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Happily Ever After?/Happily Ever After! Negotiating the Gothic in Contemporary Dark Romance

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Abstract: This article examines two recent works of dark romance, a subgenre of contemporary popular romance in which romantic fulfilment coexists with fear, violence, transgression, power inequalities, and the threat or reality of sexual assault, reading them as contemporary Gothic romances in which horror and romantic elements collaborate in complex ways. While Gothic romance has often been read as a mode in which romance moderates or weakens Gothic excesses, I argue that in the texts I examine here, Amelia Wilde's *Beast of Bishop's Landing* trilogy and Sam Mariano's *Descent*, the romance elements—and in particular popular romance's most central convention, the happily ever after (HEA)—can become sources of horror in themselves. Focusing on the role of intertextuality, I explore the ways in which the presence or absence of fairy-tale, Gothic, and romance intertexts are used to shape readers' expectations of the HEA and to guide whether that ending is experienced as emotionally satisfying, disturbing, or both. Intertextuality, I argue, functions as a key device through which dark romance manages reader expectation, pleasure, fear, and consent.

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Content note: This article discusses sexual violence and abuse in the context of romance novels.

In the first book of Amelia Wilde's *Beast of Bishop's Landing* trilogy (2021), *Secret Beast*, the male main character clears out the New York Public Library so the female main character can lose her virginity "in full view of a first edition of *Jane Eyre*" (235).[1] Afterwards, he decides to buy it for her: "This copy of *Jane Eyre* is technically a witness to her very first real fuck. It can't be left to the world" (235). The *Beast* series is what is currently usually marketed as *dark romance*; the plot involves the love interest kidnapping and imprisoning the female main character for complicated revenge purposes, and like most of the novel's sex scenes, the one described here is at least in part coercive. In this article, I explore the implications of finding this copy of a classic romantic (and Gothic) novel—and the related fairy-tale intertext suggested by the trilogy's title, Beauty and the Beast—at the centre of a story about abuses of power, dark pasts, and sexual violence.

In narratives like the *Beast* trilogy, Gothic and romance elements collaborate in complex ways. This article argues that contemporary dark romance can—given its sustained focus on fear, power imbalance, imprisonment, and sexual danger within the central relationship—be read productively as a form of Gothic romance. While, as I will discuss, critical accounts of Gothic romance often read the romantic plot as diluting or domesticating the text's Gothic elements, I suggest that in the dark romances examined here, the Gothic and romantic elements actually intensify one another. In particular, the generic expectation of a happy ending functions ambivalently: in a horror-tinged love story, the known approach of a happy romantic ending can itself be read as horrifying. I argue that these texts rely on a range of narrative and intertextual devices that allow readers to negotiate this tension in a variety of ways, allowing particular scenes and relationships to be read as primarily romantic or primarily horrifying. By contrasting two superficially similar recent romances with captivity plots, Wilde's *Beast* trilogy and Sam Mariano's *Descent* (2021), I will examine how these narratives use intertextuality—like, for instance, the inclusion of that first edition of *Jane Eyre* in a central sex scene—as a way to guide readers' responses to the narratives' happy endings.

Recent romance scholarship has drawn attention to how romance narratives depict negotiations of sexual consent between characters in potentially empowering ways. Erin K. Johns Speese's reading of "consent culture" in Sarah J. Maas's romantasy, for instance, argues that her work casts "consensual sexual practices as empowering and imperative to fulfilling sexual lives for women" (3), and Milena Popova explores how the relationships between characters in arranged marriage fanfiction "challenge dominant discourses of sexual consent within marriage and propose an alternative view of how consent within unequal relationships can be made meaningful" (2). Conversely, while my argument does discuss consent and lack of consent between the characters in my chosen texts, I argue that these texts foreground and emphasise the consent and interpretive agency of the reader, especially in contexts where the female main character is deeply disempowered. Rather than making an argument for dark romance narratives like these as either definitively empowering or regressive, my aim is to gain a better understanding of how these works invite readers to negotiate and emotionally engage with narratives that intertwine horror with romantic and erotic fulfilment.

This article centres on close readings of two dark romance narratives: Amelia Wilde's *Beast* trilogy, which I treat as a single text because it is one cohesive story with a happy ending at the conclusion of the third book, and Sam Mariano's *Descent*, a standalone novel. I pair these texts because, while they share a number of key features—including

contemporaneity and broadly similar plots—they negotiate the relationship between romance and horror in markedly different ways. While dark romance is a varied genre and no two individual texts can be taken as representative, these texts are also not exceptional; the tropes, plot structures, and textual strategies examined here are widely recurring within dark romance, including elsewhere in the work of both authors. My analysis is thus intended to have wider applicability beyond my chosen texts.

"Its darker counterpart": Romance and the Gothic

The interweaving of romance and the Gothic has a long and complicated history, going back far beyond the 20th-century popular Gothic romance. "'[R]omance' is a dangerously imprecise term," notes Deborah Russell in her examination of the eighteenth-century Gothic romance (57), so some conceptual clarification might be useful. In the work of early Gothic authors like Ann Radcliffe, the word "romance" used as a genre descriptor (as in *A Sicilian Romance* (1790)) refers to Romantic elements of adventure, wonder and hints of the supernatural, rather than to the modern genre sense of the word. At the same time, as Pamela Regis demonstrates in her *Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003), there is a tangled generic thread leading from Radcliffe's Gothic romances, through nineteenth-century Gothic novels like *Jane Eyre*, to twentieth-century popular Gothic romances like those of Victoria Holt and Phyllis A. Whitney. From there, I suggest, this thread leads to the present-day dark romance. In this article, the phrase "Gothic romance" is used primarily to refer to narratives with Gothic elements that centre love stories.

