Journal of Popular Romance Studies
published in partnership with the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance

Saying “I Don’t”: Queer Romance in the Post–Marriage Equality World

Bridget Kies

Published online: March 2024
http://www.jprstudies.org

Abstract: This article investigates contemporary LGBTQ romance in which the central couple has a queered betrothal that results in nonmarriage. Drawing on examinations of romance plot tropes, including Regis’s eight essential elements and Roach’s claim that the ending to romance is key, as well as queer theory, I demonstrate how the nonproposal offers a queering of romance that differs from homonormative same-sex romance. In the case study of the feature film *Bros*, this is achieved by one character asking the other to date and reassess in a few months, an anti-proposal that follows the conventions of a traditional marriage proposal. In the novel *Husband Material*, the central couple runs away from their own wedding because it does not feel like the right expression of their love. Unlike traditional romance narrative patterns that reaffirm social conventions and normative values, these queered anti-betrothals allow for more individualistic expressions that still offer the reader or viewer an emotionally satisfying romance ending.

About the Author: Bridget Kies is assistant professor of film studies and production at Oakland University, where she researches LGBTQ media. Her research has been published in the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *VIEW*, *Feminist Media Histories*, *Science Fiction Film and Television*, and *Television & New Media*. She is coeditor of *Fandom, the Next Generation* (University of Iowa Press, 2022).

Keywords: betrothal, homonormativity, LGBTQ, proposal, queer, rom-com

In the dramatic climax to the movie *Bros* (2022), Bobby (Billy Eichner) rushes off the stage at a gala he is hosting for the opening of the LGBTQ+ History Museum. He runs to Aaron (Luke Macfarlane), from whom he’s been broken up for several months. They kiss and say, “I love you.” Then Bobby searches the crowd for a ring to borrow. He drops to one knee, and the crowd gasps in anticipation of a proposal. Instead, Bobby says to Aaron, “Will you date me for three months, and then we can reassess?”

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

This delightfully queered proposal epitomizes a trend in recent American and British print and screen romance in which more fictional LGBTQ couples are saying, "I don't." Such scenes, in which couples choose not to become engaged or get married, follow the common narrative patterns and visual tropes of marriage proposal scenes in straight romances. The couple's choice not to legally marry becomes its own form of commitment to the unique terms of their relationship. Marriage equality laws and increasingly positive cultural attitudes toward cisnormative gay and lesbian couples have left fictional characters free from the need to fight for social recognition and legal protection. This, in addition to an increase in production and consumption of LGBTQ romance, has allowed for more possible storylines, including the nonproposal ending. Using examples of recent m/m or gay screen and print romance, this essay demonstrates how the nonproposal trend manages to both reify the romance plot and twist it to queer ends. In the examples presented here, characters are free to take a path avoiding legal marriage because it cannot fully contain the queer spirit of their relationships, one in which a happy for now (HFN) is still granted but only on grounds that push against social and literary conventions.

The Betrothal and Normativity

Although definitions of romance vary, the eight essential elements from Pamela Regis's *A Natural History of Romance* remain a useful paradigm. The last element, betrothal, is imperative, as Regis's succinct definition of a romance novel is "a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines" (Regis, *A Natural History* 19). Regis has since updated the definition to change "heroine" to "protagonist" to account for more gender-inclusive romance (Regis, "What Do Critics" para. 8). Still, the ending dictates the categorization: if the couple is not together, if their relationship is not solidified, it is not a romance novel. This definition is useful for genre classification—for instance, to distinguish the romance novel from romantic suspense or other genres with romantic elements—but it cannot be considered wholly encompassing of romance across popular culture, in that Regis is specifically referring to print literature.

Rom-coms—that is, romantic comedy films and TV movies—have similar narrative patterns in which the couple must overcome both external and internal obstacles so that, at the conclusion, they can fully express and act on their love for one another. As Karen Bowdre describes it, the rom-com's basic plot is: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl. Bowdre argues that this structure "has been a staple of Hollywood film from the time the genre first made its mark in the mid-1930s" (109). Claire Mortimer describes the rom-com as having "a narrative that centers on the progress of the relationship, and, being a comedy, [as] resulting in a happy ending" (4). Like Regis and the romance novel, Kyle Stevens sees the predictable ending of the rom-com as foundational to its appeal: the "romantic comedy says 'oh you *do* know; you've always known'" how it will end (44).

Rom-coms also have their own conventions, owing to different industry and audience concerns. The film industry's self-censorship and regulation have historically impacted how sex is portrayed on screen, if at all. Some narrative tropes also vary between print and screen media. The meet-cute, the moment when the couple first encounters each other on comedic terms, is a hallmark of screen rom-coms. Mortimer describes it as "prophetic in that it can

often suggest the nature of the couple's relationship" (6). Such a madcap first meeting may not be present in print romance.

