

Rattling the Toolkit: Methods for Reading Romance, Gender, and Culture

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Published online: October 2014

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

I want to begin by setting the scene. It's 2007 and I'm stumbling my way through my second semester as a master's student. I'm reading Judith Butler for the first time and, unsurprisingly, am completely panicking because I need to explain gender performativity to the rest of my class in three days. To manage this freak-out, I turn to a coping mechanism beloved by graduate students everywhere: total avoidance. Instead of working on my Judith Butler presentation, I decide to begin reading a book assigned for a research methods class. And thus begins my relationship with *Reading the Romance*.

I start with this story, not because I want to reminisce fondly about the traumas of my early graduate studies, but because I want to focus on the context in which many media and cultural studies students are introduced to *Reading the Romance*. *Reading the Romance* was first presented to me as a kind of methodological toolkit, a template to be used for designing research projects. Within this context, the fact that *Reading the Romance* was also a book about romance was almost incidental or, at least, positioned as secondary. And I think this positioning is significant. Different scholars first encounter *Reading the Romance* through any one of a number of lenses: as methodological teaching tool, work of feminist theory, analysis of reading practices, or, as a study of popular romance. My relationship with *Reading the Romance* always seemed to focus first on methodology and, next, on the role the project played within a larger debate on how to study media and culture in the 1980s and 90s.

Reading the Romance works tactically to fold the study of production and reception into an analysis of texts. The project is organized so that it moves from what Radway calls "the institutional matrix" for romance novels, to an ethnography of readers and, finally, to Radway's own analysis of romantic texts through the lens of feminist psychoanalytic theory. Part of what always draws me back to *Reading the Romance* is the way the project puts the researcher in dialogue with a genre, a set of romance novels, and a particular reading community. *Reading the Romance* places different textual encodings and decodings side by side. It is structured as a conversation both within and across academic, feminist, and romance reading communities. Today, the information presented in *Reading the Romance* continues to be discussed and debated among these same communities. Each time

I read it, I find myself wanting to ask both Radway and the Smithton romance readers new questions. In this way, the dialogue that *Reading the Romance* initiated continues to unfold.

Radway's project also insists on maintaining a sense of ambivalence about the romance genre and how best to study its role in women's lives. Ien Ang states that "*Reading the Romance* is inspired by a deep sense of the contradictions and ambivalences posed by mass culture, and by a recognition of the profoundly unresolved nature of critical theory's dealings with it" (Ang 228). This ambivalence regarding the relationship between scholars and popular culture can be seen in *Reading the Romance's* original introduction. In it, Radway expresses concern with scholarship that relies solely on textual analysis as a means of studying culture. She argues that this approach risks "hermetically seal[ing] off [texts] from the very people... [critics] aim to understand" (Qtd in Ang 227). *Reading the Romance's* response is to puncture this barrier and bring readers into a researcher's analysis. However, the act of breaking this seal presents its own challenges. Even when working to represent other voices, researchers are still scripting and filtering the conversation. Also, in the process of studying cultural discourse, we may inadvertently shore up the very cultural privileges we want our work to interrogate. In this way, the contradictions and ambiguities that we seek to interrogate within popular culture inevitably bleed into our work.

This leads me back to my opening comments regarding my introduction to *Reading the Romance*. It seems significant that the *romance* part of this project is so often positioned as an understood element of the work. The implication being that feminist media scholars, *naturally*, will study romance to help us analyze patriarchy. I will be the first to admit that I began studying popular romance for exactly this reason. I was interested in representations of gender and sexuality in popular culture. Clearly, I assumed, this meant I needed to pay attention to romance. It didn't matter that I was also a lifelong romance reader. Or that, as a queer feminist, my personal relationship with romance was filled with many fruitful moments of frustration, negotiation, and pleasure. Even amidst all my cultural studies training positioning texts as part of our larger cultural ecosystem, I was still keeping *romance* at a distance. I was seeing romance more as a handy object to be poked at than a vibrant and constantly changing part of my own cultural discourse.

Part of *Reading the Romance's* work in 1984 was an attempt to break through a hermetic seal between texts and their reading contexts. Perhaps the next stage of our work with *Reading the Romance* requires that cultural scholars retool their approach to romance yet again, reconsidering what it means to use this category of storytelling as a lens into gender, sexuality, and culture. After all, romance is hardly a distant and discrete object of analysis. Romance is a discourse we are always already a part of. The effort to view romance as something that can be isolated risks distorting the role that its discourse plays in our lives. Romance is either present or possible in most of the media we read, watch, and interact with: a narrative that appears across media, physically pleasures us, and that, at some point, many of us try to enact in our daily lives.

I want to conclude by listing three key questions I am thinking through as I consider my own research on romance and its role within cultural discourse:

1. If romance is so ubiquitous, why is a company like Harlequin so often given the power of "speaking for" both popular romance genres and for women?

How do I ensure that one company's voice isn't privileged above others in my own work?

2. Given how modular and diverse romantic storytelling is, how do I study romance comprehensively? As a researcher, I have a very practical desire to closely read specific sets of texts. However, in the context of media and cultural studies, romance is not simply the romance novel, but a broader cultural construct that appears in film, television, print, and digital media. If I isolate a particular set of texts or a single reading community for analysis, this omits numerous other forms of romantic storytelling and other reading and writing communities from my view.
3. Finally, if studying gender and culture requires being attentive to variance and to the differing responses people have to texts, how do I ensure that I am always studying romance and media culture from a multitude of perspectives? What methods might we use to trace the ways that different romance reading communities and texts are already in dialogue with each other? And in what other ways might media scholars continue to push their methodologies further, adding to the tool-kit provided by Radway's study a generation ago?

Works Cited

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