



# Post-Trump masculinity in popular romance novels

Johanna Kluger<sup>1</sup> 

Published online: 11 March 2024  
© The Author(s) 2024

## Abstract

As an almost exclusively female-dominated medium, the popular romance novel has, throughout its history, allowed women writers to “amplify their political voice” (Teo, 2016, p. 102), especially when they could not actively participate in politics. Commonly, writers fashion storylines that reflect and process concerns from the real world in a fictional context. Using the Regency Romance as an example and based on Jayashree Kamblé’s theory that romance novels have a shared DNA that evolves in response to social and cultural influences, this paper first defines the figure of the romance hero in the pre-Trump era to segue into analysing selected novels published by Tessa Dare in 2011 (*A night to surrender*) and Sarah MacLean in 2012 (*A rogue by any other name*). This figure is then compared and contrasted with the incarnations of the hero in these authors’ publications from 2017 (*The day of the duchess* by MacLean) and 2019 (*The wallflower wager* by Dare) to map how his phenotype has evolved to reflect a shift in cultural perceptions regarding sex and sexual power dynamics. As I intend to show, in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election and the “#MeToo” movement, the new hero’s phenotype differs specifically in the expression of gendered power and sexuality. He is less forceful than his predecessors and places heavy emphasis on the heroine’s enthusiastic consent and pleasure.

**Keywords** Romance novels · Historical subgenres · US politics · Romance hero · Genre fiction · Sexual dynamics

---

✉ Johanna Kluger  
jkluger@uni-bonn.de

<sup>1</sup> Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, Bonn, Germany

## Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States of America caused a lot of upheaval in not only American but also international politics. The event sparked protests that spanned the globe (Ahuja, 2017) and inspired artists to express their concerns and fears through their art (Kwun, 2018). As Trump prepares to run for re-election in 2024, the political climate in the United States has been irrevocably changed. And artists keep responding to this change as well—including romance novel authors. “For people who are unsettled,” romance author Mia Sosa says, “it’s comforting to know that your experience reading a book will ultimately end in a happy ending. [...] In the end, it will all work out” (Herman, 2020). Romance novels provide a break from stressful lives, and romance readers and writers alike have been using the genre to process the world they live in and the effects of political changes on their lives.

In this article, I illustrate how selected popular romance novels act as both a reflection of and reaction to the social and political climate of the time they were written in by analysing their figure of the romance hero, specifically how that figure has changed since before the 2016 presidential election and its fallout. For this purpose, I lean heavily on Jayashree Kamblé’s *Making meaning in popular romance: An epistemology* (2014) to trace the social influences that have shaped the hero figure in the early 2010s. Two novels published by two authors act as examples of the pre-Trump hero: *A night to surrender* by Tessa Dare, published in 2011, and *A rogue by any other name* by Sarah MacLean, published in 2012. Having defined the hero phenotype they present, I then contrast these works with two novels these authors published in 2017 (*The day of the duchess*, MacLean) and 2019 (*The wallflower wager*, Dare). All four are historical novels set in the English Regency period or, rather, the version of the Regency that is understood to be the foundation of this specific subgenre (Hackett & Coghlan 2021, p. 5). Through my analysis of these four incarnations of the romance hero, I show that, in response to the 2016 election as well as the MeToo movement, the qualities associated with this character have shifted towards a less domineering and more nurturing hero who respects and supports the heroine’s independence and agency, and places a marked emphasis on her enthusiastic consent and pleasure.

Naturally, the proposed thesis cannot encompass the entirety of the popular romance genre—the sheer number of romance novels published each year makes it impossible for one person to read even a majority of them. I chose instead to focus on these two authors who express their political views through their work because this means that these views are representative of a meaningful percentage of readers. It should also be noted that, despite the romance genre’s immediacy owed to the very fast publication cycle (a book a year for many authors), four years are not enough to cement a relatively subtle development like this into the genre’s genetic code. Whether or not the changes I point out are part of a fundamental shift or a passing trend born out of a specific moment in time remains to be seen.

## Romance genre and politics

Estimates show that popular romance is the most sought-after fiction genre—romance novels account for a third of all mass-market and trade paperback sales in the United States of America (Burger, 2018), a number that does not include self-published titles or ebooks. Harlequin alone releases over 100 new titles a month (Harlequin Company Information 2023), so there is not only a wealth of material to look back on, but the genre continues to be of interest to millions of readers across the world, as titles from major publishers are translated and distributed internationally. What sets popular romance apart from other kinds of genre fiction is the fact that it is perhaps the most personal of the genres. In Western culture, the romance story is a thread that weaves through recorded history and resurfaces continually (Roach, 2016, p. 3). The concept of One True Love can be considered a “foundational or idealised story about the meaning and purpose of life” (Roach, 2016, p. 4), visible in the way society views and media portrays romantic love. Platonic relationships are rarely afforded the same significance or narrative weight or risk being interpreted as romantic anyway because, culturally, friendships do not have the same gravity as romantic relationships (Karandashev, 2015, p. 8). We consider a person’s first romantic relationship in terms of a rite of passage and implicitly tend to expect that everyone will find a partner and get married at some point in their lives, and not doing so is generally viewed to be outside the norm and requiring justification (Reynoso, 2017). Romance is clearly a cultural cornerstone, and the popular romance novel, therefore, engages with subject matter that is not only omnipresent in the everyday media landscape but also pivotal in many, if not most, people’s lives, making the genre accessible and appealing to a wide range of readers. Although all romance novels share the same basic characteristics—the courtship narrative and the happy ending (Regis, 2003, p. 19)—readers can otherwise choose from an apparently limitless variety of time periods, subject matters, and heat levels (the amount of sexual content) according to their preferences. It would certainly be an exaggeration to say that romance novels are universally appealing, but the sheer number of units sold each year is significant enough that analysing how the genre has portrayed topics like love and sexuality offers insight into how these topics have been viewed in Western society.

That is not to say that romance novels are exact reflections of readers’—and, by extension, women’s—desires or fantasies. To readers and scholars of the genre, the actual appeal and value of the romance novel lies in a more complex reflection of desires and fantasies that do not need to correspond to lived reality. Catherine Roach writes about the “deep work” that romance novels do for their readers (2010, p. 2), suggesting that the act of reading satisfies not just on the surface level but can also function as an aid to processing more complex emotions and real-world situations. In a patriarchal society, Roach argues, heterosexual women have an inherently paradoxical relationship with heterosexual men who act as both the oppressors in a system that disadvantages women and the potential romantic and sexual partners with whom they want to have a happy, lasting relationship. The romance novel can offer a way to reconcile the two by acknowledging the limitations placed on women by the culture around them but ultimately refusing to accept them (Roach, 2010, p. 2); in romance novels, “the woman always wins” (Krentz, 1992, p. 5). “The woman,” in this case,

is the heroine who has to navigate a world of disadvantages and constraints imposed by patriarchal structures but who, in the end, achieves her goals and dreams anyway. Although the courtship plot is the focus of the romance novel, it is often not the heroine's initial goal. She may want to start a new career or save a family business, and the fulfilment of that motivation is as much part of her Happily Ever After as the relationship with the hero who supports her and contributes to her success (Roach, 2016, p. 166). The fantasy of a romance novel lies not just in the perfect, rich, handsome hero who is devoted exclusively to the heroine's needs and desires but also in the possibility of "having it all." In addition to the appeal of this fantasy of reparation for having to live in a patriarchal society, as proposed by Roach, romantic fiction allows women writers to "amplify their political voice" (Teo, 2016, p. 102); especially in times when women were not allowed to participate in politics, this medium that was almost exclusively a female domain offered a space to engage in discourse not just through the works themselves but also in reading circles and lending libraries, and that tradition has continued after women achieved equal political rights.

