

Theorising Male Virginity in Popular Romance Novels

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Abstract: Although the virginal female heroine is a standard trope in popular romance fiction, the male virgin in popular romance novels has yet to be studied or theorised. This study therefore seeks to explore and theorise the male virgin in heterosexual popular romance novels. Initially, I demonstrate at least four “types” of male virgins: the sickly virgin, the student virgin, the genius virgin, and the virgin as commodity. I conclude this theoretical groundwork by considering Eloisa James’ *When the Duke Returns*, which brings together each of these “types” of male virginity. Ultimately, I argue that male virginity in romance fiction is complex and is distinct from other treatments of male virginity in other popular media.

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Almost every major critic of popular romance fiction—and probably minor ones too—notes that in reading the romance novel, readers will encounter virgin heroines. “For most of the genre’s history,” Pamela Regis explains, “the romance heroine was depicted as a virgin” (35). Indeed, in the first wave of romance scholarship, the trope of female virginity was often presented as a necessary feature of the genre. “Virginity is a given here,” Ann Snitow thus declares in her influential early article, “Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different”:

The heroine is not involved in any overt adventure beyond trying to respond appropriately to male energy without losing her virginity. [. . .] [S]ex means marriage and marriage, promised at the end [of romance novels], means, finally, there can be sex. (309)

Snitow's study was not based on a very broad sample of the genre—she only considers a handful of Harlequin romances—and it is tempting to dismiss her claims as dated, given the evolution of romance fiction since the 1980s.^[1] But consider some recent Harlequin titles: *The Timber Baron's Virgin Bride* (Clair, 2009), *The Spaniard's Virgin Housekeeper* (Hamilton, 2009), *The Playboy Sheikh's Virgin Stable-Girl* (Kendrick, 2009), *Capelli's Captive Virgin* (Morgan, 2009), *Rescuing the Virgin* (Rosemoor, 2009), *The Virgin's Price* (Milburne, 2009), *His Convenient Virgin Bride* (Dunlop, 2010), *Virgin on Her Wedding Night* (Graham, 2010). And novels with female virgins in the title are not the only ones where such characters appear. Clearly, the virgin heroine is still a regular character in popular romance fiction.

Indeed, even if modern romance fiction no longer insists on “making heroines compulsorily intact and reifying a hymenal virginity,” as a more recent scholar, Jocelyn Wogan-Brown puts it, what she calls the “cultural performance” of female virginity, at least in some metaphorical sense, remains remarkably important to the genre (346). “Harlequin romances (within the many subgenres)” have come to “represent virginity not as an essentialized and mystical anatomical condition,” this scholar writes, “but as an interior state, produced by volition and emotion” (346-7). Bloggers Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, whose familiarity with the genre is far broader than most scholars', concur: the “sexually unawakened heroine” who is “relatively innocent, as proven by her inexperience or her outright virginity,” remains “one of the more peculiar constants of most romance novels, from historicals to contemporaries to paranormals to even erotica” (37), they explain in *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches Guide to Romance*. “No matter what type she is,” they add, “she is definitely not the ho-type” (37).

What, though, of the sexually unawakened hero? Is there a “type” for the male virgin in popular romance? At first glance, this figure is perhaps a rarity, both in fiction and in scholarship. Many current studies of the popular romance hero, for example, focus on the “alpha male” hero, a figure who tends to be as sexually experienced as he is powerful, masterful, and—at least as the novel begins—emotionally reserved. In fact, as an anecdote from romance author Monica Burns reveals, the alpha hero may seem hard to square with the idea of male virginity:

A little more than a year ago, I was getting ready to write my March 2011 release *Pleasure Me*. My editor and I had talked at a conference, and she'd asked me to make the hero a virgin. My initial [response] on the outside was, ummm . . . sure, I supposed I could. Inside I was thinking WTF? I write alpha heroes. How in the hell am I going to write an alpha male who's never been with a woman?

