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Reading the Regis Roundtable: An Outsider's Perspective

Jonathan A. Allan

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About the Author: Jonathan A. Allan is a lecturer in Gender and Women's Studies at Brandon University. He received his PhD from the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto, where he wrote a dissertation titled, "The First Time and the Mourning After: On Love, Loss, and Virginity," which explored the tension between theory and anecdote, as well as romance and canonical literature. His current project, Reading from Behind, is a book length study of the anus, the ass, the rear in literary and cultural theory.

I was not at the PCA this year (truthfully, I've never been). I write this brief commentary as an outsider, insofar as I've never been "inside" PCA, and as someone, who came to popular romance almost by accident. Still, I applied to the 2010 International Association for the Study of Popular Romance (IASPR) conference in Brussels because of Pamela Regis—she was giving a keynote address—and that gives me a particular investment in this discussion.

At the time, I was writing a dissertation—one that was ultimately discarded, its pages yellowing in a box—on what Doris Sommer had called "foundational fictions," which is to say, nineteenth-century Latin American romance novels: Jorge Isaacs's *María* and its epileptic aesthetic; a rebellious romance like Adolfo Caminha's *Bom Crioulo*; and the rich queerness of homosocial desire that was found in many of these romances. But it was at IASPR that I realized how much could be said about popular romance, about how much we were missing when we, in the academy, ignored it. And it was because of IASPR and subsequent discussions with colleagues that I have spent some time thinking about how we go about teaching and researching popular romance. Afforded this opportunity, I wish to offer some thoughts, however tentative, about some of the issues that have arisen throughout these wonderful papers.

It seems that we all agree that Regis's *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* was and continues to be an important book, comparable in significance to Janice Radway's foundational study, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Upon

thinking about these papers, however, I am struck by the fact that Regis speaks of "the Romance Novel" with no qualifying adjective, and that Radway's subtitle is even more inclusive, using the word "literature" rather than "romance" or "fiction," as we, in popular romance studies, are accustomed to doing.

What is lost or gained when we do not think of romance as "literature"?

Call Me Frygian, Maybe

Regis's *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* is profoundly and explicitly in dialogue with one of romance's most important theorists: Northrop Frye. Indeed, one of the first things I said to Regis when I met her was, "Have you read Frye's notebooks on romance?" For a few years (my years before Regis, maybe?), I was a very keen reader of Northrop Frye. I went to the University of Toronto because Frye had taught at Toronto, he had founded the Centre for Comparative Literature, and his archives were located in the E. J. Pratt Library. Today, I must admit, my devotion to Frye has waned, but my understanding of genre is entirely indebted to Frye, and Regis strikes me as one of his most faithful readers. So many of Regis's key terms are inspired by Frygian thought (I think here, for instance, of her discussions of the "point of ritual death") and even the way Regis sees the "structure" of romance ultimately derives from Frye.

This leaves me with two suggestions about popular romance scholarship, both of which oscillate around theory. The first suggestion is this: *we must go back and read a range of voices who theorize romance and genre, and not just those who wrote on popular romance*. Northrop Frye, as just about every major critic of romance has noted, was essential in developing a "grammar of romance" (Saunders 2), but what of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*? Like Regis's *A Natural History*, Jameson's work owes a debt to Northrop Frye, a debt that Jameson himself has noted, and it offers a searching account of "romance," broadly construed, which might well be of use to us in the field. We owe it to ourselves to read psychoanalysis in relation to the romance, and vice versa, even though we know that these two have had a complicated relationship. Particular scholars may have used psychoanalysis to pathologize the romance reader, but that past need not be prologue. We can draw on the teachings of psychoanalysis in new and innovative ways, ways that account for the complexity of women's experiences, reader's experience's, and author's experiences. Indeed, is not the experience of love profoundly informed by the psyche, and is the not the formation of the psyche shaped by the traumas and the solaces of love?

My argument here is not simply that we need to know where other scholars are coming from, what is informing their work, and how we might return to their work, reading it now to illuminate the texts we study rather than to dismiss them. Rather, what I am asking for here is something more: close readings of literary theory, which itself is often as implicitly plotted and shaped, generically speaking, as any work of fiction. As many theorists have claimed, the act of writing theory brings into action the same set of linguistic devices as those used by any novelist or poet; theory abounds with wordplay, wit, irony, metaphor, metonymy, and even (at least implicitly) plot and character. I recognize that this puts me at odds with Regis's "First Principle of Literary Critical Ethics": "The most modest

work of fiction, including romance fiction, is a greater accomplishment than the finest work of literary criticism." But one of my questions for Regis after reading her paper was, "Are you writing a romance?"—by which I meant that the argument being explored was, at heart, a quest romance, turned here into a *field* romance, with Regis herself as our heroine. (Selinger, I note, refers to himself as "wearing the genre's guerdon": perhaps he'd like to cast himself as its knight errant.)

As romance scholars, then, we should not only read more widely and deeply in theory, but we should read those theoretical texts as closely, as critically, as carefully, as creatively as the literary texts we choose to engage.

Not so Happily Ever After

My second suggestion—one comes out of my current research as well as the Roundtable responses—has to do with the sorts of theory we ought to engage.