As such, the genre is inherently political because it has always demanded better conditions for women's lives, both explicitly and implicitly. Both contemporary and historical romance novels ("contemporary" meaning the narrative takes place in the time it was written, as opposed to "historicals," which are set in a past era, like the English Regency) offer a space for writers to broach issues like reproductive rights or sexual harassment in the workplace. They are not just fantasies but can also act as a lens to "observe one's own time historically" (Kamlé, 2014, p. 42). This can take any shape, but, typically, writers imbue the characters of their historical romance novels, especially the heroine, with modern character traits and value systems. In romance novels written in the last two decades, a noticeable shift has occurred when it comes to the heroine's sexuality: heroines now are more likely to have a fairly modern understanding of and attitude to sex, are less likely to be completely in the dark about their own bodies and the sexual act, and there appears to be increased demand for non-virgin heroines in historicals (Montgomery, 2016).

### The hero figure

As a "spectacular representation of masculinity" (Allan, 2016, p. 25), the romance hero has to not only exhibit traits that are positively associated with masculinity but do so on an extraordinary level. His masculinity is essential to his ability to fulfil the romantic fantasy; he is the perfect life partner *because* of it. The central premise of the popular romance is such that the inevitable Happily Ever After is as happy an ending as possible, providing the heroine with security and happiness not just in love but also by fulfilling her financial, social, and sexual needs by means of her committed relationship with the hero. Departures from this ideal exist, such as working-class heroes or those who do not conform to the standards of male beauty, but these deviations are marked and explicitly addressed through tropes like Beauty and the Beast, style romances, or part of the conflict stemming from class differences. The unmarked, basic blueprint of the popular romance hero demands a character who is not just in line with Goffmann's pattern of the ideal man—"young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully

employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports” (1963, p. 128)—but an outstanding example of it, emphasising certain aspects almost to the point of caricature because they have become expressions of the anxieties and desires of romance readers. Although the romance genre as a whole is not revolutionary—and in fact continues to perpetuate hegemonic ideas of heteronormativity and capitalism, despite a growing number of authors challenging these pillars of the romance episteme—its boundaries do leave room for writers and readers to grapple with issues they deal with in their daily lives, transporting discourses about current events into historical or faux-historical contexts.

Personal wealth and success in a capitalist system are good examples of this. It is easy to see where this part of the readers’ fantasy originates from, considering women’s precarious financial situation that until very recently depended on their husbands’ ability and willingness to provide for the family. The prospect of financial security continues to appeal, especially since women are disproportionately affected by economic crises (UNAIDS, 2012, p. 8), so the romance hero often represents an opportunity to live in comfort as his partner. However, the hero figure as an incarnation of a capitalist can also pose a threat: novels from the 1960s onwards have increasingly involved storylines in which a wealthy hero takes over the heroine’s family business or property (Kamblé, 2014, pp. 34–37). Economic anxiety brought on by the government policy in both the UK and US in the 1960 and 1970 s, and a tentative questioning of the implications of capitalism weighed on people’s minds, and, because success in a capitalist system requires the hero to be an active participant in that system, he has become a vehicle for discourses about it (Kamblé, 2014, p. 31). Conflicts between capitalist heroes on one side and heroines representing economic uncertainty and insecurity on the other should be read as a reaction to economic policies that promote aggressive competition and infinite growth, which inevitably favour big corporations over family-owned small businesses (Kamblé, 2014, p. 37). In popular romance, this conflict is superficially solved by the betrothal, which critically involves the hero’s confession of love by which he raises the heroine to a position of metaphorical power over him but which leaves the real financial and social power in his hands. Of course, making the hero an avatar of a potentially threatening concept such as capitalism risks undermining his role as the ideal partner. In order to offset this threat, he must have some quality that neutralises it; Kamblé calls this “heroizing the capitalist” (p. 54). Because the heroine will, in the end, submit to the hero either literally (by giving up her family business) or metaphorically (by marrying him), this submission should be justified by his good character in other areas. To this end, the hero is often shown to be charitable with his money and progressive in his politics (p. 58), countering the image of the ruthless businessman or wealthy aristocrat. In historical romances, this might take the form of a duke taking care of his tenants and actively investing his inherited wealth, proving especially to American audiences that he is in some way worthy of his money and position. The romance novel thereby becomes a space in which capitalism and economic policy can be processed in a manner that is meaningful to its audience, even if it fails to effect a tangible systemic change.

In a similar vein, the image of the warrior who fights to defend his family, tribe, or nation is also closely associated with desirable masculine traits: physical strength, prowess with a weapon, and loyalty (Connell, 1995, p. 189). There is no dearth of

idealised warrior protagonists in other genres of entertainment fiction, thus it is no surprise that they are a popular choice for romance novel heroes, whether as soldiers or mythologised interpretations of Vikings and Scottish Highlanders. The warrior incarnation of the hero opens a space in the novels to grapple with the “mythology of patriotic heroism in Anglo-American countries” (Kamblé, 2014, p. 62) in a climate in which war on foreign soil is increasingly unpopular. One way to critique and reject military policy is to personify and personalise its consequences through the character of the hero, for example, by depicting his struggles with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or injuries acquired in war (Kamblé, 2014, p. 65).

Kamblé suggests that the iteration of the romance hero known as the Alpha Hero developed because of the increased visibility of and activism from the gay community in the 1960 and 1970 s (p. 87). It was perceived as a threat to the institution of heterosexual marriage, a structure which at the time heterosexual women were told was one of the few ways to access social and financial security. Romance novels attempted to compensate for the related anxieties by coding for a kind of hero that was the “antithesis of the gay male” (Kamblé, 2014, p. 89), a character so unquestioningly heterosexual as to become a kind of caricature. The Alpha Hero is hyper-masculine in every way (Wendell & Tan, 2009, p. 72). He is physically superior to both the heroine and other men, never shows weakness of any kind until he confesses his love for the heroine, and is sexually dominant to the point of force. Within the romance novel, the Alpha Hero presents a challenge for the heroine: her primary goal is to dig through his layers of masculine toughness to find the soft core at the centre, often some kind of repressed trauma, and make him confess his love. The Alpha Hero is dangerous, and the taming of a dangerous man appeals to the fantasy of female power (Regis, 2003, p. 112) that forces him to acknowledge the power that the heroine holds over him specifically because she is a woman and he is a man. Regis calls this kind of hero a “lion among men who is a lamb before women” (p. 113). The animality associated with the Alpha Hero’s aggressive and dominant behaviour emphasises that heterosexuality is natural; the Alpha Hero is “almost like a morality figure, solely embodying untampered heterosexual masculinity” (Kamblé, 2014, p. 96). This went hand in hand with the depictions of sexuality that cast the hero as an aggressor, not only sexually confident but also violent. In fact, the extreme virility of these heroes was directly intended to contrast the behaviour and appearance of effeminate gay men and closely tied to the act of procreation (Kamblé, 2014, p. 99). In this context, scenes depicting rape and sexual assault represent forceful reaffirmations of heterosexual identity (Kamblé, 2014, p. 103). However, the prevalence of the Alpha Hero was accompanied by a kind marriage of “Old World masculinity to modern [feminist] femininity” (Kamblé, 2014, 98), which saw independent and opinionated heroines paired up with brooding Alpha Heroes whose defining character trait was apparently their heterosexuality.