Even Laura Vivanco and Kyra Kramer's discussion of the virgin romance hero, which appeared last year in the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, finds oddly little to say about him: "Virginal heroes do exist in the genre," they point out—but their discussion quickly moves on to cite a short questionnaire attached to the Mills & Boon edition of Susan Napier's *Secret Admirer*, which seems to play down this figure's importance. "[M]any heroines in our stories are virgins, but it is rare for the hero to be sexually inexperienced," the questionnaire explains.

In this article, I hope to move beyond merely acknowledging the virgin hero's existence to a more complex, theorised understanding of him as a complex character within the genre of popular romance fiction. My argument is that male virginity in romance novels is worthy of a more significant study than it has thus far been afforded—in part because male virgins are treated so differently in these novels from the ways they appear in cinematic representations, and in part because studying the virgin hero allows us to revisit some of the most puzzling and provocative of Northrop Frye's pronouncements on the "romance," broadly considered: in particular, his claim that in "romance" there is a "magical emphasis on virginity, the fact that virgins can do things other can't" (*CW XV*:219, 236), but that "this prudery [about virginity] is structural, not moral" (*CW XV*:187). With Frye in mind, my approach to the topic will be anatomical; that is, I will anatomise various "types" of the virgin hero in modern popular romance fiction, with some exploration of how they overlap and relate to one another. I will close with an extended discussion of one recent romance novel, *When the Duke Returns*, by Eloisa James, to demonstrate how a single text can make use of several distinct tropes concerning male virginity and the quest-like narrative structure surrounding its loss.

To understand the construction of male virgins in popular romance, we might begin by turning to the burgeoning field of "virginity studies." Unfortunately, this body of research so far only contains the scantest of mentions of male virginity. In Hanne Blank's book, *Virgin: The Untouched History*, the most "untouched" of topics is the male virgin; and the culture surrounding male virginity is surprisingly peripheral to Anke Bernau's *Virgins: A Cultural History*. Laura M. Carpenter's *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences*, however, offers us insights not only into the modern social realities of male virginity, but perhaps also into the silence surrounding it in scholarship. While "girls can be labelled 'sluts' if they have sex without love," Carpenter reports, "boys can be labelled 'wimps' or even gay should they not have sex early enough in their adolescence" (12).^[2] Male virginity not only must be lost; it must be lost as quickly as possible: if Virginia is for lovers, as the old advertisements used to proclaim, then (male) virginity is for losers. In Frygian terms, when the male is beyond the 'normal age' to lose his virginity, he becomes an *alazon* figure, the kind who serves as "an object of ridicule in comedy or satire" (*CW XXII*:331).

I am not the only scholar to make this connection between the male virgin in popular culture and the *alazon*. In his reading of the recent Hollywood comedy *The Forty Year Old Virgin*, Celestino Deleyto struggles to argue that Andy, the hero of the film, cannot *quite* be seen as "a ridiculous man or as an Aristotelian *alazon*" because of "other traits of his character [that] are more affirmative" (259). We might, however, reverse the argument, since those affirmative traits serve precisely to contrast and counterpoint Andy's long-enduring virginity, which otherwise would indeed leave him simply "an object of ridicule" (Frye, *CW XXII*:331). He often seems like one in any case: as Deleyto himself notes, "one of

the narrative and commercial goals of the centrality of Andy's sexual innocence is its exploitative potential: it becomes the perfect excuse for the deployment of gross-out discourse on sexuality" (260). Inasmuch as the film moves beyond that "gross-out discourse" into telling an actual love story it proves itself to be a romance, rather than simply a sex farce, but it's clear that the "Happily Ever After" of Andy's romance plot requires him to lose his virginity to the film's heroine, Trish—after which, we are assured, he will not only retain all those other, "affirmative" traits, but will put them to their proper use in the context of a truly "adult" (which is to say, sexual) relationship.

The Forty Year Old Virgin frequently invokes the discourse of ridicule that Carpenter describes surrounding male virginity: that is, the question of whether Andy is "a wimp" or "gay." It does so for comic effect, notably in the film's repeated bantering exchanges about "how I know you're gay." But one might well wonder how the representation of the virgin hero in this film, which was written and directed by men (Steve Carell and Judd Apatow), differs from the representation of the virgin hero in popular culture that is written by women, for example, popular romance fiction.

