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Romanticising the Suffragette: Historical Romances and the Commodification of the Cause[1]

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ABSTRACT:

In this article, I discuss three historical romance novels, Katie MacAlister's Suffragette in the City (2011), Courtney Milan's The Suffragette Scandal (2014), *and* Evie Dunmore's A Rogue of One's Own (2020). *Based on their similar traits re-*

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garding characterisation, plot, and outcome, these works can be said to form a specific subgenre of historical romance, for which I propose the label "Suffragette Historical Romances" (Ripoll-Fonollar, 2024). I first explore these romances departing from the recurrent narrative conventions Pamela Regis (2003) associates with the genre, the most distinguishable of which is what she defines as the "barrier": what prevents the union between hero and heroine (14). What makes these novels unique, I argue, is that they present the protagonist's role as a suffragist or suffragette as the obstacle to the happy resolution of the love story. Consequently, the happy ending can only arrive when the heroine decides to renounce her activism. I, then, focus on how these romances are impregnated by the "postfeminist sensibility" Rosalind Gill ascribes to postfeminist narratives (2007), as they paradoxically illustrate the simultaneous incorporation and repudiation of feminist values. I ultimately argue the suffrage campaign serves here to promote a postfeminist ideology according to which feminism has succeeded and, thus, is presented as important, yet no longer relevant.
KEYWORDS: *suffragette; historical romance; "the barrier"; "postfeminist sensibility"; commodification.*

Idealización de las sufragistas: romances históricos y la mercantilización de la causa

RESUMEN:

En este artículo, analizo tres novelas de romance histórico: Suffragette in the City de Katie MacAlister (2011), The Suffragette Scandal de Courtney Milan (2014) *y* A Rogue of One's Own de Evie Dunmore (2020). *Basándome en sus características similares en cuanto a caracterización, trama y desenlace, se puede decir que estas obras forman un subgénero específico de romance histórico, al que propongo llamar "Suffragette Historical Romance" (Ripoll-Fonollar, 2024). Primero, exploro estos romances partiendo de las convenciones narrativas recurrentes que Pamela Regis (2003) asocia con el género, la más distinguible de las cuales es lo que ella define como la "barrera": aquello que impide la unión entre el héroe y la heroína (14). Argumento que lo que hace únicas a estas novelas es que presentan el papel de la protagonista como sufragista o* suffragette *como la barrera que impide la resolución positiva de la historia de amor. En consecuencia, el final feliz solo puede llegar cuando la heroína decide renunciar a su activismo. A continuación, me centro en cómo estos romances contemporáneos están impregnados de la "sensibilidad postfeminista" que Rosalind Gill atribuye a las*

narrativas postfeministas (2007) debido a su paradójica y simultánea incorporación y repulsa de los valores feministas. Finalmente, sostengo que el movimiento sufragista se utiliza aquí para promover una ideología postfeminista según la cual el feminismo ha conseguido sus objetivos y, como resultado, se presenta como importante, pero ya no necesario.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *sufragista; romance histórico; "barrera"; "sensibilidad postfeminista"; mercantilización.*

This article focuses on a corpus of popular historical romances which feature suffragettes as romantic heroines and, by extension, romanticise the suffragette movement, shadowing its accomplishments in favour of the romance plot.[2] The marketable potential of the suffrage movement and the suffragette is not a phenomenon of the present, nor is the connection between women's suffrage and romance. One of the clearest instances of the marketability of this historical figure are the nineteenth-century American and British Valentine cards featuring suffragists and suffragettes. Most of these were the so-called Vinegar Valentines, which substituted romantic words and images for caricatures and offensive messages (Örebro University Publications, 2021). These anti-romantic products originated in the 1840s in North America but rapidly reached Britain coinciding with the outburst of the women's campaign at the end of the Victorian period (Zarrelli, 2017). One of these Vinegar Valentines included the message: "To a suffragette Valentine, Your vote from me you will not get, I don't want a preaching suffragette" (Örebro University Publications, 2021). Another card portraying a girl sewing read: "Woman's sphere is in the home" (The Protected

[2] The aim of this article is to complement and expand my analysis of contemporary historical romances offering suffragist and suffragette protagonists developed in the chapter "Suffragette Historical Romances: Re-Purposing Women's Suffrage in a Postfeminist Context", included in the volume *Conflict and Colonialism in 21st Century Romantic Historical Fiction: Repairing the Past, Repurposing History* (2024), edited by Hsu-Ming Teo and Paloma Fresno-Calleja.

Art Archive, 2017). Pro-suffragists responded to these products through the same means. One example depicted a girl wearing a "Votes for Women" sash with the inscription "Love me, Love my vote" (Herr 2020). In another instance a girl appeared giving her back to a boy and the caption: "I may look like a demure little miss. But this I'll say, No vote, no kiss" (The Protected Art Archive, 2017). While these cards combated prejudices and stereotypes of suffragists and suffragettes as unattractive, sexless, and non-romantic, they continued to ascribe them to a heterosexual romantic regime.

Such products were not unique in employing the commercial potential of romantic love to promote the suffrage cause. Many suffragist and suffragette[3] authors in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras produced romantic stories revolving around women's suffrage and took advantage of the popularity of the genre to disseminate their ideas. Some suffragette novels were launched by the same publishing houses as Mills & Boon romances, a company founded in 1908 that published suffrage works prior to its specialisation in paperback romances (Park, 1996: 453-455). These suffragette fictional works were thus com-

[3] The term "suffragette" was first coined in 1906 by the *Daily Mail* to distinguish WSPU's members from the suffragists belonging to the NUWSS and other suffrage societies following more peaceful or non-militant approaches (Nym Mayhall, 2003: 40). Thus, it referred specifically and exclusively to women in the ranks of the WSPU, whereas the label "suffragist" was reserved to both women and men fighting for their right to vote, not only in the UK but worldwide (Roberts, 2018: 36). Replacing the ending "-ist" with "-ette" was not meant to be complimentary (Adams, 2014: 43; Gullickson, 2008: 464), but quite the opposite, since the suffix "-ette" was used to imply something was small, insignificant, false, and inferior (Roberts, 2018: 36). Nevertheless, the term was appropriated by WSPU's associates as "a badge of honour" (Boase, 2018: 158), as they were interested in distinguishing themselves from other suffrage societies. In contrast with their suffragist counterparts who wanted the vote, the suffragettes claimed their intention to actually "get" it (Moore, 2018: 423; Roberts, 2018: 26).

modified and clearly influenced by the market from the beginning (457).

