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## Paternal Structures of the Romance

**ABSTRACT:** The paper is a critical analysis of romance fiction in relation to parental structures visible in patriarchal codes and paternal tropes romance novels pivot around. As such, it provides an insight into the narrative patterns the romance uses to sustain patriarchy as well as recreate the father-daughter-like relationship at the center of cultural practices of love.

**KEY WORDS:** the romance, female pleasure, paternal tropes of care, patriarchy

Romance fiction, often referred to as “works of the Mills and Boon type” (Saunders qtd. in VIVANCO 11), despite its debased literary status, is a genre of a solid market position and dedicated readership. Although it attracts readers of both sexes, it is mainly intended for females aged from 30 (or younger) to 54 who represent various class, race, and occupation, and who profess different life values and social ideals. As literature written mainly by women, for women and about women, romances, especially in their modern incarnations, inform about the nature of female pleasures as well as reflect on the character and potential of women’s fantasies with respect to love and amorous/erotic fulfillment. In terms of narrative structure, they are, therefore, believed to be perhaps the most gendered type of fiction, which, as critics observe, has provided a template for modern practices of love (PEARCE 521) and “constitute[s] unobtrusive measures of male and female sexual psychologies” (SALMON 218).

The popularity of the romance novel, currently measured in millions of copies sold worldwide every year, reflects on expectations that contemporary women have developed about romantic relationships. According to Carol THURSTON, the romance is a main source of knowledge about “current social realities in pairing heroine with a [...] hero” (1987: i), and is often treated as a guide (and guidance) for a desired love model as well as a reflection of social and cultural trends constitutive for it. Despite the changing social position of the sexes, the genre still leans onto the happily-ever-after trope. As Ellis and Symons observe,

romances chronicle the rituals of bonding “in which the heroine expends time and effort to find [...] a man who embodies the physical, psychological and social characteristics that constituted high male mate value during the course of human evolutionary history” (qtd. in SALMON 223), and, as REGIS contends, “to accomplish the marriage that is the goal of the marriage plot,” that is, the ultimate goal of each romance narrative (9).

An interesting thing about the romance novel is that being an essentially feminine narrative, it emerges from fundamentally masculine concepts. They are expressed in patriarchal values (e.g. betrothal) and the paternal mode of coupling (need of protection and care) that romance narratives encode in the cultural image (and imagery) of feminine amorous emotionality. In this paper, I shall be examining the paternal constructions of the romance by giving an insight into structural paternalism reflected in an external (horizontal) frame of the genre’s narrative scheme (themes, tropes, etc.) as well as in the internal (vertical) organization of the narrative, the central element of which is the father-daughter-like relationship between a hero and a heroine. My standpoint that the romance recreates female childhood experiences and women’s social subordination will follow the feminist psychoanalytical reading of romance, critical about the centrality of the father figure in popular female romance writing. It will, however, defy the criticism by arguing that the recreation of paternal and patriarchal models in romance fantasy provides women with space to overcome gender constraints and help them deal with subjugation through new and creative scenarios the genre of popular romance has offered for fatherly control.

## Patronization as a Style

The word *romance*, when used in a literary context, articulates “a tale of wild adventures in love” (SCOTT 129) manifested through a wide range of texts including “Greek ‘romances’, medieval romance, Gothic bourgeois romances of the 1840s, late nineteenth-century women’s romances and mass-produced romance fiction now” (Radford qtd. in VIVANCO 12). Its current form, however, has been defined by the novels of the Harlequin (Mills and Boon) company which have provided templates for most of romance writing today from chick-lit to erotica. In its modern shape, romance is a story about a relationship between two people that is conditioned by contemporary cultural practices of affection and the generic imagery of love. Both conditions create a formula to be recreated in every romance text to render what critics refer to as an ideal romance plot, which, as STOREY has it,

is one in which an intelligent and independent woman with a good sense of humour is overwhelmed, after much suspicion and distrust, and some cruelty and violence, by the love of an intelligent, tender and good-humoured man, who in the course of their relationship is transformed from an emotional pre-literate to someone who can *care* for her and *nurture* her in ways that traditionally we would expect only from a woman to a man.

