

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

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 is an old word. It 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 her 2003 book *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Pamela Regis defines 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 it is clear that heroine and hero will end up together” (38). Nevertheless, her formulation, with its reliance on a “hero and heroine,” is heteronormative.

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 romances. This panel will explore the formal features and literary goals of the lesbian romance in order to enrich our understanding of the romance novel more broadly defined. In this paper, I will trace the evolution of the queer romantic heroine in English literature, with a

particular focus on works of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In so doing, I will demonstrate that the recent rise of the queer female hero as a viable love interest reflects the rapidly changing landscape of sexual identity politics in early twenty-first century America.

Women in the queer community are used 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.

I had originally planned to start, as many survey courses of English literature do, with Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. But since we’ll be hearing more about Chaucer’s queer women in this panel’s third paper, I’ll begin my analysis with 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 young and beautiful woman on a quest for her one true love—a man named Arthegall, who is King Arthur’s half-brother. 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 theare.
 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 grieffull 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 completely predetermined: she will go on to marry Arthegall, and their union will, over a period of centuries, culminate in the birth of Queen Elizabeth I. While Spenser's poem may hint at romantic possibilities outside of the traditional pairing of a man or a woman, heteronormativity always prevails. In 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,¹ 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. As an adult, Stephen falls in love with a young 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)!

As I was rereading *The Well of Loneliness* for this paper, I was struck by how strongly I resemble Hall's description of Stephen's physical characteristics. Tall and athletic, broad-shouldered and hazel-eyed; I even have a slight cleft in my chin. Like Stephen, I have a mother who called me "unnatural," and "a sin against creation" (200). Imagine if this were the only book in which I saw myself reflected. Imagine if this were the only story in which **you** recognized the

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

way **you** fall in love. Imagine your triumph and relief at the realization that you are not alone in your desires...and then imagine your despair at the tragic conclusion.

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. At first, most of these books ended in despair. Dorothy Allison, for example, 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.²

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.

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.

During this time, lesbians found ways to compensate for their literature's notion that death was the only recourse for a woman who loved another woman. Scholar Kate Adams, for example, tells the story of Carol Seajay, the founder of the *Feminist Bookstore News*, a major publication venue for lesbian work in the 1970s and 80s. Seajay recalls her adolescent reading habits, in which she would read pulps "only up to the last twenty pages, to avoid sharing the lesbian protagonist's inevitable tragic end" (Adams 122). Thankfully, Ann 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—was the first lesbian love story I ever read. *Safe Harbor*, by Radclyffe (one of the pseudonyms of Len Barot, who is sitting right over there) was the second. Both relay the same message: that I and everyone like me deserve true romance—including, of course, a happily ever after—with another woman.

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 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, unfortunately, happens to be a real jerk. 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 not to stick her head in the sand, but rather to acknowledge both the problem and 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. It is a celebration, an exultation. It is a consummate romance.

Radclyffe’s *Safe Harbor* was first published in 2001, almost twenty years after *Curious Wine*. 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—man or woman. 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. “There’s no way I’m getting involved with someone who’s just coming out,” Tory

thinks, “or God forbid, straight” (111). 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 create 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.

Many of Radclyffe's later novels take this trend one step further. Often, her characters are already "out" and their sexual orientation is never seen as a barrier to anything or anyone. Similarly, Lynda Sandoval and Carsen Taitte have penned romances in which being queer is simply accepted and rarely, if ever, questioned. While our society is still quite a long way from that point, the fact that our authors and our fiction can conceptualize that world is an encouraging sign.

Our readers need both kinds of fiction—both the stories that tackle the complexities of coming out, and the stories that regard the process as a *fait accompli*. The younger demographic is especially vulnerable as they grow up in a society that both openly acknowledges them and openly discriminates against them. Last year, I received an email from a young woman named Ashleigh, who had just finished my second romance, *Homecoming*, about a college student named Sarah whose family rejects her after they discover that she is a lesbian. Ashleigh wrote, "My girlfriend handed me your book Homecoming tonight and I can't seem to put it down! I am already facinated [sic] by the story. Where do you get your ideas? I'm 17 and struggling with coming out to my parents. I'm afraid they'll disown me like Sarah's parents did. Or they'd keep me from seeing my girl. What do you think? Should I keep it on the DL or just tell them?"

Ashleigh, like many young readers, feels powerless in the face of her family's potential rejection. I did not advise her one way or the other vis-à-vis coming out, but I did make her aware of resources that might be useful to her as she decides what to do. The fact of the matter is that nothing I wrote to her in an email could ever be as effective as the story I told in print—a **romance**, in which the young lovers overcome each obstacle to their union and live happily ever after. These are the stories that Ashleigh, and readers like her, need to have at their fingertips.

Back in the summer of 2006, after much discussion amongst members of the Romance Writers Association about the call to restrict the definition of romance as between one man and one woman, the RWA Board issued a statement as follows: “The Board feels that the organization doesn't define the genre; the genre defines the organization. With that in mind, the Board agrees that any definition of romance should be broad and inclusive.” One year later, Bold Strokes Books became an RWA recognized publisher, and our romances proudly feature only queer couples. Our visibility within the greater romance community has allowed for broader recognition of the affirming and celebratory stories of love and passion told by queer romances. The remainder of this panel will focus on the ways in which these stories add complexity and diversity to the romance genre.

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