leopold which, Fanny muses, “must be a love match” to someone eminently more attractive and more suitable.<sup>79</sup> Key to this suitability was Leopold’s comparative position as “younger son” of a minor ruler as opposed to heir to the throne,

since a prince without a principality would be prepared to live in England, instead, like the Prince of Orange, of insisting on taking the Princess Charlotte to live for some part of the year in his own domains.<sup>80</sup>

The issue of the competing interests of herself and Orange as two future sovereigns, and particularly the issue of her own residency and establishment in England, was certainly the Princess’s own chief argument against the match, and *A Civil Contract* also ascribes the difficulties to “the question of domicile” and Charlotte’s consciousness of her position in the succession line necessitating she “remain in her own country,” something the fictional dinner party discussing it thoughtfully “approve” as natural.<sup>81</sup>

The other direct reference in Heyer’s novels to Princess Charlotte is also related to her position in the line of succession. In *Venetia* (1958), the fictional Lanyon family receive regular visits at their home in Yorkshire from a friend and neighbour bringing his daily London newspaper to share. An excuse to pay court to the novel’s heroine, these visits are facilitated by great events of late 1817 and early 1818, including, the novel specifies, the Bernadotte succession in Sweden abroad and a “spate of royal marriages” at home amongst the King’s middle-aged bachelor children. This latter, Heyer writes, “of course, was because the Heiress of England, poor Princess Charlotte, had lately died in childbed, and her infant with her.”<sup>82</sup> The death of Charlotte and her child in November 1817 was a dynastic disaster and greeted as a national tragedy. As none of George III’s fifteen children had legitimate children of their own, and amidst fears that the throne might be inherited by a foreign

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<sup>79</sup> Heyer, *An Infamous Army*, 8; Heyer, *Bath Tangle*, 67.

<sup>80</sup> Heyer, *Bath Tangle*, 67.

<sup>81</sup> Arthur Aspinall, *Letters of the Princess Charlotte 1811–1817* (London: Home and Van Thal, 1949), 107–108, 113–119, 140–141, 176; Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 164.

<sup>82</sup> Georgette Heyer, *Venetia* (London: Arrow Books, 1998), 8, 11.

royal house descended from the King's sister, the King's middle-aged sons were induced to marry and raced to provide the nation with a new heir.<sup>83</sup> This rather unseemly desperation was heavily satirised at the time, and *Venetia*'s characters all "owned that it was diverting, for two of the Royal Dukes were over fifty, and looked it," as well as noting the hypocritical irony of the middle-aged dukes putting aside their mistresses and specifically Clarence's "large family of hopeful bastards," who were also a repeated subject of debates on propriety in *Regency Buck*.<sup>84</sup>

The timeframe of *A Civil Contract* is very precisely aligned to events of 1814–1815 and culminates in the domestic reception of the news of Waterloo in June 1815. Its central narrative revolves around what has been referred to as a "reverse romance" between Adam, the impoverished Viscount Lynton, and Jenny, the daughter of Mr Chawleigh, an immensely wealthy self-made City of London trader, who marry at the beginning of the story to provide Adam with the money to pay off his late father's debts and keep his family estate and Jenny with the title and introduction to the *ton* Chawleigh desires for her.<sup>85</sup> It is almost the latest written of Heyer's novels which directly references Princess Charlotte, though obviously not the latest-set as its timeline covers only the Prince of Orange engagement and its immediate aftermath. Although Charlotte herself does not interact with the novel's protagonists, they do acquire inside information on royal goings-on from the fictional Marquis of Rockhill, a significant minor character, who is a member of "the Carlton House Set" and thus intimate with the Prince Regent, and from Jenny "scor[ing] a hit" in her first venture as hostess as Viscountess Lynton in securing the attendance at her party of Mercer Elphinstone, the closest friend of Princess Charlotte.<sup>86</sup> But as well as these more direct encounters with the historical princess, the fictional Adam and Jenny inhabit much of the same historical world as she did. Adam, as his family had done for generations, banks with Drummond's, "an old-established firm" whose clients included "no less a personage than His Majesty King George;" his father, the late Viscount whose death immediately precedes the book's opening, was an established figure in high society and a

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<sup>83</sup> On public anxieties around the succession following Princess Charlotte's death please see Sarah Betts, "'Our Future Queen': Speculation, Anticipation, and Expectation from Princess Charlotte of Wales (1796–1817) to Princess Charlotte of Cambridge (2015–)," in *The Routledge History Handbook of Queens-in-Waiting: Ambitions and Expectations from the Twelfth to the Twenty-first Centuries*, ed. Sarah Betts and Chloë R. McKenzie (Routledge, forthcoming).

