

**Female Agency in the Harlequin Romance Formula:
developments within the timeframe of second wave
feminism**

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Abstract

Key terms: formula-driven fiction, female agency, female sexuality, second-wave feminism, romance fiction.

The rise of second wave feminism increased societal acceptance of women's empowerment and agency. To understand the rapid change in cultural norms, the author investigated modernisations of Harlequin formula elements that dealt with socially relevant themes. Harlequin novels were chosen in this particular investigation due to their highly fixed, formulaic nature which suggests that any changes in the formula elements are deliberate modernisations, meant to preserve the formula's relevance and relatability to its readership. A database of thirteen novels was examined and narrowed down to four novels which were paired (two novels written by the same author with at least a half decade difference in publication date). A New Historicist outlook was used to get a preliminary understanding of the formula in the novels and the outside influences upon them. Then, a combined approach of comparative literary analysis and structural analysis was employed to analyse these novels as manifestations of the overarching system of the Harlequin formula. It was found that in the 1980s (which was the peak of second-wave feminism), there was a significant rise in agency in the heroines in regards to their sexual agency, their reasons for deceiving the heroes, professional careers, and a less significant difference in life experience as compared to their 1970s counterparts and the male heroes. There is also a development in the formula's treatment and resolving of female infertility that incorporates a more inclusive reconceptualisation of motherhood. In effect, more care is given to the heroine's own desires and demands by authors than in the decade prior. As a result, it can be argued that during the peak of second-wave feminism, modern conceptions of female agency had become cemented in society to such an extent that even Harlequin romance novels, a notoriously conservative and formula-driven genre, had to adapt to remain relevant.

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1. Introduction

My research revolves around the cultural phenomenon of the Harlequin romance novel formula within the timeframe of rising second-wave feminism. I will use structural analysis and comparative literary analysis to focus on developments in the female lead character's agency in Harlequin romance novels from the 1970s and '80s, because I aim to discover whether the second-wave feminist societal push toward women's emancipation is noticeable in an update of the overarching system of the Harlequin formula, evidenced in individual texts showing increased agency for the heroine and more attention paid to her wishes by other characters and the author/narrator.

The second feminist wave began in the 1960s and lasted approximately two decades, gaining velocity and power in the 1970s (Whelehan 34-44). Due to this feminist movement, which was the second of its kind in 20th century Western society, the 1970s and '80s were decades during which society and societal values changed radically, especially in regards to women's agency, in a relatively short period of time. It is worthwhile to look at which developments had become so socially acceptable that they became integrated in the Harlequin formula.

Harlequin novels are a particularly intriguing study subject because they are strongly formulaic in nature. It is this rigorous adherence to formula that makes changes to it all the more significant, because the resistance to change means that changes that *do* occur are never arbitrary or meaningless, but must have become necessary. This makes it academically interesting to examine what changes consist of, analyse the possible reasoning behind the changes, notably in regards to female agency, and analyse whether the new version of each formula element is meant to alter the original function or preserve it within the environmental shift from the '70s to the '80s.

Back in the '80s and '90s, a number of studies were published on the Harlequin formula and its magnetism to female readers: why do women find themselves attracted to these romances and why do so many of them find the formulaic nature necessary to enjoy the novels (Cohn; Radway)? There is psychoanalytical research suggesting that romance fiction caters to its readership's psychological and subconscious needs more than it does its intellectual needs (Juhasz; Radway) and that the detachment that a rigid pattern causes in readers allows them to emotionally invest more in the stories, because their intellectual side

needn't stress about or solve the events and outcome (Modleski; Juhasz). Furthermore, feminist critic Jan Cohn argues that in order for the heroine to be relevant and attractive to the reader, the heroine must necessarily interact with social change. This requires the heroine to be responsive to the transforming standards regarding femininity, agency and desire while ultimately still attaining the required, happily-ever-after marriage. However, research is lacking on how this interaction influences the formula.

Research questions: main question and subquestions

Which changes does the female protagonists' agency undergo in the formula of 1980s Harlequin romance novels compared to that of those written in the '70s?

The following subquestions will help me answer this main question:

1. Which aspects of the heroine's behaviour could be defined as demonstrating or reaching for agency?
2. An essential part of the Harlequin formula is the heroine's fruitless struggle against the hero. This struggle is often both emotional and physical and ranges from refusals to admit her feelings to attempts to physically evade being in the same room as him. Against which aspects of the hero's behaviour and presence does she struggle, what is her justification or goal and does it change?
3. Which behaviours and desires are normalised in the narrative and how does this change?

2. Theoretical framework

I categorise previous research that I engage with in three categories: critical analysis, subtext analysis, and analysis of Harlequin romances' meaning and worth to the readership.

Critical analysis explains why the hero and heroine behave as they do, with studies highlighting the importance of the heroine's struggle and insisting on the necessity of the heroine *not looking for anything*. Not looking for a husband –in fact actively *struggling* against the advances of an interested, well-off and independent man– is proof that she is not manipulating the hero into loving her. This in turn is seen as evidence of his true love. Thus, the heroine resisting the development of the relationship is considered crucial within the formula. This is why I refer to the heroine's struggle as both necessary and necessarily fruitless: it is necessary for the heroine to struggle to signal her lack of manipulation, and the struggle is necessarily fruitless because she must eventually have a happily-ever-after with him.

Subtext analysis deals with the underlying messages of the Harlequin narrative. Pop-culture scholar Esther Sonnet argues that in Harlequin novels, sexual desire is only permissible when it is caused by underlying romantic love (179-180). Additionally, she states that these novels “[attest] to the dislocation of women from sexuality grounded in a sense of selfhood” (180) by contrasting female desire with the female conscious mind. With this she refers to a common Harlequin trope in which the heroine's conscious decisions are overruled by her body's involuntarily responses, exposing her true desires. The Harlequin subtext is thus that the heroine's body more reliably indicates her desires than her conscious mind. Jan Cohn studies what the heroine's desires are rooted in, arguing that the hero stands for the authority, autonomy/agency and dominant power of the patriarchy and that the heroine gains access to all of that through marriage (5). She explains that since women are traditionally excluded from the marketplace, upward social mobility is only possible through marriage (8). In essence, the subtext is defined as a love story encoding a story about power, particularly the forbidden appropriation of power (8). The hero is powerful “precisely where women are most powerless” (9) (ie. having sexual and economic

agency and power), so although the heroine must appear to seek nothing in the novel, according to subtext analysis she secretly desires the power of the patriarchy.

The meaning and worth of the Harlequin romance to its readership is the most extensive of these three categories. Considerable attention is given to the readers' familiarity with the formula as comforting and psychologically beneficial, allowing them to grow emotionally attached to the heroine while remaining intellectually *detached* due to the foresight the formula gives (Modleski; Juhasz). Theorist Suzanne Juhasz argues that Harlequin gives readers motherly comfort (ie. no tension due to formula familiarity) and excitement (ie. still wondering how the couple will overcome the difficulties) simultaneously, advancing the reader's self-realisation and psychological maturation (240). Finally, Cohn discusses that readers are drawn in by the heroine's plight; the fantasy of an ordinary woman being allowed to struggle against a powerful man, who symbolises the patriarchy, without losing anything over it and eventually even gaining patriarchal power through her marriage with him. A prime example of this is when the hero is the heroine's employer. The readers are not allowed this riskless struggle and have little chance of similarly gaining patriarchal power. Concurrently and relatedly, Cohn insists on the necessity of both an ordinary, modern background for the heroine and an interaction of the heroine with social change. There is certain friction between the rigidity of the Harlequin formula and the necessity for the heroine to show interaction with societal change. With interaction, Cohn means that the heroine's beliefs and attitudes must be modern and recognisable to the readers. The heroine's relevance to the readership comes from her ordinary life before meeting the hero and her navigating social change without losing the traditionally-desired happy ending. The power of her romance comes from the recognisability and ordinariness of her person and her previous life contrasted with the fairytale ending.

Missing from these theories and what I aim to add is an examination of what the interaction with social change consists of, where exactly the formula changes, what agency is and how it develops in the heroine. The futility of the heroine's struggle against the hero is prudent for the Harlequin narrative, but socially unacceptable during second-wave feminism. Therefore, I will investigate how this dilemma is navigated and how these two requirements (futility of struggle and responsiveness to women's emancipation) are balanced. I want to show the heroine's navigation of being more responsive to social change without losing the necessary struggle and the unconditional, not-manipulated love.

Historical context; concept definitions

When these novels were published, second-wave feminism was setting off several great shifts in popular beliefs and understandings regarding women's role in society. While first-wave feminism was focused on emancipation and women's suffrage, second-wave feminism was "distinct in recognizing the possibility that there might not be a solution to women's continued oppression short of a revolution" to address financial, social and political inequality (Whelehan 4). Radical feminist Anne Koedt describes women's disillusionment when they critically examined their own role and position in society, explaining that it

was caused by the fact that movement women found themselves playing secondary roles on every level...They found themselves (and others) afraid to speak up because of self-doubts in the presence of men. They ended up concentrating on food-making, typing, mimeographing, general assistance work, and serving as a sexual supply[.] (Koedt et al. 318)

Not only were women given second-rate positions, they had also internalised this role. This led them to self-doubt and choosing occupations that were uninteresting to men. Womanhood and what women were allowed to do or be were frameworks of oppression that women had internalised. This disillusionment was also directed inwards. As a result, second-wave feminism was characterised by an overt resistance to conventional and accepted definitions of what it meant to be a woman (Whelehan 5).

Agency is a nebulous concept in second-wave feminism as it is rarely defined or addressed directly in texts as such. This is likely due to the many grassroots movements and lack of a need to categorise a concept that second-wave feminists inherently addressed through action. However, feminist Linda Alcoff addressed agency when discussing feminist and anti-feminist women:

Claiming that one's politics are grounded in one's essential identity avoids problematizing both identity and the connection between identity and politics and thus avoids the agency involved in underdetermined actions. The difference between feminists and antifeminists strikes me as precisely this: the affirmation or denial of our right and our ability to construct, and take responsibility for, our gendered identity, our politics and our choices. (Alcoff 348)

As we can see, agency was the core tenet of second-wave feminism. Women rallied for the agency to present outside the socially accepted presentation of femininity. Going forward, my definition of agency will be the ability to self-direct: to make, have choices, and accept responsibility over one's own actions, identity, happiness, sexuality and life.

Sexuality was a heated topic where agency was concerned, prompting dozens of studies on female sexuality's intrinsic connection to the social perception of femininity. In addressing the influence of sexuality, bell hooks describes second-wave feminism and women's liberation as "often equated with sexual liberation" (hooks 148). Gaining control over one's own sexuality was intricately linked to power and the ability to shape one's own life. Therefore, the social perception of femininity became something that women could reject and rebel against.

The socially accepted version of femininity from the start of second-wave feminism was still the "domestic angel", who was often depicted as a white middle class woman who eschews her education and learned career for homemaking and motherhood which cause her misery (Wollstonecraft; Friedan). Two notable descriptions of the effect of forcing women into this role are in philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft's foundational eighteenth-century text "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" and feminist Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, written over a hundred years later (Whelehan). This long-term link between texts is likely a result of the retroactive ideological shift post-WWII which was characterised by the "cult of the housewife" which targeted women's new-found liberties in work and financial status (Whelehan 7). Second-wave activism allowed women throw off social perceptions of femininity as a sign of intelligence and education, and was seen as a way to shake off the association of women with the home (Whelehan 8-9).

