

## Queering the Romantic Heroine: Where Her Power Lies

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**Abstract:** This paper traces the evolution of the figure of the queer heroine in romance from the Middle Ages through contemporary fiction. We locate queerness not only in a female protagonist's romantic and sexual preferences, but also in any other identity categories that might render her queer within the social context of the novel (e.g., class, religion, race, species). After exploring the foundations of the lesbian romance novel, we demonstrate that, increasingly, the quest of the queer female hero of a contemporary romance is not to achieve acceptance by resolving the attributes that render her queer, but rather to mobilize her queerness as a source of power. When the romance incorporates paranormal elements, the queer female hero can be read as having adapted many of the characteristics of the alpha male of the traditional heterosexual romance novel.

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Five years ago, a letter to the editor of the *Romance Writers Report* (a monthly publication issued by the Romance Writers of America), suggested that “romance” should be defined as between one man and one woman. Specifically, the writer asserted that “what [has] brought romance fiction to its present level of success is a collection of decades’ worth of one-man, one-woman relationship stories, in all their richness, variety, and power” (Rothwell). This letter caused a great deal of discussion, and no small controversy, within the RWA membership and the romance community. Ultimately, the debate came down to one central question: What, exactly, is a romance?

*Romance* comes from the Old French noun *romanz*, which was used to describe “a medieval narrative (originally in verse, later also in prose) relating the legendary or extraordinary adventures of some hero of chivalry” (OED s.v. *romance*, def. 1). Over time, of course, the word’s meaning has changed. In 2003, Pamela Regis defined the romance novel as “a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (21). Regis acknowledges, however, that romance novels written within the last several decades do not necessarily require marriage as long as the protagonists end up together by the conclusion of the book. This is especially good news for queer readers living in locations where same-sex marriage is not recognized by law.

The early twentieth century saw the emergence of love stories featuring lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered protagonists. However, these stories often ended tragically and were thus not romance novels in Regis’s sense. Over time, however, the queer female hero has been able to inhabit the romance genre in ways that reflect the rapidly changing landscape of sexual identity politics in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century America.

This article will analyze the development of queer romance as a literary subtype that emerges both parallel to and intertwined with trends in mainstream romance literature. The authors of this paper are, respectively: an English professor and lesbian romance novelist, a medievalist and editor of queer fiction, and a publisher and author of queer fiction. As we trace the evolution of the queer romance genre, we will demonstrate the literature’s indebtedness to the LGBTQ civil rights movement, which began to gain traction in the late 1960s and has become a powerful and vociferous lobby in

contemporary politics.

## One Small Step for Romance: The Evolution of the Queer Female Hero

Women in the queer community are accustomed to reading themselves into works of literature. This process is analogous to transposing a piece of music; with subtle concentration, a hero can be transformed into a second heroine. In her article “Every Book is a Lesbian Book,” award-winning author Dorothy Allison describes this act of re-imagination: “I had spent my adolescence reinterpreting the reality of every book, movie and television show I had ever experienced—moving everything into lesbian land.” Occasionally, the queer female reader finds—to her immense delight—a passage in which the author has paved the way for her imagination. The author need only hint that the heroine is willing to deviate from the status quo as regards her love interest.

This re-interpretive project can be brought to bear on texts throughout history. One important example in English literature is Sir Edmund Spenser’s epic poem *The Faerie Queene*, which was published in the late sixteenth century during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Book III of the poem takes as its subject Britomart, a woman on a quest for her one true love—a man named Arthegall. Knowing that she will be unable to proactively seek out Arthegall so long as she looks like a woman, Britomart dons a legendary suit of armor and takes up a magical spear in order to pass as a knight. During the course of her adventures, she rescues a lovely woman named Amoret, who has been imprisoned by an evil enchanter. Initially, Amoret fears for her own virtue because she believes Britomart to be a man who might force himself on her. However, once Britomart removes her helmet to expose, in Spenser’s words, “her golden lockes, that were vp bound” (III.1.13.2), Amoret’s attitude changes dramatically. Amoret’s relief that her savior is a woman takes an interesting turn as night falls:

And eke fayre *Amoret* now freed from feare,  
More franke affection did to [Britomart] afford,  
And to her bed, which she was wont forbear,  
Now freely drew, and found right safe assurance there.  
Where all that night they of their loues did treat,  
And hard aduentures twixt themselues alone,  
That each the other gan with passion great,  
And griefull pittie priuately bemone. (Book IV, Canto I, stanzas 15.6 – 16.4)

The homoeroticism of this passage is undeniable and has been noted by several literary critics. In her 1998 monograph *The Limits of Eroticism in Post-Petrarchan Narrative*, for example, Dorothy Stephens asserts that this moment is “the one happy bed scene in the whole poem” (38). For the queer female reader, this scene is an unexpected delight: Britomart, having just proven her superiority on a field of battle traditionally dominated by men, comes out as female and proceeds to spend a sensual night with another woman.

