

Special Issue: Queering Popular Romance (Editors' Introduction)

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In 1997, Kay Mussell called upon scholars of popular romance “to incorporate analysis of lesbian and gay romances into our mostly heterosexual models” (12). Today, closing in on two decades later, that challenge has yet to be met (beyond a few examples here and there). Although print and digital venues for LGBTQ romance have proliferated, meeting a growing demand for such work among readers (especially for male / male romances), and although there is a burgeoning interest in writing LGBTQ romance on the part of both LGBTQ and straight authors, queer romance fiction remains peripheral to most academic accounts of the genre. Likewise, with a handful of exceptions,[1] scholarship on popular romance fiction has scarcely begun to engage the theoretical paradigms that have become central to gay and lesbian studies, to queer theory, and to the study of queer love in other media (film, TV, pop music, marriage equality campaigns, etc.).

Recognizing that there are both similarities and tensions between “queer theory” and “lesbian and gay criticism,” this special issue seeks to address not only the importance of identity politics to popular romance fiction—that is, romance novels with LGBTQ protagonists—but also texts which give “queer” readings of ostensibly heterosexual romances, as well as those which are theoretically engaged with the fluid concept of “queerness,” no matter the bodies and / or sexualities of the protagonists involved. In approaching the concept of “queering popular romance” we construe the term “queer” broadly, aligning ourselves with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s famous assertion that “one of the things that ‘queer’ can refer to” is “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (8). This special issue aims to open a dialogue about queer(ing) popular romance that we hope will be the beginning of a longer and ongoing conversation as the genre continues to evolve and expand in new and complex ways to meet the increasingly diverse nature of the readership and its fluid desires.

Lynne Pearce’s “Love’s ‘Schema and Correction’: A Queer Twist on a General Principle,” opens our issue and builds on her previous meditations on the function of repetition in the love-relationships depicted in romance fiction to explore “how, certain love-relationships present themselves as so definitive as to be non-repeatable in the first

place.” Pearce draws on art historian E.H. Gombrich’s modelling of perception and consciousness to analyze cognitive processes of attraction and enduring romantic attachment even after the loss of the love object. Using Annie Proulx’s short-story, “Brokeback Mountain” (2002 [1989]) and Ang Lee’s award-winning film based on the text (2005), Pearce considers the function of “textual plots and subplots from a broad cross-section of literature where bereaved or abandoned lovers refuse recuperation and trouble the text’s happy ending.” In her analysis, Pearce demonstrates how we need to complicate our considerations of affect that seems abnormal or “queer”—such as Ennis’s inability to overcome the emotional loss of his long-time lover Jack—while taking into consideration complex historical and heteronormative contexts that create dissonance between “ideal” and permissible love objects in ways that trouble cognitive processes for matching one’s schema to the actual love object, especially when it is non-normative.

Jodi McAlister’s “You and I are humans, and there is something complicated between us’: Untamed and queering the heterosexual romance” explores Anna Cowan’s *Untamed*, one of the most discussed and reviewed historical romance releases of 2013. A polarizing and unusual text, particularly due to its hero (a bisexual cross-dressing duke who passes as a woman for more than half the book), it is one that McAlister argues does adhere to the structure and many of the tropes of a typical heterosexual historical romance, yet it is also recognizably queer. To further interrogate the queerness of fluidity in *Untamed*, McAlister reads it alongside Georgette Heyer’s *The Masqueraders*, which also features a cross-dressing hero—something of a rarity in the romance genre, which has more commonly featured cross-dressing female protagonists. Drawing on David Halperin’s understanding of “queer,” McAlister explores how *Untamed*’s approaches to gender, social roles, and history, contribute to the book’s broader exploration of fluidity.

Jami McFarland’s “Resuscitating the Undead Queer in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* Saga” aims to complicate notions of queerness—both common and uncommon representations of queerness—in the context of an ostensibly popular heterosexual paranormal romance series. McFarland traces a history of queerness within the vampire genre to locate Meyer’s conceptualization of the vampire within this practice. Aligning vampirism with queerness, McFarland explores the often homosocial and homoerotic histories of the vampire figure. Claiming that Meyer’s heteronormative or, perhaps more appropriately, homonormative vampire largely deviates from a tradition of associating the vampire with the Queer (position), McFarland demonstrate how the construction of Edward Cullen still feeds on the popularly imagined construction of queerness. Ultimately, McFarland argues that Meyer’s hetero-romantic *Twilight* series can be regarded as participating in the century-old tradition of associating the vampire figure with queer identities and *ways of being*.

Moving from romance fiction and into the realm of television, Sunnie Rothenburger’s “Piratical Pleasures: Female Dominance and Children’s Literature as Romance in ABC’s *Once Upon a Time*,” considers how the show queers female sexuality. For Rothenburger, *Once Upon a Time* combines children’s literature with popular romance in a way that opens up some of the problematic and oft critiqued conventions of the latter by depicting sadistic and dominating aspects of female desire rather than masochistic ones. Rothenburger claims that the protagonist, Emma Swan, is in many ways both child and adult; in her sexual attraction to Captain Hook she is subversively “queer” and a “lost girl,” less the inexperienced heroine of conventional romance than an aggressive princess who

loves to tie up and torment her pirate. For Rothenburger, the series invites a re-consideration of childhood narratives' contributions to discourses of sexuality, and of how gender might be re-conceived when the demarcation between an individual's childhood and adulthood is troubled.

Taking a more pessimistic view of mainstream television programming's representation of gay romance, Bridget Kies's "First Comes Love, Then Comes Marriage: (Homo)Normalizing Romance in American Television" examines what has been lost in recent depictions of gay couples in mainstream programming. Although gay romance storylines have become increasingly popular, as seen in contemporary series with gay romance elements like *Modern Family* and *Glee*, these depictions has largely reified one representation of acceptable gay identity. Specifically, Kies argues that the success of gay romance on television today is a result of homonormativity, a political position favoring conformity to certain normative social values. Because of romance's emphasis on betrothal and happy endings, same-sex romance necessarily becomes homonormative; gay couples on television look and sound like their straight counterparts. By favoring marriage and parenthood as ultimate life goals, and by depicting white, middle- and upper-class men, gay romance on mainstream television has succeeded in winning over audiences. However, this mainstream appeal comes at the expense of relative invisibility for other queer identities and lifestyles.

As editors, we hope that this collection of essays begins to respond to Kay Mussell's exhortation, and we call in turn for scholars working in queer theory, popular romance studies, gender studies, and beyond to begin to consider the proliferation of queer popular romance texts. Although a great deal of work remains to be done on queer/ing popular romance media—too many voices and experiences remain unheard and unread—it is also true that genre has explored and continues to explore the multiplicities of gender and sexuality, to challenge the bonds of love, and to think creatively and limitlessly about the potential of romance. Across multiple media, popular romance texts raise questions about the possibilities of love, sex, desire, gender, and so on. Rich in critical potential, this archive can and should contribute to fields of inquiry where the popular romance has, for too long, remained absent or as a mere stereotype.

[1] At the close of this article, we provide a supplemental bibliography of recent publications that have attended to the popular romance and queer studies.

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Supplemental Bibliography: Queer/ing the Popular Romance

As Editors, we do not intend for this list to be definitive, but rather to provide readers with a series of sources that attend to queer theory and/or LGBT Studies.

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