48; my italics

This narrative pattern of romance fiction, earlier identified also by Tania MODLESKI (1982) and Janice RADWAY (1984), speaks volumes about the demand towards a modern relationship where great part of the amorous passion is bound to the provision of care and general expertise expected from a man. In much theoretical description of the romance, an ideal male protagonist is presented as “a handsome, strong, experienced, wealthy man, older than [the heroine] by ten to fifteen years” who is “mocking, cynical, contemptuous, often hostile, and even somewhat brutal,” but who finally “reveals his love for the heroine” (MODLESKI 2008: 28). These features signalize physical and emotional patronization from a hero, often exerted through his dominance over a heroine. This dominance, usually marked by the hero’s excessive self-confidence and supervisory tendencies, is, however, highly expected in the romantic plot as it assures the “proper” progression of the hero-heroine relationship: from the start (incentive on the part of a man) to the deployment of amorous practices (rituals of courtship). The hero’s fatherly maturity is therefore crucial for the proper development of romance narrative as it defines a modern female fantasy of a mate and informs about the nature of the bond(age) women wish to experience in real life, or at the very least, through the literary utopia.

Because romance is believed to be “principally a form of entertainment” (CUDDON 615) designed “only to give pleasure” (CERVANTES qtd. in FUCHS 86), romance fiction may be seen as what specifies the kind of pleasure anticipated by a contemporary female mind. Janice RADWAY speaks of reading romances as “a space within which a woman can be entirely on her own, preoccupied with her personal needs, desires and pleasure” which, “although [...] vicarious, [...] is nonetheless real” (100). SALMON paraphrases Arcand to call romances “pornography consumed exclusively by women” (219). In psychological terms, reading romances is a form of therapeutic escapism through which women can re-experience life scenarios in different interpretations. If these scenarios prioritize excessive care and nurture and make women desire affectionate supervision, then the pleasure of romance narrative should be seen as reproductive of an old cultural psychopathology, identified as a search for fatherly love.

To rehearse a definition that conveys this psychopathology, the romance is a tale of an amorous relationship enacted (on the part of a heroine) and consumed (on the part of a reader) by a female subject out of the need to re-experience

an Oedipal phase with a “perfect” mate, who becomes an “idealized” extension of the father-figure, in conditions that Rosalind COWARD defines as “power with subordination” (196). In this relationship, a heroine receives a treatment of a child (and re-experiences childhood innocence and carelessness) but from the position of a conscious contributor who controls, defines and willingly accepts the forms of pampering and indulgence she is offered. This model of an amorous relationship, as prevalent in romance writing (and cultural practice) has encouraged the development of a love fantasy that, although it draws on patriarchal ideals and paternal trope, transgresses them by constant shifts of agency and modes of execution. Unlike in a father-child relationship, in a hero-heroine union, women are to a large extent active and aware contributors to the relationship model that in romance fiction is an effect of their dreams and wishes. How these dreams and wishes have been installed in them, however, is a problem referring to the working of cultural codes that control love relations.

### The Patriarchal Code

‘Isabella Swan?’ He looked up at me through his impossibly long lashes, his golden eyes soft but, somehow, still scorching. ‘I promise to love you forever – every single day of forever. Will you marry me?’

Stephenie MEYER, *Eclipse*

‘Miss Tanner [...] I want to help you and protect you and to do that I need you to listen to me. Do you understand this, right?’

Cerys DU LYS, *The Billionaire’s Paradigm: His Absolute Purpose*

Romance fiction operates within a frame of a patriarchal code by evoking two leitmotifs of patriarchy: the chivalric ethos and bourgeois economy. The presence of the chivalric tradition in the romance is related to the cultural ideal of courtship, much of which entails knightly practices, the remnants of which may be recognized in customs such as kneeling at the proposal or the exchange of vows. They are also reflected in relationship virtues like faithfulness, honor, bondage and companionship which have continued through the Renaissance to the modern practice of mating.