Historically, Gothic romance has been marketed as a subgenre of romance: Sam Hirst's work on twentieth-century popular Gothic romance describes the influence of romance publishing and marketing in creating a set of "standardised paratexts" by which readers could recognise the mid-century Gothic romance, like "the infamous 'women with fabulous hair running away from houses' covers" (357). At the same time, Gothic scholarship has tended to read the Gothic romance as a lesser subgenre of the Gothic. Hirst notes that "the gothic romance is relegated automatically (and unjustifiably) to a secondary plane, a lesser form of the gothic due to their central concentration on the possibilities of love and desire within the frequently heterosexual love relationship" (365). Fred Botting expresses a common argument for this critical devaluation, arguing that "[r]omance, as it frames gothic, seems to clean up its darker counterpart, sanitising its depravations … it recuperates gothic excesses in the name of the heterosexual couple" (*Gothic Romanced*, 1-2). Gina Wisker, in a reading of vampire romances, similarly suggests with "some dismay" that "[t]he vampire is no longer a creature of social radicalism and imaginative exploration … he is a tortured romantic lead who will be rescuable with the love of a good woman" (234).

An element at work here is the critical tendency, particularly in Gothic scholarship of the late 2000s and early 2010s, to centre explorations of the intersections of romance and the Gothic on paranormal romance—especially, although paranormal romance as a subgenre substantially predates this moment, in the wake of the commercial and cultural prominence of the *Twilight* books and films. Such critical readings have tended to perceive romantic elements as sanitising or diluting the potential of the Gothic; Joseph Crawford's book on the subject, for instance, is entitled *The Twilight of the Gothic?* (2014). However, as scholars of both romance and the Gothic have shown, the presence of the supernatural is

neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for a romance to operate in a Gothic mode.[2] The Gothic may instead emerge through dynamics of confinement, power imbalance, fear, and the persistence of past trauma within the central relationship.

In this context, the emergence of the contemporary dark romance, which tends to locate Gothic affect primarily in the central relationship rather than in the supernatural, becomes especially significant.[3] Tracing the dark romance's consolidation as a genre in the 2010s and its current operation as "something akin to a supra-genre or mode" (2), Katie Deane notes that the genre "began its contemporary life through a self-described clustering of texts that pushed perceived generic boundaries," and that

> [u]ltimately, dark romance did not emerge solely from a romance fiction tradition: while the texts grounding the new dark romance genre – and the discussion around them – drew significantly from popular romance fiction and its gothic intersections, it was also significantly influenced by (erotic) horror, thriller, and erotica traditions, including fan fiction. Indeed, dark romance has adopted from the fan fiction community both the term *dubcon*, or dubious consent, and these narratives' deep occupation with the nature of consent itself (Spacey 2018). (8)

This hybrid genealogy helps to explain why dark romance often locates its Gothic elements not in external threats but within the romantic relationship itself. Dark romance often (though not always) lacks paranormal elements, but does include other traditional Gothic elements like fear, violence, transgression, buried secrets, the return of the past, power inequalities, and the threat, or reality, of sexual assault. In most dark romance these Gothic elements are internal rather than (or as well as) external to the relationship. Hirst notes that "[i]f we view the gothic romance more broadly as the point of intersection between the 'romance' and the gothic we find a love story which is simultaneously a narrative of constant and often claustrophobic threat" (366). Hirst argues that the Gothic romance has largely been superseded by the paranormal romance in the present-day publishing landscape, but going by this description, I suggest that the dark romance is generically a direct inheritor of the twentieth-century Gothic romance Hirst discusses. In what follows, I will describe how contemporary dark romance can complicate the critical idea that the Gothic romance represents the "triumph of … social integration over alienation, coherency over disintegration, heterosexual love over unconventional or deviant desires" (Crawford 276)—the idea, in short, that romance necessarily makes the Gothic less Gothic.

"Dead Dove, Do Not Eat": Framing the Dark Romance

Here I want to read two recent dark romances as Gothic romance narratives, focusing on the generic feature that most defines the popular romance: the "happily ever after" or "HEA" ending. "Romance novels end happily. Readers insist on it. The happy ending is the one formal feature of the romance novel that virtually everyone can identify," writes Pamela Regis (9). Catherine M. Roach titles her ethnographic study of popular romance *Happily Ever After* and reads the HEA as a necessary component of "the basic plot of the romance narrative—find somebody to love, work through problems, be happy" (4). The romance

author association Romance Writers of America describes the HEA as one of two defining elements of the genre—"[t]wo basic elements comprise every romance novel: a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending" ("About the Romance Genre")—while in the *Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction* Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger and Hsu-Ming Teo describe the romance novel as centering around "a love plot that holds the promise of a future with a unified emotional life for two or more protagonists" (2). In many ways, of course, trying to centrally and normatively define a genre is an impossible task, and Bridget Kies, for instance, argues that "[w]edding endings appear to be decreasing across romance in favor of HFN ['happy for now'] endings" (4), not least in queer romance. That said, Kies notes that "[t]hough 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" (4).

