

Escaping the Patriarchy While Enjoying Its Pleasures: Women's Relocation of Erotic Gendered Violence into Queer Male Romance

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Content warning: this paper contains references to sexual assault and intimate partner violence.

Introduction

The enemies-to-lovers trope is pervasive in romance narratives, occupying a significant portion of both the romance genre and online fanfiction spaces. These stories of erotic obsession, forbidden love, and sexual tension are primarily written by and for women, often raising concerns from feminist readers about the perpetuation of romanticized abuse, gender essentialism, and unhealthy models for love. While the enemies-to-lovers dynamic has enamoured and aroused audiences throughout the history of romance novels, its traditional heterosexual context has become increasingly criticized, while a simultaneous rise of gay enemies-to-lovers narratives occurs. A century's worth of romance novels featuring passionate loves blossoming from social tensions proves women's continued attraction towards this trope, and research within the Fan Studies field shows that the majority of slash (male/male romance or erotica fanfiction) is written and read by women (Busse and Hellekson 76). So, women's fascination with writing and reading Queer male enemies-to-lovers stories is a natural progression within the trends of these mediums and genres. However, we must also consider the rapid mainstream adoption of feminist ideology by young women and the consequent rise of disapproving feminist analysis of romance media when regarding the phenomenon of women's enemies-to-lovers narratives being relocated into male bodies and Queer contexts. I argue that women write Queer male enemies-to-lovers romance narratives because it allows them to explore and enjoy the common fantasy of erotic aggression, romantic toxicity, and hegemonic masculinity without the threat of gendered violence against women. By

using two male characters for this trope, the hetero-patriarchal dynamic of male aggression and domination does not threaten (fictional) women's safety, nor reinforce women's submission and passivity. Eliminating the misogyny from the enemies-to-lovers dynamic allows writers and readers to indulge in fantasies that are not pleasurable in the contexts of their own lives and identities. One example is the differing romantic realities and fantasies of slash writer Cath from Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl* (2013). The coexisting critiques and defenses of the popular dark romance and fantasy genres, as well as the role of gender in Rowell's Queer novel *Carry On* (2015), demonstrate both the female fantasy of hegemonic masculinity and the feminist consciousness and patriarchal realities that interfere with these erotic idealizations.

Dark Romance and Its Discourses

To establish the gendered and sexual nuances of this phenomenon, we must first understand the enemies-to-lovers trope and the popularity of the dark romance genre. The "enemies-to-lovers" trope is especially malleable due to the broadness of its premise, and it is often paired with other genre tropes, such as forbidden love, fake dating, and forced proximity. Despite this broadness and vastness for possibility, a common feature of the trope is a significant power imbalance between the pair, typically signified through class disparity and incongruous social statuses. In heterosexual romances, the majority of these dynamics place the man in the position of power, oftentimes directly placing him in an authoritative position above the female love interest, therefore giving him the advantages of wealth and masculinity in a capitalist, patriarchal setting. An iconic example of this dynamic is the romance between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy in Jane Austen's beloved novel *Pride and Prejudice*. While Mr. Darcy possesses excessive wealth and benefits from his upper-class male privilege, Elizabeth's family must actively seek social connections to avoid future poverty, placing Elizabeth at a social and financial disadvantage compared to her love interest. The sensual taboo of imbalanced power extends beyond social status, often manifesting in the actions of male love interests who are frequently displayed as violent, angry, aggressive, and sometimes criminal or supernatural. Thus, the enemies-to-lovers trope can often be found in the "dark romance" genre, which is an adult sub-genre of romance that pushes boundaries and blurs the line of consent, placing characters in situations where "Morality is optional, but pleasure is not" (Donaldson). Acts of physical domination often appear in dark romances and, much like the assault-adjacent fantasies in bodice-rippers of the past, women

readers are usually intended to interpret this male brutality as a manifestation of love rather than contempt (Kaler 95). When the collision of dark romance and fantasy occurs, we typically see an intertwining of masculinity and monstrosity, creating erotic and dangerous situations for so-called “pure” female leads, whose pursuers’ interests are both predatory and romantic. Bloodlust becomes symbolic for sexual desire, and supernatural ravaging becomes synonymous with sex. Male characters being “vampires or werewolves positions them ‘naturally’ as predators and their female lovers as prey,” but their non-humanness allows these gender roles to exist, as it excuses them from expectations of socially constructed human behaviours (Jowett 3).