But the scene is ultimately dissatisfying; the reader’s joy is tempered by her knowledge that Britomart’s romantic destiny is predetermined. While Spenser’s poem may

hint at romantic possibilities outside of the traditional pairing of a man and a woman, heteronormativity always prevails. In English texts from the medieval and early modern periods, one woman seeks out another for one of two reasons: either to avoid a man or to find a man.

Not until the early twentieth century did English literature produce a text that chronicled a full-fledged romance between two women. In 1928, two decades after the first English medical texts about homosexuality had been written,<sup>[1]</sup> British novelist Marguerite Radclyffe Hall published *The Well of Loneliness*. The book's protagonist is a woman named Stephen Gordon, who was christened with a male name because of her father's desire for a son. Stephen is the prototypical butch lesbian: "[She was] handsome in a flat, broad shouldered and slim flanked fashion; and her movements were purposeful, having fine poise, she moved with the easy assurance of the athlete. In face she had [ . . . ] the formation of the resolute jaw [of her father] Sir Phillip." Even from a young age, Stephen typifies the butch lesbian hero emotionally as well as physically. As an adolescent, she falls in love with a married woman and declares herself ready and willing to sacrifice her name, her legacy, her inheritance, and her social status for love: "For your sake I'm ready to give up my home [ . . . ] I want the whole world to know how I adore you. I am done with these lies [ . . . ] [W]e will go away, and will live quite openly together, you and I, which is what we owe to ourselves and our love." Self-sacrifice is a fundamental trait of the romantic hero, and throughout the novel, Stephen repeatedly sacrifices herself on the altar of forbidden love.

As an adult, Stephen falls in love with a young, unmarried woman named Mary. The primary barrier to their love is the social stigma of being, in the medical terminology of the time, a "sexual invert." Stephen, who has already experienced rejection at the hands of her own mother, attempts to dissuade Mary from falling in love with her. But Mary refuses to be cowed and courageously declares, "What do I care for the world's opinion? What do I care for anything but you, and you just as you are—as you are, I love you! [ . . . ] Can't you understand that all that I am belongs to you, Stephen?" (312-3). This passionate declaration of love is followed by an equally passionate embrace, "and that night," Hall writes, "they were not divided" (313).

While *The Well of Loneliness* chronicles Stephen and Mary's romance, it is not a romance novel. In the end, Stephen's despair at the world's rejection compels her to drive Mary into the arms of a man who can give her the respect she deserves from society. Stephen kills herself, crying out to God with her last breath in a prayer for compassion and recognition: "Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!" (437)

For decades following *The Well of Loneliness*, fiction about queer women offered no happy endings. Despite this trend, lesbian stories became ever more popular, particularly during the pulp fiction explosion of the 1950s and 60s. Stephanie Foote, in her article, "Deviant Classics: Pulp and the Making of Lesbian Print Culture," asserts that "pulp changed the accessibility and affordability of fiction" (170). These books were widely available, and even the ones with lesbian themes sold hundreds of thousands of copies. Most of the early lesbian titles ended in despair. Dorothy Allison remembers her frustration with the grim ending of many a lesbian pulp, referring to them as "paperbacks from the drugstore that inevitably ended with one 'dyke' going off to marry while the other threw herself under a car." In the late 1950s, however, several brave authors began to change the rules.<sup>[2]</sup>

One such author was Ann Bannon, whose best-known work, *Beebo Brinker*, was written in 1962 and tells the story of a young woman who leaves her rural home for New York City. Early in the novel, Beebo, who is still in the process of coming out to herself, mentions finding and reading a lesbian pulp: "I read a book once [ . . . ] under my covers at night—when I was fifteen. It was about two girls who loved each other. One of them committed suicide. It hit me so hard I wanted to die, too" (50). Stephanie Foote describes this particular moment as "a self-conscious, even playful metafictional reference to the pulps that Bannon herself helped to make famous." She also acknowledges, however, that Beebo's anecdote parallels the lived experience of many lesbian readers during that time. By making Beebo a reader of these tragic books, Bannon comments on the paucity of empowering fiction for the queer female readership.

During this time, lesbians found ways to compensate for their literature's testimony that death was the only recourse for a woman who loved another woman. Carol Seajay, the founder of the *Feminist Bookstore News*, would read pulps "only up to the last twenty pages, to avoid sharing the lesbian protagonist's inevitable tragic end" (Adams 122). In *Beebo Brinker*, Bannon rejects the paradigm of self-destruction and allows Beebo to find happiness, thus paving the way for the rise of the lesbian romance in the 1970s.

The pulps inaugurated a time of intense literary production around lesbian themes. "Between 1968 and 1973," writes Adams, "over 500 feminist and lesbian publications appeared across the country, and what would become an organized network of independent women's bookstores began to appear." For many years, Naiad Press, founded in 1973, dominated the lesbian market. The press was most famous for its romances, one of which—*Curious Wine*, by Katherine V. Forrest—remains one of the best-selling lesbian romances of all time.

