

From Romantic Gothic to Gothic Romance, With a Little Help from Twilight

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I came to the study of romance media largely by accident. I didn't grow up reading or watching romances: those activities were for *girls*, or maybe gay men, and I was neither. I gravitated to horror, largely because it was the 1990s, and horror was everywhere: Stephen King and his imitators ruled every high-street bookstore. All my friends were Goths, or at least Goth wannabes. We would sit around and drink cheap absinthe and watch slasher movies and talk wistfully about being vampires.

As a graduate student I studied horror in its academically respectable manifestation, as classic Gothic literature. I was particularly interested by Kate Fergusson Ellis's argument in *The Contested Castle* that the women's Gothic fiction of the 1790s could be read as a coded commentary on the gender norms of the period, with wicked barons and Gothic castles acting as symbolic versions of family patriarchs and domestic homes. At the time *Twilight* had just come out, and I was struck by the parallels between the paranormal romance craze of the 2000s and the fad for Radcliffean Gothic in the 1790s. In both cases, female writers used Gothic tropes to articulate something about their relationship with gender and society, something that clearly resonated with huge numbers of female readers.

I read *Twilight*, but I didn't understand it: I had never read a romance before, and everything about the story perplexed me. It's easy for people who've been reading a genre all their lives to underestimate just how much implicit knowledge they pick up along the way, knowledge which helps them to read each new work in the way its author expects it to be read. Still, it was clear that I was missing something: after all, no-one sells a hundred million books by accident. So I read the classic works of romance scholarship: Modleski, Radway, Thurston, Regis. I read the classic romance canon: Austen, the Brontës, Heyer, Mitchell, Du Maurier. Step by step, I internalised the genre's logic. At some point—maybe around the time I got to Cartland—it all started making sense.

When I returned to *Twilight*, armed with my new knowledge, I felt some frustration with much of the critical commentary surrounding the franchise. The problem wasn't that people disliked it—I disliked plenty of things about it myself—but that they seemed so

aggressively uninterested in understanding the franchise within its generic context, or in relation to the interpretative strategies used by its actual readers. I was, by this point, actively lurking on multiple *Twilight* fan-forums, and it was clear to me that the ways in which *Twilight*'s critics imagined it being read often bore little resemblance to the ways its fans were actually interpreting it. Furthermore, I came to see that what was true of *Twilight* was also more-or-less true of the entire romance genre. Critics habitually dismissed romance, I realised, because they often didn't *understand* romance—very much as they'd previously dismissed Gothic fiction as mere horror pornography, before the critical re-evaluations of the 1980s and 1990s.

What troubled me about this situation was that understanding romance *wasn't very hard*. There were plenty of scholars who had explored it, plenty of online spaces where romance readers and writers explained how the genre worked and what it meant to them: I myself had built up a working knowledge of the genre in just a few months. My academic colleagues routinely devoted much greater effort to understanding various obsolete literary genres, and it seemed strange that so few were willing to do the same for what was, after all, the most popular and culturally influential genre in the world. We were all meant to be feminists. Why were we so collectively disengaged from, and frequently blankly uncomprehending of, the single most widespread genre of women's writing the world has ever seen?

In devoting so much time to genres like tragedy and epic and Gothic while leaving out romance, my own literary education had, I realised, been defective. My romance fiction module, which I have taught at Exeter since 2013, was meant to address that defect. It aims to give students, in a more systematic form, the kind of education in romance which I gave myself while struggling to make sense of *Twilight*: walking them through the major works in the genre, from nineteenth-century classics to modern bestsellers, and exploring the different critical approaches that might be used to interpret them. Each week we look at a different text, and use it to think about a different theme in romance fiction: thus, *Jane Eyre* provides a starting point for conversations about romance media and feminism, while *The Sheik* offers a way into thinking about race and racism in romance. When I first offered the module, I wasn't sure if any students would be interested, but my fears proved entirely unfounded. It was hugely oversubscribed from the outset and has continued to be ever since.

When I began the module, I assumed my students would be romance fans keen to deepen their knowledge of an already-favoured genre. Each year, *some* students fit this description, but most do not: often they have little prior knowledge of romance media outside of a few favourite books or films. Some pick the module because they love Austen, others because they grew up watching *Bridget Jones's Diary* with their mothers, or because they were *Twilight* fans when they were thirteen years old. (We annually restage the 'team Jacob vs team Edward' debate in our *Twilight* seminars, an event which at this point has taken on something of a ritual character, although these days 'team Alice' makes for a strong third contender.) What brings them to the module is their sense that studying romance is *important*, a crucial tool for understanding the interlinked histories of gender, genre, and sexuality. Romance engages with issues around sex and desire, power and consent, that feel *urgent* to them, issues that they are eager to explore in relation to larger cultural histories. They want to talk through what works like *Heartstopper* and *Bridgerton* and *It Ends With Us* mean to them, and to society in general. The most important and quietly radical thing the module does is simply to provide a space where these works, and the issues they raise, are

treated as being worthy of the kind of serious scholarly attention that my students so clearly wish to devote to them.

Since 2013 I have modified the module several times. I am a cultural historian by training, so initially it was heavy on cultural history, full of texts like *Gone With the Wind*, *Forever Amber*, and *The Flame and the Flower*: I simply took for granted that since they had been important to the genre, they had to be on the syllabus. Over time, however, I have shifted my focus towards the subgenres that matter most to my students: queer romance, YA fiction, romcoms, and chick lit. It also originally focussed very much on the romance *novel*, but years of conversations with students persuaded me to change this, too, by demonstrating just how often the most important works of romance media in their lives had been films, or TV shows, or online fanfictions, or even computer games. Today I strive to take a much more inclusive approach to the genre, although the fact that it's offered as part of an English degree means that novels still tend to predominate!

When I start the module each year I make two requests. The first is for my students to avoid snobbery, because we will never understand why romance is so popular unless our seminars are the kind of places where someone can speak freely about why they love *Twilight*, or *After*, or *Fifty Shades of Grey* without fear of mockery or judgement. The second is for them to avoid defensiveness, because we'll never understand why romance is so controversial unless people are also able to talk openly about the ways it upsets or offends or disturbs them, even if the works they are talking about happens to be *your favourite novel*. Snobbery and defensiveness are the two banes of romance discussion: because liking romance is low-status, no-one wants to admit how emotionally and imaginatively effective it really is, and because the genre is so derided, people who *do* like it often want to shield it from the attacks of those whom they feel, often with some justice, *just don't understand*. But taking romance seriously means taking seriously both its ability to move us and its ability to harm us, even if I believe the latter is often exaggerated by the genre's critics. We do not study it in a spirit of condescension: romance is popular because it is *powerful*, and its power deserves our respect, and sometimes our fear. By treating it as such, it is my hope that literary scholarship can come to a more adequate understanding of a genre that it has historically, and primarily for reasons of mere sexism, treated very inadequately indeed.