

Where the Wild Things Are: Lesbian Romance and the Undomesticated Queer Hero

Wildness is a recurring motif both in discussions of romance and in the packaging of romance novels. A completely unscientific Google search on “wildness and ‘romance novel’” yields 1.3 million hits, and searching Amazon.com calls up over 2500 romance novels with “wild” in their titles. These novels span the gamut of romance subgenres, including Inspirational—although there, the titular wildness tends to be restricted to plants (for example, Ruth Axtell Morren’s *Wild Rose*).

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:

In the twentieth century the romance novel becomes the most popular form of the novel in North America. Rather than achieving affective individualism, property rights, and companionate marriage through courtship as the earlier [nineteenth-century romance novel] 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. (p. 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 herself takes the position 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.” (Introduction, p. 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. (Introduction, p. 5)

So male power in romance is dangerous, wild, in need of taming. Female power is courageous, intelligent, gentle, civilizing, domestic.

Really?

And even if we do take this to be the case in heterosexual romance, what happens to the power dynamic when there is no male hero? What happens in lesbian romance?

It is not my intent here to thoroughly explore—or explode—the paradigm, and there are surely lesbian romances in which a courageous, intelligent, gentle woman domesticates her dangerous, 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. I’m sure I won’t be spoiling it if I tell you 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.” You don’t get more dangerous than Eden at the top of the story or more domesticated than this conclusion. But I would suggest that there is a parallel track in lesbian romance, one in which wildness or dangerousness is a quality to be celebrated and cultivated and embraced, rather than tamed or controlled.

I’d like to first take a brief, hard look at the medieval and early modern roots of dangerous women in romance, and then examine the way some contemporary lesbian romances transform the dangerous, wild female hero. To control the field a bit, I’m restricting this to non-hybrid lesbian romances, to stories that fit Pamela Regis’s definition of the romance novel as “the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (Regis, p. 205). (Regis, I think,

had Jane Austen in mind with her “one or more heroines,” but I applaud the inclusive nature of this definition, albeit accidental.) We’re not going to stack the deck with works of romantic intrigue or paranormal romance, where the persistence of the female hero’s dangerousness and wildness is arguably intrinsic—more about those books and those heroes from our panel’s final speaker.

There is a long tradition of dangerous women in English romance, long before the romance *novel* hits the scene. 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.

But for our purposes today, I’d like to point to two early examples of dangerous women as romance heroines, and their fates. The first can be found in Geoffrey Chaucer’s fourteenth-century chivalric romance, the “Knight’s Tale”—the first of the *Canterbury Tales*. The story opens with Theseus returning 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. And Emily the Amazon promptly finds herself the unwilling apex of a love triangle, as two knights vie for her hand. Their love for Emily, their desire to win her attention, her refusal to favor one over the other, provokes war and chaos and copious bloodshed both on earth and in heaven. On earth, an entire military/industrial complex springs up to support a tournament to determine who wins the girl. In heaven, the gods favoring the two knights battle it out for their acolytes. Emily, for her part, prays to the goddess Diana, reminding her that she never wants to marry a man—she wants to spend her life 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 has to end up with one of them, she begs, "Let me end up with the one who wants me more." She clearly knows how romances end in the fourteenth century. It's 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.

Of course, not all dangerous women kill men with sword and spear and labrys. If the Amazon is the dangerous foreign woman, the domestic model is the shrew. And the persistent romance model here is Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which Petruchio marries, humiliates, and finally "tames" Katharina, who (like Emily) is at least superficially domesticated and silenced by the end of the romance. I note without comment that at the turn of the twenty-first century there were major award-winning Broadway and West End revivals of Cole Porter's musical version of this play, *Kiss Me, Kate*, featuring the ever-popular tune, "I Hate Men."

So we have here two models for heteronormative romance. On the one hand, the early modern English story, in which dangerous, wild women are domesticated and tamed. On the other, 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.

By way of illustration, I'd like to demonstrate how this plays out in four contemporary lesbian romances—two by Radclyffe, one of my own, and one by a new author named Karis Walsh. All of these books are character-driven romances, and each of them features a dangerous, wild woman who not only remains wild—no taming, here—but by the end of the novel, is loved for her wildness.

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, abandoned by her lover Christine, Graham has locked herself and her heart away in a Victorian mansion on Cape Cod Bay, protecting others from the dangers of her unruly passions. And not just others—protecting herself as well. 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. (*LML*, Chapter 16)

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." (*LML*, Chapter 19)

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") While I would never disagree with an author's reading of her own work, especially when she's also my publisher and sitting a few feet away, I would like to suggest that Graham, the dangerous woman, the woman with destructive, disruptive powers, the woman locked up in the grand house, is also *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.