Contemporary historical romance authors similarly exploit the marketable value of suffragettes and include them as characters in their novels to attract contemporary audiences to what ultimately becomes a conventional romantic story. Suffragette and suffragist protagonists started to appear in the 1990s in both British and American historical romances, but their presence increased exponentially from 2000 onwards, specifically in the 2010s due to the upcoming 2018's and 2020s' centennial celebrations of enfranchisement for some British and American women, respectively. Amongst these titles there are: Rhys Bowen's *In a Gilded Cage* (2009), Margaret Dickinson's *Suffragette Girl* (2009), Sandra Robbins' *A Lady's Choice* (2013), Linda Gilman's *The Suffragette Takes a Husband* (2016), Diana Forbes' *Mistress Suffragette* (2017), Judith Barrow's *A Hundred Tiny Threads* (2018), and Dunmore's *Bringing Down the Duke* (2019), the first book of her series The League of Extraordinary Women. In this article I discuss other three recent examples of historical romances featuring suffragette or suffragist heroines: Milan's *The Suffragette Scandal* (2014), MacAlister's *Suffragette in the City* (2011), and Dunmore's *A Rogue of One's Own* (2020).[4] I discuss these novels as illustrative of a corpus of contemporary historical romances in which the Cause is initially presented as a battleground for political independence and liberation, but later becomes a battlefield for romantic conquest.

But what prompted contemporary romance authors to use suffragette heroines? Such a choice reflects the evolution of the genre in the last decades. Since the 1990s, romances have diversified to include new perspectives and political inflections in connection to sexual, racial, ethnic or national concerns, deriving into the emergence of specific subgenres (Kamblé et al., 2021: 13-15). Romance novels have also expanded to include topics ranging from disability to ageism, from capitalism to consumerist

[4] From now on, these novels will be respectively referenced as *TSS*, *SIC*, *ROO*.

practices and, thus, have been forced to rethink the features of their heroes and heroines (Teo, 2018: 16-17). In her discussion of historical romance novels Sarah Ficke refers to an increasingly diverse array of characters which include

> vibrant suffragettes, Jewish con artists, gender-queer dukes, formerly enslaved businessmen, disillusioned cowboys, disabled soldiers, gun-running revolutionaries, brilliant inventors, pragmatic courtesans, entrepreneurs, spies, lesbian bootleggers, God-fearing ministers, and many, many other characters that highlight the breadth and depth of human experience. (2021: 131)

Contemporary authors featuring suffragette and suffragist heroines reflect historical romances' diversification and allow authors to bring (post)feminist discussions into the genre by casting an empowered and rebellious protagonist potentially more appealing to twenty-first-century readers than the "charming misses" (Ficke, 2021: 131) that tended to populate and are still found in many of these romances. The novels I discuss feature empowered and autonomous protagonists who, at first, endeavour to achieve equal rights with men, but eventually abandon the fight altogether, prioritizing the consolidation of their romantic relationships over their emancipation as political subjects and their advancement in the public sphere. The "happily ever after" required by the genre thus works to diminish the impact of the heroine's political achievement and, as I will argue, turns these novels into accurate reflections of a postfeminist sensibility in which feminist and anti-feminist values seem to coexist (Gill, 2007: 149).

A brief summary of the novels shows how the heroines abandon suffrage for marriage or love. *Suffragette in the City* opens with Casandra chained to a park fence with her fellow suffragette protesters at London's Holland Park. There she meets Edward Griffin and, despite his rejection of women's suffrage, falls in love with him while gradually losing interest in the Cause to the ex-

tent that she opposes militant tactics and eventually abandons the fight entirely to please her future husband. *A Rogue of One's Own* introduces Lucie as the leader of the suffragist movement in Oxford during the 1880s. She aims to publish articles about women's rights, but her goals are threatened once her old friend from childhood, Lord Tristan Ballantine, becomes a co-owner in her printing press. Following the typical "enemy-to-lovers" plots, Lucie sets suffrage aside and is ultimately rewarded with her betrothal to the hero. Set in Cambridgeshire in 1877, *The Suffragette Scandal* opens with the meeting between the rogue Edward Clark, and the suffragette and pro-suffrage newspaper owner Frederica Marshall, also known as "Free". Although hero and heroine dislike each other due to their different opinions on women's rights, they become allies to fight their common enemy, Edward's brother, and eventually develop a relationship which leads them to the "happily ever after". In the three cases, then, the protagonists end up relegating the Cause to a secondary position or abandoning the fight altogether to consolidate their romances.

Just as historical romance is considered a genre in itself because of the recurrence of plot devices and characters (Hughes, 2005: 2), romances that centre around the fight for women's rights and feature a suffragette can be regarded as a specific subgenre for which I somewhere else proposed the term "suffragette historical romance" [5], henceforth SHR (Ripoll-Fonollar, 2024: 116). Novels such as *A Rogue of One's Own*, *Suffragette in the City*, and *The Suffragette Scandal* share many of the conventions of historical romances but can arguably be considered a self-contained subgenre since in all of them the love story takes place in the context of women's enfranchisement. The different shared

[5] As far as I know, the only usage of this term appears in *Daughters of a Nation* (2016), a collection of four romantic short stories set in the context of American women's suffrage described in its cover as a "Black Suffragette Historical Romance Anthology". The term, however, is used in a purely descriptive way and has not been previously theorised.

traits found in such works explain the labelling of SHR as a new micro genre to refer to romances featuring suffragist/suffragette protagonists. Novels belonging to this subset of historical romances are set in a key city for the Cause such as London, and their timespan covers from the 1880s to the 1930s. SHRs typically focus on a heterosexual love story, which at times extends to the courtship between peripheral characters occurring in tandem with the central romance. Although the sexual content and explicitness of the novels vary, they all include references to sex, which beyond being a recurrent element in recent historical romances is here associated with women's empowerment and rebellion (Cooper and Short, 2012: 9; Wallace, 2005: 154), attributes typically related to the suffragettes.

Based on their emphasis on romance, their representation of women's emancipation, and their resolution, SHRs corroborate Cockin's claim that a few recent British fictional works deploy suffragettes and First-Wave Feminist principles with anti-feminist or postfeminist aims (2004: 20).[6] Therefore, I read SHRs as texts characterised by the contradictions Gill ascribes to the postfeminist sensibility which permeates contemporary popular literary and media narratives since the 1990s insofar as they both integrate and deny feminist premises.[7] In the vein of other post-

[6] There are other contemporary novels that differ from SHRs for they do not exhibit postfeminist tenets but instead recover and deploy the women's suffrage movement and its main icons with commemorative aims. Some examples include Ajay Close's *A Petrol Scented Spring* (2015), Fiona Graph's *Things That Bounded* (2021), Jon Walter's *Nevertheless She Persisted* (2018), Lissa Evans' *Old Baggage* (2018), Lucy Ribchester's *The Hourglass Factory* (2015), and Tracy Chevalier's *Falling Angels* (2001). These titles also take advantage of the marketable value of the suffragette but rather than commodifying the quintessential feminist icon, they go back to the women's suffrage campaign to reclaim the essence of feminism, remind readers that equality has not been achieved and, thus, promote the importance to keep fighting.

