

## Female Agency Encoding and Linguistic Expressions of Consent in Historical Romance Fiction

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### Abstract

This paper explores the concepts of female agency and consent in historical romance fiction using corpus methods of analysis. To this purpose, we provide an overview of the concept of agency in historical romance novels which focus on female characters and their journey toward empowerment and independence in addition to romantic fulfilment.

Previous research has shown that romance novels can shape perceptions of consent, as well as attitudes towards sexual intimacy. To observe if this idea is validated by the data retrievable from our corpus, we explore the linguistic expressions of consent and discuss the encoding of agency through performative verbs and indexical expressions, as well as the frequency and contextual usage of gender-marked language.

**Keywords:** *agency, consent, sexual scripts, historical romance, gender.*

### 1. Courtship Scripts and Female Agency

The concept of agency can be defined in several ways, with one definition of agency referring to the ability of individuals or entities to control their actions and behaviours, to make choices and impact themselves and others. Agency is a complex concept that encompasses autonomy, control, and intentional action (Duranti 2004). In language studies, agency is defined as the capacity of an entity to act, initiate, or exert control over an action or event; it can be expressed in various

performative and grammatical ways in different contexts (Duranti 2004).

In fiction, female agency is understood as referring to the capacity of female characters to influence the course of events and their own lives through the decisions they make. One key feature of historical romance is the portrayal of female characters who lack the freedom to make choices, ranging from trivial to significant ones, such as marriage. Often, the heroine is forced to accept a marriage proposal due to various circumstances, such as financial difficulties, the avoidance of social ruin, or the need to escape abusive situations. Part of the journey of the female protagonist is the transition from a state of submission to male authority to that of assertion of power in social situations and in her relationship with the hero.

As a key stage in romantic relationships, the concept of courtship is at the center of Regis's (2003) definition of the romance novel<sup>1</sup>, so this study explores how gendered courtship behavior and female (sexual) agency are depicted in historical romance. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2024) defines courtship as "the time when people have a romantic relationship with the intention of getting married" and "the process of developing this relationship". In the volume *Courtship*, Cate and Lloyd (1992) define the concept of courtship as including relationships that lead to marriage, as well as those where there is no intent to marry, known as "dating"<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela Regis (2003) defines the romance novel as "a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines" (14).

<sup>2</sup> Cate and Lloyd (1992) argue that courtship as a premarital stage is crucial for the quality and stability of marriage, as it develops important processes like positive communication and conflict resolution. Early models of courtship were based on complementarity or attitude similarity over the length of the premarital relationship, while later stage models depicted mate selection through a series of stages, focusing on decision-making processes.

Historical romance is infused with concerns about relationships, gender roles, and sexuality that are of actuality. Much of the conflict between male and female protagonists comes from the fact that they have opposing or complementary desires. Gendered representations place female characters as seeking commitment and the stability and security of marriage, and male characters as avoiding commitment and marriage for as long as possible. Such gendered beliefs are still common in Western societies. As recent research on current dating scripts has shown (Lamont 2014, Hamilton & Armstrong 2009) women are often expected to be passive recipients of male attention, with limited control over certain relationship interactions; such gendered attitudes are reflected in the representation of female characters in historical romance. Male characters are portrayed as being in control of interaction and timing during courtship, and as firm believers in their duty and role as protectors of female virtue.

Unlike contemporary romance, which often portray the heroines as independent and successful professionals in positions of power, the majority of historical romance novels place their heroines in dependent or socially precarious positions. There is a significant power imbalance in relationships; one reason is the considerable age gap (5-10 years to the advantage of the hero). Therefore, the hero implicitly has more life and relationship experience than the heroine. Another reason is that females are restricted to the domestic domain. As much as love might be an equalizer in relationships between romance protagonists, the fictional universe where these relationships exist is inherently flawed. At the center of most historical romances is the necessity of finding suitable husbands for young women of the upper classes. These female characters must submit to the will and authority of male characters, and they must observe and follow strict social rules or face social ruination. Their worth lies in their virtue and reproductive function. The love plot follows traditional courtship scripts in the most basic sense: the male protagonist is the initiator, he controls the timing of courtship, and he is

the one proposing marriage, while the female protagonist passively receives male attention.

