

## Isn't It Iconic: Canonical Logics and the Romance Genre

Jodi McAlister

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In 2014, cultural commentator Noah Berlatsky wrote in *Salon* that

there wasn't even a provisional consensus on which books were the best or essential romance novels ... there was nothing that gave me a sense that certain books were clearly central, or respected, or worth reading.... There is, in short, no romance canon.

He linked this to the widespread cultural denigration of romance, arguing that

Canons are a way to solidify, or demonstrate, critical bona fides ... institutionally codifying the 'greatest' is an important way to assert that there is a 'greatest' — that there is some group of experts who considers these works in particular, and the genre or medium in general, to be capable of greatness.

Berlatsky's piece was widely criticised in the romance community, in particular because of the way he approached ideas of merit and some of the proposals he made for inclusion and exclusion. As one rebuttal to the article suggested, "what he is really bemoaning is **A Lack Of Canon Featuring Books That I Deem As 'Good'**" (Wendy, emphasis in original). However, his article made me think quite deeply about questions of canonicity and romance, and it is an issue I have been meditating on for some years now. At the time, I wrote out my thoughts in an article called 'Boom Goes the Canon'. This was published on the website for the now-defunct digital romance publisher Momentum Moonlight and is no longer online. I will, then, reproduce some of those thoughts here, which I hope I have refined somewhat in the ensuing years.

Canons are problematic. There is no getting around that. This piece will discuss numerous ways in which canons are problematic: for example, they are inherently binaristic, usually reinforce hegemonic and institutional privilege, and are often not compatible with how a literary field operates and/or how people relate to the texts. But they also have an undeniable appeal: practicality. I am not the first romance scholar to have a student ask me what to read, where to start. Having some kind of list to point to would doubtlessly be extremely handy for higher-degree research students and for librarians developing collections, among many others. Romance is a genre that is infamously enormous. As Diane Elam argues, one of its generic promises is its inexhaustibility: “[t]here will always be room for another romance, since a reader can never read, a writer can never write, too many” (1). When faced with such a vast, potentially infinite literary field, having a list or a map or a guidebook would be so *convenient*.

But while marriages of convenience almost always work out in the romance genre, I am not convinced we should allow ourselves to be seduced by the convenience of canonicity. I remain concerned about it as a concept and have doubts about whether applying it to romance fiction would ultimately be productive. There are several reasons for this, but I will outline two of the key ones below.

## **#1: Canon as colonial project**

It is difficult to point to the moment “the canon” crystallised as a concept (perhaps the Council of Nicaea, almost certainly even earlier). However, if we frame this in terms of literary studies, then notions of the literary canon, particularly insofar as it informs curricula, arose in large part from the ways in which English was taught in colonial India. Gauri Viswanathan discusses this at length in *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, arguing that “the Eurocentric literary curriculum of the nineteenth century was less a statement of the superiority of the Western tradition than a vital, active instrument of Western hegemony in concert with commercial expansionism and military action” (166-67).

If, as Berlatsky contended, the logics of canonicity are tied to notions of value and merit, then we cannot ignore the colonial potential in establishing and declaring a canon and the ways in which it could reinforce existing power structures and accrue to them even more capital than they already possess. Any method for determining a canon, especially a quantitative or algorithmic method, would need to be seriously questioned. Using awards as a measure of canonicity, for example, would have clear and obvious problems, given the history of such literary institutions excluding authors of colour (see, for instance, the #RitasoWhite scandal).[1] Similarly, due to the way capital is concentrated in the global publishing industry, a canon developed this way would almost certainly disproportionately privilege North America at the expense of other Anglophone territories, to say nothing of the rest of the world. Indeed, this raises important methodological questions: Would any proposed romance canon be solely Anglophone? If not, how would that be accounted for?

John Guillory argues that “canonical and noncanonical works are by definition mutually exclusive; they confront each other in an internally divided curriculum in the same way that hegemonic culture confronts nonhegemonic subcultures in the larger social

order” (20). In other words, canonicity is, by its nature, divisive and binaristic: it creates a formal and institutional division between those that are in and those that are out, relegating an enormous amount of material to what Franco Moretti has called the “slaughterhouse of literature” (207). A canon might have useful practical applications for curricula and collections, but if the canon—however accidentally—replicates colonial practices, then, as Viswanathan argues, it has the potential to act as an instrument of hegemonic and/or imperial ideologies by centring whiteness and the West.

## **#2: The logics of category romance vs the logics of canon**

All this said, it might be possible to generate a list of canonical single-title romance, even if that list was fraught with problems. However, I am not convinced a notion of canon can adequately account for romance’s other half—category romance—due to a fundamental mismatch in logics.

