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**REPRESENTATIONS OF TRAUMA AND SOLIDARITY
IN REGENCY ROMANCE**

Keywords: Regency romance, military hero, masculinity, solidarity, trauma

Popular romance fiction is a highly successful and lucrative genre written for and by women; while it has faced much criticism for multiple reasons, the genre continues to attract both casual and dedicated readers, as well as scholars having various agendas, be they to provide critical models and methodologies to be deployed in analyses of romance fiction, or to focus on the many aspects of the genre which warrant further exploration. Often misunderstood and mislabelled, popular romance fiction operates within a very specific narrative framework and form: the courtship (and marriage) between two protagonists, traditionally a man and a woman, with a guaranteed happy ending. Despite these limits in form, the genre is highly diverse and adaptive, as it is produced by authors who are aware of and receptive to the readership preferences and demands.

In this article, we focus on historical romance fiction, specifically the subgenre known as Regency romance. A focal figure of our examination is the military hero with his role of a war veteran and a representation of this character type in Mary Balogh’s collection of novels, *Survivor’s Club* (2012-2016). Military heroes in Regency fiction allow romance authors to revisit the Napoleonic wars and to address the question of patriotic heroism on one hand, and the effects war had on soldiers and officers on the other. The theme of trauma is recurrent in Balogh’s fiction, more so in the *Survivor’s Club* series, where each novel is a representation of war trauma and, through the

stereotypical happy ending, an evocation of the process of healing and moving beyond it. The purpose of this analysis is to prove that popular romantic fiction offers space for the depiction of meaningful relationships among characters other than the development of the romantic relationship between the two protagonists and that these relationships are based on solidarity. We argue that the courtship plot typical of romance fiction is not prohibitive, and non-romantic relationships may be portrayed with depth and purpose, being complementary to the courtship narrative. In Balogh's novels, solidarity manifested in kin-like relationships is shown to be fundamental in the process of overcoming the trauma of war.

We begin our analysis of Mary Balogh's series with a review of the key terms *trauma* and *solidarity*, and continue with a survey of the Regency romance fiction subgenre and of the military hero character. The online Cambridge Dictionary provides two meanings for the word "trauma", first as the severe and lasting emotional shock and pain caused by an extremely upsetting experience, and second as physical injury, usually caused by an accident or attack. Peter Brooker (289) points out that in the 18th and 19th centuries, the term's physical designation took precedence over the emotional and psychological meaning. The symptoms were initially diagnosed as part of a physical condition, and they were sometimes considered signs of cowardice. The psychological symptoms included manifestations such as memory loss, flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety and confusion, now commonly recognized features of trauma (289). One of the early treatment methods introduced by W.H.R. Rivers and associated with Sigmund Freud is the 'talking cure', which involved verbalization and narrative coherence (Brooker 289).

This trauma treatment method is used proleptically throughout Balogh's series, as all novels include scenes in which the characters talk about their traumatic war experiences, the challenges they face in the healing process, and the progress they make. The experience of war is the source of solidarity, which is then strengthened by the common goal of healing, as well as the characters'

affiliation with certain social categories. Healing through the power of love is a central motif in romance fiction (Roach), yet in *Survivor's Club*, healing is well underway prior to, and a prerequisite for, characters finding romantic love, as we demonstrate further ahead.

Essential for our discussion, the concept of *solidarity* is defined by Jack Barbalet (602) as the basis of group formation and cohesiveness, the reason individuals experience a sense of belonging and interconnectedness characterizing social interaction. While solidarity involves collective norms compelling, but not forcing, members to participate in group activities, it also implies that the individual's obligation to the group is a result of their acceptance of the group's entitlement to demand their commitment (602). Kurt Bayertz (3) describes solidarity as a mutual attachment between individuals, comprised of a factual level, namely a common ground, and a normative level, indicating the mutual obligation to help each other, as and when necessary.