*Curious Wine*, first published in 1983, tells the story of Diana and Lane, two women who meet at Lake Tahoe and fall in love. Neither protagonist identifies as a lesbian prior to the events of the novel; in fact, both have been married to men in the past. The world that provides the backdrop for their story is very much a straight world, populated by their ex-boyfriends and straight girlfriends. Told from Diana's point of view, the novel focuses on how difficult it can be to come out to oneself. Diana's instinctive and powerful attraction to Lane leads them to fall into bed together a third of the way through the story. On the brink of consummating their desire, however, Diana pulls away, stuttering, "I can't . . . I don't . . . I'm not . . ." (77). The next day, she very deliberately seeks out a sexual encounter with a man who very nearly rapes her. She realizes in the wake of this experience that she is allowing fear to get the best of her true desires. She thinks to herself, "Diana Holland, you have really made a mess of things. You let that crude animal do that to you, but you wouldn't let a tender sensitive woman—someone you care for—do what both of you want. [ . . . ] What is it that you're afraid of, Diana Holland? What you feel? What other people think? Where is your courage? Your honesty? Your self esteem?" (89). Diana fears society's judgment, just as Stephen Gordon does, but neither she nor Lane ever contemplates suicide. The book ends with a declaration of resolve in the face of the world's opinion. "We'll have problems, Diana, being together," Lane reminds her. Diana's response is to acknowledge the problem and to recognize its solution: "Yes, I know. But we'll be together" (160). While Forrest's novel does not shy away from a discussion of the difficulties Diana and Lane will face, the book focuses most of its attention on the exhilarating passion and depth of emotion that develop between the protagonists as they fall in love. Forrest's lovers

echo Stephen Gordon's agony but move beyond it to fulfill her dying prayer.

Over the ensuing decades, lesbian fiction has evolved in a variety of ways, many of which mirror Western societies' increased concern for LGBTQ equality. Radclyffe's *Safe Harbor*, for example, was first published in 2001. Set in Provincetown, Massachusetts, *Safe Harbor* chronicles the romance of deputy sheriff Reese Conlon and physician Tory King. Reese is a new arrival in Provincetown where Tory runs a clinic. Reese is wholly dedicated to her career and has never been physically or emotionally intimate with anyone. Tory is afraid to become romantically involved again after having been betrayed by her ex, and Reese's innocence also deters her from pursuing a relationship. As in *Curious Wine*, the issue of coming out is at the heart of this book. But where Forrest describes this journey as private and internal, Radclyffe presents Reese's coming out process as a collaborative effort on the part of the entire community. In a frank discussion with her friend Marge, Reese learns that, unbeknownst to her, she has become the talk of the town. "Carol from the Cheese Shop put it best," says Marge. "She said you were an impossibly good-looking, unapproachable butch, who probably does the asking. And, my friend, there're a fair number of women waiting in line, hoping that you'll ask" (134). Marge is shocked to learn that Reese, as she puts it, has "never had that kind of relationship with anyone" (135). As time passes, Reese and Tory's friends and families subtly—and often not so subtly—encourage their burgeoning romance. In fact, it is a conversation with Tory's sister, Cath, that prompts Reese to first declare her love to Tory:

[Reese] remembered Cath speaking of all that Tory had lost, understanding the enormity of that pain as she contemplated what a life without Tory would be like. Barren and so lonely.

"Tory," she said, her voice soft but crystal clear.

"Yes?" Tory questioned as she lay listening to the strong, steady heartbeat beneath her cheek.

"I love you." (199)

Reese's coming out process is a matter of public record, and her relationship with Tory is recognized and celebrated by the majority of the town's citizens. Their love is reinforced by the community in which they live and whose constituents they serve and protect. In many ways, the story reflects changes in the landscape of sexual identity politics; just one year prior to *Safe Harbor's* publication, for example, Vermont became the first state to legislate civil unions for same-sex partners. As the battle for equal marriage rights continues to be waged publically in courts and legislatures across the nation, stories in which queer women learn to love each other openly and unreservedly take on a powerful political undertone.

Other contemporary lesbian romances take this trend one step further. Often, the protagonists are already out and their sexual orientation is never seen as a barrier to anything or anyone; their queerness is simply accepted and rarely, if ever, questioned. By normalizing sexual queerness, such stories allow both the author and the audience to

explore other modes of difference, whether a function of world or character. Moreover, in a lesbian romance these modes of difference are necessarily connected to the female-ness of the characters, and thus allow for a deeper interrogation of contemporary femininities. The following section will explore the ways in this subgenre offers up the notion of difference—what we prefer to call *wildness*, in deference to its Amazonian roots—as a celebrated quality, rather than a threat that must be contained.

## Lesbian Romance and the Undomesticated Queer Hero

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th edition, offers a string of definitions for the word *wild*. Among them (offered in order of the dictionary listing):

- 1a: living in a state of nature and not ordinarily tame;
- 3a(1): not subject to restraint or regulation; also: passionately eager or enthusiastic;
- 4: uncivilized, barbaric; and
- 6a: deviating from the intended or expected course.