The AIDS crisis in the 1980s elicited sympathy for the queer community and alleviated much of the anxiety that had allowed the aggressive, hypermasculine Alpha Hero to thrive. His successor, termed the Beta Hero, is much gentler and actually permitted to have close relationships with characters other than the heroine, he often cares for or looks after children, and no longer displays his heterosexuality so aggressively (Kamblé, 2014, p. 110). At the same time, the heroine begins to demand sex-

ual intimacy and pleasure for herself, instead of having it inflicted upon her, which results in a more balanced dynamic between the two protagonists that is markedly different from the previously stark contrast between “stern, sexual man and nurturing, receptive woman” (Kamblé, 2014, p. 111).

Of course, romance readers expect every hero to be redeemed by the end of the novel, and there is a diverse toolkit of tropes that romance writers use to indicate the hero’s inevitable conversion, such as the charitable enterprises to counteract the capitalist ventures I mentioned previously. The Beta Heroes might also take on a caring role for an animal, child, or group of vulnerable people in order to showcase their capacity for affection and nurturing, and the threat that is presented by the hero’s sexual aggression is frequently offset by having him declare a variation on the theme of “I don’t hurt women,” which occurs in three of the four novels I discuss in this analysis. This new generation of the hero is also much more likely to be invested in the heroine’s enjoyment during sex, rather than forcing his own upon her, and writers often emphasise that he brings her to orgasm at least once before climaxing himself. Although not essential or required, when a novel includes sex scenes they are an important opportunity to show the hero and heroine in intimate and vulnerable moments and have the potential to introduce some tenderness into what might otherwise be a tense or even antagonistic relationship. With forced seductions firmly in the past, this emphasis on the heroine’s pleasure during sex and the hero’s deliberate effort to provide it underlines the advances in the sexual liberation of women and indicates the attractiveness of attentive partners. In combination with the understanding the readers are provided by the parts of the novels in which the hero is the focaliser, granting glimpses of his more likely than not tragic backstory, these tropes are part of a genre-wide shorthand that an experienced romance reader will understand immediately (Barlow & Krentz, 1992, p. 16) as pointing and leading up to the hero’s ultimate transformation into the loving and devoted husband of the heroine’s dreams.

Because romance novels have been a “diagnostic mode attempting to understand the cause of male disinterest” (Kamblé, 2014, p. 101), the genre constantly attempts to reconcile a wide array of anxieties and wants in order to, to continue the DNA metaphor, produce a viable organism. To this end, the figure of the hero is continually updated and genetically modified. Because many romance writers publish a novel a year, they are able to react to current events in their work before those events become too obscure or dated. The MeToo movement is a recent and very specific example of a social and political shift that is reflected in the romance genre, both through authors’ explicit statements on social media or in interviews and in the manner that sexualised violence is addressed in their writing. Some authors who previously did not engage with the topic were prompted by the movement to highlight it (Herman, 2020; Colyard, 2019). By extension, the Trump era—with allegations about the former president’s conduct as well as legislation targeting women’s and reproductive rights—incited romance readers and writers alike to reflect on some of the dynamics that the genre routinely reproduces (Flood, 2018). Anna Boatman, publishing editor at Piatkus, says that once the heroine has been fleshed out as an intelligent and interesting character, the hero’s imposing posturing seems “really appalling” (Flood, 2018). Continuing the evolution from the Alpha to the Beta Hero, there is an effort among romance writers to examine critically what was considered



attractive in the past, moving towards heroes and plotlines that affirm the heroines' agency instead.

Sarah MacLean, who has published over a dozen of historical romances, went a step further: in November of 2016, just three weeks from the deadline for her manuscript that was set to be released the following summer, she completely rewrote what would become *The day of the duchess* (2017b). The hero, who was briefly introduced in one of her previous novels, was a 21st-century Alpha Hero who, she says, although he would ultimately be “tamed” by the heroine, would have been a Trump voter. This realisation prompted her to rework the novel completely (Flood, 2018). But, in order to illustrate how the depictions of heroes have changed since 2016, it is necessary to examine some earlier examples first. To that end, I chose the novels Sarah MacLean and Tessa Dare published in 2012 and 2011, respectively; in part because they are both the first in their respective series, and therefore, very accessible, and in part because their plots are quite similar to their later counterparts. The fact that two out of four of the heroines are called Penelope is, however, a coincidence.

### ***A night to surrender* (2011) by Tessa Dare**

The first in the series about the fictional seaside village of Spindle Cove, *A night to surrender*, follows Susanna Finch—the daughter of the local gentleman, who made it her mission to build a sanctuary for ladies needing to escape from society, stubborn suitors, or incompetent physicians—and Lieutenant Colonel Victor Bramwell, who has been sent home from the army after a disabling leg injury. Bram's primary goal in this novel is to prove his ability to return to the front by means of a military demonstration (pp. 37–41), while Susanna wants to preserve Spindle Cove as a safe haven (p. 37), and therefore attempts to prevent Bram's efforts from disrupting the village life. The novel is framed explicitly as a battle between the sexes, with Bram posing a tangible threat to the life Susanna has built not just for herself but also for all the other women who have come to her for refuge. Bram's identity as a soldier and commanding officer is a central aspect of his character, especially because he feels emasculated by the prospect of losing it due to his disability; he is a clear example of the warrior hero who appeals to both the reader and the heroine because of the qualities associated with a fighting man—bravery, physical strength, leadership—but whose personal experience of war has forced him to confront his own weaknesses. He is horrified to require nursing after a blow to the head, feels the need to prove himself by demonstrating his strength to Susanna (p. 148), and believes himself too strong and fierce for simple affection (pp. 85, 120). To balance this out, Dare utilises some of those tropes that indicate that the hero is not completely unfeeling; namely, Bram begrudgingly adopts a wayward lamb (p. 54) and takes a pair of teenage boys under his wing, displaying his ability to be gentle and protective.

Despite his own concerns, Bram's masculinity is never really called into question by anyone else. During one of their first interactions, Susanna tells him: “I remain unconvinced of your sanity. But there is no question you are male” (p. 21); a friend of hers comments that the newcomers are “rather... manly” (p. 60). *A night to surrender* is not a story about reclaiming or regaining manliness but rather about reconsidering it. The resolution to the novel sees the men and the women of the village working



side by side to put together a militia exhibition; with Susanna, among other things, teaching the militiamen to shoot. Bram is forced to confront his belief that disability makes a man any less valuable when one of the teenage boys is injured in a cannon accident. His refusal to allow the boy's foot to be amputated could have led to his death had Susanna not intervened, and the guilt he feels leads to him reconsidering his deeply ingrained conviction that he is only worthy of respect if he can fight (pp. 328–333), and eventually accepting a role in the War Office instead of front-line duty (p. 358). Thus, the novel does not offer a systematic critique of the concept of war but does grapple with the consequences of armed conflict and active service for the soldiers who return home permanently disabled, a common theme in romance novels, especially in the wake of the War on Terror (Kamlé, 2014, p. 65).

Bram is sexually dominant and he has to learn to respect the heroine's agency. He does not wait for consent before touching or kissing her and sometimes refuses to let go of her despite her resistance (p. 150). He changes the terms of their interactions—initially, he promises her all they will do is kiss (p. 197), but then initiates intercourse (p. 200). However, Dare makes it very clear that Susanna does not feel coerced in any of these situations, only a little shocked by his forwardness, by noting that Bram is holding on to her in a way that she could still stop him if she wished (p. 152), and Bram does ask for her consent several times before they have penetrative sex (pp. 200–201). Bram is also possessive of Susanna even before they establish any kind of relationship and does not plan to consult her before announcing to her father that they will marry, ignoring the fact that a sudden engagement would once again put Spindle Cove's reputation as a safe refuge for young ladies at risk (p. 225). Susanna is frustrated and disappointed to realise that Bram basically sees marriage only as a natural consequence of sex, not as “the *beginning* of a story” (p. 227). It is only after Bram finally realises that he loves her (p. 257) that Susanna takes the initiative in their sexual encounters (p. 263) and feels empowered by them (p. 267). Bram does not actually confess his love until almost the end of the novel (p. 311). Although he is not the outright antagonist that the true Alpha Hero often represents, because he poses no danger to Susanna herself, he still threatens the life she has built for herself and other young women like her.