Expounding on solidary relationships, Bayertz states that solidarity is not random, and an individual is solidary "only with members of the particular community to which one believes oneself to belong" (4). He identifies four uses of the term, which he analyses with regard to their moral dimension. Focusing on the ties binding human beings, Bayertz discusses kinship in smaller communities, and ethnic, cultural and political common ground in larger communities, as well as the elements of cohesion holding together a society, such as common descent and history, a common culture and way of life, and common ideals and goals. Another use of the term identified by the author refers to solidarity and liberation, found when individuals form a group in order to stand up for their common interests, denoting the emotional cohesion between the members and "the mutual support they give each other in their battle for their common goals" (16).

Historical romance, a subset of the genre of popular romantic fiction, is defined by its historical setting: the courtship takes place in the British or American past. The specific period used as background allows further

categorization of the novels into medieval, Georgian, Regency or Victorian romances, in the case of a British setting, and Antebellum and Postbellum romances, for an American setting, amongst others. Historical romance authors do not set out to provide historically accurate accounts of life and events in a given period in the past; they do, however, use references to specific objects, fashions and activities, as well as social structures typical of that time, to deploy popular romance plot devices which would otherwise be incompatible with, or awkward in, contemporary romance fiction. Furthermore, the historical setting also enhances the fantasy element, an important part of the appeal of the genre.

Within the sub-genre of Regency romance, there are several types of author solidarity manifested or represented, one of the most significant examples being the solidarity shown by the romance authors towards writers of fiction historically dismissed or ridiculed, by depicting heroines reading novels in general, and particularly those written by Jane Austen or gothic romances, and by depicting heroines defending their reading choices. This reflects the ongoing feelings that readers and authors alike still share, experiencing judgement based on reading choices and the type of fiction produced. In the late 20th century, romance authors united to produce a collection of essays defending the genre and its various defining features. In *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women* (1992), edited by Jayne Ann Krentz, various romance authors write about the fantasy element(s) of romance, the necessity of a happy ending, and especially about the romantic protagonist and his dual role of both hero and villain (as a challenge for the heroine) in the romance novel. This came as a justification for then-fashionable, and at the same time much maligned by critics (Douglas 1980, Dubino 1993), the “alpha male” type, a sexually aggressive and emotionally distant hero to be tamed and gentled by the heroine.

The alpha male was a fixture in both contemporary and historical romance, the authors insisting that such a protagonist was essential to romance, as it was he who carried the weight of the plot. While this type of sexually aggressive

hero has become rather obsolete in 21st-century romance, due to a shift in attitudes regarding social issues (such as gender roles, consent, and female empowerment) and the natural evolution of the romance novel, the necessity of a strong, competent, admirable hero is unquestionable. According to Krentz (7), readers may or may not identify with the heroine, but the hero must always be presented as strong and appealing, for both heroine and reader, for the romance to be successful. One kind of romantic hero that stands out is the warrior archetype, highly versatile and much loved in his multiple incarnations, especially in his role as a protector. His remarkable masculinity is often represented by traits such as physical strength, competence and honour.

The military hero is a beloved character featured in many novels, contemporary and historical, and in many variations, both within the heterosexual and gay paradigms. In historical romance, military heroes marry the heroines in acts of duty and honour, or to assert power and dominance. The military hero is occasionally represented as a war veteran who has been wounded in battle and is permanently scarred and/or impaired, who feels less-than-human due to the scarring/impairment and is feared and rejected by society. He eventually finds love and acceptance in the relationship with the heroine, but social reintegration is not always guaranteed. Furthermore, the military hero as a war veteran may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (independently, or in association with the physical scarring/impairment).

In 21st-century romance, depictions of socially isolated and rejected protagonists have diminished in frequency, and we may now see different representations of the military hero. Veronica Kitchen argues that such heroes are now presented as masculine by emphasizing their quest for control over body and mind, alongside typical traits associated with hegemonic masculinity. The military hero is forced to accept that he cannot protect everyone, that he is not invincible, and that he is compelled to come to terms with the consequences of war, receive or practice forgiveness, and achieve social integration. Some

romance authors have fallen into the trap of not providing much detail regarding the hero's process of dealing with his physical and/or emotional trauma, which has led to the conclusion that the hero is magically healed through the power of the heroine's love. This has often been the result of the limitations of the plot, which focuses on the personal relationship between the two lovers, and the type of publication, which may not allow the development of other characters, as is the case with serialized novels written according to specific guidelines.