A vital aspect of the chivalric tradition that prevails in contemporary love codes is protectiveness, associated with a male position in an amorous endeavor. As reflected in most romances, a companionate relationship between two people (of the opposite sex, but that relates also to the homosexual romance reality) is usually executed by means of the protective conduct of a man (or a partner of a manly function) who is expected to initiate the union and empower it with the

sense of care and security. That age-old ideal has been effectively sanctioned since the Victorian times, when a romantic bondage was expected to entail “not only [...] love but also [...] mutual loyalty, duty, and protection.” As such, it “focused on creating a home life that was a fortress against the corrupting forces of the outside world” and aimed to “create a private realm of comfort and happiness [...]” where “women were [...] expected to submit to the will of their husbands” (PHEGLEY 6).

The model of man's care and protectiveness, present in the romance plots through a literary and cultural practice, belongs to the discourse of bourgeoisie ideals that preach women's “subordination [...] to the property of personal interest of men [...]” (KELLY 59). Matrimony, which has been the epitome of the ideals, is in the center of the romance narrative and concludes almost every romance novel. Pamela Regis stresses the importance of marriage in a romantic narrative due to its positive resolution for the process of courtship that readers anticipate from this type of plot.

A scene or series of scenes scattered throughout the [romantic] novel establishes for the reader the reason that [a] couple must marry. The attraction keeps the heroine and hero involved long enough to surmount the barriers. [...] Romance novels end happily. Readers insist on it. The happy ending is the formal feature of the romance novel that virtually everyone can identify with.

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The connection between marriage and happy ending is believed to be an effect of the working of patriarchal structures which the romance novel resonates with by sustaining the power and “magic” of betrothal. The positive connotation the romance gives to matrimony supports the social system of control whereby women remain under male authority represented by the husband. The formation of a romantic relationship can be therefore seen as a step in a transition from one state of male domination to another as it embodies a woman's passage from parental supervision to the supervision of a spouse who is expected to take over the role of an instructor and a guardian earlier played by the father. Whereas the father-daughter relationship of care and nurture is sanctioned by blood ties, the relationship with a mate is sealed by the power of a vow. Founded on the performative ambiguity of “forever,” the vow is expressed “in language which is chiefly made by men” (HARDY 276), and as such, it adds to the forms of control sanctioned by the bondage and romanticized in the narrative of “the happily ever after.”

As included in the romantic narrative, marriage preserves two fundamental aspects of bourgeois morality: the symbolic economy of sex and the literal economy of home. The first one is responsible for the deployment of pleasure, which, as most romances suggest, may be only efficient in a fully committed relationship, that is, in the conditions of physical exclusivity and safety. The

second one, supportive of the former, allows for the proper management of desires with respect to biological conditions of the sexes and the demand of social organization. In the study on the cultural suppression of female sexuality, BAUMEISTER and TWENGE point out that “the sex drive of the human female is naturally and innately stronger than that of the male, and it once posed a powerfully destabilizing threat to the possibility of social order” (166). Matrimony has therefore been a means of exerting control over female desires to help bourgeois societies maintain social stability. This stability has been secured with the proper “utilization” of a woman’s body, possible due the father-husband control executed by means of the cultural-literary narrative of courtship-marriage-home.

### Paternal Tropes

Lucent dipped the spoon in my strawberry granola yogurt concoction and wiped the bottom off on the side so none of it would spill. Lifting it up, guiding it towards my mouth, he waited. For...? He gave me a look. The look. A brief nod, lifted eyebrows, tight lips. I opened my mouth and he slipped the spoon between my lips. I closed my mouth and licked at the spoon, pulling the yogurt onto my tongue.

Cerys DU LYS, *The Billionaire’s Paradigm: His Absolute Purpose*

Lifting me up, carrying me in his arms, he walked down the steps with me. I lay cradled against him, my cheek on his shoulder, my arms wrapped around his neck. I nuzzled against him, trying to ease away his anger and my fear, but neither of those happened. Lucent’s jaw clenched, then loosened, and clenched, but he held me tight and safe regardless.