In general, both romance writers and romance readers adhere strongly to the idea of the HEA or HFN as a necessary genre component. The abbreviation HEA originates in the Anglophone romance reader community: Rob Imes traces its first appearance to a 1991 issue of *Romantic Times*, and tracks its use in romance novel newsgroups through the 1990s (n.d.). The term remains in frequent use in romance novel discussion groups today.[4] Studies of romance readers suggest not only that most readers prefer happy endings, but that the ability to confidently assume that the ending will be happy is part of the pleasure of the experience—for instance, this is an unambiguous finding of Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984), but it also emerges from Maleah Fekete's 2016 recreation of Radway's study (2022). In the context of romance narratives with Gothic and horror elements, this strong readerly and writerly norm around a particular plot outcome becomes a site of narrative possibility.

As mentioned earlier, I chose to examine *Descent* and the *Beast* trilogy in this article because they have similar starting points and take them in different directions—the starting point being that these are stories in which the female main character is imprisoned and raped by the male main character. (I will go on to discuss the texts' depiction of consent in more detail, but want to note here that while I think rape is an uncontroversial description of at least some of what happens in each text, *Beast* never uses the word in the context of the central relationship. *Descent*, very unusually for a dark romance, uses it repeatedly.) In *Beast*, Haley Constantine is imprisoned as part of Leo Morelli's revenge plot against her family, motivated by a dark secret from his past. Conversely, in *Descent* Calvin Cutler has no external motivation for keeping Hallie Meadows captive in his house; by his own account, he just wants to. Both texts have traditionally happy endings by romance standards: in *Beast* the two protagonists are engaged at the end, and in *Descent* they are happily married with a child. This means that the in-genre necessity and desirability of the HEA gives these texts a complex task. The texts must navigate plotlines with obvious Gothic and horror elements within the central relationship—which is to say that the source of horror is not primarily external but coming from inside the house—and get to a romantic conclusion that readers are at least invited to feel good about, although that invitation may be more or less compelling.

The two texts accomplish this in different ways and to different ends. Both use various narrative strategies for guiding reader expectations and responses; here, I will briefly address their use of paratexts before discussing the role of intertextuality. I will argue that *Beast* makes active use of intertexts to shape possible interpretations of the Haley-Leo

relationship. By contrast, *Descent* can be read as withholding such intertextual frames, using what Yuri Lotman terms a "minus device": that is, a meaning-bearing absence in which an expected narrative or generic element is conspicuous precisely because it is not present. In this case, the relative absence of familiar interpretive frames can be understood as contributing to the text's unsettling effect, as it offers fewer cues to allow the relationship to be assimilated to recognisable romantic or redemptive patterns.

The most obvious way in which these texts manage reader expectations is through the subgenre itself. Romance as a genre is invested in the use of paratexts to make it as easy as possible for readers to find the kind of story they enjoy, and the forms these paratexts take are continually evolving, from the twentieth-century use of "category" publishing lines to the present-day use of trope graphics on social media (Garner, n.p.).[5] Romance paratexts are a complex field, and while cover art has received the most critical attention, other tactics include blurbs, reviews and tags on book review sites, strategies for visibility on bookseller websites, and author communication on social media.[6] One such paratextual tactic is the use of subgenre labels, often in search-optimised subtitles containing subgenre information and central tropes: *Descent*, for instance, includes the phrase "dark romance" in its full title.

While "dark romance" is a fairly recent subgenre label, it has a distinct paratextual function.[7] First, it is a general-purpose content warning, and thus also a content advertisement. Katie Deane argues that "paratextual disclosures" like trigger warning lists have "a twofold function for [the dark romance-reading] population … as aptly indicated by the popular dark romance merchandise headline 'I use trigger warnings as a check list'" (12). Similarly, by design, some readers will be repelled by the "dark" tag and some will be attracted. Second, "dark" signals that the reader should approach this text as a fantasy space rather than a normative one.[8] Much like the tag "Dead Dove, Do Not Eat" on the fanfiction archive *An Archive of Our Own*, which both instructs the reader to take the more specific content tags seriously and generally signals dark content ahead, the romance label "dark" indicates that while what happens in this text might be romanticised and/or eroticised, it is not being extradiegetically condoned. It can argued that the romance genre in itself acts as a non-normative fantasy space, but romance readers do also sometimes read normatively, interpreting particular elements of a given romance as potentially desirable to experience in real life (see for instance Owen, "Re-inventing romance: Reading popular romantic fiction" (1997), and Fekete). Romance discussion forums often feature discussions of aspects of the contributors' romance reading they would like to experience in their real lives versus ones they would not.

