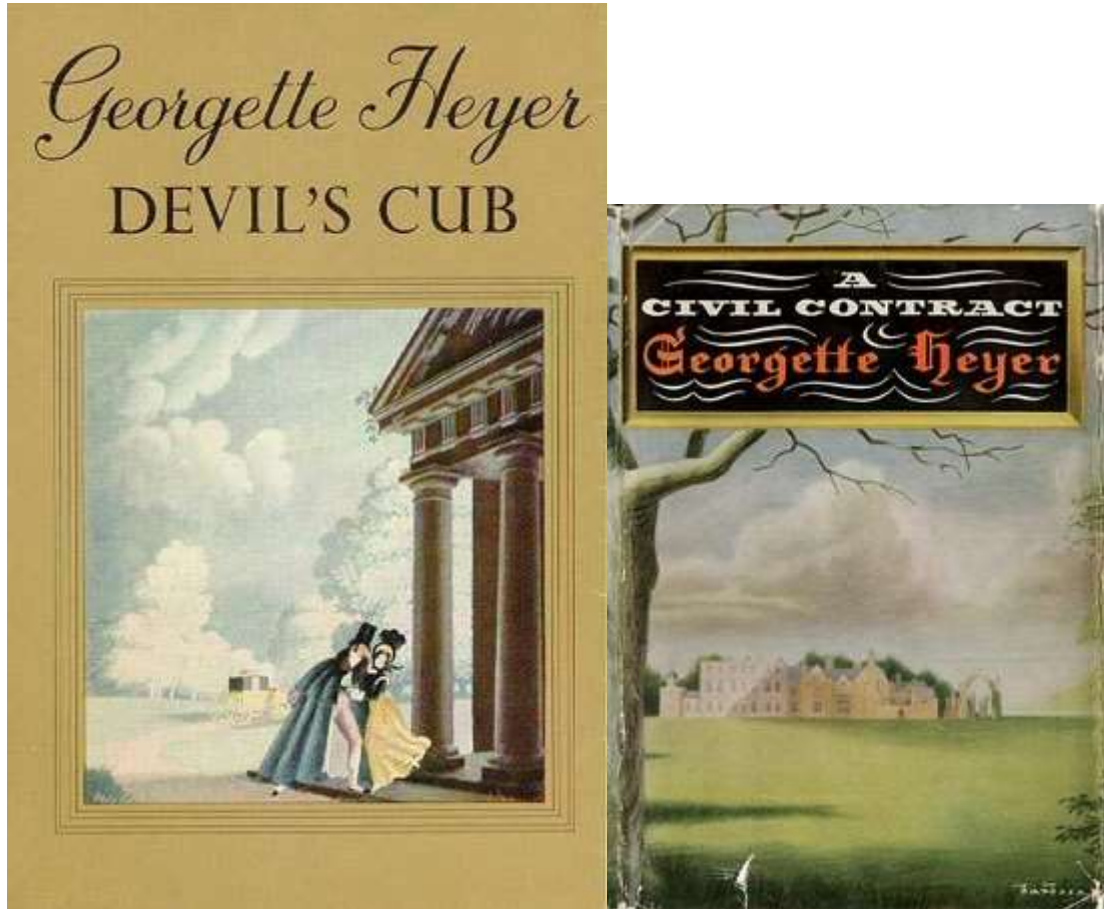


Georgette Heyer (1902-1974):

Devil's Cub (1932); *A Civil Contract* (1961)



Georgette Heyer published novels for over fifty years (1921-1972) and most of her books are still in print today, forty-four years after her death (she suppressed some early novels). She wrote historical novels set in the Middle Ages, the Georgian Era, and the Regency, most of which were romances, but not all. She also wrote contemporary thrillers, in some years publishing one of each. Heyer's are books of manners and wit as well as romance and adventure, and perhaps some of my social awkwardness can be attributed to more time spent studying cues among characters in mid-20th-century interpretations of early 19th-century high society than paying attention to interactions with living people.

