

- [Home](#)
-
- [About](#)
-
- [Editorial Board](#)
-
- [Submissions](#)
-
- [Issues](#)
 - [Issue 1.1](#)
-
- [Articles](#)
-
- [Book Reviews](#)
-
- [Interviews](#)
-
- [Pedagogy](#)
-
- [Contact](#)



Journal of Popular Romance Studies

from the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance
Browse

- [by Author](#)
- [by Title](#)
- [by Issue](#)

Issues

Select Issue

Search

Search

« [Coming Soon](#)

[“Getting a Good Man to Love: Popular Romance Fiction and the Problem of Patriarchy,” by Catherine Roach](#)

July 29th, 2010 | Author: [Crystal](#) | [Edit](#)

Abstract:

The story of romance is the most powerful narrative in Western art and culture, sharing roots with Christianity and functioning as a mythic story about the meaning and purpose of life, particularly in regards to the HEA ending of redemption and wholeness. Contemporary romance novels are popular because this religious nature of the romance narrative allows them to do deep work for the (mostly) women who read them, engaging readers in a reparation fantasy of healing in regards

to male-female relations. Romance novels help women readers deal with a paradoxical relationship toward men within a culture still marked by patriarchy and threats of violence.

Biography: Catherine M. Roach: Catherine M. Roach is Professor of New College and Affiliated Faculty in Gender and Race Studies at the University of Alabama. Her research interests are in the interplay of gender, sexuality, and popular culture, and more specifically in the function of the romance narrative in popular culture.

Keywords: American culture; popular culture; patriarchy; the story of romance; heterosexuality; romance narrative; sexuality; erotica; erotic faith; Christianity; happily-ever-after ending; narrative eschatology; sex-positive feminism; healing.

Getting a Good Man to Love: Popular Romance Fiction and the Problem of Patriarchy

Catherine Roach

The “story of romance” is the guiding text offered by contemporary American culture, and more generally the culture of the modern West, on the subject of how women and men (should) relate: find your One True Love—your one-and-only—and live happily ever after.^[1] To the ancient and perennial question of how to define and live the good life, how to achieve happiness and fulfillment, American pop culture’s resounding answer is through the narrative of romance, sex, and love. The happily-in-love, pair-bonded (generally, although increasingly not exclusively, heterosexual) couple is made into a near-mandatory norm by the media and popular culture, as this romance story is endlessly taught and replayed in a multiplicity of cultural sites: Disney princess movies consumed by three-year-olds, the wedding industry, Hollywood, pop music lyrics, advertising, popular magazines, the diamond jewelry industry, and more. One of the most important of these sites, where romance is taught, re-told, and—a crucial point—experimented with in new forms, is in the literal “romance story” of mass market genre fiction.

While there are clearly significant differences—among these media forms and certainly among the diversity of the immense romance readership, as well as in the variety of subgenres and plots within the romance publishing field—nonetheless there are significant similarities across these categories as well. The basic plotline of the romance narrative holds true despite subgenre variation, which, as we’ll see in the case of erotica and paranormal, can serve simply to highlight the core genre message. As such, likening readers and novels and considering the phenomenon of romance narrative as a whole allows important insights to emerge. More specifically, in this article, I argue romance novels are so popular partly because they do deep and complicated work for the (mostly) women who read them—work that derives from the mythic or religious nature of the romance narrative that serves to engage readers in a “reparation fantasy” of healing in regards to male-female relations. Romance novels help women readers, especially heterosexual women, deal with their essentially paradoxical relationship toward men within a culture still marked by patriarchy and its component threat of violence toward women.^[2]

Most baldly put, this paradox has women in a position of simultaneously desiring and fearing men. Romance novels function as an antidote, as a way of pleurably working through—in fantasy, in the safe and imaginative play world of fiction—the contradictory position of the heterosexual woman within patriarchal rape culture. This complex work, we will see, involves reconciling women to the limits and threats specifically posed to them as women by the culture, yet also teaching women to refuse to accept such limits and threats as normative and empowering them to expect or demand better for themselves. Furthermore, I argue that the industry subcategories of erotica (including gay/lesbian and “slash” romance) and paranormal—both areas of strong recent growth within the overall genre—offer new and highly effective literary means for women to use romance fiction as a way of working out their position within the culture. Indeed, the mainstream growth of erotica in particular signals important changes in American cultural attitudes towards women’s sexuality and perhaps, finally, a loosening of the patriarchal knot of allowable sexual expression.

This article forms the initial part of an ongoing monograph project on the romance narrative in popular culture, focusing especially on popular romance fiction. I seek to understand how this romance narrative functions and how it is currently changing, both as a genre of popular literature and as a form of human relationship. Unlike some lines of previous academic inquiry into romance fiction, my goal has little to do with either critique or defense of the genre, nor do I aim for close literary reading of individual authors (e.g., Radway 1991, Coddington 1997, Regis 2003, Goade 2007). Like Tania Modleski, I seek to read “symptomatically” (2008, xix), not intending by this metaphor for romance fiction to be taken as illness or pathology, but simply as a rich cultural site that yields much insight into critical issues of gender and sexuality in America today. I seek to place romance fiction in the broader context of the romance narrative in popular culture; and to adopt a framework of cultural studies, religious studies, gender studies, and sex-positive feminist theory to ask questions about meaning, fantasy, fear, and desire in how the romance narrative plays out in the realms of both popular and high culture in which this story holds such vast sway.