As Sarah S. G. Frantz and Katharina Rennhak write in their introduction to *Women Constructing Men: Female Novelists and Their Male Characters, 1750-2000*, several issues are at stake in the study of female-authored masculinity. The first of these arises from questions of power. As Frantz and Rennhak explain, feminist scholars have long studied the ways that male characters in female-authored texts serve as "catalysts for the subject-formation of the female characters, sparking in them emotional reaction and ideological resistance," but this is not their only function. Rather, "the male characters of female novelists represent the authors' negotiation with the ideologies of gender, class, and sexuality" (3) in their own right, with ideological and political issues playing out in the literary bodies and behaviour of a novel's men. Fictional men are no more "natural" than fictional women; no character, in short, is created without an ideological potential.

But more than merely an interest in ideology should draw us to the study of female-authored masculinity. If, as Annette Kolodny observes, a male reader "in opening the pages of a woman's book, finds himself entering a strange and unfamiliar world of symbolic significance" (174), part of that strangeness and unfamiliarity may lie in the degree to which issues of *desire* play out in the female construction of masculinity: desires that the male reader finds embodied both in "symbolic" ways and, sometimes, quite literally. As Frantz and Rennhak remark, "when women construct and write about men in fictional worlds, not only do they analyze the causes and effects of patriarchy, as Woolf does in *A Room of One's Own*, but they also construct their own realities, imagining alternative masculinities that are desirable from a woman's perspective" (2). The male reader may thus confront an analytical, even diagnostic representation of masculinity at its patriarchal worst, or he may encounter an idealised representation of some "alternative masculinity" at its post- or anti- or reformed-patriarchal best—or even, most unsettling of all, he may face a male figure who somehow combines or moves between these extremes.

The romance novel, of course—particularly in its popular manifestation—has been predominantly theorised as being a genre written "by women, for women." What, then, can we say about the virgin hero of the romance novel? How might he be read in political or ideological terms? Might he turn out to be one of those "alternative masculinities that are desirable from a woman's perspective"? Certainly the treatment of the virgin hero in romance fiction seems different, and generally more desirable, from the representation of

male virginity seen in other media, fictional and otherwise, if only because the virgin hero tends to be a complex character, not a joke to be laughed at or a tragic figure to pity. Romance novels have been criticised and even discarded by the academy for the ways in which they unconsciously reinforce patriarchal norms, but when we read these novels with a particular focus on the virgin hero, we find that they are remarkably self-conscious about those norms, allowing us insights into both gender and genre.

In my study of virgin heroes, I have come across a variety of archetypes—by which I mean a “typical or recurring image” (Frye, *CW XXII*:91) in literary and cultural texts—of the male virgin in popular romance. The first archetype is the *sick* virginal hero: that is, the hero who was, for some specific period of time, too sick or too weak to lose his virginity, unable to perform sexually and therefore unable to “perform” adult masculinity as well. In Katherine Kendall’s *First and Forever* (1991), a Harlequin Temptation, we are introduced to a mature heroine, Laura Daniels (she is 35), who meets a younger man, 22 year old Alex Shaw, who happens to be a virgin. “I’ve never been with a woman, Laura,” he tells her forthrightly: “I’m a virgin” (136). The announcement of virginity seems to be one of the requirements of the male virgin romance novel: indeed, as far as I can tell, *all* virgin heroes at some point confess that they are virgins, as though this articulation were a defining feature of virginity itself, at least for a romance hero. The romance heroine’s virginity, by contrast, may be declared aloud, but it is often also “written” by her body in the form of pain during sexual intercourse, blood on the sheets, or other signs that the hero must read and respond to—and if he fails to see any signs, like the hero in Maureen Child’s atypical *Last Virgin In California*, this is a surprising twist on the trope. (“In every book she’d ever read, the hero *always* noticed a thing like that,” Child’s heroine thinks to herself, a little disappointed [156].)

