

## Matricide in Romance Scholarship? Response to Pamela Regis' Keynote Address at the Second Annual Conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance

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**Abstract:** This paper provides a critical response to Pamela Regis' meta-critical paper "What Do Critics Owe the Romance?" While it endorses Regis' identification of the methodologically sound selection of study-texts as one of the main challenges faced by the field of popular romance studies, it also formulates a critique of Regis' account for being ahistorical and undertheorised. It briefly sketches the genealogical development of the field of popular romance studies and reads Regis' paper as part of the field's current process of maturation.

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"What do Critics Owe the Romance?", one of three keynote lectures at the [2010 IASPR conference](#), is a strong and much-welcome contribution to the development of a meta-perspective on the practice of popular romance criticism. Such self-reflexive, meta-critical accounts of the scholarly study of popular romance fiction are still rather rare.

Indeed, although the field of popular romance studies is currently booming, there are relatively few discussions of the state of the art of popular romance criticism which thoroughly consider the scholarly and conceptual origins and histories of this rapidly developing field.<sup>[1]</sup> Moreover, the few meta-critical reviews that do exist have such a wide-ranging group of studies to cover that they rarely manage to move beyond an enumerative overview of the different scholarly claims that have been made regarding the popular romance novel. With “What Do Critics Owe the Romance?” Pamela Regis does precisely this: she looks beyond the enumerative overview that merely establishes and describes differences between different studies and starts to consider both how and why such differences occur.<sup>[2]</sup> This brief response to Regis’ endeavour argues that while her meta-critical efforts are overall strongly commendable and insightfully identify and elaborate upon some of the key challenges of romance scholarship, Regis’ overall disregard for the historical and theoretical frameworks in which other scholars work could be considered problematic.

In order to get a grip on some of the dynamics that underlie the diverging interpretations of popular romance novels put forth in different scholarly studies of the genre, Regis adopts as a methodological approach the rhetorical analysis of literary criticism as texts constituting a discourse community. This approach allows her first to establish that the critical community of popular romance scholars shares a set of values, and second to analyse how the critics’ different positioning of the object of study (the contemporary popular romance novel) in relation to these shared values informs the rather different findings, interpretations, claims, and conclusions formulated by each of them. By emphasizing the notion that all romance scholars are essentially answering the same, community-imposed question—namely, are popular romance novels complex?—Regis draws attention to a core issue that all romance critics have in common, regardless of their many different approaches, frameworks, and objectives. Each act of criticism, Regis’ analysis makes irrefutably clear, requires the scholar to take up a position in relation to the object of study—requires, that is, a basic conceptualisation of the romance novel. It is in this process of conceptualising the romance novel, Regis essentially argues, that one of the core explanations can be found for critics’ rather differing takes on the same genre.

One of the most important elements of Regis’ discussion is her eloquent articulation and clarification of one of the basic methodological issues that has haunted the critical community of romance scholars since its inception: the methodologically sound selection of study-texts. As Regis implies, popular romance criticism has a somewhat problematic reputation in this regard: many older studies—like the ones by Ann Snitow, Tania Modleski, and Janice Radway<sup>[3]</sup>—make quite general claims about the entire genre of “the” popular romance novel despite being based on rather small and/or undiversified corpi. As Regis points out, these methodologically problematic overgeneralisations are often based on a too simplistic conceptualisation of the romance text and reveal that these scholars tend to underestimate or overlook the complexity of the popular romance genre.

However, Regis’ critique of these older critics, correct as it may be, fails to recognise the historicity of these studies—that is, it does not sufficiently take into account the historically and conceptually vastly different context in which these early scholars of the genre were working in comparison to their present day counterparts. Indeed, when these early critics started conducting their at-that-time highly innovative, groundbreaking studies, they were facing somewhat different conditions than we are today. Scholars like

Janice Radway, Kay Mussell, and Tania Modleski, who were operating in a context in which hardly any previous scholarship on the genre existed, were taking on a huge and virtually unexplored body of literature that was, nonetheless, surrounded by very strong cultural associations of sameness and simplicity. Negotiating these circumstances, these foundational scholars indeed made too general claims on the basis of too small and undiversified corpi, but the knowledge needed to correct them was simply not accessible to them in the academic context in which they were situated. While Regis then indeed identifies a problematic aspect of these older studies, in now evaluating these methodological errors a consideration of the original historical contexts in which these studies took place—the virtual inexistence of any scholarly knowledge about the popular romance genre and the nearly complete lack of a scholarly tradition or exemplary previous study to guide the way—might further elucidate part of the underlying causes of this methodological problematic.