As of 2013, it's safe to say that there are theoretical voices that dominate our field, while other voices are almost entirely silent or pushed to the periphery. We see ourselves as fascinated, for example, by questions of gender and sexuality, but, by and large, our approach is informed by a very small swath of feminist theory. With a few exceptions (the Australian scholar Lisa Fletcher comes to mind), the current wave of popular romance scholars have yet to engage with recent scholarship on sexuality and gender, particularly by way of queer theory, which has the potential to call into question many of our assumptions about both gender and genre. In a sense, I think that Kamble's suggestion that we look behind our comfort zone is particularly important, especially if we desire a happily ever after for our field.

In responding to Regis's paper, I asked myself (and Regis) why we insist upon the "happily ever after." In her monumental work, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Pamela Regis writes that many critics "attack the romance novel for its happy ending in marriage" (7). Arguably, Regis's *A Natural History* works to resolve, or even repair, this "attack" by illustrating that the happily ever after is really about "freedom," which is "the reason that readers react to the happy ending with enthusiasm—with joy" (16). Indeed, in summarizing the happily ever after, Regis explains: "[w]hen the heroine achieves freedom, she chooses the hero. The happy ending celebrates this" (16). Critics and advocates for the genre focus on the happily ever after, as either a sign of the genre's success or a sign of the genre's failure. There is, in a sense, no middle ground. In closing, I want to provide another, slightly different reading of the happily ever after.

While I agree with Regis that much of the "values [of romance] are profoundly bourgeois" (207)—and they may indeed be read this way—I want to suggest that attached to these values is an insistence upon heteronormativity: specifically, to the heteronormative ideal that Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurism" (Edelman 3). In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault spoke eloquently about the central place of the "utilitarian and fertile" place of the parents' bedroom (3) in our theorizations of sexuality—a place which is also, as Edelman's phrase suggests, linked to questions of time. While it is certainly true that literal fertility and reproduction are not "essential," to borrow Regis's language, to the romance, it must be equally recognized that a genre that requires betrothal is linked to

a sense of continuity and futurity. What readers love about the happily ever after is that it promises a tomorrow.

As a paranoid critic, I am imagining that a reader is already saying, "ah, but this author is unaware of male/male romance." Not so. I would contend that the male/male romance novel—the kind which, like the male/female romance, requires a happily ever after—is also complicit in this normative project. Indeed, Lisa Duggan has coined the word "homonormative," which "is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (50). Is this not precisely what so-called queer romances do, precisely inasmuch as they "uphold and sustain" the importance of the happily ever after?

I am not arguing here that queers and queer allies should be against happiness, but I *am* urging us to be wary of any homogenous, homogenizing belief in and understanding of the happily ever after as a *telos* for the genre: iconic, untouchable, cherished, revered. Taking our cue from the "fierce and powerful argument against gay marriage" that J. Jack Halberstam has noted "from *within* queer activist groups" (97-98; emphasis in original)—an argument that resists the recuperation of queerness by normative domesticity—we might go beyond simply reading romances that are "male/male" or "female/female" and read both romance, the genre (as a totalizing structure) and individual romance novels (same-sex or heterosexual), queerly. What might this mean?

Well, for one thing, queer theory has demonstrated the importance of affective thinking, and the challenge with romance is that while it is ostensibly committed to affect, the lesson of romance is generally that all negative affect is (or at least ought to be) cured, at once through and by the romance. Our happily ever after will bring an end to our sad stories, restoring what was lost. Our sadness, melancholy, distress will be cured—miraculously—by the power of love. But must the romance novel's happily ever after function like a cure? I think that work being done by An Goris is particularly relevant and important here, because she is extending the argument of romance beyond stand-alone titles. The serial romance challenges our notions of happily ever after, and this is important, both to our sense of the genre and, perhaps, to our evolving culture of love.

To speak about affect is, of course, to engage with the most famous affective quality of the happily ever after ending: its optimism. Regis does not use the word, but the Romance Writers of America certainly do, defining the romance novel as a "central love story" with an "emotionally satisfying, optimistic ending ("About the Romance Genre"). I am not about to argue against "optimism," mostly because I think a great deal of generative work is being done around optimism in queer theory (see, for example, Snediker's *Queer Optimism*, and Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*). But even we lovers of happily-ever-aftering need, I think, to entertain the notion that a certain "cruel optimism," in Lauren Berlant's terms, also inflects the genre. "Cruel optimism," she explains in the book of that name, is "the condition of maintaining attachment to a significantly problematic object" (24)—problematic because we must therefore engage with "the compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic" (Berlant 24). Sometimes, after all—too often—we are not able to live in the glory of the happily ever after, but instead, are stuck in the tremendously depressing "not again," or "never again."

We know how we deal with this knowledge ourselves, or at least we come to know it, year by year. How, though, does romance deal with it, at the levels of plot and character and trope? Does the treatment of such matters in the "romance" differ from its treatment in the "romance novel" and the "popular romance novel," and how might any or all of these differ from their representation in other media?

To answer such questions we will need to read more, and better, and—if not cruelly—as honestly and queerly as we can.

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