There are examples of popular romance novels where a significant amount of attention has been given to the portrayal of the hero in the process of actively dealing with their physical injuries and emotional pain, such as Mary Jo Putney's *The Bargain*, Lisa Keyphas' *Love in the Afternoon*, Tessa Dare's *When a Scot Ties the Knot* and *The Duchess Deal*, and Mimi Matthews' *The Lost Letter*, to name a few. The hero is portrayed as open to receiving support from others, which has led to the development of secondary male characters that function outside the typical one-dimensional roles of rivals, wingmen, or employees. Some heroes have already overcome trauma, and are actively involved in helping others deal with their difficulties, portrayal meant to emphasize that the hero is competent, honourable and worthy of respect, admiration and love, as depicted in Carla Kelly's *The Admiral's Penniless Bride*. This type of character development in a romance novel results in a particularly compelling story, as it not only reinforces the strength and resilience of the protagonist, but it emphasizes his vulnerability and humanity, adding depth and complexity to a set of traits which have become the norm in the direct characterization of romantic heroes. Regarding the military hero as a war veteran in popular romance fiction, Kitchen has performed an analysis of contemporary category romances from a dual perspective, that of romance fiction scholarship and security studies, concluding that "the narratives reflect and reinforce a new hegemonic masculinity in which heroic men are vulnerable, and maintain their hegemonic masculinity even in face of post-traumatic stress disorder" (17).

Unlike contemporary romance novels, in historical romance novels, the society is meticulously drawn and the authors typically explain its unfamiliar principles, as Pamela Regis argues (31). Authors such as Mary Jo Putney, Carla Kelly and Mary Balogh have used war-related historical events as background for love stories in which the protagonist is a war veteran (occasionally celebrated as a war hero) who is coping, or learning how to cope, with various traumas and disabilities. These protagonists are presented as desirable, masculine and appealing from the very beginning of the story (though they may not always be aware of their appeal), regardless of the physical, emotional or psychological difficulties they might be facing. Moreover, significant relationships, other than romantic ones, are represented in these stories.

As is typical for popular romantic fiction, war is not featured directly in the story, the events and battles taking place outside the pages of the novel; however, war is represented in flashbacks, it is referred to in dialogues (usually among male characters, as war is not considered a polite topic for conversation in female company, particularly in Regency romance), and it may be written about in correspondence. In Regency romance, the instances of violence most frequently referred to are the Battle of Waterloo (1815), the Siege of Badajoz (1812) and various other battles, skirmishes and ambushes pertaining to the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815). The protagonists have served as officers in various regiments (cavalry, infantry) or the navy, and may have been involved in espionage. Most frequently, these protagonists are of noble birth, they are younger sons or cousins; they may become heirs to an aristocratic title as the story progresses, or they unexpectedly inherit the title at the beginning of the novel, which eventually results in their selling out of the army. This decision often coincides with the acceptance of their feelings of love or duty (which will become love) for the heroine, as depicted in Anne Gracie's *Marry in Haste* and Mary Balogh's *Slightly Married* (2003).

Working with this narrative framework, best-selling Welsh-Canadian romance author Mary Balogh has written *The Survivors' Club* (2012-2016), a

series of seven novels which tell the story of six men and one woman, all physically or emotionally wounded during the Napoleonic Wars, who end up forming a tight bond while convalescing together at the Duke of Stanbrook's residence. While the seven stories are variations of the same two great themes, that of coping with trauma and that of finding love, all protagonists deal with unique circumstances which are resolved positively at the end of each book. Of interest to this paper are not the love stories central to each novel, but the overarching theme of the collection, that of solidarity among individuals facing a common struggle. As aforementioned, neither of the seven novels depicts war directly; however, war is constantly in the background, as five of the protagonists are former military officers, while beloved members of the families of the other two characters were direct casualties of war, having served as officers before their deaths. After the death of his son and heir, the Duke of Stanbrook has turned his Cornwall residence into a hospital of sorts for officers recovering from various battle-related wounds and emotional distress, leading to the seven protagonists being brought together.