Wildness, in each of those forms, is a key element in the power dynamic driving the romance novel. Indeed, Pamela Regis, in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, defines the female hero of the twentieth-century romance novel in relationship to wildness—crucially, not her own wildness, but the wildness of the romance hero:

Rather than achieving affective individualism, property rights, and companionate marriage through courtship as the earlier [nineteenth-century] heroines did, the twentieth-century heroine begins the novel with these in place. [ . . . ] The novel chronicles the heroine's taming of the dangerous hero or her healing of the injured hero, or both. [ . . . ] They are [ . . . ] dangerous men and must be tamed. (206)

This notion of the domestication of the dangerous hero—the dangerous *male* hero—is echoed in the title of Jayne Anne Krentz's 1992 essay collection, *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of Romance*. Krentz posits that in certain late-twentieth-century romance novels, "The trick is to teach the hero to integrate and control the two warring halves of himself so that he can function as a reliable mate and as a father. The journey of the novel [ . . . ] is the civilization of the male" (6). But Krentz goes a step further, arguing that these romance novels don't just trace the civilization or domestication of dangerous wild men, but do it through the agency of "female power": "In the romance novel [ . . . ] the woman always wins. With courage, intelligence, and gentleness she brings the most dangerous creature on earth, the human male, to his knees. More than that, she forces him to acknowledge her power as a woman" (5). According to Krentz, then, male power in much contemporary romance is dangerous, wild, and in need of taming, while female power is courageous, intelligent, gentle, civilizing, and domestic. But what happens to the power dynamic when there is no male hero? What happens in

lesbian romance?

It is not our intent here to thoroughly explore—or explode—the paradigm, and there are surely lesbian romances in which a courageous, intelligent, gentle woman domesticates her wild female lover. For instance, in Jove Belle's 2009 novel *Chaps*, Eden Metcalf, an L.A. drug-lord's enforcer, steals his money, goes on the run, and—when her Ducati breaks down in the middle of nowhere—finds herself relying on the kindness of Brandi Cornwell, a hardworking, clean-living Idaho rancher. The story ends in Idaho, on the ranch, with Eden wrapped in the protective warmth of Brandi's arms. The final words of the novel are, "Eden was home." Few romance protagonists are more dangerous than Eden is at the top of the story or more domesticated than she is at its conclusion. But there is a parallel track in contemporary lesbian romance, one in which wildness or dangerousness is a quality to be celebrated and cultivated and embraced, rather than tamed or controlled.

Before turning to the transformation of this character in contemporary lesbian romance, it is necessary to take a brief look at the medieval and early modern roots of dangerous women in romance. There is a long tradition of dangerous women in English romance, long before the advent of the romance novel.<sup>[3]</sup> It is appropriate to begin this discussion with Geoffrey Chaucer, because one of the overarching themes of Chaucer's fourteenth-century *Canterbury Tales* is how women mediate power in romance. In the "Knight's Tale"—the chivalric romance at the start of the *Canterbury Tales*—Theseus returns triumphantly to Athens, having conquered the kingdom of the Amazons. He brings his new wife—formerly the queen of the Amazons—to the Athenian court, along with her younger sister Emily. Emily promptly finds herself the unwilling apex of a love triangle, as two knights vie for her hand. Their love for Emily provokes war and chaos and copious bloodshed; an entire military/industrial complex springs up to support a tournament to determine who wins the girl. Emily prays to the goddess Diana, reminding her that she never wants to marry a man—she wants to spend her life in Diana's service, hunting and walking in the wild woods. She begs Diana to divert the knights' attention from her. But she does have a contingency clause: if she must end up with one of them, she begs, "sende me hym that moost desireth me" (2325). She clearly knows how romances end in the fourteenth century. It is not the dangerous male hero who is domesticated, but the dangerous woman who is silenced, who marries the knight who survives the tournament. And we are told that he lives happily ever after: "For now is *Palamon* in alle wele,/ Lyvyng in blisse, in richesse, and in heele" (3101-3102).

This brief excursus into early English literature reveals two possible models for heteronormative romance. On the one hand, there is the early modern English story, in which dangerous, wild women are domesticated and tamed. On the other, there is the contemporary romance novel, in which dangerous, wild men are domesticated and tamed.

Contemporary lesbian romance offers a third way. Perhaps because our heroes reach back to Chaucer's Emily, who dared admit that she didn't want to marry a man, who asked for nothing more than to spend her life in the wild wood, but who prepared for the contingency of having her wildness tamed, we view wildness in our romance heroes as a quality to be cultivated. Perhaps because we write our stories in the shadow of and standing on the shoulders of Marguerite Radclyffe Hall, whose Stephen Gordon believes that she is dangerous to the woman she loves, that she cannot offer her a happy life, we write romance novels where dangerous heroes are loved for their dangerous qualities, for their wildness, for their transgression—not in spite of it. In contemporary lesbian romance,



wildness is not the enemy of happily ever after.