Next, in Radclyffe's first medical romance, the 2003 *Passion's Bright Fury*, 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's shooting a documentary in Sax's trauma unit. Jude's first glimpse of Saxon tells her—and us—that she's 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. (*PBF*, Chapter 1)

A few days later, already attracted to and intrigued (and annoyed) by Sax, Jude watches her having anonymous public sex in a bar, and Jude knows *Sax* knows she saw her. The next morning in the OR, Jude worries things will be uncomfortable between them:

"Good morning." Jude hoped her voice sounded calm, because she felt anything but. She met Sinclair's eyes above the surgical mask that crossed the bridge of her nose and concealed the rest of her face. She hadn't been

sure what to expect from their first face-to-face meeting following the previous evening's unintentional intimacy—an awkward embarrassment at the very least. Now, when Sinclair's eyes held hers unflinchingly, unapologetically, it wasn't discomfiture she felt but excitement. *She knows I saw her last night in the bar, and she doesn't care.* (PBF, Chapter 11)

But Sax's wildness goes beyond the motorcycle and the public sex. It goes beyond how she acts. Like Graham—whose wildness is organic to her talent—and like Stephen Gordon, whose hardwired queerness, her status as “invert,” makes her dangerous—Saxon's brain chemistry is idiosyncratic. She revs at a higher speed than most people, she runs hot, she runs wild. 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: “Jude stared at the woman in the tight black T-shirt and faded black jeans, a handsome, dangerous stranger who knew things she shouldn't and touched her in ways no one ever had.” (PBF, Chapter 27). And Sax, the dangerous woman, declares her love in kind: “Jude . . . you make it safe for me to be myself. I am not afraid when I'm with you.” (PBF, Chapter 27) And that, I would argue, is the key: in lesbian romance, love frees wild women to be fully themselves. It certainly doesn't tame them.

In my 2010 romance *Do Not Disturb*, my dangerous wild woman is Greer Davis, multi-platinum top-40 recording star. Greer is forced to escape the limelight and return to her New Mexico roots after country music's good girl is found dead in her suite, after a night of partying.

As the tabloids put it:

“Rock 'n' roll's bad girl has exceeded all expectations. At least the negative ones. Again. Greer Davis, 32, whom many have compared musically to Joan Jett, served up more of a good time than at least one person could take at her latest wild-girl party. Macy Rivers, the doll of Nashville, fell pretty to

the lure of Davis's wild side and suffered the ultimate consequence for submitting to Davis's dubious charms." (*DND*, Chapter 2)

While Greer thrives both on being wild and on her reputation for wildness, and while the police do not consider her a suspect in Macy's death, when the PR fallout turns out to be more than one day of bad press, she disguises herself and escapes to her aunt and uncle's ranch where she was raised, in a small town outside of Santa Fe. While in disguise, she meets and begins to fall in love with hotelier Ainsley Faraday. But the media follow her to New Mexico, and before long Ainsley knows that the woman she's made love with is a rock star, not a sweet small-town girl. Initially furious, Ainsley slowly succumbs to the charms of the wild girl, and they declare their love just as Greer is about to leave on a world tour promoting her new album. But there's no domestication, no taming, no begging Greer to call off the tour and settle for acoustic sets in little clubs. As the novel closes backstage after a gig, the lovers pledge to make their relationship work, without either of them giving up who she is—and without Greer giving up her craziness:

Greer offered her arm. Ainsley started forward, then abruptly stopped. Greer cocked her head. "Everything okay? I know it's kinda crazy back here."

"It's crazy, but crazy in a good way." Ainsley took a deep breath and plunged on. "This life—you love it, right?" Greer nodded. "And you should. I mean, you've worked your whole life to achieve this kind of success and you deserve it. I know how much you deserve it. I've worked hard too. For different things."

Greer placed a finger on her lips. "I love you. Do you love me?" She moved her finger slightly to allow Ainsley to answer.

"Yes. Greer, I love you." Her use of Greer's name elicited the desired smile. She loved Greer's smile, and she couldn't bear the thought of compromises that might rob her of experiencing her future smiles. (*DND*, Chapter 23)

Finally, in a tease of what is to come, a brief preview of Karis Walsh's debut novel, *Harmony*, coming in August from Bold Strokes Books. In this lesbian take on the classic romance plot of the runaway bride (which is really an extension of the domestication of the wild

woman theme held over from early modern romance), we have the story of Brooke, who learned as a college freshman that following her heart only leads to despair. She's spent the years since trying to tame her own wildness. She's a paralegal in her father's law firm, and she's about to marry the very appropriate boy her parents and their social circle love. And then she meets Andy, coordinator of the string quartet that's to play at her wedding. Andy is a control freak—she plans her life and does her best to keep everyone in it on an even keel, in harmony, as it were. In a moment of pre-wedding madness, Brooke seduces Andy—and in a moment of lustful release, Andy reciprocates, and together they share a night of wild sex. The next day, Brooke calls off her wedding and turns up on Andy's doorstep, totally destabilizing her well-ordered world. And that's just the beginning. As lust turns to love, Brooke must learn to embrace her wildness and take control of her own life—and Andy learns to embrace Brooke's wildness too.

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. Our wildness, our transgression, our queerness meant that women like us couldn't be romance heroes. Now, in the twenty-first century, not only are lesbians the heroes of romance novels, but these wild women are dangerous because they're passionate, because they're artists, because they buck convention—and not just because they're queer. Contemporary lesbian romance creates a safe space for the wild hero, for the dangerous madwoman, who won't be silenced in the closet, and who won't be trapped in the attic.

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