Common across print and screen romances, however, are two key facets that affect the examples of nonproposals presented here. First, romance, like all elements of culture, comments upon the social values of its context while also, at various times, critiquing and challenging those values. Kathleen Therrien describes the "contesting ideologies" (164) that shape romance to be "both resistant and recuperative" (165). Sarah Frantz and Eric Selinger see the "self-contradictory values, conventions, themes, and audiences of the genre" as part of its pleasure. (15). Even the earliest studies of romance readers, such as Janice Radway's, noted how they responded to the "complicated and contradictory ways" romance allowed them to think about heterosexual love and marriage (221). LGBTQ nonproposal endings exist in this contradictory space built into romance and its consumption.

The second common thread between print and screen romances is the happy-for-now or happily-ever-after ending, which Catherine Roach calls "crucial" to romance (165). The Romance Writers of America similarly defines romance as having an "emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending" (RWA.org). Roach describes this ending as a moment when the central characters "come to an understanding of their love for each other and commit their lives to that love" (165). The ultimate legal expression of committed partnership in Western societies is marriage. Regis correlates romance's wedding conclusion with genre studies of classical comedy. In his 1824 epic poem *Don Juan*, Lord Byron writes, "All tragedies are finish'd by a death, / All comedies are ended by a marriage" (canto 3, stanza 9). In comedy, the wedding as happy ending resolves the disorder in society (Regis, "What Do Critics," para. 27). Rom-coms have changed over time in response to cultural shifts, but they essentially remain "a genre which usually ends with a wedding and does not question what happens after the vows have been spoken and the cake has been eaten" (Kaklamanidou 84).

The TV movie series *The Wedding Veil* (Hallmark, 2022–23) is one recent example of rom-coms with traditional wedding endings for heterosexual couples. Each of first three movies ends with a couple acknowledging their love (Regis's declaration) and concludes by jumping forward a year in time to show the couple's wedding (betrothal). The titular veil has magical properties: while holding it, a single woman will meet her true love. The final wedding scenes of the first three movies depict each heroine taking her turn wearing the veil at her own wedding. The fourth, fifth, and sixth movies of the series show the wedding of a secondary couple, who have also been brought together by the veil. In each movie, the wedding provides a satisfactory resolution to the romance plot as well as the work- and family-related conflicts the heroine has faced.

In LGBTQ romance prior to the 2010s, wedding endings were not common. Although romance offers a fantasy version of love, the complicated legal realities for same-sex couples no doubt influenced the resolution to these narratives in print and on screen. Kyle Stevens observes how gay male best friend characters in 1990s rom-coms like *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) serve as an "agent of heterosexual union" who is granted no love life of his own (144). The gay best friend "teaches precisely the subject from which he is excluded" at the same time that marriage equality was being "vociferously debated" and "widely attended to" in mainstream American media (Stevens 145; 132). As same-sex marriage became legal in certain U.S. states, some romance explored the complexities of the wedding ending. In Kaje Harper's novel *Home Work* (2012), Minnesota residents Mac and Tony have to travel to Iowa,

where same-sex marriage had been legal since 2009. Minnesota would not achieve marriage equality until 2013.

Wedding endings appear to be decreasing across romance in favor of HFN endings, perhaps in reflection of marital statistics in real life. The number of married adults in the U.S. has been steadily declining since 1990, while the number of unpartnered adults from ages eighteen to fifty-four increased nearly 10 percent in the same period of time (Fry and Parker). With marriage equality achieved in the 2010s in the U.S. and U.K., some American and British LGBTQ romances end with an engagement or wedding. Others conclude with a happy for now that is indistinguishable from the HFN that ends heterosexual romances.

If a wedding joins the community together in celebration, then a proposal is a more intimate act, with the couple declaring to each other their willingness to commit. In her study of engagement rings in print romance, Laura Vivanco finds that they may "symbolize the sexual attraction between [the couple], commemorate their triumph over 'the barrier,' recall a moment of particular importance to their relationship, or reflect aspects of the personality and appearance of the heroine, the hero, or both" (105). Vivanco notes that this "complicated, personalized" symbolism can be carried by engagement rings because they have "far greater scope for choice and individuality" than wedding bands (104). The proposal, too, should be representative of the couple, though certain elements are expected: the hero down on one knee, a ring proffered, a question asked and answered with "yes." But even the variations between different couples' proposals reiterate a normative pattern, of which "uniqueness" is an expected component.