[7] The first instances of such narratives emerged in 1996 with chick lit titles such as Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City*.

feminist fictions, SHRs do not specifically oppose feminism or disregard its achievements, but rather underestimate the movement assuming it has already accomplished its main goals and, as a result, present it as irrelevant and outdated (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 5). SHRs reflect and promote a postfeminist ideology for they ultimately present feminism as superfluous through the tropes of liberation and election (McRobbie, 2004: 255), thus implying feminist claims are no longer necessary.

In the first section, I discuss the basis of the SHR formula by focusing on the protagonists and their role as suffragettes/suffragists. To define the heroines' main features, I compare the suffragettes depicted in these contemporary historical romances to the New Woman ideal that emerged at the end of the nineteenth-century. Complementarily, I trace the heroines' evolution from suffrage to romance by resorting to the recurrent components that Pamela Regis associates with the romance story: the presentation of a flawed society to be reformed by the union of the lovers; the hero and heroine's meeting and subsequent attraction; the barrier that hinders their relation; the point in which a happily-ever-after ending seems unfeasible because the heroine is literally or metaphorically in danger; the moment of recognition that allows the protagonists to overcome the obstacle; the mutual declaration of love between hero and heroine, and their engagement (2003: 14). My contention is that in SHRs the barrier does not emerge externally after the hero and heroine's meeting, as it is common in the genre. Rather, it is the heroine's implication in the Cause that is presented as the main obstacle to the romance. The protagonists' decision to surpass the barrier by rejecting their statuses as suffragists and suffragettes to facilitate their betrothal reflects the tensions between feminism and hegemonic constructions of romantic love (Mussel, 1984: 146-147;

Since their publication, novels of the kind have proliferated not only in North America but also worldwide, leading to a wide-ranging body of global chick lit (Gill, 2007: 148; Harzewski, 2011: 18; Tasker and Negra, 2007: 11-13).

Regis, 2003: 3-4). Women's activism and their pursuit of political emancipation are perceived as incompatible with their development of and quest for romance, which confirms SHRs can be read as further examples of the expanding body of postfeminist popular and media narratives.

The second section analyses the novels against Rosalind Gill's notion of postfeminist sensibility (2007) to further explore how SHRs simultaneously incorporate and challenge feminist icons and ideals**.** These contemporary works return to Victorian and Edwardian novels but frame their readings in a context dominated by both the marketing of feminism and the advent of postfeminism. To illustrate SHRs' postfeminist nature, I shall concentrate on the similarities and differences between these contemporary historical romances and New Woman Fiction – henceforward NWF – published in the 1890s. I will also establish connections between SHRs and the romances written between 1903 and 1928, against the backdrop of the British women's suffrage movement. These links will allow me to re-examine the heroines' progression and outcome in light of both suffragette fiction (written by the members of the campaign) and the fictions of suffrage (published by authors non-related to the movement who nonetheless resorted to the Cause to serve their interests), both of which Joannou categorises as "collective fantasies", a term ascribed to the romance genre itself (Modleski, 2007: 132; Radway, 1984: 97). In this respect, I argue that Milan, MacAlister and Dunmore appear to model their protagonists after the prototypes of New Woman and suffragette fiction but eventually offer resolutions which are paradoxically similar to the anti-feminist New Woman novels or to the negative portrayals offered by the early twentieth-century fictions of suffrage. This would prove my main point that SHRs appropriate and ultimately commodify the suffragist/suffragette figure to fit with a context of publication traversed by postfeminist ideas and contradictory understandings of the feminist movement.

From New Women to Flawed Heroines: Overcoming the Suffrage Barrier

The heroine's characterisation as an activist involved in the suffrage movement is the key trait of SHRs. The novels begin describing the protagonists' political activism, their reluctance to motherhood and wifehood, and their preference for more numerous affective and sexual relationships. The heroines' initial aversion to falling in love is common in recent romantic narratives (Roach, 2016: 90) but also reminiscent of the New Woman's attitudes displayed in novels published from the end of the nineteenth century (Ardis, 1900: 1-3; Ledger, 1997: 12). In fact, the suffragette has been considered the "Edwardian relative" of the Victorian New Woman (Heilmann, 2000: 13) because the feminist premises of this literary archetype crucially inspired suffragette activism (23).

As the true embodiment of the New Woman, the protagonists of these SHRs are stereotypically represented as manlike and often seen as tomboys. Frederica, or "Free", as she is commonly called, is introduced as a "particular woman" for her masculine way of dressing: she wears a jacket with "a decidedly mannish flair to it – strong lines, military braid at the cuffs, and epaulettes at the shoulders", "a man's bower hat", and "a length of fabric […] knotted around her neck in a fair imitation of a cravat" (*TSS*, 7). Lucie is also depicted as a "rare creature" (*ROO*, 38), and her appearance is considered "unladylike" (*ROO*, 40), as she is dressed in "boots and breeches like a boy", and rides astride (*ROO*, 5). Casandra also dresses in accordance with New Woman standards because she wears hats and bloomers, adding shirtwaists, walking skirts, and suits to her wardrobe.

Despite the heroines' unfeminine looks, and what is presented as their exotic and strange way of dressing, the writers emphasise the protagonists' wish for femininity and reveal their concern with dressing fashionably. These preoccupations echo Pankhurst's insistence on the need for suffragettes to dress beautifully, since women's appearance and attire were perceived at

the time as tools to announce their respectability and, by extension, to ensure the achievement of their political goals. This idea is reflected in *A Rogue of One's Own* when an upper-class suffragist tells Lucie that a lovely appearance "confuses the demagogues" (*ROO*, 37). Lucie acknowledges "that fashion's allure is a weapon of sorts in a lady's hand" (ROO, 44) and buys a new collection of dresses to emphasise her "demureness and gracefulness" (*ROO*, 100).

Even if the heroines are concerned with fashion and femininity, they still represent the Victorian archetype because they are portrayed as the "wild" New Woman figure who neglects marriage and vehemently requests her political rights (Ledger, 1997: 12). Lucie is presented as an "independent woman […] with a modest but secure income" (*ROO*, 38) and is said to be "wary of men" (*ROO*, 126). Her unruly character is ascribed to her masculine nature and her rejection of wedlock, and her thirst for political rights results in her consequent participation in marches and strikes. Lucie's thoughts are centred on her cat, Boudicca, her campaign in favour of the Married Women's Property Act;[8] and her willingness to own part of the *London Print*, the newspaper which serves as a platform to disseminate the goals of the movement. As her nickname suggests, Free is introduced as an empowered woman fighting for women's emancipation. She is seen as a troublesome subject, in the words of Edward's brother James, as "the prime example of everything that is wrong with England […]. Beholden to no man, putting her nose in where it's not needed, setting wife against husband, servant against master" (*TSS*, 22-23). Casandra presents herself as a rebellious New Woman. While protesting for the Cause, a woman refers to her shameful "unwomanly conduct" (*TSS*, 10), as other people from