As many other authors have also done, Mary Balogh infuses her historical setting with modern sensibilities, this being evident in the way the seven characters deal with injuries, war-related trauma and the stress of reintegration into a society unaware of the harrowing realities of war. Throughout the series of novels, the protagonists are depicted practising various techniques which are part of the ongoing process of coping with what is in effect post-traumatic stress disorder. Within the safety of this family-like community, they openly talk about their experiences, accepting each other's suffering unequivocally and openly declaring their mental state. Individually, they work on overcoming their feelings of survivor guilt, which they express openly during their annual meetings, they make plans and they press ahead with them, they talk about fears and the process of overcoming them, and they try to let go of control, which is most evident when they allow themselves to open up to new people and fall in love.

In the opening paragraphs of the Prologue to the first novel, *A Proposal* (Balogh 2012), the reader learns about the bond formed among the characters during their long period of recovery, and its significance for their now-independent lives. For Hugo Emes, Lord Trentham, three years after having recovered and returned to his life and responsibilities, the operative word is “trust”, as he views his fellow survivors strong, yet scarred, and able to be open about it only when together. This emphasizes the fact that the protagonists feel that they belong to an “us” group, differentiated from the rest of the upper-class society in which they move. For Hugo Emes, this is doubly valid, due to his middle-class origins and current social status, a decorated war hero titled as a reward for service. Furthermore, the kin-like bond uniting the members of the group is evidenced not only by the fact that they have embraced the name “Survivor’s Club”, but also by their decision to reunite yearly to reaffirm their friendship, to talk about progress made, and to offer mutual support if needed. Although all protagonists are living independently and are active individuals in society as a whole, the members of that society are perceived as “others”, with whom the protagonists have no ties or personal relationships. The perception of otherness includes actual members of the protagonists’ families, who have not shared the traumatic experience of war. For this reason, the attachment holding together the members of the Survivor’s Club also has the function of establishing a family-like community. Within this community, the members experience cohesion as a result of their common interest in finding meaning in life, of becoming once more whole as individuals.

The Arrangement (Balogh 2013) focuses on the youngest member of the Survivor’s Club, Vincent Hunt, Viscount Darleigh, who was blinded and suffered from temporary loss of hearing after a cannon blast went wrong during his first combat experience as a very young artillery officer. The Duke of Stanbrook is a father figure who was instrumental in his recovery, yet Balogh is particularly attentive to the representation of independence, as she does not allow for the Duke to become Vincent’s emotional crutch. Several years after the recovery of

his hearing, he remains completely blind and is frustrated that his mother and older sisters are overprotective and eager to see him married. He believes that in the minds of others, blindness equals being mentally feeble, and he is eager to prove the opposite and take charge of his life. More difficult for him is to assert himself when confronted with the excessive sympathetic care the female members of his family offer. While he has accepted his blindness, he is struggling with sudden panic attacks which he manages with deep breathing, a modern technique used to deal with PTSD symptoms. When necessary, Vincent receives support and assistance from other members of the Club, who approve of his decision to marry. The support he receives in his marriage allows Vincent to find his voice and to assert himself; additionally, his wife has the idea of training a dog to accompany Vincent, allowing him more independence of movement, a recurring motif in Balogh's collection.

Despite his disability, Vincent is never portrayed by Balogh as a lesser man, nor is Sir Benedict Harper in *The Escape* (Balogh 2014a). Ben had his legs crushed in battle and refused the treatment recommended in the field hospital—amputation. From the perspective of this protagonist, the Club members are brothers (and sisters), a bond forged through mutual aid and support during their long recovery. The novel begins with Ben's confession during one of the group's therapeutic sessions that, six years after having suffered his injuries, he is depressed due to the loss of his military career and his painful struggles to walk aided by canes. While he is still striving for independence, he is finally able to face the limitations of his body, to accept his disability, and he decides to use a wheelchair. He rejoices in other activities which facilitate mobility, such as riding and swimming. Having found new meaning in life beyond a military career, and having discovered new interests, Ben has an additional reason to be happy because he has also found love. Another protagonist who struggled with severe injuries is Flavian Arnott, Viscount Ponsonby, and *Only Enchanting* (Balogh 2014b) focuses on his personal journey and romantic relationship. Having suffered from a head injury, he returned from the Peninsula with an

inability to communicate, episodes of violence, and significant gaps in his memory; he is rescued by the Duke of Stanbrook from imminent confinement to an institution. As is the case with Benjamin, Flavian's family is not portrayed as particularly supportive, the role of providing familial support being fulfilled by the members of the Club, through their unwavering solidarity.