3. Methodology

Selection of case study novels

To rule out differences in writing style, narrative and beliefs that are due to differently situated authors and which would influence the comparisons I make between the novels, I picked two authors who each wrote a novel in both the 1970s and the 1980s, giving them publication dates of 1971-1980 and 1981-1990. The novels were published with a gap of at least five years because differences over shorter periods will likely be less pronounced. Since I am expecting small changes overall, the more pronounced these small changes are, the better I will be able to pinpoint them.

My own collection of approximately 300 Harlequins from between 1968 and 1999 served as my database. Because all these novels are Dutch translations, I will personally translate citations in my analysis and place the originals in Appendix 3. I used the cover spine serial numbers to quickly find books from the selected time periods. From this selection, I separated novels by author, to ensure I had at least one novel per time period, per author. This left me with twenty-four novels by three authors. I read thirteen of these. These authors, plus the number of novels read, are Charlotte Lamb (4), Carole Mortimer (3) and Roberta Leigh (6). In the analysis, I use my own translation of the Dutch titles instead of using the original English titles, because they often differ. The full bibliographical details can be found in the bibliography.

From this bank I have selected Roberta Leigh's *Play of Fate* (1973) and *Sweet Revenge* (1987), and Carole Mortimer's *Like a Farewell Song* (1980) and *Lesson From the Past* (1985). These novels were chosen because they show the 'standard' Harlequin formula clearly and concisely. Because I am researching structural changes in the formula, I excluded novels with formula deviations that are incidental (evidenced by the other novels in the database). Thus, if nine out of twelve novels depict the hero as twelve years older than the heroine, I opted *not* to pick the ones where the age difference was merely five years. Additionally, I chose two novels by each author that both dealt with similar themes, to allow for meaningful comparison. Leigh's novels have the heroine's deception of the hero as a

main theme. Mortimer's novels show infertile, sexually traumatised heroines as well as sexually abusive heroes who enact or add to this trauma.

Premises of the selected novels

Play of Fate: "Billionaire Nicola is mistaken for a homeless girl after a car accident and taken to a shelter run by the hero, Barnaby. She decides to act along for a few days, but the longer she's near Barnaby, the harder it becomes to tell him the truth and leave."

Sweet Revenge: "Successful architect Leslie blames divorce lawyer Dale for the downfall of her stepfather and seeks revenge. When the unwitting Dale comes to her to have his new house designed, she decides to compel him to marry her so that she can do the same thing to him in the divorce proceedings that he helps others do every day."

Lesson From the Past: "The sexually traumatised widow Heleen keeps all men at a distance, but famous actor and playboy Leon doesn't take no for an answer, especially when he learns the reason for her aloofness. Desiring her, he decides to change her mind about sex and men."

Like a Farewell Song: "Cynara was forced to break Zack's heart five years ago and he still despises her for it. When circumstances bring him back into her life, she realises her feelings for him and their mutual sexual attraction are strong as ever. When Zack believes she's in financial trouble and offers to take her in in exchange for sexual access to her, she doesn't correct his assumptions, because as long as he doesn't find out she loves him, she can have him without fear of another marriage proposal."

In Appendix 1, I give brief summaries of the selected novels. Longer summaries of these novels and brief summaries of the nine novels I didn't select can be found in Appendix 4.

Aspects, questions, research traditions and methodology

The methodological approaches I use are structural narrative and comparative literary analysis, in order to compare and analyse novels with a sole focus on the text as a manifestation of the Harlequin formula (Todorov 2024). This combined approach entails examining the structure of the narrative in the rigid Harlequin formula and identifying changes in this structure by textually analysing and comparing formula elements in four novels written over the course of two decades. To ensure the four novels I have selected are

representative of the Harlequin formula as a whole, I read a total of thirteen novels and selected the most formulaic of those. My research begins with a New Historicist outlook that aims to study the novels in their cultural and historical context (ie. second-wave feminism; '70s-'80s Western culture). New Historicism is a critical approach that foregrounds historical context in its interpretation of literature. Texts "are examined with an eye for how they reveal the economic and social realities, especially as they produce ideology and represent power or subversion" (Brewton). I use the historical context of the novels to choose formula elements that deal with themes that were socially relevant and transforming in that time period to identify and understand changes in these elements. Despite the New Historicist outlook, the backbone of my analysis focuses on a comparison of formula elements in the novels.

Within the selected novels, I study and question the heroine's behaviour, particularly in terms of agency. I study the diegetic and extradiegetic attention, meaning attention by both the characters and the narrator, placed on the female protagonist's desires, wishes and her justifications for struggling.

I will to an extent analyse the heroine's interaction with social changes, notably in female sexuality and agency, that were taking place in the non-fictional world she was created in. With interaction I mean that the heroine's actions reflect modern ideas about femininity, female sexuality and agency at the time the novel was written. Since I'm focusing on social changes against the backdrop of second-wave feminism, this means I expect the heroine to be a more willful agent than before, while still fitting into the formula that requires her to end up in a relationship with someone she initially does not want to be with.

Furthermore, I investigate the normalisation of certain behaviours and desires in the '70s novels and evaluate whether this changes in the '80s novels. This is mainly relevant in the character of the hero. Brutish behaviour by him is normalised in the 1970s, which can be seen in how predatory pursuit (following and cornering her, sexually forcing himself on her) is accepted by the heroine and side characters as a common characteristic among powerful men. Along with the normalisation of the hero's desires, I also dissect the normalisation of the heroine's behaviour by examining if the heroine's desires and preferences are no longer dismissed as unimportant or deviant. Do other characters, particularly the hero, respect that she's an individual with her own desires and preferences and if so, how do they deal with them? Do they try to convince the heroine or override her?

There are a couple main concepts I use as analytical tools; these being agency, femininity and the Harlequin formula. The theory I discussed in the theoretical framework will guide me in deciphering, understanding and categorising the changes I find in the formula. Understanding the function of certain formula elements will enable me to see whether changes I find in the formula are in fact modern adaptations that keep the function intact and thus actually mean the same, or new developments based on transformed social standards that require the formula to include a new element with a novel function. For example, if the heroine suddenly insists on wearing jeans to parties, knowing that the hero will make an issue out of it, this could be a modern adaptation of a known formula element (struggling against the hero's attempts to fit her into his higher-class social circle by controlling her demeanour) or a new development based on transformed social standards (independently deciding what to wear has become a marker of agency; it has become less taboo for women to wear jeans). In my comparison with the '80s novels, I search for and point out either a modernisation or a contrast, which gives me grounds to compare certain elements and situations with others.

Since my research focuses on minute changes in formulaic narratives, it is imperative that my methods also focus on the novels' text and narrative. Therefore I use structural analysis and comparative literary analysis, two narrative and text based methods. While comparative literary analysis, which is "a social science which, along with the world literature canon it addresses, forms a basis for the politics of...individualism; ...the comparative method enables recognition of social and cultural differences" (During 315), will be used for a general analysis, structural analysis will be primarily used to focus on the text and themes in the plot. Structural analysis studies respective works of literature as manifestations of an overarching literary discourse in order to understand its structure and operation (Todorov 2022-2024). This system is then the true object of study. Tzvetan Todorov, who coined the method, meant for structural analysis to use individual texts to discover in each work what it has in common with others...it would be unable to state the individual specificity of each work...[I]t is always a question of going continually back and forth [between] abstract literary properties [and] individual works. Poetics and description are in fact two complementary activities. On the other hand, to affirm the internal nature of this approach does not mean a denial of the relation between literature and other homogeneous series, such as philosophy

or social life. It is rather a question of establishing a hierarchy: literature must be understood in its specificity, as literature, before we seek to determine its relation with anything else. (Todorov 2025)

The combination of these interpretative methods provide the basis by which I examine the developments of the heroine's agency in the system of the formula over time as well as create an understanding of the system "in its specificity" (Todorov 2025) so that the evolution of the formula can be related to its historical context.

4. Analysis

First I will give a brief summary of similarities I found in the 1970s novels in order to portray the status quo. In the following sections, I will single out and analyse five formula elements that have been changed or adapted in the second set of novels. These elements are virginity, deception, career, age difference and infertility. My research questions will guide me in my delineation and analysis of the changes in each element.

Similarities in the 1970s

In these novels, the female protagonist is usually about twelve years younger than the hero (early twenties versus mid thirties). This age difference is reflected in the protagonist's and hero's perceptions of sexuality; the protagonist is often extremely naive and sheltered from sexuality and others' intentions. If she isn't terrifyingly innocent, she has been traumatised by previous partners. Contrarily, the hero is often cast in the role of worldly educator who teaches the protagonist to appreciate sex and relationships in the way he thinks she should. For instance, *Play of Fate's* Nicola's past three engagements to men who turned out to be after her money before meeting her hero clearly depicts her naivety.

Career-wise, the protagonists often have a job that is unfulfilling or financially unnecessary. It is often very easy for the protagonist to abandon her career –typically halfway through the novel– whereas the hero is firmly tied to his. The protagonist's family often follows patterns as well. Specifically, the protagonist is usually an orphan who lost her parents years prior and has an older, male protector. This protector, typically an uncle or godfather, is mistaken as romantic competition by the hero. In addition to this perilous social structure supporting the protagonist, her inner circle (either family or friends) is highly untrustworthy, especially in regards to her desired interactions with the hero. Whenever she attempts to put distance between herself and the hero, they betray her by giving him access to her, information about her, organising meetings, and generally not respecting her wishes or feelings.

The hero often fills the role of either a protector or an aggressive pursuer. When he is the protector, as in *Play of Fate* (where the protagonist is mistaken for a homeless woman

and brought to the shelter run by the hero), the protagonist is responsible for the first overtures. The hero often responds by maintaining distance to protect the protagonist from his manly, base desires. On the flip side, the hero can be an aggressive pursuer who doesn't take no for an answer, as for instance in *Lesson From the Past* (the hero forces himself on her, harrasses her at her apartment, interferes with her career, persuades her to move in with him, and constantly makes her disclose personal things against her wishes). This version of the hero is so aggressive that the protagonist eventually becomes afraid to leave her home and acquiesces to his requests to regain a semblance of normalcy. He often recruits people she trusts to convince her to give him a chance, making her isolation extensive.

Virginity

In the 1970s, femininity is linked to purity, meaning that the heroine is free of sexual desire or experience. If she is a virgin, sexual desire is permitted, but if she is not, a sexual trauma must quench her desires. The heroine's lack of sexual experience made her disadvantaged in knowing what she wanted from a partner or a relationship, and her wishes and desires were oftentimes dismissed by the hero. Inexperience gave virginal heroines unrealistic expectations of romance and her naivety is used by others to dismiss her desires and decide for her what she needs (sexually and romantically). Traumatized heroines' agency is removed through sexual persistence, accusations of frigidity and assault by the hero who insists on healing her trauma.

The 1980s saw a marked difference in that the protagonists were no longer seen as children to be taught by the hero but rather adults that could determine their own desires. These heroines are older, have more life experience, are comfortable with sex and desire, and aware of what they need to be happy. Additionally, these heroines have had serious relationships in their past. Sometimes the hero is an ex-partner and the novel depicts the relationship's rekindling and the overcoming of previous differences.