[8] An improved version of the 1870 Married Women's Property Act was ratified in 1882. Both undermined the legal notion of *couverture,* which stated that the properties of a married woman belonged to her husband, thus granting women the right to manage their own assets (D'Cruze, 1995: 65).

the crowd jeer at her and her comrades for living inappropriate lives and trying to "wear trousers, smoke pipes and run the government" (*TSS*, 26). Griffins' family also condemns the "anarchistic suffrage gatherings" in which Casandra participates and accuses her and other "rough women" (*TSS*, 59) of having corrupted Griffins' sister, Helena, by involving her in the suffrage movement. Casandra is also referred to as "the epitome of the New Woman" (*SIC* 44) for her empowered position and behaviour with men. She indeed displays the New Woman's agency and liberating attitude towards sex, reflected in her references to animals copulating freely in the fields, which she uses to express her wish to do the same and to convey her defence of free sexual relationships. After meeting Griffin, Casandra reiterates her efforts to "look like a worldly New Woman" (*SIC*, 78) and affirms that "as a New Woman, [she] could not resist toying with him a little longer" (*SIC*, 74).

Given their unorthodox choices, attitudes, and beliefs, SHRs' heroines experience an inner battle to resolve the tension between the personal and the political. Unlike romance novels, which highlight the flawed nature in which the lovers meet and live, SHRs locate the flaw in the protagonists themselves. Even before the hero and heroine's first encounter, the protagonist's position as a suffragist or suffragette foreshadows the existence of this internal barrier, which is defined as all that prevents the relationship between the male and female protagonists (Regis, 2003:14). These contemporary romances, then, fuse two of Regis' narrative elements – the definition of society and the barrier – into one since they present an inherently corrupt heroine accountable for obstructing the romance, and who hence needs to be reformed. As an alternative to romances' attempt to transform the hero's behaviour and attitudes toward the heroine, or society as whole, reforming the female protagonist seems to be the easiest way to solve the incompatibility between women's roles in the public and private realms. These works then pledge a happy ending for the love story by presenting the suffragists

and/or suffragettes' flaw as easily erasable: the heroines choose to abandon their (active) role as members of the Cause and enter the realms of wifehood and potential motherhood. Thus, the internal war waged by the heroine becomes the central and most distinguishing feature of SHRs.

The heroines' implication with the Cause becomes apparent as the novels unfold and suggests they neither have the interest nor the time to devote to a relationship. *Suffragette in the City* opens with the suffragettes' rallying cry "Votes for Women" and Casandra's participation in a protest. *The Suffragette Scandal* and *A Rogue of One's Own* present their heroines as interested and implicated in the suffrage movement since both own a printing press which publishes articles in favour of women's emancipation. Free's and Lucie's choice of profession reveals the potential of writing and the contribution of the press to the Cause. The protagonists initially reject any kind of formal engagement with a man and, because of their defiant character and behaviour, constitute the opposite image of the prototypical female character considered appealing to men and suitable for marriage. Casandra's cousin, for instance, proposes to her intending to save her from being "unloved, unwanted, [and from] moving from relation to relation in the fruitless quest for a home" (*SIC*, 65). The heroines' reluctance to marry is based on their firm convictions and has nothing to do with their physical appearance. In fact, the three of them are described as beautiful and attractive and thus unrelated to the prototypical stereotypes of the ugly, mad, angry or undesirable suffragette that proliferated at the time. Casandra's appearance calls Griffin's attention from the very first moment he sees her protesting with the suffragettes. The other heroes also show attraction for the heroines from the beginning of the novels. Edward is described as Free's satellite, which proves her power of seduction over him, and tells Free she is "maddeningly beautiful, brilliant [and] perfectly seized" (*TSS*, 202). Lucie's beauty is hyperbolically described by Tristan, who is unable to divert his eyes from her: "was she real? Her

face. . . was perfect. Delicate and heart-shaped, with fine, winged eyebrows and an obstinate, pointy little chin. *A fairy*" (*ROO*, 5).

Free, Lucie, and Casandra are, thus, not married or engaged because of a rebelliousness which, according to the mentality of the time, must be controlled. Casandra's friend, Robert, for instance, tells her that what complicates her relationship with Griffin is her stubbornness, once again relating the heroine's flaw to her character. Robert's implied message is that Casandra needs to change her attitude for the romance to progress. In *A Rogue of One's Own* there are also references to Lucie's need to be restored: "women like her are rebellious because men are too timid with them. They desperately crave a firm hand and a firm prick to keep them in their place, so the more you kowtow to them, the more hysterical they become" (195). The same idea is implied in *The Suffragette Scandal* when Edward's brother sees Free as a threat to patriarchal institutions such as marriage.

The heroine's fight for suffrage is, therefore, seen as her inner fault from the start, as what impedes the protagonist to establish a relation with the hero. Yet, the tension between the protagonists' activist careers and their potential transformation into one half of the conventional romantic couple most clearly emerges during the lovers' meeting. A relation between Casandra and Griffin seems to be impracticable because from the beginning he repudiates Casandra's role as a suffragette, arguing that she ought to be "waltzing with a suitor rather than chaining [herself] to a fence" (*SIC*, 16). Edward and Tristan realise Free's and Lucie's thoughts are exclusively focused on the women's movement, which poses a threat to their potential romances as the protagonists are not apparently interested in a relationship.

Lucie, Free, and Casandra all seem hesitant to seek love. But their initial reluctance does not depend on traumas from the past or on their current mood; it is simply a result of their ideology. Nevertheless, the heroine's initial aversion to men and, more precisely, to commitment, eventually turns into an appetite for romance. The novels then reiterate one of the conventions

of the romance genre, the one that "keeps the heroine and hero involved long enough to surmount the barrier" (Regis, 2003: 33). Rather than falling in love at first sight, the heroines cultivate a gradual affection for the heroes. This seems to be a more credible and appropriate outcome for SHRs' protagonists given their initial rejection of marriage. Friendship is the root of attraction in *A Rogue of One's Own* since Tristan has long been fond of Lucie and makes multiple marriage proposals to prove his feelings and intentions. Despite knowing the hero since childhood, Lucie does not feel any affection for Tristan but, after she reacquaints with him, her feelings progressively change and she even fantasies about a "partially nude Tristan Ballentine" (*ROO*, 47). Casandra's and Free's attraction for Griffin and Edward initially derives from the heroes' sexual appeal and the chemistry that exists between them. Casandra tells Griffin she is not looking for a fiancé because she prefers to have affairs with different men. However, she demonstrates she only has eyes for him when confessing "[her] mind wandered pathways that involved his bare flesh under [her] hands, [her] breasts growing heavy as the overwhelming desire to be pressed up against him" (*SIC*, 77). Free, who initially does not show any interest in men, has mixed feelings towards Edward because she sees him as a distraction from the Cause, but enjoys her sexual experiences with him and repeatedly expresses her thirst for more.

