

**Allan, Jonathan A. *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance*. Pp. 176. London: Routledge, 2020. US\$ 31.96 (paper), £23.99 (paper). ISBN: 9780815374077.**

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In the Introduction to *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance*, Jonathan Allan asks, “What is the study of popular romance missing given how few scholars have studied these novels with the theoretical and methodological insights of masculinity studies?” Allan proposes to answer this question by wedding theory to genre, using some of the key insights of critical studies of men and masculinities (CSMM), to examine how men and masculinity are portrayed and function in the popular romance. The result is a brief, insightful, yet often frustrating monograph that poses many fascinating questions, but offers far fewer answers.

For readers unfamiliar with CSMM, Allan cites Jeff Hearn’s 2015 definition: the “historical, cultural, relational, materialist, deconstructive, anti-essential studies of men... the idea that the gender of men derives from a fixed, inner trait [or] core is antagonistic to CSMM; men are not to be essentialized or reified” (qtd. in Allan, 1). Furthermore, men and masculinities are socially constructed; what it means to be masculine differs across time/history, space/culture, within different societies/cultures, and over the course of an individual’s life. Drawing on these tenets, Allan proposes to intervene in the field of popular romance studies by switching its focus: rather than concentrate on women and femininity, as the majority of romance scholars have done in the past, he will analyze how men and masculinities are depicted and function in the genre.

In his opening chapter, “Studying the popular romance novel,” Allan explains his methodology, first by pointing to what he will *not* be doing. Taking issue with recent calls by senior romance scholars to future academics to be wary of making overly broad generalizations about the genre—generalizations which in the past have led to scholars and intellectuals to dismiss the genre in its entirety—Allan instead proposes to “critique... the now common critique that one has not read enough, not read widely enough” (19). One of Allan’s own articles was “called out,” as he terms it, for making overly broad claims without enough evidence to support them (as it happens, by this writer), and he recounts how “A part of me wished at the time that someone would just tell me exactly how many novels to study... So what is *enough*? And when is *enough* enough?” (19).

Frustrated by his inability to understand how many books are enough, Allan turns away from such calls altogether, asserting the value in identifying the general, the “typical or recurring images” of men and masculinity in popular romance (22). His claim that he is “arguing against the idea that ‘size matters,’ wherein the critic wields the size of their corpus like a phallic object” (19) is witty, yet simultaneously both inaccurate and chauvinistic. Critics such as Pamela Regis are not calling for scholars to read more and more romances in order to justify their generalizations, but instead to *narrow* the scope of their claims to what can be supported by their textual evidence. I can’t remember a critic ever referring to the size of their own corpus of primary texts as justification for their cautions against overgeneralization, never mind wield it like a punishing phallic object against other scholars with smaller bibliographies. In a genre as broad as “popular romance,” which in 2020 encompasses not only different subgenres (contemporary, fantasy, suspense, erotic, historical, religious/spiritual, etc.) but also different formats—the category romance upon which early feminist scholars focused, longer romances published by New York trade and mass-market publishers, as well as the groundswell of novellas, novels, and epic-length books put out by self-publishing authors—claiming that there is one overarching truth that applies to *all* popular romance is worth questioning even more today than it was when Pamela Regis first made her 2011 plea: “We owe it to the romance novel to recognize that our study texts are probably not representative of ‘the romance’ and to stop committing the logical fallacy known as hasty generalization” (qtd in Allan, 17).

Allan’s own corpus of primary texts (77 are listed in his bibliography) are largely category romances set in the present (i.e., contemporary romances), although he hypothesizes that his framework “can be applied to and modified for the study of other types of popular romance novels, ranging from the historical to the supernatural and paranormal” (32). As I’m not a big believer in the inherent feminism of the category romance, I’m pretty comfortable accepting many of his book’s claims—if I think “category romance” whenever he refers to “romance” or “popular romance.” Romance scholars more versed in category romance, though, may find even this narrowing unjustified.

Allan’s methodology is drawn from Northrop Frye’s archetypal criticism: “to study these novels in an archetypal fashion with a focus on the hero—since all romance novels will have a hero,”[1] in the hopes of showing that “the recognition of the archetypes within a genre is what matters, more than whether or not one has read the totality of that genre.” (23, 22). The one archetype that Allan identifies (in Chapter 2, “Desiring hegemonic masculinity”), is not all that different from what the earliest feminist critics of romance found: that of an idealized, or in more current critical parlance, hegemonic masculinity that functions to secure the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. Drawing on CSMM scholar Michael Kimmel, Allan defines hegemonic masculinity as that which repudiates the feminine; is measured by power, success, wealth, and status; keeps all emotion in check; and exudes an aura of manly daring and aggression (11-12). Although romance novels are primarily female-authored, Allan asserts that they still function as “purveyors of masculinity that is hegemonic” (30). Given Allan’s earlier definition of CSMM, which specifies that masculinity, even hegemonic masculinity, changes over time/space/culture, it is frustrating to be given a single definition of hegemonic masculinity and to have it applied to the entire genre of romance throughout his own book.