His domineering nature is also evident when Susanna reveals her childhood trauma to him, which is also her motivation for establishing and protecting Spindle Cove as a safe retreat for young women like her. Bram does not accept Susanna's initial flippant dismissal when he questions her about the scars on her wrists—caused by surgeons repeatedly bleeding her when she was a child and distraught by her mother's death—and “use[s] his weight and strength to keep her pinned” (p. 154). He reminds her that she knows about his scars and that he has revealed his soul to her, and at one point interrupts her story to apologise for unknowingly reminding her of a traumatic event (p. 165). However, the culmination of his character development sees him advocating for and comforting Susanna when an injury makes it necessary for her to receive the medical treatment of which she is terrified because of her past trauma (pp. 346–350). Afterwards, Bram informs her father that he intends to marry Susanna, instead of asking for her hand because “Susanna's wise enough to make her own decisions” (p. 352). Over the course of the novel, he has learned to respect and value her agency and

lays control of her life—and the future of their relationship—in her hands instead of making those decisions for her.

### ***A rogue by any other name* (2012) by Sarah MacLean**

*A rogue by any other name* is the first in MacLean's *Rules of scoundrels* quartet, set in the 1830s. It tells the story of the four owners of London's most glamorous and notorious gaming club, the Fallen Angel. One of them, the Marquess of Bourne, essentially kidnaps his childhood friend Penelope because her dowry includes a house—Falconwell—he lost in a wager when he was twenty years old. By blackmailing her into marrying him, he hopes to revenge on the former mentor to whom he lost the wager and, of course, reclaim Falconwell (p. 55). At Penelope's insistence, they agree to pretend to have married for love in order to protect her unmarried sisters from the scandal of their sudden wedding (p. 118).

From the very beginning, Bourne displays ruthless disregard for Penelope's feelings or agency. He forces her to marry him by abducting her and tearing her clothes so her father would believe that they had sex and insist on the marriage to save her reputation (p. 68). He does express some sympathy for her difficult position as a young woman who has already been jilted by her former fiancée and who is subject to her father's decisions about her life, but this does not stop him from coercing her to his wishes (p. 71). Despite his insistence both in his own thoughts and out loud to Penelope that she is nothing but a means to an end to him, he is immediately jealous and possessive, starting fights with both his partners (pp. 217–221) and patrons at the club and instructing his household staff to spy on her for him. Because he pretends to be aloof and does not speak to her for days at a time, Penelope soon comes to feel that he only ever pays attention to her to manipulate onlookers (p. 196), so she does not believe him when he finally confronts his own feelings and attempts to make amends for his behaviour. Bourne's sexual attraction to Penelope is expressed through his desire to "master her body" (p. 176). While she had no sexual experience when they met, he clearly did; he is domineering during their sexual encounters and, although he does ask her to tell him what she likes, the phrasing makes it sound more like he asks her to beg: "Say 'Please, Bourne,' and show me" (p. 172), and he rationalises his desire for her as part of their business arrangement (pp. 94, 167). It is not until the end of the novel (pp. 337–341), when Bourne has acknowledged his feelings for her, and thus, given her metaphorical power over him (Regis, 2003, p. 112), that Penelope takes charge during sex.

The remnants of the Alpha Hero are clearly visible in Bourne as a character: pointedly masculine, a ruthless capitalist as evident through the success of the Fallen Angel, sexually dominant, and apparently cold and uncaring until the heroine's presence in his life forces him to confront his emotions and commit himself to her happiness. However, he is obviously not the cardboard caricature of aggressive heterosexuality that the term was originally meant to denote. He has close and emotionally meaningful relationships with the other owners of the Fallen Angel and expresses affection for them, which the Alpha Hero who was born out of anxiety about homosexuality was rarely permitted to do. The servants at his residence are former employees of the club who were in need of help, showing both the reader and Penelope that he cares about

and is loyal to the people he is responsible for. His jealousy and aggression are never directed at his heroine, and, although especially their first sexual interaction the night after he has abducted her takes place in the context of coercion, it is made clear that Bourne never actually forces himself on Penelope and, in fact, waits for her to ask to be kissed (p. 82), after earlier informing her that he does not “ravish women,” which is one of the classic tropes used to establish that a romance hero does not pose a threat of sexual violence despite his threatening first impression.

## The hero in 2011–2012

Bourne and Bram are typical examples of the hero phenotype of their time: a little domineering, possessive, yet essentially good men who are protective of their heroines. MacLean and Dare both utilise established genre tropes to justify their behaviour—chief among them is the certainty of the happily ever after, which romance readers understand to mean that, despite his initial flaws, the hero will redeem himself at the end. These and similar codes are obviously still in use today, as romance plots have not changed significantly and an interesting premise occasionally requires the hero to do something morally grey or outright wrong if only so that he can spend the entire novel learning to do and be better. However, I would argue that since 2016, the baseline for the hero behaviour has changed.

### *The day of the duchess* by Sarah MacLean

Malcom Bevingstoke, Duke of Haven, is first introduced as a side character in *The rogue not taken* (2015) as the heroine Sophie’s brother-in-law married to her older sister, Seraphina. It is clear from the first chapter that the marriage has already soured when Sophie and her pregnant sister discover Haven having sex with another woman at a social event and Sophie calls him “disgusting” and “loathsome” (p. 5) and pushes him unceremoniously into a decorative fishpond (p. 7). Dripping and furious, he threatens to destroy her (p. 16). Haven features very little in the rest of the book, except as an example of how society treats rich and titled men as if they can do no wrong while ostracising ambitious young women, but the scene is a memorable introduction to the character. The book that features Haven and Seraphina as the protagonists, *The day of the duchess*, was set to be released in the summer of 2017.

The novel is told in a combination of “present day” scenes that take place in 1836, about two and a half years after Seraphina left Haven originally, and analepses to different moments of their courtship and early marriage in non-chronological order, illustrating how their relationship fell apart. Because the author has stated in interviews that she knew the infamous fishpond scene was setting up Haven and Seraphina’s story (Walker, 2017), for the purpose of this analysis, I intend to assume that the backstory remained relatively untouched when MacLean decided to rewrite the novel in the aftermath of the 2016 election. Over the course of the novel, it is revealed that, when Haven and Seraphina initially meet by chance, he quickly decides to marry her despite his reticence about the institution. Although they are both sincere about their relationship, Seraphina’s mother convinces her that she cannot trust him not to drop

her the moment he loses interest, and they conspire to have the two of them discovered while having sex, which forces his hand. Haven does marry her out of obligation but also asserts that he cannot trust her anymore and casts her out soon after their wedding (pp. 119–121). The fishpond scene is not recounted in *The day of the duchess* but fits here chronologically; the next time they see each other, Seraphina suffers a miscarriage that almost proves fatal to her. Unbeknownst to Haven, his mother pays Seraphina off to leave and never return (p. 18).