A reader with some familiarity with the subgenre picking up an MF dark romance[9] may come to the text anticipating that the MMC will hurt, control or otherwise mistreat the FMC. In this sense, genre familiarity functions as a form of intertextual competence: it activates expectations about how coercion, consent, and emotional resolution are typically narrativised within dark romance, and may predispose readers to see these elements as fantasy rather than either a realistic depiction of abuse or a normative image of what relationships should be like. Mariano explicitly frames *Descent* in this way: her website announcement of the novel describes it as dark, warns for depictions of rape, and describes the MMC as unrepentant. She also notes that "[t]here were times even I questioned: 'Is this romance?'" ("*Descent: A Dark Billionaire Romance* is live!!" n.p.). The ambiguity here is, of course, both a genuine content warning and a sales tactic: the readership *Descent* aims at

does not want to read a non-romance horror story, they want to read a romance with such strong horror elements that it is close to not being parsable as a romance.

The *Beast* series makes much lighter use of paratextual subgenre framing, although it is tagged as "dark" on book review sites and has the flowers-on-a-dark-background covers often used to connote dark romance. Instead, these books' main way of guiding reader expectations is through an element that is itself made explicit by the series title: their use of intertextuality. In what follows, I use the term "intertextuality" to refer to the ways in which texts invite readers to interpret them in relation to other narratives, genres, and cultural forms. Such connections are not fixed or universally shared, but depend on readers' prior knowledge, expectations, reading practices, and interpretive communities (Iser (1972), Fish (1980)). For that reason, the analyses that follow do not assume a single, stable set of intertexts available to every reader; rather, they trace intertextual frames that these texts make especially available or salient and consider how these frames shape possible interpretations of the texts' central relationships.

"Redeeming the Brute in Man": *Beast* and Its Intertexts

The *Beast* trilogy is a Beauty and the Beast retelling. Fairy-tale intertextuality has a central presence in romance in general; the phrase "happily ever after" is of course a reference to the traditional concluding phrase of fairy tales. While, as Jennifer Crusie Smith argues in "This Is Not Your Mother's Cinderella: The Romance Novel as Feminist Fairy Tale" (1999), romance in general draws heavily on the Cinderella story, Hirst notes that the primary fairy-tale intertext for both earlier Gothic and present-day dark romances is Beauty and the Beast: "In this trope, as Marina Warner notes, 'female love and sympathy redeem the brute in man' but it may be the very beastliness of the beast which creates the attraction" (362).

In *Beast*, the use of this fairy tale goes considerably beyond the central relationship dynamic. The plot involves the MMC, Leo Morelli, using his power over her father to entrap the FMC, Haley Constantine, into a sex contract. Aside from his fascination with Haley herself, Leo is motivated by a desire for revenge against the Constantine family—in particular Haley's aunt, Caroline, who we later learn was Leo's abuser when he was a child. Early in the series, Leo repeatedly uses the contract to force Haley into sex, telling her that "[t]he terms of our contract include complete access to your body, whenever I want it" (97). Writing on captivity romance narratives, Anne Kaler describes "the introspective interior monologue which sifts the events through … the heroine's emotions" as a way of letting the reader into the FMC's conflicted feelings for her captor (88). We see this clearly in the sections of the novels written from Haley's perspective (like *Descent* and like most contemporary romance, *Beast* has dual first-person narration): "The worst part is that I don't hate the idea … Being afraid isn't the same as hating. A dark want coils low in my belly. I can't want this, can't even fantasize about it, can't, can't, can't. No part of this is a fantasy, even if my body thinks it is." (98)

That said, by any definition Leo rapes Haley. For much of the first book she is at least in part resistant and tearful during sex, and both her and Leo's narration show that he is deliberately, though with increasing inner conflict, hurting her:

> Even if I stick to the terms of our contract and let her walk away after thirty days, she'll live with this every second for the rest of her life. The pain in her voice is what I wanted, anyway. There's no point in playing games with the Constantines if they don't hate it. (81)

In Angela Toscano's delineation of narrative functions of rape in romance fiction, Leo's (self-)justification resonates with her concept of the "rape of possession," in which the MMC "assumes that the heroine's body will satisfy his need for her reciprocal desire" (n.p.). As Toscano notes, the "rape of possession" is thus based on a misperception on the MMC's part about what he needs from the FMC, meaning that the act of rape in itself demonstrates the need for him "to acknowledge the heroine as her own person, to meet her on her own terms, to confess his wrongdoing—often in scenes of groveling apology—in order to allow the heroine to choose or to deny him as her lover"—a very Beauty and the Beast-like arc that does in fact take place in *Beast* (n.p.).

Across the trilogy, Haley and Leo gradually grow closer. Their sexual relationship retains coercive elements, but these elements deepen in emotional complexity and become motivated on his part by protectiveness and possessiveness more than cruelty, and Haley increasingly gives explicit consent during sex scenes. For instance, in one sex scene in the third book, *Fallen Rose*, after Haley wakes up screaming from a nightmare, Leo tells her that "you belong to me. I hurt you. I make you come. Nobody else" (160). While Haley is clearly emotionally and physically overwhelmed, his intention of distracting her from her nightmare seems to work, and the scene ends with her taking his hand and saying, "Please don't stop" (161). Haley chooses to return to Leo after leaving him, and his desire to take revenge via her, as well as her fear of and resentment towards him, start to fade. Leo saves Haley from Caroline's nefarious schemes and exposes Caroline's earlier crimes, including her sexual abuse of Leo when he was a child, and the trilogy ends with Haley and Leo's engagement and the integration of the families.