Within this family-like group, George Crabbe, Duke of Stanbrook is the father figure, as he is the one who got all protagonists together several years before the beginning of the first novel. At the beginning of the final novel in the series, *Only Beloved* (Balogh 2016), we learn that eight years have passed since he turned his country seat in Cornwall into a hospital and recovery centre for military officers severely wounded. Additional information for the overarching narrative is provided, such as the fact that he had involved himself directly in the selection process of the officers who would benefit from care under his supervision and that more than twenty-four had been treated in his hospital, most of whom had survived and returned to their families. Even though he had expected to only provide the space and funding for the hospital, leaving the care of the patients to the physician and nurses, he found himself actively involved in the process of healing, especially by listening and empathising with the convalescents. He is convinced that his involvement in the care of the patients had a beneficial effect on his sanity after the successive deaths of his son and wife.

At 48, the Duke is the oldest of the group, and due to his age, he is an unusual romantic hero. He had briefly served as a military officer in his youth, he has been a widower for 12 years, and he still mourns the death of his son. He has a good relationship with his heir presumptive, a happily-married younger cousin, and he is deeply attached to the other members of the Club; however, he is aware of a dogged feeling of loneliness which leads to his decision to remarry. The Epilogue to *Only Beloved* shows the members of the Survivors' Club reunited three years after the conclusion of the final story, joined by their spouses and numerous young children. It is during this gathering that George

points out to his wife the fact that the seven survivors have not recently had their customary sessions to discuss their progress, setbacks and triumphs, as they had no longer been necessary, implying that each member has found meaning and complete fulfilment in their marriages and lives.

In conclusion, throughout her collection, Mary Balogh reaffirms the fact that despite being independent individuals, each with different personal histories, their shared experience of war and current circumstances call for solidarity in the face of a common struggle. While the characters do not face direct opposition from other individuals or society as a whole, they are helpless and isolated from others due to the nature of their war-related experiences, which have resulted in physical and emotional traumas. They are all misunderstood by unwitting family members, who are unable to empathize, as the war fought in the Peninsula was a distant reality for British people on the homefront.

The bond which forms during the convalescence period endured by the characters is strong and it persists over the years, as each protagonist achieves their goals and finds romantic fulfilment. The solidary feelings do not interfere with their common quest for independence and overcoming trauma. The opposite is true, as belonging to the group entails mutual support in the pursuit of their individual goals. Throughout the seven novels, the protagonists make appearances in each other's stories, either as characters providing aid and support when necessary or as part of the protagonist's reminiscences. In addition, despite the fact that the seven characters are awarded their private time together as a distinct group during gatherings, all spouses are immediately accepted and absorbed in the group. In this respect, solidarity among all protagonists results in their integration into the upper-class society of Balogh's reimagined past. Noteworthy is the fact that, unlike many other romances, the *Survivor's Club* collection portrays the fraternal relationship among the protagonists as instrumental in their successful reintegration, with the romantic relationship developing only after each protagonist has achieved some progress in their quest for regaining control over their minds and bodies.

Ultimately, what each protagonist achieves is not only romantic fulfilment and independent existence as a productive member of society, but they find liberation, which is a direct outcome of the solidary support experienced within the Survivor's Club.

Unfortunately, there is a limitation on Balogh's great theme of finding liberation through solidarity binding a group of individuals who share a common struggle, and that limitation is imposed by a typical trait of Regency romance: it usually deals with the upper-class society. While Balogh positively represents such meaningful relationships, conducive to healing and finding fulfilment, taking precedence over romantic relationships, the group is by default highly exclusive. The Duke of Stanbrook carefully selects each officer based on recommendations, and while the care provided by his medical staff has helped over twenty-four officers, the implication is that a great number of other men were deemed unworthy of this superior care, considering that wars are fought by common soldiers. Be that as it may, the representation of military heroes as men who deal with all sorts of physical and emotional problems post-combat, resolved in a satisfying manner through personal effort and determination, and with solidary support from those who share the same struggles, is not without merits. It is particularly impressive in popular romantic fiction, seeing that during the protagonists' quests for control over mind and body, the solidary relationships take precedence over the romantic relationships, which can become a possibility only when the protagonists have already reached a certain point in the healing process.