Though contemporary HFN endings upset the tradition of the wedding as the betrothal that concludes a romance, these endings still grant the reader or viewer the "emotionally satisfying" resolution expected of romance. On Hallmark, for example, the couple often faces barriers until the final five minutes of the movie, leaving them little time to do much more than finally confess their love and kiss before the credits roll and the next movie begins. An epilogue or coda, as in the case of *The Wedding Veil* movies, may grant enough additional narrative time for the couple to become engaged or celebrate a wedding, though not always. At other times, the epilogue might advance the relationship without (yet) resulting in a betrothal. In Jasmine Guillory's novel *By the Book* (2022), a contemporary retelling of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), the epilogue focuses on the publication of hero Beau's memoir, which has been achieved with support from the heroine, Izzy, who is his editor. The professional and personal become intimately entangled for this couple, and the book concludes with them celebrating Beau's publication over champagne as they profess their love. Despite the year gap between the final chapter and the epilogue, only enough time has passed for the book to be published and not enough for their relationship to have progressed beyond the declaration to a potential marriage proposal or wedding.

As the declaration of love increasingly comes to serve as the final element of contemporary romance, "I love you" serves as a contemporary form of betrothal that offers a reader or viewer emotional closure to the conflict that has kept the lovers apart. Just as a wedding in classical comedy is intended to bring order to a society out of joint, "I love you" reinforces the normative value that everyone should aspire to find a long-term partner. Lisa Fletcher sees "I love you" as a speech act by characters that is "the key to the plotting" of romance novels and indicative of the genre's conflation of heterosexuality with universality (15). A declaration ending between same-sex partners remedies past social homophobia by giving LGBTQ characters the same opportunity to find and express love, but it does so by

bringing them into a normative existence their heterosexual friends and family can understand and therefore celebrate.

Lisa Duggan terms this enacting of dominant social values among LGBTQ people "homonormativity," a form of neoliberal sexual politics that "does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions but upholds and sustains them" (179). Marriage, or at least monogamous partnership, is seen as a good and logical thing to do in adulthood, often followed by having children. Within romance, normativity refers not only to the values embodied by the central couple's romance but also to how that romance is structured. In previous work, I described this as the "normative trajectory" of some LGBTQ television romance: the couple meets, falls in love, and, after overcoming (social and political obstacles), gets married and has children (2). Likewise, Jonathan Allan finds that the male/male romance novel, "while seemingly radical, ultimately insists upon hegemonic concepts" (97). For Marion Ross, studying Black gay romance novels, normativity is not exclusive to sexuality but also extends to race and class. Ross argues that there is often a "homonormal formula of gay love as identical to and equal with white middle-class heterosexual procreation" (676–677). Ross's findings are in line with Roderick Ferguson's argument that the "racializing logic of liberal capitalism" equates normativity not only with heterosexuality but with whiteness as well, and that this model of white, cis, normative sexuality constitutes a model of good citizenship (57).

An example that articulates a homonormative HFN ending in which the particulars of sexuality and race are effaced is *Single All the Way* (2021), Netflix's first Christmas movie with a gay romance. The movie features the usual tropes of a holiday rom-com: an annual Christmas pageant in a small town, montages of festive activities spliced between scenes that advance the romance, and a fake dating plot between two characters who don't want to be alone for the holidays. At the movie's conclusion, Peter (Michael Urie), who is white, and Nick (Philemon Chambers), the fake boyfriend for whom Peter has fallen, who is Black, announce their plans to move to the small town together to the delight of Peter's family. This ending emulates the ending of countless other holiday rom-coms without engaging much in what it might mean for them to be a (and presumably the only) gay, multiracial couple in the small town. That Peter and Nick's experiences might be different from the experiences of the predominantly white, cis, straight townspeople is largely ignored.

Queerness as Anti-Normativity

Single All the Way follows in the footsteps of other popular media that makes homosexuality palatable to mainstream audiences by "situating it within safe and familiar popular culture conventions" (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 89). "Safe" and "familiar" are terms diametrically opposed to political queerness. The term "queer" has had varied meanings across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: a slur, a reclaimed term used within the community, an identity denoting something different from normativity, a verb meaning looking at something through a non-heterosexual lens, or a catchall term that is simpler than "LGBTQIA+." In the 1990s, queer theory as academic scholarship emerged in universities, inspired by notions of sexuality and sexual identities as socially constructed. The question of what marriage might signify preoccupied queer theorists and remains a

source of interest in the post–marriage equality moment. Andrew Sullivan, for instance, argued in 1996 that the "intrinsically procreative" function of marriage has long been abandoned in most Western nations; heterosexual couples who wish to marry are not required to pledge their commitment to having children (179). Seeing marriage as an "unqualified good for homosexuals," Sullivan imagines that once same-sex marriage is legalized, it will "bring the essence of gay life—a gay couple—into the heart of the traditional family," and parents will have less trouble accepting their gay children, whose lives will follow their parents' (179–180). In narratives like *Single All the Way*, this is indeed the case: even the difference in the characters' racial identities is rendered innocuous and invisible. Because the characters' romance mirrors their heterosexual family's (and society's), who could have a problem with it?