How does this play out in contemporary lesbian romance? Putting aside for the moment works of romantic intrigue or paranormal romance, where the persistence of the female hero's dangerousness and wildness is arguably intrinsic, the discussion that follows will address character-driven romances that feature a dangerous, wild woman who not only remains untamed, but is loved for her wildness by the end of the novel.

Radclyffe's *Love's Melody Lost*, first published in 2001, is a romance between Graham Yardley, a reclusive composer-pianist living alone with a trusted housekeeper, and Anna Reid, who arrives to manage the affairs of the estate. Terribly injured over a decade before the action of the story in an accident that cost her her sight and her music, and abandoned by her lover Christine, Graham has locked herself and her heart away in a Victorian mansion on Cape Cod Bay, protecting both others and herself from the dangers of her unruly passions. After she and Anna finally make love, Graham knows she must send Anna away, much as Stephen Gordon resolved to drive her lover away:

She remembered with shattering clarity each sensation—the longing and the wonder and the miracle of communion, body and soul. She could not drive the memory of the past from her thoughts—the complete desolation of the spirit she had suffered when Christine left her. She feared that ultimately her deepest needs would force Anna to leave her, too. She knew with utter certainty that this would be a pain she could not bear a second time in her life. Despite the years, the wounds still bled, and she could not banish the fear. She had not sought this love; in fact she had hidden herself from the very possibility of it for years. (144-5)

Anna does leave, but because this is a romance novel, her love for Graham brings her back to fight for the woman she loves—for her wildness, for her dangerous passionate needs. Indeed, Radclyffe rewrites the ending of *The Well of Loneliness* as Anna refutes Graham's claims: "There is nothing you could do, short of not loving me, that would ever make me leave you. I am not afraid of your needs, or your wants, or your passions. I want you" (165).

Radclyffe herself has said that *Love's Melody Lost* is "an intentional retelling of *Jane Eyre*," with Graham corresponding to Mr. Rochester ("The Hero and The Lady"). But Graham, the dangerous woman, the woman with destructive, disruptive powers, the woman locked up in the grand house, can also be read as Bertha Rochester, the so-called madwoman in the attic. In lesbian romance, not only are dangerous women freed from the attic, but they are embraced and loved.

In Radclyffe's first medical romance, *Passion's Bright Fury* (2003), the dangerous, wild woman is Saxon Sinclair, trauma chief at a Manhattan hospital, and the woman who loves her for her wildness is Jude Castle, who is shooting a documentary in Sax's trauma unit. Jude's first glimpse of Saxon tells her—and us—that she is transgressive:

At the sound of the footsteps in the deserted hallway behind her, Jude Castle turned and got her first look at the elusive Dr. Saxon Sinclair, chief of trauma at St. Michael's Hospital in lower Manhattan. The surgeon wasn't entirely what she expected of someone with that title—particularly not with a

motorcycle helmet tucked under one arm, a well-worn black leather jacket, and faded blue jeans. (20)

But Sax's wildness goes beyond her appearance and actions. Like Graham, whose wildness is organic to her talent, and like Stephen Gordon, whose hardwired queerness—whose status as invert—makes her dangerous, Saxon's brain chemistry is idiosyncratic. She revs at a higher speed than most people. As a child and young adult, misdiagnosed and misunderstood, she was rejected by her parents, and as an adult she has borne this secret truth about herself alone, refusing intimacy, expecting rejection. She has learned to be afraid of her own wildness. But like Anna, Jude refuses to allow Sax to push her away. She wants to know her, and she wants her, not in spite of her wildness, but for it. By the end of the novel, Sax declares: "Jude [ . . . ] you make it safe for me to be myself. I am not afraid when I'm with you" (214). Thus, in lesbian romance, love frees wild women to be fully themselves. It certainly doesn't tame them.

Wild women come in many different packages. Lea Santos's 2010 romance *Under Her Skin* offers a distinctly nurturing wild woman, Torien Pacias, who falls in love with international supermodel Iris Lujan. While all of Santos's novels feature Latina characters, Tori is not only Latina but a Mexican, supremely conscious of her outsider status among Americans, uncomfortably aware that she and Iris live in different socioeconomic worlds. Iris's—and our—first glimpse of Torien is in the garden where she works—the wild woman in the state of nature:

Torien's sleeveless shirt was buttoned low enough to expose a good portion of her sports bra, like she'd thrown it over her body as an afterthought. Sweat glistened on her defined delts and the exposed area of her chest. Mud caked the bottoms of her worn jeans and work boots. Her callused hands—*Lord, get a load of those hands*—were clearly unafraid of hard, honest, sweaty work. (17)

While there is certainly nothing conventionally dangerous about Tori, we see in Tori an echo of Stephen Gordon's fear, of Graham Yardley's fear, of the wild lesbian romance heroine's fear that she will hurt the woman she loves. Torien believes that she, a lowly gardener, will only hold Iris back. Throughout the novel, Iris is the pursuer and Torien the pursued, until Iris finally manages to convince Torien that she loves her and they can be together. What is fascinating about this novel is that it is about the domestication of one of the lovers—but not of the dangerous wild one. Indeed, it is Iris who is domesticated, who turns down a lucrative long-term overseas modeling contract when she realizes that it's Tori she wants. As for Tori, far from being domesticated, far from losing her wildness, Iris quite literally joins her in her garden. Not only is the wild woman not domesticated, but in this novel, domestication means going wild.