Lisa Fletcher, Kurt Temple, Kathleen Williams, and I explored the publishing logic of Harlequin Mills & Boon (who are effectively synonymous with category romance) in a recent article, where we contended that the publishing practices of the company

suggest that category romance is not subject to the same logics of canonicity or archivability as other types of novels. This is reflected in the material form of the books. A paperback Mills & Boon [...] is not just a smaller and slimmer object than a literary novel [...] (while length can vary line to line, category romance novels are typically approximately 55,000 words long). It is also saturated with the publisher’s promise that this book will deliver an equivalent experience to others in the line. The promise of a literary novel [...] is exceptionality, which is communicated through paratextual markers such as author endorsements, prize nominations, and distinctively sparse cover design; whereas the promise of a Mills & Boon novel [...], with its template cover and prioritization of publisher and line over author and title, is typicality. (5-6)

As we found in this article, individual readers often do apply ideas of exceptionality to category romance, carefully curating their collections. However, if we read with the grain of the publishing practices of category romance, their inherent logics do not marry well with the logics of canonicity.[2] And yet any student of the genre cannot ignore category romance. How, then, should category romance be incorporated into a curriculum or a collection, if a romance canon is being used as a base?

### **An alternative model?**

In the article I wrote in response to Berlatsky’s a few years ago, I proposed a slightly different approach to canonicity: iconicity. I would like to flag here that this not an idea I have put any considerable time, effort, and rigour into developing, given my concerns with

concepts of canonicity. However, as mentioned above, I understand the appeal of canons on practical grounds, and this linguistic shift might offer some ways forward for scholars looking to approach canonicity from this perspective.

This is an approach that takes into account the remark from Beverly Jenkins noted by Eric Selinger in his introduction to this forum: “There are classics. I mean, we all know that there are classics.” This is tied to questions like “What came first?” and “What were the ground-breaking books?” which might form the basis, as Selinger argues, of a historical canon. What would happen, though, if instead of framing this in terms of canonicity, we framed it in terms of iconicity? The notion of canon is a loaded one, as can be seen by the ways in which it has been weaponised as a hegemonic tool. It comes weighted with baggage about value and timelessness—what we might describe as universal value and relevance. If we shift our language to the less loaded “iconic”, however, then we can remove some of this baggage and instead identify texts and authors—and, perhaps, in the case of category romance, lines—which have affected the trajectory of romance in important ways.

This, for instance, opens the door for the inclusion of texts such as EM Hull’s *The Sheik* (1919) and Kathleen E. Woodiwiss’ *The Flame and the Flower* (1972). Both made major contributions to the genre—without them, popular romance would probably not exist in the same way—but they are virtually unreadable now, making a location of them in a canon troubling, to say the least. Positioning them as “iconic” removes the canonical baggage of value and universality. This is a historicist approach that recognises both the importance of these texts but also that by the standards of the romance industry today, they are highly problematic and offensive.

This approach also allows for the recognition of authors and texts who are not or have not yet been formally recognised by some of the institutional forces that typically govern canons. For instance, the work of Mina V. Esguerra might not be captured by an algorithmic approach to canon development, but I would certainly argue for her inclusion in a list governed by iconicity, given her role in writing and shaping English-language romance novels in the Philippines through #RomanceClass. Similarly, as an Australian, I would argue strongly for the inclusion of Rachael Treasure’s *Jillaroo* (2002) in any list of iconic romance novels, as it is a foundational text for rural romance; however, I am not sure that this fact would be identified by any kind of quantitative approach, particularly one that centres the dominant North American publishing industry, as this subgenre has not cut through in that marketplace.

Likewise, a framing based in iconicity would allow for the recognition of aspects of category romance that cannot be captured by canon, with its reliance on the logics of exceptionality. For example, the history of Harlequin Presents is formative to the modern romance industry, and while arguing for the inclusion of a single Presents novel as canonical would be difficult, arguing for authors in the line (or the whole line) as iconic is much easier.

The downside of this work is that it is necessarily qualitative and labour-intensive. Quantitative proposals necessarily need to rely on certain institutions, and, as discussed above, the logics of those institutions can either be problematic or incompatible with the genre. And even the notion of a collection of “iconic” romance texts and authors has its problems. It does not mitigate the inherent binarism of canonicity noted by Guillory, for instance. Moreover, if a central list was to be created for practical purposes, some very serious questions about who was creating that list would need to be asked.

In the article I wrote for *Momentum Moonlight* several years ago, I argued that

I think what commentators like Berlatsky are ultimately after is a Romance 101 list: a list of texts that you can read and then automatically be considered well-read and thus an authority on romance. [...]

But the truth is this: there is no cheat sheet for romance. There are no shortcuts. There's no list of agreed-upon texts that all Well Read Romance Readers know and love, no real binary between Good Books and The Rest.

While I've refined several of the ideas I had in that piece, this is one I still stand behind. While I understand the practical reasons behind establishing a canon, I'm not convinced that such an exercise is a useful exercise for romance fiction. In 1981, Jane Marcus said that "[s]uccessful plots have often had gunpowder in them. Feminist critics have gone so far as to take treason to the canon as our text." In many ways, romance fiction resists canonical logic: so while we can certainly identify iconic texts, it is my view we need to seriously question the binarism and prescriptivism inherent in an attempt to identify a canon.

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[1] If the recent implosion of the Romance Writers of America has shown us anything, it is that when power, institutions, and whiteness collide, the results are regularly disastrous.

[2] This can also be seen in the work of Vassiliki Veros, who has written extensively about the problematic ways in which Australian libraries approach their category romance collections.

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