With popular plot patterns such as *arranged marriage* and *marriage of convenience*, typical courtship scripts are not followed, or courtship is perfunctory. The protagonists enter the marriage contract with little to no prior acquaintance, yet the development of the romantic relationship post-wedding vows can be paralleled with courtship proper. The *marriage of convenience* plot pattern allows authors to subvert traditional courtship scripts. In novels such as *The Beast of Beswick* by Amalie Howard (2019), *When a Girl Loves an Earl* by Elisa Braden (2016), and *Bed Me, Baron* by Felicity Niven (2023), female protagonists are the ones who pursue the male protagonist, propose marriage, or negotiate the conditions of said marriage. In such situations, the heroine is atypical in the sense that she takes charge of her life, takes actions, makes choices, and exerts control over her situation, which affects not only her life but the lives of other characters in the story, particularly that of the hero.

## 2. Consent and Sexual Scripts

Consent is a fluid concept, with legal and social explanations often focused on binary definitions and assumptions of equal power (James-Hawkins & Ryan-Flood 2024, Beres 2014, Beres 2007). Frequently, gender roles in sexual relationships frame men as aggressors, while women balance agency and femininity, notions that are supported in various types of fiction (James-Hawkins & Ryan-Flood 2024). Pascoe (2024) discusses the importance of sexual consent and the challenges in defining and practicing it. Pascoe argues that while consent has come to shape our sense of sexual morality, gender, autonomy, and power, there is a disconnection between how consent is defined and how it operates in practice. According to Pascoe, consent operates as a gendered norm that shapes women's participation in sex; at the same time, consent can silence other forms of sexual speech acts and reinforce male entitlement to sex.

Focusing on the social context of consent, Beres (2007) discusses the notion of explicit and verbal communication of consent and debates about the feasibility and desirability of this approach. After analyzing interviews with young adults, Beres (2014) identified the following conceptualizations of consent: a minimum requirement for acceptable sex (distinguishing between willingness and wanting); a discrete event occurring once during a sexual encounter, a moment where a decision is made to engage in a specific sexual act (particularly involving penetration); an unnecessary condition in relationships.

In an examination of postfeminist sexual agency and young women's negotiations of sexual consent, Burkett and Hamilton (2012) argue that the assumption that women are free and autonomous agents who are in control of their sexuality and can easily refuse unwanted sex is problematic. This places the responsibility on women to communicate their willingness or unwillingness to engage in sexual relations without considering implicit pressures and norms that may hinder their ability to do so. This approach fails to address the complexities of sexual consent and the power dynamics that exists within sexual relationships. Furthermore, popular understandings of sex often reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations, which limit individuals' sexual expression and reinforce power imbalances based on gender (Burkett & Hamilton 2012).

In *Sexual Conduct*, Gagnon and Simon (1973) state that scripts have a role in acquiring knowledge about internal states, the ordering of particular sexual actions, interpreting unfamiliar situations, establishing boundaries for sexual reactions, and connecting meanings from nonsexual elements of life to sexual encounters. The physical elements of adult heterosexual behavior leading to coitus include hugging and kissing, petting above the waist, hand-genital contact, and coitus. While there is variation in timing and duration, this is the physical level of normal heterosexual activity. Kelly et al. (2016) discuss the influences and changes in sexual scripts. The scripting perspective is seen as responsive to a changing historical and cultural environment.

Regarding women's sexual practices, the team of scholars found that women often perform their femininity by focusing on enabling their male partner's pleasure while ignoring their own sexual desires, wishes, or interests; women may derive different pleasures from sex (feelings of connection and closeness to their partner, emotional intimacy) and may have limited opportunities to discuss their sexual desires, interests, and needs, leading to a lack of sexual agency in contemporary life.

Literature has played a crucial role in bringing issues of sexual and gender-based violence into public discourse, particularly in the context of consent (Wallace 2024). Exploring the convergence between rape and romance, as well as the impact of romance fiction on legal reasoning, and the challenges faced by women in rape trials, Philadelphoff-Puren (2005) asserts that consent varies in different discursive locations because it is influenced by various factors such as power dynamics, cultural norms, and discourses surrounding romance and literature. The discourse of romance can influence the understanding of consent in certain contexts. Philadelphoff-Puren (2005) also argues that some romance novels may portray what is known as *forceful seduction* or the idea that a woman's initial refusal is a sign of her true desire. These narratives can shape perceptions of consent and contribute to the idea that a woman's "no" can be actually interpreted as a "yes." This can have implications for how consent is understood and interpreted in real-life situations. However, Toscano (2012) argues that rape in romance fiction is a "parodic parallel to the violence of falling in love" (1), while Dugger (2014) points out that the *forced seduction* plot pattern has become outmoded and rapist heroes have become unpopular over the last decades.