Writing in response to Sullivan in 1999, Michael Warner is critical of the LGBTQ rights movement's turn toward normalcy, which he calls a form of "social suicide" (59). Warner finds Sullivan's claim that marriage will solve all problems to be flawed, arguing that such a claim erases important differences between queer people and straight people, between people of different races and social classes, and—as recent anti-trans legislation has borne out—dangerously reinforces hierarchies of gender and identity. Warner advocates instead "a frank embrace of queer sex in all its apparent indignity, together with a frank challenge to the damaging hierarchies of respectability" (74). This kind of queerness, though, is at odds with romance's prescriptive formula.

Most mass-market LGBTQ romance features two cis, gay (m/m) or sapphic (f/f) characters, thus framing cis homosexuality as more palatable than a nonbinarized spectrum of gender and sexual identities. Proposal and wedding scenes reinforce the value of monogamy and marriage. Playing on Duggan's "homonormativity," Eve Ng refers to this as the genre's "romonormativity," or a "privileging of monogamous romance that, in the case of same-sex relationships, further marginalizes other, queerer modes of intimacy and being" (86). Kathleen Therrien similarly argues that the romance plot structure dictates an ending in which "monogamous, long-terms relationships are re-invoked and valorized" (172). The happy ending in romance is intended to reaffirm respectability and dignity through monogamous commitment. Because of these opposite end goals, I have described "queerness and romance as irreconcilable concepts" (4).

Romance and erotica with same-sex pairings have been published for centuries, though often obscured, underground, or moralized in ways reflective of hegemonic social values. In recent years, though, major presses have begun publishing LGBTQ romance and selling it in big box stores like Target, and LGBTQ rom-coms can be screened on Netflix and Lifetime. Hallmark, the most prolific producer of rom-coms and romantic dramas for American television, has started to include LGBTQ characters.[1] Romance with gay men is the most widely consumed LGBTQ romance. Casey McQuiston's *Red, White, and Royal Blue* (2019) is one such example: it made the *New York Time*s bestseller list in June 2019 before being adapted as a movie for Amazon in 2023. Sapphic romance remains less consumed in mainstream markets. Previous studies of readership of gay or male/male romance, as well as slash fan fiction, have demonstrated that women and nonbinary people of all sexualities consume these texts, but cisgender men of all sexualities are less likely to consume stories with two central female characters. A survey of five thousand users of the fan fiction repository AO3 found that women and nonbinary people made up approximately two-thirds of respondents, who reported being almost twice as likely to read slash (m/m) than f/f

content (Rouse and Stanfill). Through a survey of five hundred women, Lucy Neville demonstrates how "female passion for m/m sex is not only limited to popular culture and the written word, but extends into erotica and hardcore pornography as well" (2). Nevertheless, mainstream sapphic romance has grown, with novels like Camille Perri's *When Katie Met Cassidy* (2018) reaching mass audiences. Stories with trans and nonbinary characters are the least widely available in mainstream outlets but have seen growth in recent years, particularly in young adult categories. This increase in popular romance across sexualities necessitates an investigation into how these stories handle the declaration and betrothal.

Love Isn't Love: Queer Sexual Intimacies

When *Bros* premiered at the 2022 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), it was notable as the first big-budget feature film from a mainstream studio that featured a narrative about two cis gay men falling in love, with an all-LGBTQ central cast. *Bros*' premiere seemed emblematic of a turning point in the reception of LGBTQ romance. With posters all over Toronto of the two main characters, shot from the back, squeezing each other's butt cheeks, *Bros* insisted that gay sex was here and not going anywhere.

After its theatrical release, however, the film was considered a bomb. Its box office revenues and streaming earnings to date have not been sufficient to recoup the cost of its production, which by Hollywood standards makes it a flop. Plenty of popular press articles and interviews have interrogated what caused this film, seemingly a landmark in the culture wars, to fail. Was the world just not ready for a big-budget gay romance? Is gay romance to remain the province of the few? Why didn't more straight people support the film? Was it homophobia? Or was the problem that the LGBTQ community failed to support it, and if so, why did we let a film about us and by us flop?

My interest in *Bros*, however, finds these questions immaterial. The fact that the film was greenlit, premiered at North America's largest film festival (and one of the most prestigious in the world), and was released on over three thousand screens warrants study. While the film's box office failure may mean it takes a long time for a major studio to produce and release another gay rom-com feature film, *Bros*' improbable existence leaves us with pertinent questions about the nature of queer romance in our time. In fact, I would be more skeptical if the film had been a roaring box office success because, as I will demonstrate, *Bros* is also emblematic of a sea change in the depiction of gay (queer) romantic relationships.

