

“And he absolutely fascinated me”: Masculinity and Virginity in Sherilee Gray’s *Breaking Him*

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Abstract: This article considers the figure of the male virgin in Sherilee Gray’s *Breaking Him*, an erotic contemporary romance novel. In particular, this article considers the ways in which the novel works to maintain the hero’s masculinity, while also considering how the novel challenges masculinity. While the virgin hero may appear to challenge ideas of masculinity, particularly the sexualized hero, this article shows the ways in which the hero is constructed as masculine despite his virginal status. To these ends, I draw on recent scholarship in popular romance studies, porn studies, and critical studies of men and masculinities. Additionally, this article advances the idea of the “case study” as a model for the study of popular romance fiction. The “case study” as a model allows for a deep engagement with the text, while also looking outward to its possible value in the study of other cases.

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Readers of popular romance fiction are well aware of the history and legacy of the virgin as a common character in the genre. Titles of novels often boldly declare that a book is about a virgin, such as, *The Timber Baron’s Virgin Bride* by Daphne Clair, or *The Prince’s Stolen Virgin* by Maisey Yates, or *The Virgin’s Shock Baby* by Heidi Rice. The virgin is almost essential to the genre. Likewise, if one were to review scholarship on popular romance, it would become apparent that scholars are equally interested and invested in the heroine’s virginity.[1] However, very little has been said about the virgin hero in the popular romance novel.[2] This article, therefore, considers the virgin male hero, especially in terms of gender,

sexuality, and desire. Simply put, why is the virgin hero interesting? Why has the virgin hero become something of a trope in recent popular romance fiction? And what does the virgin hero say about masculinity? Admittedly, these are large questions, but they are worthy of consideration precisely because the genre is a reflection of the culture in which it is written and consumed.

Masculinity, Romance, and Pornography

In this article, I focus on Sherilee Gray's *Breaking Him*, a short contemporary erotic romance novel, that, in many ways, explores and exposes the figure of the male virgin. I am making a deliberate choice to study one novel, rather than a range of novels. This novel becomes a "case study," recalling here that the case functions like a genre; as Lauren Berlant suggests, "the case hovers about the singular, the general, and the normative" (664). The advantage of the case study is that it "holds, confines, protects, and travels; it also categorizes and exemplifies. Cases can be used to teach and to train, for discussion and for proof" (Phillips xv). The case study as a model allows for a deep engagement with the text, while also looking outward to its possible value in the study of other cases. Indeed, for Phillips, the case study is something akin to "thick description," following Clifford Geertz, "descriptions both evocative and informative, rich in predictable and unpredictable context" (xiv). In particular, I argue that this novel, while introducing a male virgin, continues to draw on and privilege an idealized notion of masculinity—and in so doing, it speaks to the larger phenomenon of masculinity in the popular romance novel and society more generally. *Breaking Him*, while exploring masculinity, never calls into question the masculinity of the hero, even though he is a virgin when readers are first introduced to him.

In thinking about masculinity in this novel, I draw on John Mercer's recent book, *Gay Pornography: Representations of Masculinity and Sexuality*, particularly his notion of "saturated masculinity," which argues that "masculinities are a multitude and are represented, likewise, in a multitude of ways, and this is vividly evident in the types that populate the fantasy worlds of gay porn" (27). In some ways, the fantasy world of the popular romance novel does provide a "multitude" of heroes: for instance, his career could be a firefighter, a farmer, or a ruthless CEO; he could be a widower; he could be remarkably intelligent or illiterate. In romance, the heroes of romance reflect the realities of men in the world—they are from all walks of life. But in other and important ways, this multitude serves to mask a much more limited array of masculinities. Indeed, the heroes of romance largely remain masculine in the most traditional sense, thus, when we are introduced to a virgin hero, he still maintains his claim to masculinity.

I admit that popular romance novels and pornography have had historically something of a bad romance; however, given recent turns in both porn studies and popular romance studies, I think a turn, or a return, to pornography is advantageous. Certainly, Catherine M. Roach has lauded this possibility in her 2016 book *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*. Since romance novels have long been dismissed as being nothing more than "pornography for women" (Snitow), there is, I contend, much to be learned and gleaned from porn studies.