Cerys DU LYS, *The Billionaire’s Paradigm: His Absolute Purpose*

Patriarchal structures of romantic relationships are additionally reinforced with paternal tropes of care, characteristic for love rituals enacted in romance fiction. Many romance critics echo CHODOROW (1978) in stating that cultural practices of love and courtship mirror behaviors traditionally associated with a parent-child relationship (RADWAY, STOREY, MODLESKI). Indeed, the hero-heroine interaction in romances imitates (or extends by imitation) the type of treatment children normally expect and receive from their parents. In this way, many love tropes or romantic gestures, used to signalize an occurrence of an amorous emotion, are mostly a translation of parental tending and a recreation of the assistance we experience in childhood. Because in the romance the providers of these gestures are normally men, the relationship trope romances use and sustain in love narratives is paternal, that is, one that resembles a father-daughter relation-

ship, recreated either from the childhood memories or wishes of a female partner. As STOREY summarizes after Radway,

romance is a fantasy in which the hero is eventually the source of care and attention not experienced by the reader since she was a pre-Oedipal child. In this way, romance reading can be viewed as a means by which woman can vicariously, through the hero-heroine relationship, experience the emotional succor which they themselves are expected to provide to others without adequate reciprocation for themselves in their normal day-to-day existence.

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The rituals of care sported in romances usually embrace activities connected with basic life needs such as staying nourished, staying warm, staying clean or protected. These needs are satisfied through the acts of feeding (that also include making and organizing food), dressing or undressing (often for sexual interaction but also strictly to assure comfort), carrying (when the hero uplifts the heroine to move her from place to place) and caress. The latter often engages elements of purely emotional expression of love like sweet-talking (“my brave girl,” “good baby”), which strengthens the patronizing and paternal character of the hero-heroine relationship sustained through the physical romantic tropes of care.

The position of the female character in the romance is the position of a receiver subjugated to the man’s idea of courtship and forms of communicating affection he imposes on the female character through the control of care. The feminist criticism of the romance novel has accused the romance of promoting female subordination and dependency, contending that, if in a cultural practice “[w]omen are contoured by their conditioning to abandon autonomy and seek guidance” (GREER 103), the romance novel preserves the female oppression by romanticizing her excessive infantilism and in this way acting against the liberation of the female self. The portrayals of womanhood in the romance novel are often theorized in terms of passivity, powerlessness and childishness (REGIS 5). As such, they are condemned for cultivating the assumptions of the Oedipal fantasy that disempowers woman’s sexual and emotional autonomy.

The myth of penis envy, even if devaluated in cultural criticism, is actively present in love narratives (either in a traumatic or affirmative context). In the romance, it is perhaps most articulated through the features of a male protagonist, who is older than the heroine and accredited with “power” in a physical, professional and emotional sense: “He was the perfect specimen of a man. He was all muscles and all power” (Todd, *Only for You*). Physical and mental strength are attributes that dominate in the description of a romance hero and are connected with the woman’s idealization of the father figure in her transition towards sexu-

al puberty, which in turn symptomatizes the Oedipus complex<sup>1</sup> (WIELAND 155f.). Also, this preference for powerful masculinity (again, the symbol of fatherhood) is for a woman an attempt to assert her independence from motherly protection and take over her position in the mother-father dyad. A strong male character in romance fiction (“an ideal hero,” RADWAY 97f.) is, or at least may be read as, an extension of the idealized father who returns in a form of a mate to assure safety in a sexual encounter. As such, this figure allows for overcoming the castration frustration and mother’s erotic dominance, as well as assures the care and attention a girl or a young woman deprives herself of in the course of the symbolic and literal detachment from her mother.