While there is a large readership of dark romance, and an even larger readership of the entire romance genre, there is also a large and loud population of critics. For example, feminist critiques of *Twilight* emphasize Bella’s lack of autonomy, as her supernatural romantic interests frequently use their superior strength to physically control and stalk her, and the key to Bella and Edward’s relationship is the constant knowledge that he has the capacity to kill her (Durham 288). These criticisms claim that the blending of maleness and monstrosity highlights and excuses the characters’ brutality, therefore showing violence as “essential and inexorable” to their being and inherent to boyhood (Durham 289). By framing violence and rage as fundamentally intertwined with masculinity, their presence in a man’s love for a woman is therefore excused, allowing essentialist ideology to be normalized, accepted, and romanticized. Pairing this image of hegemonic masculinity with weak, docile, indecisive, and innocent portrayals of female characters (such as Bella Swan) further emphasizes the power imbalance between the two members of the romantic pair. A 2016 study measuring heterosexual women’s romantic beliefs, such as “endorsing the ideology of romanticism, placing high importance on romantic relationships, and believing jealousy is positive,” found that women possessing these beliefs also find controlling, mate-retention behaviours romantic (Papp et al. 104). This relationship between romantic beliefs and the risk of intimate partner violence is explained partially through Script Theory. This theory argues that human behaviours are predictable and follow observable patterns, therefore suggesting that women internalize the representation of heterosexual love in the context of jealousy, violence, and control (Papp et al. 99). This study states that media’s conflation of romance with control leads to internalized messages that consequently increase the risk of violence, highlighting the need for mainstream media to eliminate the romanticization of unhealthy relationships in order to amend these toxic heterosexual scripts (Papp et al. 107). According to a 2020 poll by Pew Research

Center, feminism and liberalism are steadily increasing among women, with 61% of American women identifying as feminists, especially those aged 18–29 (Barroso). This poll also found that differing social expectations for men and women are seen as one of the largest obstacles American culture still needs to tackle regarding gender equality (Horowitz and Igielnik). As liberal ideologies and awareness of gender inequality increase among women, this population naturally becomes more critical of misogyny in mainstream media, and therefore increasingly disapproving of and disturbed by it.

So, if a large population of women are feminists, how does a genre that often relies upon the suffering and domination of women manage to thrive in the market of women's literature? The key factor in addressing this question is the element of fantasy. The enjoyment of this genre relies upon the reader's awareness that the text is fiction and the author's ability to incorporate the non-consensual, dangerous elements into a "potent but non-explosive mix" that titillates the audience without causing distress (Kaler 95). While some argue that the eroticism of threats of danger in romance fiction is simply a sexual fantasy and form of escapism, others interpret it as a subversive reclamation of power. Lee argues that these novels can be read as fantasies of female empowerment by "reposition[ing] the conflict [...] from the quest of a love that conquers all to a struggle for power through knowledge of the other" (62). Cohn argues that the romantic or sexual relationship with the powerful male figure allows the woman to obtain his social and economic power, creating "a new equilibrium of male-female power" that is "wrenched free of the historical situations in which they were created" (4). Whether reading these romantic texts of female subordination as sexual liberation through the indulgence of fantasy or as a subversive form of claiming power, the presence of hegemonic masculinity and misogyny is undeniably present from a literal reading of the gender dynamics. Arguments in favour of and against this genre can both be true at once, as the "threat of sexual danger both heightens the eroticism" and evokes concerns "with the larger cultural messages transmitted by the romance novel and what these indicate about women's fantasies" (Lee 61). The contexts that make these fictional scenarios concerning are often also what make them erotic.