Pornography, like romance novels, suffers from an ongoing moralistic narrative about the virtues of its production. Such an approach obfuscates rather than complicates narratives under consideration. Making moral judgments stifles the possibility of debate and inquiry. If pornography is “bad,” we can never actually move to a discussion of what porn is doing, how it is consumed, how the marketplace might influence pornography, and so on. Much of the same, I think, can be said of how academics and common readers alike think about popular romance.[3] To my mind, scholars of popular romance need to more carefully engage with pornography, even if the field has had a tenuous and troubled relationship with pornography. Porn studies has developed a rich theoretical and methodological framework that can influence how we, as scholars of popular romance, think about popular romance novels, especially with respect to gender, sexuality, desire, and fantasy.

One such framework can be found in John Mercer’s *Gay Pornography*: a book which nicely works between and amongst disciplines to study the representations of masculinity and sexuality, which is precisely what I hope to do by focusing on the figure of the male virgin. Mercer argues that,

Gay porn provides representations of a range of masculinities: ‘passive’ or ‘active,’ hypertrophic, ephebic, even feminized, ‘hegemonic’ ideals or radical ‘outsider’ representations. We can observe masculinities that fundamentally challenge and undermine the very notion of hegemonic masculinity. (40)

I am not certain that we can claim the same about the popular romance novel; that is, although some romance novelists are exploring multiple masculinities and trying to push them in new directions, I think masculinity on the whole is still fairly static in popular romance novels (Allan, “Purity of His Maleness”), and this remains the case even when the sexualities of particular heroes may seem transgressive. Thus, for example, when we are introduced to the male virgin, though his sexuality is in some sense transgressive, he is still written to be read as masculine in a hegemonic, rather than “outsider” way.

Male Virginitv in Popular Romance

In her dissertation, Jodi McAlister observes that while “male virginitv has been virtually irrelevant, female virginitv has been crucial, imbued with a value virtually independent of the woman herself” (*Romancing the Virgin* 12). What would it mean, then, to study the “virtually irrelevant” and to think seriously about male virginitv, even if his body and sexuality have not been nearly as policed and regulated as the female virgin? This question is central to my work on the male virgin in popular romance novels, which has been ongoing and is, it would seem, being revised.

In my article, “Theorizing Male Virginitv in Popular Romance Novels,” I offered a structuralist reading of male virginitv. Following the work of Northrop Frye, I identified a “variety of archetypes,” which includes the sick virgin; the student virgin; the genius virgin; and the virgin hero as commodity. Each of these heroes is recognizable by a character trait or an historical part of his identity. What is striking, reading the article now, is how little I engaged with questions of masculinity. In a later study, I observed that “the romance novel

depends on and is committed to an ideology of masculinity” (“Purity of His Maleness” 27) and would consider “the glorification of the male body, maleness, masculinity, and male sexuality in romance novels.” What I want to pursue now is the relationship between this ideology of masculinity and the question of male virginity where my own work on romance began. How do we reconcile the hero as embodying “the purity of his maleness” (Radway 128) while still maintaining his sexual “purity”?

Truth be told, scholarship on male virginity is nascent, slow to grow. Indeed, if one were to look at Anke Bernau’s *Virgins: A Cultural History* (2007) and Hanne Blank’s *Virgins: The Untouched History* (2008), one would see the most “untouched” subject is the male virgin. In these histories, then, the male virgin becomes something of an almost a mythical creature insofar as he is either uninteresting to scholarship, or he simply doesn’t exist. In sociological research, by contrast, we have witnessed a growing interest in male virginity. Laura M. Carpenter’s *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences* (2005) is one of the few scholarly studies on virginity to consider actively the inclusion of men, as well as lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Carpenter’s model has been adopted by other scholars, for instance, Sandra L. Caron and Sarah P. Hinman’s article “‘I Took His V-Card’: An Exploratory Analysis of Student Stories Involving Male Virginity” (2013) draws on student’s stories—real and fictional—about male virginity loss and then works to understand the discourse behind these stories. In their study, “Masculinity and Virgin-Shaming Among College Men,” Fleming and Davis advanced the phenomenon of virgin-shaming, “whereby an individual is called out or made fun of for lacking sexual experience” (227).