By the '80s, purity is no longer tied so strongly to virginity; female premarital sexual experience has been normalised, and protagonists can be portrayed as sexual beings without still being virgins. Nevertheless, heroines are only permitted to have sex with men they love. Cynara in *Like a Farewell Song* pretends to be with Zack for financial gain, but the reader is well aware that she wouldn't have sex with him if she did not love him. This falls in

line with Sonnet's argument that sexual desire requires underlying romantic love in the Harlequin formula (179-180). The heroes have to adhere to similar standards once they meet the heroine. Most heroes have extensive sexual experience and are attached to their bachelorship, but once the heroine comes into their life, they stop having sex with other women. In *Like a Farewell Song*, Zack remains celibate in the five years between his break with Cynara and their reconciliation.

Sex often has a significant role in the heroine's struggle against the hero, with the role undergoing significant changes over time. In the '70s, Heleen is more afraid of sex than of the violent hero who demands it of her and Nicola's sexual desire is not taken seriously. In the '80s, Cynara's insistence on consensual sex even within an agreement of exchanging constant sexual availability for paid expenses makes her confront Zack after he violently rapes her and name his action as rape, prompting his acknowledgement and overall better treatment. Leslie does not want to have sex before marriage, and uses Dane's sexual desire to compel him to marry her in her revenge plot.

Because in the '80s, sexual freedom was commonly being shown as the epitome of female agency and sex was increasingly seen as something men used to control women (hooks 148-9), keeping the virginity element unchanged would have changed the meaning of the function, and resulted in the questionable imagery associated with an experienced man taking advantage of an innocent young woman. In order to keep the reader believing that the hero's love is pure and non-exploitative, the virginity element had to be updated. By updating this element, the function would stay the same: the hero remains the person who can emotionally and sexually fulfill her true needs.

In *Like a Farewell Song*, Cynara exhibits remarkable sexual agency, and not only because she is in touch with her desires and openly enjoys sex (although she does). A previous relationship has convinced Cynara that her infertility makes her an unworthy marriage partner. Nevertheless, she does not let this stop her active and unapologetic pursuit of sex and sexual intimacy. Her hangups about emotional intimacy and long-term relationships, do not interfere with her having sex with the man she loves, despite being unwilling to marry him as she believes marriage requires children. Cynara also faces rape¹ in a way that, regardless of reading the scene as the punishment of a sexual woman (a

¹ Mortimer, *Farewell*, 89-90. See Appendix 3, translation 1.

common trope in pop-culture) or an assertion of the unlimited right to say no, is revolutionary and uncharacteristic for Harlequin because the rape is named as such:

“What you did, Zack, was not force me into something in one way or another,” Cynara said sharply, “but rape me.” She hadn’t wanted to say it like this, but his stubborn indifference provoked it.

He hit the table hard with his flat hand. “That’s not what it was!”

“Yes, it was. But alright, let’s drop the subject. What has happened, has happened, and I am not blameless in this either.”

“Nonsense.”

She shook her head. “I went too far. I provoked and baited you and... yes, I have paid for it.”

“But what I did, cannot be justified in any way.”²

She does not relegate his behaviour to the euphemism of ‘losing control’. The fact that she blames herself for her rape is standard for Harlequin heroines, and one can argue that this is necessary for the plot. At the end of the novel, the couple’s love must always be pure and without reservations for a happily-ever-after. It is hard to believe that a woman who fully and unequivocally blames a man for rape (especially in Harlequin, where sex is so important and the heroines never voluntarily have sex with other men during the novel’s timeline) can equally fully and unreservedly believe in the purity of his love, and feel the same in return. Furthermore, her blaming herself for her rape allows him to be chivalrous by insisting that his actions were unforgivable, and denying her self-judgement.

Sexual freedom can also be expressed by refraining. *Sweet Revenge* (1987) holds a depiction of sexual agency by a virgin that would have been unimaginable in the 1970s, with Leslie telling Dane she doesn’t believe in sex before marriage in order to get him to marry her. She effectively uses her virginity to hold power over him. His eventual agreement to marry her so that they can have sex, despite his personal disbelief in that institution, portrays the goodness of his character and the purity of his love for her. Leslie holds agency in how she uses her sexuality and virginity in a forbidden appropriation of power to get what she wants (Cohn 9).

² Mortimer, Farewell, 89-90. See Appendix 3, translation 2.

Deception

In the 1970s, there are certain trends which appear in the theme of deception; when the heroine deceives a man, it's to show that she can outwit the hero, to protect herself (or both herself and the hero) from the truth, or to preserve her self-image and ego. During the '80s, the heroine's motivations are the desire for happiness and the attainment of the best outcome she believes possible. This makes protection from unhappiness (typically for the both of them) the main theme, with her deception often entailing pretending not to love the hero out of the conviction that they will make each other unhappy. The '70s heroine's ego-centric preoccupation with her self-image is of lesser concern in the '80s, its place taken by a rise in vengeful protagonists.

Play of Fate (1973) shows an example of deception as an act to show how much cleverer the protagonist is than the hero. Billionaire Nicola is brought to a homeless shelter by mistake and keeps up the deception for weeks to prove to the doctor running the shelter she's cleverer than him.

Her vexation at Barnaby's scepticism compelled Nicola to change her plan, and what had started out as a superficial deception, now had a much deeper meaning. She resolved to stay here for one week, not only to show him how easily he could be fooled, but also to show him how bad he was at judging character.³

Nicola's motivation for deception is her self-image and ego. She cares how Barnaby sees her and is vexed by his cocky misjudgement of her as a homeless girl with grandiose pretensions. His altruistic volunteering and commentary on rich people give her the impression that he looks down on wealthy, unworldly people like her. She wants to outsmart him by deceiving him effortlessly and putting him in his place.

The revenge motif, a common trope in which the heroine believes that the hero devastated the life of someone close to her and plots revenge that replaces the egocentric 'wanting to get back at the hero'-motif for deception can be considered a more mature follow-up to the latter, with the heroine's concern being justice for someone else rather than for her own ego.

³ Leigh, *Play 71*; see Appendix 3, translation 3.

In *Sweet Revenge* (1987) Leslie blames divorce lawyer Dane for her stepfather's downfall. A week after his financially devastating divorce, her stepfather had a stroke, remaining in a vegetative coma for months before dying. Leslie is out for revenge. When Dane hires her as his architect and tries to get her to go out with him, she concocts a plan to make him find out exactly what the men he ruins in court feel when they lose everything in divorce proceedings.

Leslie's deception is far less self-absorbed than Nicola's, because they are tied to her empathetic nature. She cares little about her image, even publicly pretending to be in love with someone she hates to reach her goal. When she changes her mind about Dane, she is not too proud to admit it, and she does not go through with her plans.

Often deception is tied to fertility as well as one-up-manship.

In *Like a Farewell Song*, Cynara is blackmailed by her boyfriend's father into leaving him. Being infertile, she believes she doesn't have anything to offer a husband. When they meet again, she pretends not to love him. She insists she's only interested in money and her singing career, well up to the point when she agrees to live and sleep with him in return for lodging and her medical expenses. Her deception is meant to protect the both of them; herself from disclosing her infertility and having to see his pity and eventual bitterness, him from falling in love with and marrying a woman who cannot conceive.

Career

In the 1970s, the heroine often has an unfulfilling job and eventually quits at the hero's demand.

If it had been up to Heleen, she wouldn't have made the effort to find a job ... [she had] enough money to live on ... although it gave her a certain amount of satisfaction to do her work properly, she nevertheless realised that it would not feel like a loss if she quit.⁴

So while the 1970s heroine usually didn't make her own decisions regarding her career, by the 1980s you can see a slow change with the heroine becoming more ambitious and attached to her job. Her ambition is tied to agency and the idea that she can achieve what she wants in life. She subverts the traditional hearth-and-home image of feminine happiness

⁴ Mortimer, Lesson, 6-7. See Appendix 3, translation 4.

being dependent on romantic relationships by finding meaning and fulfillment in other things, such as professional success.

Sweet Revenge's Leslie is a highly successful architect capable of maintaining her professionalism and quality of work even in the midst of emotional turmoil, evidenced by her promotion to a director role halfway through her divorce. She does not let her revenge plans impact the job she does on Dane's house. Dane and she mutually admire each other's professional status, despite her open disapproval of his methods, and they treat each other as equals.

Sometimes the 1980s heroine does stop working. This is usually due to external, and the hero might play the role of the saviour who takes her in. This plotline is clearly visible in *Like a Farewell Song*, in which Cynara hides vocal cord damage in order to continue working as a singer. When she loses her voice onstage, Zack contacts her doctor and is told that Cynara should not sing for at least six months. She is powerless when Zack forces her to stop performing, because he's technically her boss. He offers to pay her medical expenses in return for her moving into his apartment and granting him continuous sexual access to her. Their eventual marriage is a clear example of a heroine powerless in the area where the hero is powerful appropriating forbidden power through marriage (Cohn 8-9).

Age difference

The protagonists nearly always differ twelve years in age, but in the '70s, the heroines are 21 and 22 to the heroes' 33 and 34. In the '80s, both heroines are 26, and the heroes are respectively 35 and 38, with *Sweet Revenge's* Dane being closest to the heroine in age. The '80s heroine's older age gave her time to build a career she's good at and enjoys, have serious relationships before meeting the hero and form more realistic ideas of love and happiness. This makes her less naive, impulsive and immature than the '70s heroines. She's no longer tricking the hero to prove how clever she is and how dumb he for being deceived, or insisting on fairytale romances. Additionally, she is usually financially and emotionally independent.

Agency is in choices and inexperience limits the heroine's choices, because she lacks the knowledge and experience needed to understand the possibilities in a relationship, nor what kind of treatment to expect. The hero's older age is inextricably tied to more life

experience, causing a power imbalance in their relationship. In the '70s, this allowed him to become the worldly educator and dismiss her take on things.

As mentioned in my discussion of virginity, shifted views on sex, relationships and agency made it necessary to avoid an overly inexperienced heroine to escape the impression that the hero is taking advantage of her. It was necessary to update this element to keep its function (the hero is a reliable and suitable life partner because he is mature, successful and more experienced) intact. In practice, this meant that although the age difference in the 1980s remained mostly the same, the heroine is older, more experienced and more mature. She is world-wise and aware of her wants and needs, has more realistic and measured expectations and is cognisant of whether they are met. She has become worldly enough to not need a worldly educator, resulting in a less pronounced power imbalance.

Infertility

When the heroine is infertile, she hides this and considers it a reason to not have relationships, often considering herself an incomplete woman with nothing to offer a husband. This plotline shows up in both Mortimer novels. In *Lesson From the Past* (1980), Heleen had a miscarriage from her brief marriage and was told by doctors she was unlikely to ever conceive again. Therefore, she doesn't allow herself to desire either relationships or sex. At the end of the novel, she confesses this, gets the hero's reassurance that he still wants her, and then informs him of her miraculous pregnancy.