Romance, Fantasy, & Gender in *Fangirl*

The coexisting awareness of male violence and romantic fantasies of men's toxic love are visible in Rainbow Rowell's novel *Fangirl*. The novel follows Cath, an anxious college freshman and popular slash fanfiction writer online. Cath

exclusively writes love stories about characters Simon and Baz, two enemies from the fictional *Simon Snow* series who greatly resemble Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy from the *Harry Potter* franchise. Cath is enthralled with the idea of a slow-burn, enemies-to-lovers romance blossoming from Baz's constant bullying, manipulation, and endangerment of Simon; however, her perception of similar actions by men in her personal life is completely different. Rowell provides frequent examples of men threatening female characters, such as strangers in a bar sexually harassing Cath and her twin sister Wren (116). Rowell also describes Cath "press[ing] 911 on her phone, then [running] back to the dorm with her finger over the Call button" whenever she is alone at night (84). Later, Cath's writing partner and semi-crush Nick takes advantage of her conflict avoidance and desire to be liked in order to steal her work (210). He manipulates her by saying, "You're freaking me out here. Are you actually mad about this? Do you really think I'm stealing from you?" (210). When Cath notices a bruise on Wren's cheek, she worriedly asks if it was caused by Wren's boyfriend (343, 348). By including these instances of misogyny and fears of gendered violence, Rowell shows that Cath is easily victimized by men due to her passive and socially anxious nature, aware of this threat, and actively against the harmful behaviours of men, thus contrasting the toxic love stories she fantasizes and writes about.

By demonstrating Cath's awareness of misogynistic threats and her experiences as a victim of them, Rowell establishes that Cath's reality with men vastly differs to her fantasies about men. This is further exemplified through Cath's romance with Levi versus her depictions of her fictional crush Baz, who she jokes about being in a "secure" relationship with (16). Cath's crush on Baz is central to her storytelling, as her fanfictions are written in a third person limited point-of-view, giving readers insight into the mind of Simon and framing Baz as the object of romantic and sexual desire. While Cath describes Baz as "a long, dark shadow" (139) and as having eyes that are "sunken and shot with blood" (136) in her fanfiction, she describes Levi as constantly smiling, having a friendly face, and being "hundred-watt Levi" due to his bright, cheery nature (271). Levi's friendliness and enthusiasm are unconventionally plentiful, and Cath describes him as "[going] so far out of [his] way to be nice to people" (70). This is consistently proven through his actions, such as driving Cath home rather than letting her walk home alone at night, or carrying Cath's laundry because he wants to "make [women's] lives easier" (309). Meanwhile, Cath's fanfiction includes multiple scenes where Baz verbally abuses Simon, such as calling him "the most self-centered, insufferable prat ever to carry a wand" (136), publicly bullies him, and admits to trying to kill Simon by luring him towards a chimera (138). By

writing Cath's real-life boyfriend and her fanfiction's object of desire as opposites, Rowell affirms the claim that women's enjoyment of dark romance and toxic fictional relationships are an exercise in fantasy and escapism. However, Cath explicitly dislikes the cliché heroines of romances, which she expresses while writing a love story with Nick. She describes his protagonist as a "Mary Sue to the tenth power" and proclaims, "I have something against twenty-two-year-old women [...] stopping the car to wish on dandelions," and "It's a cliché. I swear to God, every surviving Volvo produced between 1970 and 1985 is being driven by quirky fictional girls" (198). Cath's acute awareness of the gendered politics in love stories is evident in her criticisms of Nick's cliché female character, yet she adores the romance between Baz and Simon, two characters who embody tropes and clichés: Baz is a brooding, predatory vampire while Simon is a loveable, misfortunate Chosen One. As a reader, it is difficult to imagine Cath writing this story in a heterosexual context that places a girl at the mercy of Baz's sadism-disguised crush. Cath's awareness of gendered violence, preference for kind-hearted men, and disliking of poorly written female leads proves that her love of the enemies-to-lovers slow-burn embodied by Simon and Baz is able to exist because of its male Queerness. By creating a romance between two male characters, Cath can explore and experience the anticipation and sensuality of aggression, obsession, and violence without consuming a narrative that misrepresents women and places them in danger at the hands of men.