<sup>84</sup> Heyer, *Venetia*, 11; Heyer, *Regency Buck*, 93, 112–113, 172, 175.

<sup>85</sup> Jennifer Clement, "Loving and Giving: Realism, Emotional Hypocrisy and Generosity in *A Civil Contract*," in Rayner and Wilkins, *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction*, 88.

<sup>86</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 164, 210–211.



“close friend of the Prince Regent” with whom he frequently stayed at Carlton House.<sup>87</sup> The Lyntons patronise the theatre and attend court but Jenny’s wealthy father also ensures that they patronise royal warrant-holders in furnishing their London townhouse.<sup>88</sup> As well as tradesmen, the royal family, including Charlotte, and particularly famously the Prince Regent, were known to enjoy the novels of Jane Austen, and while several of Heyer’s heroines are noted as reading them, Jenny is specifically noted as a fan of both *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Mansfield Park*.<sup>89</sup>

Other references are more directly associated with Charlotte herself. A new fashion of hairstyle which Jenny adopts on the advice of her sister-in-law, with the “hair close at the sides, and braid[ed] into a coronet on the top of your head,” is certainly reminiscent of that worn by Charlotte in portraits after her own marriage, particularly the well-known 1817 portrait by George Dawe, which has been in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery almost from the time of its inception in the mid-nineteenth century [Fig. 1].<sup>90</sup> Jenny is not described as being particularly like the princess in appearance, however her fuller figure is repeatedly mentioned and compared to the “slim” and “Sylph”-like Julia, Adam’s first love. Charlotte was clearly more similar in build to Jenny than to Julia and, as Jenny’s confidence as a wife grows, she seems to settle into this more “becoming” style just as Charlotte developed it as a newlywed and was remembered following her death soon after.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 2, 22–24, 206.

<sup>88</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 115.

<sup>89</sup> Nicholas Foretek, “Jane Austen and the Prince Regent: The Very First Purchase of an Austen Novel,” Georgian Papers Programme Blog, accessed 1 May 2017, <https://georgianpapers.com/2018/07/24/jane-austen-and-the-prince-regent/>; Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 63, 227.

<sup>90</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 209.

<sup>91</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 27, 57, 97, 208–210, 225, 250, 361.



**Figure 1. George Dawe. *Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales*. ©National Portrait Gallery, London.**

Other echoes of Princess Charlotte in *A Civil Contract* come in the references to another painter, Sir Thomas Lawrence. Lawrence is mentioned a couple of times in the story as a neighbour of Mr Chawleigh in the newly-built Russell Square. Chawleigh describes how all “the nobs” flock to Lawrence’s house for their portraits, and Mrs Quarley-Bix, the obsequious chaperone he hired to attend and promote Jenny in society before her marriage, emphasises Lawrence’s portraiture as the height of fashion, claiming to “dote” upon the “genius” quality of his work, and urging her employer to “commission him to take our sweet Miss Chawleigh’s likeness.” But although in his efforts to “turn his daughter out in prime style” Mr Chawleigh had (despite his personal poor opinion of Lawrence’s works) considered a “full-length” from him, he baulked at what he considered the inflated fee. Nonetheless he caveated he might “come to it yet” in order to fittingly mark his

daughter's elevation to viscountess.<sup>92</sup> Princess Charlotte was the subject of two prominent works by Lawrence, one an 1801 double portrait from her childhood with her mother, Caroline. Lawrence's relationship with Princess Caroline came under scrutiny in the delicate investigation a few years later, but despite this association, Charlotte later commissioned a portrait from him herself after her marriage as a gift for her husband, Leopold. Completed posthumously, this painting was prolifically copied in the years after its subject's sudden demise, and Lawrence's accounts of the Princess's sittings for him were published in a collection of his papers as early as 1831 [Fig. 2].<sup>93</sup>



**Figure 2. Richard Golding, after Sir Thomas Lawrence. *Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales*. Line engraving published by Colnaghi & Co. January 1822. ©National Portrait Gallery, London.**

<sup>92</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 45, 58–59, 91, 189, 208.