The reference to Beauty and the Beast in the narrative arc—female love and sympathy redeem the brute in man—is probably clear from this plot description, but the text also draws heavily on details from, specifically, the 1991 Disney musical adaptation. These elements, many of which are not present in earlier written versions of the story, include the bookish FMC (Haley is an English major), the absent-minded inventor father, the FMC taking her father's place, the captivity in a castle, the rose imagery, the library as a compensative gift, a Gaston-like character (who with Caroline's help tries to coerce Haley into marriage), and the witch's curse (in the form of Caroline's assault on Leo, which leaves him physically scarred and in chronic pain). There is even, at one point, a subtle but wildly incongruous evocation of the Disney song "Be Our Guest."

What are the effects of this insistent intertext on the range of possible readings the narrative makes available? It helps to signal what kind of story this is, and in this case has the potential to ameliorate the text's horror elements, which for readers aware of the intertext may make it easier to anticipate and accept the happy ending. If the narrative is read through a Beauty and the Beast frame, the apparent power imbalance between the protagonists can begin to look less stable: a reader familiar with this intertext may interpret early references to Leo's chronic pain as evidence that he is already, in some sense, cursed or wounded, even before this is articulated in the text. Within such a reading, aspects of his cruelty may be partially reframed as the effects of a kind of curse. Similarly, the fairy-tale structure makes available a reading in which the FMC possesses a form of latent power, in

that her love is positioned as the means of the MMC's redemption. In this way, much as the broader intertextual conventions of the romance genre orient readers towards the protagonists ending up together, this specific fairy-tale intertext can be understood as inviting the hope that the MMC will be redeemed and that the FMC will triumph.

But *Beast* also activates this intertext in a more specific way: through its use of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre,* which appears in the text both as an object of discourse and as an actual physical object, the first edition that "witness[es]" the first time they have penetrative sex. Jessica Campbell notes that *Jane Eyre* is a Beauty and the Beast story, but also something else: "Brontë integrates two divergent tales about monster bridegrooms, 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'Bluebeard,' which serve as competing paradigms for the heroine to understand her possible relation to the mysterious Mr. Rochester" (234). These two fairy tales are opposing paradigms, offering different ways of narrativising male violence towards women within a romantic plot:

> Whereas the Beast is a character who initially appears beastly but is ultimately desirable to the heroine, Bluebeard is a character who is less obviously menacing at the outset but ultimately beastly on the inside. Fairy-tale terms, in other words, can articulate Jane Eyre's dilemma. "Is he a Beast figure or a Bluebeard figure?" is a concrete, vivid way of asking, "Should I trust him? Should I stay with him?" (235)

Campbell argues that this conflict is not fully resolved for Jane or for the reader. *Beast*'s framing of *Jane Eyre*, however, insistently reads it only as a Beauty and the Beast story, rejecting the Bluebeard interpretation. In the first book's library scene, where Leo brings Haley to see the first edition after she mentions that it is her favourite book, the two discuss the text:

> "I love this book. … The whole story. The nanny, and Mr Rochester, and his crazy wife in the attic. It's -" I'm getting choked up. "It's romantic. I miss it when I'm not reading it."
>
> The corner of his mouth turns up. "You think *he* is romantic. And he keeps his wife in the attic."
>
> "He has a secret that hurts him, and he tries to keep it from hurting Jane for as long as he can. And he gave it all up for her in the end. He was waiting for her. Mourning."
>
> That's romantic, I'm going to say, but I can't say anymore. I can't explain it, or the rush of feeling and ache and empathy … I get one glimpse of his eyes, those gold-shot wells of old pain and lust, and then he kisses me. It's hot and hard and confident. The way I imagine Mr Rochester would be when Jane returned to him. (220)

This interpretation appears late in the first book, and acts as an index to Haley's evolving feelings. The analogy between Haley and Leo's relationship is strongly suggested; Haley's reading of Rochester as victimised, hurt, and mourning, and his relationship with Jane as romantic, speaks to Leo about the way she sees him. Leo is still struggling with his feelings at this point and seems uneasy about Haley's take on the text, which is perhaps why he tries

to elicit a criticism of Rochester, but Haley does not draw the obvious comparison to Leo's own "keeping her in the attic" approach.

The Bluebeard element that Jessica Campbell identifies in *Jane Eyre* is notably muted in this reading. Haley mentions Rochester's first wife unsympathetically, but when Leo mentions the wife in the attic, the reference is to Haley and not any earlier partner. Although the narrative does centre on the hidden violence of Leo's past, it resists a Bluebeard reading in which he would occupy the position of the secret-keeping predator; instead, he is positioned unambiguously as the victim of Caroline's abuse. In this sense, the Bluebeard paradigm is displaced or foreclosed, limiting the extent to which the relationship can be read through that framework. This selective emphasis reinforces the dominance of the Beauty and the Beast framework, while constraining alternative readings that would cast Leo in a more unequivocally predatory role. *Descent*, in comparison, refuses the Bluebeard intertext in a different way, by having Calvin insist that he has never raped anyone before: Hallie is his first victim, not the last in a long line.