Devil's Cub and *A Civil Contract* represent some of the range of Heyer's stories. The hero of *Devil's Cub* is a spoiled, bored, beautiful marquis who is trifling with the sister of the heroine. He's the sort of young man whose ability to shoot is not in the least impaired when he is drunk and who abandons the corpse of the highwayman he has killed by the side of the road. The heroine is intelligent, quiet-mannered, and prosaic, but also capable of taking decisive action,

as when she foils the hero's attempt to run off with her sister, and later defends her own honor with such extreme measures that she gives the hero something to think about besides his own ennui and subsequent restless recklessness.

A Civil Contract also features a nobleman hero and a bourgeois heroine, but the tone is quite different from the romp of *Devil's Cub*, which plays out in a trip across France, half of which is the heroine giving the hero the slip and the hero rampaging after. In *A Civil Contract*, our hero, an officer under Wellington, has been forced to leave the army and come home at his father's death. He discovers his father has ruined the family finances and he must marry money forthwith. He is responsible and sensible, but also sensitive and fastidious and in love with a society beauty who is now wholly out of his reach. Our heroine is the plain, dumpy, no-nonsense daughter of a fabulously wealthy businessman. She has been well-educated and is a friend of the beauty, but her father has clawed his way up from nothing and operates by heavy-handed manipulation, intimidation, and the ability to buy or pay for anything. There is a clash of personalities (between hero and father-in-law) and class and culture (between heroine and hero). The book is about the hero and heroine committing to their marriage. Their obstacles are their own emotions and crushed dreams, in addition to the well-intentioned meddling of her father.

The happy ending of both books relies on the heroine figuring out how to make herself an equal in her relationship with the hero. In *Devil's Cub*, the hero has the advantage of rank, wealth, sex, and romantic experience and general worldliness. He's also charismatic, intense, impulsive, and reckless. Because she realizes his faults as well as his strengths—something he never bothers to consider—she is able to have leverage without confrontation, since he is passionately devoted to her. Consider the following exchange. The hero wants to marry immediately. The hero's father wishes to engineer a wedding that minimizes scandal. The heroine decides the issue without her fiery-tempered fiancé [the Marquis, whom she addresses as "my lord"] and his coolly imperious father ["his grace"] engaging in their usual battle of wills (Chapter 19):

The Marquis said impetuously: "I'll make that fellow Hammond marry us, Mary, at once."

"Very well," said Miss Challoner equably.

"You will be married," said his grace, "in Paris, at the Embassy."

"But, sir—"

"A little coffee, my lord?" said Miss Challoner.

"I never touch it. Sir—"

"If his grace wishes you to be married at the Embassy, my lord, I won't be married anywhere else," stated Miss Challoner calmly.

The Marquis said, "You won't, eh? Sir, it's very well, but it will cause a deal of talk."

They will marry at the Embassy.

In *A Civil Contract*, the very qualities that make the hero reluctant to marry a bourgeois woman without looks or charm whom he does not love—his fastidiousness and sensitivity—are the qualities that the heroine depends on to strengthen their marriage (she had a crush on him before their marriage; her feelings mature into love). Thinking about their relationship as she falls asleep one night, she muses at the end of Chapter 19:

But he wasn't really a shining knight, she thought, snuggling her cheek into the pillow and sleepily smiling: only her darling Adam, who had to be tempted to his dinner, couldn't bear to have anything in his room disarranged, and disliked breakfast-table conversation.

Day-to-day life binds them together, as they address problems and rely on each other to cope with matters large and small. He discovers his wife has a dry sense of humor, and their shared jokes draw them closer; he also gains a measure of independence and respect from his father-in-law by investing against advice and reaping a fortune. The heroine's competence and emotional stability become valued qualities in the eyes of her husband, who is both overwhelmed with his new responsibilities as head of the family and more high-strung in general. Although there is no tempestuous declaration of love as in *Devil's Cub*, the hero does say he loves the heroine, and relegates his love for the beauty to his boyish past.

I don't think I need to explain the attraction of a handsome, charismatic, intense, wealthy nobleman who falls deeply in love with an unlikely heroine. For me as a young reader, it was interesting and instructive to also see a hero who is a bit high-maintenance and a heroine whose main strength is straightforward practicality forge a marriage together and a happy future I could believe in.