While scholarly interest in male virginity remains nascent, popular culture is replete with male virgins (usually trying to lose their virginity). These narratives are important because they help make sense of how virginity is experienced, lost, and represented. Laura M. Carpenter has considered representations of “real” and “reel” virginites in the space of film (“Virginity Loss in Reel/Real Life”), which shares something in common with Celestino Deleyto’s work on the figure of the male virgin as *alazon* in the film, *The Forty-Year-Old Virgin*.^[4] This shaming quality of male virginity is what enables a film like *The Forty-Year-Old Virgin* to rely so heavily on humor.

Since Carpenter has studied “how young people use popular movies that included virginity loss to navigate their own experience” (Caron & Hinman 527), one could presume that other forms of media could equally affect and influence how people speak about their own experiences. While it is certainly true that “young males losing their virginity to a sexually experienced (non-virgin) female peer (versus an older woman) is a realm of sexual experience that is rarely represented in the media or examined in research studies,” (Caron & Hinman 537) the popular romance novel, including *Breaking Him*, provides an interesting archive in which to explore these narratives, because the genre is so deeply invested in questions of gender and sexuality.

The challenge, however, is that virginity for men is often a site of shame, which is why “it is not uncommon to see male characters lie about their virginity status in order to maintain their image of traditional masculinity” (Caron & Hinman 527). Curiously, what is interesting for our purposes is that the romance novel does not “hide” or “lie” about these instances, so much as highlights and explores male virginity as a site of interest and desirability to *readers*, even as the characters may “lie” about their virginal status, for instance, by way of omission (see, for example, Susan Napier’s contemporary romance novel, *Secret Admirer* [1992]). This duality suggests a complex relationship between male virginity

and the norms of what is known in scholarship as “hegemonic masculinity,” which must be understood both as something that these heroes aspire to, remaining orthodox in their gender performance, and as something that seems to appeal to romance readers as consumers.[5]

Virginity for men has often been understood as “the antithesis of what it is to be a man and its loss as a relief” (Humphreys 672). Likewise, Caron and Hinman found that “many young males described their virginity status as embarrassing and shameful,” leading to “feelings of being ‘less masculine’” (537). Indeed, even if we are witnessing some sociological change on this front, as some studies have suggested (Humphreys), the cultural framework still values virginity for women, while rejecting it for men. Men should lose their virginity as quickly as possible and become full, active, and participating sexual citizens. While men may not be ready to let go of the sexual scripts assigned to them, the popular romance novel does seem ready to explore the male virgin as a sexual subject worthy of desire.

In essence then, the popular romance novel presents an interesting challenge to ideas of hegemonic masculinity, as well as orthodox masculinity, precisely because it rewrites the narrative of virginity. Manjushree Palit and Katherine R. Allen have argued that “hegemonic masculinity promotes the continued prevalence of sexual double standards, where virginity is perceived as more valuable – and more identifiable – for females than males” (2). Given this claim, I am fascinated by what the popular romance is able to do in terms of male virginity, insofar as the novel never surrenders the ideal of masculinity, especially at a phenomenological and corporeal level, but at a sexual level is able to shift the narrative so that it accounts for the complexity of masculinity and sexuality—or at least of the hero’s becoming sexual.