Haley's interpretation ends with a telling misremembering: "It's hot and hard and confident. The way I imagine Mr Rochester would be when Jane returned to him." Of course, Brontë shows us Jane's return to Rochester: he is badly injured, has lost his vision, and is initially not even sure Jane is real. She is the one who kisses him. Haley edits out Rochester's character development, which leaves him considerably less confident than he is at the beginning, and she elides something Rochester shares with Leo: a life-altering physical disability.

Even if we do not read Rochester's injuries at the end of the text as a decisive redressing of the initial power imbalance between the protagonists, in combination with Jane's financial independence it at least partially shifts their dynamic, and *Beast* inverts this pattern.[10] At the start of the narrative, Leo has lived for two decades with nerve damage in his back following a physical and sexual assault that nearly killed him when he was 14. Part of the growing intimacy between the two is Haley's increasing attunement to how profoundly the pain affects him, and how he tries to conceal it from others. At end of the series, his condition is semi-magically resolved; he is not quite healed by the power of love but is motivated to try a potentially dangerous solution by his desperation to stay with Haley: "I didn't think I could survive [the pain] … I couldn't let it take me away from you" (331).

At the end of the series, Leo gives Haley an engagement ring engraved with "I am no bird, no net ensnares me" and links the Brontë quotation to a revision of the power imbalance in their relationship: "I want you to be free. Not trapped here, Haley … I want you to choose this." (329) Leo, then, accepts Haley's use of *Jane Eyre* as a relationship-defining text to the point of trying to create an ending that parallels that of Brontë's novel. Still, this intertextual alignment cannot wholly overwrite the fact that he ends the novel in the opposite position from Rochester—healed from his injury and, if anything, more powerful than before.

"No Other Frame of Reference": Intertextuality as Minus Device in *Descent*

"It happens all the time," writes Anne Kaler. "A girl, wandering into the desert, is swept up by a marauding sheik to his tents, where she is kept captive until she falls in love

with him" (86). In present-day dark romance, these captivity-romance plot elements also happen all the time. Dark romances with captivity plots are typically shaped by recurring narrative conventions, meaning that they often invite intertextual readings informed by other texts in the subgenre. Sam Mariano's *Descent*, while clearly positioned within this tradition, can be read as engaging intertextuality in a different way: rather than foregrounding familiar narrative frames, it withholds them. I will argue here that this aspect of *Descent* can be thought of in terms of semiotician Yuri Lotman's concept of the "minus device," which refers to the effect created by the absence of a textual element that a reader has a reason to expect to find (1977). Lotman argues that this kind of absent element can carry as much meaning as a present element. Comparing *Descent* and *Beast* in these terms—one foregrounding intertextual frameworks, the other limiting their availability and applicability—helps to illuminate how intertextuality shapes the range of possible interpretations available to readers.

Descent has a straightforward plot that, as in *Beast,* is basically prefigured by its title. The overall lines of the story are similar to those of *Beast*: like Leo Morelli, the MMC, Calvin Cutler, is rich enough to control his surroundings completely. He meets Hallie Meadows by chance, becomes obsessed with her, and engineers a situation that allows him to rape her, manipulate her via blackmail, and finally just imprison her in his house. Hallie's feelings about her imprisonment vacillate between horror and, at best, ambivalence, but she gradually grows attached to Calvin, and in an epilogue set some years later, she is in love with him, has a family with him, and is happy.

In one sense, then, *Descent* follows the genre requirements for a romance novel—the focus on the central relationship; the happy ending—and its basic plotline is similar to that of hundreds of other dark romances. In another sense, it is structured around palpable missing pieces. Crusie Smith makes use of the concept of the minus device in a romance context in her discussion of the Cinderella intertext in romance, drawing on Lotman's argument that

> when certain patterns in texts are violated, the violation throws the patterns into relief so that "even the absence of certain devices may produce meaning; if the codes which the work has generated lead us to expect a rhyme or a happy ending which does not materialize, this 'minus device,' as Lotman terms it, may be as effective a unit of meaning as any other." (60; the quotation Crusie Smith reproduces here is from Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1996))

The frequent deployment of Beauty and the Beast as an intertext in dark romance captivity narratives, as noted by Hirst, makes its absence legible as a minus device in *Descent*. In Beast stories, the imprisonment of the FMC is partly externally motivated; it is often structured by a "contract" that keeps the FMC's father safe at her expense. Most importantly, the MMC in a Beast story is cursed: he is operating under a disadvantage that both contributes to his cruelty to the FMC and makes him dependent on her to lift the curse. By contrast, *Descent* has very little external conflict and no external motivation for the kidnapping. Where Leo's justification for imprisoning Haley revolves around revenge against her family, Calvin does not justify his decision beyond the fact that he wanted to: "I don't know why. I also don't care. I want you, so I'll have you, but regardless of what you want to believe, I'm trying to

accomplish that in the least damaging way possible" (106). Moreover, there seems to be no curse here—or if there is one, it does not take away from Calvin's power and apparently cannot be broken. Calvin hates his father because of his abuse of Calvin's mother, but Hallie's comment that he is doing the same thing to her does not lead to reflection or change; his desire to have a daughter with Hallie suggests to her that if they were to have a son, he assumes that the cycle of abuse would continue.