Emma Donoghue notes in her recent study of desire between women in literature that "[a] society's literature is its dream: immensely suggestive, yes, but not a simple reflection of its daily reality" (14). For several hundred years, wild women in romance were silenced and domesticated. For two thirds of the twentieth century, lesbian love stories invariably ended in tears. Indeed, in 1941, a review in the *New York Times* stated categorically: "It is surely time to concede that the subject of Lesbianism, if used otherwise

than in the scientific investigation of human abnormality, should fall into a special category of its own, possibly as a minor subsidiary of tragedy” (Southron).

Now, not only are lesbians the heroes of romance novels, but these wild women are dangerous because they are passionate, because they are artists, because they buck convention—and not simply because they are sexually queer. Contemporary lesbian romance creates a safe space for the wild hero, for the dangerous madwoman, who refuses to be trapped in the attic, and who will not be silenced in the closet.

This trend is amplified when the lesbian romantic hero is the protagonist of a paranormal romance. The final section of this article will explore the figure of the lesbian alpha hero, the recent resurgence in popularity of the alpha hero in the paranormal romance novel, and how this subgenre has served to legitimate wild heroines within mainstream romance—regardless of their sexual preference.

## Queering the Alpha

In *The Writer’s Journey*, Christopher Vogler suggests that “the dramatic purpose of the hero is to give the audience a window into the story. Each person hearing a tale or watching a play or movie is invited in the early stages of the story to identify with the hero, to merge with him and see the world of the story through his eyes” (36). Romance authors would argue that the dramatic purpose of the hero is to embody a character with whom the heroine (and by extension, the reader) can fall in love. In fact, those who write erotic romances contend, as does Angela Knight in *A Guide to Writing Erotic Romance*, that the hero is responsible for the “sexual heat” of the story. The heroine may determine, as Knight posits, when and how sex ultimately takes place, but it is the hero who pushes the agenda. He creates the erotic focus of the work. He is also, however, constrained in certain ways by societal mores—both those of the story in which he finds himself, and those of the author who creates him. Jay Dixon asserts in her review of the romances of British publisher Mills and Boon that “social reality necessarily colours the portrayal of heroes in all popular literature” (64). As a consequence, since most romances are written by women, the portrayal of the hero is most often influenced by the social reality of women. This is no less true for lesbian romances.

Romance fiction allows authors to create heroes who may diverge from acceptable contemporary social and cultural parameters, thereby freeing the reader to embrace extreme psychosexual experiences in a defensible and safe forum. The alpha hero illustrates this inherent duality of social unacceptability and secret desirability more clearly than any other. The alpha hero, as with most heroes, is depicted as intelligent and supremely confident—a leader and a warrior. What critically defines him however is his ultraprotective, overtly territorial, controlling, and domineering nature. Sexually he is aggressive and often compels the heroine to accept his sexual advances by overpowering her emotionally and psychologically, if not outright physically, earning him the reputation of being a brute, an abuser, or a jerk. He appeared frequently in the historical romance, the most popular form of romance fiction until the late twentieth century, as Lord of the Manor.

As noted by Krentz, “these men are the tough, hard edged, tormented heroes that are at the heart of the vast majority of best-selling romance novels. [ . . . ] They are the

heroes who carry off the heroines in historical romances. These are the heroes feminist critics despise" (107-108). The single word that crystallizes both his appeal and his malignity is power. The alpha hero is in possession of power, and he wields it without apology.

As with all heroes, what prevents the alpha hero from being despicable and allows the heroine (and by extension, the reader) to embrace him is his hidden vulnerability—his secret need, his private torment, the wounds that only the heroine can heal. With the rise of feminism in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the alpha hero fell out of favor. Women in a fight for equality, recognition, and self-actualization rejected the dominating male persona along with the need to be protected, either from the outside world or their own inner impulses. Virginity was no longer an essential requirement for the romance heroine. The male, the hero, no longer held all the power in the sexual arena. In fiction, as in life, women sought partners, not father-figures, saviors, or knights in shining armor. Women and romance readers sought heroes who were partners with a focus on communication, sensitivity, shared responsibility, and a fierce need to protect the heroine's independence, giving rise to the beta hero. In contradistinction to the alpha male, the beta male was more of a friend than a protector—more able to communicate his feelings, more sensitive, less controlling, less dominating. Forced seduction scenes disappeared.