In *Like a Farewell Song* (1985), Cynara partly does away with expectations of womanhood by endeavouring to live the fullest life she believes possible for her, despite her inability to attain the feminine destiny and duty of wife- and motherhood. Her conflation of these roles (only mothers can be wives and vice versa) leads her to believe she's unsuitable for marriage, but rather than eschewing romantic and sexual connection she attempts to get as close to it as she can by allowing herself sexual relationships. Whereas Heleen acquiesces to her perceived fate of becoming an old maid, Cynara's behaviour exhibits more agency and self-direction. She learned that her infertility means she cannot marry, because her ex-fiance left her for it. However, she takes control over and responsibility for the direction she takes her life in, the identity she constructs for herself, and the choices she makes despite the destructive force of her infertility. She normalises her sexual behaviour

even when the hero doesn't understand how she can want a sex and a relationship but not marriage.

The heroine's motivation to come clean also changes. When Heleen is struck by the miracle of pregnancy, coming clean is her way to justify her previous struggle and explain her new willingness so that she can attain her happy ending without conflict. Cynara's motivation is to make Zack understand her decision so that he will respect it. She wants to be his girlfriend, but not his wife, because a wife needs to give him children. She wants to be honest about her feelings of love without this leading to more confusion and conflict. It is only when Zack asks her to be the mother of the children he already has that she learns to reconceptualise the meaning of motherhood and agrees to marry him.

So although infertility makes the heroine feel like an unworthy woman in both time periods, in the 1970s this quandary is resolved by a miraculous pregnancy, whereas in the 1980s she decides to raise the hero's children as her own. Nevertheless, both novels suggest that a marriage requires children for happiness and success.

5. Conclusion

The goal of this study was to clarify developments in the female protagonist's agency within the Harlequin formula from the '70s to the '80s, which included her behaviour, reasons for changed agency, the evolution of her fruitless struggle against the hero, and the normalisation of previously abnormal behaviour. The heroine's navigation of the dilemmas presented by the formula are especially note-worthy as they are defined by the actions she is permitted to take within the novel's context and the environment it was written for. Because of the formulaic nature of Harlequin novels, her actions must fit into not only what the author and formula require, but also into what the readers would find acceptable and believable.

The investigation into the changes that can be found in the Harlequin formula against the backdrop of second-wave feminism revealed several interesting trends that I have schematised in the tables below.⁵

Table 1: A table showing the schematised answers to my research questions, in the form of a comparison summary of the changes in perceptions of virginity, deception, career, and age difference between Roberta Leigh's novels *Play of Fate* (1973) and *Sweet Revenge* (1987) through the lenses of agency, behaviour, normalisation, femininity and the heroine's struggle.

DEVELOPMENTS IN LEIGH'S NOVELS	VIRGINITY	DECEPTION	CAREER	AGE DIFFERENCE
AGENCY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> using virginity and sex as a weapon, holding power over the hero with it insisting to remain a virgin until marriage, even though that makes her an oddling in her social circles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the heroine has less focus on ego and self-image her motivation is vengeance of which the purpose is tied to her empathetic nature rather than her ego or self-image 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> having a career being successful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> age difference has decreased she's older
BEHAVIOUR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sex is her weapon against him, not his against her he's respectful of her wishes and desires and exhibits much self-control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she works toward her long-term goal of getting him to marry her steadfastly, adjusting her course when needed so she can still stand behind her actions she takes responsibility over her actions and doesn't do anything against her own wishes when she changes her mind about him and his role in her stepfather's downfall, she readily admits it and apologises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she is professional and capable of maintaining that professionalism despite her emotional turmoil she doesn't let her revenge plans impact her job she works hard and delivers great work even to people she despises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she is mature and professional she controls her impulses
STRUGGLE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she insists that he may only have sex with her if he marries her her struggle against him is led by both her quest for revenge (her reason for deceiving him) and her personal desire not to have sex before marriage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> when her opinion about the hero and his role in her stepfather's downfall changes, she stops manipulating him. when she files for divorce, she doesn't go through with her original plan of financially ruining him because she has changed her mind about him 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> they're both successful and admire each other's professional status (even though she openly disapproves of his methods) 	
NORMALISATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> there is the choice for them to not have sex despite it being normalised they have sex in the book rather than in the near future after the ending he is open about his struggles with her wishes (he wants to sleep with her, but doesn't believe in marriage) without trying to force her into anything; he adjusts to her desires and ultimately agrees to her terms (by marrying her) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> having a vengeful protagonist who experiences regret, evolution, and character development as well as changing her mind is accepted as relatable and believable (which it wouldn't have been before) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> her professional success and them being perceived as equals professionally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> he doesn't lord his experience over her, he adjusts to her so that the age gap is a little less wide
FEMININITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> her ability to have or not have sex is a show of what Cohn called the forbidden appropriation of power (9) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> her femininity is the source of her power and ability to manipulate him by withholding sex, while still adhering to her own standards (of not having sex before marriage) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she is a successful architect who becomes a director in the company yet is still seen as feminine 	

⁵ For a larger version of these tables, please see Appendix 2.

Female Agency in the Harlequin Romance Formula

Table 2: A table showing the schematised answers to my research questions, in the form of a comparison summary of the changes in perceptions of virginity, deception, career, age difference and infertility between Carole Mortimer's novels *Lesson From the Past* (1980) and *Like a Farewell Song* (1985) through the lenses of agency, behaviour, normalisation, femininity and the heroine's struggle.

DEVELOPMENTS IN MORTIMER'S NOVELS	VIRGINITY	DECEPTION	CAREER	AGE DIFFERENCE	INFERTILITY
AGENCY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she has sex, enjoying and pursuing it with him without wanting to marry him 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reason for coming clean changes: Heleen did it to make him understand her previous struggle, Cynara to make him understand and respect her choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she has professional ambitions she is holding on to her career 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she is older than her counterpart in the 70s she is an emotionally and financially independent heroine with more life experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she tries to live a happy life despite infertility rather than accepting the fate of old maid
BEHAVIOUR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she has sex unapologetically 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she lies to him about not loving him and lets him mistakenly assume she's poor in order to be able to have an excuse to have sex with him without being pushed to marry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sacrificing her health for her career goals not planning to quit her job for him 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> self-direction towards happy life despite of infertility
STRUGGLE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she acknowledges what she wants, considers what she thinks she can realistically have, and actively makes the best of it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she is trying to achieve the most happiness for both of them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she refuses to quit her job for him, even though he expects her to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she's older, which makes the age difference and power imbalance less pointed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> motherhood reached not through a miracle, but through a reconception of motherhood by raising her partner's children as her own
NORMALISATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> having sex is normalised, even by her; in contrast rape is no longer normalised, but confronted and explicitly named 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> finding fulfillment in something other than love and needing more than love for a happy life is normalised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> less normalised but the age difference is made smaller by aging her up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> though her infertility makes her feel incomplete and twists her self-image, the message is no longer that women need to give birth to a child to be a mother
FEMININITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sexual purity as virginity becomes sexual purity as having sex for love: she doesn't have sex with men she doesn't love 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she pretends to have sex in exchange for financial care rather than love to keep Zack from pushing her to marry him 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Zack's first proposal (five years ago) came with the expectation that she would quit her job as a travelling singer, but she refused 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> motherhood is still essential for a woman, but can be reached in other ways than directly conceiving them

Notably, there is a distinct difference in agency between novels written by the same author between the '70s and '80s. Most commonly, these changes are apparent in areas that were significant for second-wave feminism, namely sexuality (specifically investigated as virginity and infertility), career prospects, and the casting-off of being perceived as a child (such as childish deception and a young age). However, rather than a fully revolutionised formula with new elements and functions, Harlequin authors instead seemed to use adaptations to update the formula. These minor modernising adaptations allow for the novels to retain their classic and necessary formulaic milestones such as the heroine's futile struggle against the hero, the establishment of genuine affection, and a happily-ever-after, while simultaneously ensuring that the heroine is relatable to the time. For this reason, we see a shift in crucial themes such as virginity and infertility. Virginity went from being a siren call to the hero to educate the naive heroine to a weapon used to hold power over the hero. It was also no longer necessary for heroines to be either virgins or sexually traumatised to adhere to the ideal of feminine purity. Similarly, infertility went from something that paralysed the heroine to something that she actively accepted about herself and worked around to achieve happiness.

Effectively, in the seventies, the heroine fell into a relationship and had the appropriate feelings develop afterward. By the eighties, she influences how and when the relationship develops. The '80s heroine demonstrates agency by taking responsibility over her happiness, and her struggle is linked to her pursuit of happiness (whereas she was previously driven by fear, immaturity or ego) or justice. Premarital sexual desire and activity is normalised within the boundaries of underlying love. She also finds fulfillment in something other than love, such as professional success.

In summary, although the formula only experienced minor changes and adaptations for the contemporary audience in the eighties, the impact on Harlequin protagonists and their heroes is surprisingly significant and compounds into an increased respect for the heroines' agency compared to their seventies counterparts. These adaptations can be linked to changing social values in the environmental/historical context of second-wave feminism. This is because Harlequin authors had to adapt their formula to enable readers to relate to the heroines after second-wave feminism had so radically affected many women.

Appendix 1: Short summaries of the four selected novels

This appendix holds short summaries of the four analysed novels. They contain the information needed to understand the references to the storyline in the analysis. For a full summary of these novels, please consult appendix 4.

1. Mortimer, Carole. *Les Uit het Verleden (Lesson From the Past)*. Original title: *Living Together*. Bouquet 508, 1980.

Shortly after moving to the United States and marrying the rich and famous Michael West, Heleen was raped by him. Soon after, he non-consensually offered her sexual services to his best friend. She left him three months into their marriage, not knowing he had made her pregnant, and filed for divorce, leading the press to label her as a gold digger. Michael died in an accident soon after. Heleen miscarried and was told by doctors she was unlikely to ever conceive again. She moved back to England to escape the paparazzi and spent the next two years trying to live an anonymous life. She is now 22, and has decided that she never wants another relationship again and believes that since she is infertile, she doesn't have anything to offer a husband anyway. One night, her cousin and flatmate Jenny convinces to come to a party, where she meets Leon Masters. Leon (34) is immediately drawn to her and, being used to women throwing themselves at him, is vexed by her cold, aloof behaviour. He judges her coldness to be due to frigidity, something he decides he should try to heal her from. He kisses her forcibly and is shocked to discover afterwards that she's terrified of him. She runs home, where she is told by Jenny that she should not be so distraught at being kissed by an attractive man. From then on, Jenny is on Leon's side, letting him into their apartment to see Heleen, trying to help him trick her to come on a boat trip with him, and telling him where she works. This makes it impossible for Heleen to escape him. He eventually persuades her to move in with him and even give up her job, wanting her to be at home when he comes from work and promising that he will be patient and not try to force her into having sex with him, but he soon breaks that promise and becomes angry at her unwillingness to sleep with him. Eventually, he manages to awaken sexual desire in Heleen, and succeeds in making her sleep with him, overcoming her trauma. When afterwards he insists they marry, she refuses, enraging him again.

He sends her away after accusing her of using him for sex and saying that if she doesn't want to be his wife, he doesn't want her anymore. She moves back in with Jenny and discovers a few weeks later that she is miraculously pregnant. She returns to Leon and tells him about her infertility. When Leon asks if this is why she refused to marry him, she admits this, and Leon convinces her that he wants to marry her anyway and that they can always adopt. Heleen agrees to marry him and then reveals her pregnancy.