Thence, the hero is responsible for "taming" the "wild" heroines as their reformations and political involution start after meeting the heroes, thus reversing the traditional romance tropes in which the fault is normally found in the male protagonist, and the female one is in charge of educating him sentimentally (Roach, 2016: 182). The heroes' influence on the protagonists is evident in that the heroines end up betrothed to them despite their initial reluctance to marry. To justify and make such a drastic change plausible, the main characters must have attractive features. Following the conventional depictions of romantic heroes, Griffin, Edward, and Tristan are portrayed as good-looking

men of high social status, and more (sexually) experienced than the heroines (Mussel, 1984: 117; Roach, 2016: 57). The latter is especially highlighted in MacAlister's novel when Casandra admits her lack of familiarity with sex "[claiming that there are bits of her] personal parts, tingly parts that had developed an intense interest in learning all about them with Griffin" (*SIC*, 77). While the heroes are associated with experience and reason, the heroines are more closely related to radicalism and madness, traits the conservatives and anti-feminists of the *fin de siècle* identified in the character of the New Woman. Thus, the male figure is presented as a guide and a protector for the female protagonist.

The heroes initially disagree with, or openly reject, the heroines' commitment to suffrage, or at least the way they choose to express it. Edward declares he is not against women's suffrage but tells Free it is a waste of time "to spend [her] entire life fighting for gains that will be lost in political bickering ten years after they've been achieved" (*TSS*, 11). Even if Tristan does not express his direct opposition to women's suffrage, his posture becomes clear when he claims he sees "radical women's politics" as a threat to his business, the printing press he co-owns with Lucie (*ROO*, 89). Griffin, on the other hand, is more hostile to Casandra's involvement in the Cause for he argues the feminine mind has no sense of rationality and dismisses his sister's and Casandra's participation in the suffrage movement. Exhibiting prototypical patriarchal conducts of protection and control, Griffin often escorts them to the events they attend. Yet, his sister's devotion to Casandra makes him more tolerant towards their participation in suffrage gatherings. Such a change in attitude serves as an example of the heroes' evolution, as they all become more understanding and caring in the end. It is precisely the patience, empathy, and encouragement offered by the heroes in crucial moments that leads Free, Lucie, and Casandra to change their minds towards them, and consequently towards engagement.

The protagonists ultimately realise their love for the hero, and this typically occurs after "the point of ritual death", a moment in

which the protagonist is literally or metaphorically under threat (Regis, 2003: 15). Casandra and Free face real danger after participating in a suffragette militant event, after which they are sent to prison. Once there, their life is at risk; this is especially true of Casandra, who is brutally forced-fed. Lucie is also threatened but in a more indirect or symbolic way. Her status as a suffragist leader perils after she publicly declares she has had an affair with Tristan outside wedlock; Lucie intends to impede Tristan from unwillingly consolidating his arranged marriage and her confession places her in danger. At this point, a happy-ever-after ending seems inconceivable for the heroines.

Yet, the hero is the one in charge of rekindling hope in their union. Following the genre's conventions, Griffin and Edward embody the figure of the male rescuer who intervenes to save the heroines, because they set the protagonists free from jail. Free and Casandra are grateful for their taking control of the situation. Thus, despite the strength and autonomy of their romance heroines, Milan and MacAlister reinforce "Victorian pronouncements on the inevitable weakness and dependence of the female" (Cunningham, 1973: 179). Lucie's situation is different because she is the one who rescues Tristan from the imprisonment that his arranged marriage would have triggered to. Nonetheless, in the same vein as the other authors, Dunmore portrays Lucie as weak and dependent because she demonstrates she is willing to sacrifice her role as a suffragist for a man, which anticipates the fact that Tristan will become her priority. That heroines generally end up in prison after engaging in suffragette deeds and are rescued by the heroes presents suffrage as punishing and dangerous, and love/romance/betrothal as the only path to freedom.

The "point of ritual death" is, therefore, followed by the typical "recognition scene" which Regis defines as the one in which the heroine becomes aware of and expresses her love for her male counterpart (2003: 37). Unlike the cases where the romantic hero acknowledges his feelings for the heroine at the end of the narrative (Roach, 2016: 67), here it is the heroine who confesses

her love in a final declaration. In SHRs, this moment goes hand in hand with the protagonists' recognition of their flaw, that is, with their decision to abandon completely or partially their fight as suffragists and suffragettes, thus surmounting the barrier that had prevented the romance to consolidate and allowing for the betrothal to occur. Casandra, for instance, clearly implies that she has managed to challenge her inner flaw thanks to the hero when she positions Tristan over the Cause and declares: "I can't imagine a life without you. For that reason, I have decided that after the next event, I will give up my active involvement in women's suffrage" (*SIC*, 279). Free's stance is somehow contradictory because she declares she wants to keep with her business after her union with Edward but simultaneously states she would just like "the rest of the world [could] disappear" (*TSS*, 289). Lucie is more direct in that she tells Tristan she loves him and he has become her priority, even before her interest in women's suffrage:

> She understood now that the first time his lips had touched hers had marked the beginning of the end of her old world. And she would never be able to go back to it. The only way was forward, into vaguely chartered territory where kissing Tristan was necessary and good. (*ROO*, 397)

The protagonists' final acceptance of the hero or reassurance concerning their love for him is often despatched from the marriage proposal scene (Regis, 2003: 37-38). Thence, the heroines' choice to consolidate the romance does not occur until the very end of the novel, when they have already overcome the barrier and undergone a full transformation. Casandra had first rejected Griffin's marriage offer with the following affirmation: "I am a New Woman. We believe in lovers, not marriage. Well, not marriage right away. I would like to marry you some day, Griffin. But not yet. I wish to fully explore loverhood first" (*SIC*, 226). At the end of the novel, however, she changes her mind and takes the reins by indirectly suggesting to him he should marry her:

"do you think I would marry a man who cannot even provide me with a home? (*SIC*, 314). Such a hint leads Griffin to finally propose to her again, and the novel concludes with Cassandra's answer: "as you are asking, I suppose I will" (*SIC*, 314). Lucie initially discards a formal engagement with Tristan, but when the story is about to conclude, she consents to betroth herself to him. Although the marriage's offer and acceptance coincide, and take place earlier in *The Suffragette Scandal*, Free and Edward experience a confrontation because he lies to her about his real identity, which leads them to spend time separated. Free does not recognise her love for Edward and her status as his wife until the end of the novel, when she admits she now can trust him, and accepts to go and live with him in his estate.