In his introduction, Allan suggested that his work “seeks to consider... whether or not pornography might be a good model through which to theorise and critique representations

of gender and sexuality in the popular romance novel” (4). He begins to draw on that model in Chapter 3, “Considering the money shot: orgasm and masculinity.” Allan narrows in on one specific way category romance novels construct hegemonic masculinity: through the female orgasm, which he compares to the “money shot” (male ejaculation) in pornography. It’s an important insight, recognizing how many category romance novels (with the exception of the “sweet,” sex-free ones) show “the hero... making the [female] orgasm happen” (43). Does this reflect a wider societal belief? Or is it a remnant from the more patriarchal, Old Skool type of romance, in which women were only allowed to experience pleasure if they were forced into it? Allan’s subsequent insight—that the male protagonist’s ability to bring a female partner to orgasm functions in such books as a “measure of the masculinity of the hero” (43)—is also intriguing, although one might argue that in more recent romance novels, it is less the ability to bring a woman to climax, and more the quality of that climax that proves the male lover a worthy partner. The chapter concludes by arguing that while the male protagonist’s declaration “I love you” may be *the* money shot of popular romance, the male-created female orgasms that come before it are necessary steps toward that final climactic declaration. When read through the lens of pornography, such scenes of a man bringing about female orgasm in category romance do seem to challenge pornography’s assumption that “masculinity is not just a corporeal essence, but is rather proven time and time again by actions” (51). But what does it mean that this challenge to pornography’s hegemonic masculinity simultaneously re-inscribes hegemonic masculinity in the popular romance? Allan doesn’t say.

In Chapter 4, Allan revisits male virginity, the topic of his 2011 article, asking “What can be said of the virgin hero?” Once again drawing upon Frye, Allan suggests that the romance novel male virgin is portrayed far differently than the comic *alazon* figure who serves as an object of ridicule in comedy and satire written by men. Instead, popular romance’s male virgin is the embodiment of “hybrid masculinity” that, while it may challenge some norms, nonetheless “maintain[s] the structure of institutional gender regimes to advantage men collectively over women and some men over other men” (quoting Tristan Bridges and C. J. Pascoe’s *Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinities*) (57). The virgin hero may appear to disrupt the norm of the sexually experienced romance hero, but it is a challenge without teeth; by the end of the romance in which he stars, the virgin hero always reclaims his status “as hegemonically masculine and [has] his idealized masculinity reaffirmed” (57). In the following two chapters, Allan deploys this concept of “hybrid masculinity” to assert that slash and male/male romances are less radical than they first may appear, constructing equally hegemonic masculinities.

Another concept that proves fruitful for Allan in these central chapters is that of “spectacular masculinity,” a term he takes from Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance*. Radway never explicitly defines this term, but uses it both to refer to a romance hero’s “phallic power” and to passages which present physical descriptions of the hero, emphasizing his “hard” male qualities. In the awkwardly titled Chapter 6, “Towards an anatomy of male/male popular romance novel,” Allan draws on both of these definitions, analyzing descriptions of male bodies in female-authored m/m romances that echo heterosexual category romances’ scenes of a female looking at her potential male lover’s physique. Such passages, he argues, always culminate with the penis: “the body is but a map towards the central treasure, the phallus that is central to masculinity” (94). Further, he insists that “the penis in these novels, I want to stress, is about masculinity and power. This

cannot be denied; the penis exists in these novels as the phallus was intended to” (94). Such a sentence immediately makes me *want* to deny it, which is not too much of a stretch, given that Allan provides little evidence from his primary texts, relying instead on theory from Lacan and Gallop to justify his claim.