Ménard and Cabrera (2011) studied the portrayal of sex and sexuality in contemporary romance novels and whether these portrayals have changed over two decades. The study investigated the characterization of protagonists, the context of romantic relationships, and the order and nature of sexual behaviors depicted in twenty novels from 1989-2009. The researchers also aimed to study and analyze

systematically the depictions of sex, sexuality, and gender roles in romance novels, by examining how closely these depictions align with Western sexual scripts and shedding light on the adherence to or deviation from dominant sexual scripts. The expected characteristics of romance novel characters in terms of sexual encounters include being young, attractive, heterosexual, and conforming to traditional gender roles and dominant sexual scripts<sup>3</sup>.

In romance fiction, dominant sexual scripts where women are more likely to be on the receiving end of sexual behaviour are reproduced and reinforced, but Roach (2018) argues that erotica and erotic romance can challenge stereotypes and promote sexual justice, creating a space for exploring the complexities of desire, agency, and consent. Furthermore, Roach considers that erotic fiction provides a valuable cultural platform to showcase consent, and its importance in healthy sexual relationships in real life, making it a crucial aspect of sexual culture. Female pleasure is central to the genre, and some romance authors make a point of having the female protagonists repeatedly say “yes” in intimate scenes (and other words and interjections that indicate their enjoyment) where the male protagonists are skilled and attentive lovers. However, in numerous historical romances that we have read, many male protagonists who are skilled lovers have gained their vast sexual experiences by engaging in transactional sex with kept mistresses, courtesans, or prostitutes, as well as by involvement in adulterous affairs with married women or widows. As this type of female character is seldom a protagonist, and

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<sup>3</sup> These scripts are cognitive schemas that guide individuals in planning their current and future sexual behaviors and understanding their past actions. They specify the appropriate actors and behaviors and enable individuals to apply these cultural rules to their specific sexual exchanges. Men and women in Western society are expected to conform to different but complementary sexual scripts, with key gender distinctions in sexual goals, motivations, relational context, assertiveness, and genitalia (Gagnon & Simon 1973, Ménard & Cabrera 2011, Kelly et al. 2016, Roach 2018).

most often relegated to the *other woman*<sup>4</sup> category, it is arguably a problematic portrayal of femininity.

At the same time, even though romance novels are sex-positive, the sex depicted is not always practiced safely. The studies that examined romance reading habits and safe sex behaviour have shown that there is a correlation between the frequency of reading romance novels and negative attitudes towards condoms, despite readers' awareness of the fictional element (Diekman & Eagly 2000, Ménard & Cabrera 2011, Iqbal 2014). While contemporary romance does include references to a variety of contraceptive measures, it is unrealistic to expect the same from historical fiction, when such measures were unavailable. Some authors make references to sponges soaked in vinegar, early condoms known as the "French letter", or *coitus interruptus* as contraceptive methods, but there are very few references to the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. Additionally, sexually promiscuous protagonists are never afflicted by STDs.

A central element in historical romance is the intense sexual attraction between the protagonists, which leads to unsafe sex. Even when the protagonists have discussed and agreed on one of the available contraceptive methods, in the heat of the moment, they forgo contraception. If the protagonists are not married, this often results in a *forced marriage* (a plot pattern where the protagonists have to marry to prevent the social ruination of the heroine due to the couple's being

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<sup>4</sup> The *other woman* is frequently regarded as second-class, either for their "fallen" or adulterous character, or for simply experiencing desire and enjoying their sexuality outside marriage. Such female characters may also be portrayed as shrews, emotionally unstable, flighty, jealous and possessive, etc. In the linked novels *Bed Me, Baron* (2023) and *Bed Me, Earl* (2023), Felicity Niven depicts one such female character who is a widow and, in turns, the mistress of the two titular male protagonists. She is young, beautiful, and titled, but she does not accept rejection easily, shouting, insulting and throwing things when her lovers sever the connection.



caught while engaging in sexual behaviours or such behaviours having the unwanted consequence of a pregnancy).