The popular romance novel has long valued and privileged orthodox masculinity. Heroes in the romance novel are the pinnacle of masculinity, at least in bodily representation and sexuality, but also often in terms of capitalist success.[6] The virgin hero, thus, presents an interesting challenge to the ways in which romance novels think about men and masculinity, precisely because sexuality is not essential to their definitions of masculinity, or at least not yet. In many ways, the virgin hero embodies “saturated masculinity,” which involves “a cultural context in which a vortex of proliferating representations of masculinity have emerged that suggest the very notion of a ‘dominant’ or ‘hegemonic’ model of masculinity is problematised” (Mercer 42). The virgin hero is used as a way to challenge and explore the shifting nature of masculinity in our historical moment—that is, while we do not have a plethora of virgin heroes in romance, he is a way to challenge how we understand masculinity. Saturated masculinity does not do away with the standard markers of masculinity, but reimagines them. For Mercer, “idealized masculinity becomes a chimera, constantly reappropriated, repurposed, hybridised, adapted, mutated and subverted” (42). The virgin hero, then, is a mutation or subversion of the standard hero of romance who embodies “the purity of his maleness,” to borrow Janice Radway’s phrase (128). These novels that include a virgin hero, thus, introduce a hero who is every bit as masculine as his sexual counterparts, but, who has himself yet to become sexual. (What I mean by sexual here is in the sense of relational; one can, of course, be sexual without a partner; however, the interest in this article is situated within the space of the virgin hero losing his virginity.)

Reading Virginity in *Breaking Him*

To these ends, I turn now to *Breaking Him* by Sherilee Gray to explore the tension between masculinity and virginity. In the novel, readers are introduced almost immediately to the hero,

Folks around town called Elijah Hays a monster. They were intimidated, scared of him. Never to his face. You'd have to be a stupid son of a bitch to stay any of those crazy things to Eli—and crazier than they accused him of being. But I'd never seen him that way. Not once. I trust him to take care of my ranch just like my father. (Loc 35)

The language surrounding Elijah is hypermasculine; his masculinity is so strong that he is monstrous.[7] While she is on a date with another man who becomes violent, Elijah saves Abigail. Almost immediately, then, the relationship turns erotic. She asks him “you ever touched a woman here, Eli?” and the narrative reads, “He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, jaw tightening, then shook his head.” Abigail then surmises why he is a virgin, for, “the same reason everyone in this town kept their distance. Fear” (Loc 173)—that is, not his fear of having sex, but that people are afraid of him. She creates a reason for why he has remained a virgin, which is a fairly common way of thinking about men’s virginity. What is central to our concern here, however, is that his masculinity is never undercut, never in doubt. Quite the contrary: as the heroine explains, “the man was beautiful, *masculine on a whole new level*. And he absolutely fascinated me” (Chapter 1, my emphasis).

Elijah’s body, thus, becomes a symbol of his virility and masculinity, and perhaps nowhere is this more obvious than the descriptions of his penis. Over the course of the novel the penis is described as “that big cock,” “that enormous dick,” “the massive bulge at the front of his jeans,” “the long length” (Chapter 2, Loc. 269, 274, 289, 314); “bigger than any man I’ve seen,” “that impressive cock” (Chapter 3, Loc. 350, 440); “his quickly hardening cock,” “painfully hard cock” (Chapter 5, Loc 622, 628); “hot and hard and so damn thick,” “so damn big, stretching me to my limits,” “massive dick” (Chapter 6, Loc. 897, 900, 918); “the fat head of his cock,” “huge cock” (Chapter 7, Loc 1041, 1056); “heavy cock” (Chapter 9, Loc. 1242); “his cock was long and hard” (Chapter 10, Loc. 1526); “so damn hard and long and thick,” “giant cock,” “iron-hard cock” (Chapter 11, Loc. 1593, 1595, 1605); “cock enormous and slick with my arousal, so hard and thick” (Chapter 12, Loc. 1758); “his cock stood up between us, thick and veined and so damn hard” (Chapter 13, Loc. 1862). Indeed, the word cock appears eighty-eight times, the word dick appears a dozen times, almost all of which refer to the penis in one fashion or another.

In this particular novel, *Breaking Him*, the penis becomes a synecdoche of the man himself: that is, his penis, and not what he has or has not done with it, affirms his claims to masculinity. While it may well be tempting to dismiss these phrases as merely part of the genre, I contend they are doing much more than just titillating the reader. These phrases are participating in the construction of masculinity, and doing so by way of a body part that comes to symbolize the entire man, where an object becomes subject. To focus on the penis may seem trivial, but as Ann Snitow long ago noted romance novels “are permeated by phallic worship” (309). And, in many ways, Snitow’s opinion continues, at least among critics.