The speaking-aloud of the hero’s virginity often arrives, for the sick virgin hero, in the context of some explanation of his wounded, hence virginal, status. In the case of Alex Shaw, a car accident gets the blame: “I was seventeen. Guy hit me head on. He crossed the line and hit me. When I woke up . . . [. . .] It’s impossible for me to convey the pain, the horror—the goddamned fear” (135). Some of that “horror” spills over into the depiction of Alex’s recovery and his life after the accident. As he further explains: “While I learned a lot during that time, I managed to miss quite a few things about the real world. I feel so . . . different, so ignorant of life. I never really had any friends. I fell behind other people my own age” (136). What Carpenter says about virginity loss in everyday discourse—that it “represents a rite of passage, a process of transition from sexual youth to adulthood” (143)—thus seems true in this novel, since Alex’s transition to adulthood has been delayed (“I fell behind”). A later passage makes this issue quite explicit. “Alex was a boy,” the heroine thinks to herself. “He should be making out with girls in the back seat of a car at a drive-in. His first time should be a joyful adventure. Not a self-conscious performance where the only thing on his mind was the review he’d receive the next morning” (140-41). As a “boy,” Alex should lose his virginity in a boyish way, as part of an “adventure.” Although he is physically capable of “performing” sexually, he seems here too emotionally frail (which is to say, still too much like a child) to endure the rigors of a female “review” of his “performance,” which includes his performance of adult masculinity. This scene concludes with Alex being sent home by the heroine, still a virgin, in a cab—it’s as though he were even too young to drive, at least metaphorically speaking.

The construction of virginal Alex as a “boy” in *First and Forever* leads quite naturally into a second common archetype: the *student* virgin hero, with the heroine as his teacher. Kendall makes the most of the erotic potential built into this archetype, and of the power imbalance as well. When Laura arrives at Alex’s apartment, she promptly and playfully takes charge, and Alex is glad to go along with her mix of metaphor and role-play scenario:

“Time for night school.” Wordlessly she led him to the bedroom and stationed him next to the water bed. Kicking off her shoes, she turned on the lamp next to his bed.

“Lesson number one,” she began with a smile that put to rest any doubts about her talents at seduction. “Sometimes it’s better with the lights *on*.”

Alex returned her smile, intensifying it. “Should I take notes?” (163)

She continues elaborating a series of lessons:

Laura closed her eyes, fighting off the lush, lazy heat that threatened to drug her into speechlessness. “Lesson three,” she managed at last, opening her eyes. “Female anatomy.”

“I think I’m going to like this class.” (163)

As the scene comes to a climax, the power dynamic is reversed, with Alex assuming the generically-typical quality of sexual mastery. Although she begins by leaving the lights on, Laura eventually “couldn’t watch any longer, closing her eyes to the delicious things he was doing to her body. Things no man had ever been able to do to her body” (167). One thinks of Frye’s observation that, in a romance, “virgins can do things other can’t” (*CW* XV:219, 236)—and, perhaps, of the sharp contrast between Alex’s immediate sexual prowess and the Andy’s goodhearted, fumbling, and extremely brief first time in *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, which is played entirely for comic effect. Although it’s true that the two men both respond with boyish enthusiasm to their first sexual episode—“Wanna do it again?” Alex asks (169)—this parallel hardly cancels out the striking, generically-specific difference between them when it comes to satisfying the heroine, perfectly, right from the very first time.

In Bonnie Dee’s *The Countess Takes A Lover* (2009), we see a variation of the teacher/student motif, one common enough to be its own archetype. This time, the student is a genius, and in the *genius* virgin archetype, the hero has not had sex because he is simply too intelligent to be concerned with carnal matters. His mind has been elsewhere. In *The Countess Takes A Lover*, readers are told about a virgin hero of twenty-five years of age:

Science and reason had always been the guiding forces of his life. Animal impulses were for the uneducated, unthinking louts. There must be more to life than satisfying base lust with bestial coupling; otherwise the whole of society might as well run about in animal skins cooking shanks over open fires. (31)

The genius virgin hero gives visible form to an enduring dichotomy in patriarchy: that is, the association of men with intellect and the mind, and women with emotion, sex, and the body. In this line of thought, only men are fully human—and as we can see in that reference to “uneducated, unthinking louts,” within the category of “men,” some men are more fully human than others. Needless to say, the novel does not *endorse* this line of thinking—rather it introduces the dichotomy in order to undo it.