<sup>93</sup> Stott, *The Lost Queen*, 41–42, 73–74, 228, 242; D.E. Williams, *The Life and Correspondence of Sir Thomas Lawrence*, Kt., 2 vols, London, 1831.

The clearest and most significant references to Princess Charlotte's life in the novel occur during Jenny's pregnancy. This is an anxious time for Jenny's father who, we learn upon first meeting him, lost his wife in childbirth, along with a stillborn son.<sup>94</sup> Jenny's pregnancy is also, as one of Heyer's biographers, Jane Aiken Hodge, summarises, "a difficult one made more so by the fact that she is in the hands of Dr Croft, a real figure, who was to be responsible for Princess Charlotte's death in childbirth in 1817," although, Hodge adds, it is "obviously" impossible for Heyer to "prophecy this" and so she merely "pays her readers the compliment of assuming they will understand how disastrous" his methods, specifically the diet he puts her on, have the potential to be for Jenny.<sup>95</sup> But in this way, I would argue, Heyer *does* "prophecy" what later happened to Charlotte, especially when taken in conjunction with the numerous mentions and allusions to Charlotte and her life throughout the novel, and the context of mentions of her in other previous work, which it would be reasonable to assume many of *A Civil Contract*'s readers will have read. While the specifics of Croft's attendance on Princess Charlotte may not be common knowledge to modern-day readers, Heyer pins her narrative upon key points which were widely known and circulated in the aftermath of Charlotte's death, and, for any reader whose interest is piqued for more detailed research, clues and search terms are there to follow. Croft is introduced about two-thirds of the way through the novel, hired by Mr Chawleigh as "the man" for Jenny, "an accoucheur – top-of-the-trees!" As it has been by this point well-established that Chawleigh uses his immense wealth to buy the best of everything (defined by reputation amongst, and patronage by, the ton and the royal family, and represented by historical figures whose reputation is still renowned, or at least explicit, in researchable historical sources), it is implicit that Croft is another such figure.<sup>96</sup> As Charlotte's biographer, Anne Stott, observes, the princess's selection of Croft to oversee her pregnancy in 1817 was "uncontroversial" and perhaps unsurprising at the time as he came from an aristocratic background, had trained under his father-in-law, the well-respected accoucheur Thomas Denham, and had gained a fashionable reputation since the 1790s through the patronage of the Duchess of Devonshire.<sup>97</sup> It is therefore highly plausible that Chawleigh would select him for Jenny in 1814-1815.

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<sup>94</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 45.

<sup>95</sup> Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 143.

<sup>96</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 248.

<sup>97</sup> Stott, *The Lost Queen*, 222.

Charlotte's death following the protracted delivery of a stillborn son in November 1817 inevitably and irrevocably damaged Croft's reputation, despite an autopsy and other publications defending his practice.<sup>98</sup> The case became lodged further into long-term cultural memory following Croft's own suicide, driven by guilt over the Princess, in March 1818, becoming notorious as the "triple obstetric tragedy," in reference to the death of mother, child, and practitioner.<sup>99</sup> The principal misgivings which have lasted about Croft's management of the case were his autocratic confidence in not "dividing the responsibility" with other practitioners and expertise, and the "lowering diet" he apparently prescribed during her pregnancy which was later felt to have undermined her strength for labour.<sup>100</sup> This first is certainly raised in *A Civil Contract*, where "pompous" Croft appears resistant to considering a personalised responsive treatment plan for Jenny, and is finally confirmed and summarised by Adam when he explains to his father-in-law that the accoucheur was "so much inclined to take umbrage" when a second opinion was sought, and "so entirely convinced of his own infallibility" that the Lyntons had dispensed with his services.<sup>101</sup> But the "reducing diet" is explored in far greater detail, being in fact the reason for Adam seeking a second opinion and replacing Croft in the first place, to the relief of Jenny, and, it is presumed, the reader, for, though standard practice at the time, the effects of it on Jenny's health had been repeatedly and alarmingly mentioned to the reader and caused concern amongst the characters close to the heroine whose judgement the reader has been taught already to trust.<sup>102</sup> Through the sense of foreboding that prevails through Jenny's experience under Croft, Heyer conveys a portion of blame upon Croft for the death of Charlotte and her child. This culpability is essentially confirmed when Jenny improves after abandoning Croft's diet and services, on the advice of Sir William Knighton, another historical figure who became the increasingly trusted physician and friend to Charlotte's