Against this backdrop, SHRs often conclude with the heroine engaged or married to the hero. Therefore, the novels reflect Regis' contention that betrothal is the expected and common final trait of a romance. The heroines' decision to marry grants the novels chronological and historical accuracy, as marriage was the typical road for women in the period in which they are set. But such an election contradicts the protagonists' characters as independent women who had so far opposed compromise. That Free, Casandra, and Lucie consolidate their romantic relationships demonstrates they all have managed to resolve their internal struggles and overcome their intrinsic flaw. With the protagonists' partial or total abandonment of their activism, SHRs imply that by surmounting the barrier and choosing to marry the hero the heroine transitions from a condition of restraint to one of liberty (Regis, 2003: 15). Such a resolution illustrates the fact that the heroines have progressively changed their perception of freedom, which they first associated with autonomy and (political) emancipation but which they now connect with romance and see as liberating.

Nevertheless, the supposed freedom that comes with betrothal should be called into question, particularly if we consider the circumstances under which the heroines choose to marry the

heroes. The protagonists agree to the betrothal after seeing the heroes prove to be more accommodating and tolerant towards women's suffrage; these traits also allow readers to finally sympathise with the male characters. However, in the three novels the hero becomes more understanding only because the heroine demonstrates less interest in the Cause and almost distances herself from it. The heroes' receptiveness thus works as a convenient plot device to move the action forward and ensure readers' sympathy. Griffin's compassion emerges once Casandra confesses to him her wish to give up her active role in the movement: "I don't expect you to give up your work. If it's that important to you, I can live with it. All I want is to keep you from being hurt" (*SIC*, 280). Here the implication is that Griffin would only accept Casandra's involvement with the suffrage campaign if she remained on the margins. Casandra agrees to step aside, explaining that "love for this wonderful, understanding man flooded me. It was what I had been hoping for all my adult years – a man who could respect me as well as love me" (*SIC*, 280).

Similarly, Edward displays his empathy only when Free reveals her scepticism about the role she is meant to assume as his wife: "So I'm asking you, Free. *Don't* be my viscountess. Don't throw my parties. Don't run my estate. Let me be your thimble carrier […]. I'll be the one making sure that you never run out of water" (*TSS*, 304; emphasis in the original). The hero's last words demonstrate that, despite his good intentions, he displays patriarchal attitudes of protection and surveillance. Edward also suggests that Free is emancipated and empowered thanks to and next to him as he confesses to having married Free "to unleash her on the world, not to keep her under wraps" (295). Ironically enough, the implication here is that Free's independence actually depends on Edward. Such an idea is reinforced at the end of the novel when Edward tells Free they should give the vote to both the male and female tenants in their estate, thus providing Free with what she has been struggling for. Free's smile and final kiss to him corroborate she is ultimately content because women

are somehow granted the liberation and agency she longed and fought for, even if such freedom is limited to the private world to which she has happily agreed to withdraw.

Tristan also shows his support by telling Lucie she does not need to choose between being a suffragist and becoming his wife. Yet, he only verbalises this idea after she confesses her loss of interest in the Cause: "You saw what happened, how I began to neglect my duties – missing appointments, lacking attention. The truth is, I hardly felt sorry for it, in the moment. What if I stop fighting because I stop *caring*, whether I want or not" (*ROO,* 399; emphasis in the original). After Lucie's declaration, it is easier for Tristan to show himself empathetic because he is aware their relation is no longer under threat, and his attitude is eventually what convinces her to marry him. Like Free, Lucie sets a condition to become his fiancée: "to be [her] equal before the law" (*ROO,* 402). Thereafter she warns Tristan she will never become "an Angel in the House" (*ROO,* 402) and he responds he is "a man who prefers shield maidens over angels" (*ROO,* 402), a claim securing their betrothal and the projection of a happy future together.

All in all, the introduction of suffrage as the barrier for the romance serves as a tool for the heroes to uproot the protagonists from their loyalty to the Cause. The heroines' destiny is, in fact, written from the beginning. In *Suffragette in the City*, Casandra's fate is symbolised when Griffin returns to her the lock she used to tie her up to a fence during a suffrage protest, which can be read as proof of his wish to keep Cassandra bound to him. Lucie and Free are also metaphorically bound because their role as suffragettes is abandoned at the expense of their future wifehood. The protagonists then move from a literal confinement to a figurative one. Despite being released from their literal imprisonment, SHRs' heroines are ironically trapped by the patriarchal institution of marriage, because eventually they must fulfil their duties as wives and potential mothers. Yet, they take their marriage to the heroes as a symbol of liberty. As I argue in the next section, this common resolution closely aligns the analysed

novels with a postfeminist sensibility that defines the context in which they were written.

Forcibly-feeding Readers: Suffragette Historical Romances Selling (Post)feminism

SHRs are written in a context that can be considered postfeminist in that it is marked by the appropriation, branding, and commodification of feminist slogans, ideas, and messages, which underestimate the women's suffrage movement and trivialise feminism altogether. Clearly, these contemporary romances target independent women since they offer an empowered and autonomous protagonist with whom contemporary women readers can relate. Yet, the feminist message and content these novels seem to promise with their choice of heroine fails to become realised. Considering that in present-day popular culture some forms of women's empowerment are "recognisably and profitably packaged as commodities" (Tasker and Negra, 2005: 107), Dunmore, MacAlister, and Milan exploit the marketable potential of the suffragette to meet the target readers' expectations, for they contextualise the narrative around feminist ideas and accomplishments but impregnate their plots with a postfeminist sensibility.

Gill's notion of postfeminism as a "sensibility" aims to bridge some of the current disagreements over the complexity of the term due to its manifold definitions. Gill detects this sensibility in numerous contemporary cultural and media products (2007: 147) which collectively seem to reinforce similar ideas about gender roles, women's choices, among which political choices are paramount, and social position. Gill argues this sensibility is characterised by the interrelation of the following themes and features, most of which are traceable in the SHRs romances under analysis:

> the notion that femininity is increasingly figured as a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification in the ways that (some) women are represented; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and

> empowerment; the dominance of a 'makeover paradigm'; a resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference; the marked 'resexualization' of women's bodies; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (149)

To start with, SHRs conform to the presentation of femininity as a bodily property (Gill, 2007: 149). These novels emphasise the heroines' physical appearance and sexiness in line with contemporary romances' tendency to focus on sex and romantic love, without imagining what comes after the happy ending (Roach, 2016: 166). As a result of their growing interest in the heroes, Casandra, Free, and Lucie ultimately identify beauty and sexual appeal as their source of empowerment. That is why the heroines are concerned with looking fashionable and attractive, in agreement with the characters populating postfeminist fiction. This is evident when Lucie asks a friend to instruct her on how to look feminine to attract Tristan and prevent him from seeing her as a "harridan" (*ROO,* 112). Casandra, on her part, replaces her rational garments for a corset to look like a "fairy princess", and to make herself attractive to Tristan in a ball they both attend (*SIC* 196).