Within the first few minutes of the movie, Bobby explains on his podcast that he was solicited by a movie producer to write a gay rom-com. The scene flashes back to that meeting, during which the producer says he envisions a movie about a gay couple but one straight people will also go to. He wants to show the world gay and straight relationships are the same. Bobby insists they're not. "Love is love," the producer says, borrowing a well-trodden phrase used in LGBTQ equality efforts. Bobby becomes hostile and tells him, "That's a lie we had to make up to convince you idiots into treating us fairly." For Bobby, writing a movie for both audiences is impossible. Queer romance doesn't follow a pattern understandable to a straight audience. The joke here is that Bobby is played by Billy Eichner, who wrote the screenplay for *Bros* with director Nicholas Stoller. Despite Bobby's claims, *Bros* was intended

to appeal to audiences of varied sexualities and does in many ways follow the conventional pattern of a rom-com, from the meet-cute to the declaration, but the film is also cognizant of how to queer that pattern in a way that makes sense for a non-homonormative couple.

Prior to meeting Aaron, Bobby separates sex and love. He explains on his podcast that sex is something to do with strangers from hookup apps, people he does not love, while love is for friends with whom he does not want to have sex. But, of course, as the hero in a rom-com, Bobby actually loves romance. He watches *You've Got Mail* (1998) in an early scene. Later in the movie, after he and Aaron have dated and broken up, he binges the "Hallheart" channel, a spoof on Hallmark that proudly announces its new inclusive-themed movies. They sound performatively woke and dreadful: *Christmas with Either* is the network's first film with bisexual characters, and its first polyamorous movie is *A Holly, Poly Christmas*, which features a row of people of various genders and races in winter attire, holding hands while one of them declares, "It's snowing…on all seven of us!" The Hallheart references obviously poke fun at the saccharine nature of Hallmark, and particularly its often criticized efforts since 2019 to expand its representation (though at the time of writing, it has not yet featured a bi or poly central romance). In contrast to Hallheart's clumsy attempts at LGBTQ inclusivity, *Bros* sees itself as doing meaningful work in reformulating the romance. Bobby's hate-watching of the network, which he scorns for its superficial representation that does nothing to advance civil rights, coexists alongside a deep-seated need to believe in romance and see himself at the center of one. The Hallheart references are also for savvy viewers who, like Bobby, might hate-watch (while secretly loving to watch) Hallmark and know that Luke Macfarlane is a frequent romance hero on the network.[2]

Unlike Hallheart's sexless schmaltz, sex often serves a distinct function in gay romance. In the late 1990s, LGBTQ romance novels began to feature more explicit sex scenes, paralleling a shift in heterosexual romance as well. Across all subgenres of print romance, Len Barot argues, an increase in graphic content and explicit language indicated a reflection of the "postfeminist era" in which "virginity is no longer requisite for a romantic heroine and marriage no longer a prerequisite for sex" (400). For gay male romances in the post–marriage equality world, this is equally true. Sex is often portrayed as necessary to the development of the relationship, with sexual compatibility as a harbinger of the couple's success. Discussions about kink preferences and whether monogamy is the relationship ideal help determine that sexual compatibility.

Such discussions may not necessarily translate to mainstream straight audiences unfamiliar with the nuances of gay sex culture. As Gayle Rubin has shown, North American and European societies "appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value" in which married heterosexuals are "at the top erotic pyramid" (11). In mainstream media, gay sexual intimacy is often avoided or downplayed. As Al Martin demonstrates, television sitcom cinematography often cuts away from same-sex kissing, which he sees as a contradiction: increasing LGBTQ representation on screen is valued, but only without seeing private expressions of intimacy (153–165). In her study of premium cable television, Hannah Mueller similarly finds that many series depict casual nudity and explicit sex on a regular basis, but male nudity leading up to sex with another man is often obscured from the camera, as are gay sex scenes (12).[3]

By contrast, the twenty-first-century queer narratives in this study incorporate plenty of sex and embrace nonnormative sexual experiences as part of queerness. Every moment at which *Bros* might slide into normativity is fucked, literally. During Bobby and

Aaron's first date, Aaron is asked to join a threesome with a baseball player and his husband. He invites Bobby to tag along, and we see the four attempt group sex. On their second date, Bobby and Aaron push and shove each other while arguing in the park, and when the wrestling arouses them both, they retreat to Aaron's apartment. The sex scene that ensues shows them continue a light form of physical interaction that may be uncomfortable to some viewers, though certainly neither intends to hurt the other. This tussling is spliced with other weird bodily moments, such as Bobby repeatedly shoving his foot in Aaron's face and making Aaron say he likes it. The sexual experimentation and the use of recreational drugs (poppers) are juxtaposed with the dulcet tones of Nat King Cole singing "When I Fall in Love." A second group sex scene happens later in the movie when Aaron has the opportunity to hook up with his first high school crush. Bobby joins them, as does a fourth man, Steve, whom no one has invited. Throughout the scene, Steve tries to insert himself into the kissing and groping but is unable to do more than express sexualized moans from outside the actual circle of physical contact. These sex scenes are played for laughs, but they also demonstrate how intimacy is achieved in this nonnormative romance. Following Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's idea of a queer counterpublic, Bobby and Aaron's use of casual and group sex helps develop "relations and narratives that are only recognized as intimate in queer culture" (558). Far from detracting from the romance plot, these scenes deepen Bobby and Aaron's connection to each other.