Carry On's Erotic Aggression

Following the mass success of *Fangirl*, Rowell went on to write *Carry On*, which follows the enemies-to-lovers romance of Simon and Baz in the universe of the *Simon Snow* series from *Fangirl*. In the author's note of *Carry On*, Rowell explains, "When I finished [*Fangirl*], I was able to let go of Cath and her boyfriend, Levi, and their world. I felt like I was finished with their story... But I couldn't let go of Simon" (521). She states that the story is her (not Cath's) take on the character she "couldn't get out of [her] head", and that this novel (turned trilogy) was a way to give Simon and Baz "the story [she] felt [she] owed them" after only half-imagining them in *Fangirl* (522). Rowell's own interest in her toxic romantic Queer leads is further demonstration of gender politics in romance. Her heterosexual YA romance novels (e.g. *Eleanor and Park*) depict quirky outcasts finding safe spaces in their first loves—this male/female tenderness and safety juxtaposes *Carry On's* male/male erotic violence. *Carry On* follows Simon, the "Chosen One" in the World of Mages, and his roommate (and declared nemesis) Baz, a vampire/mage,

in their final year at Watford School of Magicks and at the end of a magical war. Smith and Moruzi state that the forbidden romances of Gothic young adult novels emphasize the protagonist's occupation of "the liminal space between childhood and adulthood demarcated by sexual experience" and place the heroine in conflict with the politics of their universe, "conservatively linking their sexual maturation with danger to themselves and others" (14), which is also true of Simon and Baz in *Carry On*. When looking specifically at the context of paranormal romance, in which the male half of the heterosexual pairing is usually the paranormal figure, the monster-figure's bloodlust is read as a sexual metaphor (Durham 284). As previously mentioned, intertwining bloodlust with erotic desire and the capacity to kill with forbidden love intrinsically links the concepts of romance and sexuality to violence. Alongside this blending of bloodlust and romance, a paranormal man's enhanced strength and untamed violence become manifestations of masculinity. This combination places fictional young women at the mercy of their predators for the sake of love. While the structure of these conventions remains applicable, their gendered implications are changed when in the context of male Queerness, as are the aforementioned conventions of dark romance. The eroticism of bloodlust is expressed by Baz, describing wanting to "Kiss him or bite him [...] Those were my fifth-year fantasies: kisses and blood and Snow ridding the world of me" (201). Although Baz possesses the traditional paranormal, masculine urge to physically attack and drink the blood of his romantic conquest, he is also aware that Simon "would put [him] out of [his] misery if [he] tried" to either bite or kiss him, showing an equality between the pair's power and strength, which is unusual for the tropes it mimics (201). Searching *Carry On* for the criticized features of the (heterosexual) romance genre and the fantasy/paranormal romance sub-genre shows a disruption of these genres' gendered conventions. The duo-masculine dynamic and Queer context of the novel negate feminist critiques regarding the presence of hetero-patriarchal abuse in romance, as the boys are equally capable of harm and retaliation.

The unaligned social power between romantic leads is still present within this pair, as Simon is an orphan from the non-magical world whereas Baz is a member of the Pitch family, "the nearest thing [the magical world] [has] to a royal family" (82). Although Baz has significantly more skill in wielding magic, Simon is the declared "Chosen One" and has the most power of any Mage in history. In the context of a magical universe that assesses one's power through the amount of magic they possess, the measure of this fantastical power is therefore comparable to the enhanced physical strength of other paranormal male leads. So, while men in dark romances are seen restraining women, carrying them without their