This emphasis on the protagonists' looks is related to another idea characterising the postfeminist rhetoric: "the resexualisation of women's bodies", that is, the change from women's perception as sexual objects to sexual agents (Gill, 2007: 149). Based on Gills' theorisation, the three novels feature an independent and young female figure "who plays with her sexual power and is forever 'up for it'" (151) since they are introduced as subjects willing to engage in sex with different men and free from the attachments of marriage. The heroines then embrace their sexuality openly and frankly, which might be read as a positive feature, but can also be understood problematically, if we consider how the novels cash on the sexual dimension of the suffragette figure. The most visible evidence of the "sexualisation of culture" which Gill ascribes to postfeminist narratives (150) can be found

in the novels' paratextual material, particularly in their covers. The back cover of *Suffragette in the City* presents the heroine as a New Woman involved in the suffrage campaign. However, the sexualised image of a male and a female semi-naked body on the front cover and its clear reference to *Sex and the City* demonstrate the novel is framed in a postfeminist context dominated by the hypersexualisation of culture and the eroticisation of men and, predominantly, women. Similarly, *The Suffragette Scandal* introduces the protagonist as "an idealistic suffragette" (*TSS* cover). Yet, based on the heroine's depiction in a low-cut blue dress, and on the blurb, which anticipates Free depends on Edward to solve her problems, readers can infer the autonomy linked to this figure shall be limited to the sexual terrain.

Another trait Gill ascribes to postfeminist narratives is their focus on women's need to be under continued self-surveillance (2007: 155). Free, Casandra, and Lucie are constantly evaluating and monitoring themselves because they are made to believe their life is in a certain way faulty and, therefore, requires a change. A clear instance of the protagonist's self-analysis appears in *A Rogue of One's Own* when Lucie compares herself to her cousin Cecily, defined as the epitome of the "angel in the house" (*ROO,* 161): "a Botticelli. The angel kind, not the Venus" (*ROO,* 172). This hyperbolic description of Cecily's beauty implies Lucie needs both a physical and psychological transformation to look as appealing as her relative. In tune with contemporary chick lit novels, here Dunmore reproduces the trope of women's rivalry and competition Gill also associates with postfeminist literary and media productions in which women "are posed against each other in the 'dumbest girlfriend' competition" (2007: 160) because both Lucie and Cecily pursue a relationship with Tristan. Gill notes ironically that by replacing sexism with women's rivalry, sexist views are actually reinforced. Cecily's and Tristan's families arrange their betrothal, but Tristan is fonder of Lucie and has an affair with her. Cecily is jealous but finds consolation in thinking everyone dislikes Lucie for her attitude and behaviour. Never-

theless, Lucie, who is portrayed as a moderate suffragist, is more appealing for a hero who claims he would be bored if forced to choose a conventional woman whose aspirations were limited to becoming a wife and mother. Despite her initial and unconventional character, Lucie, like the rest of the heroines, manages to solve her flaw and follows the path expected from a woman of her time.

Hence, Dunmore, Milan, and MacAlister reproduce the tropes of choice and empowerment that define postfeminist narratives written in the context of neoliberal claims about free will and individuality (Gill, 2007: 153). The protagonists' empowered position is attributed to their decision to renounce their activism and become attached to the heroes. This attitude is consistent with Gill's assertion that postfeminist heroines appear to be coerced to exercise their empowered postfeminist status by making choices like quitting their jobs, which many feminists would view as questionable (162). Consequently, the message conveyed in these three novels is that, in times of personal instability, women should forego their public position to embrace their roles as wives and potential mothers, thus ensuring the successful development of the love story.

Finally, Lucie, Free, and Casandra are all subjected to the "makeover paradigm" Gill identifies as characteristic of these postfeminist times (2007: 156). This term is not only useful to understand the heroines' evolution but can also be employed to refer to the belief that women's lives are certainly defective and need transformation (156). The heroines are clearly conditioned by these ideas because they do not evolve as it is expected of a suffragist/suffragette but show their obsession with the culmination of their romances. With such a resolution, SHRs eventually fulfil another distinguishable trait of postfeminist discourses: the amalgamation of feminist and anti-feminist claims (161). According to Gill, here lie the contradictions of a postfeminist sensibility in which conceptions of independence, election, and one's improvement go hand in hand with "surveillance, discipline,

and the vilification of those who make the 'wrong' 'choices'" (163). These contemporary romances represent such inconsistencies by portraying brave and autonomous protagonists whose rights, the ones they have fought for and are a reality for contemporary readers, seem to be "simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated" (161) by the heroines; ultimately, the latter are defined through "retratism", that is, through withdrawal from their activism and abandonment of their political claims and beliefs. Ironically, the agency, freedom, and responsibility enjoyed by these white, middle-class, and educated women is in the end what allows them to renounce their position and freely choose to fulfil their role as wives and mothers (108).

Finally, SHRs engage in commodifying practices which Gill links to consumerist patterns defining postfeminist cultural products (2007: 149) as evident in the repackaging and romanticisation of the suffragette of the books' covers and titles. For instance, the cover of *A Rogue of One's Own* includes a womanly figure wearing a hat, a bow tie, and a sash, which corresponds to the blurb's definition of the heroine as a suffragist. The title's evident allusion to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* appears to highlight the feminist contents of the text. However, the distortion of Woolf's title, which substitutes "room" for "rogue", discloses the commodifying nature and the postfeminist subtext of Dunmore's novel, conveying the heroine's space must be devoted to and occupied by a man, more specifically a rogue.

The deployment of the word "suffragette" in the other two titles also works as a marketing strategy. Even if suffragists and suffragettes shared a common cause, suffragettes' defiance, danger, and disobedience make them more appealing figures to contemporary readers. This choice is most evident in *The Suffragette Scandal,* where Milan incongruously uses the word "suffragette" in a novel set in the 1880s, although the term was first used in 1906 (Purvis, 1995: 91). Milan refers to this license in the author's note, explaining she was not aware of her anachronistic choice until someone pointed it out to her prior to the publication of the

novel. After conducting more "serious" research, Milan solves her blunder arguing that according to the OED, the word was employed in 1877 and justifies her decision to maintain the term because "the word was so baked into the book (including a title change!) that there was no way to change it" (*TSS*, 317-318). Despite the novelists' word choices for the titles, with an emphasis on "suffragette", it can be argued that the protagonists are actually and ultimately modelled after the suffragist archetype, for they gradually distance themselves from the more militant methods related to Pankhurst's followers. As the narrative unfolds, the suffragist, as a less militant figure, proves to be a more appropriate romantic heroine, an empowered yet malleable woman more attractive for the hero to court and "tame", which again corroborates the commodification of the suffragette behind these SHRs. The protagonists' development substantiates the postfeminist background of the novels, since the heroines fail to fulfil what is expected from them as suffragettes, and their radicalism is progressively replaced by an increasingly conformist attitude.