One aspect of historical romance is the heroine's coming into her own after marriage. There is no shortage of independent heroines who make important choices and take control of their lives before meeting the hero. Still, it is through marriage that their independence and agency is legitimized.

### **3. The Linguistic Expression of Female Agency and Consent in the HR Corpus**

As both concepts of agency and consent are difficult to define, attempting to analyze their linguistic realizations and representations in romance fiction is not simple, particularly so regarding female characters in historical romance, who by default have limited abilities to act on their will in everyday life and during courtship. Duranti (2004) discusses the two dimensions of agency in language, performance, and encoding, and how they are mutually constitutive. Examining the encoding of agency in language, the diversity of encoding methods, and the mitigation of agency through grammatical and discourse strategies, Duranti argues that the representation of agency in language goes beyond the examples and types of sentences where agents are expressed. One way agency is performed through language is when individuals use language to assert their existence as agents, and it is encoded with performative verbs and indexical expressions (Duranti 2004).

Formanowicz et al. (2017) explore the relationship between verbs and the perception of agency, providing evidence from language use and experimental studies. They show that verbs are associated with agency, while adjectives and nouns are not. Verbs are particularly well-suited for expressing agency because they inherently convey action, intention, and the ability to exert control or influence over the environment. They capture the dynamic and active nature of agency,

making them a powerful linguistic tool for expressing and understanding human behaviour (Formanowicz et al. 2017).

We employ corpus analysis methods on our *Historical Romance* (HR21) corpus to explore the linguistic evidence of female agency (conveyed through verbs and indexical expressions, more specifically, the gendered pronouns *he* and *she*, as well as *I*) and consent in romantic relationships. We consider expressions of consent those that are plainly stated, either in the direct or indirect speech of the characters, as well as nonverbal body language such as nodding, pulling the partner closer, making direct eye contact, and actively touching the partner<sup>5</sup>.

### 3.1. Sample

The corpus we have analyzed comprises 200 linked romance novels published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, covering the four most well-known subgenres of historical romance: Medieval romance, Georgian romance, Regency romance, and Victorian romance. The corpus contains approximately 18 million tokens. The levels of sensuality vary, and all protagonists are heterosexual. Most protagonists are White Protestants (Anglican), although characters in the medieval subgenre are by default Catholic Christians. A very small number of protagonists are of mixed race, or a different ethnicity and some protagonists are Welsh or Scottish. The protagonists are from the upper classes (aristocracy and gentry) or experience upward mobility. The ages of the protagonists vary, but females are typically younger than males, with the average ages of early-to-mid-twenties for females and early-to-mid-thirties for males.

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<sup>5</sup> Initiating sexual activity can also be considered a form of consent. In the content analysis performed by Ménard & Cabrera (2011) on 46 sex scenes sampled from 20 romance novels, the researchers assessed who the initiator was (the characters extended physical and verbal sexual invitations), and coded for *female initiates*, *male initiates* and *both initiate*. However, when using corpus analysis methods this assessment is less straightforward, particularly when a large amount of data is generated.

### 3.2. Methods

We have used several statistical measures and corpus analysis tools to investigate the contextual usage of gender-marked language and linguistic evidence of female agency and consent in the corpus. The analysis of the corpus was corpus-based rather than corpus-driven (Baker 2014, McEnery & Wilson 2001), as we decided which words to examine before beginning the analysis. The first measure used was frequency, which was obtained by loading the corpus on version 9 of WordSmith (Scott 2024). The software generated a frequency list of all the words that occur in the corpus, and we were able to gauge common patterns and themes simply by reading the top 1000 words listed.

We used the LancsBox X software (Brezina & Platt 2023) to automatically annotate the corpus with the USAS semantic tagset and the CLAWS part-of-speech tagset. LancsBox X was also used for concordance analysis, while WordSmith was used to investigate collocates frequencies and patterns.