consent, and protecting them beyond their ability to do so for themselves, Simon and Baz are portrayed as equals in their power and the ability to harm one another. Although Simon frequently recounts the memories of Baz's attempts to kill him, Simon also states, "But I'm probably gonna have to kill [Baz] someday, and we both know it" while talking to his friend Penny (165). While the typical enemies-to-lovers dark romance plot or forbidden love in a paranormal romance usually place one character in an inferior position to their romantic counterpart, leading to empowerment through their eventual union, Simon and Baz are immediately presented as equals. The power struggle does not imply domination or submission, but rather an erotic mutual destruction between emotionally repressed teenagers. For example, Edward's intrusions into Bella's home to watch her sleep is often read as creepy and predatory stalking, despite the narrative's insistence that it is an act of romance (Meyer 293). Baz often watches Simon sleep and Simon frequently recalls secretly following Baz through the Catacombs every night (176). Both of these acts resemble those of Edward in *Twilight*, but they are not portrayed nor read as "creepy." Because Baz and Simon are both boys, they have access to one another's social and physical spaces without a sense of intrusion, whereas identical actions in a heterosexual romance would resemble women's fears of being followed and attacked by men in the dark, which Cath worries about throughout *Fangirl* when walking alone at night. The constant hateful and erotic obsession expressed by the boys is read as less threatening than it would be for a heterosexual pairing. During random, non-sexual moments, Baz will fantasize about acting upon his unrequited urges, saying, "I imagine myself spitting in his face. And then I imagine licking it off his cheek and kissing him", a statement that many women would consider objectifying and dehumanizing if it were targeted towards themselves or a female character (205). Although Rowell's Queer enemies-to-lovers story contains more pronounced unhealthy obsession and physical aggression than the typical paranormal romances that are criticized for their misogyny, Rowell simultaneously acknowledges the genre's misogynistic conventions. Agatha, Simon's girlfriend-turned-ex-girlfriend, struggles with her role as the Chosen One's girlfriend because she feels as though supporting the Greatest Mage is "the only place [she] can make any difference" (75). However, she wants to sidestep her "golden destiny" as a passive side character in her powerful boyfriend's prophesied greatness (199). Rowell writes a beautiful and passive love interest for the Chosen One and subverts her traditional role by depicting Agatha's discontent with the constant interference of her boyfriend's excessive power and his propensity for danger, as well as her desire to escape the magical world. This representation dismantles the misogyny that teenage girls in

paranormal romance, such as *Bella Swan*, often fall victim to. This further proves an awareness of gender roles within the genre and emphasizes the necessity of male Queerness for anti-misogynist readers and writers who crave the sensual hostility that often contradicts their advocacy for women. Women can relish the paranormal romance and strong, brooding men of their fantasies without the distraction of wondering the same questions Agatha asks (e.g., *what is this character's identity beyond her relationship with a man?*) or feeling disturbed by the sexualization of women's abuse in romance narratives.

Interpreting Violence and Queerness

Although this male/male reinterpretation of traditionally misogynistic tropes absolves writers and their readers of the (debated) reinforcement of women's submission to men, it does not entirely undo the harm of the genre's gender essentialism. While this practice removes women's suffering from the equation of hetero-patriarchal romance, the upholding of traditional masculinity can remain. Because the readership of fanfiction and YA romance (regardless of the characters' gender, sexual orientation, and identity) is girls and women, the romantic ideals portrayed in these women-less relationships must be considered through the lens of a female reader. It is worth noting that, although the discussed perspective frames men as romantic objects of women's desire, it does not exclude women readers who are not attracted to men. These messages can still be internalized and therefore influence one's manifestations of compulsory heterosexuality and romantic ideals. So, the Queer male romance narrative eliminates the Mary Sue archetype and the passivity of women, but, ultimately, the "female emotional longing for some old-fashioned strong-armed protection by powerful males" remains in women's portrayals of men in romance (Weisser 98). Whether or not women vicariously project their attraction into the Queer romance story or experience desire for the character(s), they are consuming narratives that promote the aforementioned gender essentialist ideology which links masculinity with violence. This ultimately justifies and romanticizes men's aggression, obsession, and dominance in romantic and sexual contexts. This is only a half-solution to the critiques of dark romance: fictional women are freed from toxic masculinity while real-life readers receive a double dose. This is not a criticism specific to Rowell's *Carry On*, nor an invalidation of its romance and readers. Instead, it is an exploration of the gendered behaviours present across genres, both in published novels and in fan works within internet communities similar to Cath's.