What may surprise in the popularity of the trope of paternal care in the romance novel today is not only its nature but also its potency. It may seem strange that after all the suffrage and emancipatory movements for the vindication of women’s position of the past several decades, women still desire masculine protection. Narrative representations of female bond fantasies articulate the women’s need to be taken care of very consistently. Also, they specify the manner of the care’s execution, which again, repeated through the narrative pattern of the romance plot, fuels the plot’s development. Two most frequent manifestations of care employed in romance narratives are food provision and carrying. When it comes to nourishment, many romances, especially the contemporary ones, use feeding to communicate the capability on the part of a hero to transgress traditional gender roles and establish new care standards. Narrative contexts for doing so vary from story to story but most often serve four purposes: (1) the unveiling of the hero’s down-to-earth self: “As Amy walked down the stairs to the kitchen, she heard the sounds of cooking and someone whistling. She could already smell the bacon and the home fries. [...] She almost fell over when she walked into the kitchen and saw Ethan standing over the stove, flipping French toast in a pan” (JAMES); (2) reversing the routine and compensating for emotional lack: “‘Are you hungry? I brought us food.’ ‘Will you feed me?’ I asked hopeful. He laughed, ‘Yes. No crying, though, alright? No being sad’” (DU LYS); (3) creating exotic circumstances or manifesting the hero’s readiness to servitude: “The door opened, and Mark came in carrying a tray that had a bowl of steaming soup and a piece of thick crusty bread. ‘Courtesy of La Mer Catering,’ he announced gravely, as though he were a butler.” (LEE, *Counterfeit Girlfriend*);

<sup>1</sup> A more suitable term to describe a girl’s sexual attraction to her father (and her dependence on the father figure in the formation of sexual/love desires), would be the Jungian concept of “Electra complex,” which was, nevertheless, rejected by feminist criticism of the romance due to the strong reliance of the criticism on Freudian psychoanalysis and its accompanying terminology. According to Freud, Oedipus complex equally renders the problem of a sexual fixation on a parent of the opposite sex for boys (mother-fixated) and for girls (father-fixated), and describes the complexity of desire triads for children of both sexes (daughter-father-mother and son-mother-father). See WIELAND 90.

and (4) declaring the hero's commitment: "[...] I'm sure I'll be taking you to breakfast every morning. Dinner, lunch... whenever you're hungry, I'm here to feed you" (ARKADIE).

Carrying is a trope of care that serves one main purpose, namely, to manifest the hero's physical supremacy over the heroine. As such, it helps define the romance's conception of masculinity (which is hyper-masculinity or super-masculinity) as well as establish the role of the hero in a romantic relationship (marked by initiative, support, and supervision): "Good, I shall carry you to the books. Where are we going?" "You aren't really going to carry me, are you?" "We're still on our date," he said, as if this made it any better. "Lucent, people don't carry each other around on dates, you know." "Yes, well..." "Where to?" he asked, ignoring me. I groaned and pointed. "That way." "Indeed." And we went" (DU LYS). Due to the emotional meaning of carrying, it is perhaps the most appreciated gesture of romantic courtship which women anticipate (in life as in fiction) and treat as a source of the hero's tenderness, often hidden under his uber-masculinity. It is therefore expected from a romance plot to include the scenes of carrying into the narrative of affection, either to complete the hero's masculine self or to satisfy the heroine's Oedipal fantasy of care. "And then I imagined him carrying me off to his office." (NUSS). In most romances, carrying works as a means to ignite a relationship between the hero and the heroine or to facilitate its progression. It often occurs in the form of rescue (when the hero saves the heroine from suffering, trouble or danger): "The gentleman offered his services; and perceiving that her modesty declined what her situation rendered necessary, took her up in his arms without farther delay, and carried her down the hill" (AUSTEN). Also, it is used as an opening or foreplay to erotic interaction: "He smiled and lifted me into his arms, carrying me into the bedroom" (NUSS). Whichever way it is used, carrying resembles the fatherly protection a girl experiences (or wants to experience) as a child, and is a reminder of the safety and support traditionally provided by a man to a woman. Carrying assures security ("I always felt like someone was watching over me, protecting me," DU LYS) as well as assistance and guardianship ("Catherine." His deep voice echoes in the eerie quiet. The sound of his voice is my undoing. A sob breaks through my chest as Ashton catches me while I fall apart," MICHAELS) women seek in the rituals of courtship. The attractiveness of carrying is also that, in opposition to other gestures of care, carrying transcends the practicality of the acts of care and emphasizes the emotional signification all these acts convey in the post-Oedipal, adult contexts of mating.