Like the intertextuality in *Beast*, the missing intertextuality here operates at a meta-narrative level: where in *Beast* the characters are able to use *Jane Eyre* to negotiate an understanding of and even develop their relationship, in *Descent* both characters seem baffled by their inability to narrativise their relationship, to find the story that fits it. We see this when Calvin is unable to explain his desire to possess Hallie, but also in Hallie's descriptions of finding herself in scenarios that look and even feel traditionally romantic, but that she knows are coercive:

> I've never been in a situation like this before. If we were a normal couple in bed after sex, I could let him pull me close. I would wrap my arm around him and snuggle up to him like a lover.
>
> We aren't lovers, but I have no other frame of reference for what we do here. (141)

Unlike Leo, who picks up on and continues Haley's reading of their relationship through *Jane Eyre*, Calvin undercuts Hallie's occasional attempts to narrativise their relationship as romantic. At one point, she is deeply upset by his willingness to describe what he just did to her as rape: "My jaw falls open as I stare up at him, appalled at how casually he says that" (263).

Descent does contain references to one fictional narrative that, while it is not an intertext because it exists only within this text, does affect how readers might interpret the characters' relationship: the children's book about an alkali fly that Hallie writes in the epilogue. Hallie's book is inspired by a story Calvin tells her about Mono Lake in California:

> "It's an unusual lake, toxic for nearly every creature that has ever tried to live there. … But for a particular kind of fly—the alkali fly—it's home. The only home that would suit them now, as a matter of fact. See, ordinary flies would drown in such salty water, but these ones have adapted to their naturally challenging environment …."
>
> … I'm not an idiot, I understand the parallel he's drawing. (396)

Calvin's attempt at renarrativising the relationship as one in which his "toxic[ity]" makes him and Hallie uniquely suited to each other works; it is the impetus for Hallie's acceptance of his marriage proposal. It is striking, though, that the text offers no readily available extradiegetic narrative that might act as an even slightly ameliorating intertext. Instead, Hallie must write the story herself.

"There's Nothing to Stop Me": The HEA in *Beast* and *Descent*

Picking up on Joseph Crawford's description, cited earlier, of what romance does to the Gothic, it would be fair to describe the ending of *Beast* as a "triumph of … social integration over alienation, coherency over disintegration": external wrongs are redressed, characters experience growth and healing, conflict turns to harmony (276). That said, the "unconventional or deviant desires" remain very much at work (276). Both *Beast* and *Descent* end with a sex scene involving consensual nonconsent, i.e. a scene in which the characters both consent to sex but act out fantasy elements of nonconsent. In *Fallen Rose*, the third book in the *Beast* series, the scene begins with a kind of curse-breaking: Haley asks to be on top, something that was previously impossible because of Leo's pain condition, and the request reactivates his memory of being raped by Caroline. He tells Haley about it for the first time, and she puts his hands around her neck to let him choke her as they begin to have sex, the scene transitioning from an evocation of Leo's victimisation to an evocation of Haley's:

> I was afraid her body in this position would force me into an old memory but I shouldn't have been. I should have trusted that I know her … there's Haley, panting in my grip, her body given over to mine. Sacrificed to mine. (340-341)

In this scene, then, two earlier experiences of rape are replayed, but not quite in parallel ways. Leo works through his trauma reaction to the memory of Caroline, helped both by his emotional closeness to Haley and by the experience of dominating her: "That sick, terrified feeling shrinks down into a shell of itself … It's no match for the silvery tears that streak down her cheeks" (341). Conversely, Haley is enacting a consensual rape fantasy with someone who previously did actually rape her. This is overall a tender and romantic scene; while we do not get her narration here, it is clear that Haley is enthusiastically consenting and that the couple's intimacy has deepened further after Leo's disclosure. But it is also a scene where the horror elements of the earlier parts of the series are not conquered, fixed, or erased: they remain active *as part of* the HEA.

The concluding lines of Leo's narration are legible both as an enactment of consensual fantasy and as a statement of genuine control over Haley, and the intended reading is not obvious: "There's nothing to stop me. Not now. Not ever" (343). I suggest that *Beast*'s use of intertextuality as an interpretive guide opens the possibility for readers to actively manage their interpretation of the Gothic and romance elements of the text. Because intertexts function as an adjunct to the text and are not accessed by or available to all readers, even readers who do access a particular intertext can choose how far to incorporate it in their reading: one reader might find the Beauty and the Beast intertext reassuring, seeing the ending scene as the final breaking of the curse that makes Leo no longer a beast, while another might give less importance to the intertext and focus on the Gothic elements that remain present in the couple's interactions. These two readers might give opposing interpretations of Leo's final lines. In this sense, while *Beast*'s use of intertextuality allows for an interpretation of the HEA as normatively romantic, it does not enforce it. Contemporary romance often uses content warnings to guide readers to or away from texts with potentially difficult subject matter, but this device makes it possible for the reader to

negotiate their own experience *within* the text—what we might think of as a kind of darkness dial.