Seraphina reappears two years later, the book's "present day" plotline, by interrupting a session of Parliament to petition for a divorce, which at this time requires a vote from the House of Lords. Because Seraphina knows they will not agree to a woman's request, since everything she owns legally belongs to her husband, she needs Haven's cooperation (pp. 80–82). Her motivation for pursuing the divorce is that she wants to own a tavern she has bought with her business partner but in her own name (p. 30). At this point in the novel, Seraphina is convinced that her husband hates her but is also too possessive to let her go: "You don't want me," she tells him at one point, "[b]ut you don't want anyone else to have me, either" (p. 192), which mirrors Bourne's feelings about Penelope in *A rogue by any other name*. What Seraphina does not know is that Haven has spent the last two and a half years regretting what happened; he is determined to win her back (pp. 3–4) and negotiates a deal with her—namely that she will spend the summer at his country estate helping him choose his next wife—to buy time (p. 81). This is the backdrop for the novel's plot: Haven, Seraphina, her four sisters, an assortment of "suitesses" (the women seeking to become the next Duchess of Haven), and their mothers spend the summer at Highley.

Haven is described with adjectives typical of the standard romance hero's physique: tall, handsome, fit enough to have visibly defined muscles (p. 36), and it is later revealed that he used to box (p. 64), all of which conforms to the ideals of masculinity that a romance hero should aspire to. From the parts of the novel written from Seraphina's point of view, we learn that he comes across as cold and physically imposing, and, although she used to know him very well, she cannot read emotions from his face as she used to. However, she still finds him attractive despite her resentment, wishing he was not as handsome as he is (p. 20): he has "eyes that might steal a woman's wits" (p. 21).

On the outside, Haven's character does not appear to be very different from the hero figure that is attractive because of the "purity of his maleness" (Radway 1984, p. 128), and he does occasionally exhibit typically masculine behaviour such as the "masculine posturing" that he finds himself engaging in with Caleb Calhoun, Seraphina's American business partner, out of jealousy (p. 71). There are several other scenes in the novel in which Haven's narration lets the reader know that he has violent impulses but controls them—like the desire to lock Seraphina in his bedroom and seduce her into compliance (p. 170)—except to defend Seraphina against sexual comments from tavern patrons (pp. 340–341). Seraphina lashes out at him a few times, trying to provoke him, and is surprised that "the blow [does] not land as expected" (p. 133): Haven does not yell back as, the reader is to understand, he would have when she first knew him. Perhaps, the most striking difference between him and the man who was pushed into a fishpond is how Haven interacts with Seraphina's sisters: although there is clearly no love lost between him and the four women, he does

not threaten to destroy any of them this time around. In fact, he is almost unfailingly polite in the face of their cheerful contempt, engages with their teasing only in kind, without insulting or attacking them (p. 203), and takes their advice about the mistakes he made in his relationship with Seraphina to heart (p. 278).

The idea of a hero who expresses his emotions through violence has been problematic for some time, but especially in the era of increasing awareness of domestic and sexual abuse and the way men use violence to assert dominance, the image of a hero raging in jealousy seems to have lost its attraction. Even when Haven, in one of the flashbacks, fantasises about finding Seraphina and kidnapping her back to England, he plans to persuade her to return with him, rather than force her, and “spend the entire journey home apologising” (p. 63). He is shown to feel shame about the way he treated his wife at the time, and, although Seraphina is not blameless in the way their relationship played out, he takes responsibility for his rash and impulsive reactions. Unlike heroes of the past, Haven does not spend most of the novel claiming power and authority over the heroine; instead, his character arc is focused on his continuous efforts to show her that she is in control of him because he desperately loves her. He has no interest in returning to a relationship dynamic in which he, the rich and titled husband, has all the power, and she should be grateful for anything she is given, which is how they have both been brought up.

At the climax of the novel, Seraphina once again disappears into the night. Although she and Haven have reconciled, and both admitted that they love each other, she is convinced that good sex and even love are not enough to make up for how much they have hurt each other (p. 323), and she still wants the divorce so she can have secure ownership of her tavern. It is not until Haven accidentally finds out her true reason for pursuing the divorce that he finally understands why she has been resisting his suggestion to withdraw the suit so they can stay married (p. 348). But this new understanding of Seraphina’s motives and the harsh truths that her sisters delivered to him earlier—that his behaviour during their courtship did not give Seraphina any indication that he was actually going to marry her and not just using her for sex (p. 86)—finally force him to acknowledge that she was also hurt by the way their marriage came about, and he is able to look beyond his own idea of their future. He still has a grand gesture to make, which is a long-established romance trope dictating that the hero declares his love for the heroine in a public and vulnerable manner and, if he has not already done so, asks her to marry him. In Haven’s case, he spends a fortune in money and favours to ensure the vote in Parliament about Seraphina’s divorce suit results in a tie. While Seraphina, her sisters, and the assembled peers of the realm watch, he proclaims his feelings for his wife, scales the wall to the visitors’ gallery where she sits, and then adds his own vote to the tally, divorcing her (pp. 262–270). Of course, the two of them decide to marry again only a few hours later, but, with this grand gesture, Haven not only voices his emotions but does so in a public space surrounded by his peers and colleagues, who previously told Haven to “control [his] female” (p. 23). By not only announcing that he loves her but also facilitating the future she has been trying to build for herself, he has opened himself up to their scorn. He has voluntarily undermined his own power and authority to serve his wife’s needs.

This by itself is not radically different from the grand gestures in romance novels of previous years, including those written by MacLean. The voluntary relinquishing

of power in favour of the happily ever after with the heroine is a central feature of a romance novel's climax and part of how even a typical Alpha Hero is "tamed" by love for and from the heroine. The ending of *The day of the duchess* is significant because it is not about the hero's fight to keep the heroine with him in some way, but about releasing her and allowing her to make her own decisions. Throughout the novel, Haven is accused of being possessive and vindictive. Seraphina offers to release him from their forced engagement, but Haven refuses and tells her they will have to accept their fate and live in an unhappy marriage (p. 190). It is clear that, before he met Seraphina, Haven had not believed that something like companionate marriage truly existed (p. 38). The biggest obstacle Haven has to overcome on his path is his inability and unwillingness to listen to his wife. In the backstory, after he finds out that Seraphina was complicit in the plot to force them into marriage, he refuses to listen to her when she tries to tell him that she did truly love him, so he does not understand how her mother manipulated her to agree to the scheme (p. 188). Later, when he attempts to win her back, he is unable to truly understand why Seraphina wants to end their marriage because he does not listen to her; not only because of her tavern but also because she needs to process the death of their unborn child. Eaten up by grief, she blames Haven for stealing her freedom (p. 17), and, after her return to London, she cannot see or appreciate that he is no longer the same man she ran away from.

A very tangible change that MacLean's hero undergoes—and arguably one of the most visible ones in the genre at large—lies in the expression of his sexuality. Haven is undoubtedly heterosexual, and it is made abundantly clear that he is attracted to and desires Seraphina at almost every stage of their tumultuous relationship. When the two of them have sex—several times throughout the novel—he “always [makes] her pleasure the most important piece of their lovemaking” (p. 163). It is, however, his approach to the heroine's consent that merits most attention.

Before every interaction, Haven either verbally asks Seraphina if and how she wants him to touch her or lets her take the initiative. The first time they kiss in the present day plotline, Haven tells her: “I shall give you anything you ask” (p. 159), and never demands anything in return. On this and other occasions, he asks her to keep her eyes open and watch as he performs oral sex (p. 161), and he vocalises his desires but at no point either pressures Seraphina into any acts or forces anything onto her. Even when she does not trust him not to use her plan of owning her tavern against her, she trusts that he will not force her into doing anything against her wishes, especially with regard to sex (p. 136). This is made explicit in a scene about two-thirds through the novel:

He was close enough that she could give in. That she could reach up and press her lips to his. That she could throw caution to the wind and take what he offered. That he could catch her.