Love as God: Healing and the Religious Eschatology of the “Happily Ever After”

What fascinates me is how, even with the possibility of new and more open twenty-first century norms for gender equality and sexual experimentation, the romance narrative continues to thrive and endure. The power of the story does not die. In fact, romance sales show new dominance in the market; for example, yearly growth in number of new titles rose from 5,184 in 2003 to 10,497 in 2007 (*Romance Writers Report* 2009). According to industry research compiled by Romance Writers of America (RWA), romance novels constitute, by far, the largest segment of fiction publishing, with \$1.4 billion in yearly US sales and half of mass market paperbacks sold.^[3] We chase romance—even when it is to our detriment—we structure our lives around it, we fashion much of our art and pop culture from it. There is a mythic and even religious nature to this endless quest for love, this search for our “One True Love,” this desire and yearning for happily ever after.

Although the romance narrative finds one of its major contemporary expressions in the publishing industry of popular romance novels, more broadly speaking, the story of romance is perhaps *the* most powerful narrative at work in popular culture and, since its ascendance in the nineteenth century, may well be the most powerful narrative in art and culture in general (Coontz 2005, Polhemus 1990). By calling romance a “cultural narrative” here, I mean a guiding story that provides coherence and meaning in many people’s lives; a story whose truth value lies in the extent it is held to be true by people who shape their lives around that story, whether consciously or unconsciously. It is in this sense that the romance narrative is mythic or religious: it often functions as a foundational or idealized story about the meaning and purpose of life.^[4] According to this story, it is love that gives value and depth to life; our purpose is to find a well-suited life-mate worthy of our love and to love well and be loved by this mate and a circle of family and friends.

Part of my jumping off point here is Robert Polhemus’s powerful study of nineteenth-century British novels of love and romance, *Erotic Faith: Being in Love from Jane Austen to D.H. Lawrence* (1990). In his analysis of these novels that stand as high literary precursors to twentieth-century popular romance fiction, his key concept of “erotic faith” provides a reading of the emotional dynamic that the romance narrative then turns into story. Erotic faith, he writes, is “an emotional conviction, ultimately religious in nature, that meaning, value, hope, and even transcendence can be found through love—erotically focused love” (1). Erotic faith is the belief “that people complete themselves and fulfill their destinies only with another ... that in the quest for lasting love and the experience of being in love men and women find their real worth and character” (27). John Keats, for example, in a recent movie dramatization, proclaims, “There is a holiness to the heart’s affection” (*Bright Star* 2009). Polhemus’s point is that we have *faith* in love, a reverence for it. Starting in the late eighteenth century with the growth of secularism springing from the Enlightenment, in the art and in the marriages of western Europe and North America, people increasingly fell in love with the idea of being in love. This faith in love has become a new form of faith, to “augment or substitute for orthodox religious visions” (4), but with such close psychological functionality between the two forms of faith that “religious feeling and eroticism run close together” (10) and “love and theology may be surrogates for each other” (19).

Erotic faith takes on story form in what I’m calling the romance narrative: spun out in prose in the novel, be it the literary high fiction of *Pride and Prejudice* or the popular mass market fiction of *The Sheik and the Vixen*; or in advertisements, Hollywood flicks, and pop lyrics; or again as mythic or archetypal template to make sense of one’s own relationship practice. In all cases, the shared and underlying mythic conviction is in the idealizing power of love to make the world, in reality so often harsh and even tragic, a better place. In line with the promise of orthodox religious faith, love offers the promise of redemption and even salvation. In novels, the love plot is the story arc by which characters mature and, the novel teaches, is the means by which real-life people can mature as well. Love leads to compassion, mercy, understanding, and kindness; it tempers pride, harsh judgment, and the violent outbursts of a reflexive defensiveness; it grants the inner peace and self-confidence for the lover to be a stronger and wiser person. In all these ways, erotic faith is the conviction, explored in the ups and downs of the romance narrative—girl and boy meet, fall in love or lust, suffer through internal and external conflicts, break up, get back together, and then live happily ever after—of the healing power of love.