The late twentieth century saw the emergence of the lesbian hero in romance fiction, along with an explosion of lesbian romances ushered in by the pulp fiction era of the 1950s and 1960s. The lesbian hero, however, is not a simple replica of the male hero, except with different body parts. She is, in fact, her own archetype, in early works close to the classic butch lesbian persona that pre-dated both the sexual revolution and gay liberation movements. Just as the portrayal of the male hero was colored by social reality, so was the early lesbian hero a reflection of the social-sexual butch-femme dynamic within the lesbian community of the early- to mid-twentieth century. Butch lesbians assumed the attributes/roles traditionally reserved for men—emotional reserve, sexual aggression, provider, and protector, while self-identified femme lesbians expressed the socially designated feminine role of caretaker, nurturer, and seductress. The lesbian hero emerged initially in detective fiction and gained popularity in intrigue/adventure romances featuring traditional hero figures: warriors, law enforcement agents, soldiers, and business tycoons. These women held traditional power roles and were often the POV characters.

Mysteries and romantic intrigue provided the perfect vehicle for merging the socially acceptable, newly independent female hero with the butch lesbian archetype. In *Amateur City* by Katherine V. Forrest (1984), the first work to feature a lesbian detective, the hero, Kate Delafield, was characterized as "[t]aller and stronger, more aggressive than the other girls; in look and manner hopelessly unfeminine by their standards. Among similarly uniformed women in the Marine Corps, she had been resented for her unusual physical strengths and command presence. [ . . . ] And always there had been that one most essential difference: she was a woman who desired only other women" (23-4). As the lead detective on the case, Kate is empowered with what traditionally had been reserved for men—the task of meting out justice. She represents not only a female hero, but a lesbian hero in classic alpha form. She is physically strong, commanding, and in control in the bedroom.

The lesbian hero was rising in popularity in lesbian romance fiction as the alpha male hero was simultaneously losing his place, temporarily at least, to the beta hero. Many

similarities existed between the male and female alphas, however. The lesbian hero of the 60s, 70s, and 80s was often a loner, often assumed responsibility for others, willingly sacrificed herself for the greater good, and was the driving force behind the erotic tension in a work. Unlike the alpha male hero, however, the lesbian hero would always stop short of any kind of sexual encounter to which she was not invited. In *Death By the Riverside* (1990), Micky Knight, the lesbian alpha hero of J.M. Redmann's detective series (widely considered to be the first lesbian noir) says, "I never, ever touch virgins unless they're very sure of what they want and they practically beg me. (This happens more often than you think)" (Chapter 2).

While the lesbian hero found her voice, what then became of the alpha male? Did he slink back to his cave (or his castle), relegated to a footnote in the history of romance fiction? Fortunately, the alpha hero wasn't alpha for nothing, and he did not go quietly. He exploded back onto the romance scene a changed man—literally—in a form more acceptable to the liberated woman. The alpha male returned with claws, fangs, and wings, becoming even more of an alpha-creature than previously—larger, more dangerous, darker, and more deadly. He also resumed his controlling, territorial, and dominant ways. The paranormal romance genre provided a stage upon which it was once again permissible to write a hero who was dominant, aggressive, protective, and controlling, and who claimed his woman for all the world to see. When the alpha male reemerged in heterosexual romance, he was paired with a strong, independent, aggressive heroine befitting the social role of the late-twentieth-century woman, thereby re-igniting the essential conflict at the heart of all good romance fiction.

This new (old) dynamic is evidenced in this passage from *River Marked* by Patricia Briggs (2011), which illustrates the instinctive aggressiveness of the alpha male, Adam, countered by the willing acceptance of his aggression and the control over it exerted by the heroine, Mercy. She is not dominated by his sexual drive or his territorial aggression. She welcomes it even as she tempers it.

Beside me, Adam rose with a snarl. I lowered my head to show that I was not a threat. After a bad change, it would be a few minutes before Adam had a leash on his wolf. [ . . . ] The wolf put his nose just under my ear. I tilted my head to give him my throat. Sharp teeth brushed against my skin, and I shivered. (Chapter 10)

In this passage the alpha hero is literally an alpha—in this case an alpha wolf, and the heroine recognizes and accepts his innate need to claim her. He, in turn, recognizes her independence (he seeks her acceptance with his nose just under her ear). Her submission is willing (she gives him her throat) and his dominance (teeth at her throat) is both consensual and sexually arousing. Very much as occurs in sadomasochistic power dynamics, the apparent submissive in this situation (Mercy) controls the exchange by recognizing Adam's need to dominate her and allowing it. The key to their relationship of equals is consent.

In lesbian fiction, the hero has never been male, but that does not mean the lesbian hero is not alpha. The lesbian butch hero slowly underwent a transformation, just as did the alpha hero in heterosexual romance fiction, as the romance genre diversified and as societal gender roles blended. Romantic intrigue, swords and sorcery, space opera, and

other romance subgenres where women held positions of power became more and more popular. Then the paranormal romance revolution hit lesbian fiction a decade after the similar surge in mainstream fiction. Suddenly, lesbian heroes could be Werewolves, Vampires, demons, and other preternatural beings. These heroes are as alpha as any alpha male hero ever hoped to be. Like the male alpha hero, the lesbian alpha hero is driven by her primal instincts to mate, to protect her young, to preserve her species, and to defend those she leads. She is also most effectively paired with a strong heroine, which generally creates a great deal of the internal conflict that drives the romance. Like her male counterpart, she is often a loner, secretly wounded, and in need of healing or redemption.