But he wouldn't, not without her consent. (p. 246)

Although, in this specific scene, the kissing and subsequent sex are described in somewhat violent terms (“rough,” cursing, Haven tears Seraphina's gown), and Haven is the one initiating these interactions, he puts himself in the position in which

all the power in this interaction lies with her (pp. 253–359). They have not had penetrative sex since the incident that led to their coercive wedding and Seraphina's subsequent miscarriage three years ago, and, although Haven has brought Seraphina to orgasm several times since their reunion at the beginning of the novel, he has not climaxed himself. In this as in their other sexual encounters, he is very attentive to her responses and reacts immediately when she displays hesitation, “releasing her as though he'd only ever existed to do her bidding” (p. 257). He assures her that, while he desires her and wants to have penetrative sex, he will wait until she is ready and explicitly asks him to (p. 258). It happens only after they have grown closer again and processed the death of their child together (p. 288). They have sex in Haven's bedroom (pp. 298–304) and Seraphina once again runs away in the middle of the night.

The Haven of the flashbacks is very like Bourne in *A rogue by any other name*: vindictive, unable to take the heroine and her concerns seriously, and too caught up in the mistakes of others to be able to look to the future. Based on similar setups for romance heroes, especially in the context of the second chance and reformed rake tropes, as well as MacLean's comments in her column and interviews, it is likely that, in the original manuscript, Haven did not spend three years on retrospection to acknowledge the harm he had done to Seraphina but would still have wanted to punish her for her perceived transgressions, and the novel would have focused on his journey to acknowledge his faults and learn to respect his wife. This narrative design would still have resulted in a happily ever after, with the hero who acknowledges the heroine's agency and gives her power over him with the declaration of his love and devotion, but, in the light of the political and social mood at the time, MacLean did not feel comfortable reproducing that image; she wanted a hero who was “an alpha feminist from Page 1” (MacLean, 2017a). Although the original version of Haven would have eventually seen “the promise of gender equality,” MacLean felt that, in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, this was not enough to satisfy the requirements for a romance hero as an ideal man. She refers to the version she created pre-election as a hero “lovingly crafted in that mold [sic!] of masculinity that romance readers have loved for centuries” (MacLean, 2017a), making it explicit that this version of the hero simply no longer fits the mood of the present times. The way Donald Trump talked about women on the campaign trail, his track record of how he had treated women in the past, and the effect of his presidency on women's rights were likely to have caused MacLean (and with her, other readers and writers of romance novels) to re-examine the figure of the hero as it had been portrayed up to that point. The idea of a romance hero who is rich, powerful, arrogant, and “aggressively masculine” (MacLean, 2017a) reminded her too much of the incumbent president and his record of mistreating women he had power over. Post-election, it was clear that Donald Trump would be able to appoint at least one judge to the United States Supreme Court, having previously promised to choose a candidate who would contribute to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark ruling that protects a pregnant woman's right to abortion (Higgins, 2020), and the Republican majority in Congress meant that it would be easier to pass legislation to roll back anti-discrimination laws protecting women and other vulnerable populations. For many, Donald Trump winning the presidential election was an event that signalled a political and social shift; the MeToo movement gained such traction in part because tempers had been running



high already, fuelled by the president who had freely admitted to harassing sexually contestants of the Miss Universe pageant which he owned (Stuart, 2012). In this light, the old romance hero reproduces some of the characteristics of the rich and powerful men who were calling racial slurs from the Oval Office, and, as demonstrated, there is an effort within the romance genre to counter this narrative. MacLean's *The day of the duchess* is a convenient example because, as has already been mentioned, she stated her intentions outright (MacLean, 2017a), and the difference between the old and new versions of her male characters is confirmed by my analysis. There is never a question of whether the new Haven supports the heroine's right to self-determination. He apologises for his mistakes by acknowledging that, although he was upset and angry at the time, that is neither excuse nor justification. This new romance hero, the way MacLean writes him, is a man who takes responsibility for his actions and holds himself accountable to do better.

### ***The wallflower wager* (2019) by Tessa Dare**

Tessa Dare's, 2019 novel *The wallflower wager* is the third in the *Girl meets duke* series. The heroine of this book is Lady Penelope Campion, whose menagerie of unusual pets has made her an oddity and social outcast. At the beginning of the novel, she is presented with an ultimatum by her family: because she remains unmarried, she must agree to give away the majority of her animals and participate in the social season enough to be featured in a newspaper society column within three weeks, or she will have to move to the country with her brother and his wife (p. 35–40).

Gabriel Duke, the hero, grew up on the streets after his mother abandoned him and has climbed his way up through hard work and careful investment. His unscrupulous business practices have earned him the nickname "the Duke of Ruin." He has just bought the derelict Wendleby House next to where Penny lives in order to renovate and sell it to a family with social aspirations, who would pay extra to live next to a lady with a title. When he finds out that Penny not only is practically a recluse but also has a collection of strange animals with inconvenient care requirements, he decides to help her so that she can remain in the house, ensuring the success of his investment (p. 49).

More so than Haven's, Gabriel's masculinity is repeatedly emphasised. The second time Penny sees him, she observes that "[h]is fine attire said 'gentleman.' The remainder of his appearance subtracted 'gentle' and simply said 'man'" (p. 42), and compares the friendly interactions she has had with other men with the "close-range confrontation with sheer masculine physicality" (p. 43) that Gabriel embodies. He considers Penny as an embodiment of pretty and delicate femininity, while seeing himself as "the bull charging through the shop" (p. 28). He repeatedly reminds himself that she is essentially too good for the likes of him because he is too rough, and he makes a point of reminding Penny that he only helps her stay in Bloom Square because he wants to sell Wendleby House for as much money as possible, not because he has any attachment to her (p. 209).

However, he consistently displays concern for her and her animals, for example, when rescuing her dog from a coal chute (p. 55) and Penny from cruel schoolmates at a masquerade (p. 178). Penny also finds out that Gabriel sponsors a children's home

in the area where he grew up and discovers his soft side in his interactions with the children—which offers us a version of the house of strays trope that MacLean also employs in *A rogue by any other name*. His continual insistence that he is a hard and cold-hearted man who only cares about profits is in direct contrast to his repeated acts of care and nurturing. This is especially true with regard to his treatment of Penny. Penny's friends and their husbands confront Penny with Gabriel's reputation and tell her she cannot be seen or work closely with him, and, while their concern and affection are clear, they also do not really listen to anything Penny says. The men especially are so intensely protective that they try to forbid Penny from seeing him at all. Gabriel, on the other hand, declares: "I'm listening to exactly one person in this room. [...] The lady can speak for herself" (p. 82). The novel positions the way Gabriel repeatedly affirms Penny's agency and worth as a person as one of his most attractive and desirable attributes. She does not believe herself to be worthy of attention, which he is outraged by (p. 92), and, despite his constant reminders that he is only concerned with his investment, Gabriel takes her needs seriously almost from the beginning. Although he is initially dismissive of her requirement that all her animals must go to loving homes, where their special needs will be taken care of, by the end of the novel, he has memorised the dossier she prepared for him about them (p. 283).