Women writers' representation of Queerness and male/male romance is a point of contention for many readers. It is argued that the practice of women writing male/male romance and erotica allows for the prioritization of women's sexual pleasure in a community by and for women, particularly in fandom spaces (Busse and Hellekson 77). This is illustrated in *Fangirl* when Cath meets a reader of her fanfiction who expresses love for Cath's story and complains that there are not enough Simon/Baz love scenes (202). The two then bond over their shared enjoyment of the gay couple despite outsiders' judgments of this interest (202). However, this centering of women's desires is often critiqued by gay men themselves, such as author Jamie Fessenden's statement that "MM Romance may be about gay men, but it isn't really ours." *Reddit* user @markthepage writes, "I am really bothered by how little published or marketed gay romance is actually #OwnVoices, and how much of it plays up yaoi fetishes," describing the frequent inauthenticity of mainstream Queer romance, the domination of women in the male/male romance market, and the fetishization of male Queerness. With the aforementioned increase in feminist ideology and liberal politics among women, feminist concerns are broadening into intersectional perspectives, no longer making (typically white, heterosexual) women's representation in media the only demographic worth considering. If readers reject characters such as *Twilight*'s Bella Swan for their inauthentic and male-centric representations of womanhood, further consideration must also be given to all romance characters who exist in a hetero-patriarchal society and marketplace. While these concerns and criticisms hold value and raise important questions, an absolutist approach that invalidates all male/male romance media by women is not an appropriate response. Rather, much like the discourse of dark romance, understanding both sides of the argument and applying them on a case-by-case basis is essential for promoting critical thinking and media literacy. For example, the domination of women in the male/male YA romance market reveals a comparative lack of Queer stories by men being published or promoted. Meanwhile, debates about this discrepancy expose the public's tendency to dismiss women's literature with broad generalizations, such as assuming that women's stories about Queer men are inherently fetishistic or inaccurate. It is necessary to establish that literature, like all artistic mediums, is a deeply personal experience which is individual to the readers' and writers' politics, identity, and circumstance.

Queer paranormal and horror stories are another popular genre with a history of gender and sexual politics. The Queer coding of monstrosity and antagonism is clear throughout the twentieth Century, such as the portrayal of Norman Bates in Hitchcock's *Psycho* and the comparisons between gay men and vampires during

the 1980s AIDS crisis, which described them both as contagions who transformed victims into the living dead through the mingling of blood (Benshoff 117). However, this subtextual representation of Queerness through monstrous otherness, which often coded violent acts as sexual perversion, has been transformed into its own genre of Queer Horror. This genre uses monstrosity as a metaphor for Queer experience (such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*) or explicitly displays the Queerness that has been culturally coded into monstrosity (such as the *Interview with the Vampire* television series). The past's discourse on Queerness in horror demonstrates how criticized genre conventions shift with the culture that consumes it. If we can now read monstrosity positively as a site for Queer identity exploration, then we should view the various discourses surrounding the romance genre (and its sub-genres) as both evidence of social progress and as a fluid space for transforming the genre and its readers' identities.

Conclusion

Queerness in fiction manifests in multiplicities. It can be monstrosity and otherness, an escape from patriarchal violence, an exploration of gender and sexuality, and/or simply a depiction of romance for audiences to enjoy. The ongoing tradition of literary criticism that questions the representation and authenticity of texts reflects a desire for diverse and compassionate stories. Meanwhile, the coexisting popularity of criticized sub-genres shows a simultaneous need to express our identities and desires in ways that do not always fit neatly into the categories created by these discourses. Romance novels are ultimately an artistic medium, and art is defined by the diverse lenses of politics and personal experiences through which it is created and consumed. Aiming for perfect acceptability, authenticity, and expression is an impossible feat: the definition is an ever-moving target that changes with our culture. A singular, universally accepted representation of love (regardless of orientation) or Queerness may never be found for the audiences of romance media. However, the continuing attempts to express love and Queerness, and the continuing critiques of these attempts, are themselves evidence of diversity. The conflict between creations and reactions leads to transformative adaptations of the genre (such as women using male Queerness to explore eroticism without the threat of misogyny, or authors expressing Queer experiences through monster allegories), and is therefore invaluable to a culture of readership, social acceptance, and self-expression. The only way to transform the romance genre is to continue writing

and reading in alignment with what we authentically feel and what we value in the world we inhabit. A genre cannot progress without a desire to continue improving the stories we write, read, and internalize. The changing trends in the romance genre are ultimately reactions to our social and political contexts, reflected in how we articulate the desire to love and be loved.

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