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<sup>98</sup> See for example, Anthony Todd Thomson, *The Authentic Medical Statement of the Case of Her Royal Highness the Late Princess Charlotte of Wales* (London, 1818); Thomas Green, *Memoirs of Her Late Royal Highness Charlotte-Augusta of Wales and Saxe-Coburg* (Liverpool, 1818), 407.

<sup>99</sup> Unusually as an historical incident, though unsurprisingly given its subject matter, the case has had a particularly lasting legacy in obstetrics. A seminal piece published in 1951 was in 2005 described by the editor-in-chief of the leading journal in which it was published as still "one of our best known papers." Sir Eardley Holland, "The Princess Charlotte of Wales: A Triple Obstetric Tragedy," *The Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology of the British Empire*, 5:6 (1951): 905–919; Jim Thornton, "Editor's Choice," *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology*, 112:7 (2005): v.

<sup>100</sup> Thomson, *Authentic Medical Statement*, 19; Stott, *The Lost Queen*, 226, 238; William Smoult Playfair, *A Treatise on the Science and Practice of Midwifery. In Two Volumes*, 8th. ed. (London, 1893), 2:20..

<sup>101</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 256, 282.

<sup>102</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 256–265, 274–279.

father and whose name was also associated with the premature, but safe, delivery of another royal baby, Princess Elizabeth of Clarence, in 1820.<sup>103</sup> In justifying his stubborn refusal to abandon Croft's expertise, Mr Chawleigh's repeated recourse to the example of his wife, of similar physique to Jenny (and Charlotte), and who lost her life in fruitless pursuit of an heir when she gave birth to a stillborn son, adds to the sense of foreboding implicit in Croft's presence in the narrative, as well as the feeling of optimism for the outcome of Jenny's pregnancy which develops following the Lyntons' dismissal of him.<sup>104</sup>

Jenny and her son survive delivery and thrive, and when the novel ends in mid-1815, Charlotte had still not embarked upon her betrothal to Leopold which would ultimately lead to the tragedy of November 1817, but subtler allusions to Charlotte abound. In *Bath Tangle*, Heyer had already specifically mentioned Leopold's presence at "the rather premature Peace Celebrations in 1814" which then became a major event featured in *A Civil Contract*.<sup>105</sup> While Leopold does not get a direct mention in the later novel, the presence of all of the foreign dignitaries in London is described in some detail, and Charlotte and Leopold's first meeting that summer, though little noted at the time later, became the subject of much public interest and a popular print after their engagement.<sup>106</sup> There are also some clear parallels between the couples. Like Leopold, Adam is a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars settling down into a new civilian life and identity. The dynamic of a marriage with an imbalance of wealth and rank between the couple, specifically a wealthier wife supporting her husband's position, is another similarity between the two couples. Adam's life, including the circumstances by which he comes to marry Jenny, is lived in the shadow of his father's debts and extravagant and debauched lifestyle at the neglect of a wholesome and virtuous family life. He was also a serial womaniser. Adam is his father's complete opposite in character, and though he marries Jenny for money rather than love, he is horrified by the suggestion of, and resolute in resisting, taking a mistress.<sup>107</sup> Charlotte, whose own parents' marriage was initiated by her father's need to have his debts settled, famously lived under a similar cloud of her father and uncles' profligacy and debauchery. As Virginia McKendry has argued, although Charlotte's cousin Queen Victoria is often credited with revolutionising the monarchy's reputation in this regard, Charlotte and Leopold promoted the "domestication" of royalty and royal image into an ideal of "national

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<sup>103</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 277–282, 290; *The Times*, December 11, 1820, 2.