In a close reading of Joey Hill's erotic romance *Holding the Cards*, for example, Sarah S. G. Frantz notes that, "the restraint and display of his penis specifically demonstrate that this narrative climax – pun intended – is indeed and ultimately a meditation on and mediation in the construction of *masculinity* in particular" (55, emphasis in original).

As we know, the penis "stands in and up for the man" (Potts, "Essence of the Hard On" 85). That is, the penis has become a symbolic embodiment of the man himself – while he may not be having sex, his penis clearly indicates that he is not only able, but that he is interested in sex, insofar as the erection serves as proof of desire. I want to be careful here because not all erections are about desire, but in the space of the novel all of these erections are fundamentally sexual in nature. It is important here to recall, "while the penis and the man are synecdochically related, the penis and the phallus are metonymically married" (Potts, "Essence of the Hard On" 85).[8] And in this regard, there are several aspects of analysis worthy of considering, namely, the synecdoche of the phallus/man in the popular romance, the metonymic relationship between the penis and the man, and that both of these are tightly bound together. I do not believe it is an accident, then, that in this particular romance novel, and perhaps even more generally, that the phallus/penis is so central to conceptions of men and masculinity. As such, the penis, which becomes phallic, is doing a lot of work in a novel like *Breaking Him* – more than just titillating the reader.

While much critical work has been devoted to teasing out the difference between the phallus and the penis, particularly in Lacanian psychoanalysis, Lynn Segal has noted that,

The problem, of course, in admitting penile reference in conceptualizing the phallus is the changing condition of that particular bodily organ, between its transient firm and erect state and its more characteristic limp and flaccid (detumescent) one. It is this only temporarily erect penis, this change in the male genital, which Lacan (and Freud) dare not risk evoking as a type of phallic lack, shifting the signification instead on an image of female lack. (136)

While we know that this is the reality of the male body – that is, the vast majority of the time, the penis is "limp and flaccid" – much critical work is devoted to its "transient firm and erect state," and indeed, in the case of the romance novel, much creative work is devoted to the phallus. As Segal notes,

The phallus, in contrast, unaffected by time, context or desiring encounter has no such temporal changeability, symbolizing (in its veiled way) the fantasy of the fullness and generative power of the always-erect penis. (136-137)

The romance novel all too often invests in the phallic fantasy: the man, who is symbolized by the penis, becomes the phallus, the phallic signifier.[9] There is, in a sense, no way out of the phallic economy in the popular romance novel, such as *Breaking Him*, when the insistence upon the phallus remains strong. Thus, even while the novel itself challenges some conceptions of masculinity, namely, the hero as virgin, the novel itself ultimately relies on a hegemonic masculinity affirmed by the phallus to sustain itself.

Eli explains, "I may not have a fucked a woman before you, darlin', but that doesn't mean I'm not a man. It doesn't mean I'm not capable of looking after you the way you need to be looked after" (Loc. 1389). Such a declaration is almost the very definition of hegemonic

masculinity—that is, he once more proves his claims to masculinity. For Eli, his being a virginity is not what makes or does not make him a man. He is a man because he can “look after you the way you need to be looked after.” He is a protector and provider. Even if he hasn’t been sexual enough (yet), and has thus lacked (so far) that tell-tale marker of masculinity, he is certainly more than able to be the genteel patriarch, as he himself explains: “Abigail, I want to claim every part of you. Will you let me?” (Loc. 1551). Admittedly, he asks for consent, but the intention there is one of conquest and domination—with permission.