This process plays out even more vividly in Jo Davis’ *Under Fire* (2009). Here our virgin hero Zack Knight, 26, is a “so-called genius” (3), while the heroine, Corinne “Cori” Shannon, is an exotic dancer who works for private parties at night and—to trouble the patriarchal dichotomy—also studies during the day to become a nurse. Cori exudes sexuality: “she was sex incarnate” (75) and “she put the ‘vroom’ in vavooooom” (11). Zack’s sexuality is alluringly present, but repressed, a duality that plays out nicely in the novel’s choice of career for him (he’s a fire fighter) and in his behaviour at the outset of the novel. “He’d never been good at relating to women on any level—pathetic, but true—” we learn, “and now he had to keep from staring like an idiot at the goddess standing in front of him” (2). But if being a “genius” makes him “like an idiot,” this doesn’t last:

Her big, white smile blasted him with a double shot of desire. Awakened his slumbering libido. She was sex incarnate, a treat he’d never sampled. He’d wondered if she’d believe his innocence, then reminded himself it didn’t make any difference. Even if he wasn’t a disaster zone, Cori was way out of his league. (75)

In this novel, as we’ve seen elsewhere, the hero has to articulate his virginity to the heroine, a moment that shifts the novel back into the student / teacher model we saw in *First and Forever*:

“I’m sort of . . . new at, you know . . .”

Sitting up, she stared at him, processing what he’d said. Holy crap! “You mean, you’ve never gone down on a woman before?”

He groaned, slapping a hand over his eyes. “More than that. I’ve never had sex with a woman, period.” (143)

Following his virginal announcement, Cori begins to introduce Zack to the pleasures of sexuality and, of course, not only does he lose his virginity, but “the sex was pretty damned amazing” (149), not embarrassing, frustrating, or disappointing, to either party.

The discourse of male virginity in *Under Fire* also introduces us to a fourth common archetype: the virgin hero as *commodity*. “Good god,” Cori ponders at one point, “how on earth had she snared one of the last sexy male virgins over the age of twenty-one?” (143). Such a construction of female virginity is certainly not novel in any sense; female virginity has long been prized and required at marriage, reducing women to the status of commodities. The commodification of male virginity, by contrast, is rarely so reductive as female virginity—and when it is, when the male is now commodified and spoken of as an object, a virgin, rather than as a subject (who just happens to be a virgin), this reduction is often played for comedy. Consider Katherine Deauxville’s *The Last Male Virgin* (2002) in which we are introduced to Dr. Peter Havistock, “the author of the surprise bestselling book *Determining Anthropological and Developmental Social Factors Among the Papua New Guinea Aborigines in the Antorok Valley*” (6). Indeed, his celebrity is so popular that readers

learn that “[t]he Harry King show called. They want me to be interviewed on CNN tonight” (23). Havistock, in this interview, explains how he survived a plane crash that killed his parents—a variation, perhaps, on the sick or wounded virgin motif—and how he subsequently spent a great deal of time in the jungles of Papua New Guinea. Pressed by an interviewer, he has no embarrassment about his state: “I believe what you are getting at is that I’m still a virgin,” he says (39). For Havistock there is nothing out of the ordinary about his lack of sexual experience; for Harry King and his viewers, there is nothing but shock: “I’m sorry, Doctor, I’m told our lines are jammed, so we are going to have to answer some of these calls. It seems a lot of people would like to talk to you” (40-41). The question of why the phone lines are jammed is quickly answered: Havistock has become a fetishised commodity.