<sup>104</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 45, 248–250, 257, 303.

<sup>105</sup> Heyer, *Bath Tangle*, 67.

<sup>106</sup> Stott, *The Lost Queen*, 159.

<sup>107</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 99, 239–241.

family values” in accordance with “middle-class” respectability and “civic masculinity.”<sup>108</sup> Throughout the narrative of *A Civil Contract* are numerous echoes of what has become known of Charlotte and Leopold’s characters and lifestyle in those of Adam and Jenny.

As Jennifer Clement and Lisa Hopkins have noted, Heyer draws heavily and openly on Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* throughout *A Civil Contract*, specifically in her characterisations of Jenny and, in contrast, Julia.<sup>109</sup> Jenny, who is introduced as displaying “more sense than sensibility,” demonstrates good common sense in her dealings with family, society, and situation, and is repeatedly mentioned to lack “sensibility,” and thus easily identifiable with Elinor Dashwood.<sup>110</sup> It is worth noting however, that, as Clement argues, Jenny’s characterisation is not quite so straightforward as this implies, for Heyer tells us that, as a mark of stoical emotional maturity, Jenny has consciously *overcome* any tendencies towards romantic sensibilities in pursuit of comfort and happiness.<sup>111</sup> Adam is conscious of having “finer” feelings and is recognised by others for his own sensibility; however, his pragmatic “sacrifice” of these feelings for the sake of his family and estate is rewarded as he gradually matures throughout the novel into an appreciative content for his domestic companionship and practical partnership with Jenny.<sup>112</sup> Like Jenny, Charlotte was known to have enjoyed *Sense and Sensibility*. As a teenager, she considered herself and Marianne Dashwood “very alike in *disposition*.”<sup>113</sup> But, to a certain extent, like Marianne, and like Adam, she ultimately settled for a mature sort of love, grown out of a more pragmatic choice of partner. In their married life, Charlotte and Leopold relished the quiet privacy and domesticity of life in the country and spent much of their time enjoying and cultivating their estate at Claremont in Surrey.<sup>114</sup> Observing them there in 1817, Thomas Lawrence wrote of

the satisfaction of seeing the perfect harmony in which this young couple now live, and of observing the good qualities which promise to make it lasting ... [Charlotte, though] wanting in elegance of deportment ... has nothing of the hoyden ... her

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<sup>108</sup> Virginia McKendry, “Taming the Sovereign: Princess Charlotte of Wales and the Rhetoric of Gender,” in *Strategic Imaginations: Women and the Gender of Sovereignty in European Culture*, ed. Anke Gilleir and Aude Defurne (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020), 255–290.

<sup>109</sup> Clement, “Loving and Giving,” 95–96; Hopkins, “Georgette Heyer: What Austen Left Out,” 74.

<sup>110</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 58, 99, 121, 141, 147, 150, 239.

<sup>111</sup> Clement, “Loving and Giving,” 97–98, 102; Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 268, 374.

<sup>112</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 94, 188, 295, 357–358, 372–375.

<sup>113</sup> Aspinall, *Letters of the Princess Charlotte*, 26.

<sup>114</sup> Stott, *The Lost Queen*, 177, 214, 217–220.

manner is exceedingly frank and simple, but not rudely abrupt or coarse ... undeniable evidence of an honest, just, English nature...If she does nothing gracefully, she does every thing kindly... she loves and respects Prince Leopold, whose conduct, indeed, seems justly to deserve those feelings ... he is considerate, benevolent, and just, and of very amiable manners ... in his behaviour to her, he is affectionate and attentive, rational and discreet ... Their mode of life is very regular.<sup>115</sup>

