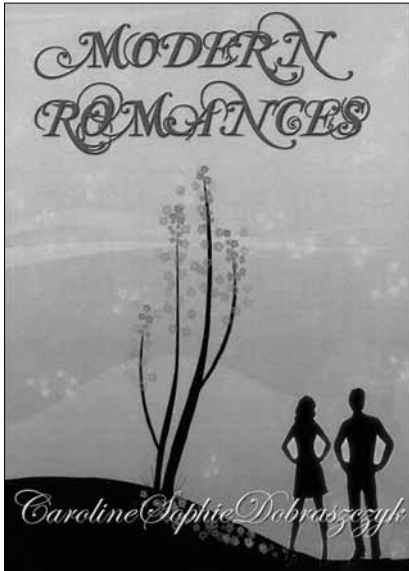


Modern Romances

Caroline Dobraszczyk | Poseidon Books | 2011



The word 'romance' in its bathetic sense is found in a Restoration play by Margaret Cavendish, *The Wits Cabal*. In Act 1, the wits have the following exchange:

Faction: I think good Husbands may be in our thoughts, but not actually in the World.

Ambition: I am of your opinion, they may be mention'd in our words, but not found in our lives.

Pleasure: Faith we may hear of good husbands, and read of good wives, but they are but Romances.

Portrait: You say right; for we may as soon finde an Heroick Lover, and see all his impossible Actions out of a Romance Book, as a good Husbands; but as for Wives, I will not declare my Opinion.

Six years later, Cavendish herself wrote a romance novel (also, by the bye, probably the first

science fiction from a female). *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing-World* opens with a prolix version of the formula we have come to love: 'A Merchant travelling into a foreign Country, fell extreamly in Love with a young Lady; but being a stranger in that Nation, and beneath her, both in Birth and Wealth, he could have but little hopes of obtaining his desire...'

The genre is criticised by an illiberal type, the person who not only thinks that they have readers' interests at heart, but feels entitled to tell them so. Hmm. The writing is, of course, formulaic, but so is getting out of bed. And what barrister doesn't respond well to formula?

Besides, and in the bar's tradition of biting the hand that feeds, Dobraszczyk avoids the one great expectation of the formula, the certainty that the two protagonists will end happily entwined.

In fact, all of Dobraszczyk's three heroines and one hero end up alone. The opening story is the lengthiest, a lamentation on the paralysis of unrequited love. She then shifts to three crisp vignettes: a visit by the ghost of love gone; the holiday tryst; and a rape.

Only the first heroine ends up with her aloneness as a continuation of an atomised life. The others return to their lives cathartised. Indeed, the last and tightest of the four stories finishes with the heroine

experiencing upon her assault a rather chilling apotheosis.

Halfway down the second page of Dobraszczyk's work, between the ISBN number and the Dewey number, is written 'Subjects: Man-woman relationships—Fiction'. Indeed.

Frigyes Karinthy was an Hungarian writer of the early twentieth century who wrote about Gulliver in the manner of Swift (and thus, unsurprisingly, in a style not wholly distinguishable from Cavendish). In *Voyage to Faramido and Capillaria*, Gulliver finds himself in Capillaria, a land beneath the sea where men – or 'bullpops' – are for fine dining and women rule as gods. Dobraszczyk's heroines might have agreed with Karinthy's introductory remark:

Men and women – how can they ever understand each other? Both want something so utterly different – the men: women; and the women: men.

Those who need their prose to be objectivised before it can be digested as Truth should avoid this book. Those who are willing to be diverted by an enjoyable perspective on the irreconcilability of idealised love and the mess which is woman + man, will enjoy it.

Review by David Ash