But to go further and flip the equation: while the romance narrative is “religious” in its faith in the healing power of love and in the scope of its mythic quest for love, the central religious narrative of western history is also “romantic.” Christianity, that central religious narrative, is easily read as a love story. In the context of western culture, wherein the artistic, literary, philosophical, and scientific heritage are all strongly shaped by the Christian religious tradition, the narrative core of that tradition is essentially a romance story. The mythic narrative of Christianity follows the pattern of the romance narrative, with a guaranteed happy ending (for well-behaved believers or the “saved”), wherein all works out and you live forever after. “Find your one true love and live happily ever after” is one way to describe the narrative content of Christian theology, of the ideal relationship between the believer and the One True Love of Christ the Son or the Christian Father God, and then the believer’s reward of life everlasting. “Are you the One?” the disciples of John the Baptist ask Jesus, as many a lover has pondered early in the game (Matthew 11:2-3; Luke 7:18-20). “God is love,” asserts a key New Testament passage (1 John 4:8, 16), a theological notion that erotic faith easily flips into its own central dogma that “Love is God.”

This two-directional religious analysis allows us to see both the romance narrative within the Christian religious story, thus highlighting the omnipresence and cultural power of this narrative, as well as the religious aspect of the romance story itself, thus highlighting the mythic work of healing and salvation carried out by this story. The point I seek to make through this parallel is the deep-rootedness of the cultural belief that there is a resurrection power to love. The love of a good woman (or man, or God, or Son of God) heals all wounds, forgives all sins stretching back to the stain of original sin, resurrects a dead man, saves a lost soul, integrates false persona and true self, can make a real man—or real woman—out of you. The belief in the healing power of love is the central trope of erotic faith, western Christian culture, and romance novels alike. Whether the romance narrative borrows this belief from the Christian religious tradition or whether the latter takes this perennial belief and incorporates it as central to its theology is a chicken-and-egg question that need not concern us here. Either way, love, in various forms of *agape*, *phile*, and *eros*, is the central emotional dynamic in the life quest for meaning, happiness, and—the point on which I want to focus—the crucial category of wholeness or healing.

To make this argument clearer, we need to consider one particular aspect of the romance novel: namely, the ending. In romance, the ending is crucial. Romance novels, as well as the romance narrative more generally, are defined by their “HEA”: the happily-ever-after ending, or what RWA calls the “emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending” (Web), wherein the protagonists resolve their various internal and external conflicts and commit their lives lovingly to one another. Stereotypically, this ending involves the hero and heroine solving the problems that kept them apart, declaring their mutual love, getting married, and often conceiving or bearing a child. Increasingly in contemporary romances, the protagonists may not marry and reproduce, but still make some sort of deliberate decision to be together, a decision that brings to their lives a sense of fulfillment, joy, and the ongoing promise of hot sex.

This ending is important because it highlights the core fantasy work of the romance narrative: everything will be all right; it will all work out; whatever pain and betrayal and disappointment and loneliness haunts you will end; you will be loved by a most worthy partner despite your flaws: absolutely, devotedly, without fail, never-endingly (“for all eternity, and even beyond” promises Mary Balogh’s *The Secret Pearl* [386]). This fantasy is the idealized version of reality that Northrop Frye (1957) sees as the central characteristic of the romance myth.^[5] Authors I’ve interviewed talk about the ending as a contract they have with their readers: no matter how wounded are their characters at the book’s beginning and how further tortured are those characters by the plot conflicts in the book’s middle, all will be well by the end. The HEA is a sacred guarantee in a romance novel: the author will not let the readers down by failing to provide the emotional resolution in the reading experience of love conquering all, healing all wounds, and leading to the promised happily ever after.

The true significance of this HEA, I submit, lies not in its presence at the end of every romance novel, but in its presence in the larger culture. The Christian mythic narrative and the romance narrative both highlight eschatology. Both are narratives concerned with the eschaton, the end of the world or the ultimate destiny of the characters involved (from the Greek *eschatos* for “last” or “farthest”). A romance, from the very beginning of the story, promises its HEA; the end of the story is inherent from the very beginning, as part of its very narrative structure. The romance story is narrative eschatology. A romance is a story about how to get to a healing end—an eschaton of love, commitment, completion, fulfillment, happiness, generational continuity, maturity, and hope. The happily-ever-after ending functions as a foundational psychological component of human wish-fulfillment: we yearn for this ideal paradise where we are loved, where the quest for wholeness is granted, where wounds are made right, where pleasure and security reign guaranteed. To be human is to desire and quest for love. This is what is both wonderful and foolish, even dangerous, about the human condition. The romance narrative tells this story of love and the human condition, in all its vulnerability and risk and wonder and foolishness.

To connect this analysis back to the context of patriarchal culture—true to eschatology, this HEA ending is not just the ending of a particular book nor of a genre of popular literature. The ending of romance novels—in which the heroine and hero will love each other well, for all their lives, and their love binds up their wounds—is not just the conclusion of a story. The romance ending, like the Christian eschaton, is the end of all endings, the ending beyond endings. It is the foundational premise of hetero-normative masculinist culture: that a woman must be under the protection of a man, yoked to him and to at least some extent in his control. But here’s the rub: as evidenced by the enormous female readership of romance novels, this premise is foundational as well to much female fantasy life: that a woman will be protected, yet also pleased, by the perfect love of a good man.