Deauxville clearly has fun, throughout the novel, playing with popular culture stereotypes and readers’ expectations. Havistock, for example, is utterly unfazed by his virginal identity, with no fear that it brands him as a “wimp” or as “gay” or as something less than an adult man. Indeed, he turns the tables on a woman who gives voice to those views:

Leslie snapped. “To many people in our society here in the U.S., and maybe to most of the world, a man who is twenty-nine years old and hasn’t had sex is . . . is . . . *unnatural!*”

He raised his eyebrows. “Hmm. You mean it’s assumed that at my advanced age I must simply be more interested in having sex with myself?”

Leslie couldn’t help a little shudder. “I don’t believe you know how unattractive that sounds.”

“Nevertheless, that’s what you implied. Damn. Is that what the majority of the citizens in the United States believe I’ve been doing for the past fourteen years?”

She hesitated. “Well, I know it sounds bad, but can you blame them for thinking it?” (89)

Playing with the usual Romantic-primitivist assumption that indigenous cultures are more sexually open than the West—Havistock’s book recalls Margaret Mead’s famous *Coming of Age in Samoa*, just as his name recalls that of sex researcher Havelock Ellis—our virgin hero explains that “[f]rustration and sexual repression have no meaning in their [Antorok] language; they don’t think of themselves that way” (Deauxville 93). In such a cultural context, many of the meanings of male virginity seem to fall away, leaving Havistock quite bemused by his effect on American women:

“And they [Antorok] would never understand why my saying I’m a virgin on television is evidently like a shot of Viagra to apparently hundreds of women.”

“Women don’t take Viagra! At least, I don’t think they do. But you’re . . . you’re an aphrodisiac, that’s for sure.” (93)

Although he shares some traits with the sick virgin hero and the genius virgin hero, Havistock's openly announced "aphrodisiac" quality seems linked neither to a boyish arrested development nor to a charmingly awkward repression of the body. It's all about his status as a commodity, a rare thing that can be desired, when it's advertised on television, by hundreds of women at once.

In conclusion, I want to consider the ways these various archetypes come together in a particularly complex novel with a virgin hero, Eloisa James's Regency historical novel *When the Duke Returns*. The novels of Eloisa James have a rather large number of male virgins; by my count, at least five of her novels incorporate them, and this repeated use of the trope suggests an effort to explore its narrative and symbolic possibilities. This novel tells the story of a duke, Simeon, who returns home to his wife, Isidore. The pair was married via proxy while he was travelling through exotic lands; upon his return the twenty-three year old bride-now-wife realises, to her disappointment, that her groom-now-husband (six years her senior) not only *is* a virgin, but intends to remain one. The first chapter emphasises this departure from the usual male-virginity trope:

"He's a virgin."
"What!"
"He's a virgin and—"
"*Your husband is a virgin?*"
"And he won't bed me."

Jemma, Duchess of Beaumont, sank into her chair with a look of almost comical dismay on her face. "Darling, if there were ever grounds for annulment, these are they. Or this is it," she added with some confusion. "Is he some sort of monk?" (11)

The attention to language here, as Isidore's friend Jemma wonders whether these "grounds for annulment" should be singular or plural, reminds us that the hero's virginity, too, is partly a matter of language: in the romance novel, as I argued above, it must be announced and articulated to be real.

As this opening chapter continues, the female friends repeatedly discuss male virginity as an emasculating, even monstrous phenomenon. "What sort of man stays a virgin until he's near to thirty?" Isidore demands. "That's almost disgusting. How am I supposed to introduce him to the bedroom, Jemma? Men do this sort of thing on their own. Honestly, if he's never used his equipment—well, who's to say that it will function at all?" (13). In part, of course, this speech reveals her anxiety—Isidore, too, is a virgin, not an older, more experienced woman like Laura in *First and Forever*—and in part it reveals her frustration about being treated as a commodity, "Isidore, property of the duke" (10) rather than as a woman with her own emotional, social, and even sexual desires. Jemma's agreement that "incapability lies at the heart of this situation" (20), however, as the conversation end, shows that the novel is aware of and informed by modern American discourse about male virginity as a sign of lack, something for wimps. Never, for example, do the women praise Simeon for having remained loyal for eleven years to his proxy bride; instead, he seems at fault for not having learned about "this sort of thing on [his] own" (13).