Annie Potts has argued that “the focus on hardness, strength, activity, and endurance in hegemonic masculine sexuality determines how a man measures his own ‘success in sex’; it centralizes sex around the penis and universalizes penises, constricting the possibilities of heterosex and limiting what counts as enjoyable male sexual experience” (“Essence of the Hard On” 89). This point is worth considering in the space of popular romance because while sex is essential to the genre, we must consider the ways in which that sex is organized and how pleasure is imagined, conceptualized, and conceived of. In this regard, *Breaking Him* is interesting because there is much emphasis on the pleasure of both partners, but much of it is oriented around and towards the phallus.

When the two do have sex, about halfway through the novel, she climaxes before he does, thus eradicating any fears of premature ejaculation, another common trope in narratives about male virginity. Indeed, premature ejaculation may well be one of the most common jokes about a man’s first time. One can think of the painfully real scene in Ian McEwan’s *On Chesil Beach*, in which the protagonist ejaculates too quickly and the relationship fails shortly thereafter. Unlike McEwan’s *On Chesil Beach*, in *Breaking Him*, Eli is able to control his penis to such a degree that there is no fear of premature ejaculation, which serves as further proof of his masculinity. Following the first time, Abigail asks, “Was it how you imagined?” to which Eli responds, “So much better” (Loc. 932). Virginity loss in the romance novel is always a fascinating moment because it allows for a reflection on the experience coupled with the realization of whether or not the experience lived up to the expectations. As Roland Barthes noted, “we recognize the first of that First Pleasure, which traverses a lifetime” (13). The first time is an important time, which is why it is so often put into words.

Over the course of the novel, the two lovers are able to explore sexuality, engaging in vaginal, oral, and anal sexualities. In exploring sexuality, the hero becomes more masculine: he becomes a warrior in the sexual arena. As the heroine explains, “He’d been growing more confident over these last couple of weeks, the things he said, did” (Loc. 1562). The novel frames sexuality, and more particularly virginity loss, as a kind of adventure, there is always something “new” to try, to experience, and to desire. Everything about this novel reaffirms and endorses a continued belief in and desire for traditional masculinities that embody the hegemonic ideal.

The final aspect of *Breaking Him* to which I should like to devote some attention involves condomless sex, otherwise known, especially in gay male scenes, as barebacking. Condoms are not used throughout the novel. Following their first sexual experience, we read:

I looked up, and Eli’s gaze was locked on his come sliding down my thighs. I was on the pill and I’d never had sex without a condom before. I probably should have told him that before I climbed onto his lap, but neither of us had been thinking clearly.

“It’s okay,” I said gently. “I’m on the pill. I’m clean. And since you’ve never...”
(Loc. 935)

The lack of condoms is an interesting narrative moment because the condom has been the subject of significant debate in popular romance studies. In this novel, there is no condom, the condom does not play a role. Even though the heroine recognizes potential risks, she notes she is on the pill, which will prevent pregnancy, and secondly, she is “clean.” He is not a risk factor, it would seem, since he has never had sex.

This scene stands in a curious relationship to the idea of “barebacking,” a topic which has been of interest to scholars of masculinity, as well as heterosexuality.[10] For Tim Dean, “barebacking represents a conscious, firm decision to forego condoms and, despite the dangers, unapologetically revel in the pleasure of doing it raw”: a definition which calls our attention to the *lack* of “conscious, firm” decision making in the novel’s version of the scene (1-2). That said, it is, in a way, hardly surprising that the popular romance novel would desire to “revel in the pleasure of doing it raw.”[11] The eschewing of condoms in a monogamous culture is a rite of passage in numerous relationships, as if it were a proof of commitment and fidelity to one another, and that context shadows the scene. Likewise, and perhaps even more than representing “unlimited intimacy,” to borrow Dean’s eloquent phrase, there is also an affirmation of traditional masculinity at play here, as well. As Dean has noted in his study of gay male barebacking that “rather than offering protection, condoms make a man and his masculinity vulnerable to doubt or derision” (52). In *Breaking Him*, the lack of condom use seems to signal an *invulnerability* to the hero’s masculinity, which is not to say that the presence or absence of condoms always means the same thing in the space of heterosexuality and of heterosexual popular romance.[12]

As noted throughout this article, the novel never challenges or allows for a critique of masculinity, that is, there is no point at which masculinity is discarded or abandoned. Instead, the hero’s masculinity is always affirmed by way of the penis/phallus, which the scenes of condomless sex extend metonymically to the hero’s ejaculate.