Lust, Loins, and Literature: Romance Novels as Mirror of Changing Sexual Norms for Women

Feminist scholars of the romance genre have long been engaged and troubled by this paradox: women seemingly love to read novels in which they are bound to men. Thus, the genre limits women (but does it?), yet the genre empowers women (but does it?). Much scholarship has prodded, and continues to prod along these lines, as variously nuanced feminist critique and/or apologia for the genre (e.g., Radway 1991, Coddington 1997, Regis 2003, Goade 2007). From a feminist perspective worried about romance novels’ take-away message for women, there is room for concern. However, while readers may

sometimes consume these novels in voracious quantity and with great attachment to the genre (reading “religiously” in another sense of the term), they by no means read uncritically. The advent of online readers’ communities exposes the rich interplay among readers, texts, and authors; far from accepting characters’ choices and any views implied by authors, readers often argue back (Wendell and Tan 2009). They post comments deriding the “too stupid to live heroine” along the lines of “why would any sane woman act like that?” or “why would she fall in love with a jerk like him?” Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume readers, perhaps especially young adolescent girls, do derive something from their reading experience in terms of a “moral of the story,” and that this moral may well have some sort of ramification in the lives of women. In the books’ complex and ambiguous nexus of women’s imagined fear and desire, shame and pleasure, hurt and healing, vulnerability and protection, pleasure and anxiety, risk and reward, bondage and freedom—what lessons then emerge for readers?

Contemporary romance novels do feature, almost universally, strong and empowered heroines in storylines bucking patriarchal convention mandating male leadership and female submission, but they also, by definition, pretty much always end in monogamous pair-bonding. In contrast to the second-wave feminist slogan “A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle,” to live happily ever after in a romance novel, a woman does need a man (and a man needs a woman). To the extent that romances push a vision of women’s lives as incomplete unless they are with a man, a vision of women’s happiness and mature fulfillment necessarily achieved through monogamous, heterosexual marriage and motherhood, this would remain a rather limited, traditional, and patriarchal vision of a woman’s life possibilities. In this regard, I am heartened by the growth of erotica, paranormal, and the new lines of gay and lesbian romance with their ménage stories; non-“vanilla” sex scenes; and heroines who even after pair-bonding remain kick-ass vampire-killers, or vampires, or some other form of strong female alpha or high-achieving professional. Although romance fiction can sometimes seem to offer a narrower vision of women’s lives—perhaps even create false expectations and impossible goals—on the other hand, judging by its massive readership, this vision is hugely appealing to women. So, why, and is that a problem? Just what is at stake in the romance novel? What does happen in reading it? What work does it do for its women readers, and does this work have any feminist liberatory potential?

I want to take a new tack on these issues by focusing on the recent rise of erotica, which I argue allows us to probe this paradox differently, by picking up the lines of inquiry I’ve laid out in regards to the HEA and its central motif of the healing power of love. I grew up reading romance novels (indeed, an important part of my motivation in this project is the chance it offers to interrogate my own fascination with the genre). I used to call the books—with amused affection—“trashy novels.” My friends and I, and my mother and some of her friends all bought, read, traded, and discussed our trashy novels. Were I to parse this descriptor now, I would see in it, on the one hand, a fondly-intended denigration of the genre as lowbrow (not the “good” literature I read for school), and on the other hand, a somewhat titillated adolescent sense that I was getting away with something naughty. I wouldn’t have been allowed to read *Playboy* or watch porn videos in the house, but although these stories were equally sexually explicit, and thus in that sense “trashy” or smutty, they were acceptable because they were both “romance,” with its legitimizing married HEA, and “novel,” thus still better than reading nothing at all. The genre has developed in many ways over the thirty years I’ve been reading it, but one of the most fascinating developments is the rise of the entirely “trashy” subgenres of erotica (which doesn’t necessarily end with monogamous pair bonding) and “romantica” (which generally does).

This rise is a controversial one, and benefits from a brief contextualization within the recent and equally controversial rise of sex-positive culture and sex-positive feminism. Kayla Perrin is a *USA Today* bestselling romance novelist who wrote this speech for her character Lishelle in the erotic romance *Getting Some* (2007, 133):

See, this is what I don’t understand. If guys fuck a hundred women, they’re heroes. They feel no shame in bedding a woman they’ve just met. But if a woman has a one-night stand, my God, she’s a dirty whore. How dare she like sex? This is the twenty-first century, honey. It’s high time we women embrace our sexuality and bury the shame. We have needs, the same as men do. Why do we feel so friggin’ bad about going after what we want?