In this way, SHRs provide a happily-ever-after for romance readers that distinguishes them from many suffragette fictional narratives and New Woman novels, which did not offer a happy ending in romantic terms and were more keen on criticising society's perception of wifehood to a man as the one and only road to women's satisfaction and realisation (Ledger, 1997: 23). At first, SHRs seem to be related to NWF works such as Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), and Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1900), because the contemporary heroines in the romances under analysis initially manifest the same opposition to marriage that the protagonists of the Victorian novels cited above. In both cases, the main character struggles to achieve an equilibrium between her public and private role despite her (initial) reluctance to marry. Therefore, SHRs follow the tendency of some NWF in shifting their emphasis from the conflict between

men and women to the conflict between women and, perhaps, the internal conflict within a single female character (the protagonist) (Heilmann, 2000: 26). Free, Lucie, and Casandra all experience an internal battle to resolve the tension between the personal and the political. As in Victorian NWF, such an effort turns out to be very much in vain in these contemporary romances, since the possibility for women to juggle their personal and professional lives is presented as incompatible. In both NWF and SHR heroines are forced to choose between their public position and their private and domestic role. In NWF the balance between the personal and the political is not accomplished because of the widespread social perception that women are unable to combine their professional/political career with their romantic relation to a man. Those works solved such an incompatibility by favouring the heroine's position in the public domain and forcing her to renounce her potential wifehood. Contrastively, SHRs offer the opposite resolution, as their protagonists end up either married or betrothed to the heroes to the detriment of their activist careers. This outcome is, once again, the consequence of these contemporary romances being written against a postfeminist background.

Suffragists and suffragettes writing romance novels had their protagonists falling in love but challenged the idea that women's fulfilment depends on love and marriage, which was perceived as a modernist feature (Norquay and Park, 2006: 302). That is why, suffragette fictional writings did not include a conventional happy ending: the heroine's happiness sprang from the development of her professional or political career. Ironically, and despite being written in a contemporary context and supposedly incorporating the more progressive outlook of recent historical romances, the novels under analysis in this paper do not transmit the messages included in the "antiromantic" novels produced by suffragettes themselves but reproduce the more conservative messages found in early twentieth-century novels against the women's suffrage campaign. Anti-suffrage authors thought that defending the Cause was a threat to marriage and

motherhood and consequently promoted love stories that perpetuated hegemonic romantic values such as the idea that women belonged to the private sphere as their role was to take care of their husbands and children. Instances of such fiction include Eliza Lynn Linton's *The Rebel of the Family* (1880), Arabella Kenealy's *Dr. Janet of Harley Street* (1894), Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* (1895), Adrienne MoUwo's *A Fair Suffragette* (1909), H.G. Wells' *Ann Veronica* (1909) and Mary Augusta Ward's *Delia Blanchflower* (1915). Those works proved the incompatibility between romance and individual autonomy and self-fulfilment.

As seen, SHRs ultimately promote marriage as the road to fulfilment and liberation for women. Such an outcome constitutes a clear reversal of the endings offered in New Woman novels of the 1890s, which generally liberated the protagonists from the constraints of matrimony (Laird, 2016: 40). While these contemporary novels depict their heroines in accordance with the New Woman archetype, the hegemonic romantic ideals they endorse are reminiscent of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anti-suffrage novels that censured feminism and implied assuming a public role deprived women of their feminine qualities (Heilmann, 2000: 29). Thus, it can be argued that SHRs use similar depictions to those anti-feminist authors who resorted to the archetype of the New Woman to refute the women's movement (Heilmann, 2000: 6), while paradoxically creating novels that appear to be feminist. The heroines' progression and resolution in SHRs are then more closely aligned to the "fictions of suffrage" produced by authors who were against the Cause, than to fictional works written by suffragettes to promote their campaign. In the same way that anti-feminist writers took advantage of the suffragette figure to serve their own interests, which often translated into an inaccurate depiction of the New Woman, I claim Dunmore, MacAlister, and Milan commodify and reshape the quintessential icon of feminism to convey and nurture hegemonic romantic ideals. Therefore, the heroines' main traits and evolution indicate SHRs similarly offer a skewed image of the

late-nineteenth-century feminist ideal, the New Woman.

It is nevertheless important to distinguish how different stereotypes are used in SHRs and anti-feminist fictions of suffrage. The latter were written to discredit those women fighting for the franchise in the light of a still-unresolved problem. SHRs, obviously, do not intend to undermine women's right to vote or obliterate the achievements women made in the past. They rather take such contributions and accomplishments for granted, undervaluing them as a result. Therefore, authors of SHRs conveniently repackage the suffragette image in tune with a postfeminist agenda, creating courageous and autonomous feminist heroines without compromising the romantic material. SHRs simply commodify the movement and its related iconography (symbols, rallying cries, ideals…), in line with a postfeminist rhetoric that fosters the belief that women have achieved their aims and it is therefore no longer necessary to keep fighting, which can be read as an antifeminist message.

Readers of SHRs are, thus, in a certain way forcibly-fed postfeminist ideas and unwittingly compelled to consume postfeminist thoughts because the novels under analysis place the heroines' political acts, contributions, and accomplishments in the background, ostensibly focusing on entertaining target readers with a love story. Dunmore, MacAlister, and Milan deconstruct one of feminism's most iconic achievements, women's enfranchisement, in so far as the protagonists anachronistically appear to be taking it for granted. Free, Casandra, and Lucie reflect their agency by electing to withdraw their battle for suffrage since they have anachronistically been granted the empowerment that is assumed for contemporary women, including the right to vote. Therefore, readers should not be surprised if an already empowered and autonomous character stops campaigning for a position she already seems to have. The heroines' development and the outcome of the three novels substantiate the irrelevance of feminism and, consequently, the postfeminist sensibility that impregnates SHRs.

Conclusion

Under the label SHRs, I have discussed contemporary historical romances that incorporate the suffragist or suffragette figure into what is eventually revealed to be a conservative and somewhat conventional romantic story depicting women as weak, sentimental, and ultimately irremediably attached to the private sphere. Besides providing a romantic happy ending for a protagonist committed to fight for women's rights, the analysed novels reinforce well-known patriarchal and traditional dichotomies, such as private/public and personal/professional, implying women's expected role as a wife shall prevail over their interests as a citizen. Therefore, the apparent feminist potential SHRs promise is automatically cancelled when readers immersed in the novels witness how suffrage is actually the impediment for the heroine to develop and consolidate a relationship.

All in all, SHRs are not faithful to the ideas promoted in their covers. Suffrage is rather commodified and adapted to the postfeminist context of publication, apparent in that the protagonists choose to (partially) renounce their activist careers and understand such choice precisely as a sign of their empowerment. Women's fight for suffrage is, then, weakened, and at times even erased. Thus, it can be concluded that SHRs deploy the suffrage movement for a commodifying rather than a celebratory or revisionist purpose. The fight for women's enfranchisement turns out to be a hostile environment eventually discarded as meaningless for the preferred happily-ever-after, which imposes a romantic lesson upon readers who accompany the heroine on her journey.

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