Whereas the methodological flaws of excessive overgeneralisation can then be, to an extent, if not excused at least explained with regard to the work of the earliest generation of popular romance scholars, this is a different matter today. As the field is moving from the foundational discussion of generalities to a more mature discussion of specifics, the need for a well-considered methodology in the selection of texts as well as in the manner in which the texts are analysed becomes urgent. The field's genealogical development from studying the popular romance genre's general properties to focussing on more specific and particular aspects of (subgroups within) the genre is currently ongoing and can be observed in numerous recent works of romance scholarship. It is visible in Regis' own work, particularly in her much-cited *A Natural History of the Popular Romance Novel*—perhaps the most influential study of the genre published in the last decade—in which the author devotes two sections to a general discussion of the romance genre and then moves on to a thorough analysis of individual romance authors and novels. Other instances of such recent, more narrowly focussed scholarly discussions of popular romance abound; think for example of recent scholarly work on geographical subgroups of the genre (e.g. Juliet Flesch's excellent study of Australian romance novels), on particular subgenres (e.g. Lisa Fletcher's magisterial analysis of historical romance novels), on particular publishers (e.g. Paul Grescoe's study of Harlequin and Joseph McAleer's and Jay Dixon's studies of Mills & Boon), on individual authors (e.g. Sarah Frantz's work on Suzanne Brockman [2008; 2010] and J.R. Ward and my own doctoral dissertation on Nora Roberts) or even individual novels (e.g. Eric Selinger's sophisticated discussion of Laura Kinsale's *Flowers From the Storm*). While such studies use more self-evident and coherent principles of corpus selection, it remains methodologically crucial to adopt a constant and unwavering vigilance for the actual representativeness of the particular with regard to the whole for which it is envisioned to stand. This methodological concern is all the more important in popular romance studies because both the (early) traditions of this developing field and the cultural stereotypes that stubbornly continue to surround its main object of study tend to obscure the diversity and complexity of the genre's cultural reality that these studies aim to unlock.

Whereas Regis' concern for the methodologically sound selection of study texts in the study of popular romance novels is very commendable, there are other aspects of her account that are perhaps more problematic, though not less intriguing. One of these elements is the scholar's acknowledged attempt to gloss over or look beyond differences in theoretical approach or conceptual framework between the studies she critically discusses.

That is, although Regis herself advocates “theoretical self-awareness [. . .] in any critical endeavour,” she proceeds to compare these critical endeavours without much consideration for their different theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Although this approach is inspired by the findings of the rhetorical studies that form the methodological basis of Regis’ argument, this does not change the fact that the risk of ignoring theoretical positions is that one remains blind to the impact of one’s own theoretical position. This position is relevant to Regis’ meta-critical discussion because it plays a role in shaping her critique and evaluation of other scholars’ acts of romance criticism.

Regis’ own theoretical position fundamentally influences, for example, her evaluative discussion of Janice Radway’s classic *Reading the Romance*, which is, apart from Regis’ own work, perhaps the best-known and most influential popular romance study to date. Regis’ approach to the study of popular romance is one which she herself characterises in *A Natural History* as “a traditional literary historical approach” (112) in which the primary site of interest is the text and the secondary site of interest the broader historical and socio-cultural context in which the text figures. Following this approach, Regis defines the genre and traces its history on the basis of textual and narrative features—an impressive endeavour that includes the identification of the now famous eight essential narrative elements which, according to Regis, define the romance novel. Although Regis convincingly argues that the concrete textual embodiments of these eight narrative elements undergo multiple diachronic and synchronic changes in response to wider historical changes, her core position is nonetheless that the romance novel—as *literature*—is defined by its narrative (that is textual) properties. Underlying this approach is a conceptualisation of romance novels as literature and of literature as something that is primarily and pervasively *textual*.

While this is of course a perfectly legitimate, interesting, and insightful approach to the study of the popular romance novel—indeed, Regis’ definition of the romance novel is often cited in scholarly and other discussions of the genre—like any other approach it is one which highlights certain aspects and disregards others. For example, Regis pays little considered critical attention to such elements as the materiality of the text (its peritext, that is its physical properties as not only an aesthetic form but also a material object in the world), the reader (that fascinating figure that seemed to endlessly intrigue but essentially elude a scholar like Radway), and the institutions fundamentally shaping both the production and reception of these novels. It is, however, towards these aspects of the genre, which Regis’ approach conceptually obscures, that many scholars, including Janice Radway, have directed most of their critical effort. Radway, who carries out an ethnographic study of romance readers, is, unlike Regis, not primarily focussed on the romance novel’s textual properties, but in the reader’s use and interpretation of this text. While Radway does indeed, as Regis points out, seem to hold a rather simplistic conceptualisation of the romance text, this conceptualisation might in part stem from the fact that Radway’s main conceptual interest is not in the romance text as such—as is Regis’—but in the popular romance novel as a strongly gendered socio-cultural phenomenon.