Given the elaborate explanations other novels have offered for the hero's virginity, we might expect to find something comparable here, and we do. Simeon, it seems, spent his

childhood “long[ing] to escape his parents’ pitched battles” (22)—a version of the *sick* virgin archetype—and as an adult he now aspires to “quell” any strong emotion and be instead a “follower of the Middle Way” (22), a vaguely Eastern philosophical discipline he adopts during three years of “rigorous solitude” in India. (57). The novel explicitly links this philosophy’s aspiration to mastery over emotions and the body with a particular construction of masculinity: he spent those years “learning endurance, manliness, the Middle Way,” we read; “he had learned to create an oasis of calm around himself, no matter what happened” (57). Clearly, then, Simeon is not just a version of the *sick* virgin, but also a version of the *genius* virgin as well, a man who embodies the patriarchal split between body and mind, alternatively disciplining or ignoring the former, “animal” side of himself and identifying only with the latter, “principled, thoughtful” side that makes him a “human being” (162).

In this novel, the genius virgin tends to pride himself not just on his intellect, but on his self-control. When his Indian teacher Valamksepa “used to recite the poetry of Rumi,” we learn, “Simeon had exulted because he was free from the embarrassments described by the poet,” particularly the way that “reason was powerless” in the face of desire (162). At one point, Isidore laments that “she had the remarkable bad luck to be married to the one man in control of his body” (206), but Simeon associates the absence of self-control with “violent tempests of emotion” (162) both inside himself and between members of his household, as he witnessed with his parents. This issue of control, or the lack of it, is crucial to the point in James’ narrative where both hero and heroine lose their virginities. “That was the wonderful thing about it—there wasn’t an ounce of composure about Simeon now, nothing of the controlled man,” Isidore marvels. “His face was alive with pleasure” (263). In this scene, self-control begins to take on a new meaning, redefined or displaced into the sexual act: “I can’t control myself much longer,” Simeon says as he makes love to Isidore, and to her delight “his voice sounded dark and anguished” (263). As the scene ends, the narrator locates us squarely in Simeon’s point of view: “[p]leasure was roaring in his legs, and Isidore was meeting him now, raising her lips in a way that made him want to bite her on the collarbone, act like a rampaging beast” (264). Finally during the orgasmic moment, we are told, “[h]e threw his head back and roared like a man who was never quiet, like a lion claiming his mate” (264): a clear signal that he has finally come to inhabit and “claim” his own animal nature.

With this turn, Simeon’s virginal journey might seem to be complete. However, unlike earlier novels considered in this study, the post-coital moments in James’s text are not spent considering the completion or perfection of the sexual experience; that is, the sex was *not* entirely satisfying, neither for Isidore (who has yet to climax, and who finds Simeon’s semen rather disgusting) nor for the hero himself. “‘We weren’t very good,’ he said propping himself upon an elbow” (267). Having both become sexual subjects, this couple must now learn to be ‘good’ at it: a remarkable displacement and revision of the teacher / student motif that I discussed earlier. Simeon is quite willing to act as both student and teacher, asking Isidore a series of questions about her sexual body and offering to demonstrate certain aspects and capacities of his. She finds the questions and offers startling: in response to his inquiry about how it feels to have breasts, for example, she initially replies “How does it *feel*? Simeon, do you think you’re a normal man” (267). The fact that she does so with “a delicious low gust of laughter,” however, shows that the novel

does not consider being a “normal” man an entirely good thing, since it implies a lack of curiosity about women, or at least women’s sexual subjectivity.