Perhaps most important within the context of lesbian romantic relationships, the lesbian alpha hero has given us, for the first time in our romance fiction, what the alpha male always brought to heterosexual romance fiction—the opportunity to write (and experience) unfettered sexual aggression. Just as is true in heterosexual paranormal romance fiction, the inherent sexual aggression of the alpha hero, male or female, has been validated by their very nature—these are not humans, but preternatural creatures driven by inhuman instincts, needs, and desires. No one can fault an alpha werewolf for being excessively territorial, for claiming her mate with a bite or demanding submission from a lover. We cannot criticize a vampire who enthralls the object of her desire when she prepares to feed and forces her lover to orgasm in the process. Forced seduction becomes biologically permissible and, most importantly, consensual.

In L.L. Raand's *The Midnight Hunt* (2010), for example, jealousy and possessiveness are portrayed as biologically hardwired into werewolf mated pairs. Near the conclusion of the novel, Sylvan, the werewolf Alpha, takes umbrage at anyone who touches her new mate Drake—even if that touch is the purely pragmatic examination of the Pack medic, Sophia:

“Back away from her,” Sylvan snarled in Sophia’s direction, her whole body shuddering with the effort not to tear Sophia apart.

“Sylvan,” Drake murmured, pressing her mouth to the bite on Sylvan’s chest. She had felt Sylvan calling out to her long before Sylvan had reached the room, had felt her power—hungry and demanding. She scraped her teeth over the bite and Sylvan shuddered. “I’ve missed you.”

Sylvan grasped Drake behind the head and yanked her forward, covering her mouth in a ferocious kiss. [ . . . ] Drake pressed her hips into Sylvan’s and raked her blunt claws down the center of Sylvan’s abdomen. She drew Sylvan in, welcomed her questing tongue, her demanding mouth. The more she gave—the more she took—the calmer Sylvan became. [ . . . ]

“You have nothing to growl over,” Drake murmured. “I hunger only for you.” (258-259)

This passage illustrates the alpha’s instinctual sexual aggression, the subsequent desire unleashed in her mate by the alpha’s primal demands, and the mate’s recognition of and control over the alpha’s needs.

By portraying a female alpha in whom dominance, aggression, and territoriality are innate and not assumed—not only beyond her control but admirable and acceptable in certain circumstances—Raand and other authors of lesbian paranormal romance set the stage for the ultimate romantic challenge, the literal taming of the beast within by love. Only a heroine strong enough to maintain her own identity in the face of the alpha's power can be a worthy mate, thus establishing the core conflict: the alpha's need to dominate and protect is at odds with the heroine's fierce need to maintain her autonomy and sense of self. Sexually the two are often equally aggressive, allowing a dynamic exchange of power within fluid gender boundaries. Ultimately, the heroine will come to trust that being cared for will not diminish her, and the alpha will learn not only to rely on her mate's strength, but to protect what her mate values the most—her independence.

The lesbian alpha thus can be seen to serve the same function in a romance as does the alpha male—she presents a larger-than-life hero with unquenchable erotic power, a dominant personality, and a proprietary attitude toward her mate likely to infuriate an equally strong heroine—all within a context that allows the contemporary heroine to embrace her, even when she bites.

It is not a coincidence that as mainstream and queer romance converge upon the figure of the alpha paranormal heroine, there are signs of increased interest in queer romance generally from the mainstream romance community. As a recent blog on the *RT Book Reviews* site reports, “the question of mainstreaming, can these [queer] love stories make the leap to everyday public consumption, was put up to discussion during a recent panel at the 2012 RWA Conference in Anaheim.” Len Barot (one of the co-authors of this article and a member of that RWA panel) noted that while it is becoming easier—particularly in mainstream paranormal romances—to find characters who identify as queer, “the revolution is not here yet.” In some respects, however, we have already seen a revolution in the emergence of the lesbian romantic hero. And there is no question that the romance novel, like the broad romance tradition from which it developed, will continue to reflect and refract the hopes and dreams of those who seek a safe space to imagine their deepest desires.

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[1] Specifically, Havelock and Krafft-Ebing. Stephen is depicted as reading the latter's *Psychopathia Sexualis* in her father's study.

[2] Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt*, published 1953 and written under the name Claire Morgan, is the first lesbian romance with a happy ending.

[3] For a thorough and thought-provoking study of the figure of the Amazon—the paradigmatic dangerous woman—in early modern English literature, see Kathryn Schwarz's *Tough Love: Amazon Encounters in the English Renaissance*. Schwarz investigates the ways in which Amazons in the literature of that period can be seen both to define and to disrupt the heteronormative construction of domesticity.

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