

Rebooting the Romance: The Impact of *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*

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In the summer or fall of 2005, I went to my local public library to pick up some books on “romance.” I was new to the field, if there was a field, of popular romance studies, and back then there was no [RomanceScholar listserv](#) to join, no [Teach Me Tonight](#) (the academic romance blog) to visit, no [wiki bibliography](#) of scholarship to consult. Instead, I browsed the shelves—first the lit-crit stacks, where I found *Loving with a Vengeance* by Tania Modleski, Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance*, and Carole Thurston’s somewhat less famous book *The Romance Revolution*, and then, on a whim, the New Books section, where, as a pleasant surprise, I stumbled upon a two-year-old book by Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. I checked it out, I brought it home, and by the end of the day, I knew what I wanted to do with the next few years of my scholarly life: not just to study and teach the romance novels I was already reading for pleasure, but to be an advocate for those novels, as Regis was, so memorably, in her study’s opening chapters.

Over the years I’ve made good use of those opening chapters, especially in the classroom. (I am currently teaching my twenty-fifth DePaul University course devoted exclusively to popular romance fiction.) In my remarks today, then, I’d like to begin by addressing Regis’s contribution to romance pedagogy, and then open things out to some thoughts on her contributions to more recent scholarship on the genre. Finally, prospectively, I will speak to the way that the political claims that Regis makes on behalf of the romance novel—claims about which I find myself somewhat ambivalent, as the years go by—might point out some useful future directions for romance novel studies.

In my 2007 review of Regis’s book (among others) for *Contemporary Literature*, I praised the book for offering a ready-made canon of romance authors and texts one might

draw on in constructing a syllabus, and also a set of “precision tools” one might use to spark focused, productive discussion in the classroom (“Rereading the Romance” 313). Six years later, I am happy to stand by both claims. Other efforts to articulate the nature and boundaries of the genre are either sweepingly general, like the two-part structure from the Romance Writers of America (“a central love story and an optimistic, emotionally-satisfying ending,” as the RWA website has it [“About the Romance Genre”]) or overly specific, like the thirteen plot functions in the “ideal romance” outlined by Radway’s study (134). Like some other famous eight-fold paths, Regis’s list of eight “elements” offers us a Middle Way between these two extremes: one that enables us and our students to talk about both thematic and formal elements in any romance novel in a specific, robust way.

Regis’s first element, for example—the “*definition of society, always corrupt*” (14)—marks an ideal point of entry for discussions of the socio-political material that shapes a particular romance novel, not just in terms of the particular corruption on display (misogyny, cruelty, homophobia, economic inequality, coarseness in love), but in terms of the solution to that problem embodied by the novel’s final, betrothed couple. Much of Lisa Fletcher’s theoretically-sophisticated discussion of the performative statement “I love you” can be brought into the general-education classroom via attention to Regis’s “declaration” element. And, as I said in the 2007 review, to have your students compare and contrast the “betrothal” elements in a range of disparate novels is to teach them to recognize, in a vivid, memorable way, the dialectics of convention and originality that shape not only the romance novel, but also any kind of genre writing. Wary of marriage, some contemporary romance novels deflect the “betrothal,” or deflate it through humor; in some LGBT romances, this element can be the site of a poignant, energizing re-engagement with the social corruption that historically has forbidden an actual marriage to occur.

Regis’s impact in my romance classes was profound and immediate. Her impact on other scholars is also worth noting—and by this, I don’t simply mean the use, by others, of her definition of the genre (later revised to replace the term “heroines” with “protagonists”) or even of that elements list.

We can measure this broader impact in two ways. First, *A Natural History* explicitly sets aside the psychoanalytic and post-psychoanalytic theoretical models that profoundly shaped popular romance criticism in the 1980s. As Regis’s opening chapters note, these models tended to pathologize romance reading, using an effortless move of psychological jujitsu to flip affirmations of the genre and its pleasures into evidence of its enervating, even debilitating effect. In casting Northrop Frye as the central theorist of *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Regis not only set aside the vexed, unhelpful metaphor of “addiction” to romance; she gave herself license to shrug off the hierarchy that segregates high-art and popular versions of the courtship-and-betrothal narrative. Frye himself was blessedly uninterested in such hierarchies, and the distinction-defying model that Regis derives from him has since proven helpful to scholars such as Hsu-Ming Teo (*Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels*) and Martin Hipsky (*Modernism and the Women’s Popular Romance in Britain, 1885-1925*). The opening chapters of Laura Vivanco’s *For Love and Money: the Literary Art of Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance*, which builds on her work at the Teach Me Tonight blog, uses Frygian terminology to delineate the uses of “modal counterpoint” and the deployment of “mythoi” that characterize popular romance aesthetics. (Like *A Natural History*, *For Love and Money* lends itself to classroom use, and

my current courses on the genre assign the full book to my undergraduates, who read a chapter of it to frame each novel we discuss.)

The impact of *A Natural History's* theoretical model is not limited, however, to those of us who've revisited Frye. Rather, by doubling back to pre-feminist, non-Freudian approaches to the romance novel, Regis essentially hit the reset button on the whole enterprise of popular romance studies. If her talk today is any indication, she herself seems to be loading an entirely new program for her current project, borrowing from Lisa Zunshine, cognitive science, and the psychological study of what is called "Theory of Mind." Whatever our method, all of us who study the romance novel in a non-pathologizing way are in her debt.

At the start of these remarks I said that *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* made me want to be an advocate for romance fiction—and, indeed, I've been proud to wear the genre's guerdon for some time. I don't, however, want to suggest that her influence is or should be limited to those who espouse the values of the genre. Consider, for example, the way that Regis describes the trajectory of the romance novel's plot as one from bondage to freedom: a freedom that is then put into action, always, every time, through one protagonist's betrothal to another. A "freedom" that so smoothly and inevitably leads to the same genre-defining choice strikes me as a freedom worth asking some tough and pointed questions about: questions which Regis herself hints at when she notes, in a qualification, that "this freedom is limited—'pragmatic' as Frye would have it. For a heroine, especially, it is not absolute. It is freedom, nonetheless" (30).

We need, as a field, to investigate the nature and limits of this "pragmatic" freedom. How does it reflect the models of freedom that get proposed in American discourse more generally: the sort which likes to frame Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic American culture as a universal norm? When and how do romance novels themselves raise questions about the inevitability of betrothal and the relationships between "freedom" and romantic love? In our research, we may need to draw once more on the work of more skeptical and resistant critical theorists, including those whose rhetoric falls into the category that Regis (following Laura Wilder) dubs *contemptus mundi*. For example, at the 2009 Princeton conference on Romance Fiction and American Culture, which I helped organize (and at which Regis spoke), Tania Modleski called on the next wave of popular romance scholars to engage with Lauren Berlant's then-recent book *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Few of us have responded to that call—yet look at what Berlant says near the start of the volume about the work she's about to do. "To love conventionality," she writes,

is not only to love something that constrains someone or some condition of possibility: it is another way of talking about negotiating belonging to a world. To love a thing is not only to embrace its most banal iconic forms, but to work those forms so that individuals and populations can breathe and thrive in them or in proximity to them. (3)

All of us who love the romance novel—as readers, scholars, editors, and authors—know that we love a profoundly conventional form, a form that relies on, revises, and investigates conventions of gender, narrative, and emotion. We also know that the readers, scholars,

editors, and authors of romance don't just blindly embrace the genre's "most banal iconic forms." We *work* them.

Ten years on, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* still gives us the precision tools to do that work, and to articulate what is to be done.

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