Lishelle’s passionate endorsement for women to embrace their sexuality highlights how the story of romance is rapidly changing, especially for young women today. A new era is opening up wherein women can write or read such erotica, “hook up” with multiple partners and different types of partners, post images of themselves on altporn sites like Suicide Girls, attend Tupperware-style sex toy parties, wear porno-chic fashion, work as strippers, or simply revel in *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*, yet still be “good girls” (“*Good Girls Do*,” reads one recent newspaper headline). The gay rights movement (LGBTQ) is an important part of opening up this narrative; “romance,” including in publishing, no longer means only heterosexual, female-virginal, monogamous, deeply-in-love pair-bonding. The category of what is culturally acceptable in love and romance has—at least in some quarters—grown much bigger. To use Polhemus’s term, our faith in what legitimately counts as the erotic is expanding. This phenomenon of potentially liberating new attitudes toward women’s

sexuality is what commentators and scholars characterize in various forms as “sex-positive culture” or “sex-positive feminism” or “striptease culture” (Nagle 1997, McNair 2002, Johnson 2002, Roach 2007). We see its boldly playful echo in such romance groups and blogs as History Hoydens, Smart Bitches, Word Wenches, Historical Hussies, Rip My Bodice, and the Smutketeers.

This effect is further seen in the recent publishing rise of erotica and romantica, and the concurrent intensification of sexual content in much of mainstream romance fiction. Romance novels, like the wider romance narrative, are in the midst of a sea change as they become affected by this sex-positive culture—indeed, I would argue that many romance novelists today are *doing* sex-positive feminism in their writing. How can we evaluate the complex implications of this change as a current large-scale cultural experiment, both potentially liberatory and at risk of re-inscribing tired patriarchal norms of women’s erotic desire, fantasy, and pleasure? Does today’s romance fiction help move women’s sexuality from margin to crossroads to center, or simply re-marginalize it anew? How are romance novels affected by—and also responsible for shaping—new societal changes about what’s acceptable sexually, in terms of the novels’ level of graphicness, underlying attitudes toward sexuality, treatment of pregnancy and STD protection, etc.? And how does this new trend toward more explicit sexuality in romance novels and more sexual choices in lifestyle relate to such apparently opposite cultural trends as, for example, the premarital abstinence movements of “True Love Waits” and father-daughter “Purity Balls,” as well as the rise of inspirational romance novel sales (with little to no explicit sexuality)?

I take the rise of women’s erotica as indicative of an important cultural moment of change and counter-resistance. Romance authors are opening up restrictive sexual taboos in ways that have true potential to lessen social injustices (for women, sexual minorities, and men too long restricted to a narrow macho role). These new romance narratives can unchain young women from an often destructive and desperate sense they have to find “Mr. Right” early on and not let go. They can give people permission to explore love and sexuality, and ultimately themselves, in new liberatory ways, but these ways are, admittedly, at the same time clearly fraught with risk and danger. Part of the risk is women turning themselves into what author Ariel Levy (2005) termed “female chauvinist pigs” through the internalization of a sex-bunny sensibility that simply gives flesh to every boy’s wet dream fantasy, and then those women experiencing the type of losses Laura Sessions Stepp laments in her book *Unhooked* (2007) about the campus hook-up culture. Another part of the risk is the early sexualization of the “porno-tot” phenomenon and the loss of innocence and health risks feared by the abstinence movement. In all of this, there is a daunting challenge for the “new erotica” to pull off, but—perhaps—real potential as well, to help us live in ways that are richer and, ultimately, more loving.

Getting a Good Man to Love in Patriarchy: “Come Back to the Bed Ag’in, Alpha Honey!”

We arrive finally at the crux of the tension, the paradox at the heart of the romance narrative. If romance is one of—or even *the*—central cultural narrative(s), with roots stretching into the culture’s foundational religious story, and if this narrative is being experimented with in new and potentially liberatory ways for wider sexual justice, then romance novels are doing deep work for their readers and for the culture. By “deep work,” I mean that this work is partly unconscious (Modleski 2008), operating at the level of both individual psychology and larger socio-cultural dynamics. The purpose of this work, I argue, is to assuage the drag and rub of patriarchy, to try to make up for the costs to a woman’s psyche of living in a culture that is always just a little, at least potentially, in certain ways against her. As Frye says, “Translated into dream terms, the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality” (1956, 136).

Let’s put it this way: if, to at least some extent, it’s still a man’s world out there, if the name of the game is patriarchy, then a woman is safer from the dangers that game poses to women—rape and other physical attack, diminished pay rates, employment discrimination, abandonment with children, restricted travel and other life options, general infantilization, misogyny, a life-long low-level anxiety over her sexual vulnerability—to the extent she is in committed relationship with, and thus protected by, a good man. The notion of “good man” here is represented by the romance hero possessing the unlikely profile of high alpha traits that both guarantee he can protect the heroine, and that render him immune to the predations of patriarchy—for patriarchy is a system of violent control and power-over that victimizes lower-caste males as well—in combination with the high sensitivity of the most enlightened pro-feminist lover. This good man/alpha hero is a fantasy, an illusion, in the sense of a powerfully-appealing figure based in wish-fulfillment. As Freud (1927) said, an illusion *may* have truth to it—for certain lucky young girls, their prince really does come; think Grace Kelly, for example. The story of the alpha hero does have such truth to it—in that love does heal wounds, romance does offer sweetness, most people do seek such and generally find such, to at least some extent—but it is also a fantasy, or illusion, and in the sense of a wish-fulfillment, is highly unlikely to be literally and wholly true. Such is the power of fantasy to offer both truth and illusion. I suspect the resonance of romance novels lies in the central paradox of this interconnected fantasy power of deep truth and of wish-fulfilling illusion.