Will You Not Marry Me?: The Anti-Proposal

Queer sexual intimacies dominate the evolution of the romance in *Bros*, up to the nonproposal ending. As a film that is rated R, its explicit sex scenes might be expected. Other gay romances with nonproposal endings, such as the movie *Fire Island* (2022) and the novel *Husband Material* (2022), do not feature sex so explicitly on screen or on the page. These examples nevertheless still depend on queer intimacy in which nonnormative behaviors help foment the romance. The nonproposal endings of these texts befit the central characters who, like Bobby, love romance and have deep knowledge of its conventions.

Noah (Joel Kim Booster) provides the voiceover narration to *Fire Island*, which begins by quoting the opening line to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). He then declares it "some hetero nonsense." The movie is a multiracial retelling of *Pride and Prejudice* set among a circle of gay male friends. Noah's romance plot is wrapped up with Will (Conrad Ricamora), the Darcy-type character with whom Noah has had repeated misunderstandings. In their final scene together, the two agree they don't believe in monogamy, and this allows them to solidify their interest in each other, as it did for Bobby and Aaron in *Bros*.

Noah's best friend, Howie (Bowen Yang), is more sentimental. He tells Noah he wants "the romance bullshit." In the dramatic climax to the movie, Howie's love interest, Charlie (James Scully), regrets not sharing his feelings before Howie departs from their vacation on Fire Island. The entire crew rushes to meet Howie at the ferry, at which point Noah tells Charlie, "This is your big rom-com moment. You gotta do something big, something stupid." Charlie throws his arms open wide and yells to Howie, "I love you!" Their friends immediately cringe and tell him the gesture is too big. Charlie and Howie have only known each other a few days, and despite Noah's earlier voiceover narration explaining that "Fire

Island time" works differently than time in the real world, Charlie's declaration is premature. Charlie settles for telling Howie he likes him, a more suitable declaration that results in them kissing, their friends cheering and waving pride flags, and the music swelling. Because *Fire Island* only spans a week, neither Charlie nor Howie mentions marriage; we are left without knowing whether that is a potential future for this couple, who are arguably more normative than Noah and Will. The scene emulates a proposal in Charlie's declaration, his physical posture (facing Howie, arms open in a plea), and Howie's kiss to seal the deal.

A more explicit reference to marriage occurs in the novel *Husband Material* by Alexis Hall. The book is a sequel to *Boyfriend Material* (2020), in which Luc and Oliver agree to fake date. Luc is the son of a famous singer who grew up dodging paparazzi until his boyfriend sold him out to the tabloids, and the nonprofit for which he works expresses concern that his reputation could affect their donations unless it is somehow redeemed. Oliver is an uptight barrister who needs a date to his parents' upcoming anniversary party. Their need to fake date for the sake of respectability is a reification of heteronormativity's correlating of adulthood and maturity with coupledom. By the end of *Boyfriend Material*, Luc and Oliver realize they actually do like each other and agree to date for real.

In *Husband Material*, which is somewhat structured after *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), Luc and Oliver attend three very different weddings. Since they have been dating and veritably living together for two years, they decide perhaps it is time they, too, marry. As planning for their own wedding, the book's fourth, gets underway, both men become increasingly uncomfortable with what a wedding signifies and with their different visions for it. Luc wants to avoid aping heterosexuality and favors a wedding full of rainbows and LGBTQ tropes; he finds traditional weddings exclusionary and uncomfortable. Oliver, by contrast, finds the symbols of the LGBTQ community performative and somewhat embarrassing and would prefer a more staid, normative ceremony. Slowly, each realizes the rift in their visions for the wedding is symbolic of a rift in their visions for marriage itself.

At the wedding, they each realize they don't want to be married. Luc, the narrator and point-of-view character, decides he should keep his feelings to himself and go through with it for Oliver's sake. Oliver, however, cannot keep quiet. He visits Luc's dressing room prior to the ceremony and offers a reverse proposal that pledges a future together without marriage. Luc seeks clarification: "That's why you're leaving me at the altar? Because you want to be with me so much?" (414). Oliver confirms this is the case, and Luc decides, "Since you asked so nicely, I'll not marry you" (415). Hand in hand, they tell their guests the wedding is off and run out of the church. The final lines of the novel describe them kissing in the rain as a rainbow of umbrellas surrounds them, a reference to the queerness of their relationship and the contentious role rainbow iconography has had for them. The book's symbolic funeral, then, is the death of their wedding and marriage, but through that death, they have ensured their relationship can continue to thrive. Luc says they have learned to express their love for each other in "this way that was just ours" (414). By rejecting socially and legally sanctioned forms of commitment, they are able to commit to each other (the betrothal).

Conclusion: Marriage Equality…for Now?