The domestic idyll described by Lawrence was immortalised in the repetition and publication of his descriptions and in the circulation of the portrait taken during Charlotte's ultimately ill-fated pregnancy [Fig. 2]. Similarly, Jenny and Adam's married life flourishes through comfortable routines of domesticity and duty, particularly when the couple are, as they both seem to prefer, ensconced in their country home, Fontley Priory, the maintenance and cultivation of which has been Adam's driving personal motivation throughout, and becomes their joint endeavour, with Adam swiftly realising that Jenny is "such a notable housewife" well-suited to the task.<sup>116</sup> As Lawrence describes the distraught widowed Leopold's continued references to his wife as "my Charlotte" as he recalls their marital bliss, so Adam, as their companionship grows and partnership solidifies, comes to refer to his as "my Jenny."<sup>117</sup>

Despite his preference for country life, and his specialist knowledge of the wider world being strictly built upon his military experience, rather unusually for a Heyer hero, *A Civil Contract* briefly, but explicitly reminds the reader of Adam's inherent political role through a discussion of his obligations to take his seat in the House of Lords. Adam's friends and family are mostly Whigs, as was his late father, and so there is some consternation that he may be introduced by his Tory uncle, Lord Nassington, and that he himself is disinclined towards the Whigs because of his guiding loyalty and faith in the Duke of Wellington. The same passage also mentions the Prince of Wales's apparent abandonment of the Whigs since his elevation to the Regency. Coming on the heels of discussion of Princess Charlotte's reluctance for the Orange match, there are clear echoes of themes of filial duty, generational differences, and the balance of private inclinations and wider familial, societal, even public responsibility.<sup>118</sup> The description of the Regent's "sad change" in political outlook, ventriloquised by Adam's circle, also echoes more specifically the

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<sup>115</sup> Williams, *Life and Correspondence of Sir Thomas Lawrence*, 2: 74–75.

<sup>116</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 171, 229.

<sup>117</sup> Williams, *Life and Correspondence of Sir Thomas Lawrence*, 2: 82–85; Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 373.

<sup>118</sup> Heyer, *A Civil Contract*, 164–166.



historical Charlotte's apparent "well-known" dismay at it.<sup>119</sup> The allusion is slight, and Charlotte's name is not directly attached to the sentiment, but taken with others, as well as more extended allusions and direct references, it adds another element to rounding out Charlotte's character and life story as a virtually spectral presence in the novel, a biographical study unwritten, yet still told between the lines of Heyer's fictional romance.

### **Biography Between the Lines: Avenues for Royal Studies.**

Lisa Fletcher, Rosemary Gaby, and Jennifer Kloester point out that Heyer had form for "deliberate use" of her extensive historical research through "drawing on the experience of [an] historical figure," for her 1957 novel *Sylvester* referred both directly by name, and indirectly through parallel, to Lady Caroline Lamb and her literary career as a woman amongst the Regency ton. *Sylvester*, they argue, perfectly demonstrates the "juxtaposition" of fact and fiction which "typifies" Heyer's methods,

By constructing her novels with an invisible scaffolding of meticulous historical detail she strengthens the verisimilitude of the emotional drama (though only the most knowledgeable readers may be aware of it).<sup>120</sup>

*A Civil Contract*, I would argue goes beyond this, being the most thorough exploration of a historical figure in Heyer's work aside from her more traditional pieces of biographical fiction. Through direct and parallel allusions across multiple works to both the princess herself and significant figures and events in her life, an historical and psychological portrait of Charlotte is drawn between the lines of Heyer's novels. It is surely significant that the subject of this indirect biographical piece was also the subject of a frustrated serious biographical project. A largely self-taught and "conservative" student, Heyer viewed historical research as a retrieval of fact, she favoured traditional political and/or military reference and historiographical works and contemporary sources as "authentic" artefacts and "records" which could be used to "accurately" construct a narrative of the past, not material to be critically analysed. She took historical research very seriously, enjoying and taking pride in the discovery element of it, but saw her communication of

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<sup>119</sup> Stott, *The Lost Queen*, 112–114, 244.