Paternal care in romantic fiction is also rendered by means of non-physical gestures, like intellectual guidance. In romances, the mate is often a source of knowledge or expertise that supports the heroine on her way to maturity (either emotional or professional). As such, the hero manifests intellectual supremacy over the heroine, becoming the teacher or tutor, who uses his education or gen-

eral know-how to explain to the heroine the surrounding world. "Harry lies back and rests his head on his arms. 'There's the Milky Way,' he says. 'Where? I can't see it.' 'Look, there,' and he takes her hand and points it up to the Milky Way so she can see. Alice gasps. 'It's beautiful,' and they lie there looking up at the stars, in silence, holding hands" (GREEN). The intellectual deficiency of the heroine (manifested by her lack of proper education or life experience) symbolizes the intellectual inferiority of a girl in the father-daughter relationship. Like in childhood dependency on her parents, in the romantic relationship, the woman often relies on the man's worldview and understanding of life. In the romance novel, this dependency also extends to the sexual expertise she develops from basics along the relationship.

An interesting aspect of the father-daughter-like relation between the hero and heroine in a romantic bond is punishment. Acts of emotional and physical "maltreatment" abound in romantic fiction and are connected with two contradictory occurrences: first, with obstacles on the way to the couple's happy union, usually due to a misunderstanding that obscures the emotions of love and hinders the progression of the relationship (it is when much of emotional punishment takes place and is executed in the form of silent-treatment or ignorance on the part of the hero or heroine); second, with sexual interaction, where physical punishment is employed to allow for the expression of desires or erotic needs. With the boom of popular erotica in the 2000s, punishment became an appreciated element of romantic narrative, seen as a form of expressing love with regard to an emotional as well as sexual growth of a romantic couple. Again, this form of physical dynamic resembles the parent-child coexistence, in which a father is the executor of pain and humiliation, who inflicts physical penalty according to his preferences or liking. In romantic fiction, the hero, although he brings punishment to sexual interaction, unlike the father is the executor of pleasure that the heroine accepts as hers and expects to happen: "'You want to be punished,' he said quietly" (PARKER).

## Conclusion: Transgressive Subordination

Despite the apparently reductionist approach to women's situation, the paternal/patriarchal structures conveyed in romance fiction carry a transgressive charge, often ignored or overlooked by cultural critics. According to post-feminist readings of romance fiction (e.g. Rosalind Coward and Pamela Regis), the presence of pre-Oedipal templates in romance narratives allows for revisiting male-female relations with regard to negative aspects of patriarchy and paternalism, and for their complete reinvention through the fantasy of a romantic plot.

The fact that romances employ elements of paternal care into the hero-heroine relationship proves that women reject the circumstances of their parental and marital situations. Also, they express a need of a complete transformation of the cultural architecture of love, which, although it may retain its cornerstone ideals, should reinvent its practice anew. By reversing the stigma of motherhood care that women carry into a relationship and perform throughout, romances communicate the faultiness of social and cultural imageries of genders as well as act against cultural concepts of gender's "natural dispositions". A caring and nurturing hero is for a romance reader a symbol of a positive resolution of her Oedipal tension she may want to transfer and re-experience in real life, contributing to the change in the social practice.

The transgressive power of romance writing lies in its potential to exploit patriarchal (social) and paternal (psychological) codes of male-female relationships by allowing women to re-experience patriarchy beyond "the damage inflicted by patriarchal power" (Coward qtd. in STOREY 67). In romance fiction, women "achieve a sort of power" that let them step outside the dependence of a child and receive the paternal care from their partners from a position of an equal/active contributor. As such, they partake in the hero-heroine relationship without the "guilt and fear that may come from that childhood world" and enjoy the protection and care, they so much desired as children, away from conditions of inferiority and obedience (67). In the romance, psychological and sexual maturity grants women a position that she was denied as a child and that she is often deprived of in her real life adult romantic relations. By offering an imagery of care and pleasure that the primary beneficiary of which are women, romance is a promise of "a secure world", in which, to paraphrase Rosalind Coward, there is dependence with safety and subordination with power (67). In this way, the romance is fiction with a strong feminist kernel. As Mark BROWN (2016) observes after Val Derbyshire, romances "are largely stories of feminist triumph, with the brooding male hero often forced to acknowledge his sexism and change his ways." Therefore, romance novels should "be considered as feminist texts that are the literature of protest rather than mere escapism."

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