### 3.3. Results

The fourth most frequent word in the corpus is *her*, indicating that there could be a female bias in the corpus. However, when we compared other pronoun forms and possessive adjectives, it became immediately obvious that male forms were more frequent. At the same time, the differences in frequency are restrained enough to assume that the use of all gendered forms is reasonably balanced for a genre that, while female-centric, revolves around heterosexual couples. For the frequency analysis of male and female subject pronouns (Table 1), we counted the contracted forms *she'd/she's* and *he'd/he's* together with the respective pronouns, with a total difference in frequency of 0.10% between female and male forms, to the advantage of male forms. Doing the same for possessive adjectives and possessive/object pronouns, the opposite was true, with the female forms 0.20% more frequent than male ones, indicating that women are more frequently receivers of

action and that a much larger number of nouns are identified as being owned or possessed by women.

**Table 1** *Frequency of female & male pronoun forms and possessive adjectives*

<b>Female form</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Male form</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>SHE</b>	326,013	1.79	<b>HE</b>	337,930	1.86
<b>SHE'D</b>	25,304	0.14	<b>HE'D</b>	29,229	0.16
<b>SHE'S</b>	4,573	0.03	<b>HE'S</b>	6,655	0.04
<i>Total SHE</i>	<i>355,890</i>	<i>1.96</i>	<i>Total HE</i>	<i>373,814</i>	<i>2.06</i>
<b>HER</b>	441,044	2.42	<b>HIM</b>	122,586	0.67
<b>HERS</b>	5,754	0.03	<b>HIS</b>	287,281	1.58
	<i>446,798</i>	<i>2.45</i>		<i>409,867</i>	<i>2.25</i>

Given that much discussion about gender revolves around the way masculinity and femininity are expressed through movements, gestures, and clothing, we considered of particular interest words related to the body and clothing. We were able to verify to which extent the two semantic categories are featured in the corpus. The most frequent semantic categories belong to four major discourse fields of 'general and abstract terms', 'the body and the individual', 'movement, location, travel and transport', 'time' and 'names and grammatical words'. Within the second discourse field, the category 'anatomy and physiology' is the ninth most frequent. Our interest in words related to body parts is justified and supported by the statistical evidence observed.

Next, we extracted the tokens that identified body parts, and their frequencies (Table 3). The frequencies of the two lemmas EYE (39,510 hits) and HAND (44,150 hits) demonstrate that authors often write about the eyes of characters (excepting idiomatic use such as 'eye to eye' and other phrases) and about actions involving their hands. Faces are also important in period romance, as are their parts. The heart (12,141 hits, 0.07%) is often mentioned, which is to be expected since the

genre inherently deals with ‘matters of the heart’ - feelings and emotions.

**Table 2** *Body parts*

Token	Frequency	%
<i>Body parts</i>	284,905	1.58
EYES	36,326	0.20
HAND	28,112	0.15

The investigation of lexical verbs and their frequency was a first step into the exploration of linguistic expressions of agency, as well as expressions of consent. While dynamic verbs are generally associated with agency, we have focused on the link between the Agent and performative verbs (Table 3) to discover to what extent are female and male characters associated with act-constituting agency. Additionally, we investigated the verbs expressing volition *want*, *wish*, *choose*, and *decide* and their gendered use. This was achieved by analyzing concordance lines with the KWIC tool in LancsBox X, where the target verbs were listed together with the immediate context (ten words to the left and right of the node).

To limit the amount of data generated, we filtered active constructions in the simple past where the Agent is expressed through third person subject pronouns *he* and *she* (narrative discourse), as well as active constructions in the simple present where the Agent is the first person (direct speech). We have tried to determine the gender of the first-person agent by looking at the subject of the reporting verbs listed in the concordances, but not all hits were unequivocally clear on the gender of the character speaking. For clarity purposes, we have restricted the third-person subject pronouns filter to the first three words to the left of the node, to account for present and past perfect uses of regular verbs, as well as adverbs. The first-person subject pronoun filter was restricted to the first word to the left of the node, which eliminated constructions with the infinitive, or nominalizations.