<sup>120</sup> Lisa Fletcher, Rosemary Gaby, and Jennifer Kloester, "Pedagogy Report: Embedding Popular Romance Studies in Undergraduate English Units: Teaching Georgette Heyer's *Sylvester*," *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, 1:2 (2011), <https://www.jprstudies.org/2011/03/pedagogy-report-embedding-popular-romance-studies-in-undergraduate-english/>.

history to her readers as a literary endeavour, to convey the past to them in the knowledge that her content was well-informed, rather than specifically to *teach* it to them.<sup>121</sup> Heyer's success in historical fiction writing, particularly with her Regency novels was founded on her immersion in this extensive source base that facilitated her building of "authentic" narratives out of a fleshed out background world that existed in her own library and mind, and was to some extent shared with her readers through her accumulated body of work. As Laura Saxton argues, in re-examining the relationship between fact and fiction in historical novels it can be seen that not only does fiction "fill the gaps" in history, but that "history also plays a role in filling the gaps in historical fiction" as external knowledge "can influence our reading of the past in historical fiction, even where those details are not explicitly included". Sometimes, as in the examples in Saxton's work, that external knowledge is shared by author and reader, arising out of "dominant cultural imagery and iconography."<sup>122</sup> Other times that external knowledge is in the author's personal world-building archives. Often the knowledge is a combination of the two.

This essay has suggested that Heyer, though frustrated in her ambitions to write the acclaimed, serious historical work that was her passion, effectively offered her readers a paratextual biography of Princess Charlotte of Wales through a combination of the contextual world created by reading her carefully periodised Regency romances and particularly the development of the characters and narrative of *A Civil Contract*. To conclude, it will now reiterate that this reading has two methodological purposes for scholars in royal studies. It is noteworthy that in addition to her abandoned Princess Charlotte project, of Heyer's four biographical novels (*The Conqueror*, *Royal Escape*, *The Spanish Bride*, and *My Lord John*), three of the central historical lives were royal ones. As material and inspiration for historical novels, royalty are fruitful and popular choices. Ronald Rougier said that his wife had selected Prince John, Duke of Bedford as a subject because "his life-span covered the whole period" she wished to "illustrate," "and because he was a great man" in his time even if less "well-known" to modern audiences, and thus his life was well-represented in, and suitably representative of, the sources.<sup>123</sup> Royal lives were not only lived at the centre of, or at least in proximity to, great events, but have also

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<sup>121</sup> Tom Zille, "Georgette Heyer and the Language of the Historical Novel," in Rayner and Wilkins, *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction*, 187–189; Fletcher, Gaby and Kloester, "Pedagogy Report."

<sup>122</sup> Laura Saxton, "Her Mother's Daughter: Elizabeth Tudor as Queen-in-Waiting in Historical Fictions about Anne Boleyn," in *The Routledge History Handbook of Queens-in-Waiting: Ambitions and Expectations from the Twelfth to the Twenty-first Centuries*, ed. Sarah Betts and Chloë R. McKenzie (Routledge, forthcoming).

<sup>123</sup> Hodge, *Private World of Georgette Heyer*, 70.

become key cultural chronological touchpoints for retrospective eyes surveying the past. Royal personal and dynastic nomenclature have traditionally been central to much historiographical organisation and periodisation, and while in more recent times academics have challenged the validity of this, it has in many ways remained a “useful organizational *and* analytical tool” in studying both “monarchy and its chronological context.”<sup>124</sup> But more importantly for the subject in hand here such conceptualisations and organisations of the past have remained central in public understandings and engagements with the past, and so royal presence in historical fiction, be it fleeting, biographical faction, or anything in between, is intrinsically linked to the sense of the past and periodisation in historical fictions.

The first methodological point to be made for royal studies here is in the analysis of historical fictions as public history and/or the memory and long-term memory of royal figures. By reading between the lines of historical novels, as well as studying their reception, the “gaps” in the narrative can be identified. This can both illuminate the author’s own external knowledge which they have implicitly brought to the text and also indicate what cultural knowledge they assume their readers will already have about a particular historical figure and their life or character. As Fletcher, Gaby and Kloester observe, Heyer was at least as much “a consumer-[as] a practitioner-of historical research” and examining her royal references, implicit alongside explicit, can potentially illuminate the nature, accessibility, and durability of particular royal reputations and sources.<sup>125</sup> This can be more broadly applied to other creators. There is a temptation in looking at historical fictions to consider them merely as imparting rather than necessarily, as reflecting historical mythology, and reading historical novelists as consumers rather than producers of historical knowledge can add valuable perspectives on cultural memory and historicism.