Without the option of an ameliorating intertext—even the alkali fly story only expresses that there are no better options for either character—*Descent*'s ending is frightening because of, not despite, the fact that it is an HEA. While, as in *Beast*, it is clear that Hallie enthusiastically consents in the final sex scene, it is also clear that it would not make a difference if she did not—as underscored by the dedication of her book to Calvin: "You inspire me and lift me up, even when I beg you not to" (468). The happy ending is entirely enabled by the FMC's willingness to accept and enjoy the MMC's behaviour rather than to try to change it, meaning that while Hallie and Calvin are experiencing a diegetically happy ending, the reader's experience of the ending as happy depends on a similar act of interpretive acceptance: the option for textual negotiation presented in *Beast* is much less available here.

Both these happy endings, then, continue the text's Gothic elements not in spite of or even alongside, but *through* a representation of romantic and domestic bliss. The HEAs of dark romances are not always as ambivalent as they are in these two texts, but while the ending of *Descent* centres horror to an extent that is unusual (though not unique) for the subgenre, *Beast*'s ending is more reflective of the endings of many other dark romances. Contemporary dark romance, then, allows for a conception of Gothic romance that sees romance and the Gothic not as opposing sides, but as intertwined systems that feed and fuel each other. While the use of intertexts can make it possible for readers to perceive a dark romance's HEA as more or less dark, the romance elements remain a potential source of complexity, transgression, and horror. In these texts, romance does not triumph over, dilute, or defang the Gothic; it lends power to it and draws power from it. These texts are Gothic not in spite of being romances, but because they are romances.

Examined together, these two novels illustrate how contemporary dark romance mobilises its Gothic elements through the form's most recognisable promise: the HEA. While popular Gothic romance has often been read as a mode in which romance moderates or renders "safe" the texts' Gothic excesses, these two texts suggest an interpretive model in which the HEA itself becomes a site of affective instability. In *Beast*, intertextual frameworks provide readers with interpretive tools that allow them to negotiate and potentially soften the text's elements of sexual violence and power imbalance, even as those elements persist into the ending. *Descent*, by contrast, withholds such frameworks, meaning that a reader will confront a happy ending that is legible as such only through an acceptance of the MMC's absolute control. In both cases, the experience of reading is shaped not simply by what the texts depict, but by how they guide or restrict readers' interpretations of what is happening. Rather than asking whether dark romance is empowering or regressive, this article has argued for attending to how it might feel, and why: how Gothic horror and romantic and erotic fulfilment are made mutually constitutive, and how the HEA can activate rather than resolve the lingering unease produced by the entwining of romance and the Gothic.

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[1] In line with common romance-reader practices, this article will use the abbreviations "MMC" and "FMC" for "male main character" and "female main character."

[2] See for instance María T. Ramos-García's work on the connections between paranormal romance and the urban fantasy genre (2020**)**, and Sanjana Basker's discussion of the "quaintly domestic" elements of the contemporary monster romance (2023).

[3] Earlier scholarship sometimes uses the term "dark romance" in ways that overlap with paranormal romance, as in Lorna Jowett's 2013 work on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but the sense of the term I describe here is now emerging in popular romance scholarship. See for instance Ashleigh Taylor Sullivan's "From Darcy to Dickheads: Why Do Women Love the Bad Boy?" from 2022, theses by Teagan Bailey Fortune and Janeth Hernandez (both 2024), and Katie Deane's recent critical "primer" "Dark Romance: An Introduction" (2026) (2).

[4] For one illustrative example, see the thread "No HEA?" in the RomanceBooks subreddit, in which the thread author requests titles of books without HEAs. Multiple contributors comment that a book without an HEA would by definition not be part of the romance genre, while some note that some older category romances may have more complicated endings (u/Nervous-Struggle-762, n.p.).

[5] Samantha Garner describes a typical trope graphic as follows: "In the centre of a square image is a book's cover, with several arrows drawn from the cover to a list of tropes or elements that surround it. Some examples include: 'strong female characters,' 'depression representation,' 'multiple POVs,' 'slow burn romance,' 'cozy fantasy,' or 'tarot card symbolism.'" (n.p.)

[6] For instance, for a discussion of paratexts in earlier category romance, see An Goris**,** **"**Hidden Codes of Love: The Materiality of the Category Romance Novel," *Belphégor*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2015. For a series of blog articles on romance paratexts from a Genettian perspective, see "Paratexts, Part One: Judging a Book by its Back Cover," *Close Reading Romance*, 1 June 2021, https://closereadingromance.com/2021/06/01/paratexts-part-one-judging-a-book-by-its-back-cover/.

[7] Kitty Thomas describes her 2010 novel *Comfort Food* as "the OG dark romance" (n.p.), which I think is accurate; prior to *Comfort Food* the term does not seem to have been widely used in the specific sense described here. Katie Deane's history of the emergence of the dark romance supports this.

[8] Albeit in Norwegian, I discuss the distinction between normative, realistic, and fantasy depictions of nonconsent in erotic romance, and what the negotiation of these textual levels of reality mean for the reader, in Kvistad (2017).

[9] I.e., one depicting a relationship between a male and a female main character. While the heteronormative gendered power dynamics I discuss here are common in dark romance and are particularly salient in my two central texts, the subgenre also includes queer and polyamorous dark romances, which explore different configurations of desire and power.

[10] I discuss Rochester's injuries and their relation to his sexual dynamic with Jane in Kvistad (2012), 69.

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