The mistakes he makes that cause the main conflict between the hero and heroine—for instance, buying up her family's debts to convince her brother to let him marry Penny (p. 294)—are consequences of his own lack of self-worth rather than domineering attitude. The narrative makes it very clear that this hero is not interested in forcing the heroine into anything she does not wish, both in the (figurative) bedroom and out of it. The reader understands that he respects her agency, so when he goes behind her back to pressure her brother, the reader knows that the intention is not to manipulate her. However, when she finds out—after she has already agreed to marry him—and confronts him with his actions, he quickly realises his mistake. The next time Gabriel sees her at a ball, he apologises and officially asks her to marry him, reassuring her that her answer is the only one that matters (p. 314). Later, when the man who sexually abused her when she was a child arrives and harasses her, Gabriel first punches him and then challenges him to a duel, despite Penny begging him not to risk his life for her (pp. 318–324).<sup>1</sup> In this way, Gabriel exhibits the very traditionally masculine desire to protect "his woman." As Penny pleads with him to call off the duel, he tells her: "If I don't defend you, I'm not worthy of you" (p. 324). However, as soon as it becomes apparent that Penny does not need him to defend her because she, her friends, and her aunt have found a way to protect her that does not require violence, Gabriel backs down from his aggression in order to support her. Penny confronts her abuser with how his behaviour affected her life, and Gabriel's unquestioning support is in stark contrast with the man's attempts to gaslight her (pp. 334–335). This reflects the way that survivors of sexual abuse report being treated when they come forward with their stories (Woodruff, 2019). By contrast, Gabriel's reaction not only voices support for the survivors who happen to read *The wallflower wager*, but

<sup>1</sup> Because duelling was illegal, he would have likely been arrested for murder and hanged for it (Ellett, 2004, p. 66).

also establishes that believing women who come forward with their experiences is a desirable trait in men.

Furthermore, it is Penny who initiates their first kiss and Gabriel who leaves that interaction rather flustered (pp. 61–65). Much like Haven, Gabriel pays close attention to Penny's reactions in intimate moments and continually asks for her consent. The first time they have sex—although without penetration at this point—Gabriel tells Penny to take her pleasure as she wishes: he has “*given* her the reins” (p. 152), putting her in power over him, heightening her enjoyment, and making her feel empowered. When she does eventually ask him for penetrative sex, he initially refuses but obliges her eventually (p. 188). The act is a way for Penny to take control of her life and body in the manner she has been unable to before and on her own terms. Even in rougher sex scenes, including one against a wall in an alleyway—an image which carries implications of male dominance—both characters play equally active roles:

She kissed him first, bless her, moaning softly against his mouth, granting him permission to take control. He slid his hands to her backside and lifted, pushing her up against the brick wall.  
Here,' he rasped. 'Now.  
'Yes.' (p. 240).

Most importantly, and this should absolutely be viewed in the context of the MeToo movement and increased public awareness of sexual abuse, Gabriel listens when Penny reveals her experience of being molested by a male family friend as a child and the effect it had on her for the rest of her life, including developing a deep discomfort with social participation (p. 278). It is worth examining this scene in particular detail, especially in comparison with the one in *A night to surrender* when Susanna reveals the medical abuse she suffered at the hands of her cousins and doctors. At first, Gabriel interprets her resistance to his questions as confirmation of his insecurities, but his anger evaporates when he realises that she is deeply upset, and he offers to comfort her and lets her tell her story. While she recounts her trauma, he takes care of her without intruding or interrupting, practically fading into the background:

As she talked, a series of objects drifted in and out of her hands. [...] They were merely there, in easy reach, exactly when she needed them.  
A handkerchief.  
A pillow.  
A cup of tea to warm her trembling hands, and then later, when her throat was parched from talking, cool water [...]. [S]he found herself clinging to one steady source of comfort: Gabriel's hand. (pp. 277–278)

The difference between these two scenes is not that they depict Bram as a heartless, self-absorbed hero, while Gabriel as the opposite. The scene in *A night to surrender* is still emotionally satisfying, and an overall positive example of a hero reacting to a heroine's revelation of her past trauma, but the way Dare wrote Gabriel almost completely into the background in the corresponding scene in *The wallflower wager* does show a marked difference. This new hero apologises for pushing too hard, offers

to listen anyway, does not interrupt, and provides a space for the heroine to recover her composure afterwards (pp. 281–282). Like Bram, Gabriel also offers violence to Penny’s abuser on her behalf to prove himself as her protector, so that is one aspect that has not changed at all, but it is clear in *The wallflower wager* that Gabriel’s unprompted and unquestioning support of the heroine is his most attractive characteristic. The protectiveness and violent impulses on the heroine’s behalf are still part of the romance hero blueprint, but this example shows especially well how these established traits are being replaced by less traditionally masculine characteristics, like the ability to listen and comfort.

## The hero post-Trump

Haven and Gabriel begin their journey to their heroines’ hearts having already internalised the lessons Bourne and Bram have to learn in their novels. Both Bourne and Haven marry their heroines under a degree of force and proceed to treat them with indifference at best and contempt at worst, but, at the beginning of *The day of the duchess*, Haven does not need to be taught to respect Seraphina’s agency and needs. He is still guilty of not being honest with her, and his efforts to win her back do involve some manipulative tactics, but he resorts to these not to reach a misguided external goal but to prove to her that he can be a good partner and husband. Similarly, Bram and Gabriel have essentially invaded their heroines’ safe spaces and need those spaces to change substantially in order to accomplish their own goals, but, while Bram originally brushes Susanna aside and ignores her objections, Gabriel immediately takes time to listen to Penny’s story and respects her wishes and needs.

Most strikingly, the heroes who were written after the 2016 presidential election treat sex and consent markedly differently than their predecessors. Both MacLean and Dare have gone out of their way to write their heroes asking and waiting for explicit, enthusiastic consent and respecting the heroine’s boundaries. In the last few years, there seems to have been a conscious effort within the genre to emphasise the importance of honest communication, with some authors drawing on the momentum of the MeToo movement and related conversations to process themes of sexual abuse and assault in their fiction. When the hero is written to be gentler and more cautious with regard to sex and more focused on obtaining enthusiastic consent, writers do not have to emphasise that the heroine takes pleasure in what the hero does to her. Although scenes in which the hero takes control and seemingly knows the heroine’s desires better than she does are representative of a potentially attractive fantasy, they also act in romance novels to reassure the reader that even a domineering, possessive hero like Bourne or one so caught up in proving his virility like Bram can be concerned with the heroine’s pleasure, which is to be counted as a positive trait.

The new generation of romance heroes is no less outwardly masculine than their previous incarnations, still a product of decades of capitalism and economic anxiety. Their basic function—an escapist fantasy for romance readers to project their desires onto—has not changed fundamentally, and it should not be expected to change any time soon. The romance hero has always been a vessel for women to project their needs and desires onto, and thus, must evolve with the times. The political climate

in which men with credible accusations of sexual assault against them are appointed to positions of power has given rise to a kind of romance hero that does not have to learn to respect women but does so from the start. Donald Trump moving into the White House is not the only reason the romance hero is changing, but it definitely acted as a catalyst for MacLean's very public rewriting of *The day of the duchess*, and many other romance writers began to use their platform for political activism. In 2020, a group of romance novelists founded Romancing the Runoff, a fundraiser to help finance the Democratic candidates' campaign for the Georgia runoff elections that would determine which party would control the United States senate. The group collected more than \$400,000 by auctioning lots, such as signed copies of books or virtual tea parties donated by fellow romance authors, including Tessa Dare (Beckett, 2020). The tone set by Trump both on the campaign trail and during his term in office encouraged a political and social climate that has only widened the chasm between conservative and liberal mindsets in the United States of America. Existing tensions were exacerbated by the shift in rhetoric and the knowledge that the political landscape would be affected for years to come because of, for example, several new appointments to the Supreme Court, whose confirmation hearings became battlegrounds for debates about issues like sexual assault and the future of abortion rights in the United States (Timm, 2022). There has also been backlash in the opposite direction, not least within the Romance Writers of America association (Nicolas, 2021). The world of popular romance is so wide and caters to so many different interest groups within its readership that there are certainly parts of it developing in the opposite direction of the trends I have described here.