But, as Ann Rigney has argued, fictional products themselves do have “an active role to play, in the production of historical consciousness, if not [always] in the transmission of specific knowledge of historical particulars.”<sup>126</sup> This is clearly seen in the case of Heyer’s regency “world,” the influence of which on *public* perceptions of regency

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<sup>124</sup> See for example Betts, “What’s in a Name?”, 470–480, 496; Jörg Matthias Determann, “Dynastic Periodization and Its Limits: Historiography in Contemporary Arab Monarchies,” *Der Islam*, 91:1 (2014): 95–114; Helen Rogers, “Victorian Studies in the UK,” in *The Victorians Since 1901: Histories, Representations and Revisions*, ed. Miles Taylor and Michael Wolff (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 248.

<sup>125</sup> Fletcher, Gaby and Kloester, “Pedagogy Report.”

<sup>126</sup> Ann Rigney, “Being an Improper Historian,” in Jenkins, Morgan and Munslow, *Manifestos for History*, 154.

England is acknowledged by scholars, even though some have highlighted this perceived world's "problematically" narrowminded, "privileged," even prejudiced, approach to social and cultural diversity.<sup>127</sup> Consequently, Rigney suggests, amidst debates of truth versus myth that preoccupy much academic discourse on popular historical products attention, scholars should consider "whether their knowledge and expertise can be brought into circulation in a multimedial world which is not at the academic historian's bidding and where blockbuster fiction has arguably as much power as academic history to shape widely held views of the past."<sup>128</sup> This is the second methodological point to be raised here. As royal studies scholars turn their attention not just to popular forms of non-fiction but to novel writing as well, and experiment with the form via which they communicate their research to their readers, they should consider how directly they need to communicate biographical detail in writing royal lives, and how important this is to them in comparison to commercial success and cultural impact. Both Heyer and Jean Plaidy, though achieving success with their royal biographical fiction, relied on "lighter historical" and wider romance-genre works for financial stability and commercial reputation. Both took their research very seriously, and perhaps their more serious historical novels got weighed down in detail at the expense of narrative, but certainly they were creatively constrained by the potentially genre-busting shape of their subjects' historically documented lives.<sup>129</sup> For professional historians, "accuracy" and "authenticity" weigh even heavier, in terms of audience expectations, academic reputation, and personal investment in their subject. But if pursuing commercial success and/or a more effective and popular "gateway" for drawing readers into history, then popular alternative formats to traditional biographical fiction should be considered. Drawing inspiration from Heyer's (albeit at least partly unconscious) creative realisation of her biography of Princess Charlotte, experimenting with indirect and implicit biography through world-building detail involving a combination of explicit reference and para-contextual allusions around purely fictional protagonists could also allow for greater

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<sup>127</sup> Cat Sebastian, "The Heyer Problem—A History of Privilege," in *Heyer Society: Essays on the Literary Genius of Georgette Heyer*, ed. Rachel Hyland (Overlord Publishing, 2018), 35–37; Street, "Georgette Heyer—Guilty Pleasures," 240–249; Lisa Fletcher, *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 57, 140; Clara Shipman, "Learning! With Georgette Heyer," in Hyland, *Essays*, 96; Wallace, *Woman's Historical Novel*, 39, 42–43, 161; De Groot, *Historical Novel*, 57–59.

<sup>128</sup> Rigney, "Being an Improper Historian," 158.

<sup>129</sup> Moira Burgess, "Eleanor Alice Hibbert [née Burford] [pseud. Jean Plaidy, Victoria Holt] (1906–1993)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online*. <https://www.oxforddnb.com/>; Trevor Allen, "Jean Plaidy's Novelised History," *The Contemporary Review*, 210:1214 (1967): 157–160.

creative freedom without compromising historical content. Because of the profiles of their subjects, in the past, and in retrospective historical culture, royal lives seem especially well-suited to this treatment. More truly embracing historical fiction as a hybrid genre, biography between the lines of fiction could be a rewarding means of conveying accurate, even cutting-edge research in royal studies without sacrificing entertainment value, genre conventions, originality or creativity in fiction.

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