2. Mortimer, Carole. *Als een Afscheidslied (Like a Farewell Song)*. Original title: *The Devil's Price*. Bouquet 765, 1985.

Heroine Cynara is blackmailed by her boyfriend Zack's father to pretend she's more interested in Zack's money than in him. Her infertility and shame surrounding it lead her to keep up the deception, even upon meeting Zack five years later and hearing his father's dead. She (now 26) doesn't want to marry, because she thinks her infertility makes her unable to offer a husband anything. Because Zack (now 38) had insisted on marrying her five years earlier and did not take an unexplained no for an answer, she keeps up the pretense of not loving him (and only being interested in money and her singing career) well up to the point where she agrees to live and sleep with him in return for lodging and the costs of her medical bills. However, Zack turns out to interpret their agreement as giving him the right over her body whenever he wants it, whereas Cynara agrees under the assumption that they both need to voluntarily and willingly consent each time. Being in love with him as she is, she does not foresee problems with this. This changes when he spends an evening berating, insulting and upsetting her, and expects to still be allowed to have sex with her. She refuses, and he violently rapes her. Afterwards, she confronts him about this, and he apologises, saying that what he did was unforgivable. She agrees to stay and keep their agreement, as long as he understands and acknowledges that she will always have the right to refuse and end the agreement. Zack treats her more civilly after this, and the situation becomes less unbearable for Cynara. Zack has two young children from his late ex-wife, who live with his mother. Circumstances bring Cynara in a situation where she has to take care of his children for a few days when their regular caregivers are incapacitated, and she grows close to them. Ultimately, she reveals to Zack that she cannot marry him because she's infertile and he tells her he doesn't care because he already has children. She realises she can be a mother to his children, which brings her to finally allow herself to marry him.

3. Leigh, Roberta. *Een Speling van het Lot (Play of Fate)*. Original title: *Cinderella in Mink*. Bouquet 154, 1973.

Billionaire heiress Nicola Rosten (21) runs away from a costume party for which she is dressed as Cinderella after she catches her fiancé cheating on her with her friend. She is hit by a car and brought to a local shelter that is run by psychiatrist Barnaby Grayson (33). He doesn't believe her when she says she's not actually poor or homeless but refuses to call home to be picked up.

Aware that her cheating fiancé will be waiting for her at her house, she agrees to stay at the shelter that night. Although her plan is to reveal all in the morning, Barnaby's disbelief and cocky misjudgement of her makes her decide to teach him a lesson by keeping up the pretense for a few days. She looks forward to revealing herself at the end and showing the handsome doctor she is cleverer than he. She quickly gets invested in the deception and keeps it up longer and longer as she falls in love with Barnaby. Eventually she's forced back to her old life after an argument in which he thinks she went back to her older boyfriend (actually her godfather) and made him pay for Barnaby's birthday present and she thinks he's about to be engaged with Joanna, the shelter's psychologist. Afterwards, she becomes a benefactress to the shelter, only revealing after several months to Barnaby that the heiress Nicola Rosten is the Nicky he sent away from the shelter. Soon after they discover that Joanna sabotaged their relationship by pretending to be engaged to Barnaby. They decide to get married as soon as possible.

4. Leigh, Roberta. *Zoete Wraak (Sweet Revenge)*. Original title: *Too Bad to Be True*. Bouquet 885, 1987.

A week after his financially devastating divorce from Charlene, Leslie's stepfather Robert had a stroke just as he was about to commit suicide. Leslie Watson (26) blames Charlene's divorce lawyer Dane Jordan (35) for Robert's fate and is out for revenge. When Dane hires her as his architect and tries to get her to go out with him, she concocts a plan to make him find out exactly what the men he ruins in court feel when they lose everything in their divorce proceedings. She plans to marry him, so as to dump him a few months later and take him to court for an enormous settlement, which she plans to donate to charity.

Over months, she pretends to like and then fall in love with him, but refuses to have sex with Dane unless they marry first. Dane, who is a committed bachelor and does not believe in marriage, eventually gives in to her wishes and they marry. They have a very fulfilling sex life for the first weeks, until she feigns a “feminine infection”. Over the next weeks, he surprises her by respecting this, never pushing for sex, and growing closer to her.

One weekend, when she is visiting family on her own, she realises she is in love with Dane and that her stepfather was to blame for his own fate. She decides to tell him everything and work at their marriage, and drives home immediately. However, once there, she sees him leave their apartment with another woman. Struck by his infidelity, she confronts him, tells him everything, and leaves. She spends some time nursing her broken heart and filing for divorce. However, she explicitly orders her lawyer not to ask for a financial settlement.

One day a new client shows up who reveals herself to be Dane’s mother and tells Leslie that her son is deeply unhappy. Leslie confesses everything to her and Mrs Jordan convinces her to go back to Dane and see if she can save anything of their relationship, arguing that Dane might have been unfaithful because he realised she didn’t love him, and that in any case her deception came long before his. Leslie decides to forgive Dane for his infidelity and goes to tell him this. He has lost weight, has dark circles under his eyes, and seems distrustful. She tells him she loves him, tells him finally that she no longer blames him for her stepfather’s fate, and says that she would be willing to give their marriage another chance, unless he could still not love her. He objects to the “still” and reveals that he has loved her for a very long time already. He turns out not to have cheated on her, they talk everything out, and reconcile.

Appendix 2: Tables: Schematised answers to my research questions

Table 1: A table showing the schematised answers to my research questions, in the form of a comparison summary of the changes in perceptions of virginity, deception, career, and age difference between Roberta Leigh's novels *Play of Fate* (1973) and *Sweet Revenge* (1987) through the lenses of agency, behaviour, normalisation, femininity and the heroine's struggle.

DEVELOPMENTS IN LEIGH'S NOVELS	VIRGINITY	DECEPTION	CAREER	AGE DIFFERENCE
AGENCY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> using virginity and sex as a weapon, holding power over the hero with it insisting to remain a virgin until marriage, even though that makes her an oddling in her social circles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the heroine has less focus on ego and self-image her motivation is vengeance of which the purpose is tied to her empathetic nature rather than her ego or self-image 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> having a career being successful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> age difference has decreased she's older
BEHAVIOUR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sex is her weapon against him, not his against her he's respectful of her wishes and desires and exhibits much self-control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she works toward her long-term goal of getting him to marry her steadfastly, adjusting her course when needed so she can still stand behind her actions she takes responsibility over her actions and doesn't do anything against her own wishes when she changes her mind about him and his role in her stepfather's downfall, she readily admits it and apologises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she is professional and capable of maintaining that professionalism despite her emotional turmoil she doesn't let her revenge plans impact her job she works hard and delivers great work even to people she despises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she is mature and professional she controls her impulses
STRUGGLE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she insists that he may only have sex with her if he marries her her struggle against him is led by both her quest for revenge (her reason for deceiving him) and her personal desire not to have sex before marriage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> when her opinion about the hero and his role in her stepfather's downfall changes, she stops manipulating him. when she files for divorce, she doesn't go through with her original plan of financially ruining him because she has changed her mind about him 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> they're both successful and admire each other's professional status (even though she openly disapproves of his methods) 	
NORMALISATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> there is the choice for them to not have sex despite it being normalised they have sex in the book rather than in the near future after the ending he is open about his struggles with her wishes (he wants to sleep with her, but doesn't believe in marriage) without trying to force her into anything; he adjusts to her desires and ultimately agrees to her terms (by marrying her) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> having a vengeful protagonist who experiences regret, evolution, and character development as well as changing her mind is accepted as reliable and believable (which it wouldn't have been before) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> her professional success and them being perceived as equals professionally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> he doesn't lord his experience over her, he adjusts to her so that the age gap is a little less wide
FEMININITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> her ability to have or not have sex is a show of what Conn called the forbidden appropriation of power (9) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> her femininity is the source of her power and ability to manipulate him by withholding sex, while still adhering to her own standards (of not having sex before marriage) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she is a successful architect who becomes a director in the company yet is still seen as feminine 	

Table 2: A table showing the schematised answers to my research questions, in the form of a comparison summary of the changes in perceptions of virginity, deception, career, age difference and infertility between Carole Mortimer's novels *Lesson From the Past* (1980) and *Like a Forewell Song* (1985) through the lenses of agency, behaviour, normalisation, femininity and the heroine's struggle.

DEVELOPMENTS IN MORTIMER'S NOVELS	VIRGINITY	DECEPTION	CAREER	AGE DIFFERENCE	INFERTILITY
AGENCY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she has sex, enjoying and pursuing it with him without wanting to marry him 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reason for coming clean changes: Heleen did it to make him understand her previous struggle, Cynara to make him understand and respect her choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she has professional ambitions she is holding on to her career 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she is older than her counterpart in the 70s she is an emotionally and financially independent heroine with more life experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she tries to live a happy life despite infertility rather than accepting the fate of old maid
BEHAVIOUR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she has sex unapologetically 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she lies to him about not loving him and lets him mistakenly assume she's poor in order to be able to have an excuse to have sex with him without being pushed to marry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sacrificing her health for her career goals not planning to quit her job for him 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> self-direction towards happy life despite of infertility
STRUGGLE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she acknowledges what she wants, considers what she thinks she can realistically have, and actively makes the best of it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she is trying to achieve the most happiness for both of them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she refuses to quit her job for him, even though he expects her to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she's older, which makes the age difference and power imbalance less pointed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> motherhood reached not through a miracle, but through a reconception of motherhood by raising her partner's children as her own
NORMALISATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> having sex is normalised, even by her; in contrast rape is no longer normalised, but confronted and explicitly named 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> finding fulfillment in something other than love and needing more than love for a happy life is normalised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> less normalised but the age difference is made smaller by aging her up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> though her infertility makes her feel incomplete and twists her self-image, the message is no longer that women need to give birth to a child to be a mother
FEMININITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sexual purity as virginity becomes sexual purity as having sex for love; she doesn't have sex with men she doesn't love 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> she pretends to have sex in exchange for financial care rather than love to keep Zack from pushing her to marry him 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Zack's first proposal (five years ago) came with the expectation that she would quit her job as a travelling singer, but she refused 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> motherhood is still essential for a woman, but can be reached in other ways than directly conceiving them

Appendix 3: Original quotes and full translations

1. Mortimer, Carole. *Als een Afscheidslied (Like a Farewell Song)*, pp. 78-79.

Full original:

Ze bleef zich vertwijfeld verweren, maar in deze onbeheerste woede was hij volkomen ontoegankelijk. Ze werd tegen de grond gedrukt, moest ondergaan dat hij haar jurk van haar schouders trok en haar met bruto geweld zijn wil oplegde. Toen Zack zich had verkleed en de flat had verlaten, zat zij nog op de grond, met haar armen om haar opgetrokken benen en haar voorhoofd op haar knieën. Haar hele lichaam deed zeer - Zack was zo onbarmhartig geweest. Maar de pijn in haar ziel was veel schrijnender. Dat hij tot zoiets in staat was! Dat hij zo driftig kon worden en zichzelf zo kon vergeten... En dan zijn gedrag erna. Alsof er niets was gebeurd, zo kalm had hij haar verteld dat hij zijn heil nu wel in een restaurant zou gaan zoeken. Als ze mee wilde, moest ze zich maar gauw gaan opknappen. Ze had slechts het hoofd geschud en hij was na een achteloze groet vertrokken. Ze huiverde. Wat moest hij haar haten, als hij haar dit kon aandoen.