As Eli explains, “I want to fuck you again, Abigail. And I want to watch my come slide down your legs every time I do” (Loc. 940). This is both proof of the orgasm, as is so often the case of the money shot (Williams), but also of what sex means both for him and for her. They know the risks – pregnancy, disease – but they have sex without condoms because they feel utterly secure in one another, a physical security that signifies something more or other than the physical. As Abigail says, “I trusted him with my body completely. His size, his quiet nature, his past and fears, none of that could hide his beautiful soul. He’d never hurt me. Ever” (Loc. 1089). As critics of the romance novel we should be careful to pay attention to such dynamics in the sexual acts that unfold, novel by novel and even scene by scene. They are, as Foucault and others would note, symbolic and meaningful, not just for those involved, but also the readers consuming these novels.

Conclusion

While this article has focused on only one novel, *Breaking Him*, it does appear to me that there is much to be learned from one “case study,” as an example through which to think about representations of masculinity and men. John Forrester’s notion of “thinking in cases” might well prove to be an interesting model for the romance novel, especially since the “idea of the case appears to be closely linked with the very idea of the compilation of a dossier” (12). In essence, then, this is just one part of the dossier, one aspect of the field, but one that can be used and tested against other case studies, even as this novel could be part of dossiers on other topics (for example, of how pornography and digitally-mediated sexual education are represented within popular romance, since in *Breaking Him* the virgin hero has very successfully learned about anal sex by doing “some research on the computer” [Loc. 1565]).

In considering, *Breaking Him*, it would seem that masculinity remains fairly static in the romance novel – even when exploring masculinities – because the genre is so dependent upon an idea of masculinity that is oriented towards and through the phallus. If not his actual phallus, then his body becomes a phallic signifier that “marks the role of language in the ‘advent of desire’” (Segal 135). Romance novels are interesting precisely because they eroticize and think about the penis and the phallus; however, there are still many directions to consider. For instance, what about situations that recalibrate the phallus? Is there space for an impotent hero in romance? Surely there is, especially in a day such as ours, where men have access to Viagra and other pharmacological interventions. But, what about an infertile hero? A hero who prefers not to penetrate his partner? An asexual hero? Is it possible for popular romance to include as varied an archive of masculinities as Mercer observes in gay pornography: “‘passive’ or ‘active,’ hypertrophic, ephebic, even feminized,” and other “radical ‘outsider’ representations,” to the point where romance, too, could “fundamentally challenge and undermine the very notion of hegemonic masculinity” (40)? As I close this article, I am left with as many questions as I am with answers, which leaves me with seeking out another case study in which to test hypotheses about men, masculinities, and the popular romance novel.

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[1] This article is not studying female virginity in romance and as such does not account for the growing body of scholarship on female virginity in popular romance: e.g., the work of Jodi McAlister (“Between Pleasure and Pain”; *Romancing the Virgin*), Hsu-Ming Teo, and Amy Burge. While there may be much to be gleaned from a comparative study, I would contend that male virginity in romance functions differently – it is much more of a “novelty” than female virginity (see Allan & Santos) – and as such, I study it in isolation, leaving comparative studies (in both directions) for future investigations.

[2] For studies of male virginity in popular romance, see Allan, “Theorising the Monstrous”; Allan, “Theorizing Male Virginity”; and Allan & Santos.