**Table 3** *Frequency of performative verbs and verbs expressing volition*

WORD	Freq.	%	Texts	I	HE	SHE
APOLOGIZE	1,032	0.01	174	340		
APOLOGIZED	197	0.00	102		62	31
CLAIM	1,323	0.01	190	27		
CLAIMED	949	0.01	187		204	134
DECLARE	158	0.00	92	19		
DECLARED	676	0.00	159		88	94
GREET	574	0.00	174	2		
GREETED	747	0.00	184		97	64
INFORM	530	0.00	161	10		
INFORMED	976	0.01	171		113	110
PROMISE	2,549	0.01	200	755		
PROMISED	1,863	0.01	198		398	229
REQUEST	644	0.00	186	11		
REQUESTED	276	0.00	127		45	39
SUGGEST	685	0.00	179	280		
SUGGESTED	1,292	0.01	191		145	129
THREATEN	192	0.00	104	2		
THREATENED	900	0.00	184		92	42
WARN	469	0.00	162	59		
WARNED	877	0.00	186		163	93
WANT	18,541	0.10	200	4,364		
WANTED	15,879	0.09	200		5123	4732
WISH	5,567	0.03	200	1,480		
WISHED	2,878	0.02	200		769	967
CHOOSE	1,401	0.01	192	107		
CHOSE	955	0.01	191		226	203
DECIDE	946	0.01	190	30		
DECIDED	3,287	0.02	200		583	684

The performative verbs investigated rarely have performative functions in the texts; however, the frequencies listed in Table 3 show that male characters are more frequently associated with this category of verbs linked with agency. While the differences in gendered use are

sometimes very small (which could suggest that we are dealing with gender similarities, rather than differences), in some cases they are significant enough to suggest that male characters have the power to threaten or warn others, as well as that promises made by males are more relevant.

Revisiting the verb *claimed*, we have added a filter for the possessive adjective *her* to the right of the node, and we have found that there are 56 constructions where *he* is the Agent, a man asserting his power over a woman. In reverse, with a right-sided filter for the forms *his/him* and *she* as the Agent, we got a total of 15 hits (8 for *him* and 7 for *his*). The statistical difference between the two types of construction is telling, and it supports the dominant sexual scripts where men dominate, and male sexuality is expressed in terms of possession.

The gender-marked use of verbs expressing volition could indicate that, in romance fiction, men are more often associated with wanting and making choices, while women are more often associated with wishing, as well as making decisions. This is relevant because female characters are also portrayed as being hesitant or in uncertain situations. As *want* can be used to express the desire for another person and in expressions of consent, we have listed in Table 4 examples of concordances with the node *want/wanted* where desire and consent are explicitly stated.

When looking for representations of consent, we focused on verbs describing touching and gestures of closeness, such as *touched*, *caressed*, *kissed*, *pulled (closer)*, and *embraced* with a female agent expressed with the personal pronoun *she*, as well as terms for orgasm, in association with the gendered forms *her* and *she*. The masculine-gendered constructions have been included for reference.

**Table 4** *Expressions of desire and consent with the tokens WANT/ED*

left	NODE	right	Freq.	Per 1M	Texts
	<i>WANT</i>		18,540	995.17	200
I	want	you	944	50.67	183
		in my bed / inside (me) / naked / now / so (very) badly / so (damned) much / to kiss me / you to make love to / you to make me yours			
	<i>WANTED</i>		15,877	852.22	200
he	wanted	her	627	33.66	175
		again / all to himself / beneath him / body / in his bed / so (damned) badly / to be his			
she	wanted	him/his	433	23.24	150/32
		more than / to kiss her / to touch her / kiss(es) / hands on her / mouth			

As seen in Table 5, for every pair of female-gendered concordances that could be interpreted as a representation of consent, the corresponding male concordance was more frequent, as was text distribution. This demonstrates that male characters are more active and initiate sexual behaviours more often, while female characters are more passive, often on the receiving end of sexual behaviour. The fact that *KISSED* was the most frequent word was predictable as long as one passionate kiss is the most intimate behaviour depicted in some novels, while others contain several explicit sex scenes.

Using the Concord tool in WordSmith, we verified the most frequent collocates of the node *she kissed*. The top two collocates to the right of the node are *him* and *his*, confirming that our initial findings are salient. The ten most frequent words on the second position to the right of the node (following *him/his*) are *back, cheek, and, with, way, on, then, lightly, throat, jaw, neck, as, hard, she*. The clusters *she kissed him/his on* are present in 145 and 91 texts, respectively. However, the male equivalent has a near-perfect distribution, which supports the notion that males are typically the active initiators of kissing.