Romance is fantasy in the sense of pleasure and escape from reality, where true love does not always conquer all nor heal all wounds—key premises of the romance narrative. But more specifically, romance does deep psychic work for its readers by functioning as a fantasy antidote to patriarchy, to the extent that it is still a man's world out there: the heroine and, vicariously, the female readers get that fantasy paradox of an alpha male who is strong and dominant, yet also caring and sensitive; sexy and desired, yet devoted totally to the heroine and her sexual pleasure; indeed he is helpless and lost without her love. Part of the reading pleasure, too, is the fantasy conquest of patriarchy. According to Frye, one of the central and climactic images in the romance is that “of the monster tamed and controlled by the virgin” (1957, 201). In my reading, this taming is the central dynamic of the romance novel as well. Apart from any realism imparted by rich details, these novels essentially represent a mythic fantasy world in which Woman: the Virgin, the Maiden, the Princess Warrior, Everywoman, tames and controls the monster, Man: the patriarchal alpha hero, who has the power to easily harm her, but who will not, because she has cracked open his frozen patriarch's heart and taught him to love (Frantz 2002).

These are large claims that must await full unpacking and exploration in future research and writing, but as an exemplar here, I want to focus on the HEA and healing in a final argument that both the subgenres of erotica and paranormal (often combined) highlight or intensify the dynamics of the HEA and of its central reparation fantasy of redemption, salvation, and wholeness. Both erotica and paranormal are highly effective at doing the deep work of the romance novel HEA and thus can more clearly reveal this deep work. The messages to women here are three: you can't fight patriarchy, you must fight patriarchy, and patriarchy will end. All this is encapsulated in the complex HEA promise: *you will get a good man to love*. Vignettes from three recent romance novels illustrate these messages.

Maya Banks's *Sweet Persuasion* (2009) is a BDSM romantica tale, featuring Serena, a successful business woman whose fantasy is to be a sex slave to Damon, the charismatic owner of a sex club. This, and similar plot lines, allow for exploration of a submission and surrender theme to the erotic desire and possessiveness of a powerful man not widely seen since the “bodice-ripper” domination and rape plots of the 1980s (Wendell and Tan 2009). BDSM romantica allows for a more politically-correct exploration of this dynamic, as here the heroine surrenders willingly, in a fantasy power game, and Damon's complete authority over her—“I want the security of knowing I am ... owned,” Serena says (70)—is ultimately benign. While he puts her in bondage and takes a crop to her, Damon also feeds, clothes, and bathes her—literally by hand; fully supports her professional ambitions; puts up charmingly with her meddling friends; buys her a wardrobe; and sends her to the spa. He demands total control over her, but he's also a good man, who loves her well and devotedly. “I wanted to own her. I wanted her to own my heart” (253), he says of a previous failed relationship, when explaining his desire to Serena. The lesson Serena learns in the end: “it takes someone strong to give up ultimate power, to allow a man to take care of her, to make decisions for her” (284). Patriarchy is literally the name of the game here: Serena wants to play sex-slave to a strong alpha master. Thus, the message: you can't fight patriarchy, lest you be a bad slave and displease your master; but you must fight patriarchy, in the sense of holding out for no less than this perfectly egalitarian master. For while the master here rules, no matter—by the time of the HEA, it's clear he rules to serve and to cherish. And so patriarchy ends. Although he's in charge, she *has* him: she owns his heart. Through identification with both the heroine and hero, the female reader experiences her subordinate and vulnerable position within our still-patriarchal culture as one that nevertheless promises her safety and pleasure, precisely because this particular patriarch has capitulated to her, fully and completely.

In Joey W. Hill's BDSM romantica novel *Natural Law* (2004), the power dynamic is reversed between two under-cover cops; instead of patriarchy ruling, here it's the “matriarch” or Mistress in charge. Violet is petite, a “pixie,” yet formidable: a dominant Mistress born. Patriarchy is already overturned here, in that the deep fantasy work of this story is that of resisting and rejecting male rule for a matriarchy where man is the subordinate, required to obey the woman's every command, and wanting nothing more than to fulfill her will and satisfaction as his own. Yet although Mac is a willing male submissive, he is still the alpha through and through: physically much stronger, a seasoned detective, no weakling who would leave you prey to harm (he in fact takes a bullet for Violet by the end of the story). Like Serena and Damon, Violet and Mac finally find each other after a long and painful life quest of loneliness and self-doubt; these couples complete each other and find healing and wholeness through surrender to their special form of love. Violet, unlike Serena, upends the patriarchal dynamic; she is “someone strong” in a different sense than Serena, but not in any sense that emasculates Mac. He enjoys “serving a Mistress's pleasure,” he says self-confidently, as much as he enjoys “being a cop, or watching a Buccaneers game, or spending a day out in the Gulf on my boat. Being a sub doesn't make me less of a man” (277). The female reader fantasy here is one of overt power, but although she's nominally in charge (you must fight patriarchy), he's the strong alpha male all the same (you can't fight patriarchy), perhaps even more so—because if it takes a real man to eat quiche, wear pink, and drink Chardonnay, surely it takes a man on the archetypal level of a romance novel warrior-king to accept bondage and open himself to the pleasure of anal penetration by his Mistress (patriarchy will end).