Radway herself demonstrates a recognition of the important difference between these two approaches when, in the conclusion to the 1984 edition of *Reading the Romance*, she notes the importance of “*analytically* distinguishing between the meaning of the act [of reading romance novels] and the meaning of the text as read” (210). The text as such—

Regis' primary site of interest—is of less importance to Radway than the ways in which the text is used by its readers, which, Radway's account continuously indicates, are highly complex. The "patient unravelling, translating, decoding, interpretation, analyzing" (Wilder 105) that the topos of complexity implies is then performed by Radway not in her discussion of the romance text, but in her discussion of the romance reader, the process of reception and the material production of the text read. If we (re)consider the question of complexity to not pertain solely to textual properties, but to the romance novel as a cultural phenomenon, Radway answers it with a resounding affirmative. The fact that Regis' overlooks this kind of complexity in her otherwise impressive and articulate discussion stems, it seems to me, from her own conceptual position which obscures or disregards non-textual issues. This brief example then indicates that Regis' own theoretical position is relevant to her meta-critical discussion and, more generally, that in such meta-critical endeavours an awareness of theoretical positions and conceptual frameworks is important.

On the whole it seems to me Regis' discussion can be interpreted as an example of a broader developmental dynamic that is currently taking place in the field of popular romance studies. As the field matures the natural tendency arises to look back at its foundations and, in an attempt to distinguish the present from those past origins, to identify, analyse, and even emphasise certain problematic aspects of older popular romance studies. Such endeavours could be considered as figurative instances of ritual matricide in which scholars like Radway, Modleski, and Mussel function as the figurative mothers of the field who, in order to create the possibility for the field to grow up, develop, and mature, have to be figuratively "killed"—taken away, put aside, moved beyond. This process is a natural mechanism of evolution and growth and one which on the whole has positive effects; as is apparent in Regis' discussion, it enables a much-needed identification and analysis of problems and errors in earlier studies. This is itself a necessary condition for present and future studies and scholars to improve in these regards and avoid making the same mistakes as their predecessors. Although critical accounts such as the one by Pamela Regis can then be placed within a positive broader dynamic that stimulates the further development, maturation, and improvement of the field, prudence is called for in such endeavours because they run the risk of overstating or exaggerating the problematic aspects of older studies. Indeed it seems to me that in particular Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*, perhaps because of its fame and enduring identification with popular romance studies (certainly in the eyes of scholars outside the field), is regularly subjected to quite harsh and even unforgiving critiques which seem to create and perpetuate a stereotypical image and too simplistic interpretation of this complex and theoretically sophisticated study. In this regard Regis' present meta-critical account is mainly to be praised, since it moves beyond the stereotypical interpretations of past studies and presents a thorough and well-considered critical discussion.

This brief response to Pamela Regis' meta-critical discussion of popular romance scholarship has pointed out some of what I consider to be the account's strongest and weakest points. While I endorse Regis' identification of the methodological problem of overgeneralisation as one of the main challenges that the field of popular romance studies faces, I also critique her account for being too ahistorical and undertheorised. I briefly attempt to demonstrate the potential problems of such a disregard for theoretical positions in meta-critical discussions. In this context I must acknowledge that, much as Pamela Regis' theoretical position influences her meta-critical discussion, my own critique of her paper is

shaped by my position as a scholar inspired by post-structuralism. Instead of considering the clashing of such theoretical perspectives as problematic, it is my firm belief that if we manage to continue to achieve meetings of and conversations between these, and many other, critical and theoretical perspectives—as we did at the 2010 IASPR conference—the future of popular romance studies look brighter than ever before.

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[1] Amongst the most important state of the art accounts of romance criticism are discussions by Juliet Flesch (11-23), Pamela Regis (3-7), Kay Mussell (6-13) and Sally Goade (1-5).

[2] Both Juliet Flesch and Kay Mussell provide somewhat similar meta-critical considerations in their above mentioned overviews of romance criticism, though neither of these accounts is as elaborate as Regis' present one.

[3] Mussell's study (1984), which is based on a corpus of over eighty romance novels, is somewhat of an exception in this regard.

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