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Abstract

The current status of popular romance fiction in academia is characterized by ambivalence; while dismissed and ridiculed by many, it has also been the object of scholarly study for the past four decades. Much has been written about it, although not

always from an unbiased perspective, and some studies have generalized about the genre based on inadequate samples, as Regis (2011) argued. Scholars are showing an ever-growing interest in the genre and its diverse manifestations. This paper focuses on a specific subgenre of popular romantic fiction; I briefly describe the characteristics of historical romance fiction, with the subset known as Regency romance, and the romantic hero as focal points of my review. Within this particular type of narrative, the role and characteristics of the military hero as a war veteran in romantic fiction are touched upon, with a more detailed analysis of the military hero represented in Mary Balogh's collection of novels, *Survivor's Club* (2012-2016). Moreover, I argue that Balogh's military protagonists are portrayed as masculine, competent, and worthy of respect and love, while adjusting to life with physical disability and/or coping with emotional trauma.

The purpose of such an analysis is to prove that popular romantic fiction allows the depiction of meaningful relationships among characters other than the two romantic protagonists. I argue that the courtship plot typical for romance fiction is not prohibitive, and non-romantic relationships may be portrayed with depth and purpose, complementary to the development of the romantic relationship. Furthermore, in Balogh's novels, solidarity manifested in kin-like relationships is shown to be fundamental in the process of overcoming the trauma of war. This demonstrates that popular romantic fiction is not a limited genre in which all stories are alike: even when a courtship is a central plot, there is yet much to be explored within the pages of a romance novel.

Obecny status popularnych romansów w środowisku akademickim charakteryzuje się ambiwalencją; choć odrzucany i wyśmiewany przez niektórych, gatunek ten przez ostatnie cztery dekady był również przedmiotem badań naukowych. Wiele na jego temat napisano, choć nie zawsze z bezstronnej perspektywy—zaś niektóre uogólnienia dotyczące romansu sformułowane zostały na podstawie nieodpowiednio dobranych przykładów, jak argumentowała Regis (2011). Obecnie uczeni wykazują coraz większe zainteresowanie tym gatunkiem i jego różnorodnymi formami. Niniejszy artykuł skupia się na konkretnym podgatunku popularnej powieści romantycznej, którym jest romans regencyjny. W artykule pokrótce opisuję cechy romansu historycznego, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem romansu regencyjnego i konstrukcji bohatera romantycznego. W ramach tego typu narracji omówione zostają cechy i rola bohaterów związanych z wojskowością, a w szczególności postaci weterana wojennego, z bardziej szczegółową analizą tego typu postaci reprezentowanego w cyklu powieści Mary Balogh *Survivor's Club* (2012-2016). W swym artykule wykazuję, że wojskowi bohaterowie Balogh są przedstawiani jako mężczyźni, kompetentni i godni szacunku i miłości, nawet gdy zmagają się z niepełnosprawnością fizyczną i / lub traumą emocjonalną.

Celem mojej analizy jest udowodnienie, że popularna fikcja romantyczna pozwala na przedstawienie istotnych relacji między postaciami wykraczających poza wątek rozgrywający się pomiędzy romantyczną parą. Twierdzę, że fabuła osnuta wokół

zalotów typowa dla romansów nie wyklucza możliwości rozbudowania wątków pobocznych, a związki nieromantyczne mogą być przedstawiane z głębią i służyć ważnym celom, uzupełniającym rozwój związku romantycznego. Co więcej, w powieściach Balogh solidarność przejawiająca się w relacjach nieromantycznych okazuje się niezbędnym etapem procesu przezwyciężania powojennej traumy. Stąd wniosek, że popularna fikcja romantyczna nie jest ograniczonym gatunkiem, w którym wszystkie historie są do siebie podobne: nawet jeśli głównym wątkiem są zaloty, na kartach powieści romantycznej jest jeszcze wiele do odkrycia.

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