Full translation:

She continued to defend herself desperately, but in this uncontrolled rage he was completely unreachable. She was pushed against the floor, and had to undergo him pulling her dress off her shoulders and imposing his will on her with brute violence. When Zack had changed his clothing and left the flat, she was still sitting on the floor, with her arms around her pulled up legs and her forehead on her knees. Her whole body hurt - Zack had been so merciless. But the pain in her soul was much more harrowing. That he was capable of such a thing! That he could become so enraged and could forget himself like this... And then how he had behaved afterwards. As if nothing had happened, he had calmly told her that he would just go to a restaurant, then. And if she wanted to come along, she would have to hurry and spruce up. She had merely shaken her head and he had left after a careless greeting. She shivered. How much he must hate her, to be able to do this to her.

2. Mortimer, Carole. *Als een Afscheidslied (Like a Farewell Song)*, pp. 89-90.

Full original:

“Wat jij deed, Zack, was niet mij op een bepaalde manier tot iets dwingen,” zei Cynara scherp, “maar mij verkrachten.” Ze had het zo niet willen zeggen, maar hij lokte het uit door zijn koppige onverschilligheid.

Hij gaf met zijn vlakke hand een hard klap op tafel. “Dat was het niet!”

“Dat was het wel. Maar goed, laten we er nu maar over ophouden. Wat gebeurd is, is gebeurd en zelf ga ik ook niet vrijuit.”

“Onzin.”

Ze schudde haar hoofd. “Ik ben te ver gegaan. Ik heb je uitgedaagd en gesard en... ja, daar heb ik voor moeten boeten.”

“Maar wat ik deed, is op geen enkele wijze goed te praten.”

Full translation:

“What you did, Zack, was not force me into something in one way or another,” Cynara said sharply, “but rape me.” She hadn’t wanted to say it like this, but his stubborn indifference provoked it.

He hit the table hard with his flat hand. “That’s not what it was!”

“Yes, it was. But alright, let’s drop the subject. What has happened, has happened, and I am not blameless in this either.”

“Nonsense.”

She shook her head. “I went too far. I provoked and baited you and... yes, I have paid for it.”

“But what I did, cannot be justified in any way.”

3. Leigh, Roberta. *Een Speling van het Lot (Play of Fate)*, pp. 71.

Full original:

Haar ergernis over de scepsis van Barnaby bracht Nicola ertoe haar plan te veranderen, en wat eerst een oppervlakkig bedrog was geweest, kreeg nu een veel diepere betekenis. Ze nam zich voor hier één week te blijven, niet alleen om hem te laten zien hoe gemakkelijk hij voor de gek kon worden gehouden, maar ook om hem aan te tonen hoe slecht hij karakters kon beoordelen.

Full translation:

Her vexation at Barnaby's scepticism compelled Nicola to change her plan, and what had started out as a superficial deception, now had a much deeper meaning. She resolved to stay here for one week, not only to show him how easily he could be fooled, but also to show him how bad he was at judging character.

4. Mortimer, Carole. *Les Uit het Verleden (Lesson From the Past)*, pp. 7.

Full original:

Jenny was vijfentwintig, drie jaar ouder dan Heleen en had er van het begin af aan een handje van gehad Heleens leven voor haar te regelen. Ze had zelfs werk bij een reisbureau voor haar weten te bemachtigen! Als het aan Heleen had gelegen, zou ze geen moeite hebben gedaan een baan te vinden, en rustig thuis zijn gebleven. Jenny had evenwel beweerd dat werken goed voor haar zou zijn en dat zelfs rijke mensen tegenwoordig werkten om hun gezichtskring te verbreden. Ze werkte dus van negen tot vijf, vijf dagen per week; ofschoon het haar een zekere voldoening gaf haar werk naar behoren te verrichten, besepte ze eveneens dat het niet als een gemis zou voelen als ze ermee ophield.

Full translation:

Jenny was twenty-five, three years older than Heleen, and had from the outset made a habit of arranging Heleen's life for her. She had even found work at a travel agency for her! If it had been up to Heleen, she wouldn't have made the effort to find a job, and would've quietly stayed at home. Michael had left her enough money to live on, as long as she didn't spend too much on unnecessary luxuries. However, Jenny had claimed that work would be good for her and that even rich people work nowadays to broaden their social circles. So she worked from nine to five, five days a week; although it gave her a certain amount of satisfaction to do her work properly, she nevertheless realised that it would not feel like a loss if she quit.

Appendix 4: Summaries of the novels

This appendix holds summaries of the full set of thirteen novels that I read, including longer summaries of the four selected novels. The novel summaries are alphabetically sorted by author and then by publication year. Quotations from the novels are my own translation, and the originals are added as footnotes.

A) *Charlotte Lamb*

Verlangen Naar Méér (Desire for More). Original title: *The Heron Quest*. Bouquet 611, 1977.

Kit is a young production assistant at a television company, a job many assume she got through nepotism, because her uncle owns the company. This leads her to continually having and trying to prove herself. When she is offered the chance to work with the successful documentary maker Adam Rothbury, she takes it, despite her personal dislike of him. They go to Paris to learn more about the past of a mysterious young poet who died in WWII. Adam, who constantly patronises her, believes that her dislike of him is due to their mutual attraction. Claiming to believe in neither platonic friendship between men and women nor real love, he decides that this dislike should not get in the way of them acting on that attraction. Although Kit initially does not feel attracted to him at all, Adam's new interest in her and the forced intimacy of travelling together changes this.

Duisternis Komt Nooit Te Vroeg (Darkness Never Comes Too Soon). Original title: *Disturbing Stranger*. Bouquet 262, 1978.

20-year-old Laura Hallam is kissed by a stranger on the street by someone in a bachelor party. This stranger is Randal Mercier, a 36-year-old rich and powerful man who enjoys that first meeting and decides to pursue her.

Randal turns out to be the owner of the company Laura's father works for as an accountant. When her father is revealed to have embezzled large sums of money from the company for years in order to financially support his daughter Laura and his chronically ill wife, Randal agrees not to press charges if Laura marries him. She realises she has no

alternative and her boyfriend Tom is not interested in proposing. She's been in love with Tom Nichol since her youth, but although he seems to enjoy being with her, he keeps his distance and treats Laura as a child or sister instead of a partner. Randal, on the other hand, is passionate. She enjoys her sex life with him, even if her heart is somewhere else.

Randal is infuriated by her infatuation with another man, and tells her not to contact Tom. When he catches her thinking about him on their wedding night, he rapes her to show her to whom she belongs to. Despite this, she slowly starts to fall in love with Randal, while he still thinks that she is only with him because of her father and that her interest in him is purely sexual.

Even though she loves him, his treatment of her makes Laura deeply unhappy. When she discovers she's pregnant, she resigns herself to being stuck in this marriage forever. She visits Tom, who is a doctor, to ask him to be her obstetrician, but he reveals that he is about to permanently move to India because the developing world needs him more than London does. He also tells her that that is why he never proposed to her; he believes her to be too fragile to handle being in his life. Upset that he led her on for so many years when this had been his plan all along, she goes home.

She tries to tell Randall that she's pregnant, but before she can he offers to let her out of the marriage. He reveals he loves her and says that he does not want her to be in a marriage that is making her so unhappy. She admits to loving him too, and tells him she's expecting his child. He asks about Tom and she says she is over him. Their mutual declarations of love compel them to give their marriage an honest chance from now on.

Een Man Als Geen Ander (A Man Like No Other). Original title: *Man's World*. Bouquet 431, 1980.

Kate (26) is a young widow who is pursued by her new boss, editor Eliot Holman. Kate has no interest in men, and is successful in keeping them at a distance by pretending she's still mourning her rich and famous late husband Toby. In reality, Toby had been cruel and sexually abusive. Kate's sexual trauma is the true reason behind her disinterest in men. Eliot discovers this and decides that he is not going to let Toby keep her from enjoying sex, so he pushes her more and more to have sex with him. Kate eventually comes to

understand that he is not like Toby, and falls in love with him. The novel ends uncharacteristically with him specifically asking her to move in with him without marrying him, so that she has the chance to get to know the kind of man he is first.

Overhaaste Vlucht (Hasty Flight). Original title: *Dark Pursuit*. Bouquet 1154, 1990.

Caitlin is a young widow who became a famous model after surviving the earthquake that killed her abusive husband Roddy. The rich and attractive bachelor Monroe Ritchie pursues her and when she refuses to have casual sex with him, he convinces her to marry him. She does this even though she doesn't believe he loves her. During their marriage, she grows close to Monroe's son Gill, who sees her as a mother figure. When Caitlin receives a phone call and leaves the house without telling anyone where she's going, Monroe assumes she's cheating on him. However, Caitlin has just discovered that her husband Roddy hadn't died in that earthquake after all; he had run off and married someone else under a new identity. Roddy now tries to blackmail her, leading to circumstances that only increase Monroe's suspicions of her infidelity. When Monroe discovers the true story, he uses his power and influence to make Roddy leave forever, and she is safe at last with the knowledge that if he did return, all she had to do was to go to the police and have him arrested for bigamy. Now that she's safe, she can re-evaluate her relationship with Monroe. They reconcile.

B) *Roberta Leigh*

Een Speling van het Lot (Play of Fate). Original title: *Cinderella in Mink*. Bouquet 154, 1973.

Billionaire heiress Nicola Rosten runs away from a costume party for which she is dressed as Cinderella after she catches her fiancé cheating on her with her friend. She is hit by a car and brought to a local shelter that is run by psychiatrist Barnaby Grayson. He doesn't believe her when she says she's not actually poor or homeless but refuses to call home to be picked up.

Aware that her cheating fiancé will be waiting for her at her house, she agrees to stay at the shelter that night. Although her plan is to reveal all in the morning, Barnaby's disbelief and cocky misjudgement of her makes her decide to teach him a lesson by keeping up the pretense for a few days. She looks forward to revealing herself at the end and showing the handsome doctor she is cleverer than he. She quickly gets invested in the deception and keeps it up longer and longer as she falls in love with Barnaby.

Eventually she's forced back to her old life after an argument in which he thinks she went back to her older boyfriend (actually her godfather) and made him pay for Barnaby's birthday present and she thinks he's about to be engaged with Joanna, the shelter's psychologist. He sends her away and she goes home without telling him who she is.

Afterwards, she becomes a benefactress to the shelter without revealing to Barnaby that the heiress Nicola Rosten is the Nicky he sent away from the shelter. Barnaby, of course, thinks she's a homeless girl that he sent out into the streets. Months later, she invites Barnaby to her mansion for dinner; the first time he will meet her as who she really is. He is surprised, but seems to take it well.

The rendez-vous has reawakened all her emotions for Barnaby, but she still believes he's engaged with Joanna. She takes a walk near the place of her car accident, and gets into a conversation with a police officer. He tells her that the psychiatrist who runs the shelter spent months walking around for hours each night near that spot, looking for a girl. Realising that she is that girl, she impulsively walks to the shelter. Once there, Joanna tells her Barnaby is not there, but just as Nicola is about to leave, he walks out of his room. The two of them talk and discover that Joanna sabotaged their relationship by pretending to be engaged to Barnaby. They decide to get married as soon as possible.

