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Conclusion: Assessing the Female Gentleman

Mary Challoner's modernity brings us full circle, then, back to the question of the social value and impact of the ‘Female Gentleman’. Is this a positive feminist ideal, or should a critic place more emphasis on the pessimistic view that middlebrow novelists had contempt for the sex in general and expected very few women to live up to the ideal? Can the gentlemanly ideal be disentangled from its class baggage? What, if any, impact does the model of the Female Gentleman have on twenty-first-century readers of these novels? These questions can be combined into one issue: the extent to which the concept of the ‘Female Gentleman’ might simply be dated beyond usability by its reliance on social distinctions that contemporary Anglophone societies have ostensibly left behind. Can a twenty-first-century woman really adopt as an ideal of behavior the same model theoretically held by Victorian imperialists who expected their wives to be domestic angels? If I am correct about the project that middlebrow writers were undertaking after World War I – freeing the word gentleman from its class and gender restrictions – they had a monumental task to accomplish, and their own attitudes toward class and race were ambiguous enough to give a reader who admires their goals pause. Yet there is value in their conception of feminism that cannot simply be discarded, either.

In answering these questions it is helpful to return to the critical history of genres with which I began this book. The detective novel has generally been regarded as conservative in its essential narrative form. A world of order is disturbed by a criminal act of violence, and the orderly society is restored in the end by the actions of the
detective. Some scholars have argued that female Golden Age novelists were more prone to breaking the rules of the genre than male ones, and that this makes their novels less conservative than other detective fiction. But such an argument leaves untouched the original premise that the detective genre is inherently conservative. The romance novel has come in for even more excoriating criticism than the mystery novel, typified by Germaine Greer's famous comment in *The Female Eunuch* that the romance novel represents 'women cherishing the chains of their bondage'. Janice Radway argues in a more nuanced way that romance novels fill vicariously the emotional needs that can never be fulfilled in real life under patriarchy, and by doing so, they prevent women from realizing how unsatisfied they are, staving off any possible revolution in social organization. As I argued in Chapter 1, Radway makes a structurally similar claim in her analysis of middlebrow novels, which serve the same purpose for middle-class knowledge workers as romance novels do for women.

While I have endorsed this view of middlebrow fiction up to a point, it has its limitations. For example, it unreasonably singles out so-called genre fiction; if an orderly ending is a sign of conservatism, then almost all literature is conservative, not just the detective novel or historical romance. On the other hand, if one chooses instead to emphasize the selectivity of the narrative's orderliness – which values are reinstated and which ones are challenged by the ending – then any novel of any genre might work any ideology, and one must make individual judgments. Discussions of the ideological conservatism of middlebrow novels also overly privilege endings, in a subversion/containment model that discounts the middles of narratives. More fundamentally, it is not necessary to figure the plot movement as one of order–destabilization–order at all. In a theory that I would extend to detective fiction, Pamela Regis argues that romance novels are a type of comedy in the classical or Shakespearean sense; the beginning of the narrative portrays a corrupt society, and the marriage of hero and heroine symbolizes the renovation or reform of that society, in which ‘the heroine’s freedom, however provisional, is a victory’. On those terms, the destabilization of the middle of the novel makes space for an affirmative model that opposes the corrupt values of the old society, and the ending merely chooses which model to establish with its orderly closure. That is exactly what Female Gentleman novels do; they present an alternative model of