In the examples presented here, gay couples actively avoid society's markers of commitment: engagement, weddings, marriages. These heteronormative trappings do not solidify the couples' relationships but instead threaten them. This is a weird retelling of gay romance that is neither homonormative in its replication of heteronormative values nor wholly politically queer in its firm disavowal of those same things. Somewhere in between, the new queer romance promises commitment through freedom from commitment and finds its happy for now by eschewing expected forms of happily ever after.

In many ways, this is emblematic of a post-marriage equality world. These queered in-between romances reveal an ambivalence allowable when legal equality no longer has to be fought for. With the right to marry or not, couples can express their love in a way that is, as Luc says, "just theirs." In *Bros*, Bobby similarly tells Aaron in his final song, "We don't have to get married, babe / This is our romance." While a proposal or wedding as betrothal is a reification of normativity, and normativity is a marker of conformity, queerness offers the promise of individualistic expressions of love.

The examples of nonproposals presented here were all from literature and media released in 2022. In June of that same year, the U.S. Supreme Court issued its opinion on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overturned the court's 1973 ruling that had made abortion legal nationwide. Writing his concurring opinion on the case, Clarence Thomas argued that the court should also reconsider previous decisions like *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), which had determined the right for gender-neutral marriage nationwide. This note was met with concern from LGBTQ activist organizations. A fait accompli in terms of LGBTQ rights suddenly seemed up in the air. The romance examples in this essay are indicative of a remarkable moment between *Obergefell* and *Dobbs* when marriage could be rejected precisely because it seemed like a right that would always be available.

In the case of romance in which the queer central couple says "I don't," a contradiction between the goals of political queerness and romance is evident. Is it a romance if the couple refuses to commit? Is it queer if the couple enacts the same gestures and conventions as a heteronormative marriage proposal, even if they refuse to propose marriage? The answers to these questions are always yes and no and always return to the way that any queering brings contradictions to the surface. But if the end goal of romance is a betrothal in which the central couple achieves their happily ever after or happy for now, then we should want to root for contemporary queer couples to reach their betrothal. Yet if marriage is always a politically fraught trap for LGBTQ couples, then a wedding or proposal resolution might not bring that happily ever after or happy for now. The examples presented here in which couples say "I don't" demonstrate an emergent pattern that offers a more emotionally satisfying (non-) resolution.

---

[1] After years of its own exclusively white, heterosexual slant, Hallmark's declaration that it was finally committed to diversity caused several of the network's most conservative actors and producers to flee to the newly launched competitor network Great American Channel (GAC).

[2] Macfarlane, like Eichner, is openly gay, though he has not yet played a gay character in a Hallmark movie.

[3] Certainly, LGBTQ-focused series like *Queer as Folk* (Showtime, 2000–05) featured graphic depictions of sex and nudity. Mueller's study does not discount the existence of this series but is interested in a broader phenomenon across multiple cable networks and series.

Works Cited

"About the Romance Genre." *RWA.org.* **https://www.rwa.org/Online/Resources/About_Romance_Fiction/Online/Romance_Genre/About_Romance_Genre.aspx?hkey=dc7b967d-d1eb-4101-bb3f-a6cc936b5219.**

Allan, Jonathan. *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance.* Routledge, 2020.

Barot, Len. "Queer Romance in Twentieth- and Twenty-First Century America." *Romance Fiction and American Culture*, edited by William A. Gleason and Eric Murphy Selinger, Routledge, 2016, pp. 389–404.

Battles, Kathleen and Wendy Hilton-Morrow. "Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces: Will and Grace and the Situation Comedy Genre." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2002, pp. 87–105.

Beauty and the Beast. Directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, Walt Disney Pictures, 1991.

Berlant, Lauren and Michael Warner. "Sex in Public." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1998, pp. 547–566.

Bowdre, Karen. "Romantic Comedies and the Raced Body." *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, edited by Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn, I. B. Tauris, 2009, pp. 105–116.

Bros. Directed by Nicholas Stoller, Universal Pictures, 2022.

Byron, Lord. *Don Juan.* Halifax: Milner and Sowerby, 1837. As reproduced at Project Gutenberg, updated August 8, 2021, **https://www.gutenberg.org/files/21700/21700-h/21700-h.htm.**

Duggan, Lisa. "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism." *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, edited by Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson, Duke University Press, 2002, pp. 175–194.

Ferguson, Roderick. "Race-ing Homonormativity: Citizenship, Sociology, and Gay Identity." *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, edited by E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, Duke University Press, 2005, pp. 52–67.

Fire Island. Directed by Andrew Ahn, Searchlight Pictures, 2022.

Fletcher, Lisa. *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity.* Routledge, 2016.

Four Weddings and a Funeral. Directed by Mike Newell, PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, 1994.

Frantz, Sarah S. G. and Eric Murphy Selinger. "Introduction: New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction." *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction*, edited by Sarah S. G. Frantz and Eric Murphy Selinger, McFarland, 2012, pp. 1–19.