The warrior-king becomes real, and becomes vampire, in my last example: J.R. Ward's *Dark Lover* (2005), the first book in her *Black Dagger Brotherhood* series. In paranormal romance, the hero can be more alpha—bigger, stronger, more deadly—than in non-paranormal: he can grow fangs, possess supernatural strength, teleport, heal miraculously fast, etc.

While “Wrath” is all that—indeed, his name says it all—he, like all males shaped by patriarchy’s “tough guise” or mask of emotional straight-jacketing, cannot love. He can only disdain erotic faith as the religion of women and weak men. He is the über-patriarch: violently aggressive against all enemies, an arrogant macho hardass toward the brotherhood, “six feet nine inches of pure terror dressed in leather” (3). Yet he’s immediately drawn to Beth, a beautiful woman thrust into his keeping, about to turn into a vampire herself. He gives into lust, but fights love. For a man to open himself to love means he’s weak, “pathetic ... pussy-whipped,” Wrath goads a happily-mated brother (186-87). But by the end, as Wrath and Beth find peace and completion in their love bond and a new life mission together to rebuild vampire civilization, Wrath is a changed man. Still the ultra-violent patriarch toward any who would dare hurt his queen, he has literally had Beth’s name carved into his back; kneeled at her feet; offered his body, heart, and soul as hers to command; and then asked, with head bowed, “Will you take me as your own?” (333). The reader fantasy here is that patriarchy ends, yet patriarchy continues, and *you get a good man to love*; that is, you now have the alpha-king for your own, as you have fought and vanquished him on the battlefield of love.

All three of these examples have in common what I am calling a reparation fantasy in the HEA’s work of imagined healing. One of the Latin etymologies for the term “religion” is *re-ligare*, “to re-bind” or “re-tie” (the term “ligament” has the same root). From this perspective, religion represents a threefold sense of original unity, recognition of loss or wound, and attempt to repair and reconnect sundered parts back into a whole. Plato’s *Symposium* dialogue famously casts this threefold sense as an origin story of humanity and humans’ rather foolish yet poignant endless quest for love. In the dialogue, humans began as four-footed symmetrical beings, then were cut in half by the gods, and now are forever on a quest for their missing other part: our better half, our soul mate, our one-and-only, our One True Love. In the *Symposium* and the three romance novels above, love renders us whole, heals and completes us, resolves life’s quest, brings true peace. From this perspective, both romance and religion are reparation fantasies, deep mythic stories of the powerful healing that comes about through meaningful and intimate relations.

One last idea: for Leslie Fiedler, the American literature critic of the mid-twentieth century, American fiction is driven by the dream of interethnic male bonding and the “myth of the dark beloved,” in which people of color forgive and love white folk, despite the predations and horrors of racism. “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey!” (1948) is his controversial essay on *Huckleberry Finn* and also *The Last of the Mohicans*, two iconic American stories authored by white males about a “dark beloved”: an African-American or Native American male other who shares an adventurous quest with a white male protagonist. Fiedler’s essay is essentially about the literature of white male America as a reparation fantasy for racism, offered with remorse and affection on the part of the racists. Romance fiction is a different, reverse type of reparation fantasy, one centered on sexism and patriarchy and offered not by those who perpetuated the discrimination (as in Fiedler’s formulation), but by those subjected to it. Instead of a myth of the dark beloved, we have a myth of the “alpha beloved.” Women readers/authors/fictional heroines, like Jim in *Huck Finn* and in Fiedler’s provocative title, bear no grudge and invite the master, “Come back to the raft”—or the bed—“again, honey.” A woman can proffer this invitation because she has taken her stand against patriarchy, and though the system remains, so too has it ended. The romance fantasy, in other words, is that the hero will come, in all his fierce and possessive patriarchal warrior-king glory, but that he will also forever stay: emotionally vulnerable, devoted unto death, serving his mistress with his sword and with his heart. The fantasy is that patriarchy overall remains in place—he remains a ruling alpha, and so can protect her—but this system, and he as its representative, never threaten or diminish the heroine.

She gets a good man. And she gets him to love.[\[6\]](#)

Works Cited

Banks, Maya. *Sweet Persuasion*. New York: Berkley Heat, 2009. Print.

Bright Star. Dir. Jane Campion. Apparition, 2009. Film.