Of course, the social and political forces at play are far more complex than this; far-right movements have been gaining steam since before the 2016 election cycle and the romance hero was already on a trajectory leading steadily away from the Alpha Hero. In the more than hundred years of the romance genre, the development I have laid out here is comparatively small, and yet it is significant because it demonstrates the interplay between real-life issues and the romance genre specifically. The new romance hero's characteristics reflect an attempt to differentiate this figure, which has historically been rather conservative in its conceptions of masculinity, from the kind of man that exploits positions of power and authority in order to undermine women's rights of self-determination, presenting instead a character who uses his power to uplift and support the women in his life. This change should be read as a continuation of a development that precedes the Trump era but that was exacerbated and made more explicit in its wake.

One thing that has not changed is that the romance hero remains a celebration of maleness and masculinity, and the hero is attractive in large part because he embodies what the romance genre considers to be the very best aspects of traditional heterosexual masculinity. The post-2016 evolution I have illustrated—the emphasis on consent, the lack of intimidating posturing compared to earlier novels, and the way the new heroes listen to and support their heroines, especially in processing trauma—shows that, in the popular romance genre in which women define what manliness is, these traits are increasingly considered an essential part of what it means to be a good man. In the context of the social, cultural, and political events in the United States of America in the years since, and because fiction is a “barometer of the ethos of its

times” (Kamlé, 2014, p. 22), this shift should be seen as a way in which romance writers process the world they live in and a deliberate form of protest.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Ahuja, M. (2017). Yes, even people in Antarctica are joining the women’s March movement. *CNN*, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/21/politics/womens-march-antarctica/index.html>.
- Allan, J. A. (2016). The purity of his maleness. *The Journal of Men’s Studies*, 24(1), 24–41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1060826515624382>.
- Anonymous, & Harlequin Company Information. (2023). *Corporate Harlequin*, [www.corporate.harlequin.com](http://www.corporate.harlequin.com).
- Barlow, L., & Krentz, J. A. (1992). Beneath the surface—the hidden codes in romance. In J. A. Krentz (Ed.), *Dangerous men & adventurous women: Romance writers on the appeal of the romance* (pp. 15–29). University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Beckett, L. (2020). Romance novelists raise \$400,000 for Georgia Senate races—With help from Stacey Abrams. *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/25/stacey-abrams-georgia-senate-runoff-romance-novels>.
- Burger, K. (2018). The billion-dollar romance novel industry is tapping into this loyal group with time and money to spare. *MarketWatch*, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/a-growing-subgenre-of-romance-novels-appeals-to-older-readers-2018-06-12>.
- Colyard, K. (2019). Has #MeToo changed romance novel publishing? *The Bustle*, <https://www.bustle.com/p/has-metoo-changed-romance-novel-publishing-authors-editors-say-the-changes-began-before-the-movement-16096558>.
- Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Cambridge Polity.
- Dare, T. (2011). *A night to surrender*. Avon Books.
- Dare, T. (2019). *The wallflower wager*. Avon Books.
- Ellett, W. (2004). The death of dueling. *Historia*, 13, 59–67.
- Flood, A. (2018). ‘Women are having different fantasies’: Romantic fiction in the age of Trump. *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/08/women-are-having-different-fantasies-romantic-fiction-in-the-age-of-trump>.
- Goffmann, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Simon & Schuster.
- Hackett, L.J. & J. Coghlan (2021). The history bubble: negotiating authenticity in the historical romance novel. *M/C Journals*, 24(1) <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2752>
- Herman, L. (2020). Readers turn to romance novels in tough times—coronavirus is no exception. *The Bustle*, <https://www.bustle.com/p/readers-turn-to-romance-novels-in-tough-times-coronavirus-is-no-exception-22646783>.
- Higgins, T. (2020). Supreme Court abortion case tests Trump’s campaign promise to overturn Roe v. Wade. *CNBC*, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/02/supreme-court-abortion-case-tests-trump-pledge-to-overturn-roe-v-wade.html>.
- Kamlé, J. (2014). *Making meaning in popular romance: An epistemology*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Karandashev, V. (2015). A cultural perspective on romantic love. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1135>.

- Krentz, J. A. (1992). Introduction. In J. A. Krentz (Ed.), *Dangerous men & adventurous women: Romance writers on the appeal of the romance* (pp. 1–9). University of Pennsylvania.
- Kwun, A. (2018). Artists mark Trump's inauguration anniversary with day of protest art. *CNN*, <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/trump-one-year-art-action-day/index.html>.
- MacLean, S. (2012). *A rogue by any other name*. Avon Books.
- MacLean, S. (2015). *The rogue not taken*. Avon Books.
- MacLean, S. (2017a). How Trump killed off my romantic lead. *The Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/how-trump-killed-off-my-romantic-lead/2017/08/08/8e3e40dc-7305-11e7-8839-ec48ec4cae25\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/how-trump-killed-off-my-romantic-lead/2017/08/08/8e3e40dc-7305-11e7-8839-ec48ec4cae25_story.html).
- MacLean, S. (2017b). *The day of the duchess*. Avon Books.
- Montgomery, A. J. (2016). The contemporary romance novel virgin: Still in vogue? *Australian Romance Readers Association*, <https://australianromancereaders.wordpress.com/2016/09/18/guest-blogger-alyssa-j-montgomery-2/>.
- Nicolas, S. (2021). Romance writers of America awards book with genocidal hero. *BookRiot*, <https://bookriot.com/rwa-racism/>.
- Radway, J. (1991). *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy, and popular literature*. The University of North Carolina Press.
- Regis, P. (2003). *A natural history of the romance novel*. University of Pennsylvania.
- Reynoso, B. (2017). The outdated stigma of being a single woman. *Odyssey*, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/stigma-of-single-women>.
- Roach, C. (2010). Getting a good man to love: Popular romance fiction and the problem of patriarchy. *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 1(1).
- Roach, C. (2016). *Happily ever after*. Indiana University Press.
- Stuart, T. (2012). A timeline of Donald Trump's creepiness while he owned Miss Universe. *Rolling Stone*, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/a-timeline-of-donald-trumps-creepiness-while-he-owned-miss-universe-191860/>.
- Teo, H. M. (2016). Imperial affairs: The British empire and the romantic novel, 1890–1939. In K. Gelder (Ed.), *New directions in popular fiction: Genre, reproduction, distribution* (pp. 87–110). Palgrave Macmillan Limited.
- Timm, J. (2022). What Supreme Court justices said about Roe and abortion in their confirmations. *NBCNews*, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/supreme-court/supreme-court-justices-said-ro-abortion-confirmations-rcna35246>.
- UNAIDS. (2012). *Impact of the global economic crisis on women, girls and gender equality*. UNAIDS.
- Walker, S. (2017). I've been thinking a lot about reading as a political act. *Bookpage*, <https://www.bookpage.com/interviews/21538-sarah-maclean-romance/>.
- Wendell, S., & Tan, C. (2009). *Beyond heaving bosoms—the smart bitches' guide to romance novels*. Fireside.
- Woodruff, J. (2019). Why we often don't believe women who report sexual assault. *PBS*, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-we-often-dont-believe-women-who-report-sexual-assault>.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.