Fry, Richard and Kim Parker. "Rising Share of U.S. Adults Are Living without a Spouse or Partner." Pew Research Center, October 5, 2021, **https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/10/05/rising-share-of-u-s-adults-are-living-without-a-spouse-or-partner/**.

Guillory, Jasmine. *By the Book.* Hyperion, 2022.

Hall, Alexis. *Boyfriend Material.* Sourcebooks Casablanca, 2020.

—. *Husband Material.* Sourcebooks Casablanca, 2022.

Harper, Kaje. *Home Work.* MLR Press, 2012.

Kaklamanidou, Betty. *Genre, Gender, and the Effects of Neoliberalism: The New Millennium Hollywood Rom Com.* Routledge, 2013.

Kies, Bridget. "First Comes Love, Then Comes Marriage: (Homo)Normalizing Romance on American Television." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1–13. **https://www.jprstudies.org/2016/07/first-comes-love-then-comes-marriage-homonormalizing-romance-on-american-televisionby-bridget-kies/**.

Martin, Alfred L., Jr. "It's (Not) in His Kiss: Gay Kisses and Camera Angles in Contemporary U.S. Network Television Comedy." *Popular Communication*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2014, pp. 153–165.

McQuiston, Casey. *Red, White, and Royal Blue.* St. Martin's Griffin, 2019.

Mortimer, Claire. *Romantic Comedy.* Routledge, 2010.

Mueller, Hannah. "'At Least Let Us See Them Before You Cut Them All Off!': The Gendered Representation of Nudity in Contemporary Quality TV." *Auteur TV*, edited by Ralph Poole, Universitätsverlag Winter Heidelberg, 2020.

My Best Friend's Wedding. Directed by P. J. Hogan, TriStar Pictures, 1997.

Neville, Lucy. *Girls Who Like Boys Who Like Boys: Women and Gay Male Pornography and Erotica.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Ng, Eve. "Rom-Com Without Romonormativity, Gays Without Homonormativity: Examining the *People Like Us* Web Series." *New Review of Film and Television Studies,* vol. 18, 1, 2020, pp. 83-100.

Perri, Camille. *When Katie Met Cassidy.* G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2018.

Radway, Janice. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature.* University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel.* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

—. "What Do Critics Owe the Romance? Keynote Address at the Second Annual Conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance," as published in *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2011, **https://www.jprstudies.org/2011/10/%e2%80%9cwhat-do-critics-owe-the-romance-keynote-address-at-the-second-annual-conference-of-the-international-association-for-the-study-of-popular-romance%e2%80%9d-by-pamela-regis/.**

Roach, Catherine. *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture.* Indiana University Press, 2016.

Ross, Marion B. "'What's Love but a Second Hand Emotion?': Man-on-Man Passion in the Contemporary Black Romance Novel." *Callaloo*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2013, pp. 670–686.

Rouse, Lauren and Mel Stanfill. "Fan Demographics on Archive of Our Own," *Flow*, February 22, 2023, **https://www.flowjournal.org/2023/02/fan-demographics-on-ao3/**.

Rubin, Gayle S. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, Routledge, 1993, pp. 3–44.

Single All the Way. Directed by Michael Mayer, Muse Entertainment, 2021.

Stevens, Kyle. "Romantic Comedy and the Virtues of Predictability." *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2020, pp. 28–48.

—. "What a Difference a Gay Makes: Marriage in 1990s Romantic Comedy." *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, edited by Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn, I. B. Tauris, 2009, pp. 132–145.

Sullivan, Andrew. *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality.* Vintage, 1996.

Therrien, Kathleen. "Straight to the Edges: Gay and Lesbian Characters and Cultural Conflict in Popular Romance Fiction." *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction*, edited by Sarah S. G. Frantz and Eric Murphy Selinger, McFarland, 2012, pp. 164–177.

Vivanco, Laura. "One Ring to Bind Them: Ring Symbolism in Popular Romance Fiction." *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction*, edited by Sarah S. G. Frantz and Eric Murphy Selinger, McFarland, 2012, pp. 99–107.

Warner, Michael. *The Trouble with Normal.* Harvard University Press, 1999.

The Wedding Veil. Directed by Terry Ingram, Front Street Pictures, 2022.

The Wedding Veil Expectations. Directed by Peter Benson, Front Street Pictures, 2023.

The Wedding Veil Inspiration. Directed by Terry Ingram, Front Street Pictures, 2023.

The Wedding Veil Journey. Directed by Ron Oliver, Front Street Pictures, 2023.

The Wedding Veil Legacy. Directed by Terry Ingram, Front Street Pictures, 2022.

The Wedding Veil Unveiled. Directed by Terry Ingram, Front Street Pictures, 2022.

You've Got Mail. Directed by Nora Ephron, Lauren Shuler Donner Productions, 1998.