In de Schaduw van de Palmen (In the Shade of the Palms). Original title: *Shade of the Palms*. Bouquet 395, 1974.

Julia Weston is an orphan who lives with her grandparents and brother. When her neighbour hears of her plight, she manages to get her a job with Stephen Brandon who prefers older, unattractive secretaries and is prejudiced against attractive women by disguising herself using unflattering choices. The work is hard but she becomes good at it

and he starts to trust her with personal work including tickets and the flowers to other women, who are all overwhelmingly pretty and dumb. Over time, she begins to miss feeling attractive to men, and begins to realise that she is in love with him despite the fact that he sees her as his walking, talking computer. To protect herself, she quits that job and finds a new one with a travel book writer, an older lady named Ms. Ross. There she meets Major Kim Chan who falls in love with her. Ms. Ross, who is a friend of Stephen's, asks her to temporarily return to her secretary job for him while he stays at a guest at her house on a business trip. This means they must live under the same roof. She is loath to go back to disguising her beauty, struggles with her desire for Stephen, but does not let him sweep her off her feet.

As she prepares to return to London, she takes some of her brother's souvenirs along for him. One of the Thai servants to Stephen asks Julia to put a painting with a hefty frame in her suitcase because it didn't fit in Stephen's luggage. At the airport, there turns out to be marijuana in the frame, and she is sent to prison. Stephen comes to visit her, but with her assuming the drugs are Stephen's, and him thinking she's protecting her brother, a comedy of errors and miscommunication between them ensues. She is visited by Major Kim, whom she tells where to find the only piece of evidence that she has. Shortly after his departure, she puts the clues together and discovers that communists tried to frame Stephen out of anti-colonialist convictions, and that Major Kim is their leader. She escapes from the prison to stop him, and Major Kim decides to kill her. Stephen saves her, officers arrest Major Kim, and upon her waking up from a dead faint, they fall for each other and profess their love for each other. She wants to have sex with him, but he stops her, telling her that she can have all the action she wants when they're married.

Als het Doek Valt (When the Curtain Drops). Original title: *Pretense*. Bouquet 162, 1976.

Ann is an aspiring actress who is in between acting jobs. When her friend, who runs the McBride Marriage Office, falls ill, she agrees to temporarily take over the job of finding suitable partners for her clients. She matches up the playwright Paul Mallison with Rosalie, a woman fitting his description of what he is looking for. However, his search turns out to be a ruse; he's not looking for a wife, but for inspiration for his latest play. Rosalie, who had

fallen in love with him in earnest, is heartbroken. Furious, Ann decides to give Paul a piece of his own medicine. Her revenge plan fails when she, too, falls in love with him. Paul devastates her by suddenly leaving her for someone else. She meets another man, Desmond, and begins dating him. She almost marries him, but realises she does not want to marry someone she doesn't love. Paul returns and it turns out that he had left her because he was afraid of his play becoming a flop and did not think he deserved her if he was unsuccessful. She is angry that he let his pride ruin their relationship, but she still loves him and they reconcile.

Spel Wordt Ernst (A Serious Game). Original title: *Not a Marrying Man*. Bouquet 210, 1977.

Sara Vale works at a company that makes cosmetics and is close to her boss, Madame Rosa. When Madame Rosa steps down and her nephew Bruno Lyn takes over as director, Sara's life changes. Bruno is a bachelor playboy who dislikes career women. Sara, who is not a true career woman at heart, is at first hurt by his attitude, but over time she starts to fall in love with him. She realises that her love is hopeless, because Bruno still perceives her as the type of woman he detests. In the meanwhile, she discovers that Bruno is Rosa's illegitimate child, and Rosa asks her not to tell Bruno this. Keeping this secret causes much strife between Bruno and Rosa. Once he finds out, they can finally talk openly to each other about their feelings, admit their love for one another and marry.

Aan de Winnende Hand (Having a Winning Hand). Original title: *Magic of Love*. Bouquet 386, 1979.

Barbara Mansfield develops vocal cord damage that force her to temporarily leave her career as a singer in London. She finds a short-term job in Wales, keeping the company of a rich old lady, Miss Berresford. Miss Berresford's nephew, Dominic Rockwood, is initially confusingly unkind to her, but eventually his cold demeanour melts on a cruise they both accompany Miss Berresford to. They grow close and she falls in love with him, believing the feeling to be mutual. But when his ex-fiancée Gina shows up, Barbara gets the impression

that Dominic is still in love with Gina. This leads Barbara to resign from her job as soon as they set foot on land in Wales again. Five years later, they meet again, and Barbara discovers that Dominic pretended to still be in love with Gina despite loving Barbara because he thought he was infertile and he didn't want her to set aside her wish of becoming a mother for him. He turns out not to be infertile, and they marry.

Zoete Wraak (Sweet Revenge). Original title: *Too Bad to Be True*. Bouquet 885, 1987.

Leslie Watson's stepfather Robert is divorcing his wife Charlene, who is thirty years his junior and used to be his nurse. Claiming ongoing marital cruelty for limiting her financial spending, Charlene's famed divorce attorney Dane Jordon (35) convinces the judge to not only grant Charlene a large part of Robert's wealth, but also to let her keep the shares to Robert's company that had been her wedding present. When Charlene immediately sells those shares to Robert's competitors, Robert realises he is going to lose his company. He attempts to commit suicide, but has a stroke just before. Leslie (26) finds him and although Robert survives, he remains in a vegetative state. Leslie holds Dane responsible and is out for revenge.

When Dane comes to her office a few weeks later as a prospective client, he is struck by her beauty, intelligence and sharp tongue. Not knowing whose step-daughter she is, he tries to convince her to go out with him by asking her to the Oscars. Although Leslie initially resists, his persistence makes her realise that his attraction to her gives her power over him that she can use to repay him in kind for what he did to her stepfather. She decides to seduce and marry him, so as to dump him a few months later and take him to court for an enormous settlement.

'To be honest, you are the first beautiful woman who doesn't bore me. That's why you, in my opinion, are worth your weight in gold!'

'My weight in gold,' she muttered. That would not be the case unless she married him and hired a lawyer of his caliber a few months later to arrange the divorce. In

that case she would make him pay her straight! For as least as much as he had squeezed from her stepfather!⁶

She intends to donate that money to charity, which tells the reader that she's not in it for her own profit - if anything, marrying him is a sacrifice she makes to avenge the wrongs he did to her family. Her belief in Dane's immorality is further evidenced by her ideas about how to bring about the divorce. She decides to play the role of the loving wife for the first few weeks, making him so happy that he would shout it from the rooftops to all his friends.

Then, once she had put him in a more or less permanent state of bliss, she would begin to annoy him. With a little luck she would one day be able to get him to lose his self-control. He would give her a few blows. Those strikes would cost him at least a couple hundred thousand dollars.⁷

Leslie's judgement of Dane as the kind of man who would beat his wife is very telling. Realising that Dane's intelligence and cunning makes him a dangerous adversary, she decides to act slowly and strategically. First, she tells him that she knows he insists on remaining a bachelor, and that because she does not want to have sex before marriage their relationship should better remain platonic. Although Dane is appalled by the idea, he agrees and starts meeting up with her platonically. After two weeks there's a brief period where he again begins trying to convince her to sleep with him, but when it doesn't work, he reverts back to his respectful platonic attitude. Because they both keep dating other people, she has ample chance to make him jealous.

Slowly, she begins to pretend to fall in love with him, and behaves agonised. She tells him they should stop their platonic relationship because it hurts her too much. They do, but she takes every chance she has to meet him professionally and he is very receptive to it. She very clearly says and shows she's in love with him, and he equally explicitly tells her he is going mad with desire for her, but doesn't love her.

⁶“Om je de waarheid te vertellen, jij bent de eerste mooie vrouw die me niet verveelt. Daarom ben jij, naar mijn gevoel, je gewicht in goud waard!”

‘Mijn gewicht in goud,’ prevelde ze. Dat zou pas zo zijn als ze met hem trouwde en enkele maanden later een advocaat van hetzelfde kaliber als hij zou inschakelen om de echtscheiding te regelen. in dat geval zou ze Dane eerst recht laten betalen! Op z'n minst zoveel als hij haar stiefvader had afgedwongen!” Roberta Leigh, *Sweet Revenge*, pp. 32.

⁷“Vervolgens, als ze hem eenmaal een min of meer vaste plaats in de zevende hemel had bezorgd, zou ze het erop aanleggen hem te ergeren. Met een beetje geluk zou ze hem zo ver krijgen dat hij op zekere dag zijn zelfbeheersing zou verliezen. hij zou haar een paar rake klappen uitdelen. Die zouden hem in elk geval al op een paar honderdduizend dollar komen te staan.” Roberta Leigh, *Sweet Revenge*, pp. 35.

Then, Robert has a second stroke and dies. Reminding herself of this constantly helps her keep her resolve even when Dane continues to behave respectfully and honestly.

After weeks of going back and forth like this, she allows him near sexually. Forgetting herself in her passion and their mutual attraction, she almost has sex with him, until he says that she is about to feel the meaning of love. Reminding herself that he doesn't love her and that her goal is revenge, she withdraws and tells him she has changed her mind; that she would regret it if she had sex before marriage.

Although he is furious, he completely respects her decision and distances himself from her afterwards. She is confused by her own emotions, she doesn't trust herself with him because she's also very attracted to him, and she does not actively pursue him any longer (although she is willing to go on with her plan if he comes near). Another few months go by and she starts dating other men, but they all bore her.

He shows up at her doorstep one night saying he can no longer go on like this and that he is willing to marry her if that means he can have sex with her. She agrees, they marry, they have a very fulfilling sex life for the first weeks, before she feigns a "feminine infection" and says the gynaecologist told her not to have sex until it's healed. To her surprise, he respects this, and they spend their evenings after work talking and growing closer, without having sex.

One weekend, she is away to visit family. Talking to them she realises she's actually in love with Dane and that her stepfather was to blame for his own fate. She decides to tell him everything and work at their marriage, and drives home immediately. When she arrives at their apartment, shortly before midnight, she sees him leave the house with a woman he is behaving very tenderly towards.

Struck by his infidelity, she packs her bags and is about to leave when he returns. She confronts him with what she saw, tells him in a fury who she is and why she married him, and rushes out. She spends some time nursing her broken heart and filing for divorce. However, she has decided not to go after his money after all, ordering her lawyer (against everyone's advice) to explicitly not ask for financial settlement. Their mutual friends believe she left him because she caught him cheating.

One day a new client shows up, an older woman, who after a long day reveals herself to be Dane's mother. Leslie eventually decides to hear her out. Mrs Jordan tells her Dane is

deeply unhappy. Leslie confesses everything to her, including their respective reasons to marry.

“‘I have never heard two such insane motives as a basis for a marriage!’ Mrs Jordan commented. ‘Sex and revenge - good gracious! I’d love to hit your heads together!’