[3] Interestingly, we could trace the history of mass-market pornography alongside the history of mass-market popular romance novels. Scholars of popular romance novels have long noted the importance of the 1972 publication of *The Flame and the Flower* by Kathleen E. Woodiwiss. Sarah Frantz Lyons and Eric Murphy Selinger explain “the discovery,

publication, and impact of *The Flame and the Flower* remains, in Eileen Fallon's words, 'the stuff of publishing legend'" (91). This novel, we are often reminded, was the moment when popular romance novels hit the "mainstream." 1972 was also the year that *Deep Throat* was released, which "usher[ed] in the so-called 'golden age of porn' beginning in the early 1970s" (Barnett 2). Pornography and popular romance, perhaps, are more tightly braided together than we might have previously acknowledged. But such a history can only ever be written if the two fields come together. In this way, we might add a third suggestion to Lyons and Selinger who posit that the blockbuster historical romance novels "need to be reread in a context that includes, yes, Brownmiller's *Against our Will*, but also the rest of the context that includes the varied and volatile media landscape that dealt with sex and women's lives" (104) and that "scholars need to think more, and more subtly, about the ways in which the blockbuster historical romances offered fictions of sexual awakening, both for characters and for their readers" (106). Their approach is reparative; however, it is, in a sense, incomplete. What is the role of pornography? After all, what can be said of the fact that two highly influential texts about sexuality appear in 1972?

[4] In the Glossary to *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye defines the alazon as "a deceiving or self-deceived character in fiction, normally an object of ridicule in comedy or satire, but often the hero of a tragedy. In comedy he most frequently takes the form of a *miles gloriosus* or a pedant" (22.331).

[5] One of the fundamental challenges of discussing "hegemonic masculinity" is that the term has become almost colloquial, like "toxic masculinity." That is, in its popularity it has lost its specificity, as noted by John Mercer (27-30), which is not about the individual, but rather about *structure*. As such, Eric Anderson proposes distinguishing between the terms. Orthodox masculinity, in Anderson's terms, "attempt[s] to approximate the hegemonic form of masculinity" (338), which in terms of American masculinity, most often aligns with David and Brannon's "four basic tenets" which include: "(1) no sissy stuff, (2) be a big wheel, (3), be a sturdy oak, and (4) give'em hell," as summarized by Anderson (338). These tenets have been central to how men perform and enact their masculinity. Anderson rightly points out that hegemonic masculinity is not a category, as in, "he is hegemonic masculinity," but rather it is "a social process of subordination and stratification" (340). That is, one cannot merely be or perform hegemonic masculinity, but rather one exists and performs within hegemonic masculinity, which is a system that reifies a particular mode of masculinity, and encourages men to strive for that hegemonic masculinity. Throughout this article, I speak of hegemonic masculinity when men are striving to embody the ideal, but they themselves are not hegemonic masculinity; when speaking about the singular subject, I prefer to think in terms of traditional or orthodox masculinities.

[6] For a larger discussion of this point, see Cohn.

[7] I have attached virginity to monstrosity in my readings of the *Twilight Saga*, thus establishing a fifth archetype of the virgin hero ("Theorising the Monstrous").

[8] Jeremy Hawthorne explains that "in traditional usage metonymy is a figure of speech in which the name of one item is given to another item associated by contiguity to it. Thus, 'the pen is mightier than the sword' works by means of metonymy: pen and sword stand for those activities with which they are closely associated. Under the heading of metonymy, [Roman] Jakobson includes synecdoche – that is, the use of a part to represent the whole: 'bloodshed' for war, for example" (240).

[9] This temporal discussion regarding the phallus is all the more interesting in the context of the popular romance novel that depends upon, in large parts, an atemporal or even anti-temporal conclusion of “happily ever after.” The happily ever after, perhaps, depends upon the phallus rather than the penis, because, as Susan Bordo has noted, “[the penis] evokes the temporal, not the eternal” (in Potts, “Essence of the Hard On” 89).

[10] Frank G. Karioris has written a fascinating chapter on heterosexual barebacking, masculinity, and the intersections of virality and virility.

[11] Various studies—scholarly and para-academic— have considered the role of condoms in popular romance novels, see, for example, Quilliam; Ménard & Cabrera; Horne.

[12] Julie Moody-Freeman discusses a counterexample of this in a study of Brenda Jackson’s work, in which the condom becomes a sign of the hero’s “protective impulse, which marks him [...] as a man who is worthy of the heroine’s love” (119).

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