**Table 5** *Expressions of consent and female pleasure*

TOKEN / Female concord	Freq. (per 1M)	Texts	Male concord	Freq. (per 1M)	Texts
TOUCHED	2,788 (149.65)	198			
(she) touched him	82 (4.40)	60	(he) touched her	319 (17.12)	136
(she) touched his	122 (6.55)	63			
CARESSED	568 (30.49)	141			
(she) caressed him	12 (0.64)	11	(he) caressed her	132 (7.09)	62
(she) caressed his	46 (2.47)	26			
KISSED	4,913 (263.71)	200			
(she) kissed him	394 (21.15)	145	(he) kissed her	1,695 (90.98)	196
(she) kissed his	172 (9.23)	91			
PULLED	6,671 (358.08)	200			
(she) pulled him close(r)	19	-	(he) pulled her close(r)	79	-
EMBRACED	234 (12.56)	106			
(she) embraced him	15 (0.81)	7	(he) embraced her	23 (1.23)	13
ORGASM	119 (6.39)				
(her) orgasm	54 (2.90)		(his) orgasm	15 (0.81)	13
CLIMAX	231 (12.40)	77			
(her) climax	96 (5.15)	52	(his) climax	54 (2.90)	40
CLIMAXED	40 (2.15)	26			
(she) climaxed	20 (1.07)	17	(he) climaxed	9 (0.48)	8
PEAK*	278 (14.92)	95			
(her) peak	39 (2.09)	28	(his) peak	9 (0.48)	8

### **Conclusions**

This article examined the concepts of female agency and consent in the context of historical romance fiction. The romance genre typically portrays female characters as passive recipients of male desire, expected to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations. Despite variations and subversions within the genre, the dominant sexual scripts tend to prevail in the portrayal of female characters in romance novels. Scholars have argued that representation of sexual activity and consent in romance allows female readers to safely engage with portrayals of intimacy and sexuality. However, historical romance can be problematic due to generic limitations, such as the depiction of unsafe sex, the normalization of transactional sex, and the glossing over the danger of contracting STDs.

Since dominant sexual scripts traditionally place men as controlling courtship timing and sexual interaction, we decided to use corpus methods of analysis to investigate the contextual usage of gender-marked language, the encoding of agency, and expressions of consent. By analyzing the language used in historical romance fiction, we aimed to shed light on some linguistic choices made by authors in their representations of female sexual agency and consent. As observed from our findings, the depiction of sex in historical romance often reinforces traditional gender roles and expectations. Men are often portrayed as dominant and assertive, while women are portrayed as submissive and passive. These portrayals reinforce power imbalances based on gender. Forced seduction narratives have become scarce, but the issue of female consent can still be considered problematic when one considers the age gap and imbalanced (sexual) experience between the protagonists.

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### Selected publications:

- (2023): "Recreating the Medieval Past through Neomedievalism: Knights, Tournaments and Fangirls in Popular Romance" (Noemi Neconesnic, Nadia-Nicoleta Morărașu), in *Cultural Perspectives. Journal for Literary and British Cultural Studies in Romania*, vol. 28/2023, pp. 163- 152.
- (2022): "Scottish Resistance through Language in *Outlander* by Diana Gabaldon" (Noemi Neconesnic, Nadia-Nicoleta Morărașu), in *Cultural Perspectives. Journal for Literary and British Cultural Studies in Romania*, vol. 27/2022, pp. 133- 152.
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- (2024): *An English-Romanian Explanatory Dictionary of Onomastic Phrasemes* (Nadia-Nicoleta Morărașu, Floriana Popescu), București: Editura Pro Universitaria.
- (2022): "Humour as a Nonviolent Resistance Strategy in *Murdoch Mysteries* TV Series" (Petrescu Zamfira-Maria, Morărașu Nadia-Nicoleta, Suciu Andreia-Irina), "Humour as a Nonviolent Resistance Strategy in *Murdoch Mysteries* TV Series", in *Cultural Perspectives. Journal for Literary and British Cultural Studies in Romania*, vol. 27/2022, pp. 155- 172.
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- (2020): *A Dictionary of Similes: from Phrasemes to Tropes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, Cluj Napoca: Editura Casa Cărții de Știință.