Leslie lowered her gaze. ‘We both behaved wrongly. We’re both paying for it now’”⁸

Still, Mrs Jordan is able to convince Leslie to go back to Dane and see if she can save anything of their relationship, arguing that Dane might have been unfaithful because he realised she didn’t love him, and that in any case her deception came long before his. Leslie decides to forgive Dane for his infidelity and goes to tell him this. He looks thin and unhealthy, and is distrustful. She tells him she loves him, tells him finally that she no longer blames him for her stepfather’s fate, and says that she would be willing to give their marriage another chance, unless he could still not love her. He objects to the “still” and reveals that he has loved her for a very long time already. He turns out not to have cheated on her, they talk everything out, and reconcile. His mother is about to visit him for a late dinner, but they are looking forward to having sex again afterwards.

C) *Carole Mortimer*

Voor het Geluk Geboren (Born to Be Lucky). Original title: *Savage Interlude*. Bouquet 402, 1979.

Kate Darwood (18) discovered four years ago that she was the illegitimate child of rich businessman Richard St. Just. Richard had just died and had written in his will that her half-brother James, a famous actor, was to take care of her. James and Kate are close, but he is twenty years older, very strict and takes his guardian role very seriously, controlling whom she meets and where she goes. Because her parentage is a secret, the world assumes Kate is James’ mistress. His possessive behaviour scares off all of her boyfriends. When Kate meets movie director Damien Savage (33), he is charmed by her open dislike of him and he

⁸ “‘Nog nooit heb ik twee zulke waanzinnige motieven gehoord als basis voor een huwelijk! was het commentaar van Mrs. Jordan. ‘Seks en wraak - allemachtig! Ik zou jullie hoofden het liefst tegen elkaar slaan!’ Leslie sloeg haar ogen neer. ‘We hebben allebei verkeerd gehandeld. Daar boeten we nu allebei voor.’”
Roberta Leigh, *Sweet Revenge*, pp. 147.

blackmails her into going to a party with him by threatening not to give James the role he desperately wants. He informs her that James is too old for her, that Damien doesn't share his women and that he is going to make her his. Kate is overwhelmed by his dominance and persistence, and although she finds herself unable to resist him sexually, she stubbornly refuses any man to simply claim her. In order to convince her to be his, he will have to learn to be less forceful.

Les Uit het Verleden (Lesson From the Past). Original title: *Living Together*. Bouquet 508, 1980.

22-year-old widow Heleen West had a miscarriage from marital rape two years ago and was told by doctors she was unlikely to ever conceive again. Her husband Michael raped her during their brief marriage and non-consensually offered her sexual services to his best friend, prompting her to leave him three months into her marriage. After her file for divorce, the press portrayed her as a gold digger, spurred on by Michael's mother. Heleen's newsworthiness only increased when Michael died in an accident a few months later and the press assumed she inherited all his wealth. In reality, most of his wealth went to his family, leaving Heleen financially comfortable but not rich.

She moved from the United States to Great Britain to escape the paparazzi and spent the subsequent two years sharing an apartment with her cousin Jenny and trying to attract as little attention as possible from the world. She has decided that she never wants another relationship again and believes that since she is infertile, she doesn't have anything to offer a husband anyway. Fearing that Heleen would become a recluse and live an empty, lonely life, Jenny found Heleen an office job at a travel agency. Although she enjoys doing her job well, she's not particularly attached to either the job or her colleagues.

One night, Jenny manages to convince Heleen to come to a party with her, loaning Heleen a form-fitting dress when she turns out not to have anything suitable for a party. The party turns out to be at the apartment of the famous actor and bachelor Leon Masters. Leon is immediately drawn to her and, being used to women throwing themselves at him, is vexed by her cold, aloof behaviour. She tries to discourage him by introducing herself as Mrs. West and attempts to leave, but when he follows her and questions her on why she is

at a party without her husband, she admits that she's a widow. He makes her spell out that she is not interested in men or dating, and judges her coldness to be due to frigidity, something he decides he should try to heal her from. He forcibly and violently kisses her and she tries in vain to escape. He's shocked when he pulls away that her mouth is bloody from pressing her teeth into her lip and realises that she's not frigid, but terrified. She runs home.

Jenny arrives home shortly afterwards, having been told by Leon that she should go to Heleen. Seeing her bruised and bloody mouth, Jenny thinks Leon sexually assaulted her, but when Heleen tells her about his forced kiss, Jenny is relieved that it was just a kiss and suggests that Heleen should not be so distraught at being kissed by an attractive man.

From then on, Jenny is on Leon's side, letting him into their apartment to see Heleen, trying to help him trick her to come on a boat trip with him, and telling him where she works. This makes it impossible for Heleen to escape him.

She tries again to make him understand that she doesn't want him, adding that she doesn't want the media attention that comes with dating a famous actor. He asks why and forces her to admit she was Michael West's wife. He tells her he never believed the things that were written about her and she feels supported by this, because other than Jenny nobody else had ever believed her.

Leon's aggressive pursuit and persistent insistence that he can heal her trauma teaches her that her struggle is futile and that he will never let her get away until he has what he wants. He is often enraged, threatening and violent, and it takes a lot of courage and energy for Heleen to keep resisting. Additionally, he keeps accusing her or playing with his feelings and manipulating him. Every now and then she runs out of energy and he gets his way with something.

He eventually persuades her to move in with him and even give up her job, wanting her to be at home when he comes from work and promising that he will be patient and not try to force her into having sex with him, but he soon breaks that promise and becomes angry at her unwillingness to sleep with him. They have a falling out and Leon goes to the United States for two weeks for a job.

A week after his departure, the press gets wind of their relationship. She hides at home from the paparazzi and is surprised when Leon comes back early to check on her. He tells her neither of them need to care about what the press say.

Eventually, he manages to awaken sexual desire in Heleen, and succeeds in making her sleep with him, overcoming her trauma. This is the first time in her life she's experienced sexual pleasure. When afterwards he insists they marry, she refuses, enraging him again.

He accuses her of using him for sex and says that if she doesn't want to be his wife, he doesn't want her anymore. He sends her away and says that if their coupling has consequences, he hopes she will at least have the decency of letting him know. She is confused, and he explains that he means a pregnancy. Heleen doesn't tell him that the impossibility of that happening is precisely the reason that she is refusing to marry him.

She moves back in with Jenny and becomes sick. Jenny eventually convinces her to go to a doctor, where she discovers that she is miraculously pregnant anyway. She returns to Leon and tells him about her infertility. When Leon asks if this is why she refused to marry him, she admits this, and Leon convinces her that he wants to marry her anyway and that they can always adopt, promising to love those children as if they were their own. Heleen agrees to marry him and then reveals her pregnancy. Then she asks him to make good on his promise to teach her more about sex, saying that the doctor told her to live a regular life. He calls her cheeky and then carries her into the bedroom.

In the final paragraph, the reader is told that their son was born seven months later.

Als een Afscheidslied (Like a Farewell Song). Original title: *The Devil's Price*. Bouquet 765, 1985.

Cynara, a travelling singer, dated Zack for three months when she was 21 and he 33. The story takes place five years after this relationship. When she met Zack, she was employed as a singer on a weeklong cruise he was on with his young son and his nanny. In that week, they developed an intimate connection that was consummated on the final night. She had opened up about growing up in an orphanhood, about her previous engagement and had mentioned having had sex with her ex-fiance.

They moved in together soon after the cruise, and he proposed three months into their relationship. With his proposal came an assumption that she would end her singing

career soon enough, when she got tired of the constant travel. She refused the proposal, expressing her long-term career plans and pretending not to love him enough for marriage.

She still intended to continue their relationship without marrying. Zack's father Nicholas, however, had used a private investigator to discover that her previous engagement had ended because she was infertile. This had led her to believe that she had nothing to offer men in marriage, and had been her true reason to reject Zack's proposal. She had not wanted to feel his pity and eventual bitterness when he found out. Nicholas blackmailed her into ending her relationship with Zack and together they made Zack believe the relationship had been a ruse so that she could get money from Nicholas.

Although Cynara thinks he went back to his estranged wife after their relationship, in fact they both remained single for the subsequent five years. Cynara is said to have "lived a half life these past years",⁹ longing for Zack.

When they meet again, Zack turns out to be the owner of the hotel she works for. They are still wildly attracted to each other, despite the fact that Zack despises her for what happened five years ago.

She is hiding vocal cord damage, but when she loses her voice onstage Zack discovers her doctor has ordered her not to sing for six months in order to recover. As her employer, he has the power to end her contract. For her own good, he refuses to let her sing at his hotel. Assuming that she wants to continue singing because she needs the income and since Zack both believes her to care only about money and is strongly attracted to her, he offers to let her move in with him for six months. During that time he will pay for her personal and medical expenses, in exchange for sex whenever he wants it. She agrees, pretending to be in it for the money, but in reality she desperately misses him and their sexual connection: "She could bear his annoyance and contempt - as long as he held and kissed her like that again."¹⁰ However, Zack turns out to interpret their agreement as giving him the right over her body whenever he wants it, whereas Cynara agrees under the assumption that they both need to voluntarily and willingly consent each time. Being in love with him as she is, she does not foresee problems with this. This changes when he spends

⁹"En hoewel er vijf lange jaren waren verstreken, realiseerde ze zich met een schok dat het heftige verlangen naar hem onveranderd was gebleven, dat ze maar half had geleefd en dat haar hart nog steeds naar deze man uitging." Carole Mortimer, *Lesson From the Past*, pp. 24.

¹⁰"Zijn ergernis en minachting zou ze kunnen verdragen - als hij haar maar weer zo zou vasthouden en kussen." Carole Mortimer, *Lesson From the Past*, pp. 57.

an evening berating, insulting and upsetting her, and expects to still be allowed to have sex with her. She refuses, and he violently rapes her. Afterwards, she confronts him about this, and he apologises, saying that what he did was unforgivable. She agrees to stay and keep their agreement, as long as he understands and acknowledges that she will always have the right to refuse and end the agreement. Zack treats her more civilly after this, and the situation becomes less unbearable for Cynara.

During one of Zack's business trips, Zack's son (who usually lives with Zack's mother) shows up at his apartment, having run away from boarding school. She calls Zack's mother and agrees to drive him back home. Zack is furious at her for this, especially when she expressed her opinion on the matter, saying that she should stay away from his family and that she should've waited until she was able to reach Zack and hear what he wanted her to do. A short while later, both of Zack's children and their nanny catch measles when Zack is again away for business. When Zack's mother calls to tell him, only Cynara is home. She offers to drive over and stay for a few days to help take care of everyone. When Zack finds out, he is infuriated and orders Cynara to leave, but his mother overrules him. Cynara grows close to Zack's children and confronts him about his cold and distant parenting method. Although he refuses to listen the first few times, she eventually strikes a chord in him. Zack's mother turns out to have found her husband's envelope with files on Cynara, and when Cynara is there, she returns it to her, reassuring her that she hasn't read it. She tells Cynara she had never believed that Cynara had really left Zack for money, and that she had suspected her husband of forcing her hand. She encourages Cynara to tell Zack her secret. Afraid that her renewed closeness and intimacy with Zack will lead him to propose to her again, Cynara comes clean about her infertility. She wants Zack to understand her decision so that he will respect it, and she wants to be able to be honest about her feelings of love without it leading to more confusion and conflict. She comes clean in order to explain why marriage would make them unhappy, despite their love for each other. Zack, however, is not bothered by her infertility, pointing out that he already has children. She realises that she is able to be the children's mother by raising them as her own, even if she did not give birth to them. This brings her to finally accept his marriage proposal.

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