Allan’s reading of another body part, the anus, proves more intriguing (unsurprisingly, given the topic of his previous book, *Reading from Behind: A Cultural Analysis of the Anus* [2016]). Unlike early theorizing about gay anal sex, which reads anal penetration as an abdication of male power, the male/male romance novel endows both the phallus and the anus with power. In male/male romance “there is no shame in the bottom” (96). Ironically, Allan claims this seemingly positive reading reinforces, rather than calls into question, the m/m romance’s construction of masculinity: “the male/male romance popular romance novel, while seemingly radical, ultimately still insists upon hegemonic concepts and representations of masculinity” (97). The chapter ends with a provocative question: “What would the romance novel look like without ‘spectacular masculinity?’” (98) While Allan asserts that he’s not claiming all male/male romance novels work to re-masculinise their protagonists, he closes off this very possibility with the comment that immediately follows his question: “It is almost impossible to conceive of the romance novel without spectacular masculinity.” (98) I wonder what Allan would think of m/m romances by Roan Parrish, or Talia Hibbert, or Amy Jo Cousins, or Joanna Chambers, or Alex Beecroft, or writers who identify as queer rather than het? Or whether he might consider that even if a book contains a physical description that reeks of “spectacular masculinity,” it still might call into question the superiority and power of patriarchy?

In the book’s final chapter, Allan shifts not just the subject, but also the methodology, of his analysis, asking “can pornography be read as a romance? And if so, what would this mean for reception and audience studies? ... How would reading pornography romantically affect how pornography is understood, represented, and critiqued?” (98) He attempts to answer this question not by searching for archetypes of hegemonic masculinity within pornography as a whole, but by close reading one pornographic film, *Tension* by Nubile Films (which seems to have been chosen both for its popularity and because it does not conform in many ways to previous critics’ identification of oppressive aspects in the genre). Allan doesn’t explain precisely what it means to “read pornography as a romance,” but through his analysis of this single film, he seems to wish to rescue pornography as a whole from those critics (many of them CSMM scholars) who would reject the entire genre out of hand as harmful and oppressive. This chapter thus ironically echoes Regis and other romance scholars who wish to rescue romance from its critics by calling for academics to avoid sweeping (and often dismissive) generalizations about the genre as a whole.

In his Conclusion, Allan asks, “Why is traditional masculinity pleasurable in fantasy?” In particular, in the fantasy that is the popular romance? Because “while we live in a culture that is increasingly concerned with toxic masculinity and that continually observes and argues that masculinity is in crisis, the popular romance novel still remains committed—married to?—traditional forms of masculinity” (111). Since Allan has argued from the beginning of his book that he is not interested in romance readers or authors, but only in romance texts, he can only offer the most speculative of answers: “the masculinities in popular romance, as hybrid masculinities, are just different enough to be acceptable to readers. The underlying structure has not changed. Popular romance novels are deeply invested in traditional masculinity” (111). Besides being frustratingly circular, this claim is

in desperate need of unpacking. Hybrid masculinities are “just different enough” from what? Hegemonic masculinities? But aren’t hybrid masculinities in the end hegemonic? Is the “underlying structure” referenced here the structure of the romance, or the patriarchal structure of society? What does it mean to a reader to “accept” the compromise of hybrid masculinity? Do some readers reject that compromise, preferring instead books that openly embrace hegemonic masculinity? Do other readers search for more radical versions of masculinity than can be found in the category romances Allan examines?

A brief epilogue, written as a response of sorts to Donald Trump’s 2016 election, asks “Are billionaire romances still popular?” But Allan is less interested in the “still” and more in the original, and continuing, “why,” bringing in Jan Cohn’s *Romance and the Erotics of Property* (1988) to explain: “the fantasy provided by popular romance exists to address the real social and economic conditions of women in the world of the present” (qtd in Allan, 121). In particular, Cohn argues that the hero “is well worth acquiring, because he carries within him all the power and authority of patriarchy. In the structures of romance there is no way for the heroine to acquire that power except by acquiring the hero” (qtd in Allan 121). Or, in other words, as Allan demonstrates through his case study of *A Virgin to Redeem the Billionaire* (Harlequin 2019), the form functions to “humanize the extraordinarily wealthy heroes who populate the world of romance while also limiting the value of those billions over the course of the novel—as if the novel declares that love can and will conquer all” (123).

I was excited when I first heard that Allan was going to publish a book about men and masculinities in romance, as I agree that the subject has received far too little scholarly attention. But now having read it, I’m not sure that *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance* provides any clear or compelling answer to the question with which Allan began: what are we missing by not applying the insights of CSMM to the popular romance? The book’s overarching argument—that most category romances “are deeply invested in traditional masculinity”—may be news to CSMM, but it doesn’t seem likely to move the critical conversation about the romance genre in any new or provocative directions.

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[1] A claim that erases lesbian romances, which have been a part of the genre in the United States since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.