Coddington, Lynn. “Wavering Between Worlds: Feminist Influences in the Romance Genre.” *Paradoxa* 3:1-2 (1997): 58-77. Print.

Coontz, Stephanie. *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*. New York: Penguin, 2005. Print.

Fiedler, Leslie A. “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey!” *Partisan Review*. June 1948. Print.

Frantz, Sarah. “‘Expressing’ Herself: The Romance Novel and the Feminine Will to Power.” *Scorned Literature: Essays on the History and Criticism of Popular Mass-Produced Fiction in America*. Eds. Lydia Cushman Schurman and Deidre

Johnson. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002. 17-36. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Future of an Illusion*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1989. Print.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957. Print.

Goade, Sally, ed. *Empowerment versus Oppression: Twenty First Century Views of Popular Romance Novels*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007. Print.

Hill, Joey W. *Natural Law*. Akron, OH: Ellora's Cave, 2004. Print.

Johnson, Allan G. *The Gender Knot: Unraveling our Patriarchal Legacy*. Rev. and updated ed. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005. Print.

Johnson, Merri Lisa, ed. *Jane Sexes It Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002. Print.

Levy, Ariel. *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. New York: Free Press, 2005. Print.

McNair, Brian. *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media, and the Democratisation of Desire*. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.

Modleski, Tania. *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-produced Fantasies for Women*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.

Nagle, Jill, ed. *Whores and Other Feminists*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.

Perrin, Kayla. *Getting Some*. Don Mills, Can. Spice, 2007. Print

Plato, *Symposium*. Trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989. Print.

Polhemus, Robert M. *Erotic Faith: Being in Love from Jane Austen to D.H. Lawrence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. Print.

Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991. Print.

Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. Print.

Roach, Catherine M. *Stripping, Sex, and Popular Culture*. Oxford, UK: Berg, 2007. Print.

Romance Writers of America. [Romance Writers of America](#). Web.

Romance Writers of America. *Romance Writers Report*. April 2009. Print.

Stepp, Laura Sessions. *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. Print.

Ward, J.R. *Dark Lover*. New York: Signet Eclipse, 2005. Print.

Wendell, Sarah and Candy Tan. *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels*. New York: Fireside, 2009. Print.

In my use of the cultural descriptor “modern West” here, I draw on Stephanie Coontz’s (2005) history of marriage, with its central thesis that starting in the later eighteenth century, a “gigantic marital revolution had occurred in Western Europe and North America during the Enlightenment” (5). The ideal of the sentimental and passionate love-based marriage—in radical contrast to the more economically and politically pragmatic notions of marriage that had predominated before that time and that continued as the norm in other parts of the world—came to dominate in western culture through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

By “patriarchy,” I adopt Allan Johnson’s definition of a cultural system that “promotes male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male centered” and that valorizes violence and control (2005, 5). High rates of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and violence against girls and women form a central part of such culture, as well as high rates of

violence against men. I share in Johnson's analysis that contemporary American culture remains marked by such patterns, although these patterns have clearly lessened through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the growth of human rights and the influence of the successive waves of the women's movement and feminism. To the extent that both patriarchy and popular romance fiction reading are phenomena with global reach, this analysis could be broadened beyond contemporary America as well, but for now, I confine my analysis to this cultural complex.

Romance Writers of America (RWA) is the US-based professional writers' organization devoted to the publishing genre of popular romance fiction, with a membership of approximately ten thousand published and aspiring authors. For publication and sale statistics, visit the organization's website at rwanational.org.

Northrop Frye's (1957) archetypal criticism in his classic theory of myths is useful here as well, where he lays out a theory of generic plots or mythic narrative structures: "In terms of narrative, myth is the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire" (136).

Although what Frye (1957) means by "romance novel" differs from the popular women's fiction under consideration here, there is significant continuity between these forms of prose fiction as well. This issue of the historical lineage of contemporary women's romance novels in terms of the long-established literary forms of both "novel" and "romance" bears further study.

I thank two very astute anonymous peer-review readers who helped me see my text more clearly with excellent suggestions for revision and expansion. I am grateful as well to the College of Arts and Sciences and New College at the University of Alabama and to the Romance Writers of America for academic grant support that made this research possible. Academic audiences at the Popular Culture Association 2009 annual conference and a Women's Resource Center talk at the University of Alabama provided useful feedback as well in working out my ideas. Finally, I thank Eric Murphy Selinger for leading me to Robert Polhemus and colleagues Deborah Weiss, Fred Whiting, and Ted Trost for helping me think through key ideas in this paper.

[Share/Bookmark](#)

- author: Roach, Catherine
- title: Getting a Good Man to Love: Popular Romance Fiction and the Problem of Patriarchy

Posted in [Articles](#), [Issue 1.1](#) | Tags: [Catherine Roach](#)

Leave a Reply

Logged in as [admin](#). [Log out »](#)

Submit Comment

Copyright © 2010 Journal of Popular Romance Studies. All Rights Reserved.

Powered by [WordPress](#) and [WordPress Theme](#) created with Artisteer.