The first time marks a juncture between having completed the necessary act of virginity loss and becoming a sexual subject; however, as we likely know, the first time is hardly ever a good time, let alone “pretty damned amazing,” as it was in *Under Fire* (149). But James’ novel does not simply distinguish between sexual activity (i.e. losing one’s virginity) and sexual happiness (which is to say, being “good” at sex, or making it both enjoyable and satisfying for both partners). It further distinguishes between sexual happiness and *marital* happiness, which requires much more than mere sexual compatibility. The final hundred pages of the novel focus primarily on how the couple arrives at the latter. But in an elegant turn, James frames the couple’s mutual struggle towards marital success in the same terms that shape their virginity loss and subsequent sexual education. The two forms of happiness cannot be reduced to one another, but the obstacles to both, and the lessons that must be learned to achieve both, are set in parallel. Control, vulnerability, respect, the desire to belong to a beloved and to possess him or her (not exclusively as a rare commodity, although not entirely *not* as a rare commodity): these topics and their key terms come up in each context.

The final moments of the novel offer a scene that embodies this parallelism. As the novel enters its closing chapters, there has been a constant, even growing tension about the success of the marriage; indeed, “the king has interested himself personally in the dissolution of [Simeon’s] marriage,” we learn, “on the ground of [his] insanity” (342). But after a series of melodramatic twists and rescues—and the novel itself calls them “melodramas” (346)—the couple find themselves ensconced in a sumptuous carriage, a vehicle metonymous with marriage, enjoying a passionate scene in which sex and love and companionate union are inextricably conjoined. “In the moments that followed, broken only by their whispered endearments,” we read, Simeon “realized something his heart already knew. They were partners” (363). And, as we learn in the novel’s two-part epilogue, their marriage is not only re-consecrated after this, but “a year or so later” the couple become the parents of triplets (371), each of them a “living, breathing, adorable source of chaos” (372). As Simeon thinks to himself in the closing lines of the text, “living in a clean tent on the banks of the Ganges river” leaves one with “no gummy smiles, no warm little bundles, no beautiful, impetuous wives, no responsibilities. . . . No life. Real life” (373). Isidore’s pregnancy and childbirth are thus metaphorically shared: the *metaphorical* virginity loss of their true, marital union (rather than of their first sexual encounter) has transformed each of them into a child-rearing, if not child-bearing, parent.

To close, virginity in popular romance fiction is never simple, even—or perhaps especially—for when the virgin is the romance hero. Romance authors do not simply treat the male virgin as an *alazon* or ridiculous character who is simply in need of sex, post-haste; instead, writers of romance treat male virginity as a topic worthy of serious consideration and sometimes quite elaborate exploration. No matter which archetypes he belongs to, the virgin hero can be read as a narrative trope, whether moral, structural, ideological, or as an opportunity to explore female desire. But more than that, in some contemporary popular romance fiction—as in the James novel—the male virgin asks us to read him through all of these lenses at once and by turns: a complexity that borders on the complexity of male virginity in real life, if one can still speak of “real life” in an academic context. Romance novels have been criticised and even discarded by many in the academy

for the ways in which they apparently reinforce patriarchal norms, but when we read these novels with a particular focus on male virginity, we find that romance novelists are quite conscious of these norms, and they sometimes break new ground in both gender and genre. Male virginity may receive its most honest and most complete fictional treatment in the genre pervasively written “by women, for women”: the popular romance novel.

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[1] For further contextualization of Snitow’s place in the canon of critical theory of romance, see Pamela Regis’s “What Do Critics Owe the Romance?” in this issue.

[2] My study does not attend to matters of queer or gay virginites in popular romance; however, there is much to be said about this concern. Queer virginites are problematic precisely because they define themselves in contradistinction to the overarching heteronormative definitions of virginity, which are dependent upon penile/vaginal penetration as a deciding factor. In male/male romance, for instance, the presentation of virginity loss is not always dependent upon penetration (either actively or passively). As such, this study brackets this area of concern as another space wherein the polemics of virginity in m/m romance can be further discussed and developed. What does seem certain is that the tripartite process discussed in this article does, for the most part, hold true. However, there is one striking difference that must be attended to in a study that would consider virginity in these textual spaces; that is, there is often a necessary recognition of the epistemology of the closet and a surrendering of the previous, closeted, identity. But, it must further be acknowledged that this is not always the case; likewise, sometimes heroes of these novels have had sex with women. Clearly the matter of virginity in male/male romance is complicated and deserves to be studied further.

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